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## ORIGINAL RESEARCH

# Socially responsible human resources management and stakeholders' Health Promotion: A conceptual paper

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## Abstract

The prime objective of this paper is to propose a new conceptual framework for how integrating corporate social responsibility (CSR) and human resources management (HRM) can impact on stakeholders' health and wellbeing. The proposed framework argues that integrative socially responsible HRM (SR-HRM) policies coupled with public health literacy and integrative responsible leadership can play a significant role in shaping health behaviour change of internal stakeholders, which in turn can spill over to external stakeholders (family and proximate communities).

From a health promotion and population health perspective, we see human resources (HR) as a leading partner in educating employees on the value of CSR and public health literacy programmes, and also as providing action plans on how to strategically and successfully implement these types of programmes. By helping to develop action plans to analyse CSR and public health literacy activities, HR professionals will be promoting both corporate citizenship and health behaviour change. Both of these are vital for developing a culture of social responsibility (and achieving the triple bottom line (TBL)) and sustainable population health promotion. Henceforth, SR-HRM policies and practices could help business organizations to contribute to the achievement of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and specifically Goals 3 and 8. This novel framework, which is especially pertinent to public health, has not yet been tested empirically. Hence, future studies are warranted to empirically test the theoretical framework using field data collection.

**Keywords:** *corporate social responsibility, public health literacy, responsible leadership, socially responsible human resources, stakeholders' health and wellbeing.*

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## Introduction

In recent years, various scholars have argued that there is a need to integrate corporate social responsibility (CSR) and human resources management (HRM) across business organizations in order to better advance a sustainability agenda and, ultimately, the triple bottom line (TBL) of profit, people, planet – or, differently put, economic, social and environmental sustainability (1,2). Notwithstanding positive findings regarding the importance of CSR as a potential strategic partner for HRM in management, there still is the need to better understand how this relationship can be understood in other disciplines such as public health. In the context of how business organizations can contribute to address society's wicked problems, and especially the promotion of stakeholders' health and wellbeing, it has recently been argued that integrated CSR-HRM can contribute to improving population health through public health literacy (3). Therefore, this paper attempts to propose a conceptual framework for how integrated CSR-HRM can potentially affect stakeholders' health and wellbeing within the context of sustainable development in terms of the TBL. The paper first discusses concepts regarding the integration of CSR-HRM, then proposes a framework for how the nexus of CSR-HRM can contribute to the promotion of internal and external stakeholders' health and wellbeing, and finally identifies a future research agenda.

### **The integration of corporate social responsibility and human resource management**

Corporate social responsibility involves integrating social, environmental and ethical concerns, as well as respect for human rights and consumer concerns, in a business organization's business operations and its basic strategy as a means to maximize the creation

of value for its owners, stakeholders and society in the broad sense; and further identifying, preventing and mitigating their potential adverse consequences on the environment (4). For the business organization, it means the introduction of socially responsible elements in the daily management of its business that legitimize its activities across the groups with which it interacts (e.g. shareholders, partners, suppliers, customers, public institutions, non-governmental organizations, employees and their families, communities, and society in general).

On the other hand, HRM is defined as the philosophy, policies, procedures and practices related to the management of an organization's employees (1). Also, HRM can be seen as a set of organizational and people-oriented functions or activities deliberately designed to influence the effectiveness of employees in the organization (5). It is suggested that HRM should be understood as concerned with all activities that are aimed to contribute to successfully attracting, developing and maintaining a high-performing workforce needed to achieve success within a business organization (5,6).

However, in recent years, the HRM role appears to have transitioned from being an administrative support service within organizations to providing a strategic HRM, thus shifting focus from a narrow maintenance role to an active one in which HR strategies are employed that integrate overall business strategy, empower employees and help restructure the organization (1,5).

According to some scholars, the CSR-HRM nexus can be understood through a common thread, the stakeholder theory, which helps to explicate the integration of CSR actions in the business organizations' management (1,2,7). The stakeholder theory focuses on the importance of stakeholders in the course and

success of CSR business activities. Nonetheless, because business organizations have multiple stakeholders that are involved in their organizational activities, it is important that they differentiate these stakeholders and prioritize them (1). The literature has proposed dividing stakeholders into two groups: (i) primary stakeholders, who have a formal contract with the organization and are essential for its proper functioning (owners, shareholders, employees, unions, customers, suppliers, etc); and (ii) secondary stakeholders, who, though not directly involved in the economic activities of a company, can exercise a significant influence on its activities (employees' families, citizens, competitors, the local community, government, public administration) (1,5,6). In this conceptual paper we consider employees as primary stakeholders, while the supply chain, consumers, local communities and society at large are considered as secondary stakeholders. Corporate social responsibility cuts across different departments in any given organization and influences the way the organization conducts its business and relates with its stakeholders, both internally and externally; the HRM activities affect all units and departments in the organization.

Through the stakeholder theory bridge, HRM systems should take increasing responsibility in managing CSR activities. This way CSR would expand the HR agenda and help its effective implementation instead of the current overlap of activities which still takes place in many business organizations (5,7). Furthermore, it has been argued that CSR can also expand the role of HRM in supporting workplace practices that contribute to organizational efficiency and effectiveness (e.g. smart working, family-friendly policies, flexible hours) (5) and that a combined CSR-HRM strategy can be the catalyst for the long-term

success of business organizations (8,9). According to Simmons, HRM needs to be seen both as a component and as a potential facilitator of CSR (8).

Voegtlin and Greenwood propose studying the link between CSR and HRM from three theoretical perspectives: the instrumental, integrative and political perspective (10). The instrumental perspective posits that the involvement of workers in CSR is instrumental in achieving greater economic outcomes for the organization. Furthermore, this perspective considers the importance of profit maximization, simply said: how CSR and HRM synergies can improve the business organization's financial performance (2,10). In this perspective, CSR is associated with hard HRM (e.g. focusing on the task that needs to be done, cost control, and achieving organizational goals).

By contrast, the integrative, or social integrative, perspective looks at how CSR and HRM can reinforce each other to create social benefit for the organization and its stakeholders. This approach bases itself in the relation between CSR and soft HRM to examine how the integration of the social demands of employees can improve their wellbeing and motivation as well as overall stakeholder value (2,10). The integrative approach to CSR-HRM links CSR strategies with soft HRM which views stakeholders (internal and external) as critical resources that are key to the business organization's long-term business strategies (2,10).

Finally, the political approach to CSR-HRM accommodates the power of corporations in society and the concomitant responsibilities this power implies. This perspective points to the relevance of contextual institutions (local, national and international) in CSR and HRM (2,10).

There have been few studies that have investigated how the integrated CSR and HRM nexus has contributed to stakeholders' outcomes from a management perspective. For instance, a study by Tekin regarding HRM dimensions in CSR, which was carried out in Turkey, found that CSR led to improvements in recruitment to organizations and that these improvements had an impact on commitment to CSR initiatives, thus making the organizations more attractive to potential employees (11). Furthermore, there was a close relationship between CSR and training activities that incorporated workplace policies (11). In another study, Celma and colleagues analysed the effectiveness of several HRM practices that were considered socially responsible, according to internal institutions, in terms of three dimensions of wellbeing: job stress, job satisfaction, and trust in management. Their results showed that higher job quality increased employees' wellbeing at work, but some practices were more effective than others for each of the wellbeing dimensions (12). Also, Shao et al. found that socially responsible HR policies increased employees' organizational citizenship behaviour while decreasing their task performance through role-ambiguity mediation (13). In the same study, prosocial motivation served as a significant moderator in strengthening the positive relationship between socially responsible HR practices and organizational citizenship behaviour as well as the negative association between socially responsible HR practices and task performance (13).

From Lithuania, Buciuene and Kazlauskaite report that there is a relationship between HRM, CSR and performance outcomes in an organization. In their study, organizations in which HRM was a function for CSR were found to have better CSR policies (14). Elsewhere, a study by Abdulmotaleb and Saha

that investigated the processes linking socially responsible HRM to employee wellbeing in Egypt found that positive employee perceptions of organizational morality arising from socially responsible HR policies and practices led to an "enhanced state-based positive affect at work that ultimately increased employee vitality" (15).

Using insights from social exchange and social identity theories, Newman and co-authors investigated the influence of three dimensions of SR-HRM, namely, legal compliance HRM, employee-oriented HRM, and general CSR facilitation, on employees' organizational citizenship behaviours in Chinese organizations (16). Their findings showed that, while organizational identification fully mediated the relationship between employee-oriented HRM and employees' citizenship organizational behaviours, general CSR facilitation of HRM had a direct effect on employee organizational citizenship behaviour. In addition, legal compliance HRM did not influence employee organizational citizenship behaviour either directly, or indirectly through organizational identification (16).

Barrena-Martínez and colleagues suggest that the integrative model of HRM needs to be studied from four complementary management perspectives. The first of these is the universalistic perspective which posits that there is a common and universal successful way in which the management of human capital organizations should be done, independent of country or any other variable (7). However, this view has been criticized for ignoring the potential contribution of context as well other variables (e.g. business strategy, technology and investments). The second perspective, the contingency perspective, argues that socially responsible HR policies re-

sult from a combination of contingent internal (e.g. structure, size, technology, business strategy) and external (e.g. organizational environment) variables to achieve a solid, responsible system (7). The third perspective, called the “configurational perspective”, sees socially responsible HR policies through the synergy and interactions of these policies with internal and external variables. This would mean a social orientation that is coherent with HR and CSR strategies consistent practices resulting from the proposed policies. In addition, socially integrated HR policies would need to consider the potential role of institutional pressures and stakeholder requirements in the context in which the organization operates. To this end, the fourth and last perspective puts emphasis on how the identification of contextual aspects outside the organization (political, socio-economic, environmental, cultural, educational and trade union aspects) as well as inside the organization (company size, technology working environment, innovation, and different stakeholders' interests) can be of great importance in the integration of socially responsible human resources management (SR-HRM) policies (7).

In this paper we argue that an integrated SR-HRM approach that takes into account the context outside (political, socio-economic, environmental, etc; see above) and inside the organization (company size, technology working environment, innovation, etc) is best positioned to contribute to stakeholders' health promotion. With this perspective in mind we expect SR-HRM policies within the organization to include public health literacy that might in the long term contribute to improvements in employees' (and their families') wellbeing. We assume that the HR component of the integration would help the messaging and implementation of initiatives

aimed to improve wellbeing based on the TBL. This would occur through training of employees in matters regarding physical activity literacy, mental health literacy, and overall wellness strategies as well as environmental-related risks linked to health outcomes. This way workplaces would develop strategies that would increase health information and services aimed at employees as well as their families.

According to Freedman and colleagues, public health literacy is the degree to which individuals and groups can obtain, process, understand, evaluate, and act upon information needed to make public health decisions that benefit the community and all its stakeholders (17). Public health literacy is seen as a challenge for public health and health promotion as it represents a new, higher level of health literacy, through which the population as a whole (and within different arenas) can better understand health information related not only to the individual, but also to the community (18). Moreover, it is posited that, compared with individual health literacy, public health literacy includes a myriad of factors such as poverty, globalization and climate change that have an influence on public health. Thus, public health literacy “takes into account the complex social, economic, environmental and systemic forces that affect health and wellbeing” (17). Hence, public health literacy is the best synergetic partner for business organizations in their pursuit of implementing SR-HRM policies and practices for the TBL, as well as for the achievement of the United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goal 3 (healthy lives and wellbeing for all at all ages) and Goal 8 (decent work and economic growth).

Individual health literacy is considered to be a stronger predictor of individual and popula-

tion health outcomes, even more than are income, ethnicity, education, employment status and age (19,20). Low health literacy has been associated with less use of preventive health services; reduced ability to manage chronic conditions (e.g. diabetes, asthma, high blood pressure); and lower likelihood to follow provider orders, such as proper use of medication; as well as feelings of shame at having low skill levels, and reduced capacity to act upon health alerts. Furthermore, low health literacy has been linked to poor self-reported health, and workplace injuries (19-21).

**Conceptual framework socially responsible human resources management and stakeholders' health promotion**

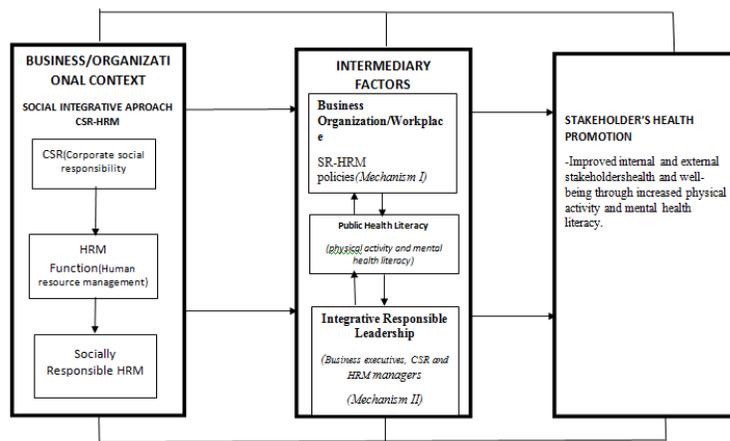
In this paper, we posit that a socially integrated CSR-HRM approach oriented through a contextual approach to management (taking into account the social, environmental, political and cultural aspects of the context in which business organizations operate) (7) will, through public health literacy at the workplace, educate employees on health and wellness. Further, the employees will in turn

disseminate health and wellbeing knowledge to other stakeholders (e.g. families and communities at large). The establishment of educational training with emphasis on physical activity, wellness and mental health literacy will contribute to the reduction of health care costs due to preventable diseases (including chronic disease), as well as to decreased levels of absenteeism and presenteeism (22).

Box 1 of the framework (Figure 1) depicts the integration of the CSR strategies with those from HRM within the context in which the organization operates (i.e. the local, national and/or international context). This way, as described above, HRM will become a function of CSR and will help deliver public health literacy (including individual literacy) to primary stakeholders (the employees).

Box 2 (Figure 1) of the framework displays potential intermediary variables in the business organization which can facilitate (or hinder) the implementation of an integrated CSR-HRM. We suggest two potential mechanisms through which an integrated CSR-HRM can influence internal and external stakeholders' health and wellbeing (physical and psychological health outcomes).

**Figure 1. Conceptual framework socially responsible human resource management and stakeholder's health promotion (authors' own adaptation of Barrena-Martinez et al. 2018 framework)**



The first mechanism includes “*socially responsible HRM policies*” that impact employee and organizational wellbeing as well as organizational performance. Barrena-Martínez and colleagues identified eight SR-HRM policies: attraction and retention of employees; training and continuous development; management of employment relations; communication, transparency and social dialogue; diversity and equal opportunity; fair remuneration and social benefits; prevention, health, and safety at work; and work–family balance (1). Empirical evidence has shown that socially responsible companies (companies that care about the TBL and sustainability in general) are likely to attract new workers (23). Employees’ training and continuous development is an important part of social responsibility, and it ensures that the employees feel empowered and become motivated to change. Employees are important assets and, hence, investment should be made in their training and development. It is argued that HR is the best change management partner for educating and empowering the entire workforce for change with regard to social responsibility, sustainability and the TBL. Others go even further to suggest that HR has the responsibility to be proactive, thus leading the way in the establishment of a business organization-wide, CSR-enabled culture (24). It is within this training and development of socially responsibility practices that we see the importance of public health literacy in contributing to the promotion of health and wellbeing. In such a context, employees will be educated about the importance of achievement of economic profit in tandem with environmental quality and social equity (25), and will also learn about how these contribute to the health and wellbeing of all stakeholders. Human resource professionals are well positioned to help with the formulation, execution

and monitoring of such training. Strandberg argues that HR managers have not only the tools but also the opportunities to leverage commitment to, and engagement in, the business organization CSR strategy (26). Engagement in such strategy can enable employees to achieve physical activity, wellness and mental health literacy, which are important predictors for the achievement of positive health outcomes. The public health literacy training would include physical activity, mental health literacy and overall notions of wellness. Here, “physical activity literacy” is defined as having the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to value and take responsibility for engagement in physical activities (27,28). On the other hand, “mental health literacy” goes beyond simple awareness of one’s mental health, to a place of greater understanding and skill development related to maintaining mental health and effectively coping with challenges. Thus, mental health literacy becomes a fundamental element of mental health promotion, and prevention, early identification, and treatment of mental health disorders (29-31).

To exemplify how an integrated CSR-HRM strategy could potentially contribute to promote stakeholders’ health we can consider a “workplace wellness program”. Such a program would aim to target modifiable risk factors of disease such as physical activity, nutrition, smoking cessation as well as mental and environmental literacy for employees and their families (3, 22). Furthermore, these activities can extend to supply chain collaborators, thus covering both internal stakeholders (employees) and external stakeholders (family members and actors in the supply chain). However, carrying out wellness programs might pose challenges to employers and employees alike. For instance, business

organizations might be conflicted from the need to make profits as well as to motivate their employees for sustainable and healthy changes, especially in the short term. In addition, organizations might lack financial and leadership-related resources (32). McCoy and colleagues reported that regardless of company size, potential barriers to workplace wellness included cost, time, expertise and legal concerns (32). Moreover, employees can be reticent to participate. For instance, a US study found that the most common barriers to employees' participation were insufficient incentives, inconvenient locations, time limitations, lack of interest in topics presented, schedule, marketing and health beliefs (33). However, we see workplace wellness and public health literacy within it as a unique opportunity to promote health and wellbeing for all stakeholders but specifically for employees (primary stakeholders) and their families.

A recent randomized clinical trial that studied the effect of a workplace wellness program on employees' health in US found that employees exposed to the program reported significantly higher rates of some positive health behaviours (e.g. weight management and regular exercise) compared with those who were not exposed. Nevertheless, the same study found no significant effects on clinical measures of health, health care spending and utilization, or employment outcomes after 18 months (34). Commenting their findings, the authors argued that it was possible that behavioural change may precede improvements in other outcomes suggesting future improvements in health or reductions in health-care spending (34). This is in line with our suggested framework where we expect public health literacy policies to contribute to behavioural change in domains of healthy life

style, mental health and environmental understanding conducive to improved health and wellbeing both in the workplace and society. According to Mujtaba et al., a company's investments in its employees' health and wellness will "pay off" for the company in the long-run and will provide benefits for employees, their co-workers, families, communities, and society as a whole (35).

Regarding the socially responsible policy of management of employment relationship, this centres on decent work, respect for human rights, ethics, social responsibility and the labour rights of the workers. Moreover, the policy encompasses employer–employee communication regarding potential changes in the organization that might alter the contractual employer–employee relationship and can contribute to employees being able to plan their careers (1). The SR-HRM policy relates to communication, and transparency in communication that promotes employee participation in the organization's decision-making. It is suggested that employees feel empowered if they perceive that they can contribute with their opinions, ideas and proposals, and activities within the organization. Of great importance here is the communication to employees, not only about the organization's economic results, but also those related to its environmental and social performance (1,36).

The diversity and equal opportunity policy is of importance in terms of employee motivation, creativity and commitment (37). It is a policy that argues for the promotion of equal opportunity and diversity at the workplace, in other words, a policy that ensures non-discrimination (e.g. based on age, ethnic background, disability) and fair policies in management practices. According to Lee et al, if employees are aware of the social value of these practices within the organization, they

will be involved with and committed to the organization in the long term because of its system of work able to produce benefits from widespread cultures and different values (38). Furthermore, the policy of “fair remuneration and social benefits” centres on the need to ensure pay equity and add value in social coverage or benefits offered to employees (1). The available evidence states that wage disparities can contribute to social conflicts between employees (39).

Prevention, health and safety at work is an SR-HRM policy that has an impact on internal and external stakeholders' wellbeing. Organizational health (including occupational health and wellness) is a growing concern for HRM today. Workers who perform their tasks under safe physical and psychosocial working conditions contribute to long-term achievement of organizational goals (40,41). We argue that within this policy, a socially integrated CSR-HRM approach will contribute to prevention because occupational health and safety, physical activity and mental health literacy will take a central stage. Increased prevention knowledge will benefit not only individual employees, but also the organization and the employees' families (which can spill over to the communities in which these employees live). Improved public health literacy (including individual health literacy) is likely to contribute to a reduction in sickness absence and presenteeism, physical inactivity, obesity, diabetes type II, cardiovascular disease, and distress which might cause depression among employees and their respective families (42-45).

The work-life balance policy aims to provide conditions that have a positive impact on stakeholders' wellbeing. Employees need to have a balance between the time allocated for work and other aspects of life (e.g. family, social and leisure activities) (46). It is argued

that organizations need to have in place mechanisms to facilitate changes in working hours to accommodate family needs, to provide time for parenthood for both men and women and, where possible, to grant transfers of employees who are geographically separated from their family. Evidence has shown that employees who experience a greater work-life balance are likely to experience better mental outcomes (47). We argue that the policies outlined above can serve as a vehicle to deliver TBL concepts for a sustainable organization in which employees will acquire knowledge of wellness promotion (physical activity and mental health literacy), which is critical to improving health and wellbeing in and outside the walls of the organization. Hence, the role of HR managers will be crucial to ensure employees' adoption of both socially responsible and healthy behaviours.

The second mechanism (see Box 2 of the framework [Figure 1]) is “*integrative responsible leadership*”, an important factor that can influence both the formulation of SR-HRM policies and the implementation of public health literacy within the organizations. According to Macassa, integrative responsible leaders are well-positioned to be agents of change for the TBL, but also to take on the important role that business organizations are likely to play for all stakeholders beyond the workplace (48). According to Maak and colleagues (49), integrative leaders exhibit behaviours that: (i) mobilize stakeholders; (ii) promote a high degree of stakeholder interaction (including the integration of legitimate but powerless constituencies) and inclusive decision making; (iii) consider strategic choices beyond the business case rationale; and (iv) show a proactive approach towards CSR (49). We expect integrative business executives to be proactive in working with both

CSR and HR managers in their organizations to provide knowledge on both sustainability and health promotion. The integrative responsibility towards all stakeholders is also expected from both CSR and HR managers. Integrative responsible leaders (CEO's) will be more prone to support their CSR and HR managers during the implementation of public health literacy and workplace wellness activities (made as part of their strategic CSR within the organization). As pointed out, responsible leaders are more inclined to do "good" and avoid "harm" to all stakeholders especially in the contexts where their business operate (3,48,49). Furthermore, as already stated these CEO's will better understand the need to promote health and well-being beyond their workplaces.

Box 3 in the framework (Figure 1) alludes to stakeholders' health and wellbeing in the form of positive health behaviour changes for employees (internal stakeholders), but also for families and the communities where employees live (external stakeholders). These outcomes can range from healthy behaviour change (e.g. increased physical activity and improved mental) or improved and hedonic wellbeing, which is linked to employee happiness, satisfaction and pain avoidance, to eudaimonic wellbeing, which relates to the employee's sense of meaning and self-realization (50).

Overall, the framework in this paper proposes two hypotheses which might be relevant in the relationship between SR-HRM and stakeholders' health and wellbeing: (i) SR-HRM policies implemented within the organization that include public health literacy will be associated with behaviour change towards environmental and social aspects linked to sustainable development as well as improvement of health outcomes. Public health literacy

training (embedded within SR-HRM policies) will contribute to changes in health behaviour among employees (and their families), which might spill over to the communities in which they reside; and (ii) integrative responsible leadership (at the top level of the company) will positively impact the planning and implementation of SR-HRM policies, thus contributing to stakeholders' health promotion.

From a health promotion, and population health, perspective, embedding public health literacy in the strategic CSR-HRM policies will not necessarily result in extra-costs for the organization; on the contrary, it might contribute to long-term profits (3). Moreover, it will boost employees' knowledge and motivate them to take decisions of importance to their health, the working environment, and the health and wellbeing of others, including the natural environment (3). However, as mentioned above, we expect that companies will adhere in different ways to an integrated CSR-HRM policy and practice, depending on the (political and cultural) context in which they operate and/or on the company size, revenue and an array of other situational factors.

### **Conclusion and future research agenda**

This conceptual paper attempts to offer a theoretical framework for how socially responsible human resource management can help improve stakeholders' health and wellbeing within the context of a business case for population health (and achievement of the TBL). The framework proposes two potential mechanisms: (i) socially responsible HR policies that include public health literacy (physical activity and mental health literacy); and (ii) integrative responsible leadership. Although HRM has been linked to employee outcomes (e.g. job satisfaction), to our knowledge this is the first time that it has been proposed to

link integrated CSR-HRM to population health outcomes in the context of sustainable development. However, the conceptual framework proposed here has not been tested empirically anywhere, let alone within the discipline of public health to which the authors pertain. This suggests the need for future studies to test the framework empirically through field data collection.

An important argument as to why it is important to make a business case for population health is that for so long business organizations have distanced themselves from the health of those outside their organizations.

But, there is now agreement that UN Agenda 2030 will not be achieved through governmental efforts alone, giving traction to the idea that business organizations (small, medium and large) will need to be a prominent partner. From the environmental and social equity perspectives as well as the health promotion context, business will need to lead by example and contribute to improve the lives of people in the contexts in which they operate, which will in the long-term contribute to financial prosperity as well as sustainable and healthy societies.

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