

Do WE Have a Problem? The Future of Charity and Canada's Aid Sector | Text Transcript

This is a text transcript of the webinar “Do WE Have a Problem? The Future of Charity and Canada’s Aid Sector” presented by the Guelph Institute of Development Studies. The event was recorded on October 16, 2020 and was moderated by Prof. Steffi Hamann, University of Guelph. The guest speakers were Simran Singh, Rebecca Tiessen and Nicolas Moyer.

Transcript:

Steffi Hamann:

Welcome everybody and thank you so much for joining us for this official relaunch of our annual GIDS speaker series. I'm really pleased to see all of you in our virtual meeting today. My name is Steffi Hamann and I'm an Assistant Professor at the Guelph Institute of Development Studies and the organizer of the World in 2030 event series.

Now we are here to talk about the WE scandal today and about its implications for charities in Canada and for the wider community that works in the international development and aid sector. I'm certain most of you have a rough idea of what constitutes the scandal, I'm just going to give a very brief recap about you know, what it's all about before I will introduce our panelists Simran Singh, Rebecca Tiessen and Nicolas Moyer and then get the conversation with them started.

Now the WE charity was founded in the 1990s by the Kielburger brothers and it grew out of the Free the Children movement. Most Canadians will be familiar with the flashy, arena filling, WE day events that they put on each year to instill in young Canadians that idea that we can have an impact and effect change, both locally and globally.

WE charity activities included things like food and clothing drives and fundraisers for domestic and international aid projects - and the WE charity is a separate entity from ME to WE which is also well known. ME to WE is a private sector company that the Kielburgers also ran, but Me to WE recruited young people for voluntourism trips to countries like India, Kenya and Ecuador.

Now all of these organizations have been scrutinized and criticized within the community of Canadian development practitioners and scholars for quite a while because their for profit - or, a for profit motive, was obscured behind a front that purported charitable corporation, and often involved celebrities to appeal to the target audience. Former employees have also raised concerns about a controlling work environment and racist practices within the WE organization.

But it was this summer that the WE charity was dragged into the spotlight and repeatedly made headlines as the center of attention, a much larger controversy involving the Federal Government under the leadership of Justin Trudeau. The hashtag "WE scandal" has made

waves on Canadian Twitter accounts, and so, that's probably the part that you're most familiar with at this point.

Because in short, the cabinet had selected the WE charity to carry out a 43 and a half million dollar contract financed through tax revenue to manage a student volunteer program called the Canada Student Service Grant program, and like other government support programs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this was meant to provide public funds, 900 million dollars in total, to pay students for volunteer services at a maximum rate of 10 dollars an hour.

But it quickly raised questions about how and why the WE charity was selected to take on the responsibility of administering this public program, with allegations that the decision process had not been transparent. Instead critics have pointed out that the Trudeau family and members of the Federal Cabinet like Finance Minister Bill Morneau had close ties to the WE organization and alleged that they used their influence and their power to make this happen.

So, we all know what came of it, the Canada Student Services Grant was eventually cancelled and the WE organization announced that it would wind down its operations in Canada altogether. So that's our starting point today, and I'm so pleased to welcome our three panelists who are here to unpack and discuss all of this with us, and I promise I'll stop talking soon because I'm really not the main attraction here today, because the main attraction, of course, are our guest speakers.

Let me start with introducing professor Rebecca Tiessen, who is a well-known development scholar with close ties to the University of Guelph. She's an international development studies graduate herself and a member of the GIDS external advisory board. She now hails from the University of Ottawa where she is, among other things, the associate director and undergraduate coordinator for the International Development and Global Studies Program.

She has researched the role of voluntourism and development in aid programming for many years and I'm so glad she's here to provide us with some of their insights today. Professor Tiessen is joined by Simran Singh who has been working as a development practitioner for more than 15 years.

She has been affiliated with government agencies in Canada, and the UK, and with the UN refugee agency, but today she works in the non-governmental sector. She's the Vice President of Global Programs for CARE Canada, one of the leading non-profit organizations committed to combating social injustices and poverty around the world, and I know she too is eager to share with us her thoughts.

So Simran thank you so much for joining us today. And finally, we have Nicolas Moyer President and CEO of Cooperation Canada, which was until very recently known as the Canadian Council for International Cooperation. That's a mouthful. An institution that brings together organizations working in the international development and humanitarian aid sector.

Cooperation Canada is dedicated to strengthening the efficiency and impact of aid workers around the world and Nick has years of experience in this field. I know he's a busy man, but I'm very grateful that he was able to make time for us today, so welcome Nick. So, I decided to cap our meeting to an hour today, mostly because we all feel that Zoom fatigue, so rather than trying to rush through and cover all possible angles on the subject, this is meant to be more as a conversation starter.

There may be a little time for audience questions towards the end but the key goal here is to shed light on what's going on and provide our audience members with food for thought about you know, this overarching subject matter. So without any further ado from me, let's officially get started. Simran, Rebecca and Nick let me start with a question to all of you.

By way of introducing yourselves could you tell us why you've been following the press articles about the unfolding scandal closely over the summer? None of you is you know, working for the WE charity, but why is it that each of you still cares very deeply about the subject matter professionally speaking, and Simran why don't you get us started?

Simran Singh:

Sure, I think before I start I just want to acknowledge that there are some really smart and passionate people that worked for WE and that this is a really difficult time for them whether or not you know, I've agreed with the way they approach development, is almost incidental, but I just want to acknowledge that there are a lot of very smart people that have dedicated a lot of their time working for the charity, and that, and what's happened is unfortunate for those people themselves.

I think, I would say, maybe I'll start like a little bit personally eleven-year-old Simran was skeptical of Free the Children, and adult Simran was skeptical of WE. So just to put that in context I was child of the 90s, I, you know, grew up with the Kielburgers, I saw a lot of that and there was a certain amount of skepticism from my own personal background.

It's being a child of an immigrant and you know, voluntourism not really being a thing that I really understood because that was just my summer vacations to India. So putting that aside, and my personal perspective, I think professionally it was really hard to watch because, you know, the international development sector and the role that WE played was, for a lot of Canadians, WE was what international development - was the international development sector.

And so you know for organizations like CARE that have significant amount of work around accountability, and compliance, and ensuring that we are being very thoughtful and careful around Canadian taxpayers' money, the concern was that we were going to get, we were going to be caught in that backlash and discourse around WE and we are not that, we're not the - we have, obviously we're a very different operation than WE, but for a lot of Canadians they didn't

understand that nuance, and so for a lot of us at CARE we were watching it to see how the conversation would unfold.

And I mean it was also particularly interesting because we're in the middle of a global pandemic, and we really know right now that global, we need global solutions to what's happening, and so seeing that kind of potential erosion of trust of the Canadians in the sector was hard to watch because we know that this is not a time, this is not a year ago where maybe, it would have been a different conversation.

We're at a really critical juncture within our sector and within the pandemic and we needed, we need that support around the work that we're doing in developing countries. So, I'll stop there because I have a lot of thoughts about this so, give space for others.

Steffi Hamann:

And we'll have more time to come back, thank you so much Simran for your initial thoughts. Rebecca you commented a couple of times on Twitter over the summer as well why did you feel compelled to follow the events this summer?

Rebecca Tiessen:

Great, well thank you Steffi for inviting me and I'm so grateful to have this opportunity to be able to hear what other people in the sector have been reflecting on over the years and what they're thinking about now. So, it's been really a great opportunity both to be reading about this over the last several months, to be having conversations, because the truth is we really haven't been able to have conversations about WE.

We've known for a long time that WE has a problem and there are various reasons for that. One is it was really hard to get information about WE and its programs, I would ask for very, you know, basic information as part of my data collection around organizations that are sending volunteers abroad, even just like numbers, and where students are going, where youth are going and so on.

Very difficult to get that information, and while it's so hard, it was such an enigma to us, it was also ubiquitous. Everywhere I turned was something to do with WE. So, if you were at Chapters you'd see a WE pencil, you'd go to the store and you could buy a ME to WE sandwich. So, when I found out from a high school friend of mine who wrote to me and said, you know, what do you think of this student volunteer opportunity?

And I scanned through it and I found very subtly at the bottom a reference to how this is a WE run activity I was like you know, where are they not? So, it was really an important moment I think for us to start to talk about this organization. I was really grateful that some spaces had opened up because for probably, 15 or so years many of us in who teach international development have been asking for more conversations and more information.

The information we had In my position, the information that I had, was really from students. So students who maybe had been involved with WE day activities or who had gone on the ME to WE programs in Kenya and in other countries, would come into our courses in international development studies suddenly feeling very uneasy about their experience or having felt unease as a result of their experience.

It was kind of like Simran had said, you know, there was a healthy skepticism among many young people. And so, we spent a lot of time working with students to unpack what they had learned through these programs. In one way it's an opportunity, these are students who are coming to us who are really interested and committed to social justice, and international development - [Rebecca is interrupted] Adam, you're - you're, you're not on mute.

Great, so um, so the... Yeah, so these students wanted to know more about what it is that they learned, and they wanted to unpack those experiences. So it was a good moment for us over the last few months to have the conversations that many of us were having very quietly in the schools because we weren't able, in the universities, because we weren't able to have these kinds of conversations.

So, and really I was concerned for people coming out of these programs. Many of these young people coming into universities had deep regret for their experiences, they had big concerns about whether or not their involvement in this program was going to hamper their goals and their future in the international development sector. Is it a liability to be seen as having been associated with an organization that is so highly criticized, but not criticized publicly? So, this was a great public moment to have that critique.

Steffi Hamann:

Thank you Rebecca. I think we had similar experiences in the Guelph Institute of Development Studies and you put it really concisely. Nick let me turn to you what were your initial thoughts, why were you particularly interested in the events? I know you were invested too.

Nick Moyer:

Yeah and frankly the question is where to start, you know, Cooperation Canada is the National Association of International Development Humanitarian Organizations, we loosely represent as a trade association would, an entire sector that is over 2000 organizations that in Canada are registered to work internationally.

We have 90 members, they are some of the countries most extraordinary organizations, they do outstanding work around the globe in so many different ways. But WE has always been an outlier, and it has been an outlier in many ways. They have not been part of the communities that formulate best practice in the sector, and even as Rebecca was just saying their dominating presence in the Canadian, sort of, sphere in culture has had a big, sort of, influence on how Canadians view international development work.

And there has been a lot of murmurs over years about this organization, how it operates. Concerns around transparency that have already been raised, the inability for us to get answers to how things work there. Where a sector, as any in the charitable sector, whether you're looking at international development or others, where our most important resource, the very first that allows us to do anything, is public trust.

And so certainly looking at this scandal and its unfolding has been very worrisome on a variety of levels because there is a risk that actually Canadians perceive that the WE charity and its many organizations are in some way representative of how other organizations operate, and they are not, they are truly an exception in a variety of ways.

And I think there's a self-critique that needs to be there for international development organizations that we haven't been able to, in a constructive manner, raise these issues earlier. So, this scandal that started as a political scandal around domestic programming in response to COVID in Canada, actually has allowed us to open up, you know, lift the hood and look in into this organization in ways that we haven't before.

And I'll say there's a lot here I think to take away as a sector in terms of reflections for, you know, really deepening best practice. At Cooperation Canada we've got a code of ethics that all our members sign up to, and it really identifies core elements of best practice in international development, and high among those are transparency and accountability. And really what we're seeing here is so many inappropriate ways of, you know, building public trust, it's exactly, a lot of what we're seeing is actually doing the exact opposite with respect to WE.

Now I'd just like to raise a couple of things that I think have really come away from me and have been part of why I've been watching this so closely, of course the public trust piece but, there really are with WE some challenging questions around outdated models of development practices, and really we are, in this space, able to talk about, and must talk about, issues of you know, voluntourism and what that means.

Intersections of private center sector interests versus development focus, communities being at the center versus Canadians and donors, and I think one of the challenges with WE has always been this tremendous success in engaging Canadians, right? And youth, and filling stadiums. I'll acknowledge many organizations have looked at that longingly with some elements of envy in terms of ability to engage Canadians, and yet if you really looked at WE it felt like that was their mandate, not working with communities overseas.

You know, the recent statements by WE that they would return to their roots of international development leave me with tremendous questions because I don't know what their international development model is, and when asked questions they don't really share. It is concerning to me that this organization with its size and influence in Canada has never been part of, whether that's major conferences, working level groups, best practice development, they are absolutely absent and have been throughout their history from these places where organizations challenge one another, elevate best practice and, so like, we don't know.

And actually, we're watching through the news and investigative journalism what is actually happening behind the scenes in this organization. I'd say there's a really important other piece here, and that's the question of power and access. So, this organization has had access to government in a way that other organizations have not, and this has actually, it's concerning to me on a variety of levels. One is, you know, obviously the privileged access and influence they may have had, but the fact that other organizations don't have that and so questions of equity.

And even worse now, is my concern of the impacts on government, now sort of taking a heavy-handed approach to tighten the screws and limit any risk of, you know, perceptions of conflict or - that actually will make it harder for the rest of organizations to work effectively with government that is now going to be even more risk averse than I would argue they often have been. So those are some of the things that I've certainly been thinking about, I'm sure we'll touch on many more.

Steffi Hamann:

Yes indeed, thank you so much, you, all of you brought up various really important aspects and sort of conflicts and controversies that relate to you know, so many different pieces. I think I'm going to turn a question to Rebecca to help us shed a little more light about you know what is it that's actually so controversial about WE.

You've done a lot of work, Rebecca, on the topic of recruiting youth for volunteer trips and then you know involving them in international development initiatives, why is it you know, in your words that WE was, sort of, stood out as a very controversial organization in this context?

Rebecca Tiessen:

So, I would say that the big concern was around the white savior complex, and the way that so much defines the kinds of programming, the approach, the rhetoric, the material, the advertisements of promotional work. And this has been covered really, really well by a number of people, graduate students, people who've written blogs, and op-eds by No White Saviors. So, there's a lot of really great material out there that helps us understand that.

What I think is a concern though is that, that skepticism was there, that critique existed, people were thinking about you know, white saviorism, you know long before this was talked about as it has been over the summer, but what it's done is I think is it's entrenched the skepticism in all thinking of doing any kind of experiential learning abroad, volunteering, international co-op placements, working in development, so in effect what it's done is it's kind of brushed the sector with you know, one paintbrush one stroke right?

So, people are not able to think more critically of the different kinds of programming that's out there, and to consider different options that exist. So, for example voluntourism is one example of opportunities for Canadians to go overseas, but it's not the only model. But people tend to conflate all overseas volunteering experiences with voluntourism, and there's some really important distinctions to be made.

One of which is the for-profit versus not-for-profit model. So Canada has a vibrant volunteer cooperation organization sector, a not-for-profit model, programs that are very much linked to existing development programs, the partner organizations are actively engaged in choosing which Canadian comes and works with them based on the skills that they have and the needs that the organization has.

The Canadians don't get to shop for the country, or the experience they want to have, they don't get to decide if they're gonna, you know, feed monkeys or I don't know, build a school. They have a set of skills and the partner organizations are able to say, these are the skills that we want, and that's a huge difference compared to the voluntourism model.

But I worry that people are generalizing across the sector and not really thinking about the diverse experiences, the diverse models that exist, and using that knowledge to make informed decisions about really great opportunities for which, you know, based on the research that I've done now in more than 20 countries with partner organizations to find out, what do you actually think about hosting international volunteers?

You know, are there problems? What are the issues? We've hired locally based researchers to help us get less biased responses, less polite responses, and there's an overwhelming positive association of working with Canadians in the international cooperation sector and that positive experiences in that volunteer cooperation work not in the voluntourism work.

And so, we have to, you know, we're thinking critically, we've got this moment to think about white saviorism and to continue to do that, I believe very strongly in us really unpacking that and addressing those issues. But at the same time we also have to remember that our partners that we work with around the world are also very engaged with Canadians, and want to continue to stay engaged with Canadians, because there's potential for solidarity, for mutual learning, and for exchange in very valuable ways.

Steffi Hamann:

Also really important points and I think, you know, it's important to really pull out that there is a difference between the for-profit voluntourism model and something like a co-op placement for IDS students who come with certain skills and, you know, that are placed in a strategic manner with actual development goals in mind, and that harks back to things that Nick said about it being important to differentiate between the WE model and you know, other actual beneficial development initiatives in Canada.

So, thank you very much Rebecca. Simran let me turn to you and ask now that you know, we see things shifting in some ways and obviously, this being a moment of change in some way, do you see you know the conversations that are coming out as a result of the WE scandal as a symptom of some sort of larger shift in the landscape of Canadian development organizations? What's sort of the - can you give us a little bit of insight on the bigger picture here?

Simran Singh:

Sure, I think it's really important to situate it within what's happening within the sector more generally. I think it's important to, you know, the MeToo movement, the refocusing and discussion around the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as the anti-racism movement, and you know the pandemic accelerating things like localization, a lot of discussion around decolonization of aid.

All of this stuff has been happening and as Rebecca has said there's been lots of discussions around white saviorism that's happened, but all the stuff was happening, you know, in parallel to what was happening with the WE organization.

And I think what was really refreshing for me to see is an actual conversation about racism, and identifying some of the work that's been happening, not just with WE, but just generally within the sector as being racist, and I think, you know, there's a lot of focus on the work that WE has done that it does seem like white saviorism, but there is a problem within our sector more generally, and again I'm saying this very generally, it's not the same for everyone and all this stuff.

But there is a certain amount of white saviorism that underpins our sector and it's taken us a while to maybe come to terms with that. It's a very deeply uncomfortable topic for many of us in the sector. We're learning, a lot of organizations and NGOs are now going on a journey around diversity and inclusion and better understanding what this means.

And so I think the discourse around WE has been shifted, I think there's more comfort identifying some of these really uncomfortable issues and more comfort in talking about that more openly, and I think, I hope, that's going to mean that - and I think it's, both Nick and Rebecca have mentioned this.

We've all known and we've heard murmurs around WE there's been an, again for lack of better term, discomfort about talking about it but this summer, there was some real honest conversations on some of this work and there's a reflection around some of the criticism level that WE, again, recognizing WE as Nick said is a very different modality from a lot of us, and we do a different kind of development work, but it was a moment to say, we need to also reflect on the work that we're doing.

And we need to better understand the role that we're playing, and I think it's part and parcel of a larger conversation that's happening with Canadian NGOs around the world that we need to play, in Canada and our role as, you know, INGO headquarters and so, you know, I found it really fascinating to see how people were talking about it.

I know I've been personally talking about racism for a while, but it was just nice to be able to hear others acknowledge that was an issue and to kind of shift that conversation away from some of the words that we talk about, where we kind of dance around the term talking about racism.

And I think it's also been really interesting because you've also seen the shift of, it's not good enough to not just be racist but the importance of being anti-racist, and I think that is a really, for me personally, a really enlightening shift. And I'm hoping that, you know, the WE scandal plus all of the other things that are happening in the sector is going to shift the way we work because I think we're in a bit of a, we're in a moment of reckoning.

We can either change or we can become archaic and I think it's important for us to evolve and recognize that, you know, us as a Global North we need to be looking at a role incredibly differently. And again, this is part and parcel of a conversation that's been happening for 15 years, but I've actually really felt that moment of change at right now, in a way that I haven't felt for a long time.

Steffi Hamann:

So, you're saying it's essentially, this uncomfortable process that we're going through might just be a necessary process in the larger process of decolonizing our charitable sector?

Simran Singh:

Right because, we have to challenge ourselves. It's gonna be these moments where some of these issues are brought to light, that is gonna make us move into a different direction, because we, as Rebecca says, so many of us have had these conversations privately but what was happening with WE was happening around localization, the conversation and decolonization of aid has forced us to have more of those conversations openly in the sector and name some of these really deeply uncomfortable issues.

I have not been able to talk about racism as much as I have in the last six months, openly on panels, and so for me that's a step in the right direction.

Steffi Hamann:

100%, absolutely. So, Nick you have been working on bringing together the non-profit sector for many years and you've been reckoning with a lot of the challenges that face charitable organizations, for a while. In your opinion, what are under the current circumstances, given the economic and the political climate, especially you know, the context of an ongoing global pandemic, what are the greatest challenges for charitable organizations in Canada currently?

Nick Moyer:

Can you give me an hour? I-

Steffi Hamann:

Not quite. [laughs]

Nick Moyer:

No listen, I think, you know, that the COVID crisis has really been and will continue to be a defining feature of a generation, it has very much bubbled up to the surface inequalities that existed already, it is having pervasive and wide-ranging impacts. I would argue that yes, the health impacts of COVID, but in fact it's all the side and corollary impacts that are really tremendous and numerous.

And I really do have to point out that after decades of consistent development progress globally, although we focus as a sector on problems, there has been tremendous progress in terms of kids in school, vaccination levels, poverty levels decreasing across the globe. All of that has stopped, it has actually in some cases started regressing, and so we have to be very conscious of this.

In fact, the needs around the world are greater than ever, in that sense that we have to double down. The objectives around sustainable development goals that we have set for the globe for 2030 are very much in jeopardy.

And so organizations are dealing with all of those ramifications elevating inequalities within countries, gender equality at risk, you know, domestic abuse, women being on the front lines of the response across the globe wherever they are, carrying the higher burden of the of the challenges and risks, you know, we could talk about human rights being under threat today in governments and authoritarian regimes, using the excuse of COVID to clamp down on organizations and humans rights defenders.

You know, there's a regression in terms of state self-interest and not being able to work together the way that we should to build the multilateral order that we need. We need robust public health institutions at the very least, and yet we're seeing countries pull back instead of investing when they should be.

So, I could speak for a long time, I think what I would say is organizations are really struggling with a very ambiguous context. We are an organizat- we are a sector that has always been strong in self-critique I don't see that changing, as Simran has pointed out there are issues we have known for a long time, as Rebecca did, that are now bubbling up in important ways.

The WE scandal hasn't happened in a bubble. We have had Black Lives Matter happen, and very importantly, raise up the importance of taking anti-racist approaches. When you hold the mirror up to ourselves, as a sector, we do not do as well as we want to do, our principles are strong, I think our principles align, but our performance hasn't, and how do we match up with that? And I think we're going to be consistently challenging ourselves. Professionals that work in international development can never say the job is done, there's always another critique that we can level at ourselves.

You know, if I could just take one moment to say, we have talked about a lot of important things, and voluntourism, and white savior, and taking anti-racist approaches, but the WE scandal has also elevated really important questions around transparency and accountability in

charitable organizations, and how governance is set up, and I really want to make a point to say that what we're seeing from WE is very much not the norm.

That in fact, organizations that work professionally in this sector take very seriously not just potential conflicts of interest, but potential perceived conflicts of interest. Tremendous efforts go into making sure that things are set up in very transparent and accountable ways, and we actually need to be looking at those infrastructures that underpin how we work.

So, when we think about Global North and Global South relationships, we have structural problems that are systemic, they're built into our infrastructure as charitable organizations, as NGOs. In Canada, we have the Canada Revenue Agency that actually dictates basically what is a very colonial approach around something called direction and control, it's enshrined in our income tax act, it's been there for 70 years, we have to excoriate that, we have to get it done.

And so, there are some real challenges for us going forward, and yes, the WE scandal basically elevates all those things. If I can weave one picture it's one of complexity, where there are tremendous efforts I think across Canada in the sector and across the globe, to find ways of progress, and I think it's just an ongoing effort for all of us.

Steffi Hamann:

Let me throw this out to all of you now, thank you for sharing some of your first impressions from your own personal and professional backgrounds, but I you know really want to open it up for broader conversations now.

Nick already brought up the larger implications on the charitable sector, Simran and Rebecca do you have you know, more thoughts on what other implications the WE context really has on organizations that are also present but you know, not as flashy as WE? Simran I see you unmuted yourself.

Simran Singh:

I did I was just going to say I think Nick made a really important point around transparency and accountability, I think for a lot of organizations like CARE and for a lot of members of CC - Cooperation Canada I was just going to say CCIC, that is such a critical component of the way we operate.

I cannot go into the amount of details around our governance structure, our accountability, transparency, our fiduciary risk and all those things, which are things that we don't often talk about because they're not as interesting but are such a component of the way we work, and it's hard to kind of explain to Canadians how we're different. But I just wanted to re-emphasize that point because Nick is right, that is, it is such a complex component of the way we work and that is very different from the way WE has kind of operated.

I think the other point, and this is something that we've been - we and WE, it's unfortunate - that CARE has been reflecting a lot about internally is the role we have played around engaging

Canadians and students and that, as Nick has said, a lot of us have looked at the way that WE has operated in terms of engaging with a bit of envy, and so there is a little bit of a reflection around whether or not we agree with how they've engaged with them, and the content, and all of that other stuff, but they were able to draw attention to an issue that oftentimes is not something that Canadians are interested in and so you know, I think as an organization, like CARE and others were reflecting on how do we tap into that engagement of youth?

Because it was very clear that youth and students care about international development and organizations like CARE maybe haven't been able to engage in a way that captures that interest, and works for them to kind of explain the complexity of work, but also be like be part of the call to action and how do we maybe make the work that we're doing, which is incredibly complex, more accessible for people outside our sector?

And we've had internal conversations around where CARE is seen as the professor, and that's something that you know, I've often looked at WE and said, okay I don't agree with a lot of what you're saying but you can engage Canadians, and how can we as a sector be better at that? And tapping all that potential that exists.

Steffi Hamann:

Rebecca do you see that potential too especially when it comes to engaging youth?

Rebecca Tiessen:

Yeah, in fact, as Nick was talking earlier and then Simran was picking up on it, the points of accountability and transparency are so important, but I think what you know, Simran's just adding to that discussion right now is responsibility. What is the responsibility that we have now as a sector and you know, from CARE's perspective you have your own you know, goals and priorities around you know, engaging Canadians.

I also think it's worth us in the academic community to think about the responsibility that we have to present the breadth of experiences, the breadth of examples that exist of different kinds of development modalities. The good, the bad, and the ugly.

But I think what happens for students too often is that we present over and over again the ugly, and we're not really showing the range of it of kinds of programming that is offered, and I think that distorts our view and it can create some healthy criticism among our students but at the same time it means our students are leaving programs without a really good sense of what is working, what could we scale up.

And more broadly, I think that we as Canadians have a responsibility to educate the very broad Canadian community about the good work that happens through international development, and I think that's a responsibility that falls to the Federal Government to reinstate or to reintroduce funding for public education, development education, to create better messaging

for Canadians so that they can start to see that you know, a bad apple is not the experience of an entire sector.

So those are two things that I think I would just add to that previous conversation.

Steffi Hamann:

Thank you, and I do want to open it up to the audience if you have any urgent questions please do feel free to put them in the chat and I'll try to pick up on them as I continue this conversation with our panelists.

One question that is on my mind is about you know, the controversial issues in the context of the WE scandal that came out about the role of the for-profit sector in our development landscape, and you know, this is maybe a question that I'd like to ask Nick first. Does the private sector have any legitimate role in the implementation of development efforts and aid delivery or, what are your thoughts on that?

Nick Moyer:

Well I think very much the private sector has a role to play. I mean that's a fact, I mean whether you're talking about small business you know, the first people that you know, are responsible for their development in any community are individuals themselves, and often private enterprise you know, entrepreneurialism is very much central to development as we see it, and we have to be able to engage in constructive ways.

I think engaging with the private sector also comes with tremendous challenges and there are very structural differences in the priorities that are set by non-profit you know, development actors, civil society versus for-profit organizations who have to maximize benefits for their shareholders, we have to go in eyes wide open around these things.

One of the things that I would say is that whenever there is partnership between civil society and the private sector, we have to be looking at private sector actions that are supporting charitable objectives you know, development objectives and not the other way around, and that's really just to me, it's that simple actually.

That as long as it is constructive, as long as it is tied with well-established sort of, development objectives and done in ways that engage communities that meet best practice, there is a lot of potential in engaging with elements of the private sector. When we find ourselves in places where development actors are in some way supporting a private sector interest now we've got an issue, and something we really have to look at closely.

So I guess that's sort of my interpretation on this, and there are a lot of intersections here with what the WE scandal has brought up because the voluntourism model, if you look at it, is really

about well, there's some we don't know in fact about how WE had structured this, but at the center is actually the participant and to me that's a core issue.

So, the participant raising money, that goes towards a private enterprise, that may or may not give a significant portion of its revenues to a charitable enterprise. But who is not at the center? The community at the other end, which is where it really should be, and so we have to be asking those tough questions. Um, yeah so on that question.

Steffi Hamann:

Thank you Nick. Simran, same question to you, you know, working you saw the work of development organizations from the governmental side you know, you saw it from the NGO side, what role does the private sector play in your opinion?

Simran Singh:

I mean, I think Nick has outlined it quite clearly and I couldn't agree more with Nick. I think, you know, I think there is obviously a role for the private sector to play and as Nick has said it needs to support development objectives and I think that's really critical.

I think, you know, 10 years ago or 15 years ago there was that kind of - you thought of the private sector as maybe something you don't want to engage with but I, you know, from the humanitarian side, my background is humanitarian, as Nick has said the needs are huge, the humanitarian needs are growing, COVID has exacerbated so many existing inequalities.

It's clear that governments, and the UN, and NGOs are not going to be able to solve this problem or support on our own, we're going to need that engagement with private sector, but as Nick has outlined it needs to be supporting the end goal of alleviating poverty and so yeah, I mean, put simply, yes you need that, we need to figure out how to work with them in a way that's - Sorry, CARE for example is working with private sector and looking at different ways to engage with them but as long as we're clear and on the same page around what those objectives are that's what's really critical in terms of that engagement.

Steffi Hamann:

Yeah and there's certainly interesting challenges in terms of the philosophy of different sector and sort of their role in the society overall. Rebecca, I have a question here from a student, from Coleman, who wants to know more about the WE charity model and I think you'd be good, well placed to answer it.

Coleman wants to know is the WE charity model shared by other development organizations on a smaller scale, do others do basically what WE had been doing or are they a complete outlier in the Canadian development landscape?

Rebecca Tiessen:

So I'm going to answer that question and also highlight a little, give some of my thoughts also on the private sector because one of the things that made WE stand out from a lot of development organizations that I've studied is that it has relied really heavily on private funding, and one of the reasons that that's posed some challenges now that we can really clearly see is that it's given them some free reign, less accountability to the Canadian public, and that I think is a big challenge.

I think that's something that we have to address, and so just to answer or to expand on that a little bit in terms of you know the world of private funding, yes I absolutely think that private funding is really important but it has to be done in partnership with organizations that are experienced, it has to be done in line with the priorities that we've set out as a country so we can really invest our money well, and it has to avoid these vanity projects.

So often private companies have whatever thing that they think is exciting and they want to claim and have ownership of and really market as their own, whether it's the Bush Foundation's abstinence project in Uganda which was, of course, a failure.

So I think that's really important that we think about, and also in line with private funding, these are big companies in a lot of cases that we're talking about that are providing money, and rather than them choosing where their money goes, I think it's through the taxation process that we're able to access those resources to put towards development cooperation. That to me I think is a big priority.

So I think we have to be a little bit more clearer that we're not going to allow private companies to own their little vanity projects around the world and to create little niche projects but rather to invest that in money that we know can be accountable, that we can be accountable to Canadians, to our constituents, the communities that we're working with around the world.

The WE charity model it's really different in part because it is the most - you know, we knew it was complicated but it's only after the last few months that we realized how incredibly complicated this whole suite of different organizations that change names and move money around.

So I can say pretty confidently that I have never come across any organization like that ever, I think Nick's maybe in a better vote to be able to talk about that, having an overview of the different development organizations in Canada, but there are other organizations that do for-profit volunteering so that one part of WE charity that does the formerly, the ME to WE - sorry the Free the Children, it's hard to keep track of all of these, formerly Free the Children.

There are other models like that and those models continue although probably suffering right now because of COVID and the lack of mobility but this is a moment, COVID has given us a moment to say how do we want to invest our energy and where can we guide students or young people who are really interested in getting cross-cultural skills and learning about the world?

I think it's really important that we have opportunities to engage in exchanges, to send our students abroad, to bring students to Canada, to be able to learn from and with each other, because the richness of that is really being lost in this COVID moment where we you know, can't have the same kind of interactions that we used to before, but it's about finding the models that work better and the for-profit model to me doesn't seem to provide, it doesn't provide the the depth of experience, the depth of understanding and learning.

And frankly I think the voluntourism model is completely misleading. I mean if organizations that do voluntourism called themselves learning projects or cross-cultural tourism, then maybe it would be more close to what's really happening on the ground where, and the emphasis then would be on learning like really getting young people to try to understand why, you know, why problems exist in other countries, what are the challenges that people are facing, and to have that kind of exposure.

But to call it tourism, voluntourism like to really to put that element of volunteering onto what's ultimately a tourism kind of initiative is really false.

Steffi Hamann:

Thank you Rebecca, so following up I mean we all seem to be very much in agreement that things have to change, and this is a good moment of showing just, you know, how much has to change. So, I have two questions from Hillary who asks from a grad student perspective, and from Christy who asked from a development sector professional perspective, who are basically asking the same question.

What are, you know, some of the ideas of how can we go about achieving these kinds of changes? And so, I'd like to ask both Simran and then Nick from, you know, a sort of personal standpoint but then also from an institutional standpoint, what are the concrete things that need to change in order to to make these changes happen?

Simran Singh:

In terms of decolonization of aid?

Steffi Hamann:

Yes, precisely.

Simran Singh:

Okay. I think, okay so, that is a topic that I know personally I obviously feel fairly passionately about and then professionally within CARE we've been doing a lot more reflection around what does decolonization of aid mean, because I think it's a term that's getting bandied about but it's not very clear what does that practically mean?

And so from our perspective right now that means that we're in the process of potentially reviewing all of our policies, how we're restructuring our board, who is in our senior leadership

team, then stepping back because as some of you might know CARE is a confederation. So CARE is a confederation I would say, you know, 95% of our staff are from the communities that we work in, but who, the question then is, even though we have 95% of our staff from the communities we work in, who still holds the power in the decision making?

What does that decision-making look like, how has that been structured, how do we support a shift, and we've been doing a lot of work around shift. The way we're structured is we basically have what we call CARE member partners which have been primarily like INGO HQ's or CARE HQ's that have been very much in the Global North, and so how do we shift that power and decision-making to the communities that we're working, in a much more meaningful way?

So that's like everything from the way we're doing our finance work, the way we structure our partnership agreements, it's really kind of shifting power on its head and shifting the way we've been working on its head and it's a very complex process.

What we're learning right now, it's very much a journey because there's been a certain power that's, you know, there's been a certain lack of diversity maybe amongst a lot of our leadership not just within CARE but I think across the Canadian NGO landscape, and how is that shifting, how do we bring in different voices, what does that look like?

And I know for me personally one of my reflections is as I've gotten more senior is that I tend to be one of the few people of color in a room, and that is changing and that is hopefully going to change, but I think that's part and parcel of the larger conversation of whose voices are being amplified, how do we support that? And how do we work with those - how do we, make sure that our work is being defined and led by our project participants?

Because ultimately the end of the day that is the key part, is the communities that we're working in, the work that we're doing is meeting their identified needs and they've actively made choices around that work, and so basically I could spend hours talking about this because this has been a big part of what I've been thinking about for a while, but there's a lot of different things at play right now.

For those of you who haven't had a chance to, New Humanitarian did a really great webinar about decolonization of aid and if you haven't had a chance to listen to Degan Ali, please do, she runs Adeso which is a Somali organization and she has talked a lot about this, she's talked about fundraising, the way we structured our fundraising, how that works.

And so we're doing a lot of that thinking but I think the important point too is that CARE and other NGOs can change but we still work and operate within a donor environment and our donor has to also change with us and what they're prioritizing, and what's important for them also has to shift in tandem because otherwise we're just reinforcing the need for HQ's to play a certain role, because we're responding to a donor who's providing that institutional funding. So that's my short long answer.

Steffi Hamann:

And Simran if you wouldn't mind if you have the link to the webinar available anywhere if you could just drop it in the chat for everyone to see I think that is a useful plug at this point.

Simran Singh:

I will definitely do that. Nick following up on that, do you agree are there other things organizationally that you think we need to see in concrete terms?

Nick Moyer:

Yeah I think we do, and I will get to that in a moment, and I think the question from Christy comes from a place of some disillusionment too and I think we have to acknowledge that, that there, we are a sector that is permanently in self-critique. We're in a period of tremendous change in evolution globally, our values are being challenged constantly, but I want you to know that we're a sector that leans into that, we're a sector that asks each other these tough questions.

We're always looking to do better, and this is a period where we will be able to evolve to a better place, and we have to really capitalize on that moment. That we are a sector that's not defined by what you're seeing from WE, we're not defined by what are the critiques that make it into the public space.

One of the things I've always lamented about our sector unfortunately, is our public visibility is defined by the bad actors it's not defined by the good ones, good stories are hard to share and to get publicized, and whether that's how we dig into investigations as media or it's a sort of academic look at areas where we can do better, we're not good enough at sharing how well we do and really the quality of the work that is out there, and it really is out there.

I think really in the immediate there's some really significant things that I think our sector will be shifting on, the anti-racist agenda, the decolonization that Simran has been talking about is very live and present, I know it's CCIC - sorry, oh my gosh, I just did it! At Cooperation Canada, we've just changed our name, has, I mean, we're looking at how our sector can define anti-racist objectives and start to hold itself to account to progress on that.

But I would say that there are some really important shifts that are underway and that we should be looking at, we should be really heavily looking at what localization means, we in the long run as international development actors have to be asking ourselves some simultaneous parallel track questions.

What is our relevance in the Canadian context as actors? When we're working on international development programs it's not just about human rights elsewhere it's human rights in Canada, it's not just about you know climate change elsewhere it's about climate change in Canada, to be relevant 20, 30 years from now as the Global South continues to progress we have to be constructive actors in the domestic space.

I think it challenges us to think of in ways that are two ways, so what is the two-way exchange with southern and global partners? Localization is an objective that is intended to elevate the agency, and the role, and the independence, and the freedom of action of our partners overseas.

We have to channel, you know, challenge, sorry, our existing structures in doing that, but one of the critical ways in that is actually looking at our relevance here and we can't only be championing elsewhere we have a role and things are not perfect in Canada either. I would say that one of the things we really do have to acknowledge openly is that the vast majority of our communications with Canadians in aggregate as a sector flows through our fundraising efforts.

This unfortunately has painted an image of what the Global South is like and how charity should be, that is not representative, that is inappropriate, that has fed perspectives of the Global South that are actually now leading to these questions that need to be asked about colonialist agendas and etc., and white saviorism.

We have to be asking those tough questions of ourselves. And I think as we evolve in this very ambiguous space, one thing that non-profit organizations, NGOs, have to embrace increasingly I believe, is our role as advocates. We don't do enough of it, we under prioritize the importance, it's not that we don't I think we do a lot of it, but we can do a lot by advocating more and really owning our role to challenge each other, challenge regulatory bodies.

Whether we're talking about the private sector earlier, you know, empowering southern partners through our donor channels, that is about us advocating with government to do the right thing and we have to really embrace that rule. So, a few thoughts from me.

Steffi Hamann:

Thank you Nick. So, we're rapidly running out of our hour which I knew it wouldn't be a challenge to fill you know, this time with your interesting inputs. Thank you to the audience also for having you know dropped in very interesting questions here and comments.

Sierra, thank you, Sierra made an important point of, you know, about the fact that of course the private sector does have an important role and especially when it comes to small scale businesses, that just because the WE model misused the for-profit model and you know, hid it behind a charitable cause doesn't mean that we should get rid of the idea of the private sector playing an important role.

But I think an interesting thought to end with was brought up both by the GIDS director Craig Johnson and Emma, a student at GIDS also sort of plays to it and that's about you know, the more, the change of the image of the development sector as a whole, and specifically the role of development studies programs at Canadian universities.

So Rebecca that would be a question very briefly for you to address, do you think this is also something that we as universities you know, should take as a moment of change that can, you know, that can help us get better for the future?

Rebecca Tiessen:

Yeah great and I had a chance to think about it actually because I saw Craig and Emma's comments there, and I just wanted to say that I think in many ways it reinforces the work that we aspire to do and that we are doing. I don't know many development studies programs that were partnering with the WE organization prior anyways, but we are partnering with really good organizations.

We're having students have co-op or experiential learning community service learning with organizations like CARE or OXFAM or many other organizations, and I think the more we can do to scale that up is going to give students that rich experience that, you know, that alternative perspective, give them some insights on what's actually happening in terms of the proactive advocacy related work that's being done to create change in Canada and abroad.

Simran Singh:

Steffi, can I say one more thing?

Steffi Hamann:

Please do.

Simran Singh:

Please start wrapping up. I think Nick made a really important point around NGOs being very critical, and I think you've definitely heard from me around my criticisms of the sector, but Nick made a really critical point that I think is important to re-emphasize. At the end of the day, there are a lot of organizations that are doing a lot of very good work on the ground and I think that often gets lost in all of this discourse.

It's really easy for us to focus on kind of the negative component, or as Nick was saying being self-critical because that's just a part and parcel of being in the sector but you know, I wouldn't have dedicated I think my entire life, most of my life at this point, to this sector if I didn't actually see the good in the work that we were actually doing.

As simplistic as that sounds, there is real change that's happening and that's been supported by INGOs, by local partners, by a whole host of different people within the ecosystem and I wouldn't want to disrespect that work because as Nick said, there is increasing need, because of COVID, because of the way the world is structured, and there's still a need for the work that we're doing.

Maybe the modalities need to shift and how we talk about it needs to shift, but ultimately we still, there's still - the work that international development, the work that our local partners are

doing is really critical to challenge some of those existing inequalities that exist in both the communities in Canada but across the world as well.

Steffi Hamann:

Thank you so much and as I said we are on a tight schedule today, but I obviously want to thank all of you for your inputs as my time is rapidly running out let me use the last half - half a minute for a plug, for future events of this type to bring people together to think about these kinds of, you know, current challenges.

Our next event is called Dirty Money and Divestment: Defunding Climate Change. So in early November we'll discuss the role of fossil fuel-based investments in university endowments and pension plans and learn about efforts from different universities to push for divestment, with representatives of the University of Toronto, Queen's University and activists from Fossil Fuel Guelph. So there's more of this type of stuff going on in the future and I do hope we get you know, this type of interactive discussion going again, but for now obviously let me thank our panelists so, so much for their input.

This really shows I think, that the scandal has a lot more implications than just the downfall of the Kielburger brothers which is kind of what seems to have, you know, been dominating the headlines, and I genuinely appreciate you sharing your thoughts frankly and you know, I know I learned a lot from the insights and I do think that our guests appreciate that too.

Thank you also for those inputs from our audience and let me thank all of you very much for making time for this today. So, this is the official end of this event, but I hope that we get to have future conversations about this topic you know, based on these very interesting insights. Thank you, thank you, thank you.