

New York, September 10th, 2002

Ladies and Gentlemen,

My name is Janina Ochojska. I am the founder and president of the Polish Humanitarian Organization (PHO), which started its operations in 1992 with an aid convoy to Sarajevo. At that time Poland was going through political and economic changes and had its own problems. But, even back then, I believed that a natural step leading to a fully democratic society was to switch from a foreign aid recipient to an active aid provider.

Now, 10 years later, our achievements may still seem modest compared to many other organizations gathered here today. But in Poland, we are the biggest and most dynamic non-governmental humanitarian organization that provides aid abroad. We very often profit from the experiences of our western colleagues, but our operations are in many respects unique. I **do** hope that this uniqueness will interest you.

### **Introduction**

My speech is based on our experience in Bosnia, Serbia, Kosovo, Chechnya and Afghanistan over the last ten years.

The tragedy of besieged Sarajevo provoked in Poland a spontaneous willingness to help. So providing aid for the victims of war in Bosnia was for us very natural. The aid that we give to any other country is always a direct, genuine aid from Polish citizens. Most of our funds come from public money drives. **Just** as receiving foreign aid was important for Poland in times of need and later became an incentive in our humanitarian work, **so too**, I hope that our assistance will motivate its recipients to help others in the future.

Our experience taught us several basic principles:

**First:** assistance means solidarity with those in need and helps to build a civil society in both donor and recipient countries. **Second:** assistance should unite people and not divide them. **Third:** humanitarian aid must respect human dignity, support it and not destroy it.

For any social services in the post-conflict areas to function efficiently there must be a solid civil society. All foreign NGOs must reconstruct such a civil society through stimulating and supporting

the activities of local NGOs. This is particularly important in countries where social activity and responsibility have been destroyed by totalitarian regimes..

Let me give you just one example: In Grozny, capital of Chechnya, we have been running a drinking water production and distribution program. When we give local people a water bladder, we expect them to organize **themselves** to monitor the refilling of bladders and the distribution of water. **Thus**, water bladder becomes a seed of social activism.

While reconstructing educational, social and health systems, we must learn how they operated before the conflict. Why were they organized in any particular way? What did people think about them? Were they provided by the state or by the people themselves? Were they imposed or tailored to specific needs? Did they create dependence or fostered local decision-making and civic initiatives? Were they perhaps corrupting?... Understanding all this is a basis of any reconstruction effort.

## **2. There can be no success without it**

### **2.1. Beneficiaries can do it themselves**

From the first day of emergency assistance, we must try to empower local social structures. This is necessary so that in the future social services will function properly. Aid recipients must be active subjects in the entire assistance process, I believe. They must be involved in its planning and implementing. Yet, when some serious crisis arises we are tempted to behave in a “technocratic” way. We believe that **we** can solve it better and faster. But by entrusting serious tasks only to expatriates, rather than the locals, foreign NGOs kill any local initiative. This proves to be counter-productive and does not foster self sustainable development.

In Albania, where in 1999 over 400 thousand Kosovars took refuge, we saw expats putting up tents in the camps. Foreigners were digging or making gravel paths while jobless refugees were standing and watching. The same goes for Ingushetia which had 250 thousand Chechen refugees. They were taken care of without any participation on their part, as if there were no Chechen doctors, Chechen lawyers, Chechen teachers. Only active participation of refugees in camp management, monitoring, running of med.-care points and schooling will increase their independence. Only through co-mánagement can refugees learn new working methods, and

develop their own initiative. This also builds trust between assistance providers and assistance recipients.

## **2.2. Let's not perpetuate anarchy**

Another key factor is close cooperation with local and central authorities. It is true that the authorities in the post-conflict regions are often ineffective, but the co-operation of NGOs with the local authorities means that both sides learn. Plus the local authorities feel responsibility for the communities they serve.

In the Kacanik municipality in Kosovo, where we worked, the lack of proper cooperation between the United Nations and local administration had very bad results. The local authorities got so used to being assisted that they could not take **any** autonomous decision **even** about waste disposal. I'm sure that the UN employees are better at collecting garbage, but what will happen after they leave?!.... Together with the local Kacanik schools we organized a project called „cleaning the world” to foster some local initiative in this field.

Close cooperation between foreign NGOs and local administration shows to the local community that working with the authorities makes sense and that democracy is beneficial for everyone. This cooperation of NGOs must start on the day of arrival. Local administration should be informed of the assistance and encouraged to participate in it. Without such cooperation there will be mistrust and chaos. Normality will be slow to come back..

## **2.3. Let's foster the spirit of initiative**

All of the above applies as well to the cooperation with local NGOs. Every foreign organization coming to a war zone should treat local NGOs not merely as partners but as a valuable, long-term investment. We have to bear in mind that when **we** leave, local NGOs will stay on and will have to take over our job. When the local people know that this cooperation is limited in time and that at any moment they may be left on their own they do not develop dependence on outside assistance.

It often happens that there are no local NGOs on the ground. In such case, we can start off by encouraging local people to do voluntary work. In the post-communist countries a major problem is their lack of social responsibility. I know exactly what it means. Although in the last 50 years Poland had no war, living under totalitarian regime discouraged Polish people from any social engagement. Even now, 12 years after returning to democracy, we are still learning. It is in the

human nature to get used to be taken care of. This is even more true for refugees, who survived the trauma of losing their homes and their dear ones. Foreign NGOs must foster the spirit of initiative: lets do it together, lets help ourselves.

#### **2.4. Let's create the foundation for trust**

Building a healthy base for peace and social trust is another crucial part of our efforts. Development programs must support civilian victims on all sides of the conflict while preserving the independence and political neutrality of the NGOs. It is not always simple; in particular when one has to deal with the oppressors and their victims. Bosnia and Kosovo prove that **these** are easily reversible roles. After the return of Kosovo Albanians to their homes, the NGOs working with the local Serbs were accused by their own clients of supporting the Albanian interests. We were met with such mistrust during our first visit to a Serbian enclave in Strpce. But after two years of working on behalf of both sides of the conflict we won enough trust to organize a basketball game between Albanians and Serbs. I will not tell you who won... This was of little importance.

#### **2.5. Mutual understanding helps**

An understanding between assistance providers and recipients helps in the reconstruction of social infrastructure. The foreign NGOs working in post-conflict areas have to deal with different cultures, languages, customs that can prove to be a difficult barrier. We should not be guided by our pre-conceptions about the scope and kind of needed assistance, but make an effort to explore the **real** needs. We should not copy and paste solutions developed in our countries but adjust our working methods and style to the specific local conditions. The competence of NGOs stems not only from its previous experiences in other countries, but also from its capacity to adapt to local conditions.

#### **2.6. Let's narrow the distance**

We have to be careful not to overkill. After the Kosovo conflict in 1999, there were 400 organizations in the Kosovo area, most of them in the capital Pristina, and an old charming town of Prizren. Some NGOs seemed to view short term (and often short sighted) spectacular actions as more important than the fate of the local people. As a result, well educated local people preferred becoming drivers or interpreters with international organizations rather than doing their previous jobs as a dentist, a civil servant or a lawyer. They were paid much higher salaries and nobody wanted their true skills anyway.

What is more, wealth, high salaries and other perks of the international humanitarian organizations contrast with the conditions in post-conflict zones and create distance between assisting organization and their local beneficiaries. Keeping some distance is understandable, one cannot possibly expect western professionals to give up for long the standards they are used to. But too big a distance brings about a perception that foreign NGOs are some kind of a „good uncle” and not a partner with more experience that one can be inspired by.

Let me illustrate this point. In April 2000 we were setting up kindergartens in Chechen refugee camps in Ingushetia. One might expect refugees to welcome this initiative with enthusiasm. After all, the kindergartens were for **their** children and the mothers complained earlier that they had no place to leave them. Yet, the refugees demanded to be **paid** for construction of the kindergartens. They argued that everyone pays them. We managed to convince them to do this work voluntarily. Our main argument was that we are not like everyone. We are a small, Polish organization and we do not pay people who do something for their own good. *But, we had to promise them a tennis table in exchange.*

## **2.7. We are there only for a while**

I am strongly convinced that local communities, authorities and NGOs can become responsible and ready to shape their own system of social services. Of course some financial support and some expertise from abroad will help. People **do** know what works best for them. It is therefore of crucial importance to stimulate right from the beginning the active involvement of those who receive the aid. We can do it by showing mutual respect, understanding and partnership. Our main role is to support the construction of a sound basis for peace and social trust. **We**, the humanitarian organizations, have to remember that we are there only for a short time. *They will stay.*

Thank you for your attention.