

Choosing the Lesser Evil: Understanding Decision Making in Humanitarian Aid NGOs.

Liesbet Heyse. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006. 239 pp. \$99.95.

Choosing the Lesser Evil can be summarized concisely as a test of two hypotheses: (1) that nongovernmental organizations (NGOs hereafter) use different methods of choosing projects: consequential, appropriate, and "garbage can" decision making; and (2) that each decisional behavior implies a different organizational structure. In relation to each of the above processes, these are, respectively, administrative, institutional, and unstructured organizations. To prove both hypotheses, the author analyzes two NGOs by developing two case studies: Médecins sans Frontières, Holland (MSF Holland), and Action by Churches Together, Netherlands (ACT Netherlands). As a consequence of this general content, the volume is organized into four parts. The first part develops theory in chapters 2–4, with chapter 1 only providing an introduction or guide to the rest of the book. Chapter 3 is fundamental, providing the theoretical key that permits readers to understand the study as a whole. Chapter 2 is a bibliographical review of state-of-the-art NGO research, and chapter 4 repeats the points raised in the third chapter but applies them to NGOs in particular.

The purpose of part 2 (chapters 5–8) is to analyze the first empirical case, that of MSF Holland. MSF Holland has three fundamental characteristics: (1) it is an operational NGO, that is, it is an organization that intervenes directly where aid is necessary; (2) it focuses on a specialized form of aid (medical or medically related); and (3) it operates immediately when a crisis occurs (in the emergency phase). These features imply a specific organizational structure that, together with the philosophy of an NGO, creates a particular decision-making pattern. The case reduces the analysis of these proceedings to only two types of categories of decision: whether to start humanitarian aid interventions and whether to terminate projects. Chapter 5 describes the organizational structure and activities of MSF Holland and presents empirical data on it. The remaining chapters (6–8) constitute a single case study. In particular, chapter 6 seeks to convince readers that MSF Holland's administrative structure implies that its standard decision making is "consequential." To reach this conclusion, the author's strategy is to describe all kinds of real interventions in which decision making rested on sequential and prospective reasoning, driven by information and maximizing organizational goals, that is, a logic of consequence. Chapters 7 and 8 explain that there are exceptions to the conclusions of chapter 6, because MSF Holland also makes decisions on the basis of either appropriateness or the garbage can model. In this way, the author uses multiple examples to show how consequential reasoning sometimes is only a persuasion strategy or legitimizes decisions already taken. The author observes how, in other interventions, external social pressures can drive the choice (the logic of appropriateness), despite a prospective analysis, or simply how the coincidence of problems and solutions that are not connected in an

orderly way is the only mechanism of decision making (the garbage can).

Part 3 (chaps. 9–11) develops the second case, ACT Netherlands. In contrast to MSF Holland, ACT Netherlands is a non-operational NGO. Its main task is to subsidize local organizations when intervention is necessary. The local organizations deliver different types of aid: food, shelter, organizational development, training, and education. Moreover, ACT Netherlands' support covers a longer period than just the emergency phase. Like the previous case, the analysis is reduced to the same two kinds of decisions. Chapter 9 provides archival data, and chapter 10 uses examples of real interventions to show how ACT Netherlands' decision making is obligated to be rule-based, instant, and based on retrospective reasoning. In other words, ACT Netherlands has traces of institutional structure and, consequently, uses the logic of appropriateness as its dominant decision-making mode. Finally, chapter 11 explains that when the NGO has no retrospective information, the only remedy is to develop the remaining two decision-making patterns: consequential or garbage can decision making. In particular, when ACT Netherlands has relevant information available, it prefers to use consequential logic, but when it is difficult to establish the trustworthiness of an organization or the need for intervention, it applies the garbage can decision-making pattern.

Finally, part 4 concludes the book with two chapters (12 and 13), plus an epilogue. Conceptually speaking, reading this final part of the book is fundamental, because the author returns to the theoretical background elaborated in chapter 3 with a discussion, limitations, conclusions, reflections, and future lines of research. Readers can now understand not only the roots of the problem in relation to the decision-making process in NGOs but also some of the variables and aspects that are analyzed in relation to its extent and robustness. The differences between the behavioral processes at the two NGOs could be the result of adaptation to their own idiosyncrasies—operational vs. nonoperational, scientific vs. religious managers, or organizational size or age, among other factors. External factors such as the context of the crisis or stakeholders' interests would also influence different types of decision making. Intervening at the beginning of a warlike conflict is different from financing organizations that are rebuilding following a catastrophe that occurred some time ago. The necessary information and the wishes and demands of donors are different and, as a consequence, decision making depends on the situation.

From the perspective of research in the field of organizations, however, the conclusions should be treated with caution because of some inaccuracies in their logic. Bearing in mind the two fundamental hypotheses, the author makes the assumption that if an NGO has a particular organizational structure, then this would imply that it also has a specific decision-making procedure. In particular, she establishes that MSF Holland has the features of an administrative organization and ACT Netherlands those of an institutional one. She therefore concludes that they have consequential and appro-

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priate decision making, respectively, although with some notable exceptions.

In my view, the main goal of NGOs, in contrast to ordinary firms, is to maximize humanitarian aid rather than profits. We may therefore suppose that their objective, per se, is "appropriate" to the values of the society in which they are located and are not those of self-interest or "rationality" in a strict economic sense. By their very nature, NGOs are sociological rather than economic actors. In fact, the organizational values of the example, MSF Holland, in which an administrative setup can be seen, are to be "present, relevant, and effective in the major humanitarian crises of the day" and to "show compassion to populations in need" (p. 184). The stated values make no mention of efficiency, only of effectiveness. This is important, because efficiency is effectiveness, at the lowest cost or effort level, but the reverse is not necessarily true. An organization can be effective but not efficient. That is, I can achieve objectives, but I may have to do so at whatever cost is necessary to achieve them.

With this idea in mind, it seems reasonable to believe that all NGOs are biased toward the logic of appropriateness. If this reasoning is correct, although the book contradicts it, the main assumption that the author makes is too extreme to be considered. Because of this bias, NGOs with an administrative structure may continue to use this as justification for appropriate behavior and not because they are applying the logic of consequentiality. With this intuition, however, chapters 12 and 13 and the epilogue become, with a new reading, an interesting source of inspiration for new research in this field, because the perspective of the examples changes. For instance, I wonder whether the administrative structure and its consequential cost efficiency behavior is the fundamental mechanism that permits the survival of sociological organizations, as it is for other competitive organizations, when they do not have other environmental shields. Alternatively, perhaps the only prerequisite for success that any sociological organization needs is to behave in an appropriate way according to a society's morality. For instance, we could imagine situations in which citizens, politicians, or media personnel (that is, stakeholders in general) respect MSF Holland simply because it takes risks that others would not even dare to consider. An alternative focus is to consider both extremes as complementary tools of decision making. Perhaps the exceptions treated as such in the book are not so exceptional but, rather, are the normal and necessary practice in this kind of organization. In any case, the information in the book will be useful to those who want to know about the internal dynamics of NGOs. It is, of course, relevant for academics and fundamental for donors and for other NGOs wanting to compare their experiences.

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