

White saviourism in fundraising



Although not new, the concept of white saviourism is now an ethical dilemma that has reared its head again for fundraisers.

At the heart of it is the question: how can we fundraise without encouraging white saviour narratives?

This assumes you accept the white saviour narrative is a real problem — which not all fundraisers do. I know many fundraisers have struggled and argued over fundraising language, portrayal of beneficiaries and pushed back against making the donor the hero. But recent public discourse on decolonisation and white privilege have pushed white saviourism in fundraising into an issue that goes beyond how we communicate with donors. If you agree that white saviourism causes harm — and again, not all fundraisers do — then this is an issue that requires systemic change. Tinkering with our fundraising messages alone will not solve it. In isolation, it would likely only result in lower income, which doesn't help anybody.

In this article, I hope to highlight some of the complex and interconnected issues raised by white saviourism and their implications for fundraising. This is not a comfortable discussion to have and it will be offensive to some.

I will declare my own interests upfront. My fundraising consultancy works with charities to produce donor-centred direct response appeals, mostly through mail and digital channels. We also work on fundraising strategy and training in individual giving. I'm also a person of colour, with parents from different Asian countries. However, I know that I am privileged — I have been brought up and educated in white Australia and have assimilated into white Western culture.

So, what is white saviourism?

White saviourism, or the white saviour complex, in fundraising is the idea that donors are only helping people in a self-serving way that reinforces patriarchal, colonial and white supremacist attitudes and systems.

Donor-centred fundraisers find this concept offensive. This is because donor-centred practice focuses on showing the need and making the donor the hero of the fundraising story. Decades of testing in fundraising show you raise more money with this approach. I've seen this myself with charities I work with.

Donor-centred fundraisers argue the concept of white saviourism amounts to dictating to donors that their motivations for giving are wrong. In effect, you're saying: "Naughty donor, you shouldn't be donating because you're reinforcing white saviour stereotypes where people in poverty can only be helped through a white, Western way of doing aid." In contrast, by making the donor the hero, you're simply doing effective fundraising when you tell them: "You're doing an amazing and generous thing when you give."

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Those who oppose white saviourism argue the donor-as-hero approach gives all the power to the donor and none to the beneficiaries. They say modern community development practice is centred on empowering local people and communities to solve their own problems. As a result, they complain the complexity of this work is reduced to simplistic fundraising offers and language that focuses too much on need and doesn't give a full picture of their programs.

They also argue that donors' wealth can come from questionable origins. In some countries, wealth has been built on slavery, stolen Indigenous land, environmental abuses, and other historic injustices, along with ongoing tax evasion. They ask why should the donor be the hero of the story and get to feel good about giving back when the wealth they have to give comes from a corrupt, white system?

Another argument is that white saviourism actively does harm to beneficiaries. Take the case of Renee Bach, an American who started a charitable treatment centre for malnourished children in Uganda. News reports state she had no medical training. Her centre was unlicensed and did not employ a doctor. More than 100 children in her care died. Bach funded her centre through donations from her church — donations that could have been directed elsewhere.

Also, wealthy donors may have too much power or influence over programs that get funded. They can make unreasonable demands or have unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved — even when they have no on-the-ground or lived experience of the communities they're trying to help. This can also create a dependency pattern in beneficiaries rather than solving the root causes of their problems.

How do donors view white saviourism?

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disconnected from the idea of being a white saviour.

If you speak to donors about their motivations for giving, they say things like: “I want to do something practical” or “I want to help people most in need” or “We live in a wealthy country, nobody should have to be poor” or “We need to take care of the next generation” or “I’m so fortunate/blessed and want to give something back”. The farthest thing from their minds is that they’re part of a system of white oppression.

However, white saviourism has different implications for different donors.

High-net-worth funders On the one hand, you have people who become interested in philanthropy after becoming wealthy. They tend to be rich, white men who made their money through their business in IT, property, mining or some other kind of enterprise. They form foundations to give away their wealth. Grant writers and relationship development officers have to conform to their criteria for funding. They control big sums of money.

At this major gift level, where relationship development is key, the consequences are significant. The majority of philanthropic dollars go to white-led nonprofits while frontline organisations led by local people of colour struggle to attract funding. Why?

Apart from overt bias, white nonprofit leaders are more likely to have networks that can introduce them to wealthy white funders. Charities also want people on their boards who know potential large donors, which means white people are more likely to serve on boards. Also, POC-led charities tend to have fewer resources and find it harder to meet the requirements outlined in the grant application process. And funders may see them as higher risk and will ask them to provide extra layers of reporting that aren’t required of a white-led organisation.

When large sums of money are at stake, are charities willing to start a discussion about white saviourism with potential funders? The reality is that many of these high-net-worth individuals would be regarded as the epitome of the white saviour. I’ve personally heard fundraisers express concern over this while quietly trying to prepare funding proposals for these same people.

Core individual giving donors On the other hand, you have the frugal 70 plus donors, who live on their pensions but love giving their \$20, \$50 or \$100 gifts to their favourite charitable causes. These classic older charitable donors make up the core of many charity databases. Of course, there are donors of varying levels of wealth between the frugal older donors and high-net-worth individuals — but they’re still predominantly white donors with white mindsets. (However, it should be recognised that some donors of non-white backgrounds choose to give to programs in countries or regions of their heritage.)

Many of these core donors will struggle to comprehend white saviourism and why it’s problematic. They believe their act of giving is an expression of love and concern for those less fortunate. They don’t understand and may even be hostile to the idea of decolonisation. Even with the best intentions, they have an unconscious desire to not challenge white supremacy. They do not see themselves as racist or part of a racist system.

Let’s look at an example at a tactical level — child sponsorship. The reality is that asking a donor to give \$50 a month to sponsor a child will always raise more money than \$50 a month to sponsor community development. That’s even if you outline all the ways in which the latter is beneficial. That is, you “educate” the donor.

So then how do you go that step further and explain to your 70-year-old donors that their act of sponsoring a child encourages racist and paternalistic thinking? That their natural desire towards wanting to help the most needy is supposedly problematic when the bigger picture is that poorer

countries or communities may be contributing significantly to their own development? (As opposed to waiting helplessly for the white Westerner to save them from their plight.) This doesn't mean beneficiaries don't need aid. But the photo of the child they have on their fridge is just the face of the community they come from and their hope for a better future.

This whole picture has subtleties and nuances that make up an extremely complex narrative. It's too complicated for a donor to comprehend within the confines of the traditional direct mail letter when the goal is to raise money. And how do you even begin to explain it in a press ad or 30-second DTV spot?

What does this mean for day-to-day fundraising now?

Now I'd like to pose a few points to consider that are related to the realities of on-the-ground fundraising.

Truthfulness I hear many complaints about how negative, need-oriented, donor-centred fundraising narratives are untrue and perpetuate stereotypes, and how they strip beneficiaries of their agency and dignity. The solution offered is usually some form of positive, hope-oriented fundraising narrative where the donor is sidelined. Sometimes, this is even enshrined in charity brand guidelines.

However, apart from being ineffective, many hope-oriented narratives are just as untrue in their own way and simply perpetuate different stereotypes. In some cases, this also strips beneficiaries of their agency — just in a different way. When you don't show the need, you are leaving out a very real part of the beneficiary's story. I know of cases where beneficiaries were angry at attempts to leave out details of their lived experience.

So the question is: How can we tell the story in a way which is true but doesn't encourage white saviourism? At the same time, we need to balance another reality. If a nonprofit can't help its beneficiaries due to lack of funds, it's going to be of small comfort to them to know they weren't stereotyped in the charity's direct mail appeal.

Hero-ing the donor As mentioned earlier, making the donor the hero is a proven fundraising tactic. One compromise may be to develop messaging that shares the credit between the donor, the beneficiary and the charity. I'm not saying this would be good fundraising practice — this would no longer be fully donor-centred, and it also breaks the rules of having a single focus. Will it reduce donations? I suspect it depends on the execution, but this would need to be tested.

Redefining fundraising offers Donor-centred offers where you ask supporters to meet a specific, urgent need are the core of successful fundraising. It could be child sponsorship, a single gift ask to help a mum in poverty, or an ask to help a young person left homeless. Whatever the case, these types of donor-centred asks work to raise money. If you want to eliminate these need-oriented fundraising offers because you believe they perpetuate white saviourism, then you need something to replace it. This will be an enormous challenge.

For those charities that do offer child sponsorship, it can make up anywhere from 30-70% of a charity's annual income. Even if you don't do child sponsorship, moving away from donor-centred offers will likely mean less money for your cause. At best, you'll suffer a short-term drop in income. At worst, you may never develop fundraising asks that will equal the success of offers like child sponsorship. Either way, you face a hit to income while you're spending more to develop and test new offers. Long term, if you can't develop successful offers that will bring in revenue and keep donor lifetime value at the same levels, then charities will need to either accept lower income or look for alternative sources of funding — or both.

If you really want to educate donors...

Program and marketing staff in charities frequently want to use fundraising communications to educate donors, but this doesn't work to raise funds. Most donors don't want to be educated. They just want to know how their gift will make a difference — expressed in a specific, tangible way.

Remember, fundraisers are measured on how much money they raise... not on how well they educate donors about complex community development issues. Does that mean we shouldn't try to change donor attitudes? No, but you also have to accept that changing such attitudes does not happen overnight. It will most likely take decades. Also, educating donors is not a fundraising function. It's an advocacy function. Does your charity really believe it's vital for donors to understand the problem of white saviourism? If so, then this requires an advocacy campaign which will have different goals and success metrics to a fundraising appeal.

One goal of such an advocacy campaign may be to shift donor giving behaviour from donor-centred asks to beneficiary-empowered asks. This would be similar to advocacy campaigns to get shoppers to buy greener or fair-trade products. But note: the success of such advocacy campaigns is mixed, even after years of campaigning. Consumers may know they should buy products that are eco-friendly and made without exploited labour — but they don't always do so.

Similarly, I would expect some donors may eventually understand the problems of white saviourism. They may even accept the idea they're part of a system that perpetuates it. But will this change their giving behaviour? Will they be able to resist a child-in-need offer in favour of a decolonised-aid-offer? Maybe, but it will be a long, slow road that will require time, effort — and funding.

So, should we be diverting hard-won fundraising revenue into such an advocacy campaign rather than directly to programs for people in need? If we agree that white saviourism does harm, then yes. But all fundraisers know how hard it is to even get their charities to invest properly into fundraising — will they invest what's needed to achieve systemic change like this? Also, will the task of eliminating white saviourism come under the heading of 'funds sent to the field' or 'overhead'? You could make an argument for either, but if it falls into the latter category, how will you explain these higher administration costs to funders and donors?

Is your charity really willing to tackle white saviourism?

In the meantime, are charities willing to accept they're likely to raise less money if they want to stop using the donor-centred, need-oriented narratives that work? At least, until other viable alternatives can be found? That will be no easy task, if it can be done at all. It may also be that to tackle such problems, we need completely different models of charity work and methods of funding it. What that would look like, I honestly don't know.

But white saviourism in fundraising is not going to be resolved by attacking working tactics without critics taking some responsibility for developing equally successful methods for raising income. At the same time, I don't believe fundraisers can ignore the bigger picture context of white saviourism if it's unjust or causing harm to beneficiaries.

To put this article together, I have drawn on resources from Community-Centric Fundraising, No White Saviors, Nonprofit AF and Rogare. If you're interested in exploring ways to tackle white saviourism in fundraising communications, please contact me via LinkedIn.

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