The Private Sector must unite to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic

Written by Zeynep Bodur Okyay on 2 April 2020 in Opinion Plus

Businesses, government and civil society can lead together, with compassion and solidarity, writes CEO of Kale Group Zeynep Bodur Okyay.

At the time of writing, there have been more than 700,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and more than 33,000 deaths from the disease around the world. Even as the number of new cases in China have fallen, they are increasing exponentially in Europe and the United States.

Turkey’s government has been driving our national response to ensure our hospitals have capacity and our most vulnerable remain safe. It has also taken steps to assist European partners where possible. Most recently, Turkey’s government showed strong solidarity with Italy and with Spain, the
second hardest hit country in Europe, announcing on 30 March that it would deliver planeloads of medical supplies to them strengthen their response.

As the outbreak spreads and the strain on public resources deepens, the private sector has a unique ability and opportunity to change the disease’s trajectory.

Those business leaders who take practical action, rather than just making statements, will stand out most. As such, businesses across Turkey have been mobilising their expertise and industrial capacity to mitigate the effects of the virus. As Coordinating President of the European Business Councils of Turkey’s Foreign Economic Relations Board (DEiK), I have been closely following its commendable response to the crisis. Many DEiK members have deployed their infrastructure and supply chains to support Turkey’s public health strategy.

Responsible leadership has taken on an even deeper meaning at this time, as our workforces and our customers find themselves in an unfamiliar and fast-moving global environment. COVID-19 has changed the way we live and work already, with far-reaching impact. Leading with compassion and caring for our workforces and communities is more important now than ever.

As the President and CEO of Kale Group, I am taking action to protect our employees and redeploy their capabilities and expertise to promote social causes.

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In the short term, we have responded rapidly to protect our workforce by imposing a heightened cleaning regime and deploying smart hygiene products, such as nanosilver ion technology used in our company’s smart sanitary-ware products to disinfect our workplaces and offices. The safety and wellbeing of our employees is our immediate priority. Meanwhile, we have further increased our supply of industrial and domestic products for distribution across Turkey so that we may all take appropriate measures to prevent the spread of the virus.

As a firm believer of giving back to society in meaningful ways, we also continue to widen our corporate social innovation strategy to support communities around Turkey. We have just launched a corporate partnership with Iyilik Kazansin, an innovative social fundraising platform established to provide NGOs and charities in Turkey with an alternative funding stream. This initiative ensures that a proportion of all online purchases are donated to organisations that are playing critical roles to
support social causes. As people all over the world move to internet shopping to fulfil their daily needs, this innovative mechanism will allow organisations to continue carrying out essential work at this time of crisis.

We recognise that as coronavirus spreads through societies and markets, young people, who account for roughly a quarter of the world’s population, are disproportionately at economic risk. Just as we take action to keep our elderly and most vulnerable safe, business leaders must act to protect the long-term economic prospects of our children. It is for this reason that, since the start of our partnership, all online purchases made by Kale Group’s approximately 5000 employees will contribute donations to organisations that promote youth education. We also call on all stakeholders to join our cause to this end.

Given the rising scale and wickedness of the global challenges we face today, COVID-19 being the prime example now, a stronger commitment to partnership and cooperation is needed. At Kale Group, we believe that this is the key for a sustainable and inclusive future. This belief is an intrinsic part of our corporate citizenship strategy and we are continuously exploring how we can maximise our impact through partnerships with young social entrepreneurs.

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For many, this pandemic is a crisis unlike any other in recent times. Public health experts are yet to reach consensus on when we will bring widespread community transmission of coronavirus under control. McKinsey's most recent analysis [10] projects that, at best, economies will recover by the end of the year, and at worst that global GDP will contract in 2020, with recovery beginning only in the second quarter of 2021.

In this moment of uncertainty, boardrooms might feel overwhelmed. The temptation to think in the short-term and to protect profits will be strong. My belief, however, is that business leaders must also take a longer-term view, to serve communities by offering security and stability as a remedy to panic and fear. This extraordinary crisis demands businesses, government and civil society to lead together, with compassion and solidarity. I am confident that through innovative strategies and collaboration, we will continue to support our communities during this moment of need.

About the author

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