

DANGEROUS PITY

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The millions donated to Ethiopia in 1985 thanks to Live Aid were supposed to go towards relieving a natural disaster. In reality, donors became participants in a civil war. Many lives were saved, but even more may have been lost in Live Aid's unwitting support of a Stalinist-style resettlement project

Isn't it better to do something rather than give in to despair or cynicism and do nothing? This is the reproachful question familiar to anyone who has criticised organisations that view themselves as dedicated to doing good in the world. To those UN agencies, relief organizations and development groups working in crisis zones from Afghanistan to Aceh, any "non constructive" criticism, especially the kind that implies that it might have been better for the would-be Samaritans to refrain from acting at all, is so much nihilist piffle. Edmund Burke's dictum that for evil to triumph all that is required is "for good men to do nothing" (a favourite quotation of Kofi Annan's) encapsulates this view. The standard argument is that to do nothing is to acquiesce in whatever horror is unfolding, from Saddam Hussein's Iraq to the mass killings in present-day Darfur. Whether it derives from the missionary impulse, so ingrained in western culture, or the purported lesson of the Holocaust-"never again"-this view of what the American legal philosopher John Rawls called "the duty of assistance" has become virtually unassailable. Yet an alternative case can be made: in the global altruism business it is, indeed, sometimes better not to do anything at all.

Of course, those who believe it is always better to do something tend to believe that the negative consequences of their action arise from not doing enough. The most frequently heard complaint of activists is that western countries, both on a government and a popular level, remain too indifferent to the crises of hunger and debt that make life hell for several billion people. For most activists, the appropriate question does not concern the value of action, but rather how to mobilise people and focus pressure on the governments of rich countries so that more gets done. For over 30 years-as long as humanitarian action has been a principal response in the west to the crises of the poor world-a favourite metaphor has been to "wake people up" to what was really going on. Thus, in the Guardian in July 2004, the paper's media correspondent, Matt Wells, could write that the reporting of the BBC's Michael Buerk in 1984 had "woken the world to the famine in Ethiopia." The particular nature of the "wake-up call" in question was that Buerk's reporting got picked up by hundreds of media outlets the world over and is generally agreed to have inspired the Irish pop singer Bob Geldof to launch his Band Aid and Live Aid charity projects on behalf of famine-stricken Ethiopians. (Band Aid was the name of the group set up by Geldof and Midge Ure in 1984 to perform the single "Do They Know It's Christmas?" which raised around £8m. The Band Aid trust then organised the Live Aid concerts in July 1985-held at Wembley stadium in London, the JFK stadium in the US and several other international venues. The total sum raised is said to be between £50m and £70m.)

Activists who bemoan what they see as the selfishness and self-absorption of life in the rich world often point to Live Aid as a sign of how compassion fatigue can be beaten. In the words of one aid worker: "Humanitarian concern is now at the centre of foreign policy. We may not have an ethical foreign policy, but no political leader can fail to respond to the humanitarian constituency. Bob Geldof deserves a lot of credit for that."

This is certainly Geldof's own view. He believes that the Live Aid "experience" was a profound social innovation that helped to shape the views of those western politicians who have shown real interest in addressing the crisis of development, above all in sub-Saharan Africa. As he put it late last year: "We have a Live Aid prime minister who sat in and watched it on TV all day. Tony Blair and Gordon Brown are served notice that Britain, through its greatest artists, wants the situation [poverty and famine in Africa] changed."

That said, Geldof, to his credit, has bridled at all the "Saint Bob" talk that has surrounded him since Live Aid days, and has often insisted that it was a disgrace that he had to carry the torch for Africa. But Geldof was, and still is, more than just a campaigner. His view of what Live Aid accomplished—and his critique of what has happened in Africa since the 1980s—is so mainstream that Geldof was not only made a member of Blair's Africa Commission (along with the current Ethiopian prime minister, Meles Zenawi, and 15 others), but even sat next to Blair when the commission's report was launched on 11th March.

For many relief professionals who work in the field, media coverage and the involvement of celebrities has always been crucial. This is hardly the way the relief establishment would wish things to be, but it is the seemingly unalterable reality of contemporary celebrity culture to which they have largely reconciled themselves. "Ethiopia would not have got the attention it did without Live Aid," Joanna Macrae, the former co-ordinator of the humanitarian policy group at the Overseas Development Institute, acknowledges. Macrae, however, has grave reservations about what she has dubbed "quick, loud responses." Such notes of scepticism are in short supply. Bob Geldof might say on television at the time, "just give us your fucking money," and justify the demand with his oft-stated line that "Live Aid was about people losing their lives." But every seasoned aid worker knew at the time, as they know now on the eve of Live 8, Geldof's long-awaited successor to Live Aid, that there is no necessary connection between raising a lot of money for a good cause and spending that money well, just as there is no necessary connection between caring about the suffering of others and understanding the nature and cause of that suffering.

And yet, as the excitement about the latest Live 8 concert in support of debt relief for Africa has shown, Live Aid became the prototype for a new style of celebrity activism—from Richard Gere campaigning for Tibet to the proliferation of benefit concerts for the Asian tsunami. Live Aid also pioneered the idea of the pop star as interlocutor with government officials. In the wake of the 1985 concert, Geldof went to see Margaret Thatcher and, by his account, it was he who did the lecturing about what was to be done in Ethiopia. Anomalous in the 1980s, such meetings are now routine. But did the mobilisation of public opinion through celebrity endorsement really play the positive role with which it is now credited? To ask this question is emphatically not to turn hagiography on its head and to demonise either Geldof or Live Aid.

There is no smoking-gun evidence demonstrating that Live Aid achieved nothing, or only did harm. But there is ample reason to conclude that Live Aid did harm as well as good. It is also arguable that Live Aid may have done more harm than good.

Before the triumph in the west of a narcissistic conflation of the sincerity of our good intentions and the effects of those intentions, people at least intermittently grasped the significance of the adage that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. But unless one really does believe that good intentions are enough, then the question of what positive things Live Aid did or did not accomplish needs to be looked at with more care than has been evident in the accounts marking its 20th anniversary. The fact is that Ethiopia remains one of Africa's poorest countries, and the whole of sub-Saharan Africa is, if anything, worse off today than it was in the wake of the Live Aid mobilisation. That should give the hagiographer pause. Geldof himself has been of two minds. He says that Live Aid "created something permanent and self-sustaining," but he has also asked why Africa is getting poorer: "The Live Aid generation that responded to the famine in Ethiopia has a right to ask that question."

No one really knows how many people died in the Ethiopian famine of the mid-1980s. Estimates run as high as 1m and as low as 300,000. The roots of this great hunger dated back to the 1970s. But even though, over the course of a decade, conditions grew worse and aid groups warned us regularly about the magnitude of the disaster, Ethiopia remained a so-called "forgotten" crisis. A statement by the Christian Relief and Development Association (CRDA) in 1984 asserted: "there is no doubt that, if substantial quantities of food are not forthcoming immediately, hundreds of thousands of people will die." However, CRDA's appeal went on: "This can be avoided. We are aware of the logistical and bureaucratic constraints, but we are confident that through concentrated effort by the Ethiopian government, international bodies and voluntary agencies, it can be overcome." Despite its name, CRDA is an Ethiopian government-related body. But its view was largely echoed by the mainstream western relief NGOs.

In general, these calls were unsuccessful until Buerk's report and the Band Aid/Live Aid mobilisation that followed. At that point, at least as NGOs such as Oxfam understand the history, the logjam preventing relief from getting through was broken. The official account of Live Aid's role is to be found on the Oxfam website in its "Short history of Oxfam." The relevant part of the entry reads as follows: "In October 1984, TV footage of famine in Ethiopia (especially a BBC news report by Michael Buerk) prompts unprecedented public generosity. Initiatives like Band Aid and Comic Relief follow, and contribute to Oxfam's income, which more than doubles in one year to £51m." For Oxfam, and Bob Geldof, there was no political dimension to the famine. Buerk's original report had spoken of the famine as "biblical." The hunger was thus an affliction, the result of age-old poverty and of a drought that was the product of nature, not human beings, let alone Ethiopian politics or the war that was then raging across the north of the country. In this, the rhetoric of Live Aid in 1985 was uncannily like the rhetoric of the Asian tsunami in 2004. At least the tsunami was an authentic natural disaster, even though the relief effort may have been put to a wide range of political uses. But Ethiopia in 1985 was a very different case. There the famine was the product of three elements, only one of which could be described as a natural event—a two-year long drought across the Sahel sub-region. The other two contributing factors were entirely man-made. The first was the dislocation imposed by the wars being waged by the central government in Addis Ababa against both Eritrean guerrillas and the Tigrean People's Liberation Front. The second, and by far the most serious, was a forced agricultural collectivisation policy pursued with seemingly limitless ruthlessness by Mengistu Haile Mariam and his colleagues in the Dergue (committee) who had overthrown emperor Haile Selassie in 1974 (and officially adopted communism as their creed in 1984). This collectivisation was every bit the equal in its radicalism to the policies Stalin pursued in the Ukraine in the 1930s, where, as in Ethiopia, the result was inevitable: famine.

It was this policy that western aid would unwittingly assist, even as it saved lives. Having tried, without a great deal of success, to run aid efforts directly, the organisers of Band Aid and Live Aid channelled millions to the NGOs working in Ethiopia and, to a lesser extent, in Sudan. NGOs welcomed the money, not least because it came without the kind of strings imposed by western donor governments. Indeed, Oxfam used some of these funds to run covert aid supplies to rebel-controlled areas, though officially no major NGO was sending food aid to rebel-held territory—Addis Ababa did all it could to prevent it and this was still a time when state sovereignty was respected by western governments and aid organisations. (It is estimated that about one third of the deaths from the famine were in the rebel areas.)

A strong case can be made for Live Aid's achievements. According to one Ethiopia expert, Alex de Waal, the relief effort could have cut the death toll by between a quarter and a half. The problem is that it may have contributed to as many deaths. The negative effects of the NGO presence on the government side became more pronounced as the crisis went on. Moreover, the government in Addis Ababa became increasingly adept at manipulating and instrumentalising these Live Aid-funded NGOs. Indeed, a good case can be made that the picture provided to the western public of the Ethiopian famine was at least to some degree manipulated by the Dergue from the beginning. Until shortly before Buerk and his team were given permission to report from the Wollo region in the north of the country, where, along with Tigray and Eritrea, the famine was at its worst, the Dergue had denied access to foreign reporters. The rationale was that Mengistu did not want reports of the disaster to upstage the tenth anniversary of the revolution that had overthrown Haile Selassie. Both the Tigreans and the Eritreans had called for a ceasefire to allow for food distributions, but Mengistu rejected any truce, however short-lived, and no matter how many lives would have been saved. "We will never negotiate with terrorists," he declared. It was in the aftermath of this rejection that Buerk was then allowed in. And hard on the heels of the Buerk report, the Dergue determined that some 600,000 people would have to be moved to areas of southwestern Ethiopia where the government was in full control. The rationale? The terrible famine whose images were now ubiquitous in the western media, and which would inspire Band Aid and Live Aid.

This is not to say that the Ethiopian famine was not real. It was all too real. The question, rather, is one of balancing the positive accomplishments of running aid programmes and the effects of that

work being exploited by government or rebel authorities. Relief agencies routinely operate in places where governments or insurgents kill their own people. What choice do they have? Yet it is one thing to accept that NGOs can never control the environment in which they operate and quite another to participate in a great crime like the Dergue's resettlement, even if the purpose of that participation is to try to mitigate its effects and save lives. The truth is that the Dergue's resettlement policy-of moving 600,000 people from the north while enforcing the "villagisation" of 3m others-was at least in part a military campaign, masquerading as a humanitarian effort. And it was assisted by western aid money.

The lengths to which the Dergue was prepared to go soon became apparent. Though even Mengistu's Soviet patrons advised against it, the Dergue, as François Jean of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) put it at the time, chose to employ "shock treatment in order radically to transform Ethiopian rural society." But one finds no mention of that in any official account of Live Aid, in the speeches of Bob Geldof or the Oxfam website. The Ethiopian terror famine was on a far smaller scale to either its Soviet or Chinese predecessors, and many people in Ethiopia who died of hunger in the mid-1980s were not victims of the Dergue's campaign in a direct sense. But, as François Jean wrote, all three terror famines "proceeded from the same approach to reality... the same vision of the future, the same extreme commitment to radical social transformation."

Initially, the authorities called for volunteers to make up the 100,000 heads of household the resettlement plan called for. Few came forward. The response was swift. A campaign of systematic round-ups in towns and villages across the three targeted provinces began. Those caught up in these sweeps were either airlifted south or transferred by land, sometimes in vehicles the authorities had requisitioned from international relief agencies-vehicles that were there to transport foodstuffs. The trip usually took five or six days. To this day, no one knows how many people died en route. The conservative estimate is 50,000. MSF's estimate was double that.

As the deportations intensified, Ethiopian officials began to raid refugee camps and feeding centres that had been set up by mainstream relief agencies like MSF and Oxfam. There was nothing secret about what was going on. But donor governments and mainstream relief NGOs chose to turn a blind eye. In this, too, Live Aid almost certainly played a role, in the sense that the popular pressure generated by Geldof and his colleagues could not simply be "turned off" by governments. And yet, reports of the Dergue's use of resettlement as a means of defeating the Tigreans and the Eritreans appeared widely in the press in western Europe and North America during the high watermark of Live Aid euphoria. *Le Monde*, *Libération*, the *Financial Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *Time* magazine all featured such reports prominently. Initially at least, they had little or no effect on public opinion in the west or funding decisions by western donor governments. The narrative that Geldof had championed, and that the mainstream NGOs had endorsed, was that while the moral dilemma was hard to deal with, the only choice was to stayresettlement policy or no resettlement policy.

The NGOs and the UN specialised agencies-above all the Oxfam/Save the Children alliance that was then the major actor in the British relief world-defended this position even when the US, perhaps acting out of enmity to the Dergue that had overthrown its ally and protégé, Haile Selassie, tried to pressurise other donors not to support the resettlement programme. The head of UN development activities in Ethiopia protested against America's "politicisation" of resettlement. According to Rony Brauman of MSF, a UN official insisted that he had no reason to believe that people were being forcibly taken out of refugee camps and resettled against their will. Most relief workers did not go that far. But for them, the nature of the Mengistu regime, while it was to be regretted, was beside the point. As one wrote later: "Sure, Mengistu was a sick bastard... but what has that got to do with feeding poor, hungry, defenceless people?" As the debate raged, and as the NGOs that were determined to stay in Ethiopia began to face criticism in the press, Geldof leapt to their defence. "The organisations that are participating in the resettlement programme should not be criticised," he told the *Irish Times* on 4th November 1985. "In my opinion, we've got to give aid without worrying about population transfers." Asked about the estimates that 100,000 people had died in the transfers, he replied that "in the context [of such a pervasive famine in Ethiopia], these numbers don't shock me."

To this day, Oxfam has not officially retracted the policy of working with the Dergue that it pursued. The most it has ever been willing to do has been to speak out against the "haste, scale and the timing" of the resettlement. Some aid officials went much further in accommodating the regime's policies. Jack Finucane of the Irish relief NGO Concern hosted a dinner in Addis Ababa in late 1985 for foreign relief workers, attended by Bob Geldof, at which he defended the resettlements. Finucane reportedly demanded that western donor governments stop being so squeamish and put money into the project. When Geldof (departing somewhat from the attitude he expressed to the Irish Times) queried Finucane about a Wall Street Journal article that claimed somewhere between 50,000 and 100,000 Ethiopians had died as a result of the resettlement policy, Finucane responded: "I've read it; I don't believe it." The UN took much the same tack. Kurt Janson, the chief UN representative in Ethiopia between late 1984 and late 1985, took the opportunity of a farewell press conference to appeal publicly to western donor governments to help Ethiopia with the resettlement programme.

Of all the NGOs, only the founding (French) section of MSF refused to go along with the pro-Dergue consensus. Once expelled from Ethiopia, however, MSF/France was free to talk publicly about what it knew about forced deportations. "We are witnessing the biggest deportation since the Khmer Rouge genocide," said MSF's president, Claude Malhuret, in late 1985. For MSF, the decision of aid agencies, UN institutions and donor governments to help a totalitarian project like the Ethiopian resettlement programme was an exercise in deadly compassion and dangerous pity. As Claude Malhuret put it, Ethiopia demonstrated that it had become imperative to "clarify the complex relations that humanitarian action forms with a totalitarian regime; to mark out the indistinct but very real limit beyond which aid to victims was unwittingly transformed into support to their executioners."

Geldof remains unimpressed by the idea that the aid he helped to raise was used in ways that may have cost as many lives-in MSF's view, more-as were saved. In interviews, he has never been drawn on whether MSF's accusations were right or wrong (though he has impugned their motives). As far as he is concerned, Live Aid raised a lot of money and used that money to feed people who otherwise would have starved. Live Aid, Geldof would say later, had been "almost perfect in what it achieved." In the context of such near perfection, raising the issue of the resettlement policy looks ungrateful. For him, it was at most a secondary concern. As Geldof put it to one interviewer: "If Live Aid had existed during the second world war, and if we'd heard that there were people dying in concentration camps, would we have refused to bring food and assistance to those camps? Of course not!"

Leaving aside the naivete of a man who can even posit the fantasy of Nazis letting aid workers in to help Jews, Roma or Russian POWs, Geldof was presumably unaware when he responded that this question of the collusion between the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Nazi regime remains one of the great controversies within the humanitarian world. The ICRC was indeed aware of the Nazi death camps. But it decided that its ability to fulfil its mandate of assisting prisoners of war held by the Germans would have been endangered by public acknowledgement of Auschwitz, let alone denunciation of the Nazis. Today, the official line of the ICRC is that its actions during the second world war were a tragic mistake-that faced by the radical evil of the concentration camps, the organisation should have defied its own norms of political neutrality and confidentiality and spoken out, even if this meant no longer being able to work in Nazi-occupied Europe. With the exception of MSF, what neither the relief world in general, nor the UN, nor Geldof and his Live Aid team have ever come to terms with is that the Mengistu regime-finally ousted in 1991-also committed mass murder in the resettlement programme in which Live Aid monies were used and in which NGOs that benefited from Live Aid funding were active. The Dergue was in control, and it did with the UN and the NGOs what the Nazis did with the International Committee of the Red Cross: it made them unwilling collaborators.