

# THREE

## TANGLED WEBS

### *Unravelling Complexity in the Global Economy*

#### APPLIED CASE STUDY

Oxfam is a global civil society organization which, much like global business, political or grassroots organizations, makes use of global networks to achieve its aims. We will here consider how Oxfam engages with external global networks and discourses to bring humanitarian aid and combat poverty worldwide.

Oxfam was founded in Oxford, UK, in the 1940s as a relief organization for Europeans suffering in the aftermath of the Second World War, but later expanded its approach to focus on humanitarian aid worldwide, with branches in 12 member nations. Having focused heavily on working with unions in the 1980s, in the 1990s and 2000s it has developed a more poverty-focused approach, concentrating on the potential for global trade to negatively affect human rights in the developing world and developing what it calls a 'rights-based approach to development' rather than on dispensing humanitarian aid. As a civil society organization, it thus influences, and is influenced by, other globalizing organizations.

#### Oxfam and the World Trade Organization (WTO)

Under the rights-based approach to development, Oxfam has concentrated its efforts in recent years in monitoring WTO activities to ensure that its policies do not have an adverse effect on developing countries. Although, as a civil society organization, it has no direct say in WTO policies, it attempts to influence WTO decisions through local and global campaigns, focusing on helping the poor by allowing them access to global markets. Recognizing that, although WTO policy encourages all member nations to be treated the same, this in practice often operates to the disadvantage of developing countries, Oxfam encourages the

formulation of exceptions and special rules aimed at encouraging fair trade with developing nations. Oxfam also uses the discourses, negotiations and meetings of the WTO to bring attention to economic problems of the developing world. Under globalization, then, Oxfam has shifted from an aid-based focus to a trade-based focus, reflecting the neo-liberalism embraced under globalization thus far, although the current rethinking of the value of neo-liberalism may well encourage shifts in other directions.

## Oxfam and the Fair Trade Movement

In keeping with its focus on economic development and the encouragement of trade, Oxfam has also been a key supporter of the Fair Trade movement, which is aimed at helping farmers in the developing world by ensuring that a fair price is paid for agricultural goods (as agricultural subsidies in the developed world often force down the price of the same products in the developing world and put developing world farmers at an economic disadvantage) and that more money from this price is paid to the producers themselves. As consumer choice becomes a significant factor in the globalizing agro-food industries' output to the developed world (see *Global Shift*, Chapter 9), so consumers in the developing world become more concerned with eating, wearing or using ethically sourced products, such as organic foods. Oxfam's support for fair trade thus picks up on a developed world discourse and uses it to the advantage of developing world food and fibre producers. However, the impact of this may be restricted by the demographic narrowness of fair-trade buying (with only a very small percentage of consumers worldwide being affected), or by the fact that, as noted in the Chapter 9 case study, ethical consumption can be undermined by cost issues, as many people will still opt to buy cheaper rather than more ethically sourced products. Oxfam's involvement in fair trade is thus prompted by developed world concerns about the impact of globalization, and affected by other discourses regarding product sourcing and consumption patterns.

## Oxfam and Marketing

Oxfam also, like other sorts of globalizing organizations, relies on fairly traditional corporate marketing techniques to draw attention to campaigns or issues. The Make Poverty History campaign, for instance, involved an extensive series of advertisements in all media as well as the use of celebrity endorsement and public events such as concerts and drives. Oxfam also makes use of media attention on particular crises, such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami or the more recent Haitian earthquake, to draw attention not just to those particular issues but to its wider activities. Oxfam also benefits from corporations' interest in being seen as socially responsible members of the global community, encouraging them to

endorse campaigns, such as many coffee companies prominently advertising their economic support for fair trade. Oxfam thus makes use of both marketing techniques and the activities of more commercially focused globalizing organizations to support itself and its campaigns.

## Conclusion

Oxfam, therefore, uses globalizing economic discourses, organizations and practices to draw attention to developing world issues and how they also affect the developed world. Civil society organizations use the same processes, discourses and concepts as commercial organizations to globalize; however, their aims and interests in doing so are somewhat different.

## QUESTIONS

1. How does Oxfam's shift from a union-focused to poverty-focused organisation reflect the rise of the current phase of globalization?
2. Compare and contrast Oxfam with Indymedia (Chapter 4 case study) and/or General Motors (Chapter 15 case study).
3. Is trade or aid most effective at helping developing regions?
4. What, if anything, makes globalizing civil society organizations distinct from any other sort of globalizing organization? Justify your answer with examples from the Oxfam case.

## FURTHER READING

- Aaronson, Susan Ariel and Zimmerman, Jamie M. (2006) Fair trade? How Oxfam presented a systemic approach to poverty, development, human rights and trade. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 28: 998–1030.
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- Hailey, John (1999) Ladybirds, missionaries and NGOs. Voluntary organizations and co-operatives in 50 years of development: a historical perspective on future challenges. *Public Administration and Development*, 19: 467–485.
- Offenheiser, Raymond, Holcombe, Susan and Hopkins, Nancy (1999) Grappling with globalization, partnership, and learning: a look inside Oxfam America. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 28 (1): 121–139.
- Stephen, June (2001). Knowledge management in Oxfam. *Information Development*, 17 (2): 107–110.