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**Between Mission and Manipulation: Ethical Dilemmas in NGO Fundraising  
Imagery**

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## Abstract

This master's thesis debates the ethical and unethical fundraising strategies, techniques, and practices that NGOs employ to promote their work. Against a widening global funding gap, many NGOs rely on emotionally charged appeals to attract donor attention. One technique to evoke strong emotions is the use of images depicting extreme poverty and suffering, known as 'poverty porn.' Despite well-documented consequences, from reinforcing harmful stereotypes to eroding dignity and the risk of compassion fatigue, the practice persists in some NGO fundraising. This raises a central moral dilemma: if 'poverty porn' is ethically indefensible for NGOs, yet donors are primarily responsive to it, what images can be used for fundraising, and where should the ethical line be drawn? This question becomes especially relevant when images of children are involved, given also the specific legal boundaries that apply.

Employing a qualitative methodology, combining literature review and interviews with NGO practitioners, this thesis moves beyond establishing that 'poverty porn' exists to explaining how and why it persists. Findings demonstrate that the problem is structural: responsibility is displaced onto institutional funders and donors; organizations draw advantageous comparisons with their competitors; and as long as the sector's overall attitude toward this type of imagery remains unchanged, individual sensitivity will not produce industry-wide changes. To support sustainable change, this thesis foregrounds community-centric, dignity-based fundraising as an ethical alternative, proposing a practical 4-step framework for image-based campaigns.

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## List of Abbreviations

|         |                                                                  |
|---------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| BMZ     | German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development |
| CCF     | Community-Centric Fundraising                                    |
| CONCORD | European NGO Confederation for Relief and Development            |
| CRC     | UN Convention on the Rights of the Child                         |
| CRIN    | Child Rights International Network                               |
| EU      | European Union                                                   |
| GDPR    | EU General Data Protection Regulation                            |
| IVE     | Identifiable Victim Effect                                       |
| INGOs   | International Non-governmental Organisations                     |
| MSF     | Médecins Sans Frontières                                         |
| NGOs    | Non-governmental Organisations                                   |
| ODA     | Official Development Assistance                                  |
| UN      | United Nations                                                   |
| UNICEF  | United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund           |

## 1. Introduction

The image is familiar to anyone who has ever opened a charity envelope, scrolled past a fundraising campaign, or sat through a television appeal: a malnourished child, flies around the eyes, distended belly, eyes turned toward the camera in silent appeal. For decades, this image, or some version of it, has been among the most prevalent ones in humanitarian fundraising. It is so familiar that most people can conjure it instantly, and so effective that it continues to appear in campaigns across the sector. The image is designed to be impossible to look away from and, more importantly, impossible to ignore. It has become so pervasive in humanitarian communication that it functions almost as a visual shorthand for global poverty itself. Yet this very familiarity is the problem, as this image is not a neutral representation of suffering. Such imagery has a name: *'poverty porn.'* What looks like straightforward humanitarian communication carries profound ethical, psychological, and strategic consequences for the human rights sector and for the people it claims to serve.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) rarely deploy these images out of carelessness. They do so under real and intensifying pressure: as donations decline and competition for a shrinking funding pool grows<sup>1</sup>, organisations face a genuine dilemma between what raises money and what aligns with their own ethical commitments. Highly emotional imagery was proven to be more successful at generating short-term donations than positive alternatives<sup>2</sup>. This places an organisation's fundraising effectiveness in direct tension with its mission and values, as fundraisers must navigate between the utility of 'poverty porn' and the dignity of the beneficiaries. This tension is the central concern of this thesis.

While a substantial body of literature establishes that 'poverty porn' persists despite widespread ethical criticism<sup>3</sup>, comparatively little attention has been paid to the perspective of the practitioners themselves: how NGO staff understand, justify, and navigate the use of suffering imagery from within. This thesis addresses that gap with a qualitative methodology by combining a comprehensive literature review with empirical research. The literature review draws on academic articles, policy reports, legal documents, statistical data, and other relevant sources to establish the theoretical and contextual framework, while semi-structured expert interviews with five staff

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<sup>1</sup> OECD Development Assistance Committee, Preliminary Official Development Assistance Levels in 2025 (OECD 2026) DCD(2026)8.

<sup>2</sup> Abhishek Bhati and Ruth K Hansen, 'A Literature Review of Experimental Studies in Fundraising' (2020) 3(1) Journal of Behavioral Public Administration 1.

<sup>3</sup> Abhishek Bhati, 'Many Global Charities Refrain from "Poverty Porn" Imagery to Raise Money from Donors, but Stereotypes Still Distort Their Pictures' (*The Conversation*, 9 December 2021) <<https://theconversation.com/many-global-charities-refrain-from-poverty-porn-imagery-to-raise-money-from-donors-but-stereotypes-still-distort-their-pictures-171576>> accessed 12 May 2026.

members and fundraisers from different NGOs provide empirical insights and complement the findings with practical perspectives, asking how ethical awareness does, or does not, translate into practice.

Accordingly, this thesis is guided by the following research question: *How should NGOs navigate the tension between fundraising effectiveness and ethical responsibility in their use of suffering imagery?* This central question is approached through two sub-questions: first, to what extent ‘poverty porn’ is empirically effective in generating donations, and what its long-term consequences might be, and second, under what conditions the use of suffering imagery becomes ethically unjustifiable and what dignity-based alternatives can be proposed in its place. The investigation proceeds from several guiding assumptions: that campaigns using ‘poverty porn’ are both more prevalent and more effective at generating short-term donations, but that ethical fundraising methods may foster more sustainable long-term donor engagement, as harmful narratives risk producing compassion fatigue over time.

To answer the research question, it is important to understand the context of NGO fundraising by surveying the range of fundraising strategies, techniques, and practices, and by identifying the challenges it faces. It is equally important to understand why NGOs use certain mechanisms to reach and persuade donors. Accordingly, the following second chapter of this thesis will examine the psychology of giving: what motivates donors to give, how do empathy and emotional decision-making shape donations, and how do mechanisms such as the Negative State Relief and the Identifiable Victim Effect explain donor responses to certain images, as well as what happens when those responses decline into compassion fatigue and psychic numbing.

Building on this foundation, Chapter 3 examines how ‘poverty porn’ operates and why it persists, defining the concept alongside related notions such as white saviorism, assessing its prevalence across the sector, its complex relationship with fundraising effectiveness, and the long-term consequences it might cause, before introducing community-centric fundraising (CCF) as an alternative. Chapter 4 develops the ethical and legal framework, articulating the utility-versus-dignity dilemma at the heart of fundraisers’ choices and reviewing the legal landscape governing images of children, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, relevant European Union (EU) law, and the ethical guidelines of the Child Rights International Network. Chapter 5 sets out the research design and methodology for the empirical part, which asks how those working inside NGOs perceive, discuss, and perhaps account for ‘poverty porn’ in their everyday work. The analysis is organized around key themes: how ‘poverty porn’ is perceived as a fundraising technique, if and what kind of internal guidelines exist, and whether more ethical alternatives are

already in use or could become relevant. Finally, Chapter 6 brings these interview findings into dialogue with the literature reviewed in the previous chapters, asking why individual ethical sensitivity does not translate into sector-wide change.

This thesis analyses the use of ‘poverty porn’ in NGO fundraising across its ethical, psychological, and strategic dimensions, drawing on both the existing literature and interviews with practitioners working inside the sector. On the basis of this analysis, the thesis develops a practical framework designed to help NGOs assess their own fundraising imagery and arrive at more ethically defensible representational choices. In doing so, it seeks not only to explain why ‘poverty porn’ persists, but to offer the sector a concrete instrument for moving beyond it.

## 2. NGO Fundraising: Context and Challenges

This chapter outlines the role of NGOs in humanitarian and human rights work, emphasizing their dependence on fundraising amid a persistent global funding gap. It then introduces a range of fundraising strategies, techniques, and practices, and lastly explores what actually motivates donors to give, to understand the psychology of giving. It will explain how empathy and emotional decision-making shape donations, highlighting key concepts such as Negative State Relief and the Identifiable Victim Effect that explain why donors respond to certain images. It will then examine the limits of this response, tracing how repeated exposure to suffering erodes its emotional impact over time, how compassion fades, and how people numb psychologically. Overall, the chapter is the base for discussing the ethical question of whether NGOs should rely on distressing imagery in fundraising, which will be discussed in later chapters, and lays the theoretical foundation for developing fundraising techniques that are both effective and ethical.

### 2.1 The Role of NGOs and the Global Funding Gap

Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) “are generally described as private, self-governing organizations that work to improve the quality of life of disadvantaged people, driven by a commitment of shared values on a nonprofit basis”<sup>4</sup>. National NGOs often join together to form international NGOs (INGOs), which can be organized by regional country groups and overseen by a global organization<sup>5</sup>. The difference lies in the scope of influence and structural size, as NGOs

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<sup>4</sup> Vakil, 1997, as cited by Hue Trong Duong, ‘Fourth Generation NGOs: Communication Strategies in Social Campaigning and Resource Mobilization’ (2017) 29(2) *Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing* 119, 119.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Willetts, ‘What is a Non-Governmental Organization?’ in UNESCO *Encyclopaedia of Life Support Systems* (UNESCO/EOLSS 2002) <[www.staff.city.ac.uk/p.willetts/CS-NTWKS/NGO-ART.HTM](http://www.staff.city.ac.uk/p.willetts/CS-NTWKS/NGO-ART.HTM)> accessed 06. May 2026.

operate at the local, regional, or national level while INGOs operate in multiple countries. Both, however, are non-governmental, non-profit, pursue charitable goals, and are funded primarily through donations or grants. Nowadays, “NGO, by itself, has come to cover both national and international NGOs,”<sup>6</sup> which is why the term NGO will be used in this thesis going forward to describe organizations operating both nationally and internationally. NGOs are often divided into operational and campaigning types, whereby operational NGOs aim to achieve “small-scale change [...] directly through projects,”<sup>7</sup> and campaigning NGOs try to promote “large-scale change [...] indirectly through influence on the political system”<sup>8</sup>. Both, however, rely on many of the same activities, such as fundraising and mobilization of supporters. In practice, the distinction is blurred because operational NGOs often adopt campaigning efforts, and campaigning NGOs frequently provide direct support to people affected by the issues they address<sup>9</sup>.

As NGOs continue to evolve, and there are now various and ever-increasing numbers and types of humanitarian organizations, marginalized communities worldwide supposedly benefit significantly. Yet, this institutional growth has also intensified the resource competition that NGOs face<sup>10</sup>. Unlike commercial enterprises, NGOs cannot generate revenue through market exchange; their financial survival depends almost entirely on external support in the form of individual donations, institutional grants, and government funding. However, there are no exact figures on donation revenue and sources, as these vary from NGO to NGO and “the percentage of funding provided by the public differs greatly among NGOs”<sup>11</sup>. This structural dependency creates what might be described as a permanent fundraising pressure to secure resources sufficient not only to fund programs but to sustain the organization itself. The gap between the resources available to the nonprofit sector and the demands placed upon it is vast and widening. NGOs increasingly find themselves competing not only with one another but with a crowded media landscape for the finite attention and generosity of prospective donors.

This pressure has been dramatically compounded in recent years, as the international development and aid sector faces immense budget cuts. In 2025, the Organization for Economic Co-Operation

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Shani Orgad, ‘Visualizers of Solidarity: Organizational Politics in Humanitarian and International Development NGOs’ (2013) 12(3) *Visual Communication* 295, 299.

and Development, an international organization focused on strengthening economic growth and sustainable development, reported the largest annual drop in official development assistance (ODA) ever recorded<sup>12</sup>. Compared with the previous year, total ODA fell by 23.1%, with the five largest providers (France, Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States) accounting for 95.7% of the total decline<sup>13</sup>. Past and anticipated donor budget cuts could significantly affect major humanitarian aid recipients, with the sectors most affected by the funding cuts being food security, nutrition, and multi-purpose cash sectors<sup>14</sup>. To close the financial gap caused by funding cuts, non-governmental organizations are increasingly reliant on private donations rather than institutional funders, which is why the next subchapter will discuss fundraising strategies and practices NGOs employ to attract potential donors.

## 2.2 Overview of Fundraising Strategies, Techniques, and Practices

Since the terms fundraising strategies, fundraising techniques, and fundraising practices are often used interchangeably in the literature<sup>15</sup>, the following distinctions between these terms are established for this thesis: *Strategies* refer to overarching, long-term decisions regarding how an organization structures its fundraising efforts, such as the choice between emotional and rational appeals. *Techniques* are the specific methods used to implement this strategy, such as face-to-face fundraising or the use of emotional imagery. *Practices*, finally, refer to the actual, institutionalized routines, that is, concrete actions such as active human engagement or online campaigns<sup>16</sup>. According to these definitions, fundraising practices employ specific techniques and follow specific strategies to raise as many donations as possible.

Effective fundraising builds a bond between an organization and each supporter, aiming at making donors feel valued, considered, and personally connected to the NGO's cause, thereby increasing their willingness to donate. Duong's (2017)<sup>17</sup> analysis of NGOs reinforces this point from a communication studies perspective, arguing that the most effective NGO communication strategies are characterized by "symmetrical communication," a balanced, two-way flow "based on the

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<sup>12</sup> OECD Development Assistance Committee (n 1).

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Mike Pearson, Fran Girling-Morris and Suzanna Nelson-Pollard, 'Humanitarian Finance in the Age of Cuts' in *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2025* (ALNAP 2025).

<sup>15</sup> Ian MacQuillin and Adrian Sargeant, 'Fundraising Ethics: A Rights-Balancing Approach' (2019) 160(1) *Journal of Business Ethics* 239.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Duong (n 4).

organization's openness and willingness to interact with its stakeholders by listening and responding to stakeholders' concerns and interests"<sup>18</sup>. Duong argues that this approach is both ethically preferable and strategically superior because it builds trust, sustains engagement, and enables the stakeholder orientation that translates into long-term institutional sustainability<sup>19</sup>.

Beyond the overarching fundraising strategies, NGOs draw on a range of concrete techniques to encourage donations. One prominent fundraising technique is Unit Asking. People are first asked how much they would be willing to donate for an individual, and then asked about larger units or groups<sup>20</sup>. Studies have shown that Unit Asking increases willingness to donate: "When people are first asked about one individual and in the next step asked about a larger number, their desire for consistency drives them to donate an amount that is proportional to the amount they donated for one individual"<sup>21</sup>. Unit Asking may make donors more emotionally responsive and more aware of the overall scale of suffering<sup>22</sup>, but some research suggests this effect is independent of the number of individuals impacted and, therefore, does not truly reflect sensitivity to how many people are affected<sup>23</sup>. However, as Moche, Karlsson, and Västfjäll (2024) note, Unit Asking is "a robust way to increase sensitivity to the scope of suffering while at the same time allowing for donors to react affectively to the charity appeal"<sup>24</sup>.

It is worth noting, however, that the "majority of the literature on fundraising techniques focuses on donor motivations and behavior"<sup>25</sup>, with relatively little attention to the experiences of fundraisers themselves or, more significantly, of the beneficiaries whose images and stories are deployed in campaigns<sup>26</sup>. This reflects, and arguably reinforces, a broader imbalance in how fundraising ethics have been conceptualized: as a question primarily about what moves donors enough (emotionally) to donate, rather than about what beneficiaries are owed.

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid* 133.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>20</sup> Maximilian Maier and others, 'Investigating (Sequential) Unit Asking: An Unsuccessful Quest for Scope Sensitivity in Willingness to Donate Judgments' (2023) 36(4) *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* e2335.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, 2.

<sup>22</sup> Hajdi Moche, Hulda Karlsson and Daniel Västfjäll, 'Victim Identifiability, Number of Victims, and Unit Asking in Charitable Giving' (2024) 19(3) *PLOS ONE* e0300863.

<sup>23</sup> Maier and others (n 20).

<sup>24</sup> Moche, Karlsson, Västfjäll (n 22) 19.

<sup>25</sup> Bhati, Hansen (n 2) 11.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*.

Fundraising practices vary greatly depending on the budget, staff, campaign objectives, and the purpose and size of the NGO. There is no one-size-fits-all fundraising approach suitable for all organizations and projects. Practices that appear to be highly effective include activities that engage people, such as auctions, raffles, or stewardship materials for further education, with walks and runs proving particularly effective for causes involving human suffering<sup>27</sup>. Although these factors remain important, the rise of digital communication and social media has fundamentally changed fundraising practices. Maqbool and others (2019)<sup>28</sup> identify social media and proposal writing as the most effective contemporary fundraising practices, for example, via Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, but also via email lists.

In the following subchapter, the psychology behind (charitable) giving will be examined to understand what motivates people to donate.

### 2.3 Why Emotional Appeals Work: The Psychology of Giving

Understanding why people give is essential to any critical analysis of how NGOs raise funds. The psychology of charitable giving is shaped by a complex interplay of altruistic, social, emotional, and self-interested motivations. Social norms and peer effects meaningfully shape giving: donors tend to give more when they know that others are donating. Socially established expectations about appropriate donation amounts shape patterns of contribution<sup>29</sup>. Donor motivation varies by gift size: large donors tend to be driven by genuine altruistic concern for beneficiaries, while smaller, more casual donors are more strongly motivated by “warm glow,”<sup>30</sup> as will be discussed throughout this subchapter, and social signaling<sup>31</sup>. Empirical research consistently shows that emotional engagement often plays a central, and often decisive, role in triggering donation behavior.

One of the most influential psychological explanations for charitable giving is provided by the Negative State Relief Theory<sup>32</sup>. Among “normally socialized adults,”<sup>33</sup> a sad mood appears to increase altruistic and prosocial behavior, such as donating to good causes, possibly because helping

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<sup>27</sup> Bhati, Hansen (n 2).

<sup>28</sup> Nadeem Maqbool and others, ‘Advance Fundraising Techniques: An Evidence from Non-Profit Organizations’ (2019) 7(1) Pakistan Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences 147.

<sup>29</sup> Croson and others, 2009, as cited in Bhati and Hansen (n 2) 9.

<sup>30</sup> Bhati, Hansen (n 2).

<sup>31</sup> Karlan and Wood, 2017, as cited in Bhati and Hansen (n 2) 9.

<sup>32</sup> Robert B Cialdini, Douglas J Baumann and Douglas T Kenrick, ‘Insights from Sadness: A Three-Step Model of the Development of Altruism as Hedonism’ (1981) 1(3) Developmental Review 207.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*

others serves as a form of self-gratification<sup>34</sup>. Hence, donors do not give solely out of altruism and to alleviate the suffering of others; they give, at least in part, to ease their own discomfort in the face of another's suffering. Prosocial spending generates what researchers call a "warm glow,"<sup>35</sup> a subjective sense of pleasure like an intrinsic reward that the act of giving evokes, independent of its objective consequences for the recipient<sup>36</sup>. Neuroscientific evidence reinforces the centrality of positive affect in giving behavior. Genevsky and others (2013)<sup>37</sup> found that donations to orphans depicted in photographs were mediated specifically by positive arousal, a "warm glow" response activated in the nucleus accumbens, the brain's reward-processing center. Beyond warm glow, compassion in the form of sympathy or emotional reactions can also lead to increased donations<sup>38</sup>. Negative arousal, for instance, did not directly predict increased giving, but it did evoke empathic pain, which also induces prosocial behavior and can forward donations indirectly<sup>39</sup>. Therefore, it can be said that both positive aroused feelings (e.g., excitement, enthusiasm) and negative aroused feelings (e.g., guilt, anxiety)<sup>40</sup> can contribute to a greater willingness to donate, albeit through different mechanisms. In line with these findings, Bhati and Hansen (2020)<sup>41</sup> report that sadness-inducing imagery, specifically images of sad or distressed faces, reliably increases sympathy and guilt, and thereby elevates donation rates. The use of such imagery points toward a potentially exploitative dimension of emotional fundraising appeals and the exploitation of negative affect. Larsen and Diener's (1987) Affect Intensity Theory adds an important individual-level dimension to this model: "Individuals are known to differ consistently in the typical intensity or magnitude of their emotional responses."<sup>42</sup> Research shows that individuals high in affect intensity respond more strongly to both positive and negative events than those low in affect intensity. Humanitarian advertising thus implicitly targets a segment of particularly affectively responsive donors.

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<sup>34</sup> This tendency increases with age, with girls exhibiting this sadness-induced increase in helping behavior earlier than boys, as they are typically socialized into prosocial behavior at an earlier age. However, the gender dimension is disregarded moving onwards, as it would go beyond the scope of this thesis.

<sup>35</sup> Bhati, Hansen (n 2).

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Alexander Genevsky and others, 'Neural Underpinnings of the Identifiable Victim Effect: Affect Shifts Preferences for Giving' (2013) 33(43) *Journal of Neuroscience* 17188.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Bhati, Hansen (n 2). 9.

<sup>42</sup> Randy J Larsen and Ed Diener, 'Cognitive Operations Associated with Individual Differences in Affect Intensity' (1987) 53(4) *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 767, 767.

While Negative State Relief and Affect Intensity Theory explain why people react to sad images and stimuli, additional theoretical frameworks help explain why donors respond to specific types of images. The Identifiable Victim Effect (IVE) describes the well-documented tendency of people to give more generously to a single, named, and identifiable individual in need than to a statistically equivalent but anonymous group of victims (such as silhouettes)<sup>43</sup> or groups of people described in numerical statistics<sup>44</sup>. As the number of victims increases, compassion and willingness to donate decrease, which seems irrational, since a larger donation pool could enrich far more lives. However, people can develop more compassion and generosity toward identifiable victims than toward masses<sup>45</sup> as they are moved to action by emotional engagement, by seeing a face, hearing a name, or reading a personal story. Appeals that foreground suffering individuals will outperform those that present facts and statistics, however compelling. Vieira, Wiegmann, and Horvath (2025)<sup>46</sup> also confirm that narratives centered on identified individual beneficiaries outperform more rational or statistical approaches to motivating donation, and relatable numbers work not because they convey quantitative information but because they manage to evoke an emotional response. However, as soon as donors are informed about the psychological mechanisms behind their own giving behavior, they donate less to identifiable victims than those who have not been informed about this phenomenon, as they begin to question their own altruistic behavior<sup>47</sup>. As Small, Loewenstein, and Slovic (2007) note: “Compassion for identifiable victims decreases with reflective thinking, but remains consistently low for statistical victims”<sup>48</sup>. Put simply, donors feel for identifiable individuals, but that feeling diminishes when they start to reflect. With mere numbers, on the other hand, they feel little from the start, and thinking about statistical victims doesn’t change that<sup>49</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> Genevsky and others (n 37).

<sup>44</sup> Maximilian Maier, Yik Chun Wong and Gilad Feldman, ‘Revisiting and Rethinking the Identifiable Victim Effect: Replication and Extension of Small, Loewenstein, and Slovic (2007)’ (2023) 9(1) *Collabra: Psychology* 90203.

<sup>45</sup> Deborah A Small, George Loewenstein and Paul Slovic, ‘Sympathy and Callousness: The Impact of Deliberative Thought on Donations to Identifiable and Statistical Victims’ (2007) 102(2) *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 143.

<sup>46</sup> Celso Vieira, Alex Wiegmann and Joachim Horvath, ‘Altruistic Behavior in Charitable Giving: A Comparison between Rational, Numerical, and Emotional Prompts’ (2025) 16 *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 1167.

<sup>47</sup> Maier, Wong, Feldman (n 44).

<sup>48</sup> Small, Loewenstein, Slovic (n 45) 152.

<sup>49</sup> For the sake of completeness, it is important to note that the robustness of the IVE has been challenged by recent replication studies. Maier, Wong, and Feldman (2023) (n 44) found no empirical support for it in hypothetical donation contexts and no evidence supporting deliberative debiasing interventions. This does not invalidate the large body of research documenting the phenomenon, but it does suggest that the IVE is not a universal, context-independent response but appears to depend on contextual factors, including the evaluation setting, the nature of the appeal, and the characteristics of the donor population [Moche, Karlsson, Västfjäll (n 22)].

The decisive factor determining how strongly these emotional responses are triggered is not the scale of suffering, but its proximity and identifiability. A study by Västfjäll and others (2014)<sup>50</sup> has shown that positive feelings and donations decrease significantly when as few as two people are involved. Participants reported higher positive affect and donated more money to a single, named child than to two children whose suffering was described in equivalent terms. The mere exception of this phenomenon was whenever several children were presented as a coherent unit, such as siblings belonging to a family; compassion and donations remained similarly high as with a single person<sup>51</sup>. This decline in affective engagement and helping behavior that occurs as the number of victims in need increases is described as “compassion fade”<sup>52</sup> or compassion fatigue. If the Identifiable Victim Effect and the Negative State Relief Theory account for why a single, identifiable victim captures our attention and negative emotions move donors to act, compassion fatigue confronts donors with the limits of that response: the same psychological system that makes donors sensitive to individual suffering also makes them vulnerable to its gradual dulling.

A meta-analytic synthesis by Butts and others (2019)<sup>53</sup> confirms compassion fatigue as a statistically robust phenomenon across 41 studies and more than 13,000 participants. With individuals, people feel their donation has an impact<sup>54</sup>; with large numbers of victims, donors feel they can make less of a difference. This finding challenges the intuitive assumption that compassion fatigue reflects a failure of empathy and suggests instead that it reflects a failure of imagination, a difficulty in scaling up emotional and motivational responses in proportion to the scale of need, as people’s emotional systems are limited and can become overwhelmed by too many distressing images or a high number of victims.

Paul Slovic’s concept of psychic numbing<sup>55</sup> provides the deepest and most theoretically significant account of why this happens. Psychic numbing can be said to be the ultimate stage of compassion fatigue. While in previous works, psychic numbing was described as rescue workers’ ability to turn

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<sup>50</sup> Daniel Västfjäll and others, ‘Compassion Fade: Affect and Charity Are Greatest for a Single Child in Need’ (2014) 9(6) PLOS ONE e100115.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Marcus M Butts and others, ‘Helping One or Helping Many? A Theoretical Integration and Meta-Analytic Review of the Compassion Fade Literature’ (2019) 151 *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 16.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Paul Slovic and others, ‘Psychic Numbing and Mass Atrocity’ in Eldar Shafir (ed), *The Behavioral Foundations of Policy* (Russell Sage Foundation and Princeton University Press 2013) 8.

off their feelings to function under a lot of pressure and horror<sup>56</sup>, Paul Slovic defined it as a total “collapse of compassion”<sup>57</sup> that may lead to “apathy and inaction, consistent with what is seen repeatedly in response to mass murder and genocide”<sup>58</sup>. As the number of lives at risk increases, people’s emotional response does not rise proportionally but may even decline entirely, so large-scale events such as mass murder or genocide are understood statistically but not deeply felt. This is grounded in the work of E. H. Weber and Gustav Fechner, who showed that people notice changes in stimuli relative to the original intensity, meaning the bigger the original stimulus, the bigger the change needs to be in order to be felt<sup>59</sup>. People’s emotional reactions and judgments about the value of saving lives tend to weaken as the number of lives at stake grows, similar to how they become less sensitive to increases in perceptual and cognitive entities like brightness or sound<sup>60</sup>. As Small, Loewenstein, and Slovic (2007) memorably frame it using Mother Teresa’s observation: “If I look at the mass, I will never act. If I look at the one, I will.”<sup>61</sup> Compassion, in other words, is not intentionally suppressed; it simply fades because the human brain is not equipped to process the suffering of many.

This decline in willingness to give is not solely a passive capacity issue. Hagman and others (2022)<sup>62</sup> suggest that it is also linked to active emotion regulation. People tend to avoid compassion when they anticipate high emotional or financial costs, or when they feel overwhelmed. This dynamic reinforces the practical conclusion drawn from Butts and others (2019)<sup>63</sup>, namely that if NGOs want to generate more donations, they should focus less on eliciting empathy through shocking images and more on giving donors the feeling that their individual contribution makes a concrete, tangible difference.

These findings carry direct implications for NGO fundraising. Campaigns that present a single, named child, i.e., with a photograph, a personal story, and a specific request, will tend to raise more money than those that present the same need in statistical or aggregate terms. The Identifiable

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<sup>56</sup> Robert J. Lifton (1967) as cited by Slovic and others (n 55).

<sup>57</sup> Slovic and others (n 55) 8.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid* 8.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>61</sup> Small, Loewenstein, Slovic (n 45) 143.

<sup>62</sup> William Hagman and others, ‘Motivated Down-Regulation of Emotion and Compassion Collapse Revisited’ (2022) 13 *Frontiers in Psychology* 801150.

<sup>63</sup> Butts and others (n 53).

Victim Effect could thus be exploited as a means of manipulating donors, taking advantage of both their cognitive limitations and their need for perceived personal impact and recognition (“my donation must make a difference, and it only does so if I can identify the recipient”), as well as counteracting compassion fatigue. This could present fundraisers with an ethical dilemma: should they exploit distressing images of identifiable victims to raise more donations?

This chapter defined the term (I)NGO and discussed one of the main challenges these organizations face today, namely the funding gap resulting from increasingly cut funding. It presented fundraising strategies, techniques, and practices that NGOs employ. Finally, the factors that motivate donors to give were highlighted, primarily factors such as social pressure, altruism, warm glow, and the feeling that their donation makes a meaningful difference. This chapter has shown that Negative State Relief Theory is the most fundamental explanation for donor behavior, as giving is viewed as a form of mood regulation. Affect Intensity Theory reinforces this and explains why some people respond more strongly to emotional stimuli than others and why they are more likely to respond to emotional fundraising campaigns. It was also noted that emotional appeals, such as sad images and identifying specific victims, can increase the willingness to donate. The following chapter examines how these psychological mechanisms are applied in a specific fundraising technique commonly referred to as ‘poverty porn.’ This technique involves the use of harrowing images, often of children, in NGO campaigns, which rightly raises ethical questions for the sector.

### 3. ‘Poverty Porn’: Definition, Prevalence, and Effectiveness

The term ‘Poverty Porn’ has become increasingly central to debates about NGO communication and fundraising ethics. Understanding how this technique operates and why it persists is central to this thesis. This chapter provides a definition of ‘poverty porn’ as well as related concepts such as white saviorism. Further, it explores the prevalence of ‘poverty porn’ across the NGO sector, its complex relationship with fundraising effectiveness, and the long-term harm it might cause. It analyses how

the exposure to exploitative imagery entrenches harmful narratives about the Global South<sup>64</sup>, undermines beneficiary dignity and agency, and may ultimately corrode donor trust and public solidarity. Lastly, it shortly examines a new, ethical fundraising strategy which might serve as an alternative.

### 3.1 Defining ‘Poverty Porn’ and Related Concepts

NGOs rely on fundraising “to support their endeavors and mission”<sup>65</sup> and must clearly and compellingly communicate “humanitarian need, the beneficiary’s plight, and the intended impact to their donors”<sup>66</sup> to “cultivate as much support as possible”<sup>67</sup>. In order to do so, NGOs often create fundraising appeals for donors in the Global North without including the perspectives of the beneficiaries in the Global South. “Within fundraising, charities have been criticized for message appeals that reinforce stereotypes, bias, along with the use of imagery and language that elicits pity and guilt when depicting individuals or international events,”<sup>68</sup> which is called ‘poverty pornography’ or ‘poverty porn’<sup>69</sup>.

“Poverty Porn,”<sup>70</sup> also referred to as “Disaster Pornography,”<sup>71</sup> denotes the deliberate use of images and narratives that foreground the suffering, destitution, and helplessness of people in low-income countries or marginalised communities, building on white saviorism and white supremacy, as will be defined below. It shows extreme images of suffering to trigger donors’ willingness to give, with neither questioning the actual causes of poverty nor portraying the affected people as equals<sup>72</sup>. The

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<sup>64</sup> In this thesis, the terms “Global South” and “Global North” are used as geopolitical and socioeconomic categories rather than strictly geographical descriptors. The author acknowledges that these terms are contested and may be perceived as reductive or potentially demeaning, as they can reproduce assumptions of economic inferiority and reinforce hierarchical distinctions between the southern and northern hemispheres (Jaime A Teixeira da Silva, ‘Rethinking the Use of the Term “Global South” in Academic Publishing’ (2021) 47 *European Science Editing* e67829 <<https://doi.org/10.3897/ese.2021.e67829>> accessed 01 July 2026). This is not the intended meaning in this thesis. Rather, the use of these terms serves to critically engage with the structural inequalities, stereotypes, and power relations that underpin representations of poverty, including the phenomenon of ‘poverty porn’ and the ethical dilemmas it raises.

<sup>65</sup> Victoria Ninaber and Robert Mittelman, ‘Exploring the Inclusion of Beneficiary Voices in International Development Fundraising Campaign Creation’ (2021) 28(4) *Journal of Philanthropy and Marketing* e1736, 1.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid* 1.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid* 1.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid* 2.

<sup>69</sup> In this thesis, both terms will be used interchangeably.

<sup>70</sup> Haseeb Shabbir and others, ‘Poverty Porn as Humanitarian Business: The Effects of Framing, Affect Intensity and Spokesperson Characteristics’ (2025) 64(7) *Business & Society* 1.

<sup>71</sup> Beth Breeze and Jon Dean, ‘Pictures of Me: User Views on Their Representation in Homelessness Fundraising Appeals’ (2012) 17(2) *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing* 132, 132.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid*.

term was primarily coined by Danish aid worker Jørgen Lissner, who proposed the juxtaposition between non-inclusive humanitarian imagery and pornography, arguing that both display the human body and soul in all their nakedness and vulnerability, “thus denigrating the dignity of the people involved”<sup>73</sup>. Lissner’s critique, though formulated decades ago, anticipated a debate that remains unresolved in contemporary NGO practice. Building on the previous definitions of fundraising strategies, techniques, and practices from Chapter 2, ‘poverty porn’ is defined primarily as a technique that stems from a strategy of emotional appeals and can become established as a practice through repeated use.<sup>74</sup>

Despite growing awareness of the ethical concerns surrounding exploitative imagery, the use of ‘poverty porn’ in fundraising has not diminished; it remains prevalent in NGO fundraising. And with it, concepts such as white saviorism remain prevalent in NGO fundraising. White saviorism is defined as “the impression that White people have the necessary knowledge, skills, and ingenuity to rescue non-White communities”<sup>75</sup>. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a white savior is a white individual “who sees themselves as helping or defending people of color,”<sup>76</sup> but often in ways that are perceived as “patronizing, performative, or intrusive”<sup>77</sup>. This behavior perpetuates a sense of superiority and reinforces existing power imbalances. In the context of development and humanitarian fundraising, white saviorism manifests through narratives and campaigns that depict marginalized communities as helpless and in need of salvation by wealthy (often White) donors<sup>78</sup>. Utilizing images and stories that depict the beneficiaries as helpless, dependent, or even objectifying them can reinforce harmful stereotypes<sup>79</sup>. Such narratives suggest that marginalized communities lack agency and rely solely on external aid from aid workers and donors. Next to

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<sup>73</sup> Shabbir and others (n 70) 4.

<sup>74</sup> Although the term ‘pornography’ was deliberately redefined by Jørgen Lissner (1981), the coiner of ‘poverty porn,’ to describe the display of body and soul without respect for the person involved, there is legitimate criticism not only of the concept behind it but of the term itself. The term’s negative connotations make unbiased research difficult, and it has since come to serve as a general critique of virtually any NGO representation worthy of criticism (Michaela Zöhrer, *Repräsentation ferner Wirklichkeiten: Umstrittene Wissensproduktion in wissenschaftlicher und humanitärer Praxis* (Nomos 2020) 272), thereby losing its exclusivity, intensity, and explicitness. In this paper, however, the term is defined according to Lissner and has nothing to do with its everyday meaning.

<sup>75</sup> Shabbir and others (n 70) 2.

<sup>76</sup> ‘White Savior’ (*Merriam-Webster*, last updated 25 April 2026) <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/white%20savior>> accessed 13 May 2026.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> Elise Peterson, ‘Dismantling Philanthropy’s White Savior Complex with Community-Centric Fundraising’ (*I Care If You Listen*, 20 December 2022) <<https://icareifyoulisten.com/2022/12/dismantling-philanthropy-white-savior-complex-community-centric-fundraising/>> accessed 13 May 2026.

<sup>79</sup> Ninaber, Mittelman (n 65).

reinforcing unequal power dynamics<sup>80</sup>, it creates donor-centric messaging and fails to put realistic narratives at the center of humanitarian fundraising<sup>81</sup>. White or Caucasian development aid workers depicted in fundraising campaigns as helping communities in the Global South ultimately perpetuate the white-dominant culture and systemic oppressions, aligning with the principles of white supremacy<sup>82</sup>, i.e., the racist belief that white people are superior to “people of color”<sup>83</sup>. What is more, depicting solely white aid workers in campaigns neglects the fact that most NGOs work with local partners to implement their work<sup>84</sup>. The legacy of colonialism and persistent power imbalances still shape NGO fundraising<sup>85</sup>, which has far-reaching consequences that will be discussed in the following subchapter.

### 3.2 Prevalence in NGO Fundraising and Long-Term Consequences

The use of ‘poverty porn’ in NGO fundraising can reinforce harmful stereotypes and unequal power dynamics, which could undermine the dignity and agency of beneficiaries. A systematic content analysis by Bhati (2021)<sup>86</sup> of 320 photographs used by 32 of the largest globally operating U.S.-based charities found that about half of the photos showed only children, primarily girls, which is consistent with established fundraising practice, as fundraisers deliberately draw on the IVE discussed in the previous chapter. Another quarter showed mothers with infants and other young children<sup>87</sup>, which also triggers the IVE as they are perceived as a family unit, as explained in the previous chapter. Almost all of the women depicted appear to be caring for the children alone in the pictures, which suggests that the primary role of women in developing countries is to care for their

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<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Abhishek Bhati and Angela M Eikenberry, ‘Faces of the Needy: The Portrayal of Destitute Children in the Fundraising Campaigns of NGOs in India’ (2016) 21(1) *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing* 31, 33.

<sup>82</sup> Peterson (n 78); Swee-Hoon Chuah and others, ‘Do White Saviour Perceptions Reduce Charitable Giving? Evidence from Five Online Studies’ (2025) 78(1) *Kyklos* 271.

<sup>83</sup> According to Amnesty International, the term “people of color” is “an international self-designation used by people who have experienced racism. The term signifies a political and social stance and is intended to be emancipatory and based on solidarity.” (translated from German; Amnesty International, ‘Glossar für diskriminierungssensible Sprache’ (*Amnesty International*) <<https://www.amnesty.de/glossar-fuer-diskriminierungssensible-sprache>> accessed 15 June 2026.) It will be used in this thesis to refer to people affected by racism and racist discrimination.

<sup>84</sup> Chuah and others (n 82).

<sup>85</sup> Mahmoud Abdulai Mahmoud and Daniel Yennube Nang, ‘Fundraising through Poverty Porn: Ethical Concerns’ (2024) 29(3) *Journal of Philanthropy and Marketing*.

<sup>86</sup> Bhati (n 3).

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*

children, since men there, “who are generally people of color,”<sup>88</sup> apparently do not care for their families. This reinforces stereotypes about gender roles and family structures in the Global South and reduces complex social realities to a series of emotionally charged images. According to Bhati (2021), the “main reason many charities still portray people in low-income countries this way is due to their acceptance of stereotypes about the people in low-income countries”<sup>89</sup>, reinforcing white saviorism.

Frequently, individuals are depicted only in terms of basic human needs, rather than as people shaped by the many components and systemic complexities at work in their contexts<sup>90</sup>. Theo Sowa, CEO of the pan-African organisation of the African Women’s Development Fund, has pointed out that portraying people as victims leads to their being seen as incapable of finding solutions to their own problems, because no one expects victims to have the answers<sup>91</sup>. This narrative can reinforce the conscious or unconscious biases of donors in the Global North toward beneficiaries in the Global South, while also promoting colonial thinking and white saviorism through the idea that “unqualified outsiders, typically white Westerners”<sup>92</sup>, can alleviate others’ suffering in a “paternalistic, self-serving, and superficial way”<sup>93</sup>. With this, ‘poverty porn’ reinforces stereotypes, deepens unequal power dynamics, and undermines the dignity and agency of the people being represented<sup>94</sup>.

This narrative began in the 1960s, when colonialism had not yet been abolished. “[T]he stereotypical image of the starving African child was elevated into a ‘universal icon of human suffering’, due to its widespread dissemination in television news reports and NGO publicity”<sup>95</sup>, and it remains prominent in NGO fundraising to this day. These stereotypes were reinforced by ‘first-generation’ NGOs such as *Band Aid*, which were “designed to alleviate the symptoms of

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<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> Ninaber, Mittelman (n 65).

<sup>91</sup> Emily Clough, Jill Hardacre and Elizabeth Muggleton, ‘Poverty Porn and Perceptions of Agency: An Experimental Assessment’ (2024) 22(2) *Political Studies Review* 347, 360.

<sup>92</sup> Ninaber, Mittelman (n 65) 2.

<sup>93</sup> *ibid* 2.

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> Andrew Jones, ‘Band Aid Revisited: Humanitarianism, Consumption and Philanthropy in the 1980s’ (2017) 31(2) *Contemporary British History* 189, 8 (page number refers to the freely available manuscript version) <<https://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/id/eprint/86913/7/WRAP-band-aid-revisited-consumption-Jones-2017.pdf>> accessed 16 June 2026.

poverty rather than the root causes.”<sup>96</sup> This reinforced “a colonial view of the global South as helpless, desperate, and dependent upon the benevolent contributions of white Westerners,”<sup>97</sup> and white savior narratives were the norm in NGO fundraising.

Since the 1970s, aid organizations have been criticized for robbing people in poor countries of their agency and dignity through extreme images, such as “images of starving children with ‘flies in their eyes’,”<sup>98</sup> taking them out of context, and portraying the Global South solely as a place of disasters and tragedy. Up until the 1980s, major campaigns like *Band Aid’s Do They Know It’s Christmas?* were not uncommon, as popular culture, mass media, and politics were increasingly intertwined at that time. The single was described by *Black Voice* magazine as “the racist event of the decade,”<sup>99</sup> yet it became the fastest-selling single of all time upon its release and raised more than £8 million<sup>100</sup>, “perpetuating ideas of Western paternalism and benevolence in relation to Africa and the developing world”<sup>101</sup>.

Indeed, in response to frequent criticism of this imagery in NGO fundraising, a new approach emerged in the 1980s that instead portrays people as independent, active, and embedded in their communities<sup>102</sup>. Rather than pity, these “positive images” are intended to evoke a sense of solidarity and justice. To this day, both approaches persist, and NGOs justify their choice of fundraising methods in similar ways: both view suffering as an emergency, that is, as something requiring an immediate moral response. And either they choose not to show certain images because they degrade or “vilify”<sup>103</sup> people, or they justify the use of these images by arguing that even difficult, “undignified”<sup>104</sup> images must be shown because looking away would be dishonest. The latter is the justification many NGOs use for the use of ‘poverty porn.’ A study by Mahmoud and Nang (2024)<sup>105</sup>, which surveyed NGO staff in Ghana, found that they consider the use of ‘poverty porn’ in

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<sup>96</sup> *ibid* 14.

<sup>97</sup> *ibid* 7.

<sup>98</sup> Orgad (n 11) 301.

<sup>99</sup> Jones (n 95) 8.

<sup>100</sup> Thomas Curtis-Horsfall, ‘The Story of... “Do They Know It’s Christmas?” by Band Aid’ (*Smooth Radio*, 9 December 2021, updated 16 November 2022) <<https://www.smoothradio.com/features/the-story-of/do-they-know-its-christmas-band-aid-lyrics-artists/>> accessed 12 May 2026.

<sup>101</sup> Jones (n 95) 19-20.

<sup>102</sup> Orgad (n 11).

<sup>103</sup> *ibid* 307.

<sup>104</sup> *ibid* 307.

<sup>105</sup> Mahmoud, Nang (n 85).

fundraising to be justified. Three main reasons emerged: first, a ‘the end justifies the means’ mindset (i.e., more donations mean more aid, no matter how these donations are raised); second, that donors want to see proof of the need for their donation before they give to charitable organizations; and third, that the images simply show reality. The study’s conclusion is therefore that ‘poverty porn’ is not only widespread among NGOs but is used deliberately.

Fundraising campaigns are often driven by the need to generate donations, which can encourage charities to rely on stereotypical, sympathy-based images in their appeals. In the past, it was shown that positive “good news” campaigns do not generate as many donations as emotional portrayals of suffering<sup>106</sup>, which is why NGOs rely on the latter for their fundraising, especially during times when government funds are cut and donations decline. ‘Poverty porn’ exploits precisely the psychological mechanisms set out in 2.3. By portraying suffering explicitly and deliberately, it draws on Negative State Relief Theory, offering donors relief from the discomfort such images provoke, and by foregrounding individuals, primarily children, it triggers the Identifiable Victim Effect. What the psychological literature describes as a general tendency, ‘poverty porn’ operationalises as a deliberate fundraising technique.

Recent studies, however, suggest that the portrayal of white saviorism in charitable appeals and NGO fundraising campaigns can actually have counterproductive effects, potentially decreasing the likelihood of donations<sup>107</sup>. As Chuah and others (2025) noted, “[m]aking the White Saviour the hero of the story, with passive recipients in need of saving, simply reinforces negative stereotypes while ignoring colonial pasts and ongoing power imbalances. The use of such imagery can offend the very people and communities that INGOs are seeking to help.”<sup>108</sup> Although such imagery has traditionally been defended as effective for raising donations, Chuah and others (2025) found “that such imagery does not lead to higher donation amounts and can even lead to a fall in propensities to donate,”<sup>109</sup> especially when the potential donors are already aware of the harms associated with the white savior concept.

Understanding and addressing white saviorism in fundraising is crucial for NGOs aiming to support communities ethically and effectively, ensuring that their efforts empower rather than inadvertently harm those they intend to help. To this day, NGOs portray children as objects of pity “in a way that

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<sup>106</sup> Breeze, Dean (n 71).

<sup>107</sup> Chuah and others (n 82).

<sup>108</sup> *ibid* 293.

<sup>109</sup> *ibid* 293.

donors would feel sympathy”<sup>110</sup> by using stereotypical images of hardship, reducing the complexity of children’s lives to simplistic narratives of suffering. Even where explicit policy commitments exist, the effectiveness of emotional imagery seems difficult to resist. The global organization *Save the Children* has repeatedly updated its policies in recent years to ensure the dignity of its beneficiaries<sup>111</sup>, primarily children, and to raise public awareness of the agency of children in Global South countries<sup>112</sup>. However, *Save the Children* “still uses some images that stereotype its beneficiaries to evoke pity and raise funds.”<sup>113</sup> This gap between stated values and actual practice illustrates how deeply entrenched such imagery has become: even an organization formally committed to dignity continues to fall back on it. This persistence matters because ‘poverty porn,’ through its sheer prevalence in NGO fundraising, cumulatively shapes the narratives donors hold about people in the Global South, with consequences that reach far beyond any individual campaign.

The lack of beneficiary involvement in campaign development can be put down as one of the main causes of stereotype-enforcing and harmful narratives. Beneficiaries are often not consulted on how they are portrayed in fundraising materials, leading to depictions that may not align with their lived experiences or dignity<sup>114</sup>. Studies show that beneficiaries prefer more dynamic, story-based representations, suggesting these approaches may better respect beneficiaries while still appealing to donors’ empathy and generosity<sup>115</sup>. Clough, Hardacre, and Muggleton (2024) suggest that NGOs should consider whether messaging that “allows individuals to explain how they have contributed personally to overcoming the hardships they’ve faced could be useful in presenting people in lower income countries.”<sup>116</sup> That can be done using community-centric fundraising, which allows individuals to talk about personal experiences and solutions to their own problems.

### 3.3 Community-Centric Fundraising as an Ethical Alternative

An alternative to traditional fundraising is ethical fundraising, in recent literature referred to as community-centric fundraising (CCF). Empowering narratives respect the dignity of beneficiaries

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<sup>110</sup> Bhati, Eikenberry (n 81) 39.

<sup>111</sup> Bhati (n 3).

<sup>112</sup> Clough, Hardacre, Muggleton (n 91).

<sup>113</sup> Bhati (n 3) n.p.

<sup>114</sup> Bhati, Eikenberry (n 81).

<sup>115</sup> Breeze, Dean (n 71).

<sup>116</sup> Clough, Hardacre, Muggleton (n 91) 361.

and highlight their agency, resilience, and potential. A study by Bhati and Eikenberry (2016) explored the portrayal of children in NGO fundraising images by analyzing 200 images from 20 NGOs and identifying five common themes, namely “(a) happy children, (b) groups of children, (c) clean clothes on children or clean place, (d) sad children or sad situation (such as death), and (e) unclean clothes on children or untidy place.”<sup>117</sup> Seven representative images were then discussed with child beneficiaries in focus groups, alongside interviews with NGO staff. The study found that children preferred to be shown as happy, clean, and unique, wanting to be portrayed positively and dignifiedly, though they also supported images that raise awareness of their struggles. This shows that beneficiaries disagree with current fundraising practices that are centered on stereotypical images, “such as the portrayal of destitution through images of rag pickers or hunger through the images of children sitting in unhygienic places and eating low-quality food”<sup>118</sup>.

CCF is an approach that prioritizes equity, centers community voices instead of reinforcing donor-centered messages, and challenges the power imbalances inherent in traditional fundraising models<sup>119</sup>. It calls on organizations to rethink their messaging, share decision-making power, and focus on collective well-being over individual donor recognition<sup>120</sup>. CCF argues that traditional donor-centred fundraising reinforces existing power imbalances, white saviorism, and donor dominance by prioritising donors’ needs<sup>121</sup>. Instead, CCF seeks a radical shift in the overall paradigm of fundraising ethics, placing the collective good of society above individual missions or donor interests<sup>122</sup>. It is guided by 10 core principles that “aspire to transform fundraising and philanthropy”<sup>123</sup> and are rooted in “racial and economic justice”<sup>124</sup>. CCF emphasizes grounding fundraising in anti-racist and social justice education, valuing and investing in fundraisers from the communities served, and challenging inequitable practices by large organizations. It also stresses that NGOs should support each other and that the goal for fundraisers should be to “foster a sense of

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<sup>117</sup> Bhati, Eikenberry (n 81) 33.

<sup>118</sup> *ibid* 35.

<sup>119</sup> Peterson (n 78).

<sup>120</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>121</sup> Ian MacQuillin, ‘Normative Fundraising Ethics: A Review of the Field’ (2023) 28(4) *Journal of Philanthropy and Marketing* e1740.

<sup>122</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>123</sup> Community-Centric Fundraising, ‘CCF’s 10 Principles’ (CCF, last updated 30 October 2024) <<https://communitycentricfundraising.org/ccf-principles/>> accessed 29 May 2026.

<sup>124</sup> *ibid*.

belonging, not othering”<sup>125</sup>. According to Ian MacQuillin, who builds on CCF, “[f]undraising is ethical when it prioritises and/or serves the needs of the community, and unethical when it does not”<sup>126</sup> and “when it is grounded in racial and economic justice and unethical when it is not.”<sup>127</sup>

This chapter has examined ‘poverty porn,’ defining it as the deliberate use of distressing, dehumanizing, or exploitative imagery of people experiencing poverty and suffering to elicit emotional responses from prospective donors. It demonstrated that despite decades of criticism and the emergence of alternative representational frameworks, exploitative and undignified imagery remains widespread in NGO fundraising, driven in large part by the structural pressures to raise funds, as documented in the preceding chapter. The sustained use of dehumanizing imagery perpetuates distorted narratives about people in the Global South, strips beneficiaries of agency and dignity, and risks reinforcing the very power imbalances, including the white savior dynamic, that NGOs seek to abolish. Furthermore, growing donor awareness of these ethical concerns suggests that the long-term reputational and relational consequences for NGOs may outweigh any immediate fundraising gains. Therefore, community-centric fundraising arose as an ethical alternative.

These tensions set the stage for the chapters that follow, which examine how NGOs and their stakeholders are navigating this dilemma between values and practices, between dignity and utility, and what alternative approaches to ethical, effective fundraising might look like in practice.

#### 4. The Ethical and Legal Framework

The following chapter establishes the ethical and legal framework for the use of ‘poverty porn’ and images of children. It addresses the moral dilemma faced by fundraisers: on the one hand, this type of imagery generates the most donations, which in turn benefits those affected, on the other hand, certain types of images are degrading or even harmful to those depicted and reinforce stereotypes, as described in the previous chapter. Important for this chapter is a brief overview of the legal landscape surrounding the use of images of children, namely the Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as EU Law and ethical guidelines from the Child Rights International Network. Finally, the potential long-term consequence of ‘poverty porn’ and distressing images of children is discussed: compassion fatigue.

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<sup>125</sup> *ibid* Principle 7.

<sup>126</sup> MacQuillin (n 121) 15.

<sup>127</sup> *ibid* 15.

#### 4.1 Framing the Dilemma: Utility, Dignity, and Moral Disengagement

NGOs<sup>128</sup> “often face ethical dilemmas that constrain their efforts to do good in foreign lands”<sup>129</sup>. The most frequently faced dilemmas are (1) because most human rights and humanitarian NGOs are based in the Global North, their representatives must balance their own human rights principles with differing local cultural norms; (2) most NGOs begin with a narrow focus and feel pressure to expand their mandate to address the deeper structural causes of the problems they respond to, such as Oxfam, which started as a famine relief organization and evolved to address the underlying conditions that create food insecurity; (3) whether and how to collaborate with non-democratic governments; and (4) the ethical limits of fundraising, especially regarding where funding comes from and how it is collected<sup>130</sup>. The last ethical dilemma will be of main interest in this chapter. Within it, the emphasis is less on the origin of the funds than on the methods used to solicit them, primarily on the images of beneficiaries that move donors to give.

The framing of those images is precisely where the ethical dilemma takes shape. The “dilemma of how NGOs ought to frame images of beneficiaries in fundraising has been a long-standing ethical conflict in the fundraising sector for decades”<sup>131</sup>. NGO fundraising essentially has two objectives: to generate as many donations as possible while upholding the dignity of beneficiaries<sup>132</sup>. In the humanitarian sector, dignity is often defined as “an essential principle to ensure that the agency, self-worth and rights of crisis-affected populations are respected and protected”<sup>133</sup> and “serves as a guiding value for NGOs and authorities working with vulnerable populations.”<sup>134</sup> The dilemma arises at the intersection of these two tasks: “how to frame images that are able to catch the attention of donors to donate and at the same time maintain the respect and dignity of beneficiaries.”<sup>135</sup> NGOs and fundraisers play a major role in shaping how social issues are understood, and face a

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<sup>128</sup> Following the definition for NGOs settled in Chapter 2 to apply to nationally and internationally operating organizations, this term will be used hereafter.

<sup>129</sup> Daniel A Bell and Joseph H Carens, ‘The Ethical Dilemmas of International Human Rights and Humanitarian NGOs: Reflections on a Dialogue between Practitioners and Theorists’ (2004) 26(2) *Human Rights Quarterly* 300, 300.

<sup>130</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> Mahmoud, Nang (n 85) 5.

<sup>132</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> Manoug Antaby, ‘Logos, Refugee Advertisement and Humanitarian Ethics: A Case Study of Syrian Refugees’ (2026) 22(1) *Journal of Global Ethics* 87, 89.

<sup>134</sup> *ibid* 89.

<sup>135</sup> Mahmoud, Nang (n 85) 5.

constant tension between depicting people and situations fully accurately and being effective with their fundraising efforts.

How that responsibility is met in practice, however, is far from settled. Humanitarian organizations like Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) view photography as a key way to raise public awareness of suffering and to inspire action. This approach is rooted in *témoignage*, or bearing witness, which involves standing with victims and using “MSF’s platform and credibility to help bring their stories to the world”<sup>136</sup>. Humanitarian organizations often believe recognizable images of people affected by crises can make suffering feel more personal and immediate. Showing faces is seen as a way to encourage donations and “let victims know they are seen and heard, while identity protection practices such as the blurring of faces or the use of silhouette shots is seen as perpetuating stigma and shame”<sup>137</sup>. On this view, visibility is not the opposite of dignity but a precondition of it: to be seen and named is to be acknowledged as a person rather than reduced to an anonymous statistic.

There is, moreover, a psychological reason why such imagery proves effective. Drawing on Negative State Relief Theory and Affect Intensity Theory, as previously discussed in Chapter 2, researchers argue that negative and extreme content provokes intense discomfort that viewers are then motivated to alleviate; when such negative cues are combined with a positive “call for resolution”<sup>138</sup>, that discomfort is channelled into action. On this account, poverty-porn imagery works precisely because it first arouses unease and then offers the donor a means of discharging it<sup>139</sup>.

Yet the very effectiveness of ‘poverty porn’ is also the root of its sharpest ethical objection, as the cost of this is borne by the people depicted in such images. Common fundraising narratives depict people of color as powerless, fundamentally different, and dependent on white, Western saviors. These narratives are rooted in white supremacy, as defined in Chapter 3, and encourage reliance on “Western aid instead of inspiring self-sustaining development”<sup>140</sup>. Those who bring suffering to

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<sup>136</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> Shabbir and others (n 70) 7.

<sup>139</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> Kayla McMenamin, ‘From Populations to People: Inspiring Action through Ethical Storytelling’ (*Minerva Strategies*, 2 March 2022) <<https://minervastrategies.com/from-populations-to-people-inspiring-action-through-ethical-storytelling/>> accessed 16 May 2026.

light, however, never do so entirely selflessly<sup>141</sup>. As soon as an organization publicly denounces injustice, it also strengthens its own credibility and standing.

The objection cuts deeper still, into the very form of the humanitarian image. Many authors have highlighted the risk of humanitarian photography being used for entertainment purposes because “extreme suffering is not something to be gazed at but to be acted on”<sup>142</sup>. Portraying and hence reproducing suffering is morally problematic as “the pornographic element of seeing”<sup>143</sup> turns suffering into a spectacle and continues the same violence and humiliation they depict. Even defiant displays of suffering are “not outside of the economy of violence”<sup>144</sup> that caused them, so the image of pain risks re-enacting the sufferer’s humiliation.

Yet the dilemma persists: if suffering is never shown, how is it to be confronted at all? If NGOs were to reject these images, a powerful means of making unbearable realities visible would be lost. As Duroch and L’Homme (2022) put it, “how else are we supposed to bring the unbearable to light?”<sup>145</sup> Making suffering visible may compound the very indignity it seeks to redress, yet refusing to depict it risks abandoning the sufferer to invisibility.

However, this ethical conflict is not solely driven by external factors; rather, it is structurally embedded within the organizations themselves. People’s moral agency manifests in their choice to avoid inhumane behavior as well as in their proactive choice to behave in humane and compassionate ways. According to Albert Bandura (1999)<sup>146</sup>, however, they can choose to detach their moral standards from harmful behavior through psychological strategies<sup>147</sup>. These include justifying cruelty as acceptable, downplaying the harm caused through advantageous comparison, blaming or dehumanizing victims, and displacing or diffusing responsibility<sup>148</sup>. Because these

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<sup>141</sup> Françoise Duroch and Maelle L’Homme, ‘Ethical Considerations around the Use of Humanitarian Imagery’ (2022) 21 *Humanitarian Alternatives* <<https://www.alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2022/11/29/ethical-considerations-around-the-use-of-humanitarian-imagery/>> accessed 16 May 2026.

<sup>142</sup> *ibid* n.p.

<sup>143</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>144</sup> Elizabeth Dauphinée as quoted by Duroch, L’Homme (n 141) n.p.

<sup>145</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>146</sup> Albert Bandura, ‘Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities’ (1999) 3(3) *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 193.

<sup>147</sup> Although Bandura’s theory of moral disengagement dates back more than two decades, it remains a key framework for explaining how individuals reconcile harmful behavior with their moral self-image. It is used here as the primary framework for analyzing how fundraisers justify practices that they themselves acknowledge as ethically problematic.

<sup>148</sup> Bandura (n 146).

processes make cruelty easier to commit, society needs both strong personal moral standards and social systems that promote compassion and prevent abuse.

The disengagement practice of moral justification involves making harmful behavior socially (and personally) acceptable “by portraying it as serving socially worthy or moral purposes”<sup>149</sup>. In this way, one can give the impression of acting morally while, in reality, (knowingly) causing harm to others. Many NGOs justify the use of ‘poverty pornography’ by saying, “the most important thing is to help the poor,”<sup>150</sup> but this approach raises “issues of relevance, reliability, and credibility.”<sup>151</sup> It would be misleading to claim that the practice is merely an external imposition on the Global South. As discussed in the previous chapter, empirical research on African NGOs shows that fundraisers there employ such imagery themselves and do not necessarily regard it as illegitimate, but rather as an effective, or, indeed, even necessary, instrument for mobilising donations<sup>152</sup>. As Antaby (2026) describes it, “[h]umanitarian actors often use such photography to raise funds for ‘good causes’ and engage targeted audiences in humanitarian responses”<sup>153</sup>. The reasoning behind it is to show suffering people, especially children, because that’s what brings in the donations that actually fund the projects that help those same children. The ethically and morally questionable act is reframed as kindness, making it seem ethically acceptable. Even the seemingly most noble justification put forward by many NGOs, which invokes a higher purpose and *témoignage*, risks falling into this category.

“Advantageous comparison is another way of making harmful conduct look good”<sup>154</sup>, as Bandura (1999) notes. If others, in direct contrast, do worse and behave more harmfully, “reprehensible acts can be made righteous”<sup>155</sup>. NGOs exploit this justification mechanism by arguing that others use ‘poverty porn’ imagery more frequently or make use of more harmful pictures, making their own behaviour appear morally superior in direct comparison.

Many NGOs pride themselves on upholding fundamental humanitarian principles, yet in their fundraising campaigns, they portray aid recipients as passive victims “and [present] them to

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<sup>149</sup> *ibid* 194.

<sup>150</sup> Mahmoud, Nang (n 85) 11.

<sup>151</sup> *ibid* 11.

<sup>152</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>153</sup> Antaby (n 133) 97.

<sup>154</sup> Bandura (n 146) 195.

<sup>155</sup> *ibid* 195.

Western viewers as helpless objects”<sup>156</sup>. Not only does this form of humanitarian fundraising undermine their agency and dignity, thus revealing the “ethical fragility of the humanitarian system”<sup>157</sup>, but also perpetuates “a racist distortion in the public’s perception of the world”<sup>158</sup>. The cumulative toll of such distortion on audiences, i.e., its tendency to wear down rather than sustain public sympathy, is further examined in subchapter 4.3. With this, beneficiaries are dehumanized into victims, which is another disengagement practice identified by Bandura (1999)<sup>159</sup>.

Displacement and diffusion of responsibility are two more disengagement practices used to justify harmful behavior morally<sup>160</sup>. In the case of displacement, a person attributes responsibility for their actions to a single, higher authority that supposedly demanded it. In the NGO sector, an example of displacing responsibility is to blame funders or donors for demanding that kind of imagery, while the individual NGO absolves itself of blame. Diffusing responsibility, on the other hand, signifies that responsibility is distributed across a collective in such a way that no one feels individually accountable<sup>161</sup>. For the NGO sector, it would mean blaming the entire field for using ‘poverty pornography,’ dispersing responsibility across a whole sector, and thereby mitigating individual responsibility and accountability.

“As donors and financial institutions impose strict conditions and requirements for providing funds to humanitarian programs,”<sup>162</sup> there is a risk of commercializing humanitarian aid. In this case, humanitarian organizations may be pressured to document beneficiaries in ways that undermine their dignity, forcing them to choose between meeting donor demands, protecting people’s dignity, and risking a halt in aid delivery. However, fundraisers have a significant ethical responsibility towards the beneficiaries and how they are portrayed<sup>163</sup>, which they should be aware of. The risk is that, in the end, the NGO itself, through deriving “money, visibility or moral authority”<sup>164</sup>, benefits more than the person whose story it tells. This is precisely why “humanitarian organisations are thus

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<sup>156</sup> Duroch, L’Homme (n 141) n.p.

<sup>157</sup> Antaby (n 133) 89.

<sup>158</sup> Duroch, L’Homme (n 141) n.p.

<sup>159</sup> Bandura (n 146).

<sup>160</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>161</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> Antaby (n 133) 97.

<sup>163</sup> Breeze, Dean (n 71).

<sup>164</sup> Duroch, L’Homme (n 141) n.p.

inevitably accused of commodifying suffering”<sup>165</sup>. NGOs are criticized for contributing to the removal of politically charged images of suffering from their original context. As a result, these images become interchangeable commodities used to generate profit, while their political message, the dignity of those affected, and their personal backgrounds are lost<sup>166</sup>.

Moral disengagement is partly shaped by social and organizational systems, which can spread responsibility, justify harmful behavior, and marginalize certain groups. But because “people are producers as well as products of social systems”<sup>167</sup>, they share responsibility for changing them. Added to this are the overarching legal and ethical guidelines that NGOs (must) adhere to, which apply particularly to the protection of children. These will be addressed in the following subchapter.

#### 4.2 Children’s Imagery: Ethical and Legal Framework

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) serves as the legal foundation for the protection of children’s rights. Children are particularly vulnerable and have the right to protection against interference with their privacy, family, and home, as well as against attacks on their honor and reputation. The best interest of the child is explicitly protected under Article 3 and must be a primary consideration in all measures affecting children. Article 16 of the CRC guarantees children the right to privacy and the protection of their private and family life. It states that:

1. “No child shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to unlawful attacks on his or her honour and reputation.
2. The child has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.”<sup>168</sup>

Accordingly, the unwanted publication of personal information or images may infringe upon the child’s right to privacy under Article 16 of the CRC. General Comment No. 25 (2021) on Children’s Rights in Relation to the Digital Environment further expands on this article and explicitly addresses the circulation of digital images, as this has become an increasingly prevalent issue today, as stated in the Introduction to the General Comment No. 25: “[t]he digital environment is becoming increasingly important across most aspects of children’s lives, including during times of crisis, as societal functions, including education, government services and commerce, progressively

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<sup>165</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>166</sup> Duroch, *L’Homme* (n 141) n.p.

<sup>167</sup> Bandura (n 146) 207.

<sup>168</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990) 1577 UNTS 3, art 16.

come to rely upon digital technologies.”<sup>169</sup> Furthermore, it is stated that “[t]he rights of every child must be respected, protected and fulfilled in the digital environment.”<sup>170</sup> The General Comment No. 25 explicitly declares that states should actively include civil society groups, including non-governmental organizations, in creating and reviewing laws and policies on children’s rights in digital spaces, and ensure those groups can effectively support and protect children online<sup>171</sup>. Furthermore, states should work together internationally and regionally with (among others) governments and NGOs to protect children’s rights online<sup>172</sup>.

The EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) serves as a binding, enforceable law in the European Union, with strong child protection provisions. It stipulates that the processing of image material is lawful if the data subject has given their consent (Art. 6(1)(a)) and/or the “processing is necessary for the purposes of the legitimate interests pursued by the controller or by a third party”<sup>173</sup> (Art. 6(1)(f)). It explicitly states that the interests of children must be given special consideration, so that their protection often takes precedence. Article 8 of the GDPR explicitly addresses the *Conditions Applicable to Child’s Consent in Relation to Information Society Services* and states that the processing of images of children under the age of sixteen is lawful only if the holder of parental responsibility for the child or the child him-/herself gives consent. Recital 38 of the GDPR provides *Special Protection of Children’s Personal Data*, as children “may be less aware of the risks, consequences and safeguards concerned and their rights in relation to the processing of personal data”<sup>174</sup>.

Beyond the strictly legal United Nations (UN) and EU framework for protecting children’s rights, there are also ethical guidelines that NGOs (should) adhere to if they wish to respect and uphold children’s rights. According to the Child Rights International Network (CRIN), there is “a suggestion that [images of children and young people] may be used inappropriately, or in order to

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<sup>169</sup> UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, ‘General Comment No 25 (2021) on Children’s Rights in Relation to the Digital Environment’ (2 March 2021) UN Doc CRC/C/GC/25, para 3.

<sup>170</sup> *ibid*, para 4.

<sup>171</sup> *ibid*, para 34.

<sup>172</sup> *ibid*, paras 123-124.

<sup>173</sup> Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC (General Data Protection Regulation) [2016] OJ L119/1, art 6.

<sup>174</sup> *ibid*, recital 38.

gain access to the children and young people pictured.”<sup>175</sup> CRIN states that images of children should only be published when doing so does not put the child at risk, and only with fully informed parental or guardian consent. Otherwise, a child’s identity should be protected through measures such as blurring images, using pseudonyms, or not sharing personal material at all if that is not in the child’s best interests. In line with this, the European NGO Confederation for Relief and Development (CONCORD) has developed a Code of Conduct “to provide a framework on which organisations can draw when designing and implementing their public communications strategy. The Code offers a set of guiding principles that can assist practitioners in their efforts to communicate their organisation’s programmes and values in a coherent and balanced way.”<sup>176</sup> Among other things, the Code of Conduct states that NGO communications should present a fuller, more balanced view of aid work by showing both local and international partnerships. They should be grounded in human dignity, respect, and truthfulness, with these principles built into internal policies and reflected across wider communications. The overall goal is to keep issues visible while avoiding oversimplified messaging or imagery.

The United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) has also developed principles and guidelines for reporting on children that journalists, same as fundraisers, can (and should) use. The first of the six principles, and arguably the most important one, is to “[r]espect the dignity and rights of every child in every circumstance,”<sup>177</sup> and the third is to “[p]rotect the best interests of each child over any other consideration,”<sup>178</sup> which is in line with Article 3 of the CRC. In addition to the six principles, there are seven guidelines for reporting on children, which state that children should not be stigmatized and that context must be provided for their situation or story. If it is safer for the children, their names must be changed or their appearance altered or concealed. Only when it is in the child’s best interest may their name and appearance be revealed. The guidelines conclude with the statement: “[w]hen in doubt about whether a child is at risk, report on the general situation for children rather than on an individual child, no matter how newsworthy the story.”<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Child Rights International Network, ‘Using Images of Children in the Media’ (*CRIN*, 2018) <<https://archive.crin.org/en/guides/communications/media-toolkit/ngo-communications/using-images-children-media.html>> accessed 16 May 2026.

<sup>176</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> UNICEF, ‘Guidelines for journalists reporting on children’ (*UNICEF Europe and Central Asia*) <<https://www.unicef.org/eca/media/ethical-guidelines>> accessed 3 June 2026.

<sup>178</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> *ibid.*

Since, according to the IVE, individual stories and images generate more donations and attention than general stories, it is understandable why NGOs want to avoid this. However, children are particularly vulnerable, which is why protecting their well-being should always come first, especially in NGO fundraising. Furthermore, by constantly reporting on individual cases of child suffering, NGOs risk desensitizing people and making them cold or emotionless in the face of suffering. This is explained in the following subchapter.

#### 4.3 Compassion Fatigue as a Strategic and Ethical Problem

The defence of ‘poverty porn’ rests on its utility: it may offend the portrayed’s dignity, but it raises much-needed funds. The psychology of compassion fatigue<sup>180</sup>, established in 2.3, gives this utility claim a temporal dimension: the very imagery that mobilises donations in the short run erodes donors’ responsiveness and willingness to give over time. As distressing images accumulate, sympathy tends to decline rather than rise, until it “can lead to apathy and inaction.”<sup>181</sup> The dilemma caused by ‘poverty porn,’ therefore, takes on a different form because the utility it is meant to provide is, in part, consumed by itself.

Testing humanitarian appeals built on ‘poverty porn,’ Shabbir and others (2025) find that such appeals can reduce long-term donor engagement and may even be “counter-productive in fostering emotional engagement”<sup>182</sup> once donors are asked to take further action beyond simply feeling sympathy, either because they become accustomed to this kind of appeal or grow skeptical of charity campaigns built on the portrayal of suffering. Instead of prompting people to donate, these images become the norm, and people are no longer shocked by extreme suffering<sup>183</sup>. The predictable result is that, to overcome a numbed audience used to horror and shock, each appeal must out-shock the last. This is consistent with the Weber-Fechner logic set out in 2.3, which suggests that stronger stimuli require larger changes to be noticed. The “pursuit of short-term income goals compromises the development of long-term cognitive compassion,”<sup>184</sup> on which sustained giving depends.

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<sup>180</sup> The psychology of giving, the Identifiable Victim Effect, Negative State Relief Theory, and the eventual onset of compassion fade/fatigue and psychic numbing, was set out in subchapter 2.3. Here, the use of compassion fatigue will rely on the definition set in 2.3.

<sup>181</sup> Västfjäll and others (n 50).

<sup>182</sup> Shabbir and others (n 70) 24.

<sup>183</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>184</sup> Shabbir and others (n 70) 5.

Each round of more extreme, more decontextualised imagery deepens the commodification of the sufferer. Antaby (2026)<sup>185</sup> reinforces this with the iconic photograph of Aylan Kurdi<sup>186</sup>. Donations to a Swedish humanitarian organization increased roughly a hundredfold within a week after the picture circulated. However, Syrian refugees, especially children, were reduced to one-dimensional victims in the public eye, as this image became the most well-known one, negating other cases and experiences. This shows the power of a single picture to “not only [undermine] the dignity of the child but also that of the entire geographical region”<sup>187</sup> because donors generalise about beneficiaries and stop caring about individual suffering the more they are exposed to it.

The dilemma stems from a vicious cycle in which NGO fundraisers seem to find themselves: repeated exposure to extreme imagery numbs the audience<sup>188</sup>; numbing depresses response, which the fundraiser reads as a need for stronger material; stronger material deepens the dignity violation of the portrayed, discussed in subchapter 4.1; and the resulting flood of increasingly graphic suffering accelerates the very numbing that began the cycle. What is more, by “using images that reflect high white savior perceptions, international aid organizations may in fact fail to raise donations and negatively affect the tendency of donors to give”<sup>189</sup>, so the strategy can fail the donor and the beneficiary at once. It is on this ground that practitioners and scholars increasingly argue for imagery that restores agency and context rather than stripping them and stories that “inspire rather than exploit”<sup>190</sup>.

This chapter has described and analyzed the ethical dilemma between utility and dignity that NGO fundraisers face. Even after this analysis, the use of ‘poverty porn’ remains a controversial issue, as there is no clear answer as to whether these images are justified or should not be used. What is, however, firmly established legally (and ethically) is that the protection of the child and the child’s best interests must always come first. If a child is at risk, images must not be shown, and the child’s identity and story must be protected. It is suggested that campaigns then focus on general situations rather than on the personal stories of affected children. This may help prevent the long-term

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<sup>185</sup> Antaby (n 133).

<sup>186</sup> Aylan Kurdi was a two-year-old Syrian boy who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea with his mother and brother in 2015, and a photo of his dead body lying by the beach became globally famous.

<sup>187</sup> Antaby (n 133) 98.

<sup>188</sup> According to the psychic numbing mechanism, as described in subchapter 2.3.

<sup>189</sup> Antaby (n 133) 96.

<sup>190</sup> McMenamin (n 140) n.p.

consequence of ‘poverty porn’: compassion fatigue. People become desensitized in the face of extreme and recurring suffering; this is a natural psychological reaction. However, this can lead to a point where even ‘poverty porn,’ as a fundraising technique, no longer elicits extreme reactions (pity, sympathy, donations), which would then cause its utility to collapse in the long term, making ‘poverty porn’ impossible to justify even from a consequentialist perspective.

To understand how ‘poverty porn’ is used and perceived in real-world practice, interviews were conducted with NGO staff and fundraisers. These are evaluated and analyzed in the following chapter.

## 5. Empirical Research: Interviews with NGO Practitioners

The preceding chapters have developed the argument that ‘poverty porn,’ previously defined as the degrading, sensationalised depiction of people in suffering, is a present NGO fundraising technique, and that it gives rise to a moral dilemma between fundraising effectiveness and the dignity of those portrayed. The purpose of the empirical part of this thesis is to confront the theory-based argument with the lived perspectives of practitioners. The study asks how people who work inside non-governmental organisations perceive, talk about, and account for ‘poverty porn’ practices in their everyday work. Because the present study seeks to understand a sensitive, ethically charged practice from the standpoint of insiders, an open, qualitative design was chosen. The following chapter discusses the research design and methodology and presents the interview analysis, which, combined with the literature reviews of the previous chapters, will be the basis for the discussion in Chapter 6.

### 5.1 Methodology and Research Design

Data were generated through semi-structured expert interviews with NGO practitioners. The semi-structured format was chosen as a deliberate balance between comparability and openness. A guide of pre-formulated questions ensured that the same core themes, derived from the literature review, were addressed in each interview, allowing the five individual responses and experiences to be compared. At the same time, the format left room to vary the sequence of questions, follow up on unanticipated points, and probe the participants’ own framings with additional, spontaneous questions. The interview guide was developed from the conceptual framework established in the literature reviews of the previous chapters. The study was conducted in accordance with the principles of good research ethics and the requirements of the EU General Data Protection

Regulation. Before each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the intended use of the data, and their rights, and they provided their informed oral consent voluntarily. Participation was voluntary throughout, and participants were advised that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw at any time without giving reasons. After an opening, low-threshold question in which participants described their role and the cause their organisation raises funds for, the guide turned to the fundraising methods and channels in use and to the part played by donor expectations in shaping them. It then addressed what participants regarded as most effective in generating donations and whether they believed that drastic or “shocking” images generally increase giving. A subsequent question explored the structural pressures arising from declining revenues or shifting funding structures, since such pressures are frequently invoked as a justification for problematic imagery. The guide then moved to the ethical core of the study, asking how the distinct organisation approaches the long-standing debate on the portrayal of affected people and whether it has internal guidelines overseeing these issues, before inviting participants to reflect on their reaction to other organisations’ emotionally charged campaigns and on whether they experience these as competitive pressure. A final question asked participants to suggest alternative fundraising strategies. The complete guide, with the exact wording of all questions, is reproduced in the Appendix [A1].

Participants were selected through purposive sampling. The decisive criterion was professional involvement in fundraising and/or communication within an NGO, as such individuals possess the relevant expertise to address the study’s objectives. Five practitioners were interviewed. Given the professional sensitivity of the topic, all data were anonymised. Participants and their organisations are not named; identifying details have been omitted or generalised so that no individual or organisation can be recognised, and to protect the participants’ identities, they are referred to throughout this thesis as P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5. Particular care was taken because the interviews touch on potentially critical assessments of the participants’ own and other organisations’ practices. The interviews were conducted both in person and by video call in May and June of 2026; each lasted approximately 30-45 minutes and was conducted in both German and English<sup>191</sup>.

The interviews were not audio-recorded<sup>192</sup>. Instead, detailed handwritten notes were taken throughout, capturing the substance of each answer and, where possible, the exact wording of

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<sup>191</sup> German quotations later reported in English were translated by the author.

<sup>192</sup> This was a deliberate methodological decision. The awareness of being recorded can lead participants to feel “less comfortable and more formal” [Nabeel Al-Yateem, ‘The Effect of Interview Recording on Quality of Data Obtained: A Methodological Reflection’ (2012) 19(4) *Nurse Researcher* 31], which is a risk that heightens when they are asked about ethically contested practices in their own organisations.

particularly telling statements. Accordingly, the participant statements presented in the following subchapter consist of close paraphrases and summaries, complemented by direct quotations, which are marked as such.

The free version of Grammarly (1.132.1.0) was used to revise and correct the entire body of this thesis to ensure that the academic English in this work is flawless. DeepL Translator was used to assist with the translation of some passages of theoretical literature for better understanding and to help with linguistic formulation. All assistance was critically reviewed and finally revised by the author of this thesis.

The interview material was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. As described by Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a method for “identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data,”<sup>193</sup> allowing the researcher to systematically organize and richly describe datasets, while also interpreting various aspects of the research topic. This thesis follows an inductive, bottom-up approach, allowing key themes to emerge directly from the interview data without attempting to fit the data into some pre-existing model or framework<sup>194</sup>. Once themes were identified, they were partly organized within a theoretically informed framework. It ensures that insights emerge from the interview data itself while relating them to specific aspects within broad theoretical orientations. The findings of the interview analysis are presented in the following subchapter; their integration with the theoretical argument developed in the earlier chapters follows in the discussion in Chapter 6.

The study sought to maintain credibility and trustworthiness through a literature-informed interview guide, and open and non-leading questions. A major focus is reflexivity, as the interviews were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. While conducting research with a critical view of ‘poverty porn’ may create a risk of confirmation bias, loaded language was avoided in interviews, giving participants room to justify their practices in their own terms. Overall, the aim was not to force a predetermined conclusion, but to understand how practitioners themselves interpret the issue of ‘poverty porn’ in NGO Fundraising, even when their views differ from the critical literature.

Several limitations follow from the design. The sample is small ( $n = 5$ ) and self-selected, so the findings are illustrative rather than representative and cannot be generalised to the NGO sector. The interviews do not, however, aim at statistical representativeness or generalisation, but at depth, contextual understanding, and analytical insight into how ‘poverty porn’ in NGO fundraising is

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<sup>193</sup> Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, ‘Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology’ (2006) 3(2) *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 77, 79.

<sup>194</sup> *ibid.*

experienced and accounted for by these particular interviewees. The absence of audio recordings means the analysis relies on reconstructed notes. While the direct wording of exclusive statements was captured where possible, the data nonetheless involve a degree of researcher mediation and do not permit fine-grained discourse analysis. The analysis was conducted by a single researcher, and although the conversational, unrecorded setting reduced the possibility of social desirability effects, i.e., the tendency of interviewees to present themselves or their organization in a more favorable light than their actual behavior might warrant, it cannot be eliminated, particularly on the ethically sensitive questions. These limitations do not undermine the value of the study, but they define its scope. The empirical part is intended to illuminate and extend the claims of the literature from a practitioner perspective, not to provide a statistically generalisable account. The following subchapter presents the findings of the thematic analysis of the five expert interviews.

## 5.2 Interview-Findings

The following subchapter presents the main findings of the interviews, organized by key themes: how ‘poverty porn’ is perceived as a fundraising technique (5.2.1), what internal guidelines exist on this topic (5.2.2), and whether there are more ethical alternatives that are already being used or could become relevant in the future (5.2.3). The overarching goal of this study was to understand whether practitioners view the use of ‘poverty porn’ as a moral dilemma and, if so, how they navigate or justify it.

### 5.2.1 Awareness, Practice, and Perceived Effectiveness of ‘Poverty Porn’

The interviewees mentioned various fundraising methods. P1, P2, and P3 described that they are primarily funded by government grants, specifically through the European Union funding or the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). The remaining portion of money needed for project implementation, not covered by government funds, must be raised by the NGOs themselves. Core themes that emerged were online (social media) campaigns, newsletters, or direct mailings as fundraising practices for private donors, as all participants mentioned these. In addition to that, P1 explained that their NGO is listed in court records, allowing the convicted to donate their fines to the NGO, which generates regular donations. In addition, the NGO is co-funded by foundations. P2 explained that the NGO raises funds through online campaigns on social media, flyers, partnerships with local supermarkets, the sale of goods, or auctions. P3 described institutional funding from government sources as the main source of income, as well as direct mailings as the most profitable source of funds for private donors and companies.

P4 explained that the primary source of funding is private donors, distinguishing between older and younger generations. The fundraising is mainly done via newspaper inserts and online campaigns, whereby the elderly mostly adhere to print media, while young people are targeted with social media fundraising. Currently, printed fundraising generates more donations than online fundraising. P5 notes that direct mail is the most widely used and most highly anticipated fundraising tool, while social media channels tend to serve as a means of regular communication and are used less frequently as direct fundraising tools.

All NGO staff members reported that they do not use images of suffering children in their fundraising campaigns. Nevertheless, they noted that there is certainly some understanding for this type of fundraising, because, especially in the past, shocking images and stories have led to more donations. A recurring theme in the interviews, stated by three out of the five interviewees, is the shared recognition that deficit-oriented, shocking images, especially those of children, are considered effective for raising donations, which contradicts the belief that this is ethically wrong. While P1 says that even today, images of (African) children still elicit the most compassion and thus donations, P3 believes that fundraising should be solution-oriented rather than problem-oriented and that shocking images tend to deter donors. P4 explained that their fundraising communication relies on reporting success stories, showing images of happy faces instead of sad ones. They aim at showcasing the organization's impact rather than sorrow or suffering. P4 concluded that fundraising should either be shocking in the sense of provocative or surprising, through unexpected facts or provoking images, or should make people laugh. Here, the term shocking does not necessarily signify horrific or demeaning but can also be positively surprising. Similarly, P5 states that problem-solution stories lead to the most donations; these stories first describe a problem and then present the solution the organization offers. Images of the person(s) affected are also included so that donors can identify with them. However, P5 notes that shocking images do not lead to more donations or other engagement; rather, positive and hopeful photos work better because people want to see what their donations can achieve. The underlying problem should be described in a way that is easy to understand, but this does not require, for example, "showing starving children."<sup>195</sup> Their organization generally considers such images disrespectful and would not use this type of communication. They want to protect those affected, especially children, which is why they primarily show positive images rather than ones depicting poverty or hunger. When other organizations use such images, they are likely targeting different audiences.

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<sup>195</sup> P5.

P3 describes that people are currently overwhelmed by global developments (crises, wars, a political shift to the right, etc.) and are consequently losing empathy for others because they are preoccupied with themselves and all the world's problems. All interviewees noted, however, that in fundraising, the role of donor expectations is generally very significant, as one must adapt to the donors, whether private individuals, institutions, or foundations. P1 noted that some donors, particularly foundations that have stipulated in their bylaws that they help children, sometimes also expect images of (often suffering) children to use for their own fundraising, which can present the NGO with ethical dilemmas. One cross-cutting theme that emerged is that NGOs justify the use of 'poverty porn' by arguing that donors, both private and institutional, expect it to a certain extent. The demand for problematic images is located outside the purview of NGOs but in donor expectations, foundation charters, media salience, and the structural funding shortage.

Regarding fundraising pressure, P5 states that both institutional and private donors have less funding available, which has a significant impact on the organization. All NGO staff members, except for P4 as they don't receive public funds, describe the pressure to raise funds that weighs on them. Donation volumes have dropped dramatically, both globally and in the countries where the NGOs whose practitioners were interviewed are located. This is due both to the US Aid cuts, which are having a massive impact on the sector, and to European policy, where EU politicians are cutting humanitarian and development cooperation funds<sup>196</sup>. One of the German NGO specializes in health aid in Africa and is severely impacted by cuts in the BMZ budget. Africa is no longer seen as "the problem continent, while everything else is fine,"<sup>197</sup> but there is now also a major conflict zone right next door: the war of aggression against Ukraine is an extreme burden on the German population in many ways and feels "closer"<sup>198</sup> to many donors, which is why many donations that would previously have gone to Africa are now flowing there, as both P1 and P3 observed. The situation in Gaza and local humanitarian disasters, as well as the situation in Iran, are also fueling additional uncertainties and not only have a major emotional impact on donors but also have a major impact on the global economy, causing donation volumes to decline somewhat overall<sup>199</sup>. Donations focus more on the crises and acute emergencies that are widely discussed in the media, and less on more hidden/long-standing emergencies that receive less media attention, as P3 notes. There is extreme competitive pressure across the entire sector: funding sources (the Federal Ministry, foundations,

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<sup>196</sup> P3.

<sup>197</sup> P1.

<sup>198</sup> P1.

<sup>199</sup> P1.

etc.) are having their budgets cut, and all small NGOs are struggling to survive, leading to more and more NGOs vying for an ever-shrinking pool of funds, as all practitioners who receive institutional funding have noted.

### 5.2.2 Ethical Decision-Making in Practice and Internal Boundaries

When asked how the respective NGOs portray affected people and whether there are internal guidelines for their portrayal in campaign materials, all five respondents stated that internal guidelines, such as codes of conduct, are in place. P1 explained that consent must be sought, both in fundraising efforts and on-site during project visits, before taking photos or sharing stories. However, it was noted that this sometimes proves difficult because staff at the NGO's main headquarters primarily receive images from local partners, and it is hard to verify whether consent was obtained in advance, even though partnership agreements with local partners always state that this is mandatory. It was described that fundraisers are in a constant dilemma between "we want to portray projects realistically (in the context of crises), but we do not want to violate people's dignity"<sup>200</sup>. P2 described that those affected must speak for themselves without their identity being revealed. They rely heavily on direct quotes and speak with people to communicate problems and situations as realistically as possible. P3 also noted that the NGO has specific guidelines for ethical fundraising. Since the organization receives many donations from companies, for example, it is clearly stipulated which funds may be accepted from which companies; for instance, the NGO does not want to and is not permitted to accept funds from arms suppliers.

While it became a clear cross-cutting theme that there are internal guidelines at stake and all participants position themselves as critical, "oversensitised"<sup>201</sup> insiders who personally reject 'poverty porn,' they all stated that their organisations "don't react"<sup>202</sup> in any way to that kind of imagery from other organisations. P3 criticised that by urging NGOs to be (politically) braver and more vocal about these and similar issues.

### 5.2.3 Ethical Fundraising Alternatives

When asked about suggestions for alternative fundraising strategies, the cross-cutting theme emerging from the interviews was that beneficiaries need to be able to reclaim dignity. The

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<sup>200</sup> P1.

<sup>201</sup> P1.

<sup>202</sup> P1, P2, P3.

interviewees talked about strengthening the partnership with beneficiaries, enabling them to self-representation, and being more solution-oriented in fundraising instead of problem-oriented.

P1 describes that a change in donation behavior is expected in the coming years because the older generation of donors, who were socialized with a “Third World Worldview”<sup>203</sup> and a division between the Global North and Global South, is dying, and the upcoming, younger generation has been socialized with different values that no longer respond to such narratives. To adapt to this, alternative fundraising strategies are needed that do not rely on shock tactics or the portrayal of suffering. P1 focuses here on the phrase “helping people help themselves,”<sup>204</sup> so that beneficiaries move away from dependence on donations and toward “enabling those who are struggling to build something for themselves so that things get better”<sup>205</sup>. The ultimate aim is to move from dependency and suffering toward fostering self-reliance, so that donations eventually become unnecessary. NGOs should ask themselves whether local people are portrayed realistically or in an overdramatized way, and whether this distinction matters to the people depicted. This is only possible through communication with the beneficiaries. P2 also emphasizes the importance of storytelling and explains that beneficiaries should not be portrayed as uninvolved victims, but must be viewed with dignity as partners who should tell their stories if they wish to do so. P3 describes a slightly different approach and states that “words can often speak just as powerfully as images.”<sup>206</sup> According to P3, a positive portrayal of beneficiaries might foster empathy, as it could give donors hope, thereby helping to overcome the acute weariness surrounding global problems. “Good news makes people feel good.”<sup>207</sup> Likewise, P5 suggests continuing to pursue a solution-oriented approach. They stated that “it is particularly important to describe the situation well and emotionally in words, to show images of the surroundings or groups of people (rather than individuals directly affected), and to present positive photos of the results of the work”<sup>208</sup>. P4 emphasized that, for their NGO, it is crucial to adjust fundraising to the specific market they seek to address. The NGO headquarters are located in two different countries in Europe, and donors in these two countries respond to different fundraising methods. While people in one country tend to react most positively to clear and simple visuals, in the other, donor audiences expect a bit more

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<sup>203</sup> P1.

<sup>204</sup> P1.

<sup>205</sup> P1.

<sup>206</sup> P3.

<sup>207</sup> P3.

<sup>208</sup> P5.

elaborate imagery. Consequently, NGOs should not underestimate the cultural aspect that shapes how fundraising efforts are perceived.

This chapter analyzed the interviews conducted as part of this master's thesis and started by explaining the methodology underlying them. The interviews show that the moral dilemma posed by the use of 'poverty porn' is genuinely perceived as such. P1 explicitly describes the "conflict"<sup>209</sup> between the realistic portrayal of people and situations and the risk that this might violate their dignity. However, cross-cutting patterns of justification can also be identified: All interviewees emphasized that they do not use such imagery and attribute this fundraising technique to other organizations. Nevertheless, there is a certain degree of understanding for these other organizations, since, on the one hand, older donors primarily respond to such fundraising techniques and, on the other hand, there is a certain logic of necessity and organizational survival behind it, as global pressure on donations seems to be pushing NGOs toward increasingly drastic fundraising techniques and practices. External funders such as foundations are also attributed partial blame for the emergence of 'poverty porn,' as they sometimes demand such images for their own fundraising. To move away from this, a dignified approach to fundraising is proposed, in which those affected should have a voice and be seen as partners, not as victims, so that fundraising can be practiced in a solution-oriented rather than problem-oriented manner. These interview findings will be further discussed and combined with literature research in the upcoming discussion of Chapter 6.

## 6. Discussion

This chapter will combine the interview findings with the literature review<sup>210</sup>. The interview questions were open-ended but tailored to the core themes of this thesis. In line with Chapter 2, participants were asked about the fundraising strategies and channels they primarily use, as well as

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<sup>209</sup> P1.

<sup>210</sup> It has to be noted that this study has several limitations that must be taken into account when interpreting the results. First, the analysis is based on a small, qualitative sample, which, while providing deep insights into the perspectives of individual NGO staff members, does not allow for generalizations to the entire sector. The findings should be considered exploratory and would need to be verified in larger-scale studies. Second, the data are based on self-reports: respondents describe their own behavior and attitudes, making the data susceptible to social desirability bias, i.e., the tendency to provide socially desirable answers. Particularly with an ethically charged topic such as 'poverty porn,' it is conceivable that the consistent rejection of these practices is partly due to this effect. Interestingly, this not only weakens the findings but also indirectly confirms them. The discrepancy between verbal rejection and ongoing sector practices is itself a central finding of this study and aligns with the disengagement practices described by Bandura (1999). Lastly, the study examined only the NGOs' perspective while the viewpoints of donors and beneficiaries themselves were not considered, even though these would be central to understanding the structural incentives. Future research could address this by explicitly incorporating the perspectives of donors and the voices of the beneficiaries.

whether and how NGOs perceive the pressure on donations across the entire sector. About Chapter 3, respondents were asked which images generate the most donations and whether they are aware of (more ethical) fundraising strategies that could or should replace the unethical type of fundraising. Concerning Chapter 4, respondents were asked whether their respective NGOs have internal guidelines on the use of images and whether, and if so, how they address problematic images used by (other) NGOs, both as an organization and privately.

As described in the previous chapter, the primary interview findings revealed that while the respondents disapproved of the use of these images and did not use them in their own NGOs, they did express a certain degree of understanding for the use of this fundraising technique. The main reasons cited were that (especially older) donors tend to respond to these sorts of pictures, the fact that financial pressure forces non-governmental organizations to resort to more extreme fundraising techniques, and that some external donors also encourage this by requesting such images.

This chapter argues that the resulting dilemma is less an individual moral failure than a structural problem rooted in the expectations and power of donors and the increasing pressure to raise funds. The following discussion first examines why ‘poverty porn’ is effective with donors (6.1), then explores the justification strategies NGOs use to legitimize its use (6.2), identifies the structural conditions that explain why individual sensitivity does not lead to sector-wide change (6.3), delimits the concept from genuine depictions of suffering and discusses ethical alternatives (6.4), and concludes with concrete recommendations for practice (6.5).

### 6.1 Why ‘Poverty Porn’ Is Effective with Donors

The first significant finding from the interviews was that the respondents described how ‘poverty porn’ imagery, that is, shocking images and images of suffering children, has a strong impact on donors because it evokes compassion<sup>211</sup>. This is consistent with the existing literature, which shows that, for example, “good-news campaigns” are not as successful in generating donations as emotional appeals based on suffering and poverty (as discussed in subchapter 3.2). The underlying psychology is primarily the Negative State Relief Theory, as described in subchapter 2.3, which promotes altruistic behavior, such as donating to a good cause, in response to a sad mood evoked by horrific images<sup>212</sup>. In the process, donors experience a “warm glow,”<sup>213</sup> that is, a sense of self-affirmation, by believing that their donation will make a positive difference in alleviating the

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<sup>211</sup> P1.

<sup>212</sup> Cialdini, Baumann, Kenrick (n 32).

<sup>213</sup> Bhati, Hansen (n 2).

suffering depicted in the image. As explained in subchapter 3.2, ‘poverty porn’ exploits precisely this human reaction by explicitly and deliberately depicting suffering and poverty to encourage people to donate and give them that feeling of self-gratification.

The fact that respondents also stated that images of children have an impact on donors suggests that they are reacting to the Identifiable Victim Effect<sup>214</sup>. As described in 2.3, this effect refers to people’s tendency to donate more generously to a single, named, or clearly identifiable person in need than to large groups of people or statistics. This appears to be confirmed by the respondents, especially when it comes to children. In addition, P3 described how, in general, topics or situations that receive extensive media coverage generate more donations. Issues that attract sustained media attention are often crises or major problems, such as wars, famines, natural disasters, or disease outbreaks, about which the general public needs to be informed. These are the kinds of stories that are typically framed as disaster narratives, accompanied by imagery depicting the suffering they cause, and are precisely the stories that tend to prompt people to donate. This confirms what could be observed with the case of Aylan Kurdi discussed in 4.3, in which the image of the child went viral and donations for refugees in Syria increased a hundredfold within a week. Here, too, the real-life experiences of NGO staff align with the existing literature.

To understand why ‘poverty porn’ is so prevalent and hard to escape, it’s worth first taking a look at why it works in the first place. A point raised by P1, one that did not emerge in this form during the literature review, is the assumption that ‘poverty porn’ or shocking imagery tends to have a greater impact on older donors. This was justified by the argument that this generation grew up with a different worldview (“Third World; Global South vs. Global North”<sup>215</sup>), while younger generations were socialized differently (globalization; moving away from the Third World thinking and toward more inclusive ideas<sup>216</sup>) and therefore no longer respond to this type of fundraising.

An alternative explanation that could possibly be mentioned is the concept of compassion fatigue, as described in subchapters 2.3 and 4.3. Compassion fade, also called compassion fatigue, describes how people’s emotional capacities are limited, and donors may feel overwhelmed by too many harrowing images or a high number of victims, or they may no longer be able to grasp individual suffering, causing their compassion to wane. Psychic numbing represents the extreme of this, that is, the total “collapse of compassion”<sup>217</sup>. This phenomenon is also described by P3, noting that

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<sup>214</sup> Genevsky and others (n 37).

<sup>215</sup> P1.

<sup>216</sup> P1.

<sup>217</sup> Slovic and others (n 55) 8.

people today are overwhelmed by global crises, wars, and general suffering and, as a result, lose their capacity for empathy toward others. This could be another explanation for why older people, according to the interview findings, are more likely to respond to shocking images than the younger generation, who, due to social media and a globalized world, have constant access to such images and have grown up amid current crises and constant media coverage. A study by Konrath, O'Brien, and Hsing (2011) suggested that the declining empathy in young people can partly be attributed to the "rising prominence of personal technology and media use in everyday life,"<sup>218</sup> which prioritizes individual entertainment and online interactions over personal dynamics and may alter empathy. Furthermore, they suggest that "exposure to media and technology may desensitize people to the pain of others if people are constantly bombarded with reports of violence, war, terrorism, and so on,"<sup>219</sup> which may lead to compassion fatigue. Younger generations might have become desensitized to images of suffering and no longer actively engage with them, but are instead more interested in a different kind of fundraising. This could represent a new avenue for further research because if compassion fatigue and generational change reduce the effectiveness of 'poverty porn,' it could mean that this type of fundraising has an expiration date in any case. In the long run, that could mean that community-centric fundraising, in which organizations are encouraged to shape decision-making processes together with those affected and to highlight their dignity, agency, and potential, as described in subchapter 3.3, would not only be the more ethical choice but also the strategically inevitable one.

While this explains why such images are effective, it does not explain how NGOs reconcile their use of them with their own ethical reservations. The interview findings reveal three recurring justifications NGO staff provide for the use of 'poverty porn': (a) externalizing the demand onto donors, (b) distinguishing and comparing their own conduct from that of others (stating that others do it, they don't), and (c) framing it as a necessary matter for the organization's survival. These can be very well explained by Bandura's (1999)<sup>220</sup> disengagement practices in the face of inhumane acts, as defined in subchapter 4.1 and further discussed in the following subchapter.

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<sup>218</sup> Sara H Konrath, Edward H O'Brien and Courtney Hsing, 'Changes in Dispositional Empathy in American College Students Over Time: A Meta-Analysis' (2011) 15(2) *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 180, 188.

<sup>219</sup> *ibid* 189.

<sup>220</sup> Bandura (n 146).

## 6.2 Justification Strategies: NGOs' Disengagement Mechanisms

By attributing the use of shocking images to donor demand, responsibility is displaced. NGOs deflect blame by stating that both private donors and institutional funders want and expect this type of imagery. This is explained, among other things, by the shrinking donation pool and the resulting pressure to raise funds, which all respondents described as clearly noticeable. As mentioned in subchapter 2.1, donations are generally declining, and institutional and government support for the entire sector is also decreasing. When certain foundations expect images of suffering (or explicitly suffering children) in exchange for their funding, NGOs must provide them in order to continue their work for the “good cause,”<sup>221</sup> even if this may not align with their moral standards and thus present them with moral dilemmas. All respondents stated that they themselves do not use these types of fundraising techniques and condemn them when others do (though they can, in some cases, understand why other organizations might). In doing so, they position themselves in an advantageous comparison, one example of Bandura's disengagement practices. By accusing other organizations of worse behavior, they make themselves look better and justify the occasional use of these techniques to themselves and others by blaming donors to pressure them into the use, as explained above. At the same time, they diffuse the responsibility across the entire sector, as they imply that it would make no difference if only they, as individual NGOs, were to completely change their already ‘superior’ behavior from occasional use of ‘poverty porn’ to none at all. This was also indirectly criticized by P3, stating that NGOs do not take enough political and moral stands and should present a united front in such dilemmas. If individuals change their behavior, it does not alter the overall situation, and the only difference would be less funding for the NGO. Fundamental change is needed, starting with the donors, both private and institutional.

By rationalizing the use of ‘poverty porn’ as necessary for their continued existence as an NGO, the respondents employ the “moral justification”<sup>222</sup> disengagement practice described by Bandura. Although they actually know better and condemn it, they sometimes use shocking images to protect their continued existence and thus the survival of their organization and its good work, which precisely illustrates the gap between ethical awareness and practice. All interviewees describe that there are internal guidelines for image use within their respective NGOs, which implies that they are aware that the use of images carries a risk and they must consciously decide for (or against) a certain type of external communication. However, it is also noted that it can sometimes be difficult to adhere to these guidelines, especially when collaborating with local partners, as described by P1,

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<sup>221</sup> Antaby (n 133) 97.

<sup>222</sup> Bandura (n 146).

and in light of the donor requirements already discussed. Accordingly, internal guidelines and Codes of Conduct appear to have only a limited influence, a finding that is also consistent with the literature review. As explained using the example of *Save the Children* in subchapter 3.2, this organization has also adapted its policies to preserve the dignity of those affected, but still uses stereotypical images to raise donations. This is partly due to structural causes, as will be discussed in the following subchapter.

### 6.3 Structural Causes Preventing Change

The problem behind the externalization strategy described above is not merely a moral dilemma for NGOs, but a more structural one: the fact that NGOs are accountable “upward” (to donors and funders) but not “downward” to those affected creates a power asymmetry that, among other things, reinforces the image of passive victims and white saviorism. Fundraising is not geared toward those affected, but toward the donors, that is, toward wealthy (white) people. Those affected are frequently portrayed as helpless, poor, and suffering to generate more donations. It is indeed a serious sign that many of the interviewees (P1, P3, P5) explicitly cited “starving African children” as an example of shocking images, because this shows just how prevalent this image is even today and in the minds of fundraisers, and in spite of the fact that they don’t use it. This is a classic example of stereotypical imagery which reinforces postcolonial power imbalances and white savior narratives, as defined in subchapter 3.1. ‘Poverty porn’ and its negative long-term consequences become ingrained in people’s minds, even if they don’t support it.

The academic literature explains that ‘poverty porn’ continues to exist; the interview data reveal the justificatory strategies through which it persists despite widespread ethical opposition. The question that emerges from these theoretical and practical findings is why individual sensitivity does not manifest itself in sector-wide change. This is partly explained by the structural pressure to raise funds, which suggests that the dilemma is not purely moral but is structurally embedded. How can an NGO raise money for its projects and work through dignified fundraising when other NGOs do not do so but instead opt for the more successful technique of portraying those affected in an undignified manner? This is what is called a prisoner’s dilemma: It illustrates that even two rational actors will arrive at an outcome that is bad for both if each pursues their own self-interest, even though cooperation would be better for them. Non-governmental organizations justify the use of exploitative images by arguing that other organizations do the same, and that if they did not, such images would continue to prevail and they would, on top of that, lose donations; therefore, it is best for them to use such images as well. This behavior, which is rational from an individual perspective

as it ensures organizational survival as donations decline, leads to the entire sector resorting to ‘poverty porn,’ even though everyone, both those affected and the NGOs, would be better off collectively if no one used such images, in order to prevent compassion fatigue. That is why individual sensitivity does not translate into change within the sector. A collective agreement or external pressure, such as from donors, could resolve this dilemma. However, NGO staff are already considering more ethical alternatives to ‘poverty porn’ that might bring about this structural shift, as explained in the next subchapter.

#### 6.4 Delimiting ‘Poverty Porn’ and Ethical Alternatives

Beyond this structural trap, a conceptual difficulty further complicates the picture: Not every depiction of suffering is ‘poverty porn.’ A question that arises is where the fine line between reality and over-dramatization lies, which was also described by P1. People who are better off must not turn a blind eye to the real problems in the world, even if they grow weary of them and their compassion threatens to fade in the face of so many problems. Those affected deserve to have their stories told truthfully and their perspectives shown, without these being over-dramatized for profit<sup>223</sup>. Not every depiction of suffering can or should be labeled ‘poverty porn.’ The somewhat vague definition of the concept makes it difficult to distinguish genuine portrayals of dire situations from pure profit-seeking and the exploitation of suffering. It is important to preserve the dignity of the people depicted, to protect their identity when necessary, especially in the case of children, and to obtain their consent when their images are used.

The respondents addressed this concern for dignity when they were asked about alternatives to existing fundraising practices. Three main themes emerged: (1) viewing beneficiaries as partners; (2) self-representation (“helping people help themselves”<sup>224</sup>); and (3) taking a solution-oriented rather than problem-oriented approach, for example, by using positive and hopeful images. This corresponds to the approach of community-centric fundraising. The approach described by the interviewees, i.e., letting those affected speak for themselves and merely helping them to help themselves, can thus be described as a classic CCF approach. The idea of engaging in more solution-oriented fundraising, which would strengthen both the collective well-being of society and solidarity among organizations, is also consistent with CCF. The idea described by P3 of using positive imagery aligns with the findings presented in subchapter 3.3 from the study by Bhati and

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<sup>223</sup> That is also why AI-generated imagery is not included in this thesis. Although it completely avoids depicting real people, this thesis focuses on the dignified representation of real people in real situations. The distinct ethical questions raised by artificially generated imagery would require separate examination.

<sup>224</sup> P1.

Eikenberry (2016)<sup>225</sup>, who found that children prefer to be portrayed as happy, clean, and unique, rather than as sad and dependent on aid. These approaches, evident in both the literature and practice, reinforce the view that beneficiaries should no longer be seen as passive victims but as inclusive partners to revolutionize NGO fundraising.

It is thus clear that ethical alternatives such as CCF are already being considered. Still, the original problem persists: as long as donors retain control over funding allocation and continue to expect ‘poverty pornography,’ the approach will remain incomplete. Despite the ethical potential of CCF, a key tension remains unresolved: emotional appeals centered on suffering and poverty have been shown to generate more donations than positive or solution-oriented portrayals. CCF is thus the more ethical approach, but not necessarily the more effective one, at least not under current market conditions. This discrepancy explains why dignified fundraising has stalled halfway. As long as undignified portrayals simply bring in more money, the switch to CCF requires an individual NGO to make a financial sacrifice that it can hardly afford, given the described pressure to raise funds.

For CCF to evolve from an ethical ideal into a viable practice, several factors would therefore have to shift simultaneously. First, funders would have to change their funding criteria, as they hold the decisive leverage in allocating resources. As long as foundations and institutional donors expect images of suffering in return, the structural incentive for ‘poverty pornography’ will persist. Second, there would need to be a form of donor education that increases the effectiveness of dignified portrayals, so that the economic logic shifts and donors learn to respond to empowerment-oriented narratives as well. Third, the sector must act in solidarity, as only a collective shift in standards will prevent cooperating NGOs from being at a disadvantage compared to those that continue to rely on shocking images. CCF can therefore only fully realize its ethical potential when not only the behavior of individual organizations but also the underlying incentive structure of the entire donation market changes.

## 6.5 Recommendations: An Ethical Checklist for Image-Based Campaigns

So how should NGOs proceed? For any planned fundraising campaign that uses images, those images must first be ethically evaluated. The following steps are recommended by the author of this thesis for this purpose:

Step 1 - Consent. Step one is to address the issue of consent. The individuals concerned must give their informed and voluntary consent to the use of their own images; otherwise, such use shall be

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<sup>225</sup> Bhati, Eikenberry (n 81).

prohibited. As discussed in subchapter 4.2, through the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, international law stipulates that children must be protected under all circumstances, including from violations of their privacy and in the digital environment, and that in all actions concerning children, their best interest must be a primary consideration. Article 8 of the EU General Data Protection Regulation further states that images of children under the age of 16 may only be used with their active, informed consent or that of their parents, which is also what the Child Rights International Network states. Hence, this step is important to align with the legal framework regarding children's imagery use.

Step 2 - Proportionality. Once consent has been obtained in the manner described, the issue of proportionality must be addressed: is the person's exposure proportionate to the campaign's purpose? Even if consent was technically given for a depiction, it can still be disproportionate, for example, if an image of extreme suffering is shown, even though a less revealing depiction would achieve the same fundraising effect. This is where the utility-versus-dignity dilemma comes mostly into play, as there must be a balance between the campaign's utility and the preservation of the dignity of those affected; otherwise, the campaign is also unjustifiable.

Step 3 - Contextualization. If proportionality is ensured, the next step is contextualization. Images, people, and their stories must not be taken out of context but must be portrayed realistically and truthfully. As shown in subchapter 3.2, images of great suffering can give rise to harmful narratives. All too often, fundraising campaigns in the NGO sector are based on the legacy of colonialism and persistent power imbalances, as they play on prejudices and stereotypes and exploit Western notions of the "Third World"<sup>226</sup> and of suffering, "starving children with 'flies in their eyes',"<sup>227</sup> to raise money for their causes. While this may be the reality, the direct depiction of this kind of suffering is nonetheless ethically questionable, as it strips those affected of their agency and individuality.

Step 4 - Long-term Impact. And finally, the long-term impact must be assessed, for the people depicted as well as for the donors and the NGO itself. To counteract stereotypical and discriminatory portrayals of people depicted while simultaneously avoiding compassion fatigue and a distorted worldview in the donors and maintaining the NGO's reputation and adhering to its mission, fundraising must not be based primarily on 'poverty porn.' While real situations must, of course, be depicted, fundraising must not rely on over-dramatization, because otherwise people become desensitized and overwhelmed, turning a blind eye to the world's real problems. If all four steps are followed, the campaign can be considered ethically justifiable according to the author of

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<sup>226</sup> P1.

<sup>227</sup> Orgad (n 11) 301.

this thesis. Nevertheless, fundraisers should always ask themselves whether there are more dignity-based alternatives, such as empowerment narratives and participatory forms of representation. If the entire sector were to adhere to this, it could be possible to conduct ethical fundraising sustainably and bring about structural change.

This chapter combined the previous literature research from Chapters 2 to 4 with the empirical research conducted through the expert interviews analyzed in Chapter 5. It was found that the respondents certainly recognize the utility-versus-dignity dilemma described in Chapter 4, but they do not resolve it. Rather, they manage and explain it by shifting responsibility via the externalization of demand onto donors, advantageous comparisons with other organizations, and rationalization based on necessity. The dilemma is therefore less an individual moral failure than a structural problem rooted in the power of donors and the increasing pressure to raise funds. While the existing literature primarily demonstrates *that* ‘poverty porn’ persists despite widespread ethical opposition, this study contributes to the *how and why*. It reveals the mechanisms through which individual sensitivity fails to translate into sector-wide change. The underlying collective action problem makes it clear that a single NGO cannot resolve the dilemma unilaterally. Only a shift in the incentive structure or sector-wide coordination would make dignified fundraising sustainable. At the same time, there are signs that compassion fatigue and generational change could undermine the effectiveness of shocking images in the long term, suggesting that CCF may represent not only the ethically required but also the strategically inevitable future of the sector. The following chapter will conclude the main ideas discussed in this thesis and recall the primary findings.

## 7. Conclusion

Somewhere in the archive of every major humanitarian organization, there is a folder of images that were never used. Not because they were technically inadequate, but because someone, at some point, decided they went too far in the portrayal of human suffering. While it is, of course, important to portray real problems accurately and not to hide or gloss over suffering, there is a fine line between a realistic depiction of problems and over-dramatization and profiteering. Maintaining this fine line poses a major challenge for fundraisers at NGOs and often presents a moral dilemma of what imagery can be shown and what is unethical to use. This thesis set out to investigate why ‘poverty porn’ persists in NGO fundraising despite widespread ethical opposition, and through what mechanisms individual ethical sensitivity fails to translate into sector-wide change.

Chapter 2 of this thesis explained how NGOs operate under growing financial pressure in an environment of shrinking public funding and the resulting intensified competition for donor attention. Donor psychology rewards emotional and fear-based appeals and identifiable suffering over rational information and dignified appeals. Negative-State Relief Theory, Affect Intensity Theory, and the Identifiable Victim Effect all converge on the same uncomfortable conclusion: that the fundraising techniques most likely to succeed in the short term are also the most likely to compromise the dignity of those they depict.

These structural conditions sustain ‘poverty porn,’ which was defined in Chapter 3 as the deliberate use of distressing, dehumanizing, or exploitative imagery of people experiencing poverty and suffering to elicit emotional responses from prospective donors. It is not a fringe practice but a persistent feature of humanitarian communication. Despite decades of criticism and the emergence of alternative frameworks such as the Codes of Conduct developed by CONCORD and others, exploitative imagery remains widespread. Its persistence cannot be attributed to ignorance but reflects a calculated response to demonstrated fundraising effectiveness in the short term.

The ethical objection that certain means are impermissible regardless of outcome is reinforced in Chapter 4 of this thesis by the observation that ‘poverty porn’ perpetuates harmful narratives about the Global South, entrenches white savior dynamics, strips beneficiaries of agency and dignity, and risks producing compassion fatigue, which was defined as a creeping desensitization that ultimately undermines the very emotional response that ‘poverty porn’ depends on. Under these conditions, the use of suffering imagery becomes ethically unjustifiable, not only because it violates the dignity of those depicted, but because it is ultimately self-defeating. Once compassion fatigue sets in, even ‘poverty porn’ ceases to generate the responses it was designed to produce, and its consequentialist justification collapses alongside its ethical one. What is legally and ethically non-negotiable is the protection of the child. Both the legal landscape and ethical guidelines emphasize that a child cannot be exposed to harm, identification risk, or exploitation, and the best interests of the child admit no trade-off against fundraising effectiveness. This is the one line that is, and must remain, clearly drawn.

What this thesis has sought to add to that picture is an account of how the ethical dilemma is lived from the inside, as analyzed in Chapter 5. The practitioners interviewed are not indifferent to these tensions. Every interviewee distanced their own organization from the use of ‘poverty porn’ while expressing varying degrees of understanding for organizations that employ it. This reveals how the dilemma is managed rather than resolved, explained rather than confronted: responsibility is

displaced onto donors and external funders, or onto unnamed other organizations assumed to be doing the real damage.

Chapter 6 brought the literature research and interview findings together, arguing that the persistence of ‘poverty porn’ is less an individual moral failure than a structurally sustained practice. The collective action problem at the heart of the sector means that no single NGO can resolve the dilemma unilaterally. Commitment to dignified fundraising, in the absence of any corresponding shift in donor behavior or sector-wide coordination, risks competitive disadvantage. The mechanisms through which individual sensitivity fails to become sector-wide change, i.e., advantageous comparison, moral justification, and displacement and diffusion of responsibility, are the predictable responses of actors navigating a landscape that continues to reward exploitation.

There are, however, reasons to believe that this shift may be coming regardless. Repeated exposure to imagery of suffering diminishes its emotional impact over time, which means that ‘poverty porn’ carries its own expiration date. Community-centric fundraising, which repositions affected communities as partners rather than objects of pity, may represent not only the ethically required future of the sector, but the strategically inevitable one.

To answer the central research question of how NGOs should navigate the tension between fundraising effectiveness and ethical responsibility in their use of suffering imagery, this thesis proposes a 4-Step framework: obtaining the informed consent of those depicted; ensuring that imagery is proportionate to the campaign’s purpose; presenting people in context rather than reducing them to a single moment of suffering; and assessing the long-term impact on those shown. These steps do not resolve the underlying structural dilemma, but they establish a minimum standard of practice within it and offer a dignity-based alternative to the prevailing ‘poverty pornography.’

This thesis contributes to the existing literature by moving beyond the question of whether ‘poverty porn’ persists, which has been well established, to illuminate the how and why. It identifies the mechanisms through which structural pressure and moral disengagement combine to sustain a practice that most individual practitioners find ethically uncomfortable. What is needed is a shift in the incentive structure itself: sector-wide coordination, donor education, and regulatory frameworks that make dignified fundraising not merely the ethical choice, but the practical one.

Dignity is not a luxury that can wait until the funding gap is closed. The evidence gathered with this thesis suggests that ethical fundraising is not only possible but increasingly necessary, and that the organisations willing to lead this change now stand to gain the most from it. The tools to do so already exist; what remains is the will to use them.

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## Appendix

### A1: Interview-Outline

*Introducing myself and my topic.*

1. Can you briefly describe your role within your organization and what your NGO primarily raises funds for?
2. What fundraising methods and channels do you currently use, and which ones play the biggest role for you (e.g., online campaigns, direct mail, events, institutional donors)? - *Follow-up: What role do donor expectations play in this?*
3. What has demonstrably worked best for you in generating donations, and to what do you attribute this success? - *Follow-up: Do you feel that “shocking” images actually lead to more donations?*
4. Many organizations report increasing pressure due to declining donation revenues or changes in funding structures. How do you perceive this development in your day-to-day work?
5. In development cooperation, there has been a long-standing debate about how those affected should be portrayed in campaign materials. How does your organization address this issue/ are there internal guidelines or a conscious approach to it?
6. When you see campaigns by other organizations that rely on highly emotional or problematic imagery, how do you react to this personally and as an organization? Do you perceive this as competitive pressure?
7. Do you have any suggestions for alternative fundraising strategies?

*Thanking the interviewee and ask them if they have any questions or remarks.*