

Why do we work non-paid?

The ineffectiveness and inefficiency
of charities



I organised two relief trips during the Ethiopian famine, helping several thousand people in January 1985 and even more a few months later. The human suffering I saw was bad. Very bad. Equally shocking was the ineffectiveness and inefficiency of the various international aid agencies. They were incompetent to the extent you wondered if they could even run a bath. I then immediately started our long-term development aid work in Sudan, responsible for thousands of Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees, as well as tens of thousands of local Sudanese villagers in a remote area. Our practical work was always successful, but I continued seeing incompetence from all of the other aid organisations.

We continued working in Sudan for 25 years, based at Awad el Sid - featured, after sunset, as the title page photographic image of this essay. Our medical clinic examined, diagnosed, and treated between 25,000 and 35,000 patients each year - or 750,000 in total. We had additional non-medical projects as well. In the late 1980s, I carried out a confidential investigation of non-government and UN organisations in six other countries: Ethiopia, Uganda, Somalia, India, Bangladesh, and Nepal. Hundreds of field staff were interviewed and numerous project sites were visited. The ineffectiveness and inefficiency of aid agencies was widespread, and much worse than what I had initially seen during my first two relief trips during the famine. I've provided examples of what I've witnessed overseas elsewhere: <https://www.thehumanpotentialtrust.org/education.html>

Aid agencies exaggerate the amount of good they do and gloss over their many failings. Huge amounts of money are involved. Empire building, flag flying, and competitiveness are rife. Misuse of funds is compounded by corruption. Staff wages are generous, and there are perks. If you ask the employees of five-star hotels in the capital city of any least-developed country what they think of aid organisations, the answer is always the same: "Big salary, big office, big car." And recent news stories of sexual abuse by aid workers has barely scratched the surface of what exploitation actually goes on.

Clever report writing and intelligent-sounding jargon hides a mass of practical incompetence. The world of aid agency staff is usually far apart from the everyday reality of being poor. Racial and religious prejudice is common. The wrong kind of aid is often provided, and the expression "too little, too late" is very appropriate. Misfits easily find a job and then get promotion, as there's no commercial pressure to show genuine results (unlike in the business world, for example). Failure is quickly forgotten or outright ignored.

Field visits by management are too short. Red carpet visits for VIPs are little more than a public relations exercise. Project evaluation becomes meaningless without honesty and thoroughness. Ladder-climbing career prospects encourage compliance, so any rocking of the proverbial boat is a rarity. Funding grants follow fashionable theories. The scale of misspending is beyond huge. One time, I was discussing the aid game with a former accountant for a well-known British aid charity working in Sudan, saying that I estimated about 1% of all funding was spent correctly. He strongly disagreed with me, insisting it was much less than 1%, backing up his statement with detail after detail.

I hope you're starting to get the idea about why we deliberately choose to work as non-paid professionals.

Similar problems of gross ineffectiveness and inefficiency happen within the environmental and conservation non-government organisations (NGOs). For every 100 rhinos living in the 1970s, only three remained by the turn of the century - a terrible decline of 97%. The tiger's plight is just as bad or possibly worse. These are well-known megafauna. Huge amounts of money have been donated to this worthwhile cause, year after year, decade after decade. So how has the money been spent? What's gone wrong?

Before looking further at NGOs, what about the other conservationists? Governments are rightly criticised - for apathy, corruption, and more. However, their national parks and smaller nature reserves generally do a good job and therefore deserve praise. Business people are also making a difference through private nature reserves. Academic researchers usually lack practicality, preoccupied with their own careers; these “shiny bums” collectively gobble up a lot of funding that could be much better used.

NGOs pride themselves on having a special status that is relatively free from government bureaucracy and political pressure. They’re supposed to be “the good guys”. Sadly, the reality falls way short. Unlike governments, NGOs are relatively unaccountable. The general public continue to support them with regular donations regardless of success or failure. Most charity staff nowadays get paid. And they pay themselves a higher wage than many imagine. The total salary cost for a NGO quickly adds up, eating a big chunk of the funding. Add to this all the office and administration costs, plus those vague miscellaneous expense accounts. Next are the questionable fundraising costs, including the hiring of outside companies which profit from these charities.

After this come the actual project expenses. But what do the charities really do? How do they specifically go about saving the endangered tiger and rhinos? Education is part of any solution and, conveniently, this often uses up a bigger chunk of the budget than is actually necessary. Few bother to think or challenge whether the public actually need yet more “awareness”.

Valmik Thapar, who worked closely with his mentor Fateh Singh (now deceased), has done much more than most to try to save the tiger in India. I worked alongside them both for a short while and their attitude was refreshingly different. Valmik has written a number of books, presented wildlife documentaries, and used his position to influence policy makers up to the highest level. He co-founded the Ranthambhore Foundation, which became well-known and the darling of NGOs for a number of years. The aim was to work with villagers around the famous Ranthambhore National Park to help alleviate poverty and, in doing so, win support for the tiger and its natural forest habitat. In his own words, he failed.

“I established the Ranthambhore Foundation in 1988 to try and find peace and harmony amongst people, tigers, and the forests. I was idealistic and believed there was a way. In the 1990s, Ranthambhore Foundation focused on various issues including dairy development, increasing milk yields, enhancing income generation of women through handicrafts and agro-forestry. But they all failed. All my work in creating Ranthambhore Foundation and trying to do something to integrate man, nature, and tigers failed. The Ranthambhore Foundation is a failure. I gave it up in the [late] 1990s.

“I accept failure fully. I am the first one who shouts to all that I have failed in my life. My life’s mission was to make sure that tigers could be saved. I believed I could do it. I met the Prime Minister, the present one, the last one, and the one before that, the leader of the opposition, and various MPs.”

Where is a similar level of self-honesty from all the other conservationists? I’ve written elsewhere in more detail about this fiasco, so I won’t over-repeat myself here. (See <https://www.wildlifeforall.org/education.html>)

The countless examples of charity ineffectiveness and inefficiency that I’ve seen with my own eyes would shock most people. I’ve repeatedly witnessed expatriate staff of NGOs smuggling gold, gemstones, and antiques. Direct corruption through pocketing 10% of an overseas budget isn’t unusual in my experience. Huge amounts of money are wasted on lavish accommodation and furnishings for foreign aid workers. Laziness

is rife. Sloppiness is normal. New 4WD vehicles are mandatory. Expense accounts are routinely fiddled. Rich donors are wined and dined. Adverts appealing for funds are misleading. The United Nations - whether it be the WHO, UNICEF, UNHCR, or the World Food Programme - is as big a gravy train as the EU. The list of what should be totally unacceptable goes on and on. Collectively, they're a useless bunch of exploitative chancers who should be sacked. And some should be criminally prosecuted. "Good guys"? It's a shameful joke.

If you think I'm limiting my words just to the humanitarian aid agencies and environmental NGOs, then let me be crystal clear: I'm not. Whereas these are the two areas where I have decades of experience, the same or similar problems are across the board. And, to state the obvious, it's totally unacceptable because all good causes deserve much, much, much better.

The word "transparency" is used a lot nowadays, especially by businesses and government departments. Can you imagine this being applied to charities, which are more like a murky, stinking cesspool?

The fundamental problem yet again is the "me, me, me" mentality, compounded by psychological avoidance. It's everywhere, messing up or degrading everything. Almost everyone lets everyone else off the hook. "Evil prospers whilst good men do nothing." Few are brave enough to face reality, then stand up to demand change.

My colleagues and I do all that we do as non-paid professionals. It's not difficult. After a period of adjustment, it becomes normalised like anything else. We all have to juggle paid work, personal relationships, etc - learning flexibility. If you're going to make any kind of a difference to the world's problems, you have to become capable. You then apply that capability to everything in your life, step by step, so there's no reason to grumble or moan. Nobody ever said that being a pioneer was easy, but it has to be done - and we're doing it. None of us want a medal. It's what you do when you understand what's what with self-orientated psychology and the alternative of non-selfishness. It's logical and practical.

Will others follow our example? Probably not, because the pressure to conform - as in "monkey do what monkey see" - is powerful and ubiquitous. Change doesn't happen easily, despite hope and good intentions. But a few individuals will take notice and some of these might apply for interview to join our work. This isn't a sprint to a better way, and it's probably naive to even refer to it as more of a marathon. You have to be in it for the long haul - and then look beyond your own lifetime.

Bursting the bubble of mass conditioning - of selfishness - is the hardest undertaking of all. I've previously described it as "an almost impossible task". But it can be done. The starting point is facing up to a history of failure when it comes to the aim of personal development. We're back to what I've recently termed, in an earlier essay, the Great Hurdle. You have to be different, better, more detailed, smarter than the many who have attempted the same before you. Any would-be pioneer is surrounded by billions of people, perhaps better described as sheep or zombies. Are you willing to escape the rat-race, for a start? Exact education is required to build understanding, which then must be applied.

Thankfully, we've done a lot of the groundwork over the past few decades. We have a precise framework for change, repeatedly tested and checked, supported by a practical infrastructure. We know how real change can happen. What we know works. There's no quick-fix or magic wand. It takes time and a lot of effort. Understanding is key. You must be willing to face your psychological baggage, move forwards through

error-focused learning, and put service before self. The normalised “me, first” has to be replaced with the far healthier psychological approach of “need before want” - a simple concept that has been shockingly overlooked by the charitable sector (and others).

If you're in your 20s or early 30s, please get in touch and apply for interview. If you're older, you can still do so, but we ask that you demonstrate evidence of outstanding achievement or capability. Then be as prepared as possible. Read our websites, including these essays, watch our various YouTube films, do our free-of-charge e-learning course, and read our books. Becky is nowadays “The Boss” and she's great. We've been calling her Wonder Woman long before the film was released - although she had to originally undo a lot of psychological baggage and learn a better way of being just like anybody else. She's a world-class coach and there's nothing about this psychology that she doesn't understand - which is why I retired as director when I did. You can see Becky in most of our YouTube films (although it's Vicky, not Becky, in *Rain Dance* as the Goddess of Precipitation). She massively cares and is extremely approachable. Again, get in touch if you want to help make a difference.

Iain Scott, December 2020

<https://www.thehumanpotentialtrust.org>

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