

How can NGOs practice 'doing good' and minimise 'doing harm'? What are the dilemmas and challenges present? Discuss with reference to a range of examples and case studies.

Introduction

Promoting human rights, driving the cause against climate change, and at the forefront of disaster relief; non-government organisations (NGOs) have an essential role in addressing the issues of global poverty and injustice. Despite good intentions, harmful conduct can arise at any time without an NGO even being aware. This occurs in many ways, such as by breaking the local economy, providing service delivery that harms health and well-being of the local people and by reinforcing conflict. This essay will contribute to the growing body of research on 'doing good' and minimising 'doing harm' by arguing that harm can be reduced by deeply understanding the context of each programme, taking a rights-based approach and conducting participatory work. Additionally, one of the most important means, albeit controversial, is to record failure. History will only be repeated if it is not documented. Based on the complexities of this debate, this essay will specifically concentrate on the role of international NGOs (INGOs) in order to channel the research. The content is structured into three parts beginning with an overview of INGOs in a modern context to show that growing pressure is being placed on NGOs to increase effectiveness and be accountable for their actions. The dilemmas facing INGOs will be analysed in part two, through the provision of numerous examples and case studies to highlight existing challenges. To finish, general principles that all INGOs can adopt to increase effectiveness will be presented. A conversation has started on acknowledging NGO failure, only if we continue this discussion can harm be reduced.

Part 1: A Background on NGOs

NGOs in Modern Society

Throughout the world, the nation-state has decreased in its ability to meet the basic needs of citizens and an increasing reliance on the world markets has only led to increased inequalities (Tesoriero 2010: 2). Although these mechanisms are not going anywhere fast, uncertainty in their performance has led citizens to look for other means to 'fill the gap' that have been left by the state and the market (Salamon and Anheier 1996: xi). This has predominantly been in the form of NGOs.

NGOs are defined as organisations that are institutionally separate from the government, despite potentially receiving support and are 'non profit' distributing, meaning they can make profit but it cannot be distributed (Smillie 1995). A dramatic amelioration of NGOs in the past two decades has been observed (Pinkney 2009: 30), with the number of INGOs rising simultaneously.

It is important to recognise that NGOs, as part of the space between state and the market, are integrated within civil society. Tesoriero (2010: 16) describes civil society as the formal or semi-formal structures established voluntarily rather than through a government programme or a directive, comprised of NGOs, service clubs and other institutions that mould a functioning society. The term 'civil society' has been rejected throughout the developing world as a northern model being 'too simplistic' and 'irrelevant to societies in the south' (Clayton 1996: 254). As this essay is focussed on analysing NGOs on an international scale, the term NGO or more specifically, INGO, will remain.

An increase in NGOs has meant enhanced competition for limited donor funding. A form of managerialism has arisen for NGOs, demanding focus on outputs, strategy, competition and entrepreneurship and has characterised them by submissions, service agreements, contracts and tenders (Kenny 2011: 162). With this, pressure has increased to raise the standards of NGOs monitoring and evaluation procedures (Pollard and Court 2008: 146). Increasing accountability has to be constituted towards donors and the public, which means that NGOs should be made more aware of possible harm caused by their actions. Competition for financial resources in the sector, has had a devastating impact on NGOs, in that it has resulted in a 'worst practice' – secrecy (Admittingfailure 2011), which will be discussed in depth in part three. Amongst the competition for donor support, NGOs are being rewarded for their successes and therefore forced to lie about their failures.

INGO Motivations

Many types of INGOs exist, each with their own motivation and theory. INGOs are defined as any NGO that is working in a country other than its own (Smith, Stebbins, Dover 2006 : 110). Within this, some authors differentiate between NGOs from the developed world, known as 'Northern NGOs' and local NGOs in the developing world as either 'Southern NGOs', 'National NGOs or 'Indigenous NGOs'. Furthermore, differences exist between the different motivations and theories

behind INGOs work. David Korten (1990) explains how each NGO implicitly operates on 'different assumptions regarding the nature of the development problem'. Korten (1990: 114) outlines four different 'generations' that define the theory of a particular NGO. This ranges from 'relief and welfare' that focuses on direct delivery to meet immediate needs, to 'small scale, self reliant local development' – commonly understood as community development initiatives, 'sustainable systems development' that seeks changes in specific policies and institutions, and finally 'the fourth generation' that associate with the power of people's movements in driving social change (Korten 1990: 115 -123). The examples and case studies provided in this essay range across the various generations of which the reader should consider. INGOs should have a clearly defined motivation behind their work as this will affect the reasons for their intervention and the methods they exert. This essay contends that a deeper understanding of the complexities associated with development and a greater concentration on long-term sustainability will lead to increased INGO effectiveness.

Part 2: Dilemmas and Challenges

More harm than good

Insufficient pre-departure research proceeded by minimal follow-through, presents space for INGO intervention to go horribly wrong. The list of such harm is endless, and the negative affects of some work possibly remain unknown. Implicit messages made through advocacy and the significant impacts of aid dependency have not been raised in this essay due to word constraints, however must be acknowledged as causing significant issues for the sector. This section will therefore solely focus on what the author believes are the major mistakes of INGO work. Before continuing, it must be acknowledged that despite many failures occurring, most INGOs succeed in providing immediate assistance (Riddell 2007: However current available statistics struggle to measure long-term affects and do not account for a consistent deficiency in reporting failure (which will be discussed in depth in part three). Moreover, poverty and injustice continue on a phenomenal scale around the world; immediate relief does little to challenge its root-causes. Regardless, within all INGO initiatives, whether it focusses on education, health, or human rights, from relief to advocacy - with all success comes an amount of failure.

The Act of Giving

Food, medical equipment, blankets, school books, toys and more; INGOs continue to import millions of resources into developing countries without assessing the local context. In the name of

'helping', non-financial resources manufactured kilometres away are brought in to poorer countries, whereas resources are often available locally. Often 'in kind' donations take up valuable space in cargo shipments, waste INGOs time sorting through the myriad of items, and may be unusable or potentially dangerous (Gray 2010). Box 1 highlights some of the dilemmas facing the provision of material items. The key issues raised here are the harm caused to local businesses with the flood of foreign items and that products are often unsustainable in the long-term. Resources may furthermore damage health and well-being. For example, the introduction of water points in many locations, such as Ghana and Tanzania, without technical training of locals has led to stagnant water found around the area, and in at least one case led to a breeding ground for mosquitoes (Adunga 2001: 25). Although these examples are filled with good intentions, the affects on the local community have proven much more harm than good.

Box 1 : Mosquito Nets in Africa

Dambiso Moyo (2009) in her controversial book *Dead Aid*, highly critical of aid to Africa, provides an example to show how aid can break the local economy. Through explaining a hypothetical scenario she describes a reality that occurs across many INGOs in Africa. Moyo describes a mosquito net maker who manufactures around 500 nets a week; employing ten people who each must support more than fifteen relatives. Despite their strenuous efforts, they struggle to beat the malaria-carrying mosquito. An INGO steps in with 100,000 mosquito nets to 'help' the affected region. However, the market is now flooded with foreign nets and the local net maker is out of business. Their 150 dependants can no longer be supported. Additionally, in a maximum of five years, the majority of the imported nets will be torn and damaged, no longer effective in preventing malaria.

Food aid is another potentially detrimental act of providing assistance. A large amount of food aid sourced through INGOs is produced far away, taking lengthy trips to arrive at its destination, as well as going through many bureaucratic channels (Timmer 2005: 1). Box 2 details the detrimental affects that this can have. Similar to the case study in Box 1, the local economy may be harmed in the process and time lost through getting the food to its destination. Timmer (2005:1) adds that the introduction of foreign food aid, although needed at the point of appeal, may be followed by a new local harvest. If a new harvest is to follow after foreign food aid has flooded the markets, local

prices may collapse, harming the local rural economy (Timmer 2005: 1). INGOs must deeply consider the affects they will have on the local people and their economies. Accessing supplies from the nearest area, whether its local, regional or in a neighbouring country, will usually be the fastest and cheapest strategy (Timmer 2005: 2).

Box 2: Food Aid to Ethiopia

In 2009, the Ethiopian Government appealed to USAID for emergency assistance in an on coming famine (USAID 2009). USAID responded with 65,410 metric tons of cereals, pulses, vegetable oil and blended food to the World Food Programme (WFP) managed by Catholic Relief Services, CARE, Save the Children US and UK, World Vision and more (USAID 2009). Owen Barder (2009), Senior Fellow and Director for Europe at the Center for Global Development (CGD) with extensive experience in Ethiopia, explains how this aid proceeds to occur. The food is bought from American farmers and shipped by road to Djibouti where it is then brought by road to the needed location in Ethiopia. Transport costs add up to \$568 metric tonne (approx. AU\$588) whereas local prices of wheat at the time were \$489 metric tonne (approx. AU\$506). Furthermore, the time taken to get the resources there, amounts to the nearly a week that local, regional or national farmers could feed the population. This food that is available locally would increase the incomes of Ethiopian farmers or alternatively those in neighbouring African countries. These local farmers livelihoods and well-being are being undermined by imported foreign food aid. (Barder 2009).

The Affects of Microfinance

Microfinance initiatives (MFIs) can play a significant role in providing people with an opportunity to escape poverty. Extensive amounts of aid money has been donated to INGOs to provide small loans to millions of people around the developing world (Riddell 2007: 274). The idea of micro-credit schemes arose from the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh who have provided credit to over five million people since the end of 2005, with 95% women, in schemes characterised by low interest payments and very high rates of repayment (Riddell 2007:274). Overwhelmingly high success rates have occurred since the MFIs were first created (Riddell 2007: 275). However, 2009-10 saw a turning point for microfinance, with numerous negative affects arising (Rozas 2011 :7). It has been made evident that often the poor are using the money only for immediate needs (Snodgrass and Sebsted cited in Riddell 2007: 275). This use as a 'stop-gap measure' to buy essential goods only

descends them into further indebtedness (The Reality of Aid 2008). Furthermore, considering the current global economic system, the success of self-employed businesses on the market is disproportionately low compared to big businesses and transnational corporations operating in developing countries (Singh 2008:50).

When the downfall of MFIs first struck in 2009, no best practices or case studies were available to provide guidance for MFI crises (Rozas 2011 :7). Through this, arose the publication *Weathering the Storm: Hazards, Beacons and Life Rafts* (Rozas: 2011), which provides MFIs with many case studies of what can go wrong and ways to overcome challenges. This publication is invaluable for MFIs to ensure best practice and not to repeat mistakes of the past.

Arguably, a more beneficial response can be provided through unconditional cash transfers. Cash transfers give people choices on where their money goes and available evidence shows that they are being used widely from meeting health and education costs, purchasing food and clothing, and even to investing in small business (IDS 2006: 1) *Givedirectly.com* (2011), is a prime example. Through a cash donation to their website, *GiveDirectly.com* locates poor households in Kenya and the money is transferred electronically to the recipients SIM card where cash is retrieved at participating banks (GiveDirectly 2011). Other than given the choice on how they spend their money, it also empowers them to meet their most immediate needs and to invest in effective opportunities (GiveDirectly 2011). This differs from microfinancing as there are no restrictions on how the money should be spent and no need for repayment (IDS 2006:1). Cash transfers are still in their infancy, however signs of successful application are something for INGOs to consider.

However, neither cash payments nor MFIs are quintessential elements for development. Both strategies must be combined with other anti-poverty programmes, such as health-care and education training to raise the living standards of the poor (Singh 2008: 46). Singh (2008: 47) asks 'what can women do with credit if they do not have child care, education, training and health services?'. The success of both programmes depends on wider changes in the development agenda, including changes in structures and institutions (The Reality of Aid 2008: 18). INGO professionals should inherently be 'trying to work themselves out of a job', therefore integrated sustainable solutions within all initiatives is essential.

Creating a 'Brain Drain'

INGOs presence in a developing country may weaken well-established local NGOs and remove able workers from more effective local positions. From a southern NGO perspective, INGOs enter a communities where local NGOs were already present and compete unfairly with the local organisations while undermining the independent sector (Menocal and Rogerson, cited in Barber and Bowie 2008:748). INGOs often offer higher international wages, removing a competent workforce lured away from essential local employment. Often local employees recruited into working for the INGO are the most educated and could have taken up employment in government positions or worked successfully in the private sector (Barber and Bowie 2008: 749). This manipulates the private sector and the civil service declines. An example of this is provided from Malawi, where the AIDS epidemic was severe and an INGO lured a local worker from their position in the state health sector with an income increase of three times what they were previously earning (Barber and Bowie 2008: 753). Barber and Bowie (2008:749) argue that a 'downward spiral' is perpetuated due to the more able citizens joining international employers and the less able remain, as corruption increases, confidence in the government declines further and young people are less inclined to join government employment.

INGOs have comfortably defined themselves as distinctly separate from the state and the government, which has created the western notion of 'civil society' (Clayton 1996: 254). Barber and Bowie (2008:748-9) argue that INGOs should not take the same approach in in developing countries. To fight corruption and establish 'good governance', INGOs should be working with state officials to form collaboration with the voluntary sector rather than seeking their own agendas (Barber and Bowie 2008: 749). Recruiting local people for their own benefit is part of this parcel, especially when they may pay international payment standards.

Reinforcing Conflict

International assistance in conflict situations, while sometimes reducing tensions and strengthening the means towards peaceful resolutions, INGOs can also reinforce or prolong conflict. Often INGO programmes are designed to only target specific sections of societies, which may cause for social discontent. Earle and Simonelli (2000: 119) explain how in Rio Chayote, the refugee population that had tirelessly fled there were being helped by an INGO, yet were seen as having acquired 'special benefits' by the local population. Power struggles had not been taken into account as the

INGO had not researched the full political situation (Earle and Simonelli 2000: 122). Box 3 examines another scenario that shows how structural differences can be reinforced. INGOs must form deep understandings of the social, cultural, economic, ecological and political context (Earle and Simonelli 2000: 122).

Box 3: Mised Efforts to Regain Peace

A dialogue process was organised by an INGO working in a conflict area. Minority and majority representatives were present and the INGO played a neutral role in the diplomatic proceedings. However, due to differing levels of education and work experience, the dialogue ended with the minority group feeling overwhelmed and cornered by the more powerful majority. The agency did not have the power to stop the domination of one side of the discussion from humiliating their counterparts. The asymmetries of power were reinforced and the minority group were further disadvantaged. (Anderson and Olson 2003: 12).

Implicit Ethical Messages

INGOs may force implicit ethical messages onto the local population through their actions and attitudes. INGOs from the developed world enter developing countries as leaders for the local community. Yet their conduct and attitudes may rub off negatively on the local community. For example, an INGO may use armed guards to protect their resources from theft or to protect their staff from harm. An implicit ethical message is broadcast that arms are legitimate and that weapons are necessary for security and safety (CDA 2004: 10). Moreover, when INGO staff appear nervous and worried for their own safety around others, this projects the message that it is normal to approach others with suspicion and belligerence (CDA 2004: 10). Gender roles may also be reinforced through INGO staff taking on more family-based roles and other staff's inability to let go of their own gender conceptions (Bebbington, Hickey and Mitlan 2008: 29). These harmful processes are not as easy to observe and much more difficult to report, while the INGO will often be ignorant of such harmful ways. However, these processes can be the most harmful as they can change the habits of society, which can be passed down generations. An engrained consciousness of their actions will deter this and training INGO staff in ethics would be ideal.

Part 3: Optimising 'doing good'

Preventing Harm

Part two explored the types of harm that can be done, while providing tools to prevent these specific processes from occurring. Discussion will now turn to the underlying principles that INGOs can adopt to minimise harmful actions. Firstly, the critical need for INGOs to fully understand the context they are entering will be analysed followed by the need to take a rights-based approach. The most fundamental means to avoid harm, however, is to document it. These following principles can be applied by any type of NGO, no matter their motivation or understanding on the nature of development.

Understanding the Context

Successful INGO work initiatives result from understanding the context and assistance program in depth before programme mobilisation. Earle and Simonelli (2000: 122) state that 'one must know the [target] community in all its facets' by researching and fully understanding its history, culture, social divides, culture alongside the current economic and political systems. They state further that without knowing the context to such an extent is a 'widely irresponsible social experiment' (Earle and Simonelli 2000: 122). INGO assistance programmes must be 'unpacked' in order to fully understand the impact that their actions may pose onto the local communities (CDA 2004: 6). Based on the findings from part 2, Box 4 highlights some key questions that INGOs should be asking before mobilising in a foreign country. These questions should also be continually monitored and reassessed throughout the life of the project or programme (CDA 2004: 5).

Box 4: Questions INGOs should be posing.

- **What resources will be brought into the country? Are these available locally? What impact will our resources have? What mechanisms can we put in place to ensure their long-term sustainability?**
- **Are there other local NGOs in the area? In what ways can we collaborate to effectively work together?**
- **Are we inadvertently undermining or weakening local structures?**
- **Have we considered power relations between conflicting groups? Will our work**

reinforce any ongoing conflict?

- **What impact will we have through our implicit ethical messages? Are we reinforcing any gender roles?**

Rights-Based Approach and Participatory Approaches

The most renowned and most-adopted principles to afford INGO effectiveness are from *The Sphere Project*, which was established in 1997 with proceeding editions (The Sphere Project 2011: 5). Although the handbook focusses on disaster relief, two main approaches are offered that every INGO can learn from. The handbook recommends a humanitarian approach routed in a rights-based approach and participatory methodology (The Sphere Project 2011: 6). The handbook stresses the importance of including not only local people but also local and national authorities in all stages of intervention (The Sphere Project 2011: 6).

Active participation of the local community is crucial to best meet the needs of the local people (The Sphere Project 2011: 23) It is argued that the more professional INGOs have become, the less inclined they are to consult with the local people, believing that 'they know best' (Whiting 2011). If change is to be sustainable it must be location specific, designed based on the knowledge of that particular context and must be owned by the people, based on their experience and understandings (Wallace 2001: 33). Involving the local population in the whole process of the INGO programme will enhance its sustainability, as the local people can take ownership and ensure greater probability for success (Fowler 2000: 21). This will no doubt also be enhanced with cooperation of local NGOs.

Document Failures

An INGO harms a local community in Indonesia. It is not made public as it may upset the donor. A few years later the same mistake takes shape in Botswana. A few months after that it is repeated again in Thailand, then Peru, then East Timor....Unless we document our failures, they are only bound to be repeated. (Admittingfailure 2011).

The INGO sector is built on a system designed to reward success and completely evade failure. Donors need to see that NGO programmes are making progress and meeting objectives in order to provide funding (Fowler 2000: 115). INGOs are then forced to distort their successes, otherwise they risk losing funding and nothing will be achieved. This occurs over and over again. This system is unsustainable. Earle and Simonelli (2000: 123) state that 'failure documentation is a liability for many organisations, whereas illusions of success sell'. A dramatic overhaul of the INGO to donor relationship needs to change to allow for recognition of mistakes. Only once we admit our mistakes can change to our processes be recognised. Through recognition, necessary steps can be taken to rectify a problem and other INGOs will not repeat the mistake. Admitting and publicising failure will contribute to a body of knowledge addressing why errors should not be repeated and this, perhaps, is INGOs 'saving grace' (Earle and Simonelli 2000: 123).

Monitoring and evaluation systems characteristically are designed to address shortfalls in NGO work; these need to be revived to form sites of honesty and integrity. Perhaps donors should not be turning the blind eye, by recognising that every project coming through may not be that well-performing. The risks associated with admitting mistakes to donors should be eliminated. Charles Kenny (2011(b)) suggests that what might work was if donors could allow, or even better encourage, early exits from bad projects, where the project managers were able to use the continued funding for something better in a similar sector. Further research into this option as well as means to turn the system around is crucial.

Additionally, a platform is needed for INGOs to share their experiences together to form a knowledge base. A fantastic new website, *Admittingfailure.com*, is trying to achieve just that. Released in January 2011, this site allows all types of NGOs and people working in development to share their stories of projects or programmes that have gone wrong (Admittingfailure 2011). The site is designed to correct the error of ignoring failures and aims to:

“create a best practice of openness, transparency and honesty. *We're all in this together*. We're on the same side in the fight against poverty, inequality and unnecessary suffering in too many forms. Let's admit our failures to find greater successes”

As it is the website is in its early stages, its success is hard to tell. It is hoped, however, that many NGOs and people working in the field will acknowledge its benefits and become more involved - as such an initiative could be the benchmark of change to come.

Conclusion

Although INGOs have a significant role in fighting poverty and injustices throughout the world, this essay has highlighted some of the issues that can arise. Non-financial foreign resources may disrupt the local economy, microfinance initiatives may indebt the poor further and INGOs may reinforce conflict through their actions. Furthermore, it has been made evident that INGOs may cause a 'brain drain' by removing workers from the government or the private sector for their own benefits. The challenges faced by INGOs in asserting implicit ethical messages is an issue that often goes unnoticed, of which INGO staff need to be continually aware of in order to reduce devastating long-term affects. Despite good intentions, much harm can be done without conscious recognition of the potential for devastation. INGOs must take greater initiative in researching the context of their work, consider a rights-based approach and involve the local people to the greatest extent to ensure local ownership. However, admitting mistakes is the most important way to ensure more good is done than harm. If space is not created for INGOs to share their lessons learned, harm will only be repeated.

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