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### CASE 3: Melcom and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Working Toward a Resilient Food Business Industry

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## CASE 3

# Melcom and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Working Toward a Resilient Food Business Industry<sup>1</sup>

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The weather is transitioning from winter into spring and the snow is melting under the influences of rain and sunshine. A combination of different weather elements is a usual occurrence in West Nia, Ontario, especially at this time of year. However, the typical spring day is filled with an unusual silence. As Anastasia Asare looks out the window of her 18th-floor office, she sighs. It was early April and West Nia, like other parts of Canada and the world, is in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, with everyone doing their best to protect themselves from it. It has been about a month since businesses started closing down in West Nia. Some businesses have had to shut down entirely, whereas others have closed and then reopened in line with local health unit guidance and regulations. Even with their reopening, many of Melcom's partners are struggling to stay afloat.

Anastasia is the executive director of crisis management and social responsibility at Melcom, one of the world's largest grocery store chains. She was surprised at the quick transition of COVID-19 into a global pandemic. She realizes that some of her ideas concerning business management in emergencies could be implemented now. Because Anastasia had had the foresight to conduct scenario and contingency planning, Melcom has developed a company guidebook for dealing with such emergencies. Nevertheless, it was still shocking to Anastasia to see that much of the grocery sector is struggling amid the pandemic. Although many grocery stores are experiencing unprecedented shortages in hand sanitizers, meat, canned goods, bottled water and toilet paper because consumers are panic buying these items, Melcom has shelves full of groceries. This capacity to still meet demand is all a result of Anastasia's crisis management expertise, which had involved anticipating this type of situation and developing a plan five years ago to address it. Although this scenario planning was previously hypothetical, early-stage planning is helping Melcom stay ahead of the game.

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<sup>1</sup> This case note is a dramatized narrative of research activities associated with the Food Retail Environment Study for Health and Economic Resiliency (FRESHER), a COVID-19 Rapid Recovery project funded by the Government of Ontario and Western University ([fresher.theheal.ca](http://fresher.theheal.ca)). The project is led by Dr. Jason Gilliland and coordinated by Alexander Wray of the Human Environments Analysis Lab at Western University. In addition, Rebecca Clarke, Alexander Morgenthaler, Carmen Ng, Lindsey Soon, and Marcello Vecchio provide staff support and research assistance to the project. The purpose of FRESHER is to track the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the food retail and hospitality sector in Ontario through mapping, surveys, and interviews. A composite person (Anastasia) and grocery chain (Melcom) was created by Ama Boamah to represent the diverse range of participants and partners involved in the project. While a fictitious representation of a potential FRESHER partner and their relationship with the study team, this case note describes in aggregate real observations and situations encountered throughout the research process.

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Melcom's board of directors quickly discerned that things might start going awry, but found the rest of the sector did not take early precautions, so grocery stores are running low on stock. As such, Melcom took early action and limited some supplies once West Nia Health Unit started announcing business closures and limits on the indoor capacities for grocery stores. Melcom and all its retail outlets in different parts of the world were able to adopt this strategy to the best of their ability and make sure it fit each store's geographic location. This, however, could not be said for Melcom's partners in the food service industries, such as many restaurants and cafes in West Nia. Melcom operates at a retail and wholesale level, and many of its customers, such as restaurants, smaller grocery marts, cafés, bakeries, bars, and small independent stores, are struggling. Although many of these businesses, along with Melcom, are starting to receive government subsidies and follow public health instructions to take precautions, such as installing barriers and implementing physical distancing between customers, not every policy fit everyone. Therefore, some of Melcom's long-term partners were making few profits and were not sure whether they could stay open. Anastasia stood by her desk and started looking at the task report left for her.

The task left for Anastasia was to start researching what could be done to help Melcom's partners in the short- and long-term, particularly in terms of how much involvement was needed from Melcom. Anastasia was not sure whether this meant she needed to create a research group in collaboration with a university research team, or whether the chain merely needed to hold regular meetings and advise its partners on the way forward based on the research and information they gathered.

### BACKGROUND

Starting as a small discount retail store in Balamory, Ontario, and keeping with the adopted policy of "low prices and high volumes," Melcom's market share in the food retail business has grown steadily. With 30 years of experience, Melcom is now one of the fastest-growing grocery store chains globally, employing more than 5 million associates.

Melcom is located in many communities worldwide and does its best to support these communities through local charities, group events, associations, and scholarships, etc. This involvement is all in an effort to bring communities together and improve the livelihoods of the people living in each store's catchment area.

A significant portion of Melcom's business is retail, although they are also highly involved in semi wholesale and wholesale distribution. Several contributing factors have made Melcom the household name it is today. The chain is committed to providing:

- Great service with a smile
- Smart and unmatched savings
- Quality merchandise

By sourcing products from all over the world, Melcom is able to offer shoppers a wide variety of affordable goods. Melcom prides itself on customer satisfaction by offering an exceptional shopping experience with the help of staff who are committed and connected to the communities they live in. Melcom continues to be a leader in sustainability, corporate philanthropy, and career opportunity.

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### **The COVID-19 Pandemic**

In December 2019, a contagious virus swept through Wuhan, China, killing many people in its wake. It quickly spread around the world, making its way to Canada in January 2020. This novel virus, a type of coronavirus, was later termed SARS-CoV-2 and is the cause of the disease known as COVID-19. The emergence of the virus caused a worldwide pandemic, placing many countries around the world in lockdown. As of March 14, 2021, Canada had a total of 906,201 cases of COVID-19, with 31,224 active cases, 852,543 recovered cases, and 22,434 deaths (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2021). Initially, most cases came from travellers returning from abroad, and this subsequently caused localized community spread (Statistics Canada, 2020). However, although infected people were coming into Canada in January 2020, the Canadian government did not take any strict precautions until after the first Canadian death caused by the disease on March 9, 2020. With the severity of this outbreak, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on March 11, 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020). The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) has focused on containing and delaying the virus's spread, particularly in indoor spaces and locations such as grocery stores that receive a lot of foot traffic as well as congregant living settings like nursing homes. To reduce disease spread, the agency has encouraged public health measures such as physical/social distancing, good hand hygiene, and mask wearing (PHAC, 2020). PHAC has advised businesses to help customers maintain a 2 m distance from others by using strategies such as visual representation to demarcate distances and by using physical barriers between customers and employees during checkout. All of these measures aim to reduce the transmission of SARS-CoV-2 that can occur in enclosed spaces.

### **Steps Taken by Melcom Against the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Melcom, like other grocery stores that have been deemed essential, has followed local public health guidelines set by the West Nia Health Unit. The store has erected floor signs to show distances, installed plexiglass in front of checkout employees, and placed automated hand sanitizer stations in different areas of the store. Overall, Melcom has been doing a great job with all of this. However, being in a pandemic does not mean Melcom will simply meet the minimum public health safety recommendations. The board of directors has asked Anastasia and her team to continue with their public relations work and ensure that Melcom's community projects persist. Additionally, Melcom is redoubling its efforts to help its struggling partners. However, there is only so much Melcom can do. After all, Melcom is also a business, and it does not make sense to commit to helping people without re-evaluating this commitment when no one knows when the pandemic will end. This is the situation that Anastasia is faced with now.

### **Corporate Social Responsibility**

Melcom, like many other companies, has a corporate social responsibility mandate, and enacting this mandate is part of Anastasia's job. Corporate social responsibility pertains to the economic and socially accountable contributions corporate organizations make to help their local citizens and communities. Many food business corporations such as Melcom are not only interested in making profits, but they are also interested in educating consumers about various issues within the scope of the food industry and establishing positive and ethical partnerships with local community charities and organizations. Examples of such activities are back-to-school drives and university scholarships for students from low-income neighbourhoods. With the pandemic underway, a thought occurs to Anastasia. Although Melcom is doing its best to help its partners, such as businesses that buy their wholesale products or are involved in joint community initiatives, this type of help is not enough, and it is only short term. There needs to be a better way to help out.

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In West Nia, food insecurity has become a growing problem, with some neighbourhoods classified by the health unit as food swamps or food deserts. Ideally, people experiencing food insecurity should be able to apply for government subsidies or access food banks. However, the pandemic has led to many job losses and a halt of some community services, making it difficult for people living in these neighbourhoods to acquire the food they need due to difficulty in travelling long distances to acquire food needed. This has in turn increased demands for assistance in these neighbourhoods. Additionally, the smaller shops in these neighbourhoods are also struggling to make ends meet—even though they provide for these communities, the pandemic has hit them hard as well. Although food insecurity is not a new issue, it is a growing one of significant concern, and it seems to have become more prevalent with the crisis at hand.

Anastasia's discussions with her partners have revealed that some seem to be doing okay switching from dine-in services to delivery and takeout only; however, other partners seem to be struggling. This shows that not all pandemic-related government benefits and policies are beneficial to everyone. Because Anastasia had been instrumental in Melcom's scenario planning, thereby keeping Melcom relatively financially stable during the pandemic, she wonders how she can do the same for her partners in the food industry. Anastasia thinks it would be helpful to listen to opinions and solicit ideas from other food retailers to help influence current government policymaking and hopefully generate ideas that could be considered later if another pandemic occurred. Even if these ideas did not immediately influence policy decisions, it was an excellent opportunity to determine what else the government could do because the pandemic did not look like it was ending soon. Although Melcom does not usually actively participate in government policymaking decisions, the chain hoped to contact the industry's essential stakeholders and help find alternative ways of influencing government policy.

### **PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATIONS**

Anastasia has been slowly rising up the ranks of Melcom's corporate ladder. Ever since she joined Melcom 10 years ago, most of her initiatives have been instrumental in raising Melcom's image and increasing profits. Her opinion is highly valued within the organization. As long as she could show why a project was useful and how it could help Melcom serve its customers and its communities better, the project would be approved. However, Anastasia needed to do a little research first to understand fully the help provided from the government to people and businesses struggling because of the pandemic.

### **Government Response**

Below is key information Anastasia and her team found about COVID-19-related government programs:

1. After speaking with her partners in the food industry, Anastasia realized some of them were able to access the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). However, the only people eligible for CERB were those who were compelled to stop working because of COVID-19-related reasons or those who had exhausted their regular Employment Insurance benefits. The benefit did not take into account people who had quit their jobs voluntarily because extenuating COVID-19-related circumstances, such as virus susceptibility or even increased or decreased workloads, made it challenging for them to work (Service Canada, 2020). The CERB also left out individuals/businesses who were self-employed with an annual income of less than \$5,000. Many smaller independent stores and start-up grocery stores were in this category.

Although the CERB was an individual benefit, it helped offset some of the losses business owners had experienced when closures of certain parts of their business, such as indoor

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dining, had eliminated some of their customers. However, CERB only worked for small businesses, community partners, and employees who had been laid off as a result of the pandemic.

2. Restaurants and other businesses such as bars, cafés, and bakeries are entitled to wage subsidies, Employment Insurance, and other employer benefits such as the Extended Work-Sharing program and the Supplemental Unemployment Benefit program.

Employment Insurance provides a regular benefit for workers and is similar to the CERB. For most people this program means receiving 55% of their average weekly insurable benefits (Canadian Federation of Independent Business, 2020).

3. Another program small businesses are entitled to is the Canadian Emergency Wage Subsidy. This applies to employers who have seen a drop in revenue since the pandemic started. It is meant to reduce job losses by allowing employers to rehire employees to payroll and return to normal operating conditions. Employers who qualify receive a percentage of their employees' pay, which is subsidized based on the business revenue lost (Canadian Federation of Independent Business, 2020).

This program seems promising, but the maximum top-up subsidy is only 10% of earnings which, according to Melcom's partners, barely covers their operating costs and payroll. Various Canadian business federations are working on increasing this percentage because the current subsidy is simply not enough. Additionally, businesses whose revenue loss is less than 30% cannot qualify for this subsidy (Canadian Federation of Independent Business, 2020).

4. The government also established the Work-Sharing program, which was designed to provide income support to employees to help employers avoid layoffs when there is a temporary reduction in business activity. To qualify, employers must develop a plan to reduce their employees' work by 10% to 60% to share their workload (Restaurants Canada, 2020). Additionally, as of March 2020, the eligibility criteria for businesses was changed from two years of operations to one year of operation. It further allows employers to top up the earnings of employees who are already receiving Employment Insurance. Furthermore, there are wage subsidies, which cover 10% of an employer's remuneration costs for a period of three months (Restaurants Canada, 2020).

This program is partially suitable for small employers, which includes corporations eligible for the small business deduction (Restaurants Canada, 2020). The program essentially allows employers to keep experienced workers and avoid layoffs, while employees get to keep their jobs and maintain their skills (Canadian Federation of Independent Business, 2020).

Many employers and employees in the food industry are receiving these benefits, but this does not change the fact that some people are not eligible for them or are struggling to access them because of "red-tape" in the application process. Moreover, some of Melcom's partners who have received these benefits said they still could not cover all their overhead costs because the loss of customers and the reduction or elimination of dine-in services has led to extensive income loss.

### **Anastasia's Next Steps**

Anastasia realizes if she wants to help or undertake any work related to this problem, she needed to conduct more research. The plan she presented to the board of directors was that

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they work with a research group to develop solutions to help their partners in the food business industry. These solutions did not have to be conclusive, but they could at least define additional areas of support that were previously overlooked by the government. Through her network, Anastasia learned a research team at Western University had received a grant from the government to study the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the food business industry. This group had already submitted their grant application and received their funding, so Anastasia was worried it might be too late for them to partner with Melcom. Regardless, she was excited that this group was researching this area. With a preliminary plan in mind, Anastasia decided to contact the lab. She knew it was imperative to have them as a significant stakeholder in her plan. They would be essential in gathering the information needed to help her partners and inform the plans and policies that Melcom could incorporate to help themselves and their food industry partners.

### **HEALab at Western**

HEALab at Western was established to support the development of evidence related to building healthy and thriving communities in the context of geography and urban planning. The principal supervisor of the lab is Dr. Jason Gilliland who, along with the primary project manager/supervisor Alexander “AJ” Wray, was in active discussions about how to more specifically allocate new funds. Although they had received their money already, the amount was insufficient to pay for the human resources and online tools they needed for their research. Although most of this research would have to be conducted virtually because of the pandemic, they still needed additional funds to accomplish various tasks and the grant money did not cover these costs. Therefore, they had to select only some of the possible topics they wanted to research. The lab had initially planned to focus on both the food industry and agri-food sectors, but now it seemed that they would have to choose between the two for the project to start. As the two researchers were contemplating what needed to be done next, Anastasia contacted them with her proposal. Her program was similar to theirs, but she wanted to focus solely on the food service industry.

Anastasia’s main aim was to find policy issues the government had overlooked. She wanted to address these issues using evidence-based data to help Melcom’s partners and then present this evidence to the government to guide long-term policy planning and decision-making. She hoped this type of research would help the government be more informed about food industry-related policies. However, she was also looking to conduct further research on food insecurity in the neighbourhoods in West Nia that had been severely affected by the pandemic because certain food items were hard to find and people often had to travel long distances to get groceries, as well as the job losses and loss of community services due to the pandemic.

Jason and AJ thought about her proposal. They had some concerns about working with Melcom because, in the past, they had found that some corporations who helped researchers had a different agenda or research plan. Although this was not always the case, it did happen, and this made Jason and AJ wary. However, after several meetings with Anastasia, they were able to come to a consensus—they would be happy to collaborate and work on a project that would focus on the food service industry. Because it seemed that Melcom had genuine and clear intentions, Jason and AJ wanted to help their counterparts in the food industry obtain more information about food-related issues during pandemics and other emergencies.

The researchers at the HEALab wanted to do their part in researching how the pandemic had affected this industry. After observing the number of stores that had closed and still not reopened even for takeout and delivery, it was clear that many food service businesses had been hit hard by the pandemic. The HEALab wanted to take this opportunity to inform the public

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and the government about what was happening and provide evidence for setting future policies relevant to the industry. Although the group has reached a consensus about the project, Jason and AJ pointed out that it may not be possible to explore food insecurity as in-depth as Melcom had hoped, but it could still be an underlying theme in the project.

### **The Food Retail Environment Study for Health and Economic Resiliency, FRESHER Project**

With the government grant and support from Melcom, Anastasia, Jason, and AJ form the Food Retail Environment Study for Health and Economic Resiliency (FRESH-RES) project. FRESHER comprises of two parts: a survey of current and former employees and employers in the food retail industry; and interviews with the owners and senior managers of these businesses. The researchers will study the effects of COVID-19 on the food business environment across urban, suburban, and rural contexts. This evidence gathering will be useful to help policymakers assess the impacts of COVID-19 financial support programs on business survival and then help adjust these policies and programs to ensure Ontario's food security during future pandemics and emergencies. The researchers hope to identify the struggles faced by business owners and operators, and their current and former employees, and identify the various strategies they have used to survive financially and/or keep their businesses from closing. The researchers will identify how governments, Business Improvement Areas, and other organizations have responded to the COVID-19 crisis and will explore how these policies and programs have contributed to the resiliency of food retail businesses (FRESHER, 2020).

Anastasia, Jason, and AJ settled on the essence and scope of the study and decided that AJ would be the point of contact for the project.

### **MOVING FORWARD**

#### **Stakeholder Analysis**

Now that the project was formed, Anastasia had to plan her next steps and then assemble the relevant stakeholders. Different stakeholders have different interests, so she did not expect everyone involved to have the same level of engagement. Stakeholders would fall into four categories: high power–high interest; high power–low interest; low power–high interest; or low power–low interest (Project Management & Yaman Bdaiwi, 2017). Making sure these stakeholders could contribute was a vital aspect Anastasia needed to consider when she decided what to do next.

#### **Planning Stage**

To plan her work and identify the steps she needs to take, Anastasia decides to use a six-step model developed by Public Health Ontario. The *Planning Health Promotion Programs: Introductory Workbook* (Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion [Public Health Ontario], 2015) outlines the following six steps:

- 1. Manage the planning process:** For this step, Anastasia would need to tackle the stakeholder roles in this project. She must determine the timeline, budget, and resources needed, and who needs to be consulted during each step. She also needs to determine what data will be gathered, who will gather and analyze these data, and how they will do it. Anastasia realized that, of all the steps, this first step would be the determining factor in what happens next. Although the other five steps were general enough to be changed along the way, the first step could determine how much investment Melcom has in this project and how far Melcom is willing to take this investment.



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- 2. Conduct a situational assessment:** This step would involve Anastasia and her team developing a data-gathering method and analyzing and synthesizing data about the community and the food industry, which would then inform the team about how to proceed with the rest of the planning. A SWOT analysis (evaluation of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats for businesses) would be used for organizing, synthesizing, and summarizing the information.
- 3. Set goals and audiences, and outcome objectives:** This goal, Anastasia thought, would be most important after step 1. It was all about deciding how to apply the information they found and deciding which strategies would be best to reach the goals set based on the resources available. It would involve determining the audience and reconsidering the goals, objectives, and activities to make sure they flowed well together. For Anastasia, this would mean deciding whether the results of this project would be applied only to Melcom's community partners in West Nia or also be sent to the government, or even whether she would involve the government as a minor or major stakeholder.
- 4. Choose strategies and activities and assign resources:** The goal of this step is to help Melcom reach the change it is looking for. It is centered around activities and strategies that will lead to the desired outcome, as well as assigning resources and writing project objectives which are in line with the desired outcome.
- 5. Develop indicators:** This step requires identifying the indicators that would prove this change.
- 6. Review the plan:** This step would involve reviewing the planning model Anastasia has constructed thus far. In this step, Anastasia and her team would set up a logic model to assess whether the plan is complete and whether everything collectively makes sense. The logic model would also allow Anastasia's team to see whether everything aligns with the initial situational assessment conducted in step 2.

Anastasia realized this was only just the beginning. The first thing to do would be to complete step 1 of the planning model because this would decide how far Melcom would go with this project.

### Considering the Stakeholders

First and foremost is the HEALab, which has already been identified as a key stakeholder and is on board with the plan. The next stakeholder is the West Nia Health Unit. With their help, FRESHER researchers will be able to access the unit's food inspection database so they can call or email pertinent businesses and let them know about the study. The contact person in charge of this database is Dr. Abena Fah, and she is interested in the project. She let Anastasia know that, normally, most of her work at the unit pertained to food inspection. However, because of the pandemic, many food service businesses had permanently or temporarily closed, and she was finding it difficult to do much for them. All Abena could do for the restaurants, bars, cafés, bakeries, and grocery marts that were still open was provide advice on sanitization processes and how to make a strategic plan to keep employees and customers safe. Anastasia thought of other stakeholders, such as the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, who may not be as interested in the project but might have additional useful information to contribute. The participation of these types of stakeholders would allow the team to get business information from multiple sources and not just one source.

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Additionally, because this is a collaborative effort to help the food industry, some of Melcom's partners could be considered stakeholders and could provide advice on the survey and what needed to take place. Anastasia thought of two businesses—Esmeralda's Bakery Café and Ameralia's Pizza—who could serve in this role and represent the local and/or independent stores and chain stores. Furthermore, Anastasia thought about whether the provincial government needed to be considered a stakeholder at this stage. It could be helpful to have a government policy maker attend the meetings, especially someone who helped set policy for the food and agri-food industry. Even with these stakeholders in mind, the list was not complete, and Anastasia was unsure whether these stakeholders were the ideal ones to start with. However, the list could be used as a starting point and then expanded as they identified other relevant stakeholders who would be interested and could assist Anastasia and her team.

The end goal is to help Melcom's partners have a better understanding of the situation they were facing and offer alternative and helpful strategies that had not yet been explored by them or the government. Anastasia hoped that the information obtained from this project could help government agencies understand more about the challenges faced by the food service industry during the pandemic and then use this information to formulate additional policies that benefited everyone. This is a long-term plan, Anastasia thought. The main issue at hand is the stakeholder analysis and engagement that needs to be conducted to move forward—everything else could wait.

### Alternative Strategies

Anastasia is now unsure about what to do with her stakeholder analysis. She wonders whether there are alternatives to this and whether Melcom should continue investing in projects like these after this one. Maybe there are other options aside from working with stakeholders and continuing with the HEALab plan that could yield the same objective in terms of Melcom helping its community partners. Anastasia and her team have come up with three additional options to help Melcom move forward now that the initial planning and stakeholder process is done. The team needs to consider:

1. Whether the Ontario government should play a more involved role in this project. This would mean the results of the study would be structured on acquiring government approval for some of the interventions being implemented before the information was disseminated to the public.
2. Whether Melcom should seek other major chain stores as funding partners. Although Melcom is funding this project in conjunction with the grant-funded HEALab, the organization needs to consider how much money is enough and whether investing less and involving other major corporations would help Melcom's ultimate goal or simply be an obstacle.
3. Whether Melcom instead focuses its efforts on helping its community partners change operations. This means Melcom would guide its partners on how to effectively shift their operations to online and/or phone orders for pick-up or delivery. Although this has worked to a point, an analysis of the system in place might yield new strategies to increase profits as it would be with indoor dining. This would help Melcom's community partners and would serve the intended purpose and final goal of the project.

Anastasia needs to decide whether she should incorporate these other strategies into her plan or move forward without them. Even partially adopting these alternatives could positively affect the project.

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### CONCLUSION

Anastasia feels this project will bring numerous benefits to Melcom and its community partners. She understands that the stakeholder analysis/engagement and situational assessment will help bring the project to new levels by incorporating different perspectives from different industries. Although it might be challenging to work with varying stakeholders, the project should progress well as long as they all have a similar goal. Anastasia is of the view that regardless of Melcom's intentions, this project is ultimately good for the community, particularly in the context of the pandemic. With this in mind, Anastasia sighs once again as she looks at all the possible stakeholders and the scope of the information about the project. She then calls in her team to start the meeting and says, "It's going to be a long meeting; maybe we should order a snack before dinner."

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## INSTRUCTOR GUIDANCE

### Melcom and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Working Toward a Resilient Food Business Industry

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#### BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating effects on all aspects of life, with everything from the business sector to schools having been affected by it. It has given the world a chance to realize new and emerging diseases that can cause pandemics are a constant threat. Additionally, the pandemic has shown with greater clarity how much people rely on food as a daily necessity, and how easily food access can be threatened. The pandemic has left many grocery stores, supermarkets, restaurants, bars, bakeries, cafés, and coffee shops in the food retail and food service industry struggling to survive even though food is so essential. With many people staying home because they are fearful of contracting the virus and they are heeding public health advice, food service businesses have fewer customers. Although many people are still getting food delivered and ordering takeout, the pandemic has simply resulted in fewer customers overall. This drop in orders, coupled with periodic government restrictions on dine-in options, has led to reduced overall food retail business profitability. Although the government has helped by introducing some financial COVID-19 benefits and services, these programs have restricted eligibility requirements that have not worked for every business. As a major grocery chain, Melcom has taken this opportunity to make an impact on the communities it serves by enhancing its corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts. Melcom has always engaged in socially responsible community projects such as back-to-school food drives and university scholarships for children from low-income neighbourhoods. Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the food industry, Melcom decided to partner with HEALab to expand their corporate social responsibility to affected businesses. This new project would entail conducting research into the food business industry and researching what measures could be taken to help Melcom's partners and possible research into communities facing food insecurity during the pandemic. This case uses Melcom as an example of a grocery store chain that has engaged in new corporate social responsibility initiatives because of the pandemic. By examining this case, information can be drawn about how local, provincial, federal governments, local partners/stakeholders and corporate partners can support food business industry during a public health emergency.

#### OBJECTIVES

1. Discuss how situational assessments and logic models help in the planning and implementation aspect of any project.
2. Discuss how public health emergencies such as pandemics affect food businesses.
3. Understand the importance of stakeholder analysis in terms of CSR.
4. Discuss the relevance of CSR amid crises such as pandemics.
5. Understand the importance of effective partnerships in crisis interventions.

## **Melcom and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Working Toward a Resilient Food Business Industry**

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### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What do you think CSR is? What do you think of when you hear about CSR in the business/corporate world? How does your definition apply to this particular case?
2. What methods of information gathering can be used when conducting a situational assessment?
3. Give an example of CSR and why you think it is CSR.
4. Identify the stakeholders in the case. Are there other stakeholders you can think of?
5. What are their roles, interests (low, mid, high), and power (low, mid, high, in terms of influence) based on your readings?
6. What is your understanding of the term situational assessment?
7. What are the facilitators of effective partnerships in crisis situations such as pandemics?

### **KEYWORDS**

Corporate social responsibility; community; COVID-19; food insecurity; food business industry; pandemic; partnerships; program planning; resiliency; service industry; situational assessment; stakeholder analysis/engagement