

Oxfam scandal must force aid sector to finally address its own power

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If Oxfam responds by listening to its critics it could restore faith in a sector that was damaged long before the latest allegations

Oh Oxfam. I love you. And I hate you. I love that you were a pioneer in international development, that you were an organisation built on solidarity, education, empowerment – convincing British people that they could genuinely help people in other parts of the world.

I love your recent campaign on inequality, choosing to pay attention to one of the world's most pressing and invasive issues. But sometimes, I hate what you've become – a big corporate brand, competing for funds, dominating civil society voices and dictating the terms of engagement to others. I remember ringing you a few years ago when I was director of a small organisation to share our research on an issue we planned to campaign on, suggesting we collaborate. Your response? "We'll ring you if we need you."

You never did, in spite of the fact you ended up campaigning on the same issue, two years after we had started. This wasn't a one-off, either. I, and others, both north and south, had similar experiences on many occasions.

I have no doubts about the sincerity of many who work for and with Oxfam, or that they're stunned, that they wish it hadn't happened, that they want to do better. The majority of people work in this sector because they believe they can make a difference, however small. Oxfam and the sector do some great work. But arrogance and power have got in the way and could now seek to undermine its mission.

The Haiti scandal is not only big for Oxfam – it has implications far beyond, amplifying the vilification of the aid sector, which has repercussions for the UK charity sector as a whole. Twenty years ago, I was involved in a project to set up an international ombudsman for humanitarian assistance, of which Oxfam was a collaborator. In the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, humanitarians were genuinely concerned that sometimes they caused more harm than good. They wanted to do better.

An institution was set up, which ultimately became a voluntary standard for the humanitarian sector to sign up to – an important step, and one that includes standards of behaviour, including a system to prevent sexual exploitation. But did it go far enough? Organisations don't seem much different now than they were then.

What Oxfam and the wider sector have failed to do is to genuinely address their own power in international development. This is the systemic failing at play, not the sexual misconduct on its own.

Decisions and actions by the larger agencies often continue to be based on arrogance and a "we know what's best" approach, rather than something that is accountable to those most in need and

the communities in which they're working. So it's no surprise that their response to the Haiti situation was wanting. They tried to hold on to the power and control of the issue and were caught out.

So how should Oxfam, and the international development sector respond? Could this #MeToo moment actually be the genuine catalyst for change that should have happened years ago?

The starting point is in responding to the crisis not as a one-off situation that could have been better handled, not as reputation control and damage limitation. But by opening up, listening to critics and putting the power into the hands of those in the global south – social justice movements, civil society groups, marginalised activists. A group of actors in philanthropy, as it happens, is doing just that, through the #shiftthepower movement.

This won't be easy – once an organisation falls from the perch, trust is difficult to reclaim. And in this case, trust in the UK international development sector is already eroding. If Oxfam rises to the challenge, however, its actions could actually serve to restore faith in the sector, and indeed wider civil society, over time.

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P.S.

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<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/feb/13/oxfam-scandal-must-force-aid-sector-to-finally-address-its-own-power>