

2013

NGO Leadership and Human Rights

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Ghere, Richard K., "NGO Leadership and Human Rights" (2013). *Political Science Faculty Publications*. Paper 47.
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Introduction

NGOs, Human Rights, and Leadership

The acronyms CAI and CIA can be easily confused. The latter of course is widely recognized as a US government agency pursuing intelligence matters, but the former may be familiar only to readers of a book about building schools in Afghanistan. Appearing on the *New York Times* Paperback Nonfiction best-selling list for 74 weeks, Greg Mortenson's *Three Cups of Tea* (2007) chronicles the author's work through the Central Asia Institute (CAI), the nongovernmental organization (NGO) he founded. In his July 13, 2008, *New York Times* op-ed column, Nicholas Kristof—who writes extensively on humanitarian issues—bestowed high praise on Mortenson: “So a lone Montanan staying at the cheapest guest houses has done more to advance U.S. interests in the region than the entire military and foreign policy apparatus of the Bush administration” (p. A14).

With the passage of time, Mortenson's image as a humble, self-sacrificing humanitarian tarnished amid accusations that he had misstated, exaggerated, or lied about accounts of his experiences in *Three Cups of Tea* and had diverted CAI funds for personal use. In his April 20, 2011, column titled “‘Three Cups of Tea,’ Spilled,” Kristof speculates that Mortenson's problems may be more attributable to inept organizational leadership than to bad character:

My inclination is to reserve judgment until we know more, for disorganization may explain more faults than dishonesty. I am deeply troubled that only 41 percent of the money raised in 2009 went to build schools, and Greg, by nature, is more of a founding visionary than the disciplined C.E.O. necessary to run a \$20 million-a-year charity. On the other hand, I'm willing to give some benefit of the

doubt to a man who has risked his life on behalf of some of the world's most voiceless people. (Kristof 2011, A27)

Kristof's intuition that associates *disorganization* with a *founding visionary* finds corroboration in some existing commentary on NGO leadership. Founders may excel at motivating followers and inspiring social innovation, but they sometimes fail as facilitators who can build an organization's future and *institutionalize* its missions (Uphoff et al. 1998; Smillie and Hailey 2002, 135–37). As noted by Marcuello Servos and Marcuello, time forces visionary founders to confront certain realities: “The charismatic founders of NGOs [need to] experience what it means to consolidate an organisation. Idealists' initial dreams [must] give way to the daily routine and the institutionalisation of certain ways of doing things, which usually gain legitimacy as time passes. The pursuit of utopia eventually employs organisational structures” (2007, 395). *In large part, this book intends to equip those called toward leadership in humanitarian work to nurture strong organizations capable of sustaining rights-based missions.*

The introductory chapter of a book titled *NGO Leadership and Human Rights* needs to offer readers working explanations for the three terminological constructs packed into that title. The three sections to follow are intended to provide some preliminary understanding of what the term *NGO* means, explain how “human rights” affect NGO missions, and focus on the meaning of “leadership” in NGOs in comparison to private sector and government agency leadership. A fourth section encourages readers with vocational aspirations in human rights work to think strategically in preparing for their professional futures.

NGOs

Defining NGOs, according to one analyst, “is not an exercise for the intellectually squeamish” (Simmons 1998, 85). First used by the United Nations in 1949, the term *nongovernmental organization* resists tight definition as it has been applied to a broad spectrum of organizations including “‘voluntary associations,’ ‘nonprofit associations,’ ‘international nongovernmental organizations,’ ‘nongovernmental development organizations,’ ‘new social movement organizations,’ ‘people’s organizations,’ ‘membership organizations,’ ‘grassroots support organizations,’ and ‘membership support organizations,’ to name but a few” (Fernando and Heston 1997, 10). Keck and Sikkink’s minimalist definition serves as a common denominator among these diverse groupings: “NGOs

are organizations that are independent of any government. Typically, NGOs are made up of activists devoted to working on particular issues according to a set of principled ideas or values" (Keck and Sikkink 1998, quoted in Breen 2003, 455).

Beyond the common denominator of "independence from government" (even though some NGOs in fact contract with governments to provide services), there is debate as to whether NGOs are in essence "nonprofit" or "private" organizations. Regarding the former, a 1994 UN document describes an NGO as a

non-profit entity whose members are citizens or associations of citizens of one or more countries and whose activities are determined by the collective will of its members in response to the needs of the members of one or more communities with which the NGO cooperates. (Simmons 1998, 83)

In addition, many NGOs rely on volunteer assistance to augment the work of paid, professional staff persons. Others understand NGO societal functions and institutional structures more closely aligned to private organizations than to third sector nonprofit entities that interface the boundary between the private sector and government. For example, rural-development specialist Norman Uphoff argues that although "people's associations and membership organizations" (often called "grassroots organizations") link the private and public sectors, NGOs should be regarded as a subsector of the private sector, a private voluntary organization, accountable *not* to a large membership but to a small governing core. He explains, "Service organizations, the category I think most NGOs belong in, deal with clients or beneficiaries. . . . Clients or beneficiaries of NGOs are in a 'take it or leave it' relationship, quite similar to that of customers and employees in a private firm" (1996, 24–25). Others cite the NGO imperative for achieving self-sufficiency as a close parallel to the profit motive in private firms (e.g., Fernando and Heston 1997, 11). Perhaps it is the case that many NGOs do in fact exhibit characteristics common to private firms (e.g., behavioral norms, forms of sanction, and decision-making processes) but find it advantageous to acquire nonprofit legal status as an inducement for contributors.

Given the absence of a universally acceptable definition, an official at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace offers a taxonomic approach that classifies NGOs according to such criteria as ultimate goal, function, and funding source—for example:

- *Ultimate goal:* Does the NGO change societal norms, improve understanding, influence agendas, implement policies, solve problems in the absence of an adequate governmental response?
- *Function:* Does the NGO facilitate advocacy, information gathering and analysis, information dissemination, generation of ideas and recommendations, a monitoring and watchdog role, service delivery, mediation and facilitation, financing, and grant making?
- *Funding sources:* Does the NGO depend on dues/assessments, donations, foundations, governments (grants or contracts), intergovernmental organizations (IGOs)? (Simmons 1998, 85)

Significant criteria such as goals, functions, and funding sources need to be understood in the context of NGO interactions with other organizations either in particular locales or on the global stage. Two of these contextual relationships stand out as especially important: (1) the funding relationship between donor institutions and indigenous NGOs engaged in development and/or humanitarian efforts and (2) connector relations with other organizations that can advance NGO missions. The first context, also known as “the aid chain” (Wallace 2007), is often characterized as a contentious relationship between *North* and *South*, terminology that has more to do with international power and wealth than geographic location (as a case in point, AusAID—the international development agency in Australian government—is a “Northern” donor whereas most of the 3,000-plus NGOs in Haiti qualify as “Southern” organizations regardless of locations above or below the equator). Thus, the North consists of *multilateral* organizations (with multinational memberships such as the Asian Development Bank), *bilateral* organizations (government agencies such as AusAID that fund NGOs), and large, international NGOs (such as CARE International or Oxfam UK) headquartered in affluent societies.

By contrast, the South consists of poor nations or settings (such as Uganda or even impoverished populations in affluent societies) wherein particular “southern NGOs work to affect change” (Gaventa 2002; Wallace 2007, 12). In regard to the “connector” context, Edwards and Fowler distinguish NGOs from other change-directed organizations in society but emphasize the unique NGO role to serve as “a critical part of the ‘connective tissue’ of a vigorous civil society [such that] making and sustaining the right connections lies at the heart of NGO management” (2002, 9). The point here is that NGOs’ accomplishments in affecting positive social change or advancing rights lie in

NGOs' abilities to "act as bridges, facilitators, brokers, and translators, linking together the institutions, interventions, capacities and levels of action that are required to lever broader structural changes from discrete or small-scale actions" (p. 9). Thus, NGOs are usually more apt to make progress by leveraging their connections than by confronting power actors such as state regimes and development institutions head-on.

Lacking consensus on a precise definition, some analysts evaluate *particular types* of organizations, such as development NGOs, humanitarian (or relief) NGOs, rights-advocacy NGOs, and so forth. This book focuses on NGO capabilities to serve as "connective tissue" in leveraging action on behalf of human rights in conjunction with goal commitments related to development (as it may be characterized), humanitarian relief, and human rights advocacy per se. Each of these mission orientations (including rights advocacy itself) poses certain leveraging constraints. First, the "development community" has tended to distance itself from human rights advocates (and vice versa), prompting appeals for interactive cooperation on the basis that "development" is inherently relational, people centered, and a fundamental right (e.g., Slim 1995; Russell 1998; Sen 1999; Uvin 2004, 2007). Second, organizations involved in relief efforts are inclined to elevate the imperative for political neutrality in the face of abusive power above responsibilities to speak out against rights deprivations and violations (see Slim 1997, 2000). Third, human rights advocates gravitate toward rights talk, "principled" confrontation, and adjudicative processes (in essence, "lawyering") in response to highly visible crises rather than toward low-profile "politicking" (that is, collaboration and negotiation) with adversaries and allies on a continual basis (see Wiseberg 1991; Uvin 2004, 122–29). Given these various obstacles inhibiting human rights connections, it appears useful to pose a few fundamental questions that can ground how readers relate to the chapters to follow, the first of which deals with forces in NGO environments: *How do NGO environments affect organizational capabilities to leverage actions on behalf of human rights?*

Human Rights, Dignity, and NGOs

How can one distinguish a "rights-based NGO" (a designation appearing throughout this book) from other organizations that generally "do good work" for people in various global settings? Any viable response to this question is bound to provoke critical questions, as is the case with the distinction proposed here: A *rights-based* organization enables the rearrangement of power relationships in ways that support the dignity of people *for no other reason* than

their humanness and advocate for rights “one should hold by virtue of being a person” (Donnelly 1982, 305). This interpretation calls attention to (1) the controversial nature of “human rights” particularly as related to various philosophical and culture-based understandings of rights, (2) the linkages (or logical incompatibilities) between alternative conceptions of “human dignity” and human rights, (3) the requisite human capabilities necessary to realize dignity, and (4) the nature of human rights’ transformative power.

First, make no mistake about it; human rights talk raises controversies concerning the substantive content of particular rights, the legitimacy of the “human rights” ideal in the context of Western philosophical traditions and varying cultural settings, and the inclusion of certain economic entitlements as a human right. Lamenting the lack of agreement on (an “official theory” of) rights content leading up to the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, Charles Beitz speculates that “the framers evidently believed that people in various cultures could find reasons within their own ethical traditions to support the Declaration’s practical requirements” (2003, 36). For Beitz, the absence of an agreed-upon theory, or conception, of human dignity is “embarrassing,” given its prominence in the US Declaration of Independence and French Declaration of the Rights of Man. With regard to Western traditions, some classical liberal philosophers dismiss notions of human rights and social justice as sentimentalist aspirations in favor of their minimalist position that moral rights entail only the “property rights” (defined in various ways; e.g., see Becker 1977; Cohen 2008; Arneson 2010)—although some *do* acknowledge the plights of “moral patients” who for various reasons are deprived of their property rights (e.g., see McPherson 1984). On the other hand, the “cultural critique” charges that the human rights ideal is a Western liberalist construct that lacks universal applicability. In particular reference to “Asian values” that supposedly justify authoritarian regimes, Amartya Sen argues that the pluralism of political ideas in Asian societies diffuses claims that Asian values are incompatible with human rights (1999, 227–40). Moreover, some find seeds of human rights and dignity within Eastern religions (see, e.g., May 2006). Finally, the inclusion of certain economic entitlements, such as the *basic right* of “at least subsistence” (Shue 1980, 22–29), finds controversy particularly where libertarian ideologies prevail.

Second, notwithstanding Sen’s insights on the diversity of political thought *within* cultures, the argument that the human rights ideal reflects Western liberalism holds some merit. In their essay explaining the linkage between a particular (liberalist) conception of human dignity and human rights, Howard and Donnelly (1986) follow the lead of Ronald Dworkin who associ-

ates “the heart of liberalism” with the right of equal concern and respect. In Dworkin’s words,

Government must not only treat people with concern and respect, but with equal concern and respect. It must not distribute goods or opportunities unequally on the ground that some citizens are entitled to more because they are worthy of more concern. It must not constrain liberty on the ground that one citizen’s conception of the good life . . . is nobler or superior to another’s. (Dworkin 1977, 273, quoted in Howard and Donnelly 1986, 802–3)

From this, Howard and Donnelly understand that “conceptions of human dignity” vary among political regimes but stress that only the liberalist conception (of equal concern and respect) supports human rights derived from “merely by being a person” as an autonomous individual. Following this logic, alternative conceptions of “human dignity” (or people’s “places” in society) either trade off equality for individual freedom (consistent with the preferences of political libertarians who advocate for the minimalist state) or circumscribe “human dignity” around expected behaviors that support a particular regime. In the latter case, there is no “place” for the individual *outside* of her defined role in (a traditionalist) community, of a homogenous proletariat (in communist societies), of an all-encompassing moral order (in a corporatist, perhaps fascist, society), or of compliance for the future benefits of development (in a development dictatorship; Howard and Donnelly 1986, 808–13). Consistent with a liberalist conception of human dignity, a rights-based perspective celebrates individual autonomy and people’s individual and collective agency to control the circumstances that affect their lives. Absent people’s *agency*, an authentic rights culture cannot exist *even if* regimes follow through in delivering the substance of a “right” (i.e., adequate housing or health care).

Third, regimes that entertain a liberalist perspective on human dignity (in terms of “equal respect and concern”) are obliged to promote conditions that make “a life worth living”—that is, provide basic *capabilities* that empower people as agents to exert control over their lives. Martha Nussbaum explains the connection between agency and capabilities as follows:

The notion of dignity is closely related to the idea of active striving. It is thus a close relative of the notion of basic capability, something inherent in the person that exerts a claim that it should be developed. . . . In general, the Capabilities Approach, in my

version, focuses on the protection of areas of freedom so central that their removal makes life not worthy of human dignity. (Nussbaum 2011, 31)

Freedom as people's potential to empower themselves can be confused with the market libertarian's "freedom" to make individual choices without interference. As Séverine Deneulin points out, "From this [libertarian] perspective, it is possible to be free while starving to death at the same time. [In other words] the freedom that matters is not the freedom from interference of others, but the freedom one has to lead a good and worthwhile life" (2009, 51). So, what *capabilities* are needed for one to realize such freedom? Nussbaum is explicit in articulating 10 central capabilities that a "decent political order must secure to all its citizens at least at a threshold level": (1) life; (2) bodily health; (3) bodily integrity; (4) senses, imagination, and thought; (5) emotion; (6) practical reason; (7) affiliation; (8) other species; (9) play; and (10) control over one's environment (2011, 33–34). Generally concurring with Nussbaum's capability approach, Sen (1999) prefers *not* to categorize capabilities in deference to others that may be acknowledged in the future. Presumably, rights-based organizations should appeal to "decent" governmental and corporate regimes (even some holding nonliberalist conceptions of dignity) to provide for the development of basic capabilities needed for worthwhile living.

Fourth, rights-oriented NGOs seek to bring about transformative change in the behaviors and actions of states, corporate entities, and individual actors in ways that promote human dignity and empowerment. As Charles Beitz explains, "[Human rights politics] seeks to propagate ideas and motivate political change. Human rights stand for a certain ambition about how the world might be" (2003, 40). That said, the change dynamics at work in advancing rights causes—whether related to authentic "moral discernment" or alternatively to a Machiavellian realization of materialistic interests (or a bit of both) on the parts of states, corporations, or individual and factional motives within either—are *anything but clear* (see Landolt 2004). Is it the case that the transformative potential of NGOs and similar organizations lies in their morally persuasive capabilities as "norms entrepreneurs" to embed new rights norms into the global culture (see Finnemore and Sikkink 1998), or rather that the norms they promote afford new opportunities for those wielding power to pursue their material interests? Or, from a utilitarian perspective, *does it matter?* The following passage reflects this utilitarian stance that Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink assume in *The Power of Human Rights* (even though these authors value NGOs' roles as norms entrepreneurs in the diffusion of human rights):

"Prescriptive status" means that the actors involved regularly refer to the human rights norm to describe and comment on their own behavior and that of others; the validity of claims of the norm are no longer controversial. We argue that the process by which principled ideas gain "prescriptive status" should be decisive for their sustained impact on political and social change. . . . We are not that interested in the "true beliefs" of actors, as long as they are consistent in their verbal utterances and their words and deeds ultimately match. (Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999, 29)

Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink then categorize consistent deeds as (1) ratifying human rights conventions (including optional protocols), (2) institutionalizing norms into constitutions and laws, (3) institutionalizing complaint and redress mechanisms, and (4) incorporating norms into the normal discourse and practice of government. Specifically, these authors situate "prescriptive status" as an achievable milestone within a particular phase of norms adoption. However, *at minimum* the transformative power of rights NGOs lies in its agenda-setting potential to confer "prescriptive status" on issues that affect human dignity. In this regard, Chapter 2 elaborates on the political nature of rights discourse, and Chapter 3 connects institutional visions of transformative change with alternative economic and political ideologies. But for now, it is important to reflect on the *leadership implications* of the controversial issues raised here: *What obstacles can NGOs expect to encounter in adopting a rights-based perspective, and how can those obstacles be surmounted?*

NGO Leadership: Making Hope "Real"

Sometimes the simple questions prove to be the most difficult to answer. Implicitly, the focus of this book is predicated on a fairly simple question that can be stated in everyday language: *What's it like to lead an NGO, particularly one that has adopted a rights-based perspective?* Such a question invites comparisons, for example—*Is an NGO leader like a chief operating officer (CEO) in a corporation such as General Electric (in the United States or elsewhere)? A government executive (like a director of a state environmental protection agency)? A head of a large not-for-profit (like the United Way)?* In terms of similarity, each is an *institutional leader* rather than simply a technocratic manager concerned only with control and authority issues or specific managerial functions (e.g., staffing, reporting, and coordinating; Clay 1994, 239). In other words, corporate executive officers, government administrators, and NGO officials *alike*

attend to the longer term, more fundamental issues of conserving institutional *legitimacy* (or general credibility in meeting various societal expectations) and maintaining *stability*—or in the case of NGOs, institutional *sustainability* (see Terry 1995; Lewis 2003).

Put another way, organizations in each of these three sectors must be understood not (merely) as “technical production machines” but as *institutions* that, according to organization theorist W. Richard Scott,

consist of cognitive, normative, and regulative structures and activities that provide stability and meaning to social behavior. Institutions are transported by various carriers—cultures, structures, and routines—and they operate on multiple levels of jurisdiction. (Scott 1995, 3)

As Scott implies, the leader’s institutional vision extends outward to local, national, and global environments wherein the expectations of specific stakeholders and broad publics affect the organization’s legitimacy for better or for worse. For example, executives of US corporations must address compliance issues related to the 2002 Sarbanes-Oxley Act that oversees corporate governance, accounting, and reporting procedures to protect investors at the national level and with “corporate social responsibility” related to all levels. Government officials in democratic societies need to be as attentive to the norms of fairness, equality, and other ethical concerns (in abiding to the spirits of “due process” and “equal protection” of/under law, of impartiality, of transparency, and so forth), as well as to the attainment of more instrumental policy objectives. Finally, NGO leaders must demonstrate that their organizations’ development, humanitarian, and rights-advocacy initiatives are not only “credible” but also *necessary* in the pursuit of human dignity.

From an institutional perspective, what is taken as “knowledge” evolves from, and in turn revises, *shared systems of meaning* within both the organization and its environments (see D’Andrade 1984, 89–96). In this regard, executives in all three sectors cultivate “meaning systems” as founts of knowledge that support legitimacy at various societal levels. If Scott is correct in his assertion that “institutions consist of cognitive, normative, and regulative structures and activities,” it can be said that leaders in business, government, and NGOs similarly avail themselves—to greater or lesser extents—to each of these “pillars” of (or elements of) institutions in exacting compliance, conveying appropriate logic, and grounding legitimacy (1995, 34–45). Although it might typically rely on corporate (regulative) rules and performance standards,

a business firm could engage in cognitive activities by interpreting (or framing) what “corporate social responsibility” actually means (see Shamir 2005) or clarifying what its “expertise” means to its customers (Alvesson 1993, 1000–4). And although government organizations typically derive knowledge from authoritative (regulative) laws and established patterns of routines to “make sense” of complex and ambiguous public environments, public administrators also may engage in “the management of meaning”—for example, by defining what “agency transparency” means by developing procedures for releasing sensitive documents or what “cyber-government” means by designing interactive modes of citizen participation.

If institutional leadership *is similar* among the sectors in relying on regulative, normative, and cognitive activities to validate knowledge, the *differences* may lie in the extent of reliance on each. In an effort to call attention to institutional leadership as a unifying theme in this book, I cautiously advance the proposition that *NGO leadership is distinguishable by its prevalent reliance on cognitive processes to transform altruistic aspirations into operational realities “on the ground.”* To borrow from a title of an article examining NGO development partnerships in Africa, I contend that NGO professionals bear the institutional responsibility of “making it [hope] real and making it intentional” (Postma 1994). The purpose of this book is not to compare leadership among the three sectors; therefore, its efforts will not empirically support (or refute) this proposition. Nonetheless, we can envision various situations that would oblige NGO leaders to manage meanings—in response to circumstances calling leaders to

- interpret what NGO accountability (and, for that matter, donor responsibility) means among various stakeholders in the organization’s work (see Anderson 2009),
- convey a coherent sense of the NGO’s mission within a culturally diverse workforce (see Lewis 2003),
- promote moral learning in terms of what it means for corporations to take responsibility in attending to human rights concerns (see Spitzbeck 2009),
- articulate an appropriate meaning of “development” that resonates with how program participants (or beneficiaries) “see their world” (see Easton, Monkman, and Miles 2003), and
- establish a common denominator of “meaning” that can be shared among organizations in an NGO network or coalition (see Postma 1994).

Each of these scenarios directs attention to the importance of cognition and perception as related to a leader's ability to promote change. In this regard, sociologist Neil Fligstein argues that principal actors in an organization can initiate change by offering a particular construct of a "problem," as well as an appropriate "solution," and that "solution" could be expected to enhance the power of the organization (1991, 315). Thus, leaders exercise power through the persuasive reasoning they put forward in (re)interpreting the meaning of ambiguous situations.

For Powell and DiMaggio, *cognition* "refers to reason and the unconscious grounds of reason: classifications representations, scripts, schemas" and so forth (1991, 35, n. 10). In other words, leaders can introduce seemingly commonsensical logics of understanding in response to ambiguity to promote *their* interpretation of reality—in essence, "making it real." For example, given the difficulties of determining an NGO's success in advocating for human rights, a leader might design *categories* indicative of success—such as prestige, self-satisfaction, goals, ability, hard work, and competition (D'Andrade 1984, 95)—that promote the agency's image in annual reports and project proposals. In his "structuralization theory," Anthony Giddens speaks of *rules of signification* (1984, 29) that "restrict and enable agents to make sense of the context they act in and to communicate this meaning and their views of ongoing practices to others" (Sydow and Windeler 1998, 271, quoted in Yang 2011, 270). Thus, the categories and schemas leaders devise to promote sense-making *in* the organization project cognitive interpretations that also influence stakeholders in *external environments*. The strong focus here on the cognitive dimension does not discount the value of the other two institutional processes (the regulative and the normative) in NGO leadership. In emergency relief contexts wherein chaos is rampant (e.g., in a makeshift refugee camp), a leader's ability to impose rules to instill order provides desperate people a humane sense of stability (see Mintzberg 2001). And clearly, "development," "humanitarian," and "human rights" communities all coalesce around inherently normative imperatives. Nonetheless, the "nongovernmental" character of these entities implies that leaders cannot rely on authoritative law to promote legitimacy or sustainability. Furthermore, it follows that adroit and nimble leadership—on behalf of humane *norms*—should take care to avoid doctrinal "traps" that limit essential dialogues with donors, beneficiaries, partners, and adversaries (Smillie and Hailey 2002, 134).

Operating within the cultures of development, humanitarianism, and human rights, NGO professionals confront the institutional challenge of (re)articulating and (re)interpreting meanings in ways that "make hope real and

make it intentional.” But in terms of professional development, how does one *prepare* for effective institutional leadership in the nongovernmental sector? Such a question seeks out both a wide range of professional skills required of staff professionals and specific competencies that support strong leadership. Along these lines, a recent book on public service management elaborates on a wide array of professional competencies, several of which relate to effective institutional leadership. Specifically, Bowman, West, and Beck group these competencies as follows:

- technical competencies (specialized knowledge, legal knowledge, program management, and resource management),
- ethical competencies (values management, moral reasoning, individual morality, public morality, and organizational ethics), and
- leadership competencies (assessment and goal setting, hard [technical] and soft [“people”] management skills, management styles, political and negotiation skills, and evaluation) (Bowman, West, and Beck 2010).

The authors discuss each of these skills in the context of a new, continuously changing public service that in many ways parallels the complex and fluid settings in which many NGOs function.

Not surprisingly, Bowman, West, and Beck focus on the regulative element (of public institutions) in pointing out the unique roles that public leaders play “as part of an administrative structure that includes career employees and political appointees [and the importance of] networking relationships that characterize the ‘new public service’ cross-sectoral boundaries” (2010, 99–100). Nonetheless, they are attentive as well to a number of competencies that, when adapted to particular situations, address the cognitive institutional dimension. For instance, these authors refer to adaptive changes in leadership style as “occur[ring] when a leader switches from negotiation to confrontation to attain a goal” (p. 107). Beyond this, Bowman, West, and Beck have much to say about “the use of political and negotiation skills” that rely on cognitive learning techniques such as asking “why?” “why not?” “what if?” “what makes that fair?” and so on. With a few interpretive liberties here and there, all of Bowman, West, and Beck’s competencies serve well as standards for NGO professionals in general and leaders in particular. Thus, readers are advised to stay attuned to appropriate leadership skills and competencies in relation to the variety of institutional settings encountered in the following chapters. Specifically,

the pertinent question here could be posed as, *What particular competencies do NGO leaders need to understand the distinctive nature of their institutional environments and respond to them effectively?*

Career Development Issues

As previously mentioned, Peter Uvin (2004) specifies some essential elements of a rights-based perspective that could guide organizational development toward a collective consciousness that affirms human empowerment. The chapters that follow in this book examine leadership responsibilities as they relate to institutional concerns such as accountability, organization learning, human resources management, and others. But from a pedagogical perspective, questions arise as to whether *individuals*—and, specifically, prospective leaders in humanitarian endeavors—can benefit from any measure of career development guidance. Since a coherent literature on “career development for rights-conscious leaders” has yet to emerge, the strategy here is to compare the career profiles of two exemplary leaders of large, rights-affirming NGOs (one headquartered in Bangladesh and the other in the United States) to discern patterns that might help others chart their career trajectories toward rights work in the NGO setting.

The first career profile focuses on Fazle Hasan (or F. H.) Abed, who founded the Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee (BRAC) in 1972. Abed’s career path to NGO leadership led through private sector management in the oil multinational Shell. An accountant by training, Abed spent his early years with Shell in personnel management, a job assignment that afforded him experiences in handling bureaucracy and working collaboratively with employees. Later, Abed directed the finance division there. He reflected on his personnel work as follows: “I learned to put faith in people and appreciate it when they put faith in me. Sometimes, it may happen that people take advantage of you, but you have to accept it, you have to learn to handle the situation and build your own team” (Smillie and Hailey 2002, 152). Abed’s commitment to (what could be described as) a rights-based perspective came about abruptly as a cathartic discovery, which he describes as follows:

Communities are in conflict. . . . There are the rich and the poor, and their interests are in conflict. Ultimately, the benefits of community development accrued to the very rich and the well to do. So we began what we called a target group orientation and focused our attention to the poor. Obviously, this change in emphasis meant

that our staff had to work with the poorest, and this made the rural elites unhappy. They were suspicious of our motives and our staff had to cope with lots of opposition. (Smillie and Hailey 2002, 98)

This discovery marked a significant turning point in the BRAC organization.

Throughout *Managing for Change* (2002), Smillie and Hailey trace the various leadership behaviors of six leaders of NGOs in South Asia, including F. H. Abed of BRAC. Their observations of Abed's approach to NGO leadership reveal the following capabilities and preferences:

- *Ability to learn by doing:* Smillie and Hailey relate that Abed understood learning as a two-way process whereby he acts both as a teacher to his staff and also as just one participant in collaboration with the staff in undertaking analyses of strategies and problems. Referring to the latter, he commented, "This is how we learned. . . . In fact, BRAC started learning by doing, and the excitement was that everybody was learning too" (2002, 75). With regard to problem analysis, Abed was an ardent proponent of "embracing error" (see Korten 1980) through learning, as evident in this quote:

You go to a woman's house and find that the [microcredit] loan you have given her has been taken away by her husband. Or a child comes to your school and suddenly has to drop out because the parents have moved away, and the child doesn't learn anymore. These are all failures. . . . You must accept that they are part of the learning process. (Smillie and Hailey 2002, 76)

- *A preference for incremental strategies:* Through his (and BRAC's) catharsis to focus development efforts on the poor rather than entire communities, Abed stressed the value of a targeted, incremental approach to mission and strategy. For example, he explained BRAC's health strategy as having evolved incrementally; after trying a number of efforts (placing doctors in the field, training paramedics in villages, raising public health consciousness, etc.), "So gradually you evolve certain kinds of work that seem effective in getting your objective of better health. . . . So in a way, it is learning by doing and isolating the non-essential aspects and discarding them" (Smillie and Hailey 2002, 95).

- *Ability to instill confidence through communication:* Abed describes his own capabilities to infuse confidence in his staff by engaging them and then “getting out of their way” in assuming a low profile in the organization. He commented that it was not for him to assume a charismatic and highly visible role: “The answers came from them—the staff—more than I gave to them. Even at the beginning, I wanted to do the best thing in the most sensitive way possible, so people should be treated as people, as human beings” (Smillie and Hailey 2002, 142). That said, Abed is less than enamored by the “flat organization,” preferring instead to maintain a formal hierarchy within the agency as a means of communication in a large and geographically dispersed NGO (pp. 125–26).

According to his biographical statement,¹ Abed was raised in an area of British India that is now part of Bangladesh. After graduating from Dhaka College in that area, he studied naval architecture at the University of Glasgow. Since shipbuilding work was difficult to find in Bangladesh, Abed joined the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants in London where he completed his studies in 1962. Thereafter, he returned to Bangladesh to work for Shell Oil. In 1970 (and while Abed was employed at Shell), a cyclone struck the coastal regions of Bangladesh, killing over 300,000 people. That catastrophe moved Abed to create HELP, an organization that provided relief and recovery to the worst affected areas. During this time, the struggle for Bangladeshi independence forced him back to London where he established Action Bangladesh, an organization to lobby European governments on behalf of the independence movement. After independence was won in 1972, Abed returned to Bangladesh to find this new nation in ruins with 10 million refugees. Amid this crisis, he founded BRAC to improve the living conditions of Bangladesh's rural poor.

A second career profile—that of Dr. Helene D. Gayle, president and CEO of CARE USA—reveals how an enduring commitment to improving the lives of the world's underserved populations has energized rights-based leadership in both previous government service and current NGO administration. As a physician, Dr. Gayle entered public service as an epidemiologist working within the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the Epidemiology Intelligence Service. From that technical role, she advanced to successive leadership positions in programs related to HIV/AIDS prevention and policy coordination in that federal agency. Through these responsibilities,

Dr. Gayle gained international experiences undertaking AIDS-related research in the former Zaire, Jamaica, South Africa, the Ivory Coast, and Thailand and working with (or detailed to) the US Agency for International Development as the agency AIDS coordinator.

An analytical biographer summarizes the skills Dr. Gayle demonstrated in public sector leadership in terms of the following strengths (Riccucci 2005, 91–98):

- *Ability to reframe issues:* In particular, Dr. Gayle effectively re-framed widespread perceptions of AIDS as a “gay man’s disease in the White community” to an affliction of acute risk to the African American and Latino communities. In addition, she successfully developed specific preventative strategies for populations that had ignored previous public health messages.
- *Ability to create partnerships:* Dr. Gayle understood that effective leadership depends on building a variety of collaborative networks at community, state, national, and international levels that include the underserved themselves, as well as private sector organizations. In this regard, she comments that “many of the issues around AIDS have led to a good deal of mistrust between communities at risk, as well as communities at large, and I have tried to facilitate bringing a broad cross-section of people more into the process and create more open communications among them” (p. 92).
- *Ability to navigate the politics of public health:* Here, Dr. Gayle’s keen political instincts combined with her interpersonal skills to support what could be characterized as diplomatic finesse to move HIV preventative programs forward. She indicated, “As I help to shape the direction of research efforts for HIV prevention programs, I try to provide justification for policy options based upon what we know and what we think will have the greatest positive benefit. While this seems obvious, it often isn’t because of the political considerations which underlie diseases such as HIV/AIDS” (p. 94). One of her associates described Dr. Gayle’s persistence in tough political environments as follows: “She is unflappable. Helene can take a two-by-four between the eyes and keep going. She, more than a lot of people I have ever met, is able to let a lot of things roll off her back and keep focused on what it is she is seeking to do within the limitations she faces.”

- *Ability to set goals and target strategies:* Dr. Gayle is described by her biographer as one who can craft long-term goals collaboratively to support a shared vision and to “foster a pragmatic incrementalism” of short-term actionable steps to reach broad goals. She comments, “Measuring how well we do a particular sub-goal, or short-term actionable goal, isn’t going to tell us whether we have reduced the spread of a particular disease, but these short-term actionable goals are necessary steps in order to meet our long-term or end goal” (p. 95).
- *Ability to build trust and confidence:* An agency colleague relates Dr. Gayle’s credibility to a resoluteness not to “point a finger” or assign blame in the midst of difficult circumstances. A former US surgeon general spoke to her ability to engender confidence in this way: “I would say that she is probably the most trusted American among the African countries. . . . She has developed a lot of credibility because of her *knowledge* and insight into public health as it relates to AIDS and also because she really cares about the issues, and people see this” (p. 96; italics his).

Particularly evident in Dr. Gayle’s career preparation prior to work at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and CARE USA is her strident dedication to the ideal of human empowerment as a unifying force that guided her formal education. From a background of family involvement in the US civil rights movement, she successfully pursued undergraduate studies in psychology at Bernard College and subsequently earned a medical degree at the University of Pennsylvania. Norma Riccucci (2005, 87) relates that while in medical school, Dr. Gayle attended a lecture on global efforts to eradicate smallpox, an event that redirected her career trajectory toward more graduate work in public health at Johns Hopkins University. Her continued commitment to humanitarian service first at technical levels (as an epidemiologist and public health researcher) and then at executive levels in a respected government agency and a large NGO distinguishes Dr. Gayle as a fitting exemplar of rights-based leadership.

Clearly, the profiles of F. H. Abed’s and Helene Gayle’s career journeys that eventually led to leadership in the NGO setting diverge significantly with regard to geographic setting, educational background, professional orientation, and previous administrative experience. Nonetheless, these profiles in fact reveal a few points of similarity that might inform those inclined to follow careers in human-rights-related work. First, the technical competencies of these

individuals (personnel and accountancy work for Abed and epidemiological research for Gayle) led to a broader array of institutional leadership responsibilities. Second, a triggering event or experience encountered along the career journey reinforced a calling toward humanitarianism as a career mission; with Abed it was the cyclone that devastated part of Bangladesh in 1970, and with Gayle it was the occasion of attending a lecture on global efforts to eradicate smallpox. Third, each had the inner strength to place faith in other individuals within and outside of their organizations. Fourth, both profiles illustrate combinations of career intentionality and unexpected circumstances that arose as their organizational careers progressed. This last similarity might lead those intending to pursue careers in human rights work and/or humanitarian concerns to grapple with a pair of fundamental questions: *Can one realistically prepare for a career in NGO leadership? If so, how?*

References to “career preparation” by no means imply that one must commit to a particular course of academic study or benefit from a specific sequence of work experiences—is it not our own unique set of experiences and attributes that keeps life interesting? Nonetheless, career preparation for professional work in humanitarian concerns (as in most vocational pursuits) appears a worthwhile undertaking; if NGO leadership depends on one’s strategic capabilities, there is cause to think strategically about a professional future dedicated to advancing human rights.

Conclusion

Although difficult to define singularly, the terms *NGO*, *human rights*, and *leadership* take on salience within a common context of human dignity. Independent from government authority, many NGOs can leverage influence on behalf of human rights causes, and in so doing they can be likened to “connective tissue” that facilitates the collective efforts of allied rights-focused organizations. This book is primarily focused on NGOs that, by the nature of their (development, relief, and/or rights-advocacy) missions, could adopt a rights framework approaching the perspective Peter Uvin prescribes in *Human Rights and Development* (2004). Thus, specific management questions center on both the leadership responsibilities needed to embed a rights orientation into the NGO culture and to act within that orientation and the particular management skills needed to meet those responsibilities. From a pedagogical standpoint, these leadership issues illustrate the career dimensions of NGO leadership, likely of interest to students or other individuals who sense a pull toward human rights work.

This introductory chapter discusses some of the terminology encountered in studying NGOs, human rights, and institutional leadership. This focus on language extends into the next chapter, which examines the strategically crafted nature of rhetoric (or, in Noah Webster's words, "the art of speaking with propriety") related to issues of development, humanitarianism, and human rights. The next six chapters probe a variety of concerns pertinent to NGO management environments in general and human-rights-focused leadership in particular, specifically: transformative change (chapter 3), organization and management (chapter 4), performance and accountability (chapter 5), organization learning and knowledge management (chapter 6), gender (chapter 7), and human resources management (chapter 8). The concluding chapter responds to four fundamental questions:

- *How do NGO environments affect organizational capabilities to leverage actions on behalf of human rights?*
- *What obstacles can NGOs expect to encounter in adopting a rights-based perspective, and how can those obstacles be surmounted?*
- *What particular competencies do NGO leaders need to understand the distinctive nature of their institutional environments and respond to them effectively?*
- *Can one realistically prepare for a career in NGO leadership? If so, how?*

For now, these questions can serve as points of reference to help readers integrate ideas from the discussions that follow.

Discussion Issues

1. One commentator refers to NGO "aid chains" as "ties that bind." Do "ties that bind" constitute blessings or burdens for NGO leaders? Explain.
2. Some human rights NGOs "name and shame"—that is, publically embarrass governments, corporations, or other powerful actors by calling attention to how they violate human rights. How does this practice affect the NGO's "connective tissue," or the ability to connect with other organizations to facilitate change?
3. Are the terms *institutional leadership* and *organization management* synonymous, or do they convey different meanings in the context of the organization? Explain.

4. “Individual morality” and “organizational ethics” are both classified as ethical competencies. Suggest how a leader who is highly competent in regard to the former but deficient in terms of the latter could compromise agencies’ goals to advance human rights.
5. On a 1-to-5 scale, rate yourself as a strategist in planning your professional future. What measures could you take to improve your strategic capabilities?

Note

1. F. H. Abed released his biographical statement on December 31, 2009, in advance of his appointment as Knight Commander of the Most Distinguished Order of St. Michael and St. George by Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain; see <http://fazleabed.com/>, accessed October 8, 2010.