FIVE QUESTIONS ON BUSINESS AND CHILDREN’S RIGHTS

Twenty-five years ago, the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history was adopted by United Nations Member States: the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In 54 articles, the Convention offers a vision of a world where all children survive and develop to their full potential without discrimination, and are protected, respected and encouraged to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

The accountability to realize these rights lies with governments, but to make the vision of the Convention a reality for every child, it needs to guide the actions of all actors in society. A number of corporate leaders, partners with UNICEF in promoting the children’s rights agenda, were asked what motivates them and their companies to engage.

Léon Wijnands
Global Head of Sustainability
The ING Group

Léon Wijnands is Global Head of Sustainability at ING. He advises the ING Management Board Banking in defining the company’s global sustainability strategy and targets. He leads the ‘ING for Something Better’ Foundation, ING’s vehicle for philanthropic activities, and is responsible for the global partnership with UNICEF. His career with ING includes directing the bank’s Customer Contact Centers and ING’s Customer Intelligence department, and leading product management at ING Bank. He has been Chairman of the Board in the ING Amsterdam district.

ING is a global financial institution of Dutch origin with outreach in 40 countries worldwide, offering banking, investment, life insurance and retirement services. ING has 65,000 employees and serves over 61 million private, corporate and institutional customers. In 2005, ING partnered with UNICEF through its ‘ING Chances for Children’ initiative, aimed at providing children with opportunities to learn and build a solid foundation for a brighter future. The partnership is based on involving ING staff who engage for children’s education and raise funds in different ways, funds which are then matched by ING.

Since 2005, ING and its employees have raised a total of €26 million and will achieve the goal of reaching 1 million children with quality education and healthier living conditions in time for the partnership’s 10-year anniversary. Moving from a primarily philanthropic to a strategic partnership over the past years, ING and UNICEF are now preparing for the next phase of the collaboration, with a focus on adolescents. By investing in the second decade of childhood, the partnership aims at tackling social exclusion, inequality and poverty and empower young people by giving them the tools needed to build a better future for themselves and their societies.

1. Why is it important for private sector companies to engage in society beyond their core business?

Léon Wijnands: I believe this engagement is part of our core business. At ING, we think it is our role as a bank to empower people and organizations to realize their own visions for a better future – however modest or grand. But we also realize that not everyone, especially not children in disadvantaged circumstances, has the means and opportunity to do that.

For ING to prosper, it is important that the communities in which we are active prosper. A strong and healthy community benefits everyone – its current inhabitants and businesses as well as coming generations. And since ING is operating in many communities around the world, we believe we have a responsibility to make a positive contribution to these communities.

Children’s access to good education is a fundamental building block for the development of societies. Education can be life-changing. It can help to equalize opportunity and lead to economic growth and the development of a healthy society. This is why we decided to start the global ING ‘Chances for Children’ programme in 2005 and to partner with UNICEF. We formulated an impact goal of providing 1 million children with access to good primary education and, by doing this, contribute significantly to the second United Nations Millennium Development Goal: universal education for all children.

However, for children to truly benefit from education, their basic needs must first be met. That is why the scope of our partnership with UNICEF includes the provision of clean water and health care.
2. Why did you choose to partner with UNICEF in support of children’s rights?

Léon Wijnands: The easy answer is that the ‘short list’ of possible organizations that have the reach, the expertise and the skill to do this is relatively short. We teamed up with UNICEF because of its strong track record in providing education to the world’s deprived children and because UNICEF, just like ING, has operations worldwide and in local communities.

But this is not the only factor. We did not want to work with an organization that just puts some bricks on the ground to build a school and then leaves after a few years. UNICEF is working on holistic, integrated and sustainable educational solutions, together with the government. And this is an approach that ING strongly believes in.

The fact that UNICEF is a very strong and well-known brand of course also helped us in our choice.

3. What has this engagement meant for your company? Has it in any way influenced your way of doing business?

Léon Wijnands: The partnership has absolutely had an influence, both on the engagement within our company and on the way we do business.

Since the start, ING employees worldwide have been the cornerstone of the continued success of the programme, enthusiastically giving their valuable time and money. Their involvement goes beyond the traditional forms of salary donations, which are of course also available. It includes all kinds of activities for UNICEF – from running sponsored marathons to baking cakes and organizing auctions where colleagues pay far too much for small things, all for the good cause. This has created an enormous level of employee engagement, company pride and in the end high levels of satisfaction in working for ING. All financial contributions from our employees are doubled through the ING matching scheme, which also helps bring in fantastic financial donations for UNICEF every year.

The engagement for children’s rights has influenced our core business, which is our lending services. The fact that UNICEF involved us in creating the Children’s Rights and Business Principles stimulated us to take a closer look at how ING is respecting and supporting children’s rights in its business model. We have now embedded the children’s rights principles in our lending policies, so when companies apply for loans, we check that they are also in line with these principles. If they are not, we will not provide the loan.

Since the start, we have been a strong advocate for the Children’s Rights and Business Principles – we hosted the launch here in the Netherlands – and embed these principles in our Environmental and Social Risk Framework which is the basis for our lending and investing practises.

4. How do you see your engagement in support of children’s rights developing, and what could it look like in five years’ time?

Léon Wijnands: I think that ING’s commitment to children’s rights will develop more and more into delivering support through its core business and purpose. Personally, I think that this is where our strength is and where we can be of even more value to UNICEF and marginalized children. So, at ING, we are very enthusiastic about the new partnership we are developing with UNICEF. It is focused on the second decade of a child’s life, the adolescents and how we can empower them, for example by providing skills like financial training and creating business opportunities that can help both them and their communities prosper. I believe that by combining our forces, UNICEF with ING, the impact we can have in society is much bigger than if we were acting separately.

5. This partnership has come to benefit more than 1 million children over the years. Has it in any way also been beneficial for ING’s business goals?

Léon Wijnands: Yes, it has had an impact on our business goals. For example, our ING Direct Spain business has been running fantastic and innovative online campaigns for UNICEF since 2008. Every year, they are awarded with prizes for best online initiative, and this has also had a positive impact on our business.

And I have a personal favourite in the savings account for UNICEF, which we launched last year in the Netherlands. It is a perfect example of a win-win situation: while saving for your own future in this account, ING makes a donation to UNICEF to also create a better future for children in Madagascar.

But above all, we are extremely proud and excited that with the support of all ING colleagues, local business units, customers and other people involved, we will be able to reach our goal to support over 1 million children in getting access to school, better quality education and safer and healthier living conditions. That is why we started this partnership, so this is our biggest achievement.