

## Looking good:

### Mediatisation and international NGOs

#### Abstract

*Many international NGOs increasingly value those parts of their work that are suited to media representation: campaigning, advocacy, projects that produce the right sort of images. In this article I make three points about this shift. First, that those parts of the NGO most reliant on media - such as the campaign desk - may be becoming more powerful. This can change the internal dynamics of NGOs. Second, the increasing use of media means that NGOs, like other organisations, hold themselves accountable in new ways. Third, NGOs may appear to look more and more like media organisations. These changes have received relatively little attention in the literature on NGOs, though they reflect a broader set of debates about the role of media in society. Using a case analysis of an international NGO, I suggest the concept of mediatisation might offer a way understanding some of the changes observed in the NGO sector.*

*Beaucoup d'ONG internationales donnent de plus en plus valeur aux parties de leur travail qui sont adaptés à une représentation médiatique : organisation de campagnes, défense d'intérêts, et projets qui produisent 'le bon type' d'images. Dans cet article, je mets en avant trois arguments concernant ce changement. Premièrement, c'est que les parties des ONG les plus dépendants des media (comme le bureau d'une campagne) peuvent devenir plus puissantes et changer les dynamiques internes de l'ONG. Deuxièmement, l'utilisation croissante des medias font si que les ONG (comme d'autres organisations) soient tenus responsables dans des nouvelles formes. Troisièmement, les ONG apparaissent de plus en plus comme des organisations médiatiques. Ces changements n'ont pas reçu beaucoup d'attention dans la littérature sur les ONG, cependant ils réfléchissent une série de débats plus larges sur le rôle des medias dans la société. Utilisant un*

*analyse de cas de une ONG internationale, je suggère que le concept de médiatisation peut nous donner une nouvelle façon de comprendre quelques-uns des changements observés dans le secteur des ONG.*

Keywords:

NGO, media, development, accountability, mediatisation, AMREF, The Guardian

## **Introduction**

From the newsreels of starving children in Biafra in the 1960s, through Live Aid or Comic Relief, to the role of celebrities such as George Clooney or Angelina Jolie in the campaigns of international NGOs, development work has always been mediated by images, speech and text. In recent years this turn toward the use of media has been particularly apparent in the NGO sector. NGOs increasingly work with media organisations to get their message out, and they also use the expanding array of information communication technologies to raise awareness and solicit funds (Cottle and Nolan 2007, Fenton 2009b, Scott 2014: 167, Wright 2015). Many international NGOs have branding strategies, public relations departments, and media desks, developing a range of stories and campaign strategies that work in media terms. This article is concerned with what this might mean for the work of NGOs.<sup>1</sup>

There are three lines of argument made. First, I suggest that the internal politics of NGOs might be changing as media, policy and campaign desks become more valued. Second, that the increasing use of media helps explain why many NGOs seem to be holding themselves accountable in new ways, to new audiences and stakeholders. Third, the turn toward sophisticated forms of campaigning and writing about development makes NGOs look increasingly like different sorts of media organisations. In other words, the boundaries between NGOs and media organisations are - in some cases - becoming blurred. A case study later in the article focuses on a particular international NGO, AMREF,

as a way of illustrating these points. I focus on broad changes within AMREF, as well as drawing examples from AMREF's interactions with The Guardian newspaper around the Katine project in eastern Uganda. To make sense of the shifts in AMREF, I suggest that it is useful to draw on the concept of mediatisation (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999, Cottle 2006, Esser and Strömbäck 2014). Mediatisation refers to the fact that institutions are increasingly 'constrained to take on a form suitable for media representation' (Couldry, 2008: 376).

In part the article arises from a comment by someone I knew who had left the international NGO OXFAM. He had worked for a number of years in the development sector, mostly in developing countries. His departure came at the time where Duncan Green's *From Poverty to Power* was getting a lot of play in the media. The book, an exploration of how 'active citizens and effective states can change the world', was heavily promoted by OXFAM through its website and a series of public engagements. My acquaintance commented on how this mixture of policy work and campaigning was symptomatic of broader changes within the NGO, noting that those working on the advocacy and policy desks and in the campaigns department had gained influence. He also noted that it was less and less easy to do context-specific sector work – on health or education, for example – unless that work could be tied into some sort of global campaign or international policy agenda. This ties in with the increasing importance being given to global policy agendas and priority setting emerging from an increasing focus on the Millennium Development Goals. There had been - I was told - an increase in the value given to expertise in advocacy and campaigning and what he described as 'influencing change at policy levels'. In this way projects were driven by the question of whether or not they could be tied to influencing OXFAM's global campaigning. At the time OXFAM had recently rebranded itself as a 'global movement for change' and was emblematic of broader shifts within the sector.

The article also comes out of my experience observing AMREF's interactions with The Guardian newspaper. The interactions were part of a project known as "Katine" where the NGO AMREF (the African Medical Research Foundation) partnered The Guardian, who profiled Katine in the newspaper on a rolling basis. Katine was an integrated rural development project, sponsored by readers of the newspaper (and also by the corporate social responsibility side of Barclays Bank). It unfolded over a four-year period, both on The Guardian website and in a rural sub-county in eastern Uganda (I contributed blogs to the website, and reviewed the project at the end). At certain points in the course of the project it was possible to see the project shifting in relation to AMREF's relationship with The Guardian. A football tournament that was not in the original plan – and not particularly popular with field staff – found itself in the project at one stage. Some other aspects of the project – particularly around public health – received attention partly because of the way they played into certain stories and broader development agendas. Later in the article I also examine AMREF's published documents and campaign materials.

Before going further into the argument or the case material, it is important to make clear that this article is suggestive. It is meant to provoke debate and encourage new work looking at the relationship between the use of media on the work of NGOs. It draws on a particular set of experiences working with AMREF and The Guardian, and pulls in information from published materials, reports and campaign documents from one medium-sized international NGO. I suspect the argument set out below has more relevance to international NGOs working in the 'north', many of which have moved away from their traditional work around issues of service delivery, than it does to those working in the 'south' (Fenton 2010). (Though it should be noted that some southern NGOs, such as BRAC in Bangladesh, or the Treatment Action Campaign in South Africa are as media-savvy, if not more so, than many smaller northern NGOs.) AMREF might be thought of as less of an obvious candidate than OXFAM or Save the Children for the type of argument put forward here, nonetheless it offers a series of useful illustrations about the three points I want to get across.

I draw from material on the Katine website, include evaluations and reviews looking at the relationship between AMREF and The Guardian as well as my own encounters with project staff and senior management. I hope that this provides enough evidence to suggest the need for a wider discussion about the way the use of media might be changing NGOs. The methods combine a reflection of recent published work on NGOs, media and development, alongside illustrative material from my own interactions with AMREF. Some of the case material relates to information on the internal workings of AMREF, partly through first-hand observation, partly through interviews and informal discussions. All this is set against the concept of mediatisation, which is more typically a way of explaining changes in the field of the politics of the public sector. (Scholars have noted the increasing bias toward initiatives that “work” in media terms in the realm of politics and public broadcasting, satirised in the BBC dramas *The Thick of It* and *W1A* (cf. Esser and Strömbäck 2014)).

#### Mediatisation, NGOs and media and development

Before looking at the case material, it is worth saying something about the approach taken here, and how it may be at some distance from the usual way changes in the NGO sector are studied. In the broader literature on NGOs, discussions about their use of media mostly tend to focus on political or economic explanations. The use of media is seen as a side effect, and there is not much reflection on the possible effects it might have on different NGOs. In work labelled “media and development” there is a very sharp distinction between NGOs and “the media”, and not much interest in the possible effects the use of images, text or other media might have on NGOs themselves.

The literature on changes in the NGO sector focuses more on economic and political shifts (Lewis 1998; Dichter, 1999, Chapman and Fisher 2000). The liberalisation of the 1980s and the New Policy Agenda

of the 1990s have been used by scholars to make sense of the turn toward advocacy and campaigning among international NGOs (Nelson and Dorsey 2008, Yanacopulos 2005). Anderson, for example, attributes the emphasis on advocacy and campaigning to the proliferation of southern NGOs, which has meant that northern NGOs have had to reframe their work (Anderson 2000; Wootliff and Deri 2001; Scott 2014). As early as 2000 Chapman and Fisher noted that “NGOs are devoting more and more time and energy to policy-influence work” in the north (2000: 151). Lewis suggests that as northern NGOs increasingly became an intermediary between donors and southern NGOs, it was possible to see their increasing emphasis on presentation through advocacy, campaigning and fund-raising efforts (Lewis 1998; Dichter, 1999). This turn towards managing presentation in the 1990s could also be seen as a response to criticisms concerning their effectiveness, performance and sustainability (Smillie 1994: 156).

Over the last decade, a small number of scholars have picked up on the way NGOs have become increasingly sophisticated in the way they use media. Fenton looks at how they have worked with news media organisations, to provide news that ‘mimics or matches the requirements of mainstream news agendas’ in a process she describes as “news cloning” (Fenton 2009a). Davis (2002) makes a wider point on how campaigning NGOs use professional press and publicity methods. Franks, a former producer at the BBC, describes NGOs providing the sort of logistical support that is often no longer available to media organisations working in the developing world, with NGOs ‘organising transport and offering access to local resources on the ground as well as helpful briefings with their staff’ (2008). Overall, though, it is difficult to find an examination of the way the use of media, in a broader sense, affects the work of NGOs.

The literature on “media and development”, is also at some distance from the focus of this article. Studies in the field of media and development have looked to the potential for media and information communication technologies to improve the work of development organisations or to help raise funds

and awareness (See, for example, Cecchini and Scott, 2003; Hyden and Leslie, 2003; Smith and Yanacopulos, 2004; Cottle and Nolan, 2007). There has also been a related interest in how newspapers and other media outlets report on development issues and the developing world more generally (See, for example, Bullock et al., 2001; Poland, 2004; Chouliaraki, 2006; Cameron and Haanstra, 2008; Franks, 2008; Fenton, 2010; Thomas, 2011). These studies do not, for the most part, examine in any detail the way media technologies reshape accountabilities or power relations *within* NGOs. They instead mostly rely on a very clear distinction between NGOs and “the media”.<sup>2</sup>

And yet, NGOs, like other large organisations, contend with a world in which things that work in media terms are gaining more value. Cottle and Nolan (2009) find that the codes and rules of media influence the work of NGOs. There is pressure to find new ways of raising awareness or raising funds in a sector that is both increasingly competitive and increasingly bureaucratic. The phenomenal growth of NGOs, their efflorescence in number, scale and scope, has been coterminous with the proliferation of information communication technologies and new media such as Twitter, weblogs and YouTube (cf. Fenton, 2010). International NGOs run dedicated websites to promote their agenda and raise funds (Werker and Ahmed, 2008). The turn towards campaigning and advocacy may involve working with mainstream media outlets, or through adopting a more media-like approach to communication (Deacon, 1996; Anderson, 1997; Davies, 2004). In the case of AMREF this had an effect on the day-to-day life of the organisation. I would suggest that the use of media affects NGOs and that this can be understood through what Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999) have termed ‘mediatisation’.

Mediatisation refers to a situation where ‘cultural and social processes are increasingly constrained to take on a form suitable for media representation’ (Couldry 2008: 376). The concept suggests a broad logic operating across organisations. The campaigning and policy work of international NGOs requires images, stories, tropes and memes and a growing concern about what these might be may change the work of organisations. In the realm of public policy, Esser and Strömbäck (2104) point to

the way policy initiatives are shaped by what looks good. In the NGO sector the focus on what works in media terms might explain some of the concerns my colleague had with changes in OXFAM, or the decision of an international NGO and a UK-based newspaper to work together.

Turning to the concept of mediatisation also means less of a concern with the relationship *between* NGOs and “the media”, or with seeing the use of campaigns as a consequence of political or economic exigencies, than with the way international NGOs, like any other large organisation, place value on their work in media terms.<sup>3</sup> It is difficult to imagine an international NGO existing without a website, an App, or a blog (Yanacopulos, 2005). Staff interviewed at AMREF felt that the decision to work with The Guardian had made them more relevant and influential, helping them become more like ‘the OXFAMs’ with their ‘big media outfits’.<sup>4</sup> This turn towards valuing things in media terms, is one way of conceptualising some of the change management and staff see in the NGO sector, though as Esser and Strömbäck argue, it also reflects a deeper structural shift in the way large-scale organisations make sense of themselves (2014).

### **Examples: three possible effects of mediatisation on the work of NGOs**

There are three possible effects I outline here about the way processes of mediatisation may affect international NGOs. The first concerns the way power can shift towards those parts of the NGO that deal with the media (or with activities that make sense in media terms). In the Katine project this meant that issues of youth disenfranchisement got bound up with a football tournament, an event that worked well in media terms. Second, that the range and type of accountabilities faced by NGOs appear to be changing, with NGOs showing an increased sense of accountability to a more amorphous audience of policy-makers, private sector organisations, foundations, campaigners, and other



international NGOs. In AMREF's case we see increasing emphasis on partnerships with drug companies like GlaxoSmithKline, philanthropic foundations, or with media organisations such as The Guardian. Third, NGOs often communicate development in a way that resembles other media outlets. Guardian-style reporting could be found elsewhere on AMREF's website, as could the 'The Status of Africa' social media campaign.

The examples in the section come from a particular NGO, AMREF, about which it is worth saying a few words of introduction. AMREF mainly works on health, and is based in Nairobi with twelve offices in Europe and North America and with projects in thirty-three African countries (2007: 11). The twelve northern offices are there 'to support fundraising, build awareness of AMREF and its programmes and take AMREF's Africa voice to policy and decision makers in the north' (2007: 13). The organisation had modest beginnings as a Flying Doctors service in east Africa in the 1950s; during the 1980s AMREF started to work on health systems in Africa more broadly, with a focus on training health workers. By the 1990s AMREF expanded further to work on disease control initiatives. More recently AMREF has emphasised health advocacy work, with northern offices partnering other international NGOs, government ministries, medical research institutes and private sector organisations.<sup>5</sup> AMREF's budget increased from \$19 million in 2001 to \$68 million in 2010. In the UK the most publicised aspect of AMREF's work has been a recent partnership with The Guardian, profiling the "Katine" project.

### **1. The use of media NGOs affects the way NGOs work**

The Katine project was a new experience for AMREF. It had not worked with media organisations on anything like this scale before, and many staff described the organisation as less media-aware than other international NGOs. One senior manager commented:

In the past we let the work speak for itself. But we saw the opportunities with this [project] to send across some messages on development issues. We also saw that we did not have the big media outfit that other NGOs had, the OXFAMs, the CAREs...<sup>6</sup>

Those interviewed from senior management spoke of the possible benefits in terms of raising profile, attracting funds, and making AMREF more effective in terms of advocacy and campaigning. The manager quoted mentions both the need to 'send across some messages' and reflects on what it might mean to be a bit more like 'the OXFAMs, the CAREs'. In presentations by senior management at AMREF, including at Polis, a think tank on media and society at the London School of Economics, it was made clear that their decision to work with The Guardian represented a new direction for the NGO.<sup>7</sup> It was described as an opportunity that had the potential to give AMREF more influence in public debates and policy arenas.

One of the managers in the Uganda country office spoke of a process of adaptation: 'We have to adapt to respond to the frequent calls, the frequent visitors, the calls for information...'.<sup>8</sup> AMREF had to get used to being a different sort of organisation, one where there was more responsiveness around how it profiled and presented its work. Adaptation meant a certain sort of commitment to adopting a media lens in the country office, it also meant more oversight at the project level than was usual. It was possible to see certain issues getting more play as the project evolved. Coverage of health issues in the sub-county focused a lot of attention on issues of drug delivery and the poor state of local health centre. This differed from the approach AMREF had taken in the project design, which had been more interested in preventative measures and community development initiatives, particularly training up Village Health Teams.

A series of articles on The Guardian's website put these failings in the public health system in human terms. In December 2008 there was a piece asking 'why is there no medicine in the dispensary?' (Guardian 2008). In May 2009 there was a powerful article reporting a woman's death during childbirth (Guardian 2009a). This moved AMREF toward a more active role in making drugs widely available in Katine (including giving the village health teams drugs). This was not something originally envisaged in the project proposal, nor was it something project staff were that supportive of (staff told me that drug provision and staffing issues were the responsibility of the District Health Office and the Ministry of Health in Kampala). As one field officer observed:

It can make you divert from what you had planned. You had planned A but are forced to do B because at the end of it all the demands are different, the expectations are different.<sup>9</sup>

The 'it' he was speaking of was the way senior management took an interest in turning the project in directions that connected AMREF's work in a rural Ugandan sub-county to wider debates and policy arenas. In one of the mid-term evaluations, it was noted that field staff felt second-guessed and somewhat disempowered. In many ways the dynamics of the project and the organisation were shifting.

Another example of the way the project shifted was the football tournament that took place halfway through. The tournament involved different teams from across the region, and was seen as a way of reaching out to a group that had been somewhat left out of the project: unemployed, male youth (Guardian 2009b). The tournament was held largely at the initiative of the newspaper; it was not in the original project plans, and was not something that field staff particularly welcomed. Those I spoke with at The Guardian were keen to involve the newspaper's sports desk in reporting on Katine. The tournament was seen as a different angle, producing a different set of images and stories. (Throughout the four years of the project The Guardian tried different ways of telling readers what

was going on in the sub-county). There was also a tie-in with Barclays Bank – sponsors of the English Premier League and part-sponsors of Katine. Before the tournament the English Premiership Trophy was displayed in the sub-county; there was also a visit by the national team – the Uganda Cranes (Guardian 2009c and d).

The tournament was a success in media terms, and was something AMREF would later celebrate on its main website, and in its annual report, but it was not something that was comfortable for project staff at the time. The memory of the football tournament produced grimaces among AMREF staff working in Katine when I visited them a year later. As one project officer commented to me: ‘the football tournament was difficult’.<sup>10</sup>

AMREF’s work with The Guardian should also be understood as part of a broader story of the mediatisation of an organisation. In reviewing annual reports, and looking at the way AMREF writes about and illustrates its work, it is possible to see changes over the course of a decade. The reports are sharper, the stories on the website more professional, and its development work more and more tied into international campaigns, and a language of global campaigning. As Rauh observes, this can be thought of as part of the wider way in which the international development sector has witnessed significant attempts to organize, align, and coordinate the conception and practice of development (Rauh 2010:29). It also links to a point Tvedt makes about the way relevance in the NGO sector means signing up to agendas, using a certain sort of shared, globalized development language and imagery (Tvedt 2006). The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, Education For All, or AMREF’s commitment to the World Health Organisation’s Global Health Workforce Alliance initiative are all examples of the search for a common framework for ‘good development cooperation’.

The cover page of AMREF's 2001 report is of two African children looking into the middle distance. Inside there is background information on the organisation and messages from the Chairman and Director General. The focus of the twenty-six-page report is the implementation of the "2000 Strategic Plan". Included in this discussion is a statement about the decentralisation of the operational work of AMREF, which requires a 'corporate plan as well as specific country strategies' and 'the formation of country advisory boards' (2001: 2). The document appears to be mostly targeted at an internal audience. The discussion of project work is often technical, explained in relation to the socio-economic and health deficits within Africa. Case studies are supported by black-and-white photographs – typically of doctors, patients, laboratories and hospitals. The language used moves between an accounting of project work and a specialist vocabulary directed at health and development professionals. A discussion of a case study on malaria resistance is introduced in the following way:

... [in a study] conducted in Serere County of Soroti district in Uganda and involving 210 children between ages six to 59 months, AMREF demonstrated *Plasmodium falciparum* resistance levels of 50 and 34 percent for chloroquine and sulfadoxine/ pyrimethamine respectively. These are the highest resistance levels so far in Uganda according to the National Malaria Control Programme. (2001: 18).

The terms '*Plasmodium falciparum*' and 'chloroquine and sulfadoxine/ pyrimethamine' are not explained in the text. The report looks exclusively at AMREF's work in Africa and does not discuss directly the activities of their European and North American offices. The following donors are mentioned: CIDA and SIDA (the Canadian and Swedish international development agencies).

By contrast, the 2010 report is eighty-five pages long. It opens with the image of a child's hand grasping the hand of a woman. The report is titled: 'Upholding our future: healthy mothers, healthy children.'

Our Millennium Goal'. (The 2001 annual report has no title other than: 'Annual Report 2001'). AMREF's work is now oriented toward a discussion of global health in a way that also makes the reader a part of AMREF's work. The first section highlights AMREF's achievements, including new projects, partnerships, and successful funding bids. The second section provides an overview of the work of the headquarters and outlines the work of the Directorate of Capacity Building and the Health Programmes Directorate. Following this, case studies are brought in to outline specific projects. The cases emphasise the partners AMREF works with and the donors involved. The pictures used in these case studies are in colour, and taken from everyday situations, mostly involving women and children, taking a more optimistic view, perhaps, than the hospital-based imagery of the 2001 report.

AMREF describes efforts aimed at 'raising the organisation's profile and positioning it as an authoritative voice on health in Africa' (2010: 28). The report mentions media-based innovations: not only AMREF's work with The Guardian; but also a BBC Radio 4 spot; or a Facebook application, which was described in the following terms:

AMREF is nurturing partnerships with agencies that can provide expertise to attract more supporters, such as the unique 'The Status of Africa' social media campaign with creative agency BBH. The innovative Facebook application gave African people the opportunity to let the world into their daily lives. Over 1,600 people used the application, with 60 articles placed in the media and over 750 people commenting on it online. It also attracted a substantial number of new audiences to AMREF, and generated high levels of coverage in numerous UK media. The application is currently being shortlisted for several new media awards. (2010: 62).

Later sections of the report highlight how national offices increased media coverage to raise awareness of the organisation, as well as new sources of funding and partnerships. The section profiling AMREF's UK office, highlights the following:

- diversifying income sources and capitalising on the existing donor base; developing strong strategic partnerships;
- appearing on a BBC Radio 4 maternal health appeal;
- conducting an event with GlaxoSmithKline;
- setting up a working group with VSO and Merlin; securing a large-scale four-year project with the European Union;
- winning the Coffey award for the Katine project in Uganda;
- producing an innovative Facebook application that ‘attracted a substantial number of new audiences to AMREF’

The number of organisations listed point to the ways in which the increasing use of media may shift the ways in which NGOs feel accountable.

## **2. Relevance comes through new sorts of accountability**

There is a fairly standard argument about the “multiple” accountabilities faced by NGOs. This dates back to the mid-1990s, when there was concern about the rapid growth of the sector and the question of “who would watch the watchdogs” (Bob 2007). In an early article on the subject, Adil Najam writes of the way non-governmental organisations held themselves accountable to a range of stakeholders, conferring on them legitimacy and relevance (Najam 1996). He observed that NGOs were accountable mostly to patrons, typically donors; and also to clients and beneficiaries. Kumar (1996) follows this by drawing a distinction between the “harder” accountabilities giving “stakeholders” direct control over NGO activities, and “softer” accountabilities that shape how an NGO justifies its work to its beneficiaries or to a wider audience. Of these “softer” accountabilities, Kumar draws a further

distinction between “explanatory” and “responsive” accountabilities. “Explanatory accountability” refers to a situation where an NGO feels the need to give an account of its actions to something that has no direct control over its work. “Responsive accountability” refers to a situation where an NGO takes into account the views of others, even though they also have no direct say in the work of the NGO (cf. Ebrahim, 2003; Kilby, 2006). These “softer” accountabilities would appear to matter more to NGOs, as they are defining their work in media terms.

In August 2009, the CEO of GlaxoSmithKline, Andrew Witty, visited Katine. His visit was tied to ongoing discussions on The Guardian’s website about the role of major pharmaceutical companies in the provision of medicines in poorer parts of the developing world. In particular, the visit was used to promote GlaxoSmithKline’s commitment to a “patent pool” of potential drugs or parts of drugs. As described on the website: ‘the patent pool would allow cheap copies and combinations of AIDS drugs to be made without legal restraint or delays from the manufacturers, whose monopolies are protected for 20 years’ (Guardian 2009e). Witty also commented in a separate piece in 2012 – by which time thirteen CEOs had signed up -- that ‘for all the CEOs that there are sensible areas where we can work together for the public good, for society’s good’. In this way the website, and AMREF’s relationship to The Guardian, was also a place where major pharmaceutical companies found a discussion of their corporate social responsibility work.

Witty’s visit was one of a number of visits by people from the worlds of business and development. Marcus Agius, the then chairman of Barclays, visited in July 2009. The head of the UK’s Department for International Development Uganda office, George Turkington, visited Katine in January 2009. Ivan Lewis MP, and minister for International Development, also visited Katine in 2009. Each of these visits was covered by the website, where the visitor linked the project to a broader development agenda. Agius, in a blog, commented that ‘The really inspiring thing is that these community finance initiatives show great potential to be replicated in other parts of the developing world’ (Guardian 2009h).



Turkington noted that 'one of the Katine project's key aims is to use the evidence and best practice gathered at community level to influence and inform government policy' (Guardian 2009g). Lewis related the work in Katine to the then Labour government's interest in empowerment (Guardian 2009f). One point to take from this is the way the Katine project found itself in a complex landscape of "softer" accountabilities, with AMREF responding and explaining its work accordingly.

Another way of illustrating this is the shift in the 2001 and 2010 annual reports. Here we can see a lot of travel in how AMREF describes its relationship to other organisations, and the sort of work it claims to be doing. The 2001 report, the public face of AMREF, had modest ambitions, targeted mostly at the "health and development" community. By contrast the 2010 report was designed to engage with a wide audience, following what Altheide and Snow termed a "media logic" (1979). The eye-catching, narrative driven approach to AMREF's work in the 2010 report brought in a more varied range of constituencies. The list of donors, thanked over the space of eleven pages, showed not only the number, but also the range of stakeholders to which AMREF felt responsive. These included business and media organisations as well as research institutions, aid agencies, and charitable foundations. GlaxoSmithKline is mentioned eight times. This was a noticeable shift if we think back to the 2001 report which only mentioned two donor agencies: CIDA and SIDA.

While Najam's (1996) multiple accountabilities referred to a relatively legible set of actors influencing NGOs in the 1990s (funders and beneficiaries), the visit of the chairman of GlaxoSmithKline to Katine, or the eleven pages of "thank you" in the 2010 annual report, suggest a different landscape: one where the sorts of softer accountabilities outlined by Kumar are increasingly valued. What had once been relatively readable, if contradictory, constituencies – funder and beneficiary – may be becoming supplanted by a more complicated set of cross-referencing actors. This might also help explain shifting priorities within NGOs, where greater importance is given to individuals and activities that reach out to new constituencies and new agendas. As Jamali and Keshishian (2009) observe, international NGOs

have sought out new sorts of partnerships, including undertaking work for the corporate social responsibility offices of global business. NGOs also work with media organisations such as The Guardian, and the increasing number of philanthropic foundations that have taken an interest in the development sector. Part of the reason for this is economic, part of it may be political; but part of it can also be attributed to the way these new relationships make development look a certain way.

A final comment links the above two sections together. It is important to understand that what I suggest is the mediatisation of NGOs is not an isolated phenomenon. Organisations of all types appear to be valuing themselves in terms of how they present their work to different sorts of audiences. Just as NGOs value partnerships with the private sector, or the mainstream media (partly because this achieves relevance in media terms), these other sorts of organisations also increasingly value working with NGOs (Esser and Strömbäck 2014). AMREF's project in Katine was supported by readers of The Guardian newspaper, by the Global Community Investment Fund of Barclays Bank, and drew interest from GlaxoSmithKline and the UK government's Department for International Development. The turn toward corporate social responsibility can be partly understood as a desire on the part of the private sector to look good, and so can the close relationship between government departments and NGOs. The Barclays Fund, for example, is described on the bank's website as part of a strategy of 'making consumers aware of Barclays stated commitment to being a socially responsible company'. This can also be looked at through the lens of mediatisation; where Barclays is similarly concerned with finding new ways of looking good (Barclays 2009: 6).

### **3. International NGOs are more like media organisations**

For as far as the eye can see, the area surrounding Wajir town is covered in a carpet of loose red soil, dotted with a stubble of hardy thorn trees and leafless bushes. July is the 'winter'

season in this arid district of northern Kenya, and while the mornings are relatively cool, the temperature rises quickly and by mid-afternoon, it is 36 degrees centigrade and rising.

'Wajir: bearing the brunt of the drought in northern Kenya', (AMREF 2011)

The third observation concerns the way a number of international NGOs appear to borrow the way they present their work from what can be thought of as media presentations. One example might be the way NGOs use more of the reporting style of mainstream media outlets, such as The Guardian. The above extract documents the drought in northern Kenya and was a piece of reporting by AMREF that resembled Guardian journalism (cf. Fenton, 2010). The posting, from which the extract is taken, offers a personalised and complex account of the 2007 drought in the area. It relates personal narratives to context, and explains the lives of those profiled in relation to health services in the region. It suggests a more professional approach to writing about development and is a long way from the more sensationalist reporting criticised in the literature on media and development literature. The piece on Wajir town is noteworthy for the absence of any mention of AMREF, even though it is posted on AMREF's website.

The Wajir piece goes on to mix the stories of individuals, with facts and figures, conveying the way people in the area are coping, or not coping, with the ongoing drought in north-eastern Kenya. The article also describes the pressures this places on local government officials and health centres. The report begins with a description by Steven Mwangi, a nurse in charge of the maternity ward of the district hospital, of the problems with anaemia among expectant mothers. It moves to a discussion of the situation faced by four different women. Hannah Abdi, a mother with six children, explains her move to the town in the following way:

‘... we came from Gambis – out there in the bush. We owned a lot of animals, but they died because of the drought. Out of our 100 goats, only these two survived. Without our goats, and with nothing to eat, we had to come here.’

Smith and Yanacopulos make a point about NGOs getting involved in a more complex ‘production and reception of development’s public faces’ (2004: 657, 663). They suggests that the emotive use of images, which according to Plewes and Stuart presented poorer people – typically children and mothers – as “helpless victims” or the “faraway other” may be becoming less dominant (2006: 33, see also Hoijer, 2004, Cottle and Nolan, 2007). The mediatisation of NGOs may mean the use of new and more varied images of development, and more varied ways of communicating.

At the same time, it is worth making the more obvious point that, with the rise of new information communication technologies, NGOs make use of a very wide variety of ways to put across their message; it is not all broadsheet reportage. The use of celebrities to highlight development issues in various ways is, perhaps, the most obvious example of this trend. Cameron and Haanstra (2008) examine the recent trend among northern NGOs to orient their media strategies around celebrities able to attract column inches. In particular, they document how NGOs increasingly seek out ‘celebrities with sex appeal – such as Angelina Jolie or Gerri Halliwell – to acts as spokespeople in order to satisfy the demand by media outlets that stories on development issues be sexy’ (Cameron and Hanstraa 2008, 1475-1476). Richey and Ponte (2010) contextualise this use of celebrity as part of a broader process where development gets to be packaged not only into media products, but also into branded goods that can be consumed in the north.

One recent example is the use of YouTube by celebrities to promote The Global Goals for Sustainable Development campaign. Tanya Burr, unknown to me before writing this article, is one YouTube’s most popular personalities with over two million subscribers to her channel. Tanya Burr is described as ‘a

fashion and beauty vlogger, blogger, make-up artist and author'. She has 1.5 million followers on Twitter, and her Instagram account boasts 2.1 million followers. In 2015, Burr posted to her Instagram followers a video urging them to engage with and help promote The Global Goals for Sustainable Development, a media campaign around the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. The Global Goals website describes the '3 extraordinary things' 193 World Leaders can commit to in 2015: 'end extreme poverty, fight inequality and tackle climate change'.<sup>11</sup> A recent viewing of the website included a link to a Twitter feed where the footballer Gareth Bale 'kicked off' 'dizzy goals for the Global Goals'. The Take Action part of the website included links to the international NGO Save the Children.

All of this suggests that participating in the field of development is about finding ways of communicating with a range of audiences, including Instagram followers alongside those more interested in the traditional output of an NGO website. In recent years Save the Children profiled a project similar to Katine. Known as Kroo Bay, the project had its own blog and micro-site, Save the Children also offer detailed profiles of celebrities who endorse their work: the footballer Cristiano Ronaldo, the actress Julianne Moore and the stylist Rachel Zoe. In a range of ways, it is possible to think of international NGOs becoming more like media organisations.

### **Looking good: NGOs and mediatisation**

In the above examples, the concept of mediatisation is useful for the way it ties together a series of related observations into a broader argument about the role of media on the life of organisations. As mentioned earlier, mediatisation refers to a situation where 'cultural and social processes are increasingly constrained to take on a form suitable for media representation' (Couldry 2008: 376). It is an approach that works on the premise that NGOs are ordinary things, similar to other organisations (Preusse and Sarah Zielmann 2010: 336). In the NGO sector mediatisation would mean value being

given to stories dealing with issues of youth disenfranchisement through a football tournament, or use the story of a dying mother to highlight the poor position of medical care. The important point to understand is that the growing use of media should have an effect in terms of what is meaningful or valuable within an organisation, and that this might constrain what gets done (cf. Hjarvard, 2007; Couldry 2008).

The concept of mediatisation also lifts some of the “media and development studies” literature out of the normative corner it has found itself in, in recent years. As noted earlier, scholars have either written about “the media” as something that can help the development sector (through development journalism, for example), or as something to be criticised for its reporting of the developing world. Instead, I have focused on NGOs and their use of media. I would suggest that NGOs are becoming more like media organisations and that this shift needs further exploration. Thinking about mediatisation offers the possibility of a less prescriptive way of studying NGOs and their relationship to media. If we start from the observation that NGOs increasingly frame their work in ways that work in media terms, and from there move to an analysis of the different ways in which this plays out, a new way of thinking about media and development opens up. Instead of asking whether “the media” is “good” or “bad” it may be more useful to think about how NGOs use media themselves, how this shapes how they work and in whose interest.

At the moment, Cottle and Nolan’s work on humanitarian NGOs, and Natalie Fenton’s work on NGOs feeding stories to mainstream media organisations, may be the closest in the literature to an interest in the way mediatisation changes NGOs. Cottle and Nolan describe the way humanitarian NGOs, such as the Red Cross – which have long depended on emergency appeals – have become increasingly adept at influencing the mainstream media. Fenton describes the way NGOs provide news that ‘mimics or matches the requirements of mainstream news agendas’ in a process she describes as “news cloning” (Fenton, 2010: 157-158).<sup>12</sup> These are both useful observations, though the concern is more with the

way NGOs relate to the wider world, than with the way they are themselves changing. The line of thinking stops short of asking how this changes NGOs from the inside out; how, for example, the campaigns or branding strategies affect what goes on, on the ground.

## **Conclusion**

In 2010, I attended a public meeting at the end of AMREF's partnership with The Guardian. This took place in the new home of The Guardian at King's Place, a 'hub for music, art, dialogue and food'. At one point a speaker asked those in the audience to raise their hands if they had donated money to the project. A few hands were raised out of an audience of more than five hundred. Those in the room consisted mostly of academics, journalists, people working in corporate social responsibility, and also those from the media desks of other NGOs. Mark Malloch Brown, former deputy director of the UN was there, as was Alan Rusbridger, editor of The Guardian. This was a space of softer accountabilities, where it was possible to see feel what the turn toward campaigning and policy work might mean. Part of the audience came from the world of media and development, either from university departments teaching the subject, or from the policy, campaign or media desks of different NGOs. People knew each other. It was, in some ways, a community that probably did not really exist a few decades earlier. It was also an existential space, somewhere where NGOs could see that their work was relevant through one another, and in relation to people from the media, the private sector and government agencies.

Mediatization offers one way of making sense of this sort of event. First, it suggests that NGOs attach more value to those parts of their organisation that are the most involved with media. The turn toward advocacy, campaigning and media in the NGO sector is evidence of this, and those parts of an NGO working in these areas may become more powerful. As we saw with the case of Katine, there

may be knock-on effects within NGOs, where operational work and on-the-ground development efforts are shifted because of what makes sense in media terms. It is worth remembering that the project was itself part of a decision by the NGO to turn from service delivery work ‘toward capacity building and advocacy’.

Second, mediatisation may mean that the “softer” accountabilities of explaining or responding to a more varied set of stakeholders. In place of the more defined accountabilities that had existed around a particular project, including the “hard” accountability of reporting to a donor, there is an interest in addressing a range of actors, often fairly removed from the operational work of the NGO: not only ‘the OXFAMs and the CAREs’ but also the GlaxoSmithKlines and the DFIDs. Perceived influence seems to be growing in importance, where the work of a particular NGO is valued for the imagined impact it has on governments, international organisations, policy-making networks, and other NGOs. In the past, AMREF’s annual reports focused on the service delivery work of the organisation and were targeted at an internal audience; at present, more space is given over to discussing partnerships and new sorts of collaboration.

Third, mediatisation may help explain how NGOs are becoming more like media organisations. In place of the single campaigns that defined the public image of NGOs in the past, there are now mobile phone apps, websites for different campaigns run by the same NGO, and Youtube and Twitter. The use of new media and information communication technologies means that NGOs have more opportunities to put across their work, to a more varied set of audiences. Innovations, such as the posting of pieces of reportage on a website, or using a YouTube celebrity, or setting up an app on “The Status of Africa” exist alongside the usual campaigns and emergency appeals. The images become more varied, the language less predictable. In this there might be the possibility that the boundaries between NGOs and “the media” are increasingly blurred.



The concept of mediatisation helps make sense of the turn toward advocacy and global campaigns. It gives us a way into thinking about the content of an annual report, the more varied use of images, the different communication strategies, and decisions to work with new partners and stakeholders. I would argue that the use of media – alongside politics and economics – helps explain changes in the NGO sector. While it has been usual to explain their use of media as a consequence of other things, it is also something that has consequences. This opens up new questions about what NGOs are and what they claim to be.

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<sup>2</sup> I should also, at this point say, that the use of the term media – as opposed to “the media” – refers to the broad set of technologies through which NGOs communicate their work.

<sup>3</sup> In this I take a slightly different approach to conceptualising mediatisation than can be found in the literature on political communication, where the focus is on how “the media” shapes and frames the processes and discourse of political communication (Lilleker, 2008: 117).

<sup>4</sup> Interview with AMREF senior management, conducted Kampala, 1 July 2010.

<sup>5</sup> In 2007 AMREF made clear its desire to move away from ‘purely service delivery, toward capacity building, and advocacy’ (AMREF, 2007: vii). In the same report AMREF spoke of a commitment ‘through our national offices in Europe and North America... to take African evidence and an African voice to policy and decision makers in the North’ (2007: 32).

<sup>6</sup> Interview with AMREF senior management, conducted Kampala, 1 July 2010.

<sup>7</sup> <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2009/01/30/telling-development-stories-media-and-ngos/> (accessed 3 September 2015)

<sup>8</sup> Interview with AMREF senior management, conducted Kampala, 1 July 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with AMREF project staff, conducted Katine, 8 July 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with AMREF project staff, conducted Katine, 8 July 2010.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.globalgoals.org> (last accessed 27 August 2015).

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<sup>12</sup> Vestergaard similarly argues that the NGO sector is itself increasingly ‘pushed... more forcefully into the media field’, though she examines this in terms of how NGOs get tied to the sorts of logics found in the commercial sector (2010: 169).

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