

A life that matters: building a dignity agenda in UK aid

Submission to the inquiry of the International Development Committee on the philosophy and culture of aid.

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What does it mean to say that a life matters? How can we ensure that charities and donors are seeing the full humanity of those they seek to serve? Dignity is the philosophical concept that helps answer those questions. But until now it has been too vague to be of much use. At the Dignity Project, we have been developing tools to help make a Dignity Agenda practical in international development.

Why should you care about dignity?

If you run a business in Hargeisa, Somaliland, here's how you pay your taxes. A group of men, some of them armed, turn up at a time of their choosing. They make an arbitrary calculation of what they can get from you, and send you off to wait for hours to pay. They may arrest you or your employees without warning, or shut down your shop. Women face sexual harassment. People are not treated as equals, they have no choice or chance to consent. They are not recognised as dignified humans.

That's Somaliland - but from meagre meal boxes to Windrush, we've seen plenty of examples of disrespectful governance in the UK. From scandals of sexual assault by charity staff to grim conditions endured by some refugees, dignity gives us a frame to understand the harm we may do. Bureaucracies of all kinds struggle to see the full dignity of those they are supposed to serve.

This disrespect is common, and it is harmful. Afrobarometer data shows that in 13 of 34 African countries, more than half the population do not feel respected by public officials. When we do not treat people with respect, we have evidence from the lab that they are less happy and less empowered, less cooperative, and more prone to conflict. They are less healthy. By contrast, when we affirm people's dignity, good things happen. Democracy functions better, and political tribalism diminishes. There are imperatives to do better for public health, democracy, social justice and development.

Among those calling for a greater focus on dignity are Joe Biden, Antonio Guterres, and Winnie Byanyima. In 'Good Economics for Hard Times', Esther Duflo and Abhijit Banerjee write that, "Restoring human dignity to its central place...sets off a profound rethinking of economic priorities". Many more such quotes could be adduced.

The same calls come from those with the least power in the aid system. One young man in Mathare, a slum in Nairobi, told us that "We would prefer to have respect like those guys from the well developed areas whereby a police officer treats you with respect and they do not harass you....Unfortunately these things happen only to the rich people." A Colombian woman who had been displaced from her home expressed her weariness with aid-givers, telling researchers from the Overseas Development Institute that "They should not treat us as if we were children and decisions should not be made without consulting us. This is dignity."

What do I mean by dignity?

There are many traditions of dignity, and sharp debates about how to pin it down. Here's the simplest way to think about it. Dignity is inherent to all people, regardless of who they are or how they act. Because people have dignity, we recognise that they are entitled to respect. There are three main pathways to show respect better: ensuring choice, equality and recognition. In this tradition, dignity is not something that only belongs to people of a certain rank, or who carry themselves in a certain way. The philosophical debates that inform this conclusion have been discussed in depth in the Dignity Project's literature review.

So, what would a Dignity Agenda look like?

There's a set of practical, evidenced steps we can take to build more respectful international development. The first and simplest of these is to routinely measure whether recipients of aid or services perceive the relationship as respectful. That allows us to start testing improvements, tracking progress and making conscious trade-offs.

We can talk about dignity within our institutions, because experimental evidence shows that doing so makes people five times more likely to commit to a dignity agenda themselves. We should engage with those who experience disrespectful treatment in their own lives, who are ten times more likely to commit to dignity, and those who perceive that the organisation doesn't practice what it preaches, who are eight times more likely to do so.

We can test which types of aid are more respectful. We have good evidence that cash transfers are more respectful than in-kind aid. We have reason to think that small acts of respectfulness - using people's names and giving them a choice of appointment time - don't

make much difference. But there's a whole world of things to test. The three pathways listed above - recognition, choice, equality - are the place to start brainstorming.

If we do start to institute a Dignity Agenda, we can count on support from the public, and from the sector. In an online experiment, members of the public gave 60% larger (hypothetical) donations to charities that promised to emphasize dignity. And in a survey of US nonprofit professionals, 79% said they would raise dignity with their colleagues.

At The Dignity Project, we think there are five big research questions to examine: defining dignity philosophically, measuring respect, describing its operation around the world, increasing perceptions of respectfulness and exploring its consequences, and increasing support for respectfulness in development. We have research projects underway to look at the impact of listening, apologies, research ethics and global measurement.

We've published two working papers, and 14 mini-articles on our website reporting our studies. We're building measures, conducting training workshops and consulting, forming new research partnerships, and advocating for cultures of dignity across development.

How the UK government can engage with dignity

I hope eventually that the FCDO and other aid-giving departments will expect respectfulness and consideration of dignity from their contractors, say so in their requests for proposals, and reward the organisations that can show they deliver on this. I hope that the steps above - measurement, generating ideas based on the three pathways, testing, and expanding the research base - can be pursued by many different aid projects.

As I hope I've shown, there's both an urgent need to do so, and a ready research base to help us. Dignity helps us to see the full humanity of those we seek to serve, and answer the pressing question: how can we make sure that every one feels treated as if their life matters.

Further resources

- [Literature review on dignity in development.](#)
- [Research agenda for dignity in development.](#)