

Since the original article was written (1994), the author uses the expression “Majority World” in place of “Developing World”. The new term is rapidly gaining popularity and is now used in magazines such as the New Internationalist and other leading publications.

ABSTRACT

Developing agencies have a dilemma. Though the myth of humanitarian aid has largely been discarded, their manifesto involves empowerment of the poor and helping them attain self sufficiency, while their funds depend largely on the sympathy they can generate for the “helpless people out there who they are in the process of rescuing”, and their political clout is directly related to the maintenance of a patron client relationship between the donors and the recipient government.

The media depends on its survival on readership and circulation. Disasters and horror stories sell. In the Western media soft stories with human interest only sell when the subjects are more readily identifiable, and nearer home. Their home grown writers and photographers have a feel for the editorial style and viewpoint, and do not impose a political angle that may be alien to that of the loyal readers.

In both cases, it is expedient to show images of helplessness, a colonial view of saving the natives. While this was more the case in the 60’s and early 70’s than it is now, at least in case of the developing agencies who have recently advocated a a different portrayal of people from the developing world, the change in the Western media has been far less significant. Starving children and the begging bowl are still by far the most recognised stereotype amongst even concerned people in the West.

Are tear jerkers still the best way of raising money? If they are, then changes in the education system are needed not only in the poor countries, but also in the rich, where the emphasis must shift from the need to save souls to the need to form a balanced world with equal partners. And if they are not, then the West is guilty not only under the trades description act but also of bad marketing.

The Visual Representation of Developing Countries by Developmental Agencies and the Western Media

by Shahidul Alam

Perceptions of the developing world

I was staying with friends in Newry in Northern Ireland. Paddy and Deborah had kindly made their five year old daughter's room available for me. Corrina was friendly and curious and would spend a lot of time in the room. One day as I was clearing my pockets of change I had accumulated, she suddenly remarked, "but you've got money, but, but you're from Bangladesh." The family had just returned from a trip to Bangladesh. Paddy was a development worker and they had visited many of the projects. At the tender age of five, Corrina knew that Bangladeshis did not have money.

Who portrays whom

A recent fax from the National Geographic Society Television Division, to our picture library - dedicated to promoting the work of indigenous photographers and writers - asked if we could help them with the production of a film that would include the Bangladeshi cyclone of '91. They wanted specific help in locating "US, European or UN people who would lead us to a suitable Bangladeshi family."

The situation is not unusual. Invariably films about the plight of people in developing countries show how desperate and helpless the people are, the people who realize their plight and come forward to their support are usually white foreigners. In some cases even local people are seen to be helping, but invariably it is a foreigner who has enlightened them about the way out, and it is always a foreign presenter who speaks out for them. The foreigner is so strong and forthright and so caring. She could almost hand over the microphone to them, if only they could speak for themselves, if only they understood.

The construction of a stereotype

Wide angle b/w shots, grainy, high contrast images characterize the typical third world helpless victim. Huge billboards with a dying malnourished child in a corner with outstretched arms. A clear message in polished bold font in the top left corner cleverly left blank. The message reads "We shall always be there." A reality constructed for and by those who want us to forget the implications. That "you (the developing world) shall always be there." In that role, those who receive aid ("the client group"), remain.

The assumptions and how they are validated

The end product in all these cases is the same. The Western public gets to see a distorted view of the developing world. A situation for which the public in question can hardly be totally free of blame. School children in the UK think 50-75% of the world's children are visibly malnourished (the real figure is less than 2%), and that only 10-20% of the world's six to twelve year olds start school (the real figure is almost 90%), and that the rate of population growth in the developing world is increasing (it is decreasing in every part of the developing world including Africa¹). The fact that a high proportion of the information about the developing world for the average western reader comes from fund raising campaigns is another cause of this gross distortion.

There is of course the other tack where "Third World Participation" is created in the form of guided tours to paid Third World journalists who are given what amounts to a censored view of well to do countries. In a recent tour of the United States organized by the United States Information Agency, I was accompanied throughout by a person from the State Department, and my request to visit Harlem was turned down due to "security reasons." My report on the trip was never made public. That people from the developing world do go on these trips and cater to these forms of tokenism is of course a slur on their own professionalism. Organizations like the World Bank do sponsor studies by people known to be mildly critical, with the proviso, that the World Bank would decide if the work would be published². Thereby retaining ultimate control.

The business of development

Every organization has a goal, a means and a method. The apparent goal of donor organizations is to make the recipients self sufficient. For this it uses tax payer's money, usually a fraction of a percent of its GNP. Genuine aid also constitutes a tiny fraction of the recipient's income³. The method varies, but invariably involves an input of a lot of personnel, and materials from the donor country which is paid for by the same money that was given out as aid. An organization's growth depends on its ability to generate more work. There are a limited number of recipient countries, a restricted market. All donor agencies compete for this small market. A recipient country that truly becomes self sufficient (unheard of in the history of development), no longer needs a donor. The donor agency, by fulfilling its manifesto would make itself redundant. The same applies for a development worker. The myth of humanitarian aid, however, has long been discarded, and the donors are now openly more concerned about governance, (how we spend their money) and there has been a visible shift towards administering the flow of funds rather than the humanitarian utilization of funds.

Donor agencies invariably declare themselves to be non-political. The very act of giving money, or its equivalent, to people who are badly deprived is strongly political. The development worker is in a very

¹ Peter Adamson: Charity Begins with the Truth. The Independent 18.5.93

² Unpublished book "Out of the Shadows" by Peter Stalker, commissioned by the World Bank in 1994

³ Less than 1% of the incomes of the poor world – less than 10% of the budgets of the developing world's governments comes from foreign aid.

powerful position⁴. They are people who have to be pleased if one wants a loan, or access to education, or food⁵.

The truth is, that despite all their claims about delegation, very little decision making involves local people. And very little decision making by the foreign experts involves in-depth local knowledge. It would be hazardous for these foreign experts to permit the infiltration of people who could penetrate their information chain, something that photographers are particularly good at doing. Culture, once considered a hindrance to development has now, become fashionable to promote. But it has to be a particular type of culture packaged in a particular type of way.

The "image business" is inextricably linked with the "development business." From slide shows in remote villages to slick exhibitions in posh hotels, from A5 flyers to coffee table books, from fund raising campaigns to annual reports, image hungry developmental agencies depend heavily on image makers. One feeds off the other. It is hardly surprising therefore that the image producers (read mostly white men photographers) produce images that are good for business for both industries. Development or fair representation doesn't enter the equation.

The Marketing Strategy

There is of course the need (amongst industrialized nations) to show the results of donor aid. The recent major feature in the Observer newspaper in the UK on OXFAM⁶, was called the Poverty Supplement, and in Observer's own words "The main aim of the Poverty Supplement was to persuade our readers to support OXFAM's work financially. This was obviously successful." The supplement was in fact an advertisement in the Observer to the tune of about £25,000⁷. Pledges from the Observer readers amounted to a third of the annual budget for OXFAM's

⁴ In a world of want and hunger, what is more powerful than food and fibre. Hubert Humphrey.

⁵ In 1974 there was a severe shortage due to floods. Bangladesh needed to export jute to Cuba. The US objected and when Bangladesh went ahead, stopped the PL480 grain supply. There was a subsequent famine which besides causing innumerable deaths, also led to the fall of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

⁶ 7th March 1993

⁷ Observer offer an independent evaluation of the sponsorship for £3,000

⁸ In a CARE supplement on its role in the '91 cyclone, though a photograph by a Bangladeshi photographer was used, the caption supplied by the photographer was substituted with text made up by the editor. The photographer was never consulted or even informed. CARE never responded to a letter of protest by their press and information officer, who later resigned.

⁹ In the 1990 almanac of the New Internationalist Publications, only four of the 52 photographs were by photographers of majority world origin. Three of those four were by Abbas and Salgado (weeks 14, 22 and 45), two of the finest photographers in the world. Both were at that time working for Magnum and based in Paris. The other photograph by a little known photographer from Bangladesh, was the only photograph amongst the 52 which did not name the photographer in the credit line (week 33). Predictably, the photograph was from the 1988 flood. The almanac did include numerous photographs by Western amateurs. The same publication on a listing of the highlights of 1993, mentioned the flood in Bangladesh. The flood in question was minor, but they used a photograph of the flood in 1988.

¹⁰ Unpublished research for the book "Hot Photography" to be published by Wiley and UPL in 1994.

¹¹ Functional education literature used in CONCERN schools in Kaliyadhuri.

development partnerships in Zambia. When a similar proposal was made for CONCERN's projects in Bangladesh, though CONCERN had proposed a local photographer of international standing who had been working on the projects for over six years, and the Observer had initially agreed, they backed out in the last minute, and used a British photographer. They did however use stock photographs from the Bangladeshi photographer, but were only interested in the slum and poverty pictures which were a small part of the total work.

The power of images

A camera can be a tool of extreme sensitivity or no sensitivity at all. A photograph can:

- 1) Be an eye check on memory
- 2) Give detailed information
- 3) Show what we cannot see
- 4) Store away complex data for future analysis

More importantly it can influence people and create powerful emotional responses. We are aware of the meaning of words, but forget that images may have different meanings to different people, and that the meaning of a photograph can depend to a large extent on the context in which it is used. "The Camera never lies" is the biggest lie of all.

The need for a different type of education

If we are to genuinely work for social change, what direction should developmental education go in? Teach local people about the fruits of good nutrition, family planning, education of their daughters. That is extremely important and is largely being attempted. What about teaching people (particularly development workers) to look for other options besides aid? What of creating role models of Bangladeshis running international developmental organizations, and giving these Bangladeshis the support and the clout necessary for them to succeed? What about foreigners trying to learn Bangla, and veering away from the policy that success in the development ladder correlates directly with a person's competence at English? What about use of images that show a positive aspect of the country rather than the fund collecting images of helpless destitute? What about not distorting captions by substituting them with dramatized, orientalist plethora⁸? What about desisting from patronizing the government and genuinely working with them rather than creating what is in effect a parallel government? What about teaching those working in development what the word really means?

The credit lines⁹ in articles dealing with poorer countries have no indigenous names. When questioned why this was so, picture editors and development workers claimed that there simply weren't people in these countries qualified to do the job¹⁰. Their reliability, their professionalism, their ability to understand the brief was all suspect. In response we began to make a survey of indigenous photographers working in their own countries. The response, both in terms of numbers and the quality of the work was overwhelming. If a small organization based in Bangladesh armed with no more than lists obtained from interested friends can pool together an impressive list of talented indigenous photographers doing good work in their own countries why has it been so difficult for the

development agencies to 'discover' them. Discovery is of course a key word when photographing the natives. The photographer steps down from the plane, 'discovers' the native and goes back with the scoop. That discovery implies past ignorance, seems to never get noticed. Yet there are people who did know the local people, understood their language, were respectful of their culture and understood the underlying causes of things. These are the people, skilled, available and able, who do not exist. They have not been discovered.

The history of photography fails to mention the work done by photographers in poorer countries. While the heroic feats of Hill and Adamson are extolled, the photographers who had to import all their equipment and materials from the wealthier countries and documented their cultures for little financial gain have never been registered in the archives. The few exceptions like Indian photographer Din Dayal, given the title Raja by the British who had been legitimized for having served the crown. Other much more important names in the field from the same period, like Ali Ahmed Khan, never get mentioned, puzzling until one remembers that Khan had led a rebel attack on British troops.

In five years of operation as a picture library based in the developing world, we have had many requests for images of Bangladesh by publishers, NGOs, donor agencies. The most frequently requested picture so far have been of the floods, cyclones, and slums. There was even a request for flood inundation of Dhaka in the floods in '93, which the client insisted had taken place. We have not for instance yet been asked for a picture of a person at a computer terminal, a very commonly stocked photograph in western libraries, and one which we too have several of. In one instance the client, an educational publisher in the UK insisted that our photograph of a tila (little stupa in the middle of a pond, used as cyclone shelters) was much too small and that they knew of huge giant stupas, which local photographers and community workers who had extensively combed the cyclone affected areas had never seen nor heard of.

The danger of being left out is not as great as the danger of being nullified. Books that teach you how to be a successful photographer, The ones that teach you the secrets of the trade, teach essentially how to become occidental. Since the person making the most important decisions regarding the usage of a photograph is invariably the person most distant from the event itself, the photographer's 'formula' for producing acceptable pictures is to regurgitate editorial policy regardless of what is observed. That is what the indigenous photographer must produce if he/she is to get ahead. That is what makes them begin to 'exist.' The danger therefore, is of becoming a sheep in wolf's clothing, and eventually of becoming a wolf.

Pretty much all NGOs seem to have the usual 'income generating activities,' the savings groups where the villagers gather round in a circle and sign the passbook, the functional education classes where village folk are taught urban middle-class expressions that even in cities only get used in formal situations. Where they are taught "the policeman is your friend..." and they know otherwise¹¹. Photographs of the activities of a hundred different NGOs would be largely identical. Where is the training

to network that the donor circuit itself thrives on? Where is the emphasis on information technology that allows the richer countries to retain their stranglehold? The poor in these countries have been observed, analyzed and understood, but why have they been built a cell with no exit? Why are entire nations guinea pigs for foreign anthropologists, sociologists, economists and photographers?

In a recent effort by an independent agency to install E-Mail in Bangladesh for setting up an inter-nation and a South-South dialogue, it was discovered that many NGOs already had their own dedicated E-Mail line, but had not offered the service to others, even to other NGOs. Information appears to be a resource that people are very secretive about, access to information something developing countries are selectively denied. The nature of the images representing developing countries is an index of the media control that will prevent developing countries from developing.

A Halloween song sums up some of the attitudes portrayed:

(Sung to the tune of WE THREE KINGS)

We Trick or Treaters in bright costumes are

Asking your help for children afar.

We want no candy But cash is dandy,

Here is our UNICEF jar.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooh

Help the children, in foreign lands,

They are starving -- do what you can,

They've nothing to eat -- let alone no treats

Reach out and help your fellow man.

(there is now a non-sexist version with fellow human).

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