



# **What can the African diaspora do to challenge distorted media perceptions about Africa?**

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**African diaspora's role in challenging perceptions of Africa**

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## **1.0 Executive summary**

The report deals with stereotypical (mostly negative) perceptions of the developing world; different perceptions associated with different parts of the developing world; the underlying complexities surrounding popular perceptions of the developing world; and possible roles for the African diaspora in countering perceptions related to Africa. The aim of this research is to give some understanding to the complexities that surround the generation of development-related media images, and to offer practical ideas for enabling the African diaspora to play a significant role in providing alternative perspectives of Africa.

Africans in the diaspora effectively operate as an invisible welfare state for African societies. They are directly involved in building wells, schools, contributing financially, sharing knowledge and ideas, campaigning, lobbying and advocating for change back home in Africa, however informally. Despite the fact that most of these contributions are informal, that is most of it goes to support families or communities, it was revealed by the President of Ghana that remittances traced from Ghanaians in the diaspora by the Bank of Ghana for 2002 amounted to some \$1.3 billion. Though there are no figures to indicate how many Africans in the diaspora are engaged in Africa's development, it is still important to mention that the African population in the UK has grown rapidly, a trend that continues. One in three Londoners (1.8 million people) is now from an ethnic minority. The two largest minority groups – Indian and Black Caribbean groups are growing by the smallest amount with the Black African group set to grow the fastest. Some 80% of the UK African population is thought to live in the Greater London region. The Black African group is expected to almost double in size between 1991 and 2011.

Based on these facts, it is surprising that the African diaspora is invisible in stories and images associated with Africa's development. Should Africans in the diaspora not play an active and important role in the creation of images of Africa? What is the starting point, and what actions can be taken? Admittedly, the issue of development-related

media images is a very complex one. Nevertheless, unravelling the puzzle means that any implications for action are clearer and more tangible.

Although we are here concerned about generally negative and distorted views in the north about the developing world, these perceptions are by no means uniform across all places. People perceive different parts of the developing world differently. For instance, a theme associated with Africa might be "helplessness", in the Caribbean it might be "consumption and devastation". In a more general sense "Africa" seems occupy a particular place in the minds of many in the UK and to generate intense responses among some people. Little wonder, then, that Africans in the diaspora are concerned.

Numerous factors help explain how and why people's perceptions (of Africa) are what they are. History; reality, facts and figures; (media) coverage related to political and economic events; scheduling of and emphasis on different media programme categories (for instance, travel programmes, wildlife programmes); dwindling levels of international programming; poor communications infrastructure are all noteworthy factors.

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The report also considers how perceptions are constructed. Contextualisation, consistency of negative images, thematic repetitions, policies within the media, collusion between NGOs and media, are all different ways in which perceptions are constructed. Inadequate context to a story for instance, will often reinforce a viewer's own preconceived perceptions. Policies within INGOs, and the use or misuse of photographs and captions, can shape perceptions. Again, the report highlights action points in all these instances, and once again these boil down to the diaspora's own lead in countering negative perceptions of the developing world.

Besides concerns about the image of the developing world in the West, the need to counter existing stereotypes of the developing world is important because stereotypes reinforce damaging notions of "the inferior and the superior" among others, which can have an indirect effect on development. Even worse, is the effect that stereotypes of Africa have on young people of African origin in the West. Young Africans often feel negative towards Africa and seek to dissociate themselves from their place of heritage. This consequently hinders their participation or engagement in Africa's development.

To turn this around and offer alternative perceptions to young people of African origin (and others), the African diaspora will need to be more involved in shaping perceptions of Africa. In essence, the African diaspora must be more visible in shaping of perceptions of Africa in the West. Suggested actions include creating a media monitoring group to monitor stories about Africa; a pressure group that insists on more balanced images of Africa; creation of a coalition of African media organisations in the UK; establishing and supporting African media outlets; exploiting new information and communications technologies in innovative ways. The African diaspora should consider both mainstream and non-mainstream alternative channels of activism and action. The list below summarises suggested actions.

### **1.1 Mainstream measures**

- Media monitoring pressure and advocacy group to challenge stereotypes, correct factual inaccuracies, hold media outlets to account and promote alternative perspectives (individuals also have a role to play in writing letters to editors, etc)
- African media coalition (a network of sources and voices for UK media, with an accessible database that UK media professionals could tap into)
- Accessing and making use of more accessible channels such as documentaries, history and travel programmes.
- Careers in the media/NGOs among Africans, particularly young Africans
- Advertising Africa and African products

### **1.2 Non-mainstream measures**

- Travel packages to Africa for young Africans
- African media (newspaper, TV and so on, edited, published, supported by Africans)
- "African Al-Jazeera" satellite TV station
- Local channels/infrastructure/agencies in Africa, example local photographers.
- Cultural and work experience (related to media) in the developing world

- Advertising Africa and African products
- Use of technology (example phone-text pals, parallel to pen-pals between young Africans in Africa, and young people in the UK)

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## **2.0 Introduction**

Increasingly, over the last two decades, various organisations including the Department for International Development (DFID), the Glasgow Media Group (GMG), and Voluntary Service Organisation (VSO) have commissioned or conducted a substantial amount of research on media representation of the developing world. The African Foundation for Development's (AFFORD's) mission is to expand and enhance the contribution that Africans in the diaspora make to Africa's development. The African diaspora, AFFORD's main focus, are increasingly questioning popular perceptions of Africa and their effects on second generation (and beyond) youths of African origin in particular. Africans in the diaspora have focused on exploring ways of broadening people's perspectives about Africa using a range of strategies. As a result of growing concerns and interest around this area, AFFORD initiated the project "*Aiding and abetting: global image, local damage?*" to explore various cultural and artistic spaces within Africa diaspora organisations and how they could be used or developed to create a platform from which such organisations could offer alternative perceptions about Africa. The underlying premise behind the Aiding & Abetting project is that, contrary to popular perceptions, Africans are Africa's biggest "aid donors" (through the agency, for instance, of Africans in the diaspora sending remittances home). Aiding & Abetting involved a process of various forms of interactions between five artists and eight African diaspora organisations who participated in the project.

### **2.1 Aim**

This research is an output of the Aiding & Abetting project; it seeks an understanding of the complexities surrounding images of development; an understanding of possible areas of change in equipping diaspora groups to offer alternative stories about their regions of origin or to intervene in media debates, policy and practice. The research also seeks to engage key players who shape media images of development in the process of reflecting on alternative approaches.

This study is aimed primarily at African diaspora organisations and young people of African origin. It will also be of interest to donors and policy makers such as DFID, Comic Relief, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and the mainstream media.

### **2.2 Methodology**

This research relies both on primary and secondary sources. Primary data came from interviews with seven individuals and organisations with expertise around media representation of the developing world. They included D. J. Clark (a contemporary documentary photographer and film maker), currently working on a project related to how overseas development agencies use images of development within their own development work; Edward Wageni, East Africa Programme Manager of WomanKind (an INGO with a focus on women's issues in the developing world); Desmond Davies, Editor, and Frank Afful, Managing Editor, both of *West Africa*

magazine; Paddy Coulter, Director of Reuters Foundation Programme; Richard Dowden, Director of Royal Africa Society, and a journalist (also at one time the Africa correspondent for *The Independent*, and the *Economist*); and Frances Burns of the DFID's Information and Civil Society Department.

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## **2.3 Overview of research**

The starting premise of this research is that global images and stories about developing regions (and Africa in particular) generally paint a distorted picture about these places and have a local impact upon peoples from those regions in question who now happen to live in the developed north. Moreover, by their often quite active selfhelp oriented engagement in supporting the development of their regions of origin, such diasporas negate the inaccurate perceptions of passive, helpless peoples in and from the south desperately awaiting handouts from a benevolent north. Such diasporas have particular interest in challenging these notions because younger members of their respective communities are particularly vulnerable to the distorted images about their places of origin.

However, change will not come simply from drawing attention to distorted images. This research seeks to understand some of the mechanics by which perceptions about different places and peoples are constructed in the hope that unravelling these complex and apparently invisible processes will make them more amenable to interventions, particularly by the African diaspora.

Surveys carried out by DFID, GMG and VSO indicate that most UK viewers generally have negative perceptions of the developing world. Of the seven respondents who contributed to this research, all of them agreed, offering varying reasons, that images of developing countries tend to be generally negative. For instance Burns was of the view that images tend to be negative and bizarre with very little explanation of the context.

Section 3 makes it clear that data on general negative perceptions of the developing world is easier to find compared to limited data indicating how (or why) perceptions about different regions of the developing world may differ.

Section 4 identifies two key differences in perceptions. On the one hand people associate different places with different themes. On the other hand, Africa seems to occupy a unique place in people's perceptions of the developing world. Section 5 attempts to explain why perceptions differ. Similarly, section 6 attempts to understand how different perceptions are constructed. The importance of both sections 5 and 6 is that implications for action by the African diaspora for countering these perceptions are made at almost every stage of explanation.

Section 7 addressed the question as to whether all this matters. It explores the danger of stereotypes, and how important challenging stereotypes can be for development.

Section 8 explores possible action points for the African diaspora's role in challenging popular perceptions about Africa. Section 9 summarises actions for concerned members of the African diaspora to consider. Section 10 provides a conclusion.

## **3.0 General perceptions of the developing world**

Studies by DFID, GMG, VSO, and the International Broadcasting Trust (IBT), have all indicated that the developing world in general is associated with negative

perceptions among the UK public as a result of a one-dimensional output in media coverage of the developing world. The focus group study by DFID found that there was a “marked imbalance in the way developing countries are portrayed, especially in the news where coverage was generally limited to disasters, bizarre events, or visits **African diaspora’s role in challenging perceptions of Africa**

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by prominent westerners... Viewers generally perceived the developing world in a negative way.”<sup>1</sup>

The GMG report put together for DFID concluded that TV audiences had negative responses towards the developing world due to inadequate explanation and context.<sup>2</sup> VSO’s focus group study reported that “80% of the British public strongly associate the developing world with doom-laden images of famine, disaster and Western aid... these images are still top of mind and maintain a powerful grip on the British psyche.”<sup>3</sup> The IBT report indicated that a 1993-94 analysis of news coverage found that a large amount of international coverage, especially of the developing world, covered conflict and disaster stories which implied that the British public received unbalanced information. <sup>4</sup>

In all these reports, it is typical to find a general negative stereotype enveloping the entire developing world. These studies did not spell out different stereotypes pertaining to different developing countries or regions. Nevertheless, the findings were hard to ignore and raised a lot of issues. Two major differences, were identified, and will be discussed in the next section.

#### **4.0 Different places, different perceptions?**

The importance of exploring what differences exist in perceptions is that they become more tangible and clearer, particularly when we consider what explains them and how they are constructed. Consequently, it becomes easier to counter them or come up with possible and more practical solutions and recommendations as will be discussed later in the paper.

Two types of perceptions came through in the surveys conducted by DFID and VSO in particular. The first will be referred to as thematic, suggesting that people associate different developing regions with different themes. The second perception is that Africa seems to occupy a special place in the hearts and minds of the UK public. If Africa does indeed occupy a unique place in a hierarchy or spectrum of perceptions, then concerns among the African diaspora about Africa’s image could be justified. The next two sub-sections explain thematic and Africa-specific perceptions.

#### **4.1 Thematic perceptions**

As noted before, perceptions about the developing world are very similar. A very common image that has stayed in the minds of many is that of the starving child with flies around his/her eyes, too weak to brush them off. Negative perceptions within the UK mean that the relationship between the UK and the developing world is mostly defined around ideas of “powerful giver, grateful receiver”; helplessness and incapacity of the developing world and therefore the need to “help” and develop these countries; very little or no expectation of gaining anything in return for “helping”; a sense of superiority in culture and lifestyle.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Third World and Environment Broadcasting Trust (3WE), *Viewing the World: Production Study*, (UK: DFID, 2000), p. 2

<sup>2</sup> Glasgow Media Group (GMG), *Media Coverage of the developing world: audience understanding*

and interest, <http://www.gla.ac.uk/Acad/Sociology/debate.html> (date accessed 21st Jan., 2003).

<sup>3</sup> VSO, *The Live Aid Legacy: The developing world through British eyes* – A research report, (UK: VSO, 2002), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Jennie Stone, *Losing Perspective: Global Affairs on British Terrestrial Television 1989-1999*, (London: Third World and Environment Broadcasting Project, 2000), p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> VSO, (2002), pp 5-7.

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Nevertheless, it was obvious in some of the focus group studies, that there were actual differences in thematic perceptions relating to different parts of the developing world, however tentative these findings were. Therefore, while for some respondents the theme across Africa would be “helplessness”, in the Caribbean it would be “consumption and devastation” <sup>6</sup>.

**Africa:** A theme of destitution and helplessness. Helplessness was seen to have been caused by uncontrollable environmental/geographical factors, therefore resulting in poverty and famine.

**South Africa:** Perceptions of South Africa contrast sharply with those of Africa generally. A theme of ‘tourism’ and holiday destination runs through, but most of the positive imagery of life is only in relation to white residents.<sup>7</sup> Six interviewees were of the view that South Africa did indeed bring to mind a different perception compared to the rest of Africa.

**The Caribbean:** A theme of consumption, devastation and destruction.

**Latin America:** A theme of economic disparities within developing countries. Significantly, though groups were given photographs on travel/adventure specifically from Bolivia, they used these images to make critical points on economic disparities within developing countries. The strength of perceptions and notions formed from their knowledge of Latin America emerged even within images that at first-hand seemed unrelated to their perception.

**Asia:** In natural history, India represented a danger to natural habitats and animals, as well as a dangerous place to travel to, a terrorist haven, and unhealthy – low in sanitation. A 15-year-old respondent was quoted as saying: “It would be a holiday nightmare if someone went to India. The houses are full of bugs.”<sup>8</sup>

Different images of China shown on video to the groups brought out varying themes for different groups of respondents. Some related China with poverty, others with a high level of industrialization. Ten-year-olds indicated a different relationship with China in their own perceptions – they saw China as a rich country because most of their toys were from China.

The VSO report highlighted a thematic difference in the perceptions of Asia and Africa. Whereas Africa's poverty was seen to be the result of uncontrollable disasters, Afghanistan and China were seen as culpable for their poverty. This was based on the belief that a lack of democracy, racial issues and religious tensions had resulted in fear, war and oppression, all direct causes of poverty. Within the context that these countries are not helpless victims, but in some ways, culpable for their fate and possibly even a threat to British security, they were not immediately considered

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

Third World and Environment Broadcasting Trust (3WE), (2000), pp. 13-14.

<sup>7</sup> Third World and Environment Broadcasting Trust (3WE), (2000), p. 11

<sup>8</sup> Glasgow Media Group (GMG), <http://www.gla.ac.uk/Acad/Sociology/debate.html> (date accessed 21st

Jan., 2003)

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“developing” by the UK consumers because they do not adhere to the victims/rescuers model.<sup>9</sup>

Thematic differences resulting from the focus group studies suggest already existing strong notions of these different parts of the developing world. It raises questions of the source of these perceptions, how they are constructed and who sustains them, questions which will be discussed in sections 4 and 5.

### **4.2 Africa's “special place”**

Africa seems to occupy a special place in the minds of the UK public. When participants in a focus group study are asked what comes to mind when the developing world is mentioned, their response is Africa.

The VSO Live Aid Legacy report states that when UK consumers think of the developing world, “Africa is their starting point – TV images of famine and Western relief ... ‘A place you wouldn't go to, and wouldn't want to go to’ ... Overall most UK consumers think of the Africa model when they hear the term developing.”<sup>10</sup>

Simon Kuper, in an article on the progress of democracy in Africa, states that “there is a consensus that Africa today is as bad as it has ever been. Everyone knows the problems: Aids, wars, corruption and poverty”.<sup>11</sup>

For varying reasons of colonial boundaries, a hangover from empire, history and so on, all individuals interviewed agreed that Africa did indeed occupy a special place. Images of Africa are so strong that obviously Africans themselves are affected. An African respondent on the VSO working group responded “To me, they have already classified us into one block of disadvantaged, poverty-stricken, diseased people – the entire continent of Africa”.<sup>12</sup>

Africa's place on this pedestal raises a series of questions. What causes this kind of perception, or this strong reaction with regards to images of development? Do images related to Africa themselves explain the reaction (are they more powerful than images of Asia, for instance)? Has Africa got more problems than the rest of the developing world? Do NGOs or the media produce different types of images when reporting different developing countries?

Noting that there is indeed a common negative perception enveloping the entire developing world, is there a reason why there are such notable differences? If Africans in the diaspora and other diasporas are to play any future constructive role in the creation of different perceptions, clear explanations that account for these types of differences should help. These explanations form the discussion of the next section.

### **5.0 Why the different perceptions?**

A search for an answer to this question almost inevitably focuses on the media, the most popular outlet being TV. The media is generally perceived to be the entry point

<sup>9</sup> VSO, (2002), p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pp. 5 & 6.

<sup>11</sup> S. Kuper, ‘The People Say Yes’ *Index on Censorship – Squeeze on Democracy* Vol. 31, No. 1 (2002), p. 108.

<sup>12</sup> VSO, (2002), p. 5

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for UK consumers into the developing world. “I think you now rely on what you’re being told by the media so heavily that you can’t form your own opinions”.<sup>13</sup> Acknowledging the constraints that the media face, Coulter for instance, was of the view that generally “A lot of news, is bad news”<sup>14</sup>, whatever the source or focus. Television news of the developing world, he says, carries the headline, makes the front page, determines perceptions formed, and is the hardest to crack. The IBT report indicated that TV remains the primary medium through which the British public is informed about the developing world. This was true for 84% of the British public in 1989, 82% in 1993 and also in 1997.<sup>15</sup> The DFID study found that television was a strong source of beliefs and impressions about the developing world. “Viewers generally perceived the developing world in a negative way, blaming this on television images ... Television policy-makers all recognise the importance of television’s role in informing people about the world.”<sup>16</sup> Sections below outline some issues that explain the different perceptions, grouped into history, facts and figures, media and infrastructure.

## 5.1 History

What people know from their own either personal knowledge of a country, or through formal education helps explain overall perceptions of the developing world and differences in perceptions associated with different places. The VSO report, for instance, on the issue of a difference in perception by UK respondents in relation to Africa and Asia (particularly Afghanistan, China and Russia), stated that reasons for the “otherness” of these Asian countries are based on historical knowledge. Respondents believed that they used to be huge empires with real world status in politics and the armed forces, and even in some cases, a high level of education. Thus because they chose a political route that reduced their material status, they are broadly responsible for their own problems. Therefore poverty, lack of food, mounting foreign debt and so on, are not viewed as sympathetically in these countries as in, say, Africa.<sup>17</sup>

British consumers rely on “accumulated images” of the developing world from historical knowledge. As the VSO report states, there seems to be “confidence in out-of-date knowledge”.<sup>18</sup> Even for journalists with very little or no knowledge of Africa, this “out-of-date” historical knowledge plays a vital role in their output of the developing world. The GMG report states that journalists are guided by their own preconceptions and limited knowledge of the developing world. Lindsey Hilsum, for instance, says journalists found it difficult to understand that Rwanda was a highly organized and disciplined society. <sup>19</sup> With a decline in British journalists with expertise in African development, Dowden’s own observation is that media companies tend to send young people, ignorant of any African history, into Rwanda for instance. Therefore their output is skewed by their own distorted perceptions

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Paddy Coulter, in interview with AFFORD, (Reuters Foundation, Oxford, 24<sup>th</sup> April, 03)

<sup>15</sup> Jennie Stone, (2000), p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Third World and Environment Broadcasting Trust (3WE), (2000), p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> VSO, (2002), p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Glasgow Media Group (GMG), <http://www.gla.ac.uk/Acad/Sociology/debate.html> (date accessed 21st Jan., 2003)

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based on empire, slavery, colonialism and so on.<sup>20</sup> They build on these perceptions. This probably explains the lack of understanding of how to make Africa's everyday life appealing, since, as Coulter states, so much of Africa is rural, and for the mainly urban British, it is difficult to make the rural appealing.

What actions by the African diaspora might these issues imply? Should Africans in the diaspora already connected with Africa encourage the younger generation to learn more about Africa? Or should journalists among the African diaspora consider setting up an exclusive African TV, or a network of African correspondents who can explore ways in which Africa can be made appealing in the West?

The consistency of the use of particular words to describe a region or a people, has a huge impact on perceptions. Phrases from former US President Ronald Reagan and secretary of state George Shultz, such as "the evil scourge of terrorism", "depraved opponents of civilisation itself", "a return to barbarism in the modern age",<sup>21</sup> to describe parts of the developing world, mostly, has ensured that over the years, people in the West, particularly those with no first-hand knowledge of the specific places, perceive these parts to be dangerous and uncivilised.

The use of propaganda has a long history, of course. A familiar story is told by St Augustine of a conversation between Alexander the Great and a pirate he has captured. "How dare you molest the seas?" asks Alexander. "How dare you molest the whole world?" the pirate replies, "because I do it with a small ship only, I am called a thief; you, doing it with a great navy, are called an emperor."<sup>22</sup> Again, should the African diaspora be more assertive in the definition of African issues, quick to make their voices heard in the media, in a constructive way, on issues that concern Africa, or should they form a media monitoring coalition?

## 5.2 Reality, facts and figures

The belief for some though is that differences in images and perceptions within different parts of the developing world result from reality, especially when reality is backed by statistics. For instance incidences of female genital mutilation (FGM) are higher in Somaliland/Somalia (90% - 95%) compared to Ethiopia's 75%, and therefore a difference in perceptions of these different parts of the developing world would reflect the reality on the ground.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, it was also noted that INGOs (via the media) in their bid to raise awareness of development-related issues, to increase publicity and raise money for their cause, tend to give out these popular perceptions. For Dowden, one only has to look at Southern Africa's constant vulnerability to the environment; UNDP statistics; or information on the 15 poorest countries, all of which are in Africa. In other words, whether images were out of context or not was not the issue, but that images reflected the statistics. The title of an article on Africa written by Dowden in the *Economist*, "The Hopeless Continent" came under heavy criticism by the African diaspora.

<sup>20</sup> R. Dowden, In interview with AFFORD, (28th April, 03).

<sup>21</sup> Noam Chomsky, 'Confronting the Monster' *Index on Censorship for free expression: Squeeze on Democracy* 1/02 p. 27

<sup>22</sup> Neil Sammonds, 'Within the Meaning of Definition' *Index on Censorship for free expression: Squeeze on Democracy* 1/02 p. 46

<sup>23</sup> Edward Wageni, In an interview with AFFORD, (8th April, 03).

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Dowden explains that the *Economist* looks at facts and statistics, believes in the free market, and always makes it a point to propose a solution at the end of its articles. Consequently, any story that does not fall within the free market system, (and most stories on Africa would not), would be hard to find a solution for, at least as far as the *Economist* is concerned, and most likely declared “hopeless”.

### 5.3 Media: coverage related to political and economic reasons

A couple of interviewees were of the view that coverage, (which they believe is influenced by economic or political factors), is a major factor in shaping perceptions. Consequently more coverage means a higher likelihood of getting a more balanced picture of a story, less coverage would mean a high likelihood of getting a less balanced picture. Davies of *West Africa* magazine was of the view that media coverage depended on how much there was at stake in individual countries for both political and economic reasons. An example given was that of Zimbabwe and South Africa. Though both have a similar land problem, in Zimbabwe, migration of a white Zimbabwean population of about 250,000 would have fewer economic and political consequences compared to a white South African population of 4 million.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, South Africa would enjoy more coverage and therefore develop a more balanced image than Zimbabwe with its comparatively little economic and political importance.

According to Coulter, Africa gets a bit of coverage due to imperial experience, but for editors, it is easier to put fewer journalists onto Africa because of small economic gains, as opposed to China<sup>25</sup>. Latin America also, with its economic problems, gets relatively, little coverage. Therefore different perceptions created could be influenced by levels of coverage.

This issue of political and economic gains might also explain a point made by Coulter and Dowden, that British journalists with expertise on Africa’s development issues for instance, had shrank considerably. Dowden recollects only two British African correspondents during his active years as a journalist with *The Independent*.<sup>26</sup> Should diaspora organisations encourage their younger generation to go into journalism, to become African correspondents? Most of the respondents stated that when people of African or Asian origin, such as Ragi Omaar, have delivered stories from the developing world, they have brought with them a sense of an understanding of cultures, and therefore a perspective placed within a context.

### 5.4 Media: programme categories

To some degree, the programme categories under which the developing world is viewed could be a contribution to the different perceptions formed of different countries. For instance, countries featured almost consistently in travel programmes, may either be seen as an attractive tourist destination, despite associated negative perceptions, such as the Caribbean or South Africa. On the other hand, it may be so unbalanced because it has been made specifically to fit this category. In the same way, countries featured in wildlife programmes could also hold some tourist attraction for viewers or can be perceived as a place where humans are a danger to the mere existence of certain species, such as the perception of India/Asia in the DFID report.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Desmond Davies, In an interview with AFFORD, (4th April, 03).

<sup>25</sup> Coulter, (24th April, 03).

<sup>26</sup> Dowden, (28th April, 03).

<sup>27</sup> Third World and Environment Broadcasting Trust (3WE), (2000), p. 14.

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Programmes about religions, cultures and arts, human rights, development and environmental issues gave a more rounded picture of the developing world than news items. Over the decade, they have been replaced by travel and wildlife programming of the developing world, which, according to IBT's monitoring research, *Losing Perspective*, constituted 60% of developing world coverage on British TV as at 1999. Therefore TV offers incomplete portraits of the developing world.<sup>28</sup> Maybe African diaspora development organisations should attempt to make use of these other programmes, and ensure that they get their own stories out through these channels.

### **5.5 Media: dwindling international programming**

It is believed that a decrease in international programming of the developed world means that a focus is thrown consistently on one theme, such as, conflict and disaster in news coverage, or that a theme's context is not sufficiently covered. IBT's analysis of international news coverage of the developing world in 1993 – 1994, found that about 48% of developing country airtime, covered "conflict and disaster" stories. "While some of these news stories may have a humanitarian agenda, it still seems unbalanced that the bulk of information the British public receives about developing countries from television news is about their conflicts."<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, several complex factors account for the decrease in developing world coverage by British TV. Some of these include diminishing budgets for programmes, rapid technology innovations which allow foreign images to be quickly and cheaply transmitted, "resulting in less in-depth analysis". Additionally, staff are more likely to freelance and move between programmes today than they were in 1989, resulting in less commitment to one strand.<sup>30</sup> Photographers are more interested in meeting the markets of the image economy than in producing a balanced image. Consequently, there is no strong relationship between images produced and reality. Clarke's own experience as a photojournalist, where his own images are often misrepresented,<sup>31</sup> bears testimony to this lack of connection between the production of images and the reality of developing countries (or the context in which the pictures were taken), so often portrayed through a one-dimensional window. Dowden similarly agrees that there is almost no relationship between images produced and reality. The use of pictures in TV is so crucial to any story that whether they represent the views of the people concerned is not the immediate concern, but rather the availability of an image to accompany a story. <sup>32</sup>

If budgets have been cut, is it worth considering a network of African diaspora organisations who will channel out stories and images to the UK media, thereby getting their own perspectives out to the viewers?

### **5.6 Media: newsworthy stories**

The adjective that qualifies a story as newsworthy is believed to be the cause of perceptions even more than the issue of coverage.<sup>33</sup> Dowden, from experience, states that from the mid-80s with Rupert Murdoch's dominance of the UK press, the stories that made the news were the sensational stories, fast dramatic events that could be

<sup>28</sup> Jennie Stone, (2000), p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p. 19.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 30.

<sup>31</sup> D. J. Clarke, In interview with AFFORD (24<sup>th</sup> March, 2003).

<sup>32</sup> Dowden, (28<sup>th</sup> April, 03).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

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captured and accompanied by dramatic images. What did not make the news, and still does not, are stories that involve a trend and are difficult to capture within an image. If it had to do with coverage related to economic gains, then a country like Slovenia, which used to be the northern province of Yugoslavia, would not be bypassed by the media. However because Slovenia has nothing dramatic happening, and is getting on with its transition peacefully, it does not make “sensational” news. This refers particularly to news that makes the headlines.

As mentioned before the African diaspora have to consider other channels of information output, such as documentaries and history channels, within the UK, since most development work will not make the “news”.

### **5.7 Lack of infrastructure**

Infrastructure and the medium through which images are channelled are vital in determining the selection of images, and how they are perceived. In an interview with Clark,<sup>34</sup> it was noted that images of Bangladesh tend to be stronger than images of Ethiopia. Bangladesh has an established photo agency, Drik, made up of professional Bangladeshi photojournalists. Drik's photographers are skilled in a wide range of areas from photojournalism to advertising, to industrial photography, and they take on assignments from international media, developmental agencies, corporations and the Bangladeshi government.<sup>35</sup> In other words, the existence of an infrastructure that controls the outflow of selected images, as well as an infrastructure that uses local people who understand the issues at hand, has ensured that (at least for Bangladesh) images used by INGOs, international media and so on, represent a wider view of the Bangladeshi people. Compared to Ethiopia where no such infrastructure exists, images used are less representative of the people, because the outflow or selection of images used is not controlled primarily by locals.

For Ethiopia, as well as most other developing countries, this implies a certain uncontrolled space, exploited by the media, NGOs and so on. Africans in the diaspora are a major resource in themselves, however they are very invisible. They have skills and resources that could be used very effectively to present a more balanced image of Africa. Consequently this uncontrolled space – lack of infrastructure - could be exploited as a way of countering negative images. They have the ability to support a similar type of initiative like Drik's.

### **6.0. How are perceptions constructed?**

The construction of most perceptions is related directly to how images are created and stories told. For the African diaspora to begin to explore how to tackle the problem of images of development, or to have a role in the creation of images, there is the need to understand how perceptions are constructed.

#### **6.1 Contextualisation, image consistency, thematic repetitions**

Lack of context seems to be one major way of misinforming the public and shaping perceptions, as was found not only from the focus group studies organised and run by DFID, GMG and VSO, but also other literature and a discussion group held at

AFFORD on media representation of the developing world. The discussion group concluded on the need to contextualize positive or negative images: without a context even a so-called positive image can be interpreted negatively. For instance discussants had difficulty differentiating between two images of Sudan without sufficient

<sup>34</sup> D. J. Clark, (24<sup>th</sup> March, 2003).

<sup>35</sup> 'Drik: Images for Change, Photographers' <http://www.drik.net> (date accessed 8<sup>th</sup> April, 2003).

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background information. One image was a typical "aid image" – of an apparently helpless African child being held up by a white person representing an INGO. Another image featured a group of smiling people standing by a consignment of goods. The background to this latter picture was that the consignment had come from a group of Sudanese students based in Germany raising money through their own efforts to support people back home. Without this background context, however, viewers had the tendency to fill in whatever gaps they perceived with preconceived notions of what was going on. So, for instance, someone thought that perhaps the boxes were another consignment of aid from (white) aid donors or an INGO! <sup>36</sup> In the DFID report, most respondents agreed that in-depth contextualisation on TV stories did not exist. Media discussions on political/economic issues were seen to be inadequate, placing stories out of context and going for the sensational. For instance, a report on BBC 1 stated that cancelling world debt would cost British taxpayers 640 million pounds over 20 years.<sup>37</sup> This amount of course seemed like a huge cost. However, what was not reported was that, this total sum actually meant 50p per year per each head over 20 years.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, one key issue arising out of GMG's study for DFID, was that audiences are misinformed about the developing world because of the low level of explanations and context provided in television reporting and because some explanations are partial and informed by what might be termed "post-colonial beliefs".<sup>39</sup> Although terrestrial television channels are required to produce some international current affairs as part of their licence agreement, there is no quota set on precisely how much international coverage counts as enough to satisfy the remit. Consequently, international news coverage on TV has been criticised for failing to provide viewers with proper context.<sup>40</sup>

In the DFID report the point was also made that disasters in the developing world, when shown on TV, followed one after the other. There tends to be a constant flow of negative images<sup>41</sup> which reinforce viewers' own perceptions. Additionally, the repetition means the viewer is not given any additional background information. The problem of reporting terrible human consequences of an event such as the Columbian crisis in 1999 arises when these (negative themes) are the only themes in the coverage and they become routinised and occur each time there is a similar disaster, for instance chaos, scenes of destruction, visuals of collapsed buildings, frantic rescue efforts, and appeals for help.<sup>42</sup> In this way, perceptions form.

Aid agencies, in their bid to help the developing world, to create awareness of development issues, to publicise their own work, and to raise funds, are believed to perpetuate and reinforce existing perceptions even more, however unintentionally.<sup>43</sup>

While a Programme Manager for East Africa working with an NGO dealing with

<sup>36</sup> AFFORD, Final Report on 1<sup>st</sup> Joint Meeting on 'Aiding & Abetting: Global Image, Local Damage?' (Dec. 2002).

37 Third World and Environment Broadcasting Trust (3WE), (2000), p. 15

38 Ibid, p. 16.

39 Glasgow Media Group (GMG), <http://www.gla.ac.uk/Acad/Sociology/debate.html> (date accessed 21st Jan., 2003)

40 Jennie Stone, (2000), p. 18.

41 Third World and Environment Broadcasting Trust (3WE), (2000), p. 15

42 Glasgow Media Group (GMG), <http://www.gla.ac.uk/Acad/Sociology/debate.html> (date accessed 21st Jan., 2003)

43 Dowden, Coulter, Clark, Burns, interviews with AFFORD, (2003).

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issues concerning women, admitted to this probability, the belief was that the end justifies the means.<sup>44</sup> A WHO brief called "Stop Propagating Disaster Myths" by Goyet points to donor countries responding, through NGOs and aid agencies, to the pressure and expectations of public opinion, and not to the real needs of the affected country. <sup>45</sup> This action, according to the report, propagates myths and of course adds to the perceptions created out of context. The brief calls on donor governments, humanitarian organisations, especially the International Red Cross and the UN to work together to strengthen local capacity to respond more effectively to the needs of victims of disasters, believing this shift to be the way to end myths related to natural disasters, such as the helplessness of victims.<sup>46</sup>

Dowden, in his own travels in Africa as an Africa correspondent, bears witness to contextual distortions. He recollects the renowned and now deceased journalist Mohammed Amin with all good intentions, literally hand-picking individuals from a group of Ethiopians for a fundraising photograph that would represent starving people. This approach obviously meant that a few people would represent all of Ethiopia's famine, whether it reflected the reality or not. He also recollects how in Ivory Coast some foreign photojournalists (working for a UK-based media company), found the need to capture an image of a young man dressed in bullets and machine guns more important than the ongoing war itself. The danger of the image itself was that it could be used to represent all of the Ivory Coast and probably even all of Africa.

The implications for the diaspora are not very different from those made before. In other words, a channel needs to be created for voicing opinions about image output, objecting, criticising, offering more information on out-of-context stories, as well as encouraging alternative stories that give a more balanced picture.

## **6.2 Media policies**

The DFID report showed that policies and other factors relating to the decisionmaking of images that got selected within the media, shaped the output and perceptions formed. Since policymakers are concerned with interest and cost effectiveness, as far as ratings are concerned, programme makers' criteria is based on what senior editors/policy makers want, to ensure that they get a commission. Other factors that come into play in all these instances, are shortage of airtime, (therefore foreign stories compete with domestic ones for time), and the cost of foreign programme making.<sup>47</sup>

The demand of UK consumers for developing world output is based on assumptions on the part of policymakers, journalists, broadcasters and the like. George Carey of the production company Menton Barraclough Carey, states "I try and guess what the

<sup>44</sup> Wageni, (8th April, 2003).

<sup>45</sup> Claude de Ville de Goyet, 'Stop Propagating Disaster Myths', [http://www.thelancet.com/journal/vol356/iss9231/full/11an.356.9231.editorial\\_and\\_review.10157.1](http://www.thelancet.com/journal/vol356/iss9231/full/11an.356.9231.editorial_and_review.10157.1) (Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Relief Coordination Program, PAHO/WHO, Washington, DC 20037, USA), p. 2.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, pp. 2-4.

<sup>47</sup> Third World and Environment Broadcasting Trust (3WE), (2000), p. 21.

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audience wants. Most people switch on to be entertained not to get a message. Instinctively, I feel domestic stories will be more interesting than foreign ones."<sup>48</sup> Various theoretical perspectives have been used in the past to explain the relationship between TV news content and the manner in which audiences respond to it, one of which is that news content is seen primarily as directed by commercial criteria, based on assumptions of what audiences "really" want to watch. <sup>49</sup> However, assumptions are not enough to know what audiences want to watch (and why) and what conditions their interest. Alex Holmes, editor of the programme *Modern Times* at the BBC admits that audience interest is very important, "...but we don't know exactly what people want. I imagine what they want. It's blissfully unscientific on *Modern Times!*"<sup>50</sup> Would it be worth the African diaspora exploring this space – finding ways in which they can demand to watch what interests them, with one voice. The growing numbers of Africans in the diaspora should be significant enough to make an impact through a coalition that addresses such issues.

### **6.3 Collusion between NGOs and media?**

Identifying who is behind the creation of images adds to understanding the complexities even better. Most people believe that due to their overlapping agendas, NGOs and the media often seem to be in conspiracy with each other. While NGOs need the exposure for fundraising, the media needs to sell a story. VSO documented that the main sources of negative information are the media and "occasionally development charities".<sup>51</sup> As a UK respondent at the VSO focus group spelt out "I think you now rely on what you're being told by the media so heavily that you can't form your own opinions ... and it's dependent upon where [the information] is coming from as to how much truth you're getting." Fundraising materials used by charities that work in developing countries, were blamed for promoting "victim" images.<sup>52</sup>

At the Africans Without Borders Course held in March 2002 (organised by AFFORD in partnership with Birkbeck College), some participants noted that while aid agencies need to take responsibility for the images they use to generate support from the public (images that have resonance with Empire and Britain), there is complicity between aid agencies and the media in perpetuating negative stereotypes of developing peoples and places.<sup>53</sup>

A *Guardian* article in April 2001 highlights this complicity between NGOs and the media when it brought to the fore tensions and struggles among journalists and NGOs in relation to the Mozambique flood pictures and the rescue. BBC man David Shukman accused camera crews of endangering the lives of victims of the flood, in a race to get the best Mozambique flood pictures, by flying too close to trees onto which victims were clinging for dear life, and possibly blowing them out with the

<sup>48</sup> Glasgow Media Group (GMG), <http://www.gla.ac.uk/Acad/Sociology/debate.html> (date accessed

21st Jan., 2003)

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> VSO, (2002), p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

<sup>53</sup> Notes from week six 'Africans Without Borders: Development from a distance' course, 'Media Representations of Africa/development: Whose myths, whose realities?' (London: Birkbeck College, March 2002), p. 3.

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strong wind produced by the rotor blades of the helicopters. Media staff and some NGOs believed that the end-product and the intentions were more important. In response to David Shukman's accusation, an ITN cameraman was quoted as saying "At no time did we see anyone put in danger by helicopters. The South African military was doing a great job. People were holding their babies up to the helicopters", while the executive director of Medicins Sans Frontieres (MSF) believed that it was crucial that journalists cover such events to keep the world informed, stating that mistakes were unavoidable. A spokeswoman for Oxfam responded much the same way, with the world's response to the media's dramatic coverage being the important issue. <sup>54</sup> In all three instances, the media and the NGOs seemed to be in collusion on the delivery, which is the end product - a story worth selling (for the media), and exposure by keeping the world informed (for NGOs) to justify their role and activities.

Not only in their ideas and agenda do aid agencies and media seem to be in collusion with each other, but also in aid agencies' own strategies, for instance, of targeting journalists whom they perceive to be opinion formers. For example, UNICEF invited influential British journalists Rod Liddle and Boris Johnson to Uganda because they perceived them both to distrust aid agencies.<sup>55</sup>

Others who do not buy the theory that INGOs and the media are co-conspirators still believe that INGOs must take responsibility for their share in the creation of perceptions. For instance, Burns is of the view that they can strengthen each other's values, but are not necessarily in collusion. <sup>56</sup> Some people feel that INGOs need to be given credit for the number of years they have spent building a constituency of support for international development.<sup>57</sup>

Nevertheless, whether there is collusion between NGOs and the media or not, it is clear that to a large extent they form a greater part of the "who" that lies behind the creation of the images that lead to the construction of most perceptions. This has crucial implications if the African diaspora is to play any influential role in the creation of images of development. More importantly, how do they play that influential role that attempts to create alternative perspectives? Would this imply working with mainstream NGOs and media, for instance, influencing their policies on the creation of images? Would it imply working through alternative channels? We return to these questions later.

### **6.4 INGO policies**

The mechanisms by which images are created and perceptions formed, or the processes through which a story goes through to get to its final stage, are complex, whether within NGOs or the media. Over 21,000 known NGOs listed in the *Directory of Development Organisations* which offer financial support, information and advice

to the enterprise sectors in the developing world, use images primarily to “fundraise; raise public awareness of specific issues; educate in schools and youth organisations; 54 Matt Wells, Stephen Morris, ‘Does the Media Circus make disasters worse?’ *Guardian*, Mon. April 23, 2001.

55 Clarke, (24<sup>th</sup> March, 2003).

56 Frances Burns, In interview with AFFORD, (30<sup>th</sup> April, 2003).

57 Coulter, (24<sup>th</sup> April, 2003).

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and to engage current supporters”.<sup>58</sup> The way images are used in these various activities is the crux of the matter. Images used for the purpose of fundraising for instance are significant perception shapers.

Within NGOs, the different sections have different agendas as far as images are concerned. For instance, images used for fundraising are found to be very negative, probably because “the more shocking images you show, the more funding you get.”<sup>59</sup> In 1984, the Burke-Amin report stated that NGOs experienced a massive growth in funds following shocking images from the Ethiopian famine. They received at least twice as much money. For instance, Save the Children Fund experienced a growth of 10 million to 100 million pounds in 10 years.<sup>60</sup> Following this period Save the Children Fund and Oxfam produced an ethical framework of guidelines for image use. Most NGOs followed suit, and more reports followed. However, the VSO *Live Aid Legacy* report, like DFID’s, indicates that very little has changed.

Following a personal experience, Dowden supports this equation of shocking images/stories to more funds. In the early 1990s the activities and daily reports of aid agencies present in Goma at the time, indicated that aid agencies were competing with each other for funds by trying to outdo each other in death tolls reported by their media men. Frances Burns of DFID, also stated that the worst images are often tied up to fundraising. <sup>61</sup>

The introduction of the educational programmes within NGOs was in response to concerns of negative and unbalanced images and perceptions of the developing world. But educational images, though they depict everyday life, or probably because they do, have been found to be boring. In the internal organisational struggle between NGO educational and fundraising departments on representation of the developing world, education has generally lost out.

Though this general assumption has not been critically examined, most would agree that using a starving malnourished African child on a full page Oxfam advertisement would reap greater financial return than showing an image of a healthy child.<sup>62</sup> Supporters’ magazines are usually found to be more positive, because supporters want to see that money is making a difference. Most images used in supporters’ magazines or handouts and so on, always give a picture depicting the difference the money given has made to individuals’ lives. Comic Relief’s Red Nose Day 2003 showed, in one of its programmes, patients in Somalia/Ethiopia in a hospital being treated with hospital equipment purchased with money raised from previous years’ Red Nose Day activities. Pictures were still devastating, but less so compared to those generally shown to emphasise the need for aid.

Comparing a fundraising image to an aftermath brochure for supporters, at Womankind, indicated that though a fundraising one gave individuals’ the chance to

<sup>58</sup> D. J. Clark, 'Overview' under 'Pictures for change' <http://www.djclark.com/change/overview.html> (date accessed 20<sup>th</sup> March, 2003)

<sup>59</sup> D. J. Clark, (24<sup>th</sup> March, 03).

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Burns, (30<sup>th</sup> April, 2003).

<sup>62</sup> D. J. Clark, 'Overview' <http://www.djclark.com/change/overview.html> (date accessed 20<sup>th</sup> March, 2003)

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voice their own perspectives on their own needs, the perception created was still one of hopelessness. Similarly, the supporting magazine approach of showing the aftermath, while less devastating, still reinforced the notion of hopelessness, and how much money from individuals could make a difference.

Paddy Coulter highlights some of the tensions within Oxfam during his own tenure of office as Head of Communications. A group in Oxfam believed that fundraising images were in danger of being patronising, and therefore attempted to change the "generous giver, grateful receiver" perception. Others, however, did not share the critique that negative could be replaced by positive. "Fundraisers need to use pictures of need, otherwise, what is the use of fundraising?"<sup>63</sup> As a result of the different views, the "negative-positive" approach was a handicap. Coulter observed that in a bid to deal with these tensions, fundraisers began to use close-up photos of children with appealing eyes – as much as this may be considered "positive", for Coulter, it does not say much for a fundraising image.

For the African diaspora, this would imply influencing policy and the agenda of INGOs. They could make more impact by forming a coalition that made its voice heard in policy issues. The educational programmes within INGOs seem to be the only programmes that give a balanced picture. However, images here are deemed to be very boring and unappealing. Coulter has said that for the British person from a developed and more urban world, it is difficult to make the rural appealing. This could be an area worth giving some thought and time to. For Africans in the diaspora who understand the rural setting and what appeals to them, they could explore ways in which they could formulate ideas on this specific area to feed into NGOs' educational programme policy. Alternatively, a group of African journalists, or Africans in the diaspora working in the media, could form a group that would carry out some research on how to make the rural appealing, and explore different mechanisms for portraying this to viewers.

### **6.5 Photographs and captions**

Captions can make a lot of difference depending on various factors - what the text says, how readable the text is from a certain distance where the image itself is fairly visible, the size of the font, how representative the text itself is and so on. Clark, in "Pictures for Change" quotes Shahidul Alam:

We are aware of the meaning of words, but forget that images may have different meanings to different people, and that the meaning of a photograph can depend to a large extent on the context in which it is used. "The Camera never lies" is the biggest lie of all.<sup>64</sup>

Let us consider an example of how images and text can shape perceptions if both are used inappropriately: In 1978, when Zimbabwe guerrillas shot down a civilian

government airliner killing 48 people, *Newsweek* carried a two page spread with the title “Please Don’t Kill Us”. Accompanying the story was a photograph of guerrilla leaders Joshua Nkomo and Robert Mugabe raising their glasses in a toast, as though celebrating the deaths. The photo itself was captioned “We Shot It Down” with no

<sup>63</sup> Coulter, (24<sup>th</sup> April, 03)

<sup>64</sup> D. J. Clark, ‘Overview’ <http://www.djclark.com/change/overview.html> (date accessed 20<sup>th</sup> March, 2003).

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acknowledgement that the picture actually pre-dated the crash. <sup>65</sup> This “misuse” of image and text probably reinforced readers’ perceptions about Zimbabwe.

Having attempted to explain the different types of perceptions, and how they are constructed, the next question to consider is “does it matter?” What impact do negative images have on viewers, both Westerners, and people from the developing world, in this case Africa. What difference would a change make to development?

### **7.0 Does it matter?**

Does it matter that images are portrayed as negatively as they are, or that the developed world has a particular, mostly negative, perception of the developing world? What difference would alternative images, and alternative perceptions make to the developed world, and to the developing world?

In response to strong negative perceptions of Eritrea, a respondent on Africans Without Borders email forum, stated that “what Africans believe about the West, is what the media shows them, and what the West believes about Africa is what they get from the media.”<sup>66</sup>

A danger of stereotypes is their ability to dehumanize, distance and devalue the people involved by “discounting the strengths and positive qualities of individuals in developing countries”, and also creating the impression that Britain has nothing to learn from, or respect in, developing countries.<sup>67</sup> A more balanced understanding of development issues, on a personal level can open up an opportunity to reassess individual priorities and values, and accepted cultural norms. At a UK level, it can improve race relations and cultural richness, and at a global level it implies an engagement with global politics and the impact of UK policies on developing countries.<sup>68</sup> If existing stereotypes or images of development have a direct bearing on UK policies (within the relevant organisations), then taking action implies some amount of influencing UK policies related to the creation of images. This would mean the possibility of pushing an agenda that favours the developing world.

As indirect and abstract as it may be, representation of the developing world does matter. As stated above, it can shape the way people think and act. Unconscious value judgements are deeply rooted and distort views of, for instance, Africa and Africans. In “European Perceptions on Africa and Africans”, negative portrayal of Africa is associated with self-respect of Africans when the question is asked “How can you expect young African-Americans to have any self respect, when everything they hear about their ancestry and their heritage is negative?”<sup>69</sup> On a more practical level, many young black people in Britain disassociate themselves from any connection with Africa, as a result of media images of Africa. It emerged out of the AFFORDBirkbeck Africans Without Borders course that teachers find that many young people whose parents are from Africa will deny their roots and claim that they are from

Jamaica.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Author Unknown, 'European Perceptions on Africa and Africans', p. 1.

<sup>66</sup> Africans Without Borders email discussion forum 'On the Eritrea Story', (22<sup>nd</sup> May, 2003).

<sup>67</sup> VSO (2002), pp. 11-12.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>69</sup> 'European Perceptions on Africa and Africans', p. 1.

<sup>70</sup> Notes from week six 'Africans Without Borders: Development from a distance' course, (2002), p. 6.

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The way Africa is presented in the media poses challenges to Africans in the diaspora who may feel they have no alternative other than denial of that coverage. A discussant (a Sudanese) at an AFFORD event told a story that illustrated the point: An Eritrean friend of his had been watching TV with his son when Eritrea had been mentioned and shown on the TV report. The pictures were so depressing and demeaning that when this man's son asked his father whether the country being shown was their country, he said "No, that is Sudan they are showing", probably partly out of shame and partly out of a desire to shield his child from the sense of embarrassment he might feel at being associated with a place that looked so unwelcoming on TV.

Representation of the developing world and Africa raises a lot of questions from people of the developing world. Questions on why images of distressful pictures of Africa, for instance, lack any dignity, whereas the war in Kosovo, as brutal as it was, was not represented in the same way; why was there a lot of coverage in the UK on tensions in the lead up to the elections in Ghana, but comparatively very little coverage on the aftermath of the peaceful transition, following the free, fair and successful elections; why does cancer research not show images of people with cancer whom the money is going to, yet images of AIDS victims is a very familiar image of developing countries?

The explanations and issues discussed in sections 4 and 5 are singularly inadequate to explain or answer any of these questions. A complex array of factors begins to provide clues.

The next section deals with the possibilities that exist for the African diaspora to play a role in shaping perceptions about Africa, and an appropriate framework within which to act.

### ***8.0 What scope exists for empowering story tellers in the south to tell their own story?***

To a large extent, development-related media images are created by Western NGOs and the media, yet the perspectives of the people who make up the population of developing countries, and understand their own culture, are not heard. Africans in the diaspora, a significant number of whom are very connected with Africa and involved with Africa's development, are a rich resource with diverse perspectives on Africa. Through their financial contributions and direct involvement in Africa's development they make up an invisible welfare state. With people so engaged in the development of their countries from a distance, images of Africa's development reflect these realities.

The AFFORD-moderated Africans Without Borders email discussion forum which discusses African issues, is one proof of what this human resource is capable of contributing to the global perspective of Africa. Can this contribution work through

and with the mainstream media and NGOs or outside the mainstream framework or a combination of both? The analysis in this report suggests that the African diaspora can influence perceptions through the media and NGOs in the mainstream, as well as through alternative channels. In other words, it is not an “either or” strategy that is required but a “both and”. Mainstream media and INGOs as well as the African diaspora can all play a role, nevertheless it seems that the African diaspora needs to be proactive and take responsibility, if they intend to make any positive change.

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## **8.1 Within the mainstream media**

How can the African diaspora influence the media to change perceptions of developing countries? Coulter suggests that while TV news may be the most important in shaping perceptions, and the hardest to crack, a focus on other elements of the media, such as documentaries, feature magazines, travel and so on, using cultural development could be the way forward. Some programme types were seen to have the strength to give different perspectives. Historical documentaries were found to offer a different perspective of the developing world and its relationship with the West. They were often found to be critical of western interference in the politics of the developing world.<sup>71</sup>

Coulter also suggested setting up a media group within the African diaspora that would take concerns and issues forward into the mainstream media. Similarly, Dowden believed that the African diaspora, INGOs and the media could work together by forming a monitoring group to monitor for instance British aid to developing countries, British INGOs, and the British media. Alternatively, or additionally, the African diaspora can organise regular discussions between groups of the African diaspora and journalists within the mainstream.

As far as *West Africa* magazine is concerned the African diaspora in the UK is becoming more and more visible. They are seen to be very vocal because *West Africa* magazine receives numerous letters every week indicating their perspectives. From his own experience as editor of *West Africa* magazine, Davies believes that as far as the media is concerned there are various channels available to complain or get the diaspora’s own perspective out. For instance, writing a letter to the editor of a newspaper within the mainstream, is worth the effort – even if it is not published, it has been heard, and the more such letters come in the more editors are pressurised to act on them. In addition, there are channels such as the Press Complaints Commission, which adjudicates on complaints about decency and taste.<sup>72</sup>

## **8.2. Strengthening Africans in the diaspora: within NGOs and media**

The managing editor of *West Africa* magazine was on the view that the media would never change because they are very powerful, and at the end of the day the photojournalist or journalist would always represent the story himself/herself, the way they would want to.<sup>73</sup> He suggested the creation of an African satellite (like Al-Jazeera in the Middle East), as well as the use of African media companies. For instance, *West Africa* magazine has recently signed a contract with Africa Press. Photojournalist, lecturer and researcher D. J. Clark, who has had the experience of doing photojournalism but having his work misrepresented, through his own research

on studying images of developing countries used by the media over the years could say that media representations had not changed, and so based on the success of Drik, looked more to the idea of using locals in image representation rather than people from the outside.

<sup>71</sup> Third World and Environment Broadcasting Trust (3WE), (2000), p. 11.

<sup>72</sup> Desmond Davies, (Editor), West Africa Magazine, in interview with AFFORD, (4th April, 03).

<sup>73</sup> Frank Afful, Managing Editor, West Africa Magazine, in interview with AFFORD, (4th April, 03).

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There are two different schools of thought based on the approach of using local photographers. There is participatory photography, where a production/media organisation goes to people or locals with an issue to get their own perspective on it (similar to what some NGOs like Womankind do). The second school of thought lays down the infrastructure – instead of telling stories for people or the developing world, they train locals to take photographs and get them to tell their own stories. <sup>74</sup>

A brief from WHO suggests that instead of quickly rushing to disaster scenes, most times very ill-prepared, as is typical of INGOs, the world would be better off if donor governments, humanitarian organisations and the UN committed instead to strengthening “local capacity to respond to future disasters in... the disaster-prone countries, and learn what is important and what is futile in helping countries.”<sup>75</sup>

Coulter was of the view that the mainstream media need to use more Africans or people from the developing world. For him, having people like Ragi Omar, Sorious Samura, George Allagiah, has meant that they bring in their own perspectives, and an understanding of culture. Again, the idea of Africans in the diaspora encouraging young Africans to take up careers in the media, could be a challenging way of expressing their culture and development issues in a more balanced way. More directly, more African commentators could make themselves available to offer perspectives on Africa-related issues, events and news items.

In response to proposals made in the DFID *Viewing the World* report, DFID established two funds, one of which is the documentary fund.<sup>76</sup> This fund is open to anyone who is capable of making documentaries in the developing world. People of African origin need to be proactive to explore the availability of such funds, to encourage young people or those already with careers in the media to take advantage of opportunities that give them the chance to “tell their own story”.

Womankind is a small INGO that deals with women's issues in parts of the developing world. Apart from ensuring that the women they are helping are given the opportunity to give their own perspectives through filming or quoting them in magazines, they also work with policy makers to ensure that the perspectives of those they help, influence decisions that affect them. Consequently, they believe that in this way they are shifting perceptions of the South.

The African diaspora can form a forum that will feed information and different perspectives into the creation of images within INGOs and the media of Africa. This forum could be a pressure group that ensures that proposals such as those made in the brief from WHO, are carried out either by the named stakeholders – donor governments, humanitarian organisations and so on – or individuals within the African diaspora with the required skills.

### **8.3. Strengthening and supporting local channels in Africa**

If appropriate infrastructure is laid down and information channelled through local authorities and local people, developing countries can begin to control what goes out of their local world onto the global world. Drik's photography agency in Bangladesh

<sup>74</sup> D. J. Clark, (24<sup>th</sup> March, 03).

<sup>75</sup> de Goyet, 'Stop Propagating Disaster Myths', p. 4.

<sup>76</sup> Burns, (30<sup>th</sup> April, 2003).

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has laid down infrastructures in such a way that it controls the output of images to governments, INGOs and world media. Drik is an example of local photographers feeding into the global market.<sup>77</sup> Training and using local photographers in various departments means that they tell their own stories in their own way, from their own perspective, instead of letting others with no understanding of their cultures do it for them.

On the same note, *West Africa* magazine has recently signed a contract to Pan African Press (PanAPress). PanAPress is an African-run organisation, first established in 1979, and now has a picture agency established 18 months ago. Whereas *West Africa* magazine indicated the difficulties and conflicts in working with AFP, a French news agency they work with as far as images are concerned, and admitted to falling short themselves, they believe that since PanAPress is an African-run organisation, and trains and uses local photographers as well, there will be a better understanding of what kind of images they want, and there will also be more dignity as far as the images are concerned.<sup>78</sup>

The African diaspora can support local channels in various ways, for example through contributions to train local photographers, or to set up a local media agency and so forth. Going one step further, perhaps Africa needs its own Al-Jazeera-type outlet to help give voice to African perspectives in concerns in much the same way as that media company has done for Arabs in the Middle East.

### **8.4. Cultural and work experience for UK consumers**

VSO volunteers who had lived and worked in developing countries were living testimonies to how perceptions can be changed by experiencing another culture firsthand. Whereas before they had felt that people "there" were "very different from us", they found out that "people's everyday concerns and worries are the same, eg worries about jobs, family, children", that instead of being "victims", "the will to help themselves and be self-sufficient was high on the community priorities".<sup>79</sup> If the average British volunteer, through his or her experiences, gained a different perspective, perhaps Africans in the diaspora should be encouraging their younger ones to experience the cultures of their African origins as well. This could be done independently or through organised trips, travel programmes, exchange programmes, and so on.

The DFID's Bursary Fund, which was also established in response to the *Viewing the World* report, supports journalists to spend time with a local media in developing countries, to exchange mutual learning, to make contacts and to understand the context. Again some proactive measures are needed here by Africans in the diaspora to explore the availability of funds like this that can make a lot of difference to young Africans in the diaspora with career prospects in the media.

### **8.5. Advertising**

The idea of using the familiar and unfamiliar may be one way of giving a more balanced picture of the developing world. Clark believes that advertising understands very well how to use images, for instance, using the familiar to reinforce existing

<sup>77</sup> D. J. Clark, (24<sup>th</sup> March, 03).

<sup>78</sup> Davies, (4<sup>th</sup> April, 03)

<sup>79</sup> VSO, (2002), p. 7.

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views and the unfamiliar to introduce new products.<sup>80</sup> Africans in the diaspora could explore ways of adapting these approaches to challenge perceptions about Africa. More radically, perhaps, what would an advertising campaign that targeted African consumers in the diaspora and spoke to their aspirations for Africa's development look like? To what extent might such a high-profile campaign start to demonstrate in creative ways the art of what is possible and thereby not just mobilise much-needed resources but also challenge the mainstream to clean up its act?

### **8.6 Other alternatives**

New technology offers some possibilities. Video links where children in north and south interact in real-time; young people in different parts of the world could interact using short messaging service (SMS) via mobile phones to "chat" in a modern version of pen pals.

### **9.0 Summary of action points**

Several implications were noted in sections 4 and 5, most of which came up repeatedly in section 7. There is the need to bear in mind whether these can be done in association with the UK mainstream media or outside of a mainstream context. The following is the summary of points discussed:

#### **9.1 Mainstream measures**

- Media monitoring pressure and advocacy group to challenge stereotypes, correct factual inaccuracies, hold media outlets to account and promote alternative perspectives (individuals also have a role to play in writing letters to editors, etc)
- African media coalition (a network of sources and voices for UK media, with an accessible database that UK media professionals could tap into)
- Accessing and making use of more accessible channels such as documentaries, history and travel programmes
- Careers in the media/NGOs among Africans, particularly young Africans
- Advertising Africa and African products

#### **9.2 Non-mainstream measures**

- Travel packages to Africa for young Africans
- African media (newspaper, TV and so on, edited, published, supported by Africans)
- "African Al-Jazeera" satellite TV station
- Local channels/infrastructure/agencies in Africa, example local photographers.
- Cultural and work experience (related to media) in the developing world
- Advertising Africa and African products
- Use of technology (example phone-text pals, parallel to pen-pals between young Africans in Africa, and young people in the UK)

## **10.0 Conclusion**

Africa seems to occupy a unique place in the British people's perception of the developing world, itself generally perceived in negative, distorted and demeaning ways. The African diaspora has a key role (indeed responsibility) to play in helping to transform how Africa is presented in the media and perceived by the British public (including young people of African origin). To be effective, African diaspora organisations and individuals not only need to be proactive and take greater responsibility for shifting perceptions. They also need to operate in multi-faceted ways to tackle the problem from many angles. At times it will be necessary to work with mainstream media, to provide alternative sources and perspectives; or with

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mainstream INGOs to help them improve the quality of the messages they put out. At other times, the African diaspora will have to use all levers of influence to demand greater accountability and performance of mainstream media and INGOs given their own first-hand experience of the damage that distorted perspectives of Africa have for them. Simultaneously, African must explore use of alternative tools and channels to tell their own stories, given the way that international coverage is seeing a secular decline on the most important mainstream outlet of all, TV.

New technology, inspiring examples from other developing regions all imply that considerable scope exists for innovation and creativity in responding to the challenge of transforming Africa's image. African diaspora organisations will need to take this challenge seriously and make the response a central element of their overall strategy. They will need to develop their capacity to understand the mechanics of the media and to be proactive in mounting responses. But as major stakeholders in Africa's progress and as members of an invisible welfare state, they have exciting, even breathtaking stories to tell.

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