



Nonprofit Ethics Case

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NPA 601: Nonprofit Ethical Leadership

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1. Title

Oxfam Sex Scandal

“A Lie has no Leg, but a Scandal has Wings”

2. Summary

The Oxfam case study covers the organization’s reaction to sexual allegations of aid workers with aid recipients after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti under the leadership of Roland van Hauwermeiren, Oxfam’s former head of operations in Haiti. The internal investigations led by the former head of Global Safeguarding Helen Evans show sexual misconduct in not only Haiti but numerous other places where the organization operated. However, the leadership did not take her findings into account and instead of confronting this problem, it tried to cover it up. This was not until February 2018 when more whistleblowers spoke up and the case got the attention of the media that actions needed to be taken. The case study will chronologically describe the events that occurred and what actions Oxfam has taken to prevent this situation from happening again.

3. Applications

This case is relevant to two main subjects:

1. The responsibility of the leadership to take an immediate action when problems across the organization occur.
2. Screening of the humanitarian aid workers in the field.

4. Outcomes

The learning outcomes from this case analysis are to better understand the implications of the whistleblower policy in nonprofit organizations. Secondly, it will explore the possibilities of ethical decision making when difficult situations occur.

5. Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wUJ--w7nTww>

6. Description

Oxfam, one of the UK's largest charities, made headlines in February 2018 once again following allegations of sexual abuse overseas. Oxfam is a global humanitarian aid organization working to "end the injustice of poverty" and "help people build futures for themselves, hold the powerful accountable, and save lives in disasters." Seeking to tackle conditions that cause poverty through saving lives, programming to overcome injustices, campaigning for social justice, and public education, Oxfam has worked with over 90 countries for the past 70 years (About Oxfam, 2018). However, the very nature and efficacy of its mission were brought into question in the wake of the allegations of sexual assault and abuse within the organization's most powerful members, those directly serving their most vulnerable populations. This culture of impunity and abuse of power within the humanitarian sector has exposed those guilty of these crimes but also has jeopardized the work and services these organizations provide.

On February 9th, 2018, The Times released an article claiming that a senior staffer working with Oxfam's relief efforts in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake paid prostitutes some of which were also underage. Among the accused was then-director of operations in Haiti, Roland van Hauwermeiren, who allegedly also used a villa provided by the charity when committing these sexual abuses on young local prostitutes. Oxfam has denied that it covered-up these behaviors, and condemned these actions to be totally unacceptable, and claims that it immediately addressed the scandal through internal investigations in 2011. In a public report, Oxfam revealed that four members of staff were dismissed, and three including Hauwermeiren were allowed to resign. At this time the organization announced its public investigation into these allegations and was then ordered by the Culture Secretary Matt Hancock, to release all evidence of the internal investigation to the Charity Commission.

The Charity Commission announced on the February 10th that it was not given full details in regards to the use of prostitutes by the aid workers. It was further revealed that Oxfam did not carry out any preventative actions to warn other humanitarian agencies of the allegations of the seven dismissed staff under investigation for abusing their power and that in fact, Hauwermeiren has successfully procured another position elsewhere in the sector. Mark Goldring, Oxfam's Chief Executive, admitted that the initial internal report filed in 2011 did not actually detail any of the allegations, but instead referred to the ex-staffers actions as "serious misconduct". (Investigation Report, 2018). The next day further allegations came to light that in 2006 while serving on an Oxfam mission in Chad, Hauwermeiren was also involved with another prostitution scandal, and a different senior staffer was fired as a result. Following the Oxfam scandal, the Times reported a new claim alleging that 120 workers within UK charities had been accused of sexual abuse within in the past year alone (Scarf, 2018). Oxfam made a public announcement on February 11th that it was looking into new measures for "prevention and handling of sexual abuse cases" ("Press Releases", 2018).

On February 12, Oxfam's Deputy Executive Penny Lawrence resigned, stating that she was ashamed, and took full responsibility (BBC, 2018). That same day the Charity Commission opened a sanctioned inquiry into Oxfam, stating that the organization had not fully disclosed all the facts in regards to these claims. At this time the European Commission, having previously donated €1.7m toward the Haiti programming in 2011, threatened to cancel all funding to any

partnering organizations that did not live up to the “high ethical standards” deemed necessary to receive government funding (The Charity Commission, 2018). On February 13, President of Haiti Jovenel Moïse openly condemned the actions of Oxfam to be an “extremely serious violation of human dignity” and a Haitian senior government source confirmed that an investigation had been launched into the work of foreign aid agencies working within Haiti (BBC, 2018). Actress Minnie Driver was the first ambassador to step down and publicly denounce the organization the very next day, followed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. A former colleague of Roland van Hauwermeiren came forward at this time to reveal that before his employment with Oxfam, Hauwermeiren had previously been investigated for similar accusations in 2004 during his work in Liberia. On February 14th, Oxfam reported that more than 1,270 people had canceled their regular donations over the weekend due to the emergence of the very publicized scandal, and by the end of the week the organization had lost 7,094 direct debits representing 3.2% of its total donations (BBC, 2018). The next day Roland van Hauwermeiren made a public statement denying these allegations in part, saying “it is not that I deny everything. There are things which have been described correctly. But there are many lies and exaggerations” (Reuters, 2018). In a press release on February 16, Oxfam stated that it had set up an independent commission to review the working culture and practices of the organization to create a global database of referees to aid in the prevention of false and misleading references and protect its budget. Executive Director, Winny Byanyima, made a promise that from this point forward the organization will “do justice” and “atone for the past” actions (BBC, 2018). At this time Oxfam also agreed to stop petitioning for government funding from the UK until it is able to meet the “high standards” required. It is very clear that Oxfam has a long road ahead of it before it will be able to regain the trust of the public. On February 19, the organization published a redacted version of its 2011 internal report into the allegations of sexual abuse revealing that three of the men were also accused of physically threatening witnesses during the initial investigation. Finally, on February 20, Chief Executive Officer Mark Goldring and two other senior executives were brought before members of parliament to discuss these allegations and be held responsible for the actions of the organization's responses. Goldring apologized for the damages done and went on to state that there had since been twenty-six claims of sexual misconduct reported since the scandal initially broke out (BBC, 2018). In the wake of the Oxfam scandal, public scrutiny has been drawn to the ethical concerns of the humanitarian aid sector. The chief executive director of the Save the Children, Kevin Watkins, came forward with the information that his charity had investigated fifty-three allegations of this nature in 2016, noting that the Oxfam scandal has unfortunately become a “wake up call” for the sector. In an interview, international aid worker Tina Tinde remarks that “this abuse is endemic in the humanitarian aid sector.” (France24, 2018). Tinde comments on the problematic and pervasive masculinity that has taken over the sector for years, creating a culture of impunity, where actions have no repercussions, and guilty offenders continue with their unethical abuse of power because they have found a system that turns a blind eye. However, in the age of the #metoo movement, we are seeing more individuals and whistleblowers coming forward and speaking out against the injustices they see and exposing the corporate power structures and corrupt culture within the nonprofit sector. The problem now is that organizations like Oxfam rely so much on donations that are directly connected to how the organization is seen by the public. This has resulted in staff not being able to speak up in fear of retribution and concerns about job security. In the case of humanitarian aid agencies, those who hold positions of power and give aid are detached from

everyday life and are able to find ways to abuse this power while serving those in the most vulnerable of circumstances. In response to this scandal, Oxfam created a ten-point strategic plan for implementing new policies to ensure adequate screening, truthful references, and transparency of their aid workers to ensure that the most vulnerable recipients of their aid are protected. However these new policies must not exist for the sake of bureaucracy and to gather dust on an organization's website, they must start from real interactions with those in the most vulnerable communities; women and children.

7. Questions

Do you think that Oxfam would be in the same situation if the whistleblower had exposed the scandal right away?

How can you ensure that the vulnerable communities you serve are not being abused or taken advantage of by aid workers, businessmen, peacekeepers, missionaries, and journalists?

What kind of measure could be in place to ensure accountability at the executive level beyond enforcing of the whistleblower policy? Would this scandal have been avoidable if the whistleblower policy had been included in the organization's bylaws?

Do you think that it is only a question of leaving up a stand of ethics or it should be enforced by law?

Could Oxfam have acted sooner, and what can be done to warn the next employers that these men were potential predators?

Do you think that the Oxfam scandal would have gone global without the #metoo campaign?

8. Resources

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