The Business of Saving Lives [VIDEOS]

July 28, 2010 By Regan Hofmann

While dressing in my hotel room recently in Washington, DC for the first day of the Global Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria's annual conference on global health (don't try to say that five times fast), I watched CNN's coverage of the oil travesty in the Gulf of Mexico. Seeing the crabs trudging through a suffocating sluice of oil and sea birds' feathers slicked sickeningly down by petroleum, I stomped around my hotel room mumbling obscenities about the irresponsibility of corporate America, the dangers of capitalism and the mind-numbing stupidity of a species that has so little regard for Mother Earth that we endanger our own futures by being obsessed with profitably satisfying our every consumer need in the here and now, personal safety, public health and the future of the planet be damned.

And then, I packed up my gear and headed outside to hail myself a taxi. A gas-powered taxi.

It amazes me how angry we all get (myself included) over corporate $%#@-ups, like BP's oil spill, without making changes in our own lives that would speak proper protest. Incensed though we are in the wake of oil pouring unstoppably across the ocean, few of us are suddenly leaving our car at home and riding our bicycle or walking to work. Even as I cried over the grease-covered shore birds I did not call my lawn guy to order him to cease and desist mowing my lawn. I traveled to the GBC conference on a jet-fueled airplane. And there I was, waiting to be driven several blocks. The truth is I had no right to be critical of corporate America--at least not as long as I remained part of the chain of demand that gives it the impetus to manufacture things (like millions of barrels of oil) that threaten the crabs, the birds and ultimately, Mother Earth.

But it wasn't until I was standing on the curb waiting for my cab that I realized what a big, fat hypocrite I was. When I finally did, I decided to hoof it across DC in my patent leather Jessica Simpson stilettos--shoes, I worried, that were probably fabricated using a petroleum product. Or at least polished to a high sheen by one.

Which is how I found myself sweating and lugging my laptop across our capital, cursing the irresponsibility of mega corporations while walking to a conference about companies who take corporate responsibility so seriously (especially as it relates to HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria) that they have joined an international organization (the GBC) devoted to saving lives through public-private partnerships. Companies who have pledged tens of millions of cold hard cash or the equivalent in goods or services to improve global health. It was all rather confusing.

It's hard to have a unilateral distrust of corporate America, even in the midst of one global

corporation's arguably abject irresponsibility (because, I'm sorry, but no one has a right to take risks that they have no contingency plan to address should it all go wrong), when other companies are saving as many lives as BP may have endangered.

In a world where greed leads us to probe miles beneath the ocean floor to find jet and taxi fuel without the necessary safety measures, it's reassuring to know that there are also altruistic, humanity-minded CEOs who use their company's resources, platforms and power to protect people--and the planet.

I'll admit. There is something inherently unbelievable about corporate largess. When I first heard about the GBC, the skeptical journalist in me was all prepared to call baloney on the notion of the likes of Levi Strauss & Co., Coca-Cola, De Beers, Chevron and the National Basketball Association coming together to stop pandemics. Wasn't this all about companies pretending to help humanity just to sell, respectively, more jeans, soda, diamonds, oil and tickets? Weren't these companies doing the good they do (especially in developing nations) because it's cheaper to keep their current work forces from being wiped out by global pandemics than to replace and retrain legions of fresh workers? Weren't they helping the local communities so the local communities didn't undermine their local efforts to do business?

So I wondered.

But unless they put the proverbial Kool-Aid in my Diet Coke can, the two days I spent at this year's GBC conference several weeks ago in June solidified what I have seen while watching the organization grow and evolve over the last two years. These people mean business. The business of saving lives.

All over the world, in ways too many to mention in a blog (so check it out yourself at gbcimpact.org), the member companies of the GBC are facilitating and supporting programs that keep people healthy. By doing more than simply handing out cash, drugs or food, the GBC helps build sustainable health for millions around the planet. A bowl of food gets you to tomorrow. A malaria net makes multiple decades possible. Giving people a job and health insurance allows for future generations to prosper.

And, giving people fundamental stability and skills makes them believe in the possibility of many tomorrows...even if and when the international aid money dries up and the multinational corporations go home. Building sustainable programs for employment and housing and health care is the only way any nation, or group of nations, or any company, or group of companies, stands a chance a putting a permanent dent in the devastation caused by viral pandemics. It's also really great foreign policy.

At this year's GBC conference, the talk of sustainability for global health went a notch further--to talk about women as a portal to--and as lynch pins of--of the health of a family, a country, a continent, a planet.

The theory is simple: keep women and girls healthy and the health of everything else follows.

That is a gross over simplification of the message discussed, debated and demanded by the many brilliant minds (male and female) who sat on panels on the GBC stage and in meeting rooms over two days. From Dr. Margaret Chan (head of the World Health Organization) to Ambassador Melanne Verveer (President Obama's Ambassador-at-large for Global Women's Issues) to Dr. Helene Gayle (President and CEO of Care, USA and head of the President's Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS) to Amie Batson (Deputy Assistant Administrator for Global Health at USAID and a woman helping to direct President Obama's $68 million dollar Global Health Initiative), to Ashley Judd and Annie Lennox, power chick after power chick (and some amazing men like Michel Sidibe of UNAIDS and Michel Kazatchkine of The Global Fund among many others) advocated for the positive impact keeping women and girls healthy can have on our, well, Mother Earth.

A focus on the health of women and girls is also the cornerstone of President Obama's new $63 billion Global Health Initiative--a budget that encompasses the proposed $48 billion President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief started by President George W. Bush. (In the July/August issue of POZ--read it here-- I penned a piece that argued that we should not forgo spending on HIV/AIDS to help keep women and children alive only so they can later die of HIV/AIDS. But I want to clarify that I agree that low-cost, high-impact health measures for women and children can be an integral, effective part of a global plan to better fight HIV/AIDS as long as it is in addition to, not in lieu of, specific initiatives to address HIV/AIDS, including among women and girls.)

In days of oil-wells-gone-bad where the questions of accountability and concern for the safety and quality of life for employees, pardon the expression, rise to the surface, it's all the more critical to know that there are companies (like Levi Strauss & Co.) who ensure that every one of their employees around the world has access to affordable health care, regardless of what systems may (or may not) exist in their nation. That Coca-Cola is building pineapple juice plants in Africa to create jobs for people living with HIV/AIDS. That Federal Express is willing to lend planes, staff and resources to ensure that supplies get every where they need to go (well in the nick of time). And that organizations with huge star power like the NBA leverage their players' persuasive ability to raise awareness and encourage testing and linkage to care for many diseases. That Chevron gave $30 million to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. That The Brinks Company festoons their delivery trucks with red ribbons to promote AIDS awareness. And on and on.

In a world where there will never be enough government funding to address all the figurative and literal ills of our global society, it is essential that we also draw on the varied power of public-private partnerships, and the power of our own pocketbooks, to help address the world's needs. It can't just be up to governments (ours or any others) to stop pandemics and treat all people who need care. We must take care of each other (and no, that does not make me a Socialist). Creating a link between global health and the private sector can mean that the proceeds of our consumerism, lent to capitalism, can benefit the global good.

And that's a smart way for us all to feel better about our seemingly unquenchable thirst for capitalism that creates so many of these problems in the first place.

While it's true that corporate social responsibility has become a marketing tool in and of itself, we, as savvy consumers, can do due diligence and choose to expend our resources through companies that will give some of the profits back to make the world a better place. The member companies of the GBC are a good place to start.

No company, however altruistically minded, or well-intentioned or artfully managed will always be able to avoid troubles like those of BP's. But we have a choice, as consumers, to put our money where it can sustain people's lives. For me, knowing that certain companies are willing to play a role in global health, and especially the end of AIDS, is critical to me giving them my business.

BP, by the way, is member of the GBC. I caught myself swerving out of a BP gas station shortly after the spill. But I later realized that I wasn't hurting BP, I was hurting the local business owner who bought gas from BP. And I made a point of going back and giving them my business. I also considered that given the cost of the clean-up, in a way, depriving BP of income is only hampering their ability to wipe off more shore birds.

There needs to be accountability for corporate irresponsibility. And the government can't always be expected to bail out bad business. But when big problems happen--even in big business--or pandemics emerge, all hands are needed on deck and we private citizens can help by thinking about what we buy, and what we don't.

I can't speak to BP's future plans for remediation, nor can I accurately dissect the role mismanagement may have played in the circumstances that led to the spill, or that have hampered the clean up and capping of the well. But I do believe that there are many BP employees and their families who would love to be a part of the solution to the problem they helped create. And we can help them and the companies that support them.

When global disaster strikes, we all have to pitch in. Because chances are, even if we feel we are very far removed from the problem, it could touch our lives in the future. (I, for one, have had a summer of swimming at the Jersey Shore totally wrecked by the shark sitings. Supposedly, the sharks have come north to avoid the oil...)

In a recent article about the GBC in The Economist, Mayor Dellums of Oakland, CA was quoted as saying, "at the end of the day, HIV is everyone's business."

Indeed. Those who know the power HIV/AIDS has to undermine the stability of the global economy by wiping out whole generations of work forces and as a result, limiting GNPs and destabilizing nations and regions realize the many ways HIV/AIDS can potentially touch every one of our lives, even if the virus never affects us, or someone we love, personally.

The bottom line is, if we take the time to educate ourselves about the various crises facing humanity and try to contribute to each and every one in some small way, we have a better chance of making the world a safer place for us all.

For my money, it doesn't really matter whether a given company is doing good out of a sense of pure altruism, enlightened self-interest or abject self-protectionism. Who cares why people do good?

All that matters to me is that when Mother Earth cries out for help, we heed her call as quickly and as completely as we can, putting our money where it will do the most good for the most people.

In a time of global economic recession, it is all the more important to spend thoughtfully. Because when we are tight-fisted or careless, too many lives remain hanging in the balance.

Keeping the world safe from natural and man-made disasters is an expensive proposition. But we can ill-afford not to create better channels for addressing global health. And, in the end, supporting socially responsible multinational corporations will mean a gain for us all.

Finally, a crazy idea. Why not advocate for tax breaks for companies that donate a certain percentage of earnings (or in kind resources) to global health? Why not make the business of saving lives as profitable as it is for some companies to risk them?

For a montage video of the GBC conference, including an excerpt from Condoleezza Rice's award acceptance speech and footage of Annie Lennox performing, click below:

To see my interview with John Tedstrom, President and CEO of the GBC, click below:

To see my interview with Melanne Verveer, President Obama's Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues, click below:

To see my interview with Amie Batson, Deputy Assistant Director for Global Health, USAID, click below:

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