

# What Oxfam can learn from charities that survived scandals

By [Mark Hurst](#)

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The [Oxfam scandal](#) has brought to the fore the relationship between the public and charitable organisations. Accusations that Oxfam covered up claims that senior members of its staff in Haiti used prostitutes has brought the reputation of the organisation into question.



By OxfamEast Africa, CC BY 2.0, [Wikimedia Commons](#)

The unethical behaviour of its staff is a short-term issue for Oxfam to deal with, but its long-term impact could have a profound effect on the charity's work. Oxfam is not the first high-profile charity to be caught up in a scandal. But past examples show that some fared better than others when it came to surviving the media and public backlash that followed.

Prominent non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Oxfam have come to occupy an important position in the modern political landscape. This is due in part to the expertise that these organisations obtain on specific matters such as humanitarian aid, the environment and human rights. This expertise can be used by politicians to inform government policy and by journalists to set the media agenda around these issues.

Alongside this, throughout the 20th century, people have come to increasingly [trust the work of NGOs more than political figures](#). This demonstrates a shift, with experts now occupying an important part of modern political life. The trust and respect for the work of NGOs is visible in the financial donations given by members of the public wishing to support the ideals of organisations such as Oxfam.

What happens when this trust is challenged by scandal? Are the consequences an end to these donations, as reports suggest that more than [7,000 people in Britain have done](#), or are there more deep seated effects? Are the NGOs themselves ruined by the events, or are there mechanisms by which they can defend their work?

## Amnesty

Amnesty International occupies a central position in how human rights are understood in the modern world. Its campaigns

regularly attract significant media attention and it has been rightly heralded as making a genuine change to peoples' lives [since its foundation in 1961](#). Yet the history of the organisation is not without scandal. Amnesty's founder Peter Benenson was unceremoniously removed from a senior post in the organisation in 1967 following allegations that the NGO [had been infiltrated](#) by British intelligence agents and had distributed secret funds.

This was particularly damaging at the height of the Cold War, where accusations of secret government funding [brought other organisations to their knees](#). Similar scandals occurred in the late 2000s when Amnesty was found to have paid substantial pay-offs to senior members of the organisation, [drawing the ire of the press](#).

Despite this, Amnesty continues to flourish. This is in part due to the philosophy that binds the organisation together – protecting victims of human rights violations. This powerful ethos, [which has been likened to a secular religion](#), has allowed Amnesty to deflect these controversial events and maintain its efforts unhindered.

## Greenpeace

Similar controversies have affected environmental NGOs. Greenpeace has been involved in several scandals throughout its history. This is in part due to its tactic to attract media attention [through its campaigning efforts](#). [Scandals of financial mismanagement](#), the short-haul aeroplane commutes of some of [its leading figures](#) and the adoption of morally dubious policies to identify climate change sceptics [in the pay of energy companies](#) have all impacted its public image. Yet Greenpeace still maintains public support, again arguably due to the strong ideals binding the group together.

So what next for Oxfam? The increased size and scale of NGOs in the modern world means that scandals are increasingly inevitable. How these organisations respond to them will rely on drawing upon the philosophy that binds them together. Oxfam is not its CEO Mark Goldring, its international executive director Winnie Byanyima or Roland van Hauwermeiren – the former Oxfam official who is at the centre of the current controversies. It is a broader idea about making the world a better place. Perhaps it is this ideal that will come to protect Oxfam's integrity.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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