ARTIFICIAL AUTHENTICITY

The Rise of Images Generated by Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Charity and Development Communications

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How are charities and development organisations currently using AI-generated images in their communications?

What are the risks and benefits of using AI-generated images in charity and development communications?

CHAPTERS

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WWF Illustration

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This report was written by Deborah Adesina and David Girling. The report analyses the rise of images generated by artificial intelligence in charity and development communications. It is the third study in the Charity Advertising series. The overall research project examines charity advertising across various marketing formats. The first study analysed adverts within UK national weekend newspapers from March 2021 to August 2021. The second study examined UK charity direct mail campaigns from March 2021 to March 2022.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH CONTEXT

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The charity and development sector has long grappled with questions of representation, power and ethical storytelling. Our previous reports on charity advertising (www.charity-advertising.co.uk) examined how charities and INGOS represent the communities they serve through advertising and direct mail campaigns.

These studies revealed persistent patterns in how poverty, need, and intervention are visually communicated to donors in the Global North. Now, as generative AI technologies rapidly transform visual communication, the sector faces a new era that demands critical examination.

The emergence of AI-generated imagery presents both unprecedented opportunities and significant ethical challenges for the charity and development sector. This technology offers compelling advantages for smaller organisations with limited budgets who can now create professional visual content; individuals and communities are protected from identification and potential exploitation through the use of their images; and there is potential for co-creation processes where people can be involved in generating representations that better reflect their own stories and lived experiences. The technology spans a spectrum from photorealistic imagery to illustration and even film, opening new creative possibilities for storytelling that could arguably circumvent some of the problematic dynamics inherent in traditional photography.

However, these benefits exist alongside substantial concerns. AI image generators are trained on datasets that often embed and amplify existing biases, potentially perpetuating the very stereotypes and harmful representations that critics have long challenged in development communications. Professional photographers and filmmakers in the Global South face potential displacement from an already precarious livelihood. Questions of authenticity, transparency, and trust emerge when audiences cannot distinguish between real and generated imagery. The ease of creation may lead to a proliferation of content without adequate reflection on whether it serves the dignity and agency of those it claims to represent.

This research seeks to map the current landscape of AI-generated imagery in the charity and development sector. By building a comprehensive database of identified AI images, analysing organisational practices, and examining public responses through online commentary, we aim to document both innovative and problematic uses of this technology.

Our goal is to provide organisations with evidence-based guidance, highlighting examples of good practice while identifying pitfalls to avoid. As the sector stands at this technological crossroads, informed and ethical decision-making has never been more critical.

Apeksh Trust Image

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH CONTEXT

Review of literature

A growing body of industry and sector reports document the rapid uptake of AI technologies across charities and humanitarian organisations. According to the Charity Digital Skills Report (2025), for example, 76% of charities are now utilising AI in some form, a significant jump from 61% in the previous year. Similarly, the Humanitarian Leadership Academy survey (HLA, 2025) found that 70% of humanitarian workers report daily or weekly usage, although full organisational integration remains rare. Adoption rates are reportedly higher among larger organisations, yet smaller charities too are also increasingly engaging with AI, often framed as a means of improving efficiency under financial pressure. Some of the more common use cases include for report writing, data summarisation, and proposal development (HLA, 2025; CEP, 2025); generating automated translations, alt-text for images, and closed captions (JRF, 2024), and for creative content. Findings from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation show that approximately 63% of organisations apply generative AI within advertising, marketing, and PR (JRF, 2024).

Advocates for AI adoption have consistently emphasised efficiency and cost savings as primary justifications. Specifically, within debates on AI-generated imagery, some authors and practitioners emphasise potential ethical and practical benefits, particularly for smaller or resource-constrained organisations. Such arguments relate strongly with donor expectations that organisations should minimise overheads and maximise impact. To this point, AI image generators offer low-cost, rapid production of visually compelling content, potentially levelling the playing field between large, well-funded NGOs, smaller charities and grassroots organisations. The use of generative AI has been variously touted as resolving reliance on extractive photographic practices that require intensive logistics and complex consent processes. From this perspective, it is argued, by avoiding the use of identifiable individuals, AI-generated images also mitigate risks associated with privacy, safeguarding, and long-term image circulation, thereby protecting the dignity and privacy of vulnerable subjects, like children (Arango et al., 2024; Arsenii et al., 2025).

Ethical concerns of generative AI

Running parallel to this techno-optimistic framing is a substantial body of critique. One major concern is that AI image generators are trained on large-scale datasets that reflect existing social inequalities and visual stereotypes. As a result, AI-generated images may not only reproduce but amplify harmful tropes associated with poverty, race, and vulnerability (Arsenii et al, 2023). Concerns about deception, transparency, and manipulation intersect with broader anxieties about "fake" content in digital media ecosystems. Thus rather than resolving ethical dilemmas, it is argued, AI risks reintroducing them in more insidious forms (Children Change Colombia, 2025; Arsenii et al, 2025). These risks are often compounded by fears of reputational damage, particularly if AI image use is perceived as cutting corners, prioritising efficiency over integrity, or undermining the credibility of humanitarian claims (Herrero & Concannon, 2024). Professional photographers and filmmakers in the Global South are also positioned as vulnerable to displacement, raising ethical questions about labour, authorship, and creative livelihoods (Alenichev, 2025).

More critically, emerging experimental studies seem to however complicate the argument for cost saving and efficiency. For instance, a study conducted by Ho and Taylor (2025) found that donors are significantly more likely to contribute to campaigns attributed to humans rather than AI, specifically because human authorship conveys greater emotional authenticity and personal meaningfulness. Similarly, Arango et al. (2024) report that awareness that an image is AI-generated reduces empathic responses, guilt, and perceived sadness, leading to lower donation intentions, an effect that persists even when charities are transparent about AI use and their ethical motivations for doing so (Arango et al., 2024). Thus, what can be gained in production efficiency can be lost in fundraising effectiveness, a troubling paradox for organisations whose survival depends on donor responses.

These findings thus challenge the assumption that lower production costs necessarily translate into better fundraising outcomes and underscore the need to weigh financial savings against potential losses in emotional engagement and trust. It is noteworthy that participants in Arango et al.'s (2024) research could not visually distinguish AI-generated from authentic photographs. In other words, the images themselves were not the problem, the disclosure and transparency was. This effect is not limited to images alone, findings from other studies record high resistance to stories labeled as "AI generated, even when these had been authored by humans (Chu and Liu, 2023)."

By contrast, in another study - a randomised clinical trial with 614 participants on the effectiveness of AI generated images it was reported that AI-generated vaping awareness advertisements codesigned with young people achieved perceived effectiveness equal or superior to that of existing advertisements.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH CONTEXT

Large-scale surveys of public attitudes towards AI in the charity sector further complicate the picture. Interestingly, donor publics appear to hold more pragmatic and less categorically opposed views than critical discourse might suggest. CAF's multi-country study of over 6,000 respondents, for example, finds that, overall, perceived opportunities of AI outweigh perceived risks, particularly among more generous donors and respondents in low- and middle-income countries. So whilst there are concerns around workforce reduction, data breaches, bias, loss of personal connection, and organisational drift from core missions, these anxieties coexisted with substantial enthusiasm for AI's potential to accelerate disaster response and expand organisational reach (Charities Aid Foundation, 2024).

Although this survey addressed AI use in general rather than AI-generated imagery, its findings seems to suggest that there is perhaps more scope for public engagement around the use of AI than the sector currently imagines. But whether or not this extends to the use of artificially generated images, is debatable. For instance, while Arango et al.'s (2024) initial findings indicated that authentic faces represent the safer approach and that AI-generated faces in advertisements, even with disclosure, likely harm fundraising efforts, further experiments within the same research revealed other possibilities. The authors found that providing clear ethical justifications for AI use, such as protecting vulnerable individuals from exposure, or deploying synthetic imagery as a last resort in emergency situations where alternatives prove unavailable, can mitigate negative responses and even generate positive outcomes (Arango et al., 2024). Their experiments indicate that negative responses to AI imagery are not fixed. Rather, in some instances, providing ethical justifications for AI image use or framing AI imagery as a last resort in emergency contexts can mitigate adverse effects. This suggests that audience reactions are shaped not only by the technology itself but also by the narratives organisations construct around its use. A white paper on the use of generative AI (Fairpicture and Kardol, 2025) recommends NGOs prohibit fabricated human suffering imagery, establish clear AI policies, commission local creators, and only use AI for non-depictive content e.g. illustrations and diagrams. The paper emphasises transparency in AI disclosure and contractual safeguards with suppliers to maintain sector credibility and uphold "do no harm" principles.

Historical critiques of ethical storytelling

Questions of representation, power, and ethical storytelling have long shaped debates within charity and development communications (Lissner 1981; Dogra 2012; Girling and Adesina 2024, Adesina and Girling 2025). Thus many of these critiques predate generative artificial intelligence, signalling that ethical tensions in visual communication are not a novel consequence of new technologies but are embedded within longer histories of image production, circulation, and interpretation. Several commentators have noted, for example, that charity advertising images have always been constructed, framed, and curated rather than neutral reflections of reality. As such, the emergence of AI-generated imagery represents continuities, and an intensification of existing concerns, rather than broad sweeping changes (Alenichev 2023). This continuity complicates attempts to isolate AI as a singular ethical problem and suggests the need for empirical scrutiny of how audiences interpret and respond to AI-generated representations in practice. Despite growing interest in generative AI within the charity and development sector, several critical gaps persist in the literature. First, there is limited systematic documentation of how charities are currently using AI-generated images, partly due to low disclosure and early-stage adoption. Second, while experimental studies provide valuable insights into donor psychology, they often rely on controlled scenarios rather than publicly circulating campaigns. What remains absent as such, is a systematic documentation of how publics engage with and respond to AI-generated images when these appear in real organisational campaigns.

This study responds directly to these gaps by mapping documented uses of AI-generated imagery in charity and development communications and analysing public reactions to these images as they appear in real-world contexts. By examining audience commentary alongside organisational practices, the study moves beyond popular "poverty porn" and other speculative critique to offer grounded insight into how AI imagery is interpreted, contested, and negotiated in practice. In doing so, it bridges the gap between theoretical debate, experimental evidence, and actual practice, contributing an empirically anchored perspective to debates that have thus far been dominated by normative argument and sector-wide surveys.

Our investigation is guided by two research questions: How are charities and development organisations currently using AI-generated images in their communications? And, what are the risks and benefits of using AI-generated images in charity and development communications? In answering these questions, we aim to provide evidence-based guidance grounded not in speculation about what AI might enable or threaten, but in documented patterns of how organisations are already deploying this technology and how audiences are responding to it.

CHAPTER 2
METHODOLOGY

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METHODOLOGY

This study examines the use of generative AI imagery in the charity and development sectors. Given the absence of systematic documentation or transparent disclosure practices regarding AI image use within these organisations, a multi-pronged search strategy was employed.

The initial phase involved identifying AI-generated images referenced in academic literature, news media and social media platforms. This was supplemented by direct outreach through professional networks and targeted enquiries posted in relevant online forums such as Reddit and LinkedIn, soliciting examples of AI-generated imagery used by organisations in the charity and development sector.

The response rate to these inquiries was notably low. Two potential explanations for this limited response emerge. Firstly, organisations may still be in the early adoption stage of integrating generative AI technologies into their communication strategies. Alternatively, there may be a deliberate reluctance to disclose AI image use, potentially due to concerns about public perception, ethical considerations and reputational risk. The opacity surrounding AI adoption in this sector presents a significant methodological challenge and we hope that more examples will emerge as a result of this research.

Due to the limited number of images received through direct requests, a supplementary strategy was employed to identify relevant materials. Images were systematically collected from diverse digital touchpoints, e.g official organisational websites, direct mailers, and stills from AI-generated video content. Each image was then catalogued and coded based on a standardised codebook according to predefined parameters, including organisational source, platform of publication, format (photorealistic, illustrative), and stated or inferred disclosure of AI use.

To analyse public perception, we tracked public online discussions across organisation pages and secondary reposts by third-party accounts. This allowed for the capture of "viral" discourse that often occurs outside of an organization's controlled digital environment.

Comments were copied verbatim, anonymised, and compiled into a dataset for analysis. To ensure qualitative saturation, where posts contained fewer than 50 comments, all available comments were coded (100%). For posts with more extensive engagement, at least 20% of comments were coded to ensure both depth and manageability while retaining discursive breadth. Comments were coded in the order presented on the platform at the time of collection.

Comments were then coded thematically, utilising both deductive categories derived from existing literature (e.g., poverty porn, authenticity) and inductive themes emerging directly from audience discourse. Non-English comments were excluded unless reliably translatable.

Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, audience responses are shaped by the framing of the original post. The textual caption accompanying an image, the platform on which it was shared, the type of account (individual, corporate, activist, media outlet), and the broader sectoral identity of the organisation may significantly influence the nature of public reaction. For instance, the author's own post on the WWF Denmark campaign generated over 7,000 comments largely focused on requests for "templates," a reaction driven more by the viral nature of the post than by a deep reflection on AI ethics. Moreso, platform algorithms influence the ordering and visibility of comments. Although coding at least 50% of comments in high-engagement posts mitigates some bias, it does not eliminate the possibility that algorithmic sorting shaped which comments were most visible at the time of data collection. Furthermore, comments posted months or years after an initial campaign will have been influenced by shifting cultural attitudes toward AI, making it difficult to isolate "pure" initial reactions.

Additionally, the demographic and positionality of commenters remain unknown. Information regarding nationality, professional background, familiarity with AI technologies, or prior attitudes toward the organisation is not available. Consequently, interpretations are limited to the discursive content itself rather than the social characteristics of participants, as we cannot determine if critiques are coming from industry experts, donors, or casual observers.

Finally, the study does not provide a controlled comparative analysis of different modes of AI usage. The cases vary in terms of whether AI was used to generate fully synthetic photorealistic imagery, illustrative material, composite edits, or elements within a broader production workflow. Nor does the study systematically compare AI-generated imagery with equivalent non-AI campaigns by the same organisations. Consequently, the findings should be understood as exploratory rather than evaluative.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the study offers a vivid and empirically grounded snapshot of public sentiment surrounding the use of generative AI imagery within the charity and development sectors. Against the backdrop of limited transparency and rapid technological change, this analysis provides an early but important insight into how audiences are negotiating the ethical, emotional, and representational implications of synthetic visual communication.

CHAPTER 3
ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

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Charities and development organisations are deploying AI-generated imagery across their communications with greater frequency and breadth than public discourse might suggest, yet this adoption remains concentrated within specific organisational contexts and visual strategies that reveal both pragmatic choices and unresolved tensions around transparency.

Country	Images
Canada	39
Australia	35
United Kingdom	28
Unspecified	21
India	11
USA	11
Denmark	10
Ethiopia	8
Afghanistan	5
Netherlands	2

***TABLE 1**. Number of images by country of organisation.*

Geographic location

Our analysis of 171 AI-generated images deployed by 17 organisations reveals adoption spanning multiple continents, with 39 of the images from Canada, followed by Australia (35 images) and the United Kingdom (28 images). However, these national totals mask significant variance in organisational practice: the volume is heavily skewed by intensive use within single campaigns, such as Maurice Blackburn's 32-image deployment in Australia and Furniture Bank's 39-image campaign in Canada. Notably, 21 images could not be attributed to specific countries. This includes the WHO 2023 campaign against tobacco, images of which showed up in different countries, on several WHO related sites. The other unspecified images were from PLAN International Stories from the Future Report. In this case, Plan International invited 15 adolescent girls and young women from 11 countries from around the world to imagine their desired versions of 2055. The illustrations were then created by André Arruda, with the support of AI image generation software Midjourney. The report however does not disclose a publication location.

This concentration suggests that AI image use is currently individual campaign-led rather than being adopted sector-wide, with certain organisations committing heavily to AI-generated visuals within specific initiatives, while others appear cautious or limited in their engagement. Importantly, this pattern aligns with our methodological observation of low disclosure and limited voluntary sharing, perhaps signalling the likelihood that current usage might be broader than what is publicly visible.

World Health Organization Image

CHAPTER 3 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Organisations

17 oranisations ranging from large international agencies such as the World Health Organization, UNOCHA, and Plan International to smaller national entities like Apeksh Trust in India and regional branches like WWF Denmark, challenge assumptions that AI-generated imagery serves primarily as a resource-saving tool for under-resourced organisations.

Both well-funded international bodies and grassroots NGOs appear to be navigating similar generative AI terrain, suggesting that the drivers of adoption extend beyond mere budget constraints to encompass broader strategic and creative considerations. Use of AI-generated imagery is unevenly distributed across organisations. A small number of charities account for a disproportionately large share of images. For example, Furniture Bank (39 images) and Maurice Blackburn (32 images) alone represent over 40% of the total dataset

Organisation	Images
Amnesty International	1
Apeksh Trust	11
Breast Cancer Now	5
Charity Right	6
Charity Water	8
Children's Cancer Foundation	3
Eskebarrett Foundation	1
Feeding America	1
Furniture Bank	39
Maurice Blackburn	32
Plan International	17
UNOCHA	5
UNOCHA Ethiopia	8
UNU	1
WHO	6
WWF Denmark	10
WWF UK	17

***TABLE 2**. Number of images by organisations using generative AI imagery.*

The Wind at Her Back
By B., age 22, Jordan*

Amal was about to turn 18 years old. She was a girl full of life, always searching for light in every little thing, studying, playing, praying, enjoying her freedom, having a good time with her family and friends, and actively participating in her community's decisions about climate management in Jordan. She didn't really have a lot of unaccomplished wishes. Except for one: to travel abroad on her own. With the global commitment to control carbon emissions, travelling overseas had become quite restricted in 2055: one had to ask permission and demonstrate a good reason to do so. Tourism was not one of them.

So, when her parents asked her what she would like to do for her birthday, Amal knew exactly what to say. She picked a place in Europe because of their incredible work on climate adaptation technology. It would be a good opportunity for her to learn from their experience and apply some of that to Jordan. She booked a carbon-free flight, something that had been tested with great success recently in her country. When she received the acceptance letter to travel, excitement filled her heart. She imagined all the adventures she would have, the new friends she would make, and the new dreams she would chase.

When she landed at her destination, a huge windstorm hit. That was definitely not the welcoming vibe she was expecting. At the airport, on the subway, and all the way to the room she rented, she felt stared at. Maybe she was just tired and needed a good night's sleep.
The following day, the windstorm was over, and yet she felt as if she was inside a whirlwind on her own. From the moment she shared locally grown organic breakfast with her housemates to her arrival at the Climate Museum, whispers followed her, eyes lingered on her, she was treated coldly and faced verbal harassment. Of course, there were also some kind people with friendly gestures and warm smiles, but the noise of the overall behaviour never faded.

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Plan International

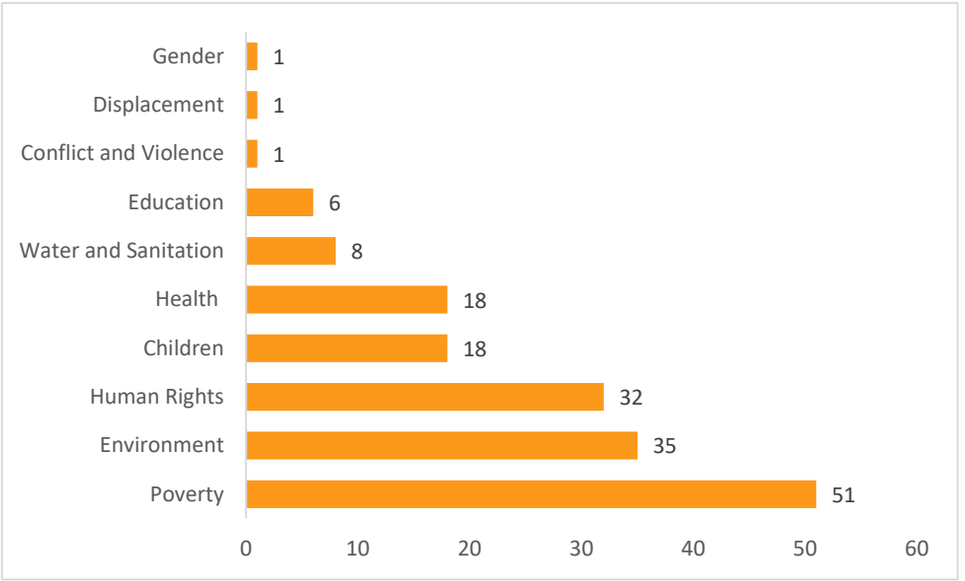
CHAPTER 3 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Subject Matter

The subject matter of AI-generated images tells a revealing story about which aspects of charitable work organisations choose to represent synthetically. Poverty emerges as the overwhelmingly dominant theme, accounting for almost one-third of all documented images (51 of 171), from three charities - Charity Right published images of children suffering hunger, Furniture Bank created a large gallery of 39 images illustrating children suffering furniture poverty, fully credited as AI generated, along with a rationale for doing so. Apeksh Trust India used AI generated images on their website to illustrate food poverty, and Feeding America created an AI video depicting hunger. In 50 out of 51 images depicting poverty, photorealism was deployed. When combined with images focused on children, health, water and sanitation, and education, the data shows that AI imagery is overwhelmingly deployed in contexts traditionally associated with human vulnerability and humanitarian need.

This is significant, given the sector's decades-long struggle with critiques of "poverty porn" and exploitative representation. That organisations would turn to AI to generate representations of poverty, rather than, for instance, images of organisational processes, volunteers, donor impact, or other systemic solutions, suggests either a persistent belief that poverty imagery remains essential for audience engagement, or perhaps an attempt to navigate ethical dilemmas associated with photographing vulnerable populations by using synthetic representations.

Environmental themes constitute the second most frequent category (35 images, all illustrative, all credited), followed by human rights (32 images, all photorealistic, all credited). Notably, these three categories of poverty, environment, and human rights, collectively account for 72% of all AI-generated imagery in our dataset. Children appear as a distinct subject in 18 images, though this likely undercounts their presence since many poverty-focused images also feature children. Health-related imagery (18 images) and water and sanitation (8 images) represent smaller but significant categories. Education (6 images), conflict and violence (1 image), and displacement (1 image) barely register in current practice, despite these issues representing core concerns for many development organisations. This thematic distribution raises important questions: Are certain subjects considered more "appropriate" for synthetic representation? Do organisations perceive greater risk in generating images about conflict or displacement than about poverty? Or does the low representation of these themes simply reflect which organisations happen to have adopted AI technology thus far? Or which are more accountable and transparent.



GRAPH 1. *Breakdown of subject matter in generative AI imagery in the charity and development sector (Adesina and Girling, 2026)*

CHAPTER 3 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Image type

Organisations are making deliberate choices about how AI-generated imagery should appear, and these choices reveal tension between authenticity and artifice. Photorealistic images constitute the clear majority at 61% of the total (104 images), suggesting that organisations prefer AI-generated content that mimics traditional photography rather than imagery that immediately signal its synthetic nature through abstract illustration. An additional 11 photorealistic video screenshots extend this pattern into moving image content, bringing the total photorealistic representation to 68% of documented usage. Illustration-style images account for 32% (56 images), representing a substantial minority but far from the dominant approach. This indicates that charities are not primarily using AI for "artistic" or metaphorical purposes; instead, they are leveraging the technology to simulate a "photojournalistic" reality. By opting for photorealism, organisations appear to be attempting to replicate the authority and emotional weight of traditional photography while bypassing the logistical and ethical challenges of on-site shoots.

The preference for photorealism warrants careful interpretation. On one hand, it may reflect practical considerations: organisations seeking to maintain visual consistency across campaigns that blend AI-generated and authentic photography might reasonably choose photorealistic AI outputs. On the other hand, the choice to make synthetic imagery appear "real" raises important questions (taken up elsewhere in the report) about authenticity, audience perception, and the continuation of established representational norms. If AI-generated images are indistinguishable from photographs, and if audiences cannot reliably detect their synthetic nature, then questions about manipulation and deception become more acute, particularly when coupled with the transparency practices discussed below.

The illustrations, while less common, represent an alternative visual strategy that signals artifice rather than concealing it. Organisations choosing illustration-style AI generation may be attempting to sidestep authenticity concerns by making clear that images are constructed representations rather than documentary evidence. Yet this approach also carries risks: if poverty, suffering, or humanitarian crises are depicted through obviously artificial imagery, does this diminish their perceived severity or urgency in ways that ultimately harm advocacy and fundraising objectives? (Interestingly, illustrative AI images still come under severe criticism).

UNOCHA Ethiopia Illustration

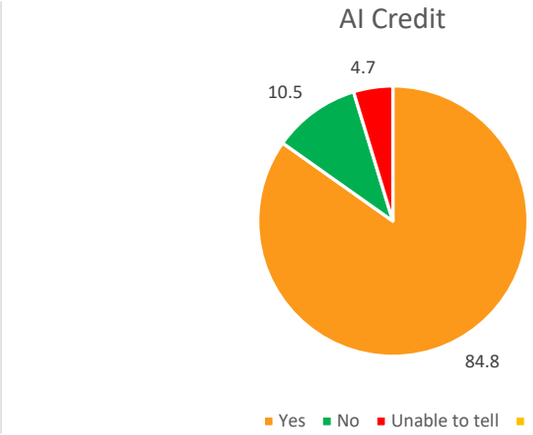
Breast Cancer Now Image

CHAPTER 3 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Types of characters

Perhaps the most consequential finding concerns how organisations handle disclosure of AI use. While 84.8% of images (145) were accompanied by explicit AI credit, this apparently high disclosure rate must be contextualised. First, 10.5% of images (18) carried no AI credit whatsoever - meaning that more than one in ten AI-generated images circulating in charity communications were presented without acknowledgment of their synthetic nature. For audiences already struggling to distinguish real from generated content, this non-disclosure represents a direct breach of the transparency expectations articulated in public perception research. Second, an additional 4.7% of images (8) existed in an ambiguous state where AI credit status could not be definitively determined, either because organisational communications were unclear or because images appeared across multiple contexts with inconsistent attribution.

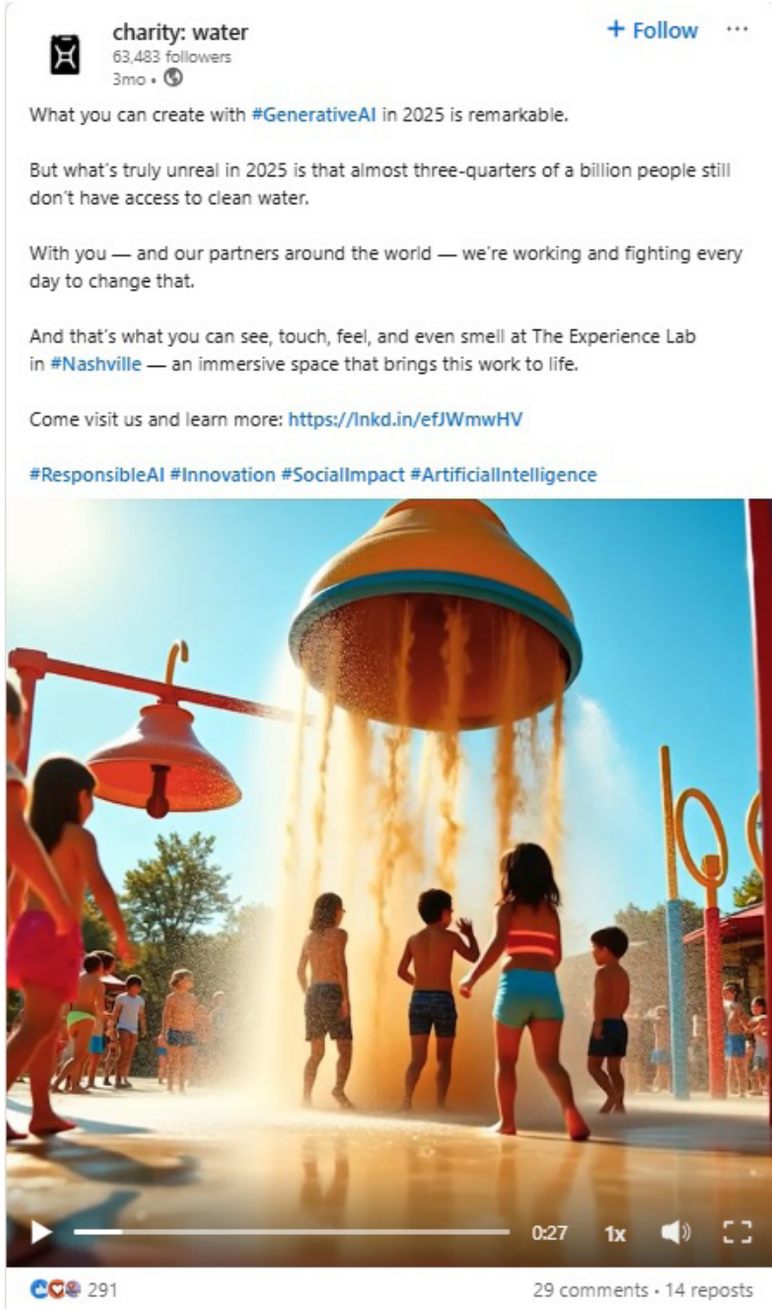
Even the 84.8% disclosure rate warrants further scrutiny. Our data does not capture how organisations disclosed AI use, whether through prominent, accessible labelling or through fine-print attributions easily overlooked by scrolling audiences. Nor does it reveal when disclosure occurred: images initially posted without credit but later updated would still be coded as “credited” in our analysis, yet audiences who encountered them during the non-disclosure period experienced them differently. It is important to note that in many instances, the images and videos were taken down by the organisations due to backlash. In these instances, the images we have analysed were from other publication outlets referencing the original.



GRAPH 2. *AI credits (Adesina and Girling, 2026)*

The lack of transparency about generative AI usage becomes particularly concerning when layered against the thematic findings. For example, if almost one-third of AI-generated images depict poverty, and if some proportion of these poverty representations circulate without acknowledgment of their synthetic nature, then audiences may be making donation decisions or forming perceptions about global need based on fabricated evidence they believe to be documentary. This was the case with the Charity Right images, leading to public outcry via platforms like Reddit. The ethical implications extend beyond individual organisational practice to the sector’s collective credibility.

Charity Water LinkedIn Post



CHAPTER 3 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Summary of analysis

The above findings paint a picture of a sector in the early stages of technological integration, characterised more by organisational experimentation than strategic coherence. Current AI use in charity communications is neither marginal nor universally adopted, neither entirely transparent nor completely concealed. Instead, it occupies an unstable middle ground where individual organisations make independent choices about whether, when, and how to deploy synthetic imagery, choices that appear driven by varying combinations of resource constraints, creative opportunity, and risk calculation.

The concentration of images within single campaigns suggests that AI adoption may currently function more as a project-specific tactic than an organisation-wide strategy. Organisations are seemingly testing AI in contexts rather than a complete overhauling their visual communications. This tentative approach may reflect the unresolved debates documented in existing literature: organisations recognise both the potential efficiencies and the reputational hazards, and respond by proceeding cautiously rather than committing fully or abstaining entirely (Arrango et. al, 2025, advocate this).

The dominance of poverty imagery, coupled with the preference for photorealistic rendering, indicates that organisations have not fundamentally reimagined their visual strategies in light of AI's capabilities. Rather than using synthetic imagery to explore new representational approaches, including depicting systemic issues, visualising future possibilities, or co-creating imagery with communities, most current practice appears to replicate established visual conventions through new technological means. Whether this represents a failure of imagination or a deliberate choice to minimise disruption to proven communication formulas remains yet to be ascertained.

Finally, the inconsistent disclosure practices reveal that the sector has not yet established shared norms around transparency. Unlike other emerging practices where industry standards or regulatory frameworks guide organisational behavior, AI use in charity communications currently operates in a normative vacuum. Interestingly, the Charity Digital Skills report, highlights that three times as many charities as the previous year are developing AI policies, and at least 37% of charities have not undertaken any actions to move forward strategically with AI, suggesting that many continue to use AI in day-to-day work tasks without looking at this strategically or actively weighing the risks and benefits (Charity Digital Skills, 2025). Moreso, most nonprofits report that they never engage in internal conversations about equitable AI, and over 80% are not participating in any activities to advance equitable AI (Center for Effective Philanthropy, 2025). As adoption accelerates, this lack of standardisation poses risks not only to individual organisational credibility but to donor trust in the sector as a whole.

CHAPTER 3 DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Discourse Analysis Introduction

This section of the report employs a systematic critical discourse analysis of public responses to AI-generated imagery deployed across six charity campaigns spanning 2019 to 2025. The analysis draws upon 472 systematically coded comments extracted from Reddit, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube, tracing how diverse audiences articulate their reception of synthetic humanitarian imagery across these platforms.

The findings challenge assumptions about public technological literacy and aesthetic judgment. Rather than exhibiting either wholesale rejection or uncritical acceptance of AI-generated content, audiences demonstrate remarkably sophisticated evaluative frameworks. Commenters engage in complex negotiations that weigh technical execution against ethical alignment, assess context-dependent appropriateness, and interrogate the symbolic implications of replacing human-centered testimony with algorithmically generated representation.

Crucially, the analysis reveals that the introduction of AI fundamentally restructures the terms of audience engagement with charity and development imagery. The technology itself becomes a primary site of discourse, often displacing substantive engagement with the humanitarian causes the images purport to represent. As charities navigate an increasingly synthetic visual landscape, they face not merely questions of aesthetic quality or cost efficiency, but a deeper crisis of representational authority and the capacity to sustain authentic connection with their publics.

Year	Charity	Subject	Credit	Platform	Comments	Sample
2023	Amnesty International	Conflict and Violence	Yes	Reddit	87	44
2024	Breast Cancer Now	Health	Yes	Instagram	709	150
2023	Charity Right	Poverty	No	Reddit	50	46
2025	Charity Water	Water and Sanitation	Yes	LinkedIn	29	29
2019	Feeding America	Poverty	Yes	YouTube	100	53
2025	WWF Denmark	Environment	Yes	LinkedIn	309	150

TABLE 3. *Number of comments on social media platforms*

CHAPTER 3 DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Sentiment analysis

The public discourse surrounding AI-generated imagery in charity communications reveals a highly discerning audience. Rather than binary acceptance, viewers engage in a nuanced negotiation of authenticity, technical execution and ethical alignment.

Audiences evaluate AI use based on campaign intent, visual realism, and disclosure practices. Outright opposition is not universal, but acceptance is rarely unconditional.

Neutral responses were most prevalent in undisclosed campaigns (e.g., Charity Right). Here, the audience adopted an investigative tone, focusing on identifying "proof" of AI rather than moral judgment. Discussion centred on identifying "proof" rather than evaluating appropriateness, suggesting that non-disclosure shifts attention from ethics to detection. In this sense, neutrality reflects suspended judgement rather than acceptance.

Critical responses were pronounced in reactions to Breast Cancer Now, WWF Denmark, Amnesty International, and Feeding America, clustering around four themes. In the Breast Cancer Now campaign, AI-generated future selves were criticised as symbolic consolation in place of material solutions. *"Get a grip. People want cures, not fantasies..."*. AI use here was thus framed as technological misdirection, an emotional substitute rather than substantive intervention.

Sentiment	Count	Percentage
Ambivalent / Nuanced	40	8.5%
Critical	131	27.8%
Neutral	215	45.6%
Supportive	86	18.2%

TABLE 4. *Analysis of comments by sentiment (Adesina and Girling, 2026)*

Charity Right

Breast Cancer Now

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In WWF and charity:water campaigns, AI's energy use was seen as incompatible with sustainability messaging. *"The amount of energy these AI tools must have used..."*. Here the critique focused less on AI itself and more on message–medium misalignment. Particularly in hunger campaigns, commenters argued funds used for AI production should have gone directly to aid. *"Think of how many people could have been fed with the budget of these commercials"*. Fourthly, comments like *"Could've paid an actual artist"*, *critiqued AI's complicity in labour displacement and creative precarity.*

Supportive views emerged when AI was used to avoid re-traumatising subjects or to protect vulnerable communities. In the Breast Cancer Now case, supporters argued AI could enable hopeful imagining and avoid retraumatisation. Some commenters explicitly preferred AI to exploitative photography, noting that AI generated images *"is a bit better than someone having the job... to find a child who has just been through some horrific, traumatic event but also they need to look cute enough to get money"*. Some also saw AI as a continuation of established staging and Photoshop practices.

Ambivalent/Nuanced Sentiments reflected conditional acceptance, acknowledging ethical concerns while recognising potential benefits. Several weighed AI's harms against alternatives: *"...the best use of AI I have seen yet... However... the irony that something as ecologically hazardous as AI was used... But... the collateral of a physical shoot still would've had more impact..."*. This ambivalence suggests discomfort lies less with AI per se and more with its perceived appropriateness of use.

An AI image generator-made picture to depict protests and police brutality in Colombia. Amnesty International said it chose to use the AI-generated images to protect protesters. Photograph: Amnesty International

Amnesty International

Feeding America

WWF Denmark

CHAPTER 3 DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The Comment Focus

The introduction of AI fundamentally alters audience attention. Discussion frequently shifts away from the humanitarian mission toward the medium i.e technology, its ethics and execution.

AI Ethics

Ethical concerns (141 comments) clustered around authenticity, consent, deception, labour, environmental cost, and emotional manipulation: *"...the children pictured aren't real... makes me think the charity is pulling a fast one"*. Some questioned whether AI fundamentally differs from photographing *"real possibly non-consenting kids"*. Others framed it as moral shortcut or intellectual theft. Environmental discourses were contested, with some others challenging exaggerated claims of AI incompatibility with sustainability messaging: *"...a simple YouTube video... use more energy than an AI query..."*, indicating ethical discourse around AI is actively negotiated rather than uniformly oppositional.

AI Quality

Technical evaluation (122 comments) centred on visual realism, artefacts, and credibility. Poor execution undermined credibility, reinforcing perceptions that AI cannot yet match human creativity, while strong execution attracted admiration. Quality concerns also extended into broader societal fears that *"Eventually, AI will be so good..."* that criminal enterprises could use realistic AI for framing individuals.

Only 80 comments focused primarily on the humanitarian issue. Where cause was foregrounded, it often emerged through critique, especially around resource allocation. In emotionally sensitive contexts (e.g., cancer), AI was framed as trivialising suffering. AI use was thus, not neutral, rather, it reshaped the moral meaning of the cause amplified.

Organisation

Though smallest (17), this category was concentrated around Amnesty International. AI imagery amplified existing reputational narratives, with commenters situating campaigns within broader critiques or defences of credibility. For instance, while some framed Amnesty as habitually controversial, while others defended transparency and protective intent.

In summary, AI fundamentally alters what audiences attend to, often displacing campaign engagement while debates about ethics, quality, and implications dominate. However, even critical debates can produce engagement, like discussions about AI's inadequacy as cancer solutions still prompt reflection on cancer itself. Where technical execution and creative integration succeeded, audiences moved beyond AI as critique object to engage more deeply with causes. AI thus restructures meaning-making conditions, introducing new credibility, ethics, and aesthetic thresholds organisations must navigate.

Comment Focus Category	Total Count
Other	168
AI Ethics	141
AI Quality	122
Campaign/Cause	80
Organisation	17

TABLE 5. *Analysis of comments by category (Adesina and Girling, 2026)*

Charity Right

CHAPTER 3 DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis reveals a public discourse characterised by unresolved contradictions, selective principle applications, and context-dependent judgements shifting dramatically based on visual style, organisational identity, and perceived alignment between technological means and communicative ends.

In cases like Charity Right, audiences engaged in collective detection work, identifying "dead giveaways". Aesthetic failure signalled illegitimacy. In contrast, strong human–AI collaboration was praised: *"...I'm not praising only Ai... as we know behind every prompt there is a homo sepiens... the message really hits home"*. Yet technical novelty can backfire: Feeding America's visual transformation triggered discomfort and misinterpretation, indicating aesthetic experimentation with AI carries heightened risk where ambiguity undermines trust.

Innovation, Efficiency and Technosolutionism: Hierarchies of Appropriate Use

This theme (67 comments) captures tension between technological progress enthusiasm and AI rejection as misplaced solution, particularly pronounced in health contexts where commenters asserted *"AI cannot cure cancer"*, critiquing symbolic/imaginative purposes over material problem-solving. These responses don't reject innovation outright but articulate hierarchies of appropriate use. Others framed AI as cost-cutting or labour substitution: *"...used to be normal photoshop techniques..."*. Conversely, several argued AI added little beyond traditional digital artistry, reframing it as cost-cutting: *"This was possible before AI. You just had to... pay the digital artist..."*, thus, weakening novelty claims and positioning AI as ethical shortcut.

Theme Category	Count	Percentage
Tangential Other	190	35.1%
Technical Execution, AI Quality and Aesthetics	124	22.9%
Innovation, Efficiency and Technosolutionism	67	12.4%
Authenticity, Truth and Trust	66	12.2%
AI Political Economy	62	11.5%
Representation, Power and Dignity	21	3.9%
Transparency, Disclosure and Accountability	11	2.0%

TABLE 6. *Analysis of comments by theme (Adesina and Girling, 2026)*

Authenticity, Truth and Trust

Authenticity emerged as central to legitimacy. AI-generated future selves were described as *"memories that did not happen"*, raising concerns about emotional manipulation. Authenticity was defined by perceived alignment between message, medium, and moral stakes. WWF Denmark illustrates this - it's illustrative AI style didn't shield from greenwashing accusations where AI seemed misaligned with environmental values regardless of disclosure.

In charity:water's case, commenters debated through several competing notions of truth, on whether disclosure preserved trust. Here, transparency mitigated but did not eliminate distrust.

AI Political Economy

These concerns addressed environmental cost, labour displacement, and resource allocation, defining who profits and who loses in the AI shift. For instance, a response to the WWF campaign described designers as an *"endangered species"*.

Critiques were contested, with some relativising AI's environmental impact via everyday digital practice comparisons or arguing that critical focus on nonprofit AI distracts from corporate responsibility. Hunger campaigns refracted longstanding tensions between awareness-raising and direct aid.

Representation, Power and Dignity: Displaced Exploitation or Scaled Harm?

Though less frequent in the comments, this theme introduces conceptually significant questions. Charity Right comments reflect ambivalence about whether AI reduces or displaces exploitation. While some welcomed avoiding exploiting real children, others argued AI systems trained on exploited images reproduce harm at scale.

Breast Cancer Now debates shifted from representation to decision-making authority, with some condemning exploitation while others insisted dying people's wishes should supersede public discomfort, raising critical questions: whose judgement matters, organisation, beneficiaries, donors, or wider public?

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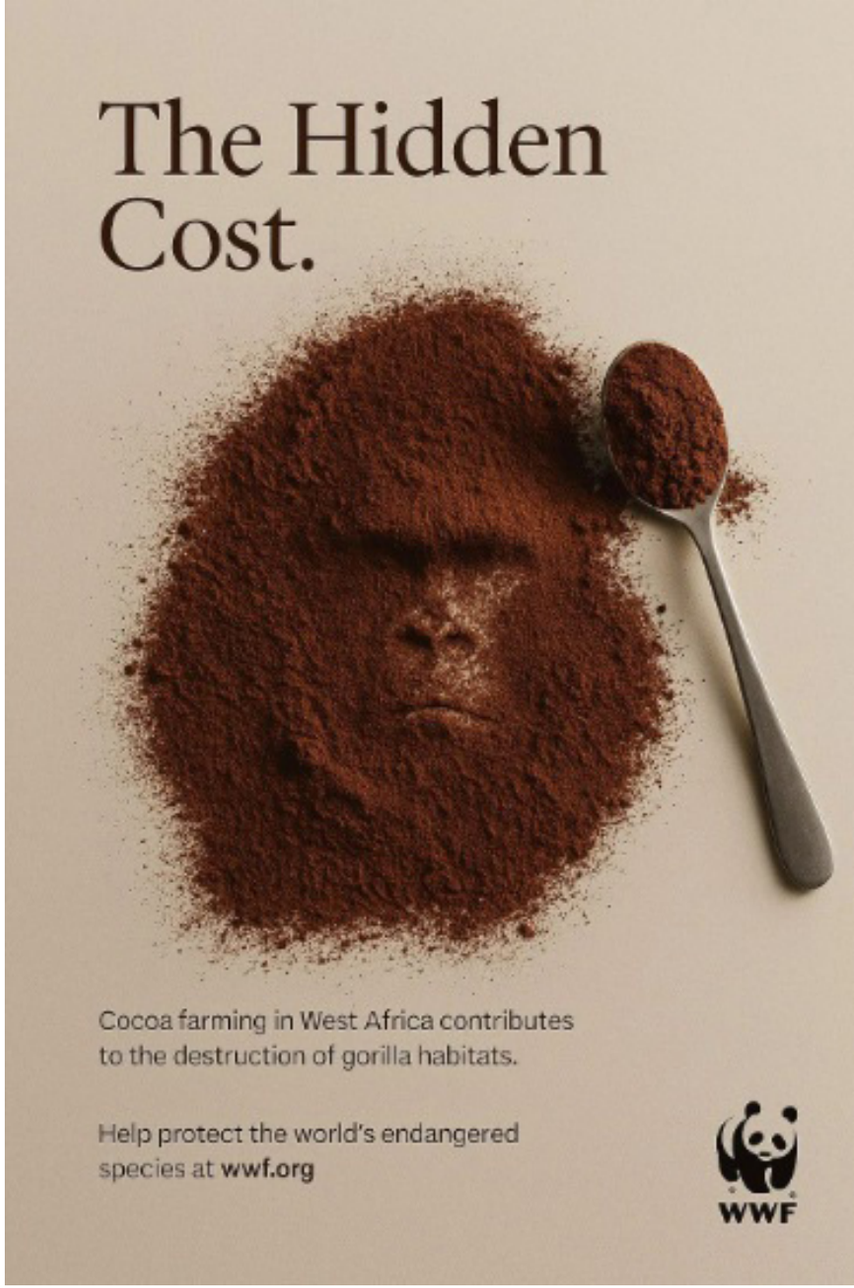
While disclosure was praised as responsible, it was rarely sufficient. Several argued that even disclosed AI use undermines credibility, though others suggested disclosure merely exposes how many organisations may already use AI undisclosed. In Amnesty International's case, commenters acknowledged clear labelling and protective purposes yet still framed it as problematic. Transparency thus functioned as a necessary ethical baseline, not its resolution.

Emerging Tensions and Unresolved Questions

A striking pattern emerges: commenters frequently critique AI in one context while endorsing it in others, raising unresolved questions about what makes applications ethical—cause, audience, platform, stakes, or political-economic considerations.

Equally notable is the near-absence of explicit "poverty porn" references in the comments, despite academic prominence. This may reflect the concept's racialised history and relative absence of Black and brown bodies in analysed imagery. Yet this absence raises critical questions: does lack of commentary signal progress in charity communications, or reveal narrowed ethical concern when suffering is depicted through white bodies or abstracted through AI?

Finally, data expose fundamental tension: audiences may reject AI-driven hope even when beneficiaries embrace it, forcing confrontation between public moral judgement and individual agency. This tension sits at the core of debates about artificial authenticity, ethical storytelling, and future legitimacy of humanitarian representation.



WWF Denmark
Illustration

CHAPTER 4
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CHAPTER 4 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has examined the emergence of AI-generated imagery in charity and development communications, revealing a landscape characterised by cautious experimentation, ethical ambivalence and intensifying public scrutiny. As the third instalment in the Charity Advertising series, it extends our understanding of visual storytelling in humanitarian contexts into new technological terrain, where the boundaries between authentic documentation and synthetic representation are increasingly blurred.

The findings expose a public far more discerning than binary framings of acceptance or rejection. Audiences do not uniformly oppose AI use. Rather, they evaluate it through context-dependent criteria, assessing alignment between technological means and communicative ends, scrutinising disclosure practices and considering the trade-offs between protection and authenticity. Debates and criticism are often centred around resource allocation, labour displacement, environmental cost and the lack of cultural vetting.

Discussions frequently migrate from humanitarian causes toward debates about technology itself i.e ethical dilemmas, aesthetics and political economy. This displacement effect poses a strategic risk: even technically proficient campaigns may inadvertently become referendums on AI rather than catalysts for social action. Of the 472 comments analysed, AI ethics and quality dominated discourse (263 comments combined), whilst only 80 comments focused primarily on the campaign or cause itself. This represents a profound shift in the dynamics of charity communications, where the medium increasingly eclipses the message.

Yet where execution succeeds and purpose aligns, AI can facilitate protective representation and enable new forms of hopeful imagining without exploiting vulnerable subjects. Supportive responses emerged particularly when AI was used to avoid re-traumatising communities or when technical innovations offered a clear humanitarian purpose. The tension, however, remains unresolved: audiences may reject AI-driven hope even when beneficiaries themselves potentially embrace it.

What remains strikingly absent is consensus. Commenters critique AI in one context whilst endorsing it in another; they demand authenticity yet acknowledge longstanding staging practices; they celebrate innovation yet mourn displaced labour. The same technology praised as “brilliant execution” in environmental campaigns is condemned as “pulling a fast one” in poverty contexts. These inconsistencies suggest that ethical judgements are shaped less by AI itself and more by perceived appropriateness within specific humanitarian narratives and organisational identities.

For organisations navigating this uncertain terrain, transparency emerges as necessary but insufficient. Disclosure does not resolve ethical questions, it merely renders them visible. The legitimacy of AI-generated imagery will ultimately depend not on technological sophistication alone, but on demonstrable alignment with organisational mission, respect for beneficiary dignity, accountability for environmental and labour impacts, and sustained public trust.

As this technology matures and becomes increasingly indistinguishable from photographic documentation, the sector must develop robust ethical frameworks that move beyond disclosure toward substantive principles governing when, how, and why artificial imagery should be deployed in humanitarian storytelling. The choices made now will shape not only the future of charity communications, but the very terms through which distant suffering is made visible.

CHAPTER 4
RECOMMENDATIONS

1. View the Charity Advertising (www.charity-advertising.co.uk) website to explore examples of AI-generated imagery by charities and development organisations.
2. Establish or update internal ethical content guidelines and publicly accessible policies to include AI imagery policies with clear parameter on appropriate use.
3. Train staff on responsible AI image use, prompt engineering, and avoiding biases including how to specify accurate skin tones and culturally appropriate markers.
4. Creative teams and content strategists should reassess automatic use of photorealistic AI and explore alternative visual strategies e.g illustrative, systemic, future-oriented representations.
5. If you choose to use AI-generated imagery, co-create it with local communities by involving them in the creative process including generating AI prompts, reviewing outputs, and approving final imagery to ensure they are accurate and culturally appropriate.
6. Also ensure AI-generated images portray diversity in terms of age, gender, ability and nationality to show a broader and more representative cast of characters.
7. Charities and development organisations must become actively involved in shaping not just the discourse around ethics and equitable AI, but in creating the processes and policies that enable it. This can include participation in research, policy and advocacy.
8. Work with technology providers and AI companies to develop charity-sector-specific AI tools with built-in bias detection, stereotype alerts, and ethical guardrails tailored to humanitarian representation.
9. Collaborate with academic and research communities to conduct longitudinal studies tracking how AI imagery use and public acceptance evolve over time, particularly examining whether familiarisation reduces or intensifies ethical concerns.
10. Funders and philanthropic organisations can provide dedicated funding for commissioning photographers, filmmakers, and visual artists, particularly in the Global South as an alternative to AI-generated imagery.
11. Continue to invest in local photographers and storytellers rather than replacing them with AI tools, thus preserving jobs and authentic cultural perspectives.

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UNOCHA Illustration

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