

Caring in Crisis – Why development and humanitarian NGOs need to change how they relate to the public

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Dr Shani Orgad, LSE, presenting the study findings at the 'Caring in Crisis' colloquium

This post was written by [Dr Shani Orgad](#) from the Department of Media and Communications at LSE and [Dr Bruna Seu](#), Department of Psychosocial Studies, Birkbeck.

Ian Birrell, a staunch critic of the humanitarian aid sector, has attacked '[cash-swollen charities](#)' for focusing 'on hitting on an outdated aid target, instead of on results'. Unfortunately, the UK public seems often to share similar sentiments of disillusionment and distrust towards humanitarian and development NGOs.

Our three-year Leverhulme Trust-funded study '[Mediated Humanitarian Knowledge: Audiences' Reactions and Moral Actions](#)' investigated the UK public's understandings and reactions to humanitarian and international development issues and to their communications. We specifically explored

how members of the UK public make sense of the images and narratives that NGOs generate and how ideologies, emotions and biographical experiences shape those responses. We also looked at how NGOs plan and think about their communications.

Our study shows that the UK public is emotionally responsive to humanitarian issues, but people are fatigued and disillusioned. We found widespread public distrust of humanitarian and international development NGOs, and strong resentment towards some of their marketing techniques and communications practices. Because of financial pressure (especially in the context of the recession) and increased competition within the charity sector, NGOs communications have become more and more geared to fundraising. NGOs' communications with the public increasingly adopt methods and forms similar to those used by advertisers and retailers of commercial goods. This predominantly fundraising-driven approach is proving detrimental. The public is expressing huge fatigue and resentment towards being the target of monetary donation. They feel dehumanised and manipulated. Crucially, as soon as NGO communications are perceived as advertising and money-seeking, the public disconnects from the humanitarian message.

As evidenced by DEC's successful fundraising for its Philippines Typhoon appeal, the UK public gives generously to one-off appeals for natural disasters. However, people struggle over maintaining ongoing meaningful connectedness with humanitarian and international development issues. While mobilising public empathy is a crucial first step, it is not sufficient to turn caring into action to alleviate suffering.

Drawing on a psychosocial perspective, our study explains how this obstacle might be addressed. We show how the public's connectedness with humanitarian causes can be sustained, beyond the immediate, one-off donation. First, **appropriate manageable emotions need to be elicited**. The public expects and accepts the sadness and distress caused by humanitarian communications. However, the upset such messages and images cause should have integrity of purpose. If perceived as manipulative and exploitative, they lead to desensitisation and resentment towards NGOs. If the upset is not manageable, it is followed by a switching off and further distancing from humanitarian issues.

Second, **understanding has to be created**. Concise and contextualised information enables people to understand

distant suffering, and their appropriate personal response to alleviate it. Contrary to the image of an apathetic public that is not interested in knowing and understanding, our research shows that people welcome understanding even if they feel overwhelmed by the amount and pervasiveness of information about disasters and suffering. Being able to understand and contextualise human suffering caused by humanitarian crises makes them easier to manage emotionally and clarifies what actions would be appropriate.



Dr Bruna Seu, Birkbeck, presenting the study findings at the 'Caring in Crisis' colloquium.

Third, **people's familiar practices of care are very significant**. When relating to far-off human suffering, the UK public tends to apply familiar moral principles and practices of care related to caring for loved ones, and those in their immediate communities. Therefore, with the exception of humanitarian emergencies, the public mostly seeks a relationship with distant sufferers that is not mediated by NGOs. People want an embodied, direct and meaningful relationship with those whose suffering they are being asked to alleviate. However, this desire differs considerably from how NGOs frequently address the public: as monetary donors, not carers. The discrepancy between how NGOs approach the UK public and the way the public wants to relate to and help people far away, increases a sense of alienation, both between the public and the far-away sufferers, and between the public and NGOs.

If NGOs want to build a sustainable relationship between the public, their 'beneficiaries' and their organisations, that can develop and deepen over time, it is essential that they address the UK public not just as monetary donors, and that they understand and respect the psychosocial complexities of people's relations and responses to humanitarian issues. Monetary transaction is an important, but not an exclusive or, necessarily, always primary possible action for the public. Many NGOs realise that and are already taking steps to extend their approach to the public from not just donors, to supporters and followers,

e.g. by utilizing social media. However, so far these efforts are being barely recognized by the UK public.

Our study of people's views and responses also suggests a need for NGOs perhaps to rethink their role: from gatekeepers and money-collectors, to channels facilitating the UK public's relationships with individuals and communities in the global south. This would certainly involve a serious transformation and handing over of power, far from easy to accept, let alone implement. But in the face of the crisis of public trust that our study identifies, and which is echoed (and perhaps reinforced) by criticisms such as Birrell's, such a rethinking would seem urgent.

*This post was written by **Dr Shani Orgad** from the Department of Media and Communications at LSE and **Dr Bruna Seu**, Department of Psychosocial Studies, Birkbeck.*

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