



THE AID INDUSTRY — WHAT JOURNALISTS REALLY THINK

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Cover picture: WaterAid/Mustafah Abdulaziz. The picture shows children from the village of Thatta in Sindh Province, Pakistan collecting dirty water from an unprotected source.

Design by birdy.

Helen Magee is a writer and broadcaster and author of a previous IBT report *The East African famine – did the media get it right?*

About IBT

IBT (The International Broadcasting Trust) is an educational and media charity working to promote high quality broadcast and online coverage of the wider world. Our aim is to further awareness and understanding of the lives of the majority of the world's people – and the issues which affect them.

IBT regularly publishes research and organises events to encourage a greater understanding of the role the media plays in engaging people in the UK with the wider world. We are a membership based organization. We organize briefings for our members so that they can work more closely with broadcasters and producers. For a current membership list see the members' page of our website www.ibt.org.uk

FOREWORD

There has been growing media criticism of the aid industry in recent years. Some of this has been ideologically driven and some opportunistic but it also appears that journalists are more insistent on holding aid agencies to account than they have been in the past. This is a good thing but often the aid sector has appeared unduly defensive in the face of criticism.

This report seeks to understand what a broad range of journalists – both specialists and generalists – think about aid and the

agencies that deliver it. The criticisms are wide ranging but several themes emerge. There's a consensus that the aid sector as a whole needs to be more open and transparent. Since media reporting of the aid industry undoubtedly has a big influence on public opinion, it's important that we take the views of journalists seriously.

A better understanding of what journalists really think will also enable those working in the aid sector to deal more effectively with media criticism.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Most of the journalists, broadcasters and NGOs interviewed for this briefing acknowledge there has been an increase in media scrutiny and criticism of the aid sector. Some felt it was overdue. The reasons most frequently given for this increase were:

- The political consensus around the 0.7% target and the ring-fencing of overseas aid at a time of cut-backs and austerity for many.
- The transparency and accountability agenda which has developed since scandals over MPs' expenses, the crises in the banking sector and allegations of malpractice in a range of public institutions.
- A growing academic literature which questions the value of development aid and the shift away from the belief that charities are necessarily a "good thing".
- The increase in size and influence of the aid sector which has opened it up to greater scrutiny.

Interviewees distinguished between aid policy and aid agencies, and between emergency and development aid, but the lines are often blurred. They felt criticisms were related to the following concerns:

- Development aid is no longer seen as the panacea for poorer areas of the world. At best it only forms part of the economic development of any particular country and at worst it can marginalise local expertise, and encourage corruption and an abdication of responsibility by national governments.
- NGOs set unrealistic development objectives and make exaggerated claims about what they can achieve.
- Development policy is too susceptible to "fashions" such as conflict resolution and gender-based programmes.
- The Haiti earthquake in 2010 demonstrated failings in the way emergency aid is delivered. Interviewees highlighted the chaos created by the sheer number of aid agencies that flocked to the disaster area.
- Aid agencies sometimes overstate the scale of a disaster while raising funds.
- NGOs increasingly restrict their activities to the safety of refugee camps and do not address the needs of those on the frontline in conflict zones.
- The aid sector has become too big and competitive. NGOs are overly concerned with their corporate image and pay their senior executives

too much – all of which tends to undermine their core message.

- Although aid workers are often self-questioning in private, they are reluctant to discuss difficult issues openly when confronted by the media on the record.
- Despite the increased criticism, NGOs still enjoy too close a relationship with the media and too often set the agenda. This has also helped to perpetuate an image of Africa as a place of famine and poverty.

Interviewees were asked how NGOs could best respond to these criticisms. There were a few comments about the practical day to day business of media relations, but in many cases this seemed to work well. Journalists were equally concerned about the fundamental way in which the aid sector operated. They made the following suggestions:

- There should be greater honesty and transparency – a willingness to tell it how it is.
- The larger aid agencies in particular should be better at explaining the way they now operate.
- Agencies should adopt a less patronising tone when dealing with the media.
- The aid sector should be restructured to achieve more specialisation amongst the different agencies and less competition between them.
- NGOs should rethink their role in society – a choice between taking government money and remaining closer to their roots.
- They should stop development aid altogether and focus on emergency aid.

The three NGOs interviewed for this briefing also gave their recommendations for improving the response to media scrutiny.

- Rise to the challenge and do not be afraid to campaign against the government's aid policy when appropriate.
- Acknowledge the realities of operating in the global aid sector and be prepared to explain the necessity of spending money on salaries, administration and logistics.
- Find ways into the mainstream media with stories that resonate with a UK audience and open up communication with journalists who might otherwise not talk to NGOs.

INTERVIEWEES

Ian Birrell, Freelance columnist and foreign correspondent
Rob Davies, City Correspondent, Daily Mail
Nick Ericsson, Regional Planning Editor, BBC Africa
Peter Gill, Author and former TV journalist
Katie Harrison, Head of Media and Corporate Communications, Tearfund
Roger Hearing, Radio news presenter, BBC News
Nevine Mabro, Head of Foreign News, Channel 4 News
Tim Miller, Launch Editor, Sky News On Demand (and former Foreign News Editor, Sky News)
Brendan Paddy, Head of Communications, DEC
Ben Rayner, Executive Producer for Al Jazeera English
Sean Ryan, Associate Editor, The Sunday Times
Edward Stourton, BBC journalist and presenter
Asha Tharoor, Head of UK Media at the ONE Campaign
Fran Unsworth, Deputy Director of News and Current Affairs, BBC

Several other journalists and broadcasters gave off the record interviews

FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been a growing tide of criticism directed against NGOs and overseas aid policy across all sections of the media. This is partly in reaction to the political consensus on overseas aid spending, particularly at a time of austerity in the UK. But there are other factors which are also prompting greater scrutiny of the sector.

This briefing investigates the attitude of those working in the media towards aid agencies and the role they play in UK society and globally. It seeks to gain an insight into what is motivating media criticism and the questions journalists think NGOs need to address. It is hoped that a better understanding of the thinking behind some of the recent media stories will help NGOs respond more effectively to such criticism in the future.

The briefing is based on:

- a. Examples of press articles, television and radio programmes which illustrate concerns and criticisms expressed by journalists and broadcasters in the last 4-5 years.
- b. 16 telephone interviews conducted on and off the record from 9 June to 4 July 2014 with broadcasters (9), journalists (4) and NGOs (3).

Why criticism may have increased

Without a more detailed comparison over time, it would be difficult to assess to what extent media criticism of the aid sector has actually increased. An overview of recent articles in the press and programmes on radio and television suggests there is an appetite for stories that question aid policy and the work of NGOs. Certainly many of those interviewed for this briefing thought that there was more criticism and in most cases, they felt that this was probably overdue.

One of the most consistent and severe critics of NGOs and the aid sector generally is Ian Birrell, a freelance columnist and foreign correspondent who writes principally for the Daily Mail, but also several other newspapers including the Guardian, Observer, Daily Telegraph and The Times. He clearly sets out his own position in an article written for the Daily Mail in November 2013¹ in which he criticises the arrogance of the *ever-growing global relief industry which wastes money on ill-conceived, extravagant and vainglorious projects* and marginalises local expertise.

In an interview for this briefing he attributed increased criticism of the aid sector to 4 main factors: the narrative of aid which has gone on for a long time but ultimately failed; the growing

sophistication of the academic argument against aid (see his review of William Easterly's *Tyranny of Experts* in The Guardian²); the digital age which has given a voice to the previously voiceless in the developing world; and the emergence of the Chinese model in Africa which he suggests is having a more positive impact than aid. He rejects the idea that criticism can easily be dismissed as part of a Daily Mail agenda and believes that comments in the liberal press are also beginning to change.

When I write on these issues for the Guardian or the Independent, I'm increasingly noticing that the comments I get are much more supportive... The criticism used to come from people who didn't like to give aid to foreigners. Now it's coming from people who care, but realise the flaws in the old fashioned, simplistic model.

Rob Davies, City correspondent of the Daily Mail, has investigated the tax avoidance practices of a number of UK based companies that operate in the developing world.³ He understands why media scrutiny may have increased in recent years.

In a financial downturn, the spotlight is turned on to areas where there could be savings. This is a question for the aid budget – I'm not suggesting there shouldn't be an aid budget but I can understand why it's under the spotlight. There are always examples of waste or money going to governments that can't be trusted so it's an obvious narrative.

Off the record, a journalist for another daily newspaper, acknowledged this increased scrutiny and sees it as a governance issue.

Post the bankers, these issues have leeches into other sectors including the public and voluntary sectors... I've done similar stories on councils and council perks, MPs' expenses, bankers – it's all part of a piece. People want to know where the money goes.

BBC broadcaster, Edward Stourton, has recently made programmes critical of the management of aid for the World Service and Radio 4. He feels there has been a decisive shift away from the days when charities were automatically viewed as a "good thing" and therefore above scrutiny. Whilst it might be difficult for the media to criticise agencies they often rely upon for access, the NGOs have now become so huge that journalists do question them more than in the past. He believes that a different set of standards applies to the large influential organisations they have become. Sean Ryan, Associate Editor of the Sunday Times, agrees that NGOs face more scrutiny now because they have become bigger players *and therefore more likely to attract media attention*. Peter Gill, a former TV journalist and author of several books on aid, also believes that NGOs have evolved into great corporations in their own right

‘In the past there was perhaps a feeling that they were untouchable because the majority of what they do is good.’

Nevine Mabro, Head of Foreign News, Channel 4 News

and that there has been a reluctance to rock the boat for too long. Whilst he feels there is an antipathy to aid in some parts of the media which can rub off onto others, he suggests that the political consensus around 0.7% may also have triggered more scrutiny.

Fran Unsworth, Deputy Director of BBC News, suggests 3 main reasons why aid agencies are subject to more media scrutiny now: the transparency agenda which has affected all aspects of public life – MPs, the BBC etc; the Conservative party in power (albeit in coalition) probably subjects NGOs to greater scrutiny because it sees them as politicised; and austerity Britain. None of these factors relate to NGO operations in the field, but are more about policy in the UK, hence the stories about senior executives’ salaries.

Former Foreign News Editor at Sky News, Tim Miller, thinks that more transparency and the Freedom of Information Act have meant scrutiny is more do-able now. Unlike many interviewees who cite Haiti as an example of failings in the administration of humanitarian relief, he believes the *nadir in NGO activity was the tsunami in 2005 when it became apparent that aid money had been raised and no-one knew where it was going*. He argues that previously the media would simply have reported on the emergency and the money donated, but on this occasion they began to investigate and although aid agencies have since addressed some of these concerns, the criticism has continued.

Like others, Ben Rayner, Executive Producer for Al Jazeera English, thinks that greater examination of the government’s aid policy has been sparked by austerity over the last 6 years. But he does not believe that the examination of NGOs is new or that journalists are turning against NGOs. Indeed he feels that the media has not been critical enough of some organisations.

Nevine Mabro, Head of Foreign News at Channel 4 News, is aware of recent programmes about aid on both the BBC and Channel 4. Whilst she does not think that the media are deliberately looking for reasons to criticise NGOs, she believes they are now simply subject to the same kind of scrutiny as any other large organisation.

In the past there was perhaps a feeling that they were untouchable because the majority of what they do is good so there was a tradition that they weren’t worthy of investigation in the way that a big corporation would be. But I can’t think why or when that might have changed. But if someone came to me with a story now about corruption, I would definitely look into it.

One experienced correspondent who has lived in the developing world did not feel there has been an increase in scrutiny of the aid sector – EU annual reports on aid have always been picked up and the reports of the Independent Commission

for Aid Impact provide some ammunition. (Although it should be noted that the ICAI itself was only set up in 2011). He suggested that if anything there should be more scrutiny.

We swallow what NGOs do far too readily and are too strapped to do our own investigations.

Only 3 NGOs were interviewed for this briefing as it is primarily intended to present the views of journalists and broadcasters. However, these interviewees acknowledge there is more media criticism and that certain issues need to be addressed if NGOs are to respond effectively.

Brendan Paddy, Director of Communications at DEC, believes that gradually over the last 20 years, the growing size and influence of aid agencies have led many to question whether they should remain above scrutiny. He suggests that the political consensus around aid may have created a climate in which people ask whether it should be taken for granted that aid is a good thing. But he is also aware that NGOs can become too sensitive to media criticism and there is a risk that they could over-react even though the coverage is still overwhelmingly positive.

Katie Harrison, Head of Media and Corporate Communications at Tearfund, also thinks that the aid consensus has sparked greater scrutiny as journalists began to investigate who was campaigning for the 0.7% and questioning whether it is possible to receive government funding and campaign against government policy at the same time. In the past people may have fought shy of attacking charities, but austerity and transparency have changed that and NGOs have to be ready for it.

I remember speaking to journalists in January ’13 about the IF campaign and one of them said they were really interested in doing stuff on transparency. They were going to look at all charities that campaigned on transparency and look at their own transparency – how they raise and spend their money. It was thought to be a good time to do this. We said yes, why not? You do it with others and there was a sense that it was our turn.

ISSUES RAISED BY THE MEDIA

Aid policy

Most of the attacks on the coalition’s aid policy are to be found in the press and particularly the Daily Mail. Much of the Mail’s criticism is centred on “wasted aid” and corruption in the countries in receipt of foreign aid.^{4,5} In February 2014 the paper organised a petition calling for foreign aid to be diverted to British flood victims.⁶ Whilst this report was being written, the Mail published an article about an Ethiopian

farmer who has been given legal aid to sue the British government for funding a one-party state in his country that has breached his human rights – one of a series of articles on British aid to Ethiopia.⁷

In The Daily Telegraph Andrew Gilligan has written articles critical of waste in the aid sector⁸⁻⁹ and their Pakistan correspondent, Rob Crilly, suggests British aid policy is pragmatic rather than altruistic in making Pakistan one of its largest recipients in a bid to reduce the threat of terrorism.¹⁰

As a significant part of British aid is delivered via EU projects it also provides the Daily Mail and others with an opportunity to examine decisions made by the European Union.¹¹ Sean Ryan highlighted this as the one area where the Sunday Times was prepared to consider more closely how aid money is spent.

Half of our aid money is decided in the EU so we like to look at that very carefully... if we look at aid there, it's a different matter. We're looking to embarrass the decision-makers.

Although individual NGOs are not often targeted in these attacks, they are sometimes seen as guilty by association or of deliberately colluding with government. Writing in the Daily Telegraph in June 2013, Robert Mendrick and Edward Malnick alleged that a *supposedly independent charity campaign to pressure the Government into spending more on foreign aid was secretly orchestrated by David Cameron, his ministers and aid organisations.*¹² Ian Birrell also criticises the aid agencies for being too close to government:

The If campaign was cooked up by the aid sector with the government to shore up public support for the 0.7%. Theoretically they campaign against the government, but it's a corrupt relationship. Collusion with the government – that's where it's got to.

The broadcast media has looked at aid to specific countries and questioned its impact, for example, Channel 4's *Dispatches* investigated aid to Rwanda in *Where Has Your Aid Money Gone?* (TX 26.11.12).¹³ The programme described a repressive regime with a disregard for human rights and asked if British aid was being used to support a tyrant. In March 2013 Al Jazeera's *South to North* featured a studio discussion on foreign aid and asked whether it was a blessing or a curse?¹⁴

Tim Miller does not consider it to be part of Sky's remit to make judgements on aid policy, but recognises some aspects are worth exploring.

I don't think we make any judgements on aid more generally. That's for governments and for us it's just straightforward reporting. We don't have a view. India and their space programme is worth raising, particularly when there is poverty in the UK. But we're not banging any big drums about it unlike newspapers. It's a good discussion to have.

Development aid does not work

The academic literature questioning the fundamental value of aid feeds into and provides a certain legitimacy to the media debate. Peter Bauer, development economist at the LSE from 1960 to 1983, argued against the effectiveness of foreign aid many years ago, but more recent publications include Dambisa Moyo's *Dead Aid: Why aid is not working and how there is another way for Africa* (2010);¹⁵ Peter Gill's *Famine and Foreigners: Ethiopia Since Live Aid* (2010);¹⁶ Linda Polman's *War Games: the Story of Aid and War in Modern Times* (2011);¹⁷ Angus Deaton's *The Great Escape: Health, Wealth and the Origins of Inequality* (2013);¹⁸ and William Easterly's *Tyranny of Experts* (2014).¹⁹

Interviewees did distinguish between emergency and development aid. In the words of one journalist, *the former is what charities are expected to do, but the latter is where the debate lies.* Several other interviewees felt that development aid was becoming increasingly difficult to justify. Ian Birrell believes that it does not work, can lead to corruption and should be stopped:

It's the myth of development, trying to impose development from outside. It doesn't work and they [NGOs] are just getting fat and complacent.

But Sean Ryan thinks it unlikely that The Sunday Times would even cover development issues. Emergency relief provides a better story.

I get about 400 emails a day and if I saw "policy" or "development", I'd probably delete them. We're more interested in emergencies – that's now a story and we like to team up and help raise money, for example, with DEC. We might do a development policy item in the News Review section which is more discursive, but there are lots of other competing debates.

Broadcasters, however, have taken up the development debate. Allan Little investigated allegations of *NGO inefficiency, political bias and lack of transparency in Malawi, India and Haiti* for the World Service in *The Truth About NGOs* in December 2011 and January 2012.²⁰ BBC Africa looked at development aid's relationship to good governance on one of its monthly Africa debates and asked whether we should provide aid when democracy is not a prerequisite.²¹ As Nick Ericsson, Regional

‘There’s a danger you can over-promise and make people cynical leaving an opening for people to expose what’s wrong. A bit more humility would not go amiss.’

Edward Stourton, BBC journalist

Planning Editor for BBC Africa at the World Service, explained:

It’s a very emotive subject in Africa. There’s a disconnect between aid and good governance and good governance is not as big a priority as aid donors would have us believe.

Roger Hearing, journalist and news presenter with the BBC World Service, has reported from Zambia, Iraq, Burma, Azerbaijan, India and Peru.

There’s a political tinge to a lot of the development argument. It’s a left/right issue in the UK and also in the US and Europe – whether the answer is the growth of a country’s own economy, a market solution. The Guardian is less likely to pump that line than the Telegraph. But it’s far less black and white. It’s to do with ways aid can stimulate economies. Everyone takes their hats off to emergency aid, but with development aid you have to ask is it being used to develop local opportunities or to kill off the local economy.

Edward Stourton is not sure that the public makes a distinction between emergency and development aid and thinks the latter is more difficult to explain. *Inside the Aid Industry*, which he presented for Radio 4 in 2013, explored the successes and failures of longer term development in Kenya and South Sudan.²² Whilst he believes it has been *positively corrupting* in some places, he is reluctant to criticise development aid because the basic instinct is good. However, he feels that NGOs are sometimes reluctant to have the debate. He also highlights the dangers of exaggerated claims about what is achievable:

There’s a danger you can over-promise and make people cynical leaving an opening for people to expose what’s wrong. A bit more humility would not go amiss.

Peter Gill, whose most recent book was on Ethiopia, agrees. Although he believes that aid can still achieve a great deal, particularly via individual projects, he thinks that agencies are too keen on fashionable agendas such as gender-based, conflict resolution and climate change programmes, and risk ignoring bread and butter matters.

UK NGOs particularly have caused their own headaches by the grandiloquence of their objectives – most obviously the Make Poverty History campaign. It’s not going to happen and if it does it won’t be Western aid that brings it about. The accounts of bad aid – corruption etc – are also beside the point. It’s the larger strategic point that matters – aid can achieve a great amount but can’t eliminate poverty and transform societies. Only real

people living in those countries can resolve those issues.

Another journalist argues that those countries that become wealthier do so because of peace, stability and good government, not because of development aid. *Thus Ghana is doing better than Ivory Coast because it’s got a better government.* He believes his views are shared by other journalists who report on these issues and live in developing countries and thinks they are themselves partly to blame because real investigations take time and are expensive. He poses some fundamental questions about the purpose of NGOs:

Do NGOs exist because it makes rich people in the west feel better? Do they exist because they’ve become large organisations and people don’t want to lose their jobs?

Brendan Paddy recognises the dilemma:

There’s a lot of serious debate about how significant development aid is in development. Most now accept that NGO aid is not the most important part – it’s economic policy, trade, remittances, inward investments etc. That does open you up to a lot of questions – if it’s not the principal driver, why do we do it?

Emergency aid is poorly delivered

Although the principle of emergency aid is free from media scrutiny, there is nevertheless criticism of the execution of humanitarian relief programmes. In 2010 the BBC World Service provoked a heated response from Bob Geldof when it broadcast an *Assignment* programme in which a former Ethiopian rebel commander claimed that in 1985, only 5% of the \$100m destined for famine relief in Tigray reached the hungry.²³

For several interviewees it was the earthquake in Haiti that first focused attention on the challenges of delivering aid in a disaster zone. One broadcaster accepted that emergency aid saves lives. But he uses Haiti, *NGO city*, to illustrate his argument that NGOs often displace the efforts of national governments. Edward Stourton returned to Haiti one year on from the earthquake for BBC Radio 4.²⁴ He also chaired a discussion on the situation there for Merlin before it merged with Save the Children. He discovered that the criticisms in the radio programme were as *nothing compared to what NGO staff were saying themselves.*

In his article for the Daily Mail in November 2013, Ian Birrell also commented on the chaotic situation created by aid agencies in Haiti and accused the DEC of exaggerating the severity of the typhoon in the Philippines while raising money for the disaster relief effort.¹

On television, *The Trouble with Aid* was transmitted on BBC4 in December 2012.²⁵ In this film, directed by Ricardo Pollack, the history of humanitarian relief was explored from the Biafra war to the Ethiopia famine and Live Aid to the war in Afghanistan. It interviewed former aid agency workers and explained how their work was often compromised or undermined and considered the implications for disaster relief today. The programme was followed by a studio debate.

Criticism also comes from within the aid sector itself – most notably from MSF. Its most recent report, *Where is Everyone?* published during the writing of this report, highlights shortcomings in the international aid response to emergencies in conflict zones.²⁶ Its publication in July 2014 is intended to spark debate amongst aid agencies, the UN and donors about deficiencies in the present system and has already been picked up by Ian Birrell who reviewed the report in *The Guardian*.²⁷

NGOs have become too corporate

Criticisms of the increasingly corporate nature of the aid sector can be found in peer reviewed journals as well as in the popular press. In 2010, for example, an editorial in *The Lancet* presented a damning picture of the operation of the larger aid agencies.²⁸ Having observed the work of these agencies over many years and spoken to people working in them, it considered them to be highly competitive, exhibiting too many of the characteristics of large corporations and overly obsessed with raising money, marketing, branding and media coverage.

...just like any other industry, the aid industry must be examined, not just financially as is current practice, but also in how it operates from headquarter level to field level. It seems increasingly obvious that many aid agencies sometimes act according to their own best interests rather than in the interests of individuals whom they claim to help.

The increasing size and professionalization of aid agencies was questioned by many interviewees who used the recent stories about senior executives' pay to illustrate their concerns.²⁹ But journalists and broadcasters were also afraid that slick press and PR operations and an emphasis on branding and marketing were undermining the true purpose of these NGOs. One journalist thought some of this was due to the increasing number of government contracts issued to aid agencies.

As more government contracts are given to NGOs, they've moved away from their core charitable basis, their bread and butter. More government money has necessitated increased professionalization amongst aid agencies, which means they have to offer more pay to get people to run them and so not

so much money is going to the places it was intended for.

Sean Ryan recognises the danger that NGOs could become too corporate and too concerned with strategic development. But he praises the achievements of one of the largest NGOs, Save the Children, and does not think it has reached that stage. For him, it represents a strong brand which *The Sunday Times*, as another strong brand, has chosen for its Christmas appeals.

Save is changing from collecting tins to corporate donations... It's legitimate to run a story about CEOs' salaries but I don't think it's very important. If you're changing into a more ambitious organisation, doubling the number of children you can help, you have to be well run and I have no qualms with that.

Tim Miller and Ben Rayner agree that as larger, more professional organisations, NGOs need highly qualified people to run them. Al Jazeera would not run stories on NGO salaries and Rayner feels that they may be getting lumped in with stories about the BBC and executive pay.

Roger Hearing believes that *it's the nature of the aid business that people move from one agency to another – analogous to big business. It's the same with pay.* He thinks that the large salaries of some senior executives undermine their whole message. He also feels that the fudging of the lines between the different areas of activity traditionally undertaken by the agencies makes it harder for the public to differentiate between NGOs and raises the question of why there are so many if they are all doing the same thing. He argues that smaller, more narrowly focused agencies are demonstrably more effective in some situations.

I came across a Maltese outfit when I was in Khartoum that was working with children who'd been freed from slavery. It was very effective and its costs were very low. Then you hear horror stories about big NGOs. They tar the whole breed.

But he believes that the main concern regarding NGOs is increasing competitiveness. This partly results from the growing number of agencies competing to raise finite funds either from the government or the public, but also the growing weariness of the public in the face of stories about corruption and aid not reaching the intended recipients, which makes it an increasingly hard sell for NGOs. Consequently, they are attempting to act like companies in a market in getting their messages across.

Lack of transparency

One of the most frequently expressed concerns was related to

‘When we can team up, I’m delighted to do so. If they are exploiting us, I have no problem if we’re getting a good story.’

Sean Ryan, Associate Editor, The Sunday Times

honesty and transparency and Brendan Paddy accepted there is too often a dissonance between the image created by NGOs in the UK and the reality of situations on the ground. During the course of making programmes for the World Service and Radio 4, Edward Stourton observed how self-critical aid workers can be and he would like to see this reflected in their responses to the media.

When I did the radio programmes I found that there was a lot of self-questioning amongst the NGOs themselves, but there tends to be a resistance to having these internal questions asked in public... In organisations where there’s a disconnect between your private and public faces, you always get into trouble in the end.

Similarly, another broadcaster who has worked in the field finds it very frustrating that many NGO staff will discuss issues privately, but are reluctant to do so publicly.

Off the record when you have a drink with them, they’ll criticise the governments they work with, but on the record, they won’t. And the ones who get the big grants from DFID engage least – I don’t know if that’s coincidence or not.

Daily Telegraph articles on the subject of senior executive pay in August 2013 led to much criticism amongst certain sections of the popular press and calls for greater transparency in the aid sector more generally from others including The Guardian.³⁰

The relationship between NGOs and the media is too close

Broadcasters and journalists acknowledged that they frequently rely upon NGOs for access and support when covering certain parts of the world and that this is even more the case when newsroom resources are limited. Fran Unsworth commented that although the BBC sometimes finds itself in conflict with NGOs as a result of its duty of impartiality (for example, the Gaza appeal), they have a close working relationship on the ground where it is often simply too dangerous for a journalist to travel alone. She believes that aid agencies generally enjoy considerable access to the BBC. Nevine Mabro accepted that the relationship between the media and NGOs could be perceived as cosy, but commented that many journalists used to work in the aid sector and access sometimes is not possible without the assistance of aid agencies. She sees it as a natural alliance with the Channel 4 News emphasis on foreign news and longer pieces. Sean Ryan at the Sunday Times also appreciates the support that NGOs provide:

When we can team up, I’m delighted to do so. If they are exploiting us, I have no problem if we’re getting a good story.

However, some feel that the relationship has become rather too close and that too often the media allows aid agencies to set the agenda. Ian Birrell tries not to work with them and one of the broadcasters interviewed off the record regards it as a failure if he has to include an aid worker in one of his pieces *because the people with the real understanding are the local people.*

Roger Hearing has long believed that the media is too close to NGOs and consequently less ready to challenge their activities:

I always fought against that. Agencies have an agenda, whether it’s just getting publicity for their activities. We should now treat them like competing businesses – it’s incumbent upon us to do so.

Nick Ericsson, Regional Planning Editor for BBC Africa at the World Service, takes up this point. He accepts that broadcasters have to guard against becoming *just a mouthpiece*, but thinks the problem is getting better and they now try to dig deeper. Both Tim Miller and Ben Rayner feel that despite their reliance on NGOs, the relationship is a healthy one and they would not refrain from questioning an NGO if necessary.

Ian Birrell believes that one of the consequences of too close a relationship between the media and NGOs is the *fraudulent* image of Africa it helps to create:

Media views of NGOs

Many of the press articles reviewed for this briefing focused on aid policy rather than the operation of individual NGOs.

However, the BBC targeted specific aid agencies in two *Panorama* programmes transmitted in December 2013. *Where’s Our Aid Money Gone?* investigated the Global Fund which has spent almost £15 billion fighting AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis.³² It revealed that its inspector general had been sacked whilst reports documenting how aid money went missing have been delayed. *All in a Good Cause* looked at allegations of waste within Amnesty International, questionable corporate partnerships at Save the Children and dubious investments within Comic Relief. The programme asked if the drive to raise funds and brand awareness is undermining their primary purpose.³³

There was a range of views amongst our interviewees about NGOs. Peter Gill who is currently writing a book on aid agencies and the ‘war on terror’ found that some were *wary, defensive and corporate*: whilst other were more *committed, engaged, thoughtful and open*. Edward Stourton spoke positively about those NGOs who appear to be more honest about the limitations of what is achievable.

Rob Davies praised NGOs that he'd worked with, especially those that have strong partner networks:

They have the local contacts and the local know-how so it's not just about the imposition of Western solutions. So I've found them to be pretty good.

HOW SHOULD NGOS RESPOND TO CRITICISM?

Day to day working relationships with the media

Roger Hearing of the World Service does a lot of media training with NGOs. Whilst he believes there are fundamental issues with the message of the aid sector, he also thinks there are problems with the way it is delivered.

They need to present their message clearly and free of jargon. They need to lose that slightly patronising tone because the complications of aid are difficult to explain to the public... If you have a message that you believe in, understanding that it's not as self-evident to others is a real leap of consciousness. Sugaring the pill is an idea that they find hard – it's been a perennial problem.

Ben Rayner of Al Jazeera criticised NGOs who still fail to make anyone available when they publish a report and Tim Miller of Sky News would like a unified point of contact during a humanitarian crisis. However he also acknowledged that the availability of spokespeople in London and on the ground has improved markedly:

NGOs have slick operations in offering their services to the newsdesks. In emergencies they are always in contact immediately and everyone knows the drill. Technology has made it all do-able.

Rob Davies at the Daily Mail thinks NGOs are very proactive, but do not always understand the way a newspaper operates and need to think more about the mechanics of getting a story into the press.

They send press releases that require a lot of legal checks late on a Friday afternoon – no good if you want something in the paper on Saturday... They're often not presented well – too wordy and the main message is lost. Their raison d'être is different. They'll often argue that something should be reported because the issues are so important. We don't rank by importance of issues. They have to view things through the cynical prism of journalism and find the path of least resistance.

He also believes that they should be prepared to consider other outlets than The Guardian:

If you give the story to them you're preaching to the converted.

You'll get greater recognition if you can get a story in the Mail – it makes people sit up and take notice, including the government.

Channel 4's Nevine Mabro thought that most experiences of working with NGOs were positive and they always made themselves available although she agreed that NGOs are not good at press releases.

NGOs don't pitch stories or do press releases very well. It's all down to individual relationships. Someone will call Jonathan [Miller] up with a story or an idea. Press releases are good for information but we are not going to cover a story on the basis of a press release.

Several broadcasters commented on the increasing tendency for NGOs to become film-makers in their own right. But both Fran Unsworth and Nevine Mabro made clear they preferred to use their own material.

NGOs are keen to go into a more direct approach – send in their own camera crew and shoot their own footage. The BBC is not interested and it's how you start to lose support. At the end of the day they are lobby groups and we're not interested in handing air time to them.

I get the feeling that a lot of NGOs want to do media work... We've been approached by several people asking if we'd like to air their film, but no, we do our own.

Issues journalists would like to see addressed by NGOs

The practical details of day to day relationships with the press were of less concern to many interviewees who felt it was the fundamental purpose of the aid sector, rather than the way NGOs communicated that purpose that really needs to be addressed. Some interviewees suggested this will require not only more explanation about the way the larger aid agencies now operate, but also a radical re-think of their role in society. One journalist, speaking off the record, told us:

NGOs have got a choice – take the public money and get bigger or stay close to their roots. If they take the money, they have to carry out audits and employ expensive people to do that. But they need to explain that to their donors who don't expect to see big salaries. Most people think charities are run on a shoe-string and they're not. They have higher overheads now. There needs to be more explanation of what's going on and then donors can take a view. They shouldn't just get cross about the criticism and try and hide the big salaries.

For Roger Hearing, a restructuring of the aid sector would have to involve more specialisation amongst the different agencies and less competition between them.

‘They need to have a good long think about the structure of aid. Competition is unhealthy and a turn-off for people.’

Roger Hearing, BBC radio news presenter

They need to have a good long think about the structure of aid. Competition is unhealthy and a turn-off for people. Save – if you encounter it now, talks about much wider issues than children. They now look at women’s rights. I understand the logic, but once you start to widen your remit, why not more? Amnesty now campaigns on all sorts of things... I don’t know what the answer is – a sort of permanent DEC or an agreement that each agency will have its own portfolio... Development is multi-faceted, but the artificiality of having lots doing the same things and competing – people start to think they’re probably as dodgy as some companies.

Several interviewees expressed the need for greater honesty in the way NGOs responded to criticism from the media. On and off the record, broadcasters challenged NGOs to be more open.

How could NGOs respond? They could be completely honest for one thing. I’ve asked if I could go with one NGO when it carries out their evaluations. They were all very PC about it and we discussed details, but it’s never happened. I have also asked the Independent Commission but again, although they don’t say no, nothing has happened.

How can NGOs do better? A preparedness to answer the question – that’s all. Tell it like it is and not simply burnish the corporate image.

Being open and transparent is the only way. If you’ve got a good story, why should they feel defensive? For example, salaries – they are paying competitive rates. All of us have to come to terms with transparency.

However, Tim Miller at Sky News questioned whether aid agencies could ever be entirely honest or make guarantees when trying to raise money.

NGOs should always be transparent and provide information but I can’t see a time when campaigns say give us money and 40% will reach its destination.

NGOs’ response to criticism

NGOs recognise that they have to respond to the transparency agenda and some are beginning to find new ways to challenge media criticisms of the aid sector.

Ben Jackson, CEO of Bond, chose the *conservativehome* website to respond to stories about CEO pay and highlight the work of the International Aid Transparency Initiative and Bond’s own Effectiveness Programme in supporting NGOs to publish project, governance and performance information and

demonstrate value for money.³⁴ Like others, he believes NGOs need to get better at explaining *the reality of running large global operations in some of the most challenging environments.*

Others also responded to the specific stories circulating in the press about CEO salaries in August 2013, and to the issues of transparency and accountability that they raised. Writing in *The Times*, Justin Forsyth of Save the Children argued that

...the way we work has had to change dramatically. Aid agencies cannot afford to be run in an amateur way, however well intentioned. We need professionals to staff the complex global organisations we have become; experts at delivering aid to tough and often dangerous places and campaigning for the changes the poorest children need.³⁵

Katie Harrison of Tearfund recognises that since austerity and cuts in government spending, the debate about transparency has grown. However, she thinks NGOs are given opportunities to respond if only they are prepared to rise to the challenge, criticise the government’s aid policy when appropriate and now that the goal of 0.7% has been achieved, focus on how that money should be spent.

What we have to do is to push people to scrutinise the right things and not focus on the wrong things. One charity put their Chief Executive on TV to defend DFID, when really they should have challenged some of DFID’s policies too. We shouldn’t just be saying all aid is good... if you get money from the government, it shouldn’t stop you from campaigning. We deliver on their behalf but we also have to hold them to account. We’ll continue to campaign on 0.7% but the debate is now about how to spend it.

What she believes that NGOs need to pay more attention to what journalists are saying and pitch stories accordingly. Asha Tharoor, Head of UK Media at ONE, agrees that everyone now has to be transparent and that although they will never change the stance of the *Daily Mail*, if they can find a way in via stories with a UK link, they should do so:

When I was at ActionAid I found a way in via Rob Davies, City correspondent at the Mail. I worked with him on the tax justice story – that gives a UK angle to a story about Africa and then I found I could penetrate through to others who wouldn’t normally talk to NGOs.

Brendan Paddy sees a large gap between the public perception of how a charity works, *a happy band of amateurs who do everything on a shoestring*, with the reality of modern NGOs who are now highly sophisticated operations and, he would argue, more effective as a result. He believes they ought to be more prepared

to acknowledge these realities and face the critics of executive pay etc head-on. He recently made a film for Truth Loader on YouTube, *Five Myths About Aid Answered*, to explain how money is spent on administration, staff and logistics.³⁶ He finds it difficult to convey this more complex message about aid delivery to the mainstream media who see things in much more black and white terms. But in 2013 he shared a platform at the Sheffield Documentary Film Festival with Ricardo Pollack, director of BBC's *The Trouble with Aid*, who has expressed interest in making a TV observational series based in a large NGO, which may be one way to engage a wider audience in the realities of today's aid sector.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this briefing was to gain a better understanding of the factors motivating recent media criticism of the aid sector and NGOs. It therefore inevitably focused on negative reporting and it should not be forgotten that most coverage of NGOs continues to be positive. It is important also to note that several interviewees, spoke about the good relationships they share with aid agencies and others were keen to point out that there was no anti-NGO agenda.

Nevertheless most agreed that media criticism had increased in recent years. A review of selected stories in the press and broadcast media revealed that although some of this criticism may form part of an ideological antipathy to overseas aid usually found in the more right wing elements of the press, it is clear that people who have considerable knowledge of the developing world and care about the issues also have growing concerns about the aid sector.

There were consistent themes regarding the reasons for increased criticism in all the interviews. Journalists are not surprised that in a period of austerity, the overseas aid budget is now far more closely scrutinised for examples of waste and corruption. Moreover, the growth in size and influence of the larger NGOs opens them up to the same calls for transparency and accountability as in other areas of public life.

But it is also apparent that some concerns are more deeply rooted in fundamental questions about the purpose of development aid in particular and its failure to deliver on over-ambitious objectives together with the perception that some NGOs are too corporate, too competitive and too obsessed with their own image and self-interest. These concerns were often expressed by individuals who felt that greater scrutiny was overdue and had sometimes been inhibited by media dependence upon the aid sector for access to people and stories. Indeed as several of those interviewed believe the media already has too close a relationship with NGOs and as most of the criticism was directed at large NGOs with very

professional communications departments (often staffed by former journalists), simply improving practical day to day dealings with the media may smooth the path to more constructive coverage in some cases, but will not address the more underlying issues.

Journalists and broadcasters frequently expressed the need for more honesty amongst aid agencies – *to tell it like it is*. For many of those interviewed, honesty not only means admitting when mistakes are made or emergency relief fails to reach all those in need, but also being prepared to engage with more fundamental debates about development aid. Others go further and call upon NGOs to rethink a strategy which has led to increased competition in the aid sector and collusion with the government in order to maintain levels of funding.

Of course, NGOs do respond to criticism in the media. But it could be argued, for example, that those in receipt of large salaries should not be the ones to defend them. Or does this not only echo similar justifications from the banking world? Using social media to overcome the mainstream media's perceived inability or reluctance to handle more nuanced arguments may provide one answer, but this is less likely to reach a wide, general audience. Moreover, it is elements of the mainstream media who are calling for more openness and who admire those NGOs like MSF who are prepared to stick their heads above the parapet. Bond provides support to NGOs, not only to improve the transparency of their organisations through its Effectiveness Programme, but also to respond to specific media allegations of malpractice and corruption. In December 2013, for example, it offered guidance to those aid agencies that might be contacted following the transmission of Panorama's *Where's Our Aid Money Gone?*³⁷

In many ways, the media is only reflecting what some in the aid sector are already thinking. The Start Network, formerly the Consortium of British Humanitarian Agencies, was launched in April 2014 and held its first annual conference in June 2014. It was set up to rethink the way emergency relief is provided. The Network's Director, Sean Lowrie, *thinks NGOs are stuck in a Victorian model, which requires people to suffer and die to get on the front page of newspapers, and the newspapers trigger public donations and that triggers political will. It's a reactive model.*³⁸ The proposed new way of working will be funded by money provided by DFID and Irish Aid, which can be channelled through whichever organisation can most effectively mount an immediate response to a humanitarian crisis (including local partners on the ground). It would require greater collaboration between NGOs and *an unusual degree of selflessness on the part of member organizations, who may in the past have competed for funding and public profile.*

‘What we have to do is to push people to scrutinise the right things and not focus on the wrong things.’

Katie Harrison, Head of Media, Tearfund

NGOs will never be able to change the minds of the more entrenched critics in the media, but in order to respond to the greater level of scrutiny they now face, they need to get better at explaining the work they do and show a greater willingness to express some of their own misgivings. Greater openness may help to dispel the myths that have developed around the aid sector – some of which have proved advantageous whilst others are increasingly proving to be detrimental. The broadcast media has proved relatively successful in dispelling myths in other areas of public life with documentary series about the NHS, the police, the prison service, social work and many more. These programmes are not without risks, but one of the interesting ideas to come out of this research has been the possibility of making an observational programme based within an NGO. Ideally, any potential observational documentary would not be an advocacy project, but would instead provide a more in-depth exploration of what it is like to work for an aid agency whilst facilitating the discussion of some of the more contested issues around aid and development within a real environment.

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