

Book Review: Representations of Global Poverty: Aid, Development and International NGOs

by Blog Admin

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*Through the efforts of increasingly media-aware NGOs, people in the west are bombarded with images of poverty and inequality in the developing world. **Representations of Poverty** is a comprehensive study of the communications and imagery used by international NGOs to represent the developing world. In this meticulously researched and original book, **Nandita Dogra** examines the full cycle of representation – integrating analyses of the public messages of international development NGOs in the UK with the views of their staff and audiences. Reviewed by **Philip Goodwin**.*



Representations of Global Poverty: Aid, Development and International NGOs. Nandita Dogra. IB Tauris. May 2012.

What do the fundraising and advocacy messages that International NGOs send out, actually tell us about global poverty? How do they help us to understand and respond to it? How do they influence our understanding? These are questions addressed by Nandita Dogra's book which comes out at an interesting time for the UK International NGO community. An old and fierce debate is currently re-emerging in the UK about the nature of international development and the relationship between civil society organisations and government in shaping public understandings of development.

Over the last month or so, the battlelines have begun to be drawn. The recent publication of a working paper by Nicola Banks and David Hulme of the Brooks World Poverty Institute at Manchester University on "The role of NGOs and civil society in development and poverty reduction" has prompted vigorous discussion on the internet and in the UK press between different NGO practitioners and between NGOs and academics. Interestingly and perhaps tellingly, UK politicians have stayed well clear of the argument. Banks and Hulme's critique is that NGOs have lost their way becoming bureaucratic, depoliticised organisations responding primarily to government and donor agendas rather than being the "autonomous, grassroots-oriented, and innovative organisations that they once were".

Alongside this is an emerging disagreement between international NGOs over a proposed joint NGO / UK government campaign on global food security along the lines of the 2005 "Make Poverty History" campaign. Mark Tran writing in The Guardian quotes John Hilary the Executive Director of War on Want, the anti-poverty NGO, which is highly critical of the focus of the campaign and of the direction some of the UK NGOs are taking. "Too many", says Hilary, "have lost sight of the long-term, transformative goals of international development, and are instead following a donor-led agenda of aid and service delivery. If we are to play our proper role in civil society, NGOs need to learn from grassroots movements and embrace a far more radical vision of change."

War on Want belongs to an emerging coalition of international NGOs, Trades Unions and other civil society organisations called the Progressive Development Forum. This group wants to reframe the development debate away from aid and charitable giving towards one focused on global justice and addressing the structural causes of poverty. They see this as at odds with, for example, the approach taken at the recent UK [hunger summit](#), attended by NGOs, politicians and the private sector.

Whilst many of those attending the Summit feel that it has successfully served to heighten public

awareness of the issues around food security and made a step towards agreements on targets to reduce hunger and malnutrition, others including Owen Barder at the Centre for Global Development argue that this fails to deal with the fundamental injustices of the global food system. In an article on his blog entitled “Tough on Hunger, Tough on the Causes of Hunger”, he argues that the risk of such an approach is that “the G8 will think that they can address these issues by earmarking some of their aid programmes and they will not feel under pressure to make the systemic changes which only they can make”.

With this debate about the role of NGOs and public understanding of poverty starting to turn acrimonious, Dogra’s book is certainly timely. Through an analysis of a range of international NGO fundraising and advocacy campaigns undertaken throughout 2005-06, her argument is that despite the NGO soul-searching after the 1984 Ethiopian Crisis and the “imagery debate” of the 1980s and 1990s, NGO representations of poverty are still entirely removed from its root causes. The meat of this book is her deconstruction of a series of these NGO campaigns through an approach that mingles “discursive history with textural analysis”. In doing so, she asserts that NGO representations completely ignore the historical context of poverty in the “majority world”, build on neo-colonial and romanticised notions of “otherness” and difference whilst at the same time tapping into unreflective concepts of “oneness” and shared humanity.

Whilst they have been successful in raising funds for NGOs, she argues that these representations only serve to confuse public understanding of global poverty and ultimately damages the case for radical reform of global institutions and behaviour. Perhaps more worryingly for NGOs, Dogra says that these representations actually serve to undermine their objectives by creating internal dissonance between their advocacy and fundraising objectives and weakens their ability to deliver by first, underplaying the “voice” of beneficiaries from the global South and second, by denying the institutional, political and historical aspects of global poverty.

From an NGO perspective, it is a tough message to hear but the challenge Dogra lays out in the book is an important one to respond to even if the evidence is not accepted in its entirety. For me, Dogra’s book works best as rhetoric and theory. Her main arguments are revealed in the opening chapter but unfortunately, these can sometimes feel weakened rather than strengthened by the detailed analysis made in further chapters. Part of this is a sense of leaping from micro scrutiny to macro conclusion with little in between. In his blog [From Poverty to Power](#), Oxfam’s Duncan Green criticised the Banks and Hulme working paper for presenting NGOs as an homogenous entity. I suspect he would find similar fault here. In spite of the detailed deconstruction, the differences between NGOs are somehow lost in some rather broad-brush conclusions. What Dogra gives us glimpses of but could explore further, is the internal organisational struggle that international NGOs engage in around message and substance. She deals much better though with the commodification of development messaging and its “consumption” through charitable giving.

As Chief Executive of an international NGO, this is not a comfortable book to read. Nor should it be. I can quibble on the detail but Dogra makes her challenge both clear and readable and as a starting point for future debates on building public understanding of global poverty and how it might be tackled, it is an important and thought-provoking contribution.

Dr Philip Goodwin is Chief Executive of [TREE AID](#), the International NGO working on forestry and poverty reduction in dryland Africa. Before joining TREE AID in 2010, Philip spent 11 years with British Council holding various leadership positions including 5 years as Regional Director in sub Saharan Africa. He has previously worked as a researcher on poverty issues at the Overseas Development Institute and as a community development worker in Timbuktu, Mali. Philip is a musician and composer as well as being co-author of the leadership book *From Hippos to Gazelles: How Leaders Create Leaders* with the leadership consultant Tony Page. [Read more reviews by Philip.](#)

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