

INITIATIVES FOR CHILDREN IN DIFFICULTY FROM BUSINESS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

The accumulation during the COVID-19 pandemic of ecological, institutional crises, trade barriers, increasing debt, economic, political, social, financial or other challenges have strongly affected vulnerable groups of the population, especially children in difficulty due to their dependence on significant adults (parents, guardians, guardians). In order to reduce the negative impact on such population groups, various entities (state authorities, NGOs, international organizations) have implemented relief and recovery measures. The business sector, which is not usually considered a traditional support provider, has also contributed to such efforts. This paper aims to present a review of business initiatives to support children in difficulty during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is found that a significant part of companies especially prefer to donate to charities specializing in supporting children in difficulty.

Key words: *children, support, business, COVID-19, social protection, education, health.*

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Introduction

The spread of COVID-19 infection and the measures implemented to control it have affected not only the physical and mental health of the population, but also the functioning of most entities (governments; businesses; population groups, including the vulnerable ones and others) socially, economically and on other levels.

One of the most vulnerable population groups is the children in difficulty, because of their dependence on the support of significant adults (parents, relatives, guardians, guardians or others) and because of their reduced ability to exercise their rights by virtue of their level of psychophysiological and cognitive development, as well as due to the difficult situations that some children end up in, which can jeopardize their development in the absence of a prompt response. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, children in difficulty have an even higher degree of vulnerability due to the accumulation of crises exacerbated by the pandemic (health, ecological, institutional crises; trade obstacles; deepening debt; challenges of economic, political, social, financial or other type etc.). Although there is no unique definition of children in difficulty, in general, these children either suffer from chronic neglect or disability, or are abused or have limited socio-economic opportunities.

In the scientific literature, support measures for children in difficulty are treated more frequently by NGOs, international organizations, relevant national institutions and less by business, which is an opportunity to be developed more, especially in the context of challenges posed by COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, in this paper we did a review of business initiatives in various countries to support children in difficulty during COVID-19 pandemic.

1. Literature review

In the scientific literature, the business support initiatives of children in difficulty during the COVID-19 pandemic are treated sporadically. Among the reasons that determined this could be mentioned: the significant costs

suffered by the business in the pandemic period that rather need themselves somehow covered, and the support of others only aggravates the economic state of the business; relatively short period since the declaration of the pandemic; the fragmentation of such support measures in the current uncertain context, which may discourage such research; the traditional support of vulnerable groups from state institutions, NGOs, specialized international organizations, which often occupies a more significant place in the overall support of these people, overshadows business support, which also, next to all this, it can have a discreet character.

Supporting vulnerable groups of population, including children in difficulty, especially during crisis situations is part of corporate social responsibility policies of businesses (Mahmud et al, 2021). Some studies like (Manuel & Herron, 2020) treat the business answers to the coronavirus pandemic through the prism of ethical behaviour of business. Charity initiatives not only support vulnerable children, but also enhance sales and loyalty of customers to a company (Huang & Liu, 2020). This study also shows that „warmth-focused messages combined with handwritten typeface and competence-focused messages combined with machine-written typeface” increase intention of donations of customers, at the root of these effects being the brand trust.

In one study (Green, 2020) was observed that measures being taken to control the spread of COVID-19 are causing what has been dubbed a “secondary pandemic” of child neglect and abuse, in other words “children are perversely suffering for the benefit of adults.”, which aggravates pre-pandemic socio-economic problems.

According to another study (Navickas et al, 2021), COVID-19 crisis has made a paradigmatic shift in the concept of corporate social responsibility.

The study demonstrates that corporate social responsibility activities became more than philanthropic activities, getting to be corporate activities in systematic manner and intense interactions in socio-economic-environmental interests with stakeholders, thus companies have CSR activities irrespective of the level of development of the country for the long-terms goals of public well-being and safety even in the periods of crisis.

2. Research methods, information sources and limits of research

In this paper we did a review of existing measures of support for children in difficulty during the COVID-19 pandemic from business from various countries. As sources of informations were mainly used the scientific papers on corporate social responsibility of business oriented towards children, reports about businesses' support of various organizations specialized in helping children in difficulty, that were published during the pandemic period. As a limit of research is that the paper doesn't present an exhaustive review of support measures from business, but just a series of examples to show the diversity of means of support. Also, the support initiatives from the business sector in most cases cover such areas as: social protection, healthcare, education.

3. Initiatives of support for the children in difficulty from business

In response to the challenges of the pandemic, some companies have set up foundations to help children in need and other vulnerable sections of the population. An example of this is provided by the decacorn Gojek, an Indonesian company with an on-demand multi-service platform and digital payment technology based in Jakarta. In March 2020, this company created the Yayasan Anak Bangsa Bisa Foundation or, in short, YABB (Children of the Nation's Foundation) (Rosilawati, 2021: 180). This foundation aims to create more sustainable livelihoods for those who rely on their daily income and their families, whose lives have been directly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (public transport drivers, garbage collectors, construction workers, sellers, Gojek drivers and trading partners and others). To this end, in 2020 a series of COVID-19 relief and recovery programs were implemented. Among the programs that focused more on the support of children in difficulty and their families can be mentioned the relief program *Free Family Meals Program* and the recovery program *Education Aid Program* (YABB, 2020). In the first mentioned program the vouchers for the free meals were distributed through a smartphone app, in which could be selected from a list of partner merchants to redeem for a family meal package. Each voucher could be exchanged for 3 meal portions, to ensure that the worker could take the meal home to their family. In the second program to pupils and students were offered tablet and phone credits; cash for books and school fees; support with life skills to build confidence, interpersonal skills, critical thinking and creativity; mentorship. In the framework of another additional program *Home*

School Mobile Data Program was offered support to the stay-at-home mothers, providing monthly mobile data which helps their children continue distance learning and also the mothers to continue to have access to products and services.

A significant portion of companies choose to make donations to nonprofits to support children in need, such as Save the Children, No Kid Hungry Project, or others with a broader profile, such as the World Health Organization, International Red Cross (Mahmud et al, 2021: 11). Major companies of this kind include: General Motors, Hasbro, General Mills, Gap, Citigroup. General Motors donated non-reimbursable funding to non-profit organizations for home education, and in addition to its employees paid 2-week leave in case of special conditions, such as the school closure for children. Citigroup has announced that it will donate US \$2 million from the general public to the No Kid Hungry Project. Hasbro has supported Save the Children and No Kid Hungry Project, which aim to meet the most urgent needs of children, including providing nutritious meals and distributing books and learning resources to families and children in need. And in addition, taking into account the stay-at-home regime, the entertainment company Hasbro has launched the "BringHometheFun" project, which was created to make the world a better place for children and their parents. Consumers of the company are invited to join the discussion, connect with other families and share tips for home activities using "BringHometheFun" on social media. General Mills has used grants totaling US \$5 million globally through the General Mills Foundation for the Most Vulnerable Children to facilitate access to meals during school and community closures. Gap distributed goods to helpless families through nonprofit organizations, such as Baby2Baby and Good360.

Employees in need of help for child care, as well as other needs (food, utilities, medical expenses, rent) were provided by AbbVie through the *AbbVie Employee Assistance Fund's Employee Relief Program*.

With 2 major initiatives of children in difficulty came the well-known Danish company for the production of children's toys LEGO, including through the foundation of the same name created by it, which aims to build a future in which learning through play empowers children to become creative, to be lifelong learners involved in building the broad set of skills they need to thrive and succeed. These ambitious initiatives include a wide range of

children in difficulty - from the most vulnerable in refugee camps and war-torn countries to those waiting in a community quarantine. The first initiative involves an US \$50 million donation from the LEGO Foundation to support the most needy children and to ensure that they continue to have access to learning through play that helps them develop skills throughout life. The donation is divided between 3 groups of partners: Education Cannot Wait, which provides education to children in emergencies and prolonged crises; a selection of existing LEGO Foundation partners whose work with children and families is under additional pressure from COVID-19; and charitable partners serving communities where the LEGO Group has a strong presence. The aim of the initiative is to reach urgently the children affected by the crisis with essential supplies and to provide support to continue learning through play. The second initiative was inspired by the magnitude of the impact of the crisis on children's education, as UNESCO estimates that more than 160 countries have implemented school closures nationwide, affecting 87% of the world's pupils, or more than 1.5 billion school-age children who are currently out of school (LEGO, 2021). At the same time, the LEGO company through its website created a special page for children www.LEGO.com/letsbuildtogether and the hashtag *#letsbuildtogether* on their social channels as a way to share construction ideas, daily challenges set by LEGO designers, retro constructions and live build-a-longs with fans from everywhere. LEGO Foundation game experts can also share ways to inspire learning through all types of play, which will help children develop lifelong skills such as critical thinking, creativity and problem solving outside school.

Microsoft Corporation together with UNICEF have expanded The Learning Passport education platform globally to help COVID-19 children and youth continue their education at home (Microsoft, 2020). The platform is designed to provide education to displaced and refugee children. Content available to students includes online books, videos, and additional support for parents of children with learning disabilities. Children who continue their online education can do so through a country-specific platform, accessed through their country's learning page. The platform for each country offers a digitized curriculum with textbooks and a selection of additional content, in national languages, which is jointly organized at the country level to best meet the specific needs of learners and educators. The Learning Passport captures a record of the subjects that each pupil learns and guides the pupils, with little

additional support needed. The Learning Passport is an example of how companies can work with UNICEF based on a shared value approach.

Telecommunications businesses and internet streaming companies also came to support children's education. For example, in Croatia they offered free of charge mobile internet for the pupils that have a low socio-economic status, and in the Republic of Moldova the Chisinau city hall in partnership with the streaming company Crunchyroll, the National Association of ICT Companies from Moldova and a few other organizations had created a virtual platform (www.educatieonline.md) with a digital library for the distance learning of pupils (Primăria Chişinău, 2020).

The Indonesian state-owned oil and natural gas corporation Pertamina has offered educational support to school children in the form of laptops to assist the teaching and learning process as a form of regional policy support.

The Lithuanian natural gas transmission operator AB Amber Grid in cooperation with the public organization “Save the Children” have distributed more than 110 computers which were obsolete, but still in good condition to the children of the socially vulnerable families for free.

Many companies that are part of business coalitions (such as The Global Business Coalition for Education) have created tools and resources for educating children in difficulty in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. One of Africa's leading telecommunications companies, Econet offers free online access to textbooks and online teachers on a zero-rating platform (with free Internet access under some conditions) for Zimbabwean students. The regulated e-money issuer sQuid offered online learning platforms, academic content, as well as digital payment platforms to distribute targeted payments, especially for marginalized children. Impact (Ed) International, formerly known as the Discovery Learning Alliance, has provided free educational videos to ministries of education and broadcasting platforms so that children can continue to learn at home in areas such as literacy, math, science, life skills and more.

Aside from monetary or in-kind support, including for education of children in difficulty, companies also offered support for healthcare. As an example, the American casual dining restaurant chain Chili's Grill & Bar has tried to combine the loyalty of their customers with charity, by encouraging it's clients to make donations to St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital at the checkout. Such a corporate social responsibility practice helped raise

money for the hospital while enhancing the loyalty to the brand of it's clients and sales (Huang & Liu, 2020).

The Latvian chemical and pharmaceutical manufacturer JSC Olainfarm has donated 15 thousand Euros to the Children's Hospital Foundation which operates to support Children's Clinical University Hospital. With these funds were purchased 6 anti-bedsores mattresses for the department, which currently also cares for children hospitalized with the COVID-19 virus.

All these are just a few of numerous practices of support from business directed towards helping children in difficulty. The practices are practically as diverse as businesses are, even though some common patterns can be seen, like focusing on charity and leaving more active measures to entities that are more specialized in supporting children in difficulty or making partnerships with them.

Conclusions

COVID-19 pandemic affected negatively vulnerable groups of population around the world, especially children in difficulty. Because of communitary lockdowns children had to use alternative ways for their learning.

Numerous companies offered support through in-kind donations or grants to nonprofit organizations or through the foundations created by the companies themselves. Some businesses offered vouchers to families in need, free meals, fee compensations, mentorship services, used their own websites to offer online support or created special platforms. Although companies themselves faced economic and financial problems, as a part of their corporate social responsibility they offered support to vulnerable groups of population, including children in difficulty. COVID-19 crisis compelled companies to have a paradigmatic shift in the concept of corporate social responsibility, so that their CSR activities become more than philanthropic activities, getting to be corporate activities in systematic manner and intense interactions in socio-economic-environmental interests with stakeholders focusing on the long-term goals of public well-being and safety even in the difficult crisis periods like COVID-19.

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