

How the COVID-19 Crisis Is Changing – and Challenging – Humanitarian and Development Organizations

CEOs of NGOs share how the pandemic has changed their views on their organizations and their work in the world

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Humanitarian and development organizations are no strangers to pandemics. They have helped fight Ebola in West Africa, tackle SARS in Asia, and handle longer-term health crises affecting both developing and developed countries, such as HIV. COVID-19, however, presents a different and potentially even greater challenge. The scale and unpredictability of the coronavirus has significantly complicated access to services, and organizations must take into account the safety of their people while they simultaneously work to help those who need it most.

To find out how humanitarian and development organizations are tackling the major challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic—and finding a few opportunities in it—Egon Zehnder gathered nearly 30 CEOs of NGOs from around the world for a virtual meeting on April 18, 2020. The missions of the organizations represented span humanitarian relief, global health, human rights, and education, among others. Here is what was most on the CEOs' minds.

Reaching the Most Vulnerable

One of the most difficult challenges for organizations in this crisis is getting critical aid to those in developing countries where access to health care and preventative measures are lacking. “There is heightening inequality and injustice in how this crisis is deeply impacting life in the global south and global north,” one leader said. Another added

that, “Maybe two months from now Africa will be facing this nightmare—and they have nowhere near the resource capacity of Europe or United States.”

Part of what makes weathering the COVID-19 unique from other health emergencies is the rolling nature of the pandemic and not knowing when exactly “the horribleness will hit.” “We’re waiting on pins and needles, and we know there are regions lacking ICU beds and ventilators that will soon be hit,” a CEO shared.

Another challenge in reaching populations is that technology infrastructure is often lacking, making outreach and connection much harder. This isn’t just a developing country problem. “Half of the U.S. communities where we work have zero connectivity,” a CEO shared. Others leaders felt now could be a good time to make a bigger play for enhanced technology access for the communities their organizations serve. “This is a time for big initiatives to bring digital equality,” a CEO said. “It is an opportunity to digitally enable business models and delivery in the non-profit sector.” Another leader agreed and added: “How do we as leaders make sure we think outside the box and anticipate the fundamental change required? How do we make digital connectivity a human right?”

Ensuring Employee Safety and Well-Being

While many humanitarian organizations that work on the frontlines of health crises have specific protocols to keep field staff safe, COVID-19 also affects employees whose main responsibilities keep them in offices. Employee safety was a primary concern of leaders at our virtual gathering. Not only are they thinking through increased safety measures, but how to prevent employee burnout and keep them motivated and engaged from remote locations.

Some leaders at our virtual gathering noted that organizations must band together, especially as emerging economies deal with reverse migration and displacement of people amid the pandemic.

On top of that, leaders must also remain aware that every employee’s situation is different and they may not have access to the same tools while working from home, so keeping empathy front of mind is important. One CEO noted that it’s important to remember that not all staff have been through a humanitarian emergency. “There is a portion of staff that is used to functioning in humanitarian crisis while others have not so they don’t have that training or that skill,” she said. “As leaders, we need to be aware of that and balance those different skills sets and ways of working.”

Leading Differently in a Crisis

Several of the CEOs at our virtual gathering shared that the coronavirus crisis pushed them to reflect on their leadership styles and to make some changes. “In my 360-degree

reviews, it was often suggested that I be more appreciative of staff and their efforts,” one CEO shared. “I now find myself doing this more—I have to and I want to.” Another CEO added that the crisis is an opportunity for leaders to model what good behavior looks like. “Taking breaks, being open about exercise and family needs—that’s not the way we normally lead,” he said. “But these are positives, and I am seeing some leaders in my organization do this.”

Other leaders suggested that the COVID-19 outbreak has prompted them to ask themselves more existential leadership questions. “It’s a moment where you have the possibility for growth,” a Director explained. “Ask yourself, ‘What is it actually that I bring to the table as a leader’, and think deeper about how you lead, contribute, and bring value to the organization in a different way.”

In addition to looking inward, CEOs are also able to appraise their internal talent to see which employees are rising to the occasion. “I’m keeping a talent list of people who have stood up,” a CEO said. Another added that he believes a crisis doesn’t build character rather that it reveals it. “Some teams responded really well—they see it as a challenge to work through and learn to do things differently,” he noted. “Others have struggled in the senior leadership team. It’s been an intense assessment center.”

Enhancing the Board and CEO Relationship

Management and Boards are working more closely than ever during the crisis. CEOs noted that they are catching up more frequently than the typical quarterly meetings. “It’s more intense than usual,” a CEO who has been in the role for 18 months shared. “Discussion is very much around cash and ensuring the impact of the crisis doesn’t damage us too much.”

Another CEO added that this increased engagement has been a positive for his organization, which was in crisis-mode before the COVID-19 outbreak. “I started my interim role six months ago in a crisis, and have had virtual, weekly calls with my board,” he said. “It has been a lot of work but has assured alignment and also integrated board member perspectives in a constructive way.”

Communicating Trust and Care in New Ways

Several CEOs said more informal communications have been helpful during the crisis. “I like Bollywood, so I sing on a karaoke track and send it out weekly to staff,” a chief executive shared. “People write back to me, and I learn so much about them.” Others added that they have implemented virtual coffee breaks, puzzles, and sharing skills to keep employees feeling connected and bring a sense of calm and normalcy to current working conditions.

Another leader agreed that informal communications were important, adding that it still requires planning. “Informal communication in this environment doesn’t just happen—you need to plan for it because you won’t just have chats,” she said. “It puts the focus on how to be a good communicator when you aren’t close to people and what that requires.”

Reframing the Mission

As leaders on our call reflected on what the recovery from COVID-19 could look like, they pointed to their hopes for a new reality. For some, that means a new, global solidarity. The coronavirus outbreak highlighted existing inequities in health care and income, and there is an opportunity for organizations to get their messages out to audiences they may not have been able to reach before. Others highlighted that the post-COVID landscape would allow for greater partnerships between organizations and with the private sector and governments.

While leaders on our call had various visions of a post-COVID-19 world, most agreed that they weren’t seeking a return to before. “We don’t want to bounce back to the status quo, but bounce forward toward innovation and rethinking the humanitarian experience and the workplace,” a leader said.

Further complicating the path forward is the uncertainty of how the pandemic will impact the developing world, considering that thus far it has been mostly developed countries facing down the virus. The leaders of humanitarian and development organizations will play an important role in addressing the challenges of this new landscape from the front lines. Their leadership will be key, and they need all the support we can give them from all parts of society.

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Covid-19 Micro-Website

We have launched a micro-website where this and other informative pieces are posted. This site will be regularly updated: [click here](#) for further details.

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