PORTRAYING THE DEVELOPING WORLD:
THE WHOLE TRUTH AND NOTHING BUT
THE TRUTH?

September 10th 2009.
Venue: Irish Aid Volunteering and Information Centre,
27-31 Upper O’Connell Street, Dublin 1

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Seminar Proceedings

The joint Africa Centre – Dochas seminar focusing on the portrayal of the developing world was held on September 10th 2009 in the Irish Aid Volunteering and Information Centre, O ’ Connell Street, Dublin. Conference participants were welcomed by Eric Yao, Co-Ordinator of the Africa Centre. Matthias Fiedler, Director of the Irish Development Education Association and Board member of the Africa Centre chaired the Conference.

The keynote speaker was Angela Long, Journalist and Media Consultant. A Discussion Panel comprised: Selam Desta, member of the Africa Centre, Tom Arnold CEO of Concern Worldwide and Peadar King, Film Producer. The new Africa Also Smiles poster was then formally re-launched by her Excellency, Ms Catherine Muigai Mwangi, Ambassador of Kenya. The Conference was formally closed by Hans Zomer Director of Dochas. The Conference was attended by 87 people.

Mr Yao welcomed Conference participants and in welcoming people made the following comments. Over the years the main aspects of Africa which have been given prominence in the media have been wars, famine poverty and disease despite the continents wealth and capacity. Messaging about the African continent, even if well meaning, can be misleading and damaging. The ‘Africa Also Smiles ’ poster and its development education programme have been some of the ways the Africa Centre has challenged negative and stereotypical imaging. Mr Yao emphasised the importance of the Dochas Code of practice on images and messages as a tool in which the developing world can be portrayed in a fair and balanced way.

Eric Yao, Coordinator of the Africa Centre

Angela Long, Keynote Speaker
Ms Long gave a stimulating and pertinent presentation focusing on the use and abuse of media messaging. In particular she made the following noteworthy points:

We are all working in a media world which gives less and less attention to world affairs, and where millions are more interested in Victoria Beckham’s dress than world events. There are therefore major difficulties for us working in a world of celebrity media; we cannot shake our heads and put this phenomena down as ‘trash’ but need to find opportunities to use this to get our own world messages across. Television stations are decreasing their coverage of world events: in 2007 ITV ran just 5 hours of programming on developing countries. Foreign news is generally on the wane with many newspapers closing down foreign offices. Major stories can still make the headlines if they are places that westerners might travel for holidays - the occupation of Bangkok airport, the Tsunami. ‘How therefore can we wean people away from blanket of indifference or ignorance?’

Ms. Long indicated that we need to be wary of putting out continuously negative images; they wear away at audiences and do not ultimately get a positive image of global issues across to the public. Too often the ‘other’ is depicted as ‘victim’ and this has a cumulative effect on the general public of irritation or negativity. We need to find ways to challenge the portrayal of African people since the scramble for Africa: passive, ignorant, helpless, victims, troublemakers - the white man’s burden’
Ms Long emphasised the importance of continuing to get our messages across, and asking how that message can be put across, in a context of major cuts and withdrawal of funding. She posed the critical question of How can we interest society in helping poor people, human beings exactly like us, who are not concerned with the decreased value of their houses, or that they can no longer take as many city breaks, how can we combat compassion fatigue and make the message fresh and full of impact.

She emphasised the importance of putting ourselves in the shoes of those to whom we want to deliver messages: young people for example under 30 who are accessing news not through RTE or Vincent Browne, but through mobile messages, DVD’s, Face Book, websites, emails. She quoted Jeffrey Cole from the Center for the Digital Future at the University of California who observed a couple of years ago If there were a nationwide newspaper strike in the US, almost nobody under the age of 30 would even notice.’

There was a panel discussion, made up of Selam Desta, member of the Africa Centre, Tom Arnold, CEO of Concern Worldwide and Peadar King, a Film Producer.

Selam recounted how she became aware on her first day in Ireland of the perceptions that were in peoples minds. The portrayal of the ‘developing world’, a term she did not necessarily agree with, is dominated by (a) tragedy or disaster, (b) the ‘good works’ undertaken by people from the west which portray helplessness, dependency alongside corrupt governments and wars, and (c) a newer move towards the portrayal
of more positive images that the media itself needs to take responsibility to recognise what a powerful tool it is and to take responsibility to analyse and educate rather than take the lazy route of sensationalising and trivialising at the expense of the most vulnerable.’

Ms Desta outlined how Africa is portrayed as impoverished and homogenised despite it being a continent of 57 countries with nearly 900 million people. That it is portrayed as dependent on charity, corruption, incapable of self government and despite some effort by aid agencies in Ireland, the marketing of images continues to contribute towards enhancing ‘huge prejudice and negative stereotyping towards Africans’ While accepting intentions are genuine the approach continues to ‘employ a manipulative and patronising technique’.

The images and messages to the public have a lasting impact. Africans continue to be viewed as inferior in terms of education and language, untrustworthy, are unnecessarily pitied and patronised and the Irish public has low expectation of them despite the fact they are often highly educated. All of this negative stereotyping diverts from issues of justice, human rights and the complex issue of poverty.

In his presentation, Tom Arnold noted how important it was for aid agencies to look for new opportunities in the media such as celebrity interest. He said it was important that aid agencies recognise the inherited perception we have of Africa and to see the Dochas Code of Practice as a fresh opportunity to look at all the messages delivered to the media. African countries as well as the Irish have also to engage in shared responsibility for the images created, and the former also have to look at the perceptions created in the west by such issues as the attitude of other African countries to the current situation in Zimbabwe. Mr. Arnold also highlighted the importance of development education in Ireland and how it can reach the grass roots and challenge stereotyping and the importance of the aid budget and other government policy and practice matching up in terms of images.

Mr King expressed concern at the huge reduction in coverage of the ‘developing world’ on western TV which reflects changes in what is deemed to be ‘newsworthy’ e.g. in Britain there has been a drop of over 50% in the last 20 years. Both quality and quantity have suffered with any documentaries likely to be shown in off peak times e.g.
What in the World was broadly slotted in at 11pm on Irish TV.

Important to recognise that despite this decrease in coverage, TV remains the most influential medium in shaping people’s understanding of the world; this is true for students as well as adults. In a 2007 study in Limerick seven out of ten students stated that TV was influential in informing their view of the world and eight out of ten teachers identified TV as one of their main sources of information.

Journalists themselves have to take responsibility not to become what Peadar called ‘lazy conduits of the dominant political view who rely on press releases or are embedded with armed forces’ and not challenge people’s in-grained taken-for-granted ideas. The reporter also has to avoid the culture of the personality. However Peadar pointed to the pressure on reporters of deadlines and to be first with the news.’

He pointed to the increasing pressure documentary film makers like himself were under to product marketable products within very tight deadlines and budgetary constraints. There were huge constraints in trying to present people as subjects versus objects, as active versus passive and taking the time to enable self representation. The reality for What in the World was a seven day shoot which meant that even with some levels of self representation, the western media and the development community dominate, so that ‘for the most part we are still operating in object rather than the subject mode.’ The issue of people having ownership and control over their images poses profound challenges to the media.

Mr King affirmed some of the points made by earlier panellists: the enduring images of ‘north/south’ which needs to be challenged: donor/recipient, developed/underdeveloped, knowledge/ignorant, teaching/learning, designing/implementing.

He pointed to the very damaging inferiorised perceptions of Africa and Africans which results from such negative stereotyping in Ireland and elsewhere in the west.

Conference participants made the following points:

- When people from Africa come to Ireland and read the newspapers here, you are left with the impression that there is no life going on in Africa and no structured government. This has a major impact on Africans living in Ireland. It can be very hard to get the positive things that are happening in Africa on the media.

- In criticising African governments for their stand on Zimbabwe, account is not taken that in Africa we like to do things in an African way, and not in a European way. What the media portray does not mean we are not taking a stance on Zimbabwe.
The media job is not to reflect government policy; it our job to tell a story and to highlight for example poverty in Africa and the complicity of western institutions in creating this poverty.

Can a Code of Practice really change people’s attitudes and highly ingrained perceptions?

Importance of influencing children in schools and their images of other worlds.

We need to deepen the debate about what is a positive image – is it a child smiling?

The west dominates global news; and the views of African people are not taken into account.

Participants noted the new forms of images emerging on TV such as Tribal Wives, White horse Village, Travel programmes and how these might be used as opportunities to challenge stereotypes.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made at the conference:

- Projects and programmes funded by Irish Aid should make the signing up to the Dóchas Code of Practice on images and messages mandatory.
- A process of consultation by the Irish aid agencies with the Africa Centre, Dóchas and the relevant embassies should be developed which includes constructive feedback on the use of messages.
- Need to develop clearer messaging around the underlying causes of poverty.
- Aid agencies should always consider the impact of photos they use on Africans and other international people living in Ireland.
- Develop a mechanism of meticulously monitoring of how ‘development’ fares on Irish TV and how the world ‘out there’ can be more effectively communicated to mass Irish audiences.

The seminar was closed by Hans Zomer, Director of Dóchas.

After the seminar, the Africa Centre re-launched its Africa Also Smiles poster campaign. The campaign was re-launched by Her Excellency Catherine Muigai Mwangi, Kenyan Ambassador to Ireland. Also present at the conference were other members of the African Diplomatic Community.
Her Excellency Catherine Muigai Mwangi, Kenyan Ambassador to Ireland.

Eric Yao and members of the African Diplomatic Corps in Ireland after the launch.