

## Book reviews

Reviewer [George Simons](#), SIETAR member

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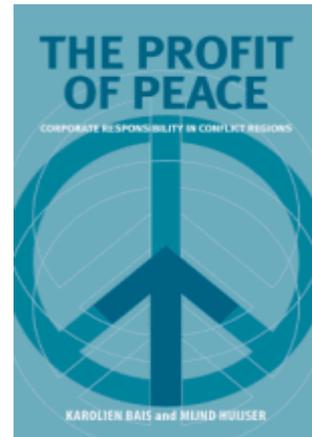
Author Karolien Bais & Mijnd Huijser

Title The Profit of Peace: Corporate Responsibility in Conflict Regions

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In this short but incisive book, veteran journalist Karolien Bais, and intercultural consultant Mijnd Huijser force us to look at the ethical dilemmas we face when it comes to investing, divesting, and providing service in parts of the world where intense poverty and corrupt governance are the daily fare. “Damned if you do and damned if you don’t,” seems to be the inevitable price entrepreneurs must pay if they dare operate in these environments, however good their intentions or meticulous their ethical decision making.

*The Profit of Peace* is both simply and extremely well written. It combines interviews with top executives, values analysis and intercultural perspectives. It leads to the conclusion that trust and collaboration between these multinationals and NGOs has the greatest potential not only for reaching the organizational goals of each, but enables them better contribute to local well being and prosperity—perhaps the critical condition for developing greater freedom and increased respect for human rights.

The moral high ground is a slippery slope. The lack of trust and the shortage of the willingness and skills to build trust between multinational corporations, activist NGOs, government, not to mention *invidia academica*, hobble the ability of our organizations to arrive at the facts and react together effectively to the needs of conflicted areas of the world. Unfortunately as one who has worked in academic institutions, non-profit organizations and government agencies as well as businesses it is hard for me to not become cynical about the self-righteousness that we are each capable of in respect to the other. But, I am aware that yielding to cynicism is simply surrendering to the same cycle of blame and dismissal of my fellows that I am complaining about.

How can sincere and committed idealists deal with “dirty money” and abusive power? How can well-intentioned businesspeople create prosperity with packs of activist watchdogs relentlessly snapping at their heels? We need to abandon these and other cherished images that we use to dismiss each other if we are to become open to cooperation and the real achievement of each of our goals. How can we do this?

Bais and Huijser help us to see how cultural assumptions underlie organizational as well as public policy and decision making. Action-oriented people who prefer simple universal rules and simple systems, for example, will choose different means of addressing ethical dilemmas than those who perceive situations as complex and inextricably intertwined with roles and relationships. The most glaring example of this is the strong preference of some cultures for

sanctions intended to force change in conflicted regions or “despotic” regimes. This, despite the fact that history clearly demonstrates that economic sanctions almost without exception align the suffering and impoverished victims of the sanctions with their leadership, no matter how corrupt, and focus anger on the one imposing the punishment. They almost always backfire.

As a US American, this book’s discussion of sanctions confirmed my nagging belief that moral judgment and punishment lead to resistance, not change. 40+ years of sanctions in Cuba have not budged its government. Only half jokingly in March 2003, I suggested to anyone who would listen (few did) that “shock and awe” would be more destabilizing to the regime (and cheaper on the US military budget) if we carpet-bombed Iraq with foodstuffs, medicine, household goods, and random luxury items instead of cluster bombs.

The authors of this book dare to challenge us with the concept that our ethics bear the stamp of our own cultural particularities, and that perhaps those peculiarities need to be reflected upon and negotiated rather than be imposed as absolutes. When our response to conflicted countries begins to sound more and more like “the white man’s burthen” of a colonial past, activist leaders need to find synergy with those whose approaches to the cure of conflicted and failing states are slower, more patient-centered, and less dramatic. There must be other metaphors than that of “policeman” and “superhero” for our engagements abroad. Less activist cultures need to learn as well how to convince the more activist that their sincerity, commitment and determination to unraveling complex dilemmas is neither cowardice (it may indeed take more courage) nor turning a blind eye to dilemmas (it may be a deeper search for insight). In conflicted areas, half steps may be the only possible steps forward; perhaps more intense engagement in messy situations can be more productive than condemning and isolating “them.”

The book leaves us with dilemmas to digest, e.g.: Which comes first, peace or justice? Democracy or well-being? The authors suggest that the road to any of these is confidence, “that is only built by getting to know each other, by looking for facts instead of emotions, by being predictable in actions and by being transparent.” Multinationals and NGOs alike, they insist, have core businesses, and, “It is not necessary to develop a common organizational culture” but to understand that contributing to the other’s core business can add value to its own core business. Is this in itself also too idealistic in a world dominated by greed and power with a strong smell of corruption in the air? Perhaps. But is there really another alternative to the status quo? *Corruptio optimi pessima*, whether we are talking about Enron, religion, or US democracy, the corruption of our best institutions is the worst of all.

Who should read this book? Certainly multinational managers and policy makers who would like to question organizational machismo and seek deeper insight into the nature of their dilemmas in conflicted environments; certainly NGO activists and those academicians who fear that initiating dialogue with corporate types makes them adulterous bedfellows; certainly interculturalists and those of us who consult with people who manage and work in organizations. We are in an age when almost everything has global and intercultural implications and our clientele need to collaborate with others whose bottom lines differ from their own.

I would also recommend *The Profit of Peace* strongly to those working in the media and those engaged in politics. Often it is the moral indignation or the trust of the public that can be either most damaging or most helpful in ethical dilemmas. The challenging ideas in this book

whether read in its pages or mediated by those who influence populations and organizations can help to refine our overall ethical sense. It is my opinion, no doubt culturally biased, that we are all in this world together, not just saints and sinners, but each of us sometimes saint and sometimes sinner. I am reminded of my favorite line from singer-poet Leonard Cohen, “There is a crack in everything... That’s how the light gets in!”