

# Africa - more than a photo opportunity

By [Margi Sheard](#), issued by [Greatstock](#)

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The way Africa is depicted in mainstream media is constantly criticised - and for good reason. Far too often, the varied and diverse lives of people on this vast continent are simplified to the point of being represented as a single story or image that matches existing preconceptions.

Stock photography and footage is one of the major culprits in the over-simplification of the African reality. As a South African company operating in this industry, visual solutions company Greatstock is acutely aware of the pervasive narratives that feed the constant demand for the same type of 'African' content.

A simple Google image search for 'Africa' or 'African people' confirms the very worst of society's patronising stereotypes. Going on the results alone, you would be forgiven for thinking that Africa can be reduced to stunning scenery and wildlife on the one hand and poverty, despair - with the occasional group of white people enjoying Cape Town on the other.

The 'African people' image results even suggest refining the search to 'dancing', 'poor', 'happy' or 'starving'. Because those are the most common characteristics the rest of the world seems to ascribe to Africans.



## Distorted in overuse

While not fabricated, the images of struggle and poverty in Africa have been distorted through their overuse. Perpetuating the idea that there can be no other African reality.

In 'Rewriting Africa', a [scathing parody](#) of the dominant African narrative, renowned author Binayavanga Wainaina defines 'taboo' subjects when it comes to talking about Africa as ordinary domestic scenes, references to African writers or intellectuals, and mention of school-going children who are not suffering from Ebola.

"Broad brushstrokes throughout are good. Avoid having the African characters laugh, or struggle or educate their kids, or just make do in mundane circumstances," writes Wainaina.

## Stock stereotypes

There are two very clear extremes when it comes to the visual representation of Africans in the realm of stock imagery. There are either images of starving people and children in abject poverty or there are highly posed pictures of African-Americans trying to pass off as being representative of Africans.

There is a complete dearth of the 'everyday' content that truly reflects African life - and life in each of Africa's very unique, diverse countries. It's a conversation that the industry as a whole needs to have with itself and its clients, because we are

ultimately the ones who either perpetuate or counter the stereotypes in the content we put out into the world.

Greatstock's aFRIKA Collection was premised on the notion that it is not up to everyone else to change the image of our continent. By providing a platform for African photographers and filmmakers to tell authentically African stories, we hope to counter the flood of typical African imagery with a steady flow of more nuanced content that serves to break the lens of distortion.

## Transforming the visual lexicon

If you are only ever shown one very specific version of reality, it is very difficult to conceive anything else. The aFRIKA Collection aims to fill the gap in global perception by showing the domestic scenes, the character, the success and the empowerment that have been missing from the African visual lexicon. It contains content from Africa, captured from the African perspective.

Greatstock is the first to acknowledge that there is still a long way to go in changing the narrative - even in our own approach to content from Africa. We are committed to doing our part. Imagery is an incredibly powerful tool in informing and transforming our frames of reference. And it's about time the world was shown the full African picture.



The aFRIKA Collection includes exquisite authentic African photography and footage, rights managed and royalty free, captured across all regions of the continent. For more information, or to begin searching Greatstock's range of editorial, creative and feature images and motion imagery, visit [www.greatstock.co.za](http://www.greatstock.co.za).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Margi Sheard is Managing Director of Greatstock South Africa.

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