

Crisis? What crisis?

How do aid agencies get journalists on their side?

When there are so many humanitarian crises taking place around the world at any one time—from wars to earthquakes, from deadly epidemics to famines—how do aid agencies overcome the difficulties of raising public awareness about them? How do they ensure that their disaster is the one that reaches the television screens in affluent Western homes, thereby encouraging donations and boosting the relief effort?

Polly Markandya of Médecins Sans Frontières faced just this problem during the civil war in Sierra Leone in the late 1990s. Despite the apparent newsworthiness of the obscene limb mutilations that rebel fighters were inflicting on the people of Sierra Leone, Ms Markandya, who has worked in MSF's communications department for seven years, found it hard to engage the interest of Western media outlets in publicising the butchery. The British media regarded it as "too horrible, too far away, too expensive," she said. "No one was interested without photos—no one was willing to go there for photos."

So in 1998 she hired a freelance photographer, Robert Grossman, to get the story out. It was a step that she had never taken before and one of last resort. Grossman's pictures made the front page of the New York Times and started the media ball

rolling. Other journalists soon travelled to Freetown, Sierra Leone's capital, to follow up the tale. Ms Markandya told the BMJ that journalists nowadays going to Sierra Leone still gave extensive coverage to the mutilation story—almost to the point of overshadowing other humanitarian relief issues in the country.

The challenges that aid agencies face in attracting media attention are highlighted in a study published this month by the San Francisco based Fritz Institute and Reuters Foundation's AlertNet. Toward New Understandings: Journalists & Humanitarian Relief Coverage (www.fritzinstitute.org/images/FI_pdfs/Media_study_wAppendices.pdf) says that there is a lack of understanding between the publicity staff of nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) involved in relief work and journalists who cover the crises and chronic problems that dog certain parts of the world. However, the report points out that the relationship between journalists and the NGOs is a symbiotic one. While public relations divisions rely on media coverage to marshal resources and support, journalists need help with orientation and access in the field. However, both sides experience frustrations with each other that the report says are to the detriment of public awareness of many humanitarian issues. The apparently sheep-like tendency



Why is malaria almost never on TV?

Credit: DEAN CHAPMAN/PANOS

of editors and reporters to follow each other on foreign stories is just one difficulty that the aid agencies face.

The Fritz/Reuters study, which is informed by surveys of both NGO public relations staff and journalists worldwide, claims to be the most comprehensive study of its kind. It says that NGO PRs feel hindered by a lack of specialist journalists covering relief stories. Indeed, the study says that most journalists sent to cover crises are general reporters dispatched as and when events occur.

BBC developing world correspondent David Loyn is one of only a few to have a regular "beat"

that covers aid issues. "I was initially surprised by quite how complicated the area is," he told the BMJ. "The language that development people use is very difficult and technical."

He added, "Relief people always think they're pretty clued up and most journalists are incompetent, which is a characterisation that's not very helpful. Whether it's right or not, it doesn't assist them in getting their message across. They forget that the journalists are there for other reasons and that they're competent at telling a story even if they don't speak the same language."

However, Loyn is not without an understanding of agency problems. "Every time NGO officers talk to us they're talking to the devil," he said. "They know they need us, but they'd rather run their own campaigns about malaria in Africa—which kills as many people as AIDS but which

is almost never on TV because it's not sexy."

Ms Markandya said, "We've a feeling that you can have a maximum of two foreign stories at any one time. There just isn't room for a third."

Both Mr Loyn and Ms Markandya pointed out the need for PR ingenuity—to get coverage, to get it in a variety of media, and, importantly, to focus on those issues such as malaria in which editors might not immediately show any interest.

Among journalists' frustrations the study cites a lack of NGO PR training, a lack of aid agency willingness to share information, and a lack of agency appreciation of good press coverage.

The study even showed that PRs and journalists disagreed about how much coverage humanitarian aid stories received. While

most journalists said coverage was up, most PRs believe it to be static or declining. On this, at least, the study's own research can offer some conclusions, backing the journalists. It found, for instance, that the number of articles mentioning AIDS in Africa increased from 3607 in 1998 to 19 375 in 2003.

The study also finds areas of agreement—for example, both PRs and journalists recognised the severe problems that budgetary constraints placed on covering stories. It recommends establishing a single, independent organisation to produce information for journalists and to support people wanting to cover emergencies.

Naomi Marks, freelance journalist

Brighton