

How can companies achieve a lasting impact in the coronavirus crisis?

By [Nick Rockey](#) and [Cathy Duff](#), issued by [Trialogue](#)

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Over the past few weeks, we have seen big business stepping up to mitigate the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. While financial support is laudable and much needed - NPO Candid estimates that \$1.9bn had been spent on coronavirus relief by private entities all over the world as at early April - demand is always going to exceed supply during such a crisis. No amount of money will ever be enough. This point is illustrated by the fact that Johann Rupert's well-intentioned R1bn Sukuma Relief Programme shut down temporarily after just a few days due to oversubscription by small businesses in search of relief.

The lesson here is that companies need to consider how to respond strategically to the crisis, particularly as short-term challenges will soon give way to longer-term ones – a second wave of infections after lockdown, further job losses, and a weakening economy.



Nick Rockey

Before responding with philanthropic initiatives, it is useful to perform a thorough needs assessment. Understand what you are responding to and make sure you can sustain your efforts without losing momentum. Is your aim to feed hungry children right now or focus on supporting an organisation so that it can adapt and continue doing meaningful work within communities? Douw Steyn's companies [have made R200m available](#) to support feeding schemes in areas including Diepsloot, while R50m has been allocated to the Solidarity Fund. **Old Mutual** has pledged R50m to fund educational initiatives that address immediate and emerging needs across the sector. This encompasses nutritional needs, hygiene awareness, and financial education. Food relief is greatly needed but sometimes organisations prefer cash in order to cover salaries, enabling them to continue with vital work on the ground.



Cathy Duff

Businesses who are already involved in corporate philanthropy should take the following guidelines into account.

- **Work within your sphere of influence and contribute in terms of your core products and services.** Vodacom is spending [R500m to add network capacity and increase network resilience](#) while working closely with Discovery on doctors' virtual consultations. Jaguar Land Rover has [made its Defender fleet available](#) to emergency services and the Red Cross. You can respond more comprehensively – and sustainably – if your efforts are aligned with your strategic focus areas.
- **Respond in a way that does not create false expectations.** Make sure you can deliver the benefit you have in mind – if you can't, chaos may result. In addition, don't be in such a hurry to roll out a programme that you cause fall-out within your company.
- **Work with other stakeholders if you believe this can create greater social impact** but pay attention to the allocation of national, regional and local resources. If local government is already rolling out initiatives, collaboration can help to build momentum. Offer customised support and communicate regularly with all stakeholders as the situation will change from day to day.
- **Consider adapting existing programmes** rather than starting an initiative from scratch and be aware of what the on-the-ground needs really are (you may need to identify new partners who can assist with this). Foundations may not come up with the best or most achievable solutions, so consult with your partners to avoid frustration, particularly since expectations may be high at this juncture. Consider which community needs can realistically be met, and what is likely to make your intervention more effective.
- **Make funding less conditional**, but don't just write a blank cheque. More flexible and unrestricted funding can be

used for core costs or specific programmes. If you have funded an organisation to run 30 workshops, don't cancel them – find a way to take them online. Don't stop supporting the organisations you fund. Rather help them to fine-tune their offerings to achieve lasting impact.

- **Offer your services pro bono if possible**, to assist organisations that may need to renegotiate contracts, undertake cash-flow forecasting, and so on. Virtual business mentors can play a vital role.
- **Pledge to support partner organisations** by being more flexible with regard to timelines and reporting requirements, as well as converting grants to more general support – Ford, General Motors and Tesla [have all pivoted to make ventilators](#).
- **Plan ahead** – the world has changed and it's a good idea to consider how you can meaningfully contribute to that change within your focus area. Is your company agile enough to adapt, and can you help your partners and other organisations to do the same?

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