

'Africa' in the media: between starving children and smiling children

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Stories and images of hunger, conflict and underdevelopment have for long functioned as metonyms of Africa: a continent of vast ethnic, linguistic and geographical diversity. These narratives have reinforced the reductionist discourse of Africa as a site of monolith suffering, permanent crisis and hopelessness. Perhaps one of the most pronounced images to emerge from this trend has been that of starving children: a depiction which has largely been used by aid agencies in their [campaigns](#) to stir the reaction and the charity of the masses.



Front-page covers for The Economist in 2000 and 2011

On his recent visit to the LSE, [Alex Perry](#), a contributing editor to Newsweek and former foreign correspondent for TIME in Africa, shared some of the challenges and frustrations of reporting beyond these pre-packaged conceptions. One of his main pleas focused on exposing the [patronizing lies of aid agencies](#), which have benefited particularly from perpetuating negative images of Africa to keep the flow of charity going. In this regard, Perry made it clear during his talk that “development is not something that can be handed out from the back of a plane”.

In fact, Perry argued that aid agencies can often extend the geopolitical interests of some countries and become counter-productive, ultimately exacerbating situations such as the 2011 [Somalian famine crisis](#). In light of this, it has become increasingly important to both challenge the illusion that more aid will bring about the prosperity of Africa and recognize the agency, independence and important socioeconomic improvements that the continent has experienced in the last few decades.



(c) Julia Liborio-Rocha-Lima

The problem that the current mediascape faces, however, is perhaps the opposite as reports on Africa have become increasingly celebratory. [Recent stories](#), in an effort to override negative depictions of Africa seem to have traded one reductionism for another. Images and narratives of empowerment, agency, voice, prosperity, diversity and hopefulness have become in many cases new metonyms for Africa. Perhaps one of the most pronounced images to emerge from this latest trend has been that of smiling children: a depiction which aid campaigns have recently [adopted](#) in an effort to distance themselves from any paternalistic claims against them. Like many business, the humanitarian industry has focused on a simple ideal: product differentiation in order to secure a steady stream of donations.

Ultimately, the problem that these narratives on either end of the spectrum present is the flattening of a complex socioeconomic and political landscape. Unfortunately, this phenomenon is not only restricted to Africa as it appears that for places such as India with the image of slums and in Latin American with the image of drugs and violence, fiction seems to travel faster than reality. Perhaps, a good antidote for the current mediascape on Africa is to be more [afro-realistic](#) and spread stories that are not monolithic in their suffering nor their triumphalism, but rather present the indelible right of Africa to struggle.

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[vimeo <https://vimeo.com/148218758> w=600&h=336]

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