

# A Primer for Preventing Pandemics: Insights for Business

**Ivan Montiel**

*Baruch College, The City University of New York, USA*

**Junghoon Park**

*Baruch College, The City University of New York, USA*

**Bryan W. Husted**

*Tecnológico de Monterrey, Mexico*

**Andres Velez-Calle**

*Universidad EAFIT, Colombia*

## *Abstract*

*We first summarize the key points of our recent article titled “Tracing the connections between international business and communicable diseases,” published in the Journal of International Business Studies in 2022. Then, building on these points, we provide four recommendations for managers to help prevent future pandemics: (i) use the company’s core capabilities to improve health, (ii) integrate public health tools and knowledge into the company’s strategic decisions, (iii) reduce the risk of syndemics in communities where the company operates, and (iv) engage in cross-sector health partnerships.*

## **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to most industries around the globe. Even in late 2022, almost three years after COVID-19 was first declared a pandemic, companies were still struggling with operational disruptions, especially in their global supply chains. In this article, we reflect on the role of international business and managers of companies in preventing future communicable-disease pandemics.

Communicable diseases are brought about by microorganisms such as viruses and bacteria that can be transmitted among people. Emerging infectious diseases,<sup>1</sup> including COVID-19, SARS, MERS, and Ebola (and reemerging infectious diseases like monkeypox and polio), are a sub-category of communicable diseases defined by their recent (re)appearance or spread to a new area.<sup>2</sup>

Most of these diseases arise from animals—zoonoses—and are more prone to appear in places with regulatory voids and increased pressure on ecosystems due to factors such as deforestation.<sup>3</sup>

A communicable disease typically goes through different stages of contagion, from an outbreak confined to a few people to widespread localized infections—epidemics—and to transnational and global spread—pandemics—and finally to an endemic phase. Only time will tell if a new communicable disease will spread through human contact, but it is just this sort of risk that companies must deal with in a timely way so as to contain it. Hence, in this essay, we aim to synthesize the main practical implications derived from our recent *Journal of International Business Studies* article on the connections between international business and communicable diseases.<sup>4</sup>

### **Business and Pandemics: Part of the Problem?**

Public health scholars usually perceive business as harming the population's health. On the one hand, noncommunicable diseases—such as obesity and diabetes—are often associated with companies' intensive commercialization of unhealthy products, influencing consumer lifestyles and ultimately affecting health negatively; this research stream is referred to as the commercial determinants of health.<sup>5</sup> On the other, public health scholars also express concern that corporations, in particular the activities of multinationals, contribute to the spread of communicable diseases.<sup>6</sup> History provides evidence of the tight connections between international trade, its leading agent—currently multinationals—and the emergence and spread of communicable diseases leading to pandemics.

In the first part of our *Journal of International Business Studies* article, we provide a historical timeline from the sixth century with the plague of Justinian, caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis* spreading along trade routes, to the most recent 2019 coronavirus pandemic through numerous factors related to international business. Then, drawing insights from this evidence, we highlight how both international business contextual factors (host country regulatory quality, urbanization, trade barriers, and global migration) and multinationals' activities (foreign direct investment, corporate political activity, global supply chain management, and

## Business and Pandemic Prevention

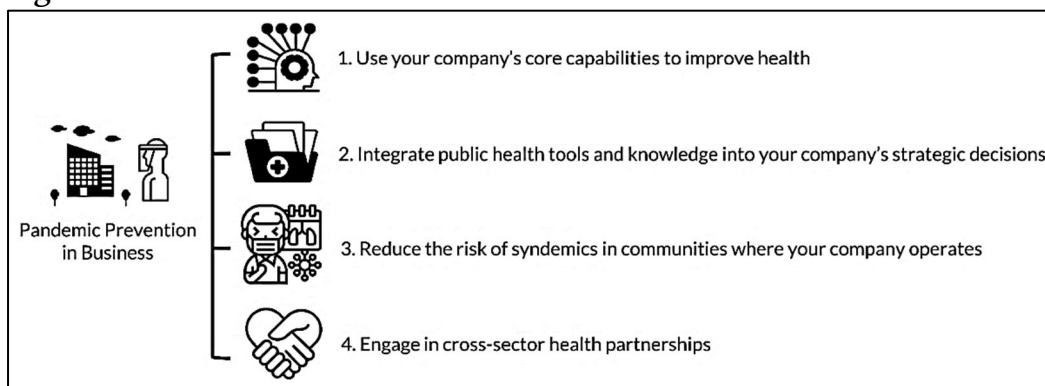
---

international travel) may accelerate the emergence and spread of communicable diseases.

### **Business and Pandemics: Part of the Solution?**

While companies do play a role in the potential rise of pandemics, they are also equipped to help prevent the spread of communicable diseases and contribute to the increased well-being of stakeholders, including surrounding communities and consumers. Here are four practical recommendations for managers to prepare for and even prevent the emergence of future pandemics, illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** Pandemic Prevention in Business



*Note.* The use of the six icons is permitted by the Noun Project under a Creative Commons license.

#### **1. Use your company's core capabilities to improve health**

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that companies can potentially use their core capabilities to improve the health of all their stakeholders.<sup>7</sup> Companies with global operations can use their resources and capabilities to prevent health risks within and across their subsidiaries to slow the spread of emerging and future infectious diseases. Examples include investments in the efficient roll-out of vaccines by Anglo American plc, a British multinational mining company.<sup>8</sup> In February 2021, the company declared that it would invest up to US\$30 million to support the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out across its operations worldwide. In addition, Anglo American plc sought to enhance the ability of host governments to procure, store, and deliver vaccines by providing supply chain infrastructures and logistical support. In South Africa, the company used its operational health facilities and professionals to assist several provinces with administering COVID-19 vaccines to over 45,000 internal and external stakeholders—including employees, their families, and local community members.

### ***2. Integrate public health tools and knowledge into your company's strategic decisions***

Companies operating globally can help prevent the emergence and spread of communicable diseases if they integrate tools proposed by public health experts, particularly the corporate health impact assessment tool,<sup>9</sup> into their strategic decisions. This instrument is especially useful for companies operating in host countries with weak epidemic prevention infrastructure due to the lack of resources, limited public health education, or frail healthcare systems. Companies could implement the corporate health impact assessment tool to understand further how their operations affect ecosystems and thus minimize zoonotic events.<sup>10</sup> For example, the international nonprofit BSR—formerly Business for Social Responsibility—established the Healthy Business Coalition initiative to make suggestions for business to design and implement corporate health impact assessments<sup>11</sup> alongside business-health impact metrics.<sup>12</sup> The initiative identifies scopes of business activities, including occupational health and safety, products and services, community engagement, and policy and advocacy. BSR also highlights key business-health challenges in the areas of communicable diseases (e.g., HIV, tuberculosis, SARS), noncommunicable diseases (e.g., obesity, cancers, mental health), and economic and social determinants (e.g., income and gender inequalities, lack of education, unequal access to healthcare).

### ***3. Reduce the risk of syndemics in communities where your company operates***

We observed that COVID-19 is especially aggressive toward vulnerable populations by triggering comorbidities. A comorbidity—also referred to as a syndemic—is a combined effect of a pathogen and a pre-existing condition, particularly noncommunicable diseases, which multiplies the severity of the emerging disease.<sup>13</sup> Thus, companies can contribute to reducing the risk of syndemics by addressing noncommunicable diseases across communities in which they operate. As the director of sustainability of a large food multinational said: “Healthier communities mean healthier business.” Managers can support the health of their communities through preventive health. For instance, a company in the food or consumer products industry could focus on higher-quality ingredients or more informative labeling to help consumers make wiser choices and stay healthier. Grupo Nutresa, a Colombian multinational food company, has completed more than 400 product reformulations—including 219 sodium reformulations, 124 sugar reformulations, and 57 saturated fat reformulations—since 2015 to mitigate the adverse impact of its processed foods on consumers’ diet-related

noncommunicable diseases. Moreover, the company delivered 1,024 tons of products to food banks in Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Panama, and Mexico.<sup>14</sup> Given that undernutrition is considered a risk factor for overweight and noncommunicable diseases,<sup>15</sup> the company's health-related initiatives designed to protect the population in host communities from struggling with undernutrition may mitigate the risk of developing noncommunicable diseases while also reducing the risk of syndemics associated with communicable diseases.

#### ***4. Engage in cross-sector health partnerships***

Companies are not alone in the quest to improve human health. They can partner with governments, nongovernmental organizations, and other social actors. Cross-sector health partnerships should be part of a company's mission since humanity and our planet deal with several grand challenges, such as war, climate change, hunger, and poverty. Companies are now considered crucial actors in global sustainability and essential contributors to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>16</sup> There is evidence that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic would have been worse without the involvement of companies. One example is the partnership between the international nongovernmental organization CARE International, the British bank Barclays, and the British pharmaceutical GlaxoSmithKline. In 2016, they joined forces to establish Live Well, a social enterprise based in Zambia to improve health awareness in underserved communities and facilitate access to affordable healthcare supplies, including basic drugs and reproductive health, dental hygiene, and malaria-prevention products.<sup>17</sup> CARE International brought its know-how on how to establish rural sales programs and work with the locals, including community health workers; GlaxoSmithKline provided knowledge on healthcare supply chain networks; and Barclays offered expertise on effective business models and financial skills training.<sup>18</sup> If we address current and upcoming grand challenges, we believe that business should be important team players in the Sustainable Development Goal 17 on Partnerships for the Goals.

#### **Conclusions**

In the early 2020s, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted everyone on the planet. Companies are often portrayed as profit-driven organizations. Yet, we witnessed how companies also helped curtail the pandemic spread and mitigate its negative consequences, thereby contributing to addressing health challenges and advancing the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically targets under the Sustainable Development Goal 3 on Good Health and Well-Being. Our four recommendations can encourage business

to think of how they can prevent future outbreaks from evolving into epidemics or pandemics and promote their stakeholders' health and well-being.

### Authors

*Ivan Montiel is a Professor of Business Sustainability at the Zicklin School of Business, Baruch College, the City University of New York. He investigates how businesses can contribute to solving social and environmental grand challenges such as climate change and human health deficiencies. He is particularly interested in the role of businesses in addressing such challenges in Latin America. His work has appeared in journals including Journal of International Business Studies, Strategic Management Journal, Journal of Business Ethics, Business & Society, and Journal of Economics & Management Strategy, among others.*  
email: [Ivan.Montiel@baruch.cuny.edu](mailto:Ivan.Montiel@baruch.cuny.edu)

*Junghoon Park is a Ph.D. candidate in Management with a concentration in Strategy and Corporate Sustainability at the Zicklin School of Business of Baruch College, City University of New York. His research expertise is in global sustainability strategy, stimulated by an interest in how firm strategies address intractable grand challenges. His research agenda aims to build a framework that helps businesses identify and adopt strategies that meet their needs while mitigating negative externalities and increasing positive ones to improve sustainability worldwide. His research has been published in Journal of International Business Studies and Business & Society.*  
email: [Junghoon.Park@baruch.cuny.edu](mailto:Junghoon.Park@baruch.cuny.edu)

*Bryan W. Husted is a Professor of Management at the EGADE Business School of the Tecnológico de Monterrey, where he coordinates the research group in social innovation. His current research focuses on corporate sustainability in emerging markets. His work has appeared in such journals as Journal of International Business Studies, Journal of Management, Organization Science, and Strategic Management Journal, among others.*  
email: [bhusted@tec.mx](mailto:bhusted@tec.mx)

*Andres Velez-Calle is an Associate Professor of International Business at Universidad EAFIT, Medellin, Colombia. His research interests include international business, strategy, alliances, and culture. His publications appear in journals such as Journal of International Business Studies, International Journal of Cross-Cultural Management, Critical Perspectives on International Business, and Thunderbird International Business Review.*  
email: [avelezca@eafit.edu.co](mailto:avelezca@eafit.edu.co)

### Endnotes

1. Bloom, D. E., Black, S., & Rappuoli, R. (2017). Emerging infectious diseases: A proactive approach. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 114(16), 4055-4059.
2. World Health Organization. (2014). *A Brief Guide to Emerging Infectious Diseases and Zoonoses*. World Health Organization Regional Office for South-East Asia.
3. Morse, S. S., Mazet, J. A., Woolhouse, M., Parrish, C. R., Carroll, D., Karesh, W. B., Zambrana-Torrel, C., Lipkin, W. I., & Daszak, P. (2012). Prediction and prevention of the next pandemic zoonosis. *The Lancet*, 380(9857), 1956-1965.
4. Montiel, I., Park, J., Husted, B., & Velez-Calle, A. (2022). Tracing the connections between international business and communicable diseases. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 53(8), 1785-1804.
5. Kickbusch, I., Allen, L., & Franz, C. (2016). The commercial determinants of health. *The Lancet Global Health*, 4(12), e895-e896.
6. Saker, L., Lee, K., Cannito, B., Gilmore, A., & Campbell-Lendrum, D. H. (2004). *Globalization and Infectious Diseases: A Review of the Linkages*. World Health Organization.
7. Park, J., Montiel, I., Husted, B., & Balarezo, R. (2022). Business and the human health grand challenge: A review and an urgent call for business-health research. *Business & Society*, 61(5), 1353-1415.
8. Anglo American. (2021, February 4). *Anglo American contributes up to US\$30 million towards global Covid-19 vaccine roll-out* [Press release].
9. Baum, F. E., Sanders, D. M., Fisher, M., Anaf, J., Freudenberg, N., Friel, S., Labonté, R., London, L., Monteiro, C., Scott-Samuel, A., & Sen, A. (2016). Assessing the health impact of transnational corporations: Its importance and a framework. *Globalization and Health*, 12(1), 27.
10. Please refer to Baum et al. (2016) for a more detailed framework to conduct the corporate health impact assessment.
11. BSR. (2016). *The Healthy Business Strategy Tool*. San Francisco, CA: Healthy Business Coalition.
12. BSR. (2018). *The Healthy Business Metrics Guide*. San Francisco, CA: Healthy Business Coalition.
13. Mendenhall, E. (2017). Syndemics: A new path for global health research. *The Lancet*, 389(10072), 889-891.
14. Grupo Nutresa. (2020). *Annual and Sustainability Report 2020*. Medellin, Colombia: Grupo Nutresa.
15. Branca, F., Lartey, A., Oenema, S., Aguayo, V., Stordalen, G. A., Richardson, R., Arvelo, M., & Afshin, A. (2019). Transforming the food system to fight non-communicable diseases. *BMJ*, 364, 1296.
16. Montiel, I., Cuervo-Cazurra, A., Park, J., Antolín-López, R., & Husted, B. W. (2021). Implementing the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals in international business. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 52(5), 999-1030.
17. Menden, A., van der Vleuten, N., Pirzer, C., & von Blomberg, I. (2019). *NGO and Company Partnerships for Inclusive Business*. Berlin, Germany: Endeava.
18. Lee, L. (2016, October 21). *Live Well: A journey to better health for rural people in Zambia*. Geneva: Switzerland: Care International.