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Joining forces on the Humanitarian field: Business, new humanitarian?

Case-study on innovative partnerships between the UNHCR and the
private sector

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, the number of people affected by humanitarian crisis has dramatically increased, as well as the cost of humanitarian assistance. Indeed, the conflicts are escalating and worsening and natural disasters confront societies with huge problems.

Mirroring their important power, large multinationals have decided to use their skills and resources to help people affected by natural disasters or victims of man-made crisis. These multinationals have become more committed in humanitarian assistance through funding, in-kinds donations or, since a decade, through operational partnerships with international organizations and NGOs. Recently, businesses have thus made use of a substitute to the corporate social responsibility or philanthropy to get involved in the humanitarian sphere.

Focus of our research, the UNHCR has made the collaboration with the private sector one of its main policies and benefits from those partnerships to also innovate and developed new products, largely contributing to the humanitarian sector.

The private sector has thus an immense potential in helping the humanitarian sector. However, it also challenges the way the sector is traditionally conceived. Indeed the question on whether profit-maximization entities could conform to the principle of humanitarian action and its specific requirements emerged.

This study explores the question on whether business could be considered as a humanitarian actor or not.

Through the illustration of four innovative partnerships concluded between the UNHCR and the private sector, this research allowed us to conclude that corporations can actively participate in humanitarian action, but that their collaboration has to be strongly framed. Indeed, for an efficient work, their participation has to take the form of partnerships with experimented humanitarians. This led us to think that, because businesses can effectively enhance the humanitarian response, but also because they need to collaborate with traditional humanitarians, they can be conceived as “second class” humanitarians.

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