

## From conflict to collaboration: NGOs and business

### A response and invitation

by **Judith Vitt** vitt@systain.com

In *CSR Asia Weekly* (vol. 3, week 48), Jochen Weikert and Tilman Altenburg put their view on the pros and cons of cooperation between the representatives of two of the most important non-governmental political actors on a global scale. The article summarizes and summons all of the popular arguments currently in use for explaining or justifying the few trial projects where business and NGOs cooperate instead of attacking or ignoring each other.

To begin with, the article is a worthy effort to make a constructive contribution in a debate on the risks and limits of relations between business and NGOs. This debate has arrived at a critical point with: the Amnesty UK Business Group dissolving itself after years of endeavours to engage business actively in the protection of human rights; a vigorous appeal to UN Special Representative John Ruggie from half of the world's human rights organisations to watch out better for corporate misdoing; Sir Geoffrey Chandler who openly speaks about his frustration with an NGO community that does not manage to understand business as its stakeholder instead of its adversary. With all these features, the current debate could mark a turning point in how human rights protection and international development are promoted in future. It could be the final setback, sending the actors on this global stage back to their customary corners of ideology, to indulge in frustration and mistrust again.

This article assembles good reasons for cooperation in spite of all fears and maybe negative experience. It is the next step that I would have liked Weikert and Altenburg to make: cooperation should not need an apologetic explanation, and interest is nothing to be ashamed of.

A few general remarks will help to shed light on the point I wish to make here.

Most people prefer positive and self-confident rhetoric that promises "easy gains" and "win-win solutions" rather than negative assessments. However, I think it is high time that we start taking action instead of endlessly discussing them. After all, there are a lot of urgent issues pending in the developing world (HIV, migrant labour, food security, basic or vocational education, sanitation and health, etc.), and both NGOs and businesses would be truly responsible if they just started working together. If business and NGOs only started focusing on finding out about the problems they have in common, we would have come a long way already.

It is true: NGO and business come from different spheres. They represent different aspects of society, and none of these aspects should be ignored. But cooperation is more than mere speculation on how the other could be useful for reaching one's own goals (and still eyeing him as the devil in disguise, hoping not to be tricked). Sharing a problem is the strongest cause for cooperating: the problem obviously defines the purpose of the cooperation, without much additional effort. The mission is clear and partners can concentrate on finding the best possible way for solving the problem or alleviating its effects.

There are a few more points I would like to raise in continuation of the

original article but also in light of a general debate on what is necessary for a fruitful cooperation.

1. **Distinctions are vital.** More or less completely lacking in the whole debate is a thorough analysis of the manifold features that make up the blurred group of "business". Who says that cooperation between NGO and business is limited to the few big players that are engaging in prestigious corporate programmes? SMEs are getting more and more involved in the issues, but there is still a certain reservation that maintains an invisible barrier between potential partners. On behalf of NGOs there seems to be an invariable fixation on big business with all its tragic two-facedness that comes with their potential to create and solve problems, to protect and to violate, at the same time. Regular SMEs that provide goods and services seem to be way out of focus for many. SMEs themselves seem to be simply afraid of NGOs, as though they were an unknown factor. It is necessary to know the other half of potential partnerships in all its colours and varieties. Business is not wicked by definition, and neither are NGOs rioters or dreamers by profession.
2. **Concretisation is vital.** I may not know much about international development work but I know a little about how things are run in business. If you want to get serious with problem solving, you should spare the general level and start thinking about how projects should be managed. Unlike many actors from an explicitly political background (be it governmental or non-governmental), businesses have an urgent need to focus on facts, actions and relatively timely results, as the authors correctly describe. Involving business in development projects successfully means setting agendas, goals and aiming for facts. Time horizons should not be too wide, and projects should be designed so that cause and effect can be noticed within a life time. If this precondition cannot be met because it is a too deeply rooted problem, then it is probably not a suitable object for cooperation. Especially when it comes to smaller businesses, NGOs should learn to take the lead: if they name their terms and expectations clearly, their business counterparts will have a chance to opt-in.
3. **Interest and cause are vital.** Instead of frowning upon agendas and making them a sensitive issue or a cause for mistrust in cooperation and thereby ignoring them, the focus should be turned much more deliberately on exactly this point. Only those who have a clearly defined interest can qualify as a predictable partner. As diverging interests will become a problem and will soon turn projects into public relation stunts, it is necessary to define the cause and interest of cooperation at the very beginning. Embarking on cooperation just for the sake of "doing something together" is not an option. The only occasion for partnering can be a situation where interests are equally strong

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and evenly balanced: isolated problematic situations that require a solution.

4. **Skills and results are vital.** Once a cause for cooperation is identified, further principles should be observed. Project cooperation should always be driven by an interest in generating results. A good partnership in action is primarily based on the fact that each of the partners does what they are best at. Giving funds is not a skill. Results should be measurable and should be directly linked to the original problem that was identified in the beginning. Given the dizzying complexity of injustices globally, it is a challenge to stay focused on projects that are limited in time and scope. Results will depend on making choices and concentrating the skills at the disposal of the partners.

Without being unfair, I suppose one could say that in the end it is the job of NGOs to learn more about how to better engage business in projects. As business is obliged to care for its stakeholders, so too should NGOs; and business could easily be among their most important stakeholders.

The basic point is this: cooperation requires understanding others,

including agendas. Would it not be interesting to finally talk about problems in order to find out how different we really are? Would it not be exciting to form a network of people who are not so much interested in talking about what they are planning to do and what should be done but simply start doing it? Would it not even be satisfying to concentrate on problems for a little while in order to identify the best matches possible?

I am well aware that there are plenty of networks trying to deal with this, of which the most prestigious initiative is the UN Global Compact. I am not proposing to invent new initiatives. What I have in mind is more about changing the point of view just a little, collecting information from scratch and, on both sides, connecting people in a dialogue focused on a common cause.

I would like to extend an invitation to everyone willing to bring together the right partners under the right circumstances for identifying and consequently handling the problems that they have in common. If you are willing to share your thoughts on this idea, to start comparing experience with unglamorous but efficient projects that helped solve problems, or to simply collect problems and their stakeholders in both business and NGOs, just get in touch with me.

*Judith Vitt is a consultant with Sustain Consulting Germany. ■*

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