

The Image Dilemma

Rachel Tallon

Education Officer

Global Education Centre

Wellington

Email: rachel@globaled.org.nz

Abstract

Images of the poor or people who are suffering, have been used by media and charities to raise awareness and fundraise for many years. Images of the majority world have been used extensively in this manner by Western Development agencies since the 1960s. This paper gives a brief historical outline of some of the recent debates and issues concerning the use of images by non-governmental organisations in the United Kingdom. The issues concerning the use/abuse of images and their significance in representation of the majority world remains pertinent today and this paper seeks to inform NGOs in Aotearoa New Zealand about some of the issues that have arisen.

Introduction

In August of 2005, a research project called 'Imaging Famine' staged an exhibition in London to explore the issues surrounding the media representation of famine over the previous two decades. A visit to the project's website www.imaging-famine.org reveals that the process of debating and discussing the validity of images of the poor and suffering is ongoing. Publishers, news editors, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and photographers all grapple with using images. In an effort to understand some of the journey the United Kingdom has been on in relation to this field, I have constructed a timeline showing the significant events and debates surrounding the use of images. This is not an exhaustive nor complete history, but it will help the New Zealand reader understand some important events that have shaped the discourse.

Timeline of major events in the UK concerning NGO fundraising images

Mid 1960s	After the Congo and Biafra horrors, the starving African child gained media attention. Not all NGOs used negative images, but many did.
1970s	The debate begins and some radical critics attack the 'starving child' appeals that were used by NGOs.
1984-5	The Ethiopian Famine – a watershed in the debate between fundraising and educators. The Live Aid concerts contrasted with the growing role of the area of Development Education. The 1984 Famine appeals generated millions of pounds for British NGOs, but strengthened the stereotypes.
1987	<i>Images of Africa: The UK Report</i> , sponsored by Oxfam and the EEC, critical of the 'mass of contradictions arising from both within NGOs and between NGOs'.
1989	The ' <i>Code of Conduct: Images and Messages relating to the Third World</i> ', is adopted by the General Assembly of European NGOs
Early 1990s	UK NGOs start to develop their own guidelines for image use, led by Save the Children, Oxfam, Christian Aid and World Vision. Words like 'dignity, reality and empowerment' were found in their voluntary codes.
Early 2000s	There is a noticeable shift towards 'deliberate positivism' in images used by NGOs. Studies are carried out by VSO and Dfid on the representation of the majority world in the general media and NGOs.
Mid 2000s	In 2002, Dfid and the BBC publish a study of public perceptions of TV news coverage of developing countries and VSO's report on the Live Aid Legacy is published. 2005: <i>Imaging-Famine</i> project and other critical voices, particularly from Africa, raise the concern that the 'Poster Child' image so favoured by NGOs, is still popular, and undermines Africa.

From negative images of starving children, images that evoke the Christian iconography of the Madonna and child to a deliberate positivism, the issues surrounding the type of image used as well as whether images should be used at all, are part of the discussion that the Imaging Famine project seeks to raise and which I would support being raised here in Aotearoa New Zealand within the Development community.

Creations of stereotypes

Images are not without their surrounding context. They can have multiple messages and connotations, not just for the subject, but also for the viewer. One of the major criticisms has been of the use of the ‘de-contextualised lone child’ that has resulted in the creation of a stereotype in the Western mind; that the starving child has come to resemble an entire continent, in most cases, Africa. (Peach, 2004:18). NGO fundraising posters have been a major user of images of the poor, which alongside general media news footage of disasters and poverty can “frequently reinforce...the perception of Africans as helpless victims”, (Colin Jacobson, as quoted in Peach 2004:20). Critical studies of fundraising posters by NGOs point to an underlying relationship of unequal power that is one of neo-colonial ‘trusteeship’ towards the Other, who is in an inferior position (Peach, 2004; Dogra, 2007; Alam, 1994; Clark 2004).

Machiel Lamers carried out research on a Belgium NGO’s annual fundraising posters from 1966 to 2001. He paid particular attention to relation of power between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’. He noted some striking dichotomies between the ‘other’, which was often a helpless child, and the ‘self’, the viewer in the West to whom the poster was directed. He summarised these in a table:

The ‘other’	The ‘self’
Child	Adult
Ignorant	Wise, knowledgeable
Passive	Active
Helpless	Helpful

Lamers (2005: 54)

He argues, that paradoxically, those who are most active in actually trying to improve the situation (the adults in the country affected) are often silenced. Actual and real information about the situation is rare and informed education, including any complicity by Western governments or companies is not mentioned. He argues that images of poor and needy people in fundraising posters could have negative consequences for the country to which they are referring (Lamers, 2005:48). This issue of short-term gain versus long-term damage is a recurrent theme in critiques of fundraising posters beginning with the 1984-5 Ethiopian famine. After this event, Oxfam and the European Economic Community sponsored the *Images of Africa* report which concluded that British NGOs must decide 'whether following the media and promoting images of Africans as tragic and passive is a feasible long-term strategy or a short term solution' (Van der Gaag and Nash, 1987:76). Thus, one of the main critiques is that of reinforcing stereotypes of the majority world that may have negative long-term impact.

From the Ethiopian Famine it is well known that emotive images increase the funding base of NGOs who are then able to offer practical assistance. Even political lobbying is helped through such awareness raising campaigns. Less well known and less documented is the longer impact of negative images on the country, such as reduced investment, negative publicity for tourism, and an overall 'negative' image that can be out of proportion to the country itself.

The dilemma

The dilemma that NGOs face is a double-edged sword: They wish to raise awareness and educate about an issue, but they also need to fundraise. Thus, for many NGOs, their educational arm competes with their fundraising objectives. Education is, amongst other things, about knowledge, the historical and geographical context and the awareness of different perspectives. Fundraising is less about education; in its double role as awareness-raising it is primarily about persuading the populace that they should give financially to alleviate a need. The concern is of the dichotomy that exists: that fundraising may impede education, and in some cases, cause negative and racist education, and this paradox, with all its implications needs to be discussed within the NGO community.

D.J. Clark, the project leader for *Imaging Famine*, notes that representation of the majority world is often negative, out-of-context and rooted in the West's colonial relationship of dominance (Clark, 2005). He asks questions concerning the nature of many images, and finds that there is an imbalance in representation. He quotes Sean Kenny: "Images of too much modernity in the majority world makes the relationship between 'us' and 'them' difficult both economically and psychologically" (Clark, 2005:11). Is it simpler (and better for fundraising) to portray 'them' in an inferior position? Nandita Dogra notes that "The images NGOs choose to project are not based on unmediated or 'free' choice. [There are] limitations of charity laws, tug of multiple stakeholders, specific 'organisation subjectivity', and the very nature of visual images and their myriad interpretations. However, there is still a choice which is deliberately exercised by the NGO when it selects one image over another and uses it publicly" (Dogra, 2007:170).

Escobar has argued that development institutions control a 'regime of truth' about the developing world (Escobar, 1994). NGOs are a significant influence in the visual media that informs people in New Zealand of different countries. A fundraising image of a situation in a foreign country can lead to a false or 'imagined geography' of a country, culture, race, or even an entire continent. Closer analyses of the situation behind an image may reveal that it pertains to perhaps just a small percentage of a country or to just a particular time-bound and uncommon event. The reality is that greater analysis of the situation is not likely (and often not readily provided) and a distorted and incorrect geography of a whole region or people results in the viewer's mind, and may stay that way until proven otherwise.

Shadidul Alam, the director of Bangladesh-based Drik Photography, argues that the West is guilty of 'bad marketing'. He records that in a period of five years of operation, his picture library had many requests for images of Bangladesh by publishers, NGOs, donor agencies. However, the most frequently requested pictures have been of floods, cyclones and slums. He has not yet been asked for a picture of a person at a computer terminal, of which he has plenty (Alam, 2005). Radley and Kennedy (1997:444) raise the question "are 'charity photographs' used by people in the West to order their understanding of their own and other societies?" For NGOs in the West who use images in representing the majority world in some manner, either through campaigns or education, it is essential that they evaluate and critically assess the impact of their images on a variety of different levels.

Complexity versus simplicity

In recent years, the debate around representation has centred on issues of complexity. Cohen asks if NGOs are mere ‘merchants of misery, shaming us into giving money’ (Cohen, 2001:179). Are NGOs more than this? Whether the images are negative or positive, one of the key critiques is that they remain, in the 21st Century, simplistic portrayals of complex situations, cultures and geo-politics. (DFID 2002; VSO 2002) Dogra notes that showing a more complicated reality is difficult for NGOs. She argues strongly for NGOs to challenge the simplistic view:

“Notwithstanding their own limitations and deficiencies in representation, the role of NGOs in challenging and modifying representations and their meanings is of paramount importance. It may lead to confusion in the minds of viewers, as feared by some NGOs, but that bafflement might be preferable to a uni-dimensional ‘truth’ about the Third World.”
(Dogra, 2007:169)

With an increasingly changing world and complex situations that cause poverty and need, simplifying issues and supporting neo-colonial relationships in order to elicit funding will come under increasing scrutiny and criticism, both by the wider community in the West and those being represented, the majority world. This is where the educational arm of NGOs could yield greater influence. Education about any situation that takes in a variety of perspectives, critiques and has a balanced historical background will not just inform those in the West, it will actively mobilise them, perhaps not just to give financially, but to lobby and to take action themselves, perhaps within their own country, perhaps within themselves.

In a paper that explores the educative versus fundraising use of the emotive image, Kate Manzo suggests that ‘dominant media images of the majority world promote emotion without understanding, charity without structural change’ (Manzo, 2006:11). To borrow a term from Stanley Cohen, the question could be asked: Can the Western populace move beyond being ‘cognitive misers’ and be educated to know the wider issues, the bigger picture, and all the complexities in any situations of need, plus, their own (or government’s) messy role within it? Whether NGOs take on this role and seek not so much

to represent the other, but to challenge the situation or whether the majority world do this themselves, remains to be seen.

Images of the majority world used by the general media, NGOs or educational institutions have an incredible power to influence and even control the relationships and the discourse between the viewer in the West and the object in the majority world (Fair, 1993:13). Opening up the discussion and even critiquing their own representations of the majority world by Aotearoa New Zealand NGOs is a positive step. Becoming aware of the history of the debate and engaging with the issues is part of that process. To continue along the same path, using images uncritically, may not be a long-term sustainable nor ethical option. In time, as questions are raised and as research is carried out within this country, even the New Zealand public may wish to move from the position of visual power to a position of equality with their global neighbours.

Rachel Tallon
Education Officer,
The Global Education Centre
Development Resource Centre
Wellington New Zealand

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Acronyms:

DFID: Department for International Development (UK)

VSO: Volunteer Service Overseas (UK)