Can NGOs work successfully with international oil and gas companies in Africa?

One agency representative describes what it’s like to join forces with the American Marathon Oil Corporation to combat malaria in Equatorial Guinea

Non-governmental organisations have traditionally opposed multinationals and oil companies in developing countries, rather than worked with them. But today the tide is turning and big businesses are teaming up with NGOs, charities and other pressure groups.

In business schools, ethics and corporate social responsibility have moved on to the curriculum and business leaders say that if they want to attract the best young talent around, they have to pay attention to issues such as sustainability.

This is according to Lee Yallot, who works for Medical Care Development International, the implementing agency for the Global Fund initiative to combat Malaria in Equatorial Guinea. He is the financial and administrative co-ordinator, based in Bata, on the mainland of Equatorial Guinea.

He told participants at the EMRC’s Africa Finance & Business Forum in Paris last month that there are a lot of benefits in a partnership between Marathon Oil Corporation and an organisation like Medical Care Development International, which is starting off in a country. “Particularly it provides us with high-level access to the government in order to discuss priority and activities for the national strategy – to allow us to cut through bureaucratic stuff that sometimes can be confusing, so that there are commitments from the government to the project in terms of both human resources but also in terms of financial resources. And also to help us have a more positive image within the population.”

“Also there is the obvious support managerially that comes from the administration that is already in place,” Yallot says. “Assistance with customs clearance, knowing what the local laws are, and how things work, as well as the very good communications that private firms normally have.”

“Notwithstanding this is the financial commitment that private firms can provide – but also in addition to the funds themselves, private organisations have a flexibility that public organisations normally don’t have and this allows us to move quickly.”

The link with Marathon also enables the agency to
have easy and immediate access to offices, warehouses and other accommodation on the island, which, maintains Yallot, has proved to be a "tremendous help."

Other benefits to his organisation is the Marathon's commitment to his staff and its willingness to assist whenever necessary, along with Marathon's commitment to achieving results and making a substantial impact.

**Leading-edge technology and innovation**

“When this project began, Marathon went against the conventional wisdom of how a malaria project was supposed to be run,” Yallot says.

He explains that in Africa, at the time the Bioko Island project was launched, indoor residual spraying was not common. Bed nets were the standard. Marathon however was committed to moving ahead with this project and today the President's Malaria Initiative, Roll Back Malaria and the World Health Organisation now support such programmes throughout Africa.

“All private organisations, having a strong desire for cutting-edge technology and innovation, want to be models (and this) is something that allows projects like our own to work effectively in finding the best solutions to the problem and not necessarily just implementing a project as it was designed.”

**Sustainability**

Yallot says Marathon has also demonstrated a commitment to sustainability in Equatorial Guinea by, among other things, helping to extend the project to the mainland, where Marathon does not have operations.

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