*6th World Conference on Humanitarian Studies*

**Can private companies effectively support Humanitarian Response Plans? \***

**Abstract**

In the last few years, a lot has been discussed on the engagement of private companies in humanitarian aid. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) has signed agreements with German mail services DHL and the Swedish telecom Eriksson meanwhile, some UN agencies such as UNICEF have traditionally been relying on private funds to meet its ever-growing needs. Nevertheless, in places where financial resources are needed the most, in some of the worst humanitarian crisis of our days, there is a disturbing lack of vision to attract private funds to support Humanitarian Response Funds (HRP) and country-specific funding appeals.

The 2019’s HRP of the Democratic Republic of Congo, underfunded at more than 55%, has received less than 2% from private donors, and yet, not a single conference was organized in-country, by the United Nations Country Team (UNCT), to raise awareness on the pressing needs that humanitarian organizations were trying to meet. Despite the annual meetings between the Secretary-General and private companies, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. UNCTs are still in need of inspiration to replicate the “UN – Private Companies talks” in countries where it is also required. Thus, this paper aims to look at how to try to shift the underfunding paradigm seen today.

**Introduction**

More than 20 years ago now, former Secretary-General Kofi Annan, while attending the World Economic Forum in Davos, quite eloquently urged private companies to join hands with the United Nations (UN, 1999). He went on stating that: “whether in peacekeeping, setting technical standards, or providing much-needed assistance to developing countries -- without businesses’ know-how and resources, many of the objectives of the United Nations would remain elusive.” Being pragmatic and visionary at the same time, the former Secretary-General anticipated that humanitarian crisis would unfortunately only increase in the years following his participation in the rich men’s club. The call on businesses from Kofi Annan gave birth to the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC) which is today the world’s largest corporate sustainability initiative, with more than 12.000 signatories – amongst businesses, civil society organisations and academia – in over than 160 countries[[1]](#footnote-1).

Despite the undeniable role that private companies can play in mitigating, preparing, responding, or yet recovering from disasters and that the UN Global Compact has developed into a powerful platform. Moving from a success in New York, where the Secretary-General hosts a yearly UN Global Compact Leaders’ Summit, to places where businesses engagement is needed the most, remains a challenge that makes a question around what is the real impact of the UNGC?

Particularly assessing the dauting needs in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), from providing funding to ensuring the respect for environmental and labor standards to influence decision-making in the country. The United Nations Country Team (UNCT) in the DRC should not only consider private companies as a major partner but also ensure a strong strategy to reach out, in a coordinated manner, to the key businesses operating in the country, such as oil & mining, telecommunications and banking.

Despite its vast natural resources, the Democratic Republic of Congo is one of the poorest countries on the planet. Endless conflicts in the east part of the country, food insecurity, extreme poverty, economic crisis, epidemic outbreaks, etc. are all factors that negatively impact the social situation and well-being of Congolese people, particularly women and children. Beyond the challenges of long-term development, the humanitarian situation has further deteriorated in recent years. 19.6 million people are currently in need of urgent humanitarian assistance across the country (OCHA, 2021), including 11.5 million children.

Traditionally, a number of UN agencies (i.e. UNICEF and the World Food Programme – WFP), have been working with businesses as key partners. One initiative to be highlighted was the call by UNICEF to private companies to support the Covid-19 response in the country, at the beginning of the pandemic, UNICEF had called on the private sector to support the initiatives of making reusable masks and printing exercise books for primary and secondary school students. In June 2020, The Congolese Enterprises Federation (FEC), whose role is to uphold, advise on and promote the interests of companies, committed to accompany UNICEF and the Government of DRC in the fight against the coronavirus (UNICE, 2020). Hence, assisting to minimize the impact of the pandemic on the poorest families. Also, a number of telephone operators have committed to fight the coronavirus by facilitating the implementation of toll-free numbers that allows communities to ask questions and get answers in real time.

Although all the initiatives highlighted above are highly commendable, the Humanitarian Response Plan – which is the key coordination document outlining the required response to most the most pressing needs in the country – remains largely unfunded. As of 14 of October the 2021’s HRP was funded at 32.5% (with less than 0,2% provided by private companies!)!

**Humanitarian Crisis and Opportunities**

Humanitarian workers and organizations alike routinely portrait themselves as being entities and individuals dotted with higher moral values.

Humanitarian marketing typically presents us as near miracle workers who will go to the hardest of places to reach people who are suffering the most and then help them in a highly principled and professional way that responds to need alone and is immune to any undue pressure or constraints. And we do all this, apparently, in a way that offers our donors great value for money.

The German government has been particularly active in support private companies, especially the mining sector in meeting its corporate social responsibilities. A Project implemented by the German GIZ – Corporation for International Development (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH),

In line with the idea that every crisis can be used as an opportunity to do something new.

**Do we trust corporations? Pragmatism vs Fundamentalism**

Trust in humanitarian action is also about money and behaviour (Slim, 2019).

The Connecting Business initiative was launched at the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016, and it takes forward the Summit outcomes, as well as the 2030 Development Agenda and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction.

Conclusion

As the WEF’s mission statement goes: *progress happens by bringing together people from all walks of life who have the drive and the influence to make positive change.* Therefore, there may be time for humanitarians to believe that principles and decency are nobody’s trademark.

**Reference**

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UN (1999), Kofi Annan's address to World Economic Forum in Davos [Kofi Annan's address to World Economic Forum in Davos | United Nations Secretary-General](https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/1999-02-01/kofi-annans-address-world-economic-forum-davos)

\*Gerson Brandão

1. [Participation | UN Global Compact](https://www.unglobalcompact.org/participation) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)