Introduction

This chapter contends that a significant way of understanding a campaign’s effect on the public is to look at its influence on collective beliefs associated with the campaign’s issues. A key goal of Make Poverty History was ‘[t]o engage and educate the public in poverty and development issues in an unprecedented way’.1 Years of research by academics, the UK government and NGOs showed that the public had a limited and often stereotyped perception of the causes and consequences of poverty in developing countries, leading to a sense of disempowerment about what action they could take to make a difference. This will be my starting point for this chapter, which will look at how Make Poverty History affected long-term beliefs on global poverty among the UK public. I will draw mainly from the theory of collective beliefs as developed by Klandermans (1992).

My core argument will be that my different audiences’ collective beliefs were shaped by their level of involvement in and knowledge of the international development movement. Members of the general public had the simplest, most stereotyped and media-influenced beliefs. The interesteds had more questioning and complex ones. And the activists had the ones most in line with those of the campaign. First, I will look at audience understandings of Africa, since this continent comes out as one of the key issues that members of the public link to global poverty. While this was not a major part of the campaign’s strategy, key actors in Make Poverty History tried to challenge common stereotypes of Africa through the choice of the campaign’s communications. Second, I will move to the general feeling of helplessness – or compassion fatigue (Moeller 1999) – that appears to
pervade audience reactions to developing world poverty, with individuals not knowing whether they can personally do anything to help change the situation. *Make Poverty History* tried to overcome this helplessness by empowering individuals with its key message of justice not charity, which attempts to reverse the collective belief that all that Western nations can do is give aid. Third, I will look at the collective belief that developing nations are responsible for their poverty because they are corrupt. *Make Poverty History* eventually attempted to challenge this, particularly by trying to put more blame on the West. However, it did so with varying success because of its lack of preparation for this argument.

I will use evidence from a variety of methods – interviews, focus groups, document analysis and quantitative research – to triangulate my findings. My emphasis will be on the focus groups to stress the consumption side of this section. As explained in the appendix on methods, the focus groups have been divided into mass public, interesteds and activists depending on their degree of involvement in campaigning on international development. There were several waves of focus groups and more than one group in each category, hence the need to refer to them, for example, as interested group 2 (June 2005) or general public group 2 (April 2005).

**The formation of collective beliefs**

Every person is born or received into a community that has a well-established set of collective beliefs (Klandermans 1992). The number of people who share a belief does not affect whether it can be called collective or not: beliefs held by two individuals are as collective as those held by an organization or a whole culture. It is the fact that they are shared that is important: this means that they acquire an existence independent of the individual. Furthermore, collective beliefs are not created by isolated individuals, but by people communicating and cooperating, through the media, at parties, in meetings and at other social gatherings. They tend to be stable and difficult to modify. Klandermans (1992, p. 84) comes up with three conditions that must apply for a public to be persuaded by an argument or an issue: ‘The public must adhere to the collective belief system of the persuading agent; the persuading agent can, in one way or another, anchor its arguments in the collective beliefs of the public; or the persuading agent succeeds in transforming the collective beliefs of the public.’ The social construction of protest affects collective beliefs on different levels as it fundamentally affects