

News and analysis

Oxfam involved in sex scandal



The news

The British charity Oxfam is accused of concealing the findings of an inquiry into claims of sexual misconduct. Reports state that the charity's staff used prostitutes while delivering aid in Haiti following the earthquake in 2010.

Mark Goldring, Oxfam's Chief Executive, denies there has been a cover-up and apologised to the UK's International Development Committee for the damage done to people in Haiti as well as the wider efforts for aid and development. He said that there have been 26 reports of sexual misconduct since news of the scandal broke, of which 16 are related to international programmes.

Haiti has suspended the charity from working in the country. Aviol Fleurant, Haiti's Minister of Planning and External Cooperation, said Oxfam made a "serious error" by failing to inform the Haitian authorities of the allegations.

Around 7,000 people have cancelled their donations to Oxfam since the scandal broke, and charities' watchdog Charity Commission has received reports of 80 cases of safeguarding concerns relating to other charities and aid organisations.

The views

Following the scandal, Caroline Thomson, the Chair of Trustees at Oxfam, stated: "On behalf of the council for Oxfam, we are ashamed of what happened in Haiti. We don't think it was well-handled and our task now is to make sure we report always with transparency and accountability."

The Guardian reported that Goldring said: "the scale and the intensity of the attacks [on the media] feels out of proportion to the level of culpability."

António Guterres, the UN Secretary General, told the BBC there must be "zero tolerance" of sexual misconduct within the aid community.

Nonetheless, Guterres said that Oxfam were "very reliable partners" during his time as UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and that he hoped the charity would "overcome this difficulty and do everything necessary to re-establish normal operations".

He added: "In relation to sexual harassment and sexual exploitation, these are widespread problems that all organisations have and they need to fight it very strongly."

The analysis

Mark Goyder, Founder and Trustee of Tomorrow's Company, a not-for-profit think tank that encourages organisations to adopt an approach that focuses on purpose, values and relationships on the long term, told *QW* that organisations need to have strong codes that ensure that staff and suppliers adhere to their values.

He said, as a charity, it is important that Oxfam has a clear purpose that attracts donors. "Unless you also embed the right behaviours and create a culture in which the wrong behaviours can be challenged by the lowliest of your staff or stakeholders, then that purpose can be undermined by neglect of values.

"Governance and leadership are the 'ying' and the 'yang' of successful organisations. If you have leadership without governance you risk tyranny, fraud and personal fiefdoms. If you have governance without leadership you risk atrophy, bureaucracy and indifference. The trick is balancing the two," Goyder said.

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