Images of the developing world and the risk of disempowerment

One of the activities we do with BOVA volunteers during their training involves asking them to quickly jot down 5 words or phrases which “represent Africa to them” (and I’m using Africa here just as an example). Average responses include lions, elephants, vast skies, starvation, war, street children and so on. We then read the essay ‘How to write about Africa’ by Binyavanga Wainaina, a Kenyan author. This is a powerful satire about the way Africa is represented in developed countries – all about negatives images of people and romantic images of land and animals (available online).

A similar exercise is to ask people what they think of the following:

“They eat a food made from the seeds of a type of grass, cooked once and then burned, which is smeared with a product from an animal. They eat this with the albumen from a bird. Traditionally this is only eaten at certain times of the day”

What shocks/disgusts them is simply a description of scrambled eggs on toast!

The point is to challenge their perceptions. Yes, Africa has poverty, war, starvation and so on. But it also has people going about everyday life. Children play games! There are universities! Lawyers and doctors! I’m sure you get the point. Developing countries are not completely without capacity – and in the end they must develop themselves. Support is required from external sources (development aid for example), but what comes first is a need for rich countries to stop abusing them. The image I use is that we give a certain amount while taking far more – thus the first stage required is justice not charity.

This is a difficult balance to maintain when working with young people. The images of poverty, shocking statistics and so on are powerful motivators – which is why they are the images we are so familiar with from TV appeals, leaflets and so on. However, if we are not careful there is a risk of providing young people with a limited picture of developing countries. A young person at a youth club once suggested to me that we just need to set up a number of supermarkets across Africa and everything would be fine – he had no concept of Africa being lots of countries with cities and shops etc. Freire noted the importance of the voice of the oppressed (“histories of oppression and suffering must be recounted… Memories of hope, too, must be offered… These should include the voices of the oppressed and respect for their integrity and subjugated knowledge”; from ‘Paulo Freire: A Critical Encounter’, edited by McLaren and da Silva 1993, p77). We must try to find ways to respect the humanity and dignity of people in developing countries by presenting a more complete picture and where possible using their own words and images.

So…

- Try to make use of images and words from the countries under discussion
- Avoid using only negative images (e.g. all starving children); include pictures or videos of ‘normal’ activities which your young people can relate to
- Talk about justice not charity
- Be aware of the message you put across and beware of too much oversimplification

Resources created by BOVA returned volunteers can help you give your young people a more complex message about poverty.

Life in Pasil is a collection of short stories and poems written by the young people of a slum in the Philippines. It shows both their struggle with poverty and their love of their community.

‘Life Stories’ by Trainees of the Don Bosco Training Center, Pasil. “Its aim is not to evoke pity but to give a small insight into the life of the trainees here in Pasil. The trainees were asked to write a few words about their family background, about their coming to the Don Bosco Training Center, and their hopes for the future. You can now read their stories in their own words.”

Savio Bhavan, Don Bosco Tumkur is a film showing a day in a life of the ex-child labourers in a Salesian home in India – again it makes clear both joy and struggles.

Our resources are available free online from http://boscovolunteeraction.co.uk/Resources.aspx