Reflections on the role of business in health promotion and the challenge of partnership

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The engagement of private sector business in partnerships for health promotion is one of the most important challenges for all concerned with health improvement in the twenty-first century. The Jakarta Declaration is a major step towards this, recognizing for the first time the vital need to secure the participation of business in partnership strategies for action and in an alliance for global health promotion. It is a tribute to the participants and organizations who worked on the partnership theme during the Jakarta Conference that this progress has been achieved. My organization, The Prince of Wales Business Leaders Forum, has been pleased to play a part in the process with WHO and other partners.

It is clear that business and its activities in the global and local economy is and will be an increasing major influence on the problem of and the solution to ill health development of positive health promotion. It also brings unique skills and experience which can be used to strengthen action through partnerships. It is not without controversy and bad experiences from the past. Partnerships are also in fact more difficult than working in isolation. But there is now wider recognition that success relies on new partnerships and open minds and I wish to share some of my experience in working with the private sector on social issues over the past 20 years.

My most recent experience is through the activities of The Prince of Wales Business Leaders Forum, which is an international organization formed by 50 multinational companies from Europe, America, the Middle East and Asia. They include many of the leading investors in emerging markets (such as Indonesia, China, India, central Europe and across Latin America), employ between them some 25 million people directly and indirectly through their supply chains, and operate in every country and territory in the world. We also bring together the major global hotel chains with 10% of the world’s hotel rooms in a global alliance called the International Hotels Environment Initiative.

THE ROLE OF THE PRINCE OF WALES BUSINESS LEADERS FORUM

The Forum focuses on promoting the active involvement of business, as good corporate citizens, as a partner in the development of countries and communities. We recognize that this requires businesses themselves to operate in a socially responsible and transparent manner as well as contributing to sustainable development and its social, economic and ecological dimensions. Our experience lies in less developed countries and those in transition, where we are active in over 30 countries in all continents. We are engaged in partnership formation to demonstrate what can be achieved at the grass roots level, as well as through sharing information and capacity building. We work through national and international partnerships including with the WHO, other inter-governmental organizations, the World Bank and European Commission as well as with bilateral agencies.

The Business Leaders Forum is itself a product of business and other leaders responding to the challenges of a rapidly changing and globalizing world economy—the opening of markets and economic liberalization and widespread adoption of
privatization. This has been accompanied by an earthquake-like crisis of confidence in the old state centred ways of doing things and a growing interest in the potential of public/private partnerships as a more effective, legitimate and enabling framework for the promotion of sustainable development. From this perspective we can make a number of observations on the potential role of the private sector as a partner in meeting the health promotion challenge you have identified.

WHY BE CONCERNED ABOUT THE PRIVATE SECTOR AT ALL?

While we can say that the private sector is now an essential player in the new era—why should this be? Put simply, the market with all its strengths and weaknesses is now the only game in town. We have the choice to tame it and ensure it is soundly regulated and engaged as a responsible motor of economic growth—but to ignore it is to ignore reality as well as an opportunity. The private sector makes a direct impact on health problems, standards and products. It is a significant influence, and in some places the leading influence, on the health agenda in the workplace, market-place and through the ripple effect of its skills and resources on societies.

But engaging the private sector brings difficulties in the traditional health field. There is immense suspicion of commercial and other motives which has to be overcome through transparency and understanding. There is the questionable legacy from the past and the horror stories of pollution, and major health and safety disasters as well as outright corruption. There is the question of accepted legitimacy as a participant in public policy—the private sector is powerful yet less accountable to the societies where it operates—although few organizations are accountable in the real sense. There are wide differences in culture and even vocabulary between public and private sectors. All of which so often adds up to a threat of the unknown among all participants.

In our experience, to release the real potential from private sector participation requires effort, frankness, transparency and real recognition of the benefits from working together rather than in opposition, even though some real differences may remain on some issues. The Jakarta Conference, with its built-in effort to engage the private sector as partners, is itself something of a watershed in this respect.

WHY DOES BUSINESS WANT TO BE ENGAGED AS A PARTNER?

Private sector activity and development is not in conflict with health promotion, and it is widely recognized that economic development is a prerequisite for quality of life improvements and ‘health gain’—if coupled with measures to protect society from the harmful side-effects of rapid growth, such as pollution and accidents. There is also more than enough evidence that growth on its own will not promote inclusion, harmony and mass improvements in quality of life without linked action to promote inclusion, education and social development.

Everyone, business included, benefits from stable and healthy societies and employees, clean water, high literacy rates and low crime as well as sound and fairly implemented regulations and human rights. Playing a part and contributing to social development both at the workplace and in society is also not in conflict with the need for competitiveness in business. Businesses have a need for a healthy workforce and services which underpin family health and independence. Both employees and customers generally have high expectations of good business performance and social and environmental responsibility. In fact, surveys demonstrate awareness changes less with country and culture than with level of education and age. Businesses need to manage risk and thus have an interest in stability and security. There is, particularly for global and international companies who are easily exposed to the threat of public disapproval, a special need to gain social acceptance in a ‘host’ community.

Good health and bad health effects all businesses small and large, national and multinational. Even though the large health-care companies have a direct commercial interest in products and services, all businesses have an interest in health. What you may ask does a motor manufacturer know about health? Well, the Ford Motor Company spends more on health in the USA than it spends on the steel for the cars it produces! Most larger international companies have deep experience of health promotion and occupational health.

WHAT CAN BUSINESS BRING TO THE PARTNERSHIP?

This last comment is an example of what business can bring to the partnership through action at the
workforce and community level and with its supply chain partners, and can be summed up as:

- product (pharmaceutical and other health-care products and equipment);
- services (occupational health, health-care financing, risk assessment, insurance as well as health services);
- experience of occupational health (including mental health, nutrition, family planning and education on STD).

But business can bring other special skills and experience which will be essential for success in meeting the health promotion goals. Put simply, private sector business around the world has demonstrated a capacity to respond to customers and mobilize people to produce results with a track record unparalleled in the history of the planet. Examples of the business contribution include:

- experience of resource efficiency—e.g. the sharing of inventory control with Russian hospitals resulting in massive savings and increased capacity for patient care;
- management process techniques such as human resource management—e.g. the sharing of team-building techniques in a Brazilian hospital which resulted in level of hospital-acquired infection being reduced;
- marketing and outreach skills—e.g. the application of a consumer marketing approach to child education in personal hygiene in Africa;
- management and enterprise skills—e.g. assisting social development community organizations to work more effectively.

Business can also provide cash and non-cash resources (such as vehicles, equipment, facilities, training) in support of social development and community health promotion—whether to global campaigns such as the new Global Business Council on HIV/AIDS or national and community projects and programmes. A particularly valuable contribution can be through employee involvement or ‘volunteering’ whether at general staff or management level which brings the ‘win-win-win’ of personal satisfaction, employer approval and community benefit. Through partnerships engaging business in these many ways and through public/private partnerships, small-scale projects can be brought up to scale to make an impact.

**WHAT ARE THE CONDITIONS FOR EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS?**

Finally, given that this contribution from the private business sector is the exception rather than the rule—what are the conditions which will release this and provide the foundations for partnership? Several can be observed in most countries and successful programmes—many points on this process are included in the background paper for the Jakarta Conference (Tennyson, 1997):

- open and transparent relations between the partners;
- action to confront mutual suspicions and reconcile different cultures in the cross-sector group early in the process—using group work techniques;
- adoption of partnership structures—sometimes there is a case for separate business and civil society organization groupings as long as these come together;
- action on capacity building partnership skills;
- an ‘enabling climate’ set by the public sector and intergovernmental organizations which underpins partnership.

In structuring the Jakarta Conference to address the potential of partnership, the WHO itself has reached a watershed and demonstrated the vision and risk-taking necessary to go down this pathway. The challenge is now to seize the moment for building partnerships into the next stage through the Jakarta Declaration on Health Promotion in the 21st Century. Given the changes in society and the global economy—the private sector will be a player in this new era. We all have the influence and insight to determine whether this will be a partnership, and whether the enabling climate is created for this to be mainstream to meeting the challenges of health promotion.

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