

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A GIANT SNEEZES?

Deborah Doane

- *How the international development sector needs to react following the recent sexual misconduct scandals* •

ABSTRACT

Over the last six months, a spate of sexual misconduct scandals has rocked the international development sector. In this op-ed, Deborah Doane discusses the impact that the scandals – which came as little surprise to many working within the organisations affected – are having, including loss of trust, loss of income and increased regulation. Already facing a hostile operating environment, Doane argues that civil society has two choices – either to continue unchanged or to see the scandals as an opportunity to disrupt the sector and its existing systems. She argues that the latter will require considerably more imagination, ambition and up-front investment than is currently evident. In addition, Doane makes the case for southern organisations needing to change as much as northern organisations – despite the fact that the scandals erupted from within the latter – because doing so will help address existing power imbalances between the South and North.

KEYWORDS

Sex scandal | International development | Oxfam | Save the Children | Power dynamics | Reform

What happens when a giant sneezes? We all catch a cold. This is the most likely impact of the devastating sexual misconduct revelations across the international development sector in recent months. The effects won't simply be contained to a few large international NGOs (INGOs). It could have far-reaching implications for many across the wider civil society eco-system. As far as I see it, civil society has two options: accept the consequences and accept a weakened civil society as a whole; or courageously confront the challenges as an opportunity to reform, refresh and embolden civil society globally.

At the time of the immediate crisis, nobody I knew who had worked in international development were the least bit surprised. Humanitarian aid was rife with stories of abuse for decades. The former head of Save the Children UK guilty of sexual harassment? Aid workers using prostitutes? As one colleague who had worked for both entities said to me, "We knew. We all knew. Yet we did nothing."

Large organisations' power and dominance, especially in international development, has helped to build a quiet complacency across civil society. Smaller civil society groups in the global south depend on them for income. Donors rely on them to deliver aid. They have helped to influence and amplify issues on the international stage, like international debt relief, climate change or increases in aid budgets. The "halo" effect was implicit. We assumed for years that the virtues of civil society would be obvious to all, and even with a few annoyances, large INGOs could help to grow public support for everything from poverty eradication or environmental improvements, to human rights.

Of course, there is an alternative story. It's that the large professional NGOs like Oxfam or Save the Children had long ago strayed from the heart and soul of civil society. They had become corporate machines dominated by arrogance and hubris about being able to "Make Poverty History". Fuelled by a white man's saviour complex, embodied by rock stars like Bono and Bob Geldoff, the mainstream of INGOs felt so very far away from the regular grass roots struggles that most face. The hyper-professionalisation of civil society – moving from spontaneous and bottom-up citizen action to complex log frames in a fairly short space of time – has been a huge detriment to civil society as a whole. It has disconnected civil society organisations from the very issues they're meant to address, and the communities they're meant to serve.

And the immediate consequences of having got to this point do indeed look dire. As readers of *Sur* will be acutely aware, any "non-governmental organisation" these days already faces a series of threats. Governments seek to contain and regulate them; populist media is intent on vilifying "foreign agents" or NGOs; and a wider public is looking for someone to blame when things go wrong.

So a consequent loss of trust of the big guys has a serious chain reaction: loss of trust leads to loss of income, leads to increased regulation, leads to a deliberate hollowing out of civil society over time.

Already, public opinion surveys and commentaries are showing an immediate decline in public trust, at least in the North, with a March 2018 survey in the UK showing public trust down 6 per cent from the year before. As one Haitian commentator wrote about the scandal, “With friends like these, who needs enemies?”¹

Negative narratives against civil society are now commonplace, and this incident may only further help to fuel the flames of discontent: In the North, development NGOs, in particular, are often positioned as being corrupt, free riding off limited tax dollars that would be better spent at home.² In the South, rights based and environmental organisations are positioned in public discourse as being “anti-development”,³ foreign agents, bringing in western values. Populist governments exploit these sentiments readily, turning the public against civil society.

Loss of income is the most obvious consequence. International bilateral donors have withheld funds to INGOs caught up in the scandal, while individual donors have been pulling out in droves. Oxfam, for one, saw over 7,000 people withdraw their support after the issue came to light. Comic Relief, meanwhile, a major private development funder, saw its takings decrease by one third in their annual fundraising campaign.⁴ The UK’s Department for International Development has worryingly used the scandal as an opportunity to divert more funds towards the private sector and away from civil society.⁵

Organisations in the Global South stand to lose the most. Less money for INGOs means less money going to partner organisations. Ironically, it also means more money being directed to northern administration in order to implement the types of systems that can ensure better safeguarding of beneficiaries. And it may mean private donors picking up the slack, again diverting away from other causes too.

More regulation, of course, will undoubtedly follow. The UK’s charity regulator has recently launched a serious investigation into Save the Children, as more whistle blowers have emerged about the failure of the Board to address sexual harassment at the most senior levels of the organisation. The UK and US charity regulators are often models for regulation in the Global South. This can only spur controlling efforts of the sector on.

So what are the responses going forward? Scenario one is Business as Usual (BAU). This sees civil society simply accepting the consequences discussed above. It’s already coming to fruition. It will see an even more conservative and “professionalised” sector, with narrower sets of understanding of what civil society can be and how it should be supported. Most of the proactive attention across the sector is being placed on safeguarding beneficiaries and implementing better staff recruitment procedures, including increased diversity in organisations.⁶ This is probably a good thing but doesn’t go far enough.

Aside from loss of income, and increased regulation, the BAU scenario could also serve to further embed the reactionary conservatism inherent in some INGOs, further

moving away from a rights-based agenda. When the scandal itself erupted, Oxfam had been leading a strong campaign on inequality, and some were even suspicious that the scandal was only exploited by a right-wing media who didn't like the political nature of the campaign. One clear outcome is that INGOs will move even further away from solidarity, battering down the hatches and sticking to "safer", non-confrontational work, like service delivery. Let's see how this one plays out.

Scenario two, could be called 'Revolution from below'. It's a more enlightened scenario but will also require more imagination, ambition and up-front investment. Here, the scandals are seen as an opportunity to disrupt the sector and its systems, with a complete overhaul of the structure and power relationships within global civil society.

Scenario two has the potential to move us away from the paternalistic INGO model, by shifting systems of power and accountability. If the INGOs see the whole scandal as more than just a safeguarding issue, then there is an opportunity to put this into action. But southern organisations will need to demand this, too, and move away from the client/patron relationship that's come to dominate much of civil society.

Maybe this shouldn't be said by a white northerner, but in my view, southern organisations need to take the reins and demand a better, more solidaristic future, not wait for it to be given to them. Because like all systems, those in power rarely relinquish it. INGOs may think they're doing so, but they are also protecting worn out structures too. Old-fashioned charity, where money flows from North to South, with northerners, including INGOs and donors, dictating the rules of the game, still dominates.

There are good examples of alternatives, but they're far too few. Southern civil society organisations should be able to not just hold organisations in the North to account, but they should be sharing governance, too. Finally, they'll need to become stronger advocates locally, demonstrating that they're working on behalf of their communities in more explicit and connected ways. But this can only bring more power to the South, by helping to root civil society more strongly in local communities.

Few are acknowledging the real scale of the challenge – that the structure and power imbalances within the sector – mirroring those in the wider world – is the root cause. If the Oxfam scandal can be seen as a launch pad for genuine systems change, then we should be grateful it all came to light.

NOTES

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