
Save Norway!

ERIK SCHREINER EVANS

People view the world through the information they're presented. So, here is some information. People in Norway are freezing to death. Thank goodness some generous Africans are sending help.

Well, sort of.

Last year, the fake non-governmental organization "Africa for Norway," launched a mock campaign to save the lives of ostensibly freezing Norwegians by collecting and shipping radiators. The mock campaign, dubbed "Radi-Aid," entreated Africans to come to the aid of their less fortunate Norwegian brethren. The video that launched the mock campaign featured a South African choir singing about the dangers of frostbite and the joys of opening their hearts for those in need. "In Norway kids are freezing. It's time to lend a helping hand," they sang, in an earnestness rivaled only by the Band Aid 1986 "Do They Know it's Christmas?" video.

The choir scenes were crosscut with stock footage of Norwegians struggling in a blizzard and images of young, good-looking Africans collecting radiators, just because they wanted to "spread some warmth, spread some light, and some smiles." And because, they remind us, "frost-bite kills too."

This video—made on a miniscule budget of less than \$30,000—was the work of the organization Norwegian Students' and Academics' International Assistance Fund (SAIH), with the mainly volunteer help of students in South Africa. SAIH is an aid and advocacy organization that has been working on global issues and access to education since its foundation as an anti-apartheid organization in 1961. Working among other charitable organizations, SAIH has often felt uneasy about the narrative of the starving and suffering Africa that some organizations keep telling

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as part of their fundraising—and that is confirmed by media without the time or resources for in-depth journalism.

For those that didn't get the joke: the purpose of Africa for Norway and Radi-Aid is that many efforts in international charity present a grossly distorted image of the country or people they are trying to help. Just as Norway is much more than people freezing, Africa is much more than the corrupt, impoverished, and draught-stricken continent that is commonly depicted by the news media or charity ads.

The point is: images count. When we think about another country, we think about it in images—some positive and some negative. What we've seen is what we believe. And, confining a country or region through those images to one or two traits is not just reductionist, it's also deeply unfair. By letting handsome young Africans sing their hearts out in overly sincere exhortations to give to the poor freezing Norwegians, we wanted to point

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It's important to remember that this image distortion is the annoying—and disheartening—reality for people in many African countries. Whenever you see Africa on Western TV, chances are it's either a tear-jerking fundraiser

or a news report about the latest disaster. Just think of Band-Aid, the global fundraising initiative by Bob Geldof, and the lyrics, "where nothing ever grows, no rain or river flows." My gosh. All those famous pop artists were crooning about Ethiopia, the very source of the Nile!

The truth is, most African countries are actually progressing pretty well. Between 2000 and 2010, six out of ten countries with the biggest economic growth were in Africa. Angola had a growth of 11.1 percent of GDP, Nigeria 8.9 percent of GDP, and Ethiopia 8.4 percent of GDP. Some are out-performing many European countries on a number of indicators; in fact, Ghana experienced economic growth of 14.4 percent in 2011 at a time when *austerity* was the name of the game in Europe. The same is true of Mozambique, which now sees the influx of immigrants seeking a better life from its former colonial master Portugal. While poverty and famine are very real issues that do deserve attention in several regions, it's simply wrong to apply this to Africa in general. In a continent of more than fifty countries and hundreds of languages, the variations among and within Africa are huge.

The misleading depiction of a homogenously poor and dependent Africa is not just annoying; it's also downright harmful. The standard image of the anonymous starving child in some undisclosed part of sub-Saharan Africa has become the involuntary trademark of a whole continent. This is hardly a conducive environment to promote a more just distribution of wealth. Assuming that financial security and profit are key motivating factors for investment, the presumption that a region is unable to grow on its own can deter potential investors. Moreover, leading academics from sub-Saharan Africa complain that their institutions are in effect excluded from the circle of cooperating institutions in the West. Using the previously ascribed presumptions, this is of course logical. Who would assume that academic excellence could be achieved in a region characterized by such extreme underdevelopment of which one gets the impression when asked to open our wallets to feed a child?

Worse still, far too often the fundraisers confirm a narrative that we in the West have been telling each other for half a century now: that nothing good can ever happen on the African continent without the help of benevolent foreigners. The local African is reduced to a passive recipient of aid, unable as she is to lift herself out of whatever misery is on display that day. Fortunately, for the most part this isn't true. But when repeatedly subjected to images of misery, we the donors believe these images are the *only* truth.

Many news reports and charity campaigns create and confirm the notion that the world is divided into "Us" and "Them." "Us" are the successful protagonists that have the power to manage their own destinies, while "Them" are those unfortunates who lack agency and are therefore dependent on the generous compassion of "Us" in the West. As long as the mindset is that development of "Them" remains dependent on the charity of "Us," there will never be any sense of equality between the two.

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Some might consider this criticism to be unfair. There are many organizations that do a lot of great and very necessary work. They rely on donations to do their job, and in order to get those donations, they need to show the viewer how necessary their gifts are. This is a valid point and I choose to believe that these same organizations genuinely care about the broader situation in the region in which they are working and not just the

specific project they are promoting at the moment. SAIH believes that an unremitting focus on poverty and famine desensitizes viewers to those very issues. A survey from 2012 by Oxfam UK found that the public has become de-sensitized to pictures of poverty. Only one in five believed they personally can do their part to eradicate hunger. It's hard to believe that something can get better when you only see negative developments. At the same time seventy-four percent thought that ending hunger is possible, just that one personally can't do anything about it. If an organization wants to reduce suffering in the long-term, then it should perhaps refrain from pushing this negative narrative in the short-term.

In addition to contributing to a destructive depiction of the world, commercials that suggest a monetary donation is the panacea might distract the audience from the deeper, underlying problems. Whenever poverty or mass suffering is reported by broadcasters, we need to ask the questions, "Why is this happening?" and "How can this be avoided?" One child in need is a *symptom* of a problem. While it's important to help that child in need, it is far *more* important to eliminate the reasons for children to end up in need in the first place. When an organization has already captured the attention of a viewer, there is no reason not to use the opportunity to elucidate the greater picture. More often than not, there will be at least one or two factors related to the economic and political relations over which

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..... the viewer may have some modicum of power. If you analyze the situation, there are probably several ways you can contribute to solving the root problem by adjusting your own habits and actions. Where is that diamond you're considering buying from? Should you consider switching to fair-trade coffee? How does your representative in the national legislature vote on trade policies with the particular country in question? Should you consider voting for another candidate? The organization doesn't even necessarily need to provide specific options on what the

viewer or reader should do. Individuals are able to decide for themselves, if they're just provided the necessary information to do so.

Africa, as a whole, is by no means a clear-cut case of economic progress. Nor, however, is it the opposite. To a great extent, this is the point

of Radi-Aid. The campaign does not wish to reduce the importance of the hard work many organizations do in African countries, but it calls for a change in how we communicate issues of development and poverty. Although donating money is a good start, it won't get us to the root of systemic poverty or economic underdevelopment in Africa—or in the rest of the world, for that matter. Instead, we need to change the way the majority of us see the world and global issues.

To achieve this, we first need to rethink the way we communicate. Next time you see a three-minute ad encouraging your donation, don't just call the number on your screen; think for yourself. And next time you read about something horrible happening overseas, don't just accept the brief explanation of why it came to be; seek more information and think about how your context is connected to it. This is crucial for the efficacy of aid and development projects. Otherwise, we can keep on doing what we are doing, which can turn out to be the equivalent of Africans sending Norwegians radiators. ■