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The ethics of using AI imagery

A reflection from the INGO sector

AI-generated images are finding their way into NGO communications at speed. They can be tempting tools: quick to produce, affordable, and sometimes the only way to illustrate a story when a camera cannot be present. But in a sector built on dignity, trust, and long-term relationships, using synthetic images isn't a neutral shortcut. Even when no real person is shown, synthetic visuals can still shape how communities are perceived, and can unintentionally echo the stereotypes our sectors have been trying to leave behind. This reflection explores that grey zone: not whether AI imagery has a place in our work, but how to use it in ways that strengthen ethical storytelling rather than erode agency, nuance, or respect.

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Recent research has raised serious concerns about the unethical use of AI-generated imagery by international NGOs and global health actors. Studies such as those by Alenichev et al. (2025) have revealed that AI tools are being used to generate artificial images depicting people in contexts of poverty and vulnerability – what has been termed a new form of "AI-generated poverty porn" (The Guardian, 2025; The Independent, 2025). These images, though not depicting real-life human subjects, reproduce harmful stereotypes that have long plagued international development, global health, and humanitarian communications.

The ethical pitfalls of this type of imagery are well-known but have taken on new dimensions with the rise of AI. The use of "poverty porn" not only reinforces the idea of the Global South as perpetually hamstrung by poverty or underdevelopment but also deprives depicted people of agency. When such imagery is used for marketing or fundraising purposes, it risks exploiting suffering for financial or reputational gain. The fact that AI-generated images do not depict real individuals may appear to exempt organizations from ethical guidelines regarding consent or representation – but in practice, these images still shape global imaginaries about who suffers, who helps, and whose story is told.

Big tech companies are profiting from the production and sale of such imagery, often without accountability or ethical oversight. As the research highlights, AI imagery of this kind has the potential to perpetuate harm under the guise of innovation. The AI landscape remains largely unregulated; companies are testing ethical boundaries, seeing what they can get away with, and development, global health, and humanitarian actors are following suit without fully grasping the implications.

Our perspective

At Mensen met een Missie (MM), we recognize the urgency and complexity of this debate. We are an international NGO working on peacebuilding and dialogue, and sharing images of the people we work with is a vital part of how we communicate the impact of our work. Our photographs often depict people involved in our programmes in Global South contexts – partners, local leaders, and community members. We have so far chosen not to use AI imagery in our visual communications. This is a deliberate, strategic choice rooted in our values, but should not be seen as a naïve or dogmatic stance against emerging technologies.

Our work is based on dialogue, trust, and long-term relationships. It relies upon authenticity – face-to-face contact, mutual respect, and personal trust between individuals. Such qualities cannot be captured by the generic aesthetics of AI image software like Midjourney. With trust and relationships at the core of our approach, using artificial images would feel fundamentally counterintuitive. Moreover, our work is guided by principles of equity and power shifting: we strive to see our partner organizations and the communities we work with as equal partners and experts. Our visual communications should reflect this reality, rather than reproducing the problematic tropes in which helpless beneficiaries gratefully receive foreign aid.

Authenticity

MM's Communications Officer Esther Pordon draws a parallel between the organization's approach to imagery and its wider ethos. For her, visual communication is inseparable from MM's core values of dialogue and equality. Working with photographers from within the countries where our programmes take place is a deliberate choice. "The people we work with in these countries live in the same realities we write and talk about," she explains. "They know the context, the culture, the habits, and the small social nuances that you simply can't grasp as an outsider." This shared understanding, she adds, is essential when the goal is to build trust: "Our work revolves around people – their experiences, beliefs, and emotions. When we communicate about them and their communities, we want to do that as authentically as possible. When we speak about people, dialogue, or rebuilding trust after conflict, the stories and images we share should come from those real people, not from an algorithm. Authenticity, dialogue, trust, and equity all depend on genuine human encounters. You can't fake that with AI."

Esther also points out that authenticity matters not only in relation to the people portrayed, but also to those who view and support MM's work. "There's another dimension to this: trust from our audiences and donors. The people who support our work do so because they believe in what we do; in the real relationships we build and the change we help make possible. Our communication is simply a way of showing that: we inform people about what's happening in these countries, about the urgency of the work there – and we do that through the eyes of the people who live it. If we were to start using fabricated images or AI-generated scenes, it wouldn't just undermine the credibility of our communication – it would cast doubt on the authenticity of our work itself. How can someone trust that their donation is making a real difference if the stories and images we share aren't real? Using genuine photography and real interviews is our way of being transparent and accountable. It shows that what we communicate is grounded in reality, that the work we talk about is actually happening, and that people's support truly matters."

The photographer's perspective

In the countries where we work, Mensen met een Missie has built long-term collaborations with photographers such as Andrew Herbert Okello in Uganda and Primagung Riliananda in Indonesia, both of whom have worked with us on multiple assignments. These sustained relationships foster deeper trust and mutual understanding; qualities that translate into more authentic visual storytelling.

For Primagung, this approach aligns closely with how he understands photography ethics. He sees a photograph as authentic "when the photographer manages to convey a deeper story than simply presenting beauty," something that only emerges through time and engagement. "There are certain situations," he explains, "when a photographer finally manages to enter the most personal side of the subject and the place being photographed after a lengthy engagement with them. At that point, the photographer succeeds in presenting the most ideal, authentic side – even if it takes more time."

From Uganda, documentary photographer Andrew Okello echoes this sense of responsibility: "My job is not to beautify or manipulate. That is what AI images do: they manipulate reality, and in so doing, they isolate the real beneficiaries of NGO programming." For Okello, authenticity depends on emotion and presence – the subtle expressions of pain, hope, or uncertainty that can only be captured through human connection. "The pictures we take will be re-shared, reused, or interpreted by others beyond the boardroom," he adds. "My responsibility, then, is not to erode the trust of the people in my viewfinder or trifle with the viewer's empathy."

Such reflections point to what bioethicist and AI researcher Dr Alenichev describes as truthfulness rather than truth in visual storytelling. Absolute truth may be impossible – every image involves choices of framing, timing, and interpretation – but truthfulness lies in remaining attentive to the people and realities one seeks to represent. At Mensen met een Missie, this is why we choose to work with photographers from within the communities where our programmes take place, developing collaborative guidelines together with them and our partners.

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The bigger picture: beyond blaming AI

It would be too easy to lay the blame solely at the feet of AI companies. As Reda Sadki (2025) has argued, AI tools are trained on human-generated content and reflect human biases. Simply banning or restricting AI will not solve the problem. The ethical challenge lies in how humans and organizations use these tools – and in the values and intentions that guide their use. AI can, in some contexts, be an asset: a resource for smaller or under-resourced organizations in the Global South that lack the budgets to commission original photography. The challenge is therefore not the technology itself, but the ethical and relational frameworks within which it operates.

As Dr Alenichev reminds us, the deeper ethical tension in NGO imagery lies between photojournalism and marketing. Many organizations, often unintentionally, produce what he calls "marketing in the style of photojournalism": polished, emotionally charged narratives that mimic documentary realism while serving fundraising goals. At Mensen met een Missie, we consciously lean toward the photojournalistic imperative: to bear witness, not to aestheticize; to communicate, not to commodify.

At the same time, as Primagung observes, the use of AI across creative and humanitarian sectors "is actually inevitable." Institutions are drawn to it for its cost-saving potential, but this comes with trade-offs. "Ethically, is it wise to tell a story with images that are created through technological manipulation?" he asks. For him, while AI may make some jobs easier, "it reduces a lot of feel and taste, especially for institutions that work for the public interest, such as the media and NGOs." His reflection captures the uneasy fact that technological progress often runs ahead of ethical reflection, and that being alert to exploitation, rather than technology itself, is the real challenge ahead.

As Alenichev points out, there are powerful examples of how AI can be used not only to replace photographs but to expand their possibilities. In one such project, artists collaborated with refugees to visually reconstruct their experiences through AI-generated imagery – using technology to deepen and render legible, rather than distort, human experiences and stories. "There are similar initiatives emerging across the board," Alenichev notes, "but they are expensive and time-consuming. I believe that equitable and responsible representation isn't possible if the end goal is to cut corners and save money."

This reflection underscores that the ethical use of AI is not about rejecting the technology itself but about asking who uses it, how, and to what end. At Mensen met een Missie, our decision not to use AI-generated visuals at the moment stems from that same ethical foundation. We prefer to invest in relationships, time, and what Alenichev calls truthfulness – the act of witnessing with integrity – qualities that cannot be automated.

Learning our way forward

At the same time, organizations are facing budget cuts as the funding landscape alters radically. Being able to effectively communicate the urgency of our work is essential to the survival of organizations such as our own. And for smaller organizations, especially those in the Global South, AI can offer a shortcut in terms of visual communication. For some potential donor audiences, we know that images depicting hardship can lead to a greater emotional resonance, thus generating higher donations and, ultimately, a greater impact. In that sense, it might be considered moralizing or high-handed to generalize the use of AI imagery as inherently problematic – the real question should be how to use new technology in a responsible manner.

There is a sense of inevitability in the way AI is rapidly transforming the world, so perhaps the sensible thing to do is to ask: how can we use it in a way that does justice to the communities we intend to serve? Rather than dismissing AI outright, we may need a more nuanced and evidence-based exploration of how it can support ethical fundraising and storytelling. This includes understanding its risks, but also acknowledging its potential – particularly for organizations with limited resources. A constructive way forward could be a shared commitment by organizations and donors to experiment, reflect, and learn together, ensuring that new tools strengthen, rather than undermine, the dignity and agency of the people at the heart of our work.

The question of how to responsibly and ethically represent development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding cooperation is deeply tied to broader conversations about localization and decolonization in our sectors. There are no easy answers. The rise of AI images adds a new layer of complexity to an already difficult ethical landscape. At Mensen met een Missie, we see ourselves as part of an ongoing learning process – engaging in dialogue with our partners, photographers, and researchers to continuously improve how we represent our work and the people involved.

As Dr. Alenichev warns, "Not only organizations but also individuals working in the sector are posting AI-generated images. All the conditions are in place for poverty porn to emerge synthetically. The core idea is to raise the alarm and prevent it." A growing number of initiatives are now working to help organizations navigate these ethical questions. Fairpicture, for instance, has developed a Toolkit for NGOs on Generative AI, to support responsible and transparent visual communication practices in the AI era.

AI does not necessarily have to be a bad thing. But without human intelligence, empathy, and ethical reflection guiding its use, it risks amplifying the very colonial patterns many of us seek to dismantle.

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