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HPG Working Paper

# Learning from the past to shape the future

## Lessons from the history of humanitarian action in Africa

Edited by Christina Bennett, Matthew Foley  
and Hanna B. Krebs

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# 2 Biafra's legacy: NGO humanitarianism and the Nigerian civil war

Kevin O'Sullivan

The mantra that Biafra was 'the first humanitarian disaster to be seen by millions of people' (Vaux, 2001) is so often repeated it is easy to forget the depth of its impact. In two and a half years, between late 1967 and the beginning of 1970, the relief effort thrust non-state actors to the forefront of public and official thinking about aid. Biafra was the first 'televised famine', the first real test of the West's response to crisis in post-colonial Africa, and one of the largest disaster relief efforts of its kind in history (Barnett, 2011; Heerten and Moses, 2014; O'Sullivan, 2014). Yet Biafra also raised serious questions about the structure and operation of the global humanitarian industry. The crisis acted, as Alex de Waal famously put it, as both 'totem and taboo' for NGOs: 'it was unsurpassed in terms of logistical achievement and sheer physical courage', but 'the ethical issues that it raises have still to be faced' (de Waal, 1997: 73).

This paper focuses on one of those issues: Biafra's impact on how the West viewed and acted towards post-colonial Africa. It examines the crisis not only as a period of massive expansion for the NGO sector, but also as a moment that had an important defining effect on NGOs' role in the independent Third World. The kind of 'people-to-people' action espoused by Oxfam, Africa Concern and others brought with it heightened awareness of, respect for and funding for non-governmental aid. Through their activities and their role in shaping public discourse, NGOs effectively became translators of Biafra for the watching public in the West. That vision was not without its problems: the NGO reaction to Biafra, this essay argues, was refracted through the prism of decolonisation and its impact on both the West and the Third World. The end of empire challenged humanitarians to adapt to the changing demands of an independent Africa. But it also laid bare the proto-imperial images and ideas that the West could

not leave behind. Those concepts had considerable purchase on the public imagination; they generated a role for NGOs based on the primacy of intervention and the immediacy of emergency relief. They brought with them a particular understanding of Africa and humanitarian aid. And they proved remarkably difficult to shake in the decades that followed. Although not born in Biafra, the interventionist, depoliticised reading of humanitarianism that solidified during the crisis remains as problematic now as it has ever been.

To make that argument, this essay draws on the converging experiences of NGOs in two Western European states: Britain (Christian Aid, Oxfam and the Save the Children Fund) and Ireland (Africa Concern, Gorta and Christian missionaries). The response to Biafra in those countries had radically different roots: British attempts to redefine a role for the state in post-colonial Africa contrasted sharply with Irish anti-colonialism and the parallels Irish NGOs drew between their country's experiences of empire and the fortunes of the contemporary Third World. Yet the two stories were, in practice, much closer than their rhetoric suggested. Missionaries, NGOs and the wider publics in both states struggled to articulate new roles in, and new attitudes towards, independent Africa. Exploring the similarities between them allows us to unravel the dominant discourses of European NGOs, and the broadly Western lenses that they used to describe the Third World.

This essay unpacks that narrative over the course of four overlapping themes. It begins by exploring Biafra's role in shaping the rapidly expanding international NGO sector in the late 1960s, before outlining the impact of the myriad practices and discourses of empire on the humanitarian response. Those processes came together under the umbrella of

intervention – the essay’s third theme – and the kinds of hierarchical relationships that humanitarianism created. The West/Third World divide was, in many ways, to be expected; it was difficult for any individual to conceive of a humanitarian compassion that extended to the *entire* world, after all. Yet the nature of those connections, and the pillars on which they were built, had a huge impact on how the West viewed and encountered Biafra and, by extension, independent Africa. The final part of this essay examines the kind of humanitarian solidarity that Biafra created. It argues that the primacy accorded to emergency relief led NGOs to depoliticise both the crisis itself and the people they intended to help, as well as striking a vital blow for those who argued in favour of the immediacy of charity over political and economic reform.

## Biafra and the rise and rise of non-governmental aid

The Biafran crisis began in earnest in May 1967, when Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu announced the Eastern Region’s intention to secede from the Nigerian state. Within two months the Federal Military Government and Biafran forces were at war. By the end of the year, the conflict’s outcome was clear: this was a war that the Biafrans had little hope of winning. Military losses on the ground were matched by a lack of progress in the diplomatic field – only Gabon, Ivory Coast, Tanzania and Zambia recognised the nascent ‘state’, while the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) stood resolutely behind the ‘territorial integrity’ of Nigeria. Peace talks that opened in Addis Ababa in August 1968 were followed by successive (failed) attempts to bring both sides to a settlement. The conflict settled into a war of attrition, marked by Federal military superiority, stubborn Biafran opposition and international (US, British, Chinese, Egyptian, French, Portuguese, Soviet and South African) interference. Biafra’s clever propaganda campaign – run by Swiss-based public relations company Markpress – won it sympathy but too little in the way of territory, and throughout 1969 it struggled to make any gains on the ground. The end, when it came, was quick. On 11 January 1970 Federal forces charged across Biafran territory. Resistance crumbled; Ojukwu fled and the Biafran regime collapsed (Falola, 2008; Heerten and Moses, 2014).

By then, however, the world’s attention was focused on a much bigger question: how to feed and treat

the millions of ‘ordinary’ civilians suffering from the human consequences of the war. Those concerns first gained currency in late 1967 when a lack of protein made cases of kwashiorkor and marasmus increasingly common in war-affected areas. That November the first International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) supplies arrived in Biafra. By the following spring the ICRC had taken the leading role in an international response that included aid from Caritas Internationalis (the official aid agency of the Catholic Church) and the Protestant World Council of Churches (WCC). While the Federal and Biafran authorities wrangled over the possibility of a land corridor for humanitarian relief – a solution that never materialised – aid agencies took to the air. The ICRC led the effort until its activities were cut short following the shooting down of one of its planes in 1969. Caritas and the WCC combined their operations under the umbrella of Joint Church Aid (JCA, or ‘Jesus Christ Airlines’ to its pilots). JCA’s activities became emblematic of the relief effort, with great attention paid to its ‘heroic’ flights from the Portuguese island of São Tomé to Uli airstrip in Biafra, carried out under cover of darkness to avoid the attentions of the Federal Air Force. In the last months of the war more than 250 metric tons of aid arrived at Uli *every night*, to be distributed by missionaries and aid workers spread across Biafran territory (de Waal, 1997; Finucane, 1999: 180).

Yet it took the involvement of the world’s media to spark the widespread public outpouring of compassion for which Biafra is now remembered in the West. 1968 proved a pivotal year. In June a film broadcast on British television and a press campaign by the *Sun* newspaper sparked the humanitarian response into life. Britain’s sense of responsibility towards its former colonial territory combined with the birth of a new form of global humanitarian concern. By the end of July Oxfam and Save the Children Fund (SCF) relief teams had transferred to Nigeria to work with the ICRC, while Christian Aid provided assistance to the WCC relief effort. Over the following 18 months the public reaction to the crisis resulted in a massive increase in visibility and income across the British NGO sector – so much visibility, in fact, that aid fatigue became increasingly prevalent. In 1969, for example, the *Guardian* newspaper referred on more than one occasion to creeping ‘charity weariness’ among the British public: ‘You see starving children on television, very nice photographs. You give something and after three weeks you give something more to get rid of it. You don’t want to see it any more’ (Banks-Smith, 1969).

The story in Ireland was similar. An explosion of media interest in the crisis in June 1968 was followed by increased NGO activity and growing donations to the Irish Red Cross. Africa Concern (created in March 1968 in direct response to the crisis, and now known as Concern Worldwide) collected over IR£1 million in the course of the relief effort, and drew the Irish public into new territory in its engagement with the Third World (Farmar, 2002; O’Sullivan, 2012). Yet the impetus for that response came from a very different place to Britain’s. Ireland’s strong Catholicism fostered a culture of charity similar to that generated by Christian Aid, Oxfam and Save the Children, but the worldwide reach of Irish missionaries also generated networks that connected the Irish public directly to the decolonised world. It was not unusual for Irish men, women and children to have an aunt, uncle, sister, brother or neighbour ‘on the missions’.

Nigeria had long been at the heart of that ‘spiritual empire’ (Bateman, 2008). When Ojukwu announced the East’s intention to secede in May 1967, there were 1,449 Irish Catholic missionaries in Nigeria, just under half of them based in Biafra (O’Sullivan, 2012). They were joined by a number of Irish missionaries who took up prominent positions in the humanitarian relief effort. Fr Tony Byrne, head of the Caritas Internationalis airlift, was an Irish Holy Ghost missionary. Fr Raymond Kennedy, one of Africa Concern’s founding members, belonged to the same order. On the ground local networks of nuns, priests and brothers lent a distinctly Irish accent to the distribution of relief. They offered an important source of action, information and connection, and became key players in the Irish NGO sector that emerged in Biafra’s aftermath.

The experience of the Biafran crisis in Britain and Ireland was replicated across much of the Western world, in the process radically altering the public profile of non-governmental aid. NGOs had long been present in the field of disaster relief: from the actions of charitable organisations in empire, for example, to the international response to famine in Russia in the aftermath of the First World War (Baughan, 2013; Paulmann, 2013; Cabanes, 2014; Little, 2014). Their role expanded in the 1940s, when non-governmental aid featured prominently in efforts to alleviate the massive refugee crisis that affected post-war Europe (Barnett, 2011; Davey, 2014). Biafra, however, was different. Measured in simple monetary terms, the explosion of activity was accompanied by a massive spike in income for humanitarian NGOs (for the

British case, see Hilton et al., 2012: 301). With that increased funding came increased responsibility, but also heightened interest from the apparatuses of the official aid system. The gains won in the late 1960s spawned an increasingly integrated global humanitarian system, in which NGOs played a minor (in monetary terms) but very visible role in the provision of aid. Britain (1975), the European Economic Community (1976) and Ireland (1977) created new structures for co-financing NGO activities in the fields of development and disaster relief, while the UN agencies, the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) also became actively engaged in ‘tapping’ non-governmental aid.

Yet the story of Biafra and its aftermath is not simply one of the inexorable forward march of NGOs. The crisis also coincided with a much broader discussion about the function of international humanitarianism. Some looked to advocacy as a solution. The late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed deep soul-searching across the Western humanitarian sector as aid workers imbued their actions with something more than charity and relief (Leebaw, 2014; O’Sullivan, 2015). Others transferred their energies to the world of development, or, at the very least, a combination of long-term assistance and emergency aid. Still others searched for ‘better’ models of disaster relief. Chief among them was Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), which emerged in 1971 as a response by a group of French doctors who had served with the ICRC in Nigeria and East Pakistan to the perceived shortcomings of the Red Cross system (Vallaëys, 2004; Davey, 2011; Desgrandchamps, 2011).

## **Biafra, decolonisation and the implications of post-colonial aid**

What did all this mean for the humanitarian sector? As we have seen, the enhanced profile enjoyed by NGOs in the late 1960s transformed them into key interlocutors between the West and the newly independent Third World. Sometimes that link was direct: NGOs used their role as aid providers to shape news agendas in the West (Africa Concern, for example, installed a telex machine that allowed the agency to relay information directly from West Africa to the Irish media); missionaries became mouthpieces (representative or not) for local communities from West Africa; and the visibility afforded to Oxfam and

others gave them a disproportionate influence on the language of public debate. Most of the time, however, the NGO sector's influence was less easy to discern.

The prism of decolonisation played a crucial role in defining their impact. In Britain, humanitarian NGOs were at the heart of popular efforts to negotiate the transition from benevolent imperialist to international do-gooder (Bocking-Welch, 2012). Biafra reminded them of the post-imperial power's obligations towards the independent Third World. But the response to Biafra also provided evidence that the break from empire was nowhere near as clear-cut as contemporary observers liked to presume. The legacy of imperialism was visible in the language of volunteering. SCF, for example, advertised for doctors and nurses 'interested in doing a humanitarian service of the highest order and who are prepared to rough it in a hot tropical climate for a period of four to six months' (SCF press release, 25 June 1968). It was also evident in the ways that British organisations conceived of their service to Africa. Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), a volunteer-sending agency whose workers operated across Nigeria, provided the most striking evidence of that mentality in practice. Founded in 1958 by Alec Dickson, a former colonial official in Nigeria, VSO's young educational, agricultural and medical graduates transferred the popular image of the British colonial serviceman or woman to the humanitarian volunteer, 'the lonely pioneer in his mud hut' (Adams, 1968: 199). Empire also played a role in shaping the humanitarian response in a very direct sense: in the personnel employed to deliver assistance on the ground. Colonel I. R. Y. Irvine Neave, for example, moved from a position within the colonial service in Nigeria in the 1950s to a role within SCF's operations in the newly independent country. He was not alone in bridging those two worlds. Christian Aid and Oxfam were also dependent – to varying degrees – on officials with experience of imperial service for the running of their operations on the ground.

In Ireland humanitarianism played an equally important role in shaping national identity. Irish compassion towards those suffering in West Africa was expressed outwardly as anti-imperial, internationalist and built on the tenets of Christian responsibility towards the less well-off (O'Sullivan, 2013). The Irish were 'kin to the Biafrans', the story went, their relationship forged by a common historical experience. Accusations of gun-running against Irish missionaries, and the actions of the hundreds of nuns, priests and brothers who worked to provide food and medical relief, did little to hinder that

vision of a small, Catholic nation helping another small, Catholic nation in need. The Igbo – the Irish claimed – were an industrious people, who had used education to raise themselves out of poverty (as the Irish had done in the nineteenth century), and now faced oppression from a larger neighbour. They also shared what Dr Joseph Whelan, the Irish-born Catholic Bishop of Owerri, described as 'one final and terrible likeness': famine. 'Biafra is in the grip of a great hunger', Whelan told a press conference in Dublin in June 1968 (Whelan, 26 June 1968), echoing the title of Cecil Woodham-Smith's widely-read history of the catastrophic events of mid-nineteenth century Ireland (Woodham-Smith, 1962).

At first glance, that evocation of a shared experience of colonialism made for a very different reading of the crisis in Ireland. In practice, however, Irish and British responses to Biafra shared one significant factor: the importance of empire and its legacies in shaping their actions. African independence in the early 1960s had challenged Irish missionaries to adjust to the demands of post-colonial governance. Nuns, priests and brothers increasingly undertook training in social work and development techniques, while the Catholic role in areas like education and health provision shifted to match the needs of independent states. Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (1967) and the creation of the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace in the same year underlined this reorientation of the Church's role to fit the needs of a 'development' world. Yet the continuities from empire remained openly in evidence. Africa Concern's campaigning and the role of Irish missionaries in distributing relief in Biafra was instantly recognisable to generations of Irish men and women brought up on 'penny for a black baby' fund-raising campaigns in churches, schools and local communities. That organisation's close links with the Holy Ghost missionary order merely reinforced that connection. With it came an (almost) seamless transition in the minds of the watching Irish public: from contributing to the needs of the 'spiritual empire' to a desire to 'save Ireland's spiritual children from extermination' (Whelan, 26 June 1968).

## NGOs and intervention in a post-colonial world

The confluence of empire, humanitarianism and the rise of NGOs had a profound impact on how the British and Irish publics understood the crisis in Biafra and, by extension, how they imagined the Third World.

Much has been written about the patchy record of NGOs in meeting the needs of local communities in Africa, including in Biafra (Rieff, 2002; de Waal, 1997; Vaux, 2001; Terry, 2002; Polman, 2010), and that critique has been easily extended to the world of development. Writing in 2002, for example, Firoze Manji and Carl O’Coill condemned the mechanics of the contemporary NGO sector in Africa as ‘a return to the colonial paradigm in which social services are delivered on the basis of favour or charity and their power to placate’ (Manji and O’Coill, 2002: 581). Their account did little to flatter the activities of non-state actors: ‘Today their work contributes marginally to the relief of poverty, but significantly to undermining the struggle of African people to emancipate themselves from economic, social and political oppression’ (Manji and O’Coill, 2002: 568).

Yet the reality of how NGOs acted in the field – in Biafra and elsewhere – was also deeply entwined with the vision of humanitarianism that they developed and promoted at home. It was a complex story. On the one hand, the drive and compassion that fuelled the actions of volunteers and aid workers was genuinely felt. On the other hand, however, that commitment disguised a number of underlying – and often unspoken – attitudes that shaped that response and what it meant for NGO activities in the Third World.

One way of unpacking that narrative is to think in terms of the ideal of ‘common humanity’ that underpinned Oxfam, Africa Concern and others’ commitment to ‘people-to-people’ aid. What did it mean to feel compassion for those suffering thousands of miles away, and what were the consequences for how we think of aid? Solidarity with distant others involved ‘ordinary’ individuals in the West in relationships with people they were never likely to meet. The idea of humanitarian solidarity that emerged in Biafra, by extension, implied a connection, if not with *everyone*, then at least with some universalistic aims. Historians and theorists of global social movements have sought out the languages and spaces in which those forms of transnational solidarity were articulated (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Politics, class and shared social concerns, they teach us, mattered greatly in the creation of transnational solidarity. Individual connections were also a powerful force, assisting in the development of shared languages and belief in ‘the cause’ (Alston and Laqua, 2014). Non-state actors played a particularly important role in that process: making sense of events in the Third World for ‘ordinary’ populaces in the West (Thörn, 2006).

In applying those lessons to cases like Biafra, however, we are still left with the problem of scale. Since universal solidarity was almost impossible for any individual to conceive, the NGO solution was to describe the humanitarian connection with West Africa as something more than local but less than global. In this way NGOs attempted to render tangible the ‘common humanity’ ideal. Stories of missionary endeavour in the distribution for aid, for example, were rendered all the more ‘real’ through the stories of individual priests, brothers and nuns transmitted in print and on radio and television. In taking that route, however, non-governmental actors simultaneously reinforced the sense of difference between the West and the Third World. The message put forward by British and Irish NGOs tended to reduce the complexity of the crisis to simple, easily consumable ideas. In Biafra, as later in East Pakistan, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Sudan and a litany of other distant locations, the urgency of ‘saving’ replaced ‘civilising’ as the buzzword for Western intervention in the Third World. The nature of this ‘crusade’ – as one commentator labelled Africa Concern’s activities (*Missionary Annals*, 1970) – generated a sense of adventure among its participants and, most importantly, its supporters. Stories of missionary relief work and Africa Concern’s campaign to ‘Send One Ship’ (SOS) met with widespread enthusiasm among the Irish public. In Britain the popular belief that ‘some really desperate action is needed, completely regardless of politics and danger’ was reinforced by the actions of NGOs (Ruddall to Black, 2 August 1968). But it was the relief airlift that generated the most headlines and popular support. How better to portray the selfless heroism of NGOs than through the dangerous – and sometimes deadly – act of landing at Uli airstrip in darkness and under the attentions of Federal fighter planes?

The response that those images generated was equally simplistic. To the watching public, the humanitarians – NGOs and missionaries – became the key to ‘saving’ Biafra. It was they who provided the protein and the medicines necessary for life; if only their supporters would give that extra money, they suggested (intentionally or not), everything would be fine. The process of administering those remedies further reinforced the primacy of the NGOs. Powerful television images of white aid workers handing out food to Biafran refugees made clear the hierarchy of relief. ‘Experts’ recruited in the West administered medical and other assistance to local populations, and in Western terms. And however closely expatriate

missionaries and volunteers identified in their own minds with those they assisted, their actions nonetheless contributed to a donor-recipient chain that was defined by the ‘radically unequal order that is the mark of the humanitarian relationship’ (Fassin, 2012: 253). Three months after Biafra’s collapse in January 1970, Oxfam reminded its supporters of the difficulties associated with rapid social and economic change in a context like that unfolding in Nigeria: ‘The very world itself confounds them as they are sucked by the slipstream of modern technology from their ancient ways. They need both steadying influence and a helpful bridge to cross this chasm successfully’ (*Oxfam News*, April 1970).

## Biafra and the politics of aid

Therein lay the great contradiction of humanitarian relief. Biafra transformed benevolence into an act of unity with independent Africa: we have compassion because we are all part of the same human race. But the ways in which that empathy was expressed ensured that humanitarianism remained something done unto others (Dogra, 2012; Fassin, 2012). In that sense, British and Irish NGOs operating in Biafra also helped to reinforce what Mark Duffield termed the principle of ‘permanent emergency’: the reproduction of the humanitarian movement through consistent crisis, simultaneously emphasising NGO neutrality and stripping away any complexity from the recipients of disaster relief (Duffield, 2007). Biafra became a site for intervention, a space to be occupied by NGOs, and one to be saved by their transnational agency.

It was also a depoliticised space. From the beginning of the crisis British and Irish NGOs attempted to elevate their actions above and outside of the politics of the conflict. Christian Aid, for example, was adamant in its intention to be ‘impartial in regard to the military and political issues of the war – and [to] try to relieve suffering on both sides, as equally as possible’ (Brash to Christian Aid staff, 9 December 1969). Oxfam, too, made clear to its supporters that it was ‘in no way concerned with the politics of the situation ... In pleading for a cease-fire our only concern is for humanity’ (*Oxfam News*, December 1968). The broadly pro-Biafran sympathies prevalent in Ireland – the Nigerian Federal government was so suspicious of Africa Concern and the Holy Ghost Order’s activities that it expelled them from the country immediately after the end of the war – were

tempered by a similarly apolitical approach to relief. Humanitarianism belonged to the realm of Christian charity, a broadly shared pride in missionary and NGO endeavours – so the broad consensus went – and stood apart from debates about genocide and civil war.

There was nothing new, of course, in NGOs asserting the neutrality of aid. That notion has long been cherished by the humanitarian sector. Yet neither was there anything new about that outward expression of independence disguising a much more complex story of the politics of relief. The humanitarian campaigns of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries engaged British NGOs in debates about the merits of neutral versus active humanitarianism (Gill, 2013). Since then, however, the political motives of aid have been less explicit. Subconsciously, humanitarianism has always been connected to Western attempts to ‘organise’ the outside world: from Save the Children’s internationalist agenda in the inter-war period (Baughan, 2012; Hilton, 2015) to the relationship between NGOs and the international community in the Balkans in the 1990s (Rieff, 2002). Biafra was no different. The undercurrent of empire described earlier in this essay reflected a very Western imagining of how life in independent Africa *should* operate.

The insistence on the neutrality narrative also had implications for the discursive environment in which the response to Biafra took shape. It did so in two ways. First, it largely ignored the geopolitical context in which the humanitarian crisis evolved. One of the greatest fears expressed by political observers in Britain and Ireland was that a Biafran victory would open a ‘Pandora’s box’ of territorial claims and counter-claims, along with a broader questioning of the appropriateness of imperial-drawn state boundaries elsewhere in Africa. With it – so the sub-current of those debates went – would come fragmentation, disintegration and, ultimately, opportunities for the spread of communism and Soviet influence (Simpson, 2014). Yet that debate was kept almost completely separate from the discussion of aid, despite its obvious implications for how external powers related to, negotiated with and applied pressure on the Federal government when it came to the question of relief.

Second, the depoliticisation of relief also reduced the agency of independent African governments in the eyes of the watching publics in the West. British and Irish NGOs knew and understood the role of the Federal and Biafran authorities in manipulating the

provision of relief and in perpetuating the conditions that made it necessary in the first place. However, they failed to adequately address that question with their supporters – or, indeed, among themselves – preferring to bury it in the hope that it would go away (de Waal, 1997). It didn't. The divisive intra-sectoral debates that surrounded MSF's departure from Ethiopia in late 1985 – precipitated by the Ethiopian government's resettlement policies and their impact on famine relief – showed that little had changed (Davey, 2011), while more recently the Syrian refugee crisis has thrown up equally contentious discussions around the politics of humanitarian aid (Weiss, 2014).

Implicit in those discussions was a much deeper question about the role of charity and relief. The late 1960s witnessed the 'discovery' of development and the search for 'justice' for the global South (Leebaw, 2014; O'Sullivan, 2015). Organisations like the Haslemere Group (formed in 1968), World Development Movement (1969) and Third World First (1969) in Britain issued strong critiques of a global economic and political system 'devised by the rich to suit their needs' (Haslemere Group, 1968: 4). In their words, overseas aid was 'largely a myth; at best, a wholly inadequate payment for goods received, at worst another name for the continued exploitation of the poor countries by the rich' (Haslemere Group, 1968: 4). The conversation in Ireland was described in appropriately local terms: the formation of a national Commission for Justice and Peace (1969) brought with it a discussion of the Catholic Church's role in issues of justice, rights and global economic reform. Yet those issues remained on the margins of popular debate. The crisis in Biafra offered many individuals their first glimpse of post-colonial Africa, and the image it created – of suffering, devastation and the need for immediate relief – eclipsed the debate about justice or the politics of aid. It was telling that NGO efforts to move into the worlds of justice and rights in the 1970s took shape largely in Latin America, not Africa. In Africa, so the popular understanding went, everything came second to the primacy of emergency aid – even development. The complete eclipse of Irish development organisation Gorta's model of long-term agricultural projects by the immediacy of Africa Concern's activities in Ireland provided the most striking evidence of this hierarchy in practice (O'Sullivan, 2012: 117).

It was not all Biafra's fault, of course. The struggle between charity and advocacy had much deeper roots, and precipitated a more broadly emotional response

than one crisis could generate. The debate about economic reform in the Third World in the late 1970s, for example, carried little weight with the majority of NGO supporters. Veronica Booth (Oxfam trustee, and former manager of one of its shops) pleaded at the organisation's 1981 annual staff conference not to 'get too sophisticated and forget that many supporters join us because of an emotional response to poverty – to the sight of a pitiful baby dying – and not because they know anything about land reform or the politics of aid' (Booth, 1981). A year earlier, Concern's Overseas Director Hugh Byrne had made a similar remark to his organisation's supporters: Concern could 'not stand by and watch people die in misery', he wrote, 'while the benefits of a major economic restructuring "trickle down" to the poor' (Byrne, 1980).

But Biafra could take at least some credit/blame for the shape of the humanitarian sector at the beginning of the 1980s. The image of NGOs running to the aid of the starving people of the Third World was merely underlined in a succession of crises that followed. The flight of refugees from civil war in East Pakistan in 1971 inspired not an interrogation of its causes but a Concern-run 'Pakistan Famine Appeal'. In Cambodia eight years later, NGOs focused attention away from the politics of Vietnamese intervention and the residual influence of the Khmer Rouge regime towards a situation that Oxfam technical officer Jim Howard described as 'worse than Biafra. But you can't make comparisons like that when there are so many people dying of starvation' (Davies, 1979). In Ethiopia (1984–85) the situation was much the same. British and Irish NGOs preferred to emphasise the distribution of aid, rather than publicly criticise the policies of displacement and resettlement followed by the Derg regime. The equation was simple: the Third World = disaster, famine and war = the need for NGO-led, apolitical humanitarian relief.

## Conclusion: Biafra's legacy

Biafra marked a series of beginnings for humanitarianism. It was the first televised famine, the West's first major response to disaster in independent Africa and the first time that the international non-governmental sector had significantly shaped the agenda of disaster relief. Yet Biafra was also deeply rooted in a much longer history of humanitarian aid. The continuities (from empire to post-imperial aid) and inequalities (aid as something done unto others) that

the crisis brought to the fore underlined the enduring potency of a Western ideal of ‘civilisation’ in organising humanitarian relief. Concepts like ‘saving’, ‘expertise’ and the superiority of scientific knowledge were expressed in new but familiar ways. The ‘othering’ of empire was transformed into an imagining of Biafra – and, by extension, Africa – as a place of disaster, famine and war. In both Britain and Ireland the popular representation of the crisis reinforced a tendency to view the peoples of the Third World as inferior or, at the very least, as near-perpetual victims.

What makes Biafra important, however, is the context in which those narratives took shape. The NGO response to the crisis came at a crossroads for humanitarian aid: the meeting of a rapidly expanding international NGO sector with popular attempts to come to terms with a decolonised world. That confluence of narratives helped to crystallise a particular humanitarian vision of, and relationship with, the Third World that the sector has spent decades trying to change. To understand what it means, we

must begin by rejecting any easy dichotomy between ‘good’ or ‘bad’ aid. The NGO-inspired narrative of Biafra made some aid workers – and some NGOs – very uncomfortable indeed. Instead, we must unravel the key tension that shapes disaster relief: between humanitarianism’s aspiration to universality and its grounding in a set of Western ideals. The Biafran story reminds us that the kinds of compassionate pleas that rendered the crisis in simplistic, depoliticised and interventionist terms held a considerable attraction to those watching in the West. The budgets of emergency-focused NGOs did not suffer from the images they employed in the late 1960s – quite the opposite, in fact. Nor did their profiles, as those organisations emerged to take centre stage in the provision of aid. The West, the Biafran experience suggests, *needed* a translator to make sense of the outside world. And the crisis brought NGOs to the forefront in providing that mediation. But Biafra also provides us with one final but critical lesson: that with that role comes great responsibility, and the need for a very careful appreciation of how and for what purposes humanitarianism is portrayed.

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