

Role of the private sector in humanitarian response

by Soraya Narfeldt

All companies are in business to make a profit - but it's how a company makes a profit that counts. They should be encouraged to see the many benefits of supporting humanitarian response and operating in an ethical fashion.

Dubai-based RA International specialises in re-establishing infrastructure in shattered communities. Like all companies, we are in business to make a profit but we are committed to humanitarian causes, ensuring a return to the communities in which we work, and we encourage other companies to do likewise. By offering humanitarian aid, private companies can develop sustainable long-term relationships with local people. This helps gain a foothold in the community, facilitating the company's efforts in doing business in the area.

We help communities by recruiting staff locally and offering them salaried, vocational on-the-job training. The company then either employs them or helps them set up businesses on their own and then enters into partnerships with them. We foster the growth of community-based NGOs that add value to their communities. By giving people the means to set up their own businesses and associations we foster trust between our company and the local communities. This goes a long way to facilitating a good business environment while breaking down barriers on all sides.

We supply camp services, catering, waste management, procurement and logistics, power generation and engineering and construction in countries around the world, and have sponsored many community projects in countries such as Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan and Kenya.

In the field of waste management RA International currently operates the majority of NATO contracts within Kabul and also has waste management operations in Mazar-

e-Sharif, Gardez and other areas of Afghanistan. Instead of setting up our own wastewater treatment plants, we work with the Afghanistan government and build treatment installations with Afghan ministries, thus adding to the government's infrastructure. Whilst using these installations, RA also pays fees for the service, further adding revenue to state coffers. We also operate waste management contracts in Juba, Sudan, working closely with the Government of South Sudan to establish environmental guidelines. We provide Portalooos, as well as emptying and cleaning them, for two girls' schools in Kabul. We have provided food for orphanages in Kabul and given the finance ministry essential office equipment. In Juba, we have supplied free offices and accommodation to Médecins Sans Frontières and supplied a community of lepers with food and drink. In Sierra Leone we have provided materials to build two schools and installed a number of handpumps now supplying water to schools around the country.

It is doubtful if many similar projects and their ensuing benefits would have taken place without private sector funding. Of course it's our business and we reap profits – but by paying attention to how we work and with whom, we can help ensure that local populations benefit more and in the longer term.

In Meynemah, north-western Afghanistan, we have worked with the Norwegian Provincial Reconstruction Team on a major hygiene project for the regional hospital on which over 1.1 million people depend. The Norwegian army donated a ventilator which enabled the hospital to undertake more complex life-saving surgery.

It was soon realised, however, that hygiene standards were poor. A local nurse approached RA International for help and we agreed to provide funding to train and employ local men and women to disinfect operating theatres and surgical wards and assist doctors to scrub up and gown prior to surgery.

One should never underestimate the power of private companies who offer aid. Companies are almost always focused on efficiency, good negotiation, building their reputation (their brand) and getting things done on time and on budget. The basic rules of capitalism that work for the good of the communities they aid can in turn aid them in business and ultimately help post-conflict societies to recover and progress.

We see humanitarian response as a way of helping communities grow stronger. When they see that we want to give back to the communities we serve, it becomes easier to operate there. We urge other private sector operators to consider the ethics of how they operate and to ensure that their operations bring wider benefits to all.

Soraya Narfeldt (info@raints.com) is Chairman of the Board of Directors of RA International (www.raints.com) and a former UN Volunteer.

RA International is an active member of the International Peace Operations Association (<http://ipoaonline.org/php>). IPOA is a trade association whose mission is to promote high operational and ethical standards of firms active in the peace and stability industry; to engage in a constructive dialogue with policy makers about the growing and positive contribution of these firms to the enhancement of international peace, development and human security; and to inform the concerned public about the activities and role of the industry.