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COMMENT



# You hear me, are you listening? Reflections on positionality and performative change in INGO representations

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## ABSTRACT

In their substantive work, Ademolu and Crombie delve into the ethical complexities of humanitarian storytelling, focusing on the impact of fundraising communications for UK African diasporic communities and those featured in these materials. They explore ways to responsibly negotiate these complexities and empower disenfranchised communities in representation practices. This article reflects on their research within broader calls for representational change, examining positionality and performative change in INGO representations. It highlights challenges and opportunities in shifting power dynamics in INGO content creation, aiming to inspire a more accountable approach prioritising the voices of marginalised communities in shaping representation practices. The discussion also engages with the messy realities and challenges that determine whether, and if so, how, this change happens in practice.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS


SDG1: no poverty; SDG2: zero hunger; SDG10: reduced inequalities

## Introduction

This co-authored article emerged from a series of engaging online discussions between Edward Ademolu, a lecturer in cultural competency and researcher specialising in development communications and diaspora engagement, and Jess Crombie, a researcher, and senior lecturer focusing on humanitarian narratives and their impact, with a background in humanitarian aid work. This special issue's central question, "We talk about shifting the power, but are we really shifting the practice?" provides an ideal platform from which to openly examine and ponder these previously private dialogues.

In exploring the dynamics of communication and storytelling within humanitarian contexts, it is essential to acknowledge the traditional distinctions between humanitarian aid and international development. Humanitarian aid is typically characterised by its focus on immediate, emergency responses to crises, whereas international development aims at long-term structural changes to address chronic issues of poverty and inequality. These distinctions have historically guided the strategies and narratives employed by organisations in their communication efforts (Belloni 2007).

However, as noted by scholars such as Basu and Modest (2014), recent trends reveal a growing convergence between these domains. As aid agencies increasingly integrate short-term humanitarian responses with long-term development goals, the lines between them have become more blurred. This overlap is evident in how INGOs communicate crises and development efforts, often merging the urgency of humanitarian narratives with the broader objectives of development.

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Our discussion sits amidst this evolving landscape, where the overlap between humanitarian and development communication practices are increasingly obfuscated, complicating these traditional distinctions. While acknowledging the importance of recognising these distinctions, our focus is on addressing the contemporary realities of humanitarian work, where communication strategies are no longer neatly categorised but rather interwoven with ongoing development objectives and the intended and unintended effects of this.

By situating our analysis within this framework of increasing overlap, we aim to critically examine how communication practices can both reflect and shape shifting power dynamics. This perspective enables us to explore not only the immediate impacts of humanitarian storytelling but also the broader implications for systemic change and diaspora engagement. In doing so, we contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how communication can evolve to better address the needs and experiences of affected populations and diaspora communities while fostering more equitable and inclusive practices.

The research presented here is informed by the perspectives of two distinct yet interconnected groups. Ademolu engages with Black British diaspora communities in the UK, while Crombie interacts with individuals who are often the “subjects” of humanitarian narratives from Africa and South Asia. Despite their differing contexts, both strands of research highlight how these groups – frequently outside the primary target audiences – are impacted by representational practices. This impact shapes their self-perceptions and external perceptions, revealing a need for a more nuanced approach to humanitarian and development storytelling.

The conversation documented below was guided by jointly developed questions and then transcribed verbatim, barring minor removals of filler words for clarity. This discussion delves into the overarching themes of positionality amid practical shifts, bookended by an introduction to their work and concluding reflections on implementing transformative changes in representational practices. This approach was influenced by qualitative research methodologies that emphasise the importance of capturing the dynamic essence and detailed nuances of discussions, a facet that is often lost in the more traditional “fair note” method of editing (Hill et al. 2022, 1). Further inspiration came from Nell Dunn’s influential work “Talking to Women” (Dunn 1965), which presents a collection of unedited, transcribed dialogues with nine women. Dunn’s work was a deliberate feminist endeavour to elevate the everyday voices and dialogues of women to a place of literary significance. In her succinct epilogue, Dunn describes the profound enjoyment derived from these dialogues, casually conducted with a tape recorder within reach, as an attempt to crystallise their life aspirations (Dunn 1965, 211). It is this concept of encapsulating the fullness and joy of genuine dialogue between two people genuinely engaged with each other’s perspectives that this text aims to replicate.

## **Research and personal motivations**

### ***Edward***

My research offers a critical analysis of the relationship between Black British communities of African descent and the UK’s international development sector, with a focus on how poverty-alleviation international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) represent African poverty in their fundraising materials. This study extends beyond mere visual representation to explore its implications for African diasporic identity and participation in global development (Ademolu 2021). It contributes to ongoing discussions about the impact of international development on the African diaspora worldwide, including those in Britain and Northern Ireland (Dillon 2021; Young 2012), emphasising the significant role of fundraising narratives in shaping African diasporic engagement global development initiatives.

These discussions are embedded in broader societal transformations driven by the global Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and ongoing decolonisation efforts. Both have particularly challenged INGOs and the development sector to address and confront racial issues in visual representations (Ademolu 2023; Warrington and Crombie 2017). My research is critically informed by personal

reflections on my Black British Nigerian heritage and shaped by formative experiences with Comic Relief's "Red Nose Day". These insights have profoundly influenced my understanding of how international development communications impact Black British communities and contribute to the wider discourse on racial representation in global development.

Cameron's (2015) study on Comic Relief's "Red Nose Day"<sup>1</sup> posed a challenging question: "Can poverty be humorous?" Despite the event's jovial tone and its history of encouraging charitable acts since 1985, my memories from the 1990s reflect a mix of amusement from comedic performances and a profound impact from stark portrayals of poverty in Black African communities. These vivid depictions featured malnourished infants in dire conditions, milkless mothers, and aid-reliant communities, influencing my perception of Africa and global Black Africanness as a child, and heightening my awareness of stereotypes and cultural sensitivities.

Given this, I critically examine systemic oversights in development communications for UK-based INGOs. This involves addressing the historical marginalisation of Black African diaspora perspectives in visual storytelling and their importance in institutional decisions on race and representation.

### **Jess**

My research focuses on incorporating the opinions, ideas, choices, and preferences of the "subjects" of humanitarian stories into the editorial process, and challenging audience perceptions of these individuals.

The act of creating INGO communications materials has been described as the "tangible instantiation of a triangular relationship" with the content created "to mobilise the power of those who fall into the category of viewer to act on the suffering of those who are rendered subject" (Drain 2020). At the core of my research is an acknowledgment that there are three main groups involved in the humanitarian editorial process – the makers (humanitarian agencies), audiences (donors, policy makers, etc.) and subjects (people with lived experience), and the uneven amounts of power that each group has to impact narrative.

Much of my career has been spent in the "maker" role – which I typically conducted to fulfil a pre-written brief that detailed whose stories were valued, and what these individuals needed to say to fulfil the narrative expectation. However, the people I was speaking to rarely fitted these briefs so neatly and were often unwilling to contort themselves into the required characters. They would instead tell me how they wanted their story to be told, question my approach, challenge me, or try to subvert the narrative to their own political views in both obvious and subtle ways. As one young woman told me; "I want to take the photos, not be an object" (Warrington and Crombie 2017, 55). But these subversions did not fit into the role of the story as part of a much-repeated formula for inducing audience engagement.

This formula has been described as a "humanitarian imaginary", a "configuration of practices which use the communicative structure of the theatre in order to perform collective imaginations of vulnerable others in the West" (Chouliaraki 2012, 45). In other words, humanitarian agencies reproduce these subjects in such a way that the narratives reinforce what Homi K. Bhabha has described as the ongoing and enduring legacy of colonial productive power: "crucial to the binding of a range of differences and discriminations that inform the discursive and political practices of racial and cultural hierarchization" (Bhabha 1994, 67). The question now is how the humanitarian sector can shift from "disempowering narratives that ascribe pity to aid recipients and heroism to aid providers, to ones that align with what affected citizens ... value: independence and agency, equity and shared values, partnership and progress" (Saez and Bryant 2023, 30).

### **Conversational sharing**

JC: In the context of this special issue, I was thinking about this idea about who is deciding what a power shift means. I often go into my research projects with the partner UN body or INGO having one idea about

what making a power shift means, me with another, and then when I go and talk to the contributors, they have a third way. So, we're all coming at it from our own perspectives and with our own experiences and agendas and assumptions.

EA: In light of that reflection, how would you define shifting power?

JC: In my practice, shifting the power means shifting who gets to make editorial decisions about narrative. What happens at the moment is that editorial powers are shared in bounded ways, most commonly limited to contributors being asked to communicate their experiences by answering a set of questions written by the INGO. Instead, power shifts are about those with lived experience being involved in editorial decision-making, all the way from the point of story production into the editing process and up to final decision-making.

EA: Power shifting, to me, embodies a fundamental reconfiguration of how influence and decision-making operate within our representational practices. It's about dismantling entrenched hierarchies and ensuring that marginalised voices, like those of diaspora communities, hold genuine sway in shaping narratives and policies. This isn't just about token gestures; it's about substantive, systemic change that fosters true diaspora-inclusivity and accountability. It's also thinking about our positionality and how that influences the extent to which transformative shifts in power are possible.

JC: On the positionality point, I spend a lot of time thinking about this and how my background intersects with the contributors with whom I work. The thing I worry about the most is whether my well-meaning attempts at change will still end up being disempowering.

As an example, when I worked with UNHCR to develop their ethical communication guidelines the input group, which was made up of people who had lived experience of being a refugee, critiqued my decision not to use the word "dignity" in the document. They explained that a loss of dignity on multiple fronts was a key effect of their refugee situations – and that it was important for the guidelines to acknowledge this. I had made the decision to remove it as my experience of this term was of INGO professionals deciding on behalf of affected populations what dignity looked like in storytelling, and I didn't want to perpetuate this behaviour. But I realised the irony of my actions – while attempting to prohibit UNHCR from making decisions on behalf of refugee populations, I had done exactly that myself.

I think a lot of people reading this would, if they were being honest, recognise that this decision-making on behalf of others is still a day-to-day part of humanitarian narrative creation. It's hard to change the attitude that we, the INGO staff, are in one role – that of expert decision makers – and you, the subject, are in another – that of the well, a subject – and that those roles are not immutable and fixed.

EA: Your insights really got me thinking. When advocating for African diaspora groups, there are complexities arising from the differences between my personal background and these communities. Although I share racial and cultural ties with these African diaspora communities, my experiences diverge significantly, particularly regarding the extreme poverty often depicted in fundraising materials. For instance, my own background does not involve the severe poverty represented in these campaigns, nor do I have direct familial experiences of such conditions. This disparity can create a disconnect between my understanding and the actual lived experiences of these communities. Such a gap is crucial to acknowledge as it can influence how accurately and empathetically I advocate for and represent their experiences.

Navigating the well-meaning liberal trap feels like moving through a "Third Space", where transformation is possible, yet I often feel unheard. Being taken seriously as a Black researcher within INGOs presents challenges, especially advocating for diaspora communities not directly impacted by the issues INGOs focus on. On the flip side, individuals like yourself [JC] may have more freedom and influence to push for change within this system. This exploration of our positions, the traps we face, and the potential for change opens up fascinating discussions on power dynamics within humanitarian narratives.

JC: I see these traps and the difficulties of navigating this Third Space playing out in my work. This is anecdotal – but what colleagues and I have observed during interviews with UN or INGO staff is that white staff, when interviewed by a Black or Brown researcher, are less honest about biases they may recognise in themselves and less willing to admit to racialised imbalances in power. Conversely, Black or Brown staff, when interviewed by a white researcher, are also less honest but in a different way, presenting a watered-

down version of the opinions they may have, and even seeming fearful of sharing their real feelings. I think both groups are acting to protect – both themselves and the researchers – and out of fear, for real or imagined consequences.

And if you look at this as a microcosm of what is happening in terms of conversations about change within the sector, you can see that there is widespread fear and protectionism (being careful not to offend individual's positions), which is of course an inhibitor of change. And of course there is another inhibitor to change, the recognition that we are the only sector that will cease to exist if it performs well. A strange kind of realisation!

- EA: Absolutely, your thoughts really hit home. So, if my proposals – specifically, the strategies I've diligently advocated for, including improving the accuracy of African diaspora representation, promoting more nuanced portrayals of poverty, and fostering systemic changes within INGOs – pan out, they raise questions about my ongoing relevance and legitimacy. This could lead to an identity and purpose crisis. Your perspective highlights crucial aspects of our work's nature and its long-term impact, compelling us to rethink our mission and explore new ways to contribute. Perhaps this is an opportunity to shift focus towards addressing emerging challenges or advocating for broader systemic changes. It's a complex yet intriguing scenario that warrants careful consideration as we navigate the evolving landscape of our advocacy efforts.
- JC: One of the last questions I wanted to discuss is how pragmatic should change be? I'm really interested to hear your thoughts because I spend a lot of time with people whose main argument is to dismantle the entire INGO structure. But I wonder what we can do within the existing system. This necessitates compromise, which can be hard, but my work often focuses on what you can do to create change while acknowledging the systemic flaws. What do you think about this idea of pragmatism?
- EA: Navigating the practical side of things can be pretty challenging. I find myself wrestling with putting reflections into actual strategies that INGOs can use, given all the complexities they face. Sometimes, my focus on research can overshadow the real-world challenges INGOs deal with. I'm all about pushing for real change based on solid insights, but INGOs often prioritise immediate needs over long-term goals. The feedback I get often points to this gap between theory and what's doable on the ground. INGOs struggle to turn ideas into action within their setup, which shows how diaspora issues sometimes take a backseat in the grand scheme of things. It's a tough balancing act, trying to blend big-picture ideas with the practical realities INGOs face every day.
- JC: It is ... I wonder if it would help to think about how we as a sector are educators. This isn't the way that a lot of INGOs think of themselves – but while we are engaging audiences and asking them for their actions, we are also inadvertently educating them about the people and locations which feature in the stories. Recognising this means that you can then move your strategic objectives from being audience led (responding to what existing audiences say they want, or show you they want with their actions, which inevitably leads to a repetition of what has come before), to being audience leading (showing them something new in a way that is engaging, as you would do when educating anyone). This shift necessitates the seeking out of diverse opinions from the two groups we are working with, as it means also recognising that they too are part of your audience base.
- EA: Looking closely at grassroots levels, especially within UK diaspora groups, INGOs must prioritise shifting power in their visual messages. It's not just about the emotional impact on these communities but also the financial effects on INGO support. My research reveals a link between dissatisfaction with portrayals and decreased financial backing. Some prefer private remittances over supporting INGOs like Save the Children or Oxfam due to problematic campaigns. Participants often express feeling dehumanised or misunderstood, leading to hesitance in financial support. In contrast, remittances offer control, letting them decide where funds go and tracking impact closely. This emphasises the need to correct misrepresentations for genuine community engagement and support.

## What's next?

### Edward

In the realm of international development communication, the persistent marginalisation of Black African diaspora communities presents a profound challenge. This marginalisation is deeply rooted in a legacy of colonialism, entrenched discriminatory practices, and systemic barriers that inhibit genuine representation and equitable participation (Ademolu 2023; Dillon 2021). While

initiatives have made strides in amplifying the voices of continental Africans in fundraising campaigns, diaspora communities remain conspicuously underserved. Their experiences are often either omitted or trivialised in communications aimed at UK audiences. To rectify this, it is imperative to centre diaspora perspectives, dismantle entrenched stereotypes, and implement more inclusive strategies.

Despite not being the direct subjects of fundraising campaigns, African diasporic communities in the UK endure significant psycho-social repercussions (Young 2012). They grapple with a complex interplay of emotional and identity-related challenges when confronted with depictions of African crises, which often fail to reflect their lived realities. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort to diversify representation within decision-making bodies and effect transformative changes in institutional power dynamics. Implementing inclusive decision-making processes and cultural competency training is crucial for fostering understanding, recognising biases, and promoting respectful communication.

Engagement with diaspora communities is crucial for crafting narratives that genuinely reflect their experiences. Such collaborations empower these communities as key stakeholders, facilitating more meaningful engagement and driving impactful outcomes. Ongoing feedback from these communities ensures that development communication is both resonant and responsive to their needs.

The involvement of scholars, especially those with African diaspora heritage, is crucial in this discourse. They bring invaluable insights into the cultural, historical, and socio-economic dynamics that inform the portrayal of Africa and its diaspora. Their contributions challenge reductive stereotypes and provide a nuanced perspective that may counter exploitative narratives. Such academic contributions are vital to crafting stories that authentically represent the complexities and contradictions of diaspora experiences.

Furthermore, academic partnerships bring critical analytical frameworks and methodological expertise to development communications. Researchers from African diaspora backgrounds are instrumental in identifying and addressing gaps and biases within current narratives. Their contribution is more than a matter of adding diverse perspectives; it is fundamental to establishing evidence-based communication strategies. Integrating these crucial insights allows INGOs to develop strategies that are both more effective and ethically responsible, resonating deeply with diaspora communities.

The African diaspora's experiences are unique, necessitating a distinct focus that acknowledges their particular historical and socio-political narratives (Dillon 2021). The portrayal of African migrants and the continent's humanitarian crises in media and campaigns often prioritises emotive imagery over a deeper understanding of the systemic issues at play. This approach can inadvertently perpetuate a singular narrative that centres on suffering and overlooks the complexities of the African diaspora's experiences (see e.g. Ademolu 2023; Dillon 2021; Opoku-Owusu 2003; Wambu 2006; Young 2012). A more nuanced representation would consider the diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contributions of these communities, moving beyond the trope of the "suffering African" to a more empowered and multifaceted portrayal. By doing so, it would not only address the immediate needs but also foster a broader understanding and advocacy that could be extended to other diaspora communities, promoting a more inclusive and accurate representation in the global narrative.

It is essential to highlight the transformative power of accurate and dignified portrayals in humanitarian crises. Such portrayals have a profound impact on diaspora minority groups, particularly in fundraising nations. They serve to dismantle stereotypes and counteract the dehumanisation of those affected, instilling a genuine sense of representation within the diaspora (Ademolu 2021; Dillon 2021; Flores and Malik 2015). By presenting crises with the necessary dignity and complexity, INGOs not only enhance their own credibility but also foster deeper, more meaningful support from these communities.

There is a clear synergy between the enhancement of representation practices and the aspirations of diaspora minority groups. Campaigns that incorporate nuanced and respectful depictions resonate with the diaspora, bolstering the credibility of INGOs and encouraging greater involvement

from these communities (Flores and Malik 2015). Such accurate portrayals enable diaspora members to view their countries of origin in a more balanced light, promoting unity and strengthening their engagement with the cause. This synergy extends beyond financial contributions; it amplifies advocacy efforts and mirrors the diaspora's quest for authentic and respectful interaction. By focusing on these aspects, the unique concerns and contributions of the African diaspora are brought to the forefront, ensuring their integral role in shaping narratives and driving change in humanitarian efforts.

Disparities between the portrayal in fundraising campaigns and the actual experiences of diaspora communities may lead to strain. Highlighting only the most severe cases of poverty and hardship fails to represent the diverse experiences of these communities, potentially causing feelings of alienation and annoyance. When the stories shared by organisations do not align with the values of the diaspora, it can give rise to concerns over exploitation and inaccurate representation. To mitigate these issues, it is crucial for INGOs to maintain ongoing conversations with members of diaspora communities and incorporate their insights into fundraising approaches (Ademolu 2023; Dillon 2021; Flores and Malik 2015). This inclusive approach not only prevents exploitation and misrepresentation but also fosters a genuine connection, ensuring that advocacy and fundraising efforts are both respectful and impactful. By integrating this feedback, INGOs can create strategies that truly resonate with the diaspora's multifaceted reality, promoting a more accurate and empowering representation.

To genuinely progress and drive meaningful change in representational practices, INGOs must elevate African diaspora audiences from their secondary status in communication strategies. Addressing pressing concerns like racial identity, cultural sensitivity, and authentic representation with urgency is imperative. A failure to act decisively not only undermines the integrity of these representations but also harms the psycho-social well-being of diaspora communities. Adopting this proactive approach is essential for fostering significant and transformative shifts in power dynamics within the development sector.

### **Jess**

I would suggest that the process of unpicking the narrative humanitarian imaginary requires dismantling and remaking the core roles of maker, audience and subject. For the makers, this means relinquishing not just power but also the assumption of greater knowledge. This can be destabilising in the way that we discuss in our conversation; nobody wants to be made redundant, but creativity and change lie in the recognition that there are multiple forms of expertise and finding ways to bring these together.

Audiences need reinvestigating – seeking out and listening to new groups in the way that Edward describes, as well finding out new information about existing audiences. Amref Health Africa recently carried out a test in partnership with me and another researcher to see how their audiences responded to fundraising appeals created by people with lived experience. The test was a blind A/B with an audience split of 50/50 – one half received a “control”, an appeal created by Amref in their house style, the other received the participant-created “test”. The results were that the test raised more money – only a little, but still more. But what was more interesting was what the donors told us after they had donated: “it’s good to see the old paternalistic model of charitable donation give way to a realisation that Africans are capable of making their own decisions about how to help their community” (Crombie and Girling 2022, 25). This surprising and pleasing response shows an appetite for change from existing supporter bases.

And for the people in the stories, this means being fully involved in decision-making, truly heard, and never rendered an object. In one of my studies, participants from Niger shared this Hausa proverb: “a song sounds sweeter from the author’s mouth” (Warrington and Crombie 2017, 60). It serves as a helpful reminder that being involved in sharing your experiences isn’t just about a singing your song; more fundamentally, it’s about also being able to author that song and therefore control your own narrative.



## Closing statement

Our dialogue stresses the imperative for INGOs to undergo substantial shifts in their representational practices. The research outlined in this article demonstrates that humanitarian and development narratives have impacts outside of their creators' intentions. They do more than just raise money and engagement: they mould perceptions, affect funding, and shape societal attitudes. They also impact how groups of people see themselves in the world, and how they are viewed by others. These are not mere stories; they have power.

If we are to shift power in any meaningful sense, we must change practice on three levels – personal, practical, and cultural. On a personal level, those who have the power to create these narratives need to recognise their power, and the impacts, so that they can do this with the care it needs and deserves. Practically, NGOs should prioritise listening to and hearing marginalised voices and experiences through meaningful, inclusive strategies that go beyond performative gestures. This means testing fundraising and communications materials with groups beyond the donor databases of these organisations, deliberately seeking out the voices of diasporic groups and humanitarian crisis-affected populations to incorporate their views, ideas, and responses. And culturally, it means acknowledging as a sector that just because there is expertise and experience, this is not the only useful knowledge in the metaphoric room, and it means relinquishing some of the decision-making power to diverse points of view.

All of this work requires challenging stereotypes, valuing diverse perspectives, and fostering empowering partnerships in development communication. These changes are not just ethically crucial but also strategically vital for INGOs to genuinely engage and impact the lives of those they serve and to be able to stand by any claim of shifting power.

## Note

1. <https://www.comicrelief.com/rednoseday/>

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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