

[temp: source: saved from <http://www.csis.org/human/991102Ogata.html>]

Can Business Help? Partnership and Responsibilities in Humanitarian Work

Speech by

Mrs. Sadako Ogata

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to the Center for Strategic & International Studies

November 1, 1999

On November 1 and 2, CSIS co-hosted a conference with the Business Humanitarian Forum Association on [Defining New Cooperation in the Humanitarian Agenda](#). Mrs. Sadako Ogata, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, was one of the keynote speakers.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me to the Business Humanitarian Forum. It is an honour to be with you tonight. I am very glad to see that you are pursuing this initiative. Today's discussions were most interesting, and I was particularly encouraged by the fact that the Forum decided to focus on problems far from the spotlights of media interest and public passion: such as Africa and the "gap" between humanitarian and development assistance.

A common focus: people

I would like to start by speaking about working together - you, business people, we, humanitarian organisations, and of course governments. Is there room, and is there a rationale for business to cooperate more closely with humanitarian agencies? I think the answer is clearly yes. This support, however, should not be simply a contribution to a good cause. Nor should it be a convenient image booster for companies that want to "look good". Supporting humanitarian and refugee programmes is much more than this. Supporters become stakeholders in activities on which depend the lives of many people, and adhere to a set of values with people at their center.

In short, supporters must accept responsibilities.

UNHCR's work offers a good example. Refugees are a real, global responsibility. As we say in our jargon, it is a "mandated" responsibility, in the sense that the international community has entrusted UNHCR - through a system of legal conventions and accepted practices - with the custody of refugee protection. UNHCR's mission is therefore neither optional, nor selective. It is not even simply humanitarian, since it concerns a very specific set of people, with very specific needs. It is a mission that must be carried out wherever and whenever refugees need protection and assistance.

However, we cannot work alone. We need partners, who by becoming associated to our work also help us shoulder the literally vital responsibility of protecting and assisting refugees. This is well understood by NGOs, our traditional partners, with whom we have developed a complex and

relatively sophisticated system of cooperation. This, I would like to propose tonight, must also be true for newly emerging partners, with whom we need to enter into much more meaningful dialogue. In our own sphere of work, we have made efforts - for example by including the corporate sector among the targets of a "reach-out" campaign to explain and discuss UNHCR's refugee protection mandate. These efforts must be broadened, and the Business Humanitarian Forum is a starting point. We must define, better than we have ever done before, how new partners, and business in particular, have a stake in humanitarian responsibilities.

We - governments, business and humanitarians - have a common goal: meeting the needs of people. Governments are interested in people as citizens. Business focuses on people as shareholders, customers or employees. Humanitarian agencies are concerned by the plight of certain categories - victims of war, the poor, refugees. We look at people from different perspectives, but the dynamics of our relationships can boost everybody's ability to deal more effectively with people, and to fulfil respective responsibilities.

I would like to insist in particular on the idea that business focuses on people. Flip through any magazine. Or watch commercials on TV. Most company ads insist that their business is about people - "we care for people", "our work is about people". Of course, some of this is rhetoric - flattering people, making them feel that they are not exploited. But it is also profoundly true that business - especially today, in an increasingly deregulated and globalized world - must make people feel that they matter; not only in slogans, but also in reality. Business is about profit - but then, profit, of course, and increasingly so, is about people.

It is not by chance that an agency working in some of the most remote, inhospitable and dangerous parts of the world, such as UNHCR, often finds itself on the ground in close contact with the field staff of business companies. The immediate purpose of our presence is not the same, but being there creates a common proximity with people often deprived and suffering. And in many places, I have seen this proximity prompting companies to share and support UNHCR's efforts. I could cite extraordinary examples: back in the 70s and 80s, oil companies helped us rescue Vietnamese boat people on oil rigs in the Gulf of Thailand; during the massive influx of Rwandans into Tanzania, in 1994, a construction company helped us build refugee camps and access roads very rapidly, thus enormously improving the speed and quality of vital assistance; in Azerbaijan, crucial support in giving shelter to hundreds of thousands of refugees and internally displaced has been provided by companies established in the country to develop its energy resources. And I could continue.

One may say that these were generous gestures, prompted by the sight of suffering - yes, indeed, they were. In this sense, they were also truly humanitarian gestures. But I firmly believe that business, by nature, wishes people not to be poor, not to be deprived, not to be excluded. Business wants prosperity and inclusiveness - it cannot thrive otherwise. Business wants people to be secure - insecure people are bad clients. And could humanitarian agencies - could the UN refugee agency, in particular - wish anything but a prosperous, inclusive and secure world?

Let me use again the example of refugees. Resolving refugee problems contributes to stability, which in turn opens up possibilities for economic development, and ultimately prosperity. Business has therefore much to gain from turning the negative spiral of conflict, forced population movements, and poverty, into a positive one of ending conflicts and achieving sustainable peace through reconstruction and development. Business has more to gain from what - for lack of a better word - I will call "sustainable" profit, than from forms of profit which are immediately tangible, but do not establish the ground for longer term prosperity. Once again, these are the same goals as ours. Once again, our shared desire to secure the lives of people, and to improve the livelihood of their communities, provide us with crucial common ground.

Different, complementary responsibilities

Responsibilities towards people on whose behalf humanitarian work is carried out, raise some critical problems that we should reflect upon. I would like to mention three areas, all related to the concept of responsibility.

First, the responsibilities of states. Once again, the case of refugees is a good example. Over 90% of UNHCR's resources have traditionally been provided by governments. This is not just a matter of funding our work. It also hopefully contributes to make governments feel more responsible for refugees. Protecting refugees is their responsibility. Granting asylum is the single most important action that any state can take on behalf of refugees. Therefore, in seeking support from non-government sectors, UNHCR wants to complement, but not to substitute for government contributions, which, both in symbolic and concrete terms, mark the continued commitment of states to upholding refugee protection.

Second, the responsibilities of humanitarian agencies. We use resources that are contributed to us mostly by governments. It is taxpayers' money that we are accountable for. It is our responsibility to continuously seek ways to improve our effectiveness, striving to minimize costs and maximize benefits for refugees. It is not an easy task. In many countries, a handful of UNHCR field officers are in almost complete charge of coordinating basic services in refugee camps as big as tented cities - like mayors without town hall employees. And although humanitarian agencies will never operate in the same way as business - we do not seek profit and competition, but the widest possible consensus in resolving problems - we share the pressure to operate cost-effectively. Business is much more advanced than we are in responding to this pressure. It is an area in which we have much to learn from the corporate world, and in which the advice and support of business would be invaluable. Let's talk about it.

Third, and not least, the responsibilities of business. The purpose of business is profit, which does not mean that this should be pursued at the expense of a broader vision of the social, political and - yes - human context in which business groups operate. Going back to the concept of "sustainable profit", I want to make two proposals.

The first is prompted by my concern - which I share with many others, in particular NGOs - over the fact that some business groups, unwittingly or not, may be contributing both to war and to human rights violations. It is very well known, for example, that some of the worst refugee-producing conflicts in Africa today - in Sierra Leone, in the two Congos, in Angola - are partly fueled by business groups with interests in natural resources: money received from selling oil, diamonds or wood, is used in turn to procure arms. In other countries, there are companies doing business with governments that violate the human rights of their own people - sometimes these companies even contribute to these violations, by further exploiting, as cheap labour, persecuted and repressed groups.

A spin-off effect of these practices is that it creates an atmosphere of suspicion around business/humanitarian relations. Even this meeting has not been immune from criticisms of this kind. If we are to continue to cooperate, however, we must address these problems squarely, and dispel all misunderstanding. My proposal is that we seriously work together in trying to address, marginalize and ultimately avoid these dangerous practices. I am ready to discuss how to pursue these goals in areas of concern to UNHCR.

My second proposal is that businesses could offer more concrete opportunities to people suffering from exclusion, both in developing and developed countries: by supporting education, providing

training and especially giving job opportunities. Business, in many countries, far from being party to unacceptable behaviour, could play a very positive role in inducing governments to improve their own human right standards, or to fight exclusion. We at UNHCR stand ready to discuss these issues, provide advice and start joint projects. Next year, for example, on the occasion of our 50th anniversary, we will launch a Refugee Education Endowment for which we hope to raise up to 50 million US dollars, including - we hope - contributions from business and other non-government sources.

What type of support can business provide?

I am often asked by business people - what do you exactly expect from us? I do not like this question. It gives the impression that humanitarian agencies have shopping lists, which they "expect" business to respond to. It is a widespread mentality: business donates, humanitarian agencies receive - a very simplistic concept of charity, if I may say. Rather, we should work together to define what type of support business can provide to humanitarian and refugee programmes. As I said, it should not simply be about "giving". I look at it much more as a partnership with the same objectives. I see four main areas in which of support and cooperation.

First, financial support. This is particularly important. Humanitarian programmes function mostly thanks to donations. Well over 90% of UNHCR's one billion dollar yearly budget, for example, is funded through voluntary contributions of governments. Therefore we have to constantly urge governments to provide adequate funding in a predictable manner, and through rapid and flexible procedures. On the other hand, business understandably prefers to fund specific projects with a direct link to those who will benefit from them - possibly related to its own field or location of work and as much as possible within a clear timeframe. I agree. We do not want business to fund more than a minimum amount of administrative costs. "Institutional" support must continue to come from governments. This way, business contributions will truly be complementary to those of governments.

Second, support in equipment and services. I think this is the most interesting area of business/humanitarian cooperation - and the one in which we can benefit most from sharing the know-how and resources of business. The most relevant examples are probably in the field of information technology and telecommunications - as crucial to humanitarian and refugee operations as they are to any other activity. Because of our limited resources, our access to state-of-the-art technology is also limited. In today's massive emergencies, UNHCR's traditional information, communication and refugee registration systems - designed for more manageable crises - have come under incredible strain. This has provided us with a good opportunity to open up new areas of cooperation with business. In Kosovo, for example, many companies were eager to help us address the movements of enormous masses of people. Let me mention in particular a very substantial contribution of resources by Microsoft and several computer companies, thanks to which we tried a new, electronic refugee registration package, which we hope to improve and use in other situations as well.

Besides registration, there are other areas in which we must improve our technology. For example, information campaigns aimed at refugees about conditions in their own country are crucial to help them make up their mind about whether to stay where they are, or return home. This is what we must do in Indonesia for refugees from East Timor, and we did in Tanzania and the former Zaire for Rwandan refugees, for example. Our delivery of messages to large groups of people could improve immensely if we had more effective tools. And I could refer to other sectors, too - logistics and transport, for example, which is the single most expensive activity in any humanitarian operation; or shelter and housing, another crucial and very costly sector of operations.

The third area I wish to mention is that of projects to provide direct support to uprooted or deprived people. There is a great variety of opportunities in this area, both in developed and developing countries. We should pursue cooperation particularly in two fields, both oriented towards self-reliance: education and jobs. Let me make one concrete proposal, one that we could call "jobs for coexistence": why not explore together the possibility of creating jobs for a number of people in countries that have undergone severe inter-communal violence - like Bosnia or Rwanda or East Timor - and link the project to inter-ethnic coexistence, by providing equal opportunities to members of different communities? Joblessness - and lack of economic prospects in general - is nowadays one of the main reasons for the failure of inter-communal reconciliation. I am aware that unemployment is not going to be resolved by finding jobs for a handful of particularly deprived people. Do not underestimate the impact of an inter-ethnic shoe factory, however! Any such project could be of immense value - even if only symbolically - for the promotion of peace-building in areas of fragile peace, for the prevention of further refugee flows, and - ultimately - for the creation of an economically viable environment.

The last area of cooperation that I would like to mention is the promotion of awareness of humanitarian and particularly refugee problems. Business can be extremely useful in this field, too, by helping humanitarian agencies obtain broader and better access to the Internet, for example; by supporting advertising campaigns; and through the association of their employees to fund raising and awareness activities. The politicization of migration and refugee issues, for example, in both developed and developing countries, leads to discrimination and racism. It would be extremely significant if businesses could support the improvement of the image of migrants and refugees, and show that they are not a threat, but rather that they make a contribution.

We - at UNHCR, and in the humanitarian community at large - are quite serious about working with business in all these areas. UNHCR, for one, is prepared to enter into stand-by arrangements with companies, that could be activated in case of large emergencies, and through which resources can be made available, and more importantly, staff can be deployed to provide support in refugee operations. We are ready to talk with you on how we can make your available inputs of real service to refugee programmes.

Conclusion

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At all levels - in the financial, political, even personal sphere - we live in an era of experimentation in partnerships. We, the humanitarians, are facing this not only with business, but also, for example, with the military - as Kosovo has shown. We should not be frightened by new associations, even if the expertise, prior experiences, and even respective languages are so different. Being new, these associations are most exciting. But as with any new terrain, exploration must be bold and careful at the same time.

This is what I have been trying to convey by focusing on "responsibilities" and not just on "support". For sure, humanitarian organisations - and I can certainly speak for UNHCR - have much to benefit from business models and contributions. However, I am persuaded that this cooperation will also be of great benefit to businesses. Being partners in humanitarian activities will provide business with positive visibility. I do not think there is anything wrong with this, provided that it is done honestly and transparently. But there is more. In many companies, being associated with humanitarian causes often has a "rallying effect" on employees, thus improving team spirit, and a sense of belonging to a meaningful organisation. Helping people can also give

business groups stronger "roots" in communities in which they operate.

Business today thrives on partnerships. Globalization means that business has never before been so dynamic in searching for synergies, and in maximizing them. I represent here a very different world, in which partnerships are nevertheless as essential. And I am here to propose that you become partners in our endeavours to help people have better, safer lives. The challenges are immense. What you can offer us will be crucial to strengthen our capacity, especially in chaotic emergencies. What we can offer you is partnership in making profit - as I said - "sustainable"; in making profit accessible also to those who are as far away from profit as it is possible to be in today's world - the refugees, the war victims, the poor. Through humanitarian assistance, we can give them hope. By going a step further, and offering them opportunities, we will give them a future. They need both.

Thank you.