

Public-Private Partnerships and the United Nations

Melinda L. Kimble
United Nations Foundation

It is currently popular to talk about public-private partnerships as a new mechanism to advance the work and support the core goals of the United Nations. This assumption, like many others, ignores the number of public-private partnerships that supported this institution since the inception. At the outset, there was broad recognition that civil society, especially in the Western democracies, needed to be actively engaged in building this new institution, if it were to withstand potential political attacks that contributed to the failure of the League of Nations. The concept of national United Nations Associations (UNAs) was born. These organizations were incredibly important in building broad bipartisan support within the United States, and ultimately, in Western Europe and Japan for the fledgling international institution. Moreover, the provision in the Charter that permitted nongovernmental participation, as observers, in the deliberations of the Economic and Social Council was farsighted in retrospective, paving the way for the engagement of civil society in many United Nations' endeavors, from arms control to international environmental cooperation.

The private sector and private philanthropy has also had a role to play. From the Rockefeller family decision in 1949 to donate the land on which the headquarters complex now stands, to the mobilization of many Swiss citizens to

restore and refurbish the magnificent Palais Wilson on the shores of Lac Lemman in Geneva to house the Office of the UN High Commissioner of Human Rights in the last decade of the twentieth century. Private philanthropy, notably the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations have made earlier contributions to shaping the work of the United Nations. The Rockefeller Foundation and John D. Rockefeller III were in the forefront of supporting new agricultural technologies for improving agricultural production in developing countries through the “Green Revolution” and promoting access to family planning. The Ford Foundation sponsored the Commission that developed the norms for the refugee conventions in the wake of World War II. These conventions resulted in the creation of the UN High Commission on Refugees, and provided that body with an extra-sovereign mandate for the protection of refugees. Thus, we can see that public-private collaboration among the private sector, private philanthropy, and civil society has a long and significant history. Our challenge today is to reinvigorate that cooperation – and that was certainly the personal commitment of Mr. Ted Turner, the primary benefactor of the United Nations Foundation.

Since Mr. Turner’s unprecedented 1997 commitment, private interest in the United Nations and its programs has actively increased. In partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Rotary International, the United Nations Foundation has collaborated with WHO and UNICEF to re-energize the drive to eradicate polio. This partnership has mobilized nearly \$150 million from the private sector and another \$400 million from bilateral donors. Assuming current trends hold, the international

community will eradicate a second major disease in 2008. Two other major partnerships have been launched through the initial support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation – the Global Alliance on Vaccines and the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative. These efforts seek to make a variety of vaccines more available in developing countries and to spur research on a vaccine for HIV/AIDS – the most crucial public health challenge facing the international community in the new century. Another partnership, involving the Gates Foundation, the American Red Cross, the Center for Disease Control, and the UN Foundation is the Measles Partnership, which is working to provide routine measles immunizations in sub-Saharan Africa, where measles remains a major cause of child mortality in children under five. This partnership builds on the networks put in place for polio eradication and aims to strengthen capacity and reinforce the use of routine immunizations as an essential public health practice.

At the onset of the new century, United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan called for the creation of a Global Fund to fight HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria. This new mechanism was established with record speed and more funds than ever are flowing to fight these diseases. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation are major contributors to the GFATM; the Rockefeller Foundation has mobilized a coalition of 10 foundations to support ongoing clinical treatment for HIV positive mothers in a targeted set of African countries as a pilot effort to demonstrate the efficacy of anti-retroviral treatment in difficult settings. The United Nations Foundation has supported a two year public service advertising campaign, “Apathy is Lethal” and

established a private contribution mechanism for the GFATM and UNAIDS that has raised more than \$4 million to date.

Yet, private and philanthropic financial resources alone cannot meet the public health challenges or ensure the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals on health. More official flows are needed, certainly. But what is most critical is building on the ground capacity in developing countries in the most effective and efficient way possible. Delivering health interventions, for example, is a people-intensive process. For the international community to be successful each country needs a combination of nongovernmental programs, public health officials, institutions, and budgetary resources to achieve the goals. As an example, the late and highly respected Dr. Ransom Kuti of Nigeria was deeply immersed in developing an active NGO network to provide voluntary testing, counseling, treatment and prevention services in Nigeria, when he died. He recognized, along with a few others, that Nigeria has a reservoir of highly trained people that could be deployed to recruit, train and organize a variety of health service providers throughout the country. The Ministry of Health was not equipped to do this job, although collaboration with the Ministry would be an essential, the point was to put people in place to help deliver the awareness-raising, the education, and the means to prevent, diagnose, and treat HIV/AIDS throughout the country. In South Africa, activist networks have been critical in raising awareness and promoting a more proactive government policy.

To illustrate how even committed governments require time to organize and mobilize against the pandemic, we only have to look at the example of Botswana. In 2000, the government, backed by the Gates Foundation and Merck, committed its own resources and its own public health system to the fight against HIV/AIDS. Gearing up to meet its own goals, however, took the better part of the first year. And this is in a small country with an excellent system of public health services and many trained personnel. For larger and poor countries we can expect that the effort to mobilize effectively may take longer – this is why initiatives like that of Dr. Ransom Kuti are so important.

The examples above demonstrate that reinvigorating public-private partnerships in support of UN objectives and programs are an important element in the broader effort to mobilize the entire international community in support of improving livelihoods and eradicating poverty. These examples also underscore that the health area is potentially well-positioned to capitalize on such initiatives. The United Nations Foundation is a public charity that has the express goal of strengthening the United Nations' ability to build partnerships. Given the ambitious goals of the Millennium Declaration and more recently, the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, there is an opportunity to expand partnerships to the broader agenda of sustainable development.

For example, the UN Foundation and the United Nations Association of the United States are mobilizing annually thousands of grassroots contributions in support of Adopt-A-Minefield, a program that consistently returns

several million dollars annually in support of clearing minefields. We have also joined with Conservation International, WWF, the Wildlife Conservation Society, and other environmental groups to mobilize more than \$30 million in support of UNESCO's natural World Heritage sites. Over the course of the next two years we hope to develop a campaign that will support these world-renowned protected areas as a cornerstone in the international effort to conserve critical habitat and save species. We have worked with the Global Environment Facility, UNDP, and the E7 (the major electrical utilities in the US, Western Europe and Japan) to bring renewable energy to the Galapagos. And we have joined with a variety of Canadian government institutions and UNDP to launch the Equator Initiative, which celebrated in 2nd Biennial Award event in Kuala Lumpur this month, recognizing the work of communities in developing countries in protecting threatened biodiversity.

With three years behind us on the way to the 2015 goal post of the Millennium Development Goals, much work remains to be done. While the UN Foundation concentrates its efforts in child health, reproductive health, environmental sustainability and conflict prevention, there are many opportunities for new public-private partnerships that others could initiate. Among the most opportune, I believe, would be a collaboration that focuses on girls' primary education. This area is a priority for UNICEF and UNESCO as well as the United States, which has recently rejoined the latter agency. Two decades of research – and the visible examples of the Asian Tigers, Tunisia, Costa Rica and other countries – confirms that no investment pays off more in

terms of healthier, smaller and more productive families who, in turn, create more dynamic and prosperous societies.

Every member state, every nongovernmental organization, and civil society writ large has an opportunity to re-engage with the world community in support of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. As I have illustrated public-private partnerships have a long tradition in the UN, and they can be an elemental force in strengthening societies throughout the world in this new century.