MAKING AID AGENCIES WORK

Reconnecting INGOs with the People They Serve

TERRY GIBSON

Making Aid Agencies Work

Never afraid to ask the difficult questions and to come up with challenging answers, Gibson digs under the surface of recent problems in the aid industry and provides disruptive and innovative solutions. You may not agree with everything he says, but taking the journey with him will definitely lead you somewhere new in your thinking, whether you're part of the industry yourself or just an interested observer.

— Dr Simon Batchelor, Development Entrepreneur and Innovator, DFID recognised champion of mobile payments, MPESA and Solar Electric cooking

Making Aid Agencies Work *brilliantly captures the tensions INGOs face in trying to meet the increasing demands for results, accountability, transparency and efficiency from their masters in development agencies in the north while still meeting the needs of the people they seek to serve.*

— Dr Ian Smith, Former Executive Director of the Office of the Director-General of the World Health Organization

Gibson is uniquely positioned to ask important and novel questions of the INGO community – and of those who partner, support and fund INGOs. His analysis provides guidance on contemporary challenges in a rapidly changing and increasingly politicised world.

— Professor Mark Pelling, King's College London

Making Aid Agencies Work: Reconnecting INGOs with the People They Serve

Terry Gibson

Inventing Futures, UK

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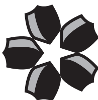

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Terry Gibson is a researcher and activist in international development. After a career in filmmaking focused on the Global South, he combined doctoral research at Manchester University with a full-time role as Operations Director of the Global Network of Civil Society Organizations for Disaster Reduction (GNDR). Here he developed and led the major research programme 'Frontline', collecting community perceptions of disasters and risk. His current research focuses on local learning and action, the lived experience of everyday disasters and the role of NGOs. His website is available at inventing-futures.org.

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Some have asked me, when I told them about this book, why another is needed about problems faced by international NGOs and the entire aid industry. This usually leads on to a discussion on those problems, but they are not, at the deepest level, what the book is about. Its real focus is learning. My career, spanning communications, international development, research and practice, has been driven by a fascination with learning, and I realised quite early that what interested me wasn't book learning by individuals but the kind that goes on socially, in groups and organisations.

When I sat in an African village talking to Cathalene, who you'll meet in these pages, I saw that she brought tremendous energy and determination, day after day, to bringing up her family. What I also saw was that she and her fellow villagers understood clearly how things could be different and how decisions made further away affected their daily lives. As I carried on travelling, working and studying, I discovered it made sense to listen to these voices and the knowledge they created, but few were.

We live in a technocratic world, the province of experts. What people learn in their ordinary lives is undervalued. Their reality doesn't count. The aid industry does the maths on people's lives and acts for them, not with them. Travelling to cities, towns and villages in many countries I became more and more convinced that their voices, ideas, experience should be heard. Not just politely before carrying on, but as an important basis for action.

Having stood uncomfortably for some years now straddling the gaping crevice between practice and study, I wish this gap would close. Academics have much to offer when they think questioningly and imaginatively and show others how to do that. I particularly like the way they can look in on the day-to-day from outside and see things often unnoticed. This is critical thinking. What's not so great are the career and financial pressures which

turn academia into an inward-looking industry, writing stuff that's more and more obtuse just to impress or even outcompete colleagues.

Practitioners I've worked with in the aid industry are almost invariably passionate about their work, concerned to make a difference, energetic activists, determined change agents. The trouble with the treadmill many of them are on is it gives no time or permission to stop, think and ask whether this is the best way things can be. Activists find it very hard to learn and have little patience with thinkers, researchers and academics.

You can see why if the two could bash their heads together creating a blend of the best of both we might learn better. Donald Schon called this combination 'reflective practitioners', a term I like, though I wish it somehow implied groups, discussion, collaboration rather than someone sitting, solo, at a desk.[1] Learning from action is a group process. It's learning that results in further, better, action and it doesn't need education and training. I guess what it does need, and what is often drummed out of us in various ways, is self-belief. People, particularly in poverty, become passive and resigned when they decide not only that there are no options but that no one values their thoughts about how things could be different.

Turning back to the industry which is the focus of this book, I think the missing piece is learning. It's gradually become clear to me that vital knowledge is created everywhere people live, work and struggle, but is unheard. If INGOs could shift their focus away from the treadmills they are on to listen, learn, become change agencies, things might be very different.

The first four chapters of this book investigate how this industry has developed, what drives it and what challenges it faces. They suggest that INGOs' historical development has created constraints to their pursuit of their missions, that their staff in turn are constrained in their actions, experiencing dislocation and disconnection whether in the field or in head offices. Financial drivers tend to focus INGOs on the priorities of funders and these in turn focus their goals towards institutional priorities rather than local concerns.

The following chapters explore insights that can be gained from local experience and knowledge, how these might lead to a radical restructuring of INGO operations, what this implies for the structure of the organisations themselves and what can be learnt from organisations which, from

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[1] Schon, D. (1983). *The reflective practitioner*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

inception or through restructuring, have adopted different forms of organisation focusing more strongly on learning and action.

I believe strongly in learning from action and also in the power of stories, so I've made use of many of my encounters spanning a quarter century, some very recent and some from further back. I've used them because even if they're less recent, the issues they raise are still relevant, and the research wrapped around them draws on current sources.

If I've learnt anything myself over the years, it's been with and from the valued colleagues around me. I'm grateful to UK INGO Tearfund who sent me all over the world filming, introducing me to many people and places, shaping my thinking. I learned a huge amount from working with hundreds of members of the Global Network for Disaster Reduction and particularly, over the last two years, with Festus Tongwa Aka, Ruiti Aretaake, Sarwar Bari, Guillaume Chantry, Manu Gupta, Grace Molina, John Norton, Hepi Rahmawati, Nisha Shresha and Ben Wisner.

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As well as patiently tolerating my long absences at the desk and my moods, my wife Olwen brainstormed the structure and arguments with me for which, along with everything else, I'm eternally grateful.

Though I champion social learning, this was a solo enterprise, so any errors or shortcomings you find here are solely my responsibility. Beyond these pages I hope some discussion and even learning may grow. Join the conversation at http://inventing-futures.org/making-aid-agencies-work/. See you there.

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INTRODUCTION

The aid industry is worth billions. The income of some individual international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) is greater than that of some of the countries they serve.[1] Whenever disaster strikes, for example the devastating earthquake flattening Haiti's capital Port-au-Prince in 2010, they are there in force, their logos emblazoned on t-shirts, equipment and Land Cruisers. Alongside this humanitarian work, they run development programmes in villages, towns and cities right across the Global South, attempting to lift people out of poverty. They're ever present on our high streets with their charity shops and 'chuggers' – 'charity muggers' on the streets of towns and cities trying to get us to sign up to support charities. We give to them because they channel our deep moral dislike of poverty and injustice.

Despite the scale of the industry's work and the dedication of the professionals and volunteers who work in it, a deep and sustained unease about the effectiveness of its programmes led me into research and writing about the role of INGOs.[2] I had already prepared an outline of this book when allegations of misconduct at some INGOs hit the UK headlines on 2 February 2018.[3] I felt the news masked a deeper malaise. Their stated visions as *change agencies* tackling poverty, inequality and injustice seemed at odds with what they actually did, more to do with *service delivery* than change.

But is another book needed? A colleague asked '*Why? – everyone's writing about how bad INGOs are and about the need to change.*' Why indeed, and what can I add?

My professional career has enabled me to observe Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in action in over 40 countries, to work in a growing international network, collaborating with several hundred mostly small NGOs, and to study, research and write about this world. As a professional

film-maker fascinated with the Global South and the role of international development I worked regularly with one UK INGO, Tearfund, and then on a widening range of filming assignments, covering about a million miles. I saw what INGOs did on the ground in quiet settled villages, teeming megacities, slums, refugee camps and war zones. The most interesting conversations came when the camera stopped – the off-the-record insights into the way the development industry worked. These many short-term encounters offered an unusual breadth of encounters and experience. Thinking about them comparatively raised huge questions in my mind.

I found many of those working in the industry shared those questions. At best I, and they, became more realistic about what was possible. At worst, it was possible to become hard-bitten, cynical and disillusioned. I saw much good work being done, but I sometimes found a gulf between the goals of projects and what actually happened. I saw misunderstandings, bad communication and waste despite everyone's best intentions.

I set myself the goal of investigating what lay behind this complex industry through master's study and doctoral research alongside the day job. There seemed so much knowledge and experience out there that I wanted to research how to share and apply it as an alternative to the top-down decision-making I repeatedly encountered.

Networks seemed a particularly interesting way of sharing learning, and I got an opportunity to work with a newly established network of mainly south-based NGOs, the 'Global Network for Disaster Reduction' (GNDR).[4] A short-term contract grew into a longer-term role as Operations Director, responsible for the design, development and implementation of the network's programmes.[5] I worked shoulder to shoulder with over 800 NGOs. We often met together, and again the most interesting conversations came after work finished for the day. They struggled in their dealings with large INGOs and UN agencies. Some great work was done, but often despite rather than because of how the industry was run.

My answer to my colleague about 'why?' is in part that I've accumulated wide experience to draw on. I've also discovered that much of the criticism and questioning comes from INGOs themselves, they know something needs to change. So the main job of this book isn't to criticise them, but through understanding how they've become locked into *service delivery* treadmills to see how they could become more effective *change agencies*. It aims to build bridges between the critical thinking of academics and the practical experience and action of practitioners. All too often there is a gulf

between these two communities, with academics easily dismissing what they see as the lack of rigour in the thinking of practitioners and practitioners finding academics unnecessarily critical and difficult to understand. There's increasing interest in building bridges, reflected in the 'Impact Agenda' of UK universities, seeking to strengthen links between research and practice.[6] I hope that practitioners will accept the invitation this book offers to think reflectively and critically about the enterprise they're engaged in, and that academics will be ready to embrace a style which, while rigorous, attempts to maintain accessibility to all readers.

Let's return to the story which hit the UK headlines in February 2018. Sometimes the failings of INGOs rise to the surface and become very public. When aid workers behave immorally, betraying our trust, as in the case of Oxfam workers in Haiti, our disillusionment is far deeper even than that of the casting couch revelations in the film industry coming at the same time (Box 1).[7]

Box 1

What Happened in Haiti?

On 9 February 2018 a *Times* newspaper exclusive revealed allegations of misconduct by Oxfam staff during its response to the 2010 Haiti earthquake.[8] These had been investigated by the charity in their 2011 report, leading to resignations and dismissals, but had never been made public.[9] The *Times* report publicised the finding that Oxfam's Haiti country director Roland van Hauwermeiren and several staff had organised sex parties on Oxfam premises with paid sex workers. There were further allegations of downloading pornography, of abuse, and of intimidation of witnesses to these events.

Further reports revealed that van Hauwermeiren, who was allowed to resign in return for cooperation, had been involved in similar behaviour in Chad, and previously in Liberia.[10] Very soon dominos started to tumble. On 12 February Penny Lawrence, Oxfam's Deputy Chief Executive, resigned when it became clear the charity had known of previous incidents involving van

Hauwermeiren and others in Chad.[11] On 20 February the current chief executive of Save the Children revealed to the government's international development select committee that it dealt with 193 child protection and 35 sexual harassment cases involving allegations against its staff around the world in the previous year. Cases in 120 countries led to 30 dismissals.[12] Oxfam's chief executive Mark Goldring told the same meeting his charity had lost 7,000 regular donors in the wake of the scandal.[13] On 23 February Justin Forsyth resigned his position at UNICEF after publicity about his departure from his role as Chief Executive of Save the Children in November 2015 as a result of allegations of inappropriate behaviour.[14] On 24 February, 22 UK charities issued a joint statement promising to clean up their act.[15]

The underlying question was why the events in Haiti had been kept under wraps? Mark Goldring told BBC's Today programme '*With hindsight, I would much prefer that we had talked about sexual misconduct, but I don't think it was in anyone's best interest to be describing the details of the behaviour in a way that was actually going to draw extreme attention to it.*'[16]

On 18 May Goldring announced he was stepping down, saying: 'I think that this journey will best be led by someone bringing fresh vision and energy and making a long-term commitment to see it through.'[17]

Who decides on the levels of openness and transparency in INGO operations? It might be argued that it was very much in the best interests of those affected in Liberia, Chad and Haiti to draw attention to these events. Can it ever be justifiable to conceal the truth? What do we expect of these organisations and their people?

Take a step back and consider two stories of INGOs in action, from Ethiopia. Travel to Ethiopia's rural Metarobi district. Leave your Land Cruiser at the head of the Rift Valley and hike four hours down into the valley, carrying your bags on donkeys. Arrive at a village nestling on the terraced slopes above the Nile. Outside one of the larger thatched buildings 60 children are in line, each with their hand on the shoulder of the one in front. They are about to go into the classroom for the day's lessons. They are excited. Not only excited to see us (some of them have never seen white

people), but excited about their classes. Two years before, there was no school here. The nearest was at the head of the valley, too far for young legs to climb, so they had no education until they reached secondary school age. A local NGO has helped to establish schools in several villages along the valley. Their development worker shows us what they've done with the help of funding from an INGO and introduces us to the children. Why are they so excited about the school? They tell us what they want to be: doctors, drivers, teachers … airline pilots. Surprised, we ask where they've got the idea of being airline pilots. They point upwards, towards where vapour trails span the valley. Globalisation has reached its tendrils to the Metarobi district.[18]

As I watch the silver fish traverse the sky I remember I flew over this same terrain in 1985, my first visit to Africa. I knew from Michael Buerk and Bob Geldof that below me, as I looked down onto the yellow-grey parched land, people were faced with drought, famine and suffering. Buerk broadcast harrowing BBC news reports with images of emaciated children and Geldof and his music industry friends mobilised massive public support through Band Aid and Live Aid, helping to pump millions into the country. What we didn't know then was the scale of misuse of those millions. Well-meaning aid agencies adhering to principles of humanitarian neutrality shipped in aid which was frequently diverted by the Ethiopian government to feeding their troops, shoring up their regime and their civil war, increasing rather than decreasing the suffering of people opposed to their regime.[19] There were still echoes of that time when I was there. The local development worker remembers as a resident in the capital that in reality 'prices went up a bit'. Another aid worker said there was a long-term legacy in the villages, when drought recurred locals would say 'we won't go hungry as long as there's a good grain harvest in Canada'. What they meant was they remembered aid supplies, sacks of WFP grain, the name 'Canada' stencilled on the sacks.[20] The episode had fostered a dependency culture.

Two stories of Ethiopia. The first seems to show what we expect and hope the aid industry is doing, working practically and sensitively to help people lead the lives they wish to. The second illustrates some of the challenges the industry faces in meeting that goal. As will be seen, since their beginnings NGOs have had to consider whether their interventions contribute to social progress or undermine it by short-circuiting the role of governments – in this case in providing education.

When major disasters strike, aid agencies are also on the scene. In 1998 Hurricane Mitch swept across Central America, leaving over 11,000 people dead. One village, Posoltega in Nicaragua, lost over 2,000 of its inhabitants when the side of the nearby La Casitas volcano slipped away and shot across the valley, engulfing and burying the village.[21] Many local NGOs collaborated in response to the disaster, supported by INGOs, and as I sat in the rebuilt village four years later I saw trained counsellors from a local Nicaraguan NGO sit patiently with the villagers, helping them deal with the deep trauma they'd experienced. Sadly, one of the most enduring problems villagers expressed was the loss of their homes. After the disaster, INGOs swept in and coordinated construction of a new village several kilometres from the previous site. The neat rows of block-built houses seem smart and clean to an outsider but to the villagers only increased their sense of loss. They weren't the kind of homes they were used to, they had tiny gardens with no room to grow vegetables or keep livestock, and they felt disconnected from their ancestral lands. Several had started moving back, rebuilding on their original land.[22] I saw a contrasting story along the typhoon-prone Vietnamese coastline where a small local NGO spent over a decade working sensitively with local people and builders to develop safer housing which suited people's culture and needs and tapped into local techniques.[23]

As I travelled to different projects I wondered what determined whether INGOs learnt and what led them to reproduce insensitive interventions. The same questions were asked of the entire aid industry. A World Bank report on the sum total of the aid and reconstruction effort after Mitch found that instead of improving or 'transforming' lives of people in the region, the work had simply restored the status quo.[24] After the Boxing Day Tsunami of 2004 the Red Cross coordinated over 700 local development programmes to help reconstruction in the region and commissioned a report to learn from their programmes. Much good and valuable work was documented, but it also found that while they aimed for 'sustainability' – for work to continue after their projects finished and their teams left – in many cases it hadn't. Why? Because rigid project plans were followed to enable the many volunteers to follow set templates with limited training. They failed to forge close links with local people or gain their participation, delivered short-term projects and left.[25]

On a broader canvas, INGOs and their predecessors have been working internationally for hundreds of years in various guises, and the industry has

grown and grown inexorably. Some evidence suggests it may have reached a tipping point, overextending its resources and claims, in need of radical reform in its working methods.[26] Episodes such as abuse by Oxfam staff in Haiti may be the tip of an iceberg.[27]

One writer describes aid workers as 'Missionaries, Mercenaries or Misfits'.[28] Many such workers and their predecessors in Colonial administrations were fiercely individualistic 'Lords of Poverty' heroically roaming the developing world.[29] They've been largely replaced by professionalised, trained staff.[30] A master's degree is almost de rigueur, though these professionalised staff are ironically often less connected to the localities they serve, their expertise drawn from university courses and pursuing careers by hopping between INGOs. They're the product of the organisations which employ them, and there lie questions about the role of INGOs, their understanding of the people and places where they work and constraints placed on them by their paymasters, more often institutions and governments than the public.[31] What do INGOs really do? Do their actions meet the needs of the billions of the world's poor? Do they even know, in reality, what those needs are? Are they learning organisations, or does the attempt made by Oxfam to conceal failure illustrate an inability to learn? Driven by their own need for survival and by the political agendas of their paymasters have they disconnected from the people they serve?

It seemed like the genie was out of the bottle at the UN's first World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. NGOs based in the Global South headlined the tiny 1.2% of humanitarian aid which went directly to local and national NGOs and the dominance of INGOs based mainly in the Global North, remote from the situations they served and keeping tight control of the money.[32] The summit proclaimed a 'grand bargain' which would ramp up funding directly to national and local levels to 25% by 2020.[33] If delivered, rather than fudged, the deal would lead to massive disruption of big INGOs.

How have we reached this point? This book investigates the genesis and growth of the industry, looks at what is revealed when something goes wrong and digs deeper into the structure of the industry and the challenges it faces in meeting its goals. It turns from this to the lives of the people it aims to serve and the nature of their world. It suggests the problem lies with a disconnect between these two worlds, barring flows of learning, resources and even political influence. It concludes by highlighting possibilities for change based on learning, looking inside INGOs and looking outwards to

the villages, towns and cities where they work, learning how to become adaptive, responsive and better fitted to achieving their claimed goals.

Should we even ask these questions? After Oxfam's Haiti debacle not only did the organisation's donation support drop, but income to an unconnected large-scale biennial UK TV charity event, 'Sport Relief' slumped to less than two-thirds of what they generated previously.[34] These effects are used as an argument for suppressing failure, for '*avoiding drawing extreme attention to it*' as Oxfam's ex-CEO argued. Resistance to criticism and questioning creates a dangerous moral trap as it insulates organisations from learning, change or adaptation. The purpose of this book is to provide a necessarily provocative and critical analysis of the industry founded on a rich body of evidence, as a basis for proposing constructive change: proposing options for INGOs to reconnect with the people they serve.