

Six things INGOs need to fix to be fit for the future. Mark Goldring's outgoing reflections

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Guest post by my former boss Mark Goldring, first published in the March edition of [Governance and Leadership Magazine](#). Mark was chief executive of Oxfam GB from 2013 until January 2019. This article is based on a talk



given to Civil Society Media's NGO Insight Conference in November 2018.

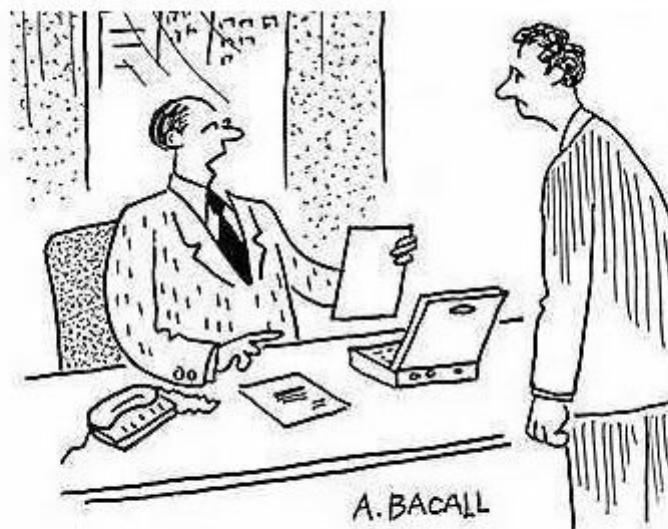
My last year as chief executive of Oxfam was dominated by the serious misconduct of some staff in Haiti in 2011 and the management of events around this. Fresh media coverage in early 2018 had a massive impact on reputation, funding, programmes, confidence and relationships external and internal, and was the source of serious damage and much learning. However, while these lessons are of vital importance, as I leave Oxfam I want to offer some stimulus from my own broader experience, helped by the thinking and writing of former Oxfam colleagues, particularly former deputy CEO Penny Lawrence and senior strategic adviser Dr Duncan Green. I think that for INGOs to play as valuable a role in the future as we have in the past, we need to respond to a number of drivers for change. I have summarised these under six Ps: progress, paradigm, power and politics, partnership, and people.

Progress

The world has seen substantial progress in terms of most measures of poverty and wellbeing; financial, educational, life expectancy, and health have all significantly improved over time in most countries. Aid programmes, including those of NGOs, have certainly played a part,

especially in helping the most marginalised to benefit. But aid is an ever-shrinking proportion of investment and expenditure, and NGO funds an even smaller part of that. Oxfam is the UK's biggest international NGO, but the Department for International Development (DFID) alone spends more in a fortnight than Oxfam in a year. Local and international investment that creates jobs, public services funded by tax, remittances from migrant workers, social and economic policy; these are the things that dwarf aid and are really going to drive progress towards the end of poverty in countries not being torn apart by war. Yet our INGO ways of operating too often work as if governments don't. We put disproportionate effort into our own projects, intensively designed and managed and often genuinely valuable, but reaching a limited few and often with little impact on the wider environment.

Even in an organisation like Oxfam, that prides itself on combining advocacy and practical work and has influenced policy and practice in a way that few NGOs can match, we need to work harder at exerting leverage and influence over public and private expenditure, over the way business is done and governments work, over who pays tax, around how people move and send money home, as well as continuing to promote inclusion of the most marginalised who are often discriminated against. This requires a varying combination of sustained and coordinated



"Your proposal is innovative. Unfortunately, we won't be able to use it because we've never tried something like this before."

global and local advocacy, working in broad coalitions while all playing our own distinctive role. Projects that exemplify what can be done are valuable, but we won't achieve real change with isolated, short-term and usually small-scale projects that benefit a few hundred or thousand people. This may be what we think our donors, public and institutional, expect – but maybe we are too willing to let them.

The best projects innovate, demonstrate what is possible or reach those that others won't. In humanitarian situations direct delivery may be lifesaving. And in the most fragile and dysfunctional states, the limitations of influence and the need for services where there is no government to provide them will require more practical responses. But we need to radically change our mindset and our mix of activities, especially in the less poor countries, to be much more impactful than we currently are.

The paradigm

Instead of rethinking our fundamental role in a fast-developing world, we are too often preoccupied with our own international structures and internal relations. In my early days in Oxfam I came off a phone call having negotiated hard for Oxfam to work more widely across government and opposition-held areas of Syria. A colleague who had overheard the call was amazed at its intensity, but impressed with the outcome. He congratulated me for convincing the Syrian government to let Oxfam work in opposition-held areas, only for me to have to admit that the parties I was negotiating with were merely other Oxfams!

Every INGO seems to be forever exploring how to organise, govern and improve its international network or family. We certainly have to improve how our networks work but we really need now to put most of that effort into how we relate to increasingly forceful and restrictive governments, North and South, and into the businesses that are rapidly



beware outbreaks of navel-gazing

driving economic, social and environmental impact for both better and worse.

Power, partnership, politics

Many institutional donors have become ever more prescriptive and risk-averse. Demands for political and media accountability, quick results, and compliance with legal, money-laundering, anti-corruption, counterterrorism and other requirements, along with donors' own overstretched capacity, mean that it is hard to see many funding relationships as true partnerships. Politicians, procurement and compliance departments dominate, and all too often creativity, shared risk-taking and innovation are squeezed out. But the resulting model of subcontracting isn't just what others do to INGOs; it is what we ourselves do all too often to national and local organizations.

The demands of local and international governments, donors, and ourselves have led to rulebooks and processes that are ever longer and more complex. No surprise that when I visited a new programme area in the Democratic Republic of Congo into which Oxfam had moved with commendable speed when fighting broke out in 2017, I found that we didn't work with the local NGOs that were already there. We had talked to them and then had set up our own operations. On being challenged, my colleagues showed me the complex due diligence requirements demanding policies, audits and historic records that few genuinely local

community organisations are ever likely to be able to provide. Yet they are the churches, mosques, community groups and collectives that were there before we came and will be there when we've gone.

The project and funding cycle drives commissioned activity over short periods and often outside the broader approach to politics and the delivery of public services. I see us losing the ability to back movements, individuals and ideas and to work on the norms and the politics that will determine whether change happens and is sustained. If we are really to work alongside local people trying to deliver the change we both believe in, we are going to have to choose, collaborate with, trust and sometimes underwrite organisations and individuals in ways that take more risks and have more flexibility and co-creation than most institutions are currently up for. This may need a new funding mix.

People While you will never get respectful and sensitive behaviour if leaders don't themselves demonstrate it, we can't assume that an organisation's values will drive who we recruit and how they behave simply by what its leaders say and do or through the documents we sign or share. We all need to do more to explicitly drive our values, not just through words, but through the way everyone who works for and with us actually behaves. This, alongside rebalancing power relations, is fundamental to improving safeguarding and much more. And, alongside and without compromising this, we need to employ more of the thinkers, mavericks and pioneers who might be less adept at a logframe or donor report but really can work with and support local activists.

None of my insights pretend to be original; and all the activities I advocate for are actually happening somewhere. I've seen transformative work and amazing partnerships supported by Oxfam and other agencies. There is a lot to be positive about and there also remains important work to be done by those agencies who pick a specific practical cause and just get on with it. But for big INGOs seeking to make a distinctive contribution based on our heritage while offering something relevant to the public, North and South, in 2020 and beyond, we need to change more forcefully.

Our ways of working, funding, organising ourselves and relating to others have a long way to go before what I think we need to be becomes the norm. These are the issues, alongside the vital safeguarding improvements, that I wish I'd been able to spend more time on in 2018 but

now urge other leaders to keep working on.

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4 Responses to “Six things INGOs need to fix to be fit for the future. Mark Goldring’s outgoing reflections”

1.  Garth [April 29, 2019](#)

Thank you for publishing this. As Mark acknowledges, these arguments are not new and among those of us who have been making and/or applauding them for years, there is a tendency toward cynicism or despair, which Mark seems to have avoided. There is one sentence I'd like to highlight, and which I'd like to hear more about: "This may be what we think our donors, public and institutional, expect – but maybe we are too willing to let them." I have been hearing (and saying) this for more than 20 years, during which time the average NGO funding model has become more and more dependent on increasingly restrictive institutional donor sources. i.e. not only have we not "cracked" the challenge of educating private donors, we have arguably regressed, doubling down on quick fix/silver bullet rhetoric in our advertising even as the evidence base against actually programming that way gets more and more overwhelming. Child sponsorship is an extreme example—no one who actually sees how it operates in reality can give a straight-faced defense of the resulting wasteful and exploitative practices, and yet no one seems willing to expose it to donors either—but the fundraising campaigns of non-sponsorship NGOs are appallingly and increasingly divorced from the realities of what real social change requires. Agreeing 100% with Mark's diagnosis, I cannot find any NGO that has shown half the courage required to make the changes he is recommending. We're all dinosaurs, smoking cigarettes, so it's hard to be too sad about our inevitable extinction. Yet I am.