Beyond Charity: Helping NGOs Lead a Transformative New Public Discourse on Global Poverty and Social Justice

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> "The aid agencies are not run by fools; they are full of intelligent people severely constrained by what public opinion permits."
>
> Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It*[1]

This article looks at the role that Northern nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) can play in engaging domestic publics in efforts to eradicate mass global poverty. In doing so, it makes two assumptions about this relationship that are important to outline. First, it is assumed that what the public in Northern countries think or understand about mass global poverty is a relevant factor in alleviating or overcoming it. In other words, it is important that people in Ohio or the Scottish Highlands understand why, for example, a billion people live in absolute poverty in a world that has the physical resources to provide for all of humanity's basic needs. As long as Northern states dominate the G7, the G8, and the Bretton Woods institutions; dictate many of the terms of international trade; and consume far more than an equitable share of global resources, the social norms of these countries will directly inform global efforts against mass poverty. Further, the idea that the fight against mass global poverty is the job only of politicians and business leaders, and that the attitudes of the general public are not at all instrumental in or relevant to their decision-making, is clearly untenable. Indeed, public support for the policies that would bring transformational change is essential. As Paul Collier writes in *The Bottom Billion*, "Without an informed electorate, politicians will continue to use the bottom billion merely for photo opportunities, rather than promoting real transformation" (p. xii).

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The second assumption is that public campaigns by NGOs possess a power that discrete policy and political advocacy alone lack. Mass public action can elevate issues from the level of technical or bureaucratic policy debates (which can all too often flounder on the rocks of political fashion or ideology, departmental bureaucracy, or short-term business needs) to the level of political or business imperative.

These assumptions are accepted by most large NGOs[2] and have driven a rapid expansion in their public campaigning capacities over the last twenty years. It is now common practice for NGOs to ask the public to lend their voice or even change their behavior to help alter government or corporate policies. Campaigns such as Jubilee 2000, Make Trade Fair, and Make Poverty History are among the recent high-profile examples. Whether they are the most constructive uses of public support is one of the key issues that I will discuss below, but such campaigns do undeniably illustrate that engaging the public on a relatively grand scale is not only possible but can make headlines of events and issues that might otherwise struggle for high-level or mass attention.

The argument I make here is that in spite of their best efforts, NGOs will deliver less than they might, and will certainly fail to have the impact they say they want on mass poverty, as long as they do not focus on large-scale shifts in public norms over time. Further, there is increasing evidence that the current knowledge and techniques may be leading NGOs to do more harm than good.

The Scale of Missions and Resources

There is a vast gulf between what NGOs say they are about, how they sell that mission to the public, and what their strategies and capabilities can actually achieve. In other words, they routinely pin their ambitions far higher than they can reach, yet never acknowledge this either to the public or even to themselves. In fact, they use the scale of their ambition to attract public support, while actively maintaining a blindness to their inability to deliver their stated goals. This tendency is at best misguided and counterproductive, at worst cynical and dishonest.

That said, NGOs deliver an astonishing quantity of good into the world. They have helped countless millions of people in abject poverty and distress. They have saved more lives than can—or at least have—been counted. In recent years they have been instrumental in promoting the Millennium Development Goals and making climate change a mainstream political concern. However impressive these accomplishments are, though, NGOs have not come close to achieving

their public ambitions to "overcome poverty and suffering" (Oxfam), to ensure that "every child, even those caught up in disaster or war, can expect a basic education" (Save the Children), or to put an "end to poverty" (Christian Aid). Even putting these matters on the public agenda is a signal accomplishment, of course, but that alone is not the same as being able to achieve them.

Perhaps, though, there is a different, less critical reading of this gulf between the missions of NGOs and their ability to achieve their goals. Perhaps the missions are merely aspirational, designed to inspire, and perhaps the public is aware of that. If such is the case, it would be disingenuous to suggest that because these goals have not been achieved, the NGOs need to revisit their practices. Unfortunately, however, the NGOs themselves discount that reading. For example, ActionAid confidently says, "Eradicating poverty is not a distant dream, but one we can realistically achieve."[3] Save the Children has actually committed itself to "creating a world in which orphans and other children at risk are protected in their own communities and not put in institutions" by 2017.[4] Given that Save the Children's own research puts the number currently in institutional care at eight million worldwide, that is a remarkably ambitious goal. Taking these public declarations at face value, we must conclude that NGOs genuinely believe this scale of change is possible. Thus, they are in effect demanding transformative, systemic, and radical change—the kind that requires, among many other things, supportive publics.

To reach these publics, NGOs are prepared to spend large sums. For instance, the British Overseas Aid Group[5] (Oxfam, Save the Children, Christian Aid, ActionAid, and Catholic Overseas Development Agency) spent about £165 million on public operations in the United Kingdom in FY 2009–2010.[6] This money went to fund-raising, running over 1,000 nonprofit charity shops, supplying resources to schools, buying and generating media space, and public campaigning, most of which tells a common basic story about charity and global poverty.[7] Though this figure is still far lower, in cash terms, than the budgets of major corporations, NGOs undeniably have significant national and often global footprints. Given their scale and their efforts, these NGOs are certainly doing *something* to affect public attitudes and beliefs about global poverty.

The Missing Diagnosis

Despite the significant resources spent on public outreach, according to a 2011 report the British public understands the causes and cures of mass global poverty

no differently today than they did in 1985.[8] At the level of social norms, the report argued, most conceive of aid and development as being acts of charity. Charity, in turn, rests on the interaction between a powerful giver—be that an individual or a nation—and a grateful receiver. In this paradigm, agency lies almost exclusively with the powerful givers; the grateful receivers are simply understood as poor, needy, and without control over their own destiny. Further, "the poor" are understood as an undifferentiated group without intrinsic strength, often referred to through the shorthand of "Africa," where nothing ever changes. It is in the photos of starving children in fund-raising advertisements; in pop concerts designed to raise a few million pounds or dollars; and in nonprofit charity shops where secondhand goods are bought and sold cheaply that this paradigm of aid giving is perpetuated.

A corollary to this paradigm is that radical or transformative political, corporate, or social change is beyond reach. Charity operates within an understanding of the world as it currently is, and does not reach into realms of radical or systemic change. In other words, "charity" is too small a frame; it fundamentally restricts the scale of action offered or demanded to a scale incommensurate with the job of alleviating poverty. This basic argument was made in the recent report *Finding Frames: New Ways to Engage the UK Public on Global Poverty* (to which I was a contributor). The authors surveyed all the available data on UK public opinion on the subject, and drew on two areas of academic study: social psychology (looking at human value systems in particular), and linguistics and the cognitive sciences (examining the role of cognitive frames). Moreover, they found the charity paradigm for global development to persist "despite massive campaigns such as the Jubilee 2000 debt initiative and Make Poverty History; the widespread adoption and mainstreaming of digital communication techniques and social networks; steady growth in NGO fundraising revenues; the entire Millennium Development Goal story; and the establishment of a Westminster consensus on core elements of development policy."[9]

This diagnosis has been further validated by linguists from the University of Lancaster, who have analyzed transcripts from deliberative workshops with cross-sections of the British public. Their work, commissioned by the Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR) and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), is due to be released in full later in 2012.[10] This new research again shows that perceptions of "us" (in Britain) and "them" (the global poor) are commonly moralistic and judgmental, and that many are motivated to help in order to make "them" more like "us."

Further, a common refrain in public opinion data on charitable giving is that "nothing has changed." This was repeated in the IPPR/ODI workshops. NGOs are seen as large and opaque institutions, sometimes pejoratively referred to as "businesses"; and their fund-raising imagery—their largest and most dominant form of communication—is often criticized as exploitative, and their motivations then questioned. Indeed, given these perceptions it is remarkable that the British public continue to give in large amounts to NGOs. In the IPPR/ODI workshops, participants expressed exasperation at NGOs' behavior, but they had not stopped giving to or supporting NGOs altogether.

If that, then, is the old charity discourse—one that sustains public norms and expectations that are too restrictive for action on the scale needed to overcome poverty and suffering—what is the alternative? The alternative is to promote a new discourse with the public, the main features of which are actually already well known within the NGO community, particularly within their policy and advocacy departments, where structural causes of poverty tend to be most thought about. The challenge is how to make their public communication efforts powerfully and effectively represent it. The new discourse is grounded in ideas of justice and equality, taking into account the realities of modern networked life in a complex and multipolar world, rich with diversity and profoundly interdependent. Where the twentieth-century narrative was based on the granular "symptoms" that describe the individual suffering caused by poverty, the new narrative should have at its heart an understanding of the systemic "diseases" that underlie the gross injustice of mass poverty. It should centralize the agency of people in poverty themselves and tell a story of how people in the global North can work—and contribute to work—*alongside* them, rather than "save" them. It should describe a worldview based on shared prosperity, in which basic standards of fairness are a common good and mass poverty a moral and practical wrong. And it should strive to always paint an accurate—if aspirational—picture of what can be achieved with campaigns rather than promising to, for example, "Make Poverty History."

It is important to be clear that reforming NGOs will require far more than merely changing messaging and language, however. At best, this is a useful but insufficient first step. NGOs must also seek to understand their attachment to their old paradigm, which many would agree is inaccurate. NGOs need to be guided away from descriptions of *what* people tell pollsters and focus groups they believe about global poverty, and toward understanding *why* people believe

what they do. In the medium term, they should reexamine the methodology by which they engage the public. For example, rather than seeking to build up very large lists of campaigners who take "low value" action (for example, sign a petition or send a preconstructed email to a parliamentarian), the approach to public engagement should be revised to focus far more on building deeper, longer-lasting relationships (initially with a strategically selected audience), with an explicit and well-constructed longer-term aim of affecting social and cultural norms. Ultimately, though, NGOs will need to grapple with challenging questions of organizational cultures, business models, and the reason for engaging domestic publics at all.

Even if all this were undertaken, it would be churlish to suggest that NGO communicators abandon the charity frame altogether in the short term; it runs too deeply through society's understanding of NGOs. But there is mounting evidence that this paradigm must be either fundamentally changed in order to remove the strong overtones of paternalism and moral hierarchy or be replaced with less damaging frames. To that end, this article now examines how other sectors have successfully drawn on academic work to improve their public engagement; how a misplaced overreliance on consumer marketing approaches has distracted NGOs from embracing new approaches as enthusiastically and deeply as necessary; and concludes with suggestions for how groups such as ASAP can help remedy these deficiencies.

Untapped Reserves of Knowledge

There is a rich and rapidly growing body of evidence on how ideas and attitudes develop, helping to explain why people act the way they do. The *Finding Frames* report and the earlier *Common Cause* report attempted to apply some of this evidence to social and environmental issues, but the pool of knowledge is rapidly expanding and is far more extensive than these reports could possibly hope to reflect.[11]

This evidence is coming from all sides. Traditional academic disciplines, such as psychology and neuroscience, are publishing at an astonishing rate, but experts are also stretching across traditional boundaries to enhance their own work with the best from others, such that cross-disciplinary approaches is the new norm. Behavioral economics is perhaps one of the most widely recognized, applying learning from cognitive and social psychology to reassess traditional views of

human behavior found in neoclassical economics.[12] Cultronomics must be one of the newest; it can only exist because of the Google Book Library Project,[13] launched just nine years ago to digitize massive numbers of books (five million and counting), thereby exposing information on social patterns that was hidden within previously unknowable amounts of text.[14] The more established consumer psychology and related fields bring together psychology, sociology, and marketing.[15]

Although the study of human behavior is in many ways as old as science itself, this continuous branching out and cross-fertilization shows both that people vary and evolve, and so new understanding must follow suit; and that there are few conclusive answers, and thus few of us would believe that we can confidently understand, predict, or determine human behavior. More and better knowledge is always in high demand. And yet, despite the unending complexity of the subject, there is a tendency in much of the work that NGOs do with the public to assume far more control and ability to affect opinions and beliefs than is truly the case. Such assumptions lead to inefficient, ineffective, or, worse, counterproductive practice. As the psychologist Cathrine V. Jansson-Boyd says of consumption, perhaps the most studied of all behaviors, "Many people seem to believe that consumption is just common sense and that you do not need scientific methods to prove what they already know, but this could not be further from the truth. What individuals think they know is often incorrect."[16]

A Growing Trend Toward Application

This new knowledge is being turned into influence, power, and money by those able to make use of it. Corporate behemoths, such as Apple, with their staggering ability to reinvent the relationship people have with computers, have applied it with amazing success, as have countless other large corporations.[17] Politics, also, is increasingly connected to cross-disciplinary academic guidance. In the United Kingdom, Prime Minister David Cameron and his erstwhile Director of Strategy, Steve Hilton, are perhaps the most high-profile contemporary enthusiasts, having embraced approaches derived from behavioral economics; and today the "Nudge Unit" in No. 10 Downing Street is spreading such ideas across Whitehall.[18] In the United States, President Obama has put cognitive policy thinking and social psychology to work in the design of his language and campaigning. The undisputed masters, though, are the right wing of the Republican Party, in large part because they have been at it longer than anyone else. By investing

over the long term and then being disciplined about how they deploy what they learn, the Republican Right has managed to shift the center of gravity of American politics. And they have done so not by winning high-minded policy debates, but by studying and using emergent knowledge to engage the hearts and minds of Americans.[19]

NGO communicators live in a different reality than their counterparts in business and politics. Unlike politicians, they do not have countless think tanks vying for their attention, eager to refresh their ideas and skills. And, unlike business, they are not fully beholden to the forces of competition that require them to constantly improve or else fail. The very things that set NGOs apart and give them the space necessary to focus on issues of morality and humanitarianism also keep them separated from the resources, capacities, and, importantly, the "succeed or die" imperatives that drive innovation and best practice.

Large development NGOs excel in two main areas that relate to their domestic environments: using consumer marketing techniques and retail operations to raise funds and guide mass broadcast communication; and traditional advocacy and public policy. Expertise in fund-raising and, for some, running shops, is undeniable. Oxfam GB, for example, raises over £300 million a year and is the largest secondhand bookseller in Europe.[20] It knows how to run a business. And, like Save the Children, the Red Cross, World Vision, and many others, it knows how to do this because it knows, among other things, how to build brand awareness and appeal to people to get an immediate response. There are few better at direct-response marketing than the best NGOs. This consumer marketing knowledge is also the traditional bedrock of their mass communications abilities. NGO brands are some of the most widely known and trusted.[21] They can construct campaigns that generate large numbers of immediate actions; and when they work together they can promote a brand extremely well. Make Poverty History, in many respects a mass-marketing exercise, was audaciously successful in this regard (see below).[22]

Policy and advocacy expertise usually sits in NGO departments much like think tanks. Their remit is twofold: to provide world-class public policy arguments to convince those in power to do what they deem necessary; and to provide the advocacy expertise to take that policy and plot an influential course through infinitely complex policy and political debates at the national, regional, and global level. But this work is required to stretch to one more task that it cannot, in truth, adequately serve: intentionally and positively affecting social attitudes and norms.

The usual process to build and run a campaign goes like this: First, a policy agenda is constructed. This can be anything from how to improve agricultural productivity in specific countries to recommendations for policy changes by such global bodies as the World Bank or such forums as the G20. Depending on the size of the organization, the analysis that informs the policy is drawn from a mixture of sources, including primary research conducted within the NGO's program base; research drawn from the program data of others; and secondary research and policy analysis shaped and partially reanalyzed to inform the particular focus of the organization.

This agenda is worked on by public campaigns and communications staff to develop a package that is communicable to the public and the media. Again, different organizations can bring different levels of resources to bear, but at some point consumer marketing approaches often come to the table and weigh in on messaging and audience targeting. In addition to whatever internal expertise is available, these resources can range from creative agencies, market researchers, brand trackers, digital media agencies, media buyers, or some combinations of the above.

The problem with this capacity, however extensive, is that it is not suitable to the task of delivering profound and long-term shifts in public attitudes. It can stimulate immediate pressure by getting large numbers of the public to support "a good cause," but it is inherently limited in the scale of what it can achieve. It depends on what the public understands to be necessary, possible, and acceptable—which, because of the ubiquitous and oppressive charity frame described above, is limited to fund-raising for services that deliver help directly to "the poor" and to only marginal policy change, both of which fall short of what NGOs themselves believe is actually required. This deep limiting effect of public opinion is not addressed in any systematic way because NGO communicators are either homegrown campaigners or they come from a consumer marketing background and are thus not trained in how to understand it, let alone change it.

What keeps NGOs focused on this approach is that it is, in some important ways, successful. It can have immediate policy impact and dwarf the costs incurred many times over. What was achieved with the 2005 Make Poverty History campaign, for example, was an exercise in efficiency: for the few million pounds directly spent on the campaign, it arguably played an instrumental role in securing an agreement by the G8 in Gleneagles to increase aid by $50 billion a year.[23] Further, by the measures of public awareness and engagement that it set for itself,

it was remarkably well executed: with the help of some inspired promotion and marketing, it gained 88 percent brand awareness within months of its launch and inspired 20 percent of the UK population to sign its petition.[24] It had solid policy foundations, and its political influence stretched to the highest level. In other words, it created a temporary focus for its issues and made a particular political promise appear fashionable. But perception, rhetoric, fashion, and even such large political promises as the Gleneagles agreement are not the same as sustainable systemic change.

The problem is that for all its good intentions and marketing success, its strategy for change was far too limited to honor its own rhetoric. It never would, *because it never could*, "make poverty history." By treating this disconnect between rhetoric and ability as unimportant, it failed to give due appreciation to its own long-term impact. It ignored deep social and systemic change by playing directly into existing public understandings and frames. At best, this did nothing to move public attitudes or understandings. At worst—and what increasingly strong evidence suggests—*it moved them back twenty years* by reactivating and validating the old and limiting charity frame.[25] Those close to the campaign will recognize the irony here; it started with the mantra "justice not charity," yet because of an inability to recognize important truths about social attitudes and norms, it ended up having the converse effect. As the *Finding Frames* report sets out in detail, because the campaign relied on consumer marketing techniques, it chose to employ many of the same visual, linguistic, and experiential cues as Live Aid. And because no one knew to ask the right questions, all the other usual NGO "charity" activity went on around it largely unchanged. Thus, while it could market itself with extraordinary success, it was blind to its long-term impact on social attitudes and beliefs. Neither policy expertise, nor political connections, nor consumer marketing knowledge could expose how the design of the campaign would reinforce the negative frames, associations, and values that actively constrain transformative change in the long term.

It is important at this point to be clear what is meant by "consumer marketing." It is defined here in its most basic sense: an approach to communication and social interaction designed to promote and sell products within a market; "I sell, you buy." Everything that is designated a marketing activity, including marketing through social media, is derived from this basic formulation, built up from a worldview that puts products and markets at its heart. The end result is better results for the organization involved. In the business world, "results" means a

greater number of sales and a larger market share. In the NGO world, sales and market share are also often factors; but where individual businesses and individual NGOs part company is that NGOs are also necessarily—by virtue of their declared missions—interested in public attitudes toward poverty and injustice, as well as toward other social conditions.

In the normal course of events, a jeans manufacturer does not need to worry about social norms that underlie the conditions that create the market for jeans. The market for such apparel, in its broadest sense, is ubiquitous, and the market for jeans has grown to a size that means that each individual jeans company can focus on being appealing enough to grow their share of sales within that market.[26] This is because the aim of each jeans manufacturer is never constructed as something that requires a fundamental shift in deep social attitudes—for example, to eradicate the need for suits. They just need to be effective within the current system—a system, moreover, that is simultaneously being promoted and validated by every other clothing, if not every consumer-driven product, manufacturer. NGOs, on the other hand, consciously define and promote themselves to society as agents of radical, systemic, and transformative change. For the jeans manufacturer, consumer marketing is a very effective and highly sophisticated discipline that is often effective enough to drive extraordinary growth. If NGOs could sell enough products to overcome poverty and suffering, consumer marketing might well suit. But they cannot, and they know it, at least in part, which is why they campaign and run the programs they do. Yet they continue to rely on a communication model that was designed for selling products.

It is more than a simple difference of purpose, however, that should make NGOs question consumer marketing as an encompassing communication discipline. First, traditional marketing is designed to activate and strengthen values that are antagonistic to the values that NGOs ultimately rely on. Where marketing revolves around the idea that the individual is supreme, and that audience understanding and interaction is all about persuading the right individual to make a specific decision (usually to buy a product) or to form a deeper emotional bond with a brand, contributing toward overcoming poverty and suffering—by supporting an NGO, for example—ultimately relies on values related to universalism and benevolence, which require people to recognize and prioritize the needs of others. In other words, even the most experienced and roundly educated marketer is focused on asking the question, "How can I persuade x to do y (usually today)?" This approach will inevitably produce answers that focus on a benefit

to the individual; do x because it will make *you* feel or appear or be y. To shift public attitudes in the direction of accepting radical action against poverty, NGOs need to be asking themselves, "How can we make compassion and benevolence more dominant in society?"—the informed answer to which will almost certainly be *not* to focus on or validate the importance of a benefit to the individual. This is because, as mounting empirical evidence and academic literature shows, values relating to individual status and achievement are not just different from but antagonistic to values of benevolence and universalism.[27]

Distinguishing which values are being appealed to and strengthened is not always straightforward. There are some relatively simple examples, where NGOs clearly appeal to people's sense of their own social status and power as motivations.[28] But more often what seems on the surface to appeal to one type of values may in fact be appealing to the opposite. For example, in an advertisement that shows a young boy and is accompanied by the words "just £2 a month could help give a child like Jean clean, safe drinking water,"[29] what values are being appealed to? An immediate reading could conclude it is a simple appeal to universalist ones: the viewer's entirely altruistic desire to save suffering children. On the other hand, if all NGO communications are enmeshed within the powerful giver/grateful receiver worldview, in which poverty is subconsciously accepted as a sign of natural and therefore moral weakness or inferiority, then what may be activated and strengthened is the viewer's inherently assumed power and moral superiority: *I*, a rich and therefore morally superior person, can save *you*, a helpless person whose poverty is evidence of moral weakness or inferiority. As Charles Kenny writes, this view is characterized by the idea that "we must help, because they are so helpless"[30]

In the short term, this may seem a pedantic, pointless, or even insultingly arcane question given the subject: so long as people are saved, does the motivation of the donor really matter? When placed in a longer-term context, however, the question looks very different. If, as the mounting evidence suggests, one of the barriers to systemic change is the ubiquity of the charity frame and the values of individualist power and achievement that underpin it, then anything that validates and strengthens that frame and those values becomes profoundly problematic.[31] The important point here is not that one of the readings above is clearly right and the other absolutely wrong, but that such complex questions are important and require focus and expertise to navigate. Consumer marketing is, at best, simply not equipped to grapple with such questions, and at worst is actively harmful.

Second, consumer marketing is itself market-bound. The success of a marketing approach depends in large part on the amount of money that can be thrown at it. Creativity and innovation are certainly factors, but not nearly as important as how many slots can be afforded in prime-time TV schedules or how many words can be bought in a search engine optimization strategy. The Internet has briefly opened up space for creativity to be its own reward and inspired countless attempts by small organizations to produce that highly successful, inexpensive viral ad, but these are few and far between and becoming rarer still. Small and independent players are rapidly being squeezed out of even this market as big corporations throw multimillion-pound budgets at creative agencies to design viral advertisements, many of them designed specifically to look amateurish.[32] The territory that was briefly open to all has now been all but colonized by the few. NGOs, because they stand apart from the corporate system that determines the rate for marketing and will never have access to the huge ad budgets of corporations, will always be at a critical disadvantage on that field of play.

None of this is to say that every tool in the marketers' toolkit is useless or harmful to the approach NGOs take to eradicating mass poverty, or that NGOs should never attempt to use channels that are dominated by consumer marketers. There are many things to be learned from how marketing departments deconstruct and reconstruct communications, channels, messages, and audiences; and NGOs can gain good traction, even with limited budgets. The point is that there are critical underpinnings to consumer marketing that NGOs should pay more heed to. These are not necessarily obvious or easily isolated, and so a *different* and *independent* expertise is required within NGOs to be able to make these judgments confidently.

Toward Solutions

NGOs must ultimately find their own way. Change must come from within, and be guided by a strong and clear vision of the role they believe they can play in the twenty-first century. Do they want to remain aid agencies in a literal sense, tied to a particular form of development financing and proponents of a charity model of change? That is certainly a credible model that has a track record of helping millions of people, but it is just one option and it will almost certainly never lead to the NGOs' currently stated aim to end mass poverty. Alternatively, they could look to become genuinely radical and transformative agents of systemic

change, able to authentically claim to have the ideas and the mandate to make mass poverty a thing of history. What is increasingly apparent is that they probably cannot straddle the two with integrity.

If they choose the latter course, there are two areas where they will need to enhance their approach. First, they must extend their time horizons when it comes to engagement with their domestic publics. Second, they must develop independent expertise on social engagement that will allow them to avoid the dangers to their mission inherent in a consumer marketing approach while still benefitting from all the positives that good marketing practice has to offer.

Of the first: Most NGOs operate based on campaigning, fund-raising, and communication strategies that are between one and five years long. And while most have longer-term corporate strategies, even these tend to be for no more than ten years. The next point of achievement is usually the mission, which is clearly a far longer-term objective, although no NGO has a credible idea as to when it might be achieved. So there is a basic disconnect between the mission and the delivery strategies. This might not be a problem if these short-term strategies were based on credible evidence and theory regarding their long-term impact. Where engaging domestic publics is concerned, however, there is simply none of this evidence or expertise. In other words, NGOs do not know what public attitudes or norms they are working to encourage in the medium to long term. Many do not understand the meaning of the opinions they read in opinion polls, or even understand the need to understand them. This leads to their second problem: the uncritical application of consumer marketing methodologies.

It might be that NGOs—as a quasi-homogenous group—divide into two categories: organizations such as Save the Children focusing on immediate assistance akin to an ambulance in a health-care metaphor, and organizations such as Oxfam working toward systemic change under a more radical social justice banner, perhaps more like a public health agency. Currently, however, NGOs as a group are mostly a muddle in terms of their communications and campaigning, seeming to want both to champion aid and charity *and* campaign for systemic change.

A critical barrier to change within NGOs is the fact that existing approaches are locked into a single paradigm for what counts as required knowledge for communications and campaigns in their home markets. Thus, a group such as Academics Stand Against Poverty could be extremely influential by making the concerted case for change, and then assisting practically with authoritative guidance. It will require commitment and effort from both sides, of course, and it

should probably start with an attempt to define a common understanding of the purpose and ambition driving it. Beyond that, I suggest that academics within such a group as ASAP and their NGO partners look to deliver work that abides by the following principles:

- *Be tailored for the NGO audience*. NGOs, as we've seen, have very large public engagement capacities. Academics have theory and evidence that could help transform the effectiveness of this capacity by applying new learning from, for example, the social and cognitive sciences. But the problem, even now, is not a lack of information being available to NGOs. If anything, it is the reverse. The real problem is a lack of a way to apply the learning to the idiosyncratic, specific needs of NGOs. To solve that, academics should design interventions that meet these needs.

- *Be a joint exercise with NGOs and have the outreach function built in*. Simply setting up another traditional think tank that exists away from NGOs could risk increasing theoretical knowledge that leads to little or no practical change. Rather, this relationship should be based on a networking model: a hub that locates, filters, and makes palatable the learning and evidence from the many different academic disciplines that are relevant to questions of social change, and that works with NGOs to make sure they can put this knowledge to use. In many ways it needs to be a service organization.

- *Be dedicated to the task and adequately resourced*. Expecting this sort of work to happen through, for example, a coalition of existing campaigners is unlikely to deliver what is needed. Such an effort needs focus, time, and expertise from the start. Adding on to existing roles or workloads is likely to frustrate more than help ongoing efforts to address poverty.

- *Look to serve the whole NGO sector, not individual organizations*. There is a large number of NGOs, each with its own ideas on how best to engage publics in the fight against poverty. Assuming they can be brought together around a need to shift public attitudes and opinion in a commonly agreed direction, there is little point in one organization striving forward, leaving others to catch up over a protracted period. That would not only waste time and resources but would probably have limited impact. This must,

therefore, be an initiative that addresses—exclusively, forcefully, and with the collective perspective in mind—the whole development NGO sector.

First Steps

If there is an appetite from both NGOs and academics for a more systematic approach, the first step would be to think about structures and forums for practical engagement. ASAP would seem to provide a logical point of contact through which a dialogue could be opened.

In terms of where investment should be made for some concerted study, my preference would be to look at three broad areas: the cognitive sciences for further exploration of the biology of attitudes and beliefs; the social sciences, in particular where sociology, social psychology, and anthropology meet; and complexity theory as it pertains to human systems. To be more specific, at the project level, there are some immediate areas that could be explored.

Advancing the Study of Cognitive Frames and Value Systems

The work on cognitive frames and value systems has been relatively well developed, but is still new and needs much more exploration, testing, and dissemination in the NGO sector.[33] The NGO sector has reacted hungrily to what has been placed in front of it so far, but there is much more to be done to properly develop and embed these concepts. Further, there are many outstanding questions that should be of great interest to NGOs, including:

- What are the dominant frames that underpin attitudes on global poverty or social justice across Europe and America, or indeed India and Brazil or any of the emerging economies?
- What tools and methodologies are needed to embed deeper thinking within NGOs, and how can we make them stick?
- What would a twenty-year and values-derived vision for a development sector look like? And how do we get there?

Building an Understanding of Systems, Networks, and Complexity

The fact that we live in increasingly complex and interdependent societies is a given. But what to do about this insight and how to effectively operate in such a world is far from obvious. Or, as the physicist, development economist, and

network analyst Cesar Hidalgo puts it, "While it is trivial that everything is connected, the structure and nature of connected systems is not trivial."[34] Complexity theory has yet to be used with any rigor in NGO strategizing. It could help make practical sense of complex human and other systems we cannot help operating in, and find important patterns in vast quantities of data.

Reevaluating NGO Expertise and Ambition

There has been an explosion of NGO campaigning capacity in the last fifteen years, and we should take an analytical look at whom these NGOs are employing, what they reward, and what assumptions and norms have emerged. Are NGOs, as some evidence suggests, actually undermining their own long-term objectives with short-term strategies? What knowledge and experience do we rely on to make these judgments?

Building Conceptual Links with the Progressive Private Sector

NGOs and businesses are increasingly overlapping at the highest strategic level. On the business side, it is typified by the likes of Michael Porter at the Harvard Business School through his work on shared value platforms,[35] and Dominic Barton, the global managing director of McKinsey, who describes it as "capitalism for the long term."[36] This new breed of industry leaders is expanding the definition of the bottom line to include sustainability and social justice, which offers considerable potential for working more closely together. Some of the larger NGOs, such as Oxfam, are already making strides in this area, but it is still relatively new territory that holds enormous potential.

Conclusion

What do NGOs *say* they are about? It is heady stuff: the eradication of poverty and suffering from this world, no less. But NGOs are not yet engaged in any sort of activity that could realistically hope to deliver on such grand ambitions. They are locked in a model that can only deliver piecemeal and unreliable progress, and they do so largely without the support of the public. To be true to their missions, NGOs must first reassess their ability to engage the public in their home countries, because overcoming poverty and suffering cannot happen without public support. In a world where many of the rules governing global security, trade, taxation, and other forms of resource management are set by rich democratic nations, and in which publics are increasingly connected to each other across

geographical boundaries, the behavior of people in, for example, the United Kingdom has a direct impact on the lives of people in developing countries. If the drivers of the systems that perpetuate mass global poverty are to be challenged and changed, they will need to be engaged in those places where power most resides, as well as those places where the injustices are most keenly suffered. No such change ever happens without public norms demanding, or at the very least accepting, the change needed to deliver it. This leaves NGOs with two choices, assuming honesty and credibility are important to them: they must either reduce the scale of their ambitions or increase the ability to engage the public. In order to do the latter, a shift in standards and knowledge must take place. The good news is that NGOs need not discover all this new knowledge on their own. There are whole disciplines out there that should be able to help. NGOs just need to team up with those who have the best knowledge and insight. ASAP may offer an exciting route through which to do this. But in order for change and progress to happen, first must come the acknowledgment that such actions are needed, followed by concerted efforts, by both NGOs and their partners, to address our common challenge. Looking at the tectonic changes happening in the world right now, it may be that there has never been a better or more important time to open up such potentially powerful new alliances.

NOTES

[1] Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 184.

[2] Throughout this article I will refer to NGOs as if they are a collective group with broadly similar characteristics. This is shorthand for sectoral norms, and reflects perceptions from the public more than it might individual departmental or even organizational practice. It is not meant to suggest a complete uniformity either within or between all NGOs.

[3] See ActionAid, "Our Vision and Values"; www.actionaid.org.uk/100052/our_vision_and_values.html.

[4] See Save the Children, "Achievements and Actions"; www.savethechildren.org.uk/en/2108.htm.

[5] The British Overseas Aid Group is a small and largely informal peer group of five of the biggest agencies listed, established in the mid-1980s, in part to counter negative perceptions of aid. One of their first joint exercises was to set up *New Internationalist* magazine, which actually espoused system analysis, rather than a "charity" approach. It is not a publication designed for the mass market, however, so it does not reach a national mass audience.

[6] This information is from 2009/10 Annual Reports and accounts, and includes all reported campaigning, trading, education, and fund-raising activity. It does not include governance costs.

[7] It is impossible with publically available information to determine precisely how much of that was campaigning in the traditional sense and that therefore might have been trying to do something other than direct marketing, but from what is available it would seem to be about 10 percent.

[8] Andrew Darnton with Martin Kirk, *Finding Frames: New Ways to Engage the UK Public in Global Poverty* (London: BOND, 2011).

[9] Ibid., p. 5.

[10] A blog on the initial findings can be found at www.ippr.org/articles/56/8946/framing-the-argument-is-key-to-maintaining-support-for-foreign-aid.

[11] Tom Crompton, *Common Cause: The Case for Working with Cultural Values* (Surrey, UK: WWF, 2010).

[12] Richard H. Thaler and Sendhil Mullainathan, "How Behavioral Economics Differs from Traditional Economics"; www.econlib.org/library/Enc/BehavioralEconomics.html.
[13] See www.books.google.com/intl/en/googlebooks/history.html.
[14] Jean-Baptiste Michel et al., "Quantitative Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books" www.sciencemag.org/content/early/2010/12/15/science.1199644.
[15] See www.elsevier.com/wps/find/journaldescription.cws_home/713950/description#description.
[16] Cathrine V. Jansson-Boyd, *Consumer Psychology* (Berkshire, UK: Open University Press, 2010), chap. 1, p. 2.
[17] As of the day of writing, Apple is the largest music vendor, game company, tablet maker, smartphone provider, most valuable brand, and the most valuable technology company in the world; www.marketingapple.com/.
[18] Taken from Richard Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth and Happiness* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008).
[19] Much has been written on this subject. See, e.g., George Lakoff, *The Political Mind: Why You Can't Understand 21st-Century Politics with an 18th-Century Brain* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2008); and Drew Westen, *The Political Mind: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of a Nation* (Cambridge, Mass.: PublicAffairs, 2007).
[20] "Dan Brown Tops Oxfam's 'Least Wanted' Chart," *Guardian,* September 3, 2010; www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/sep/03/dan-brown-oxfam-least-wanted.
[21] npfSynergy, "Trust in Charities Bounces Back Whilst Faith in Banks Wilts"; www.nfpsynergy.net/media_coverage/our_press_releases/trust_in_charities_bounces_back_whilst_faith_in_banks_wilts.aspx.
[22] The Make Poverty History campaign involved scores of NGOs in a range of countries focused initially on pressuring rich countries at the 2005 G8 summit in Gleneagles, Scotland, to commit to principles of fair trade, debt relief, and effective aid for those in poor countries. Concerted efforts continue in several countries under the Make Poverty History banner. See www.makepovertyhistory.org/takeaction/.
[23] Opinions differ as to who should claim what level of credit, or even blame, but it is undeniable that the campaign made the agreement considerably more likely, if not outright possible.
[24] See www.peopleandparticipation.net/display/CaseStudies/Make+Poverty+History.
[25] Andrew Darnton with Martin Kirk, *Finding Frames*, p. 13.
[26] The growth of the consumer culture that led to a ubiquitous jeans market, though a fascinating topic that in many ways demonstrates the power of the application of wide and emergent knowledge, is not the topic for this paper. Readers interested in this could do worse than watching the BBC documentary series *The Century of the Self* by Adam Curtis.
[27] Tom Crompton, *Common Cause: The Case for Working with Cultural Values* (Surrey: WWF, 2010).
[28] See, e.g., Global Cool; www.globalcool.org/.
[29] See www.wateraid.org/other/display/jean.php?cartID=UN0000,12/TAB,DRTV,12/TAB/01A.
[30] See Charles Kenny, "Sharing the Burden," *Foreign Policy*, April 2, 2012; www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/04/02/sharing_the_burden?page=0,1.
[31] This question takes on a business model dimension when applied to complete fund-raising models like child sponsorship, upon which several large NGOs depend for large amounts of their income.
[32] See Mission Imblogable, "Top 5 Corporate Viral Videos"; www.missionimblogable.co.uk/2011/04/top-5-corporate-viral-videos.html.
[33] See Lakoff, *The Political Mind*; Darnton with Kirk, *Finding Frames*; and Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (London: Allen Lane, 2011).
[34] See www.chidalgo.com/gallery.html.
[35] See hbr.org/authors/porter.
[36] See hbr.org/2011/03/capitalism-for-the-long-term/ar/1.