The Label Will Change Again. Will the Work Survive It?

By Suze François, MPA | April 1, 2026

I have watched this field rename itself across four decades.

It was Corporate Social Responsibility. Then Triple Bottom Line. Then Creating Shared Value. Then ESG. The labels accumulated. Conferences were held. Reports were written. Frameworks were built. And through every transition, the practitioners I respect most kept their heads down and kept doing the work because they understood, even then, that the label was never the point.

I want to be honest about something: there are organizations today whose boards never wavered. Whose leadership never needed the political climate to tell them what mattered. And whose social impact work is as funded, as supported, and as integrated as it has ever been. That is real, and it deserves to be said.

But there is also a harder conversation happening in our field right now. And I think we owe each other the honesty to have it.

At nearly every conference I have attended over the past several years, practitioners have said some version of the same thing: the next frontier is to embed this work into business operations. Not as a program that runs alongside the business. Not as a team that reports to communications or sits in a silo adjacent to strategy. But as a true business function woven into procurement, into HR, into product development, into how capital gets allocated and how decisions get made.

We have been saying it. Writing it. Recommending it. And for most organizations, it has remained exactly what we called it: the next frontier. Not yet the current practice.

Then 2026 arrived. And the standalone ESG program, the one that always lived one leadership change away from defunding and one political cycle away from being quietly deprioritized, is being tested in exactly the way we privately knew it could be.

I am not here to argue about whether that is fair. I am here to ask a different question.

> *What if 2026 is telling us something we already knew, but did not yet have all the pieces in place to act on?*

Embedding social impact into operations is not a rebranding exercise. I want to be clear about that, because it would be easy to read what I am saying as simply calling the work something else and moving on. That is not what I mean.

What I mean is harder than that. It means building relationships across functions that were not designed to think about people and planet. It means doing work for which someone else gets credit. It means advancing under a different name, whether that is supply chain resilience, workforce stability, license to operate, or risk management, not because you are retreating from your values, but because the outcome matters more than the attribution. It means the kind of patience and organizational tenacity that most institutions have never asked of this function before.

Getting all the pieces aligned is genuinely difficult. It requires the right relationships, the right moment inside the organization, and a willingness to work across functions that were never designed with people and planet in mind. That is why it has remained the frontier for so many organizations, not because practitioners lacked conviction, but because the work is structurally hard.

It is demanding. It is slow. And it is the only version of this work that is truly sustainable.

Because here is what it looks like when it works: supplier due diligence that is simply how procurement operates. Workforce dignity that is simply HR policy. Community investment that is simply how the business develops markets and earns trust. There is no ESG budget to cut because there is no ESG budget. It dissolved into every other budget. There is no ESG team to defund because the work is no longer located in a team. It is located in the institution.

When that happens, everyone wins. The company wins through resilience it did not have to manufacture. The workforce wins through conditions that do not depend on a favorable political climate. The communities win through investment that is not contingent on a program surviving the next budget cycle. The environment wins through decisions that consider long-term consequence as a matter of course. And the practitioner wins by having built something that outlasts the weather.

That is not a compromise. That is the finish line. It always was.

The environmental dimension of this work has embedded faster, and the reasons why are worth understanding by anyone trying to accelerate the social side.

So I want to close with the questions I am sitting with, and that I suspect some of you are sitting with too.

> *Maybe 2026 is not a setback. Maybe it is the moment that finally creates the conditions to do what the field has been pointing toward all along.*

> *Maybe the time has come to stop treating social impact as a standalone program and to build it, finally, as a true business function.*

> *Maybe the sustainability of this work was always going to live inside the operation itself. Maybe we always knew that. Maybe now is simply the moment we stop waiting and do it.*

The label will change again. Let’s make sure the work doesn’t have to.