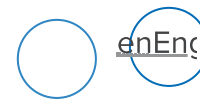


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# MeToo, AidToo: The next steps

A briefing on how to move forward after Oxfam



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GENEVA, 22 March 2018

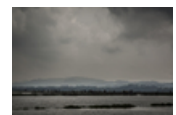
**What can realistically help curb sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector? A flurry of reviews, new procedures, panels, regulatory enquiries, resignations, and public apologies have followed media revelations of serious misconduct among staff at NGOs, the Red Cross, and UN agencies. Will any of it make a difference?**

In the weeks since revelations about Oxfam hit the British media in February, humanitarian organisations have been discussing how to move forward. Drawing on an expert panel ([full video here](#)) held by IRIN and the Graduate Institute in Geneva on 22 March, and on interviews with analysts and non-profit managers,

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we've highlighted some topics at the heart of those discussions.

## Survivors and whistleblowers: Justice

**Amira Malik Miller**, a Swedish civil servant and former aid worker, speaking at the Geneva event, said she was surprised at the level of media interest she has faced since coming forward to retell the story of [her formal complaint, which led to the removal of Roland van Hauwermeiren](#) from an NGO post long before he resurfaced in Oxfam Haiti. She said international aid workers in particular should take more responsibility to report misconduct.

Asked what victims and survivors expect, **Ignacio Packer**, executive director of the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), a Geneva-based NGO alliance, said, simply, "justice". Better in-country mechanisms for survivors to report incidents and initiate prosecution are necessary, he added.

Governments in affected countries should regulate foreign NGOs more robustly, suggested **Marie-Rose Romain Murphy**, an NGO management advisor from Haiti. "We should also implement a system of consequences" for breaches of regulations, she explained. "I know that some INGOs were prohibited to work in Haiti a few months ago because of lack of compliance. It's a start, I guess."

**Thea Hilhorst**, professor of humanitarian aid and reconstruction at Erasmus University Rotterdam, suggested the need for [country-level ombudspeople](#) who can pursue cases at the local level.

**Antonia Mulvey**, executive director of Legal Action Worldwide, called for more prosecutions of serious cases. She noted that often when staff abuse their

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power in order “to obtain sex in fragile or conflict-affected areas,” their actions are deemed sexual exploitation and abuse. “This is incorrect,” she said, “this is rape... We must start calling this conduct rape and demand that perpetrators are criminally prosecuted.”

## **Calls for change: Organisational culture**

There’s no shortage of policies, but enforcement has been found wanting. Why?

British NGOs Oxfam and Save the Children have appointed independent reviewers to look into their organisational culture. But codes of conduct, procedures, and policies can do only part of the job, said Packer; bringing change to agency cultures may take longer.

A participant in the Geneva panel, **Hannah Clare**, former head of safeguarding at Oxfam GB, said: “We operate under some of the most entrenched power imbalances that you can imagine.”

According to Romain Murphy: “What has happened is that organisations have set up policies and not really enforced them. It’s the sickening hypocrisy of the milieu.” A number of agencies, including within the UN, recently announced new hotlines and reporting processes.

A safeguarding expert, who requested anonymity, remains sceptical: “Recent behaviour would indicate that much of these newly announced systems come off more as window-dressing than a real attempt to change the culture.”

## **Boards: Too “chummy”**

Board-level accountability is another weakness: A [campaign by former Save the Children staff](#) argues that the group's international board chairman, Alan Parker, should resign because of the handling of [cases of in-house harassment](#). **Jeremy Konyndyk**, former US humanitarian aid chief, now with the Center for Global Development, a think tank, told the audience in Geneva relationships between the board and chief executive were too “chummy” and led to a “screw-up” in Save the Children UK's investigations. Those cosy setups and resultant poor oversight form a pattern that is not uncommon for NGOs, he said.

## Checks and balances: Investigations and accreditation

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How do previous offenders keep getting re-hired? What could work, practically and legally, to stop this? Save the Children has floated the idea of a “[humanitarian passport](#)”, possibly backed by Interpol. Other groups have proposed professional registers, like those for doctors. British NGOs are looking to adapt offender databases.

But the unnamed safeguarding expert told IRIN that new systems aren't needed and that, “We don't need Interpol – we need functioning HR departments.” Investigations that are abandoned when a staffer resigns are also a blind spot, the expert said, adding: “Organisations need to commit to complete investigations in a timely manner, even if the accused leaves during the process.”

False allegations need to be weeded out of any tracking system, but the numbers of such accusations may in fact be low: only three in 200 cases that Clare investigated at Oxfam were

malicious, she said, adding that unreported cases are far more likely than false reports.

## Donors: Demands for tracking

Institutional donors have moved rapidly to demand details of past incidents and assurances of solid investigative procedures; some have even acknowledged the need to turn the spotlight on their own organisations. The demands have been exhaustive, but is their real purpose to “act tough” in order to reassure the public? “Donors need to be careful not to drive this issue underground through punishing organisations who come forward regarding internal findings and past faults,” **Patricia McIlreavy**, a vice president at US NGO alliance [InterAction](#), said. “Donors and foundations must recognise that addressing this issue will take time and courage.”

Packer’s organisation, ICVA, is a vocal advocate of [simplifying paperwork in the humanitarian sector](#). He said aid workers are “spending a lot of time behind computers” dealing with demands for paperwork, which he doubts donors will ever be able to process or act upon effectively. He called for realistic donor expectations and realistic aid agency promises. Zero tolerance of abuses is not the same as “zero risk”, he noted, adding that NGOs shouldn’t “commit to things we cannot deliver”.

There is some new spending on the issue: **Tamsyn Barton**, CEO of British NGO consortium BOND, confirmed that new funding from the UK government will go to “design systems of accountability and transparency that have beneficiaries at their centre... to integrate safeguarding throughout the employment cycle, secure accountability through reporting and complaints mechanisms, and to ensure

whistleblowers and survivors of exploitation and abuse receive support.”

## Prevention: Transparency

“Greater prevention of sexual misconduct will only occur if organisations feel free to openly talk about the improvements needed within their own systems,” Mcllreavy said. Packer said he hoped for a wider recognition that Oxfam is now "top of the class" in its procedures on the issue of sexual misconduct, although it is taking a disproportionate blow to its reputation. He doesn't believe that aid agencies have cooperated to create a united front. Since the Oxfam scandal broke, some NGOs have already seen drops in their funding, leading to the closure of programmes with real and positive impact, he added.

While transparency may at first appear to be painful and self-damaging for NGOs, it's like HIV testing, the unnamed safeguarding expert said, adding: “The numbers were alarming at first, but it helped give us a good picture of the problem so that we could tailor our responses to address the epidemic more effectively.”

Donors, Konyndyk said, "should also take care to not, in effect, be penalising the organisations that have been the most transparent.”

## Obstacles: Costs and structural imbalances

Using the analogy of the need to build housing after a disaster, **Gry Tina Tinde**, of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, told IRIN that you can't just say shelter is important and expect shelters to go up, so why would it be any different with safeguarding?

A “dollar figure” is attached to stepping up safeguarding systems and processes for all NGOs, Packer noted. Half of ICVA's members are local and national NGOs, and they might struggle to find the cash to set up strong safeguarding procedures, he explained. He is concerned such efforts could lead to reduced “diversity of humanitarian actors” in the sector and less support to home-grown aid delivery – “localisation”.

Power imbalances are another obstacle, Romain Murphy noted. Sexual exploitation in the international aid environment can be fuelled by underlying attitudes, she said, including [race](#): “The ridiculous and unhealthy imbalance of power – an expert mentality which too often tends to breed discounting of local leadership, condescension, ineffectiveness and – as we’ve seen too often – abuse.”

*(TOP PHOTO: Survivor of sexual violence in Jordan.  
CREDIT: Areej Abuqudairi/IRIN)*

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