



Literature Review: The South Through the Northern Eye

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I Introduction

The “public face of development” shapes our relationships with people in the global South¹. Popular images produced by NGOs in the North contribute to the creation of stereotypes and the ways that groups in the South are represented and portrayed in the North. These images often provide the grounds for our interaction with the Southern ‘Other’ and shapes how we see and think about the South as a place.

This literature review will look at some of the major debates on ethical images of people living in the global South, especially regarding poverty. More specifically, we examine some of the tensions around how these images are used in NGO fundraising activities, how these images portray development in popular media, and some of the debates on changing the way we use images of the South in the field of development. Finally, we provide a brief background on some of the academic theory on poverty and representation.

II Fundraising and Promotional Images

NGO promotional and fundraising materials contribute to framing public opinion on development issues. Stimulating public involvement in development issues is a key resource and challenge for many NGO communities, as public opinion influences official government policy and forms a cornerstone of our democratic system. Through pamphlets, websites and television ads, international NGOs produce several (often contradictory) images and discourses on poverty in the South. Over the past ten years, a few different debates have emerged on the ethics and contradictions of these discourses produced by NGOs.

a. Ethical Fundraising in the North

Development organizations may try to pursue a community-based agenda overseas, but the competitive fundraising environment in the North encourages NGOs to market images emphasizing the poverty of people living in the global South. There is an impression that if NGOs use images of empowerment, the public will not donate as much or as quickly because they will not perceive that there is a great need. One of the key debates around

The **Live Aid legacy** of development imagery provides a good example of the role of popular media in constructing the poverty-stricken Southern subject. In a study conducted by the VSO in Britain, Live Aid contributed to a particular set of images of poverty in the developing world:

- Starving children with flies around their eyes
- Victims are seen as less than human
- False sense of superiority and inferiority
- Powerful giver and grateful receiver
- Confidence in out of date knowledge

¹ Note on usage: We understand that there are concerns with the language of the global North and global South, as it reproduces dichotomies and certain kinds of power relations. For reasons of consistency and clarity, we have decided to maintain this current usage.

ethical fundraising, then is the tension between maintaining ethical imagery (which some would argue entails images of empowered Southern citizens) and efficiency in fundraising.

b. Neediness and Empowerment

An important debate revolves around the tensions between representing neediness vs. representing empowerment. Much NGO fundraising and promotional materials are criticized for over-emphasizing the neediness of poor people living in the global South, in order to gain the sympathy and cheque-books of Northern audiences. Some argue that this unfairly represents a single facet of life in the global south, and reinforces patronizing and pity-on, power-over sensibilities among the Northern public. Additionally, some suggest this contradicts NGO practice which has been moving towards alternative models of development emphasizing empowerment frameworks and local ownership of the development process. However, there is a danger that in order to show that they are effective at empowering people, NGOs will feel obligated to present images of happy, empowered people, which may mask or fail to adequately represent very real situations of extreme poverty, marginalization, and exploitation that exist in the South. Thus the dichotomy of neediness vs. empowerment is very much a contested terrain (filled with contradictory messages).

c. Legitimacy and Authority

NGO use of these images contributes to claims of legitimacy and authority. Northern NGOs are legitimate in part because we claim to 'know' the South: by producing these images, we also present ourselves as experts and authorities on the problems of the South. As well, in our fundraising activities we often claim to know what the solutions are. How do we present a critical analysis of our own positions in relation to the people in whose name fundraising is being done, while simultaneously maintaining our legitimacy to the donor community? The tension, therefore, lies between our claims of knowing the global South on behalf of our constituents and being accountable for the knowledge that we produce.

d. Educating the public while reinforcing stereotypes

A central challenge for more ethical use of imagery is negotiating the tension between the need to expand public awareness about development issues, and the dangers of re-producing essentialized or stereotypic knowledge about the developing world. The problem is that the easily-accessible images that accompany public mobilization and fundraising campaigns frequently appeal to an underlying moral obligation to 'save the world's most wretched'; this can create a public knowledge of development that 1) hides the agency of those in the developing world, 2) obscures the multi-faceted political, economic, and social dimensions of situations of poverty and marginalization, and 3) reinforces an enduring sense of western trusteeship and superiority over the developing world.

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III Media and Development Images

Mainstream media also plays an important role in promoting particular kinds of development images.

a. What's in a Photo?

The power of photographs rests in their ability to claim objectiveness and social truth through authentic representations of society. It is important to note, however, that the whole truth can never be captured in one picture: a photograph is a framed version of reality which will always include some aspects while excluding others. Because of this, photographs are never neutral: rather, they are grounded in historically specific political and ideological visions of society.

b. I saw it on TV, it must be true

The results of a 2004 DfID report *Public Attitudes Towards Development* show that 82% of respondents used television news as the most popular source of information about developing countries. Popular images of development produce a certain way of looking at the developing world which is reinforced by CSO fundraising and promotional material. It is difficult to change these discourses, because they are reinforced by popular media images.

c. The Image Economy

Journalists and freelancers who take pictures of people in the South are also interested in selling those images, or are attempting to sell a particular angle or story. It is easier to portray an image or a story that the Northern audience is familiar with, such as the starving African orphans in refugee camps, rather than one which calls into question well-established stereotypes. Clark (2004) suggests that many NGO photo libraries are predisposed to be negative because those are the images that are available to be sold/used. We suggest that while there are an increasing number of positive images of people living and working in the global south, there is an on-going need to interrogate the production and selection of appropriate images of citizens of the global South.

The Department for International Development (DfID) in the UK suggests that in order to strengthen public confidence in, and support for, the fight against global poverty, **our objectives** should be to promote:

- Knowledge and understanding of the major challenges and prospects for development
- Understanding of our global interdependence
- Recognition of progress made, and that further progress is both affordable and achievable
- Understanding of the role that individuals can play

d. A business, not a public service

In the commercial market environment of the television industry, competition from alternative sources of news/media, such as internet, broadband, and multi-channel news services, can create contradictory pressures on the public service principles of ethically representing people and providing in-depth contextualization of events in the global South. A DfID survey in 2000 of 38 British television executives and policy/decision-makers found that while these television policy-makers recognized the importance of informing people about the world, they feared low levels of public interest would make covering the developing world a ratings risk. While we find this a problematic assertion, it usefully highlights the corporate culture of for-profit media. The high costs of maintaining overseas bureaus and the subsequent reliance on consolidated media giants for international coverage, as well as the demise of investigative journalism, also contributes to news coverage that is largely limited to disasters, bizarre events, or visits by prominent westerners.

Sources on Media and Development Images

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IV Change

There are various debates around how to change negative representations of the South in development discourses. With more sensitivity around this issue, the demeaning and patronizing images in NGO publications (what some call a development pornography) are slowly being replaced. However, moving towards more ethical images of development can be tricky, as it involves much more than replacing demeaning images with seemingly neutral ones. This is because the question of ethical images is much more complex than the dichotomy of presenting people as either victims or as empowered.

a. We produce these images, we can change them

Some argue that because we in the North are the producers of these images, we also have the power to change the images (Smith 2004). This provides an opportunity to challenge conventional images of development and to create ethical images. Changing these images could have implications for shifting current relationships between the South and North. But in what specific ways can we, as development practitioners, participate in changing Northern discourses on poverty in the South?

As development practitioners, we need to develop a **critical eye** for unethical images. Important questions to ask when viewing images of development:

- Who took the photograph? What is their position/job/role?
- Why did this person take the photograph? Commercial, personal, voyeuristic reasons?
- How is the photograph being used? Who benefits from the usage of the photograph in the short/long term?
- What message is the photograph meant to convey? What message does it convey?

b. Making our representations of poverty political

Both the causes of poverty and the array of potential strategies for poverty reduction are inherently political. A central challenge for ethically representing the poor is therefore to avoid de-politicizing how we talk about poverty. For example, if we take the time to look beyond the image of a starving child, we are able to recognize that the incidence of famine victim-hood has little to do with overall food supplies and much to do with patterns of distribution and access (Sen 1983). The factors that determine whether or not human beings have access to resources and opportunities are deeply embedded in social and institutional arrangements, which extend in local and global configurations. By representing deprivation as structural and political, we are better able "portray the causes of poverty as surmountable, rather than intractable" (Bastiaensen et. al 2005). If we strive to use images that frame poverty in such 'political' terms we begin to convey that the problem, and possible solutions, ultimately have to do with changing existing structures/relations of power, and changing the institutional arrangements that ensure the reproduction of poverty over time (Bardhan 2002).

c. Linking poverty with Social Justice

The collection of articles gathered in the journal World Development, Vol. 33 issue 6, June 2005, broadly suggests that a better way of approaching ethical representation of Southern poverty would begin by relocating poverty reduction within a broader framework of social justice. We agree that efforts to link discourses about poverty with discourses about social justice might

precipitate both more ethical representations of poor people, as well as begin to generate responses that call into question those institutional arrangements, economic practices, and social norms that contribute to poverty's perpetuation and reproduction. Linking poverty with social justice might provide a broad political framework within which networks and alliances could be forged across a wide variety of activisms and social movements, with local, national, and trans-national intent.

d. Understanding our Privilege

One common critique of conventional poverty reduction campaigns suggests that they allow for band-aid solutions, which make a Northern donor feel good in the short run, but do not adequately address questions of long term action. These campaigns also allow for Northern constituents to act without acknowledging or attempting to deal with broader issues of Northern privilege. The public education that these campaigns produce are inherently focussed on the question of Southern poverty as a stand-alone issue: they do not focus on the various relations of power and privilege that the Northern donor has, or question the positionality of the Northern subject.

Sources on Changing Images of Development

Johan Bastiaensen, Tom De Herdt and Ben D'Exelle. *Poverty reduction as a local institutional process*. World Development, vol. 33, no. 6, 2005

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P.K. Bardhan, *Understanding underdevelopment: Challenges for institutional economics from the point of view of poor countries*. Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics 156 (2000), pp. 216–235

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Yeo, Rebecca and Karen Moore. (2003) "Including Disabled People in Poverty Reduction Work: "Nothing about Us, without Us"" *World Development*, 31 (3): 571-590.

Codes of Conduct regarding Ethical Images

CCIC (Canadian Council for International Cooperation)
http://www.ccic.ca/e/docs/001_code_of_ethics.pdf Section 3.5, pages 12-14

IFRC (International Federation of Red Cross Red Crescent)
<http://www.ifrc.org/publicat/condict/code.asp> Section 10

BOND (British Overseas NGOs for Development)
<http://www.bond.org.uk/aboutus/principles.html> Section B5

V Theoretical Background

There has been a great deal of writing done on poverty and representation. The way we understand and interact with the idea of 'the South' is often grounded in particular social relations. It is also based on historical legacies.

a. Problematizing Poverty

'Poverty' is a loaded term that needs to be interrogated. Representations of poverty often strive to capture the immediate texture and quality of situations of poverty, while papering over and ignoring historical, political, and economic contexts. Poverty is often represented as a snapshot, a static image of temporary manifestations of poverty; this endorses responses designed to ameliorate immediate needs, while making it more difficult

What is Poverty?

"Poverty and inequality are the endemic *situations* that need to be jointly explored in order for reformulated and more specific *problems and solutions* to emerge"
 - Julie Fisher, *Nongovernments*. 1998; P. 27

"Poverty is global, heterogeneous, multi-causal and geographically configured, and has macro-, meso-, and micro-level dimensions"
 - Joe Mullen, *Rural Poverty*, in *The Companion to Development Studies*, eds. Desai and Potter. 2002; P. 149

to address deeper underlying causes and hiding issues such as empowerment, participation, and the agency of the poor. Poverty is frequently conceptualized as a linear problem that requires linear solutions, when in fact it is much more complex and requires an array of different responses.

b. The 'deserving poor' vs. 'the destitute'

A survey by the VSO in Britain found two distinct visions of the developing world in the public imagination. The 'deserving poor' are thought to share similar codes of values with the non-poor, and the causes of their poverty are seen as 'culpable', i.e. caused by a lack of democracy, racial/ethnic tensions, or wars and conflicts, as in Russia, China, or Afghanistan. Alternatively, the 'undeserving poor' are seen as helpless and naturally pre-disposed to poverty, caused by environmental, geographic, and in some cases biological, factors. Most of sub-Saharan Africa falls into this category. We need to avoid using images that reinforce the distinction between the 'deserving poor' and the 'undeserving poor', as this propagates poverty reduction strategies that are apolitical in nature and hinge on income-based interventions targeting the "productive" or "economically active" poor, while further marginalizing the most destitute. (Hickley and Bracking 2005)

c. The historically constructed 'Other'

There is an important relationship between past colonial images and the way we understand 'the Other' in everyday discourses today. Edward Said discussed this process as 'orientalism' and analyzes the ways in which the Oriental subject was constructed within colonialist discourses on difference. We are continually in a process of representing and constructing the global South through visual images, language and discourses. Some argue that these constructions are part of a system of representation, which has roots in historical processes of colonialism (Hall 1996, 1997). The ways that contemporary images of the southern 'other' are constructed, and how we interact with these images, are very much related to past colonial images of places and people in the global South.

"They rely so much on crops, so if they have a bad year, it's all back to square one - it will all happen again, and they'll need our help."
-UK respondent, VSO survey on The Live Aid Legacy, 2001

d. Trusteeship

Related to historical colonial relationships is the idea of trusteeship: the 19th century resolution to the problem of how to achieve progress was that "those who took themselves to be developed could act to determine the process of development for those who were deemed to be less-developed" (Cohen and Shenton, 1996). Today, a tension exists between reproducing older colonial patterns of dependence and attempting to do development in the global South: while we attempt to engage with poverty in ethical ways, some argue that the NGO aid structures have replaced past colonial relationships with a new version of trusteeship, in which "the means of development are entrusted to 'developers'" (Cohen and Shenton, 1996) and control over patterns of development is still primarily based in the North. NGOs have attempted to engage with this critique through models and practices that are based on empowerment. But to what extent do the discourses that we produce through our publications reproduce a notion of development that hinges on trusteeship – the intent of one to act on behalf of another?

e. 'Truth'

Images of the South also provide a clear idea of what is true about the developing world to a Northern audience. This idea of truth is related to issues of power: who has the power to create these images, and who has the power to set the terms of the debate? Essentialized images of the South not only erase the great diversity within societies. they also lead to essentialized approaches to development.

Sources: Theoretical Analyses of Poverty and Representation

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