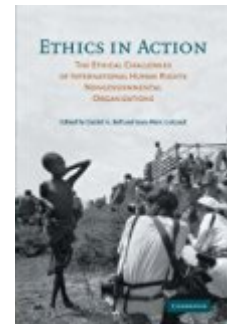


H-Net Reviews

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Daniel A. Bell, Jean-Marc Coicaud, eds. *Ethics in Action: The Ethical Challenges of International Human Rights Nongovernmental Organizations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 320 pp. \$88.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-86566-1; \$37.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-68449-1.

Reviewed by Andrew Thompson (Senior Fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation, and Program Officer at the Balsillie School of International Affairs)
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Shades of Gray

How have international human rights nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) responded to—and even come to terms with—the ethical dilemmas that they encounter while promoting human rights in foreign lands? Perhaps more importantly, how should they respond to these dilemmas? These are questions for which there are no easy answers. But they are questions that must be asked. The international organizations that work globally for the advancement of human rights are often required to operate under very difficult circumstances with limited resources available to them. The decisions they make, the priorities they set, can sometimes mean the difference between life and death for those whom they hope to serve.

A new volume of essays, entitled *Ethics in Action: The Ethical Challenges of International Human Rights Nongovernmental Organizations*, edited by Daniel A. Bell and Jean-Marc Coicaud, seeks to better understand, and even reconcile, some of these moral challenges that human rights INGOs face in their everyday activities. The collection is the product of a series of three conferences that took place in New York, Hong Kong, and New York again between 2002 and 2005, in which INGO practitioners and academics gathered together to accomplish two objectives: “to discuss the ethical challenges that human rights INGOs encounter as they attempt to do good at home and abroad and to refine thinking on the relative merits and demerits of ways of dealing with those

challenges” (p. i). Intended for both civil society and academic audiences, the book covers three thematic areas: the first explores some of the ethical dilemmas that arise as a result of power imbalances between INGOs based in the North and recipients of aid in the developing South; the second examines some of the difficult decisions that INGOs must make when working with national governments that “restrict the activities of NGOs”; and the third focuses on the moral quandaries that INGOs encounter in their efforts to bring an end to global poverty. The book concludes with a brief survey of ethical challenges that INGOs face while operating within the United Nations system. For the most part, the combination of practitioner and academic perspectives makes for a highly engaging collection of essays. In her assessment of the Mertz Gilmore Foundation’s human rights programs, Mona Younis provides a balanced yet forceful critique of the positive and negative impacts that large private institutions can have, either intentionally or unintentionally, when they decide to get in the business of funding human rights work. Similarly, Steven Weir’s chapter on the international work of Habitat for Humanity offers a thoughtful reflection on the compromises that that particular organization has had to make in order to be able to build affordable housing units in communities that practice customs and traditions that are at odds with some of its core values, such as non-discrimination based on ethnicity and religious affiliation, and the advancement of gender equity. Lyal S. Sunga provides a fascinat-

ing account of the dilemma faced by apolitical humanitarian organizations that wanted to provide relief services in coalition-occupied Iraq following the George W. Bush administration's decision to grant USAID funding to only those NGOs that agreed not to criticize the war, namely whether to "bite the hand that feeds them" and risk losing much-needed funding or remain silent and, in effect, become complicit in the war. Perhaps the highlight of the book is an engrossing, albeit testy, exchange between Kenneth Roth, the executive director of Human Rights Watch, and Neera Chandhoke, an academic at the University of Delhi, on the practical challenges that INGOs encounter when trying to promote economic and social rights. Many of the other chapters in the collection are equally insightful. There are some weaknesses with the book. Betty Plewes and Riecky Stuart provide an important reminder of the harm that INGOs can cause when they produce fundraising materials that, while highly effective, rely on images that exploit the poor in the developing South by depicting them as "helpless victims" who are dependent on foreign aid from the industrialized North. But these types of arguments about the evils of "pornography of poverty" have been around since at least the mid-1990s, so that readers who are familiar with the subject will find little that is new in their chapter. Bonny Ibhawoh's chapter on the widening gap between the idealism of INGOs in the North and the material realities of life in the South is, at times, quite perceptive; yet his portrayal of INGOs is often simplistic and one-sided, so that many of his arguments are unpersuasive. Of the four chapters in section 2, three focus on the ethical challenges involved in working in the People's Republic of China; while each offers a unique take on the numerous barriers that INGOs must live with and adapt to while working in China, a more geographically diverse set of case studies that included examples of INGO experiences working with other obstinate governments would have made for a more balanced and well-rounded discussion. Readers may also have difficulty with Thomas Pogge's chapter on the "Moral Priorities for INGOs." A moral theorist whose principal concern is with "harm reduction" for the most impoverished elements of humanity, Pogge attempts to make a case for why INGOs should concentrate their limited resources on protecting the greatest number of individuals at the lowest possible cost. While Pogge is quite correct that INGOs need to think long

and hard about how they set their priorities when they cannot do it all, his arguments are too abstract to be of much practical value to INGOs, a point that Joseph Carens stresses in his response to Pogge.

There are a number of ethical dilemmas that are not covered in this book. Very little attention is given to the moral dilemmas that INGOs encounter while advancing human rights in fragile and failing states emerging from violent conflict, such as whether it is sometimes necessary to sacrifice justice for victims of human rights violations in order to prevent a recurrence of violence. More disappointing is that the book does not address the ethical dilemmas associated with coercive interventions for humanitarian purposes. This omission is particularly puzzling. The question of when, if ever, the international community has a duty to intervene in order to end mass human rights violations is arguably the most pressing human rights question of the first decade of the twenty-first century. The Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, "The Responsibility to Protect," has established a strict test for intervention, and, as a result, has clarified a great deal of the thinking on this issue. Even so, it is not clear whether it is ever ethical for apolitical international human rights organizations to call for coercive action. If the answer is yes, how do they arrive at that decision, and are they at all responsible if those who eventually intervene end up doing more harm than good? If the answer is no, meaning INGOs should at all times refrain from taking a position on armed conflict, then are they not guilty of dodging the issue by hiding behind the shield of neutrality?

Ethics in Action fills an important gap in the growing literature on the contributions that INGOs make to the international system, and the editors deserve praise for taking on such an important, yet often neglected, subject. The book's authors have taken a hard look at the impact—both positive and negative—that human rights INGOs have on the world, and in doing so have fulfilled the editors' first goal of discussion. But if the book compels other like-minded civil society actors and academics to take pause and reflect on their own activities and research, then they will have succeeded in their second goal of refining responses as well, and in doing so will have made an invaluable contribution to the cause of global human rights.

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