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Companies vs Coronavirus: A Call for Rapid Responsible Innovation

Leopoldo Gutierrez-Gutierrez, Professor of Management, University of Granada Spain
Ana Castillo, Assistant Professor of Management, University of Granada, Spain
Ivan Montiel, Associate Professor of Management, Baruch College, United States

This note is both a call for immediate action and hopefully also inspiration for companies to act against the COVID-19/Coronavirus outbreak in the form of ***rapid responsible innovation*** — innovation developed in a short period of time in a state of emergency with the hope of protecting people and saving lives. The current global pandemic has caught the entire world off guard and driven companies to step up in service of society. Companies now have the potential to show their commitment not only to shareholders but also to all their stakeholders.

The unprecedented COVID-19 outbreak across the entire planet has rapidly shaken up the foundations of human society, becoming an urgent, global grand challenge, that *must be* addressed through coordinated and collaborative efforts.¹ Governments at all levels, international organizations, health institutions, national security and military forces, among others, are developing numerous coordinated health, human and economic programs. Further, individual initiatives are also emerging, such as people who have collaboratively developed sanitary material to be manufactured on their own 3D printers. But this crisis also demands responsibility from business to tackle health and economic societal problems and clear doubts about their exclusive orientation to economic benefit. In particular, companies' responses seem to be taking the form of responsible innovation — new or significantly improved products, services, processes, organizational practices or business models whose implementation in the market solve or alleviate an environmental or social problem.² Responsible innovation fits perfectly into the context of grand challenges, such as COVID-19, becoming a suitable framework to analyze organizational responses.

In Spain, one of the epicenters of the pandemic in Europe, many companies are leading a response movement that is helping to alleviate the negative impact of the outbreak. Since the state of emergency was first declared in March 14 2020, the immediate response of Spanish companies has materialized in different ways. The main actions we have been able to track during the first week of the Spanish state of emergency include:

¹ George, G., Howard-Grenville, J., Joshi, A. and Tihanyi, L. (2016). Understanding and tackling societal grand challenges through management research. *Academy of Management Journal*, 59(6), 1880-1895.

² Halme, M. and Korpela, M. (2014). Responsible innovation toward sustainable development in small and medium-sized enterprises: A resource perspective. *Business Strategy and the Environment*, 23(8), 547-566.

- (i) the adaption of ordinary production processes to manufacture medical and sanitary products,
- (ii) cross-sector collaborations to host citizens with the virus,
- (iii) design of mobile apps to inform and help citizens with symptoms,
- (iv) distribution of food supplies to hospitals and medical centers,
- (v) production and commercial logistics services,
- (vi) keep employees on payroll during the outbreak,
- (vii) medical research against the clock to find a COVID19 vaccine.

These fast responses by companies can be characterized as *responsible innovation*. Responsible innovation is oriented towards avoiding harm, doing good and developing responsible governance that involves establishing institutions, structures, and procedures to facilitate innovations.³ However, an additional attribute of responsible innovation relies on the capacity to adapt quickly to the emergency situation in what we term *rapid responsible innovation*. The COVID19 outbreak challenges the long-term focus emphasized in responsible innovation, in particular, and corporate sustainability, more broadly. We are now dealing with a grand challenge that requires rapid short-term action but also flexibility and agility to experiment and implement fast solutions. Long-term or even mid-term mindsets are not an option.

We as management and Organizations and the Natural Environment (ONE) scholars spend a lot of time discussing grand societal challenges such as climate change, biodiversity, loss of access to water, and how business has a crucial role in alleviating all these challenges. We are now facing an unexpected grand societal challenge that needs rapid collaborative efforts by all members of society to save lives. We expect that our call for immediate action for companies to engage in *rapid responsible innovation*, not only within their own operations but also as open collaboration with stakeholders. Companies now not only have an opportunity but also a responsibility to act as good corporate citizens willing to offer their expertise, capabilities and services to governments and the civil society. It is only through rapid action, collaboration, and agile governance systems that humanity will defeat the virus.

³ Voegtlin, C. and Scherer, A. G. (2017). Responsible innovation and the innovation of responsibility: Governing sustainable development in a globalized world. *Journal of Business Ethics*, **143**(2), 227-243.