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Global Health Security

COVID-19: Private Sector's Role in Times of Crisis

By Christopher Chen

SYNOPSIS

While people usually rely on the state in times of crisis, the scale and significance of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitates a more inclusive global response. Can the private sector step in to fill existing gaps in the current response?

COMMENTARY

WITH COVID-19 showing no signs of abating, the rapid spread of the disease is placing considerable strain on global systems and processes. As a result, populations are heavily scrutinising governmental efforts to manage the pandemic.

With the severity and scale of the outbreak, dealing with this crisis requires the combined efforts of multiple stakeholders. The private sector can play a vital role in supporting the state to manage this outbreak.

Private Sector Contributions

Private sector involvement in humanitarian and health crises is not a new phenomenon. In the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, pharmaceutical company Pfizer [provided](#) US\$10 million in financial aid and \$25 million worth of medicine to relief organisations and affected populations.

More recently, during the 2014 Ebola outbreak in Western Africa, global businesses [contributed](#) \$300 million to the global response. Indeed, the private sector has almost always been willing to provide in-kind and cash donations in times of crisis.

However, the impact of COVID-19 is on a much larger scale as compared to previous outbreaks. It is not geographically isolated, with the disease spreading to [187](#) countries worldwide since the first case was reported in December last year. The scale and reach of the disease have created a global supply chain crisis, with many countries facing shortages in medical equipment such as surgical masks and ventilators. In this context, the private sector is stepping up efforts to manage the pandemic.

Companies are repurposing their factories and leveraging on their comparative advantages and resources to help plug gaps in the medical supply chain. For instance, gaming hardware company Razer Inc. is devoting some of its manufacturing lines to [produce](#) surgical masks and will look to donate up to one million masks to healthcare professionals around the world.

Luxury goods company LVMH recently [announced](#) that it would be converting some of its fragrance-production factories into hand-sanitiser plants. Longer-term solutions such as vaccines require more investment and time to develop.

However, as the examples above demonstrate, private sector input can help meet the short-term needs of frontline health workers. It also demonstrates how all companies, not just those in the healthcare industry, are doing their part to address COVID-19 problems.

Private Sector and New Technologies

Philanthropic contributions aside, the private sector also offers a range of other functions that can be tapped on during a crisis. Some companies are leveraging on their technical expertise to provide solutions to the effects of COVID-19. For example, [IBM](#) refocused its 2020 Call for Code Challenge to solve problems stemming from the COVID-19 crisis.

IBM will provide reference materials and technical resources to facilitate the creation of open-source technology solutions to address issues such as crisis communication and remote learning. This highlights how private sector interventions can help to generate innovative solutions in the fight against COVID-19.

Furthermore, it is not only the big players who are getting involved. To address medical supply shortages, hospitals are turning to 3D-printing start-ups for assistance. [Recently](#), in Italy, Isinnova, an additive manufacturing company, volunteered to reverse engineer and 3D-print ventilator valves for a hospital when its usual suppliers could not meet the overwhelming demand.

This enabled the hospital - which was situated in Lombardy, one of the areas worst affected by COVID-19 in Italy - to have quick access to the valves. This was a cheap and fast solution to a potentially life-threatening problem. To put it in perspective, it usually takes [three months](#) for valve part deliveries; the Italian start-up sent [100](#) valves to the hospital within a day.

Changing Social Norms and Organisational Cultures

Apart from material contributions, companies can also shape the way people think about work. In order to '[flatten the curve](#)' and control the spread of the virus, the general consensus is that social distancing measures work the best. What this means is that current social norms such as [going to work sick](#) and the 9-5 work cycle need to be reassessed.

Companies can play their part by changing existing policies which incentivise employees to take minimal medical leave, while at the same time implementing flexible working arrangement plans. Policies such as allowing employees to take the day off without the need to obtain a medical certificate can also change the social norm of reporting to work sick.

During this trying time, companies also have a moral obligation to support their employees. [Several](#) major multinational corporations are already offering unlimited paid sick leave to employees experiencing coronavirus symptoms or who have been quarantined. These efforts prevent the spread of the virus and maintain a degree of normalcy in people's lives.

Public-Private Partnership

The COVID-19 outbreak reveals many deficiencies in the current pandemic management system. From overstretched medical supply chains to severe economic disruptions, it warrants a rethink of how we should prepare for future outbreaks of this scale. In the process, it also highlights the importance of adopting a multi-stakeholder approach in future preparedness planning.

To cope with future outbreaks, it is essential to strengthen public-private partnership in pandemic preparedness planning. Governments should include businesses - especially those that provide essential supplies such as medical equipment- in their crisis management plans. Companies and government bodies can also sign Memorandums of Understanding which guarantee stockpiles of specific items that can be quickly accessed in the event of an outbreak.

The scale of the current pandemic has compelled private sector intervention in a wide range of areas. Just like governments, businesses have a vested interest in minimising the impact of COVID-19 on society. As such, it is a timely reminder that all sectors need to work together to ensure the robustness of the global system.

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