

VIRTUAL EXHIBIT: Doctors Without Borders

An analysis to contextualize the white
saviour complex in the organization

By Shreya Iyer
SOCI2705B



About Doctors Without Borders

Doctors Without Borders, or Médecins Sans Frontières, often abbreviated into DWB and MSF respectively, is a humanitarian aid organization founded in December, 1971 in France. They are dedicated to entering areas affected by conflict, natural disasters, and epidemics to provide medical aid to citizens, and have won a Nobel Prize for their efforts and acts of aid worldwide. Today, they have over 40,000 members and provide aid in almost 70 countries.

The three core values of the organization are impartiality, neutrality, and independence. They believe in providing medical care to anyone in need of it, regardless of their country of origin, religious beliefs, and political affiliations. They do not take sides in conflicts, and aim to only provide medical care to anyone who needs it. Finally, nearly all of DWB's income comes from independent donors who donate what they can, as opposed to being funded by large corporations or governments, which gives them the independence to act in any country during times of crisis. However, they prominently mention that these values do not mean that they will be silent; they also aim to bring attention to conflicts and issues around the world.

They remain active on social media as a way of providing updates of relief missions and promoting their organization to gain more donations and volunteers. They also have a bi-weekly video series called PULSE, in which viewers can have a close look at the day-to-day lives of the volunteers as they work across the globe.



DWB: 50th ANNIVERSARY CAMPAIGN

This campaign was released for Doctors Without Borders' 50th anniversary in March 2021. The campaign images seen below were developed by the company SuperHumans, based in Italy. The photographer is Davide Bellocchio, and Scramble Team contributed to the editing and retouching of the photos. They feature three recent conflicts in which DWB has aided citizens: Democratic Republic of Congo, 2019; Liberia, 2014; and Iraq, 2017. The images all feature young children on the other side of a barrier, each of them visible only through a Doctors Without Borders logo. The barrier itself represents the lack of borders in which DWB believes, that there is no border or barrier between them and providing medical aid to those in need of it. Reportings of conflicts mostly do not feature images of individual, average citizens; in accordance with DWB's principles, they do not take a side in the conflict, but highlight those in need of medical help (in this case, children) and show that they will respond regardless of what barrier is between them.

https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/print/doctors_without_borders_beyond



DWB: 50th ANNIVERSARY CAMPAIGN

While the principles of the organization lie behind this campaign, there is a significant issue with presenting these images through the lens of the DWB logo. This requires an implicit trust from the audience viewing the campaign that what DWB shows through this lens is, in fact, the truth. It allows them to shine the lens wherever they choose to do so and requires the audience to trust that this is truly an unbiased, independent perspective on the conflicts of the world, as they say in their organization values. However, just a year prior to the release of this campaign, staff of DWB came out with allegations of significant racism that they experienced working in the organization. This was reported by sites such as [NPR](#), where it was found that white members of the organization would behave coldly to people of colour in countries where they offered help but would behave kindly to other white people. Some of this behaviour was described as a colonial mentality, that the entire organization is founded upon a white saviour complex where white people go to provide help to people of colour in their countries, especially to little kids.

This highlights a significant issue with the 50th anniversary campaign, which prominently features children in countries of conflict, shown only through the lens of the DWB logo. If the organization is, in fact, founded upon beliefs of white saviour complexes, as the staff themselves claim, then how can the audience trust that the images being presented are unbiased? The implicit trust required to accept these images as truth and fact is no longer certain. This highlights a significant component in how humanitarian aid functions: those who are not on the front lines must be able to trust the organization providing aid that they are doing the right thing. When the story is told through the lens of the organization, they have to be able to trust that the reporting is unbiased and comes from solely a place of providing help and relief. When the organization's staff themselves claim that the organization is founded upon a white saviour complex, doubt becomes cast on the objectivity of the reporting and of the campaign, and on humanitarian aid as a whole due to how revered DWB is in today's world.

“This is MSF”: INTRODUCTION VIDEO

This short, two minute and fifteen seconds long video was posted by DWB in 2016 to provide an introduction to the organization. The description of the video mentions an initiative launched by YouTube called #YouTubeGiving. DWB asked for donations to meet their goal of \$200,000 and most likely shared this short video to explain what they do so that individuals will donate. Since DWB operates primarily on individual donations, this goal is important as it keeps them running and able to provide aid.

The video features clips and information about what DWB does across the world when they respond to situations of crises. It shows how DWB provides medications, vaccines, surgeries, childcare, mental health services, and more to those in need of these services but without access to them. Then narration discusses the organization’s core values and how they aim to provide help to those in crises.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLPvzieC7rw>



“This is MSF”: INTRODUCTION VIDEO (1/2)

It is important to consider how DWB's financial situation affects them. This video was shared to help the organization gain \$200,000 in donations, which is necessary to them because they do not have significant financial backing outside of independent donations. By advertising their organization, including clips of them saving babies, helping people give birth, and providing life-saving vaccinations and medical aid, they present the help that they offer to the world.

However, the implicit message of this video is that, without independent donations to keep the organization active, they will be unable to continue providing these services and aid. In essence, if not for average members of the audience watching this who decide to donate, they cannot save other people. In a way, this shifts the onus of providing help and relief from the volunteers and staff of DWB to the individuals who may or may not donate. This is, of course, not a bad thing in itself; being able to help a humanitarian aid organization as impactful as DWB is understandably a good feeling for an individual. The problem, however, lies in the fact that this is not entirely true.

DWB does not aim to help a few individuals in any country to which they go. They go to places affected by war, natural disaster, and health crises. This means helping at least thousands of people. When considering those costs, the prices of medicines, vaccines, and supplies is multiplied so much that an individual donation of, say, \$20, does not actually contribute significantly to the organization. Even though the donation can make the donor feel good about themselves, it does little to provide financial help to DWB. However, by implying that any individual donation can and does help DWB, they are able to gain more money. If an individual feels that their \$20 will make no difference, they will be less likely to give it. On the other hand, if they are told that this will make a significant difference, then more people will feel motivated to donate, even if all they have to give is \$20. This shifts the focus of the organization from the people they are trying to help to the people donating to them.

“This is MSF”: INTRODUCTION VIDEO (2/2)

Humanitarian aid organizations function on the principle of giving help to other people, first and foremost. This video shifts that focus to donors instead, by encouraging them to donate through the implication that any amount of money will make a big difference. Rather than the focus being “Any amount of my money will help *others*”, it becomes, “Any amount of *my* money will help others”. The entire video focuses on the people who are being helped, from babies to those who are pregnant to those facing severe injuries. Rather than focusing on them, DWB makes each individual watching the video feel like they are the focus because of the significant difference their donation will allegedly make.