

# Working Together for the Future of Post-Conflict Societies

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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 being a foreign aid recipient to being an active aid provider.

Now, ten 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.

My talk 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 very natural for us. 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 its own time of need and later became an incentive for our humanitarian work, so too, I hope, 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 and support human dignity, 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, the capital of Chechnya, we run 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 distribution becomes a seed of social activism.

When reconstructing educational, social and health systems, we must learn how these systems operated before the conflict. Why were they organized in this or that 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 did they foster local decision-making and civic initiatives? Were they perhaps corrupting? Understanding all this is a basis of any successful reconstruction effort.

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. I believe that aid recipients must be active subjects in the entire assistance process, involved in its planning as well as its implementation. But when some serious crisis arises, we are tempted to behave in a "technocratic" way. We still believe that we can solve it better and

faster. However, by entrusting serious tasks only to expatriates, rather than to the locals, foreign NGOs kill any local initiative. This inevitably proves counter-productive and does not foster self-sustainable development.

In Albania, where in 1999 over 400,000 Kosovars took refuge, we saw expats putting up tents in the camps. Foreigners were digging or making gravel paths while jobless refugees stood by and watched. The same goes for Ingushetia, which had 250,000 Chechen refugees. They were taken care of without any participation on their part, as if there were no Chechen doctors, Chechen lawyers, and Chechen teachers. Only the active participation of refugees in camp management, monitoring, the running of med-care points, and schooling will increase the refugees' independence. Only through co-management can refugees learn new working methods and develop their own initiatives. Such co-management also builds trust between assistance providers and assistance recipients.

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 cooperation of NGOs with the local authorities means that both sides learn. In addition, the local authorities then 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 about even something like waste disposal. I'm sure that the UN employees are better at collecting garbage, but what will happen after they leave? So together with the local Kacanik schools, we organized a project called "cleaning the world" to foster 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 assistance projects and encouraged to participate in them. Without such cooperation there will be mistrust and chaos. Normality will be slow to come back.

All of the above applies as well to cooperation with local NGOs. Every foreign organization coming to a war zone should treat local NGOs not merely as partners but as valuable, long-term investments. 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 cases, 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 a totalitarian regime discouraged Polish people from any social engagement. Even now, twelve years after returning to democracy, we are still learning. It is human nature to get used to being taken care of. This is even truer in the case of refugees, who have survived the trauma of losing their homes and their loved ones. Foreign NGOs must therefore foster the spirit of initiative: let's do it together, let's help ourselves.

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 both the oppressors and their victims. Bosnia and Kosovo

prove that these are easily reversible roles. After the return of Kosovar Albanians to their homes, their own clients supporting Albanian interests accused the NGOs of working with the local Serbs. 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.

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

We also have to be careful about overkill. After the Kosovo conflict in 1999, there were 400 organizations in the Kosovo area, most of them in the capital Pristina, and the charming old 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 to become drivers or interpreters with international organizations rather than to do their previous jobs as dentists, civil servants, or lawyers. They were paid much higher salaries by the NGOs - and nobody wanted their true skills anyway.

What is more, wealth, high salaries and other perks of the international humanitarian organizations contrast sharply with the conditions in post-conflict zones, creating distance between assisting organizations 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 more experienced partner from which the local community can draw inspiration.

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 had complained earlier that they had no place to leave them. Despite this, the refugees demanded to be paid for the 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. Even so, we had to promise them a tennis table in exchange.

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. But 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 this by showing mutual respect, understanding and partnership to the populations we serve. 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.

Janina Ochojska is president and founder of the Polish Humanitarian Organization. The PHO has worked in the post-conflict areas of Bosnia, Kosovo, Serbia, Chechnya, and Afghanistan, as well as in Poland, to realize its mission to provide help to the victims of wars and natural

disasters. In 1994, Janina was awarded the title of Woman of Europe by the European Community in Brussels.

*The above speech was given at the plenary session of the 55th Annual Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations associated with the United Nations Department of Public Information (DPI), on the topic "The need for the provision of basic services during the recovery process in post-conflict societies."*