Partnerships between private companies and civil society organizations

Interview with
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"Companies are increasingly seeing partnerships with civil society organizations as part of 'a good way of doing business' not simply 'a good thing to do'"

Question: Over the past few decades, companies have become very interested to develop partnerships with civil society organizations to work together in projects related to their core business instead of activities merely philanthropic. Why a private company would be interested in partnering with a civil society organization in this case?

Answer: Companies partner with civil society organizations for a number of reasons – but I believe that it is true that increasingly companies are seeing this as part of 'a good way of doing business' not simply 'a good thing to do'. And perhaps now, in the growing global economic crisis, it is clear why this makes sense. No business exists as a law unto itself. Every business at whatever scale needs a stable, healthy and productive environment in which to operate well. A stable society is one where the interests of all are taken into account – a fact that business ignores at its peril. Business can benefit in direct ways from working constructively with communities and the organizations that work in communities – whether NGOs or CBOs.
Question: What do you think are the general benefits that partnerships with civil society organizations can bring to private companies?

Answer: Earned reputation for good practice; loyal stakeholders (workforce, suppliers, customers, investors etc); Access to new ideas, information, people; Influence with policy makers; Improved products and services with greater reach and market share...

Question: What are the main challenges private companies face in partnering with civil society organizations?

Answer: Being able to give enough time to understanding each other and building genuine ‘value add’ for both parties. Battling with preconceptions of some civil society organizations. Unwillingness to be revealing about their (usually quite justified) motives for partnering.

Question: How can private companies choose their best civil society partners?

Answer: By spending time analyzing their needs and scoping the options available. By selecting the CSOs that are most likely to be able to cope with the partnership and most capable of ‘co-creating’ programmes of work (rather than simply providing services)

Question: Do private companies need to contract an intermediary individual/organization to help them build sustainable partnerships with civil society organizations?

Answer: No this is not always necessary – in fact can be a disadvantage by letting the company 'off the hook' in terms of them having to adjust and accommodate the partner relationship fully. I would advocate an external agency (whether an individual or an organization) only where doing without is likely to lead to failure or where there is already a history of mis-communication or relationship-breakdown OR where the proposed partnership is very complex (ie with multiple partners)
Question: How can you define a successful partnership?

Answer: I look for a level of trust, flexibility, tolerance of difficulties / critique, highly action oriented, focused on sustainability of outcomes, building clearly on the diversity and specific competencies of each partner.

Question: Can you give an example of a successful partnership between a private company and a civil society organization?

Answer: One of my favourite examples is the mining company Rio Tinto and its partnership with 6 international environmental NGOs. These relationships started on an entirely philanthropic basis. An unpopular company with a poor reputation for land management and a bunch of NGOs accepting donations to fund their environmental work. Virtually no connection between the company’s business practices and the NGOs activities. Over a period of years this transformed completely... the NGOs worked with (and from within) the company and helped the company to create a global biodiversity strategy for all their sites. Environmental protection is now well established company policy and those same NGOs are helping implement the policy throughout their operations and helping to monitor their impact and reach.

Question: How about an example of a partnership that did not work very well? Which lessons can we learn from this experience?

Answer: In my organization we undertake a lot of reviews of partnership to assess their value and their value added from the perspective of each partner. In one such review (between in this case a global company, and international agency and an international NGO) despite good will on all sides and a highly valuable and innovative project, the partnership essentially failed because the organisational cultures of the three partners got in the way. The first expected quick decisions and immediate implementation, the second had a hugely bureaucratic procedure that meant every decision took months to go through committee procedures and the NGO got immensely frustrated at having to be accountable to two organizations with completely different reporting and governance requirements.
Question: An increasing number of Spanish private companies have been very interested in partnering with civil society organizations in Latin America to find solutions to some environmental and social problems. Which recommendations would you give to them in terms of cultural diversity? Which role this topic plays in the development of partnerships?

Answer: It is interesting that cultural diversity seems to be an almost larger challenge than sectorial diversity. I think for me the single most important thing is that companies approach potential partners respectfully and bearing in mind 3 core partnering principles: equity (are we really listening and valuing this potential partner), transparency (are we being open in conveying our motives, interests and expectations?) and mutual benefit (what do they want from this partnership? What do we want? Are these compatible?)

Question: Taking in consideration the skepticism between private companies and civil society organizations and how different their core values and general objectives are, how can trust be built in partnerships among these two sectors?

Answer: As above and with time and patience given to building understanding and insight into each others values and priorities.