

Nomination 4 Fly in the Eye Award 2024

‘Jerrycan Challenge’ | Dorcas

Simulating human suffering in the Global South during events in the Netherlands is another trend that has persisted. These so-called misery simulations are intended to generate attention, awareness, and donations, but they almost never succeed in communicating human suffering in a dignified way. [As we already noted a few years ago](#), ‘simulations are increasingly used as a strategy in Dutch campaigns, but they are almost always inappropriate – not only because the structural nature of vulnerability simply cannot be replicated, but also because they turn the suffering of the Other into a fun or educational activity stemming from Western privilege.’

The most inappropriate misery simulation this year, in our opinion, was the [Jerrycan Challenge](#) by Dorcas. In this video, communications staff member Anniek takes to the streets of Almere with a 15kg jerrycan to ‘see what it’s like to walk a long distance with a heavy jerrycan full of water,’ something many people in the countries where Dorcas operates must do to access clean drinking water.

Several passersby take on the challenge and discover that, indeed, it’s quite heavy to carry a jerrycan for a short distance: ‘Wow, I don’t know if you realize, but this is really heavy.’ Reflections include the fact that there are ‘people in the world who have to walk seven kilometers for water’ (where exactly this is and how that figure is calculated is not explained) and that it is ‘really far and really tough’ – but there is also plenty of laughter: ‘This morning [I was thirsty] because I always sleep with my mouth open, and then you get thirsty!’ and ‘Do I get paid if I carry it a bit?’

Only at the end does Anniek briefly explain that Dorcas is campaigning this week for clean drinking water and that ‘you can help by donating for clean water.’ The accompanying text under the YouTube video provides a bit more context about the countries where Dorcas works and what they do, but the details remain scant – the simulation feels more like a gimmick.

The amusing, casual, and ultimately privileged nature of such imitations of human suffering ensures that these ‘awareness events’ are almost always problematic. A similar example is [Sa/ecret](#) by Verre Naasten, where the search for an ‘evangelist in a dangerous country’ has been bizarrely turned into a game – earning a solid special mention. Another special mention goes to [Nacht zonder Dak](#) (Night without Roof) by Tearfund. While the imitation of poverty and homelessness is less central to this event compared to when it was [nominated in 2018](#), and the slogan ‘a night in a shack’ has been replaced with ‘a night under the stars,’ the campaign’s title still carries an element of simulating human suffering.

Fundraising activities are also frequently framed as sports events. While these may not explicitly or literally mimic human suffering, they often carry the implicit or explicit message: ‘They endure hardship, so we endure hardship.’ This inappropriate comparison – between non-privileged people in structurally vulnerable situations and privileged people taking on a one-time physical challenge – can be seen in events like the [MudRaise](#) by International Justice Mission, [Sport for Others](#) by Woord en Daad, and the [Climbing Marathon Against Climate Poverty](#) by Solidaridad.

The Climbing Marathon even uses the slogan, ‘They face an extreme challenge, we face an extreme challenge,’ where ‘they’ refers to small-scale farmers facing extreme climate challenges, and ‘we’ refers to participants in ‘the most extraordinary climbing event in the Netherlands.’ What here and elsewhere often feels off as well is the portrayal of participants as (sports) heroes, despite the fact that they primarily enjoy combining, as one Sport for Others participant put it, their ‘favorite leisure activity’ with ‘a good cause.’