

Growing up in a Palestinian refugee family, often moving from country to country, culture shock has been a constant presence in my life.

As a young woman in Gaza, I earned a scholarship to attend the United World College in Norway. Thrust into a campus of 200 students from 85 different countries, every day brought new shocks. Different languages, foods, personal habits, and taboos. I found it especially hard to adapt to the different way Western students held conversations and discussed ideas. It seemed their cultural idea of debate was to stake your ground and hold it at all cost. Listening meant using the time the other person was talking to formulate your own rebuttals. If the listener disagreed, they'd cut the speaker off.

It was a far cry from the etiquette I'd grown up with, born out of Bedouin culture. I was taught to really listen when another person is speaking. When they finish, pause and digest what they've said before responding. Never interrupt. The goal is not to win the argument, but to achieve understanding. From that understanding, you can bridge perspectives and build partnerships based on mutual respect.

That approach to listening has proved invaluable to me at work in the field of international development. Sitting together with women in rural Ecuador or Kenya's Maasai Mara as they formed small business groups, hearing them share their challenges and needs, I learned how to best support them in their own empowerment. Every country and every culture had different goals.

What I didn't expect was to experience culture shock from the non-profit sector itself. But I did. I often hear professors and researchers bemoan the competitive nature of academia. But I was surprised to learn that it's also the reality at times among charitable organizations.

We're a sector full of passionate, driven and opinionated activists who are bound to butt heads. There's a lot of emotion brewing. People deeply believe in their models and missions. And, with a trend of donations decreasing, it's easy to foster competition for a share of a shrinking pie.

As Executive Director of WE Charity, I spend much of my time with other NGOs in over a dozen countries listening, learning, and sharing ideas. I've personally learned so much from these conversations and believe that we need more of this dialogue. I'm a passionate believer that non-profits can support each other to achieve our collective goals.

In the spirit of understanding and achieving our common goal of creating a better world, I'd like to offer up for conversation three aspects of our work that others in the sector often see as worthy of further discussion. It might be helpful to articulate our beliefs around them at WE, and why we take these approaches.

1. Social Enterprise

There are some who feel strongly that there's no place for business in development. We respect those that hold that opinion and recognize there will be debate. But our experience has taught us that integrating business models is key to tackling global challenges.

The sad reality is that donations in Canada are dwindling. Between 1990 and 2016, there was a 22 per cent decline in the percentage of Canadians giving to charity. This is a fact that will only be complicated by the looming recession predicted by economists. Our partnership between WE Charity and ME to WE Social Enterprise has provided funding stability that has ensured the long-term sustainability of our work. It's a set-up similar to that of Grameen Bank or Habitat ReStore. Our cross-sector model has

insulated us from the shifting tides of government funding, allowing us to make long term commitments to our partner communities for greater impact.

The success of our social enterprise is measured on three levels. First, this model has allowed us to create steady employment for over 2,000 entrepreneurs in WE Village communities overseas, including Fairtrade farmers, artisans, and hospitality hosts—most of these are women. Second, as per our [audited statements](#) over the past five years, an excess of 90 per cent of ME to WE's profits have been donated to WE Charity, with the balance reinvested to grow the social enterprise. This stable funding has empowered us to grow and scale our impact, partnering with more developing communities in more countries, and reaching more than four million youth with our service learning programs. Third, at an organizational level, the revenue stream from our social enterprise lets WE Charity keep its administration costs at just 10 per cent of expenditures. We don't have to spend money on costly fundraising tactics like street canvassers and phone banks. That means 90 cents on every dollar donated goes directly to fund projects, and we're so proud of that number.

2. ME to WE Trips

There has been considerable debate among non-profits about volunteer travel, and rightfully so. Done poorly, so-called 'voluntourism' can fall into the traps that critics identify—undermining sustainable development by taking local jobs, and promoting the 'white saviour' complex.

Critics have rightfully pointed out that a small number of unscrupulous operators engage in superficial, potentially harmful practices like visiting orphanages or allowing trip participants to interact with children unsupervised.

But when done properly and in partnership with communities, trips can be beneficial. The UN has identified tourism as one of the greatest drivers of global economic growth, accounting for one in eleven jobs. That's why tourism is one of the [pillars of the Sustainable Development Goals](#)—not simply beach resorts, but authentic, cultural travel. Contrary to hurting local employment, ME to WE Trips creates 350 jobs annually in our rural communities.

So, in keeping with the SDGs, WE has built a College of Tourism and Hospitality in Kenya to create even more jobs and establish an eco-tourism industry that serves our partner communities in the Maasai Mara. Dr. Jane Goodall herself has stated best way to prevent problems like poaching in East Africa is for local communities to benefit economically from their natural assets.

WE has worked hard to ensure that our trips promote sustainable development and achieve maximum positive impact for both partner communities and trip participants. According to [independent reviews](#) by impact verification agency Mission Measurement, our trips are designed to educate visitors in manner that respects and uplifts local culture. In a similar model to Rotary International or University exchanges, volunteer service is a platform for our participants to bond and learn with locals. Volunteer trips for accredited professionals like teachers and doctors provide capacity building and professional development for local educators and health care workers.

I invite you to listen to what community members and leaders like [Narok County Governor Samuel Tunai](#), [Maasai mama Jane Marinday](#), and [Jose Hurtado—President of the Guasuntos local council in Ecuador](#), have to say about the impact that ME to WE trips has had on their communities.

3. Working with companies

Much like social enterprise, corporate partnerships are a contentious issue in the non-profit world. It's true that many harmful companies do engage in greenwashing, or worse. But many others are making great strides to create truly scalable, sustainable change. I believe it is not only possible but necessary to engage the business world in the work of non-profits. Building cross-sectoral partnerships and engaging the business world is SGD number 17. Businesses have vast resources and networks; non-profits can offer the expertise to help leverage for-profit assets to scale social impact.

I'll use just one example that often causes confusion: our WE Day events. WE takes an approach to partnerships that benefits the entire non-profit sector, engaging businesses at a marketing level and encouraging them to shift sponsorship budgets. Rather than paying to attach their brand name to a stadium or sports venue location, companies can create broad social impact by supporting WE Day. Our sponsors cover costs to help 200,000 kids attend dozens of events every year, for free. We could never offer this inspiring event to thousands of public schools at no cost without our sponsors. It's also important to note here that WE works carefully with educational leaders, and has been widely [recognized](#) by [educators](#) and [school boards](#) for our efforts to properly manage any sponsorship or branding.

The WE Day stage has featured more than 6,000 different causes, reaching an audience of more than one million youth attendees across North America and the UK over the past dozen years. Since WE Day began, students have contributed more than 46 million volunteer hours and raised more than \$119 million for local and global causes. More than 80 per cent of that money has gone to non-profits and causes that aren't affiliated with WE Charity, such as The Terry Fox Foundation, Ronald McDonald House, the SPCA, and the Amanda Todd Legacy Society.

I've met so many business execs who, after attending WE Day, return to their offices to drive new CSR initiatives in their companies. I believe it's important to acknowledge and reward companies that do good—as this pushes them to continue to move the dial on social impact.

A Childhood Parable

There is a Bedouin parable I remember from my youth. It concerns a group of people lost in the desert. If they fight among themselves, they are lost forever. But if they work together, they reach the oasis.

In the non-profit sector, global problems and challenges are our vast desert. The plights of the world can easily overwhelm us. There are many roads to the oasis. We can spend valuable energy pointing fingers about going the wrong way, or we can encourage one another on our separate but parallel paths.

I'm a proud Middle Eastern woman, and like all of us in the non-profit sector, I have strong beliefs. Over the years I have learned so much sitting down with dozens of other non-profit leaders, and listening to those who think differently. I deeply appreciate, in turn, those who take the time to reach out to me, to discuss and learn about our model and approaches at WE. I want to keep listening and talking, please allow me to extend an open invitation to sit down and share your ideas and thoughts.

If you have questions or want to learn more about WE, I invite you to check out our Transparency Report: <https://online.flippingbook.com/view/652461/>. Or, you can reach out to me directly to chat over tea: Dalal@we.org.

If you're a fellow traveller on the journey of social impact in non-profit world, best wishes on your path.
We're cheering for you!

Regards,

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