

# Finding Frames: New ways to engage the UK public in global poverty

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# Background

This report is the product of a six-month study initiated by Oxfam, and supported by the Department for International Development (DFID). The aim of the study was to explore the potential for frames theory to be used as a practical tool to re-engage the UK public in global poverty – an objective not pursued in concert by the development sector since *Make Poverty History* in 2005.

In exploring the uses of frames theory, we have built on work by Tom Crompton at WWF-UK, who began the task of linking values to frames and thereby suggesting new ways forward for engaging the public in environmental issues and actions. An important finding from his *Common Cause* paper is that there is a common set of values that can motivate people to tackle a range of ‘bigger than self’ problems, including the environment and global poverty. The implication is that large coalitions can – and must – be built across third-sector organisations to bring about a values change in society. This report responds to that call.



# Executive Summary

The basic argument of this paper is that there is a problem in terms of the UK public's levels of engagement with global poverty. Simply put, people in the UK understand and relate to global poverty no differently now than they did in the 1980s. This is the case 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.

By many measures we have made amazing strides forward in recent years, but the public have largely been left behind. The result is that we operate within social and, by extension, political conditions that are precarious in the immediate term and incommensurate to the challenges of poverty and climate change in the medium and long term.

This study looks at what can be learned from values (the guiding principles that individuals use to judge situations and determine their courses of action) and frames (the chunks of factual and procedural knowledge in the mind with which we understand situations, ideas and discourses in everyday life). Values and frames offer ways to look at the problem of public engagement with global poverty and to identify possible solutions.

If we apply values and frames theory to the question of how to re-engage the public, we come up with some compelling insights into the impact of our existing practices and some striking solutions to the problems that these reveal. They may not be perfect solutions, and they bring with them significant challenges. But we believe they offer something valuable and timely: a fresh perspective. The persistent problem of public engagement suggests it is time for the development sector to transform its practices radically. Values and frames offer pathways to potential solutions that should be debated across the sector, and now.

## **The problem**

- Public engagement matters because the UK public has a vital role to play in tackling global poverty. This role can be described as having three dimensions. First, the public provides a licence for NGOs and government to take immediate action on global poverty (in supporting public spending on development aid, for example).

Second, individuals make a positive difference through the actions they take in their daily lives (eg giving money, buying ethical or fairtrade products, volunteering and lobbying). Third, public support opens up a space for debate in society, which in turn gives government the opportunity to make the systemic changes required to tackle the causes of global poverty.

- The UK public is stuck in terms of how it engages with global poverty. Since 1997 around 25% of the UK public have reported being ‘very concerned’ about global poverty. In 2005, as Make Poverty History built up, these levels reached 32%. But they have fallen ever since, and are now back at 24%. Meanwhile the segmentation model used by the Department for International Development (DFID) suggests that the proportion of the most engaged segment of the public has shrunk by a third since April 2008. It now stands at only 14%.
- The quality of public engagement is also low: *“the public as a whole remain uninterested and ill-informed”*. Even engaged people can’t sustain a conversation about debt, trade or aid for long.
- The causes of poverty are seen as internal to poor countries: famine, war, natural disasters, bad governance, over-population and so on. The dominant paradigm has been labelled the Live Aid Legacy, characterised by the relationship of ‘Powerful Giver’ and ‘Grateful Receiver’. Public perceptions have been stuck in this frame for 25 years. As one respondent said in recent research: *“What’s happened since Live Aid? I was at school then. Now I’m 36 and nothing has really changed.”*
- The practices of the development sector are strongly implicated in the state of public engagement. Data on voluntary income suggest that increasing incomes have been gained by changing the nature of engagement: by turning members into supporters, and setting them at arm’s length. In the social movement literature, today’s NGOs are described as ‘protest businesses’, and their model of public engagement is called ‘cheap participation’ (characterised by low barriers to entry, engagement and exit – all of which generate high churn). The sector’s engagement models have achieved big numbers and ever-increasing incomes, but with what impact on the quality of public engagement?
- Make Poverty History exemplifies these themes. On the one hand, it was a spectacular success: a mass mobilisation with near universal awareness. On the other hand, it changed nothing for the UK public. The transformative potential offered by the rallying cry of ‘justice not charity’ went unheard, in part because it was unfamiliar and hard to comprehend, and also because it was drowned out by the noise of celebrities, white wristbands and pop concerts.

- Our reading of the Make Poverty History campaign suggests that the prevailing ‘transaction frame’ (in which support for tackling poverty is understood simply as making donations to charities) proved too strong. Meanwhile all the things that made the campaign ‘mass’ reinforced the consumerist values that make the transaction frame so dominant. In the end, Live8 reminded everyone of 1985; in the public mind, Make Poverty History became the slogan for Live8, and the Live Aid Legacy was (inadvertently) reinforced.
  - The Make Poverty History case study demonstrates that frames and values can be powerful theoretical lenses through which to see problems. The rest of this paper explores these theories further. It also investigates where some of the solutions might lie, if a values and frames approach is adopted.
- Towards solutions**
- Values are powerful guiding principles that are foundational to humans’ motivational systems. Empirical research shows that they correlate strongly with patterns of behaviour. People who have stronger ‘self-transcendent’ values tend to engage in more pro-social behaviours, and sustain that engagement over time. This suggests that if the development sector wants to widen or extend public engagement, we should appeal primarily or even exclusively to people’s self-transcendent motivations. If we appeal to their self-interest, they will only become more self-interested, and less likely to support pro-social campaigns in the longer term.
  - A large body of cross-cultural research indicates that there are relatively few human values, and that these can be clustered into ten types. They are all inter-related, such that changes in one affect others. Values types can be plotted in a circle of compatible and conflicting values known as a circumplex. If you reinforce values on one side of this circumplex, you will suppress values on the other side. The values the NGO sector is interested in when it campaigns on ‘bigger than self’ problems (such as global poverty and environment issues) are primarily of the type called Universalism. This includes the values of Equality and Social Justice, as well as Unity with Nature. The antagonistic values to these on the circumplex are known collectively as the Power and Achievement values, including Wealth and Status.
  - Frames offer one way of activating positive values. They have a rich academic heritage, having first come to prominence in the mid-1970s. Put simply, we understand things, mostly subconsciously, using frames. In language, for example, our ‘frame’ for a word is not just its dictionary meaning but also all the other things we know, feel or have experienced in relation to it. When we hear a particular word or encounter a specific situation, the dictionary meaning and all those other bits of knowledge and experience are activated in our brains. This is the ‘frame’ for a word or scene – and hence it is thought that frames can activate values.

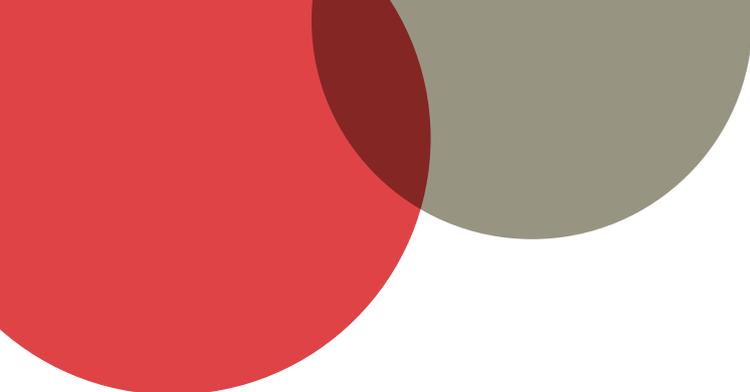
- Since 2000, frames have begun to be used as practical tools, particularly by cognitive linguists such as George Lakoff. Lakoff's work on 'cognitive policy' in the US has applied frames theory to political problems. He split out the frames concept into 'deep frames' and 'surface frames', the distinction being that deep frames essentially represent whole worldviews. Deep frames connect to values systems and hence are more foundational and abstract than surface frames. Surface frames are closer to the 'simple' meanings of words – not just the dictionary definition, but the whole 'chunk' of related knowledge. This theory can teach us much about which frames we should use in our messages, but it can also help us to identify the deep frames around which we can organise our strategies and practices.

- The literature on cognitive frames does not directly connect with the concerns of campaigners on global poverty. The evidence base for how frames work is weak when compared to the weight of empirical data that lies behind values theory. There is still much to be done to develop the main measurement methodology (discourse analysis) into a campaign evaluation tool. Because of these limitations we employed an exploratory methodology in this study. We held a 'staged conversation' with senior development NGO campaigns staff, and had it observed by a cognitive frames analyst from the US. Working together, we have identified some positive and negative deep frames which seem to be at work in the practices and discourses of UK development NGOs.

- The negative deep frames we identified include the 'rational actor' frame, the 'elite governance' frame and the 'moral order'

frame. These frames are defined in the paper below, but it is worth summarising one of them as an example. The 'moral order' frame holds that nature is moral and that natural hierarchies of power are, by extension, also moral. Power then becomes bound up with a very particular conception of morality: man above nature, Christians above non-Christians, whites above non-whites. Such a frame underpins notions of mission, and what it is to be a charity. By making inferences based on deep frames like the 'moral order' frame, we can suggest that alternative positive frames could include the 'embodied mind' frame, the 'participatory democracy' frame, and an emerging frame that relates to 'non-hierarchical networks'.

- Working from positive deep frames, we inferred some surface frames that could activate those deep frames in the context of global poverty. Applying frames theory, it is striking that some of the words that should be avoided are right at the heart of how the development sector describes itself – words such as 'development', 'aid' and 'charity'. To take just the first of these, 'development' is a problem because it activates the 'moral order' deep frame in which 'undeveloped' nations are like backward children who can only grow up (develop) by following the lessons given by 'adult' nations higher up the moral order. A variety of different frames for development are proposed in academic literature, including most famously 'development as freedom' (Amartya Sen) and AK Giri's challenging thesis of 'development as responsibility'. A frames approach has the potential to transform everything about an organisation and its practices. Getting the surface framing right is part of this transformational change process.



## Implications

- The implications that we have drawn from our work so far will need to be refined and tested through further research. We should not assume that they will lead us to uncontested solutions; there are likely to be both theoretical and practical problems in adhering strictly to the values and frames prescriptions identified here. The development sector will need to come together if we are to find a way to break the current lock-in of public engagement.
- Rebalancing the dominant values in society is a potentially formidable task. It is likely to require more than the will of a single NGO or even the entire development sector. But it is not an insurmountable challenge. We are not proposing the creation and introduction of an entirely new set of values. Instead frames and values theory suggests that transformational change can be achieved simply by reinforcing the positive values which people already hold: by changing the level of importance accorded to particular values relative to others.
- Some of those who are resistant to the proposed programme of change may object to these ideas on the grounds of mind manipulation. We should counter any such charges upfront, by stating that there is no such thing as values-neutral communications, campaigns or policy. Every message and activity activates and strengthens values. Those values and frames that are dominant in society are so, in some considerable part, because of the

activation and strengthening undertaken by other actors, most obviously companies and marketers. The evidence strongly suggests that if the self-enhancing values of achievement, power and hedonism are activated and strengthened – as they are by consumer marketing – then the positive values of universalism and benevolence are actively suppressed. In other words, the social and political scales are tipped significantly against the emergence of the systemic changes NGOs are interested in. Meanwhile, the deep frames we discuss are already out there in society, and at work in how we think. We are not advocating the forcible replacement of frames, but instead drawing attention to the frames which are dominant in our culture, and showing how we, as practitioners, have choices about the frames we activate through our words and deeds.

- Most importantly, this paper does not provide answers. It is in keeping with the frames we advocate that no organisation or group of organisations should set themselves up as the authority on which frames others should use. It is for the sector to find ways to negotiate the tensions we identify. Ultimately, we see change as a process of reflective practice, pursued through deliberation and debate. The public themselves should also be involved in the collective task of finding new frames for development.

- The implications outlined in this report should serve as a starting point for the debate. They include the following:
  - We need to shift the balance of NGO public engagement activities away from ‘transactions’ and towards ‘transformations’. This means placing less emphasis on ‘£5 buys...’ appeals and simple campaigning actions, and more emphasis on providing supporters with opportunities to engage increasingly deeply over time through a ‘supporter journey’.
  - In online campaigns and communications, similar principles apply. It is important to move to models where clicktivism is a small and complementary tactic that supports in-depth engagement, and not the dominant model it is at the moment. In order to engage people with the complexities of global poverty, developing opportunities for more meaningful action over the longer term should be the focus.
  - Models of communication should be based on genuine dialogue. There need to be opportunities for supporters and practitioners to deliberate together.
  - There should be serious reflection about whether, when and how we use forms of words that have come to define and sometimes undermine the public perception of NGOs and their work – words such as ‘aid’, ‘charity’ and ‘development’.
  - Celebrities should be used with extreme care in campaigns, given the strong links between celebrity culture, consumer culture and the values of self-interest.
  - Charity shops should also try to distance themselves from consumer culture. They should return to their roots by presenting themselves as places for giving more than buying, and emphasising their role in closing up loops of consumption.

- If, for short-term reasons, NGOs choose to trade on more self-interested motivations, for instance to earn revenue or engage new supporters, then they must do so. But all the time they should be mindful of the collateral damage these tactics will cause to the supporter base in the longer term. Such tactics should only be employed as part of a considered, longer-term strategy for building public engagement with development – a strategy founded on positive values.
- This agenda should also be pursued with others beyond the development sector – ideally including the Government, whose practices and policies are instrumental in determining the dominant values and frames in society. There is an opportunity in particular for DFID to play a key convening role that enables otherwise financially competitive NGOs to debate and plan together using values and frames perspectives. Tom Crompton’s Common Cause paper, and working group, has already set in motion a process for wider debate across the third sector that DFID could respond to.

This paper is intended to spark and invigorate that debate. It provides a potential focal point around which to begin building informal networks and ‘safe spaces for dialogue’. It also highlights the grave consequences if we do not act. Recent qualitative research conducted for the Independent Broadcasting Trust (IBT) has found that young people aged 14 to 20 are “*relatively informed but broadly disengaged*” on issues of global poverty, and have inherited a sense of ‘development fatigue’ from the media and their parents. We believe there is an urgent need for action if we are to break the cycle of disengagement that is already showing signs of engulfing the next generation.