



Michelle Sullivan, president of the Caterpillar Foundation, delivered the third and final leg of the [Policy & Progress: Investing in Women for Peace, Security and Stability](#) series this Tuesday. Pamela Reeves, a Watson Institute Senior Fellow, moderated.

Sullivan's lecture, entitled "The Role of the Private Sector and Foundations in Policy and Foreign Affairs" dissected how private corporations can leverage their philanthropy to enact productive policy across the world.

She stressed that much of her perspective comes from her background. Before heading the foundation, Sullivan worked in the business end of Caterpillar, which she insists is a relational company where everyone was treated like family. In her case that's no overstatement: for years she worked alongside her parents and siblings; today her mother joins her to fly around the world.

Sullivan also lives with a particular type of dwarfism that fewer than a hundred people in the world share. Her condition has required multiple orthopedic surgeries, but she nonetheless she feels lucky to have been born in the U.S. instead of another country where she might not have received health care or education. She urged audience members not to judge others' problems prematurely.

Combined, Sullivan's business acumen and deep commitment to equity have transformed the Caterpillar Foundation into a cutting edge charity.

“We’re like the Shark Tank” she said. “We receive five thousand requests around the globe and we fund three to four hundred.” In choosing organizations to support she looks for the return on her own investment, and those that address root causes.

To give an example she added, picture a local foodbank. The money donated can temporarily fix issues of hunger, but cannot address the systemic problems underneath. We need to take a long term view to fix those issues, she said. And, one of the most powerful but underutilized levers in the charity toolbox is policy.

To successfully influence policy, Sullivan added, everyone at the table has to benefit. This pragmatic approach sometimes requires pursuing objectives indirectly. In Africa for instance, Sullivan wanted to empower women but recognized that she could not ask the governments to change their laws directly. Instead, she chose to focus on water security, since many young girls miss out on education as they fetch water for their families. The solution was palatable for the government which wanted to spur economic growth.

This “collaborative charity” Sullivan concluded, is the future of philanthropy. Private-public partnerships can push every dollar farther than any government or corporation could by itself.