

Shifting Power in Humanitarian Nonprofits

A Review of 15 NGO Governing Boards

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KEY FINDINGS

Humanitarian aid recipients have limited scope to affect the decisions made by the nonprofit organizations that they rely on for basic needs and often bear the cost of organizational failures. In a survey of 15 governing boards of prominent international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) engaged in humanitarian response we found that

- fewer than 2 percent of board members had experience as a refugee or had been otherwise impacted by a humanitarian crisis;
- fewer than 20 percent of board members were from countries that are eligible to receive aid;
- governing boards prioritized financial management and administration and fundraising competencies over subject matter expertise; and
- improving representation of aid recipients on NGO governing boards could increase their accountability and effectiveness.

INTRODUCTION

Humanitarian nonprofit organizations, from small, volunteer groups, to international NGOs with thousands of paid staff, operate in a patchwork of intersecting, competing and reinforcing missions. They share a common objective: to protect the lives of vulnerable people in crisis. When organizations fail to maintain public confidence in their mission, as in the recent spate of [#AidToo scandals](#), the cost falls most heavily on the populations they aim to serve, but accountability to aid recipients is often missing aside from these isolated incidents incurring heightened public scrutiny. The Black Lives Matter movement and calls for decolonizing the aid sector present a new impetus to evaluate sectoral priorities and power dynamics.

Governing boards of typically between 10 and 35 people hold power in nonprofit organizations to interpret organizational missions, set strategic direction, control public image, and manage how funds are raised and spent. They nominate trustees, set compensation for key officers and CEOs, and hold the CEO accountable. In an association of NGOs, global governing boards may be composed of representatives from national organizations or their nominees. Participating national organizations also send representatives to member assemblies to vote on bylaws that apply to the entire organizational structure.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion of differences among staff, and shared participation in organizational decision-making, have been the theme of a wave of internal professional trainings and awareness-raising in the sector, that has increased in response to the Black Lives Matter movement. Oddly, governance arrangements—governing boards in particular—have not yet been given similar prominence in the sector’s efforts to address power dynamics or localize and decolonize aid. Should NGO governing boards be the next frontier of reforms?

MIND THE REPRESENTATION GAP

Nonprofit governance has distinct objectives from those in the private sector. Nonprofits transfer the value of donations to often distant aid recipients who have limited scope to affect the decisions that impact their lives, unlike customers. Over the last several decades, as the humanitarian sector has professionalized, NGOs have led efforts to set industry standards around accountability, safeguarding, and inclusion of affected populations in decision-making in humanitarian programming. Some [have interpreted](#) the proactiveness of nonprofits to reform as a response to donor and host government demands to distinguish emerging specialized expertise from the often-messy goodwill of “amateurish” volunteers.¹ In particular, NGOs have endeavored in recent years to improve the participation of aid recipients in operational assessments and performance monitoring. However, progress has been limited and there is still a long way to reach acceptable levels of accountability to affected populations. In a [2019 paper](#), CGD researchers proposed ideas to improve inclusion in operational practice.²

To bring about durable changes at the institutional level, however, representation in governance structures should improve too. Aid recipients, the humanitarian NGOs’ *raison d’être*, lack effective representation in the governance of the organizations they rely on to meet their basic needs. NGO governance arrangements often still reflect the foundational missions of different nonprofits. Periods of crisis have, in turn, shaped norms and principles that guide their work.

Examples of how governance and mission are interconnected include the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), and Caritas Internationalis. The ICRC was formed to establish basic rules of conduct in war—principles that would later become international humanitarian law. Today, the ICRC acts as the guardian of the Geneva Conventions. Headquartered in Geneva, it was founded and is governed by Swiss nationals—a symbol of adherence to a strict principle of neutrality in armed conflicts similar to that of Switzerland. During the Biafra war in Nigeria, a few ICRC doctors disagreed that humanitarians should remain neutral in conflict. They formed MSF,

1 Barnett, Michael N. (2013). Humanitarian Governance. *Annual Review of Political Science*. 16: 379-98. Washington, DC: GWU.

2 Konyndyk, Jeremy and Rose Worden (2019). *People-Driven Response: Power and Participation in Humanitarian Action*. Center for Global Development.

for which the act of “bearing witness” is foundational. Consistent with this, MSF International is organized as an association of regional sections that draws from former staff members and volunteers to fill governing board seats. Caritas Internationalis, begun in 1897, has evolved into a Catholic NGO network of 160 organizations; it supplies members to organizational governing boards via bishops’ conferences.

While direct representation of aid recipients on governing boards might not be realistic, NGOs should nevertheless examine the make-up of their boards to make sure that it does not run counter to efforts to improve accountability and rectify power imbalances. The skills and competencies represented on governing boards impact how boards strategize, carry out financial and administrative functions, raise funds, and interpret their missions. Humanitarian NGOs operate across vastly diverse nations, cultures, economies, and crises. Given the sensitive and consequential nature of NGO missions, deliberations conducted on behalf of aid recipients should be subjected to the scrutiny of diverse viewpoints. [Research](#) shows that decision-making and group performance is improved in organizations with decision-makers of diverse backgrounds and viewpoints. Nonprofit organizations are taking measures to expand and measure diversity across senior management and staff on metrics such as race/ethnicity and age, equity, and inclusion, but these attributes have not typically been prioritized in governance structures, with the exception of gender, where the governing boards increasingly achieve parity.

PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

This study aims to contribute to ongoing debates around the collective governance priorities of the sector by examining the composition of a sample of governing boards of prominent NGOs that provide humanitarian relief. Governing board make-up is influenced by numerous historical and practical factors and provides valuable insight into organizational priorities. By identifying and categorizing competencies and characteristics of a sample of NGO governing boards, we hope this project serves as a resource for organizations and the broader humanitarian community to better understand and guide sectoral governance priorities.

We first assessed governing boards of prominent international NGOs engaged in humanitarian response to map the professional competencies NGOs prioritize in their governance. We conducted an in-depth literature review on nonprofit governance best practices and humanitarian NGO governance. Next, we compiled profiles of 19 governing boards from 13 organizations headquartered in North America and Europe with the largest 2018 funding volumes as listed in the Financial Tracking Service of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs database.³ These included national organizations, as well as international alliance and supervisory boards. We assessed publicly available information from organizational profiles, news articles, LinkedIn, and other sources. Then, we drew on particular skills identified in the literature review as important to humanitarian practice to develop a group of competencies important to nonprofit governance in the humanitarian sector and assigned categories for demographic characteristics and professional competencies to each board member. We also reviewed some organizations with unique or notable governance structures. Throughout the research process, we consulted with NGOs to gain deeper insight into the skills and backgrounds they find valuable to have on governing boards.

³ We passed over some organization because of a lack of information on board membership online. We assessed and verified data for 15 governing boards from 10 organizations. See annex for full list.

We then disaggregated the data by demographic categories, starting with gender and race/ethnicity. Then, we created a category called “national origin”—to capture personal connections to countries that are eligible to receive aid—and one called “representation”—to capture whether a board member has personally been in a similar position to people served by aid organizations. The categories for professional competencies included subject matter expertise, experience with financial management and administration, nonprofit leadership and management, fundraising, and policy influence. We posit these categories are important to humanitarian governance, though not exhaustive of potential competencies. With that recognition, we have refrained in our analysis from making judgements about ideal distributions of these categories in governing boards. We defined the categories according to the rubric below and assigned them to board members. In the analysis, we compare the proportions of each category on governing boards.

Humanitarian NGO governing board member competencies

Fundraising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History of fundraising for other organizations • Strong private sector background, high-level position in multinational corporations or equity firms • Great personal wealth (multimillionaire +)
Policy influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prior high-level political engagement or government position
Financial management and administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Human resources, financial management, private sector or nonprofit, financial management experience • Attorneys and certified accountants
Non-profit leadership and management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Substantial background in non-profit or mission-driven work • Includes management, communications and advocacy experience • (Board membership in another non-profit is not sufficient)
Aid subject matter expertise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humanitarian or development educational and professional background • Humanitarian and/or development technical knowledge

Humanitarian NGO governing board characteristics

Gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Male/female/nonbinary
Race	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White/non-white
National origin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aid eligible countries where NGO is active or has responded to past crises
Representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Board members who have lived experience as disaster survivors, refugees, or other categories of aid recipients

FINDINGS

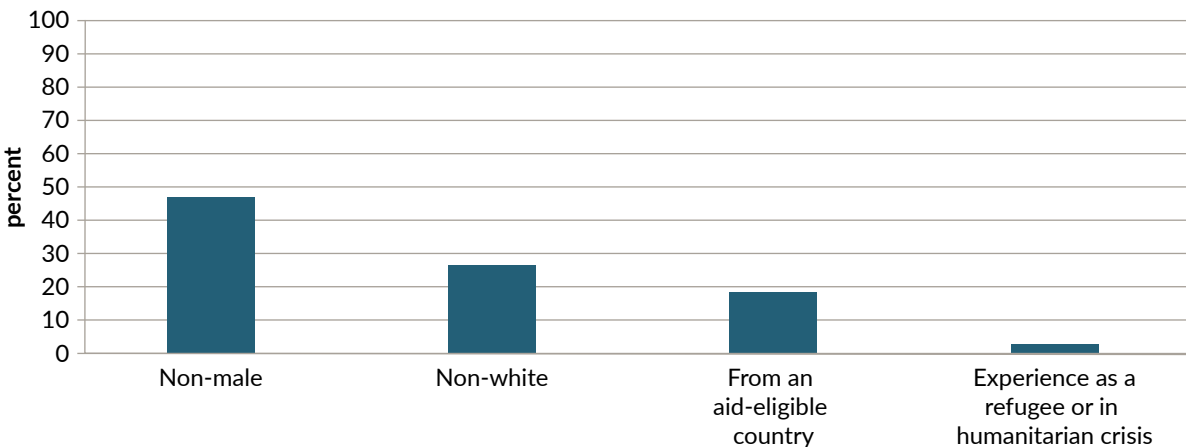
1. People served by NGOs are not represented in governing boards

Humanitarian NGOs respond to peoples' greatest needs, often when governments are unwilling or unable to do so. Yet aid recipients are not even superficially represented in NGO governance structures. Though gains have been made in the Grand Bargain agenda to increase accountability of NGOs to affected populations through feedback mechanisms, their governing boards often lack clear pathways to hear directly from aid recipients. The 2020 Grand Bargain [independent report](#) found “no evidence of a system-wide move towards a transformative approach that affords affected populations strategic influence over the aid they receive and how they receive it.”⁴ Currently, even superficial representation is rare. Only 2 percent of board members we assessed reported having any lived experience in a refugee or humanitarian context. Of the 2 percent, none represent populations currently experiencing crisis.

We assessed geographical representation to determine how many board members come from aid-eligible countries. NGOs have pursued a concerted approach to localization at the program level by drawing on nationals for their in-country program teams, however this has not been duplicated at the governance level. For instance, Mercy Corps Europe reports that 90 percent of its team members work in countries that they are from. By contrast, 22 percent of its governing board members are from countries where the organization has programming.

Institutional barriers to change include how skill sets are prioritized on governing boards. NGO representatives we spoke with mentioned the need to comply with the rules of charity commissions, which can be a barrier for individuals not familiar with those rules. Organizations we spoke with acknowledged the challenge of ensuring that representation is meaningful and not tokenistic. Some nonprofit boards require annual donations from their members, who also perform their board duties free of charge. Such rules can limit the scope for board membership. Governing boards also must comply with external rules set out by national charity commissions or similar bodies where they are incorporated.

Figure 1. Percentage of underrepresented group characteristics across 15 humanitarian NGO governing boards

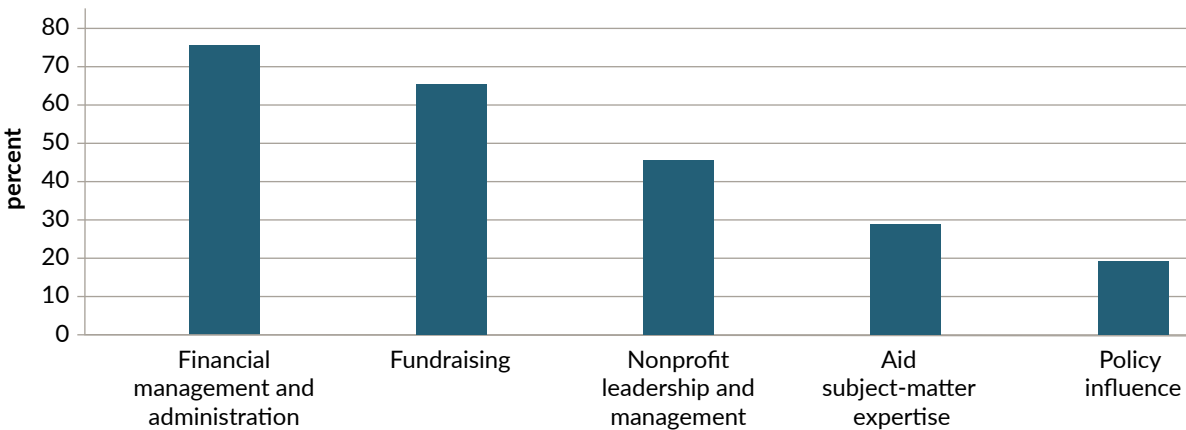


⁴ Metcalfe-Hough, Victoria, Wendy Fenton, Barnaby Willitts-King, and Alexandra Spence (2020). Grand Bargain Annual Independent Report 2020. Overseas Development Institute Humanitarian Policy Group.

2. Governing boards prioritize administrative management and fundraising over subject matter expertise

Overall, more board members in the sample (76 percent in total) met criteria for financial management and administration—the most general and fungible competency category—than any other competency. Fundraising is a chief function of governing boards that is distinctly separate from management, specialized subject knowledge, and oversight, and was the next highest competency represented (65 percent), followed by nonprofit management (46 percent), and subject matter expertise (29 percent).

Figure 2. Representation of competencies across 15 humanitarian NGO governing boards



In the sample, governing boards with higher levels of subject matter expertise tended to have lower fundraising competency. Among the high fundraisers, all of CARE USA's board members, and more than 90 percent each of Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Save the Children International USA, and its global board, held the fundraising competency. Subject matter expertise was found in either greater or equal proportion as fundraising on the governing boards of the Norwegian Refugee Council, Mercy Corps Europe, Oxfam Great Britain, ActionAid USA, and Concern Worldwide. On all governing boards with greater levels of subject matter expertise than fundraising, only 20 percent or fewer board members met the criteria for fundraising.

This general pattern could be explained by the unique fundraising models of some organizations.

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), which had the largest proportion of subject matter expertise, received nearly 60 percent of its funding in 2019 from the Norwegian and other European governments, the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, and UN agencies. Private donors accounted for only 8 percent of its funding total. With reliable institutional donors, the organization may not need to prioritize fundraising on its governing board.

Similar to NRC, Oxfam Great Britain raised a sizeable portion (roughly 42 percent) of its funds in 2018/2019 from institutional donors including the United Nations, European Union, governments, and other NGOs, and roughly 39 percent from public fundraising including events, humanitarian appeals and gifts. Corporate, trust and foundation donations comprised less than 5 percent of the total. Fundraising is the least represented competency on Oxfam's governing board.

Figure 3. Percentage of NRC board members with each competency

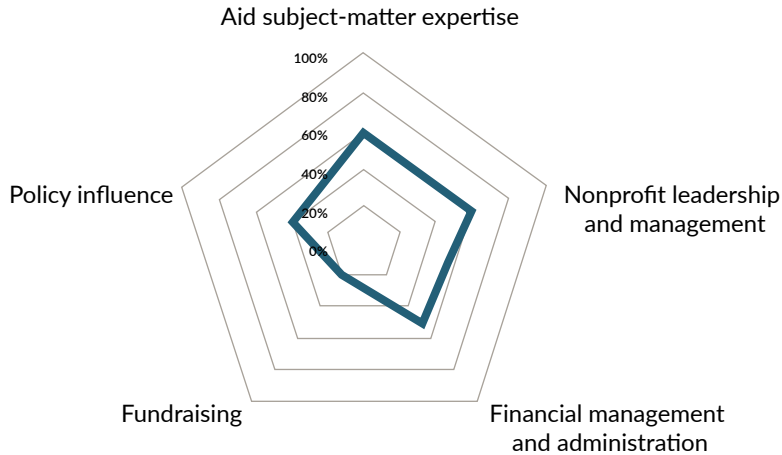
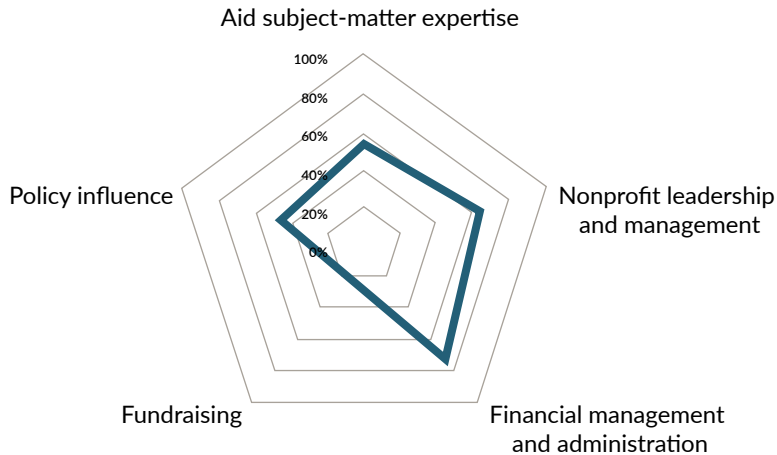


Figure 4. Percentage of Oxfam GB trustees with each competency



The NGO ActionAid USA included 50 percent of members as subject matter experts and 20 percent as fundraisers. ActionAid USA is a member of a democratic federation of ActionAid organizations, focused on solidarity and activism. Its fundraising model is also decentralized, relying heavily on crowd-funding and peer-to-peer events. This practice may reduce reliance on board members for revenue.

Differences in fundraising models may partly explain the relatively lower levels of fundraising competency on some boards, but do not necessarily account for relative differences in subject matter expertise. One possibility is that national organizations may serve particular roles, such as fundraising or program implementation. Certain competencies would offer more practical relevance, and likely be found in different proportions on governing boards of different entities in the network.

Figure 5. Percentage of ActionAid USA board members with each competency

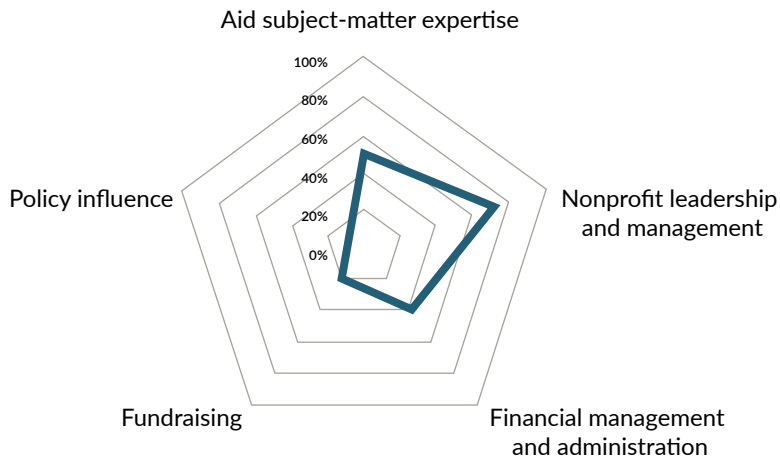
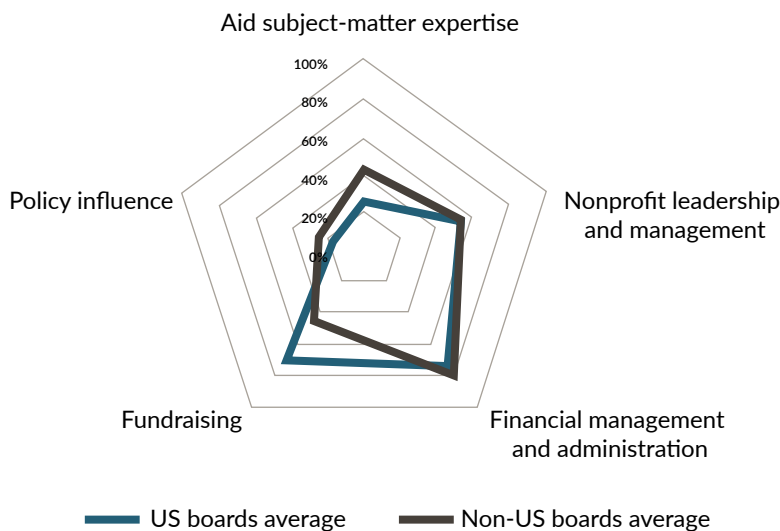
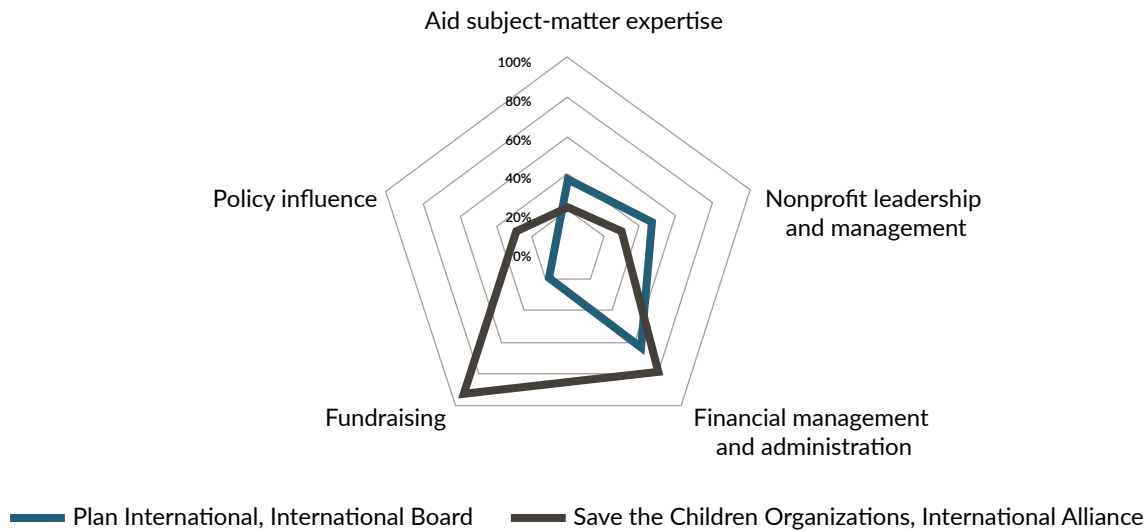


Figure 6. Competencies of US- and non-US-based board members



The different boards of members of the same NGO alliance do not necessarily display the same competencies. Mercy Corps' Europe and US boards differed in nonprofit leadership and policy influence categories, and closely aligned on fundraising and aid subject matter expertise. By contrast, Save the Children International's US board included 90 percent of board members with fundraising competency, while its UK board included 54 percent fundraisers. Plan International's US and Canada boards shared similarities across all competencies. Overall, humanitarian governing boards of US- and non-US-based NGOs tracked closely in terms of nonprofit leadership and management, with the US boards having about 1.5 times the fundraising competency of boards in other places. In the sample, non-US-based NGOs rely more heavily on institutional donors than US-based NGOs. Policy influence featured the least across governing boards, though we learned in our conversations with NGO representatives that organizations value different types of influence through a range of actors, including those with private sector backgrounds.

Figure 7. Percentage of Plan and Save the Children’s international board members with each competency



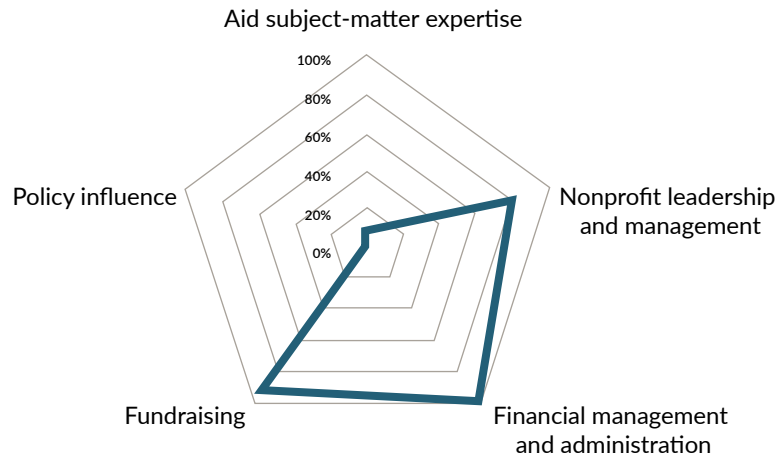
Plan International’s global board includes marginally greater aid subject matter expertise and non-profit leadership competency than that of Save International, which focuses heavily on fundraising. Its bylaws require board member appointees to hold specific skills and set a quota for board seats of 7 of 11 seats filled from governance bodies of national organizations. Its global board focuses on strategic planning, risk, financial, compliance, human resources, performance management, and CEO management.

Save the Children International also operates as an association of organizations that take decisions on bylaws and other matters in an assembly represented by member organization board chairs. International board membership is partly guided by constituent revenue, with quotas for nominees from some organizations that contributed at least 8 percent of the combined total income of the association, and some that contributed less.⁵ Its board focuses on business-related matters of compliance, financial planning, and oversight, and nominees are selected entirely from outside the organization.

Association policies can also impact board membership eligibility in other ways. Catholic Relief Services bylaws constrain membership to include majority Catholic bishops as a condition of its participation in the Caritas Internationalis global confederation. In our analysis, Catholic Relief Services’ governing board included higher administrative competency than many boards, and lower subject matter expertise and gender diversity than other boards. The competencies and characteristics reflect those found in the population from which its majority membership is drawn.

⁵ Save the Children International (2020). Trustees’ Report, Strategic Report, and Financial Statements for 2019.

Figure 8. Percentage of CRS board members with each competency



Governance models in the humanitarian NGO sector vary. For instance, MSF has an associative governance model that draws on former staff members to fill its international governing board. MSF association members elect national and regional board members at annual general assemblies. Its international board is accountable to the international general assembly and appoints the secretary general. As a result, the international board is composed almost entirely of aid subject matter experts with years of experience in the organization.⁶

3. Governing boards reach gender parity, but lack broader diversity

In many of our discussions with NGO representatives, we learned that organizations are taking steps to codify or improve their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies. Diversity in gender appeared to be a strong priority for the sector in governance. This is in line with general trends in the non-profit and aid sectors. Our sample reached gender parity overall (47 percent non-male). One third of boards sampled were at least 50 percent non-male, and 93 percent had at least 40 percent non-male members. In other areas, the data reflected somewhat less diversity. Overall, 26 percent of total board members were identified as non-white (see limitations in the Annex). Just 18 percent of board members were originally from aid-eligible countries where NGOs had programming.

National organizations may have distinct approaches to design and implementation of DEI policies, or be subject to common bylaws that encourage diversity in governance. For example, Plan International's bylaws require that its global board meet criteria agreed by the members assembly, including for the representation of gender, geographical, ethnic, cultural, and age diversity. Perhaps as a result, its international board included the highest proportion in the sample of members from aid-eligible countries of all those assessed (45 percent). Save the Children is undergoing governance reform and currently collects data on the diversity across senior management [coming from non-OECD countries](#),⁷ however its US organization declined to verify data on geographic diversity.

⁶ MSF website, <https://www.msf.org/how-we-are-run>

⁷ Save the Children International (2020). Global Accountability Report 2019: Delivering More for Children by Supporting Staff Health and Wellbeing.

CONCLUSION

This study assessed the competencies and characteristics prioritized in 15 prominent international humanitarian NGO governing boards. We designed the study as a first step to survey the sector and create an entry point to facilitate debate. We have released the data within an interactive tool that other organizations can use to assess how they compare.

NGOs operating in humanitarian contexts take different approaches to governance at all levels of their organizational structures and are shaped by a wide range of internal and external factors. Our findings show that overall, the sector prioritizes administrative and fundraising competencies, and gender diversity in its governance.

Increasing diversity on metrics such as gender, race/ethnicity, background, geography, and age at the strategic level *could be advantageous* for organizational decision-making.⁸ As the focus deepens from DEI approaches to discussions of power in the aid sector, NGOs should develop approaches to include participation of aid recipients not only at the program level where accountability can often be treated as a box to tick, but also in governance.

Better representing the views of aid recipients on NGO governing boards could insert an element of accountability to affected populations at the highest level, where it is currently absent. While it may not be practical to uniformly address representation in governance across the sector, different models should be explored. Ideas could include having advisory groups of representatives from aid recipient countries or those currently or recently experiencing humanitarian crisis first-hand report directly to governing boards.

Further research questions in this area could include the areas of influence NGOs consider important to mission success, how organizations strategize to influence policy, and what competencies not captured in this project organizations consider essential to their governance. Such an exercise could entail a broader survey of NGO governance in the sector, with targeted participation from NGO board members and leadership through surveys and interviews to better understand how organizations seek to influence external policies and public perceptions about their work.

To enable this, humanitarian NGOs should prioritize transparency in governance. As a first step, NGOs should be more proactively transparent about their board composition and representation by measuring performance against indicators used across their other areas of DEI policy, or developing new ones.

⁸ Better Decisions Through Diversity. Kellogg Insight (blog). Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, Oct. 1, 210.

ANNEX 1. NGO BOARDS ASSESSED

- ActionAid USA
- CARE USA
- Center for Global Development⁹
- Catholic Relief Services
- Concern Worldwide
- International Rescue Committee
- Mercy Corps
- Mercy Corps Europe
- Norwegian Refugee Council
- Oxfam Great Britain
- Plan International Canada
- Plan International, international board
- Plan International USA
- Save the Children, international board
- Save the Children UK
- Save the Children USA

⁹ The Center for Global Development is not included in sectoral composites. CGD is a think tank that works to reduce global poverty and improve lives through innovative economic research. We assessed CGD's governing board with the caveat some categories are less applicable to the think tank model. Subject matter expertise here pertains to CGD's programmatic areas. Non-profit management competency is less relevant since CGD is not a program implementing organization. CGD's governing board had relatively high levels of subject matter experts, fundraising, financial management and administration expertise, followed by policy influence. CGD values a diverse range of expertise in its board composition. Its governing board carries out its duties through regular standing meetings, has a number of committees and assesses CEO performance. CGD's board is 35% non-male, 22% non-white, and 16% from an aid eligible country.

ANNEX 2. LIMITATIONS

During the research process, we encountered several limitations to our methodological approach. First, the process of categorizing board members by pre-defined criteria proved challenging because of publicly available biographical information not necessarily being presented according to such categories. To mitigate the risk of misinterpretation we reached out to NGOs to verify our analysis. This sometimes led us to revise our initial assessments and sparked deeper discussions with organizations about their governance policies. Not all NGOs responded to our verification requests.

Two NGOs declined to verify data for either the representation or national origin characteristics. In these cases, they are excluded from group totals. In the verification process, several organizations attributed the policy influence competency more liberally than the categorical definition of having a background in high-level governmental representation. Examples included representatives from regional civil society organizations, private sector leaders, and high-profile individuals. In some cases, board members clearly added value to the organization through capacities not captured by any of the competency definitions, such as in branding, marketing, and broader “influencing” with the public, donors and others. In all cases, we have kept the competencies as applied by NGOs through the verification process.



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