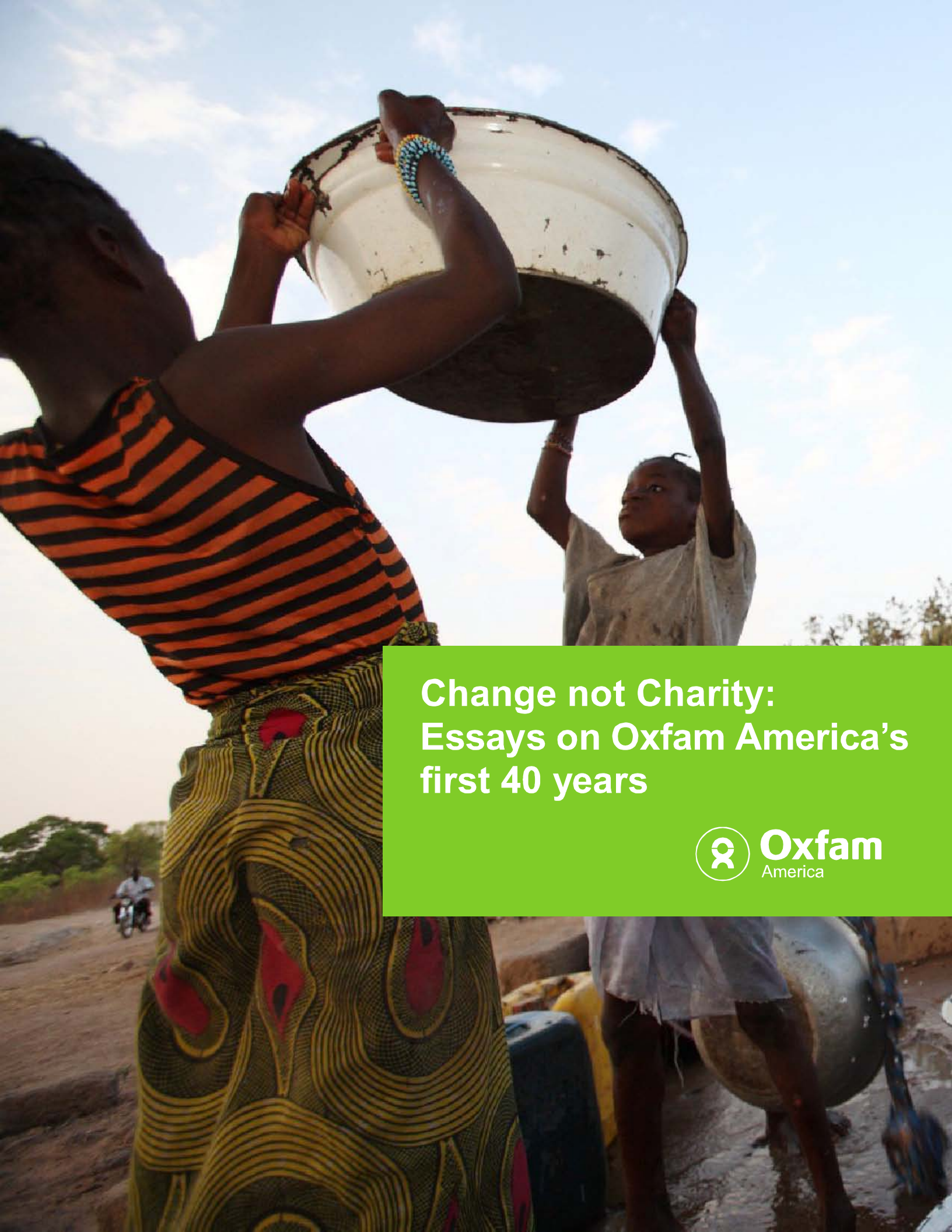

Change not Charity: Essays on Oxfam America's first 40 years

Oxfam America

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The Power of Words, Pictures, and People: Reflections on Oxfam Communications

Sylvia Sukop

For Oxfam America, communication was as integral to its strategy as its grant making. It consistently sought to shift public perceptions around complex issues of poverty, so that the public would support genuine solutions that addressed root causes. A central part of this reframing was to portray the dignity and capability of the people and communities with which it worked, treating them as purposeful actors rather than victims. The author's involvement in Oxfam America communications was a formative experience for her and it influenced her career in signigicant ways.

In late June 2007, more than 75 former staff gathered in Boston for what was billed as an "Oxfam '80s Reunion." We packed a small Thai restaurant in Jamaica Plain for dinner on Saturday night, and then expanded on Sunday, with families in tow, into a soaring, modern, sunlit hall at Brandeis University for a long and lively lunch. We never seemed to stop talking, even as we posed for a group portrait, spilling all the way down the grand staircase. It was amazing just to see everyone's faces again, all of us older now but smiles still fresh and our affection for each other and for the years we had shared still palpable.

Workplace reunions are rare, far less common than family and school reunions, so when they occur one might rightfully ask, "What made this workplace so special?" Why would a group of people not affiliated by blood or faith or alma mater choose to participate in such an unusual but no less spirited homecoming? In my own case, why did I skip my 25th college reunion that same month in favor of attending Oxfam's?

The answer may be different for everyone, but I suspect it has something to do with the distinctive ideals and values behind the mission that has shaped Oxfam America's work—and workplace—from its founding until today. These include compassion and mutual respect,

dignity and self-determination, fairness, and self-reliance. They continue to bind us together and to guide many of us on the professional paths we have taken since.

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People who applied for jobs at Oxfam were usually looking for more than just a job. They were looking for comrades concerned with the root causes and, hence, the politics of global poverty and hunger. They were humanitarians who rejected the facile notions of charity that dominated mainstream approaches to aid and that failed to acknowledge the United States's own culpability in promoting the very conditions that led to suffering and need. Some were motivated by a desire to make amends by taking personal responsibility in light of their government's failures. They were critical of US foreign aid and military intervention, and challenged international trade and loan policies that reinforce poverty. They were eager to correct stereotypes and condescending cultural attitudes in relation to the so-called Third World. And they were looking to join a community of like-minded people who shared these goals and were committed to taking action and mobilizing others through grassroots organizing.

At the heart of our struggle was what has since come to be known as "framing"—a way to shift public perception and understanding of complex issues—and the Oxfam I experienced as a young communications professional was every bit the revolutionary training ground in this struggle. At the time, Oxfam funded projects in more than 30 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Staff at every level attended brown-bag lunch seminars to hear reports and recommendations from program officers just returned from the field, or from policy analysts who rigorously debunked the myths of hunger and poverty and showed how no disaster was entirely "natural." The maps on our walls were Peters Projection, rendering the world's landmasses more accurately than the maps we grew up with. When there were demonstrations in Boston or Washington, we were out in full force, marching in our Oxfam T-shirts. On the historic day when Nelson Mandela was released from prison (Feb. 11, 1990), many of us gathered at a downtown Boston church to celebrate his freedom after 27 years and the turning point it represented in black South Africa's struggle against white oppression.

I am forever grateful to my many teachers in the "school of Oxfam" including Joel Charny (Cambodia); Monawar Sultana (India and Bangladesh); Rob Buchanan, Jill Harmsworth, Laura Kullenberg, and Deborah Toler (Africa); Jethro Pettit (Central America and the Caribbean); Kathy McAfee (policy); and Katherine Yih (research). Thanks to Oxfam's many project partners who visited us in Boston over the years, staff members were also privileged to hear firsthand from "visiting faculty" like Latin American indigenous leaders Rigoberta Menchu and Evaristo Nugkuag.

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As press officer for the first three of my six years at Oxfam, beginning in 1984, I handled media relations aimed primarily at the New England market and key national print and broadcast outlets. I pitched stories, drafted op-eds, arranged press tours, and trained our staff for interviews. I also traveled in Sudan and Cambodia to photograph and report on Oxfam

projects and gave a speaking tour of college campuses to support the Fast for a World Harvest campaign.

For my last three years, through 1990, I served as Oxfam's chief editor and publications director, pleased to take a break from the capriciousness of the media—because as every publicist knows, what you put into it does not always match what you get out. Now with more control over the final product of my labors, I edited the quarterly *Oxfam News* along with annual reports, direct mail, grant proposals, and Congressional testimony. I worked closely with the Education, Development, and Policy Departments, and I was honored to be part of a creative and energetic communications team that included Phillip Martin and Rachel Zoll, under Executive Director John Hammock. It was a wonderfully complementary team, anchored by John's humility and spiritual grounding, energized by Phil's *chutzpah* and humor, and elevated by Rachel's intellect and sense of irony. It felt like a family and I remember taking daily pleasure in our work and camaraderie, and tremendous satisfaction in what we accomplished together.

Of course, there were differences and struggles within Oxfam, not only between management and staff but often of a political nature. Our idealism was constantly being tested, both by the external battles we waged on behalf of the world's poor and by internal dissent in the home office. People would disagree about the best strategy to achieve a shared goal, for example, or when to compromise for the sake of consensus; in at least one case a staff member resigned over that kind of disagreement. At the same time, the phrase "political correctness" had newly entered our progressive lexicon and, for better or worse, made us sensitive to even lightheart-ed charges of ideological rigidity.

After Oxfam staff became unionized through SEIU, I served for a time as a shop steward and so was keenly aware of various fault lines during contract negotiations or when staff voted to take action against a management policy. I spent many a late evening huddled around a com-puter with fellow union members as we strove to articulate our position in written statements that harkened back to those core values we all shared, trying to bridge whatever it was that seemed to separate us in that moment. I remember these as my most stressful times within the organization, but they also demonstrate my abiding faith in words—to make whole, to make peace, to make change.

* * *

The key defining event of my six years at Oxfam came right at the beginning.

A now-famous BBC television report—broadcast in the US by NBC News on October 23, 1984—sparked what would become the largest disaster relief effort in history. Shocking scenes of famine in Ethiopia and emaciated babies swarmed by flies were beamed into American homes where families would shortly sit down to Thanksgiving dinner, their biggest feast of the year. This powerful juxtaposition between the Horn of Africa and our own horn of plenty penetrated public consciousness and created—for better or worse—the perfect media storm.

Oxfam and other NGOs working in the region were already well aware of the mounting crisis in Ethiopia, but their pleas for emergency assistance had been largely ignored. It took the mass media, the coincidence of approaching holidays, and a parade of celebrities to turn it

into a true cause celébre. British rocker Bob Geldof, moved by the BBC report, enlisted a bevy of other pop stars to form Band Aid and record the single, "Do They Know It's Christmas?" The song (its problematic title notwithstanding) became an instant hit and ultimately raised more than £8 million ($10.4 million). USA for Africa, another star-studded group of 45 musical artists, followed up with "We Are the World," written by Michael Jackson and Lionel Ritchie and produced by Quincy Jones; revenues from the single, the album, the video and related merchandise generated more than $63 million for famine relief. And in July 1985, Geldof staged the Live Aid concerts in London and Philadelphia, broadcast globally, which raised another $100 million for famine relief. Oxfam America experienced its own huge influx of donations, with its annual revenues more than doubling from $6,666,042 in FY 1984 to $16,869,600 in FY 1985.

That summer of 1985, hunger in Africa was omnipresent, a pop cultural phenomenon. But like any fashion, it was soon on the way out and the discourse shifted to one of "famine fatigue."

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Most relief agencies used photographs of starving children to raise money. Such images neatly positioned the viewer/donor as rescuer/savior and bestowed a kind of grace on the giver and absolution from further responsibility. Some donors would even keep a photo of the child they "saved." But given that starvation is the end phase of an extended process with social, economic, biological, and political dimensions, unfolding over time, such images skipped right over more complicated questions of how a particular child came to be starving. That part of the film was left on the cutting room floor.

Oxfam, by contrast, deployed more "empowering" images. We emphasized that Oxfam was a relief *and development* agency. The development part meant that we were working in a country before, during, and after emergencies, supporting farmers and community-based initiatives, with the goal of enabling poor people to exercise their right to manage their own lives. Oxfam used images of Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans who were strong, smiling, active, and seemingly self-sufficient. They chopped wood, harvested crops, sifted grain, gathered firewood and water, wove baskets and textiles, built houses, fed their children, cared for animals. (Critics might well have asked whether the semiotic pendulum had swung too far. Did *no one* suffer or starve in the countries where Oxfam worked?) In this visual equation, the viewer/donor was positioned as a partner/investor in projects—read: success stories—that were already underway.

Boston Globe photographer Stan Grossfeld won the 1985 Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography for his searing black-and-white images of Ethiopian famine victims, some of which were taken in camps and communities to which Oxfam helped him gain access. Although he made the photographs available to Oxfam's communications office, we decided not to use them because they were not in keeping with our more "empowering" approach. Still, I have great respect for Grossfeld and his work, and he generously designated Oxfam as the beneficiary of proceeds from the sale of his photographs at a Newbury Street gallery that year.

Timing is everything in the news business. Then as now the window for international reporting was extremely limited. Whether a story gets ink or air time, and what its impact will be, greatly depends on what else is happening at that moment.

In November 1984, we had gone to great lengths to schedule John Hammock, just returned from his own fact-finding trip to Ethiopia, to appear on one of the national morning news shows out of New York. He was literally standing in the wings, about to go on, when his appearance was suddenly called off. The "baboon heart baby," the first child ever to receive a heart transplant from an animal, had died. Tragic as that story was, its total displacement of John's report on the Horn of Africa—where millions of lives were at stake—seemed grossly out of proportion.

In addition to the Ethiopian famine, other urgent issues of the Reagan-Bush 1980s included the US-backed conflict in Central America, war in Sudan and Namibia, violence in Sri Lanka, floods in Bangladesh, earthquakes in El Salvador, and hurricanes in the Caribbean. Our communications department always brought to the fore the *politics* of a crisis situation and at one point developed an effective series of behind-the-headlines analyses of mainstream news articles about countries where Oxfam worked. We would dissect the article by highlighting phrases that reflected political bias or were just plain wrong and, in the margins, would offer a different viewpoint or a correction. Our prototype was a recurring feature we had seen in *Harper's* magazine.

While US administrations and foreign locales may have changed over the years, the triggers of devastation and disaster remain the same, as a glance at Oxfam America's Web site on any given day will testify.

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The advent of digital media—the Internet as well as digital photography and video—has had a dramatic impact on communications at all nonprofit organizations and perhaps especially those involved in social change. Call-to-action fliers that used to be mailed or handed out to dozens or hundreds of people can now reach thousands or millions in a single e-mail blast; footage from a protest or a disaster site can be Webcast live or widely circulated within a matter of hours; petitions and letters to policymakers can be signed with a click. Still, getting global poverty on the radar with so many other urgent causes competing for attention remains a challenge. Attention spans are short and the issues are complex and hard to convey in a brief email bulletin.

It's hard to imagine that Oxfam did not even have a Web site until the late 1990s. The sheer reach and speed and content-capacity of this new communications tool cannot be overstated. In the late 1980s our communications staff numbered three. In 2008, the Web team alone has three members, in a communications staff of 31. The Web has become an important tool in fundraising and currently roughly 15% of donations are made online. Back in the 1980s the circulation of *Oxfam News*, our newsprint newsletter, peaked at approximately 100,000; in 2008 Oxfam America regularly sent e-mail bulletins to triple this number, as well as maintaining a list of 115,000 e-activists who have taken at least one action on behalf of an Oxfam advocacy effort. This giant leap in scale of communications corresponded to a leap in income and organizational growth.

Oxfam has at times gained access to even wider audiences by piggybacking on Internet powerhouses like MoveOn.org.[1] I suppose that Oxfam is the progressive movement's NGO of choice when it comes to emergency response because it is progressive, secular, and independent of US government funding. The folks at Oxfam don't play the heroic role of "parachute humanitarians" coming into a situation at the last minute. Rather, they are there for the long haul, partnering with local organizations around the world and supporting sustainable solutions. On the home front, they are consistently critical and activist through their grassroots engagement with college campuses and progressive faith-based organizations, and their advocacy work with policymakers on Capitol Hill.

But could an e-mail ever have the same impact as that BBC/NBC television report once did? I doubt it. While an email campaign might mobilize supporters of a cause to take effective action in support of a specific goal, it is not likely to generate instant mass awareness of an issue. We lived in a much less fragmented media world back in 1984. Network TV viewership was more concentrated and, it's worth noting, less jaded by depictions of "reality." Today no single news broadcast or e-mail or YouTube video clip is likely to have that kind of sweeping impact.

* * *

I spoke earlier of my faith in words. What about images? As a writer and a photographer I am continually negotiating between the two. One never seems complete, or sufficient, without the other and yet they don't always work in harmony either.

Whenever I gave a public talk about Oxfam I would be confronted with the images-versus-words dilemma. Although I would show slides of the projects I had visited, my more important goal was to share information about that particular country or community, what had led to current conditions there, and what kinds of long-term systemic and policy changes were needed. I soon discovered how pictures could actually get in the way of such information because invariably the audience would begin asking for the story behind the picture, taking time and attention away from my intended remarks.

Photographs have an ineffable emotional power that goes straight to the heart. And because pictures do not speak for themselves we want someone to speak for them. They are wide open to individual projections and interpretations, anxieties, and fantasies—narratives that tend to reinforce our existing beliefs, attitudes, and ideologies, rather than telling us something new. All of photography rests on the most literal act of framing, yet I firmly believe it takes words to really make people see things differently.

At Oxfam I became increasingly troubled by the fact that my job compelled me to traffic in images of people I did not know, submitting their faces, bodies, and identities to narratives

[1] MoveOn.org highlighted Oxfam America as an effective humanitarian agency in the Spring of 2003 as concern grew about the potential humanitarian impact on civilians of the Iraq War. Oxfam, concerned about its reputation as a non-partisan organization, eventually asked to be removed from the Web site as MoveOn became more stridently critical of the war and President Bush. This did not represent a breach, however, and MoveOn directed some of the funds it raised for the 2004 tsunami to Oxfam.

utterly outside their control. It seemed to fly in the face of what Oxfam stood for. Yet our work (on behalf of those very people) depended on it.

I ultimately left Oxfam to attend graduate school, not only to advance my studies in photography but also to better understand how images actually operate, and why they succeed or fail in meeting the objectives we set for them.

Photography is a powerful medium but it does have serious limitations, among them its conditions of creation, selection, dissemination, and reception. And in any case, bearing witness to suffering (by looking at a photograph) is different from addressing it. We cannot depend on photographs to change the world. Only people—informed and inspired—can change the world. And it remains the task of succeeding generations of communications professionals to inform and inspire using all the tools at their disposal.

* * *

The Oxfam '80s Reunion brought back many memories, and when I was invited to reflect on my years there, I realized that the arc of Oxfam's influence in my life could be traced right up to the present. Personally and professionally, working at Oxfam remains one of my most formative experiences, and I gather the same is true for many of my colleagues. Several went on after Oxfam to start their own nonprofit organizations and a high proportion have continued to work for social change, whether locally, nationally, or internationally.

Throughout graduate school in the early 1990s I continued to be preoccupied by Oxfam's themes. I conceived and organized an interdisciplinary conference at NYU—"Famine in the Media Age: The Politics of Aid and Representation" in June 1994—examining the cultural and political dimensions of world hunger, timed with the 10th anniversary of the Ethiopian famine crisis. I enlisted eight different academic departments as co-sponsors, from Nutrition and Journalism to Education and Africana Studies. Participants included writers and photographers, nutritionists and health workers, food aid specialists and policy makers, educators and activists, historians and cultural critics. Partial funding was provided by an Oxfam board member, Michael Shimkin.

The following year I helped NYU's Ireland House organize its May 1995 International Conference on Hunger, marking the 150th anniversary of the start of the Great Irish Famine. At that conference, keynote speaker Mary Robinson, then President of Ireland, was joined by 40 renowned scholars in the humanities and sciences—including the future Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, Seamus Deane, Homi K. Bhaba, and Terry Eagleton, along with my friends and fellow Oxfam alumni Joel Charny, Michael Sheridan, and Deborah Toler, and former Oxfam board chair, J. Larry Brown.

As they grappled with issues both historical and contemporary, speakers at both conferences brought to the subject of famine a depth of analysis and complexity of understanding that one could only wish for in the mass media. The absence of more enlightened, ongoing public discussion of these issues remains as serious a problem today as it was 25 years ago.

* * *

Joel Charny, one of the organizers of the Oxfam '80s Reunion (along with Anuradha Desai and Laura Roper), said he was motivated by a desire to stay connected with former colleagues. He had been upset to find out, too long after the fact, that several of his closest Oxfam colleagues had died. He didn't want that to happen again.

Staying connected, keeping in touch, being in communication—these are all signs of life and of the persistence of the unique and ever-expanding intentional community that was and still is Oxfam. To borrow a phrase from ACT-UP, fellow activists who also got their start in the 1980s, if silence = death, communication = life.

This essay is lovingly dedicated to my comrades at Oxfam America and at Blue Mountain Center where it was written during a residency in 2007.

Working together to end poverty and injustice

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