

Engaging the public to tackle global poverty

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It doesn't take much reading of the comments sections on news websites to find the signs of fundraising fatigue on stories mentioning international development assistance and aid.

Commenters questioning why we are still seeing the same problems in Africa that we saw more than two decades ago. People scoffing that donations just get eaten up by administration. Complaints that foreign aid merely encourages corruption.

Despite the existence of public cynicism, Australians have continually [performed well](#) in global polls measuring charitable donations. But can this last if aid and development communicators stick with the same messages? Is this fundraising fatigue and rising cynicism the result of false promises and oversimplification?

A report released earlier this year by a consortium of UK NGOs, [Finding Frames: New ways to engage the UK public in global poverty](#), questions the way that poverty and charity has been communicated.

The report found that UK citizens largely viewed poverty in the same way as they had in 1985, when the Live Aid concerts were held.

The report authors have called this the 'Live Aid Legacy' — a giver/grateful receiver model of donation that fits into a prevailing 'transaction frame' where support for poverty is perceived as solely being about donation, rather than social justice, consumer decisions, debate, advocacy and discussion.

Research undertaken for the report has shown that concern about global poverty has been declining in the UK, though donations have been rising since 1995 — the report authors believe this has only been able to occur because of new ways for organisations to collect donations (i.e. direct debit).

How do these findings translate to an Australian context? A 2011 [report by ChildFund Australia](#) [pdf] on the attitudes of Australian adults and children to child poverty in developing countries shows two-thirds of adults believe international aid is effective — a drop from 76 percent in 2007. Corruption and insufficient funds are understood to be the main obstacles to effective aid delivery. Children are more pessimistic than adults about the situations facing other children in developing countries (perhaps because they are more susceptible to blunt fundraising advertisements). Overall, the importance of child poverty has declined during the past four years in the surveyed groups, with other concerns such as terrorism and the global financial crisis taking precedence.

These trends are similar to those unearthed in the UK report, indicating that more engagement, education, participation and values-based communications may be the better way forward instead of [shock campaigns](#).

Some NGOs and agencies have transitioned towards this, particularly through the expanded use of social media and multimedia — however Live Aid-era methods are still around.

In an [earlier Devpolicy post](#), I wrote on the need for aid agencies to move beyond simplistic messages in their public communications — this is supported by the Finding Frames report, as well as the [Common Cause: The Case for Working With Our Social Values](#) [pdf] report, which touches on similar subject matter.

While the international donor community is moving to new models of transparency and information disclosure, it makes sense for international development communications to take on an educative role to ensure that global poverty remains a priority in the public consciousness.

Communications should encourage public debate, discourse, understanding and ultimately support for development through a global social justice framework, rather than leaving private donors feeling as if their only way to participate in poverty alleviation is through their credit cards. Donations are important and much needed — however if campaigns remain overly simplistic, who is going to keep donating to problems that never seem to get fixed?

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