

Small charities let down by poor organisation

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By Nick Cater

A study of small international charities has suggested that organisational shortcomings undermine much of their work in disasters and development, while financial weaknesses and loose regulation increase the risk of abuse.

Overseas development organisation Allavida surveyed a selection of the thousands of small British charities operating in developing countries and Eastern Europe, from Ghana and India to Romania and the Balkans, and conducted direct interviews with 30. Although they are not identified in the study, the charities would appear to be typical of those that often spring up in the wake of televised disasters, with local fundraising and run by individuals keen to play an active role in their own agency rather than operate within a larger group.

The Allavida study found such agencies did important work, such as mobilising specialists skills - including dentists or engineers - channelling funds, cooperating closely with small communities, generating in-kind donations and fostering international volunteering. They often find it easier than the big charities to forge links with local organisations and are most successful in small, specific projects.

But the study found "very worrying" financial weaknesses, especially given the general lack of controls overseas in terms of international transfers and payments between charities, and looser regulation of smaller charities, which offered "potential for widespread abuse".

The study suggested that smaller agencies were isolated, limited in their scope, constrained by their lack of funding, dependent on volunteers and dominated by a few personalities, while their work was often not evaluated - despite confidence in their high impact - and suffered from poor planning and inadequate shared learning.

The report's recommendations included establishing:

- A network for mutual support among small charities, plus a specific regulatory body
- A central website as a source of good practice and to share goods and services
- Training and peer-learning conferences tailored to small charities' need

Allavida chief executive Andrew Kingman said many of the small charities surveyed were formed in response to a humanitarian crisis. Registrations of such groups had increased in the 1980s and 1990s. But he said organisational weaknesses had led to missed opportunities. "Effective networking of specialists to supply larger agencies ... doesn't happen. Activities are undertaken but barely evaluated. Any learning is ad hoc. Any dissemination is entirely local."

Smaller charities appeared to be reluctant to open up their operations perhaps because of what Kingman called "founder's syndrome" or the "number of strong characters who evidently believed that they could do something better than, or different from, the larger NGOs".

"Much of the experience and expertise gained by small charities is either going to waste or not being fully capitalised upon," he said. "If they have things to learn from support networks, from each other and from larger charities, they also have things to teach. Is it not possible that a small charity that has supported one community for a decade has something to tell Oxfam?"

The study was backed by the Hilden Charitable Fund, which makes grants to voluntary agencies.