THE VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF DEVELOPING COUNTRIES BY DEVELOPMENTAL AGENCIES AND THE WESTERN MEDIA

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Perceptions of the developing world

I was staying with friends, Paddy and Deborah, in Newry, Northern Ireland who 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 where Paddy was a development worker and they had visited many development 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 Drik’s 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 1991. 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 but those who realize their plight and step forward are usually white foreigners. In some cases 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 black and white shots and 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 (a passive existence necessary to be maintained) 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 sees 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 United Kingdom (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 attend 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 Africa). 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 wealthy countries. In a recent tour of the United States of America (USA), organized by the United States Information Agency, I was accompanied by a State Department employee who denied my request to visit Harlem for ‘security reasons’. My report on the trip - suggesting that people from the developing world who go on these trips and cater to these forms of tokenism are slurring their own professionalism – was never made public. Organizations like the World Bank sponsor study tours by people known to have mildly critical perspectives on development, with the proviso, that the World Bank decides if the work will be published 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 and for this purpose they use taxpayers’ money, usually a fraction of a percent of the Gross National Product (GNP). Genuine aid also constitutes a tiny fraction of the recipient’s income and while the method varies, it normally involves inputs like 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 and there are a limited number of recipient countries, a restricted market, with all donor agencies competing for this small market. A recipient country that truly becomes self-sufficient (unheard of in the history of development) no longer needs a donor, and therefore in fulfilling its manifesto the donor agency would make itself redundant. The same maxim applies to development workers. 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 - as part of a discernible shift towards administering the flow of funds rather than the humanitarian utilization of funds. Moreover, donor agencies invariably declare themselves to be non-political and, yet, the very act of giving money, or other forms of aid, to people who are badly deprived is strongly political. Similarly, the development worker is in a very powerful position in this regard through the capacity to dispense loans, or provide access to education or food.

The reality of how development NGOs operate is that, despite all their claims about delegation, local people play a marginal role in decision making even if overseas experts often lack 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 photographs are particularly good at doing. Culture, which was once considered a hindrance to development, has now become fashionable to promote although it has to be a particular type of culture packaged in a particular 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 thus it is unsurprising that the image producers - mostly white male photographers - produce images that are good for business for both industries. Development or fair representation generally does not enter the equation.
The marketing strategy

There is of course the need amongst industrialized nations to show the results of donor aid. For example, the UK newspaper the Observer newspaper recently featured a Poverty Supplement on Oxfam, stating, ‘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 £25,000 and pledges from Observer readers amounted to a third of the annual budget for Oxfam’s development partnerships in Zambia. When a similar proposal was made for Concern’s projects in Bangladesh, Concern proposed using a local photographer of international standing who had been working on the projects for over six years, the Observer initially agreed but backed out at the last minute and ultimately used a British photographer instead. Although they used stock photographs from the Bangladeshi photographer they 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: be an eye check on memory; give detailed information; show what we cannot see; and store away complex data for future analysis. More importantly the camera 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

In order to genuinely work for social change, development organisations need to examine other options besides aid. In the context of Bangladesh, they could create role models by providing Bangladeshis with the support and clout necessary for them to succeed in running international development organizations. Moreover, development NGOs need to be more sensitive to local cultural needs in developing countries. For example, overseas workers could try to learn Bangla, and veer away from the policy that directly correlates success in the development ladder with competence in English. Cultural sensitivity should also inform the use of images that
show a positive aspect of the developing world rather than the use of
damaging negative stereotypes. Photo captions should not be distorted by
substituting them with dramatized, orientalist plethora. In a macro context,
this involves working in partnership with host country governments rather
than creating what is in effect a parallel government.

The credit lines in articles dealing with poorer countries often lack
indigenous names. When questioned as to this practice, picture editors and
development workers often claim that there simply are not sufficient
numbers of people in these countries qualified for the positions. Their
reliability, their professionalism and their ability to understand the brief are
often questioned. By way of a response, Drik began to survey 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 contacts
obtained from interested friends can pool together an impressive list of
talented indigenous photographers working locally, why has it been so
difficult for the development agencies to ‘discover’ them? Discovery is of
course a key word when photographing indigenous peoples and can be
insensitive to the history and cultural practices of host countries. Yet there
are local agencies and activists who know indigenous people, understand
their language, are respectful of their culture and are aware of the underlying
causes of poverty. There are indigenous people with the requisite skills
available to carry out work on behalf of development agencies who are often
overlooked for positions in development.

The photographic work of indigenous photographers in poorer
countries is often neglected in historical collections and reviews. While the
heroic feats of Hill and Adamson are extolled, the photographers who had to
import their equipment and materials from wealthier countries and
documented their cultures for marginal financial gain have rarely been
registered in photographic archives. Most of those that have been
recognised, like Indian photographer Din Dayal, who was given the title
‘Raja’ by the British for services to the crown, played a role in legitimising
colonial exploits. Other much more important names in the field from the
same period, like Ali Ahmed Khan, rarely get mentioned because they were
activists in anti-colonial causes.

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 pictures to date have
focused on floods, cyclones, and slums. We even received a request for
images of a flood inundation of Dhaka in 1993, which the client insisted had
taken place. We have not for instance yet been asked for more positive
images of a person working at a computer terminal, a very commonly
stocked photograph in Western libraries, and one to which we have ready
access. 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 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 excluded from the work of development
agencies and publishers is not as great as the danger of being nullified. For
example in literature on successful photography - those that teach you the
secrets of the trade – the essential focus is on how to become occidental.
Since the individual 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 progress and secure
employment. The danger therefore, is of becoming a sheep in wolf’s
clothing, and eventually of becoming a wolf.

Most development NGOs seem to have the usual ‘income generating
activities’ in the developing world such as the savings groups where the
villagers gather round in a circle and sign the passbook, or the functional
education classes where village folk are taught urban middle-class
expressions that even in cities only get used in formal situations. As a result,
the photographs compiled by different NGOs are very similar and lack
insight into the situations being observed or the factors that perpetuate
poverty in developing countries.

In a recent effort by an independent agency to install e-mail in
Bangladesh to facilitate international and South-South dialogue, it was
discovered that many development 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 is selectively denied to developing
countries. The nature of the images representing developing countries is an
index of the media control that will prevent developing countries from
developing.

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of Photography. He has been a recipient of the Mother Jones,
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