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# ***The ‘Good Samaritan’ and the ‘Marketer’*: public perceptions of humanitarian and international development NGOs**

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## **Introduction**

This article reports on a nationwide study conducted in the UK<sup>1</sup> to investigate public responses to humanitarian and international development issues and their communications<sup>2</sup>. We focus on participants’ perceptions of NGOs<sup>3</sup> and how these affect both their relationship with the NGOs and with humanitarian causes in general. The paper builds on the extensive literature on public trust and confidence in charities (Sargeant and Lee, 2002, 2004, 2004a, 2008a, 2008b), touching on issues of charity branding and values (Venable *et al.* 2007; Sargeant *et al.* 2008a; Sargeant *et al.* 2008b) in the context of a recognised climate of increased competition in the non-profit and voluntary sector in the UK (Bennet & Gabriel, 2003) and the adoption of management and marketing methods (Saxton 2004; Bennet, 1998). The analysis of participants’ perceptions of NGOs discussed here identifies two key models of humanitarian NGOs, descriptively anthropomorphised into the figures of *the Good Samaritan* and *the Marketer*. Although some of our conclusions concur with extant work in the field, the work described here is unique in several respects. First, it identifies a new key model through which NGOs’ identities and activities are understood by the UK public, *the Marketer*, which hasn’t been recognised and researched so far. Second, this model was consistently referred to across all focus groups and emerged ‘naturally’ rather than being prompted by specific questions from the researchers, thus marking a methodological departure from the majority of existing research. Third, we also differ from existing work as we don’t focus on the role of these perceptions in stimulating donations, which largely characterises current research. We don’t understand monetary donations as intrinsically signifying responsiveness, on the contrary we have found that monetary donations can be an effective way of only fleetingly engaging with humanitarian issues (Seu & Orgad, 2014). The focus on factors stimulating donations and the deductive approach of existing research might explain why this model of humanitarian operations hasn’t been identified so far.

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<sup>1</sup> We are grateful to the Leverhulme Trust for generously funding this project (grant F/07 112/Y). For further information study please refer to the project’s website: <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/psychosocial/our-research/research-projects-current/mediated-humanitarian-knowledge-audiences-responses-and-moral-actions>

<sup>2</sup> Although there are important differences between humanitarian and international development causes, here the term ‘humanitarian’ will be used as shorthand to refer to both, for the sake of brevity, and because participants discussed humanitarian and international development causes (and indeed charities in general) interchangeably.

<sup>3</sup> The specific use of the term NGO in this paper refers to humanitarian and international development NGOs. However, when referring to relevant research and only when used by the author we use the broader term of ‘charities’.

First we map out current literature debates on public perceptions of NGOs, then we briefly introduce the project and present its findings. The paper concludes with a discussion of the relevance of these findings for the relationship between NGOs and its public.

### **Public perceptions of NGOs, trust and commitment.**

The voluntary sector plays a highly significant role in modern society, dealing with difficult social issues and occupying a distinct space, separate from government and private sector enterprise (Sargeant & Lee, 2004, 2004a). Although small when compared with either of these, the sector possesses a moral authority that belies its relative size (Hind, 1995). Indeed, it has been argued that voluntary organisations play a pivotal role in generating broader trust (Fukuyama, 1995) and that, when non-profit organisations fail, the breach of public trust can be devastating (Herzlinger, 1996).

According to a survey conducted by the Charity Commission in the UK (2010), charities enjoy a high level of trust from the public, as the third most trusted group after doctors and the police. However, a recent study carried out in the UK found that the relationship between the UK public and humanitarian and international development NGOs is in crisis (Seu & Orgad, 2014), a view shared by others, including NGOs themselves (see Crompton, 2010; Darton & Kirk, 2011; Orgad and Vella, 2012). Saxton (2004) argues that “ironically it is the very success of professionalization in delivering the goods in terms of income and effectiveness, direction and impact that is the root of the problem” (Saxton, 2004: 188).

Many (e.g. Bruce, 1994; Mullin, 1995; Sumption, 1995) have commented on the critical role played by trust in “defining both the credibility and legitimacy of the charity sector and in affording it a higher moral tone in the minds of key stakeholder groups such as supporters, the media and the general public.” (Sargeant & Lee, 2004a:614). According to the Charity commission (2002, 2001) the maintenance of public goodwill necessary to support both donating and volunteering activity is consistently tied directly to the presence and the promotion of, trust as the enduring and central relationship that sustains the sector as a whole (Sargeant, 2004a:186). Recent studies lend further support to the idea that the strength of a donor’s commitment to the relationship with a non-profit is a function of a complex causal structure driven by trust (Atkinson *et al.*, 2012, Sargeant, 2004, 2004a), which is fostered, amongst other factors, by the perceived ethics/judgement of the organisation, and the extent to which the purpose of the organisation is felt to be benevolent (Kennedy, Forrell & LeClair, 2001; McFall, 1987; Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

However, over the last 20 years the way that charities and humanitarian and international development NGOs work has changed beyond recognition (Calhoun, 2010, Chouliaraki, 2012) in a move away from the traditional ‘charity’ model. Competition among general charities *vis-à-vis* attracting public donations is intense (Bennet & Gabriel, 2003) due to the proliferation of charities resulting from the British government’s withdrawal from many areas of medical and social welfare (Sargeant, 1995), and the adoption by charities of a market focus and the latest management and marketing methods (Bennet & Gabriel, 2003, 1998; Bennett, 1998; Bruce and Chew, 2011; Chouliaraki, 2013). According to Saxton (2004)

non-profits and charities now run operations like professional businesses; they set performance target, employ professionals –fundraisers, marketers, campaigners, CEOs – to do their work.

Reflecting on the historical and political changes affecting humanitarianism Calhoun (2010) has similarly pointed out that, in contrast to the old fashioned model of charitable practices, since the 1980s organisations have been increasingly concerned with achieving best practice, with many of their executives coming from backgrounds in consultancy, advertising and communications industries. Hilton *et al.* (2012) claim that the ethos of ‘business’ in the British NGO sector broadly coincided with the Thatcher years, when the government attacked public sector services, expecting NGOs to provide public services, but do so in a manner which increased accountability requirements. A wave of professionalism and managerialism then became further entrenched in the 1990s (Benthall, 1993).

The political implications for NGOs immersion in commercial norms have been widely analysed. For example, on the basis of in-depth interviews with top communications managers of major international aid agencies, Cottle and Nolan (2007) found that these organisations were foremost structured by corporate media practices and priorities, concluding that these NGOs were deeply ensnared in global media logic. In marketing terms, organisations strive to project a strong and positive corporate identity, because this is the ideal image that an organisation wants its public to hold (Johnson & Zinkham, 1990) and is crucial in determining whether people enter into a relationship with an organisation or not (Venable *et al.* 2005). But people’s *perception* of this identity is complicated (Seu & Orgad, 2014)

Saxton (2004), argues that although non-profits and their communicators – most notably fundraisers – tend to play down and gloss over the size, shape, scale and sophistication of modern charities, this has considerably complicated charities’ relationship with the public. Humans need symbolic representations to simplify buying decisions and a person’s image of an organisation can be viewed as a preliminary heuristic for deciding whether to become involved with the organisation (Venable *et al.*, 2005). Venable *et al.* (2005:307) found that the respondents in their study ascribed human personality traits to non-profit organisations and that many of the dimensions used to describe the non-profit organisations were similar to those previously found for consumer brands (Aaker 1997: 347) defines ‘brand personality as “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (quoted in Venable *et al.*, 2005: 298), and Berger & Gainer (2002) have found that, because giving carries important psychosocial meanings, donors are drawn to brands that are perceived as having a personality encompassing values congruent to their own, be they actual or aspired (De Chernatony *et al.*, 2004, quoted in Sargeant *et al.* 2008a)

The organisation’s ‘brand personality’ has also been found to be intimately connected to trust and commitment to the organisation (Sargeant *et al.* 2008a), a crucial component of which is its image. *Image* concerns the knowledge, feelings, and beliefs about an organisation that exist in the thoughts of its audience (Bennet & Gabriel, 2003, Hatch & Schultz, 1997); that is

“the set of meanings through which people know, describe, remember and relate to an organisation (Dowling, 1986, quoted in Bennett & Gabriel, 2003: 277). Because image is the *mental representation* which can be manipulated in the minds of an organisations’ audiences, it has been argued that “an organisation’s image needs to be consciously managed.” (Nennet & Gabriel, 2003)

Sargeant *et al.* (2008b) found that participants employed the notion of ‘charity’ to imbue the organization with a distinctive set of characteristics (e.g. ‘trustworthiness’ or ‘caring’), which were regarded as the necessary base to include the organisation in their consideration set. Additionally, responsive and engaging, ability to effect a change, approachable, compassionate, helpful and, importantly, the perception of heroism, were considered desirable characteristics in the organisation.

Stride (2006), also explored the relationship between charities’ branding and values, questioned whether branding is an appropriate and effective tool in the charity context and argued that it is precisely the non-negotiability of charity values that differentiates them from commercial organisations (see also Vestergaard, 2008). More recently Chouliaraki (2012), in her study of what she terms ‘post-humanitarian’ communication, also discusses the role of brand recognition in spectators’ response to humanitarian organisations. She argues that, when using post-humanitarian communication, humanitarian NGOs are positioning themselves within the world of corporate branding and ‘obeying market logic’ with detrimental effects on an ethical discourse on public action.

In summary, an inconsistent picture emerges from these different strands of literature. One, ‘critical’ strand of work (based on Lazarsfeld’s distinction, 1941) critiques and problematizes the increased professionalization of NGOs internal operations and the changing norms in NGOs communications, and draw conclusions on how the commercialisation of NGOs has affected public perception of NGOs and their operations. Because this strand is rarely supported by empirical evidence it is difficult to get a real sense from these studies of the extent, the nature and implications of these tensions.

The second, ‘administrative’ strand of work provides robust, empirically based insights into the role of trust, image and brand in donor perceptions of organisations. However, these studies don’t problematize the marketization of NGOs and openly aim at finding effective strategies towards increasing donations. With few exceptions, these studies are deductive in nature and predominantly quantitative.

Overall, as Sargeant *et al.* (2008a, 2006) have pointed out, a noticeable gap in research still exists concerning the role that the characteristics of a recipient organisation might play in stimulating donations and developing trust. In particular there is little empirical evidence and understanding of how members of the public, donors and non- donors, view NGOs, how they understand and assess their activities, and how these opinions and perceptions affect their relationship with and to NGOs. This study seeks to address this gap in existing research.

## Method

The nationwide study, conducted in the UK, presented in this paper sought to address this lacuna in several ways. The study had a broader scope than the focus on monetary donations, thus allowing much needed empirical insights into how members of the public understand and assess NGOs activities, respond – cognitively, emotionally, and through actions – to humanitarian communications, and how these responses relate to audiences' everyday morality and biography. As a qualitative and exploratory study the research was participant-led and, although following a semi-structured schedule of questions, it respected the natural flow of the conversation and enabled the emergence of naturally occurring themes.

We wanted to know, firstly, what emotional reactions and cognitive responses were generated in members of the public by humanitarian communications. Second, we were interested to know what socio-cultural scripts people use to make sense of humanitarian communications and their ideological, emotional and biographical underpinnings. Third, we wanted to understand the relationship between the moral scripts audiences draw on and those informing humanitarian organizations and how audiences' responses to humanitarian appeals relate to those intended by humanitarian organizations.

The first two research questions were investigated through focus groups and individual interviews with members of the UK public, the third through individual interviews with representatives from international humanitarian and international development NGOs, and a comparison between the audience and practitioners data sets. The focus groups took place first, then the individual interviews with practitioners and, lastly, the individual biographical interviews with a selection of participants who had taken place in the focus groups.

The data discussed here comes from the 20 focus groups (each with 9 participants) with members of the UK public. Groups were selected to represent a range of age, gender, socio-economic class, sexual orientation and family formations. The focus groups were conducted by the first and second author.

Participants were given a folder containing 12 examples of communications from the 8 key humanitarian agencies (Oxfam, Save the Children, Disasters Emergency Committee, Plan UK, ActionAid, Médecins Sans Frontières, UNICEF<sup>4</sup>, Amnesty International) collaborating on the study. All these agencies are registered charities in the UK. Collaborating agencies were asked to select communications that best reflected their work and ethos to be used as props during the focus groups. Out of these the research team (the three authors and the project's consultant) selected the 12 examples as enabling technique, but also to reproduce what members of the UK public are normally exposed to. The appeals were given in different and random order for each participant to prevent bias.

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<sup>4</sup> With the exception of UNICEF, representatives from these NGOs were interviewed and actively participated in the project's knowledge exchange and action research activities. We also interviewed representatives from CARE International and CONCERN Worldwide, but the pack did not contain their communications.

One of the aims of the focus group discussions was to gather views, attitudes and emotional reactions towards NGOs and charities in general. The schedule contained specific questions asking which NGOs participants recognised and trusted, as well as to which they donated, but only a small minority of the quotes discussed in this paper were in response to individual questions about NGOs and their communications. Noticeably, almost invariably, impressions, perceptions and experiences of humanitarian agencies were spontaneously offered by participants as a way of opening group discussions, and these ‘naturally occurring’ comments also peppered the whole discussion. Additionally, participants frequently returned to the topic of NGOs whilst discussing other issues. Overall, the focus group data suggest that NGOs and the charitable sector figure large in the public imagination and that their actions and communications elicit strong emotional reactions.

The data were thematically analysed and the analysis was triangulated throughout. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data, a particularly useful one when studying under-researched topics, especially when an inductive approach is applied and themes are identified in a ‘bottom up’ way (eg, Frith and Gleeson, 2004). “Thematic analysis is not wedded to any pre-existing theoretical framework. [...] it works both to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of reality’.” (Braun and Clark, 2006:81)

The analysis was data driven and the themes were selected on the basis of frequency, relevance, richness, but also when they captured “something important in relation to the overall research question” (Braun and Clark, 2006:82).

## Results

Overall, participants’ comments made use of two distinct and contrasting models to characterise NGOs in positive and negative ways. Positive views of NGOs and their activities were organised around descriptions of NGOs as *Good Samaritans*. As captured by its dictionary definition - “charitable or helpful person (with reference to Luke 10:33)” -, the figure of the *Good Samaritan* in ordinary parlance is shorthand for pure altruism. The Christian parable tells the story of how a Samaritan spontaneously helped an injured stranger, from a different ethnic group to his own, at a cost to himself and without expectation of reward or compensation. Although participants never literally used this definition, the figure of the *Good Samaritan* encompasses many of the positive qualities attributed by participants to NGOs when viewed as helping strangers with no benefit to oneself. Although the ‘*Good Samaritan*’ characterisation of NGOs was directly mentioned only in 4 out of the 20 focus groups, it was consistently presented and experienced, implicitly or explicitly, as the ‘true spirit’ of charitable work and to illustrate ways in which NGOs were perceived by audiences to ‘get it right’.

On the other hand, strong negative views were expressed in terms of accountability and the increased marketization of NGOs, what we have called *'the Marketer'* model of NGOs. These negative views were continuously and consistently mentioned within and across different focus groups, thus highlighting the dominance of this previously unidentified perception of NGOs and suggesting that a crucial dimension of NGOs relations with the public has been neglected and needs further investigation.

It is through the stark contrast with the *'Good Samaritan'* characterisation that NGOs as *'Marketer'* comes across as one of the most disliked aspect of NGOs' work.

The next section presents the two themes at their 'face value'. It is not our aim to question the truthfulness or accuracy of the extracts. Rather we intend to take note of these two polarised views of NGOs as they emerged in the focus groups discussions, and how they speak to each other.

### **THE GOOD SAMARITAN**

The 20 focus groups discussions lasted between 90 and 120 minutes, generating hours of lively discussion. Yet, only 8 comments, from 4 different groups explicitly described NGOs as *Good Samaritan*. This suggests that, however powerful and cherished this view of NGOs may be in public imagination, it is far from dominant or widespread in terms of how humanitarian agencies are currently perceived.

*Bridget*<sup>5</sup>      *(I chose) this one. (MSF) because I've heard of doctors and you do feel as though they go there and they stay there and they've got some kind of positive commitment that they are with people.*

*Belinda*      *And I saw this one, Médecine Sans Frontières. I've always admired them for the same reasons that have already been discussed, that we know they're on the ground and most of them are doctors, I believe, and they're actually administering the medicines and doing the wounds and all that, so I like it. [...] And then these two, [...] both Amnesty. [...] I've been subscribing to Amnesty for many years because with their work, you know, you can even ring the Amnesty office and find out exactly what's going on in a particular situation and they send something, I think, monthly, don't they?*

The first two quotes capture the key characteristics of the *'Good Samaritan'* construction of NGOs according to which NGOs work *on the ground* and in *direct contact* with sufferers. Their mandate is easily recognisable, familiar, and down to earth. Belinda approves that *"they're actually administering the medicines and doing the wounds and all that,"*, implying that the doctors behave humbly and are in direct contact with the sufferers in whatever way is

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<sup>5</sup>For ease of reference in reading the extracts, participants to the same focus group were given a pseudonym starting with the same letter of the alphabet. The letter were allocated to groups in the chronological order in which the group took place: group 1 =A, 2=B, 3=C and so on.



needed. Bridget identifies another important dimension of the ‘*Good Samaritan*’ type of NGO. Additional to their direct contact with sufferers, they are in for the long haul, committed in the long-term. So, they don’t just “*go there*”, also “*they stay there*”. This temporal emphasis is particularly important as it seems to suggest a dislike for NGOs (seeming to be) carrying out short-term ‘fleeting’ interventions.<sup>6</sup>

The quality of NGOs’ accessibility and direct contact to both the sufferers and/or the UK supporters seems key to these positive representations.

The idea of a clear and visible outcome and NGOs’ mandate also seemed important to participants who talked of wells, homes, bandaging wounds and, in the case of Amnesty, getting a good solicitor:

Of course, as these are big organisations, what participants refer to is only a part of their operations. For example, not all people working for MSF are medics, or are on the ground. Like all other agencies they have offices, administrators, fundraisers, etc., but the infrastructure doesn’t seem to be resented as long as there is sufficient and consistent evidence that agencies are primarily motivated by being *Good Samaritans* and prioritise sufferers’ needs. This was also a key criterion in Cathy’s choice, from a different focus group.

*Cathy: (UNICEF) because they do try to help the ones that are starving and on the streets abroad and all that. Different people go out and get these buildings and house them*

In Cathy’s extract there is a similar reference to NGOs’ ‘hands on’ direct intervention. NGOs as *Good Samaritans* fight for the underdog, canvass on behalf of the weak and disenfranchised, and achieve visibly effective changes. .

In summary, the relationship between NGOs and those in need emerged as a key factor in the *Good Samaritan* characterisation.

If we were to personify agencies as *Good Samaritans*, we would say that the public sees them as selfless. They put themselves at risk to help others. This makes them visible, as well as their clearly identifiable and measurable effectiveness. They are heroic and ‘hard-core’, but there is no arrogance or machismo in this vision. Agency workers as *Good Samaritans* are primarily perceived as profoundly caring for the victims to their own detriment. In fact, as some commented, they are seen as humble, available and accessible, both to the sufferer and the public. As a couple of participants put it “*They are good people*”.

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<sup>6</sup>This corresponds with Author 3 critique of the limits of the fleeting intimacies constructed by contemporary humanitarian communication.

Finally, the *Good Samaritan* model is Universalist. Like in the parable of the *Good Samaritan* these agencies could be found anywhere and at any time of human suffering and people being in need.

These characteristics seem to produce two important outcomes. First, there is a clear sense that to be seen to behave as a *Good Samaritan* engenders trust and respect in the NGOs. We are not suggesting these are the only factors engendering trust and respect in NGOs, but that the *Good Samaritan* seemed to generate overall positive feelings towards NGOs. Second, NGOs' 'positive commitment' towards victims and/or beneficiaries, according to the participants, engenders a mirroring of this commitment through the donors' continuous support to NGOs. Notwithstanding the contextual nature of these connections – for example, that negative views of NGOs might rhetorically warrant participants' refusal to donate and unresponsiveness to humanitarian appeals (Seu 2013, 2011, 2010) – it seems important to pay attention to the polarised and passionate nature of feelings evoked by the two models. This is particularly important when considering that the potency of the *Good Samaritan* model was not limited to the characteristics identified above, but seemed to exist as a foundational principle informing more broadly public's reactions to NGOs. See, for example, how it is invoked, even though not directly referred to, to argue that NGOs employees should donate their time for free.

*Monica*        *At the end of the day, I think that if they're doing it for charity, why don't they do it for charity and not take their bit out of it? Give certain hours for the admin. If they're asking us to donate £1, why can't they donate their time, if that's what they've chosen to do?*

That the *Good Samaritan* is still implied as the desired norm is revealed by the question “*If they are doing it for charity, why don't they do it for charity [...] and donate their time?*” This suggests a taken for granted notion that NGOs should use a ‘charity model’ which is about giving something one holds dear – time, money, safety – to help others in need, voluntarily and with nothing in return. The core of Monica's argument is that NGOs fail to act as they preach, whereby NGO workers do not give their time for free, but expect the fair equivalent of monetary donations from the public. It is in comparison with the *Good Samaritan* who works for NGOs out of the goodness of their heart, that the *Marketer* is implicitly presented as self-serving..

## **THE MARKETER**

In stark contrast with the positive connotations of agencies perceived as ‘*Good Samaritans*’, the construction of the agency worker as ‘*Marketer*’ is steeped in distrust and criticism for NGOs' perceived inappropriate use of funds and the employment of marketing techniques. Although discussions around these topics took a myriad of forms, a common thread was that the participants repeatedly questioned the motives behind NGOs operations, as well as of their workers in joining the humanitarian field.

The qualities of the *Marketer* model described below were mentioned in all the focus groups and were always voiced negatively with some participants expressing strong animosity. This model portrays NGOs as corporate businesses, in competition with each other, preoccupied with targets, and striving towards expansion. Such construction of NGOs as corporate businesses is contrasted with an alternative and preferable view of NGOs as cooperating rather than competing.

*Alistair: I used to work for a humanitarian aid group quite a while ago, and I think a lot of people within the humanitarian aid groups also make too much money themselves. I think most of these adverts are actually there to actually keep directors in jobs, to keep the organisation going, also to, how do I say, make the organisation bigger. I think too many organisations nowadays, they're competing with each other, which is wrong when it comes to charity. They should be working together and actually helping people instead of competing, Q< oh, our organisation can get more funding than this one>Q, because at the end of the day they're not reaching the target they are supposed to. While they're competing, they're spending too much money on advertising on TV or newspapers when that could have been going to whatever they are campaigning about.*

Alistair is critical of what are in his view overinflated salaries of NGO personnel and that the purpose of fundraising is to “*keep directors in job, to keep the organisation going, to make the organisation bigger*”. Thus NGOs are portrayed as greedy and self-serving. These are compounded by his third point that, instead of helping others, NGOs use their energy and resources to compete with each other. The mocking tone used by Alistair in the speech attributed to NGOs – as if they were taunting children triumphing over each other – betrays Alistair’s veiled contempt and disapproval of NGO behaving as corporate businesses. His concluding statement positions NGO appeals and communications as self-advertising aimed at competing with other NGOs rather than ameliorating the plight of distant sufferers.

It is not surprising to see that this type of characterisation of NGO workers seems to have a negative effect on a potentially trusting relationship between NGOs and the public. Because of the expressed distrust in the agencies, the lack of accountability and mismanagement of funds referred to by many, the damage to the NGOs’ relationship with the public cannot be addressed and repaired by simple accountability of resource usage.

*Bruna: Would it make a difference if any of these organisations reported back to you with a breakdown of how much they spent?*

*Hugh: I think so, but I don't know whether I'd believe it or not.*

According to some, lack of accountability and, for others, suspect morals are exacerbated by the size of the organisations: the larger the size of the NGO, the less resources are used for helping beneficiaries. Funds are instead used for *business venture*.

*Hugh: The bigger the charity, the bigger the business, I feel like, the less actually gets to where it's intended. [...] once you get to this stage there's less going (to those in need). That's all, it becomes a business venture*

Other participants also blamed the size of the organisation for an alleged NGO's disconnection from their original aims. These two kinds of disconnections – financial investment in the beneficiaries and a principled investment in the original values and aims of the NGO – were considered one of the key characteristics of the *Marketer* model. The next extract takes this point further and illustrates a clash between the view that NGOs need professional fundraisers to procure funds to help people, and the view that this 'marketisation' of NGOs is antithetical to helping others.

*Alan: I agree with (Alistair) 100% in the way the charities are set up, because they're set up as businesses, and you've got the people at the top who [...] are going in as a job, they're not actually going in for the sake of helping. [...] the way they advertise in the papers, they are advertising for a successful career or whatever, rather than actually helping someone.*

First, this extract illustrates the perceived polarisation between a market ideology and motives, and what is implied as charity's 'true spirit' of helping selflessly. It points to a strong expectation that NGOs should be driven by traditional principles of charity and altruism, and the deep disappointment that this is no longer the case. Thus while only few people believe that currently NGOs are *Good Samaritans*, the majority of participants still hold a strong belief in the significance of these values. This suggests an important gap between the public's normative views of humanitarian principles and those principles they perceive to practically drive NGOs activities.

Second, the widespread concern that the business side of NGOs is antithetical to the original and 'true' aims of charity was believed to affect NGOs' activities in many ways. Whilst some were primarily concerned with the self-serving quality of NGOs as intermediaries between donors and beneficiaries, others worried about the effects on the relationship with the beneficiaries. Some suggested that as the size of the NGO grows, the distance between its workers and the beneficiaries also expands. As a consequence, many participants believed that the operations of large NGOs are in danger of becoming impersonal and saw NGOs' communications as forms of marketing and advertising.

*Keith [...] when you think about it, whoever produced these [the appeals], (has) done a good job, [...] It's how they get you. I think personally, it's a form of advertising, marketing*

*Bruna What do you think they're advertising?*

*UM Well, they're preying for your money, aren't they?*

*Keith They're advertising to get your money. It's like a car, or something. They're advertising for you to go and buy that car. I think they're advertising for money, really. That's it.*

*Bruna* So it's like a business?

*UM* I think so personally. It is a business. I think it is a business.

And from a different group:

*Harold* I see charity donation as <sup>7</sup>sometimes a risky thing to get into.

*Hamish* It's lack of trust now.

*Bruna* Lack of trust?

*Hamish* No one trusts them.

This section on data analysis has used participants' statements to illustrate how members of the UK public understand and judge NGOs identities and activities through the two key models of the *Good Samaritan* and the *Marketer*. In the next section we summarise the characteristics of these two models, in dialogue with existing literature on the relationship between NGOs and the public.

## **Discussion**

In summarising the main characteristics of the *Good Samaritan* and the *Marketer* models, our aim is not to privilege one model over the other, but to offer an empirically grounded examination of views as expressed by focus group participants in order to expose the salience of these models in people's thinking and how they inform and affect the relationship between NGOs and public.

We identified four key characteristics of the *Good Samaritan* model of NGO.

The first was NGOs' visibility, discussed in three contexts: NGOs' visibility through direct action (through public profile, brand recognition, performance over time) and indirect means (through independent media, particularly documentaries) and clearly identifiable and measurable effectiveness of NGOs' actions (e.g. provision of housing, wells, solar power to sufferers). The stress on NGOs visibility highlights the desirability of a concrete and transparent quality of NGOs activities. This confirms Sargeant *et al.* (2006) findings that trust (and indirectly commitment) are significantly affected by the performance of the non-profit, and is predicated on the perceived benefits supplied to beneficiaries. Further support comes from Sargeant *et al.* (2001), Harvey & McCrohan (1988) and Bennett and Savani (2003) who highlight the significance of the notion of perceived efficacy to giving behaviour and that, in general, charities perceived as more efficient tend to generate higher levels of compliance and levels of giving (Sargeant *et al.* 2008).

The second was primacy of the Other. In the *Good Samaritan* model, NGO workers offer help to Others selflessly and sometimes putting themselves at risk, with no expectation of reward. This resonates with Venable *et al.* (2005) who stress the social importance of non-profit being kind, caring and compassionate, and with Sargeant *et al.* (2008a, 2008b), who

found that humanitarian workers' heroism generated excitement and emotional engagement with agencies.

The third characteristic of NGOs workers in this model was their verifiable accessibility, both to sufferers and supporters.

Finally, the *Good Samaritan* model is underpinned by Universalist principles. Similarly to the mythical biblical figure, the helpfulness of the *Good Samaritan* is not reliant on their identification with the sufferer in terms of shared ethnicity of other characteristics. NGOs as *Good Samaritans* can be found anywhere and anytime of human suffering and people being in need.

As repeatedly demonstrated in existing research (Sargeant & Lee, 2004, Sargeant *et al.* 2006,) and further supported by our findings, the perceived performance and qualities of the organisation impact on the level of trust afforded to the organisation by the public. In particular, while agencies perceived to be wasteful of or mismanaging funds have been found to struggle to foster trust in members of the public (Sargeant & Lee, 2004; Bailey & Bruce, 1992), the perceived ethics of the organisation and its benevolence foster trust and inclusion of an organisation in an individual's consideration (Sargeant *et al.* 2007)

Similarly to our study, others have also found that participants employed the notion of *charity* to imbue an organisation with a distinctive set of benevolent, values-based characteristics (Sargeant *et al.* 2008, Sargeant *et al.* 2007, Werther & Berman, 2001). Our study takes these points further and shows that the potency of the Good Samaritan model was not limited to the characteristics identified above, but seemed to exist as a *foundational principle* broadly informing public's reactions to NGOs. Indeed, a closer examination of the extracts shows that the *Good Samaritan* model underpinned *all* discussions of NGO activities. It is against this model, sometimes ideal and idealised, that NGOs are being judged by the public.

Conversely, and particularly when compared, openly or not, with the *Good Samaritan*, the *Marketer* model of NGOs was consistently judged negatively and generated hostility and animosity. Scott (2014) and Madianou (2013) have touched on this issue when studying the role of celebrities and social media in humanitarianism respectively. However, with the exception of Venable *et al.* (2005), who have commented that "a new generation of donors has emerged that increasingly perceives the non-profit sector as a "big business" that should be held accountable for the effectiveness of its operations and services" (2005:295), the *Marketer* model has not been systematically investigated or given due attention so far. This is particularly striking considering the dominance of this perception of humanitarian agencies in our study and the high level of distrust and strong emotional responses associated with this model.

In direct contrast with the *Good Samaritan* model, NGOs considered as *Marketers* displayed the following characteristics. First, the Marketer appears to carry a negative direct visibility in terms of flash cars, glamorous careers, inflated salaries, scandals. Agencies as marketers were viewed as greedy and self-serving, and NGO appeals and communications as self-

advertising aimed at competing with other NGOs rather than ameliorating the plight of distant sufferers.

As argued by Sargeant *et al.* (2008a) and Sargeant & Lee, (2004), this generated distrust. Crucial for current research and theory, our data suggests that, because of the expressed distrust in the agencies, and the lack of accountability and mismanagement of funds referred to by many, the damage to the NGOs' relationship with the public cannot be addressed and repaired by simple accountability of resource usage. Indeed, many participants blamed the size of the organisation for an alleged NGO's disconnection from their original aims. These two kinds of disconnections – financial investment in the beneficiaries and a principled investment in the original values and aims of the NGO – were considered one of the key characteristics of the *Marketer* model. Considering the robust evidence in the literature that trust is significantly affected by the performance of the charity and is predicated on the perceived benefits supplied to beneficiaries and the manner in which the impact of these benefits is communicated back to donors (Sargeant *et al.* 2008 and Sargeant *et al.* 2006), the *Marketer* model seem to have a profoundly damaging impact on trust and confidence in the agency.

Additionally, NGOs' generated visibility through communications to the public is viewed with suspicion, considered overall as manipulative self-promotion. Connected to this and crucial in terms of how its comparison with the *Good Samaritan* engenders animosity, NGOs as *Marketers* actions are seen as self-serving, rather than Other-oriented and in aid of strangers. As *Marketers*, NGOs are seen as businesses employing marketing techniques aimed at expanding and beating competing NGOs.

A very small minority of participants held the view that the marketization of NGOs operations is justifiable by a more efficient provision of aid to sufferers. However, what the data show clearly is, that even when there is recognition of the increased complexity of humanitarian work and some degree of acceptance for NGOs' need to professionalise, the intense and often passionate criticism of the *Marketer* model, and the distrust it engenders, is widespread and expressed across all the demographic groups. Overall further research is needed to explore the separate aspects of this model, some of which are perceived as potentially positive and/or necessary by some members of the public.

## **Conclusions**

This study has shown that The *Good Samaritan* model of humanitarian work even when not explicitly articulated, appears to be very much alive in people's minds and is used as the yardstick against which to evaluate and make judgments about NGOs and their activities. Despite efforts made by NGOs to shake off associations with charitable endeavour, the evidence indicates that aspects of an imagined Victorian charitable ideal still exercise a remarkably powerful hold on the UK public imagination, particularly in relation to expectations of voluntarism from NGO staff members. This model continues to be adhered to, desired, and used by participants to actively resist a more professionalised model of

humanitarian work, which is perceived to go against the much cherished values of the *Good Samaritan*. This suggests an important clash of values and resistance to a model of operating that betrays what the public seems to perceive as the ‘true’ spirit of charitable work/operations.

In this sense, the data discussed in this paper support assertions made in Finding Frames (Darton and Kirk, 2011) about the persistence of ‘charitable’ frames for audience understanding, as well as the problematic knock on effects of the ‘cheque book’, transactional mentality which has generated increased revenue for NGOs in the last decade, but has kept the public at arm’s length. This is corroborated by the expressed salience for the public of NGOs approachability, both to sufferers and supporters, and further feedback from members of the public expressing worry about the unwelcome distancing effect of bureaucratisation of NGOs, compared to the desired ‘hands on’ and human touch approach.

In conclusion, while *the Marketer is* perceived to be out of touch with both the public and beneficiaries, the *Good Samaritan* model evokes positive responses, trust and public loyalty to NGOs.

Our conclusions have implications for NGOs current practices. The data suggest that the humanitarian principle of helping distant others in need is not in crisis, but the relationship of NGOs with the public might be. In terms of the desirability of the *Good Samaritan*, two elements seem at odds with current practices. First, one of the key characteristics of the iconographic Christian figure of the Samaritan is that he was a stranger *and* remains a stranger to the beneficiary. Yet, NGO communication and branding works precisely against this anonymity of the stranger, and is geared towards familiarising audiences with NGOs and their workers, stressing recognition. Second, the *Good Samaritan* provides aid to the sufferer, without articulating their deed and their justification and, importantly, without expressing emotion (Boltanski, 1999). Again, NGOs’ contemporary practice is antithetical to these important features of the *Good Samaritan*.

Participants expressed a deep disillusionment and disappointment deriving from the recognition of the *Marketer* model being applied to and employed within the realm of humanitarianism. This suggests that completely moving away from traditional notions of charity might be premature and counterproductive. Drawing on these findings we want to underline the persistence of the *Good Samaritan* model, despite its rejection by NGOs, and suggest that it might offer some creative opportunities for NGOs to engage with questions around the endurance of such powerful ideas of encounter, victimhood and strangeness.

As a final comment we would like to reflect on the pervasiveness of a transactional model in humanitarian work in current research, in particular, but perhaps unsurprisingly, in the marketing literature, where the connection between public trust in humanitarian and charitable organisations and donations is consistently taken for granted, unquestioned and therefore normalised. The vast majority of studies in the field openly state an interest in enhancing public trust in humanitarian and charitable organisation *in order to* increase donations (e.g. Sargeant *et al.* 2006), and indeed members of the public are unproblematically



classified in terms of ‘current and potential donors’ (e.g. Venable *et al.* 2005). Although this might be understandable within the field of marketing research, nevertheless it highlights that the view of humanitarian and charitable organisations as ‘marketers’ is uncritically treated as endemic to their relationship with their public, which consequently can only be transactional and instrumental. This is, in our view, highly problematic both intellectually and politically.

Privileging and normalising a view of NGOs as marketers is in danger of reducing NGOs relationship with the public to one between ‘sellers and buyers’, potentially foreclosing the investigation of other important aspects of this complex relationship. This restrictive view may also mask the potentially corrosive impact the marketing model may have on public trust in the sector and consequent engagement with humanitarian issues (Seu and Orgad, 2014). Intrinsically positioning NGOs as *Marketers* could also explain, to some extent, why the figure of the marketer has not been previously identified in research. If public trust and commitment to NGOs are viewed primarily as instrumental to donation n, then the figure of marketer is intrinsically taken for granted.

This might also have wider political and social repercussions. If NGOs act as moral entrepreneurs contributing to the “creation of a new fragment of the moral constitution of society” Becker (1991 [1963]: 145), then the volume and potency of the public’s disillusionment, distrust and animosity towards humanitarian NGOs expressed in our study may have serious repercussions for their capacity to effectively carry on this role. These strong sentiments and perceptions expressed by the UK public could negatively impact not only individual NGOs, but also the non-profit charity sector as a whole and humanitarian aid in general (Seu & Orgad, 2014).

These findings suggest that further empirical investigation of these issues is urgently needed. The consistent reference across all focus groups to *the Marketer* model highlights the dominance of this previously unidentified perception of NGOs and suggests that a crucial dimension of NGOs relations with the public has been neglected and needs further investigation, in particular the negative impact of the *Marketer* model on public trust and commitment to humanitarian NGOs and causes in general.

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