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### CHARITY SEES THE NEED, NOT THE CAUSE: THE STRATEGIC CSR DURING THE PANDEMIC OUTBREAK

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#### ABSTRACT

The year 2020 has turned into a turmoil after the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic around the world. The pandemic has sacrificed hundreds of thousands of lives and impacted the world economics severely as many countries face dire economic situation due to the lockdown of business operations to break the chain of the COVID-19 infection. Similarly, citizens experience stressful situations, requiring assistance and support in essential needs, such as food, monetary aid, and health equipment. To address the citizens' needs might be challenging for many countries as governments themselves also face financial constraints. As such, private sectors could play their roles in this challenging situation through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives. This paper aims to explore the CSR initiatives by private sectors in Malaysia in supporting the fight towards the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak.

#### INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of COVID-19 virus has spread to many countries around the world. Up to this article being written, hundreds of thousands of deaths have been reported, and millions of people have been identified positive for COVID-19. The threat of the COVID-19 virus to public health has led to the declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Malaysia is no exception to the COVID-19 outbreak, where the increase of infection clusters has induced the government to take drastic action by

implementing the Movement Control Order (MCO). The primary purpose of implementing this measure is to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 infection and break the infection chain by restricting social activities whereby the unnecessary individual movements are not allowable, and the international borders and cross-state travellings are also restricted. This measure has, in turn, affected many socioeconomic activities, especially the communities and the businesses in the country. Among groups affected the most are those of B40 as well as frontliners of essential services, such as health, safety, security and other related sectors. Some of these groups might have difficulties in obtaining food, lost their jobs or sources of income due to the enforced lockdown of business operations during the MCO. The challenges during this hard time have urged the government to call for assistance and cooperation from the private sectors. To reduce the burden of citizens, the Malaysian government has initiated many initiatives, such as the financial stimulus package, to create an aggregate demand for the country's market. However, during this pandemic outbreak, the government is also encountering heavy economic burden and might not be able to fulfil the needs of all ranges of people and sectors. Therefore, assistance from private sectors through corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives is highly essential in the current critical situation.

This paper intends to explore CSR initiatives contributed by private sectors in Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic. Besides, this paper also elaborates the strategic CSR measures taken by corporations, i.e. MNCs, and SMEs in Malaysia, including the dilemma or difficult choices among corporate companies that would implement CSR initiatives, the groups that would receive CSR benefits, the aspects of CSR initiatives, and the importance of CSR during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak.

### ***To Survive Or To Be Kind? Companies' Dilemma***

Many definitions of CSR have been proposed by various organisations, researchers, and businesses in which Kotler & Lee (2005) defined CSR as a commitment to enhancing the well-being of the community through prudent and caring practices. Collaborations and efforts undertaken by the private sectors on global development issues are carried out through CSR initiatives where CSR practices require companies to operate for profit without neglecting their responsibility to the general public by considering public interests in their business operations.

Society expects companies to perform their CSR according to societal expectations. Nevertheless, ensuring a smooth business operation is essential for the companies to remain in the country that they are based in and CSR is a medium for companies to show how they can be sensitive to social issues. Companies involvement in community activities through CSR initiatives will prove that they are concerned with local community issues. By this principle, the society and the environment will directly benefit from such companies whereby the benefits of CSR initiatives do not only impact companies' external stakeholders, such as consumers, clients, and customers but also impact internal stakeholders, such as employees and shareholders.

According to McKibbin & Fernando (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has a profound effect on the current economic whereby the recovery process of an economic downturn stemming from the COVID-19 outbreak will take a long time for Malaysia. The situation has affected and will continue to affect several critical sectors in the country, including tourism, service and retail sectors. This issue also has impacted some of the major population in the country, namely the B40, specified as the group that is most vulnerable due to the uncertainties of the economy (Ab. Rani et al., 2019; Shahzad et al., 2020). Although the government has announced economic stimulus packages in many aspects, the government may not be able to meet all the needs of the various sectors of the society. Therefore, cooperation and involvement from the business sectors are essential in the current critical situation.

Although the role of the business sectors through CSR initiatives is significant in the wake of the economic uncertainty following the COVID-19 outbreak, companies may experience a dilemma to provide funding and distribute donations to those in need. CSR is not limited to sincere acts or social responsibility for a good cause, but it is regarded as a strategic and potential method for enhancing companies' financial performance, reputation, brand recognition, and customer relationships. Companies responding to CSR initiatives to meet social and survival needs will create a sort of 'immunity' that may protect their businesses in times of economic crises. Companies will gain positive results through the creation and ownership of a robust CSR framework (Srisuphaolarn, 2013; Hassan & Marimuthu, 2018; Di Vaio et al., 2020; Di Vaio et al., 2020a).

By implementing various CSR initiatives, companies will gain a better reputation through the involvement of stakeholders, such as suppliers, customers, and business partners. Good company reputation leads to the acquisition of stakeholders' confidence, thus increasing sales revenue that will generate profits. Generally, large companies that have a surplus of financial resources can fund CSR initiatives to make a significant impact on society. Besides, industries that impact the environment are more likely to implement CSR initiatives to ensure the sustainability of business operations, competitiveness and operational sustainability (Nair, 2017; Hassan et al., 2015; Alvino et al., 2020).

Companies implementing CSR initiatives will enjoy a better operating performance, higher growth, optimal employee productivity and better access to debt markets in times of crises. The rewards of investing in CSR may vary over time, so it is difficult to determine the exact time of receiving the profits from the investments. CSR initiatives protect companies from downside risks, much like insurance that benefits and protects risk, especially when it comes to situations or issues of trust from stakeholders (Lins, 2019).

The implementation of CSR initiatives also provides a competitiveness advantage to companies even during economic turmoil. Therefore, based on the benefits it provides, the implementation of CSR initiatives is a logical step for companies to take in which implementing CSR initiatives during the COVID-

19 pandemic is considered a strategic move because it relates to a company's ability to  
 make discretionary decisions in the absence of any external pressure to implement CSR;  
 design CSR in line with its mission and objectives;  
 anticipate the emergence of political, social, technological, and economic trends in the absence of crisis;  
 gain recognition from internal and external stakeholders; and  
 benefit from CSR programmes instead of simply provide public goods shared by the industry and society as a whole (Yin & Jamali, 2016).

### ***Who Needs Assistance?***

The COVID-19 outbreak has affected several key community groups in the country. Some of them have been affected by the implemented Movement Control Order (MCO) which is an effort to curb the spread of COVID-19. The current economic situation has also led to more challenging situations for those who have been forced to resign.

- ***B40 and M40 Groups***

These groups have been profoundly affected by the Movement Control Order (MCO) due to economic uncertainty. Many individuals either have no fixed income and employment or have been terminated when their companies are forced to shut down business operations. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected several industries, including major sectors, such as tourism, transportation, retailing, as well as small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Besides, small traders of night markets, wet markets, and roadside stalls could not continue operations during the MCO period. According to Ab Rani (2019), households in this category face a myriad of vulnerabilities, such as low income, lack of skills and working experience, lack of motivation, and low focus in employment, but they seem to be comfortable with their persistent situation.

- ***Frontliners in the Health Sector***

The frontliners in the health sector are an essential group who attempt to prevent the COVID-19 pandemic from spreading. The group comprises healthcare professionals, such as doctors, nurses, and other healthcare personnel, experiencing the highest risk of exposure to COVID-19 because they have to deal with infection cases and treating positive COVID-19 patients daily. Working hours have been prolonged as they have to deliver the best effort to ensure the community's safety and health.

- ***Frontliners in the Security Sector***

Apart from the frontliners in the health sector, those in the security sector, such as police officers, soldiers, auxiliary authorities, state and municipal enforcement officers, and even security guards, play an essential role in ensuring that the public obeys the MCO. Security personnel ensure that safety aspects are maintained during the MCO period whereby strict controls have been enforced so that people would remain in their homes during the MCO. Unnecessary outdoor activities would increase the risk of spreading COVID-19.

- ***Employees***

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the current stock market's volatility and changed the country's economic landscape. Employers face challenges, and

some of them have to cease business operations. Thus, some workers lost their jobs, while others are at risk of losing their jobs, in addition to those who are earning reduced wages during the MCO period. According to McKibbin & Fernando (2020), the unemployment rate is expected to rise and estimated job losses would increase due to operational disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic. To those who have to work during MCO, they face a higher risk of being exposed to the spreading dangers of COVID-19.

- ***Students***

Many students, especially those in the Public Higher Education Institutions, Polytechnics, and Private Higher Education Institutions, were not able to return to their hometowns. The MCO had forced students to stay on campus and remain in their dormitories and residence. The restrictive movement had made the students difficult access for basic needs, such as food.

Immediate and proactive action is essential for disaster relief to minimise casualties and sufferings. The immediate response through CSR initiatives in disaster management proves that companies prioritise stakeholders and sensitive to the needs of the people. The concerns expressed by companies through the implementation of CSR initiatives will attract stakeholders who hope that companies will meet their future demands and needs. Disaster assistance through CSR initiatives will attract more attention from stakeholders, involving donations in the form of financial aid, goods, and services (Madsen & Rodgers, 2014).

### ***What Can Csr Contribute Or Have Contributed?***

According to Ariyabandu & Hulangamuwa (2002), CSR initiatives can be carried out in several forms, such as unilateral initiatives, collateral initiatives, long-term solutions, and public awareness. The activities to be implemented need to be planned and aligned with the needs of the target groups for the CSR initiatives to achieve their objectives and make significant contributions to stakeholders. Radzi et al. (2018) found that aspects such as strategic planning and participation are the major steps taken by companies in implementing and ensuring the success of CSR initiatives. However, Ariyabandu & Hulangamuwa (2002) argued that the most appropriate disaster relief aid is the one that is fresh and meets the needs of the community. Table 1 shows the details of companies' contributions through CSR initiatives to various recipients in the effort to fight COVID-19.

Because of the highly contagious nature of COVID-19, CSR initiatives are needed in the forms of financial support, safety equipment (e.g. PPE), food packs, and basic needs for particular groups. The assistance provided through the CSR initiatives is much welcomed due to the difficulty in accessing certain resources and budget constraint in government allocation. Apart from the necessities and medical equipment, the next aspect that is considered for the implementation of CSR initiatives is financial assistance for groups affected by the impact of the current economic situation.

Several multinational corporations have taken the initiatives to lend a helping hand to the government in terms of CSR towards the community. Renowned

companies, such as Petronas, the NAZA Group, the MAH SING Group, and others, have provided monetary donations to the government. A special COVID-19 fund was established, carrying out initiatives to curb the spread of the COVID-19 outbreak. Besides, several companies have donated medical devices and equipment to hospitals and clinics nationwide. Malaysia's leading paid broadcasting company, ASTRO, has also taken the initiative to offer free broadcast viewing to customers who subscribe their services over the MCO period. ASTRO's top management is aware that the community spends much of their time watching television during the MCO.

Recognising the importance of online communication throughout the MCO period, TELCO companies in Malaysia have provided some free internet quota to their customers. Although people have been encouraged to stay at home during the MCO period, they could still carry out online tasks, such as banking, teaching, shopping, and social networking. The well-known fast-food company, McDonald's, has donated food to frontline workers to provide moral support and encouragement to frontliners in continuing their work on preventing the spread of the COVID-19 outbreak. AEON Company, a major retailer in Malaysia, provided an exemption of rent payment for a month to tenants who have business premises in their retail malls. AEON's action has proven its concern over the distress of traders who have suffered losses during the MCO period.

### *The Importance Of Csr Initiatives*

Although the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak has affected the current stock market and threatened the country's economy, the time is perfect for companies to give back to the community. CSR initiatives are ways of extending help to the community battered by the pandemic. Although companies also face financial challenges, there is still an opportunity for companies to show their concerns and fulfil their corporate citizenship concerning social situations and needs. The donated funds are provided directly to the disadvantaged groups.

Through the implementation of CSR initiatives, companies can highlight their significant existence in the country. When the role of CSR initiatives is rehabilitated and reconstructed, it can provide an excellent image to the stakeholders, companies' reputation can be elevated. Although companies need to provide funds to assist, the costs incurred will be in the form of positive returns, and they can gain trust and confidence of stakeholders.

The government faces many challenges, and one of them pertains to the financial aspect. The country's income has been severely affected by the decline in economic activities, as imports and exports could not be carried out as usual since most business operations that have been providing the government with revenues are reduced. The drastic decline in global oil prices has also affected the country's income as the economy highly depends on the oil and gas sector. The government needs to apportion the limited financial resources to rescue various groups and sectors affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the concern and support of corporate companies through CSR initiatives are expected to ease the financial burden that the government has to bear.

Companies that implement CSR initiatives strategically, especially during this difficult time, will enjoy advantages in management practices contributing to better performance. Additionally, companies that encourage CSR practices and sustain these efforts during the economic crisis will have the advantage of accessing resources and gaining support from different stakeholder groups. Companies will garner support from external stakeholders, such as customers and suppliers, in terms of loyalty (Cunha et al., 2016).

Managers can increase the positive publicity that their companies receive from social activities and contributions to the cause in line with their firm's competence. Treating disaster relief as a CSR initiative has a strong correlation with stakeholders' attention. Managers can also increase such attention through ad-hoc assistance and prompt responses to events or disasters. This situation also increases the value of assistance to recipients. Assistance provided through collaborations with NGOs (non-governmental organisations) can also increase publicity and provide good impressions that corporations should adopt to align with the concept of good citizenship, which will prove to be advantageous in terms of reputation and trust among the parties concerned (Madsen & Rodgers, 2014).

### **IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

The year 2020 which had been awaited by the society, was supposed to be the benchmark for the advancement of progress and technological sophistication, however, has been tainted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The tenacity of the pandemic has given rise to catastrophic economic, political, and social situations almost everywhere around the world. Despite the difficulty of these situations, world governments need to act and devise better ways of dealing with the challenges. Fortunately for Malaysia, the government is not alone in addressing this problem, as many companies in the country appear to be contributing much assistance through corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives that have been a cornerstone of many companies' operating principles. Companies' assistance has provided some critical implications:

- Companies have shown concern over current issues and have helped to ease the government's burdens. CSR initiatives undertaken by corporations have indicated their sensitivity to the current situation that has been affecting many parties. Companies are also concerned about the burdens borne by the government and the society that has been affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. The government's appreciation for the assistance provided by the corporate sector is exemplified by the reduction of corporate taxes, which may further encourage more CSR initiatives in the future.
- Companies concern for the community through CSR initiatives have led to the creation of positive values for companies and their stakeholders. For companies, the implementation of CSR initiatives will lead to brand recognition and reputation enhancement. Improving reputation is essential in ensuring companies' sustainability and competitiveness. 'Killing two birds with one stone' is a befitting proverbial analogy to illustrate the implications of implementing CSR initiatives, whereby corporations benefit external stakeholders and vice versa.

- The incentives provided by companies to disadvantaged groups are significant, given the lack of resources which requires assistance from external parties. Companies' involvement in CSR initiatives is very crucial for stakeholders to cope with the difficult and restricted conditions imposed on them during the Movement Control Order (MCO).

• This article has discussed CSR initiatives undertaken by Malaysia's leading companies and industries. The concerns expressed by these companies have facilitated the government in coping the COVID-19 pandemic, as the country has to take drastic measures in enforcing the MCO to curb the gradual spread of the disease. The implementation of CSR initiative has also aided several key groups that have been struggling with resource constraints, especially among frontliners and those affected by the loss of income consequent to the implementation of the MCO. Although some companies have been affected as well, their efforts of allocating a substantial amount of company revenues to implement CSR initiatives are wise and noteworthy. Subsequent empirical studies are recommended to explore the effects and implications of CSR initiatives or contributions to those who receive such assistance. It is hoped that more companies will step forward to implement CSR initiatives alongside NGOs to assist community groups affected by the COVID-19 outbreak.

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**Table 1: Details of corporate and private companies' CSR contributions**

No.	Name of Company and Industry	Type of Company	Type and Value of Contribution	Recipient Group
1.	Petroleum Nasional Berhad (Petronas) – Oil and Gas, Petrochemical	Government-Linked Company	250kg of polypropylene to Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) to help the university produce 18,750 face shields to be supplied to 100 government hospitals and clinics nationwide	Frontliners
			RM6.4 million through a voluntary salary contribution initiative to be channelled to the COVID-19 Fund under NADMA	Various Groups
			Contributed RM20 million worth of medical equipment and supplies to assist hospitals and healthcare frontliners mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia	Frontliners
2.	Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre – Property Development and Investment	Public	Food Aid	Frontliners and homeless people
3.	AIA Malaysia – Financial, Insurance and Takaful services	Public	Financial Aid	Frontliners
4.	Supermax Corporation Berhad – Trader of Latex Gloves	Public	Financial Aid	COVID-19 Special Fund
5.	Berjaya Corporation Berhad – Property Development and Investment	Public	Financial Aid	COVID-19 Special Fund
6.	Axiata Group – Telecommunications	Public	Financial Aid	COVID-19 Special Fund
7.	Sunway Group – Property, Construction, Hospitality, Retail, Leisure, Commercial, Trading & Healthcare, Education, and Real Estate Investment Trust	Public	RM34 million to help Malaysians cope with the pandemic, and RM300,000 through various NGOs to B40 communities in Sunway townships nationwide	Frontliners, B40 Group
8.	Country Garden – Property Development	Public	1 million facial masks	Frontliners
9.	Mah Sing Group – Property Developer	Public	30 thousand facial masks & 20 units Critical Care Ventilators	Frontliners and National Disaster Management Agency (NADMA)

10.	Kenny Rogers Roasters – Food and Restaurant Chain	-	900 meal sets	Frontliners
11.	Malaysia-Based US Companies (Intel, Texas Instruments, Micron) – Electronic and Technology	-	RM5 million cash & lifesaving equipment supplies (Surgical & N95 facial masks, Nitrile gloves, hand sanitisers, notebook computers & printers, thermometers, reverse osmosis machines, PPEs including goggles, shoe covers, hairnets, and jumpsuits)	Frontliners
12.	Coway – Clean Water and Air services	-	Stay-safe kits	Food delivery riders and delivery customers
13.	Watsons - Healthcare, Pharmacy and Beauty Retailer	Subsidiary	Healthcare supplies and equipment (Watsons' Antibacterial Wipes, Watsons' Vitamin C, hand sanitisers, thermometer scanners, and rain coats)	Frontliners
14.	Tenaga Nasional Berhad (TNB) – Electricity Provider	Government-Linked Company	6-month 15% discount for the six sectors identified as being most affected by the impact of COVID-19: hotel operators, travel agencies, local airlines offices, shopping malls, conventions centres, and theme parks. 6-month 2% discount to all residential, commercial, industrial, and specific agricultural premises, excluding the 6 sectors mentioned above	Domestic customers
15.	DRB Hicom – Automotive and Logistics	Public	Cash totalling RM1 million	Government (COVID-19 Fund)
16.	MMC Berhad – Utilities and Infrastructure	Public	Cash totalling RM1 million	Government (COVID-19 Fund)
17.	YTL Corporation – Utilities and Construction	Public	Cash totalling RM1 million	Government (COVID-19 Fund)
18.	Titijaya Land Berhad – Property Developer	Public	520,000 facial masks	Frontliners
19.	MR DIY – Home improvement Retailer	-	Contributed materials to make 200 units of face shields, as well as raincoats for PPE suits to Hospital Ampang; safety boots, raincoats, and also materials to make 300 units of face shields to HKL; 300 units of face shields to Hospital Sungai Buloh; contributed over 800 stationery, Safety Glasses, Furniture, and PPE Units	Hospitals and frontliners
20.	QSR Brands – Retail Food Services	Public	Provided over 27,000 meals to various communities, including health workers, firefighters, police officers, media, and public service workers at the frontlines, as well as university students and the communities; Donated products through campaign and promotion	Communities; frontliners

21.	The Edge Group – Tabloid	-	Initiated and promoted a fund collection	Government (COVID-19 Fund)
22.	Astro – Broadcasting and Mass Media	Subsidiary	Provided free all channel view during MCO	Customers
23.	Banking Institutions	Public	COVID-19 Safety Messages	Communities

