THE ETHICAL TERRAIN OF INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT NGOs: FIVE LEADERSHIP DILEMMAS

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Abstract. This paper explores the ethical terrain of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in international development with regard to particular leadership dilemmas relating to cross-cutting stakeholder expectations. NGO leaders find themselves caught between a constitutive legitimacy of service for their beneficiaries and a representational obligation to meet donors' expectations. In particular, this paper examines five major ethical problems that leaders of international development NGOs typically confront in attending to missional priorities such as reducing poverty, improving quality of life, and promoting human rights in developing nations. This study ultimately concludes that the international development NGOs' ethical terrain is characterized by a *constitutive* legitimacy that supports advocacy for particular constituencies that conflicts with *representational* obligations to donors.

Ethical terrains of organizations vary depending upon how those entities are perceived as "legitimate" in relation to expectations (however diverse) placed upon them. This paper explores the ethical terrain of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in international development (inelegantly defined below) in terms of particular leadership dilemmas related to cross-cutting stakeholder expectations. Generally, these NGOs qualify as non-profit organizations insofar as they are primarily dependent upon funding from private (individual and/or corporate) donors to support their development missions.

Globally, the population of NGOs attending to missional priorities such as reducing poverty, improving quality of life, and advocating for human rights has expanded exponentially since the end of the Cold War. This in turn has heightened competition for scarce donor resources and empowered donors to demand that NGOs cultivate professional practices relating to governance structure, reporting procedures, and performance documentation. Although a few development organizations are relatively large and well-funded (e.g., Oxfam and Care International), many more are small (50 and fewer employees) and under-resourced. Thus, NGO

leaders find themselves caught between a constitutive legitimacy of service for their beneficiaries and a representational obligation to meet donors' expectations (see Peruzzotti 2004).

Defining NGOs, according to one analyst, "is not an exercise for the intellectually squeamish" (Simmons 1998, p. 85). First used by the United Nations in 1949, the term *nongovernmental organization* resists tight definition as it has been applied to a broad spectrum of organizations (Fernando and Heston 1997, p. 10). Delineating those organizations that function specifically as *development* NGOs, distinct from *humanitarian* or *human rights* organizations, is vexing as well. The traditional distinction between "humanitarian" relief as a short-term, politically neutral undertaking—in contrast to "development" as a more sustained, politically-entangled effort—has become clouded as humanitarian organizations have reacted to the charge of attending to the "well-fed dead" in conflict settings (see Barnett 2005, p.728). In other words, many humanitarian agencies have taken on longer term (development) initiatives to improve security or living conditions beyond their initial relief efforts. Moreover, some "development" organizations have integrated "human rights" approaches into how they do development (see Uvin 2007; Llewellyn-Fowler and Overton 2010).

Given these definitional problems, the term "development NGO" used herein refers to a nongovernment organization that implements programs of significant duration to improve human conditions in the (so-called) "developing world". That organization may be based outside of the assisted society—i.e., in the "developed world"—or alternatively, within the society as a "local" NGO.

The international development literature offers benchmarks that delineate the ethical terrain on which NGO professionals function to the extent it identifies key values-based dilemmas they confront on a frequent basis. Thus, the focus here is on forces that act upon moral

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decision-making—or in Bailey's words, "winds above the timber line" (1964, p. 238)—at the

executive level, rather than upon matters of personal conduct in agency operations. The next five

sections address five ethically-grounded leadership dilemmas:

- Interpreting/managing "meanings" of ideas about "development",

- Reconciling "formal" and "informal" organizations,

- Deciding whether to contract with governments or corporations,

- Documenting "quality of life" improvements amid donor demands for "hard" data, and

- Investing in personnel management at the expense of resourcing core mission initiatives.

Each of these discussions elaborates on the context of the dilemma, outlines leadership options,

and comments upon ethics considerations inherent within each leadership conundrum. A final

section offers a comparative summary of the five dilemmas and concludes with a brief

characterization of the ethical terrain of international development work.

Interpreting/Managing "Meanings" of Ideas about "Development"

Context

Words, terms, and discourses (i.e., "ensembles of ideas, concepts, and categories through

which meaning is given to phenomena"; Hajer 1993, p. 45) matter strategically in framing (or

shaping) what "development" means in particular settings and what ought to be "taken-for-

granted" about problems and priorities. As Cornwall and Brock maintain, words and terms that

convey policy ideas like "empowerment" and "poverty reduction" are seldom if ever neutral but

instead implicitly advocate particular understandings and courses of action. In essence, these

words "succeed" when they achieve a "taken-for-granted" status or consensus within a range of

diverse perspectives. As an official of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

suggests, the "taken-for-grantedness" of terminology and meaning constitutes political accomplishment as "ideas changing minds" as important as aid "money changing hands" (Vandemoortele 2009, p. 356).

In her analysis of development discourse, Cornwall refers to terms having achieved such status as *buzzwords* that "get their buzz" from being in vogue and that serve as passwords to funding and influence (2007, pp. 471–72). Because they are typically vague and euphemistic, buzzwords are especially useful in negotiating the ambiguity (or "fuzz") surrounding diverse interpretations of issues and problems, as Cornwall explains:

> Policies depend on a measure of ambiguity to secure the endorsement of diverse potential actors and audiences. Buzzwords aid this process, by providing concepts that can float free of concrete referents, to be filled with meaning by their users. In the struggles for interpretive power that characterise the negotiation of the language of policy, buzzwords shelter multiple agendas, providing room for manoeuvre and space for contestation. (Cornwall 2007, p. 474)

Put another way, development buzzwords are frequently invoked in development and related conversations to show how terminology can be obfuscated, morphed, co-opted, overhauled, and retrofitted, not only to describe but also to "do things" that advance political goals by legitimizing, justifying, building consensus, excluding or including, and/or making promises, all in name of "making things better."

Options

As do most organizations, development NGOs can exploit selected definitions of buzzwords (such as "poverty" and "empowerment") internally in order to animate organization cultures and ideologies. That "word power" can in turn affect key decisions in a number of sensitive areas such as hiring, promotion, selectivity in rule-enforcement, and interpersonal relations. As Robin Broad demonstrates in her 2007 study of the World Bank, organizations can engage in knowledge-management strategies that lock-in certain ideologies (and maintain

particular paradigms) that privilege "true believers" over others, especially those with dissenting viewpoints. In the World Bank case, Broad reports that economists control narratives about "causes" of global poverty as well as appropriate "remedies." She relates that those economists are better compensated, and more often promoted, than their colleagues with backgrounds in the social sciences. While the World Bank is obviously large and well-funded, smaller development NGOs are as (if not more) susceptible to such ideological control. Some faith orientations, for example, reject "human rights talk" as subversive on the grounds that all rights and "human charity" (according to their belief) emanate from God and not from humans (see Slim 2000, p. 493).

In rhetorical terms, development NGOs (to the extent of their resource capabilities) may opt to extend their "knowledge"—that is, propagate meaning among peer organizations. In other words, such organizations can be successful as propagandists *if* they can persuade what Charli Carpenter calls "network hubs" (that is, the most influential organizations in particular global policy networks) to endorse their cause. One of the three cases in her book *"Lost" Causes* (2014) documents the conundrums that small NGOs encountered in their unsuccessful effort to convince a hub organization (UNICEF) in a network of child rights advocates to endorse their position that infant male circumcision constitutes a human rights violation, as does female circumcision (pp. 122-147).

Yet most NGOs find themselves on the receiving end of knowledge-management efforts to embed particular meanings of buzzwords into the institutional vocabulary of the pertinent development sector (for example, child rights.) At minimum, organizational leaders need to be aware that the ambiguous nature of the development "enterprise" presents political opportunities to control narratives in ways that advantage particular actors. Moreover, these leaders would be

well-advised to cultivate interpretive skills among staff members to enable them to deliberate competently in fora where institutional meanings take shape (see Kuosmanen 2016).

Ethics Considerations

Presumably, the core ethical problem surrounding the management of meanings within international development sectors is that of a power asymmetry whereby well-funded organizations have the wherewithal to define norms, "problems," and remedies for others to "take-for-granted." Policy analyst Deborah Stone points out that in the context of litigation, rights claiming suffers from the power asymmetry between well-funded "repeat players" (in court frequently to fend off claims) over "one-shot" rights lawyers with less familiarity of judges and judicial behavior (2002, pp. 344–45). By analogy, if NGOs can gain legitimacy as participants and advisors in policymaking for a (sometimes known as "discourse coalitions; see Jennings 1993), they can establish themselves as repeat players able to affect development narratives in inter-organizational policy networks.

As suggested above, leaders of NGOs on the "receiving end" of meaning dissemination bear the ethical responsibility of promoting interpretive competence among professionals in their organizations. Indeed, part of the problem may lie in the fact that NGO professionals tend not to realize that they are "being framed" by other power actors; in other words, policy makers in the leading development institutions determine what those in smaller NGOs are obliged to "buy into". An executive director of a human rights center advises colleagues in his field as follows: (1) "Don't believe your own propaganda," (2) nor "your opponent's propaganda," and (3) "know the literal terrain upon which you will meet your opponent" (Cornell, Kelsch, and Palasz 2004, p. 156). The first two maxims advise NGO professionals (and amateur volunteers) to recognize the

power of buzzwords and discourse, but so too does the third if the notion of terrain is expanded to include the politics of rhetorical interpretation.

Reconciling "Formal" and "Informal" Organizations

Context

As Smillie and Hailey conclude in *Managing Change* (2002), leaders steer development NGOs through the crosswinds of formality and informality at various organizational life stages. Thus, commentaries sometimes depict leadership as pairs of contradictory roles whereby the first coordinates efforts through formal control, but the second depends on interpersonal agreement, or mutual adjustment, in the informal organization. In other words, NGO professionals should become adept at reconciling priorities to promote the interactive synergies of the informal organization with those to conserve external legitimacy (i.e., to demonstrate outward appropriateness in governance structure, formal reporting procedures, and accountability standards).

How NGO leaders balance external pressures for *governance* and accountability structures with the workflow of the informal organization is critical in determining the organization's effectiveness in serving beneficiaries. Following Tandon's definition, governance "requires the creation of structures and processes which enable the NGO to monitor performance and remain accountable to its stakeholders" (2002, p. 215). Increasing emphases on NGO governance since the 1980s appears somewhat paradoxical. On one hand, Northern neoliberal (i.e., pro-free market) institutions have looked upon NGOs as "magic bullets," or as *autonomous* agents equipped to democratize not-so-democratic regimes. But on the other hand, it is precisely that autonomy that raises the eyebrows of donor institutions calling for more rigorous governance and accountability controls (see Edwards and Hulme 2002).

Appeals for strong governance measures prompt leaders to institute formalized, or at least well-established, accountability mechanisms within NGOs. But to what extent should day-to-day organizational work, in the interest of "responsible governance," be formalized or structured at the cost of disrupting the interdependencies of team-oriented work? Rights-based NGOs do not (or at least ought not) function as mass-production firms that pride themselves on uniformity and consistency, like Holiday Inns® where "the best surprise is no surprise" (Mintzberg 1993, pp. 173–74). For Mintzberg, development and human right advocacy organizations should more often resemble *adhocracies* that innovate and solve problems on behalf of—or better, *with*—their clients or beneficiaries.

Elaborating on the balance of formal governance mechanisms with the informal work culture, Smillie and Hailey question whether organizations are managed more effectively through formal systems and controls or left to consensual processes that motivate staff and facilitate collective learning (2002, p. 166). Comments by an official in a South African community development organization reinforce the latter:

> As a staff we are in a tremendously privileged position . . . free to devise our strategies and approaches and select who we work with. To that end, and because our work is in pursuit of a social vision, we work closely, mutually accountable, with individual practices subject to the scrutiny of the team as a whole. This is not simply good professional practice (although it is that too), but is also about holding the organisation as a whole on course, ensuring that its resources are put to best use. (Soal 2002)

Options

In their study of particular South Asian NGOs, Smillie and Hailey suggest leaders support informal processes to the extent they buffer the staff from information demands placed on them. Although information is vital for staff learning, demands for excessive documentation, case study reports, and field-worker diary entries can crowd out collaborative efforts that support interactive strategy formation. One leader rejected demands for documentation, claiming, "We

are implementers, not researchers—I don't have the funds or time for process documentation." Another NGO founder echoes the sentiments of the first, maintaining, "If we get in the documentation business, it consumes a lot of time, at least 30% of the time we could spend in four or five villages" (2002, p. 86). Thus, leaders can opt to balance the formal and informal as gatekeepers who minimize the external reporting demands that warrant the attention of staff.

On the other hand, NGO leaders may opt for structure in governing development work with the hope that donors will reward "disciplined" accountability with subsequent program contracts. Such motives conform to a rational, "business-like" logic that program success in one global setting can be replicated (or "scaled up") in others. Here the leader sacrifices autonomy (or "room to maneuver"—see Biggs and Neame 1996) for fiscal sustainability.

Yet those who value bottom-up local participation in development settings castigate such a structured approach. One outspoken proponent of participative development, Robert Chambers, devotes an entire book—*Whose Reality Counts: Putting the First Last* (note the double-entendres and scriptural reference) —to mounting an indictment against "the development industry." At one point in the book he characterizes the depth of his commitment to the participative process, commenting upon how people should participate directly in program planning: "In Pakistan in March 1992, several non-literate women drew systems diagrams of their farms and households with internal and external flows and linkages. For people who do not read and write, though, [drawing in] the ground is usually better." (1997, pp. 151-152) Such activities call on development professionals to be facilitators, not necessarily technical specialists, who need wide latitude in which to maneuver—often beyond the hierarchical expectations of donors.

Development NGOs can pursue still another option, one that finds "middle ground" between autonomy and rigid donor accountability. Specifically, development organizations with

similar missions can "institutionalize suspicion" by establishing what amounts to self-regulating "good governing practice" associations that certify an organization's conformance to accountability standards such as reporting, recruiting practices, and the like (see Moore and Stewart 1998). Ostensibly, such a "Good Housekeeping" seal would satisfy donor expectations while affording workers the latitude required to attend to the specifics of the local setting.

Ethics Considerations

At first glance, leadership dilemmas involving whether to buffer the day-to-day operations of development work from donor scrutiny (and to what extent) might be cast as an ethical problem that pits a moral imperative (i.e., tell the truth to donors) against the consequences of straightjacketing the development professional—or alternatively, the virtue of empowering people through maximum participation. Nonetheless, there may be justification for taking a more practical, problem-solving approach—stakeholder analysis—as Lewis and Gilman illustrate in *The Ethics Challenge in Public Service*. Here they assert:

> Ethical analysis is all about ambiguity and confusion; that is what the word *dilemma* implies. Stakeholder analysis is a method of viewing a scenario from the potential victims' perspectives, for taking the empathic leap to public interest without sacrificing too much or too many…A manager [or NGO leader], acting on the principle of reciprocity in human relations and respect for the other person, searches for some way to bring practice in line with principle. (2005, p. 161; italics in original).

But an ethical justification for buffering staff development activities from formalistic scrutiny by no means pre-empts possible donor repercussions. It therefore might be prudent for NGO officials to take proactive steps to apprise donors (as well as other stakeholders at a distance from the development setting) as to the intricacies of work in progress half-a-world away with hope that they might "buy into" the organization's work strategies (see Zadak and Gatward 1996).

Deciding Whether to Contract with Governments or Corporations

Context

In their book *NGO Accountability*, Jordan and Van Tuijl explain how since the early 1990s

NGOs found legitimacy in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre through the

following syllogistic logic: "*1. Civil society is necessary for democracy; 2. NGOs are civil*

society; [therefore] *3. NGOs are good for democratic development*" (2007, p. 11). Yet if NGOs

build credibility through their involvement as public service providers as civil society

organizations (CSOs), they risk their autonomy in relation to funding institutions or governments

that contract with them for services. Development expert Deborah Eade presents the dilemma as

follows:

> Many of those civil society organizations . . . find themselves trying to maintain a balance
> between the difficulties of surviving within a hostile environment and the challenges posed
> by swimming the tide, and seeking alternatives to it. They are caught between
> accommodating themselves or "selling-out" on the one hand, and being neutralised or cast
> as outdated radicals on the other. As the ethical and human values that accompany the
> forces of globalisation are shifting, so it becomes far harder to draw the line between
> adapting to change and simply abandoning one's principles. (Eade 2000, p. 149)

Yet some critics refer to NGOs' roles as service providers in civil society as "gap filling,"

suggesting that CSOs "let governments off the hook" by assuming responsibilities for costly and

challenging public functions (see, e.g., Whaites 1998, p. 344). Funding institutions have looked

to the prevalence of such partnership arrangements in the West (which some public management

experts criticize as "hollowing out" state authority; see, e.g., Frederickson and Smith 2003, pp.

207–28) as apt development models (Ridde 2005, p. 6). In any case, this contracting dilemma

lies at the crux of the conflict between *constitutive* and *representational* legitimacies.

Since the end of the Cold War, NGOs that offer emergency relief and peacekeeping

assistance in areas of armed conflict have come under increased pressure to contract with

protagonist governments. NGOs with strong humanitarian commitments risk having to abandon

(or have in fact abandoned) a traditional neutrality ethos that Henri Dunant embedded in the

culture of the International Committee of the Red Cross, when he founded it in the mid-

nineteenth century. International Relations scholar Michael Barnett explains the ethics morass

this way:

> Humanitarian principles were completely shattered in places like Kosovo, Afghanistan,
> and Iraq, where many agencies were funded by the very governments that were
> combatants and thus partly responsible for the emergency…Commentators spoke of
> humanitarianism in "crisis" and warned of the dangers of "supping with the devil,"
> "drinking from the poisoned chalice," and "sleeping with the enemy." (Barnett 2005, pp.
> 724–25)

Pointing specifically to US involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, critics argue that the political

agendas of Western states exploit development and relief work to accomplish political and military

objectives (see, e.g., de Torrenté 2004; Donini 2004).

This problem became particularly visible when a former U.S. secretary of state referred to

humanitarian effort as a military strategy, as international studies scholar Thomas Weiss explains,

"The value of a humanitarian veneer for the military was obvious when US secretary of state Colin

Powell described NGOs in Iraq as a 'force multiplier.' He was even clearer in the same speech when

noted they were part of his 'combat team.'" (2012, p.161) **NGOs work under hostile conditions**

compromises the NGO's moral imperative to "do no harm" as workers must persevere under

life-threatening conditions (see OCHA 2011).

Options

The contracting recourse can offer distinct opportunities for development organizations

in particular contexts. For example, a program director of Save the Children in Pakistan and

Afghanistan reports on how his area-based NGO assists multinational athletic equipment

conglomerates by monitoring the child labor practices of local subcontractors stitching soccer

balls (Husselbee 2000). In addition, it would be prudent for NGO leaders to partner (or network)

with other NGOs—particularly grass roots—and indigenous organizations not highly dependent on international aid.

But as a general proposition, it could be said that an NGO's decision to contract with a governmental funder significantly limits its options to advocate for the rights of beneficiaries and maintain the integrity of development and humanitarian missions. Moreover, the intricate weave of stakeholder accountability obligations (mentioned above) becomes even more entangled within contract networks (see Romzek 2011, pp. 28-32). Nonetheless, the *individual* development or humanitarian relief professional *does* have options whether or not to work in a contractual situation. Mary B. Anderson, a prominent figure in NGO peacemaking work, draws on personal experience to frame the predicament arising from a contractual relationship:

> In 2004, as the first anniversary of the US entry into Iraq approached, I was asked by colleagues to go to Iraq to conduct some training workshops for the local staff of international non-governmental organizations. I am an American. The NGOs I would be working with receive US government funding for some programs. If I went, would I be reinforcing a military operation by advancing a "hearts and minds" campaign? Or would I be demonstrating concern and support for local people involved in efforts to alleviate suffering and contribute to redevelopment? (2007, p. 201)

She concludes that there is no option here that is "completely pure."

Ethics Considerations

There appear to be few if any generalizations to be drawn regarding the ethics of development organizations' initiatives to contract with government as a major funding source. Any such judgment would need to examine the particular context to determine whether (and how much) autonomy and mission integrity are traded-off for how much material support—and for what public (or state) purpose. The vantage point of those casting ethical judgments—whether from a nationalistic commitment to regime values (see Rohr 1989, pp. 59-96) or an advocacy for

a universal ideal—seems pertinent to the ethics quandary. Perhaps Lewis and Gilman's ideas about stakeholder analysis (discussed above) are pertinent here as well.

Documenting "Quality of Life" Improvements Amid Donor Demands for "Hard" Data

Context

The further one moves from quantifiable NGO outputs—wells built, credit provided, trees planted, people trained, buildings constructed and so on—to impacts on people's lives, the more significant less tangible factors (such as socio-economic divisions, power relationships, human motivation, individual and collective behavior, cultural values, and local organizational capacity) become. In other words, where it matters most, at the end of the international aid chain, human development results from a complex mix of non-linear processes which are largely determined by non-project factors; in other words, it is an open system (Fowler 1996, p. 59). By contrast, performance measurement closes the system by positioning the user (or evaluator) *outside* of that under scrutiny. This makes sense in traditional rigors of scientific inquiry where *objectivity* depends on impartiality in measurement. Yet it is often the case that the roles and behaviors of (donors and other) evaluators affect how the organization functions; in other words, they are part of the open-systems picture.

"Results, of course!" is what donors expect of development organizations. In development NGOs, the logical framework (or logframe) typically embodies the methodological nexus between programming and planning and subsequently offers the evaluative criteria for monitoring project success; see table 1 below that shows a schematic of the logframe planning approach which epitomizes the deductive mindset. Essentially embodying POSDCORB for international development administrators, the logical framework "blueprint" (see Korten, 1980, pp.496-498) requires officials (in descending order) to (1) establish a goal, (2) define a purpose

to be achieved, (3) articulate outputs indicating achievement of the purpose, and (4) identify

activities for achieving each purpose (CIDT n.d., pp.6-8). Without elaborating on a host of

additional "logframe" specifications, the development logic here becomes apparent; it is both

possible and necessary to pre-program how people's conditions will be improved through

sound managerial procedures.

TABLE 1 HERE

Yet donors may find it difficult to clarify exactly what they mean: what kinds of results,

based on whose definitions of goals, how significant those results are and on what scale, and so

on. For example, a project to improve children's health in a rural (poor) local village might link

various development objectives (e.g., "Children or estate laborers in X district enjoy better health

than earlier."), indicators (e.g., "frequency of treatment of relevant diseases, health personnel's

statements, mothers' statements"), and indicators for evaluation (e.g., "height, weight/age,

frequency of diarrhea") (Dale 2003, p. 63).

Thus, it appears that stakeholders, such as donors, furthest removed from grassroots

development work highly value the logframe, while those closest to the change efforts generally

discredit (if not despise) it. One author illustrates the controversial nature of the logframe as a

blueprint for the preplanning change in his title: "The Logical Framework: An Easy Escape, a

Straitjacket, or a Useful Planning Tool?" (Dale 2003).

Indeed, "results" constitute the critical element in the logical framework—a published

guideline for crafting the logframe maintains that "outputs describe WHAT you want the project

to deliver. . . . If you provide the necessary resources, you can hold the project team directly

accountable for achieving these results" (Centre for International Development and Training n.d.,

p. 7; uppercase in original). In terms of leadership, these issues center on the basic question "What is performance?" in both the general sense and as related to human development work.

Options

Development professionals can navigate, and in some cases pre-empt, this "quality of life/demand for hard results" dilemma by pursuing either of two leadership strategies or, alternatively, drawing from both. First, they could opt to improvise or customize the generic logical framework planning "blueprint" to adapt to unique or changing circumstances encountered during program implementation; in addition, such improvisation might enlist local participation into "logframe" planning activities such as establishing goals and objectives or endorsing planning assumptions built into the document. Beyond this, donors and agencies can move beyond measuring outputs to assessing longer-term impacts, both intended and unintended, of quality-of-life initiatives. For example, in reference to a project that combines peace-building with health improvement in three Southeast Asian nations, Grove and Zwi illustrate a method used to examine project impacts related to cultural sensitivity, promotion of social justice, promotion of social cohesion, and promotion of good governance. Specifically, these researchers indicate how Likert-surveys were conducted among program beneficiaries. Regarding *cultural sensitivity*, respondents rated the statement *The project is sensitive to health-related issues that have contributed to mistrust in this community* from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." (2008, pp. 74-75)

Second, NGO leaders can strive to reconfigure the agency's/program's funding base in ways that reduce dependence on one particular corporate donor or funding source. Both strategies essentially call for NGO leaders to manage the accountability expectations of donors, either by *mitigating* (that is, explaining the problematic contexts of meeting targets and

milestones) explanations or *reframing* the donor's expectations altogether (see Romzek 2011;

Dubnick 2005). Development NGOs that pursue "quality of life" improvements often depend

upon educational and self-awareness program components that defy predictable outcomes. Such

agencies may fare better if the fund portfolio is "diversified," consisting of several smaller

donors rather than one or two major funders. Additionally, NGO leaders might be well-advised

to seek out the equivalent of "venture capital" revenue sources from foundations that encourage

development innovations and experimentation in human capability-building and are therefore

willing to offer recipients flexibility in how they document outcomes (see for example, Easton,

Monkman, and Miles 2003).

Ethics Considerations

At first glance, some observers might opine that development administrators would be

ethically obliged to follow a *third option* (not discussed above)—strictly complying in reporting

"results" to donors in reference to outputs stipulated in the logframe planning document. Such a

viewpoint would look to categorical imperatives such as "do not lie" or "tell the truth" as the

overriding moral standard applicable to this dilemma. Yet, as Bowman and West suggest in

Public Service Ethics, complex situations may call for multi-perspectival analysis whereby a

categorical (deontological) interpretation might be balanced against virtue- and consequentialist-

based logics (2015, pp. 118-123), This issue pitting "quality of life" against donor demand for

hard data appears to be a classic case that warrants Bowman and West's "triad approach" that

triangulates categorical rules, virtue, and consequences in order to determine a prudent course of

ethical action. In that this matter affects multiple stakeholders, it seems that that the standards of

virtue and consequence (particularly in terms of improved quality of life) deserve strong

consideration.

Investing in Personnel Management at the Expense of Resourcing Core Mission Initiatives

Context

In his casebook on public management, Robert Watson characterizes personnel issues as follows: "Organizations are made up of people and many organization problems ultimately end up being people problems. As such, management tasks like recruitment, selection, and training are vitally important to the health of the organization" (2002, p. 43). For a variety of reasons, humanitarian and development organizations typically confront "people problems" that in some cases compromise capabilities to implement programs. But unfortunately, many NGOs find it difficult to support a viable human resources operation.

According to organization development trainer Vijay Padaki, the human resources management *orientation* of rights-based and humanitarian organizations should be distinctly developmental or focused on capacity building, in contrast to the regulatory purposes of HR in many public organizations. He argues that if the HR function is truly developmental, then its management cannot simply consist of a "bag of [control] tools" but must instead emerge from "a sound body of theory and methodology" related to how HR management builds NGO capacity (2007, p. 66).

Yet as Padaki asserts, human resources development is sometimes perceived more as a liability than an asset within humanitarian organizations because of its costs in relation to scarce resources and the burdens it places on operational managers (Henry 2004, pp. 57–58). Human resources' reputation as an excessive administrative cost can be understood by reviewing the scope of obligations that "good practice in the management and support of aid personnel" entails. For example, People in Aid's model *Code of Good Practice* includes the principle that "the security, good health, and safety of our staff are prime responsibilities of the organization."

When broken down into component activities, that principle translates into numerous

expenditures, such as the costs of

- assessments of security, travel, and health risks for workers and their dependents at regular intervals;

- health clearances before international postings;

- record-keeping on work-related injuries, sickness, and accidents; and

- available health care, personal counseling, and career advice during a worker's assignment (2003, p. 20).

For Padaki, the availability of personal counseling emerges as especially important for

development workers given common occurrences of role stress in the forms of alienation,

emotional load, responsibility load, and work–living imbalances during assignments (Padaki

2007, pp. 1–72). But, as he suggests, the accompanying costs of staff well-being pose an ethical

dilemma for humanitarian agencies "*spending on themselves* . . . made possible by *spending*

somebody else's money" donated to assist distressed people outside the organization (2007, p.

71; italics his). Advocates of vibrant human resources programs (such as People in Aid) regard

the pervasive attitude associating NGO efficiency with minimal administrative (e.g., under 5% of

total) costs as "a simplistic perception by evaluators of the use of human resources in

humanitarian action. . . . [Instead] human resources should be the starting point from which to

calculate the capacity to respond to needs" (Henry 2004, p. 58).

Options

Padaki's argument (stated above) that NGOs should opt to invest in human resources for

developmental, rather for *organization control*, purposes speak to the complexities of the labor

market from which these agencies draw. In a nutshell, development agencies cope with

chronically high turnover, since many serve on a temporary basis as volunteers, interns, or

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professionals (such as physicians) on "service leave" from their regular practices. Moreover, other employee distinctions—such as between ex-pat and in-country workers—spawn inequities in the workforce that lead to burnout, perceptions of inequality, and poor morale.

These problematic contexts temper Padaki's subsequent assertion that decisions to invest in human resources amounts to agencies opting to spend money on themselves rather than programs benefitting clients. The counter-argument stresses that development success largely depends upon professional competence, that in turn calls for ongoing employee training activities. Thus, the People in Aid studies (mentioned above) suggest that development agencies need not approach this personal question as a binary option of whether or not to invest in human resources; instead, NGO leaders could commit to varying levels of a personnel initiative, ranging from a (relatively) inexpensive strategy that supports one individual's half-time responsibility to handle certain employee issues to more extensive human resources components.

Ethics Considerations

As with the previous dilemma, ethical consideration of the complex trade-offs surrounding small NGO decisions to invest in a human resources strategy raises questions of priority among obligations to stakeholders. Again, Bowman and West's "ethics triad" offers a platform for multi-perspectival analysis that can help sort out these moral priorities. Certainly, the intensely problematic nature of the NGO labor market (short-term stints, more applicants willing than able, wide variations among employee types, and so forth) accounts for consequentialist motives for attending to personnel matters. Still, a virtue ethic calls NGO leaders not to sacrifice direct investments in core missions to cover the costs of additional staffers. But in this case, the categorical imperative of "doing no harm" stands out as especially salient. Workers (particularly women) who serve in remote development settings deserve some

measure of physical safety as well as psychological support to counteract burnout and senses of isolation. Interns who undertake tasks comparable to those of full-salaried workers need some form of non-monetary benefit that recognizes their work initiatives. Although parity is virtually unattainable in these turbulent environments, development agencies should demonstrate tangible concerns for the dignity and well-being of those who labor to achieve development missions.

Summary and Conclusion

Table 2 below summarizes each of the five NGO leadership dilemmas by comparing the contexts, options, and ethics considerations associated with each. With regard to context, it is not surprising that all of these relate to matters of boundary exchange, whether connected generally with external power actors, specifically with donors, or macro-economic forces related to labor markets. With one notable exception, the various recourses listed as "options" reflect varying strategies of diplomatic finesse to elicit adherence to agreement in persuading other relevant actors (such as government regimes, donors, peer organizations, or beneficiaries) to "buy into" a particular line of argument. The exception involves a (rare) circumstance in which an NGO could exert sufficient clout to insert a particular definition of a "problem" or remedy as taken-for-granted in discourse of development. However, it is more often the case that inter-governmental (e.g., UN) agencies and bilateral aid organizations (e.g., USAID) within governments (neither are addressed herein) control the discourse of development.

TABLE 2 HERE

"Ethics considerations" associated with the dilemmas vary, but only to a limited extent. In at least four cases, NGO officials are left to sort through crosscutting obligations related (respectively) to categorical rules, virtue, and utility; only one—that involving human resources—appears to warrant strong reliance on a categorical imperative ("do no harm" to NGO

workers). In others, the utility (or consequentialist) logic to "do good" on behalf of program beneficiaries stands as a compelling moral justification. Less obvious (but nonetheless salient) among the ethics considerations listed is the importance of a leadership virtue that promotes staff *competence*, whether to cultivate interpretive skill among workers (so they might "see what is going on around them" in political fora) or buffer them from externally-imposed distractions. Such virtue can empower workers to perform effectively in difficult settings.

So in conclusion, what can be said about the ethical terrain of international development NGOs, perhaps in contrast to that of governmental service bureaucracies? Despite their many differences, development agencies most often act *independently of government* in the absence of sovereign power or authority within themselves. In promoting and facilitating "development" (however defined), these NGOs usually function as agents of change, sometimes in conflict with regime interests to maintain the political and social status quos. Yet NGOs must rely on donors (different than taxpayers who are theoretically service recipients) who are distant and perhaps unfamiliar with the specific conditions "on the ground" that affect development efforts. Thus, as Peruzzotti asserts (2007, pp. 46-55), the NGOs' ethical terrain is characterized by a *constitutive* (rather than by a *representative*) legitimacy that supports advocacy for particular constituencies. When an NGO approaches development from a human rights perspective, the NGO assists clients in stridently *claiming their due rights* (as opposed to charitably *providing for the needy*) from power actors that allegedly marginalize or deprive that constituency,

On occasion the difference between the constitutive and representative functions confuse ethics reformers who would transplant accountability mechanisms appropriate for representational government onto NGOs that essentially serve as pro bono lobbyists attempting to leverage their political finesse on behalf of their constituents. All of that said, donors

understandably demand as much transparency and accountability as can be negotiated as

conditions for development funding. As discussed throughout, the ethics associated with NGOs'

constitutive function leads to challenging priorities among competing moral obligations.

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Table 1. Logical Framework Matrix*

Objective (narrative summary	Indicators	Sources of verification	Assumption
Goal (overall objective)			
Purpose (outcome)			
Outputs (results)			
Activities			

*From Grove and Zwi 2008, p. 71

Table 2. Five NGO Leadership Dilemmas: Comparing Contexts, Options, and Ethics Considerations

NGO Leadership Dilemmas	Contexts	Options	Ethics Considerations
Interpreting/Managing "Meanings"…	Establishing meaning represents political power given the ambiguous nature of development.	-control discourse in a development sector -persuade influential hub organizations -cultivate interpretive skills within NGO	-the ethics of developing competency in the NGO
Reconciling "Formal" and "Informal"…	NGOs need "good governance" structures while affording staffers "room to maneuver"	-leaders buffer workers from external controls -comply strictly with donor demands to keep project money flowing -join "good governance" (certifying) associations	-Categorical obligation "to tell donors the truth" vs. consequentialist obligations to program beneficiaries
Deciding Whether to Contract…	NGOs risk autonomy in government contracting arrangements that offer fiscal stability	-approach or resist government contracting opportunities	-classic ethical stakeholder problem; particular emphasis on virtue ethics
Documenting "Quality of Life"…	Quality of life improvement difficult to measure, but donors expect "hard" results	-improvise on standard logframe format -diversify funding base -focus on impacts rather than outputs	-classic ethical stakeholder problem; particular emphasis on consequentialism for beneficiaries.
Investing in Personnel Management…	Under-resourced NGOs cannot afford HR, but need it to cope with complex personnel issues	-No HR because it robs from direct program resourcing -A limited personnel undertaking within resources available	Categorical imperative to "do no harm to NGO workers"