

Knowing about and acting in relation to distant suffering: mind the gap!

"If people only knew, then they would act!"

The image of a suffering child or the story of a starving mother supposedly should make us care and want to alleviate that suffering and make a change.

People know, but they do not necessarily act.

Messages about and images of suffering can spur large money donations, raise awareness and mobilise action, the recent East Africa Crisis Appeal (which so far has raised £75m) being an example. At the same time, in our information-dense environment where people know about suffering, atrocities, disasters, and human rights abuses (or have no real reason not to know), action - of any kind - is not always forthcoming.

It seems that there is a gap between knowledge and action; between what people know about suffering and how they act and react. We know very little about this gap: how people respond to messages about suffering, what elicits certain responses and what blocks or works on people's hearts, minds and pockets.

In the current financial context and in times of rapid change, many NGOs in the sector are re-thinking their communication and fundraising from the bottom up. Some commentators have suggested that audience disengagement can be caused by the approaches and cultural frames NGOs themselves have used to communicate: that the emphasis on urgency, small donations, "giver power"

and grateful recipients may be part of the problem. Many feel that the legacy of Live Aid has not been dealt with.

At a time of re-evaluation, it is essential, in our view, that empirical evidence showing how audiences think, feel and act, not simply in response to discrete communications, but in terms of the deep structure of their moral thinking in the long-term, be taken into account. It is crucial also to understand how NGO professionals – communicators, advocates, campaigners and fundraisers – think.

This is the focus of "Mediated humanitarian knowledge: audiences' responses and moral actions", a Birkbeck/LSE three-year research project funded by the Leverhulme Trust. The project examines the responses of the UK public to messages about distant suffering, how people make sense of NGO and media images and narratives of distant suffering, and how ideologies, emotions and biographical experiences shape their responses. The research will also investigate how NGOs plan and think about communications and fundraising.

This research is new and urgent. It probes the relationship between audiences' knowledge and caring and action. Our research questions are closely informed by the ongoing debates and challenges confronting NGOs, and interaction with NGOs is an important part of the research process. The findings from the project will not be purely academic; they will include also recommendations to assist NGOs in decisions related to communication and fundraising strategies.

In November, 2011, towards the end of the first year of the project, we organised an event in collaboration with Plan UK and Polis, the journalism think-tank at LSE.¹ It brought together NGO professionals involved in development and humanitarian communications, advocacy and fundraising, allowing them to discuss issues related to communicating with and engaging the public. This report is a summation of the discussions that took place in that meeting. We hope it reflects the challenges and opportunities faced by NGOs in communicating to the public about global poverty, development aid, and humanitarian disasters, and allows their voices to be heard.

Bruna Seu, Birkbeck, University of London

Shani Orgad, London School of Economics and Political Science

Frances Flanagan, Birkbeck, University of London



What's next: "Mediated Humanitarian Knowledge' Birkbeck/LSE research project

In late 2011, the research team conducted **focus groups with over 160 audience members** from across the UK, and **interviews with professionals from 10 NGOs** in various functions in early 2012.

As part of the ongoing dialogue with NGOs, the research team will convene **three Action Research Meetings** with representatives from NGOs to feedback and discuss findings from the research project.

The first meeting will take place in autumn 2012 and will discuss preliminary findings from the focus groups concerning UK public responses to messages about distant suffering.

Two Action Research Meetings will take place in 2013 and report on

- (1) interviews with NGO professionals about experience of their practice and their views of the sector and
- (2) in-depth interviews with audience members about psychological and biographical aspects of their engagement with distant suffering.

Forethought: a picture paints a thousand words

Leigh Daynes

Take the starving, half-clothed toddler. Her suffering is said to be emblematic; a nation is gripped by famine. She urgently needs your help. You can save her life.

Her exhausted, hopeless mother stares at you forlornly. Powerless and dependent, her cause is yours for £3 a month.

Or, for the equivalent cost of a cup of coffee each month, you can fund the maintenance of a bore hole that will supply a village with clean water in perpetuity. You can read about the heroic Western engineer that installed it, on his blog. And find out more about how you are preventing the spread of disease. Without you, children will die.

And so we salve and soothe; all is well, and all manner of things shall be well, as T. S. Eliot might put it.

The nomenclature of the aid and development industry has framed our understanding of humanitarian action, and our attitudes towards its beneficiaries, for decades.

Traditionally, as self-appointed proxies we have mediated the stories of distant millions, serving them up to munificent donors in the hope of winning financial support.

Not all charity communications stereotype or demean. But all charity communications need to “cut through” in an ever-more crowded and competitive market place if they are to be heard and responded to.

Our work to inform, to educate, to campaign for change and to recruit long-term supporters to fund change is valid. Often it is life-saving.

Yet the least understood area of our work often is the impact of our communications on public understanding of and support for aid and development.

The public are telling us they are saturated with suffering, that we are charming or disarming them into acts of compassion, and that we are abusing their emotions.

That’s why this Birkbeck/LSE study is so important.

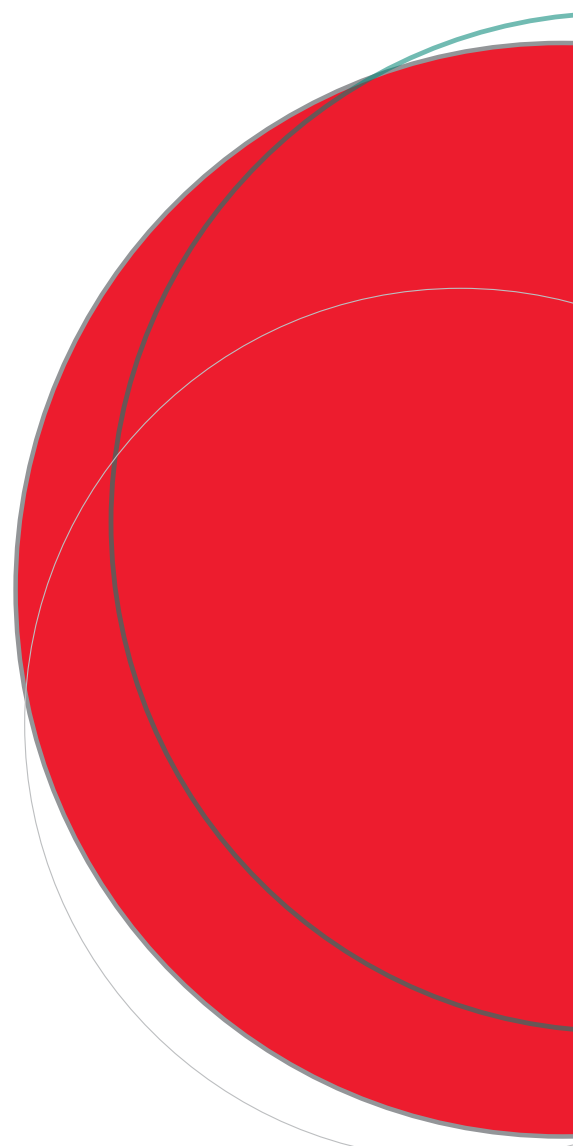
In shining a light on our practice as a sector this study can unlock new ways of engaging the public in the cause of aid and development; of reframing the way we work – from mediating others’ voices overseas to working in partnership with them, and the public here, in the cause of social, political and economic transformation.

Understanding the impact of the “lingua franca” of our industry matters because it has fuelled a template approach to the media reporting of suffering. It matters because the exponential growth in access to mobile and social media technology and platforms means we are no longer the de facto guardians we once were. And it matters because it speaks to the power between us and them, and you and me.

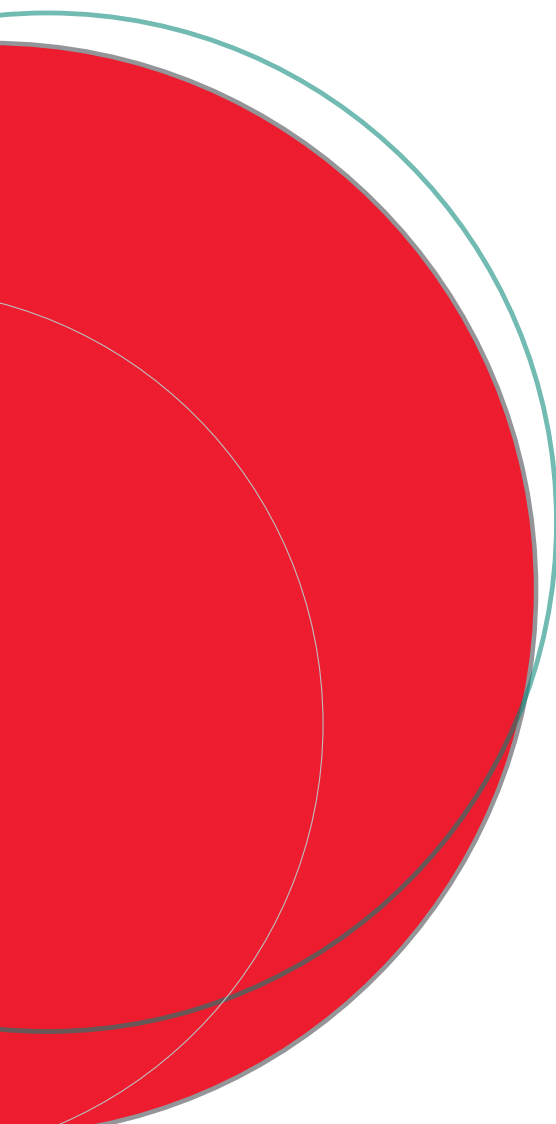
I hope you find this report, which presents the voices of people working in the sector, a useful, critical friend in our work together - in partnership with others - for just societies in which human dignity and rights are respected, and lives fulfilled.

Because in telling the story of the starving child, whose situation demands action, the language and images we choose must speak of both the plight and of the power and potential of individuals, communities and nations to be agents of change in their own development.

Leigh Daynes is director of advocacy, campaigns and communications at Plan UK. He is the current chair of the Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities Network.



UK NGO professionals' voices: challenges and opportunities in communicating distant suffering



In November 2011, professionals from 18 NGOs and related organisations in the development and humanitarian sector, across communications, marketing, branding, fundraising, advocacy, policy and campaigns, gathered at LSE to discuss some of the pressing issues they face in communicating with and engaging the UK public. The context for the “Who cares? Communicating distant suffering to the public: opportunities and challenges for NGOs” meeting,² was the Birkbeck/LSE project “Mediated Humanitarian Knowledge”, introduced at the opening of the report.

A close dialogue between NGOs and the research is vital. The November meeting, which was hosted by Polis LSE and Plan UK, began an invaluable conversation that will continue through further meetings (in autumn 2012 and 2013), in which the research findings will be shared and discussed with NGOs.

Participants in the “Who cares?” meeting in November 2011 were presented with some evidence from an earlier research study on audience responses to NGO appeals,³ which echoed issues identified in the 2011 focus groups with the UK public, in the “Mediated Humanitarian Knowledge” research. This evidence provided a springboard for discussions among professionals.

This report is a summation of the views of NGO professionals, as expressed during the meeting.⁴ It is organised under four themes which emerged as the central issues in the meeting. There are clearly crossovers between the themes; however, each also raises questions concerning different dimensions in NGOs' work. Each theme is followed by a brief NGO case study which seeks to illustrate some of the related issues.

The first theme focuses on **NGOs' portrayals of suffering** and some of the central tensions and challenges involved in this process. Brendan Paddy's case study shows how many of these considerations come into play in the work of the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) on its East Africa Crisis appeal and in the agency's thinking and practice more broadly.

The second theme explores some of the challenges and opportunities in **NGOs' relationships with the UK public**. It is followed by Leigh Daynes' case study of Plan UK's interactive facial recognition-based ad. The case study demonstrates how this innovative approach is used to capture audiences' attention and engage them with the complex issue of girls' rights and empowerment.

The third theme looks at the growing **challenges NGOs are facing in managing their public image**, in the light of growing criticism of and scepticism about international aid and NGOs. Ian Bray offers a case study of Oxfam's decision to admit publicly that things went wrong in the context of the 2010-2011 floods in Pakistan. He argues that communicating both positive and negative aspects in NGOs' operation is crucial for maintaining public trust.

The fourth theme addresses the challenges and opportunities entailed in **NGOs' engagement of the public in development and humanitarian issues in a crowded and competitive field**. Joe Morrison's case study provides an insight into Save the Children's approach to diversification and innovation in the development and humanitarian sector.

The report is a spot analysis of professionals' views on the issues. Rather than providing definitive or prescriptive solutions, its purpose is to offer a map of the issues that NGOs face and see as opportunities and challenges, and to stimulate debate towards addressing them.

Notes:

1 Though the term “beneficiaries” carries connotations of dependence and passivity and does not fully account for the agency of individuals and communities, it is used in this report as a convenient form of reference. However, the authors want to make clear that the use of the term “beneficiaries”, as applied here, is not meant to imply that the individuals and communities involved lack agency.

2 As the meeting was held under Chatham House Rule, the identities and affiliations of speakers quoted in the report are not revealed. Terms such as “communications director” or “fundraising director” are used to refer to NGO professionals who participated in the seminar.

Portraying distant suffering

In this section

Representing beneficiaries: from needy victims to empowered agents

Emotion: a double-edged sword?

Reducing the gap between here and there, us and them

Case study 1: *Conveying gravity without undermining dignity*, Brendan Paddy, DEC

Representing beneficiaries: from needy victims to empowered agents

NGO professionals are alert to criticisms of 1980s-like depictions of starving African children and the negative effects of dehumanising imagery, of messages that reinforce stereotypical views of developing countries and the patronising paradigm of the “powerful giver” and “grateful receiver”, described in the Finding Frames study.⁵ There has been a shift from “flies-in-the-eyes” portrayals to more positive imagery and accounts, portraying beneficiaries of international support as resilient empowered agents who can make real changes to their lives and communities.⁶

Nevertheless, NGOs’ approaches and practices differ, for example, the different depictions of the East Africa crisis – of starving, helpless babies on the one hand and empowered communities on the other. As one participant explained, the “fundraising logic” is portraying a “crying, emaciated baby on the ground” rather than positive images of beneficiaries as active, resilient and empowered. However:

If you’re a policy person or... a programmes person, then you’re going to sit there with your head in your hands, saying “but it’s so much more complicated than that all the time!”

Communications director

The inconsistency and double standards produce frustration and a sense among professionals that NGOs should have a greater collective responsibility since their representations have long-term effects on public perceptions of development and aid, beyond their own organisations.

From an ethical perspective, some see over-positive messaging as potentially dangerous. They warn that positive messaging:

...doesn’t address violence. In fact, it masks violence...it actually makes a lot of people feel good but it is masking a reality.

Advocacy director

If you’re self-censoring, you’re not actually depicting the real life situation...You’re saying “it’s all fine.” It’s not. That’s taking it too far the other way.

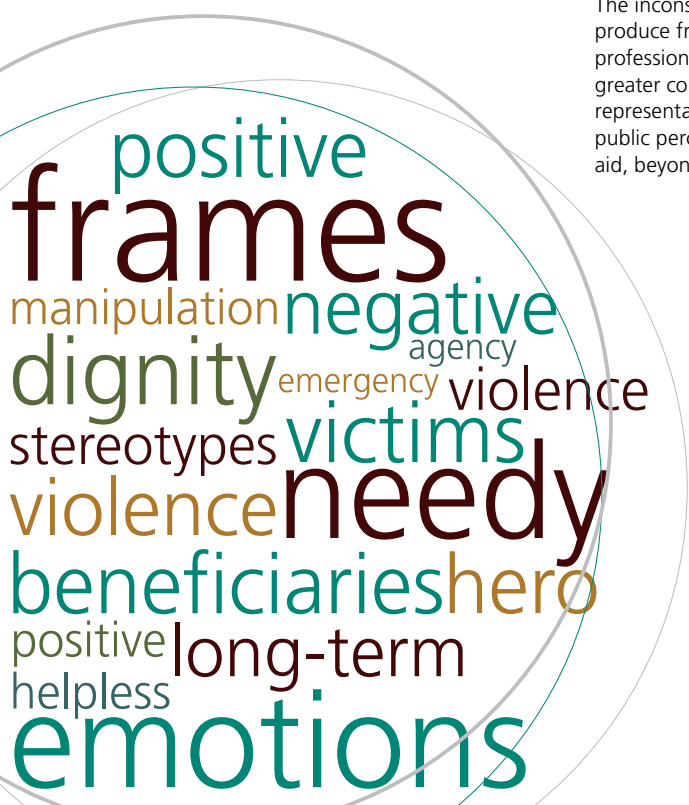
Fundraising director

Thus, **the challenge is to balance stories of suffering and crises with stories of positive change, and to avoid negative depictions, of beneficiaries as needy, passive and disempowered, which rob people of their dignity and humanity and reveals only their vulnerability.** NGOs want to show supporters that their donations are making a difference, while also showing the reality and the broader global injustices which call for continuous help and engagement.

A participant summarised the challenge:

In our world, “serious” is defined as the worst TV pictures and death or immediate threats to life, which is a pretty narrow definition of seriousness. It’s about urgency... rather than about importance...It’s what’s current and immediate as opposed to underlying causes.

Communications director



Emotion: a double-edged sword?

Emotion is vital for creating a personal connection and promoting action.

A fundraising director said that the critical involvement of emotion is borne out by in-house research:

We've done research with some of the most rationally minded audiences...When you talk to them about which charities they'd give to, there's always some kind of emotional, personal connection that makes them give to the charity they want to support... Emotion is always critical to engage with people in the first place.

Fundraising director

However, use of emotion in communications can antagonise.

Audience research shows that people can feel "manipulated" into donating through feelings of guilt, and that these techniques to promote sympathy can make audiences resistant and critical.⁷ Many professionals are uncomfortable about the use of emotion when it is seen as (or is) manipulative and dishonest.

Some distinguish between what they regard as negative emotions, such as distress, guilt and shame, and emotions considered more rewarding, such as compassion, empathy and identification. However, in some situations, participants agreed that negative emotions – such as guilt or outrage – are important and necessary to mobilise people to respond and to act.

Professionals also recognise the importance of using emotion according to the stage of the relationship between NGO and supporter. Emotion is critical to "recruit" people, while long-term engagement is founded on a more nuanced use of emotion and messages that provide better understanding of (rather than mere identification with) the issues. And emotion is always central to the effectiveness of a communication if the NGO gets its story into the news:

If you were doing a piece on the 10 o'clock news or a piece on World Tonight or Today Programme from a country, you would definitely want to have emotion in there...You're there because you're part of a bigger editorial, you're there because of current affairs. It's news.

Media director

Reducing the gap between here and there, us and them

There are 5000 or more miles between you and that person [the "beneficiary"] every single day, every moment of every day. And essentially as marketing people, as communicators, advocates, we're just continually trying to close that gap.

Marketing director

Stories from beneficiaries and intermediaries, such as NGO workers, journalists and celebrities, are seen as effectively helping reduce the gap between people "here", in the UK, and beneficiaries "there", in the global south whose conditions are radically different. New media are seen as particularly useful for creating identification, empathy and even, some professionals suggest, a sense of immersion. One NGO uses 3D films to provide a simulated experience of a village and its people. Some NGOs are experimenting with innovative uses of social media to enable audiences to engage with beneficiaries miles away.⁸

Participants also described the "gap" that they experience as professionals: how do you tell a story without having direct access to, or experience of, the field?

I was in a situation where it was a sort of a product that I'd never seen or tasted. Then you bring in a marketing agency who knows even less about it and they don't particularly want to raise the truth... But then someone comes in who actually knows what's going on, looks through ... and goes: "bloody hell, what the hell is that?!"

Communications director

While field visits are no substitute for direct work experience, they provide NGO staff with a better understanding of the complex reality that has to be represented to the UK public. Budgets for travel for non-field workers are limited, but NGOs try to make field visits available to some staff, and encourage journalists to follow these visits.⁹

There are 5000 or more miles between you and that person ...as communicators, advocates, we're just continually trying to close that gap.

It was a product that I'd never seen or tasted.

Case study 1: Conveying gravity without undermining dignity

Brendan Paddy

The Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) plays a unique role when there is a major crisis in one of the world's poorer countries. We co-ordinate a single public appeal which brings together the UK's 14 leading aid agencies and is supported by the main UK broadcasters and other corporate partners.

The East Africa Crisis Appeal launched in early July 2011, but the need for it had been foreseen for some time. Increasingly dire warnings were issued from late 2010 by the sophisticated early warning systems established after the 1984/85 famine in Ethiopia. Aid agencies sought to draw public attention to the impending crisis and there was significant but sporadic media attention.

Unfortunately, concerted media attention and serious public engagement seem to require images that suggest a disaster is actually happening. In the case of a major food crisis this means waiting until many people, particularly children, become so visibly emaciated that many deaths are unavoidable. The DEC and its member agencies had been seeking to launch a DEC appeal at the earliest opportunity, but had felt until early July that the comparatively low public awareness of the crisis would have severely limited the prospects of a successful appeal.

Once the decision was taken to appeal, the DEC had a wide range of resources and relationships on which it could draw, but only 48 hours to prepare before primetime appeals would be screened on all the major UK TV channels. It is a curious quirk of the DEC model that we influence but do not directly control the TV appeals run by the major broadcasters on our behalf. These are produced by the BBC and ITN according to their own editorial standards, although with our input to ensure factual accuracy and broad compliance with the standards we and our members seek to uphold.

One of the most critical decisions over which we do exercise full and direct control is the choice of a primary appeal image to be used in all our fundraising and communications activity. These images have to powerfully convey the seriousness of the crisis without degrading and objectifying their subjects.



Howa Madey and some of her surviving family members in the main image used to promote the DEC East Africa Appeal.

© Phil Moore / Concern Worldwide

We selected an image taken in a camp for displaced people in Mogadishu, by photographer Phil Moore for Concern Worldwide. The reasons for our decision sum up in many ways our understanding of the wider issues and our obligations under the Red Cross Code, which concludes with the affirmation by its signatories that: **In our information, publicity and advertising activities, we shall recognise disaster victims as dignified human beings, not hopeless objects.**

The principal subject is Howa Madey, an adult woman. The photo also includes two of her young children and her husband, all pictured in front of their make-shift shelter. The camera is at eye level and she meets our gaze directly. She is grim-faced, but appears resolute rather than visibly distressed. The toddler in her arms is in fact dangerously malnourished but fully clothed and de-emphasised by the framing and cropping of the picture. Howa lost three children during the current crisis, one died the day before the photo was taken. We chose this image because it clearly conveys the seriousness of the situation and the impact of the disaster on specific people.

There is a clear message that this family needs help, but we hope this is conveyed without depriving them of their dignity and agency. It is a significant step away from the high angle pictures of emaciated, isolated, naked children staring up into the frame that were commonplace in the 1980s. While the photo promotes a connection at a human level between Howa and potential donors it risks obscuring many important differences between them. Any sense that they are meeting on truly equal terms is obviously misleading. We hope it represents a small step towards representing the complex reality of emergencies more fully and accurately. Our intention is to influence the way the public think and feel about these situations without undermining their continued support.

Brendan Paddy is communications manager of the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC)

Relationships with the UK public: a complex journey

In this section

Initiating the relationship: from attention to action

Sustaining the relationship: from occasional givers to committed actors

Enhancing the relationship: feedback, customisation and personalisation

Case study 2: *Innovative consumer engagement in action*, Leigh Daynes, Plan

Initiating the relationship: from attention to action

Participants emphasised that, to initiate a relationship, supporters need to be approached in their everyday spaces - the street, the workplace, on social networks, on mobile phones. However, approaching people for support "where they are", for example, in the street, can be regarded as intrusive and some municipal councils have banned street fundraisers.¹⁰

Supporters' initial responses need to be consolidated through greater awareness, engagement and commitment. However, achieving this is not easy.

We're trying to engage people, to get them interested in development, think about the world and that they need to take action, whereas what is successful often is appeals that pull at heartstrings, that use extreme images which don't necessarily engage. They are successful... That way of messaging works in terms of raising money but it doesn't work in terms of engagement.

Communications director

The Finding Frames report¹¹ suggests that understanding of global poverty among the UK public has changed little since the 1980s despite a steady increase in NGO revenues, more sophisticated communication technologies and networks, political consensus on core development policy issues, and huge public campaigns such as Make Poverty History. The challenge for NGOs is to increase awareness, enhance understanding and encourage long-term commitment beyond immediate reaction, without losing their audience.

However, engaging the public at a deeper level may be too ambitious, one fundraising director said:

There is so much awareness of international issues... however, the depth of knowledge is incredibly shallow... The UK public is not at that stage where they can engage in those debates, which is why people often respond... at a very surface [emotional] level.

Fundraising director

Some think NGOs should be more ambitious in their approach and cater not to people's (perceived) "levels" of interest and states of mind, but to try to "fight" ignorance, and dispel myths and "old-school" narratives of development in order to change perceptions and attitudes and motivate people to care and act. Many agree with the opinion of an advocacy director that **the aim should be "to develop a deeper model of meaningful relationship", which would extend beyond the monetary act of giving.**

The UK public is not at that stage where they can engage in those debates.



Sustaining the relationship: from occasional givers to committed actors

Supporters can be categorised as one-off (or single) givers and regular givers. The former are:

People [who] feel moved to give but... once they give, a switch goes off and they get on with their lives.

Media director

Regular givers commit to regular donations, usually by direct debit. They donate to express their support for and commitment to the cause and the NGO. A marketing director said that some people, after an initial donation, sign direct debit agreements, which they forget about:

It's a very, very small amount of money so it can be an impulsive, quick decision, which, people may not even remember, let alone be able to rationalise exactly why they did it... Some of them find it really very difficult to explain in a rational and structured way why they do that.

Marketing director

Some believe that one-off givers are not easily converted into long-term supporters and, alternatively, that long-term supporters are not moved by emergency appeals. Many organisations, however, focus on persuading supporters who donated to emergencies to become regular givers, to show loyalty to the NGO's cause by regular provision of funds and engagement in related activities.

NGOs often describe taking supporters on "a journey", of persuading one-off givers to become regular supporters or companions on this journey. **Showing donors how their money is used is considered crucial for encouraging a long-term relationship and promoting trust.** Practitioners argue that without ongoing evidence of the impact of money donations and action, people will cancel their contributions – especially in the current financial climate and amid public criticisms of development aid (see Section 3).

However, the provision of too much detail on the impact of individual donations may imply that the donation is "a drop in the ocean" and therefore its cancellation will have little effect. Thus, a communications director said that:

Rather than saying "yes, it's a drop in the ocean but it's really a good drop", say "but there's lots of good drops".

Communications director

It is also important to get to know supporters as individuals. NGO supporter databases are becoming more advanced, allowing appeals to be tailored to individuals' characteristics, preferences and lifestyles. Some fundraising professionals are mimicking how commercial corporations personalise their communications and tailor their packages to consumers.

Personalisation requires more specialised use of media and communication channels. In the past, NGOs targeted particular audiences using single or primary channels. Paper-based communication is still preferred for older age groups:

Most charities are set up for that type of donor and that's their baseline that they're getting most of their income from because older people prefer to have door drops and paper channels, and then we find it difficult to wean ourselves off those channels.

Fundraising director

Single channel communication may be appropriate for some target audiences; however, in other cases a more encompassing experience using multiple communication channels is required. Messaging across several channels can help to promote public engagement with an NGO, moving people further along the supporter spectrum from one-off to regular:

[It] is about how you use different channels to engage people and bring them to our cause ... to make them feel like the next time an ad comes up ... they're already predisposed to you because they've heard you on a channel where you've had legitimacy.

Media director

Personal face-to-face communication is seen by some as the most effective way to connect to a fragmented audience:

Once they give, a switch goes off and they get on with their lives.

One of the strengths [of our organisation] ...is that we're a relatively young charity and the foundation stone of our fundraising has been fundraising by the community...People from the community who visit the projects, travel back to the community in the UK and can say to people as one of their own "I've been there and I've seen the difference that it makes".

Media director

In trying to convert one-off givers into regular supporters and engaging supporters to contribute more than monetary donations, NGOs have to judge the potential level of commitment and the type of relationship that would be most appropriate. For example:

There are people that go "take my money; I don't want to know about what you're doing; I trust you". And as soon as you try and create more relationship, they'd go "why?"

Fundraising director

Some NGOs filter out those unlikely to want an ongoing relationship:

We are quite ruthless about it: we will not go after you, because you're not worth it to us! Not that you don't have enough money, but because you are at a level where you do not care and the amount of money it would take us to make you care isn't going to be worth it.

Branding director

Debate on the most effective ways to form relationships with the public is ongoing. Practitioners understand the problems, but do not have concrete solutions:

The challenge is how do you make that individual relationship? That's what we're all struggling for. It is about keeping the commercial imperative but linking it to the individual relationship, which is what we're all seeking.

Media director

Enhancing the relationship: feedback, customisation and personalisation

Finding out what feedback supporters want and expect is an ongoing exercise. NGOs' investment in providing feedback to supporters is, at least partly, the result of the UK government Department for International Development's (DfID) emphasis on the importance of transparency and accountability, and the need to demonstrate impact and value for money to the tax payer.¹² However, the degree of feedback must be defined:

You can give [audiences] all the information and all the feedback and say "this is what we'll do with your data", and there are groups that will say, "you're giving me too much".. The challenge is knowing that one wants loads of information and equally knowing that [another person] just goes: "I trust you".

Fundraising director

At one end of the scale are those supporters who:

want to be thanked, but they don't want to feel like they're being thanked. They want to know what charities do, but they don't want you to spend money on communications...You just have to find a right balance. And inevitably you will upset some people.

Advocacy director

At the other end are supporters who expect to receive detailed accounts of the NGO's work and expenditure. Between these extremes is a range of different expectations.

Feedback is designed to show supporters how their money is used and to demonstrate progress and positive change. Thus, NGOs select stories to which their supporters can relate, which means that some aspects of their operations do not feature, for example:

You can't say, "yes, you are a campaigner and your subscription is helping us pay for getting the expert on this question to go and speak to the person who is going to influence...the decision makers and get this to change".

Communications director

Several professionals commented that, while many supporters say that they want feedback about how their money is used, they want case studies, not statistics, to make them feel they have helped in tangible ways.

Providing feedback is becoming more difficult with current supporters.

Professionals argue that people think and act like consumers, demanding more information about how their money and support are used. The level of detail reserved in the past to major donors is being expected by "£5 givers", and would drain valuable resources.

New media and especially social media, are providing cheaper ways to give personalised feedback. A communications director described an innovative model akin to "track your parcel", that would enable individuals to track how their donations are used and their impact. The costs and operational backup required make it unfeasible, but this degree of personalisation would seem to be what NGOs are aiming for in their relationships with supporters. The advantage of greater direct communication between supporters and beneficiaries, enabled, for example, through certain sponsorship or microfinance lending programmes, is that:

They [supporters] are hearing back from the beneficiary about what a difference they've made, so that it's not us massaging all of that, manipulating it so overtly.

Communications director

The level of detail reserved in the past to major donors is being expected by "£5 givers".

For most NGOs, expanding beyond the "conscience constituency"¹³ and attracting new types of donors – described by one participant as the "non-development audience" – is a major challenge. The non-development audience is regarded as comprising primarily younger people whose lifestyles, interests and habits are fundamentally different from those of the "conscience constituency", which includes primarily older, middle-class members of the public, with liberal political views.

A communications director commented that older people will have had more exposure to NGO messages and prefer feedback showing that their support has "made a difference". Younger people with shorter experience of information about distant suffering are more likely to respond (by donating or signing a petition) to positive messages. A YouGov survey conducted for an International Broadcasting Trust (IBT) study reveals that most young people in the UK are concerned about global poverty and the lives of people in developing countries.¹⁴ Some practitioners suggested that the trend is for young people as opposed to older people, to engage in supportive action, especially if they receive some kind of benefit for their engagement. However, the Finding Frames report¹⁶ warns against a transactional frame driven by self-interest, where supporters are called upon to give and act because there is something "in it for them".

"They want to be thanked, but they don't want to feel like they're being thanked. They want to know what charities do, but they don't want you to spend money on communications."

Case study 2: Innovative consumer engagement in action

Leigh Daynes

Plan is a global children's charity that works in partnership with children, their families and communities to enable them to move from poverty to opportunity, and realise their rights.

It was founded 75 years ago and works in 50 countries. Notwithstanding its heritage and scope, Plan is one of the least well known organisations of its type in the UK.

A new communications, advocacy and campaigns team was formed in 2010 to tackle the impact of low public awareness on Plan's fundraising, policy influencing and campaigning, to help increase the organisation's impact with and for children.

The organisation's first brand building campaign was launched in February 2012. **This integrated, multi-channel and activity campaign sought to grow awareness of and engagement with Plan among young women in the South of England, positioning the organisation's work on girls' rights and empowerment overseas with this niche audience in the UK.** Insight research suggested this thematic approach was likely to prompt their support.

One element of the campaign was the first ever use in the UK of facial recognition scanning technology in a bespoke advertisement that was installed, for two weeks, at a bus stop on London's prime retail "high street", Oxford Street.

The interactive ad was designed to highlight the choices that girls around the world are being denied because they are girls, and what the public here could do in response.

Viewers were invited to stand in front of the ad to have their face scanned. Only women were served the ad; men were denied access to the full ad content and were directed to the charity's website.

The innovative use of this technology attracted some criticism. Eight complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority that the ad caused offence on the basis of gender were dismissed.

But positive coverage was widespread. BBC London and Al Jazeera featured the ad; it was the most read story on the BBC News website and it achieved eight national coverage hits in the first five days. Plaudits in the marketing and advertising trade press included

Marketing magazine's "Outdoor Campaign of the Month", with global coverage extending from Brazil to Australia.

Over 40,000 tweets, reaching over 4 million accounts, promoted the campaign with tweets from key influencers Stephen Fry, Jonathan Ross and Mashable's Pete Cashmore. News articles and blogs have been shared over 7,000 times and ad views across online platforms exceeded 1.1 million.

And, crucially, the ad device drove engagement with the campaign. Supported by online and train panel adverts, it delivered over 20,000 new leads via petition sign ups, text responses, online donations and new Facebook fans.

These results demonstrate that the ad was much more than just a stunt. Rooted in audience insight, the execution of the ad was key to driving engagement with Plan, especially in recruiting new supporters who may not otherwise have connected with the distant cause of girls' education overseas. It was a good example of the use of new technology to support the "message in the moment", meeting consumers where they are.

With monthly website traffic doubled, target audience awareness up by 4%, propensity to support increased by 8% and new unsolicited approaches from major corporates, the response to the ad campaign has exceeded our expectations, providing us with a platform on which to build further awareness of and engagement with Plan.

Leigh Daynes is director of advocacy, campaigns and communications at Plan UK.



Singer-songwriter Gabriella Cilmi tries out the Plan UK gender-specific ad in Oxford Street

© Anthony Devlin/PA

Managing the NGO image: dispelling the myths

In this section

Dispelling the myths about international development and humanitarian aid

Increasing transparency of how money is used

Media scrutiny: demonstrating impact and building trust

Case study 3: *Honest communication: the best policy*, Ian Bray, Oxfam

Dispelling the myths about international development and humanitarian aid

The current financial crisis is making it more difficult for NGOs to project positive images of their work, especially in relation to how they use the funding received from government and from public donations. There has also been criticism of international aid and calls for greater scrutiny of NGO operations. Ian Burrell's essay in *The Spectator* is indicative:

Newspapers and broadcasters take pride in their readiness to challenge cant and corruption in government departments, corporations and public bodies. Charities, especially the big global ones, should be treated in the same manner... The charity industry has grown fat on unthinking compassion fuelled by uncritical coverage.¹⁶

In addition to the unfavourable economic conditions in the UK, scepticism and resistance among potential supporters are being aggravated by "social and, by extension, political conditions that are precarious in the immediate term and incommensurate to the challenges of poverty and climate change in the medium and long-term."¹⁷ Government cuts and attempts to curb public spending and ensure that international development funds are spent efficiently, contribute to reinforcing beliefs that international aid is not being effective.

Many professionals in the sector have observed public cynicism about the effectiveness of aid generally:¹⁸

Make Poverty History. No one ever criticised aid, or it was very minor, but now there's a whole industry out there...at the time when aid is being taken pot shots at...that rubs off on charities as well.

Communications director

A media director said that the proportion of UK national income that is funnelled into international development aid, partly through NGOs, is often grossly overestimated:

[There is] extraordinary ignorance about how much of the national income actually goes [on aid]... how little we're trying to strive for 0.7% of GDP... some of those questioned on the streets... they were talking about 40%! It was crazy!

Media director

In an attempt to dispel the myths related to international development, some NGOs emphasised the need to provide more information about the context of the problem. For example, the Finding Frames study suggests that:

Campaigns should move away from short-termism in messaging, notably anything that suggests complete solutions in short or imminent timescales (e.g. Stop Climate Chaos, Make Poverty History, End World Hunger) or claims of opportunity ("last chance to..."; "it's now or never").¹⁹

No one ever criticised aid, or it was very minor, but now there's a whole industry out there.

However, some practitioners argued that attempts to describe the larger purpose and the underlying causes of the immediate problems they are trying to solve become boring for audiences. To try to demonstrate the effectiveness of aid generally and of individual donations in particular, they resort to case studies or "snapshots":

People say..."does aid work?"... When you try and answer the question in earnest you get nowhere; if you try and put it in context and the broader change, their eyes glaze over. If you do a big number thing their eyes glaze over...[However], saying "this is one person it's helped" is usually enough to make most people go: "I'm okay with that".

Communications director

Increasing transparency of how money is used

Negative views of international aid and development are based generally on beliefs about how NGO revenue is spent, and how efficiently it is distributed and delivered to its intended beneficiaries. As a result of the difficult conditions in the field, NGOs' distribution and delivery of funding is often unconventional and difficult to explain and justify to supporters and the wider public. This can result in mistaken impressions and misunderstandings about the use being made of individual donations:

Different ways of getting money to people on the ground is quite a complicated thing to explain. And I don't think charities have been successful in doing that at all.

Communications director

There is a great deal of uncertainty among the public about how NGOs spend their money, how much of it supports core operations and on-the-ground programmes, and how much funds their administration and communication cost.²⁰ Resolving this uncertainty is a continuing preoccupation for NGOs:

It's been talked about a lot, hasn't it? Transparency around fundraising, transparency about everything. For me the question is, even if we chucked millions, tens of millions at it, would it actually change the fact that you could have 30% infrastructure and administration and be excellently organised and have 10% and be appalling and shabby? ... How do you actually disabuse people of certain preconceptions?... you could keep going day in day out saying "this is what we do"...Will it actually change, is the question.

Fundraising director

International development and humanitarian NGOs' use of funding attracts criticism also because many beneficiaries are in countries considered by the public to be corrupt. This reduces trust among donors that their contributions will benefit those in need. Audience research shows that NGOs are also seen negatively by some; people say they are "bloated" and over-resourced businesses, whose employees are overpaid.²¹

A marketing director of a small NGO said that demonstrating that more than 90% of donated money is spent in the field has proven extremely effective for encouraging people to support the organisation and donate regularly. The size of this organisation worked to its advantage because (especially) first time givers felt that they could see that their money was not being "wasted" on administration or communication, but was producing "real results". One practitioner said that showing how his organisation worked directly with agents in the local communities had increased confidence among donors that money was used appropriately and efficiently:

The way we're set up working through local communities, through churches...all over the place...at the community level. They know where the need is greatest and they can get it as far as they can...It's a sort of connectivity to dispel that myth.

Media director

Different ways of getting money to people on the ground is quite a complicated thing to explain. I don't think charities have been successful in doing that.

How do you actually disabuse people of certain preconceptions?



Media scrutiny: demonstrating impact and building trust

There's a real danger in being defensive even if you craft it and sculpt it beautifully.

Several participants remarked that the media, specifically mainstream news media, could be a hindrance because of the tendency to feature NGOs in negative news stories. News stories can undermine the efforts of organisations to present themselves as professional, accountable and transparent. In the words of one participant:

The media love hypocrisy and if any charity has a bad story about fraud ... then it is really blown up with glee...That also has the potential to undermine our accountability and make us look like we're unprofessional organisations.

Media director

NGO professionals feel increasingly vulnerable in the face of media scrutiny. While most agreed that media coverage increases accountability and transparency, they expressed frustration at being the targets of media stories about scandals, which exacerbate negative perceptions among the public.

Furthermore, the commonsense expectation is that transparency has an automatic positive effect on the NGO's public image, because the organisation is seen as accountable and open to scrutiny. However, in the seminar discussion it was suggested that this could have the opposite effect of eroding public confidence and trust. The very act of explaining an NGO's actions, said one fundraising director, could undermine its own objective:

I think there's a real danger in being defensive even if you craft it and sculpt it beautifully...maybe people are looking at it going "why are you doing this Q&A? Why are you telling me that this is all so?" "I just want to tell you the money will definitely get there; we track it through to the beneficiary", which ought to

sound bloody brilliant... Of course you should have the Q&As. It's just a question of how much you push that out and being aware that it's risky just to try and address all the issues proactively.²²

Fundraising director

Practitioners describe several strategies related to the demonstration of openness and transparency in NGO communications. One media director described how an organisation had adopted a deliberate strategy of providing potentially negative stories to the media to dispel the myth that NGOs routinely exaggerate crisis reports. However, some have criticised this approach and see it as reducing public trust:

Do the research into that and you'll find that people's disbelief probably has gone up as a result.

Media director

Still, readiness to admit mistakes can work in the NGO's favour:

When charities are ready to admit when things go wrong, it increases trust...because if I talk to somebody and that person always gives me good news about something about himself...at some point you get a bit suspicious and you start thinking, "well, is he really telling the truth or is he just telling me something nice because he wants money from me?"

Media director

Another practitioner suggested that, rather than trying to reduce public suspicions about international development, NGOs should be honest about the effectiveness and limits of their activities.

If I talk to somebody and that person always gives me good news about something about himself...at some point you get a bit suspicious.

Since public scepticism affects the whole development sector as well as individual NGOs, one participant thought it would be beneficial for NGOs to "come together and have a joint myth busting advertising campaign". However, it is acknowledged that such action could backfire:

The problem is, what you're doing is you're creating a self-fulfilling doubt...what works in advertising is repeated positive messages. What doesn't work in advertising is repeated justifications of non-negative actions.

Media director

Practitioners clearly recognise and agree that accountability is crucial, but worry about the right balance in their communications between what the public expects and what beneficiaries need. What beneficiaries need may not fit with people's expectations about what NGOs should do. In the words of one participant:

You have to tell people who are supporting us that we're not just delivering their idea of what's the right thing to do.

Communications director

You have to tell people who are supporting us that we're not just delivering their idea of what's the right thing to do.

Case study 3: Honest communication: the best policy

Ian Bray

The public give money to aid agencies trusting that it will be spent wisely. Aid agencies report back on how the money is spent and what it has achieved. These reports are full of very positive stories of small donations making a difference to individuals in need. But aid work takes place in difficult environments and at times we have to innovate. And with innovation comes risk of things going wrong, at times horribly wrong. We feel the public should hear about the bad times as well as the good so they have a better understanding of how aid works and we have to be honest in our communications.

At the height of the 2010-11 floods in Pakistan, Oxfam's monitoring and accounting procedure discovered irregularities in its aid response. Initial reports indicated that the sums involved could have been anything between zero and £500,000. This was not money we had received from the public, but from government donors.

It would have been easy just to speak with the donors who funded the programme, explain what we thought had happened and what we were going to do about it. We did this.

But governments' money is essentially taxpayers' money and also the public had given generously to Oxfam's and the Disasters Emergency Committee's Pakistan Flood Appeal. We also had to take into account the trust they had placed in us. We decided to tell them, so we went public.

The decision was not without risk. Going public could seriously affect the public's faith in our ability to deliver aid. We had to manage the communication as best we could, but more importantly we had to do, and be seen to do, the right thing.

In early June 2011 we issued a press release announcing we had discovered financial irregularities and had begun an external investigation. Going public was not without its challenges and it did not go as smoothly as we had hoped.

For the original release, it was too early to say exactly how much money could have been lost and of course that was precisely what journalists wanted to know, so we had to reveal the amount that could possibly be at risk.

There was some misreporting that implied our whole £27 million programme was under scrutiny but in general most media coverage dealt with the story accurately.

We did not name the partners involved in the case as we were in the midst of the investigation and it would have been wholly unfair to them. Though this approach treated them fairly, other organisations in Pakistan felt they were also seen to be under scrutiny, of course unfairly.

Trying to manage the message, we did not inform other international development agencies working in Pakistan prior to going public and many agencies first heard about the story through the BBC. This meant they had no time to prepare any media comment on an issue that was fundamental to their work.

We also underestimated how long it would take for the investigation to be completed. The delay in announcing the result of the investigation meant it could have appeared we were hiding things.

Just over two months later, we released the results of the investigation to the media, which showed that a member of staff of a well-established partner had embezzled up to £135,000 and we would do all we could to recover the money. Eventually we will recover all the money that was not accounted for, but this will take several years.

Going public with what was essentially a message of failure was very uncomfortable. It would have been easier to have kept quiet and managed the message if it leaked out. We actually considered the chances of the story leaking out as very low. But we decided that going public was the right thing to do.

If we are to live up to a commitment of being accountable and to maintain public trust then we have to be open about the good times and the times when things go wrong. In the end trust is all about communicating honestly.

Ian Bray is senior press officer at Oxfam.



Reshma, 10 years old, from Qambar Shahdadkot, with her extended family who were displaced when the worst floods in the history of Pakistan hit in the summer of 2010.

© Timothy Allen/Oxfam

Engaging the public in development and humanitarian issues in a crowded field

In this section

Market logic and branding

Differentiation in a competitive field

Innovation: opportunities and risks

Relating to the media

Case study 4: *How to innovate and stand out from the crowd*, Joe Morrison, Save the Children

Market logic and branding

We're all screaming that we're most important and our issue is most important. [But] how do we all move forward? ...The alarm bells have been heard now, and that's great, but there's still a problem of moving to action.

Advocacy director

NGOs operate in a very crowded and competitive environment where the "rules of the game" are based on market rules. Many refer to the "marketplace", and describe NGOs as supplying "products" and building "brands". Supporters and the general public are often regarded by NGOs as consumers, who, in their turn, expect some control over their "purchases" and look for "value for money" from their donations:

Value for money comes out in all kinds of different ways...specifics about how does a particular somebody's money get spent and then there's the organisational stuff about value for money and about keeping costs down...²³

Communications director

I think you can learn an awful lot from looking at...products or supermarkets...They [supporters] are expecting a very parallel experience they get from any other suppliers.

Branding director

We're all screaming that we're most important and our issue is most important. The alarm bells have been heard now, and that's great, but there's still a problem of moving to action.

Most NGOs invest a great deal in "branding" – in increasing awareness of their organisation through an association with positive values that resonate with and connect to consumers' lifestyles, values, interests and identities.

The NGO brand is seen as an important tool to differentiate and positively identify an NGO and to promote its vision and mission using the mechanisms of the market:

We occupy the same slots [as commercial products]...You can find the ad on the tube and on the telly and on the same page in the newspaper where you can find an ad for a product. And at the same time I think that the modern brand theory always tells commercial companies... that ads are not just about selling product. They always try to sell a philosophy that surrounds the brand and makes it relevant.

Media director

Although NGOs adopt commercial sector codes and practices, they are aware that addressing the public as "consumers" inevitably turns problems and people into "commodities" that they try to "sell". Some participants described a strained relationship with the market. While admitting the impossibility of not subscribing at least in part to its logic, they acknowledge possible undesirable outcomes:

We give but we also get annoyed with our inbox being clogged up with being asked, and the endless leaflets ...we're talking about a relationship and these relationships often go on for very many, many, many years...If we adopt the methodology of the marketplace then we have to ... live by the sword [and] die by the sword. We have to accept that we're turning ourselves into a commodity.

Media director

They're expecting a very parallel experience they get from any other suppliers.

Differentiation in a competitive field

NGOs need to find a balance between regularly contacting prospective supporters to engender and maintain interest, and too frequent contact which may result in rejection:

If you go out on a limb and say, I'm going to [contact] you twice a year or I'm just going to let you choose and I'll just mail you at Christmas, and [another organisation is] asking you 12 times a year, you go "I'm sorry. Yeah, they are a bit annoying but they came round and they were talking about this in February and March and April and I've spent my money now." That's the challenge.

Fundraising director

Some participants believe that a "lighter touch" approach is more rewarding. Supporters prefer not to feel pressurised

into giving, or being viewed in transactional terms. Less frequent contact promotes greater trust in the organisation and often results in unsolicited donations.

Competition among NGOs can be counter-productive and antagonise the public. Several participants reflected on this issue:

The public see us as very competitive... They are saying... you're behaving like...commercial brands in a competitive sense.

Advocacy director

They get this sense of having too much stuff coming at them, which is a product of the competition.

Communications director

Sector-wide collaborative initiatives can be productive and help reduce the perception of NGOs being in fierce competition.

However, they do not guarantee success. One professional commented that "Make Poverty History is history". Sector-wide initiatives also can lead to public disillusion with the whole sector:

A lot of the agencies have complained about... well, where have we gone from there? What have we done with that movement? We haven't got the names [of supporters]; we haven't got the momentum from it.

Media director

Emergency "umbrella" initiatives, such as DEC appeals, can channel donations efficiently towards a central cause. This is seen as overriding competition and reducing use of resources. Nevertheless, differentiation remains an important aspect of NGOs' overall communications planning.

Innovation: opportunities and risks

Technological innovation and new ways of connecting and networking are providing NGOs with opportunities to target particular groups and members of the public, and to differentiate themselves from the competition. They are enabling power shifts and changing the ways that people receive, process and distribute information. NGOs are continually examining and revising their practices and devising innovative ways to convey their messages.

Innovating involves taking risks and is costly. NGOs and the market generally are having to restrict their spending, and the costs related to experimentation are difficult to justify when funding

comes mostly from the public and government. Also, as one practitioner commented, if a new approach or tool does not work, "the danger is everyone goes back into their silos".

The challenge is to find a balance between the need to innovate and to distinguish the cause, and the need to ensure a steady revenue stream that is often the priority driving the use of familiar models and techniques already proven to attract funding. "In our sector", commented one participant, "we are still, time and time again, going back to trusted models rather than innovation, because it works".

We are still, time and time again, going back to trusted models rather than innovation because it works.



Relating to the media

News stories can highlight particular concerns, predisposing people to taking action to find a solution. An organisation whose planned communications and appeals are aligned to the news is more likely to attract donations and other forms of support. Emergency-response organisations can tailor their appeals to the news agenda, taking cues from news headlines to achieve exposure for their cause. NGOs need to find ways to push their causes further up the news agenda, particularly when emergencies continue beyond the lifecycle of the news story:

We do definitely depend on, more heavily, on our media coverage... people hear something on the Today programme that we're inside Somalia and ...they draw on those combining factors and then they send donations.

Communications director

Occasionally, an NGO's planned appeal coincides with a news story:

The famine this year and the food crisis [in East Africa], a lot of NGOs had planned to do stuff on agriculture...the fact that that was in the news has given us an opportunity to go in and say: "okay, if you want to stop this happening here's some long-term things we need to do" and probably create a lot more cut through because of that, because people are seeing it and asking the question "why is this happening again?"

Fundraising director

The structures that define news and news reporting shape the stories that NGOs are able to communicate through news media:

If you want to get into a flagship television programme [or] radio interview ... you can't just ambush people, you have to have a way-in that is legitimate within that space.

Communications director

Thus, **while NGOs may be frustrated by the media's general lack of interest in international development stories, when there is media coverage, its impact is high in terms of reach and viewers do not feel "ambushed" or pressured to respond, and are more likely to give.**

NGOs sometimes seek to inject what they call a "jeopardy line" into their stories to attract news editors:

Something that's ongoing and longer term, how do you make that more serious? ... How do we ... inject jeopardy into this?

Fundraising director

How do you know and select which bit of bleakness you actually engage with?

And in some cases:

There's some things we know are amazing causes but we can't make a good film about them because [there is] not enough jeopardy in it...so we have to drop it.

Fundraising director

As a communications director concluded, the challenge is "how do you know and select which bit of bleakness you actually engage with?"

You can't just ambush people, you have to have a way-in that is legitimate within that space.



Case study 4: How to innovate and stand out from the crowd

Joe Morrison

The UK charity fundraising market is very crowded and very competitive. As economic stagnation squeezes household budgets, charities are increasingly competing not just against each other, but also with commercial goods and services.

The majority of UK charities are reliant on very established mechanisms to engage donors, and they tend to play on very similar emotional triggers. In short, charities focus their resources on what works, and this is as true for Save the Children as it is for any other charity.

More than ever charity marketing is crying out for diversification. We've all become a little too similar and the manner in which charities communicate has become very predictable, with little in the way of surprise or stand out. It is by no means commercial suicide to continue down this path, indeed it can still be very profitable, but it does result in missed opportunities; firstly to engage younger people, who have very different expectations from past generations, and secondly to engage those who want to make the world a better place, but are uninspired by what's currently on offer.

Charities must demonstrate what is unique about their organisation. Just as ailing corporations often return to the principles of their founders, established charities need to return to the passion and values that their founders had when they filled a unique space. Charities that innovate successfully will stand out by establishing a unique position and successfully reaching people who share their passion and values. Charities need to identify their reason for being and acknowledge the need to stand out. Being different requires a degree of bravery – which most charities have “in spades” – coupled with a willingness to take risks – something more unsettling to a fiscally conservative sector.



Kadiatu's baby wears a hat knitted by Save the Children supporters, distributed through its Kroo Bay clinic, Sierra Leone

© Anna Kari

At Save the Children, our No Child Born to Die campaign simplifies our broad array of work down to the most important and powerful issue; the fact that children, millions of children, still die in the 21st century before their 5th birthday. We attempt to deepen the engagement of supporters by going beyond feelings of sympathy and focus more on creating empathy. We do this by highlighting what connects our supporters with the people we support around the world. Parents and those close to young children in the UK know first-hand the progress that a child has made by the age of five – first steps, first teeth, first vaccination – and the emotions, anxieties and joyful moments that accompany them.

When our communications highlight universal needs and moments experienced by the children we support, it unlocks feelings of empathy because these are key moments parents recognise from their own children. The more we create these deep feelings of connection, the more we highlight the unique benefits of supporting Save the Children.

This is just the start and we have ambitions to go much further. **The sign of a truly innovative charity in a crowded market is one that enables people who are passionate about changing the world to do so.** We want to show supporters more directly the impact of their time, money and voice that they so generously give. **The public will be most attracted to organisations that can articulate a clear problem and a uniquely bold, blistering ambition to resolve it.**

Joe Morrison is strategic innovation manager at Save the Children.

Where next?

NGOs' thinking and practices are beginning to unravel because of shifting demographics, evolving technology, economic pressures and uncertainties, the influence of consumer culture and the market, the changing media landscape and a fragmenting audience. This report shows that discussion continues to centre largely on "traditional" media, particularly television, but as established practices are challenged, the meshing of experience with innovative modern media platforms and devices could be very productive.

The discussions that took place in the "Who Cares?" meeting in November 2011, among professionals in 18 NGOs, highlight several areas that are likely to be central—although probably contested—in future communications of development and communication issues.

Accountability, transparency and impact: sustaining a positive public image

Economic uncertainty is increasing, budgets and incomes are shrinking. Heightened visibility and scrutiny are increasing pressure on NGOs to demonstrate "value for money" and impact. **Accountability and transparency are becoming more important.** How much information should be conveyed to whom and in what form, to demonstrate impact? How can NGOs tell stories that are interesting and convincing, yet true to their long-term cause? These questions will become increasingly central to building and sustaining a positive public image for the individual NGO and the sector as a whole.

Building trust: in search of strategies

Transparency and accountability are critical for building trust with current and potential supporters, and the wider public alike. **The question of public trust should be a central concern for NGOs** in their work and their communications. They need constantly to search for ways to enhance and/or restore trust. The decision of one NGO to go public about an incident of embezzlement is an example of how accountability can strengthen relations with supporters and the wider public, and help to ensure long-term support.

Representing global suffering: towards a greater collective responsibility?

NGOs can and should develop distinct approaches to communicating their causes; the need to diversify is ever more acute in a crowded and competitive space. However, **the sector should also aspire to and practise greater collective responsibility.** Compliance with Article 10 of the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief, on ethically appropriate portrayals of victims, is seen as a necessary baseline.²⁴ What one NGO does and how it communicates, have far-reaching effects on the whole sector. Forums in which NGOs can debate their approaches and styles of communicating global suffering can constitute informal means of regulation for the sector.

Looking outwards and forward towards new audiences

Support for NGOs traditionally comes from the "conscience constituency". A combination of competition among charities and new technologies is driving many NGOs to seek support outside this constituency. **Many turn particularly to young people** who are familiar with the use of new media and who should be cultivated as potential future supporters.²⁵

Mediated proximity: death of the gatekeeper?

There is growing recognition of the importance and potential of proximity between NGOs and their audiences, between audiences and beneficiaries, and between NGO professionals and the places and people they seek to help. Survivors and beneficiaries are being seen and heard more often in television appeals and direct mailings, and via new media platforms that potentially enable longer-term, more personal connections between supporters and beneficiaries, and between NGOs and their beneficiaries. **The trend is for supporters ultimately to connect directly with recipients of aid, which is challenging the traditional role of the NGO as the gatekeeper.**



About the authors



Dr Shani Orgad is a senior lecturer in Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). She is the

author of *Media Representation and the Global Imagination* (Polity, 2012) and *Storytelling Online: Talking Breast Cancer on the Internet* (Peter Lang, 2005). Her research and teaching focus on media coverage of disasters, war and conflict, globalisation, new media, and health and the media. Shani co-directs the "Mediated Humanitarian Knowledge" research project.



Corinne Vella graduated in Media and Communications from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). She works on media relations,

communications and editorial projects for individuals, institutions, commercial firms and international organisations, including the World Economic Forum, in various parts of the world.

Contributors



Dr Bruna Seu is principal investigator on the "Mediated Humanitarian Knowledge" project. She is senior lecturer in Psychosocial Studies

at Birkbeck, University of London, and has been a practising psychoanalytic psychotherapist for over 20 years. Her forthcoming book *The Passivity Matrix; Human Rights and Everyday Morality* (Palgrave) condenses 10 years of research into public responses to mediated news of human rights abuses, in the UK and Spain.



Dr Frances Flanagan is a lecturer and postdoctoral researcher on the "Mediated Humanitarian Knowledge" project and is based at Birkbeck, University

of London. She is a historian and lawyer with several years experience of working for a human rights NGO. Her research interests include history and cultures of activist organisations and the memory of war and political violence in the 20th century.



Ian Bray is head of the humanitarian side of the Oxfam Media Unit. He has worked for Oxfam for more than 15 years, first as an aid worker in

Mozambique, then as a press officer. He has worked for Practical Action and Water Aid. He has over seven years' experience as an aid worker in Indonesia and southern Africa.



Leigh Daynes was appointed to the new role of director of advocacy, campaigns and communications at the international children's

development charity, Plan, in January 2010. Previously he was head of corporate external affairs at the British Red Cross. Leigh has worked extensively overseas in communications and representation roles from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe, at the headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva, and as a member of the Red Cross permanent observer mission to the United Nation's head quarters in New York.



Brendan Paddy has been Disasters Emergency Committee's communications manager since October 2009. He moved to NGOs from

journalism and was press officer and later media unit director for Amnesty International, senior media officer in Save the Children and head of media at Childline and Age UK. On his first day at DEC he assumed overall responsibility for the media work of 13 of the UK's leading aid agencies as they responded to the two typhoons and the earthquake that hit South East Asia. He led the media work of DEC in the aftermaths of the Haiti earthquake, the Pakistan floods and the East Africa food crisis.



Joe Morrison is strategic innovation manager at Save the Children UK. Joe previously worked in a variety of insight and analysis roles, studying

the healthcare market for Wall Street fund managers, to informing policy for several UK government departments. Since joining Save the Children he has worked on a number of strategic initiatives, including the No Child Born to Die campaign. Joe is also responsible for championing innovation and creating the conditions for new ideas to flourish.

The authors would like to thank Cynthia Little for her help in editing this report.

Endnotes*

- ¹ See: <http://www.plan-uk.org/news/events/who-cares-debate/>
<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2011/11/02/who-cares-polis-panel-debate-on-public-perceptions-of-humanitarian-aid/>
- ² *ibid.*
- ³ Seu, Irene Bruna. *A Multidisciplinary Investigation of Bystanders and Human Rights Abuses*. The Leverhulme Trust (RF&G/11158).
- ⁴ Most of the quotes in the report are from the November 2011 discussions.
- ⁵ Darnton, Andrew with Kirk, Martin (2011). *Finding Frames: New Ways to Engage the UK Public in Global Poverty*. Published by Oxfam. See: <http://findingframes.org/> Full report available at: <http://www.findingframes.org/Finding%20Frames%20New%20ways%20to%20engage%20the%20UK%20public%20in%20global%20poverty%20Bond%202011.pdf>
- ⁶ See: Cohen, Stanley. (2001). *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*. Cambridge: Polity; Dogra, Nandita. (2012). *Representations of Global Poverty: Aid, Development and International NGOs*. London: I.B. Tauris; Lidchi, Henrietta. (1993). All in the Choosing Eye: Charity, Representation and the Developing World. Unpublished PhD thesis. Open University, Milton Keynes.
- ⁷ Seu, Irene Bruna. (2011). "Shoot the messenger": dynamics of positioning and denial in response to human rights appeals, *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, 3(2): 139-161. Similar views were expressed in the focus groups with the UK public, held in 2011, as part of the "Mediated Humanitarian Knowledge" research.
- ⁸ For example, see the campaign Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria to end mother-to-child HIV transmission. See TEDxGeneva "Social Media for Social Change" presentation at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m7ZVXRovnc>
- ⁹ NGOs' efforts to facilitate field visits for staff were described in extended interviews with NGO representatives conducted as part of the "Mediated Humanitarian Knowledge" research.
- ¹⁰ See: Pati, Anita. (8 February 2012). "Curbing charity chuggers – reactions from across the sectors", *Guardian*. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/voluntary-sector-network/2012/feb/08/curbing-charity-chuggers> Gardner, Tom. (5 March 2012). "Now Gloucester bans "intimidating" chuggers as FORTY other councils considers limiting their hours", *Daily Mail*. Available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2110532/Chuggers-target-shoppers-behalf-charities-banned-city-centre-accused-intimidation.html#ixzz1t92YkTj7>
- ¹¹ Darnton, Andrew with Kirk, Martin (2011). *Finding Frames: New Ways to Engage the UK Public in Global Poverty*. Oxfam. See: <http://findingframes.org/> Full report available at: <http://www.findingframes.org/Finding%20Frames%20New%20ways%20to%20engage%20the%20UK%20public%20in%20global%20poverty%20Bond%202011.pdf>
- ¹² Mitchell, Andrew. (23 December 2010). "Mitchell: Aid agencies to focus on value for money". Press release issued by Department for International Development. See: <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/News/Latest-news/2010/Mitchell-Aid-agencies-to-focus-on-value-for-money/>
- ¹³ Cohen, Stanley. (2001). *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*. Cambridge: Polity.
- ¹⁴ See IBT study Global Generation (October 2010): http://www.ibt.org.uk/all_documents/research_reports/GG_comp110411-website.pdf#view=FitV
- ¹⁵ Darnton, Andrew with Kirk, Martin (2011). *Finding Frames: New Ways to Engage the UK Public in Global Poverty*. Oxfam. See: <http://findingframes.org/> Full report available at: <http://www.findingframes.org/Finding%20Frames%20New%20ways%20to%20engage%20the%20UK%20public%20in%20global%20poverty%20Bond%202011.pdf>
- ¹⁶ Burrell, Ian. (18 February 2012). "The aid business has grown fat. It's time there was proper scrutiny", *The Spectator*. Available at: <http://www.spectator.co.uk/essays/all/7652098/big-charity.shtml>
- ¹⁷ Darnton, Andrew with Kirk, Martin (2011). *Finding Frames: New Ways to Engage the UK Public in Global Poverty*. Oxfam. See: <http://findingframes.org/> Full report available at: <http://www.findingframes.org/Finding%20Frames%20New%20ways%20to%20engage%20the%20UK%20public%20in%20global%20poverty%20Bond%202011.pdf>
- ¹⁸ See also: Cottle, Simon and Nolan, David. (2007). Global humanitarianism and the changing aid-media field: 'Everyone was dying for footage'. *Journalism Studies*, 8(6): 862-878.
- ¹⁹ Darnton, Andrew with Kirk, Martin (2011). *Finding Frames: New Ways to Engage the UK Public in Global Poverty* (p. 107). Oxfam. See: <http://findingframes.org/> Full report available at: <http://www.findingframes.org/Finding%20Frames%20New%20ways%20to%20engage%20the%20UK%20public%20in%20global%20poverty%20Bond%202011.pdf>
- ²⁰ Similarly, there is public scepticism about how organisations handle personal data and signatures collected from one-off and regular givers. Some NGO representatives said that prospective supporters are reluctant to provide their personal and bank details, and signatures.
- ²¹ Seu, Irene Bruna. *A Multidisciplinary Investigation of Bystanders and Human Rights Abuses*. The Leverhulme Trust (RF&G/11158). The view of NGOs as bloated over-resourced businesses was corroborated by the many UK focus group participants, as part of the "Mediated Humanitarian Knowledge" research.
- ²² Philosopher Onora O'Neill argues that the obsession with transparency can potentially erode rather than foster trust. See: A Question of Trust, *Reith lecture series*, BBC Radio 4. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2002/lectures.shtml>
- ²³ The Department for International Development places particular emphasis on accountability and "value for money" of UK aid. This is motivated, at least in part, by the ring-fencing of the UK budget for overseas development at 0.7% of GNI. Reacting to the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee Report on the Economic Impact and Effectiveness of Development Aid, bond chief executive Ben Jackson (n.d.) remarked that "For little over a penny in every tax payer's pound the UK has forged one of the most effective and efficient aid programmes in the world." *Comment on House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee Report on the Economic Impact and Effectiveness of Development Aid*. Available at: <http://www.bond.org.uk/pages/abandoning-0.7-would-mean-abandoning-some-of-the-worlds-poorest-communities.html>
- ²⁴ See: <http://www.ifrc.org/en/publications-and-reports/code-of-conduct/> (accessed on 2 May 2012)
- ²⁸ See also IBT study Global Generation (October 2010): http://www.ibt.org.uk/all_documents/research_reports/GG_comp110411-website.pdf#view=FitV

