

World TB Day 2020 – Commentary

The Private Sector Must Help Defeat Entrenched & Emerging Epidemics

By Adrian Thomas, Private Sector Constituency Board Member for the Stop TB Partnership.

The COVID-19 crisis continues to escalate, spreading through developed and developing nations alike and bringing the global economy to a halt. Though the term “coronavirus” was largely unknown by most until a few months ago, battling this novel strain may prove to be the defining challenge of the early 21st century.

COVID-19 is not the only contagion devastating communities. Millions of people around the world are already grappling with another, far older respiratory pathogen: tuberculosis (TB), the world’s deadliest infectious disease. The entrenched TB epidemic could be worsened by the emergence of the novel coronavirus as health workers are overburdened, health systems are pushed to their limits, and resources become even scarcer.

It is crucial, now more than ever, that we all stand in solidarity with and recognize the incredible courage of health workers on the frontlines. And we must stand with the millions of TB patients worldwide, who already face stigma, isolation and difficulty obtaining care. Many of these people live in resource-limited settings and now face greater threats to their own health and continuation of care. We must do our part to “flatten the curve” and avoid overloading fragile health systems.

But we can also do more. In October 2019, I participated in [Event 201](#), a pandemic exercise conducted by the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, World Economic Forum and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. This exercise was by no means predictive, nor was it modeled on COVID-19, but it did examine the spread of an entirely different strain of coronavirus.

The simulation led to several key recommendations for boosting pandemic preparedness. A common thread among these is the necessity and importance of business and industry working jointly with governments and international organizations to swiftly and effectively respond to urgent public health threats. Companies worldwide have the institutional knowledge, programmatic expertise and technical proficiencies needed to help tackle these problems. These skills and resources are needed, now more than ever.

Today, we are living through the real thing. We are witnessing firsthand the devastating impact a pandemic can have on our health systems and economies. This is a wakeup call to us all – especially in the private sector – that we must do more and invest in preparedness, global health security and strong health systems.

Further, businesses are now understanding the need to factor the possibility of pandemics into their forecasting and risk models. Both entrenched and emerging epidemics alike greatly interfere with workforce health, general business operations and the distribution of both goods and services. It is more

evident than ever that pandemics have the capacity to reshape entire industries and economies, and while public health authorities have the primary responsibility for response and preparedness, it has become evident that businesses must also play a dynamic role.

As chair of Stop TB's [Private Sector Constituency](#) (PSC), a diverse alliance of companies committed to ending TB, I have seen firsthand the impact private sector engagement can have in addressing global health challenges. Members of the PSC are improving outcomes for thousands of patients around the world. They are helping with diagnostic efforts, launching education and awareness initiatives tailored for individuals in impacted communities and facilitating comprehensive TB training for healthcare workers to build stronger and more capable health systems. They are working with global partners to ensure that workers and supply chains have the support and care they need, and they are helping to identify innovative methods for funding TB programs and consolidating data so it can be easily accessed by healthcare providers and governments as they work against the epidemic.

It is more critical than ever for more companies, from all industries, to join the fight against TB. We risk not only the worst effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also backsliding from the progress we've made against TB. The consequences of this could be enormous. The emergence and proliferation of newer, drug-resistant forms of TB pose major challenges, with one recent study projecting these forms of TB will kill 75 million people and incur costs of \$16.7 trillion by 2050 – even before we were faced with COVID-19.

The simple truth is that the world needs private sector engagement to defeat both entrenched and emerging epidemics. It is time for companies from all sectors to join in solidarity with the health workers and people battling infectious diseases and to bring the needed resources to bear against the greatest challenges of our time.

There's too much at stake not to act.
