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Putting A Face On African Poverty

July 06, 2005

By Lana Bortolot

When the international relief agency ActionAid decided to send a message to members of the G8 as they met in Scotland to discuss Africa's economic future, it chose South African photojournalist Gideon Mendel as its messenger.

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Comprised of leaders from eight of the world's most prosperous nations, the G8 met July 6-8 in Gleneagles, north of Edinburgh, to discuss Africa's economic future and climate change. With its focus on Africa's increasing poverty (the continent makes up 28 percent of the world's poor) and devastation by AIDS, the U.K.-based ActionAid wanted to challenge the eight leaders to make good on past promises and present meaningful initiatives for Africa's poorest countries.

To do that, ActionAid looked for a photographer to put a face on Africans' most pressing needs: aid for education, healthcare and water; universal access to HIV and AIDS treatment, debt relief and unfair trade practices. London-based Mendel—himself an activist—was the logical choice for the project. Mendel has put more than 12 years of work in Africa documenting social issues such as poverty, HIV and AIDS.

"We needed someone who had a track record of getting into people's lives in an intimate way, and who could work well with our country commissions—all in a short time," says Alice Wynn Willson, ActionAid's head of media, who commissioned the project. Mendel proposed photographing women who would speak directly to the G8 not only through images, but also through text, Web-based audio and giant banners carried through the streets in Edinburgh.

ActionAid workers in Africa provided entrée into communities where they had relationships, and accompanied Mendel through six countries. Working side by side, they gathered a group of people whose daily lives could be affected by G8 decisions. After three trips, and shooting for five weeks, Mendel chose eight women—to counterbalance the men of the G8—who became one voice for Africa's desolation and its determination.

"It was logistically difficult finding the right person to represent the issue," Mendel says. "There was always a multitude of issues with these women—AIDS, poverty, education—and sometimes we had to make tough choices to match the right person with the right issue."

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Another challenge: having to drop strong stories in favor of weaker ones when subjects decided they didn't want their identities revealed. In these cases, the women were either living with AIDS or were going to speak out against a company's labor and trade practices, but in the end, feared losing their jobs.

Mendel shot environmental portraits, his subjects looking directly into the lens, surrounded by the clutter of their lives. "The idea was always that these would be very powerful portraits, very immediate and very striking," Mendel says. He shot the images specifically with the banner project in mind, so the women seem larger than life.

It was a style that Willson says captured the strength and determination of African women, but also gave a context to their words.

"He got the defining portrait, but he also got the whole story in strong pictures that showed their daily lives," she says.

Mendel brought the feature to *The Guardian Weekend*, which had published his previous African projects, and had already committed to a yearlong series focusing on African aid and trade. Because Mendel's project actually anticipated the news, picture editor Sarah Gilbert said it had a particular appeal for the newspaper's readership.

"It's the year of Africa, which is a big deal in the U.K., and we're always interested in covering contemporary issues in a visual way," Gilbert says. "We have a commitment to covering issues that give a voice to people. We were particularly interested in the fact they were only women, as African women often are marginalized."

The magazine devoted its June 6 cover and 11 interior pages to the piece, calling it "Eight Women, One Voice." An expanded essay appeared simultaneously on the paper's Web site, with audio interviews with the women.

"It achieved our aim," Gilbert said. "We wanted to share with our readership something important about Africans in a different way ... that even though their lives are different, they all want the same thing."

Though the project revisited themes Mendel has covered before, it also achieved a new goal.

"There's so much written about Africa that's the photographer's voice," he says. "There's a lot of satisfaction in pushing the boundaries in the ways that photos can be used, and I'm pleased that I could be supported in work that really gives [the women] their own voices."

The project can be viewed at www.actionaid.org.uk/africa8 or www.guardian.co.uk/africa8.

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