OXFAM, AGENCIES AND EXPLOITATION

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Just imagine how a local builder feels, when a bunch of teenagers from the UK or the US rock up to his town to build a church without any knowledge or experience of local building techniques.
Category: Observations

If you live in the UK and you've not been hiding under the duvet to avoid the cold weather, you can't fail to have noticed that Oxfam has run into some trouble. I don't want to go into all the details, but essentially, some Oxfam workers paid to have sex with victims of the Haiti earthquake - people they were supposed to be helping. To compound matters, there is a concern that the charity then tried to cover things up. You can get the details by following links on this story. You can also find a more balanced approach here.

For someone involved in Christian mission, the stories of wrongdoing at Oxfam obviously raise the concern that similar things might be happening in Christian mission agencies, many of whom work in very similar situations to Oxfam.

After years working in agency leadership, I am able to make two categorical statements on this issue.

- I know of no cases of workers with Christian mission agencies being involved in this sort of exploitation.
- Despite this, it would not surprise me to learn of similar cases occurring in the Christian sector. Missionaries are human and subject to the same temptations as other people and, yes, sometimes they do fall.

However, if this sort of sexual exploitation does occur, it is very, very rare. I am more concerned about some of the subtler ways in which agencies and missionaries exploit the people they are working with.

> *on a scale of profile-pictures-with-little-kids-in-africa to a-total-disregard-for-the-privacy-and-autonomy-of-people-in-other-countries, how white savior are you*
>
> *â€" Jackson Dame (@jacksondame) December 25, 2017*

There are a number of little ways in which agencies can and do exploit local people and all of them should be avoided. Let me list a few:

- When we use other people's photographs and stories (without permission) in order to promote our work and to raise funds for ourselves, we are on very dodgy ground.
- Exporting unemployment by bringing self-funded missionaries (or worse, an unqualified short-term team) to do work that a local person could do is a trap that many agencies fall into. It makes financial sense, but it does nothing for the place where we are working. It undermines the economy and robs people of dignity. Just imagine how a local builder feels, when a bunch of teenagers from the UK or the US rock up to his town to build a church without any knowledge or experience of local building techniques.
- Using other people's poverty to teach our kids life-lessons. There is something rather ugly

about a bunch of rich kids with expensive phones and trainers learning about poverty by making a short visit to a favela or slum in the developing world.
- When we say, or imply, that people needÂ *us* to solve their problems, we are making them into victims and ourselves into saviours - neither is a good position.
- The less said about orphan tourism the better, but sadly some Christian agencies are still involved in it.

OK, these might seem small issues compared to the scandals rocking Oxfam and the wider charity world. However, they are key to how we view and relate to the people that we are supposed to be working with and for. If we place our work, our objectives and our people above the needs and dignity of the people that we are supposed to be serving, then something has gone seriously wrong.


If only I had a Bible instead of this pineapple!