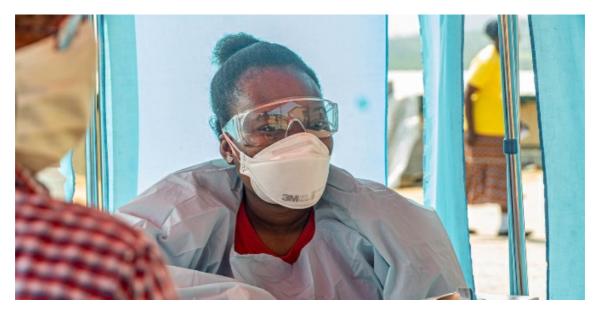# COVID: how corporations can improve their impact on society

As the COVID-19 crisis began to impact the work of changemakers around the world, I felt it was important to create a community where people responsible for social change could get ideas and inspiration in the face of an unprecedented level of uncertainty about the future. This became "Change for Good". Over sixteen weeks, leaders from corporations, foundations and civil society organisations from countries including Canada, Singapore, India and Germany shared how they were responding to the immediate needs of vulnerable people and how the crisis was changing their thinking about how to improve social change in the future.

I'm happy to share the ideas that some of the world's most experienced social change leaders think are most important. This starts with the observation that perhaps the most significant social consequence of the coronavirus is that people who were vulnerable before are even more vulnerable today and that the impact of COVID on these populations is likely to continue for years to come. However, despite the severity of the situation, the leaders I spoke with believe that the crisis has created an opportunity for corporations to improve their impact on society.

The coronavirus crisis has revealed the most important social change priority for businesses today: protecting the health and safety of their employees. With some employees starting to return to the office, some choosing to work remotely at home and others having no option but to remain working in industries where they are particularly vulnerable to infection, the first imperative is for employers to ensure their employees are healthy and safe. Bruce MacDonald, chief executive of Imagine Canada, suggests that corporations have a special role to play in helping employees who have become caregivers and who need mental health support.

While many corporations have taken action to protect the interests of their employees and customers, groups such as the 30 chief executives of Canada's largest corporations have raised the bar. By sharing key actions to which their companies have committed and encouraging other organisations to do the same, they've reinforced the need for businesses to help solve social problems and the role that leaders play in making this happen.

Funders need to address the urgent needs of front-line organisations by increasing philanthropic giving and ensuring that these funds get out the door as quickly as possible. One good example is GIVE5.CA an initiative of Canadian foundations that have pledged to donate at least 5% of their assets in the current year. In another example, by the end of April the TD Community Resilience Initiative was launched to allocate $25 million to organisations engaged in COVID-19 response and community recovery. More corporate funders are finding new ways to increase and accelerate their giving and ensure it's getting into the best possible hands.

During COVID, governments around the world have led the policy response and funding to address the needs of the health care sector, employees, businesses and charities. This won't continue indefinitely. Effectively addressing the impact of COVID, solving climate change and addressing other SDGs will require more — and more meaningful — collaboration between corporations and governments. In the weeks ahead, Change for Good will be looking more closely at the ways in which the public and private sector can work together.

Small and medium sized businesses, which contribute more than fifty per cent of gross domestic product in Canada, are the foundation of socio-economic prosperity for most people and have suffered the most as a result of COVID. We need to recognise that these business owners contribute to social change in ways that are just as important as corporate and non-profit leaders. Corporations can do this by recognising the important work done by SMEs in their supply chains.

Corporations need to take a stand on issues such as Black Lives Matter and move beyond the superficial actions that have characterised much of what has been called "corporate responsibility". This imperative is something corporations don't know how to do well enough. This fall, we'll be listening to Black, indigenous and people of colour share their ideas about what businesses should be doing differently to advocate for people with lived experience and take effective action on their behalf.

While many corporations and other funders have responded generously to the needs of their employees and communities, there's no certainty that the commitments they have today will be sustainable. In India, Manju Menon, co-founder and chief executive of Bangalore-based NuSocia, has seen positive corporate response to the crisis but is concerned about lack of funding during and post recovery. We need to do our best to act quickly now, carefully consider what needs to be done differently in the future and have what Markus Lux, senior vice president of active citizenship at Robert Bosch Stiftung, calls a "tolerance for complexity".

Tabatha Bull, president and chief executive of the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business told me what is fundamental to how indigenous people consider their impact on the world: think five generations ahead. "For everything I'm doing and everything I'm taking from the land today, how is this going to influence my seventh generation?" asks Bull. I kept thinking about it. Corporations should consider their actions through this lens and pay attention to the other ideas shared by the Change for Good guests. If they do this, we'll have more sustainable businesses, better social change outcomes and help prevent another coronavirus crisis in the future.

<div align="center">♣♣♣</div>

Notes:

- *The post expresses the views of its author(s), not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
- *Featured image by USAID in Africa, under a US Government Works licence*
- *When you leave a comment, you're agreeing to our Comment Policy*

Paul Klein is the founder and CEO of Impakt, a B Corp that helps corporations benefit from solving social problems.