# You Made *Africa* Boring

*towards a new vision for development*

presentation to the
British Overseas Aid group

Rive Path Associates
23 April, 1998

*How to do it without every eye glazing over as the familiar statistics sound, merry as a leper's bell?*

Gore Vidal

People remember where they were. How they felt. The music. Phil Collins getting on Concorde. Bob Geldof swearing on TV. They wore the T-shirts and went on the sponsored run (or was it a walk?).

Live Aid was a wave of popular action with its own theme tune. The aid agencies rode that wave. All the way to the shore.

Now it's time to wade back in and catch a new one.

*If we transported today's Oxfam – lock, stock and barrel, to the year 2008,*
*it would shrivel like cellophane in a furnace*
*in the new environment.*

The Review, Oxfam

But aid agencies are nervous. The years of rapid growth are tailing off. Attempts to blame the public (*sofa slobs*! *compassion fatigue*!) don't cut it. It's the agencies that need to change.

So where is the new vision? Who's got the new ideas? The whole development-aid-poverty-sustainable-Third World-mishmash needs freshening up.

As Oxfam bluntly puts it: "why should people support us, rather than a donkey sanctuary?"

## Canute

*One could reasonably expect the chairman of AT&T to know*
*what his corporation will be in ten years from now. He doesn't.*
*One could, within reason, expect the chairman of AT&T to be able*
*to predict how technology will transform his business a decade hence. He can't.*
*At the least, he should know who his major competitors will be in 2005. Stumped again.*
*But here is what he does know: something startling, intriguing, and profound is afoot.*

Robert Allen, Chairman, AT&T

*There will be two types of CEOs who will exist in the next five years:*
*those who think globally and those who are unemployed.*

Peter Drucker, management theorist

The world is changing – quickly.

Technology is driving a whole new way of working and living. Already, pundits hail the 'death of distance' and there is little sign of the process slowing. In just ten years, Intel expects to produce computer chips 1000 times as powerful (at 1/10th the cost) as those used today.

You might expect aid agencies to embrace the process. After all, it is our interest in this changing world that has helped them (and the environmentalists) thrive in recent times. While the St. John's Ambulance has lost nearly half its membership, the income of Oxfam has roughly tripled. Geoff Mulgan and Charles Landry of Demos note the internationalisation of the charitable sector:

> The overseas aid charities have been amongst the most successful in recent years. Across the world, non-government organisations have steadily grown in stature, with a leading role in development agencies, in the Rio conference and in initiatives like Local Agenda 21…an embryonic global civil society is taking form around issues like the environment, human, or women's rights, just as it has long existed around the major religions.[1]

But, at the moment, our charities make reluctant internationalists. A recent IT trade deal, comments CAFOD, ensures that countries without advanced IT industries 'will probably *never* be able to compete'. Opposing arguments are not given the time of day, like *The Economist*'s line:

> In 1996, 5.8 billion people made do with a mere 745 million telephone lines. Most of those are in the rich world: 80% of the world's people share only 30% of its telephone lines. Over the next quarter century, that will change, as most developing countries take advantage of new ways to provide telephones at lower cost. The countries of the developed world will thus lose one of their comparative advantages over the less developed countries: vastly better communications.

Millennial angst is in ("it's the end of the world", "we're all going to die – unpleasantly") and guilt is still the main driver. On the extreme wing sits an unholy alliance, as socialist worker meets year zero pastoralist. "They'd be much happier if you left them alone," as one NGO activist recently harangued an EU development worker. "They don't want your money. They don't want your television. They just want to get back to the forest to live traditional lives."

Yeah, right.

---

[1] Geoff Mulgan and Charles Landry, *The Other Invisible Hand: Remaking Charity for the 21st Century*, 1997, Demos, London

## **You think we're stupid** – *don't you?*

*Our market research told us that our supporters are less pure than us.*

BOAG charity worker

*The battle is over.*
*In the 1970s hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death.*

Paul R. Elrich, The Population Bomb

Frankly, to outsiders, the agonising within development is all quite bizarre.

We're happy with development and think it works.

We've been told that access to safe water doubled in the last 30 years, that more food is being grown for more people, that basic immunisation saved 3 million children's lives in the past 20 years and that, today, more people live in democracies than ever before.

And when we hear the bad stuff – that 17 million people die each year from infectious and parasitic diseases (people *die* of diarrhoea!); that 500 million people are chronically under-nourished or 900 million illiterate – we think something should be done.

So we get quite enthusiastic when DFID signs up to halving poverty in the next 20 years (leaving DFID's own civil servant to mock this aim in public session). We're impressed when James Wolfensohn blasts into the World Bank, convinced that change is possible (though this just seems to depress his staff). And we respond well when a Museveni or a Mandela starts making things happen (sorry Pilger, we just don't believe Nelson is as bad as Botha).

But, as you know (as your own research tells you) we're stupid – and getting worse. Oxfam found that "in an increasingly globalised world, people will use the choice which that brings to learn and know less about the world". Meanwhile, CAFOD must reluctantly deal with people looking forward to the millennium, that "commercialised celebration of complacency".

Which is presumably why we're treated to messages that are so grim.

We get a confused narrative ("disaster is not the issue…look, a disaster!") based on an outmoded political world view ("capitalism = bad, equality = good"), using emotional blackmail ("look at this poor starving wretch *and it's your fault*, you rich fat wretch"), absurdly impossible statistics ("in the developing world one child dies every 2.4 seconds – or is it 2.4 children dying every one second?"), complete with painfully patronising pseudo-attitudinal questionnaires ("it can cost Oxfam as little as £2 a month, over a year, to help villagers build wells to provide a clean, safe water supply for 12 people. Do you think this is expensive/about what you'd expect/good value for money?") and a free pen (we'd never have found one ourselves).

And it comes on cheap and nasty media ("one hundred per cent recycled with an old-fashioned typewriter font", "sender: Prunella Scales, supporter, *in her own handwriting*"), at a high volume (four to six a month) and goes on. At great length.

Worst of all, for some reason we can't fathom, every other line is underlined for emphasis
**or put in bold like the writings of a mad obsessive.**

## **The global** *mix*

*Look at how a public message on aid could be made more persuasive and less contradictory.*

Our brief

A parlour game: what political party best characterises the development community in this country? The Conservatives? LibDems? Old Labour? New Labour? The Socialist Workers' Party?

They used to say: "no-one ever got fired for buying IBM". Just as true today is the slogan: "a communicator will prosper by copying the Labour Party".

So what did Labour do?

Crucially, they tried to understand the basic needs and aspirations of their constituents – and work with them. They thought about what people liked about them – and played that up – while sorting and binning a lot of baggage (or taking it down the charity shop).

They agreed on simple messages and told them clearly. And – when they weren't sure – they undersold (and hoped to over-deliver).

So how might the aid agencies follow?

First, by realising that we don't want to be told that we're going down the pan, come what may. There are people much better skilled at painting the world as a frightening and alien place (come on down, Michael Portillo).

We also don't want to hear about the shrinking perspective of the UK as a global player, just when we've stopped feeling embarrassed about being British. We don't want to boorishly claim we're the best ("Britons never ever shall be slaves" – it's such a *silly* song) – but we do think our culture can hack it out there in the global melting pot.

So what *do* we want?

Well, we're beginning to hear phrases like "the emerging global civic society"[2] – and, although we're not quite sure quite what that means, it sounds interesting. It seems to follow on from another slogan "think global, act local". That resonated because it recognised that we now identify with the world, as well as down the street.

We feel the urge to belong, to participate, to achieve change – and we expect the aid agencies to help us do this. This is part of a wider need: to build involvement – if not directly, then in terms of a *vision*. A vision of a world that works.

And we want people to make connections. To speak to us through our businesses – which trade with the developing world, or with someone who does. Or as we set off on our holidays (tourism: 6% of world GNP – and yes, we know there are problems).

We've started branding Britain to the world. Now, we want you to *brand the world back to us*.

---

[2] Our brief

*How can we move from cynicism, distrust and distance,*
*to risk-taking and involvement [when] there is so much baggage?*
*There is a need, somehow, to break through this glass wall,*
*to get this enthusiasm, change and commitment.*

James Wolfensohn

OK, so we're going to brand the world to Britain.

But what does that mean?

Or more precisely – what does it mean for aid agencies? What might they do to get the ball rolling?

First off, BOAG needs to recognise its limitations. Hugh Raven found little enthusiasm for a BOAG campaign to raise development awareness – and understandable concern that such campaigns dilute distinctiveness for little gain.

BOAG must concentrate on being midwife – not mother – to the emerging new vision of aid. It can help create a better understanding of the issues. It can facilitate a consensus about the way forward.

And it can ensure that all ideas – however bold and attractive – are pinned down by intelligent, carefully designed research into audience attitudes.

*There is always something new from Africa.*

Pliny

River Path have looked at developing BOAG's existing backroom role.

We think it needs to **make friends** (taking some of the fight out of development), **take chances** (to prosper on today's issues), **tell stories** (and embrace complexity), **be robust** (in defending its patch) and **be a champion** (because the developing world ain't boring).

## **Make** *friends*

*The lobby is schizophrenic. It demands more while pouring scorn on what is already done…*
*The public, who after all are the voting taxpayers,*
*are served up a very difficult diet to stomach.*

Richard Sandbrook

Save The Children, ActionAid, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Oxfam.

These are strong and valuable brands. Communications specialists in each organisation need to concentrate, as the Oxfam review puts it, on being *distinct*, rather than *extinct*. Instead of asking "why are we failing?", agencies must find out what makes them popular and build on their strengths.

BOAG, meanwhile, must act decisively to counter the virus of division that so afflicts the development lobby. As the Labour Party discovered, the public hates squabbling and the atmosphere of negativity it creates. A modern mandate for development will only emerge as different organisations accept their niche and work together along a broad front.

Relations between the NGOs and official aid providers need to be improved quickly. Fortunately, the atmosphere is currently propitious. The World Bank and DFID have charismatic new heads – and both are struggling to reform their own organisations, while building public support for their work. They start from a low base. The publication of the recent DFID survey made grim reading – hardly anyone has heard of the department and 70% of people have no idea what Clare Short does.

The fact that the results were published, however, sets an interesting precedent and is matched by moves towards greater openness at the World Bank. Also exposed were charities which, "with the exception of Comic Relief, also came out badly even though people did not begrudge giving them cash. Many feared the money didn't reach the people it was meant to help."[3] As to government, "nearly 80% of people think the government does too little to explain the money it spends on aid."

As yet, DFID is making slow progress. The White Paper and the department's elevation to cabinet status were both major communication opportunities – disastrously fluffed. Similarly, the World Bank has, as yet, proved reluctant to explain its remit more widely in this country – concentrating instead on old-style lobbying.

There are green shoots, however. In Richard Calvert, DFID has a younger head of information, with direct access to Clare Short's team and few of the negative impulses of the traditional government information officer. Similarly, Andrew Rogerson has now had a year in post and – Washington willing – should be ready to start increasing Bank profile. BOAG need to help establish a much clearer agenda, one that all development organisations can agree to and support (DFID, for instance, sets targets for poverty – what about working towards agreed targets for public support over the next five years?).

---

[3] *The Guardian*, 3 January 1998

Division is not just a problem externally. It is also rife within organisations – with the cognoscenti spending much of their time gossiping about the latest civil war (usually fought, no holds barred, between marketing and policy functions).

Again, there is a role here for BOAG. Modern organisations no longer create a product (policy or whatever) first, then decide what they want to say about it and finally who to say it to. Instead, they aim to communicate *strategically*, to face outwards to the world and ensure that communication is embedded in all stages of the process. Flatter structures result – with once separate product (or policy) and marketing functions at work in cross-disciplinary teams.

To be sure, BOAG's communication professionals already understand this trend and appreciate its implications. The problem, however, is seldom with the *specialists* – it lies in awakening generalists to the challenges of the communication revolution. (Representative of an organisation with a public remit at a recent conference: "if we need to spend £100 on getting a PR company to write our press releases, then 'why not?'").

Dissemination becomes crucial. Don Redding's report on the challenges offered by new media makes some excellent and persuasive points, but even the following "in short" paragraph needs translation – by someone with a flair for the demotic – if the underlying message is to achieve wider circulation:

> In short, development agencies who seek to communicate via the media will not be immune to the deepening and widening consumer culture which determines the content of all the new information and entertainment services on offer, and will themselves have to adapt to become consumer-friendly, even consumer-led organisations, at least in the way they organise and conduct their communications functions.

Similarly, it is the direct quotations that Hugh Raven's report provides, from the 132 interviews he conducted for *Future Imperfect,* that give the general reader the strongest flavour of the points he is making – and perhaps also explain why the report is still unpublished after so long.

## **Take** *chances*

*Even where programmes on developing countries are commissioned, there may be minimal or no agency input, as with the spate of programming on TV and radio around India's 50th anniversary of Independence this year.*

Don Redding

As we have argued, the creation of DFID was a missed opportunity for the department – but it also showed the *sector's* inability to capitalise on major media opportunities. Instead of taking its moment in the spotlight to make the case for development (or, as we would put it, to brand the world back to Britain), the day's coverage was dominated by a small NGO trying to change British policy in Guyana.

There were other lost opportunities that day, too:

- drawing attention to and supporting the poverty target (BOAG does believe in this doesn't it?)
- underlining the commitment to spend progressively more money
- explaining how government and charitable work are complementary
- showcasing some cutting edge work that is really making a difference

BOAG must help its agencies hang much more on the big pegs – as well as help to shape and define the opportunity from the *public's* perspective. (An activist recently boasted that the forthcoming – and much delayed – C4 documentary on the World Bank utterly discredited the Bank and made its staff look "foolish, misguided and pompous". Another hit for development).

Top of BOAG's new list of forthcoming opportunities must surely be the millennium. CAFOD is currently dismissive ("for some, it will just be a time for parties and exhibitions") when, in fact, it is inconceivable that *anyone* in the UK is living through the last months of this millennium without sometimes thinking about what the future holds. And even church-goers are likely to party, too. Doubtless, many of the plans for Jubilee 2000 are already laid. It is essential, however, that BOAG helps re-think the prevailing tone – otherwise the aid charities will be stranded looking humourless, dour and dull.

Complementary to a programme of planned *reaction* to big events should be a *proactive* programme through which BOAG helps agencies re-discover just how much they have to say. ECA International, for instance, was a little known research organisation specialising in providing statistics for corporate human resources managers. It employed PR agency Larkspur Communications[4] and is now regularly used as a source by journalists for everything from FT Country Surveys to soft consumer stories – rivalling more established organisations like the Economist Intelligence Unit.

[4] Contact Victoria Collis – victoria@larkspur.co.uk

A major obstacle to what one communication professional calls "communicating from every pore" is the fact that aid agencies currently have weak internal communication systems. Raven interviewed an ODA (now DFID) official who did not know any ODA projects, while Don Redding makes it clear this is more than a one-off:

> From head office level in the UK…stories are often as unknown and inaccessible to the agency as they are to the producer. And because programme beneficiaries are often seen in category terms – 'the displaced', 'child labourers', 'rural women' – agencies can find it difficult to relate their personal stories as rounded people.

A better understanding of what is happening on the ground must accompany the trend towards more rigorous evaluation. Again, dissemination is the key – it is no good knowing that something works if these lessons are not broadcast to the widest audience.

Hugh Raven identifies the quality of the aid agencies' existing communications as an important problem. He recommends that BOAG "should therefore re-visit their work on providing a balanced vision of aid and development, including through setting standards in advertising for funds." We are, however, somewhat sceptical about the viability of a 'legislative' approach to better communication. Certainly, higher standards are needed – but a general move towards 'quality' will not be achieved by, say, outlawing photos of helpless babies. Again, BOAG could act to bring voluntary sector organisations into contact with the best modern day communication practice. It should also consider using focus groups to give all levels of an organisation a direct sense of how they come across to the world.

Recently, a draft leaflet for a major government consultation was circulated to a couple of hundred 'interested parties'. Unfortunately, no-one thought of asking *any* member of the target audience what they felt – until it was too late. Even though uniformly hostile comments were returned ("same old ideas being aired", "patronising", "creepy", "nothing of any value is ever decided by courting opinion in this spurious fashion", "re-think the whole thing"), it was decided that changes were not possible within the time-scale. So the "creepy" leaflet went out, unchanged.

Research is essential – but it must be practical. It's not people's *opinions* that are interesting – but how they will react when they meet development communications in the field. So focus groups need to look at past communications, and mock-ups of future possibilities. The reactions should then be widely reported.

Playing catch-up with today's more brash, colourful and disrespectful style cannot be done without challenging traditional risk-averse attitudes. The energies and enthusiasms of younger artists, designers and communicators must be employed. Organisations should also make use of an untapped resource – their own often quite junior people who, through club culture for example, have direct experience of the emerging communication world. Their input must be sought – and valued.

Celebrities, too, have a role – but it is time for charities to start seeking out younger, less complacent role models. The Teacher Training Agency recently used Skin (from Skunk Anansie) – where are the development documentaries fronted by Tricky or Boy George?

There is also the need to set realistic budgets and to recognise that communication is no longer the 'icing' on the 'cake' – it is a major ingredient. "Marketing on the cheap" is undoubtedly a false economy.

## **Tell** *stories*

*There is no longer any such thing as fiction or non-fiction; there's only narrative.*

E. L. Doctorow, U.S. novelist

*Branding the world* means taking a rigorous look at the narrative of development, with its third person, abstract, emotionally neutral verbiage cluttered with jargon and passive sentences. Currently, instead of real communication, we get a series of clichéd (and lazy) tones. We hear a hushed tone (appropriate to a tragedy), then a strident one (appropriate to a crisis), then a patronising one (appropriate to another age), then a matronising one (appropriate for tidying up rooms, not planets), then a matey one (appropriate to mates), then a jokey one (appropriate if the joke is any good).

If the development narrative has one over-arching fault, it is its simplicity. As Alex de Waal of African Rights, says:

> They tend to go for a very simple script which is: 'Here is a starving victim, here is a villain. The villain is an optional extra. Sometimes the weather is the villain. And here is an outside saviour coming in to save the victim.' And this is actually akin to a fairy tale, because it never actually happens like that in reality.

What we are seeing is a shadow of behaviour often found in corporate communications. While many companies come unstuck trying to present all news as good news (uniform white), aid agencies think the public can only understand an unadulterated bad news narrative (uniform black). But as communication specialists Jon White and Laura Mazur write:

> Energy spent contriving to present an upbeat image rarely works backward into corporate reality. Instead the opposite seems to be true: reality seeps out into the image. Unpalatable truths can be hidden or smothered for a time, but not for very long; reality has a nasty habit of popping up.[5]

Strong narratives are born from the realisation that *people like complexity,* and that the difference between a story and a scenario is that a story has depth – it is *never as simple as it seems*. The secret is to:

> Take stock characters and give them depth…
>
> Tell us something new…
>
> Contain complexity *within* the narrative…

There is also a need (and an opportunity) to generate *different* narratives for different audiences – tech for techies, health for fanatics, peri-natal problems for expectant mothers, sport for hearties, art for arties, business for business, music for musos etc.

Narratives are a tremendous leveller. They will be read as keenly by a 5 year old child as a 50 year old professor. They open up whole new audiences – lifestyle and women's magazines, the

---

[5] Jon White and Laura Mazur, *Strategic Communications Management*, 1995, Economist Intelligence Unit, London

Daily Mail[6] Saturday magazine, the Mirror, the Sun – offering a place for modern society to convey, to itself, the dramas of life, death, passion, suffering, hope, charity, faith etc.

Again, BOAG needs to champion narrative throughout the development community and to convince the instinctively elitist developmentalist that the majority audience is worth reaching. Don Redding again:

> The minds of development agency staff tend to glaze over when this soft end of television is mentioned…but at its best lifestyle programming is about 'us' not just in the selfish sense, but also about how we live our lives, make our choices, face our challenges and responsibilities – in other words, about values. And it often generates compassion values.

It needs to work at the "visual narrative" too. For 100 years, the look has remained the same – the colour and vibrancy of Asia, Africa or Latin America is but a backdrop to the true story of pain, misery, blight and Western hideousness which we're (personally) to blame for. Cecil Beaton's famous photographs for the Ministry of Information, done in 1944, would not look out of place today – other than by the fact that they are better than many modern offerings.

Finally, there is work to be done explaining that 'new' narratives don't stay fresh that long. Sure, Live Aid was exciting – but that was years ago. Its successors now seem dull and tired. Instead of starting willy-nilly to campaign on the latest issue of the day (say global taxation or carbon sequestration), BOAG would do well to act early to deepen the debate and bring in opposing views. Then when the issue does go live, it will be able to speak in a rich, experienced, well-rounded voice -– rather than the indignant treble the public is used to.

[6] Biggest ABC1 circulation.

## **Be** *robust*

The danger, for organisations questioning their meaning and purpose, is that they become timid – and timidity is the sign of terminal decline.

A perfect example is development's increasingly sniffy attitude towards disaster:

> Disasters and stories of personal tragedies usually bring in the most money, but this approach…perpetuates stereotypes of developing world incompetence.[7]

The laziness of the "let's tone down the disaster" rap is staggering. A more rounded picture of the developing world *is* essential, but to stop tapping into one of the richest veins of cultural memory we have (Biblical deluge, European wars, the Black Death, potato famine, the great flu epidemic) is absurd.

*Everyone* understands that natural disasters happen, and that war brings misery – that's why they hurry to donate. Is BOAG about to start telling them their efforts aren't worth it?

Obviously, the disaster narrative itself needs refreshing, with greater attention to character, plot and detail. The following was excised from *uk@earth.people* as politically incorrect. It may have been – but it certainly brought abstract events alive.

> In April 1994 the world watched the largest and fastest refugee exodus it had ever seen: over a quarter of a million Rwandans flooded into Tanzania's Ngara region in 24 hours. To put this in perspective, imagine over half of Liverpool turning up on your doorstep overnight (with the rest following). Or look at it this way: by the time over 550,000 refugees had arrived in the region, Tanzania was dealing with a group of people equivalent to well over a third of the population of its capital city, Dar Es Salaam. Imagine over 2 million Londoners turning up in Yorkshire – to stay.

As BOAG helps agencies draw together clear communication objectives, it should also help them be robust about follow through. Clearly there are many areas where trouble is possible. Charity shops, for example, will come under increasing attack over the next few years – with shopkeepers challenging their tax breaks and town planners carping against their down-beat image. BOAG should prepare for the crisis – by finding out (and publicising) the positive impact that the second-hand trade and volunteering has on local communities. It should also try to make individual shops more independent, by tackling volunteers' low morale and encouraging diversity within a corporate framework – thus allowing shops to be both 'smart' and relevant to their own communities.

Corruption is another good example. It has tainted foreign aid for a long time – and people know it. It is one reason that attitudes to aid have soured. However, finally, the "C" word is beginning to be used, by James Wolfensohn and the Nigerian Finance Minister among others – although it is still rarely addressed by the charities in public communications. We all suspect that new wells sometimes go straight to the local strong-men and the cash onto Imelda's feet – just *pretending* it doesn't is no good. Again, the agencies need to work from the belief that the public can take the truth. Yes, there's a problem. Yes, we're trying to tackle it. No, we can't claim to have it sorted (yet).

---

[7] Foy, C., and Helmich, H., (eds.), Public Support for International Development, OECD, 1996

Perhaps the most interesting area where conflicting interests must be brought into a productive dynamic is in relationship between NGOs and businesses. There are fundamental problems to be dealt with.

As Hugh Raven points out, it is hard for the average NGO activist (one stop from sainthood) to consort with the average businessman (Beezelbub's brother): "the idealism and commitment to social justice of voluntary aid and development agencies is understandably offended by the amorality and self-interest of business". But, as he goes on to note, this "probably contrasts with the views of BOAG supporters, and certainly seems to conflict with public opinion, which in BOAG's polling put multinational corporations narrowly third behind the UN and Third World Governments (and well ahead of Northern Governments) as groups which can make the most difference to Third World poverty."[8]

Certainly, for the purposes of any campaign that has *branding the world* at its heart, the public's attitude seems the more realistic one. BOAG, therefore, has to work hard to foster better relationships through seminars and conferences on areas of mutual interest (and with speakers from both sides). A carefully planned, imaginatively designed and closely monitored programme of swaps at middle and senior levels between multi-national businesses and aid agencies (and between official agencies and charitable ones) might be useful. Stereotypes need to be broken down – as recent work by Ashridge Management Centre[9] showed. Whereas business people were seen as being "out for themselves, eager to take over and quick to judge when things go wrong"; voluntary organisations were said to be "obsessed with involving people at the expense of deadlines and targets."

Coke, Levis and other big brands are, *potentially*, ideal partners. They have money, reach, credibility – and are sophisticated enough to recognise the advantages in working together. In some cases – e.g. Levi's – they already have an impressive track record. But mutual suspicion and incomprehension do not help.

Such partnerships can take years to develop, and initial contacts would probably only follow a development phase as internal guidelines were worked out. Time to start.

---

[8] Gallup poll on third world poverty for BOAG, July 1994

[9] Financial Times, May 1st

## **Be a** *champion*

While its constituent organisations need to focus on their individual niches, BOAG can take the time to consider a wider perspective. While agencies do valuable work *branding the world* in the foreground, it could exert a considerable background influence.

Firstly, it should consider that developing countries have growing resources to make their own case – both through stronger governments and the coming of age of the southern NGO. The image of Africa, in particular, needs to be developed and deepened. BOAG could work closely with embassies, the Commonwealth secretariat and so on to help *brand* countries – with BOAG communication specialists offering their expertise at seminars and the like. It could also determine which countries have professional communicators acting for them in this country, and provide a forum for exploiting synergies between what are, at the moment, diverse initiatives.

Development agencies spend a lot of money sending people out to the developing world. A few more tickets the other way would not go amiss. Intelligent media planning could get a lot out of a visit by Museveni or "a key players team" from Southern Africa, for instance. Less high profile visits by southern NGOs would be useful too – though they would need to have general communication goals, and be prepared to exploit human interest and soft news angles. One suspects that, at the moment, most such trips are planned around lobbying *against* something.

Fair Trade is important here – not for its moral charge – but for the messages it carries about developing countries. Ethnic tat has had its day. Its dominance in the fair trade sector peddles the lie that developing countries don't have anything interesting to sell. Meanwhile, it encourages highly-skilled artisans to persist in making products for which there is a dwindling market, when they could be adapting those skills to generate new designs – and new business.

Instead of thinking we all want brass elephants and wooden incense holders, marketing professionals should be looking to build a stylish and modern collection which sells on its virtues, not its charity-factor (which should simply be the icing on the cake). This means clean design. Punchy copy. And no more throws from hell.

BOAG could also be at the forefront of initiatives to give UK volunteers a better deal. Volunteering should be presented as a *job* – albeit unpaid – not as a second class role stuffing envelopes. The cover picture on one BOAG volunteering leaflet is stunningly off-putting. In a modern world, and with plenty of employment around, a new message is needed. Contracts. The same rights and responsibilities as other workers etc. Unpaid holidays. Above all, challenging and satisfying work. By raising the status of volunteering, BOAG agencies would raise their own status.

Ultimately, BOAG could find itself championing a dialogue. Volunteering is at the core of strong communities in the UK, and BOAG should be promoting its work as a way of building and maintaining UK social capital. (Why, for instance, do Wimborne's churches only hear from CAFOD or Christian Aid once a year?). Equally, much of the best development work is about using participation to create strong societies in developing countries – societies in which people speak for themselves.

A further global dialogue would explore, using creative research, links *within* generations. From music and clothes to haircuts and wider aspirations, the young man or woman in Harare has increasing amounts *in common* with the equivalent Londoner. Above all, they have in common *the future*.

Dialogue is also needed *between* generations – there are younger people in developing countries with very different ideals to their parents. There is also a pressing need to bring Britain's ethnic minorities into the debate (or don't they have anything to say?).

It's time to get the world talking.

## $G^g$ – *the Global Group*

The exciting thing about BOAG is the extent to which it can act as a forum to promote change in its constituent organisations – and in the development community as a whole.

Just as BOAG (presumably) replaced the Disasters Emergency Committee, so we could lose the "British" and the "Overseas" (awfully old-fashioned but not very tasty), gain a bit of environmental presence (e.g. WWF) and *get global*. $G^g$, the Global Group, could act as a knowledge broker, mixing policy and communication expertise into a powerful and energising brew.

In time, $G^g$ might develop into a source of informed, intelligent and authoritative comment to the media on the issues of the day. We like familiar spokespersons – look at that absurd man with the clotted vowels from the MoD during the Falklands War – and grow to trust them. But for the moment, backroom activity should be prioritised.

## **It's not glamorous** – *but someone's got to do it.*

# **River Path** *Associates*

*Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.*

Albert Einstein

Most large organisations are already changing – but public perceptions lag behind. The task is to reconnect people to their institutions – to keep in touch.

The solutions vary, but share a common theme: change the signals.

**River Path Associates** is a strategic communication consultancy. Our commitment is to communications that work. We *specialise* in bringing intelligent creativity – based on thorough understanding – to complex issues.

**Jane Austen-Smith***, Business Manager*. She specialises in all aspects of project and business co-ordination, with an emphasis on organisational, administrational and linguistic skills. Jane has a wide range of experience from retail, technical and industrial & commercial industries.

**David Broadbent,** *Design Associate.* With a background in multi-media, David is responsible for in-house design, presentations and other graphical work.

**Mick Fealty**, *Research Associate.* A background in youth and community work in inner city Belfast, combined with extensive experience in language work and the arts. Also edits theatre magazine and teaches adults the Irish language. Specialises in qualitative research interviews.

**Ryan Haigh***, Design Assistant*. He's an accomplished graphic designer, map maker and web designer. At River Path, he is helping develop in-house design concepts and starting the process of re-designing the website. He is also setting up a River Path digital video editing facility.

**Abi Hanson**, *Administrative Assistant.* On leaving school, spent time in Canada as an Au Pair/online bookshop administrator before returning to England to take up a post as administrator for Marriage Resource. Recently joined the River Path Team offering administrative and computer skills to complement a growing demand.

**Sam Phillips**, *Associate*. Combines a specialist background in language analysis and educational systems and processes with a wide and varied professional experience – including several months spent shadowing the full range of divisions in the Los Angeles Police Department.

**John Pollock**, *Associate*, co-founder of River Path Associates. Has worked in private, public and voluntary sectors, and for central government, that odd mix of all three. The Department of the Environment's first senior policy researcher with responsibility for the environment. Via work for the UK Biodiversity Action Plan Committee and River Path, he has become, by default, one of the few social policy analysts exploring how to communicate complex ideas to the public - and then trying to do it. From scripts for *The Bill* to acclaimed publications for the Department for International Development.

**David Steven,** *Associate*, co-founder of River Path Associates. Has a widely-based publishing, editorial and policy background in arts and communications, and has run training workshops for professionals in schools, prisons and special-needs centres in Britain and across Europe. Co-ordinates all River Path projects, in addition to undertaking policy analysis and research with a particular emphasis on scientific and technological change.

**River Path**'s key strength lies in its network of *associates*. They have a broad range of skills, and are active in areas from politics, finance and geotechnology to advertising, business and criminology (via multimedia and PR).

There are few fields in which we cannot tap *current* expertise.

River Path Associates
61a West Borough, Wimborne, Dorset, BH21 1LX
**T** 01202 849993 · **F** 01202 843911 · **E** Pathfinders@riverpath.com **W** www.riverpath.com