



Humanity Link 

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The Complexity of Partnerships Between Social Impact Businesses and Non-Profits

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Partnerships between social impact businesses and non-profits—especially the heavyweights like the UN and large INGOs—should be a no-brainer. These relationships hold the promise of aligning the innovative dynamism of the private

sector with the moral mission and expansive reach of non-profits. Yet, anyone who's tried to work within this space knows that these partnerships are often far more complicated than they ought to be.

There's a reason so many social impact entrepreneurs walk away from the table frustrated, and it's not because they lack passion or perseverance. It's because the system itself—riddled with outdated procurement policies, excessive bureaucracy, and an entrenched "we always want something for free" mentality—actively works against the very partnerships it seeks to foster. And the consequences aren't just felt by businesses or non-profits; they reverberate through the communities these partnerships aim to serve.

Procurement Policies That Slow Everything Down

Let's start with procurement policies. Any entrepreneur or innovator who's tried to work with a UN agency or an INGO can tell you about the labyrinthine process that's involved. You'll submit proposals through platforms so complex you wonder if they were designed to actively repel applicants. The decision-making process can stretch over months—sometimes even a year. By the time you get a response, your technology might be outdated, your team might have moved on, or your start-up might have closed shop altogether.

These long lead times create a fundamental misalignment. Social impact businesses, especially smaller ones, need to

move fast to stay afloat and iterate on their products or services. Non-profits, by contrast, operate in a world where change is slow and layered with caution. The mismatch between these timelines creates friction, lost opportunities, and, frankly, exhaustion.

The “Something for Free” Mindset

Then there’s the perennial expectation that social impact businesses should operate as if they’re charities. I’ve lost count of the number of times a large organization has approached a social enterprise with a pitch that boils down to: “This is a great opportunity for exposure—can you do it for free?”

This mentality is damaging on multiple levels. First, it devalues the work of social impact businesses, which often operate on razor-thin margins as it is. Second, it creates an unsustainable dynamic where businesses can’t afford to grow, scale, or invest in the innovations that could deliver even greater impact. And third, it erodes trust. When a large, well-funded organization demands free services, it sends the message that they value their budget sheets more than the partnership itself.

The Cost of the Status Quo

The status quo hurts everyone. Non-profits lose out on the chance to work with agile, innovative partners who could help them achieve their goals faster and more effectively. Social impact businesses, meanwhile, are forced to either pivot to

less mission-driven work or shutter entirely. And the people who were supposed to benefit from these partnerships? They're left waiting—or worse, forgotten.

So, what needs to change? Let's talk solutions.

Suggestions for Breaking the Cycle

1. **Simplify Procurement Processes:** Non-profits and INGOs need to overhaul their procurement policies to make them more accessible to smaller businesses. That means creating shorter timelines, clearer guidelines, and more transparent processes. Imagine a streamlined system where decisions are made in weeks, not months, and where the focus is on outcomes rather than bureaucratic box-checking.
2. **Pay Fairly:** It's time to retire the “something for free” mindset. Non-profits should budget for partnerships with social enterprises as a standard practice, not an exception. These businesses are delivering value, and they deserve to be compensated accordingly. Think of it not as a cost, but as an investment in impact.
3. **Create Dedicated Partnership Roles:** Both sides need people who can bridge the gap—professionals who understand the language, priorities, and constraints of both sectors. These roles could help manage expectations, align timelines, and ensure that

partnerships are built on mutual respect and shared goals.

4. **Foster Long-Term Relationships:** Partnerships shouldn't be treated as transactional, one-off deals. Instead, both sides should commit to building long-term relationships that allow for trust, flexibility, and iterative improvement. This is how real impact happens—not through short-term contracts, but through sustained collaboration.
5. **Encourage Co-Design:** Too often, partnerships are structured in a top-down manner, with one side dictating terms. A better approach is co-design—where social impact businesses and non-profits sit down together from the outset to define goals, roles, and metrics. This ensures that both parties are fully invested and aligned from day one.

Let's move forward!

Partnerships between social impact businesses and non-profits have the potential to transform the world—but only if we're willing to rethink how they're structured. It's not enough to talk about collaboration; we need to create the conditions that make it possible.

The stakes are too high to let this cycle of inefficiency and inequity continue. If we're serious about achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, addressing climate change,

and ending systemic inequities, then we need to get serious about fixing the way we work together. It's not just about doing better business—it's about creating a better world.