

It pays for aid groups to buy supplies locally

Peace Dividend Trust shows UN how in-country procuring is less expensive, boosts local economy

BY CRAIG & MARC KIELBURGER, SPECIAL TO THE SUN MAY 31, 2010

Scott Gilmore offers a bet. With one phone call, the Ottawa native said he could get a trailer filled with bottled water shipped to the most remote corner of the world within a few days.

We took his word for it. Few people know more about moving the nuts and bolts of humanitarian missions than Gilmore. He's dedicated his life to improving these logistics.

"It's really easy," says the executive director of Peace Dividend Trust. "The global logistics industry is so simple."

Simple is one thing. But efficiency in places such as Afghanistan, Haiti and Africa is another.

"When it comes to supply chains and managing people, the aid industry is decades behind the private sector," says Gilmore. "We can help [these organizations] spend locally."

Gilmore knows buying local isn't synonymous with easy -- but it is efficient. While working as a diplomat in East Timor he saw just how wasteful aid could be. Supplies were held up at borders and on ships while in-country managers helplessly waited the red tape to be sorted out overseas.

"We were very frustrated at the fact that peacekeeping missions were limited by lack of attention to the nuts and bolts," says Gilmore.

But Gilmore did see positive change through his own day-to-day personal spending living in the country. Buying food and personal items generated more income for the local economy than the guarded shipping containers. He figured if he could recreate this growth on a larger scale, he could make missions cheaper, smarter and more effective.

"We want to make it as easy as possible for even the laziest procurement officer to spend money locally," he says.

Peace Dividend Trust set up their flagship project in Afghanistan in 2006. There, he found Westerners working as procurement officers -- people who purchase supplies in the field -- who didn't speak the language and were concerned about personal safety.

"He's probably just heard someone got kidnapped," says Gilmore. "He's scared about the security, so he doesn't leave the compound."

The officer makes a phone call and gets aid shipped from Pakistan and or flown from Dubai.

