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**A “global nervous system”:  
The rise and rise of European humanitarian NGOs, 1945-1985**

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**Introduction**

Writing in 1978, *Guardian* columnist Harford Thomas described the rise of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the second half of the twentieth century as an ‘awakening’ and a significant shift in the socio-political sphere: ‘NGOs are evolving into a new and central organism in what is sometimes called the body politic. Together they form a network which I see as the emergence of a global nervous system.’<sup>1</sup> At the heart of those changes lay the humanitarian aid and development sector. Going a step beyond the guiding principle of Amnesty International and the human rights movement – that ‘individuals could change the policies of foreign governments’ – humanitarian NGOs emphasised the power of ‘people-to-people’ interaction.<sup>2</sup> In the process they contributed to a re-alignment of international relations, towards a more globalised concept of international action. Their activities became so prominent – or at least their brands were so visible – that the 1980s won the moniker ‘the NGO decade’, in recognition of their lasting impact on the aid industry.<sup>3</sup>

But why did the forty years after the end of the Second World War provide such fertile ground for the emergence of a European humanitarian NGO sector? And what role did states play in shaping non-governmental action? To answer these questions, this chapter combines an analysis of global currents of change with evidence from two national case studies: Britain and Ireland. Both states shared similar social and political structures, yet the expansion of the humanitarian sector in each case was shaped by contrasting local religious traditions, experiences of empire, and relationships with the developing world. The resultant differences and shared experiences offer an important insight into the character and operation of European NGOs.

Their story can only be properly understood in a transnational context, as part of the international community that Mark Mazower described as ‘a rhetorical device, an empty box which successive generations filled with new content’.<sup>4</sup> In the second half of the twentieth century, the principles of humanitarianism, development, aid and

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<sup>1</sup> Harford Thomas, ‘NGOs – the not-so-hidden persuaders’, *Guardian*, 13 Dec. 1978.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Cotey Morgan, ‘The seventies and the rebirth of human rights’, in Niall Ferguson, Charles S. Maier, Erez Manela and Daniel J. Sargent (eds.), *The shock of the global: the 1970s in perspective* (London, 2010), p. 241.

<sup>3</sup> Terje Tvedt, *Angels of mercy or development diplomats? NGOs and foreign aid* (Oxford, 1998), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Mazower, ‘An international civilization? Empire, internationalism and the crisis of the mid-twentieth century’, *International Affairs*, Vol. 82, No. 3 (2006), pp. 566.

emergency relief were developed in, and projected into, that space. In the process they helped to re-shape Western relationships with the outside world, from the UN to the state and civil society. This chapter describes these developments in terms of three phases of European humanitarianism. The first, post-war, phase took place against a decidedly Western backdrop. Its primary focus was on European reconstruction and the plight of European refugees; colonial concerns came second and were often the result of following the refugee trail to the Middle East and Asia. Access was plentiful – NGOs collaborated closely with, and learned from, international agencies such as the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) and the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). Yet the boundaries of opportunity for the sector were still largely defined by the requirements of the Western international community. Once the immediacy of the crisis in Europe had dissipated, the NGOs' momentum proved difficult to sustain.

The second phase coincided with the emergence of a vocal, independent group of states from the global south at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the following decade. Contemporary commentators and historians keen to impose unity on the 'Third World' may have underplayed their heterogeneity, but the cumulative effect of their actions was to raise the profile of aid and development and to spark the beginnings of a global humanitarianism. Access was provided by a UN system keen to foster closer collaboration with private agencies. Opportunity came in the form of a renewed discussion of humanitarianism, particularly the focussed global campaigns offered by UN World Refugee Year (1959) and the Food and Agriculture Organisation's (FAO) Freedom from Hunger Campaign (FFHC; inaugurated in 1960).

The third phase took those processes to another level. Between the late 1960s and the mid-1980s NGOs benefited from the emergence of a truly global – if still bearing the hallmarks of Western control – humanitarian effort. As the world's attention expanded to emphasise the problems of the global south, NGOs adapted accordingly. The globalisation of political models such as co-financing structures and an emphasis on reaching 'the poorest of the poor', and of the emergency relief effort brought NGOs access to the heart of the global humanitarian sector. A growing public and official conversation on issues such as economic interdependence and global structural reform, along with the search for appropriate forms of development presented NGOs with the opportunities to stake a claim for a central role in this new humanitarianism. By the mid-1980s they had become fully integrated into, and displayed a brash confidence about their role in, the international system.

The importance of the state, and by extension of inter-governmental organisations (IGOs), in shaping this rapidly changing international agenda provides the core argument for this chapter. As Kim D. Reimann suggests, the explosion of NGO activity in the second half of the twentieth century owed much to greatly increased opportunities for expansion and heightened access to the levers of international action.<sup>5</sup> That states and IGOs were prominent in providing both implies that the emergence of the international non-governmental sector was not the simple, organic, bottom-up, process that Thomas's 'global nervous system' depicted. Instead, those who set the international humanitarian agenda also largely dictated its terms of

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<sup>5</sup> Kim D. Reimann, 'A view from the top: international politics, norms and the worldwide growth of NGOs', *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 50 (2006), p. 26.

engagement: from the relief and reconstruction efforts in post-war Europe to the NGO sector's response to calls for a New International Economic Order in the 1970s. The official co-option of NGOs into the aid system – through co-financing arrangements with governments and international agencies, for example – formalised that relationship still further. Yet even where NGOs attempted to operate outside those boundaries, they constructed their identities in a framework dominated by states and IGOs. NGOs described themselves as separate from funding agencies, as an alternative, more effective form of aid and development, yet were simultaneously conscious of their relatively minor role in the humanitarian industry. This chapter therefore ends with a simple but significant conclusion: only by appreciating the enduring importance of the state can we begin to unpack the complex relationships that emerged between actors at all levels of the international system in the second half of the twentieth century.

### **The origins of global NGO humanitarianism**

The Second World War marked an important period in the transformation of non-governmental aid, development and disaster relief. There were precedents, of course: the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC; founded in 1863); the philanthropic roles played by missionaries and colonial officials; the organisations like the Save the Children Fund (SCF; 1919) and the Committee for Relief in Belgium (1914) that emerged during and immediately after the First World War. But the 1940s brought something appreciably different to the NGO sector. In simple numerical terms the rate at which those organisations were founded annually showed a dramatic increase in the aftermath of the war and steady expansion thereafter until at least the mid-1980s.<sup>6</sup> A number of NGOs that later became leading players in the sector – including the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (founded in 1942 and later renamed Oxfam), Catholic Relief Services (CRS; 1943), World Relief (1944), CARE (1945), Church World Service (1946) and Lutheran World Relief (1946) – emerged in a short period during and immediately after the war. The war also provided a fillip to older organisations like SCF, for whom it brought renewed receptiveness for what Ellen Boucher termed the 'explicitly internationalist social consciousness' that had been drowned out by the state-centric ideologies of the 1930s.<sup>7</sup>

The growth of the NGO sector owed much to the emergence of a culture of international humanitarianism in the immediate post-war period. UNRRA, though short-lived (it was disbanded in 1947), instigated massive transfers of food, clothing, medicine and agricultural supplies and support for the rebuilding of infrastructure in Europe. The Marshall Plan foreshadowed the kind of co-operative effort between powerful donor and weaker recipient economies for the 'development' of the latter and the economic benefit of the former. In January 1949 US President Harry Truman's inaugural address marked the formal beginning of the 'Point Four' programme, a plan for massive economic and technical aid to the developing world. American efforts were matched by a growing concern with development on the part

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<sup>6</sup> Colette Chabbott, 'Development INGOs', in John Boli and George M. Thomas, *Constructing world culture: international nongovernmental organisations since 1875* (Stanford, CA, 1999), p. 227.

<sup>7</sup> Ellen Boucher, 'Cultivating internationalism: Save the Children public opinion and the meaning of child relief', in Laura Beers and Geraint Thomas (eds.), *Brave new world: imperial and democratic nation-building in Britain between the wars* (London, 2012), p. 170.

of the colonial powers. The British Colonial Development and Welfare Act (1940) and the French *Fonds d'investissement pour le développement économique et social d'outre-mer* (1946) imagined a new role for 'development' in the imperial sphere. Further initiatives followed, from the Colombo Plan of aid for south Asia, launched in July 1951 and sponsored by Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, to the provisions made in the 1957 Treaty of Rome for the assistance of territories 'associated' with the six member states of the European Community (EC). By then foreign aid had become an accepted currency of international relations.<sup>8</sup>

The impact of these state- and UN-led efforts was considerable. By making humanitarian aid and development a currency for action outside the European sphere (albeit one conducted in Western-dominated frameworks and largely on Western terms), they offered a template for policy-makers and the international community alike. The fortunes of the world's refugees were shaped by a variety of international agencies: the International Refugee Organisation (IRO), the UNHCR, and the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). So too the nature and direction of the reconstruction efforts in Europe and beyond owed much to organisations like UNRRA, the UN Children's Fund (Unicef), the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the FAO. Equally importantly, UNRRA, its counterpart agencies and its successors introduced the concept of a 'planned' humanitarian response, reliant on data collection and detailed analysis of everything from nutrition levels to access to health care and housing. Their field workers adopted an international outlook that some contemporary observers noted as 'a remarkable novelty'.<sup>9</sup> NGOs benefited accordingly. They worked with international agencies, won funding from them, learned their methods, and began to adopt their professional approach. In so doing they gained valuable experience and won increasing legitimacy in the eyes of the international community.

Reflecting on these events in subsequent decades, NGOs emphasised their practical implications. The narrative was simple. Organisations initially focussed on emergency relief – Oxfam's response to the threat of famine in Greece, for example, or CRS's initial focus on aiding Polish Catholic refugees – gained experience first in Europe before turning their attentions to Africa and Asia. This experience in turn convinced them of the need for long-term assistance to tackle the underlying causes of need and to assist in the rehabilitation of affected societies. The description employed by Inter-Church Aid (the relief agency of the Protestant British Council of Churches, founded in 1945 and later renamed Christian Aid) was typical: 'it was [the refugees'] plight in the post-war years which gave the system of Inter-Church Aid so much of its impetus. And as the refugee phenomenon spread beyond Europe, so did Inter-Church Aid.'<sup>10</sup> But it was not alone in framing its experience in those terms. Commenting on his organisation's first 25 years of existence, Oxfam Director Leslie Kirkley underlined its early emphasis on 'the simple task of meeting the urgent needs of easily

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<sup>8</sup> For a history of the foreign aid regime, see Carol Lancaster, *Foreign aid: diplomacy, development, domestic politics* (London, 2007); and David H. Lumsdaine, *Moral vision in international politics: the foreign aid regime, 1949-1989* (Princeton, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> Gerard Daniel Cohen, *In war's wake: Europe's displaced persons in the postwar order* (Oxford, 2012), p. 62.

<sup>10</sup> 'Sunday Night in Southwark: Christian Aid presentation on Sunday 28 January 1968', School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, Special Collections (SOAS) Christian Aid Papers (CAP) CA/1/14/4.

recognisable groups such as refugees and victims of natural disasters ... Now, however, whilst retaining this first aid responsibility as top priority, we take a more sophisticated view of our role.’<sup>11</sup>

There is much to be said for this narrative – the experience these organisations accumulated provided a vital grounding in the field of humanitarianism. Yet it should not distract from the roles played by states and IGOs in shaping their fortunes. Working alongside the UN agencies gave NGOs valuable experience in the practicalities of disaster relief and of immediate post-conflict rehabilitation. The dominance of Europe in the NGOs’ geography and of Western concepts of humanitarianism also set clear boundaries to the expansion of the sector. It was true that as the West’s attention moved outwards – first to refugee crises in Hong Kong and the Middle East, then to the plight of former colonies in Africa and Asia – NGOs followed, creating links with existing bodies like missionary societies and local philanthropic organisations and in the process greatly expanding their field of operations. But while state and IGO actions remained driven by a particularly Western agenda, the opportunities for NGO activity on a global scale remained limited.

Writing in the mid-1970s, one Christian Aid official reflected on the limits that had existed for his organisation – and by implication the entire British NGO sector – two decades earlier: ‘In the 1950s [Christian Aid’s] small income and the circumstances which gave it birth also gave it a clear and limited role.’<sup>12</sup> The implication was clear: where the war had provided the impetus to action, that momentum proved difficult to sustain. Oxfam was only beginning to transform its public reputation into an organisation of ‘pioneers rather than backwater philanthropists’.<sup>13</sup> War on Want, a left-leaning NGO created in 1951 and with origins in the British labour movement, struggled to find its feet and was beset by organisational and leadership difficulties.<sup>14</sup> In Ireland, the situation was even less developed. Little or nothing existed in the way of a recognisable NGO sector in the late 1950s, save the actions of the country’s Christian missionaries in raising money for mission stations, hospitals and schools in Africa and Asia. Church-led ‘penny for a black baby’ campaigns and the distribution of missionary magazines like *Africa* and *The Far East* were no substitute for an organised non-governmental sector. Neither was the Irish Red Cross – created in 1939, closely linked to the Department of Defence, and coloured by the old-school nationalism of its chairwoman Leslie de Barra.

### **Freedom from Hunger**

Three immediate – and linked – events at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the new decade changed the global context for humanitarian action. The first was UN World Refugee Year (WRY), launched in June 1959.<sup>15</sup> In twelve months the campaign’s efforts to tackle the Second World War’s residual refugee problems

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<sup>11</sup> H. Leslie Kirkley, ‘Ready to take risks’, *Oxfam News*, Oct. 1967.

<sup>12</sup> Note by Hugh Samson, ‘A re-appraisal of Christian Aid’s role’, Aug. 1974, SOAS CAP CA2/D/15/1.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Harris, ‘To have more and to be more’, *Oxfam News*, Feb. 1974.

<sup>14</sup> See Mark Luetchford and Peter Burns, *Waging the War on Want: 50 years of campaigning against world poverty* (London, 2003), pp. 28-40.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Gatrell, *Free world? The campaign to save the world’s refugees, 1956-1963* (Cambridge, 2011).

sparked a renewed focus on humanitarian issues among governments, IGOs and NGOs, and generated the kind of inter-agency collaboration and rivalry vital to the emergence of an international non-governmental sector. It offered opportunities for NGOs – in the form of a concentrated, popular UN-led international campaign. It provided access – to UN agencies, governments and other major actors in the humanitarian sector. And it prompted the sector to mobilise, leading to the foundation of national WRY committees that brought together NGOs and other interested organisations in pursuit of the campaign's goals.

The impact of these processes was immediately evident. The Irish Red Cross's involvement in WRY prompted increased levels of public interest and carried over into the organisation's participation in a number of subsequent international campaigns. In Britain Christian Aid, under the watchful eye of Director Janet Lacey, led the way in using a national-level campaign to transform its image and to generate considerable additional income.<sup>16</sup> WRY also had important implications for the creation of an embryonic international NGO community. By drawing those organisations into a campaign that spanned almost one hundred countries, generated considerable financial support, and resulted in closer co-operation with the UN and UNHCR, WRY reinforced an international language of humanitarianism taking shape alongside the realm of inter-state relations.<sup>17</sup> Although it did not succeed in its goal of shutting all of Europe's refugee camps, the campaign explicitly aimed to draw public and government attention – as well as that of the wider humanitarian sector – away from that continent towards refugee crises in Hong Kong, the Middle East and further afield. WRY also helped to internationalise the NGO sector through the creation of the International Co-ordinating Committee for World Refugee Year, a coalition of international NGOs headed by the British Standing Committee of Voluntary Agencies Working for Refugees. That organisation in turn acted as the forerunner to the International Committee of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), a loose grouping of NGOs formed in 1963 'to enable the non-governmental world to pool its experience'.<sup>18</sup>

The launch of the FAO's Freedom from Hunger Campaign in 1960 took these processes a step further. Like WRY, the FFHC was built on an explicit attempt to incorporate NGOs into the global humanitarian culture. As early as January 1959 FAO Director-general B. R. Sen publicly appealed to NGOs 'to stimulate public interest' in the problems of global food production.<sup>19</sup> Yet the new campaign also offered something different in humanitarian terms. Where WRY focussed on an immediate problem – refugees – the FFHC's emphasis on long-term agricultural development allowed NGOs to build relationships with their constituents both in the West and in the recipient states. Initially planned as a five-year campaign and subsequently extended, the FFHC coincided with a number of important developments at international level: growing recognition of the inter-connectedness of global food markets, concern about the disparity between Western over-production and developing world needs, and the creation of the FAO's World Food Programme

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<sup>16</sup> See Janet Lacey, *Christian Aid* (London, 1961), p. 10, SOAS CAP CA/J/1.

<sup>17</sup> Gatrell, *Free world?*, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> International Committee of Voluntary Agencies internal memorandum, 'ICVA Commission on Emergency Aid', 10 Apr. 1968, SOAS CAP CA/II/11/1-2.

<sup>19</sup> Amy L. S. Staples, *The birth of development: how the World Bank, Food and Agriculture Organization, and World Health Organization changed the world, 1945-1965* (Kent, OH, 2006), p. 107.

(WFP; 1961).<sup>20</sup> The result was a strengthening of international interest in food-related issues and the extension of an emerging culture of global humanitarianism.

The manner in which the FAO linked its efforts to tackle global hunger with a broader commitment to development education proved extremely significant. FAO officials told the Irish Red Cross (which operated the campaign at national level) in 1962 that they were ‘anxious to help you make the most out of the appeal, both in terms of immediate financial gain and long term public benefit’.<sup>21</sup> Three years later, prompted by the Irish government, a national FFHC committee was formed under the title Gorta (‘famine’). Among its aims was the need to conduct educational and publicity programmes aimed at increasing public awareness.<sup>22</sup> In Britain too the campaign prompted the involvement of dozens of NGOs – humanitarian-focussed and otherwise – under the banner of a national FFHC committee. Its activities had a lasting impact. In 1961 the committee organised a countrywide educational campaign to raise awareness of the campaign and of the issue of world hunger. The following year saw the foundation of the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD), inspired by the campaign’s success. By 1968 Christian Aid noted ‘a change in the climate of public opinion’ on aid and development: ‘Due in large measure to the years of education during the Freedom from Hunger Campaign, most people now know that the answer to hunger is increased food production.’<sup>23</sup>

At one level the FFHC’s success was easy to explain. What Oxfam Director Brian Walker later termed ‘people-to-people’ aid created new channels through which local communities could identify directly with projects their money had helped to fund in the global south.<sup>24</sup> At the end of the 1960s War on Want, one of the NGOs involved in the national FFHC committee, described its ‘essential task’ as ‘the work of enabling people in Britain and the developing countries to become allies’ in the battle to end global poverty.<sup>25</sup> In Ireland the campaign had a similar, if less widespread, impact, prompting schools, firms, and other small groups of individuals to become involved in a variety of activities, from walks to fund-raising collections. The novelty of these efforts lay in translating concern for the welfare of refugees in Europe into widespread sympathy for communities the global south – part of what Bruce Mazlish termed the creation of a global sense of ‘the larger “local” above the national one’.<sup>26</sup> The FAO certainly appreciated its value in broadening humanitarian horizons: ‘A major innovation of the Campaign had been this involvement of non-governmental bodies in development programs and their investment in long-term projects’.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See Ruth Jachertz and Alexander Nützenadel, ‘Coping with hunger? Visions of a global food system, 1930-1960’, *Journal of Global History*, Vol. 6 (2011), pp. 112-117.

<sup>21</sup> Weitz to de Barra, 29 March 1962, National Archives of Ireland (NAI), Department of Foreign Affairs files (DFA) 2001/43/1167.

<sup>22</sup> Department of Agriculture and Fisheries memorandum for the government, ‘The FAO Freedom from Hunger Campaign’, 10 Aug. 1965, NAI DFA 2003/17/265.

<sup>23</sup> Christian Aid, *Year’s report, October 1967 – September 1968* (London, n.d. [1968]), p. 8, SOAS CAP CA/J/1.

<sup>24</sup> Brian Walker, ‘South Africa: We want to improve and extend’, *Oxfam News*, Dec-Jan 1977.

<sup>25</sup> War on Want, *Annual report 1969* (n.d., n.p. [1969]), p. 2, SOAS War on Want Papers (WOW) Box 247.

<sup>26</sup> Bruce Mazlish, *The new global history* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 71.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Freedom from Hunger Campaign: Progress Report of the Campaign’, undated extract [1968?], The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNA), Overseas Development Files (OD) 25/119.



But the role of states and IGOs remained prominent. What the FAO saw as ‘the beginnings of long-term private voluntary action to fight hunger’ was in fact largely driven from above – by the FAO.<sup>28</sup> Its success also owed much to the context within which those developments took place, and to one issue in particular: decolonisation. As the ends of empire gained in momentum, countries like Britain and France witnessed an increased interest in, and discussion about, their future relationship with the global south. Peter Gatrell noted that ‘[t]he young British Conservatives who launched WRY had a clear view of the relationship between their proposed campaign and the divisive and messy process of colonial retreat.’<sup>29</sup> WRY’s efforts to raise awareness and financial support were assisted by the visibility of a number of crises in the colonial and post-colonial world – the escalating conflict in Ruanda-Urundi, for example, or the persistent refugee problems in Hong Kong and Palestine. In Ireland this narrative produced a different emphasis – articulated in Gorta’s focus on the Irish ‘historical experience ... [that] ... places us in a position better than most in the modern world, to appreciate the plight and problems of the underdeveloped countries’ – but the same result: an increased interest in the issues of aid and development.<sup>30</sup>

Yet Michael Barnett was only partly correct to describe this process as a ‘shift from Imperial Humanitarianism to Neo-Humanitarianism’.<sup>31</sup> Western concerns and a Western language of aid and development may have dominated the NGO sector, but they were not the only drivers of change. The emergence of a vocal group of newly independent states caused a significant shift in the international agenda, with knock-on effects for NGOs. It did so in two ways: by altering the dynamics of the UN and, by extension, of the international community; and by making humanitarianism, aid and development important currents of international debate. The Irish response to these changes was instructive. Wartime neutrality and the state’s subsequent isolation from the international community until it joined the UN in 1955 had left an Irish populace largely unmoved by the campaign to assist Europe’s refugees. Only the Irish Red Cross’s limited response to post-war crises in France and India and the activities of Irish Christian missionaries drew the Irish public into a wider conversation on non-governmental humanitarianism. In those circumstances NGOs made little inroads. But as the state attempted to find an independent voice in international relations, the UN – and with it the needs of Africa, Asia and the global south – took on a guiding role.<sup>32</sup> Playing on a strong commitment (public and official) to the international organisation, WRY gained the backing of the Irish government and elicited a total public contribution of IR£71,270 – the eighth highest per capita in the world when adjusted for individual income.<sup>33</sup> The same was true of the FFHC, which won immediate official support and established a precedent of secular non-governmental humanitarian action.

Equally significantly, the shoots of international action began to blossom into something resembling a global humanitarian culture. WRY and the FFHC created

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Gatrell, *Free world?*, p. 35.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Address by the Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries, Mr Charles J. Haughey, at the inauguration of Gorta, the Freedom from Hunger Council of Ireland, at the Shelbourne Hotel, Dublin, on Monday, 8th November, 1965’, NAI DFA 2001/43/1156.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Barnett, *Empire of humanity: a history of humanitarianism* (London, 2011), p. 104.

<sup>32</sup> See Kevin O’Sullivan, *Ireland, Africa and the end of empire* (Manchester, 2013).

<sup>33</sup> Figure taken from a note by Con Cremin, ‘Assistance for newly-independent African countries’, 20 Sept. 1962, NAI DFA 2002/19/298.

both opportunity – in the form of concerted international action and discussion on issues of humanitarian aid and development – and access – by co-opting NGOs ever more closely into the UN system. But the growing importance of southern voices in humanitarian debates proved vital in translating these efforts into a global affair. As director general of the FAO (1956-67), the Indian diplomat B. R. Sen played helped to revitalise the organisation and, through the FFHC, launched ‘a frontal attack on the problems of widespread hunger and undernourishment’.<sup>34</sup> The first UN Development Decade, launched in 1961, extended that conversation by focussing on the international community’s responsibilities in the fields of aid and development. A number of new organisations were also created to tackle the question of under-development, from the WFP and the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD; 1964), to the UN Development Programme (UNDP; 1965). Their impact was significant: by reacting to the increasingly vocal demands of the newly independent states, the language of humanitarian aid and development became an ever more important part of the everyday workings of the international community.

### **Global norms and global realities**

NGOs were significant beneficiaries of this global humanitarian conversation. Christian Aid Director Rev. Alan Booth admitted in 1973 that his organisation had benefited hugely from WRY and the FFHC: ‘We didn’t invent [them], but we certainly used [them].’<sup>35</sup> Yet the real transformation in the sector’s fortunes came later. When the FFHC’s promotion of ‘people-to-people’ action met a growing international emphasis on the concept of inter-dependence and a widening space for global civic action, the result was increased opportunities and access for NGOs. Importantly, the process of political globalisation that accompanied these developments created the institutional framework within which the non-governmental sector could flourish. In less than two decades, between the late 1960s and the mid-1980s, the playing field for NGOs was revolutionised.

The importance accorded by Western governments and IGOs to the concepts of inter-dependence and the search for appropriate forms of development was significant in that process. In 1969 the World Bank’s Commission on International Development, chaired by former Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson, delivered the influential *Partners in Development* report, setting an international target of 0.7 per cent of GNP for official development assistance and in the process beginning a shift in the international approach to development.<sup>36</sup> The response caused an increased interest in humanitarian issues across the West. The North-South dialogue, the EC’s embrace of development through the Lomé Convention (1975) and the expanded European Development Fund, and initiatives like the meetings of ‘like-minded’ states, led by the Netherlands and the Nordic countries, brought the search for constructive solutions to global economic reform to the forefront of international debate.<sup>37</sup> At the beginning of the 1980s it was the turn of former German Chancellor Willie Brandt’s Independent Commission on International Development Issues to lead the way, with

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<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Staples, *The birth of development*, p. 105.

<sup>35</sup> ‘Christian Aid Staff Planning Consultation: Bishop Otter College, Chichester, 13-17<sup>th</sup> September, 1973 – Opening Session: Rev. Alan Booth’, SOAS CAP CA2/D/5/2.

<sup>36</sup> World Bank. Commission on International Development, *Partners in development: report of the Commission on International Development* (London, 1969).

<sup>37</sup> See Lancaster, *Foreign aid*, pp. 34-44; and Gilbert Rist, *The history of development: from Western origins to global faith* (3rd ed., London, 2011), pp. 140-170.

two equally influential and revealingly titled reports: *North-South: A Programme for Survival* (1980) and *Common Crisis North-South: Co-operation for World Recovery* (1983).<sup>38</sup>

These debates and the global focus they brought to humanitarian issues provided the opportunity for the NGO sector to capitalise on an increased appetite for concrete action. Yet they do not tell the full story of the emergence of the humanitarian sector in this period. The growing assertiveness of the global south and the integration of its varied demands into the international aid agenda also played an important role. The Second UN Development Decade, beginning in 1970, reinforced the international organisation's commitment to supporting the global south. Successive UNCTAD meetings at Santiago (1972), Nairobi (1976) and Manila (1979), coupled with the demands of the Group of 77 developing world states for a New International Economic Order (NIEO), focussed attention on structural change and global economic reform. Those activities – however fragmented their campaign ultimately proved to be – bequeathed a global language of development to Western NGOs of all persuasions. Trócaire (the official aid agency of the Irish Catholic hierarchy, formed in 1972) linked the 1971 document issued by the Vatican Synod of Bishops, *Justice in the World*, to 'the same basic message proclaimed by the NIEO'.<sup>39</sup> In the middle of that decade the organisation joined colleagues from Belgium, Canada, Germany, New Zealand and the United States in a 'Coalition for International Development'. In the same period Oxfam also shifted its attention to the question of global structural reform: 'there is a crying need not just to patch up the old system but to build a New International Economic Order'.<sup>40</sup>

A number of parallel shifts in development thinking – again led by states and IGOs – further enhanced opportunities and access at a global level for the non-governmental sector. The role of the World Bank, under the stewardship of Robert McNamara, was significant, pioneering the concept of 'basic needs' and in the process shifting that institution's priorities by linking targets for economic growth to the needs of the poorest in the developing world.<sup>41</sup> Though McNamara's new agenda was only part of a wider concern with bottom-up solutions – including E. F. Schumacher and Paulo Freire's respective alternative models of development – the decision had considerable implications for the NGO sector.<sup>42</sup> The 'basic needs' concept was, as Gilbert Rist later remarked, an idea 'so simple that one wonders why it took so long to see the light of day'.<sup>43</sup> But its focus on reaching the areas where the poorest of the poor resided and worked meant that NGOs, who already worked among these communities, stood to benefit most from any increased emphasis on bottom-up development. The sector well understood its opportunity. Commenting on draft proposals developed by the British government to set up a co-financing arrangement with the sector in December

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<sup>38</sup> Independent Commission on International Development Issues, *North-South: a programme for survival* (London, 1980); and idem., *Common crisis North-South: co-operation for world recovery* (London, 1983).

<sup>39</sup> 'Campaigning for a better world', *One World*, winter 1975/76.

<sup>40</sup> 'A new deal for the poor: What a new international economic order would mean for Britain and the Third World', *Oxfam News*, Mar.-Apr. 1976.

<sup>41</sup> For a history of the World Bank, see Devesh Kapur, John P. Lewis and Richard Webb, *The World Bank: its first half century*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C., 1997).

<sup>42</sup> E. F. Schumacher, *Small is beautiful: a study of economics as if people mattered* (London, 1974); and Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York, 1970).

<sup>43</sup> Rist, *The history of development*, p. 163.

1974, Christian Aid Director Rev. Alan Booth noted that ‘[i]f we are to take McNamara’s analysis seriously, and facilitate the flow of aid to rural and “grass roots” communities, then probably governments need the assistance of voluntary agencies.’<sup>44</sup>

While NGOs, Christian Aid included, preferred to see their expansion as part of a linear narrative – the ‘move from warm, personal “charity” to serious partnership in the transfer [of] resources’ – the influence of international institutions was inescapable.<sup>45</sup> Matthew Hilton’s analysis of the British humanitarian sector’s dependence on global currents of debate to prompt their interest in, and involvement with the field of human rights, for example, highlights the extent to which NGOs were often followers rather than leaders of debate on international development.<sup>46</sup> International conferences and summits – what Lechner and Boli termed ‘peak events that show concretely and dramatically how world culture gets constructed’ – proved particularly influential.<sup>47</sup> In the early 1970s, for example, concern at the growing world food crisis, and particularly the 1974 World Food Conference, prompted an equal response on the part of the NGO sector. In Britain the result was Foodshare, a six-month campaign organised jointly by CAFOD, Christian Aid, Oxfam, the World Development Movement and the Christian churches in 1975, which aimed to generate greater public and political interest in the food crisis. Oxfam ran a parallel ‘Feed all the Family’ campaign.<sup>48</sup> The theme for the annual Christian Aid Week in May 1975 – ‘Let the Hungry Feed Themselves’ – attempted to generate financial and public support for ‘the poorest of the poor’.<sup>49</sup> In Ireland too the food question provided a strong impetus for action. Gorta’s origins in the FFHC meant its approach retained a close association with the aims of the FAO, not least its commitment to finding ‘the most effective long-term way in order to help the hungry countries to produce more food’.<sup>50</sup> Trócaire was similarly concerned with these issues. Launching the organisation’s 1975 Lenten campaign, Director Brian McKeown emphasised the need to ‘bring whatever pressure we can to bear on the Government to implement the recommendations mad[e] at the World Food Conference’.<sup>51</sup>

This reliance on outside inspiration was underlined in the role played by the global Christian churches as catalysts for expansion in the European NGO sector. In 1958 the Protestant World Council of Churches (WCC) was the first to raise the idea of a national target for aid, suggested at 1 per cent of GNP per annum. In the following decades its influence proved extremely important for shaping a Christian response to

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<sup>44</sup> Internal memo, Booth to Littlewood, 13 Dec. 1974, SOAS-A CAP CA2/D/22/4.

<sup>45</sup> ‘Consultation on “Development and Salvation”: Background paper by Alan Booth, Director of Christian Aid – Giving and Receiving with Respect’, undated [Feb. 1974?], SOAS CAP CA2/D/6/2.

<sup>46</sup> Matthew Hilton, ‘International aid and development NGOs in Britain and human rights since 1945’, *Humanity* (forthcoming, 2012).

<sup>47</sup> Frank J. Lechner and John Boli, *World culture: origins and consequences* (Oxford, 2005), p. 84.

<sup>48</sup> ‘A call for government action on food’, *Oxfam News*, Mar. 1975.

<sup>49</sup> Christian Aid press release, ‘Politicians underestimate public mood’, 7 May 1975, SOAS CAP CA2/D/23/6. For details of the Foodshare campaign, see the information note to all Christian Aid staff, ‘Foodshare Campaign’, 16 Jan. 1975, SOAS CAP CA2/D/23/6; ‘A call for government action on food’, *Oxfam News*, Mar. 1975; and TNA OD 64/73.

<sup>50</sup> ‘A Message from the Chairman’, *Gorta News*, 1970.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in ‘Trócaire aims to raise over £250,000 in Lenten campaign’, *Irish Times*, 11 Feb. 1975.

humanitarian issues, from the 1970 Montreux Consultation's recommendation that up to 25 per cent of resources be devoted to development education, to the Council's role in raising the issue of human rights in Latin America in the early 1980s. For organisations like Christian Aid, which had strong links with the Council and its Commission of Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service (CICARWS) in particular, a close relationship with WCC reinforced their participation in what they viewed as 'a world-wide ecumenical development operation'.<sup>52</sup>

Changes in Catholic Church teaching were of equal significance. In Ireland the church's social dominance – and a strong tradition of missionary Catholicism in particular – provided an important organising framework for an emergent development sector. Concern, for example, was created in 1968 as a direct response to the Biafran humanitarian crisis and had strong links with the Holy Ghost missionary order and with *Viatores Christi*, a group of lay Catholic volunteers. Gorta and Goal (a relief-focussed NGO founded in 1977 by the journalist John O'Shea) worked through missionary organisations. But the language of development bequeathed to the NGOs by the international Catholic Church proved most influential. *Trócaire* drew heavily on changes in Vatican teaching on development, including Pope Paul VI's 1967 encyclical *Populorum Progressio* and the 1971 document *Justice in the World*. It built on the organisational structures of the Vatican's Commission for Justice and Peace and co-operated closely with Caritas Internationalis, the Church's relief agency. But its approach also owed much to voices from the global south, particularly the liberation theology practised in Latin America and evidenced in *Trócaire*'s commitment to the 'criticism of and resistance to oppressive regimes and unjust structures and to the pursuit of justice through non-violence and of peace through development'.<sup>53</sup>

Significantly for the NGO sector, the emergence of this new global humanitarianism was matched by new political structures that mediated between the official and non-governmental aid sectors. In June 1975 the EC organised a seminar between its staff and representatives of forty European NGOs, the UN, the FAO and the UNDP, at which the Commissioner in charge of development policy, Claude Cheysson, made clear what he expected from the collaboration: 'The Community's activities could only be adapted to the realities of the new situation in the field with the help of experienced groups of organisations such as the NGO[s]'.<sup>54</sup> Coming on the back of the 1975 Lomé Convention, a trade agreement between the Community and the developing world, the meeting had important implications for the future playing field for aid and development in Europe. NGOs were brought closer to the heart of the EC's development efforts, providing them with access to funding and a channel for information and lobbying for policy change. Practical changes quickly followed. In 1976 an EC-NGO Liaison Committee was established, and the same year the Community began a programme of financing projects through NGOs. By the end of

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<sup>52</sup> 'The British Council of Churches, Christian Aid – Notes for Aid Advisory Committee by the Director', 3 Jan. 1975, SOAS CAP CA2/D/28/2.

<sup>53</sup> 'Tribute paid to Cardinal', *One World*, Jul. 1983.

<sup>54</sup> 'Report of a seminar on 10-12 June 1975 between Commission staff and members of non-governmental organisations (NGO) specialising in development', SOAS CAP CA2/D/21/3.

the decade EC co-financing prioritised projects aimed at ‘the poorest sections of the population, and also to those in which there is a high level of local participation’.<sup>55</sup>

The EC was not the first to introduce formal structures for the funding of development and emergency relief work through the NGO sector. The Dutch (1965) and Canadian (1968) governments began co-financing schemes in the mid-1960s, primarily, Brian Smith argued, ‘to complement and extend newly inaugurated bilateral assistance programmes and to gain an apolitical “easy entry” into many new nations’.<sup>56</sup> These concerns remained prominent in the similar schemes launched by the British (1975) and Irish (1977) governments, among others, in the following decade. But the influence of the new currents of global humanitarian discourse was also openly in evidence. The British Ministry of Overseas Development’s co-financing programme was ‘intended to assist voluntary organisations to extend their development work among the poorest in rural areas and in the urban slums of developing countries’.<sup>57</sup> The Irish government framed its approach in similar terms: ‘to help the poorest sections of the communities of [recipient] countries to develop their own resources’.<sup>58</sup>

### **Disaster or opportunity?**

The growing interest shown by NGOs in bottom-up development, the expansion of their work in local communities in the global south, their support for economic reform, and their increasingly prominent role in the official aid effort absorbed large proportions of those organisations’ energies from the late 1960s onwards. Yet it was the globalisation of emergency aid and the role played by NGOs in disaster relief that had the most visible impact on the sector. Just as WRY and the FFHC helped to widen the scope for humanitarian action beyond the European sphere and with it created a new playing field for NGOs, so too the emphasis on finding a global response to disaster relief created new opportunities for non-governmental actors.

It did so in three ways. The first was a symptom of a more global age: the growth of international media and the visibility it afforded to the NGO sector’s efforts placed the latter at the heart of the public’s understanding of international relief. At the end of the 1960s, the humanitarian crisis precipitated by the attempted secession of Nigeria’s Eastern region – re-named Biafra by the rebels – and the civil war that followed became the first ‘famine-as-media-event’ and the first such crisis to truly capture the imagination of Western public opinion. Missionaries and NGOs were to the forefront in publicising the crisis in the West. The ecumenical Joint Church Aid airlift flew relief supplies into the region, where they were distributed by religious and lay organisations alike. That pattern was repeated in successive disasters in the 1970s and into the 1980s. Media coverage of crises in East Pakistan (1971), the Sahel (1973-74), and Cambodia (1979-80) kept the developing world to the forefront of the international agenda. NGOs benefited accordingly. Their visibility and ability to

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<sup>55</sup> Note by Jackie Barton, ‘EEC Co-Funding with special reference to Southern Africa, based on visit to Brussels, 6-8 June 1979’, SOAS WOW Box 142.

<sup>56</sup> Brian H. Smith, *More than altruism: the politics of private foreign aid* (Princeton, 1990), p. 90.

<sup>57</sup> Undated note [1977?], ‘Joint Funding of Development Projects by British Non-government [sic.] Organisations and the Ministry of Overseas Development’, TNA OD 68/43.

<sup>58</sup> DFA press release, ‘Minister allocates funds to Voluntary Aid Agencies’, 8 May 1978, NAI DFA 2008/79/2840.

capitalise on the media attention allowed them to take centre stage in the provision of emergency relief. In the Horn of Africa (1984-85) NGOs took that process a step further as Band Aid/Live Aid's style of celebrity humanitarianism, however problematic, placed their actions at the very heart of the global campaign for disaster relief.

Yet media attention alone was not enough to explain the sector's arrival on centre stage. For NGOs to flourish, it was necessary that their visibility be matched by a global acceptance of their role in humanitarian relief, with all the access and opportunities for action that it entailed. Close collaboration with Western governments was important. But the most significant factor in integrating NGOs into the global humanitarian system was their relationship with the international relief agencies. There was little new, of course, in that process. The NGO sector's response to the refugee crisis in post-war Europe enabled what Gerard Daniel Cohen termed 'the transformation of traditional charity groups into "nongovernmental organizations"'.<sup>59</sup> Yet the 1968-85 period saw those relationships crystallise and NGOs take on an increasingly equal footing in the field of disaster relief. The international response to the unfolding crisis in South East Asia at the end of the 1970s, as thousands of refugees fled Cambodia following the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime, was typical. Concern worked closely with the UNHCR in the refugee camps that sprang up on the border with Thailand. British NGOs kept in close contact with the ICRC and UNICEF about the unfolding situation in the region throughout the summer of 1979.<sup>60</sup> In October 1979 UNICEF, ICRC, Oxfam and WCC representatives met in Geneva to discuss the co-ordination of relief efforts in South East Asia.<sup>61</sup> By then NGOs – and particularly larger NGOs like Oxfam – had become part of a truly global community of organisations involved in the provision of emergency relief and long-term rehabilitation.

Experience in the field of emergency relief was important in another sense: in showing what NGOs could do, and what governments and international organisations (at least notionally) could not. A 1983 survey of public opinion in the EC found that an average of 25 per cent of respondents believed that NGOs offered the 'most useful' help to the global south. Second only to international organisations in their perceived impact, that figure was dramatically higher again in Ireland (64 per cent) and Britain (47 per cent).<sup>62</sup> It was a carefully constructed reputation. In Biafra Oxfam contrasted the NGO sector's efforts with the apparent inaction of the British government: 'if millions of lives are to be saved, then an operation a score of times greater than the present efforts of voluntary agencies like Oxfam must be undertaken by governments at international level'.<sup>63</sup> Concern remained intensely critical of the Irish government's perceived inaction to relieve the crisis: '[they] found us impetuous and too ready to

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<sup>59</sup> Cohen, *In war's wake*, p. 64.

<sup>60</sup> For Concern's co-operation with UNHCR, see Tony Farnar, *Believing in action: the first thirty years of Concern 1968-1998* (Dublin, 2002), pp. 167-170. For the British NGOs' conversations with ICRC and UNICEF, see SOAS CAP CA3/A/PAC 80.

<sup>61</sup> 'Report of First Meeting of Consultative Committee for Coordination of Aid to Kampuchea, 23 October 1979, at the offices of International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva', SOAS CAP CA3/A/PAC 80.

<sup>62</sup> European Consortium for Agricultural Development, *Europeans and aid to development* (n.p., 1984), p. 124.

<sup>63</sup> 'Nigeria/Biafra war: A statement', *Oxfam News*, May 1969.

take a risk. We would have found them totally unready to take a risk.<sup>64</sup> Those criticisms were not limited to governments. The UNHCR's refusal to become involved in the crisis – attributed by Michael Barnett to 'its finely tuned radar for knowing when to push beyond its mandate and when to keep its head down' – created the space for world church agencies like Caritas Internationalis and the WCC, and subsequently for NGOs, to act.<sup>65</sup> The ICRC drew sharp criticism for its neutrality and apparent paralysis in the face of the politicisation of the humanitarian crisis by both sides.<sup>66</sup> Those perceived failings – repeated in its response to crisis in East Pakistan less than two years after the end of the Nigerian conflict – generated the conversations and consternation among a group of French aid workers and activists that eventually led to the creation of Médecins sans Frontières in 1971.<sup>67</sup> The implication was clear: NGOs could, and should, go where other agencies feared to tread.

Yet NGO criticisms of states and IGOs also made clear the latter's importance in shaping the terms of engagement in the humanitarian sector, particularly the field of disaster relief. Events in South East Asia in the late 1970s again provided a good example of these relationships in action. In October 1979 Oxfam Director Brian Walker defended his organisation's decision to enter into a direct agreement with the Cambodian government at a time when the ICRC and UNICEF were still attempting to do so (and on terms less favourable to the regime), by remarking on those organisations' 'alleged collaboration with the Pol Pot forces [in the eyes of the regime]'.<sup>68</sup> The dramatic journey of an Oxfam barge filled with food, seeds and agricultural equipment making its way into the heart of the affected areas contrasted sharply with the apparent ineffectiveness of the international organisations also operating in the region. The message was obvious: while Western agencies continued to drag their feet, Oxfam adopted the role of 'saviour' of the Cambodian people.<sup>69</sup> Walker repeated his arguments in a meeting with Christian Aid officials in January 1980. The ICRC's failure to negotiate an agreement with the new Cambodian government, allied to UNICEF's association with on-going debates at the UN on the question of recognition for the regime, he explained, had simply impelled Oxfam to act: 'Oxfam took unilateral action after other agencies (especially ICRC) failed to negotiate a relief programme – the UN recognition of Pol Pot was clearly a factor there.'<sup>70</sup>

One must be wary however of assuming that the NGO sector's rise marked some inexorable march of Western humanitarianism to 'save' the poor of the global south. In some cases – particularly church-led organisations like Trócaire and Christian Aid – a lack of operational staff led NGOs to work through and with local organisations, including the semi-indigenous regional church agencies. In others their ability to act was severely checked by local politics and preferences. In Nigeria/Biafra, the determination of both sides of the conflict to use hunger as a political and diplomatic

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<sup>64</sup> Interview with John O'Loughlin Kennedy, Dublin, 16 Jan. 2006.

<sup>65</sup> Barnett, *Empire of humanity*, p. 138.

<sup>66</sup> See David P. Forsythe, *The humanitarians: the International Committee of the Red Cross* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 65-68.

<sup>67</sup> For a history of MSF, see Anne Vallaëys, *Médecins sans Frontières: la biographie* (Paris, 2004).

<sup>68</sup> David Beresford, 'Appeal for urgent aid to Cambodia', *Guardian*, 16 Oct. 1979.

<sup>69</sup> Maggie Black, *A cause for our times: Oxfam the first fifty years* (Oxford, 1992), p. 221.

<sup>70</sup> Unsigned note, 'Discussions with Brian Walker, at Reading University, 6 January 1980', SOAS CAP CA4/C/1.



weapon placed constraints on how – through the airlifts of food from neighbouring countries – and when – by night – they could act. In July 1971 Indian authorities instructed non-indigenous NGOs to leave the camps set up for East Pakistan refugees, on the grounds that the country ‘already had sufficient [medical teams] of their own’.<sup>71</sup> NGOs operating in South-East Asia at the end of the 1970s did so according to the geographical and practical limitations imposed upon them by the governments of Cambodia and Thailand. Half a decade later, in Ethiopia, one NGO’s (MSF) consistent criticism of government resettlement policy led to its expulsion while the remaining community of non-governmental organisations operated under the considerable constraints imposed by the army’s priorities in the on-going civil war.

## Conclusion

The implications of this narrative for our understanding of the European NGO sector are two-fold. If it is easy to agree with Harford Thomas that ‘[t]he awakening to the nature of the real world has been the work of NGOs’ – as their role in promoting awareness through the FFHC and subsequent development education campaigns proved – it is more difficult to assent to his argument that the NGO sector was ‘where the new thinking started’.<sup>72</sup> During each of the three phases of growth presented here, states and IGOs played a prominent role in shaping the fortunes of the non-governmental humanitarian sector. In the immediate post-war period the rise of the foreign aid regime created an environment in which a new global humanitarianism began to emerge, with knock-on effects for the NGO sector. At the same time in Europe, and increasingly in Asia and the Middle East, NGOs benefitted from the leadership, opportunities and experience afforded to them in the field by agencies like UNRRA and UNHCR. The UN played an important role in the second phase, by deliberately drawing NGOs further into the structures of international humanitarianism – through WRY and the FFHC. The hand of the state was equally visible in shaping the fortunes of the non-governmental sector in this period: the needs of the newly independent governments of Africa and Asia altered the international humanitarian agenda at the UN, while Western governments worked to find new ways of meeting their increasing responsibilities (and aid budgets). In the third phase, NGOs were co-opted even further into the structures of the international aid system, in a manner that had strong echoes of the voluntary sector’s involvement in the operation of European welfare states. They became a recognisable cog in the aid machine, consuming increasing proportions of budgets, while simultaneously attempting to defend their independence.

Taken together, these narratives present a simple conclusion: more often than not, NGOs were followers rather than leaders of international debate. Yet the chinks in that same narrative remind us that there is much still to learn about the role played by NGOs in shaping the agenda of international relations. In emphasising the emergence of a global humanitarian environment in which NGOs could and did thrive, this chapter has adopted a top-down approach. But just as important to understanding the global culture of humanitarianism was the interplay between local, national, regional and international factors. The non-governmental sector operated in the space between all four. States and IGOs facilitated the emergence of those organisations, but it is too simplistic to view NGOs as passive actors in a process of political globalisation; they

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<sup>71</sup> ‘Report dated 13 July 1971 from the Chargé d’Affaires at New Delhi on Visit to India of Deputies Esmond and Loughnane’, NAI DFA 2002/19/5.

<sup>72</sup> Harford Thomas, ‘NGOs – the not-so-hidden persuaders’, *Guardian*, 13 Dec. 1978.

were beneficiaries of changes in the international environment but by their actions also helped to shape the global humanitarian system in which they operated. There were also limits to the extent to which global currents of debate were adopted in a national context. The Irish government's stance at the UN World Population Conference in Bucharest in 1974, for example, was criticised by media commentators as 'ambiguous' and 'regrettable', but it was hardly surprising in a strongly Catholic country that it and the NGO sector remained largely silent on the issue.<sup>73</sup> Even in Britain an ostensibly secular organisation like Oxfam, while arguing that it was 'inescapable that the organisation must increasingly concern itself with environmental and population control matters', realised that to do so necessitated 'some fundamental rethinking of long-held beliefs and values'.<sup>74</sup>

Which leads us to a final, important caveat. In explaining the rise of the NGO sector, one must be careful to avoid the suggestion that it represented a wholly positive, one-way process – of Western humanitarianism being welcomed with open arms in the global south. NGOs were expelled from Nigeria, India, Cambodia, Ethiopia, and elsewhere. Their actions often left them open to charges of paternalism, cultural insensitivity and neo-colonialism. They and the broader Western concepts of humanitarianism that emerged in this period were also influenced by voices from the global south. One only has to witness the interest of many European donors and NGOs with President Julius Nyerere's ujamaa programme in Tanzania or the influence of the Group of 77's calls for an NIEO to understand the extent to which the language of global humanitarianism borrowed from the communities it purported to 'serve'.

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<sup>73</sup> John Cooney, 'Irish opportunity sacrificed to government convenience', *Irish Times*, 30 Aug. 1974.

<sup>74</sup> Ken Bennett, 'What role for Oxfam?', *Oxfam News*, Aug. 1972.