

Oxfam crisis: we need a more informed debate about NGOs and international aid



Few would say that the alleged behaviour of aid workers in the Oxfam sexual exploitation scandal is acceptable. But the nature of the criticism that has followed these revelations, including government threats to cut Oxfam's funding, is driven more by politics than genuine understanding of the sector, explains [David Lewis](#).

Evidence of sexual misconduct by staff within Oxfam rightly made the news headlines recently. Oxfam has admitted that past problems had not been handled well enough, offered a full apology, and has publicised improvements to its safeguarding arrangements that it hopes will afford better protection to people in the future. Its deputy chief executive resigned.

Few people would suggest that the alleged behaviour of these aid workers is acceptable. The exploitation of some of the world's most vulnerable by those tasked with providing them with assistance and support during a time of crisis is inexcusable.

Nor would many disagree with the criticism that Oxfam has been less than transparent about what actually happened, how it was dealt with, or how much of it was communicated to the Charity Commission. It is good that the murky world of humanitarian work and disaster relief is now being subjected to much closer public scrutiny.

But the storm of criticism that has greeted the revelations, which included a government threat to cut Oxfam's funding, and calls in the press for its chief executive to resign, is disproportionate and unhelpful. It has been driven more by politics and ideology than genuine understanding of the sector.

What is needed now is an effort to build a better-informed public discussion about the pros and cons of international aid, the nature of humanitarian action, and the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) like Oxfam. NGOs themselves have a responsibility to initiate this. But for this to happen, three key points about NGO work need to be far better understood.

NGO workplaces are ambiguous and difficult

We live in an era in which unprecedented light is currently (and rightly) being shone on the problem of abuse and harassment in society. It is simply naive to think that sexual harassment is not an issue in every area of institutional life, including the development and charitable sectors. Or that bad people don't take advantage of the opportunities afforded by the power imbalances implicit in front line humanitarian settings.

Humanitarian emergency work usually takes place in unstable areas, in pressured situations, in places where there is a high degree of dysfunction and disorder, and where little goes according to plan. It's messy, unpredictable and difficult.

We have to move beyond the oversimplified popular stereotyped view of aid workers either as 'idealised virtuous helpers' or as 'self-serving overpaid professionals'. Neither view is accurate. The work attracts many different kinds of people with varied motivations, usefully expressed by Jock Stirrat in terms of his [three archetypes](#) of 'missionaries', 'misfits', and 'mercenaries'.

Aid doesn't travel by itself

Governments and private individuals who donate to NGOs are understandably committed to a belief in securing 'value for money'. However, this can lead them to expect that resources can reach those in need without requiring much in the way of organisational structures or overhead costs.

This is unrealistic. To do effective work, agencies need to invest in proper management systems including safeguarding. One outcome of the relentless pressure to minimise resources spent on NGO overheads is that it may contribute to a lack of effective management. A key theme in my own 2014 [book](#) on NGOs and management is the point that aid money does not magically move from people's donations or taxes to arrive safely to the people who need it – it requires effective management processes and systems to make that happen.

A better-informed public aid debate

The debate about international aid has become ideological rather than being based on a discussion of proper evidence. An informed debate about international aid is needed, but the current politically motivated [attack on aid](#) is unhelpful. Bringing international aid into the ongoing 'culture wars' benefits no one.

Instead we need to challenge misleading public perceptions of what it is that development organisations do. The government used to spend a tiny part of the aid budget on something called 'development education' in schools and local communities – aimed at promoting public understanding of international development issues. The funding for this was [cut in the UK](#) during the 1980s. What's now needed is improved safeguarding systems, a clearer code of conduct and a raised level of public education and debate.

Ironically, a 2017 Tufts University [report on sexual harassment](#) in the international NGO sector found that Oxfam was ahead of other NGOs in its safeguarding systems and was identified by the authors as an example of 'best practice'.

About the Author



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