

The  
Role  
of  
Graphic  
Design  
in  
International  
Development

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GRAPHIC DESIGN FOR DEVELOPMENT

The adaptation of graphic design to  
the daily needs of people living in  
different socio-cultural contexts

A working paper  
by  
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## Abstract

In July 1987, a working paper entitled Graphic Design for Development was submitted by board members [1] of ICOGRADA (the International Council of Graphic Design Associations) to UNESCO (the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization), following a 4-day seminar in Nairobi, Kenya. The main objectives of the seminar were to raise awareness on the contributions graphic design can make in improving people's lives and to increase a better understanding of graphic design in international organizations.

21 years on, this study will show, how graphic designers have become more sensitive to world issues and how the professional world of design tries to encourage and promote new social design practices in partnership with the United Nations. Several case studies will demonstrate how graphic design, as a branding and communication tool, has been used within the UN system and its public information structures. Additional examples from the UN and its partner-organizations will be presented in order to reveal a new perspective on graphic design and its role for social and cultural development.

## Keywords

Social design, international development, graphic design, globalization, cultural identity.

# 1

## Introduction

In recent years the realm of design has expanded rapidly into new areas. The social and humanitarian benefits of design paved the way towards a new kind of practice shaped around socially responsible behaviour.

This new perspective on design gave more responsibilities to designers who play an important role as the new agents of change. Designers today seek to create something new for the world by using creativity and strategic design thinking whilst demonstrating their ability for social awareness.

Design has always played an important role around society and the individual as it affects cultural identity, social structures, economies, cultural development and environments. It touches many individuals on a daily basis and encompasses a variety of disciplines, from architecture, to communication, engineering, products, computer-related technology and even contemporary studies in anthropology and ethnography.

Victor Papanek wrote in *Design for the Real World* that “ All design must fill a human need (...) (it) is basic to all human activities. The planning and patterning of any act towards a desired, foreseeable end constitutes a design process. Any attempt to separate design to make it a thing by itself works counter to the inherent value of design as the primary underlying matrix of

life” [2].

Since the industrial revolution, design has taken a primary role in modern societies. It attempts to shape a better life for people and humanize information and technology. Everything we use and experience today from a newspaper, a cup, a car, a map, a computer, a medical device, a chair, a street sign, or a shelter has been conceived by a designer, whilst historically and politically, designers have worked on the promotion of tolerance and respect, sustainability issues, ideology, beliefs, propaganda and national identity amongst others.

In recent years, design has become an international phenomenon affecting an increasing number of countries from the developing world and designers play a major role in the process of cultural and sustainable development. India, China, South Africa and Brazil are successful examples of places where design is believed to be an effective methodology and tool for socio-cultural improvement.

“It is very important for any nation to understand the larger agenda of the work of designers. By working with designers, a nation invests in the growing ability to change, to work on innovation, on creativity. Enabling change and enabling creativity is perhaps the most important challenge that we are faced with.” [3]

During my 4-year career in UNESCO (the United Nations Educational Scientific and

# 2

## Graphic Design, the UN and International Development

A Yale architecture graduate called Donal McLaughlin designed the United Nations emblem in 1945.



Cultural Organization) I concentrated more specifically on the promotion of graphic design for development and researched about its application in the fields of general education, public health, environment, public information, and social responsibility by emphasizing on cultural diversity, contemporary practices and the empowerment of future generations of designers. Design is a creative methodology that has the ability to support UNESCO’s notion of successful development, which is defined as being “a tradition specific to each culture combined with the most modern economic, scientific and technological resources” [4]

Many graphic designers are today involved with both social and cultural responsibilities in a world that is more globalised than ever. Following are a few examples on how they propose solutions to global challenges and choose to cooperate in an international context.

To this date there are very few visual symbols that are so universally understood by people from around the world. The UN emblem demonstrates the power of graphic design in its ability to unite people through graphic images by rendering complex ideals into one visual symbol.

Over the past 60 years graphic designers have worked to promote UN values by creating posters, book covers, or corporate identity.

Although collaborations between graphic designers and UN agencies have been relatively inconsistent in the eighties and nineties, graphic design started contributing very positively towards UN goals since the start of the millennium.

## 2.1. UNICEF Corporate Identity



UNICEF has been for many years at the forefront of “good” UN branding within the UN family. Its in-house branding toolkit has been used as a model by other UN agencies when they needed to refresh their own identity. This toolkit has been designed to be accessible to all including non-designers who are not familiar with graphic design and typography rules.

## 2.2. UNFPA



UNFPA is another successful example. Their youthful and colourful identity is an exception in the UN system where sobriety is usually favoured. Another unusual feature is the public availability of their styleguide on their website.



## 2.3 Designmatters



In 2001 Art Center College of Design launched Designmatters, a college-wide initiative focused on socially responsible design. By showing its commitment towards world issues, Art Center became the first design school in the world to receive an NGO status from the United Nations. The Designmatters Fellowship Programme has also managed to send a few of its students to the UN Headquarters and other UN agencies in recent years. In September, Art Center initiated a poster exhibition celebrating the anniversary of the declaration of human rights at UNESCO headquarters. Designmatters is an educational model for design schools that are looking to make their own contribution towards international development.

## 2.4 JAGDA and UN Water for Life



In 2005 the Japan Graphic Design Association launched the Water for Life poster competition, in partnership with the United Nations Information Centre in Tokyo, following the success of their Peace Poster competition. Poster competitions remain today the most common graphic design initiatives related to social awareness campaigns.



# 3

## The Cultural Value of Graphic Design

There is a cultural dimension to graphic design that is affected by traditions, multiculturalism, ethnicity, diversity, language, gender, beliefs, value systems, and also a certain ability to “transform the visual heritage of places and peoples into contemporary commercial currency and cultural expression” [5].

In order to be socially credible, design must mean something in the cultural context where it originates. It is a powerful method to promote cultural identity and therefore it is important for local people to develop the design skills that will allow them to communicate about their own culture and develop a visual identity inspired by both a deep sense of tradition and contemporary life.

Graphic design is compatible with all traditional cultures and can be adapted in different socio-cultural contexts. Cultural understanding plays a particularly important role in the exercise of place branding.

Following are a few examples amongst many others that show how graphic design can impact the world. The next generations of graphic designers need to be aware of their ability to emphasize on deeper cultural meanings and develop their capacity in strengthening mutual understanding amongst people and nations.

### 3.1 Branding South Africa



Place branding specialist Wally Olins explains in an interview that ‘Brand is a useful way to help governments understand the value and complexity of external reputation and internal cohesion (...) the strategic pillars of nation branding are: connecting policy, culture, people, products and tourism in a joint strategy, a coherent approach to short, medium and long-term planning (...) honesty, transparency and inclusion, clarity of vision, and lastly, courage.’ [6]

Graphic design played a crucial role in the re-branding of South Africa, during its bid for the 2010 World Cup, as it modernized South African iconography and culturally symbolic images and transformed them into effective communication campaigns.

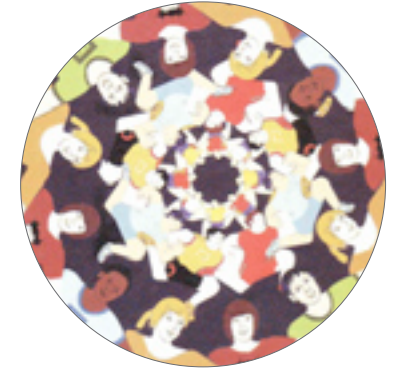
### 3.2 INDIGO



The INDIGO Network promotes indigenous design as living culture, looks at its relationship to national identity and its role as visual culture within contemporary society. “Big Words” will be launched in 2009 as the first INDIGO exhibition investigating on the evolution of graphic language in indigenous and non-indigenous communities alike.



### 3.3 Designed in China



This year the Victoria and Albert Museum in London showcased contemporary Chinese design for the first time in the United Kingdom. The creativity reflected in the graphic posters from Shenzhen (the “birthplace of modern Chinese design”) introduced a new perspective on China as a creative nation. By focusing on design China’s goal is to gradually change people’s perception on the label “Made in China” and establish itself as a genuinely creative environment.





Following a Master's degree in graphic design from Yale University, Saki Mafundikwa returned to his native country Zimbabwe and researched on the origins of African writing systems and typography. His research of ten years was followed by a book called *Afrikan Alphabets* in which he promotes through a designer's perspective an aspect of African culture, which had been long suppressed by colonial powers. To Saki Mafundikwa, design has always been inherent to African culture.

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## 4

### Room for Improvement: What Next for Graphic Designers?

In order to promote the expansion of graphic design beyond conventional frames of reference as well as help maintain the international discourse of design and its role in socio-cultural development, graphic designers and other related organizations have to learn, promote, network and collaborate. Here are 10 recommendations to achieve socially responsible design:

- Build experience around the needs of people living in different contexts;
- Network with international organizations and corporations in order to demonstrate the value of design;
- Participate in multidisciplinary initiatives in which designers have a critical role to play in the development of entrepreneurship and innovation;
- Work on publications, events, exhibitions and competitions on design in collaboration with design bodies from different continents showcasing international design works and initiatives for cultural development.
- Advocate the power of graphic design in a cultural context by organizing workshops and seminars and by encouraging cross-cultural design activities.
- Study the quality standard of design education across the world and help develop design curricula for the developing world.
- Learn from professional organizations

that can provide expertise, knowledge, guidance, contacts and ensure an international perspective and representation of design;

- Enable a open sources of information on design methodologies in partnership with public/private partners worldwide.
- Provide new platforms where individuals and professional organizations can share best practices and create opportunities for designers to work together internationally.
- Knock on doors that have never been opened.

### References

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### Links

UNICEF  
UNFPA Styleguide  
Designmatters  
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INDIGO

