“Demystifying and Unlocking the Resources of the Private Sector”

The main business of the private sector is to generate earnings – that’s why we are called “for profit”. This is the same for the healthcare and pharmaceutical sector as it is for any other business. The risks and complexities of biomedical research are such that a sustained high level of investment is needed – and that has to be covered by a successful financial model. Being global and being profitable brings particular privileges and clear responsibilities and moral obligations. One of them is helping to respond in times of natural disaster. The resources that a company such as Pfizer has are not necessarily intuitive. We have the skill base and resource mix of a high tech biomedical organization coupled with the business skills and sophisticated business mechanisms of a global corporation. We have expertise not usually resident in the public sector – just as the public sector has skills and techniques we do not possess in large measure.

We are also misunderstood, not trusted and sometimes disliked. This is a complex background against which to determine how to work in a complementary and effective way with public sector partners – whether the UN system, governments or NGOs. But – we do rise to challenges…

So what really motivates the private sector and a company such as Pfizer to engage in these disasters – and what can stimulate broader and more systematic engagement by the private sector going forward? In equal measure the answer includes: because we can (we have the financial and other resources to help); because we should (we have global reach and a wealth of relevant product and human expertise) and because it is in our own present and future self interest.

Pfizer’s experience in helping with the Tsunami devastation has been humbling but uplifting. Humbling – because we lost some of our dear colleagues – and also because we fully realize the limited nature of our input. Uplifting however – because we know we made contributions which have been meaningful and supportive of the lead actors in the recovery efforts.

Many private sector actors performed surprising and unexpected work and provided unanticipated resources. I continue to be surprised by the diversity and breadth of what has been made available and applied. This paper can only address Pfizer actions but recognizes that we are one of many who were impelled to act in exceptional ways to the devastation. It is also a proxy for the future possibilities of harnessing the particular thrust and inventory of resources resident within many sectors of the business community. This applies both as the Tsunami recovery work continues – and as the world readies itself for the next disaster.
Our response fell into four categories—money, medicines, manpower and minds. All are necessary—some were expected—others were not. We provided about $13M in cash—the recipients were NGOs and UNICEF. To date we have given about $50M in medicines—which were particularly difficult to manage logistically in view of the scale, speed and intensity of the requests—and the need to observe WHO Donation Guidelines to the letter. How could we ensure that medicines sent were appropriate and useable? Being demand driven is key—and by the right people. Manpower and minds were to us—but not to many others—a natural—and maybe more important provision of our assets. Due to 1) preexisting relations and work programmes with some UN agencies and 2) the vision and flexibility exhibited by senior UN officials—especially at WHO and UNICEF—we were able to deploy to Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Thailand and Maldives senior staff with expertise in supply chain management and logistics, water sanitation and medicine and public health. The mutual investment by ourselves and the UN in building a certain level of trust and credibility was an essential and foundational prerequisite to being able to share our people resources—very much a novel approach for Pfizer in disaster circumstances. All deployed experts worked as part of UN teams.

Our people deployment was a real time experiment—but no one could afford for the results to be experimental in nature. In filling expertise gaps and assisting capacity building therefore both Pfizer and its UN and government partners carefully prescreened many experts—but quickly—before a final selection. The decision was that of governments and the UN agency or agencies in question. From our side we undertook to ensure that they were senior, deeply experienced, as ready as possible for the unknown—mentally and physically equipped—and had determined not to be distracted if they encountered ambivalence or even hostility from less traditional partners.

There were legitimate issues to be confronted in an open and constructive way with our partners when considering the overall value of staff deployment. Consider—the sudden arrival of new experts who were: largely unused to working in disaster environments; needing a level of orientation from on site personnel who had little time to spare; not used to working within the UN environment—and only staying for a relatively short period of time (about six weeks). Is this appropriate, effective and efficient? Does it fill a clear need—and could the team chemistry work? The result could be at best unhelpful and at worst destructive, distracting and counterproductive. In the experience of the Pfizer experts deployed this did not happen despite some early discomfiture. In fact the opposite occurred with the development of bonding and good chemistry with the team on the ground and substantial benefits accruing from the work both in terms of managing acute and immediate issues and in leaving significant blueprints for systems improvement and capacity building.

There were several reasons for the more than expected success of the expert deployment initiative—including:

- smart—and maybe fortuitous—selection of those deployed in terms of pertinent skill sets, personal qualities and commitment to help
- forceful support and vision displayed by key officials within the UN (HQ) system
- Geneva and India based briefings before the work commenced
- pragmatic approaches taken by UN officials on the ground and government officials
- quick identification by the company experts of where their skills and management abilities would best be focused

There are two dimensions to the value of incorporating private sector skills within a public private approach to disaster relief. The first is adding relevant skills to the acute needs – in our example, helping to assess the medical supply needs and putting a system in place which drives appropriate and needed product to users as soon as possible, helping to assess and manage damaged or destroyed waste management processes, water purification plants etc. However an arguably greater benefit is the review of systems and processes and resultant recommendations which can lead to working with governments and UN agencies in planning major systems and structural improvements going forward and making a substantive contribution to capacity building. This can include the application of private sector management skills, project planning, technology transfer, IT knowledge transfer and other areas of capacity building. This can contribute to the improvement of overall systems and therefore also help build in better capabilities to withstand future disasters. One key question and challenge which subsumes the core expectations and principal analytic components of this conference is” what barriers need to come down and what processes, motivators and systems need to be put in place to derive greater and more systematic benefit to disaster management approaches from this latent private sector pool of resources – and the added power which will result from synergies with the public sector? There are legitimate differences between public and private sectors in their approach, structure and motivations. Recognizing these is essential, helpful and in some cases powerful. Suspicions, ideology and antagonisms are also a reality and should also be honestly and consistently addressed.

Regular forums at which public and private colleagues can exchange views and ideas on how best to cooperate in times of disaster, where the UN and governments can keep the private sector appraised of current thought developments in how to anticipate and manage situations, utilize latest technologies and intellectual progress would help to address better relations, better preparedness and ultimately a quicker and more efficient and effective response to disasters. For the private sector demand driven is the key. The UN in some form should therefore take the initiative to set in motion a regularized mechanism through this can be achieved.

Expectation management has a significant bearing on results achieved. There are clearly some aspects of post disaster recovery that are the province and responsibility of states, the UN and other actors – not the private sector. An honest and ongoing dialogue will also help identify and codify those areas in which the private sector can be supportive and lend its resources and those where it should not be engaged. Working efficiently towards clarifying these issues and agreeing what outcomes and metrics define a successful public private partnership approach to disaster management will result in a more informed and likely more willing and broader response from different parts of the private sector when called upon.

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