**The NGO Pocketbook: The purse strings and their limits**

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**Description of Research**

My research was centered upon gaining first hand experience in the work with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to examine the financial need for their general activities. Specifically, what are the unexpected tradeoffs of financial independence from governments and how does their financial model affect their utility. NGOs do not receive reliable government funding and must instead facilitate their own funding through grants, private donors, or government contracts. As a result they are often criticized for being accountable to their donors over their mission and ideals.

Existing research on this topic is limited, as the central question is aimed at how NGOs make their decisions, which is an unquantifiable by objective measures and is too complicated to account for in the majority of reports. Thus, the goal of my research was to have a more in depth, hands-on case study of the work of one specific NGO, in this case the Cheerful Hearts Foundation in Kasoa, Ghana. As an intern, I would have access to all facets of the organization, including most notably grant writing. I would see the programs they operate, what it takes to operate them, the funding required, and how hard it is to access that funding, ultimately making a claim about the role of financial need in decision making within the programs.

Child labor in Ghana is of increasing concern. According to the Ghana Statistical Service, 26% of children between the ages of 5-14 work illegally. Moslem Family Counseling Services in the capital city of Accra estimates more than 1 million underage children work in Ghana, and of that more than 800,000 are not in school and 242,000 are employed in dangerous and exploitative works. The children working often receive less than the equivalent of 50 cents a day, hardly enough to feed themselves and rendering any savings for a later return to school an impossibility. The fact is most families can’t afford the daily school fees, and it’s better for the children to earn some form of income, even a pitiful one, than to have to pay for their education. These children and their families are often faced with the choice of education or food, and not surprisingly, they choose food.

The main goal of the Cheerful Hearts Foundation (CHF) is to make education accessible and a viable alternative to forced child labor. They use a dual approach of both prevention efforts within schools and reaching out to the community. Within the schools, they raise awareness of the issue and promote the value of an education, while in the community they identify cases of child labor, and ultimately sponsor some of the children to return to school and escape their debt trap through education.

My role personally in the organization varied daily. Mondays and Wednesdays I taught mathematics at a local school, helping to further CHF’s aims of promoting education. There is a deficit of teachers in the area, and even those that do teach show up on a variable basis. As interns, we were used to fill that gap on a part time basis. Being so active in the classroom also gave us insight into how their education system works, and we could thereby make meaningful recommendations for the education programs through CHF.

Personally, I taught grades four, five, and six (ages ranged between 10-17) material ranging from counting money and telling time to decimals, fractions, and exponential values. On Tuesdays I worked in the office, doing administrative upkeep (website and promotional materials), as well as grant writing and outreach. Thursdays we went to the fishing shores, looked for children who were already working, and asked to interview them. Our questions encompassed their socio-economic demographic, asking what works they do, how long they’ve been doing them, their family background, education history, and overall well-being. We would subsequently compile a two-page profile characterizing their personal risk. Based on these profiles, CHF ultimately chooses who among those children will be sponsored, depending on who is at the highest risk or has the most need.

Fridays we went to local schools and gave interactive talks on the problem of child labor versus appropriate child work. Due to financial need, often the children need to undertake some form of work as a means of survival. Legal and appropriate work, like helping a mother sell soap for example, is sometimes unavoidable. The goal of the talks is to clarify the difference between legal work and illegal dangerous labor that keeps children out of school, puts their lives at risk, and perpetuates the crushing debt cycle. Children working at the fishing shore has been so normalized that there is no discussion of it socially, and many of the school children don’t understand what it takes to work at the shore. By informing them of the conditions and extremely low pay, many are able to more accurately consider their options and are encouraged to stay in school.

My research was mainly participant observation with interviews conducted of child laborers as part of my field study as well as informal conversations with fellow volunteers and the program directors. Through my role as an intern, I was able to observe the daily operations of the organization, and evaluate its shortcomings as well as achievements. My ultimate goal was to understand the impact of this NGOs financial need and the effectiveness of its financial model to meet that need.

**Budget**

From a budgetary standpoint, my finances were largely sufficient with some personal supplementing. The most expensive cost incurred was a flight from Denver, Colorado to Accra, Ghana, ultimately costing around $2,400. My room and board, paid to and provided through the organization, was $1,090. Another major expense was medical costs, especially malaria medication, which was over $280 for that one prescription alone. One significant roadblock to my research, and ultimately a huge monetary expense, was my visa. I was just returning from my semester abroad, and only had 11 days between the return from the first trip before my departure to Ghana. Since there was so little turn around time, I decided to hire a third party service to get my visa. They generally guarantee a 72-hour process for an extra fee, I was to send all my completed application materials to them and they would personally walk my application over to the embassy and ensure it was properly submitted. Due to a series of miscommunications from their agent, and the timing over a weekend, the third part did not get my visa in time despite their guarantee. I had to push my flight back, a very expensive flight change (around $900) and the visa itself ended up costing around $250. I did ultimately go over budget, mainly due to the unexpected flight change.

Generally, the funds expended were for startup costs or things that had to be bought or arranged before I arrived. Once in Ghana things were mainly inexpensive. An average lunch (not included in the program fee) cost about $1-2, and average daily transportation cost was around $2, depending on the day’s activities. A Ghanaian cell phone was the most expensive in-country purchase, costing about $40 for the phone itself, a SIM card, and about 3 weeks worth of phone credit. Ultimately, the flight (even before the flight change which grant funds did not cover) and room and board took up almost 90% of my trip funds, with the balance paid by visa fees and preventative medical care.

**Preliminary Findings**

As expected, I found financial need to be a limiting factor for CHF. But it was limiting in a way I didn’t expect. Namely, they accomplish a broad range of projects in a way they deem most effective and appropriate, however, they are done on a small scale. CHF is able to accept international volunteers, place them as teachers into schools, maintain a website and produce promotional materials, fundraise, give seminars to schools and communities, and sponsor children to go back to school. For an office with just 6 full-time Ghanaian staff members and revolving volunteers, this is extraordinary. They don’t have a consistent flow of volunteers, more in the summer months and relatively few the rest of the year, so the project has to be flexible. It should be able to scale up when possible, but scale down without compromising the project the rest of the year. For example, they have teachers working through CHF year round. But not every school in the area is able to have a CHF teacher consistently. During the summer months, CHF supplies around 6 schools with teachers, and during the year perhaps one or two schools are able to receive teachers.

As far as sponsoring children, CHF is limited by funding, but still achieving success in terms of the program and the basic structure. The goal set by CHF, determined by the need in the community via interviews and assessments, is to send 100 children back to school by the end of the year. However, the cost per child for school fees, uniforms, one meal a day and summer classes (to assist in the transition) is around 375 USD. Currently they’ve sponsored 25 kids, of whom 18 are regularly attending school and having a relatively high degree of success. I participated in the evaluations of 6 different “rescued” children at their respective schools, and only one appeared to be struggling with the transition and work load. The majority were excelling, often leading their classes, with high praises and commendations on behalf of their teachers. Thus, the performance of the NGO relative to its specific goals has been high, and self-reported to be a success. However, it is currently at a much smaller scale than the ultimate goal of 100 children.

CHF is entirely reliant on external funding. The majority comes from personal donations, made by families, and the fees paid by volunteers. The personal donations are from three families who annually donate between $1,000 - $3,500 each. These funds are mainly used for general expenses, like computers, printers, gas for the one car, and rent of the office space. To the families themselves, the program is marketed as helping the organization without specifics, but followed with the story of two of the sponsored children as an example of how they as donors are helping CHF ‘save children.’ Hearing they will pay for the gas in a car doesn’t motivate donors, they want to save the children. So though they are not unaware of operating expenses, it simply isn’t as appealing as helping kids, and subsequently CHF markets to appease its donors, shifting rhetoric and promoting the preferred imagery.

The second source and the main funders of sponsoring children are actually the volunteers themselves. Each volunteer pays a program fee that covers their portion of rent and utilities for the communal ‘intern house’ as well as covering breakfast and dinner; lunch is the intern’s responsibility depending on their particular placement site. Attached to each volunteer’s program fee is a one-time payment of $200, meant to cover half the costs of sending a child back to school. So for every two volunteers CHF is able to recruit, they can sponsor one child. As such, volunteers are prioritized as a financial resource, and are often ‘accepted’ as interns whether or not their qualifications are appropriate. This creates its own concern of effectiveness, as skill requirements for potential interns are lowered for the sake of increasing volunteer numbers. This was exemplified in my experience teaching math. As an intern, this was a part of my responsibility, and despite having limited qualifications or preparations that would make me an effective math teacher, I was thrown into teaching twice a week. The contrary argument is often that any teacher with basic math skills is better than no teacher, but it does represent a serious challenge for the interns, and limits the effectiveness of the classroom experience.

CHF is a multi-faceted organization, given it has its own programs, like the STOP CHILD LABOR NOW project where I worked, but it also functions as an umbrella organization for volunteer placement in the area. It serves as the connection between Western Volunteers and many local services. For example, Point Hope is an international organization working mainly in Liberian refugee camps in Ghana. They were interested in having an intern work on their nutrition program, but did not have the capacity to secure their accommodation, like housing or food. Thus, one of the interns with me this summer was living with us in the house, but left every morning to go to work for Point Her connection was CHF was more like renting a room. CHF also does placements in public clinics and other government services, which are unequally unable to host volunteers. This feature offered by CHF is mainly for its own financial gain. By hosting more volunteers and interns, the cost is lowered and CHF is able to retain more of the profit from the rest of the volunteers it hosts. Additionally, as aforementioned, it receives those one-time payments that are sent to the project, regardless of the volunteer placement location.

**Reflections**

The majority of my challenges on the project were related to cultural differences. There are very few white, blonde, females in Kasoa, and my presence there drew a lot of attention. Ghanaians are known for being exceptionally friendly, so much so that the women there receive frequent marriage proposals, which was true in my case as well. It was hard to be taken seriously at the fishing shore, as many of the men would divert my interview questions in favor of asking me questions about whether or not I was married. This also happened at the school where I taught with many of the male teachers.

The school also operates under vastly different disciplinary structures. The teachers carry a “cane,” usually a plant reed, and strike the children for any host of reasons, most commonly not paying their school fees, speaking out in class, or even getting an answer incorrect. From a moral standpoint, this was extremely difficult to bear. I spent a lot of time torn between observing cultural tolerance of this practice and my own ethical code. I did engage in several conversations with the teachers, in my hope to encourage them to reconsider the practice I believed was counterproductive and cruel. Again, I often wasn’t taken seriously, and was continually encouraged to start using the cane myself.

This disciplinary action was heavily reflected in the students’ behavior during class. They were often dead silent, too scared to raise their hand or answer a question. For an inexperienced teacher, this was an exceptionally difficult obstacle to overcome, and teaching was undoubtedly the most challenging part of my time in Ghana. Ultimately I felt like the true solution was to earn their trust, something nearly impossible to achieve in the 6 weeks I spent there, which leads me to another challenge – time.

I was concerned about my role in the NGO as an effective agent by only spending 6 weeks working. There is a heavy learning curve, as volunteers must initially learn all the workings of the particular organization and its aims and goals, while simultaneously adapting to a foreign culture and learning all the practices and customs associated with that as they pertain to the workplace. All this adjusting and learning has to happen before a volunteer can be effective; during this orientation period they are mainly just a drain on staff time and resources. Volunteer duration ranged from 3 weeks to 12 weeks, with each volunteer choosing his or her personal length of stay. It became clear to me as time went on that the two directors preferred and encouraged at least 6 weeks, but due to their financial constraint, always accepted the duration set by the volunteers.

This concern has led me to pursue the repercussions of international volunteer service for their host organizations and what circumstances maximize their utility as my senior thesis. There was my concern with duration and lack of qualifications, but I was also struck by some of the hidden benefits of volunteering as well. At the height, there were eleven volunteers in the house, representing different nationalities, specialties, and perceptions. Housing all of us under one roof created an exceptionally interesting dynamic, one I believe to have been for the betterment of everyone personally as well as for the organization itself. For example, one of the interns was working in the maternity ward of the local hospital. Through one of the midwives, she learned about a local orphanage, and five of the volunteers went with her one afternoon to check it out. Ultimately, we were able to offer HIV tests for the children, enroll some in the nutrition program at the refugee camp, update their vaccinations, and send some back to school, due to the varied specialties of the volunteers that day. This sort of interdisciplinary cohesion and productivity struck me, both in being a central focus of International Political Economy, but also as an immeasurable benefit as a result of international volunteers and the complex cultural exchange that occurs. An opportunity for further research would be a focus on the social impact of volunteers, though it would be limited to case studies with few extrapolations and general conclusions.

Actual research limitations were few, as my role was simply participant observation. I didn’t schedule interviews and didn’t have to visit any particular locations. Everything that happened was relevant, and everything that didn’t happen was equally relevant. Overall I was impressed by the relevancy and effectiveness of CHF. There is always room for improvement in the NGO sector, but CHF has undoubtedly made great strides in its mission. I expect they will continue to expand and create meaningful change in the lives of these children as they continue to search for new sources of funding.