

In this section, Howard Davies responds to issue 8's discussion on Accountability by highlighting questions facing media practitioners.

Accountability in the media

The discussion on accountability in issue 8 raised many interesting points, not least that many leading NGOs are developing strategies for assessing the efficacy of their programmes in terms of their advocacy and accountability. The paternalistic attitude adopted by some aid agencies towards their development and emergency work has for the most part been proven outmoded and inappropriate. Simon Harris's article describing the Listening surveys initiative, conducted by Oxfam GB and SCF UK with displaced people in Sri Lanka, is an indicator that innovative practices to assess accountability are being successfully and imaginatively employed.

This commitment has been simultaneously reflected in the attitudes of the communications departments in the larger NGOs. Photographers and writers are constantly encouraged to challenge the stereotypes that their images and words may support and, through interviews, to give a voice to people who in the past have often remained nameless faces in a photograph.

Aid agencies like SCF have published clear guidelines both for the photographers who take pictures for them and for those who use them, such as designers. These guidelines address a range of representational issues including the misuse of images by selective cropping or inaccurate captioning, techniques for too long employed to subvert the meaning of images. Even before the advent of digital manipulation, the old adage of the 'camera never lies' had become an evident falsehood with numerous examples of manipulation. Now with the technical ability to alter images convinc-

ingly so readily available it is more important than ever that media practitioners act responsibly.

Sadly this attitude is not always prevalent in the mainstream media where pressures, such as deadlines, result in unsatisfactory compromises. A UK broadsheet published a photograph I had taken of a Vietnamese refugee woman and child in a Hong Kong camp to accompany an article about the poor living conditions of Filipino maids in the former colony. Another picture editor, at the Daily Mirror, while viewing my pictures of Somalia asked me for a few prints for the 'famine file'.

It is not just the broadsheets who can have such a cavalier attitude to images. A refugee group used a photograph I had taken of an Assyrian Christian refugee girl in New Zealand to accompany the story of an Iranian Muslim girl in the UK. By altering the ethnicity, nationality, religion and country of exile, a disservice was done to the family. Only after long discussion had the family agreed to their children being photographed, in the hope that it might create a better awareness of their plight.

Oxfam encourages a responsible attitude in the photographers who document their development and emergency work. This includes an understanding that the gathering of background information and interviews takes time and will inevitably compromise to some degree the photographer's ability to produce images. That is preferable, however, to the photographer who speaks to no one, taking photographs which have no context or background.

Last year, following the initial exodus of refugees from Kosovo, I had the opportunity, through Oxfam, to document the

lives of a refugee family where two of the three sons had been disabled with a degenerative illness. The children had previously attended a disability centre which Oxfam had supported for many years in Pristina, well known for its radical advocacy of disability rights. Through extensive interviews and over several days we were able to build up a picture (in a much fuller sense) of the family's life in the camp, and of some of the particular problems faced by people with disabilities in a refugee crisis.

Lack of accountability by photographers and journalists can have severe repercussions. On an assignment to Pakistan to cover the Afghan refugee camps, I was warned by the UNHCR press officer of the inappropriateness of photographing young Afghan girls. The previous year, despite having been similarly warned, a photojournalist snatched a picture of a young Afghan refugee girl while she was bathing by a river. The photo subsequently appeared on the cover of a major news magazine. The local Mujahideen became aware of the photograph and, with the name of the camp helpfully supplied in the caption, duly found the girl and reportedly executed her for the disgrace she had caused Islam.

Failure to address accountability may not always have such extreme consequences but the issues it raises, whether for the journalist or aid worker, remain the same: issues that cannot be ignored.

Howard Davies is a freelance photojournalist who has been documenting the lives of refugees and asylum seekers for more than twelve years. A website featuring many of his photographs can be found at www.exileimages.co.uk.