

Introduction

On 20 August 1985, a shipping container sent by the Toronto-based Ethiopian Famine Relief Fund arrived in Djibouti port but there was no one there to claim it. Or, rather, no one wanted to claim it. The Canadian Red Cross had been asked to facilitate the delivery but said that it 'wouldn't be interested'.¹ The shipment was addressed to World Vision but it too refused to have anything to do with it. When the Fund's president, Donald Calladine, contacted World Vision Canada in July 1985, the response he received was straightforward: 'the organisation did not have the staff in Djibouti to take it, nor could they arrange to get it'.² Calladine sent it anyway. And so, this shipment of goods, valued at more than C\$110,000, sat unopened in port and its contents undistributed. Even the Canadian Embassy in Addis Ababa was unwilling to get involved. 'We don't know what we'll do about it', an official told the *Toronto Star*, 'We're a three-hour plane ride from there so we can't go and see what shape it's in.'³

Why did no one want this consignment? It was hardly the only such shipment sent from the West in desperation at the humanitarian emergency then ravaging the Horn of Africa. Nor were the difficult logistics surrounding its arrival all that unusual. The problem of distributing food and medical supplies, which often built up in stores in Addis Ababa and elsewhere, was a familiar part of the relief narrative in the region.⁴ The answer lay instead in both the nature of the cargo and the reputation the Ethiopian Famine Relief Fund had garnered since it began operating in February 1985. Inside the container were eight bags of fertiliser, 126 packages of paper cups (approximately 1 million individual items), some old clothes, and 730 cartons of chocolate (weighing 6,000 kilograms) donated by a major confectionary manufacturer in Canada. It was a lot of chocolate. And it became the deal-breaker for any potential distributors. Most aid agencies were less than convinced about chocolate's appropriateness in a disaster situation, not least its questionable nutritional value – no matter how much the Ethiopian Famine Relief Fund maintained that it had received advice to the contrary. One of its

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staff members, Larry Cohen, recalled that Calladine had spoken to 'someone', who told him, 'Hey, it's got nuts in it. That means it has nourishment, so it should be sent.' 'What's wrong with chocolate?' Cohen added, 'even if the chocolate were melted down and they had the nuts from it, there's 20,000 pounds of nuts'.⁵

And this was just a glimpse of the absurdity that surrounded the organisation. In March 1985, Cohen mislaid 500 tickets for an auction designed to raise funds for a small NGO called Canadian Physicians for African Refugees. ('They were in the office. They got lost.')

⁶ A fundraising dinner at the Golden Country Chinese restaurant on Dundas Street, Toronto, two months later, left the Fund out of pocket after a mix-up left it with dozens of unsold seats. Another event at Designers Walk, a trade centre for architecture and interior design, ended similarly badly when Calladine found out that he had to pay the models and musicians involved. The story would be funny if it were not so depressing. As Larry Cohen admitted, the Fund's staff had little idea what they were doing: 'In our naivety, I suppose, we felt it wouldn't be such a difficult job.'⁷ By the time the chocolate and paper cups arrived in Djibouti, the entire organisation appeared bereft of momentum. The doctors were at odds with the Fund over the transfer of donations. Two (unnamed) Canadian NGOs had severed their relationships with it. Many shops, bars and businesses had also removed its red donation cans from their premises. And the confectionary company, which refused to be named, quietly distanced itself from its donation: 'We assumed that the charity knew what it was doing when it asked us for it.'⁸ Donald Calladine was clearly exhausted by the whole experience. When asked why he failed to answer the telephone at the organisation's office, he remarked: 'I just didn't bother . . . I haven't been putting much time into the fund. I can't get people to work for me.'⁹

The Ethiopia Famine Relief Fund was a calamity of the kind that often grabs headlines during an emergency response. Beneath the farce, however, its story tells us a great deal about the profound transformation that had occurred in non-governmental aid at the end of the twentieth century. Between the late 1960s and the mid-1980s, humanitarian aid and development NGOs became the primary conduits of Western compassion for the global poor. This was a period of profound change for the West's relationship with the Third World. The world's first televised famine, in Biafra, precipitated a dramatic spike in the number of new NGOs.¹⁰ Financial gains followed; in Britain, for example, the combined revenue of the sector's largest NGOs increased five-fold in this period.¹¹ By the time fundraising for Ethiopia reached its peak with Live Aid in July 1985, NGOs had become the symbol of, and principal channel for, public and state interventions in the Third World. Donald Calladine and

his colleagues and the ill-fated shipment to Djibouti were part of that narrative too. Although their experience of aid-giving ended in disaster, it was driven by a motivation that was common to many individuals in the West in the mid-1980s: 'I saw the television reports of people dying of starvation and felt I had to do something', as Calladine put it.¹² This compassionate impulse was hardly new. But the belief that individuals like Calladine could contribute themselves to that process spoke to a democratisation of aid-giving that had never been witnessed before.

The centrality of NGOs to that process, the reputation they gained, and the trust they accrued from it, was truly extraordinary. In little over a decade-and-a-half, the sector had transitioned from the rather patronising label of 'charities' or 'voluntary agencies' to being thought of as reliable, 'expert' providers of aid and compassion for the Third World. The contrast drawn by the *Toronto Star* between the Ethiopian Famine Relief Fund as an example of 'what can go wrong in the outpouring of sympathy' and the professionalism of the NGO sector (which was by then managing a budget of C\$45 million, donated by the Canadian public), was indicative of that process.¹³ Non-governmental aid should be better policed, it suggested, but it was intrinsically good. It was also presumed to be inherently global. We take it for granted now, as Donald Calladine and many other Canadians did, not only that we should care about poverty and suffering anywhere in the world, but that NGOs can and should intervene to do something about it. Yet such an assumption would not have come naturally to the sector's supporters – nevermind the wider public – just twenty years earlier. 'The concept of development aid to poor but independent countries, as opposed to assistance to colonial dependencies, is a relatively new one, and its scope is still far from being clearly understood and agreed upon', Christian Aid (the official aid agency of the British Protestant churches) told supporters in 1966.¹⁴ The question of how the sector transitioned from that role to its pre-eminent position in Ethiopia is central to the *NGO Moment*. How and why did non-governmental aid become global? What factors shaped the sector's rise to prominence? And what made it so attractive to supporters and donors?

Compassion and Constructing the 'Global'

In answering those questions, this book makes three claims about the nature of popular compassion and what it can tell us about globalisation in the late twentieth century. The first is to view the history of non-governmental aid in terms of moments of acceleration: bursts of activity that refreshed the sector while carrying with them the baggage of what had

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come before. The rise of global media, the creation of a global development industry from above, and the immediacy of crisis in the decolonised world in the period between Biafra and Live Aid, fostered a proliferation of NGOs, and allowed them to assume a dominant role in how people in the West encountered the Third World. Yet, as this book shows, the moral frameworks that guided those organisations were equally the product of a much longer formative process.¹⁵ To echo Jeremy Adelman, narratives that emphasise the transformation of compassion from one (unreconstructed) period to a more humane other, provide a 'hopeful telos' and 'a welcome brake on the temptations of catastrophism and declension'; but they also tend to underestimate the degree to which new ideas could regenerate older, less-savoury approaches.¹⁶

This emphasis on all that the sector could not leave behind is crucial to how we understand the NGO moment. In the most basic sense, it commands us to ask questions about how aid has been defined, adapted and contested in its various contexts. What are the different levels of expression of global compassion – from local and regional groups to transnational networks of non-governmental action? Where does the impetus come for change in the sector? How should we conceptualise historical shifts in the discourse, practice and definition of 'aid'? The answers to those questions, in turn, lead us to a complicated understanding of what non-governmental aid meant, its motivations and what it was for. NGOs in the late twentieth century borrowed from an understanding of human rights that had its origins in compassionate sensibilities that were at least two centuries old.¹⁷ They were rooted in a vision of development that was shaped by the move from 'progress' and 'improvement' in empire to the aid industry that materialised in the second half of the twentieth century, the ideological continuities that accompanied it and its implications for global governance.¹⁸ They should also be viewed as part of an entangled history of the humanitarian impulse that manifested in the pursuit of ethical capitalism, humanitarian internationalism, refugee relief, imperial welfare, rationalised modes of aid delivery and a broader moral economy of relief.¹⁹

These interwoven narratives produced an equally knotty understanding of humanity's obligations towards the suffering and the poor.²⁰ Emergency aid was different from human rights, it is true, and development projects were not the same as the pursuit of economic justice. More often than not, however, aid workers, NGOs and their supporters moved fluidly between these different categories. 'Aid' was as much the product of the intersections of rights and relief, and the nexus of development and justice, as any of those ideals alone.²¹ In this book, I adopt the term 'compassion' as a way of capturing this complex and multi-faceted

process. 'Compassion', as it is used here, encompasses the range of emotions, from charity to solidarity, via the improving urge and the desire to protect individual liberties, that make up what Thomas Haskell famously called 'humanitarian sensibility'. It was rooted not only in the desire to 'save' human life, but also in a much broader 'concern for distant others'.²² Understanding how and where this impulse was expressed allows us to better elucidate how the West encountered the Third World.

It also leads us to this book's second claim: that this was the period when a Westernised, NGO-led model of compassion became the dominant global expression of solidarity with the Third World. In the quarter-century or so after the Second World War, Western models of humanitarianism, aid and development competed for primacy with alternative projects of compassion that emerged from the communist world and within the wider anti-colonial movement. These were often intimately tied to political goals. As Young-sun Hong has observed, Cold War dynamics blurred the lines between emergency relief, the human cost of decolonisation struggles, and more overtly political forms of development aid, 'whose goal was to shape long-term postcolonial state-building projects in accordance with the ideology of one party or another'.²³ These projects, in turn, produced a compassion that was global in ambition, and globalising in the connections that it fostered.²⁴ The presence of Cuban medics in a variety of Third World contexts, Chinese support for development as a form of socialist solidarity, the alternative models of humanitarian action that emerged from Egypt, Ghana, Guinea and elsewhere in the 1960s, and the large quantities of humanitarian assistance delivered from the Soviet Union and the wider Eastern bloc to places like Cambodia (in the late 1970s and early 1980s) and Ethiopia (mid-1980s) made real a rather different concept of 'compassion' than that practised by Western NGOs. Solidarity, in that context, was an explicitly political process. Citizens of those countries were frequently encouraged to be internationalist in their outlook and to openly express their opposition to what they perceived as moral, as well as political, injustices abroad.²⁵

These alternative globalisations, however, were eclipsed in the NGO moment by the emergence of a 'progressive', interventionist model of compassion that privileged aid over political solidarity with the Third World. Debates about welfare, solidarity, economic inequality and global justice led not to socialist globalisation but to 'boycotts' and fair trade (see Chapters 3 and 4). Support for the political goals of decolonisation was made secondary to the defence of human rights and the protection of biological life (Chapters 7 and 8). And, most strikingly, the delineation of what I call 'compassionate space' (Chapter 2), allowed Western NGOs to

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justify their presence *anywhere* suffering existed and, rhetorically at least, decoupled their intervention from geography and politics. Oxfam's dominant role in Cambodia (Chapter 6), the very visible presence of Western NGOs in Central America (Chapter 7) and Ethiopia (Chapter 8), and the global reach of Live Aid – including in the Soviet Union – provided ample evidence of how this worked in practice.

The period that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc in the 1990s illustrated just how powerful this particular vision of 'globalised compassion' had become. Images of Western charities providing succour to Romanian orphans and to children whose lives had been devastated by the fall-out from the Chernobyl nuclear disaster had significant propaganda value in Europe and North America. But they were also symbolic of the triumph of the NGO model of intervention. Put simply, non-governmental compassion became associated with support for civil society and democracy. By the mid-2000s, indeed, the consequences of that process were deeply ingrained in efforts to enable the post-communist states of Eastern and Central Europe 'to accomplish their new obligations on development' as members of the European Union.²⁶ The promotion of a vibrant non-governmental sector, EU officials argued, was vital to encourage those states to meet their new-found responsibilities (framed under the rather revealing label, 'capacity-building').²⁷

We must be careful, however, not to divorce these processes from the wider environments in which they were formed. The third assertion that underpins this book is that the rise and rise of the NGO sector was a constructed, context-contingent (historical, social, political, cultural and geographical) process. That claim is rooted in a methodological shift that began with Akira Iriye's call in 1999 to rethink the twentieth century as 'a century of NGOs' and has led scholars to seek out the complexities of international society beyond the Cold War and great-power politics.²⁸ Historians of globalisation have been particularly keen to emphasise the role that NGOs have played in building an interdependent world, as Bruce Mazlish's rather eloquent description of their impact attests: 'Stumbling, fumbling, fudging, and nudging, NGOs as a social movement are a major, almost dominant factor in present-day globalisation. As someone said of religion, if it didn't exist, we might have to invent it.'²⁹ Scholars of transnational civil society have likewise attempted to reconstruct the contribution of non-state actors to the mechanics of connecting people and creating new polities throughout the world.³⁰ Others have taken this further, by foregrounding the relationship between domestic and international society, culture and politics.³¹ Each of these approaches is useful in contextualising – and, ultimately, explaining – the

narrative that unfolded in the NGO moment. At the heart of this book is a story of how those organisations connected the 'ordinariness' of political action at home with the intricate moral, social and political interactions those activities generated abroad.³²

Yet the complex nature of these interactions should make us wary of the tendency towards self-affirming grand narratives that sometimes accompanies the writing of global history.³³ At the very least, reading the late 1960s to mid-1980s period as a moment of acceleration suggests that the NGO sector's rise was inseparable from pre-existing relationships and patterns of intervention in the Third World. By the same token, it also became an intricate part of how the West responded to decolonisation. The sector's fortunes were intertwined with the networks and complex power relationships that underpinned the links between those two worlds. Stitched into those narratives, too, is the realisation that NGO-led histories of internationalism, modernisation, development and global civil society problematise our understanding of the North-North, North-South and South-North exchanges that have shaped the globalisation process. The various case studies presented in this book belie easy categorisation as examples of Whiggish progress towards the triumph of the global, or, indeed, of the opposite: of NGOs pressed into the service of liberal world governance. Rather, they point us towards a more nuanced understanding of the 'good' and 'bad' of compassion, and the role of a variety of different actors (North and South) in shaping that concept. The rise of NGOs was not simply an expression of bottom-up activism; of top-down, state-led development; of the power of neo-colonialism; or of the spread of a liberal world order, in other words. NGO aid could be some or all of these things (or none of them) at once.

The spaces in which we trace the history of the 'global' are vital in describing those dynamics. This book tells the story of the NGO moment through a variety of different lenses: the aid workers, activists, missionaries and donors who embodied the individual experience of compassion; the organisations and institutions they worked for (and through); the states and local and regional authorities that conditioned those actions; and the international agencies and ideas that helped to give practical form to their globalising ambitions. Taken together, these different units of analysis allow us a better insight into the construction of global compassion as a multi-valent process. The complex web of connections that helped to constitute the NGO moment are best understood not from the perspective of a single organisation or individual but as the product of the complex (and, often, quite heterogeneous) social, cultural and political environments that produced them.

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In reconstructing those narratives, *The NGO Moment* also attempts to break out of the American-centric (and Franco-centric, in the case of humanitarianism) frames that have dominated the historiography of NGOs. It is only by widening the geographical lens, I argue, that we can fully untangle the global history of non-governmental aid and how it was conceived as a universalising project. This book focuses, therefore, on the experiences of organisations from three states – Britain, Canada and Ireland – that were to the forefront of the new global aid industry that emerged in this period. Those countries (the province of Québec excepted) shared in a broadly Anglophone tradition of aid but had different vested interests in the Third World and justified their interventions in different ways: Irish anti-colonialism, British post-imperial benevolence and Canada's self-defined role as 'humane internationalist'. Their experiences of social, cultural and political change in this period were also different – contingent on local, national and regional forces. Yet the significance of these case studies lies not in their contrasting backgrounds. It is to be found instead in the striking similarities that defined their experience of the NGO moment. Missionary, colonial and international organisation connections were recast in similar ways across each of these countries, first as an expression of public morality, then as a popular movement across the West. The British, Canadian and Irish people imbued non-governmental aid with a familiar set of values that was reflected in the remarkably consistent spectrum of non-governmental actors their societies produced. There were faith-based organisations: the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD) and Christian Aid (Britain), Development and Peace (Canada) and Trócaire (Ireland). There were establishment and catch-all organisations: Save the Children and Oxfam (Britain), Canadian University Service Overseas (CUSO) and Gorta and Goal (Ireland). And there were also more radical, left-leaning NGOs: War on Want (Britain) and Oxfam-Canada. What united them all was the globalised framework of 'aid' to which they were committed: the languages and practices they shared, and the broadly shared understanding of 'compassion' they generated.

Accelerants

This book is divided into four sections, each corresponding to one of four 'accelerants' that defined the NGO moment: the legacies of empire and the possibilities afforded to NGOs by decolonisation; the birth of an NGO 'movement' that embraced a range of more radical concerns for the Third World; NGOs as conduits of world culture; and the widened definitions of NGO action that transformed the sector into something

resembling a people's compassion. The two chapters in each section, arranged broadly chronologically, do not pretend to offer a comprehensive narrative of non-governmental aid in this period. Rather, they focus on particular crises or moments of discussion and debate, as a way of drawing out the book's main arguments.

The NGO Moment begins in the shadow of empire and the fractured promises of postcolonial governance. The opening two chapters set the scene for a theme that runs throughout the book: the complex connections between imperial notions of charity, relief and development, and the practices adopted by NGOs. The principle of 'access' is at the heart of this section. Non-state activity in empire (whether through charities, colonial endeavours or the Christian churches) had been well-established by the 1960s. In many ways, indeed, NGOs simply replaced those entities as the 'acceptable' face of intervention in the Third World. The sector's paternalistic language, the images it employed, and its continuities in personnel (missionaries and former colonial officials) from empire, were important in fostering popular engagement with non-governmental aid. Yet decolonisation and the construction of postcolonial states also created new opportunities for NGOs. Chapter 1 analyses how 'access' shaped a role for NGOs in disaster relief, by establishing the concept's centrality to the West's response to the Nigeria-Biafra War: in the NGO-inspired model of 'people-to-people' action that drew so much popular support for the people of Biafra, and in the televised images of the aid airlift that brought supplies into the region. New agencies emerged in Canada (Canairerelief) and Ireland (Concern) to channel that discourse, while existing NGOs such as Oxfam, Save the Children, Christian Aid and Oxfam-Canada, benefited considerably from the increased publicity and income it generated. Chapter 2, on the refugee crisis in South Asia in the early 1970s and the conflict that created independent Bangladesh, extends that principle further. It addresses a key issue in the NGO sector's rise to prominence: how those organisations adapted the language of scientific rationality – here labelled 'humanitarian modernity' – to construct a sustainable model of intervention based on universal needs.

This emphasis on how access was framed from the West, however, should not distract us from the central role played by Third World actors in shaping the territory of non-governmental aid. In Biafra, the relationship that NGOs cultivated with the local regime lay at the heart of their claims to legitimacy in the West, while also granting considerable agency to local authorities in setting the agenda of non-governmental aid. In Bangladesh, the need to negotiate access, first to refugees, then to the welfare systems of the new state, created the conditions of what I call a 'compassionate space' that would have long-term consequences for how

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NGOs were embedded in Third World contexts. This was a unique type of association, which could not be shoehorned into conventional categories of Western domination or neocolonial influence. Collaboration with Third World authorities became a vital currency in convincing supporters of the NGO sector's legitimacy, based on its ability to reach those in need, while in the field it paved the way for long-term engagement with postcolonial governments. It also became integral to the concept of protection that emerged in this period: the tropes it employed, the problems it faced, and the communities of practice that flourished in that context.

While this narrative was unfolding in West Africa and South Asia, NGOs were also busy widening their interests and, with them, their support base, in other ways. The vital ingredient in that process, and the second accelerant identified in this book, was the more expansive definition those organisations applied to the concept of 'aid'. In the decades immediately after the Second World War, the cultivation of NGO support for the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA; 1940s), World Refugee Year (1959–60), and the Food and Agriculture Organisation's (FAO) Freedom from Hunger Campaign (FFHC; 1960s), engaged middle-class donors and students with the broad question of global poverty. Most significantly, however, it identified NGOs with a variety of different solutions to that problem. The long-term impact of this approach became apparent in the NGO moment. As this book shows, at a time when the world was experiencing a 'revolution' in human rights, the beginnings of a 'justice cascade', and the expansion of what would later be termed 'global civil society', the NGO sector's dexterity – better described as constructive ambiguity – allowed supporters who campaigned for solidarity and economic justice to project their aims on to it, in the same way as those wedded to more traditional forms of charity, development and disaster relief.³⁴

Chapter 3 takes up that story by asking how long-term concerns with charity, welfare and structural reform translated into support for the humanitarian aid and development NGO sector. The emergence of a new generation of aid workers in the late 1960s and early 1970s is at its heart, along with the challenge they posed to traditional ideas about aid. Left-wing critiques of aid, the influence of intellectuals like Paulo Freire, Ivan Illich and Argentinian economist Raúl Prebisch, and a new emphasis on poverty and inequality in transnational religious circles, converged in a common discourse that placed 'justice' (broadly defined) at the heart of debates about the sector. The emphasis on reform in those discussions was key. Ultimately, this story is one of compromise, of how ideas of advocacy and reform were absorbed and rearticulated by the NGO sector. But what did this anti-poverty movement look like? In