

# **You've been reframed**

## **How beneficiaries are and ought to be represented in fundraising materials**

(Part of Rogare's review of fundraising ethics)

### **Project outline and terms of reference**

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# 1 Objective

To review how beneficiaries are framed in fundraising materials and close the gap (which may or may not be an 'ideological' gap) in the approaches and attitudes of those fundraisers who favour 'stark' images and those service delivery and other staff who favour a 'values' frame.

The underlying issue here is the fundraisers and service delivery staff<sup>1</sup> often have opposing views and attitudes about how beneficiaries ought to be portrayed in advertising, marketing and fundraising materials.

Fundraisers tend to favour those images that they believe will maximise income (that will be used to alleviate the plight of the beneficiaries). These images tend to show in quite stark context the plight and suffering of beneficiaries, often quite graphically. We are calling this the 'Fundraising Frame'<sup>2</sup>. Criticisms of the Fundraising Frame are that it stereotypes beneficiaries and does not afford them an appropriate degree of dignity.

Service delivery staff (and other at charities) tend to favour images that reflect more 'positive' values about beneficiaries, maintain their dignity and focus on the solution to the problem. We are calling this the 'Values Frame'. Criticism of the Values Frame is that it generates substantially less income with which to help alleviate the problems that beneficiaries find themselves in.

Our contention is that adherents of the both frames have become polarized in the discussion and debate, which has become increasingly adversarial and may in fact be 'ideological'.

Our objective is therefore to 'reframe' this whole debate to close this gap and achieve a new consensus on this matter.

## 1.1 Scope of the review – who is a 'beneficiary'

This review has its provenance in the context of aid agencies where the term 'poverty porn'

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this project, we are henceforth generalizing that there is a 'fundraising' side and a 'service delivery' side to this argument. However, it is clear that some fundraisers advocate the values frame and some service delivery advocate images necessary to maximise income. This should always be borne in mind when we refer to 'fundraisers' and 'service delivery' in this document.

<sup>2</sup> This approach is often called the 'pity' frame or the 'victim' frame or even the 'negative' frame. We have avoided value-laden terms and opted for a neutral term that 'does what it says on the tin' to avoid begging the question about whether this approach actually does represent victimhood, pity, or negativity. We have also avoided another, more positive, value-laden term for the this approach – the 'needs-based frame'. This is because while it certainly does show needs that need to be fulfilled, these are lower order needs such hunger and shelter. But it begs the questions that these are the only needs that beneficiaries want or need to be filled; whereas they also have higher order needs such as self-esteem and self-fulfillment.

has been coined for the most stark images used to fundraise.

However, all charities and all causes have 'beneficiaries' of some description and these are not limited to humans.

To render this project achievable, we have decided to exclude non-human beneficiaries from these terms of reference.

This means that animals and causes such as the environment do not form part of this review, notwithstanding that how animals are represented raises interesting issues of its own (this may be something we can explore at a later date)

Further to that, humans are beneficiaries of any number of different charities in any number of causes. Beneficiaries are also donors themselves to the charities of which they are beneficiaries; while many beneficiaries have a very close relationship to people who give to 'their' charities, e.g. because they are friends and family.

It is possible therefore to consider the Fundraising v Values frames in a number of different circumstances and situations.

To render this project achievable, we have decided to restrict the review to consider framing of beneficiaries in cases where there is usually some degree of 'psychological distance' between the donor and the beneficiary, and where the donor is likely to be different to/disconnected in some way from the person they are trying to help.

In this case, this project would therefore consider framing issues for organisations such as:

- Aid agencies (where donors are not themselves people in poverty)
- Homelessness charities (where donors are not themselves homeless)
- Refugee charities (where donors are not themselves refugees)
- \*Learning difficulty/disability charities (where donors are not themselves people with disabilities or learning difficulties).
- \*Children's charities (where donors are not children)

\* These last two also raise issues about representation of people who may not be able to speak for themselves.

It would exclude cases of framing in organisations where:

- Beneficiaries (or their close family) also form the majority of the organisation's donorbase (e.g. cystic fibrosis charities)
- Organisations where donors are likely to be giving because of a strong personal connection to the cause (e.g. cancer charities).

This does not mean that how beneficiaries are framed in these causes is irrelevant or unimportant, merely that we are cutting our cloth to fit the resources we have and to ensure that we can deliver focused outcomes in a reasonable timeframe.

However, we should be flexible in this review and include any relevant literature that relates to the excluded causes/charities and highlight how our review could be used to inform these debates in the future.

We should have the flexibility to include this material and change the terms of reference if we have reason to as the review progresses.

It will be a task for the steering committee to consider this scope of beneficiary in the review and make suitable recommendations.

## **2 How will we do this?**

### **2.1 What research do we need to do?**

Rogare's standard approach to its projects is to begin by assimilating what we do and do not know about the subject through researching the current literature.

At this stage, we think five mini-literature reviews will be required.

#### 2.1.1 Discussion papers

1. Review of 'philosophy' behind approaches to this topic (e.g. Finding Frames, Common Cause etc) to establish the philosophical/ideological nature of the debate and hypothesise as to the degree of polarization in the discussion.
2. Efficacy of positive v negative advertising (and by proxy, Fundraising Frame v Values Frame)
3. How beneficiaries view their portrayal in fundraising
4. Routes to communicate with beneficiaries
5. Commonalities and differences in relevant existing codes of practice.
6. Final report outline a new ethical approach to using beneficiary images and stories.

Each of these will be a brief review – attempting to be as comprehensive as possible given the resources – of the academic literature and most robust practitioner literature (e.g. market research, reports), covering other practitioner literature (e.g. media articles, blogs etc) where relevant. Each review we expect would be 4-5,000 words (although depending on what is available, it may be that some reviews are less than this). We expect these reviews to be robust and comprehensive, but not necessarily definitive.

The objective of these reviews is to coalesce knowledge in these areas and stimulate discussion and debate within this review as we seek new consensus, not to provide the last word on these topics.

The steering group of this project (see s3) will consider whether there are any other areas where we may need to review existing knowledge.

### **2.1.2 Original research**

Based on whether the steering group identifies other gaps in our knowledge, it may transpire that we need to conduct original research. This could be, for example, research (qual or quant) among fundraisers and service delivery to identify their current attitudes (do most fundraisers really advocate the Fundraising Frame?) or to identify what both sides consider to be the barriers to achieving consensus (perhaps fundraisers feel pressure to meet short term targets?).

Any original research required would be a decision of the steering group to recommend.

We would then need to make an executive decision on whether this research is feasible.

## **2.2 How we will bring about this new consensus**

The steering group (see s3) will help with identifying how we can communicate and disseminate our ideas to close the (ideological?) gap between the two sides of the beneficiary framing debate.

### **2.2.1 Dissemination**

- Discussion paper – an extended discussion paper outlining why we are doing this review and what we hope to achieve (essentially a less formal version of this paper including some more of our initial contentions and hypotheses)
- Five literature reviews (see s2.1.1)
- Ongoing updates via blogs (on Critical Fundraising, Bond, and elsewhere)
- Guest blogs – for example, by members of the steering group, people involved in research, to take ideas in directions we are not currently exploring (e.g. animals), or to delve into greater depth about something only superficially discussed etc
- Symposia or workshops – it may be that we feel we need to gather people together to discuss this review and our ideas, whether for information purposes to present latest ideas or to enlist participants in the next stages. This
- Conference presentations
- Final report – drawing all five literature reviews, discussion paper, any original research and proceedings of any symposia or workshops, making recommendations about how to achieve consensus in this debate. This may also contain cases studies about how NGOs have gone about this.

The steering group will identify and make recommendations about the best way to disseminate and communicate our findings and also hopefully take an active role in doing so.

This is closely connect to the next section...

### **2.3 Measurement**

It will be a task for the steering group to deviser a set of KPIs and KISSs by which we can assess whether we are achieving a new consensus on beneficiary framing.

## 3 Steering group

There will be a steering group that will oversee this project.

### 3.1 Role

The steering group will have two roles:

1. Advisory – the steering group will provide advice and recommendations on this topic and issues in response to questions and requests for assistance, such as:
  - \* Identifying research, blogs and media articles
  - \* Effecting introductions
  - \* Commenting on outputs and reports as requested
  - \* Etc
2. Practical – the steering group will also be active in delivering this project by, for example:
  - \* Individual members of the group conducting literature review (it is likely that we will ask specific people to join the group specifically to carry out one or more of the reviews).
  - \* Taking part in tasks assigned to the steering group (see s3.4)
  - \* Proactively disseminating the ideas from this project and helping to deliver the new consensus on beneficiary framing.

The steering group will have no executive or governance remit.

#### 3.1.1 Steering group specific tasks

As identified in the course of this document, there will be specific tasks that we need the steering group to carry out collectively. These are:

- a. Review the proposed scope of ‘beneficiary’ for the purposes of this review and make recommendations (see s1.1).
- b. Identify knowledge gaps that we may need to fill through a literature review (s2.1.1).
- c. Identify knowledge gaps that we may need to fill through original research (s2.1.2).  
In the cases of both b. and c. this means considering whether this review is asking the right questions by asking ‘what do we need to know?’.
- d. Make recommendations on how to disseminate outputs and results of this review (s2.2.1).
- e. Devise a key set of KPIs and KISSs that will measure if we are achieving success in bring about this new consensus (s2.3).

These tasks do not have to be carried out by the entire steering group but could be done by a subsection of the group that is qualified to do it and has the time and motivation to do it.

We will also ask the group to carry out other task as and when necessary. One such likely task is:

- Recommending new people to bring into the group or co-opt for specific purposes should we require particular knowledge or expertise.

There are also specific individual task for steering group members.

Some members of the group will conduct research and lit reviews (this is probably the reason why we asked them to join the group)

### **3.2 Composition**

We are looking to recruit people the steering group who:

1. Have sufficient knowledge of or experience in this area in order to fulfil the advisory role.
2. Are sufficiently motivated (and have the time) to fulfil the practical role.
3. Who can critically assess the arguments for and against the Fundraising Frame and Values Frame, without being unduly influenced by pre-existing strong beliefs about these issues.

We want to recruit people from both sides of the debate but it is essential that members of the steering group approach this with an open mind and a genuine desire to develop a new consensus and bring both sides closer together.

We are prepared for rigorous and robust debate, but this should not be seen as an opportunity to argue for an established and entrenched position, whether in favour of the Values Frame or the Fundraising Frame.

Part of the cause of the polarization – we suggest – is that both sides believe they are right, and if they are, then the other side by definition is wrong, so we want to help proponents of the Values Frame to understand the rationale for the Fundraising Frame, and vice versa.

#### **3.2.1 Size**

We expect the steering group to compose at least 12 and a maximum of 20 members. About five or six members are likely to come from Rogare’s International Advisory Panel.



## Rogare Associate Members

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[HOME Fundraising](#) – doorstep fundraising agency (UK group)

[Pursuant](#) – US strategic and creative fundraising agency (North America group)

[Rapidata](#) – regular giving specialist (UK group)

[Stephen Thomas](#) – Canadian creative fundraising agency (North America group)

### Associate Members – helping Rogare to change the way we think about fundraising

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**Stephen Thomas**

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#### GLOBAL GROUP:

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