

The Business Playbook

Responsible Business in times of crisis

How companies can lead with purpose when it matters most

Maala - Israel's Corporate Responsibility Network

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ABOUT THIS PLAYBOOK

This playbook was developed by Maala, Israel's leading corporate responsibility ratings and advisory network, drawing on three years of documented corporate response to crisis conditions, such as armed conflict, mass displacement, and social emergency.

It builds on original research from the Maala ESG Index, field data gathered from over 100 of Israel's largest companies, and insights shared at a GlobeScan-hosted global webinar on "Sustainability in Times of Crisis" (April 2024), to which Maala was invited to contribute as a featured case study alongside organizations from Ukraine, Canada, and Brazil.

The goal is practical: to give ESG and sustainability professionals, company leadership, and business umbrella organizations a structured framework for preparing and responding when crisis arrives.

The framework presented here grew out of a context with a distinctive characteristic: the companies that developed and tested these responses were not operating at a safe remove from the crisis. They were inside it, their employees affected, their facilities sometimes targeted, their communities disrupted. This proximity shaped the nature and urgency of the response, and it is part of what makes the Israeli experience a useful reference point for organizations

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This playbook is accompanied by a companion document: [ESG in Times of Crisis – The Israeli Case Study](#), which presents data, examples, and field insights from three years of documented corporate response in Israel.

WHY ESG IN TIMES OF CRISIS

We are living through what some have begun to call a “polycrisis”: a convergence of multiple, interacting emergencies that compound one another in ways we are still learning to understand. Climate breakdown, armed conflict, pandemic, economic inequality, political polarization: these are not separate crises unfolding in parallel. They are entangled. The collapse of one system accelerates the failure of others.

The business community sits at the center of this reality. Companies are not spectators to these crises, they are embedded in them. Their employees are affected. Their supply chains break. Their customers lose stability. Their communities fracture. And yet, as the Israeli experience of the past three years demonstrates, this is precisely the moment when business has both the capacity and the obligation to step forward.

A World of Compounding Disruptions

The scale of disruption facing businesses globally is accelerating across multiple dimensions:

- Climate events are becoming more frequent, more severe, and less predictable. Wildfires, floods, droughts, and extreme freezes are disrupting supply chains, destroying crops, displacing populations, and straining infrastructure across every region of the world.
- Geopolitical shocks and conflicts are disrupting economic systems that were built on assumptions of stability. Ukraine's experience since 2022 and Israel's since 2023 have demonstrated the speed with which “business as usual” can be overtaken by emergency conditions.
- Pandemics and health crises have shown that a single biological disruption can cascade within weeks into economic contraction, mental health collapse, supply chain failure, and political destabilization.
- Social polarization is intensifying in democracies worldwide, generating internal pressures on companies around employee cohesion, DEI commitments, and the social license to operate.

These disruptions are no longer outliers. They are the operating environment, what strategists have come to call the VUCA world: Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous. The question is no longer whether the next crisis will arrive, but whether organizations are ready for it when it does.

Why ESG Is the Right Framework for Crisis

There is a widespread assumption that ESG is a fair-weather practice, something companies engage with when times are good and set aside when survival is the priority. The evidence from Israel, Ukraine and elsewhere argues the opposite.

ESG in crisis is not a luxury. It is the infrastructure that determines whether companies can maintain trust, retain their people, sustain their supply chains, and contribute meaningfully to social recovery. Companies that invest in ESG capabilities before a crisis hits are measurably better prepared to respond when it arrives. The frameworks, relationships, and commitments they build in normal times become operational assets under pressure.

At the same time, crisis changes what ESG looks like in practice. The long-term environmental and governance agendas that typically dominate the ESG agenda are not abandoned, but they are necessarily deferred. The “S” in ESG rises to the foreground. Social needs – of employees, families, suppliers, customers, and communities – become the dominant priority. The companies that navigated crisis most effectively were those that understood this shift and moved quickly.

From Compliance to Commitment

In normal times, ESG practice is often shaped by compliance imperatives: meeting reporting standards, satisfying investor requirements, managing reputational risk. These are legitimate and necessary functions. But crisis shifts the weight of expectations. Stakeholders (employees, communities, suppliers, customers) are less focused on disclosures and more focused on action. What a company does in the critical first days and weeks matters more than what it has reported.

This points to the kind of ESG infrastructure that holds up under pressure. Reporting frameworks and governance structures provide an important foundation, but they are not sufficient on their own. What makes the difference in a crisis is the degree to which corporate responsibility has been genuinely internalized, through pre-existing stakeholder relationships, decision-making frameworks that can be activated quickly, and leadership that is already oriented toward purpose alongside performance.

Israel's experience offers a compelling illustration of what this looks like in practice, particularly on the social dimension of ESG. Companies that had invested consistently in employee welfare, inclusion and diversity, community relationships, and stakeholder engagement over years were better positioned to respond quickly and coherently when crisis arrived. The creative and coordinated responses that emerged were the product of deliberate, sustained investment in corporate responsibility culture.

This playbook is an attempt to make that culture transmissible. Not as a set of rules to follow, but as a framework for thinking and acting when normal stops.

WHAT COMPANIES CAN AND MUST DO

The Five-Domain Framework

Based on three years of documented corporate response in Israel, combined with insights from around the world, Maala has mapped corporate responsibility in crisis across five interconnected domains that provide a practical organizing structure for crisis planning and response.

A critical observation: the experience in Israel and elsewhere in the world shows that in crisis, the social dimension of ESG rises to the top. Social needs of employees, families, suppliers, customers, and communities become the operative agenda. Crisis planning should build this in from the start.

1. EMPLOYEES & FAMILIES

- Basic needs of displaced employees (housing, supplies, logistics)
- Physical safety and emergency protocols
- Wellbeing, resilience, and mental health programs
- Extended care to families, not just employees

2. DIVERSE WORKFORCE (DEI)

- Addressing the specific needs of employees with disabilities
- Proactive outreach to employees from minority and marginalized groups
- Connecting employees to available support systems
- Sustaining inclusion commitments even when under operational pressure

3. SUPPLY CHAIN

- Expedited payments to SME suppliers
- Business continuity support (including hosting suppliers on-site)
- Active monitoring of supplier vulnerability
- Long-term supplier partnerships beyond crisis period

4. CUSTOMERS

- Adjusting services for affected and displaced customers
- Creative solutions when normal processes break down
- Easing payments, charges, and financial obligations
- Extended access for customers without documentation

5. COMMUNITY & SOCIETY

- Mobilizing core business capabilities for humanitarian needs
- NGO and civil society partnerships
- Long-term recovery commitments, not just immediate relief
- Sector-specific support drawing on the company's core expertise

Domain 1: Employees and Families

The most immediate and extensive corporate response in crisis conditions is directed at employees and their families – an expansion of the traditional employer–employee relationship.

Basic needs of displaced employees

When employees are evacuated or displaced from their homes, companies face responsibilities that go far beyond the normal scope of HR. In Israel, companies stepped in to help with housing, basic supplies, and logistical support for employees who had lost access to their normal lives. This is not charity, it is a recognition that an employee whose basic stability has been destroyed cannot function, and that the company has both the capacity and the interest to help restore it.

Safety

Physical safety measures become urgent and complex in crisis conditions. This includes not only emergency protocols and evacuation planning, but real-time coordination with security authorities, adaptation of physical facilities, and, in conflict situations, ensuring that all employees, including those with sensory disabilities, have access to alert systems and safe spaces.

Wellbeing, resilience, and mental health

The psychological dimension proved to be one of the most significant areas of corporate investment in Israel. Companies developed multi-level mental health support programs that went far beyond access to a counselor: manager training in psychological first aid, peer support groups, measurement of employee emotional health at scale, and even inclusion of employees' family members in support frameworks.

This last point carries a lesson that outlasts the crisis itself: mental health infrastructure, once built, becomes a lasting organizational asset.

Domain 2: Diverse Workforce

Crisis produces a shift in how diversity, equity and inclusion is understood and practiced. The recruiting, measuring, and reporting activities that typically define DEI work give way to something more urgent: active support for employees whose particular vulnerabilities are heightened by the crisis.

- Employees with disabilities face specific practical challenges: accessible shelter, adapted alert systems, modified workflows. These needs require immediate attention and creative solutions.
- Employees from minority or marginalized communities may have reduced trust in government institutions and official channels, meaning that the employer must play an active bridging role in communicating, reassuring, and connecting these employees to available support.
- Crisis conditions can intensify existing social and ethnic tensions within organizations. Minority and marginalized groups may be disproportionately affected, and companies need sensitive, empathetic management that can reduce friction and prevent conflicts from escalating, while ensuring these groups receive the support they need.

In Israel, Arab–Israeli workplace relations were a particular area of attention during the crisis. Companies with strong, pre–existing inclusion programs reported that those relationships generally held, and in some cases provided a foundation for broader community outreach.

Domain 3: Supply Chain

Crisis creates acute pressure on supply chains, with smaller suppliers facing the greatest vulnerability. They lack the reserves to absorb sudden shocks, often have less access to government support, and depend heavily on the relationships they have with their larger partners.

Expedited payments

One of the highest–impact interventions available to large companies is deceptively simple: paying suppliers faster. For an SME operating on tight cash flow, the difference between being paid in 30 days and 7 days can mean the difference between survival and closure. In Israel, expedited payment programs were among the most widely implemented and most valued crisis responses.

Supporting business continuity

Companies went beyond financial support. Where supplier facilities were damaged or unsafe to access, larger companies opened their own premises, allowing suppliers to relocate operations, maintain their teams, and continue serving their customers. This level of supply chain solidarity is rare in normal times. In crisis, it becomes a natural expression of shared interest.

Ongoing communication and care

Beyond financial and logistical support, crisis calls for a different quality of communication with suppliers. Procurement teams play a critical role here in maintaining ongoing dialogue, checking in on suppliers' specific situations, and demonstrating genuine care rather than transactional efficiency. Understanding what a supplier is going through, and adapting accordingly, is what sustains the relationship through the crisis and preserves business continuity on both sides. This kind of attentive, two–way communication tends to receive less emphasis in normal operations, but in crisis it becomes one of the most important tools available.

Domain 4: Customers

The customer dimension produced some of the most striking examples of corporate responsibility & creativity under pressure. When normal processes break down, when customers have been displaced, have lost documentation, have no access to their financial accounts, companies face a choice: apply the standard rules, or find a way.

In Israel, financial services companies chose to find a way. Credit card issuers arrived at evacuation centers on the third day of the conflict, offering emergency cards without the standard verification process generally applied. Banks created protective financial shields such as payment moratoriums, fee waivers and mortgage deferrals for millions of customers whose lives had been uprooted and even shattered. These actions were taken without regulatory requirement.

They were expressions of what is often described as "the social license to operate": the understanding that long-term corporate legitimacy depends on how companies behave when their customers are most vulnerable.

Domain 5: Community and Society

The final domain encompasses corporate action at the broadest social level, beyond the company's direct relationships with its own employees, suppliers, and customers.

Immediate financial mobilization

One of the most immediate forms of corporate community response is financial – direct donations to civil society partners and, in many cases, to communities with which companies have ongoing relationships. This is usually based on geographic proximity to company sites or long-standing partnerships. The speed of corporate giving matters here: while government and official channels often move slowly through bureaucratic processes, companies can deploy resources quickly and directly where they are needed most. This speed is particularly valuable for civil society organizations, which frequently face sudden and exceptional operational costs in the first days of a crisis and depend on fast, flexible funding to function effectively.

Leveraging core business capabilities

Having said that, the most distinctive and sustainable form of community support is actually not financial donation, but rather the deployment of what a company is uniquely positioned to provide. Food companies, for example, contributed first and foremost through food donations but also in more innovative ways by extending support to farmers, dairies and agricultural suppliers whose operations were disrupted, drawing on their sector expertise and supply chain relationships. Similarly, logistics companies enabled humanitarian distribution, technology companies provided digital infrastructure, pharmaceutical companies ran mobile health clinics, and retail chains set up emergency points of sale in evacuation zones.

This kind of contribution, rooted in core competence rather than extracted from it, is more sustainable, more scalable, and more genuinely useful than generic philanthropic giving.

Long-term recovery commitments

This is perhaps the most forward-looking element of the framework. Companies that distinguished themselves in crisis did not limit their commitment to immediate relief. They made explicit pledges to support rebuilding, with structured investment in affected communities and sectors, oriented toward sustainable recovery rather than one-time transfers. Building back better becomes not just a slogan, but a specific, plannable set of corporate actions.

THE ROLE OF THE CSR/ESG OFFICER IN TIMES OF CRISIS

When a crisis breaks, the ESG or corporate responsibility officers occupy a uniquely consequential position inside the organization, and they are suddenly needed simultaneously by operations, HR, communications etc. What they do in the first hours, days, and weeks matters not only for the company's response, but for the shape of their role going forward.

Drawing on conversations with CSR professionals from major companies in Israel who navigated the first months of crisis following October 7, 2023, the following framework describes what the role looks like in practice.

The First Phase: Immediate Mobilization

In the first days and weeks of a crisis, the CSR officer functions as an emergency coordinator. The priorities are speed, clarity, and connection.

Rapid needs assessment

- Working alongside HR and other departments, quickly map which employees, communities, and partner organizations have been directly affected and what they urgently need.
- Avoid the trap of giving what is easiest to give. The discipline of understanding what affected people actually need (rather than assuming) before mobilizing resources. The most impactful interventions came from listening first.
- One Israeli CSR professional described visiting families evacuated from the warzone at the hotel they were housed in temporarily. They expressed that what they wanted most was not aid packages, it was the ability to cook their own food. The "Taste of Home" project that followed, bringing families to cook together in company kitchens, had a depth of impact that no donation could replicate.

Activating pre-existing relationships

- The CSR officer's network of NGO, municipal, and community relationships, built over years of normal operations, becomes critical infrastructure in a crisis.
- Phone calls that might take weeks in normal times happen in hours. Trust that has been established over time enables speed. Partnerships that might have required formal processes can be activated informally.
- Companies that had invested in stakeholder relationships before the crisis reported being able to mobilize support within days. Those that had not, had to build those relationships from scratch under the worst possible conditions.

Bridging the corporate and social worlds

- The CSR officer bridges between the company's internal world and the external social world, communicating what is happening in affected communities to senior leadership, and representing the company's resources and intentions to external partners.
- This bridging role of helping leadership understand what actually need, not just what the company finds easy to offer, is one of the most valuable things a CSR officer can contribute in a crisis.
- In organizations where the CSR function sits within senior management structures, with access to HR, finance, security, and operations, this translation function is significantly more effective.

The Second Phase: Structured Response

As the initial emergency stabilizes into what one Israeli professional called "a wartime routine," the CSR officer's role evolves from mobilization to coordination.

Coordinating cross-functional response

- Effective crisis response draws on every function of the organization: HR for employee welfare, finance for emergency payments, operations for logistics, communications for internal and external messaging.
- The CSR officer, particularly in organizations where they sit within a senior management hub, is uniquely positioned to convene and coordinate across these functions. They know what each team is doing, they understand the full picture, and they can identify gaps and connections that no single team sees.
- This systemic view, seeing the whole organization as a unit of response, is perhaps the highest-value contribution the CSR function can make in a crisis.

Managing the pace of response

- Crisis generates an enormous amount of creative energy. New initiatives, partnerships, and programs emerge rapidly, often faster than they can be evaluated or managed.
- The CSR officer plays a crucial filtering and prioritizing role: ensuring that energy is directed toward initiatives with real impact, that partnerships are chosen strategically, and that the organization does not exhaust itself in the first weeks, leaving nothing for the long months ahead.
- Agility matters enormously. The ability to move quickly, decide without perfect information, and adapt as circumstances change distinguishes the most effective crisis responders.

Cross-sector and cross-company collaboration

- No single company, however large, can meet the full scale of social need in a major crisis. Collaboration is structurally necessary – between companies, between companies and NGOs, between companies and government.
- CSR officers are particularly well-positioned to initiate and sustain these collaborations. They understand the logic of partnership, they know the key actors in the social ecosystem, and they are practiced in navigating the tensions between competitive and collaborative interests.
- In Israel, cross-company forums and initiatives were convened within days of the crisis beginning – pooling resources, avoiding duplication, and scaling impact far beyond what any single company could achieve.

The Third Phase: Recovery and Reinvention

The most experienced CSR professionals in Israel consistently described a third phase, one that begins when the immediate emergency has stabilized but the underlying crisis has not resolved. This phase is in many ways the most demanding, because the urgency has receded but the need has not.

Sustaining commitment over the long term

- The initial wave of corporate generosity, driven by shock, solidarity, and visibility, is relatively easy to generate. What is much harder is maintaining the same level of commitment twelve, eighteen, twenty-four months or more into a crisis that has become chronic.
- Effective CSR officers work proactively to re-anchor the organization's commitment, ensuring that long-term recovery initiatives are funded, that community relationships are maintained, and that the company's values are visible not just in the first weeks but in the long haul.
- This requires internal advocacy: making the business case for sustained investment, connecting community outcomes to employee engagement and organizational culture, and finding ways to make the ongoing commitment visible and meaningful.

Reinventing the role for what comes next

- Crisis permanently changes the CSR role. The professionals who navigated the most challenging periods in Israel were unanimous on this point: the function does not return to what it was before.
- The scope expands: new stakeholders, new responsibilities, new expectations from leadership. The pace changes: a function that once operated on quarterly cycles must become capable of responding in days. The strategic visibility increases: leaders who saw CSR as a reporting function have discovered it to be a critical operational asset.
- This is an opportunity as much as a challenge. Crisis has demonstrated the value of the CSR function in ways that years of reporting had not. The professionals who seize this moment, who build on the credibility they have earned, will shape a significantly more influential role going forward.

“The role never goes back to being exactly what it was before. It always changes in the face of the challenges it encounters. And that is also what makes this field fascinating – every year looks different.” CSR professional, interviewed for Maala’s “Corporate Responsibility in Wartime” podcast series

Key Capabilities for the ESG Officer in Crisis

Across the conversations with Israeli ESG professionals, several capabilities emerged consistently as the defining attributes of effective crisis leadership:

- **Agility:** The ability to move fast, decide with incomplete information, and change course as circumstances evolve. There is not always time to wait for perfect information or standard process of authorization to act.
- **Relationship capital:** Pre-existing relationships with NGOs, municipalities, suppliers, and government bodies. In crisis, you can only move as fast as your trust allows. Build these relationships before you need them.
- **Systemic vision:** The ability to see the full organizational picture, to understand how HR, operations, communications, and community response interact, and to act as an integrator across functions.
- **Emotional intelligence and listening:** The discipline to understand what affected people actually need, rather than what is easiest to give. The best crisis interventions in Israel came from listening before acting.
- **Organizational intelligence:** The ability to navigate internal dynamics, advocate effectively with leadership, manage competing priorities, and build the coalitions needed to sustain commitment over time.
- **Resilience:** Crisis is exhausting. Managing pace, building team support, and maintaining personal sustainability are crucial professional requirements.

THE ROLE OF BUSINESS UMBRELLA ORGANIZATIONS

When crisis strikes, no single company, however large or well-resourced, can meet the full scale of social need. The coordination challenge is immense: dozens or hundreds of companies wanting to help, thousands of community organizations and affected populations expressing needs, and government systems under simultaneous pressure. Without coordination, even well-intentioned corporate generosity becomes fragmented, duplicative, and sometimes counterproductive.

This is the essential function of business umbrella organizations and corporate responsibility networks in times of crisis: not to replace individual corporate action, but to make it more effective.

In practice, this means mapping validated needs from the field, preventing duplication of effort, bridging the gap between corporate capacity and civil society knowledge, and enabling collective initiatives that no single company could sustain alone. The “Businesses Mobilized” initiative that emerged in Israel, as a collaboration between several organization, offers a working model. Several principles from that experience proved particularly important:

Maintaining a full, updated picture of needs

- Umbrella organizations are uniquely positioned to both track needs across geographies, sectors, and communities, and to share that picture actively and regularly with member companies, flagging gaps and helping redirect capacity where it is most needed. This requires ongoing coordination with civil emergency services, municipalities, NGOs, and frontline organizations.
- This picture has two dimensions: urgent, immediate needs that require fast response; and quieter, less visible needs that receive less attention but are no less important. Both require active mapping.

Balance immediate response with long-term thinking

- The most common failure mode in crisis philanthropy is an overwhelming focus on immediate, visible, humanitarian needs, often at the expense of resources for recovery and rebuilding.
- Umbrella organizations must hold both timeframes simultaneously: ensuring that urgent needs are met now, and that reserves of capacity (financial, organizational, relational) are preserved for the longer recovery phase. Building back better requires sustained investment, not just emergency relief.
- This is structurally difficult because immediate needs are tangible and visible, while recovery needs are diffuse and long-term. The umbrella organization must actively advocate for long-term investment even when the pressure of the moment is entirely toward the immediate.

Coordinate with government, not around it

- Effective crisis coordination works with civil defense authorities, municipal structures, and government ministries, not in parallel to them. The most efficient distribution of resources happens when corporate capacity is channeled into validated needs, rather than running alongside official systems.
- This requires relationships built before the crisis. Umbrella organizations that have established working relationships with government and civil society partners before an emergency can activate those relationships quickly. Those that have not must build them from scratch under pressure.

Ensure efficiency and accountability

- Donors, whether companies or individuals, need to trust that resources are reaching their intended destinations efficiently. Umbrella organizations have a responsibility to provide transparency about where resources are going, what impact they are having, and where gaps remain.
- This is not just a governance requirement. It is what sustains commitment over the long term. Companies that see clear evidence of impact continue to engage. Those that cannot trace the effect of their contributions often withdraw.

KEY TAKEAWAYS AND ACTION POINTS

Crisis does not create corporate responsibility, it reveals it. The companies that responded most effectively when crisis arrived were not improvising. They were drawing on cultures, relationships, and commitments that had been built over time, long before the emergency began.

The framework in this playbook is not a checklist. It is an attempt to map the terrain that responsible companies navigate when normal conditions break down, across their employees and families, their supply chains, their customers, and the communities around them. The social dimension always rises to the top. Speed matters. Listening matters. And the quality of a company's relationships – with its people, its partners, and the society it operates in – determines how effectively it can act.

Three principles stand out above all others:

Prepare before you need to. The companies that responded well had not waited for a crisis to think about what they would do. They had frameworks, relationships, and values in place. Crisis readiness is not a contingency plan in a drawer, it is a culture that is practiced continuously.

Expand your sense of responsibility. Crisis consistently pushes companies beyond their normal boundaries to the families of employees, to vulnerable suppliers, to customers who have lost everything. The companies that led most effectively were those willing to ask: how far does our responsibility actually extend? And then act on the answer.

Stay the course. The hardest phase of any crisis is not the first weeks, when urgency is high and solidarity is visible. It is the months and years that follow, when the emergency has receded but the need has not. Sustained commitment – through recovery, not just response – is what separates genuinely responsible organizations from those that showed up only when the cameras were on.

This playbook was built from real experience. The lessons here were not derived from theory, they were observed in practice, under pressure, by companies that had to figure it out in real time. We hope it serves as a useful starting point for your own preparation.

This playbook is a living document, shaped by ongoing experience and dialogue. If you have questions, insights to share, or would like to continue the conversation, we welcome you to write to us at: info@maala.org.il