

What the Oxfam ‘Sex Scandal’ Should Teach Us About NGO Imperialism: Haiti, the “Republic of NGOs”

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Imagine living in a country where the entire social services sector is privatized, run by “charities” that are based in other countries and staffed by foreigners who get to decide whether or not you qualify for assistance.

Welcome to Haiti, the “Republic of NGOs.”

As salacious details about Oxfam officials hiring Haitian girls for sex make headlines, the media has downplayed NGOs’ lack of accountability to those they purportedly serve. Even less attention has been devoted to the role so-called non-governmental organizations have played in undermining the Haitian state and advancing wealthy countries’ interests.

According to a series of news reports, Oxfam UK’s Haiti director [hired prostitutes](#) and organized orgies at a charity-run villa set up after the devastating 2010 earthquake. Some of the girls may have been as [young as 14](#), and Oxfam representatives traded aid for sex. Oxfam UK leaders tried to keep the issue quiet when it emerged in 2011, which enabled a number of the perpetrators to join other NGOs operating internationally.

Since the earthquake there have been innumerable stories of NGOs abusing their power or pillaging funds raised for Haitians. In an extreme case, the U.S. Red Cross built only [six houses](#) with the \$500 million they raised for Haiti after the earthquake.

While impoverished Haitians get short shrift, NGOs respond to the interests of their benefactors. After the UN occupation force brought cholera to Haiti in October 2010, Oxfam and other NGOs defended the Washington-France-Canada instigated MINUSTAH (Mission des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation en Haïti). In response to Haitians protesting the UN’s role in the cholera outbreak, Oxfam spokeswoman Julie Schindall, [told](#) the Guardian

“if the country explodes in violence, then we will not be able to reach the people we need to.”

At the same time Médecins Sans Frontières’ head of mission in Port-au-Prince, Stefano Zannini, told Montreal daily *La Presse* that

“[our position](#) is pragmatic: to have learnt the source at the beginning of the epidemic would not have saved more lives. To know today would have no

impact either.”

Of course that was nonsense. Confirming the source of the cholera was medically necessary. At the time of these statements, UN forces were [still disposing](#) their sewage in a way that put Haitian life at risk. Protesting UN actions was a way to pressure MINUSTAH to stop their reckless sewage disposal and generate the resources needed to deal with a cholera outbreak that left [10,000 dead](#) and one million ill.

Worse than deflecting criticism of the UN’s responsibility for the cholera outbreak, NGOs put a progressive face on the invasion/coup that initiated MINUSTAH. Incredibly, many NGOs justified U.S. Marines taking an elected President from his home in the middle of the night and dumping him 10,000 km away in the Central African Republic. On March 25, 2004 Oxfam Québec and a half dozen other Canadian government-funded NGOs defended Canada’s ([military, diplomatic](#) and financial) role in the ouster of thousands of elected officials, including President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, before the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs.

Marthe Lapierre of Development and Peace stated:

“[We’re not](#) talking about a situation where a rebel group suddenly orchestrated Aristide’s departure. We’re talking about a situation where the Aristide government, since 2000, had gradually lost all legitimacy because of involvement in activities such as serious human rights violations and drug trafficking, but also because it was a profoundly undemocratic government.”

Oxfam Québec regional director Carlos Arancibia concurred:

“[I fully](#) agree with the analysis presented by others. It’s important to understand that things went off the rails starting in the year 2000, with the election.”

(After they lost the May 2000 legislative elections the opposition [claimed](#) that the electoral Council should have used a different voting method, which would have forced eight Senate seats to a runoff. Aristide’s Fanmi Lavalas party would likely have won the runoff votes, but the U.S./Canada backed opposition used the issue to justify boycotting the November 2000 presidential election, which they had zero chance of winning. For its part, Washington used the election dispute to justify blocking aid to the country. Even without the disputed senators, Fanmi Lavalas still had a majority in the senate and even when seven of the eight Lavalas senators resigned the aid embargo and effort to discredit the elections continued.)

At the time of the coup, most of Haiti’s social services were run by NGOs. A Canadian International Development Agency report stated that by 2004, “[non-governmental](#) actors (for-profit and not-for-profit) provided almost 80 percent of [Haiti’s] basic services.” Amongst other donor countries, the Canadian government channelled its “development assistance” through NGOs to shape the country’s politics.

According to CIDA,

“supporting non-governmental actors contributed to the creation of parallel

systems of service delivery. ... In Haiti's case, these actors [NGOs] were used as a way to circumvent the frustration of working with the government ... this contributed to the establishment of parallel systems of service delivery, eroding legitimacy, capacity and will of the state to deliver key services."

As intended, funding NGOs weakened the Aristide/René Préval/Aristide governments and strengthened the U.S./France/Canada's hand.

Highly dependent on Western government funding and political support, NGOs broadly advanced their interests.

The Oxfam "sex scandal" should shine a light on the immense, largely unaccountable, power NGOs continue to wield over Haitian affairs. It should also be a lesson in how not to use "aid" to undermine democracy.

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