

# An extension of colonialism? Development education, images and the media

**Kate Manzo** reviews the continuing use of stereotypical images of famine in the Western media and highlights their negative long-term impact.

The *Imaging Famine* exhibition and stakeholder conference held at the Guardian Newsroom in 2005 was designed with two principle aims. One was to reignite debate about famine coverage in Western media. The other was to maintain that debate via an email discussion list and (most importantly) an ongoing, web-based project of the same name (see [www.imaging-famine.org](http://www.imaging-famine.org)).

*Imaging Famine* was two years in the making by curators David Campbell, DJ Clark and myself. It was therefore clearly not timed in relation to external events. As it happened, however, the exhibition opened one month after broadcast of the Live8 concerts held in solidarity with the Make Poverty History campaign and just as famine images from Niger began appearing in Western media. And there they were again; the iconic representations of famine (especially the starving baby and mother/child images, some of them recycled from the 1984-85 Ethiopian famine) that were featured on the walls of the Newsroom.

Against that backdrop, this article shows how contingent events and associated images helped shape media responses to the exhibition itself as well as refocus attention on particular issues. Furthermore, I argue in what follows that the settling of certain questions has only reinforced the need to maintain a debate about others – a debate in which development education retains a significant stake.

## The persistence of 'development pornography'

As Stanley Cohen notes in *States of Denial*, denunciation of 'negative imagery' was well underway by the mid 1970s. Images of helplessness, dependency and suffering in 'traditional 'starving child' appeals' were being denounced as an allegory of colonialism as well as 'an analogy with pornography' (Cohen, 2001: 178). In a debate pitting charity fundraisers against development educationalists, the latter appeared to be in firm control of the moral high ground. In Cohen's words, 'ideological and intellectual weight moved towards the educationalists; fundraising was just something necessary for survival' (2001: 179).

Media coverage of the 1984-85 Ethiopian famine marked a watershed in the course of that debate. The pronounced and immediate impact of traditional appeal imagery on public consciousness and compassion only strengthened (perhaps paradoxically) the hand of the critics. With aid agency coffers still groaning under the weight of public donations, reformers called for positive guidelines and codes of practice. The *Images of Africa* final report sponsored by Oxfam and the European Economic Community, meanwhile, cited 'a mass of contradictions arising from the different and

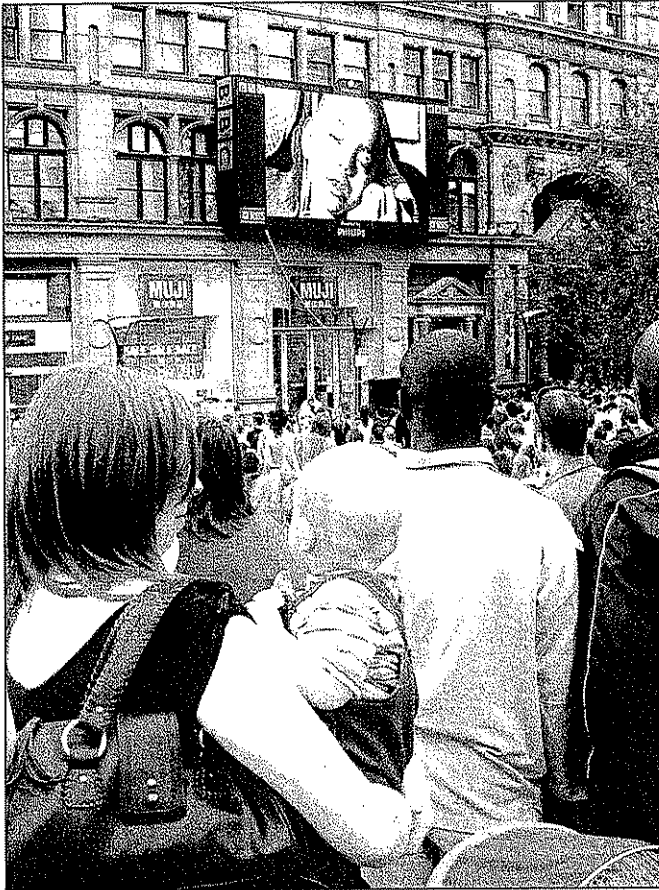
even opposing aims of different departments, and from the competition between NGOs.' Before wondering whether the British public would continue to donate in response to such images, the report concluded that British NGOs must decide 'whether following the media and promoting images of Africans as tragic and passive is a feasible long-term strategy, or a short-term solution' (Van der Gaag and Nash, 1987: 76).

By the 1990s it appeared as if the battle had been won. Agencies such as Save the Children (which first launched *Focus on Images* in 1991) developed internal guidelines on their own use of images. Broader international guidelines were also drawn up, most notably the *Code of Conduct: Images and Messages relating to the Third World* adopted by the General Assembly of European NGOs in 1989 ([www.dochas.ie/Documents/Code\\_images\\_98.htm](http://www.dochas.ie/Documents/Code_images_98.htm)). Key watchwords in these voluntary codes – espoused most obviously by the more critically self-aware NGOs like Save the Children, Oxfam, Christian Aid and World Vision – were reality, dignity and empowerment.

Efforts to ensure that 'positive' imagery becomes the norm for the noughties can be seen in the formation of MAC (the Messages, Actions and Campaigns working group of Make Poverty History). Such efforts are further signalled by the 2004 agreement to review the 1989 Code reached by a European gathering of development education practitioners. The review was subsequently spearheaded by Dochas, the umbrella organisation of Irish NGOs (for the final report on the review see McGee, 2005).

Unfortunately for all such commitments to the various codes, it had become abundantly clear to many by the middle of 2005 that the image battle still *hadn't* been won. Concerns were already apparent by the dawn of 2004 (see for example Safo, 2002; Gidley, 2004). So it wasn't only Live 8, *Imaging Famine* and the crisis in Niger that refocused the critical spotlight on fundraisers and the media. Such contingent events did, however, make it impossible to ignore evidence of 'development pornography' (Gidley, 2005) and 'the return of the poster child' (*New Internationalist*, 2005: 6). Though the sources just cited mention a 'rise' or 'return' in emotive images of children in distress, it's debatable whether such images ever fully went away (see for example theme board number 12, 'Same Image Repeated?' on [www.imaging-famine.org](http://www.imaging-famine.org)).

If there is a silver lining in that black cloud, it is that the continued resort to 'emotive images, particularly of children in distress, to raise funds' (*New Internationalist*, 2005: 6)



Live screening of Live 8 concert, Exchange Square, Manchester, 2 July 2005. Picture: D J Clark/Panos

has reinforced the imperative to revisit old questions. Under three main (sometimes overlapping) headings, the brief overview that follows highlights the issues that appear to have been settled as well as areas of continued concern.

### The use and reuse of 'negative imagery'

The question of who benefits from the use of traditional famine imagery was both posed and insinuated by the media during the summer of 2005 (e.g. the Madeleine Morris report from the *Imaging Famine* exhibition for 'World Today,' the BBC World Service News and Current Affairs Programme, August 4, 2005; the report by Vuyiswa

Ngqobongwana for the 'Talking Africa' radio show, August 13, 2005; and the September 14 report on the *Imaging Famine* conference by Gidley (2005)). The simple answer is that aid agencies benefit. If NGOs 'don't get funds they don't exist' (Ahmed Rajab, speaking on 'World Today,' August 4, 2005). NGOs benefit in the short-term from both increased funding and political clout (DJ Clark, speaking on 'Talking Africa,' August 13, 2005).

And yet, simultaneously, NGOs suffer from negative press. When the Irish agency Concern, for example, ran appeals for Niger featuring starving naked babies, it invited criticism from those who consider such images to be pornographic and exploitative (see Gidley, 2005; *New*

*Internationalist*, 2005). Lizzy Noone, Concern's own Development Education Officer and former fundraiser, argued for showing people with dignity instead of resorting to negative stereotypes even though some fundraisers may 'argue that softer images don't bring in the money' (quoted in Gidley, 2005: 2).

That telling example suggests that fundraisers have gained the upper hand in internal battles over images. It also recalls significant insights from the *Images of Africa* final report – not just the point about NGO contradictions and competition but also the question of the relationship between image and audience.

### The emotive power of images

Why the continued reliance on contested images? Again, the answer is simple. If starving baby images worked in the past 'then starving babies will headline the next difficult crisis' (Moeller, 1999: 2). Aid agencies 'long ago learnt the tug of sympathy' (Hutnyk, 2004: 79). Their fundraising departments 'say the starving baby pictures tug heartstrings and bring in cash' (Gidley, 2005: 2).

So the old issue of whether the British public would continue to donate in response to emotive images has clearly been settled. At least with regard to Britain, this ongoing charitable impulse would seem to undermine Susan Moeller's thesis about 'the inevitability of compassion fatigue' (Moeller, 1999: 2). The question now is not *whether* we keep giving but rather why we keep responding to 'this blatant manipulation' (Hutnyk, 2004: 80).

If that particular question defies easy answer and warrants further debate it is because of two complicating factors. First – as I have argued elsewhere – the dominant iconography of the majority world as a whole is not the bloated belly or starving baby but the lone child photographed in close-up (Manzo, 2005; see also Ruddick, 2003). Starving baby images are but one component of what Hutnyk calls 'a vast representational compendium of children in need' (2004:

81). The wider issue, then, is not the fundraisers' resort to 'pornography' in emergency appeals but the wholesale reliance on images of de-contextualised children to convey a variety of messages.

Second, the 'we' that responds to iconographic images is not only the general public but also the donor community more broadly. The World Food Programme's Greg Barrow has charted the flow of donations to Niger to the appearance of media images of starving children. When a United Nations (UN) emergency appeal for southern Africa failed to raise a single donation, 'rich countries' were lambasted by Neil Townsend, Oxfam's humanitarian coordinator for the region, for failing to act 'until television crews show children dying' (quoted in Meldrum, 2005: 14).

Questions remain about the reality behind images (Cohen, 2001: 180) and about the assumptions that inform them (Dodd, 2005: 26). The two factors just mentioned further

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allude – as do the questions raised in the following section – to the need to maintain debate about complex relationships among images and audience, culture, identity, politics and policy.

**The effects of representation**

*Do the abject and passive victims (invariably women and children) so beloved of photographers represent an extension of 19th-century colonialism – Africa as inferior, feminised, infantilised, the object of our charity? Furthermore, do they not work to reinforce a power relation between the west and Africa that, by prioritising aid, masks the gross inequalities that keep a majority of the world's population in poverty? (Dodd, 2005: 26).*

As images of starving babies in Niger became a media feature, reporter Madeleine Morris asked on the BBC's 'World Today' programme (August 4 2005) whether the short-term gains to be made from this sort of image will be worth the long-term implications. So what then are the long-term implications of such stereotypical (colonial) imagery?

While 'compassion fatigue' remains a valid possibility, a number of other anxieties point to the neo-colonialism theme suggested in the above quote from Dodd. There is the idea, first of all, of a negative relationship between business investment and images of Africa as an object of charity. Concerns about the harmful economic effects of stereotypical images were aired on 'World Today' (*Ibid.*) by Ahmed Rajab, the editor of *Africa Analysis*, and by Tafari Wossen, the director of Waag Communications in Addis Ababa. This was not the first time that such concerns have been raised. They echo sentiments expressed, for example, by various business interests in Africa during meetings held with media representatives in London in 2003. Organised by Diageo Africa (a brewing and distilling corporation that produces a wide range of brands – most famously Guinness – for sub-Saharan African markets), the discussions focused on the quality and quantity of media reporting. A subsequent document entitled *Africa: the Marginalised Continent* bemoaned the persistence of a climate of 'Afro-pessimism' and insisted that 'reporting exclusively on politics, conflict, famine and disease is perpetuating an unbalanced picture of Africa and fuelling the appetite of audiences for further pessimistic coverage. It also contributes to undermining investor confidence in Africa' (Diageo, 2004: 17).

Whatever the truth of those claims about investor confidence, the thesis that audiences come to crave negative stories is not universally supported. In its report into the so-called Live Aid legacy, for example, Voluntary Service

Overseas claimed that '55% of British people say they want to see...the positives as well as the negatives, and they want context and background to a news story' (VSO, 2002: 3).

That said, the basic idea that contested images (whatever their short-term benefits) produce a variety of negative outcomes in the long run enjoys widespread agreement. The VSO report warned of the dangers of misunderstanding and mass ignorance produced by stereotypes that recreate a 'false sense of superiority and inferiority' and thus reproduce

unequal relationships at home and abroad (VSO, 2002: 3). The focus there was the effect of information deficit on the British general public. But the increasingly global circulation of images generates global effects. When Vuyiswa Ngqobongwana, the 'Talking Africa' radio show presenter (August 13 2005), confessed to

feeling 'ashamed' of being African as a child she showed how damaging stereotypes of the majority world can cut both ways – affecting not just how 'we' see 'them' but also how 'they' see themselves.

Perhaps most worrying for development educationalists is the very real prospect of further division and conflict – not just internal divisions between fundraisers and educationalists (an old divide) but also global tensions between NGOs and their partners. As the preamble to the 1989 NGO *Code of Conduct* states, 'the quality of development co-operation and solidarity with the Third World is dependent upon the types of images and messages used by NGOs in their public awareness raising activities.' It further states that the sorts of images and messages that serve development education objectives are those that promote awareness, stimulate participation in debate, strengthen solidarity and boost commitment to structural change ([www.dochas.ie/Documents/Code\\_images\\_98.htm](http://www.dochas.ie/Documents/Code_images_98.htm)). Neo-colonial images clearly fail to make the grade.

**Conclusion**

In reviewing a series of questions about the media and images (especially of starving babies in Africa), this paper has suggested that dominant media images of the majority

**'reporting exclusively on politics, conflict, famine and disease ... contributes to undermining investor confidence in Africa'**

**...dominant media images of the majority world promote emotion without understanding, charity without structural change.**

world promote emotion without understanding, charity without structural change. The British people continue to give. Their reactions to Live8 suggest that they will also respond positively to political campaigns that rely heavily on images and messages about suffering children.

There is nothing inherently wrong with moving people to demand political change. There is certainly nothing inherently wrong with charitable giving that results in lives saved. But at a time when NGOs in the global north typically speak the language of partnership rather than charity

(McGee, 2005: 10), there is a very real danger that the dominance of neo-colonial images in mainstream media will minimise rather than maximise the impact of NGO work in general and diminish rather than improve its quality (McGee, 2005: 21). It is for that reason that NGOs in general and development educationalists in particular have an ongoing stake (like the business community and academics, among others) in maintaining debate about images and their use.

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## The World in the UK

### Creating a media strategy which builds support for development

*London, Spring 2006*

This half-day seminar and networking event is organised by the Development Education Association and the International Broadcasting Trust/3WE in partnership with the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association, OneWorld Broadcasting Trust, OneWorld UK, Plan International and others.

It provides a chance for broadcasters, development communicators and development education practitioners to swap ideas and work out strategies for putting development on TV.

There will also be the opportunity to share results of key audience research on the impacts of programming and of the Make Poverty History campaign.

#### Key Questions:

- Do development education practitioners know how to talk to the media?
- How do we make the message fit the medium?
- How can broadcasters find the good development stories?
- Are we ready for 'citizen media'?
- How are broadcasters adapting to the new climate created by digital media?

If you would like to play a part in taking these discussions forward, please contact Jennie O'Donovan at the DEA, tel: 020 7812 1282, email: [jennie.odonovan@dea.org.uk](mailto:jennie.odonovan@dea.org.uk).

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