

An Agenda for Business-Humanitarian Partnerships

Humanitarians assigned to some of the most remote, inhospitable, and dangerous places on earth often find themselves in the same areas as field workers for large international corporations. Perhaps unknowingly, they share common goals.

Although their missions differ, they sometimes share the same space with poor and suffering people. Often, they also share a sense of compassion and a strong desire to help their neighbors. In the 1970s and 1980s, for example, oil-rig workers helped staff of the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) rescue Vietnamese boat people in the Gulf of Thailand. During the massive influx of Rwandans into Tanzania in 1994, a construction company helped UNHCR build refugee camps and access roads. In Azerbaijan, international energy companies have provided crucial support in providing shelter to hundreds of thousands of refugees and internally displaced people. Although many in the world of humanitarian work remain wary of any association with private business, these examples illustrate our common goal—meeting the needs of people. It is a shared concern we should build upon.

Stereotypes labeling big business as “lacking a social conscience” and humanitarians as “naïve do-gooders” will soon become a relic of the past. Globalization will foster new partnerships, associations, and alliances. Business and humanitarians are destined to become partners helping those in need. In doing so, they will ultimately help themselves. Businesses want prosperity, inclusiveness, and security. Insecure people make bad customers. Humanitarian agencies also wish for nothing more than a prosperous, inclusive, and

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secure world where people do not suffer from hunger, poverty, and violence from ethnic conflict.

Resolving refugee problems, for example, contributes to stability, which in turn opens up possibilities for economic development and ultimately prosperity. Businesses have much to gain from seeing the negative spiral of conflict, forced population movement, and poverty replaced by conflict resolution and a sustainable peace ensured through reconstruction and development. Both have a joint long-term goal to make the world a more stable place. Largely as a result of a new global compassion sparked by instantaneous communications and the information revolution, signs of a strategic alliance between businesses and humanitarians are already emerging (see pp. 164-165, "Preserving Cultural Heritage"). Images of the misery of refugees and other suffering people are beamed daily into homes around the world, stirring a desire to help. With more than 21 million refugees and others in need worldwide, humanitarians need all the help they can get.

Business support should not, however, simply be an act of charity or a convenient way to improve a company's image. Partnership with humanitarian agencies requires that companies accept responsibility and certain basic norms of ethical behavior. The purpose of business is profit, but it should not come at the expense of a broader vision of the social, political, and human context in which business operates.

Some business groups, unwittingly or not, may contribute to war and to human rights violations. They exacerbate these problems by taking profits from natural resources, by doing business with governments that violate human rights, or even by exploiting persecuted and repressed groups as cheap labor. It is well known that some of the worst conflicts in Africa have been sustained in this way.

We must seriously work together to address, to marginalize, and ultimately to stop these dangerous practices. Business, for example, can play a positive role by inducing governments to improve their own human rights standards. There is common ground on which to build. Governments, business, and humanitarians share a goal: meeting the needs of people, whether we look at them as citizens, shareholders, customers, or victims of war and persecution.

So, how can the business and humanitarian sectors work together to make this a better world? We should not simply view this relationship as one in which business gives and humanitarians receive. At UNHCR, we see it as a partnership based on common objectives.

- Financial support is particularly important. Humanitarian programs are funded by donations. Well over 90 percent of UNHCR's \$1 billion annual budget is provided through voluntary contributions from governments.

Businesses can supplement this general support from governments by funding specific projects, especially in areas where they work and where they have an interest in promoting stability and prosperity.

- There are numerous opportunities for support in equipment and services. The private sector's expertise in the fields of information technology and telecommunications, for example, could be of immense benefit to humanitarian and refugee emergency operations. Our limited resources mean our access to state-of-the-art technology is also limited. In today's massive refugee emergencies, our existing information, communications, and refugee registration systems have come under incredible strain. Other areas where private-sector expertise would be valuable include the provision of emergency shelter, housing, and information for refugees, as well as logistics and transport.
- A third area for business involvement could be in projects to provide direct support to uprooted or deprived populations. One concrete proposal could be called "jobs for coexistence." Why not explore together the possibility of creating jobs for a number of people in countries that have experienced severe intercommunal violence, such as Bosnia or Rwanda or East Timor. The goal would be to link the project to interethnic coexistence by providing equal opportunities to members of different communities. Joblessness—and the lack of economic opportunity in general—is one of the main reasons that reconciliation may fail. We should never underestimate the impact of an interethnic shoe factory or assembly line where former foes work side-by-side for the benefit of all. Though unemployment is not going to be resolved by finding jobs for a handful of particularly deprived people, it is a start.
- A fourth area of partnership could involve raising public awareness of refugee and humanitarian issues. Business can be extremely useful in this area by helping humanitarian agencies obtain broader and better access to the Internet, by supporting advertising campaigns, or by encouraging employee groups supporting humanitarian causes to be established.

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We at UNHCR are quite serious about working with business in all of these areas. We are, for example, prepared to enter into temporary arrangements with companies to provide resources, staff, and other forms of support in the event of humanitarian emergencies.

At all levels—in the financial, political, and even personal spheres—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 prior experiences tell us otherwise. New associations are exciting, but, as with any new terrain, exploration must be bold and careful at the same time.

Partnering with humanitarian agencies can help business make profit 'sustainable.'

Business today thrives on partnerships. Globalization means that business has never before been so dynamic in searching for synergies and in utilizing them. I represent a very different world, in which partnerships are nevertheless essential. I propose business becomes a partner in our endeavours to help people have better, safer lives.

Partnering with humanitarian agencies can help business make profit “sustainable”—that is, making business opportunities accessible to those who are as far away from profit as it is possible to be in today’s world: the refugees, the war victims, and 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.