

POLICY REPORT

# IMAGES AND MESSAGES ABOUT AFRICA FROM AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. Alfred Hickey M'Sichili



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# INTRODUCTION

## The image of Africa and Africans in Western society has been predominantly negative.

Fueled by the need to justify slavery, colonialism, neocolonialism, and recently draconian immigration policies, a number of negative stereotypes have been constructed about Africa and Africans that have little resemblance to reality, but that are profoundly harmful to Africans around the world including the African Diaspora in Europe. Intricately linked to these negative stereotypes, for instance, is the racial discrimination and human rights abuses that have blighted the lives of many Africans and those of African descent living in Europe.

What is particularly disheartening is that an industry that ostensibly sells its self as a friend of Africa is currently at the forefront of creating and disseminating images & messages that reinforce this negative stereotyping of Africa and Africans. The development aid and charity industry is guilty of creating images and messages, especially in their fundraising campaigns, that are hurting the image of Africa and Africans around the world. Many of these images that could only best be described as a kind of pornography of poverty are now a staple of nearly all major aid charity fundraising campaigns, and given their ubiquity (on television, newspaper ads, bill boards, schools, buses, trains and churches), their impact in entrenching negative stereotypes of Africa and Africans is quite significant.

This policy report summaries research conducted over a three year period into the impact on public perception of the images and messages employed by aid organisations, and argue that the time has come for a complete ban to be placed on the use of emotive images and messages about Africa.<sup>1</sup>

**Part I** of the report presents a summary of the research findings; **Part II** looks at proposed solutions; **Part III** examines some challenges and objections to the proposed solutions; And **Part IV** outlines policy recommendations.

# PART I: RESEARCH FINDINGS

## The research uncovered several issues related to the use of images and messages about Africa by aid organisations.

### **ISSUE: False Narrative**

Aid charities have 'constructed' a simplistic image and false narrative of Africa and Africans in their fundraising campaigns

- **Africa as helpless children** - *the starving baby pictures tug hearts strings and bring in cash.*<sup>2</sup> In their relentless use of images of starving children in their campaigns, aid charities construct a simplistic image and false narrative that presents Africa as in effect infantilized and requiring assistance from the West. This focus feeds perceptions of Africans as passive, needy, incapable, or indeed, unwilling to help themselves. Implicit in the understanding of these images is the sense of Africans as inferior and under-developed.<sup>3</sup> It also echoes the 18th & 19th century image of Africans as primitive and heavens in need of the civilising and evangelising power of the West, similar to the ideas used to justify both slavery and colonialism. Even though the object being justified is different, the core narrative is the same - and of course false.
- **Africa as women** - *the men are conspicuous in their absence.* The depiction of women or groups of women, sometimes accompanied by children, is another staple of charities fundraising campaigns. The use of these images not only reinforce the disempowerment of Africa, but also , demeans the social structures in place by deliberately depicting the mother and child in isolation, falsely implying that the African family unit is weak and broken and in 'need' of Western intervention.<sup>4</sup>

- **Africa as 'Agrarian'** - Africa is one of the most urbanised areas in the world, and yet aid charities in their campaign ads continue to perpetuate the false image of Africa as rural and 'agrarian.' This representation of Africa and Africans as rural and 'agrarian' effectively prioritises aid rather than investment. It paints a picture of an Africa that is backward rather than urban and modern. It also suggests the resistance of Africa and African to the greater modernization agenda. This undermines the industrious and enterprising nature of Africa and its people and depletes investor confidence. Diageo, the brewing and distilling multinational corporation, for instance, stated in one of its reports on Africa that: "Reporting exclusively on politics, conflict, famine and disease is perpetuating an unbalanced picture of Africa and fueling the appetite of audiences for further pessimistic coverage. It also contributes to undermining investor confidence in Africa."<sup>5</sup>
- **Africa as a monolithic, undifferentiated region** - this is another false narrative perpetuated by charity organisations. By attempting to procure funds in a manner that appeals to the emotions of individuals' and groups', the fundraising campaigns of aid charities often neglect to portray countries in Africa in an accurate and thus differentiated manner.<sup>6</sup> The concentration and reproduction of these superficial images profoundly shapes how European society views individuals and groups who identify with the region, and feed into well-established discourses that debase Africans and their cultures and stocks the flames of racial discrimination and prejudice.

Missing in all these images is the complexity and rich diversity of Africa; the vibrancy, enterprise, and self sufficiency of many Africans.

### **ISSUE: Impact on public perception**

Several opinion polls were conducted to gauge the impact of images and messages about Africa on public perception. It was found that with the history and geography of Africa barely taught in schools, the majority of respondents based their knowledge of Africa and its inhabitants on media related images and messages. Thus;

- 89% of respondents associated Africa with "poverty"
- 60% associated the continent with "disease"
- 70% said their knowledge of Africa came "from watching TV"
- 46% from reading newspapers
- 44% from Charity adverts.<sup>7</sup>

Given these findings, it is easy to identify that the role played by images and

messages used by aid organisations in shaping public perception of Africans and those of African descent is therefore quite significant. It is no exaggeration that these skewed, biased, inaccurate, incomplete and unfair images and messages are directly reinforcing stereotypes of 'race inferiority.'

**ISSUE: Link to racial discrimination and human rights abuses**

Racial discrimination and human rights abuses are intricately linked to negative stereotypes and other prejudices.<sup>8</sup> The negative stereotyping of Africa as a dark Continent plagued by war, disease, famine, and poverty has in many ways damaged the image of Africa and people of African descent across the three countries of Ireland, UK, Slovenia and other Western societies. The depiction of Africa as a continent whose governments and institutions are corrupt; whose people are docile and incapable of helping themselves; whose future is uncertain and doomed, thus in need of the saving power(s) of the West continues a long tradition of the dehumanisation and depersonalisation of Africans in the West. This strategy of dehumanisation and depersonalisation has been used to justify the most horrendous human rights abuses in history. Challenging the construction of images and messages that both prey upon and reinforce these negative stereotypes is one of the defining moral issues of our time.

# PART II: PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

In the course of the research, a number of possible solutions were advanced to address concerns raised in connection with images and messages used by aid organisations in their fundraising campaigns.<sup>9</sup> These included:

## **SOLUTION: Self Regulation**

- Adoption of an industry led images and messages code of conduct that encourages best practice in the use of images and messages in charity fundraising campaigns.
- The Dóchas code of conduct for images & messages was cited as one such industry led initiative. Dóchas, The Irish Association of Non-Governmental Development Organisations (an umbrella organisation for Irish NGOs) outlines in its code that imagery employed by organisations must adhere to the following principles:
  1. Respect for the dignity of the people concerned;
  2. Belief in the equality of all people;
  3. Acceptance of the need to promote fairness, solidarity and justice.
- The principles require each organisation that signs up to the code to contextualise any situation they are representing in images so as to aid the public in a wider understanding of the issues relating to aid and development.
- It also compels organisations to move beyond established stereotypes of people, regions and situations.



- The organisations must also gain the permission of each person depicted in the images used, as well as ensuring to give individuals an opportunity to tell their particular story.<sup>10</sup>

Self regulation and voluntary codes of conduct, in any industry, have a bad record in terms of implementation, monitoring and sanctioning of offenders. As such, however well intentioned or comprehensive, most voluntary codes of conduct have often remained on the shelves of organisations gathering dust and having no impact whatsoever in terms of decision making or changing behaviour. It is therefore not surprising that the Dochas code appears to be suffering the same fate. Despite major aid organisations signing up to the code, it is hard to discern any change in the way images and messages about Africa and Africans are used in their fundraising campaigns. Not only have the images and messages constructed for aid campaigns not evolved beyond established practices in relation to how groups and individuals are depicted, it is arguable that there has in fact been a rise in the use of emotive images of African children in distress.<sup>11</sup>

The only way a voluntary code of conduct can have any real impact in changing behaviour, it seems, is for it to be made binding and obligatory by being transformed into law. If an organization claims to be happy with a code of conduct then they should have no issue in the code being adopted into law. In opting for a voluntary code, it is arguable that aid organisations hope to be seen to be doing the right thing without in reality doing anything to change their behaviour. Transforming the code into law, although it may encounter some form of opposition from the industry, has the power to gradually safeguard the processes and systems engaged in the use of images. It also, most importantly, ensures to protect the humanity and rights of those whose images are thus used.

### **SOLUTION: Appointment of an Independent Ombudsman**

- Another suggested industry led initiative is the appointment of an Independent Ombudsman or Complaints Commission, one of whose tasks would be to police the use of images and messages and to whom concerned members of the public could bring their objections / complaints about the use of negative or offensive images and messages in aid campaigns.
- This could be modeled along the lines of a Press Ombudsman or Complaints Commission.

Like the voluntary code of conduct, the success of this initiative largely depends upon what ‘teeth’ the Independent Ombudsman or Complaints Commissioner, appointed by industry, would have with respect to monitoring behaviour and sanctioning offenders.

### **SOLUTION: Substitute the use of negative and emotive imagery with logos and symbols**

- Another suggestion is that aid organisations voluntarily abandon the use of negative and emotive imagery altogether and in its place use logos and symbols.
- A parallel was drawn with cancer charities fundraising campaigns that often rely on the power of symbols (e.g. the daffodil) rather than on the use of emotive and potentially negative images of children suffering from cancer, to attract public donations.
- The success of the daffodil as a campaign symbol for cancer charities is a clear rebuke to those in the aid industry who argue that the use of emotive images of African children in distress is essential to attract public donations to aid charities.

### **SOLUTION: Regulation / Legislative underpinning**

- It was also suggested that legislation be introduced proscribing the use of negative images and messages by any organisation, especially those images and messages that perpetuate the negative stereotyping of a region, people or group of people.
- This will be akin to legislation that forbids the use of hate speech and incitement to commit acts of terror.
- Such legislation, if enacted, would effectively ban the use of negative images and messages about Africa by aid organisations in their fundraising campaigns.

### **SOLUTION: Using existing Equality / Anti-Discrimination Legislation**

- Rather than introducing new legislation, it was suggested that enforcing a ban on the use of negative and emotive images and messages could possibly be sought under existing equality or anti-discrimination legislation.
- This creative application of existing law is evidenced by the recent campaign by Feminist organisations to remove from super market shelves the sale of so called 'lads' magazines that depict on their front pages young women in various degrees of undress. Following legal consultation, The *Lose the Lads' Mags* campaign by UK Feminist and Object issued an open letter to high-street retailers calling on them to immediately withdraw lads' mags and papers

featuring pornographic front covers from their stores.

- The letter stated that “Displaying these publications in workplaces, and/or requiring staff to handle them in the course of their jobs, may amount to sex discrimination and sexual harassment contrary to the Equality Act 2010. Similarly, exposing customers to these publications in the process of displaying them is capable of giving rise to breaches of the Equality Act. Every mainstream retailer which stocks lads’ mags is vulnerable to legal action by staff and, where those publications are visibly on display, by customers. There are, in particular, examples of staff successfully suing employers in respect of exposure to pornographic material at work. Such exposure is actionable where it violates the dignity of individual employees or customers, or creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for them.”<sup>12</sup>
- It is not hard to see that a similar argument could be made with respect to the involuntary exposure to the pornographic images of poverty. Exposure to these images is equally actionable where it violates the dignity of individual employees (as in the case of Africans and those of African descent who are staff members in aid organisations) and members of the public (particularly Africans and those of African descent living in Europe) by creating “an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for them.”

# PART III: CHALLENGES AND OBJECTIONS TO PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

OPPONENTS SAY:	PROPOSERS SAY:
<p>The use of emotive images and messages is <u>effective</u> in raising funds for aid projects.</p>	<p>This overlooks the great costs in terms of negative stereotypes that the use of these images and messages promotes. The true impact of these images and messages should not only be viewed in terms of funds raised, but should also take into account the real long term harm caused in terms of entrenching negative stereotypes, promoting racial discrimination and self-hate, distorting the complexity and diversity of life in Africa, and creating a degrading and humiliating environment for Africans and those of Africa descent, especially children.</p>
<p>The use of emotive images and messages is <u>essential</u> to raise funds for aid projects.</p>	<p>The assumption here is that people will not give money for aid projects unless shocked into doing so. Thus, strong emotive images and messages, however potentially negative, are necessary to accomplish this.</p> <p>Apart from holding a very low opinion of human beings and fellow citizens, this argument is simply not true. As already noted above, the success of the daffodil as a campaign symbol for cancer charities is a clear rebuke to those who espouse this argument.</p>

OPPONENTS SAY:	PROPOSERS SAY:
<p>It is important to portray the <u>true realities of poverty &amp; inequality</u> in Africa however unpleasant or shocking that reality may be.</p>	<p>This may be so, but it does not necessarily follow that the only way to do this is through the depiction of emotive images of children and women; or through the construction of a false narrative of a 'helpless' Africa in dire need of the West as a 'saviour.'</p> <p>Secondly, although it is true that poverty and inequality do exist in parts of Africa, it is equally true that happiness, joy, enterprise and solidarity also exists in Africa.</p> <p>African children are not caught in endless misery and distress. They laugh, they play, they dance, they smile, just like all children around the world.</p> <p>So depicting only one side of the story is not depicting <i>reality</i> but merely depicting a <i>half-truth</i>.</p>

# PART V:

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### The use of emotive images and messages about Africa in aid charity fundraising campaigns has and continues to inflict real long term harm on Africans and those of African descent around the world.

These images and messages reinforce negative stereotypes and help create an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating and offensive environment for many Africans and those of African descent in Europe. Given the vested interest that marketing and fundraising departments of aid charities have in maintaining the status quo, it is doubtful that industry led initiatives will provide the desired solution. Ultimately, what is needed is the enactment of legislation that proscribes the use of images and messages that reinforce negative stereotypes such as race inferiority and promote racial discrimination and human rights abuses. We therefore recommend that:

- The use of emotive images and messages about Africa that reinforce negative stereotypes be proscribed by law, much like hate speech or incitement to commit terrorism acts are.
- Any comprehensive voluntary code of conduct should be made binding and obligatory by being translated into law.
- An easily accessible and effective mechanism must be set up where members of the public can bring their concerns regarding the use of emotive images and messages in aid campaigns and seek sanctions against the offending organisation(s). For example, an independent ombudsman or equality complaints commission, with legislative powers, could be appointed by the government to oversee this issue.

- Aid charities should be encouraged to adopt symbols in their fundraising campaigns rather than relying on emotive images and messages with potentially negative and far-reaching consequences for Africans and those of African descent.

# ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The research cited in this policy report was conducted across three European countries (Ireland, UK, Slovenia) as part of an EU Funded programme "Images of Africa from an African Perspective."
- <sup>2</sup> R. Gidley. 'NGOs Still Fail Standards on Appeal Images'. Reuters Foundation, AlertNet,  
See: <http://www.trust.org/alertnet/news/ngos-still-fail-standards-on-appeal-images>
- <sup>3</sup> O. Young. 'African Images & Their Impact on Public Perception: What are the human rights implications? ACSONI, p. 19
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 30
- <sup>5</sup> Accessed at <http://www.diageoafricabusinessreportingawards.com/downloads/MarginalisedContinent.pdf>
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 35
- <sup>7</sup> See, ACSONI Opinion Poll Survey Report. 'The Perceptions of Africa and African in Northern Ireland' May 2011
- <sup>8</sup> See, E. Ukpong-Dan. 'Human Rights and Images of Africa and African Peoples' Africa Centre, Slovenia
- <sup>9</sup> See, ACSONI International Conference Report. 'African Images and their impact on public perception' June 2011
- <sup>10</sup> Accessed at: <http://www.dochas.ie/code/>
- <sup>11</sup> Kate Manzo. An Extension of Colonialism? Development Education, Images and the Media. p 9.; Accessed at:  
<http://www.imaging-famine.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/extension-of-colonialism.pdf>
- <sup>12</sup> Letter reproduced in The Guardian, Monday 27 May 2013, accessible at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2013/may/27/lose-lads-mags-risk-legal-action>



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