

# Eviscerating Oxfam will not clean up charity sector

The media storm and threats to cut funding will not encourage openness from other organisations, Peter Csemiczky and Ben Rose write

As criticism rains down on Oxfam and Penny Mordaunt, the international development secretary, holds talks with the National Crime Agency, the renowned and once respected charity looks increasingly isolated.

The approach of the international aid sector to sexual misconduct clearly needs to change but allegations of sexual abuse are far from new. For example, there were the reports of UN police buying sex from under-age girls in Bosnia in 1999, and allegations of sexual misconduct are far more widespread than the charity sector. Oxfam is only the latest casualty in an ever lengthening list of institutions facing accusations of a cover up for the way they dealt with sexual misconduct of employees in the past.

Mordaunt's statement that Oxfam failed in its "moral leadership" borders on the hypocritical. If moral leadership is lacking within Oxfam, the same could be said of a number of organisations that have failed to properly tackle allegations of sexual misconduct in the past, including those responsible for its investigation.

Law enforcement and regulators have long shown a reluctance and inability to investigate the kind of behaviour raised by the Oxfam scandal. Knee-jerk reaction to the spate of high profile historical sex offence allegations now shifts the focus away from the bigger picture. Any serious attempt to grapple with these issues must also reflect on the way offences are investigated by the authorities.

The allegations threatening to engulf Oxfam do not call for new legislation. Regulators and law enforcement in the UK already have powerful tools to investigate and sanction such alleged conduct.

The real difficulty is in creating a culture in which an organisation can hold a robust investigation into misconduct and can report their findings to law enforcement and regulators, knowing that they in turn will act in a fair and objective manner. In almost every case the cover up will do more damage than the misconduct itself. Transparency is to be welcomed, but this proves very difficult if an organisation trying to do the right thing can only look forward to a media scandal that threatens its very existence. The media storm and thinly veiled threats to funding now directed at Oxfam are unlikely to encourage openness from others.

No doubt, a lack of professionalism and competence in dealing with allegations of sexual misconduct deserves criticism. However, creating the conditions in which we can have an honest debate - as to both acceptable standards of behaviour and why misconduct was not properly addressed - is more likely to achieve a positive outcome than eviscerating one at a time the institutions who get this wrong.

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