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## Global Challenge

After the kaleidoscope is shaken the pieces assume a different pattern. Turmoil, however unwelcome, creates opportunity.

How might we give lasting and expanded purpose to the phrase of the hour “the age of responsibility” and how might we fill it with meaning not only for the bankers and the brokers but for us all? Responsibility not just for ourselves but also for others?

I'm a realist and an optimistic. I look out into the world and back into our own history and even in the midst of misery I find reasons to be cheerful.

Across the planet the poorest communities work most effectively together. Some of the best examples of community development, social entrepreneurship and social finance are in the southern hemisphere. Previous generations in the UK came together during the darkest periods in our recent history. Indeed the wartime spirit is the stuff of legend famously resurfacing in latter disasters. A full blown recession could drive division, bitterness and exclusion or it could bring us together extracting greater value from all that we have embracing new ideas, and, above all collaborating.

The Chinese ideogram for “crisis” combines two characters. One denotes threat, the other opportunity. The choices we make in the weeks ahead will determine which is to be remembered as the dominant force

Even before the crunch Business leaders interviewed for an Economist Intelligence Unit report two years ago anticipated the importance of a new kind of collaboration. “Firms have traditionally collaborated vertically—with suppliers and distributors, for instance. But the need for agility in a fast-changing environment will drive companies to increase collaboration of all types in order to move quickly, work efficiently and continue to grow.”

We wouldn't choose these circumstances but suddenly there is an unexpected urgency, new opportunities and a clear imperative, a real need, to collaborate now across sectors, functions and geographies.

For example market prices may have dipped for stock, land or buildings but they retain intrinsic value for an entrepreneur with an alternative perspective. There is an essential social purpose for the 45,000 homes that are likely to be repossessed this year and potentially a role in utilising them for Housing Associations, local authorities, central government, charitable foundations, and the financial institutions.

Conventional financial models may be of limited use in this scenario but here's the chance for the CDFIs – the Community Development Financial Institutions that have pioneered alternative instruments to scale up and reshape the commercial landscape with socially responsible banking.

Nor should the financial sector be the only one to change. This is the time for the mutuals, co-ops and especially the social enterprises, expanding in size and purpose in recent years but still largely fringe players, to take the next step.

If unemployment has to rise might we apply the spare resource to another global challenge? This could be the opportunity we need to undertake an insulation programme across every home and every public building in the country. Ed Milliband the minister at the head of the newly created energy and climate change department has already signalled his interest in these possibilities.

Alternatively what progress might be made with delivering on the rhetoric of co- production involving the whole community in the support of one another - the willing citizen as a partner not an adjunct or an alternative to an enabling state? And whilst we are thinking aloud what would be the implications of a shorter working week for a bigger workforce? Less cash for some in the immediate future of course but in time a different quality of life for everyone.

In all this there is a welcome chance to bring CSR in from the margins of business strategy and install it at the centre fundamentally reshaping functions and process, influencing all staff and informing everything they do. For the third sector the challenge would be cultural as well as structural and just as big. Are we ready for new kinds of collaboration that could render obsolete the old divides but open up opportunities that we have yet to imagine?

And what might be the role of government in all this? Through the Prime Ministers Council on Social Action I have glimpsed the potential of ideas and structures that cross the sectors. No government action which approaches the mandatory will work in this territory but much more can be done to inspire and support innovation and engagement. This cannot be about government saying "we must" or, worse still, "you must" but rather "why shouldn't we? And here's how we can help

Each development could be individually worthwhile, maybe in just one community, one business, one institution but just as every event in the markets has triggered another so might these social solutions fire a chain reaction significantly reconfiguring the ways we live, work, learn and play.

Paradigm shifting possibilities that pull in experience from across the sectors and throughout the world could only work if we worked together and with open minds Chain Reaction - a unique and timely event open to all will examine the potential next month. It will start with an address by Dr Victoria Hale who founded the very successful San Francisco based One World Health 10 years ago. Her premise is straightforward: find promising candidate medicines in areas of great unmet need; partner with the right experts and institutions to take these medicines through development, clinical trials, and regulatory approval; and finally, deliver safe, effective, and affordable medicines to the patients in the developing world.

"One can" Dr Hale says "view the world in two ways: from the perspective of the problem, or from the perspective of the opportunity... We generate unique opportunities and invent creative solutions. We are ambitious, we are exacting, we are passionate, and we will change the face of the world, one disease at a time"

It is a measure of the timeliness of this message that BBC Director General Mark Thompson, Comic Relief founder Jane Tewson, Virgin's Richard Branson, Hazel Blears, Eden's Tim Smit, IBM's Brendon Riley, CBI's Richard Lambert, NCVO's Stuart Etherington, Big Issue's John Bird, Royal Mail's Adam Crozier, Divine Chocolate's Sophie Tranchell, and Dragons James Caan and Peter Jones, will be amongst the 500 other participants at Chain Reaction exploring the "unique opportunities" and the "creative solutions" that will "change the face of the world" in the years ahead.

There are moments of opportunity for every generation. This may be ours. Join us.

Details at [www.chain-reaction.org](http://www.chain-reaction.org) or e.mail me at [info@chainreaction.org](mailto:info@chainreaction.org).

Article by David Robinson co-founder of Community Links and of the Council on Social Action: in a personal capacity.

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