

Representations of Global Poverty: Aid, Development and International NGOs

Book Review by [Rachel Tallon](#)¹

Representations of Global Poverty: Aid, Development and International NGOs by Nandita Dogra, 2012, IB Tauris, ISBN 9781848858916. 233 pages

I came across Nandita Dogra early on in my reading for my doctorate as she was questioning the representation of Southern world women in general media and NGO marketing. At the time I viewed her as a recent version of Chandra Mohanty, the critic of the ways in which women of the South have been represented (see her 1988 paper), but for her own doctorate Dogra concentrated on the messages that NGOs send regarding the global South and this book is the result of that research. She is concerned about how 'difference', as a historical narrative, is perpetuated through NGO representations of poverty, and yet she knows NGOs have actively sought to portray us all as part of a global humanity. It is this tension that she unpacks and it will be a familiar one to many NGO campaigners who take the time to consider the true messaging of their work: what relationship is being represented?

Most NGOs are acutely aware that despite the global accessibility of the Internet age, their media channels are still an influential lens by which Northern publics 'see' and learn about what is happening in the South. In her book, Dogra gives a good round up of the key issues and moves beyond the negative/positive image dichotomy. She is not so concerned with the ethics of the images, the rights of those photographed and the style of the representation. Instead, her main argument is that NGOs collectively send out two main messages that contradict each other. Through their advertising and campaign work, she argues that they both 'distance' the Other and yet seek to present the world and humanity as 'one'. This is problematic as the audience is positioned differently with each message – are we like them or different? Giving actual examples from UK NGO campaigns, Dogra shows how powerful (and contradictory) these messages about the South can be.

In my own doctoral research I'm looking into this difficult area of audience interpretation of NGO messages specifically with young people. The intent is often to raise awareness, but exactly what is this 'awareness' that is being 'raised'? Is it about the causes of the situation, the work of the NGO, the people who live there, or a combination of all three and more? What is actually *signified* by a poster, by an advert on TV? Dogra points out that what is often signified is distance and difference – that 'they' are just so far away from us that all we can do is give them our spare change. But what other messages are part of the package of NGO media? When an image is shown it is more powerful than the text that accompanies it. The text may point out that the people are working out their own

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solutions, that part of the problem lies in historical trade imbalances or bad governance. The image may tell us none of that and far less people read the text that accompanies an image.

Increasingly, the power of NGOs, their messages and representations of the South are under scrutiny and Dogra's book is essential reading for all those interested in media, development, campaigning and marketing. Every NGO campaigner should have a copy; they need to be aware of their power. Their power *not* just to raise millions of dollars in funding but their power in *forming perceptions* of the Other that mean that they stay as 'Other'. Dogra's book is not an academic tome, and at only 233 pages, it is easily digestible. She gives examples from her study which will resonate with marketers here. She also shows how some NGOs can subvert the standard doctrine and push new ways forward in their thinking about marketing. Martin Kirk (2012) argues that NGOs are in some ways constrained by their history, in that they don't know it, but they are attached to old paradigms of selling a story. I fear that the audience has 'moved on'. New ways forward might require some outside critical thinking about current practice and Dogra's book would be a good start. At the very least, it will enable NGO marketers to consider the full power of their messages. Social justice often begins with representation.

References

Kirk, M (2012) "Beyond Charity: Helping NGOs Lead a Transformative New Public Discourse on Global Poverty and Social Justice" *Ethics and International Affairs* 26 (2) pp.243-263

Mohanty, C. (1988). "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses". *Feminist Review*, 30, pp.61-88. (also see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chandra_Talpade_Mohanty)