



UN partnerships: Mistrust of corporate world wearing off

By Sarah Murray

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The United Nations released the results of its most extensive investigation yet into the ability of its agencies to engage in partnerships with the business world on Tuesday. Based on case studies and more than 60 interviews with UN staff members, business executive, governments and civil society organisations, "Business UNusual" takes a long hard look at partnerships across the UN system and finds that, while progress has been made, the picture is a mixed one.

The report stresses importance of the UN's new-found recognition of the need to work with business. "In order to effect change and improve the living conditions of billions of people in a sustainable manner, partnering with civil society and business is more than just an option," it says. "In many ways, it has turned into a necessity for the United Nations in order to 'get the job done'."

At the same time, businesses are increasingly turning to the UN when embarking on projects that address social or environmental issues. A report issued in May by Globescan, which researches global public opinion, found that partnerships with the UN were seen as a way of building trust. The research also suggested that businesses see joining the Global Compact, the UN's voluntary corporate citizenship network, as an effective way of improving corporate reputation, "particularly in the developing world where partnerships with the UN are especially well regarded", it says.

But as the old mistrust between the UN and the corporate world continues to melt, there is evidence that many agencies still have some work to do before they can easily embark on partnerships. "The UN culture in many places is one of control, compliance and hierarchy, and that doesn't support pragmatic solution finding," says Georg Kell, director of the Global Compact. "So the culture issue is very serious."

Structural obstacles also prevent agencies from working effectively alongside business. "The institutional reality in many UN organisations is still one in which partnership work remains at the institutional fringes, conducted in institutional silos that are parallel to, but usually disconnected from, the main lines of work," the report says. It also points out that legal hurdles and other practical obstacles contribute to time lags in the implementation of partnerships, while many agencies lack adequate resources to devote to partnerships.

Nevertheless Mr Kell and the report's authors are optimistic. For a start, the UN has already undergone a radical rethinking of its relationship with the business world.

"The trend towards working in partnership has triggered a process of profound structural and cultural change within the organisation," the report says.

An important part of the process has been convincing governments at the General Assembly that partnerships assist development and poverty eradication and are complementary to, rather than a substitute for, government activities.

"This kind of fundamental understanding is important because otherwise governments feel threatened in their own spheres," he says.

As more successful partnerships emerge, what Mr Kell calls "backwards linkages" are giving UN agencies a growing body of knowledge and experience to pass on to other departments.