The Pornography of Poverty: Reframing the Discourse of International Aid’s Representations of Starving Children

Janice Nathanson
York University

ABSTRACT Canadian perceptions of developing countries are often dominated by images of starvation, despair, and crisis. The result is that people see not solutions to development challenges, but perpetual problems. One cause of these perceptions may be fundraising messages that present distorted portrayals of the developing world. Images of buzzing flies, begging eyes, and bloated bellies flood television screens and print media in an attempt to pull at heartstrings and garner donations. This article examines the problems of representation in development advertising and explores its evolution over a six-year time period using an ideological analysis of select communications materials produced by three child sponsorship organizations. It then proposes framing theory as one possibility for developing more balanced representations and asks whether current advertising practices are more in line with its propositions.

KEYWORDS Ideological analysis; Mass communication; Development education

In 1947, Dr. Bob Pierce was visiting China where he came across a teacher who had with her a child named White Jade. The teacher, unable to care for the child herself,

Janice Nathanson holds a PhD in Communications and Culture from York University and consults to public and charitable institutions on advertising and fundraising communications. Email: janicenathanson@rogers.com.

Canadian Journal of Communication Vol 38 (2013) 103-120
©2013 Canadian Journal of Communication Corporation
asked the doctor for help. He offered his last $5 and promised to send the same amount every month (World Vision, 2005a). Only 10 years earlier, during the Spanish Civil War, a child wandering the streets of Santander was found by John Langdon-Davies, a British war correspondent. In the child’s pocket was a note that read, “This is Jose. I am his father. When Santander falls I shall be shot. Whoever finds my son, I beg him to take care of him” (Plan Canada, 2005a).

Deeply affected by their encounters, Pierce and Langdon-Davies set out to help the world’s children. Pierce established the Christian humanitarian organization World Vision in response to the plight of hundreds of thousands of orphaned children at the end of the Korean War. Langdon-Davies founded the charity Foster Parents Plan (today Plan International) as a means of creating a personal relationship between refugee or orphaned children and English sponsors. China Children’s Fund (today known as Christian Children’s Fund) was created in 1938 by Dr. J. Calvitt Clarke, a missionary who wanted to care for Chinese-Japanese war orphans.

What began as a personal crisis of conscience and a deep desire to help has evolved, more than half a century later, into a multi-million-dollar fundraising industry in Canada and a multi-billion-dollar enterprise around the world. In 2010, World Vision Canada (WCV) raised an astonishing $415 million (World Vision, 2011a). Christian Children’s Fund of Canada (CCFC) attracted $47 million that same year (CCFC, 2011a). For its part, Plan Canada (PC) generated $115 million in 2010 (Plan Canada, 2011a). Since 2000, cumulative revenues of Plan Canada have more than doubled.

On the face of it, all this looks good. A significant portion of civil society in the West has been raising major dollars with the hopes of helping those in the world’s poorest countries. Here at home, Canadian development non-governmental organizations provide relief and emergency assistance, longer-term development programs, education to sensitize Canadians to development issues, and advocacy programming to change inequitable policies and practices. So what’s the problem?

The problem is that some charitable agencies have been raising tremendous amounts of money but perhaps doing profound damage at the same time. Using trivialized representations of people in developing countries marked by begging eyes, distended bellies, and starving souls, their hope has been to pull at heartstrings and garner donations. This kind of distorted representation is known as the “Starving Baby Appeal” (Fine, 1990, p. 154); its result, many in the international development community have been saying for years, is

- a public wholly unaware of the complexities and root causes of world poverty (Canadian International Development Agency, 1988)
- a societal attitude characterized by guilt, helplessness, charity, paternalism, and even racism (Canadian Hunger Foundation, 2002)
- a dwindling level of political support for foreign assistance and aid (Earnscleff Research & Communications, 2000)

In short, the net effect has been the “pornography of poverty” (CIDA, 1988, p. 7). As social issue theorist Eric Young (1996) said in one report,

For the most part, people see a wall of problems, not solutions. They have little sense—and even less understanding—of development. Rather, they view...
the Third World as a place of intractable misery. A sense of crisis—not progress—shapes their perceptions. The widespread sense of hopelessness, which is reinforced constantly by media reports and fundraising campaigns, understandably fuels responses that range from apathy to antipathy. Clinging to the belief that “we must do something,” the conviction that “nothing we do can make a difference” has become deeply entrenched. (p. 3)

The issue is not new. Critics within the development community have been claiming for decades that while desperate images may capture hearts and loosen pocketbooks, they also portray the people of the developing world as helpless and hopeless, without agency or voice, and without the knowledge and expertise to manage their lives with skill and dignity (Canadian Council for International Co-operation, 2008). Some organizations have been trying for years to effect change. As far back as 1988, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) held nationwide consultations with development organizations to elicit their views on public perceptions of the developing world as a basis for creating a responsible public outreach strategy. Throughout these discussions, the issue of representation was an enduring focal point. In 1993, the Canadian Council for International Co-operation (CCIC), a coalition of Canadian non-governmental development organizations, launched a national, multi-media public education campaign entitled The Shock of the Possible (CCIC, 1993). Its aim was to challenge the sense of hopelessness and apathy that characterized Canadian attitudes toward development by shifting the dominant focus from a perception of problems to a sense of solutions.

In 2001, members of the Africa-Canada Forum (ACF), a coalition of African-focused development organizations, partnered with CCIC to formally explore the images used in fundraising and marketing materials by charitable organizations, particularly child-sponsorship ones. The intent was to “begin a process of reflection and discussion among fundraising and communication staff from ACF and CCIC member organizations” (CCIC, 2008, p. 1), with a focus on images of Africa. In 2005, the scope was broadened to include fundraisers and communication specialists of CCIC member organizations working in all parts of the developing world.

Though change has not come overnight, there have been in-roads. After years of messaging that promoted difference and charity, development organizations are now adopting some new approaches to representation that are relying more on images of self-reliance, progress, and hope. This article examines the problems of representation in development advertising and explores its evolution over a six-year time period using an ideological analysis of select communications materials produced by three child sponsorship organizations (CSOs) in 2005 and 2011: Plan Canada, World Vision Canada, and Christian Children’s Fund Canada. It then proposes framing theory as one possibility for developing more balanced representations and asks whether current advertising practices are more in line with its propositions. While effects are likely too early to measure, there are signs that changes in the representation of people from developing countries are indeed underway and might be having some positive impact.

The dangers of misrepresentation
On the cover of a 2004 issue of Canadaaid, a now retired publication of Christian
Children’s Fund (2004), is the head shot of a beautiful little Black girl. Her hair is tightly braided in dozens of cornrows and her big brown eyes, brimming with tears, stare seechingly into the distance. Her lips turn downward as her cheek leans tiredly into the palm of her hand. This is a very sad child indeed.

And so have gone the representations used by sponsorship agencies. “Human beings … reduced to hollow shells, bloated stomachs, or empty gazes” (Rutherford, 2000, p. 125) is how one scholar describes visuals. “The image of the starving African is said to edify us, sensitize us, mobilize our good will and awaken us from our apathy,” says Michael Maren (1997a, p. 3), a development worker for nearly two decades. Arturo Escobar (1995) suggests that “the body of the malnourished—the starving ‘African …’—is the most striking symbol of the power of the First World over the Third. A whole economy of discourse and unequal power relations is encoded in that body” (p. 103).

Portrayals like these are no accidents. The rationale goes like this: the happy pictures do not attract the money. Nor do complex explanations of why people are suffering. And for agencies in the business of aid, it’s the dollars that count. What matters is that people connect emotionally and that they perceive easy solutions. “Consciousness-raising can come later” (Coulter, 1989, p. 2).

A report summarizing the CCIC discussions (2008) provides insight into why some organizations (including CSOs) support and why others oppose the use of drastic imagery. According to proponents, the photographs are accurate portrayals of the “horrible situations in which people are living. People are starving, children are dying of preventable diseases, people are clambering over trash piles looking for food” (CCIC, 2008, p. 3). If images were modified to present a less horrific picture, the real truth would be obfuscated. Moreover, these groups argue, people in the North have a responsibility to care about suffering throughout the world. Images like these “tap into Canadians’ values of compassion, fairness and respect” (CCIC, 2008, p. 4), and once they are exposed to the real conditions, people can act by giving money. And research has shown, proponents contend, that people give far greater amounts of money in response to appeals that feature individual shots of children and simple messaging. “An appeal that tries to explain the complexity of the situation and show the broader development issues, and which does not show an urgent personal need, will not attract donors. The result will be a less effective fundraising campaign, leaving the organization with fewer resources to support its work: it will be able to do less in the fight against poverty” (CCIC, 2008, p. 6).

These arguments do little to convince development organizations that oppose this kind of representation. As they put it, “pictures of human suffering—images that show people half-naked, crying, sick, desperate—undermine human dignity” (CCIC, 2008, p. 3). What is more, dehumanized imagery may promote racism, portraying “people in the South as being ‘other’—separate from ‘us,’ objects of pity” (p. 3), which might in turn foster the notion that “development problems can only be solved by Northern charity” (p. 5). These images, critics say, “undermine the efforts of CSOs and their partners to create a broader understanding of the underlying structures causing poverty and injustice” (p. 5). And, these same critics allege, while a focus on personal, individual stories may create strong emotional connections with potential donors, the
outcome may not serve everyone well. CCIC cites research suggesting that
when poverty is described in terms of individual victims ... and when context
is ignored, the poor themselves are most often held responsible for their own
plight. Yet when news items include background information about general
trends and poverty is expressed as a collective outcome, people tend to assign
responsibility to societal factors. (p. 5)

Finally, say critics, images that present the same level of misery and hopelessness
year after year only leave Canadians to assume that things are not getting any better
and, by extension, that development work is not very effective (p. 6).

At the heart of the struggle is whether bringing in the money at the expense of a
balanced understanding of the issues has repercussions. As Stuart Hall (1997) says,
“representation is a complex business and, especially when dealing with ‘difference,’
it engages feelings, attitudes and emotions and it mobilizes fears and anxieties in the
viewer, at deeper levels that we can explain in a simple, common-sense way” (p. 226).
Borgerson and Schroeder (2002) argue that, on a cognitive level,
representations often ‘stand in’ for experience as sources of information and
serve as a foundation for future knowledge. Information, sensibility and atti-
tudes gleaned from representations may influence thinking and understand-
ing about people and cultures. Moreover, such influence may affect the way
new experiences and information are interpreted. (p. 571)

For Escobar (1995), “certain representations [can] ... become dominant and shape in-
delibly the ways in which reality is imagined and acted upon.... A certain order of dis-
course produces permissible modes of being and thinking while disqualifying and
even making others impossible” (p. 5). Feminist scholars have linked representations
of women in advertising with perceptions of women’s real-life roles and abilities
(Lerner & Kalof, 1999).

According to Hall, at the core of a “racialized regime of representation” (1997,
p. 249) are stereotypes that “reduce, essentialize, naturalize and fix ‘difference’”
(pp. 258–259). Stereotyping, he says, also creates a
symbolic frontier between the ‘normal’ and the ‘deviant’, the ‘normal’ and
the ‘pathological’, the ‘acceptable’ and the ‘unacceptable’, what ‘belongs’ and
what does not.... It facilitates the ‘binding’ or bonding together of all of Us
who are ‘normal’ into one ‘imagined community’; and sends into symbolic
exile all of Them—‘the Others ... ’ (p. 258)

It is this construction of the Other that fuels our superiority and paternalism. “The
starving African exists as a point in space from which we measure our own wealth, suc-
cess, and prosperity, a darkness against which we can view our own cultural triumphs.
Starvation clearly delineates us from them” (Maren, 1997a, p. 3). This construction of
the Other also perpetuates notions of Western dominance. Chandra Mohanty claims
that most feminist literature on development portrays women in developing countries
by the usual discourse—“ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, fam-
ily-oriented, victimized, etc.” (as cited in Escobar, 1995, p. 8). Their image is set against
what many believe to be true of Western women—modern, free, independent decision-
makers, and in control of their bodies. Mohanty argues that “these representations implicitly assume Western standards as the benchmark against which to measure the situation of Third World women” (as cited in Escobar, 1995, p. 8). The result, Mohanty believes, is a “paternalistic attitude on the part of Western women toward their Third World counterparts and more generally, the perpetuation of the hegemonic idea of the West’s superiority” (as cited in Escobar, 1995, p. 8).

Some in the international development field speculate that damaging representations have negatively influenced Canadians’ support for international development assistance and have compromised their willingness to take meaningful action. In a 1996 address to the Aga Khan Foundation of Canada, for instance, Young remarked that over the prior 20 years, there had been a “marked erosion in public support. Over the previous ten years, the number of people who felt that this country spent too much on aid rose steadily from about 15 per cent to just under 50 per cent of the population” (Young, 1996, p. 2). And by the mid-1990s, only one in ten Canadians felt that the country was not spending enough on aid—down from one-quarter of the population in 1985 (Young, 1996).

Lack of knowledge might be one factor. Historically, Canadians have not known much about international development. A 2000 Earnscliffe study revealed that less than half the population was familiar with government foreign aid policies and less than a quarter were familiar with CIDA. In 2004, more than half of Canadians (55%) said they did not consider themselves to be informed about Canada’s aid program (Environics Research Group, 2004). What is more, Canadians have historically overestimated the amount of foreign aid provided by our government. According to one study, Canadians believed five cents of every dollar spent by the federal government went to Canada’s aid program when, in fact, only between one and two cents were allocated (Environics Research Group, 2004). But of perhaps even greater importance, Canadians have not necessarily understood the connection between international development and the issues that face Canada (Canadian Hunger Foundation, 2002). And an overwhelming majority (82%) of Canadians believe that much aid never gets to the people who need it most (Carin & Smith, 2010).

Finally, while Canadians have donated great sums of money, they have been far less likely to take an activist approach to change. According to one study, the majority of Canadians involved in development activities gave money or purchased fair-trade products. Only 20% joined organizations or renewed their memberships in organizations working in poorer countries, and only 11% participated in a campaign or demonstration to promote the interests of people in poor countries (Environics Research Group, 2004).

Critics contend that discourse produced over many years has focused on the personal at the expense of the political, has exploited difference to solicit our sympathies and chequebooks, and has created the helpless Other to reinforce our privileged status (CCIC, 2008). The result, they maintain, has been a tendency to blame the poor, to undermine our sense that change is possible, to promote skepticism rather than relevance, and to advocate short-term solutions rather than long-term change. The following research helps to illuminate the problem.
An ideological analysis
This ideological analysis of select development materials (see Table 1) is based on the perspective that cultural texts offer a “particular construction of the world rather than a universal, abstract truth” (White, 1992, p. 172). As cultural artifacts, these texts can expose how our values, beliefs, and ideas are embodied within and expressed through an advertising discourse, and they can illustrate the way in which cultural assumptions are reinforced with respect to the developing world.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plan Canada</th>
<th>World Vision Canada</th>
<th>Christian Children’s Fund of Canada</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Annual Report, 2004</td>
<td>• Annual Report, 2004</td>
<td>• Annual Report, 2004 (Canaid)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Every Child Deserves a Chance</td>
<td>• Turning Hurt into Hope, 2005</td>
<td>• Creating a Future of Hope, 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—brochure, 2005</td>
<td>• Every Dollar You Invest, 2005</td>
<td>• Calendar, 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• fosterparentsplan.ca, 2005</td>
<td>• The Hope Initiative, 2005</td>
<td>• ccfcanada.ca, 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Infomercial, 2005</td>
<td>• Annual Report, 2011</td>
<td>• Annual Report, 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Universal Birth Registration, 2005</td>
<td>• Canada is a Song of My Heart</td>
<td>• ChildVoice, 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Annual Report, 2011</td>
<td>—video, 2011</td>
<td>• Jelil-SponsorMe.ca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The Big Picture</td>
<td>• Girl Rescued from Sexual Exploitation—video, 2011</td>
<td>—video, 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—infomercial, 2011</td>
<td>• No More Books in Plastic Bags</td>
<td>• Small Voices, Big Dreams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—catalogue</td>
<td>• Joannie Rochette and Gift of Knowledge—video, 2011</td>
<td>• Appeal to Sponsor a Child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• plancanada.ca, 2011</td>
<td>• Joannie Rochette and the Fish Farmer—video, 2011</td>
<td>by Catriona Le May Doan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Annual Report, 2011</td>
<td>• worldvision.ca, 2011</td>
<td>• ccfcanada.ca, 2011</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I ideological criticism includes a “variety of procedures and methods that emphasize different aspects of the intersections among individuals, systems of representation and the social formation” (White, 1992, p. 169). Different forms of ideological analysis include, but are not limited to, semiotics, genre study, visual analysis, narrative analysis, and critical discourse analysis; these forms of analysis have been used by scholars as they look at different instances of mass media and other texts (see Bishop, 2001, for an ideological analysis of diet product advertising; Haines, Bottorff, McKewan, Barclay, Ptolemy, Carey, & Sullivan, 2010, for a visual analysis of breast cancer messaging; and Mendes, 2010, for a critical discourse analysis of text in Chatelaine magazine during the 1950s). The form of ideological critique employed is borrowed from Rutherford (2000), who relies on a semiotic approach to “understand the construction of signs, differences, and meanings” (p. 75). Contrary to content analysis, which “is based upon the assump-
tion that pictures and other texts contain objective, non-rhetorical meaning that can be measured objectively and literally” (Bristor, Lee, & Hunt, 1995, p. 50), Rutherford’s approach is interpretive and focuses on three processes—totalizing, interpellating, and privatizing—which themselves “seek to transform the consciousness and behavior of the viewer” (Rutherford, 2000, p. 75). It is no accident that Rutherford chooses this form of ideological critique. In his view, language (including text, discourse, and imagery) expresses relations of power and “fashions our worlds, our desires and fears, our identities and enemies” (2000, p. xiv). Civic advocacy, according to Rutherford, is a “specific technology of power” (p. xiv).

Nonetheless, ideological analysis has certain limitations. It is subjective rather than objective. It does not provide insight into the techniques of production or the approach to framing strategies used by the producers of the discourse. And it does not provide results—how audiences have responded and why. As CSO fundraising discourse continues to evolve, these issues will be essential to address.

Data collection
The analysis is performed on two sets of advertising discourse that meet the following three criteria:

• All communication was produced by three CSOs—Plan Canada (PC), World Vision Canada (WVC), and Christian Children’s Fund of Canada (CCFC), the largest child sponsorship organizations in Canada, with the greatest advertising reach.

• Materials were directed to current and potential sponsors. Documents specifically targeting governments and other stakeholders were excluded.

• All materials were reviewed during two time periods—March 2005 and November 2011. The year 2005 was selected as the first period of inquiry because it was then that CCIC began its nationwide investigation of the impact of fundraising images.

Materials were obtained using through three approaches. First, television guides were searched for listings of infomercials from PC, WVC, and CCFC and recorded over a month-long period. In some cases, the name of the organization was not listed in the guide. Rather, the listing simply read “infomercial.” To ensure accuracy, the correct air time was confirmed with the organizations. It should be noted that only 30- or 60-minute infomercials were analyzed. No television commercials were recorded. Second, materials (brochures, annual reports, magazines, gift catalogues, et cetera) were requested from organizations and/or collected through direct mail (unrequested). Third, each organization’s website was reviewed for publications (most are posted online), financials, other kinds of messaging (e.g., letter from the president), media releases, and so forth. Finally, YouTube videos were reviewed during the 2011 analysis (they did not exist in 2005).

Data analysis
Coding took place in two stages. To begin, all materials were recorded based on the following six features: 1) source; 2) type and format (e.g., broadcast, print, or other); 3) time of airing or date of publication; 4) intended audience; 5) length; and 6) overall
theme, narrative, and approach. In the second stage of coding, Rutherford’s thematic
categories—totalizing, interpellating, and privatizing—were applied, and criteria
within them were established as a basis for analysis. Criteria included background of
host; method of information delivery; use of language (rhetoric, nomenclature,
metaphor, tone, et cetera.); narrative themes; portrayal of characters; and visual sym-
bolism such as colour, clothing, layout, and so forth. Findings were recorded for each
text and then compared to one another to identify similarities and differences among
organizations and between the time periods studied.

Findings

TOTALIZING

According to Rutherford (2000), totalizing refers to “the way in which an ideology ex-
presses its will to power and its assertion of control over a text, an act whose success
gives any message a definite and homogenous meaning” (p. 76). In effect, the adver-
tisement searches for textual and ideological closure. There is little ambiguity in hopes
of ensuring a monosemic or closed reading.

One way to promote closure, says Rutherford, is the use of monologue rather than
dialogue. Such is the case in the 2005 infomercials. Both World Vision and Plan Canada
employ a series of speakers—local celebrities, sponsors, and paid organizational lead-
ership—who speak directly to the audience at home and virtually never engage in di-
alogue with the children or families who are in need of help. In the case of World
Vision, the monologue passes from the very White, blonde Susan Hay (a Canadian re-
porter), who hosts the show, to the White sponsors who provide testimonials to the
president of World Vision, who also happens to be White.

In 2011, things are somewhat different. Of the seven World Vision videos examined
on YouTube during November, just three (World Vision, 2011b, 2011c, 2011d) were
hosted by White Westerners. And their time on camera was quite contained. For the
most part, the audience hears from those most affected by famine and poverty, and in
some cases, by community workers such as teachers, who are on the ground every
day. Plan Canada has also made some changes. In The Big Picture, its 2011 infomercial,
there is an unseen narrator—though the voice is clearly Western (Plan Canada, 2011d).
And some of the children do speak now, though their voices are dubbed in English. In
one case, however, we see a child learning English words for parts of the body. Christian
Children’s Fund has not quite made the same progress. Two of the videos posted in
November 2011 are hosted by Catriona Le May Doan, an Olympic champion (CCF,
2011b, 2011c, 2011d). She speaks for the children, whose sad faces we see but whose
voices we never hear. She tells us they only drink dirty water, they might not eat today,
and school is not an option. But if you could sponsor just one of them, she says, then
they all would know help is on the way (Christian Children’s Fund, 2011b).

Besides using monologue, another way to create closure, says Rutherford (2000),
is by creating a clear distinction between the top and the bottom, by defining “the
poor as objects and victims, never the agents of their own salvation” (p. 78). World
Vision’s 2005 infomercial (2005b) opens with Susan Hay in Mozambique. She tells us
repeatedly that she has never before seen such a dry and desolate-looking place.
Behind her are the stereotypical images of hunger: distended bellies, dirty children,
and lifeless sand. We meet a family. We are told that they are industrious, they make things to sell, but alas, there are no buyers. The family has absolutely nothing. Still, she assures us, the children are adorable. Mischievous, in fact. They want to laugh and play (one plays with Hay’s gold watch). But life is hardly playful because they spend all day looking for food, the supply of which has run out weeks ago. The camera cuts to a child asleep on the leg of his mother while she cracks the nuts that will be dinner. She knows it is not enough, but it is the best she can do for her family. How long, asks Hay, can these children survive on leaves and nuts? The mother is worried about the children (she has already lost one to starvation), and she is praying someone will come along and help them.

In other words, she is praying for our help. Because she cannot help herself. Nor can anyone like her help, despite the fact that “the overwhelming numbers of aid workers are Black Africans … . The central role that African villagers play in the improvement of their own lives is rarely, if ever, acknowledged by Western charity advertisements, newspapers or television newscasts” (Rutherford, 2000, p. 135).

Creating the difference between us and them, top and bottom, means that some qualities are honoured at the expense of others. And those qualities, according to Rutherford (2000), are “masculinity, whiteness, and expertise … [as well as the] Kennedyesque brand of liberalism where the privileged strove to help the down and out” (p. 78). In Plan Canada’s 2005 infomercial (2005c), our host is Rod Black, a Canadian sportscaster, the epitome of White maleness. He is positioned as saviour and, as in Rutherford’s analysis, the “startling contrast is between the empowered white expert and the disempowered people of color” (Rutherford, 2000, p. 135). In one 2005 PC storyline [2005c], a foster parent from Canada visits an orphaned family in Africa. She brings gifts—paper, pencils, and baseballs. We watch as the three boys, lined up in a neat row, accept them, but even the carefully staged filming cannot mask the confusion on their faces. She comes into their home, a ravaged little hut. There are holes in the roof. She is shown their beds of torn plastic sheets and told that the boys often go two days without eating. The sponsor breaks down in tears in front of the children, who look at her in bewilderment. She concludes on behalf of all of us that this is not right. When she gets back to Canada, she will help. Noblesse oblige and the status quo have been maintained.

Cut to today. Plan Canada’s 2011 infomercial (2011d), The Big Picture, seems to vacillate between traditional fundraising discourse and stunning portrayals of self-reliance, local expertise, and enduring accomplishment. On the one hand, the advertising leaves out the most glaring images of starvation and children lying helpless. But the focus remains on the misery of the children’s lives and on the decent future that will never come. We are introduced to a series of children who, at the youngest ages, work 12-hour days sorting coffee beans and searching for uncontaminated water. We are told that all they want is to go to school, but they cannot. And their parents cannot help them. So we must. In fact, we are told, Plan Canada is planning to change the world and we can be a part of it, if we sponsor a child. Then, suddenly, the story cuts to a remarkable clip of a local worker. “Ma Africa” is an Ethiopian Mother Teresa who saves orphaned slum children and has worked miracles. We also meet former child recipients of Plan’s work,
now grown up. One is a lawyer and another is a nurse. They tell us about their lives
today, in their own words, in their own voices. They tell stories about their families,
their struggles, their achievements, and their plans for the future. This segment is a ra-
dical departure from only six years before in terms of both content and tone.

**INTERPELLATING**

Rutherford (2000) defines interpellation, or hailing, as

the process whereby a message tries to position individuals, to define their
subjectivity, even to provide a social identity. Hailing serves, above all, to sat-
ify people with an illusion of autonomy and centrality that suits the purposes
of ideology. (p. 79)

Interpellation allows us to take the place of the Other. “Try on these identities,
such ads invite, and see what it is like to experience life in a different kind of world”
(Rutherford, 2000, p. 80). In its 2005 infomercial, the textual surrogate is the president
and CEO of Plan Canada (2005c). She takes us to meet an 11-year-old girl who has been
orphaned by HIV/AIDS. She is being raised by her grandmother, who has leprosy. We
see her scars and we shudder, afraid that we might ever look like that. The president
tells us that she has been wanting to meet this little girl. Yet we do not meet the little
girl, for she is voiceless. It is the president who tells her story. Then we are told that
this girl should not be the one doing the parenting; she needs to be parented. We must
be the parents. And for only a dollar a day, we can be. The president is now teary and
her voice quivers. From this moment on, she tells us, this little girl’s life can change
through you and through Plan Canada.

Thus, our identities are constructed for us. We are surrogate parents, loving bene-
factors, heart-broken observers, self-satisfied saviours. Yet what is happening, says
Rutherford (2000), is that we are being “hailed … as voyeurs, looking in on the misery
and suffering of another. Unlike consumer advertising, this propaganda [is] not about
us, about somewhere we would like to be or someone we would like to emulate”
(Rutherford, 2000, p. 125). “‘We don’t pay to join in, we pay to keep away’” remarks
one journalist (as cited in Rutherford, 2000, p. 125).

In today’s advertising, we are still voyeurs. In a November 2011 World Vision video
(2011e), “Girl Rescued from Sexual Exploitation,” a White celebrity (Tanya Memme)
introduces us to Chanty, an orphan forced into prostitution. But the difference now is
that we get to know Chanty. She has a voice, and she speaks throughout (dubbed in
English). She tells her own story directly. Yet we are still told by the host that Chanty—
like so many others—has been saved by our support.

**PRIVATIZING**

According to Rutherford (2000), privatizing is the act of converting the “collective cri-
sis into a personal problem and the social issue into a moral ill” (p. 81). It does so by
simplifying the situation, stereotyping individuals and groups of people, and “focusing
attention on one aspect of an issue in order to offer a concrete solution” (p. 81). In the
case of all three sponsorship agencies in 2005, the focus is on the desperate need for
food, shelter, and education because those are the things money can buy. The fallout
of this strategy is twofold. First, as Maren says, “the problems in developing countries
are not about food shortages. They are about political and economic problems. But that’s more complicated than messages which say ‘this baby is starving; send money and we’ll bring him food’” (1997b). Second, because sending money is the only constructed response to the problem, we are never told what else Canadians might do to make a difference: write a letter, protest, or understand our interdependence. We are simply asked, over and over again, to send the cheque.

In fact, says Rutherford (2000), decontextualization is a major feature of these advertisements. They avoid controversy by neglecting to tell us about the impact of class, race, trade policies, the global corporate agenda, neoliberalism, and privatization. No one must be offended, particularly governments who are major supporters of these organizations or corporations whose staff are often foster parents. Representations must be trivialized because insurmountable problems will only beget an overwhelmed public. And that will not lead to donations. The single mention in all 2005 print and television advertising pertaining to the broader context comes from Plan Canada when its president remarks that if we can spend billions fighting a war against terrorism, then surely we can spend something fighting HIV/AIDS (Plan Canada, 2005d).

Privatizing, according to Rutherford (2000), also entails a transfer of responsibility—primarily to the individual. In large part, this is about blaming the victim. Although none of the materials analyzed explicitly suggests that the poor are at fault, the perpetual presentation of misery, with little information about the incredible strides already made in the face of overwhelming odds, leaves little opportunity to think about much else. Success is measured by our sponsorship dollars—not what those in the developing world have accomplished without our help. It is hardly surprising, then, that according to research, people were more likely to attribute world poverty to the poor themselves (Campbell, Carr, & MacLachlan, 2001). In a 2005 brochure (Plan Canada, 2005b), we are told that Susan was abandoned when she was only an eight-month-old baby. Her mother deserted her. And in a 2005 World Vision story of a single father of three girls, he cannot care for his children because the crops are failing (2005d). His youngest is malnourished and has malaria. Water comes from a watering hold filled with disease. The girls do not go to school because he cannot afford the uniform. He has the will but lacks the means to help his children. The story in a Christian Children’s Fund 2011 video (2011c), Jelil-SponsorMe.ca, is much the same. Jelil is without parents. His father died and his mother left him, and his only remaining caregiver, his grandmother, is dying. He needs to know love, and with our sponsorship, he will. Plan Canada’s 2011 infomercial is virtually verbatim (2011d). In The Big Picture, the water is contaminated. The children cannot go to school. And so they walk for miles a day, care for their baby siblings though they are only babies themselves, and their single mother can hardly do anything at all.

But we can. For only the cost of a cup of coffee a day.

Reframing development fundraising discourse
Is it possible to introduce new kinds of representations that build on less trivialized notions of development so as to transform public cynicism and charity into real engagement? Framing theory provides a possible framework. Developed by social movement theorists (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986) and based on symbolic
interactionism, collective action frames are symbolic constructions designed to “articulate “the ‘world out there’ by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions” (p. 137). In effect, ideas are cast in such a way that attract adherents and mobilize action. They are articulated in a manner that “involves accenting or highlighting some issues, events or beliefs as being more salient than others” (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 619).

Framing theory addresses two linked questions. Why do some frames resonate more than others, and why are some more effective at mobilizing action? One factor to account for the variability is “relative salience” (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 619), which has several dimensions. The first is centrality, which says “the more central or salient the espoused beliefs, ideas and values[,] … the greater the probability of mobilization” (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 621). As it stands now, it is questionable whether development fundraising speaks to the values of its audiences.

According to a series of studies done in the 1990s, most Canadians are surprisingly united in their values: compassion leading to collective responsibility; democracy; freedom; equality, and a moral community (Young, 1996, p. 4). More than a decade and a half later, not much has changed. A 2011 poll (Chase, 2011) showed that an overwhelming number of Canadians and newcomers share values that include “gender equality” and “tolerance of others.” Yet much of development advertising speaks not at all to these values. Instead, it undermines a sense of equality by positioning the West as saviours, and it promotes individual obligation rather than collective responsibility. “You can make a difference,” we are told. Christian Children’s Fund 2005-2010 tagline was “The Power of One.”

The second dimension contributing to a frame’s salience is experiential commensurability (Benford & Snow, 2000): the more congruent frames are with the personal, everyday experiences of the audience, the greater their salience and the more likely the mobilization. Frames that are too distant from the lives of audiences have less salience. We see little that bridges the lives of people in developing and developed countries. When everyday experiences of the Other are portrayed as perpetual cycles of famine, war, earthquakes, and disease, how can we relate? Maren (1997a) points out just how constructed the advertisements were during the 1992 Somali crisis:

I made a point of going to Reuters in Nairobi where they have all the raw footage. I watched … hours and hours of tape. And what you see is the camera on ‘The Starving Baby’, which was the footage edited into the news program, but then the camera pans away or pulls back, and you see there's people going about their lives. There’s people driving cars, smoking cigarettes, and so on. What you can do with a camera … is you can compress the hunger. You can package it, frame it, and it always looks worse than it is. (p. 213)

Maren’s aim is not to dispute the suffering but to argue that messages are framed in certain ways for particular purposes. And it is to suggest that we are not that different, them and us. We have places and things that connect us, and we have shared experiences and ideas.

Framing theory also addresses the notion of efficacy in its bid to determine frame resonance. Briefly, “one’s level of self-efficacy concerns the extent to which an individ-
ual believes he is capable of averting the threat by enacting one or more recommended behaviors” (Roberto, Meyer, Johnson, Janan, & Atkin, 2000, p. 162). As discussed earlier, Canadians do not tend to feel that their actions can make a difference. Yet unless a person “believes both that he or she is capable of enacting the recommended behaviors and the recommended behaviors work, he or she will be unlikely to engage in the behaviors” (Roberto et al., 2000, p. 163). In other words, until Canadians believe that their actions make a difference, and that development aid is indeed effective, participation will be limited.

Framing theory suggests that the more urgent and severe the frame, the less efficacy there is (Benford & Snow, 2000). In a study exploring the kinds of messages that promote positive response to social issues, researchers found that when issue awareness and concern are high, “sick baby” appeals (or those presenting the problem as threatening or severe) make the problems seem insurmountable and reduce the sense of efficacy. Rather, a “well baby” appeal might be more effective.

The heart of the “well-baby” appeal is an affirmation of the individual’s action and its potential for significant effect (i.e., the baby is sick, but you can make it well). Thus, whereas the “sick-baby” appeal works by increasing concern for the problem, the “well-baby” appeal works by increasing the belief that one can do something to solve the problem. (Obermiller, 1995, p. 55)

Canadians already have a deep concern for global poverty. Now they need to know what they can do about it, and they need to feel that their actions are useful.

In the context of framing theory, then, child sponsorship agencies seem to have been working at cross-purposes. Their assumption has been that emotionally intense images that portray people in developing countries as hopeless and helpless will ignite our pity and induce us to give more. In fact, framing theory suggests the opposite. It proposes that people will be more likely to mobilize if messages are presented in ways that respond to their values, that speak to their everyday experiences, and that support their sense of efficacy. Thus, frames that rest upon linkages and interdependencies will be more useful than those that create distance and difference. Frames that present the social and political context will be more useful than those that rely only on the personal. Frames that demonstrate progress will underscore how development is working. The great irony is that the very same frames that might help to promote the dignity and accomplishments of those in developing countries, that might endow a sense of partnership and connectedness, and that might engage us not as consumers but as citizens are those frames that might help fundraisers generate even more dollars and mobilize even greater action.

Where to from here?
The good news is that, little by little, child sponsorship agencies are moving in the right direction. Largely (but not completely) gone are images in their communications of horrific decay and starvation. We are hearing increasingly from the children themselves and, in some cases, from local workers. In two 2011 videos (World Vision, 2011f, 2011g), we finally see a mother speaking in her native tongue (subtitled in English). We see a medical centre stocked with medicines and beds, and a nurse speaks directly to us. We
see a school with books and supplies, attended by kids dressed in clean clothing, and again, a teacher talks to us. And there are far more instances of advertising that showcase the people of the developing world working on their own behalf as they farm fields, sell goods, prepare meals, and lie down to sleep in a safe, comfortable shelter.

In a groundbreaking video by Christian Children’s Fund (2011d), Small Voices, Big Dreams, a survey is conducted among children of the developing world. They are asked what they want to be when they grow up. The answers? A lawyer, a doctor, a painter, the president of their country. Not much different than what Canadian children might answer (and precisely the principle of experiential commensurability discussed earlier). The kids are asked—and answer in their native language or in English—what makes them feel safest. Again, like kids here they tell us it is being home with their families. They are asked what makes them happiest. Their friends, their families, playing games, they say. What is so remarkable here is that for almost the first time, we see how alike kids are when it comes to their hopes, their worries, their dreams. And we realize, without being told, that we must support these kids because they are our children. It is not about pity, but about connection.

Perhaps most astounding is the “Because I Am a Girl” campaign began in 2009. Defined as “a social movement to unleash the power of girls and women to claim a brighter future for girls in the developing world” (Plan Canada, 2011b), the program takes an entirely new approach. It connects issues of discrimination, sexism, and patriarchy in the developed and developing worlds. It speaks not in a language of charity and paternalism, but in a nomenclature of rights. The campaign declares: “Girls have the right to be educated. Girls have the right to eat. Girls have the right to be safe. Girls’ rights are human rights” (Plan Canada, 2011c). The campaign offers not only ways to give money, but also ways to join a movement, sign petitions, become ambassadors for change, or start a local girls’ club where the local-global link around issues of common concern are continuously explored (nutrition, body image, self-esteem, finance, et cetera). Videos are fact-based and documentary in style and tone—dramatically different from the images of tragedy we are so accustomed to—and showcase actual dialogue between girls here and abroad. The videos speak to potential and progress, and we join because we feel empowered. In fact, 106,000 of us are Facebook fans and 8,000 are Twitter followers (Plan Canada, 2011b).

Young (1996) has said that “twenty-five years or so of development communication have failed to produce a critical mass of public understanding about the issues, urgencies and realities of development, and the presumed support that would come from such an understanding” (p. 1). Perhaps that is changing now. While the “starving baby” appeal is not yet a thing of the past, its presence is waning. And while it is still too early to measure results, there are hopeful indications that a new kind of discourse is having desired effects. A 2009 study shows, for instance, that just less than half of Canadians knew of or could state the purpose of CIDA (Stewart, 2009). That number is up substantially from the one-quarter who were familiar with CIDA a decade ago. And according to a poll conducted in 2010, “77 per cent of Canadians think it is important for Canada to be known as a world leader in finding solutions to reduce poverty,” while “61 per cent agree that Canada should increase the amount of money...
it currently spends on international aid programs” (Make Poverty History, 2010). Still, problems persist. According to a recent report, many still view “Canada's five billion dollars in foreign aid investment disappearing into a 'black box' where we invest but rarely have clarity on what we’ve achieved” (Haga, 2012).

Perceptions will not change overnight. But with the right kind of representation, perhaps they will change over time. What CSOs plan to do next as they track results is well worth investigating.

Notes
1. World Vision Canada, begun as part of an international effort in 1957, is a Christian relief, development, and advocacy organization working with children, families, and communities to overcome poverty and injustice and is by far Canada’s largest child sponsorship organization (CSO). The vast majority of revenue (87%) comes from donations from the public, including cash and gifts-in-kind. The remainder comes from government and other grants. WVC is governed by a board of directors made up of health care professionals, government officials, academics, and industry and religious leaders. It is a great proponent of celebrity spokespersons because it believes celebrities have the capacity to motivate the public to become involved; its roster includes Jann Arden, Tom Cochrane, Alex Trebek, and Mike Clemens, among others. In addition to its sponsorship programs, WVC undertakes advocacy campaigns around relevant child issues, such as slavery (World Vision Canada, 2011a). For more information, consult http://www.worldvision.ca.

2. Christian Children's Fund of Canada is an independent, Canadian-based, child-centred international development organization governed by a board of directors and inspired by Christ's example of caring for the poor. Established more than 50 years ago, it has as its vision a “world where every child has a voice and the ability to achieve their full potential.” CCFC is part of the international ChildFund Alliance and with them is a major proponent of child rights—the right to a name, to parental care, to education, and the right not to be forced into child labour or child marriage (CCFC, 2011a). For more information, consult http://www.ccfcanada.ca.

3. Plan Canada, part of Plan International, is a child-centred community development organization that defines itself as a "global movement for change, mobilizing millions of people around the world to support social justice for children in developing countries." Founded in 1937, it too is governed by an illustrious board of directors, yet unlike its counterparts, it is not a faith-based organization. Recent campaigns include “Because I am a Girl,” “Learn Without Fear” (issues include school-based violence and sexual exploitation) and “Universal Birth Registration” to overcome discrimination associated with registering girl babies. Celebrities play an integral role in its communications (Plan Canada, 2011a). For more information, consult http://www.plancanada.ca.

References


World Vision Canada. (2005a). History. URL: [http://www.worldvision.ca/About-Us/History/Pages/History](http://www.worldvision.ca/About-Us/History/Pages/History) [January 15, 2013].


World Vision Canada. (2011f, December 8). *Canada is a song of my heart* [Video file]. URL: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K4vreCdHoH](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K4vreCdHoH) [January 4, 2013].
