

Ethics of NGOs

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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

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'

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

"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"

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

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

Questions?