

An equitable response to the COVID-19 crisis

This is a summary document, the session can be watched in full on [ACEVO's website](#)

Speakers: Wanda Wyporska, director, Equality Trust; Becca Bunce, human rights activist; Mubin Haq, chief executive, Standard Life Foundation; Camille St-Omer Donaldson, organiser, Charity So White.

Introduction

Although we will all be impacted by Covid-19, we won't all be impacted equally. A crisis such as coronavirus highlights the inequality individuals are already experiencing, and compounds systemic difficulties for many marginalised communities.

During this crisis, organisations of all kinds will be moving with speed to secure their survival, find and distribute emergency funding, support the people they work with and stay abreast of government announcements. Moving quickly is essential, but the need to act quickly does not justify actions or behaviour which exclude others or reinforces harmful practice.

What does coronavirus show us about inequality?

Wanda Wyporska, director, Equality Trust

It has never been more important to talk about inclusivity. A lot of charities that are facing crisis are small grassroots charities, often working with marginalised communities, and those charities are often doing the job of the state. Not focusing on inclusion is dangerous because it is essential that charities are able to deliver the right services to the people that need them most at this time of national crisis.

COVID-19 will impact people from low income households more than those from affluent backgrounds and marginalised groups including disabled people, BAME people, and single parents are disproportionately represented in low-income households.

The effect of a lack of resources means that people from low income households won't be able to flee to a second home, it will be harder to buy affordable food, and for those in overcrowded or unsafe homes it will be difficult to stay inside. In addition to that, people that experience prejudice in the 'traditional' workplace are more likely to be freelancers or have set up their own businesses leading to less job stability for these people during the crisis.

During the pandemic charities should keep their eye on the new powers going through parliament and the additional power such legislation gives to the state. We know which groups are disproportionately impacted by increased police powers and we must keep an eye on the human rights implications of new laws and enforcement practices.

Charities need to talk to the people they work with because they have the answers. While there is a need for speed, this is not an excuse for command and control. If fast decisions are made that are the wrong ones, they can do more harm than good.

Charities should not work in silos and there must be support from larger organisations with more resource to stop grassroots charities from going to the wall. There needs to be more agile and collaborative leadership, this includes joint working between organisations: large and small, national and local.

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Long term COVID-19 will change how charities work and there are already examples of that happening. There will be innovative practice that comes out of changes to the way charities operate caused by COVID-19. Charities will have to think more broadly about who their audiences are and how they engage them. But alongside that it will make charities think more about collaboration and mergers, how they can work together more effectively.

We have had high levels of inequality in this country for decades. It is crucial now that government steps in because intergenerational equality has left households without a financial safety net. Politicians need to take the first step and recognise the impact of inequality during the pandemic.

Learning from margins: Creating social connection when social isolation becomes the norm

Becca Bunce, human rights activist

Charities are having to move quickly to take digital tools and online spaces seriously, whereas previously such spaces were often dismissed as 'armchair activism' or lazy activism. In the short term there is a massive boom with charities suddenly picking up a variety of online tools, but this comes with its own challenges as not all online tools are accessible. There are still groups that are digitally excluded and charities must take action to include them in order to prevent social isolation.

There is a risk that as the sector changes to adopt new practices, certain toxic behaviours just move online. Charities also have to think about how inequality plays out in online space, for example women of colour are more likely to experience online abuse. It is also important to think about how challenging behaviour can play out online, especially when compounded with an emotionally challenging situation like the country is experiencing at the moment.

It is important to be aware that the online space can replicate the inequality that exists in the offline space. If racist, sexist, ableist or other harmful comments happen in the office, these will also happen online, and those comments are effectively now entering a person's home. This links into boundaries and making sure there are breaks and down time. It is going to be hard to work 9 – 5 for many people right now, and there is a need to be flexible but think about the tools we can use (like delayed delivery) to make sure people's phones and emails are not pinging when they are trying to rest.

Working from home, and working truly flexibly, is a skillset which hasn't previously been recognised. At the moment people are not just working from home, they are working from home in a pandemic, it is a stressful situation. People need to pace themselves, and support others to do so. What is happening now as a result of the pandemic, financial insecurity, social isolation, denied access to space, arbitrary government decisions, is a microcosm of what people at the sharp end of inequality have experienced for years. For those that have not experienced this before, there is learning to be done about how it feels to be in a constant state of anxiety, taking time to understand the tools that help. It is important that to be in a constant state of learning and not just wait for the pandemic to end and do a round-up of lessons learnt.

This experience may change the sector's understanding of disability as something broader than visible physical impairments. There may be people who have hidden disabilities that have not disclosed in the workplace before because of a fear of being discriminated against or losing their jobs. However an individual may now need to disclose a disability because they are in a high-risk

category. As leaders do not ask them to qualify or prove their disability, focus on asking about the support they need right now. People have experienced lots of harm through not feeling able to disclose and we need to learn from that.

The language being used around disability now can be dehumanising and othering. The word 'vulnerable' has been used a lot but it can be a very jarring word for people to hear about themselves. The best way to think about vulnerability is in relation to power. That vulnerability around choices we make is challenging because people are forced to admit that harm can be done to you by people who hold power over you. Allyship is essential now and we need to platform people with experience of working from home and making sure those who have led in online community building (typically marginalised people) are credited. Opportunity to meaningfully share that power and provide a platform.

The communication and language used right now has serious implications for people in high-risk groups, because people keep saying their lives are expendable. Prioritising treatment of people who are more likely to survive is a hard idea to hold. Talk directly to people in high risk groups, send messages, and check in on people. Asking for help might be hard, e.g. disabled women experiencing domestic violence. If communications are not targeted at these groups they are even more isolated. Disabled people are often left out and excluded from activism, for example climate activism – urgency of this situation must not result in further discrimination. Our lack of understanding about care needs and disability will be exposed at this time. Ask this question: who are we missing, who is not going to be included, and who is experiencing this at the harshest end?

Equitable grant giving

Mubin Haq, chief executive, Standard Life Foundation

London Funders coordinated a joint response quickly, and this level of coordination feels unprecedented and has been very impressive.

There are three main things for Trusts and Foundations to be thinking about:

1. Grants programmes

This is where the London Funders statement is particularly useful, as it focused on the flexibility that needs to be offered to charities at the moment. Flexibility will be easier for some foundations than others, for example those that are already giving unrestricted core funding. But there are things that all trusts and foundations can do, for example relaxing timelines and reporting criteria. Key to this is a dialogue between the funder and the grantee.

Funders can help by not being too 'needy', not putting onerous processes in place. Foundations are fortunate to have endowments, so they don't have the same kind of immediate short-term challenges that many charities have.

Arts Council England had a particularly strong response, allowing charities to pay freelancers and artists who may otherwise have lost funds. There are many other examples of great work e.g. Community Foundations, Wellcome Foundation, National Emergency Trust, Nuffield Foundation. The other things funders can do is think about advocacy. Funders have a lot of intelligence and they can advocate themselves. Some funders are more familiar with this kind of approach, e.g. Joseph

Rowntree Foundation but funders can think about how they can advocate and support the people and communities they work with on the ground.

2. Operations

Trusts and foundations are, like everyone else having to think about how staff work from home, and how grant payments can be made.

3. Investments

Most funders are invested in some way in the stock market and that has plummeted. No-one knows how far this will go, and how long it will go on for and what the impact will be in future years. This may mean an immediate cut in programmes. For funders with permanent endowments (where the value of the endowment must be maintained), this will be particularly difficult. For those with an expendable endowment then thinking that this is an unprecedented moment and how should this be approached. For those with a permanent endowment dialogue with the Charity Commission could help and ensure flexibility can be found.

Role of government

Trusts and foundations however have their limitations, there is a role for government as they have the resources to respond to this in a way that no other group can. The Job Retention Scheme announced by the Chancellor was an important and necessary step but also need to think about the role of the voluntary sector. The role of our sector is how to advocate for what the needs of people and communities are, to keep communities together at this crucial time.

Developing new programmes

Normally developing new programmes is done over a long period of time and with a lot of direct engagement. Funders must move with speed and be engaging as possible but a lot of this doesn't need to be reinvented and won't require a big evidence gathering exercise. We already know that coronavirus will hit some groups, and people on the lowest income harder than others. There are other groups that perhaps weren't initially thought about, like the result of self-isolation on people experiencing domestic abuse or the impact on single parents. There will be a lot of cross-cutting themes, for example ethnicity, gender, migration status.

We need to see greater collaboration and partnerships with user-led groups, it cannot be seen as a nice to have, it is a must have. The leadership we need to see now is humble, we need to be thinking about the medium and longer term – what kind of society do we want to see at the end? The situation we are facing now is the situation that many marginalised people have experienced, and people with resources and people in positions of privilege are just waking up to that. We need to think creatively, collaboratively and ditch any branding. Leaders should focus on the advocacy and advocating for the needs of the people they support.

Covid-19: How can the sector ensure that our response is through a racial justice lens?

Camille St-Omer Donaldson, organiser, Charity So White

Racial justice is about the systematic, fair treatment of people of all races. If achieved, it results in equitable outcomes and opportunities. Charity So White focuses on power and privilege rather than

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just diversity and inclusion, this is because a focus on diversity and inclusion can result on a focus on the numbers and saying 'more research' is needed rather than looking at structures and processes. The threats to racial justice work are internal to the sector and external to it. Internally, there is a fear that racial justice work will be de-prioritised, for example ACEVO and Voice4Change England were originally going to launch a report on racism in the charity sector today, for very understandable reasons that hasn't taken place, but how can we make sure progress isn't ignored while people focusing on responding. If the charity sector loses a focus on racial justice in its response than the sector could end up even whiter, and less inclusive than it was before the crisis. Ways of working are changing quickly but we have to be careful that this doesn't come at the expense of BAME people. There is work for example done by The [Ubele](#) Initiative which looks at the impact on COVID-19 on the BAME community.

For leaders that are acting quickly and thinking about using their power to make change happen, then consider what happened in civil society's response to Grenfell, when grassroots and community organisations were marginalised by those with power and trust was lost. The charity sector must demonstrate that it has learnt the lessons from responding to Grenfell.

Externally, charities must look at the fact BAME people are overrepresented in vulnerable groups that are going to be impacted by the crisis. The impact on low income households and people without access to public funds, both of which BAME people are overrepresented in. The announcements about GCSEs and A-levels being teacher assessed and research supports that teachers bias negatively impacts grades given to BAME pupils – so what are the long-term impacts on people of colour of these decisions?

There are opportunities for the charity sector which is uniting, but how can we make sure the practice we see now – for example flexible funding practice – is sustained into the future. Suddenly lots of things the charity sector couldn't do before can be done and are happening, those blockers must not return. Charities should be innovative about how they move forward. Charities should be working based on a set of principles that they can uphold, holding themselves accountable so voices aren't lost.

In other crises equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) are put on the backburner but this just stores up problems for later. Charities must keep their EDI glasses on. This EDI lens has to be intersectional: when we talk about vulnerable groups the message has often been for older people and some disabled people have been left out of that discussion. For example, what does a response look like that meets the needs of a self-employed black disabled woman?

Leaders can support the work of Charity So White and charities like Runnymede Trust working in this space by reading, sharing, engaging and acting on their work. Also by challenging the government and people with power to make sure responses meet the needs of people of colour.

What questions should CEOs be asking?

Collaboration

- Who has been involved in developing this policy/idea/fund/project? Who was not in the room? Who has power and influence in this process?
- Have I given up any power/control or am I just talking to more people?

- As a leader, am I still trying to learn and grow despite the need for speed? Have I asked colleagues and partners for feedback and thoughts? Can I work differently in order to support the inclusion of more people?
- Have I checked in with my team? Can I tackle any challenges they are facing in terms of these new ways of working? Have I truly offered them the flexibility they need, in light of possible illness and new caring responsibilities?
- If I have managed a quick response in this crisis, have I engaged fully with:
 - other organisations in my local area
 - organisations that might be smaller than me, and more vulnerable to close during this crisis?
 - have I managed this response in silo, or in partnership with them?

Working with communities

- Which groups have the least resource? Which groups will be more likely to experience harm because of the crisis?
- Do I understand how intergenerational inequality has impacted the resources available to the groups I am working with?
- This is about power. In all of my responses, have I:
 - Considered my own power in this specific space or issue, and how I relate to others?
 - Considered my organisation's power, and relationship to other organisations?
 - Noticed any new changes of power dynamics, and people who are newly vulnerable in relation to these changes of power?
 - **Given up** power, and recognised what I can't do myself? Have I tried to maximise my own power, or share it?

Long-term change

- What learning and changes in practice can be carried forward? How can I implement more flex in our organisations systems to we have more capacity for crisis responses?
- Have I learnt anything from the decisions I have made? Can I store this learning anywhere, and return to it when things settle to implement learning meaningfully?
- What blockers have I overcome to implement urgent strategies, and how do I keep those blocks out of my organisation, rather than reverting?

Resources mentioned

Glitch website - <https://glitch.com/>

London Funders Statement: <http://covid19funders.org.uk/>

Mia Mingus: transformative justice -

<https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2019/01/09/transformative-justice-a-brief-description/>

Runnymede Trust - <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/>

@CharitySoWhite (Twitter) – www.charitysowhite.org