Ethics of NGOs
Ruth Weatherall
Deborah Jones

International Perspectives
• Ethical challenges discussed in the international literature include:
  ▫ balancing effective change and ethical action
  ▫ accountability to donors over clients
  ▫ balancing good governance and mission centricity
• Most discussion is orientated to large, international NGOs & well publicised cases

Wellington Based Study
• Interviews with 12 different social service NGOs who also had an advocacy function
• All NGOs had a base in Wellington although some operated nationally or internationally. They were primarily small-medium in size
• Participants were asked about both ‘internal’ challenges and ‘external’ challenges. They were asked about their own experiences, experiences of their organisations, and of the whole NGO sector

Funding - ‘Making a Deal with the Devil’
• Securing funding while retaining independence. Striking the balance between obtaining long-term funding, and funding that directly supports the mission
• Relationship with the government: dictatorship not partnership?
• Another key funding dilemma was the acceptance of funds from ‘questionable trusts’ such as alcohol or gambling trusts

NGOs and ethics
• NGOs are traditionally depicted as ‘saints’ or ‘sinners’ this project gave a different perspective on ethics and NGOs – that they were ethically complex
• Ethics was broadly defined as ‘action that leads to a good life’

“We are not trying to be paragons of virtue in the community; running around saying that we are better than anyone else. We try to live to the values and are absolutely committed to them”
Appearing Apolitical

- Several NGOs, particularly those with high levels of government funding, took great pains to appear apolitical. This became an issue in two ways:
- Not speaking out against government or engaging in critical advocacy
- In public/donor communication NGOs tried not to speak directly for/against particular bills or petitions even if it was in line with the mission

Helping people to help themselves

- The portrayal of clients/benefactors to the public had to be in line with the long term goals of the organisation.
- In the short term it was easier to gain funding from donors by evoking an intense emotional response – ‘helpless victims’
- Too little emphasis on the difficult reality could also do short term financial damage

The Treaty of Waitangi - ‘A living part of the organisation?’

- On some level all of the organisations recognised the importance of the Treaty
- For some integration was now “run of the mill” and they felt they were bi-cultural, or even multi-cultural organisations. Others were trying to integrate more practices.
- The key concern was ensuring that it wasn’t just a ‘token gesture’

The ethical treatment of staff and volunteers

- Balancing action and wellbeing of staff members. A pervasive consciousness of the dangers of exploitation – particularly in terms of volunteers
- “We borrow workers from their family and have a responsibility to return them whole”
- One key issue was paid staff coming in voluntarily on weekends to do extra hours – a sort of ‘self-exploitation’

Passion

- Overstepping of boundaries – volunteers expectation of doing good or sharing their experiences.
- “Because they are passionate souls, they will rationalise their behaviour against their passion for what they do”
- Engaging in antagonistic, competitive behaviour toward other NGOs in order to further the organisations personal interests

Difficulty in critiquing the sector

- The ‘because we do good, we are good’ mentality
- Banding together against criticism both externally and internally – not directly an unethical practice but one that could stop the long term goals of the NGO sector as a whole
- The NGOs felt there was increasingly competitive behaviour but felt that they “couldn’t be blunt about the sector”
- Example – duplication of services
• The significance of this study is that it emphasises the value of seeing NGOs as ethically complex. Ethics should be placed more clearly as a central focus, as both a driving force and an operational consideration.
• The significant question that this raises is for further study is not ‘what goes wrong’ but ‘what is going on’ in NGOs in terms of ethics.
• Challenges raised here, such as passion or the treatment of staff and volunteers, can be further explored and better understood.