

War Is Different

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Corporate Citizenship During a Geopolitical Crisis, Part 1: War Is Different

Over the past two years, executives who lead corporate citizenship efforts have been among the very first at their companies to marshal resources to take on emerging societal issues. Whether facing the initial spread of COVID-19 in Africa, the surge of the Delta variant in India, or the racial reckoning in the summer of 2020, citizenship teams are frequently the corporate equivalent of first responders.¹

With the invasion of Ukraine, corporate citizenship leaders are again moving swiftly. In this report, we offer four insights that reflect the significant ways in which responding to a geopolitical crisis *differs* from responding to a natural disaster in time of peace. In **Part 2** of this series, we address the similarities.

1. **Providing relief is more dangerous and difficult.** When a hurricane or an earthquake hits, help from neighboring communities and countries is usually welcomed. A war zone is more dangerous and chaotic, and many organizations may not be allowed entry. NGOs with existing operations in the area will have difficulty getting resources from the outside, and aid workers and their families could become victims themselves just like everyone else. Set your philanthropic strategy—and educate your stakeholders, especially employees—accordingly.
2. **Work through established international organizations.** With natural disasters, especially in the US, corporate citizenship teams often work with local nonprofit

organizations with whom they have established relationships. In an international geopolitical crisis, the approach is far less feasible. Turn instead to humanitarian organizations that have extensive experience working in conflict zones. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) takes the lead in working with both UN agencies and humanitarian organizations such as the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). The risk of running afoul of US Treasury sanctions on institutions or individuals underscores the need to work with established organizations.²

3. **Cash is even more important.** The best way to help established international organizations is through cash donations. In-kind donations can bog down relief efforts in the absence of an ongoing agreement with global humanitarian organizations to provide needed services and physical goods.
4. **Prepare for the long term.** In addressing natural disasters, recent research reveals that 73 percent of companies make immediate relief their top priority, 22 percent make disaster preparedness their top objective, and just 3 percent focus mostly on long-term relief and recovery. We've suggested a shift toward preparedness when it comes to natural disasters.³ With geopolitical crises such as war, however, companies should be prepared to focus on long-term relief and recovery. Wars lead to all forms of long-term physical and social disruptions, including refugees. That is when help may be most needed.

As corporate citizenship teams respond to the invasion of Ukraine and its inevitable fallout, it will be critical to ensure that senior management, employees, and other stakeholders understand the differences from the company's approach for natural disasters. Shared expectations will help the company respond more efficiently and effectively now and in the future.

¹ [Corporate Citizenship in the Global South During Covid-19: Part 1 - Africa](#), The Conference Board ESG News & Views podcast, June 18, 2020; [The Covid-19 Crisis in India and the Global South – How the Business Community Can Help](#), The Conference Board Corporate Citizenship Watch webcast, May 11, 2021.

² [Protecting Charitable Organizations](#), US Department of the Treasury.

³ Robert Schwarz, [Disaster Philanthropy Practices 2021](#), The Conference Board, November 22, 2021.

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