A CRUSADE FOR OUR TIMES

On 18 December 1960, the Observer carried a brief front-page story about mass starvation in a corner of the newly independent Congo. Around 280,000 Baluba people had fetched up in a waterless and foodless plain, and there, strung out along the road, had stopped because they simply had no strength to go further. Thousands were no more than walking skeletons and many were swollen from hunger oedema. The weakest, mostly children, were dying at the rate of 200 a day.

People working for Oxfam at the time remember that story in the Observer with the clarity normally reserved for the deaths of presidents and the outbreak of war.

The tragedy in the Congo burnt the image of the starving African child onto the collective British conscience. Oxfam helped make that come about, and in the process itself leapt into public view as the British medium for prompt relief to famine victims in faraway places. When Kirkley went to the Austro-Hungarian border in 1956 he was no-one special, a helper among many. When he went to the Congo in early 1961, he was, fleetingly, a celebrity, on whom British hopes of saving lives were visibly pinned.

Chaos had steadily engulfed the Congo in the months since independence on 30 June 1960. Belgium had been extremely negligent in preparing the handover from colonial rule, holding onto all vestiges of authority till the last possible moment. There were no Congolese in senior administrative or military positions; no trained doctors or professionals – there were only 17 university graduates in the entire country. Within days of independence, Congolese troops mutinied against their Belgian officers. The country’s leading federalist politician, Moise Tshombe, announced the secession of mineral-rich Katanga Province, and law and order began to break down.

The Belgians panicked. Most officials took to their heels, leaving an administrative vacuum and military turmoil. The Prime Minister, Patrice
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Lumumba, turned to the United Nations for help. The UN Security Council agreed to despatch peace-keeping troops and a ‘civilian operation’ to restore order and maintain essential services – just while the Congolese sorted themselves out. Never had the United Nations Secretariat taken on such a complex, interventionist and controversial role; it came under tremendous strain, and the popular UN Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjöld, was killed in late 1961 when his plane crashed in the African bush on his way to mediate the crisis.

At the beginning of 1961 when the famine hit the headlines, the UN’s main peace-keeping operation was floundering. In Leopoldville, the capital, contingents of troops from Indonesia, Malaya, Tunisia, Ceylon, Ireland, Sweden, Ghana, and Egypt made occasional sorties to the bush. In New York the UN member states argued about pulling out their national forces, about extending the Cold War onto the African continent, about Dag Hammarskjöld’s interference in Congo’s internal affairs, and about who should pay for the UN’s attempt to keep control in, without governing, a disintegrating country. Out in the vast expanse of the countryside, things fell apart.

The famine in South Kasai was months in the making, but – busy with battles for political control – no-one was looking out for the human suffering which must follow chaos and anarchy on such a scale. The source of the problem was ancient tribal friction, erupting under the pressures of mass insecurity. Over the years, some enterprising Baluba people had moved westwards into the country of the Lulua. When independence arrived, the Lulua were fearful that the Baluba would take power over the entire province, and turned upon them.

The Baluba ‘refugees’ set off on a 300-mile trek towards their tribal heartland without food to eat or seed to plant and quickly became destitute. Many erected miserable little huts along the road. Meanwhile their co-tribesmen, who happened to be sitting on most of the Congo’s diamond wealth, followed the prevailing fashion by seceding and setting up an autonomous state under their own ‘President’, Albert Kalonji.

When hunger took hold in November, Dag Hammarskjöld appealed for funds within the UN family and UNICEF, the United Nations Children’s Fund, came up with $150,000 for emergency feeding. But the routes and the transport for getting supplies into Bakwanga, the main local town, were complicated not only by every kind of geographical and communications difficulty but also by the political niceties attendant on ‘President’ Kalonji’s relations with his neighbours and the central authorities. In early December, he agreed to the presence of a special UN unit and an air-lift began. A fleet of ancient trucks was despatched, and distribution centres set up. By this time the area’s two hospitals and
handful of dispensaries were overwhelmed by pitiful creatures starving and dying.

It took time in such adverse circumstances to build up the food distribution system and some kind of rudimentary care for those in extremity. Many children could no longer digest ordinary food. Dr. Melson, a British medical officer attached to a Ghanaian military unit, was trying to cope with 1,000 patients in a 150-bed hospital in a village called Miabi. He and a colleague from WHO began making up ‘Kasai cookies’ from maize flour, powdered milk, and sugar, for special feeding. Gradually the death toll began to decline. By mid-January, around 60 tons of food a day were being delivered against the 150 tons needed for full distribution.

The Oxford Committee was comparatively well-informed about the famine before it became front-page news in December 1960. Its first relief grant was made in October, and in mid-December it made an emergency grant of £5,000 to the Congolese Red Cross for child feeding. Just before Christmas, a special UN relief account was opened in a Leopoldville bank, and Oxford thereafter sent sums directly to this account: £5,000, and a further £5,000, as donations trickled in.

At that time, there was no automatic identification of Oxfam by the British press or public as a charitable saviour for remote disaster victims. The Committee sent out Congo Appeal letters to the press over the signature of Canon Milford, again the Committee’s Chairman, and Sir William Hayter, Warden of New College and a trustee. On 6 January, the story of the famine hit the popular press in an unprecedented way, splashed across four pages of the Daily Mirror. Sir William’s and the Oxford Committee’s name were mentioned. Oxfam ordered 50,000 reprints of the news spread and mailed them to all its supporter groups and donors. The coverage brought a tidal wave of response.

Oxfam’s press office and advertising machinery were operating in high gear. Some newspapers carried the appeal ad. free and the offices in Oxford were inundated. On one day, 9 January 1961, £20,000 arrived in the mail. Finance Officer Gordon Rudlin could scarcely manage to carry his suitcases of cheques and cash to the Bank. The Committee had to hire a church hall to house the mail-opening operation, with 30 volunteers working in shifts. In towns all over the country, regional organisers were swamped with demands for collecting tins and Congo literature.

This massive outpouring of public generosity was something completely new. It came purely from coverage in the newspapers – there were no television pictures; and even the press coverage was modest and the pictures mild by the standards of later African disasters. Other overseas aid charities such as the British Red Cross and War on Want had similar experiences. By 21 January, a total of £104,000 had flowed
into Oxfam's Congo Appeal; the Red Cross had received £64,000 and War on Want, £40,000.

The following day, Leslie Kirkley flew to the Congo. The Committee had never had at its disposal such large sums to dispense so rapidly. Kirkley felt that the scale of the expenditure, the criticism of UN operations in the Congo, and the intense concern of the British public – one donor wrote: 'No child on earth should look like this' – required him to undertake a voyage of relief inspection. On Wednesday 25 January, in the company of the UN relief co-ordinator, a British Embassy official, and a party of journalists, Kirkley flew down from Leopoldville to the famine area.

Conditions were still severe with around 40 deaths a day. But things were very much better than they had been. The food distribution programme was in place and, drawing on further supplies from UNICEF, was about to step up daily capacity to 150 tons a day. Seeds and hoes had been given out by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) so that the refugees could plant in time for the heavy rains of mid-February. The worst of the crisis was over, and everyone agreed that whatever the shortcomings of the UN's peace-keeping operation, its conduct of emergency relief had been first class. Kirkley was told that Oxfam's prompt response with ready cash – vital for transport – was deeply valued. Among voluntary agencies it had led the way.

As Kirkley's heart was being wrung by the kwashiorkor babies in Miabi hospital, Edward Heath, the Lord Privy Seal, was on his feet in the House of Commons answering questions from Dennis Healey, Labour Foreign Affairs spokesman, about British government tardiness over the Congo famine. Heath rejected this charge. Indeed, he had gone shopping all around the colonies – groundnuts had been flown from Nigeria, maize seed and flour from Rhodesia, dried fish from Uganda and Nyasaland: 'FAO appealed for appropriate food and we have done our best to get hold of it.' Still, there was no question that the public response had bumped the government effort up. Heath himself paid tribute to voluntary fund-raising, singling out 'Oxford Famine Relief'.

Altogether, by the end of September 1961, £313,826 had been spent by Oxfam on Congolese relief. Some of this went towards other refugee problems stemming from the upheavals, which did not finally end until 1963. Some went on longer-term medical programmes for child health and nutrition run by the missions, in South Kasai and elsewhere. Severe as needs were during the crisis and for months to come, the key outcome of the relief effort was that no further tragedy of famine was allowed to develop from the Congolese chaos.

The starving child of the Congo in early 1961 was a temporary phenomenon and, on disaster mortality scales, not a spectacular
claimant: perhaps 10,000 deaths altogether. But that starving child
tapped a new well of compassion and launched a new perception of
Africa, poverty, and the hungry world. For good or ill, that same
perception launched the Oxfam that we know today.

The withdrawal of the Belgian authorities from the Congo in mid-1960
was only one such colonial retreat in a year known in international circles
as 'the Year of Africa'. No less than 17 former African colonies achieved
independence in 1960 as the 'winds of change' – a phrase immortalised
by Harold Macmillan – blew over the continent in stormy gusts.

Most of the remaining British possessions on the continent –
Basutoland (Lesotho), Bechuanaland (Botswana), Kenya, Nyasaland
(Malawi), Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), Sierra Leone, Swaziland,
Tanganyika, Uganda, Zanzibar – would raise their own flags within a
few years. Meanwhile the events surrounding the various countries' in-
dependence – the wars in the Congo, the release of Jomo Kenyatta
from prison, Bugandan claims for self-government, the break-up of Roy
Welensky's Rhodesian and Nyasaland Federation – were daily subjects
of front-page news in a Britain consumed with interest in a continent
shedding the colonial past.

The rapid pace of change took most people by surprise. Africa was
suddenly full of nation-states demanding an equal place at the interna-
tional table, an end to the old paternalistic relationships, and the abandon-
ment of an outworn, often racist, mentality. For those in Britain for
whom the imperial sway and the responsibilities of the civilising mission
had been cornerstones of a world view and a lifetime of service, the
changes were greeted with misgiving. For others, they were intoxicating
in their promise of renewal, of a world casting off its chains to find new
paths of co-operation on terms which respected the dignity of all.

In colonial days, the typical British view of the societies which
flourished in those pink-shaded areas on the map was of an endless
National Geographic spectacular of exotics and primitives, nomads and
warriors, dressed in magnificent outfits – or nothing – eating foods with
curious names. These creatures were rarely seen in the newspaper,
except when a Royal came by on an empire tour, at which time dances
and feasts of extraordinary abundance and colour were the predominant
motif. Feats of bravery were often stressed, as were the tribesmen's
physical prowess, their vast numbers of wives and progeny, and their
longevity. Occasionally, in a sermon or a talk at the Parish Hall, a
missionary gave a more moralistic and anthropological perspective.

Whatever variations were provided in the picture of Her Majesty's
brown- and black-skinned subjects, one feature was axiomatic: they were
not described in the same terms – political, economic, social – as us. Comparisons using the same set of criteria were not made because the people were not comparable, they were ‘not like us’. In the late 1950s, the prospect of widespread African independence, and its implication that peoples black and white, strong and weak, would now be treated on equal footing, meant that the viewpoint had to change. In a bewildered post-colonial Britain there was a sudden psychological vacuum, waiting to be filled by a new perception of those who were once the subject peoples.

With the hasty transplant overseas of Western political institutions and other trappings of the modern nation-state came the application of standard economic vocabulary. And then came the revelation: half, or was it two-thirds, of humanity lived at the very margins of existence by any comparison with our own standard of living. However deft with a spear or proficient with a talking drum, the average tribesman’s material wealth was non-existent; people often had too little to eat; shelter and clothing were minimal; life expectancy was low; children died from minor causes; sickness was common and often fatal; in short they lived in poverty. Nothing about this was new – except that it was a revelation. This was because ‘living standards’ had not been the window on these societies through which most observers had previously been looking.

In the new age of partnership, an end to the dichotomy whereby one part of humanity lived well while the other lived in penury had to become the crusade for our times. Opinion-leaders began to call for an all-out attack on world poverty. The United Nations led the way by announcing that the 1960s would be ‘The Decade of Development’. The actual declaration was made by President John F. Kennedy immediately after an inaugural address which signalled a new sense of moral purpose in international affairs: ‘To those peoples in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves. ... If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it can never serve the few who are rich.’

Kennedy’s inspirational words were delivered on 20 January 1961, two days before Leslie Kirkley set off for the Congo to visit the UN relief programme for the starving children of South Kasai.

The UN Development Decade set a target for every industrialised country: one per cent of their gross national product should be devoted to official Overseas Development Assistance. This was ‘aid’, a word previously associated with military and strategic purpose. ‘Aid’ was now to become the instrument of ‘development’, the means whereby resources would be channelled from the better-off countries to the poorer to help build up their social and economic institutions.
To some, the notion of aid continued to carry investment and strategic overtones. Aid was something you ‘gave’ - actually, it was usually in the form of concessional loans - to struggling allies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, to help build a prosperous bulwark against the Communists. But in other minds the twin ideas of aid and development were golden with promise. The rich nations should help the poor, not for reasons of strategic self-interest, but - as Kennedy said - ‘because it is right’. The hopeful projected the idea of social justice and the welfare state onto an international canvas and dreamed of a world made more humane by rearrangements of wealth between the nations.

In the US, Kennedy initiated the Peace Corps, the Alliance for Progress, and ‘Food for Peace’. In Britain, there was ‘Voluntary Service Overseas’ for young people prepared to spend a year or two helping fill a new country’s educated manpower gaps. A blue-chip think-tank was set up, the Overseas Development Institute under William Clark, which pressed for a coherent government policy and more aid for the less developed members of the Commonwealth. This goal was achieved in 1964 when the new Labour Government created a Ministry of Overseas Development with a Cabinet seat and Barbara Castle as its first incumbent.

Above all there was optimism. If only aid could be given on a grand enough scale, on dimensions like those of the Marshall Plan, the growing gap between the prosperity of the rich countries and the poverty of the rest could – surely – quickly be closed. Fantastic as it now seems, many thought that the Development Decade would see the task almost completed.

The expression of acute poverty in the newly-independent countries of Africa, as people witnessed in the press reports from the Congo, was hunger. In Britain, the idea of providing help for the poorer countries reached public prominence via the ‘Freedom From Hunger Campaign’. This was the springboard from which the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief became a practitioner of development assistance alongside its existing role in disaster relief.

The symbol of its involvement in both disasters and development was the starving child of Africa, an innocent whose haunting eyes and skeletal limbs made a startling impression on the British conscience.

The ‘Freedom from Hunger Campaign’ was initiated by the Director-General of the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, the dynamic Dr. Binay Ranjan Sen of India. In late 1959, Sen convinced the member nations of FAO that the world’s apathy towards hunger must be thoroughly shaken up by an urgent programme of action. On 2 July 1960, with applause still echoing for the success of World Refugee Year,
Sen launched his campaign in Rome, stating that this onslaught on food shortage aimed to help countries break out of the cycle of poverty and relegate hunger to the pages of history.

This was a time at which great hopes were vested in the organisational galaxy of the United Nations, invented to improve human well-being in the interests of peace and justice for everyone. As the bonds of European empire unwound, the UN found itself with an unforeseen role in world affairs. Its unbiased machinery was free from the taint of self-interest and assumed superiority which inevitably clung to the old colonial powers. The new nations sat down on equal terms with their old rulers in the UN General Assembly and on the governing boards of its member bodies. The UN might have performed disappointingly in the political arena, but with decolonisation a new day dawned: its economic and social organisations would lead the 'development' crusade.

Sen's 'Freedom from Hunger' drive was FAO's clear demonstration that it was resolved to meet this challenge with energy and determination. It also stemmed from frustration that FAO had never been given the mandate, the powers, or the budget to do more for countries with widespread hunger than offer advice or 'technical assistance'. Sen was at the same time also pushing for the setting up of an FAO 'World Food Programme', finally inaugurated in 1963, to use food surpluses to promote economic development via public works programmes, and for emergency relief.

'Freedom from Hunger' sought a worldwide partnership among like-minded groups, not for emergency relief or hand-outs but for self-generated agricultural development. Of all the rich world countries to take part, as with the World Refugee Year, Britain responded with the most enthusiasm. Ironically, this was just because of the long colonial affinities everyone was now working so hard to discard. The response was encouraged and garnered by those voluntary agencies already associated with sending help overseas. 'Freedom from Hunger' helped them to recast their own role to confront the challenge of world poverty, and to join the development crusade as partners of the big brothers in the UN system.

Oxfam was the voluntary agency – alongside War on Want and Christian Aid – to identify itself most closely with 'Freedom from Hunger'. During the Campaign's key period, 1960-65, Oxfam became the main vehicle whereby the new crusade on behalf of the poor overseas took root in British hearts and minds. This partly occurred as a result of conscious strategy; partly because at an historical turning-point a number of internal and external forces combined to propel Oxfam forward, and Leslie Kirkley was keen to run.
Three weeks after the international launch of FFH in Rome, the Oxford Committee held a week-long Annual Conference on the 'Freedom from Hunger' theme and gave the campaign its first public airing in Britain. The venue was an Oxford college, and 150 delegates attended from all over the country and from France, Holland, India, Nigeria, Sweden, Switzerland, Trinidad, and the US.

The opening lecture, grimly entitled 'The Survival of Mankind', was given by Dr. Arnold Toynbee; other speakers included Lord Boyd-Orr, the first Director-General of FAO, and Dr. Neville Goodman, the first Assistant Secretary-General of WHO. The most important contribution came from M. Veillet-Lavallee, Assistant Director-General of FAO, who spoke optimistically about the possibility of rapid increases in food production. 'Aid', he said, 'must go beyond philanthropy. It must fit in with a balanced plan for relieving the world of its food problems. Our campaign is directed not against famine, but against the causes of permanent insufficiency of food supplies.'

For many of the Oxfam audience, this kind of global view required a large perceptual leap from the good works of a Mrs. Donnithorne and child-feeding schemes in Korea, Jordan, or the slums of Calcutta. However, by such an event Oxfam took part in the growing development debate, and later annual conferences – often combined with the biennial Gilbert Murray Memorial Lecture – continued to attract major speakers: William Clark, Barbara Ward, Shirley Williams, Group Captain Leonard Cheshire, Marcel Autret of FAO, Paul Hoffman of the UN Special Fund, and Dr. A.H. Boerma, Director-General of the World Food Programme.

On 5 August 1960 at its final session, the Conference passed a slate of resolutions. Echoing the UN Development Decade goal set for the wealthy countries, the delegates stated that everybody in Britain should aim to give one per cent of their annual income to help free the world of hunger. They urged the government to establish a National Freedom from Hunger Committee and equip it to run the campaign in Britain. Finally, they declared: 'It is vital for the survival of mankind that we and all other peoples should habitually think of ourselves as members of a world community,' and described the growing gap in living standards between rich and poor countries as 'morally indefensible and inherently unstable'.

Early in 1961, the government appointed as Chairman of the National FFH Committee Earl de la Warr, a one-time Under-Secretary for Agriculture who had long been a distinguished champion of a beneficent international food policy. His deputy was Sir Arthur Rucker, Honorary Treasurer of the Oxford Committee and active on its Grants Sub-Committee. The government also provided £55,000 for the
campaign's administration. But it was made clear that its activities were to be carried out by the voluntary organisations and whomever the Committee could persuade to take part. A rollcall of eminent persons did so agree, and it began work in June 1961.

Their first decision, and it was significant, was that there should be a protracted stage of inquiry into the problem of hunger in the poorer nations and careful thinking about solutions before any rush for collection boxes or appeals to public generosity. This was not World Refugee Year, with 'one last push' to end a specific problem among a specific population. Hunger was much more deep-rooted and its elimination required a longer-term and more considered approach.

This concern with education, both among those participating – the voluntary agencies and their donors – and of society as a whole, about the causes of hunger and poverty in developing countries was a striking feature of the FFH Campaign in Britain. In pinpointing its priority audience, the Education Advisory Group, chaired by Dr. Leslie Farrer Brown of the Nuffield Foundation, settled on the schools. The campaigners had a strong conviction that the generation then in the classroom should learn the facts of world hunger as an integral part of the school curriculum. One of the FFH Campaign's achievements was the first ever 'Teacher's Guide' on how to incorporate these facts into a variety of subjects. This sold 25,000 copies within a year of publication in 1962.

The other important preparatory task was to identify the projects that the Freedom from Hunger Campaign would support. Here the Committee was effectively charting new territory, trying to bridge the gap between philanthropy and the large – nowadays they would be called 'macro' – schemes funded by UN and bilateral aid. Unlike the 'micro' projects of the charitable world, these rarely involved the participation of local people. Synthesising the two perspectives was the FFH aim.

The FFH Projects Group consisted of experienced administrators and experts in tropical agriculture, and the grant selection process contained lessons for agencies such as Oxfam. The FFH team set out to consider project proposals on the basis of whether or not they would attack the root causes of low agricultural production, not on whether applicants for funds were sound humanitarians and would spend charitable money well and wisely. The possibilities included investment in some kind of seed, animal, plant, storage facility or processing gadget, or training in new cultivation methods. Thus, although the credentials and efficiency of applicants were important, FFH scrutiny was more concerned with policy issues, and with long-term impact and viability, than with capacity to relieve immediate suffering.
De la Warr and Rucker made it known at both the Colonial and the Commonwealth Offices, and at the new Department of Technical Co-operation set up in 1961, that applications from all parts of the developing world would be welcome. These might come from ambitious humanitarian entrepreneurs who normally looked for support in the private sector; or from sub-departments of government or official institutions who normally looked to the public sector and 'aid'. Submissions were evaluated against FFH criteria and proponents asked to fill in a questionnaire. This asked about the local food economy, and was progressive in its thinking, particularly in its emphasis on the need for people's participation, and for inbuilt sustainability. Many projects submitted for funding did not pass muster; by March 1962 the Group had examined 72 projects and approved only 16.

This careful development of a Projects List according to pre-set criteria, and - incidentally - before any money had been raised, was in contrast to the way Oxfam made its grants. In 1957, Oxfam had set up a Grants Sub-Committee because the load of applications had become too large for the Executive Committee to handle. The Sub-Committee met regularly to examine proposals and give its sanction to expenditures. Most members and officers were drawn from the Executive Committee, to whom they reported; but gradually more people with special expertise - many from Oxford University and some of them figures of renown - were included as the 1960s advanced.

Allocations were made within a loose financial planning framework; a growing proportion of monies granted - around 10 per cent in the early 1960s - were not 'one-off' grants to projects but envisaged continuing support in subsequent years, always assuming funds were available. Otherwise the key feature of the grant-making policy was not to have a policy - other than adherence to charitable purpose. Each scheme was judged on its merits - however 'merits' were defined at a given moment - and if the Committee agreed to fund it, the precedent became the policy. Kirkley, an arch-pragmatist, preferred to remain flexible, not to close options by statements of policy which might inhibit the organisation's freedom to act. The overseas aid programme was still largely characterised by response, grants being made in answer to the call of suffering made visible by emergency, or described by an applicant agency or mission. Thus, although the allocation of assistance was undoubtedly thorough and conscientious, it was not governed by a coherent plan, targeted objectives, or careful policy guidelines. Oxfam wanted to be all things to all varieties of needy comers.

Each voluntary agency joining in FFH had its own aid agenda and projects list. The FFH Projects Group resolved the problem of fusing private philanthropy with a planned developmental approach in a
constructive manner. It sought financial contributions for FFH Projects from the agencies: in Oxfam's case, the original commitment was for £500,000, later rising to £1,800,000 including £300,000 to the World Food Programme. The Group also studied the food-related projects on Oxfam's projects list which could be described as developmental - improved sheep in Greece; Musa Alami's heifers; Winifred Coate's farming plots; fishing boats in Vietnam; poultry breeding in Morocco. While most did not match FFH criteria, many were put on an 'FFH seal of approval' list. This meant that Oxfam could talk about certain of its own projects as part of the Campaign and raise funds for them on that basis.

The main FFH fundraising drive was launched in June 1962, a year after the education work began. A grand ceremony was held in the Royal Festival Hall, addressed by the Duke of Edinburgh, the Campaign's patron. Present were civic leaders from all over Britain. As with World Refugee Year, the three heads of the political parties all served as Campaign Vice-Presidents, as did the Archbishop of Canterbury and every top churchman.

Over 1,000 FFH Committees were eventually set up in towns and villages all over the country, many with help from Oxfam's growing network of local organisers. Typically, they raised between £1,000 and £4,000, but some did spectacularly well: Birmingham raised £63,000, Somerset, £76,840, Swansea, £23,400, Nottingham, £43,500, Glasgow and the Clyde Valley, £114,360. Every group adopted one of the growing list of approved FFH Projects. These ranged from £170,000 for the construction of three farm institutes in Tanzania, adopted by Somerset, Devon and Exeter, and East Central Scotland; to £1,247 for two bulls and a rotovator for Tristan da Cunha, adopted by the national WI; to £30,000 for laboratories to control disease in groundnuts in Nigeria, adopted by Oldham. By 1965, the Campaign had raised a superb £7 million, for over 400 projects.

The Freedom from Hunger Campaign profoundly influenced the philosophy and approach of Oxfam and other overseas aid agencies towards the longer-term development objectives of the projects it supported. In fact, such was the new passion for 'development' as opposed to 'relief' that Bernard Llewellyn began to question whether hand-outs to the hungry were unfairly being given a bad name. Time would show that investment in development schemes was much more problematic than many enthusiasts with their rosy prognoses of egg-laying, fish-farming, and bumper crops for years to come were yet able to envisage.

Optimism was, for the moment however, the order of the day. Among the huge oceans of need in the world, the sense was that grants for relief
must simply vanish into bottomless depths. Giving out a dole was intellectually and psychologically unappealing to those people, especially young people, wanting to build the new Jerusalem. Proponents of the new school of thought quoted what became a much over-worked Chinese proverb: 'Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach him to fish and you feed him for life.' This was the new faith to which the Freedom from Hunger Campaign began to give currency. It had a ring, it chimed with the go-out-and-do-it age of Kennedy, the Beatles, 'Ban the Bomb', and 'Beyond the Fringe' – the swinging sixties.

In Autumn 1962, Oxfam announced to its supporters that among many grants allocated to Freedom from Hunger projects it had committed funds to a 'Big Four'. The largest was a feed-compounding plant for a dairy project among poor farmers in India, the Anand District Milk Producers' Co-operative; the £108,000 needed was raised by the Glasgow and Clyde Valley FFH Committee, an achievement which helped to launch Oxfam in Scotland. The other three were: £25,714 to develop an improved variety of maize in Pakistan; £60,000 for a range of agricultural activities at Thesprotia in Greece, including olive-canning and cheese factories; and £90,000 for a programme in the three British High Commission Territories in Southern Africa, Basutoland, Bechuanaland, and Swaziland.

This last, the first set of projects ever to be carried out with the government as Oxfam's main partner, and much the largest undertaking in Africa unconnected to disaster relief, represented Oxfam's plunge into the age of development.

The Oxford Committee's involvement in Africa pre-dated the Congo crisis, but similarly stemmed from emergency situations. From 1954 onwards, grants had been made for relief among Kenya's Kikuyu people around whom had swirled the horrors and dislocations of Mau Mau. In 1956 came the first grant to church groups in South Africa. This grew into a programme of school feeding and recreation centres to compensate black African children in the townships for cutbacks – in school hours, school meals, school activities – imposed under a new Bantu Education Act.

The people of the three British High Commission territories – Basutoland, Bechuanaland, and Swaziland – had escaped apartheid domination but their social and economic condition was on a par with black African neighbours in the Republic. The British were sensitive to their responsibilities in these Protectorates, and wanted to make them 'a shop window for the Commonwealth'. Leslie Kirkley wanted to take up the Protectorates as a destination of project funds. He began by looking
for a partner in Basutoland to copy the South African churches' effort to combat child malnutrition via school meals. In time the Save the Children Fund took on this role, providing a meal of milk, soup, and biscuits to nearly half the Protectorate's primary schoolchildren, with Oxfam's assistance.

In early 1961, Kirkley began to explore whether an Oxfam Freedom from Hunger programme might be developed in the Protectorates. Through contacts in left-wing circles then caught up with African liberation, Kirkley came across Tristram – always known as Jimmy – Betts, an ex-colonial servant who had spent 24 years as a forestry officer in Nigeria. Since Nigerian independence he had been doing research for the Fabian Colonial Bureau. Kirkley sent Betts off to Southern Africa to look around and see what he could come up with.

In October Betts returned with a persuasive recommendation for a 'crash programme' of several dozen projects designed to improve agriculture in the three territories. Up to this time the Committee had mainly depended on Kirkley, Llewellyn, and – more recently – Colonel Widdowson, a retiree from the Salvation Army with long experience in the Far East, to visit projects on tour from Oxford. It had, in fact, been a Committee boast that working through local voluntary agencies avoided the unnecessary expense of posting its own officers in the field – Frankie Hamilton in Greece being an honourable exception; but she was regarded as a project in herself.

With the list of grants to Africa rapidly growing, and with the Charity Commissioners beginning to take an interest in Oxfam's selection and monitoring of disbursements, Kirkley decided that the time had come for what seemed like a drastic change. He invited Betts to return to Africa and set himself up in one of the territories to ensure that the programme moved ahead on track. Betts accepted. He was thus appointed in late 1961 as Oxfam's first Field Director, a move which had far-reaching implications.

For his base Betts picked Basutoland, later to become the independent kingdom of Lesotho, the tiny, mountainous and eroded enclave of 900,000 farming people entirely surrounded by South Africa. He worked closely with the Department of Agriculture, and most of the schemes he promoted – credit for smallholders through the Co-operative Bank, farmers' training centres, fish farming, experimental work in hydroponics and reafforestation – were Oxfam-funded increments to government services. Betts assumed the colonial officer role with which he was familiar, except that, in his personal style, he was a thoroughly unconventional type of operator and enjoyed cocking a snook at boffins and bureaucrats.

Jimmy Betts became something of a legend in Oxfam, regarded with a
mixture of horrified admiration and affection. A brother of Barbara Castle, his left-wing sympathies put him solidly behind the anti-apartheid struggle: he eventually tangled with the South African authorities too successfully to reside in a country whose access routes they controlled. He was a larger-than-life personality, given to extravagant behaviour which could estrange as well as endear. But whatever his idiosyncrasies, he brought tremendous energy to his Field Director role, travelling relentlessly and building up a vast portfolio of projects. He broke new ground for Oxfam, moving the centre of gravity of the overseas programme to the field.

The Basuto project which Oxfam worked hardest to promote was 'The Progressive Farmers' scheme, originally started by the Department of Agriculture in 1958. Through demonstration and example, farmers working unproductive soil on small plots were introduced to good seed, fertilisers and pesticides. A loan of £25 was advanced to cover the cost of these inputs over six acres. In an average year, the extra yield of maize and sorghum would – theoretically – permit the farmer to pay off his loan, with £20 still in pocket to invest in next year's crop. 'Progressive farmers' were given advice about contouring the hillsides, binding the soil, preserving grass for winter fodder, and other aids to higher productivity.

Another approach was short courses for farmers in two specially-built training centres – the first institutions of their kind built with Oxfam money. The contribution was held down to £81,310 after many brisk exchanges about architects, specifications, sloppy planning, and suitability – exchanges which Oxford was only too relieved to leave to the man on the spot. The first centre at Leribe was opened in May 1964 by Paramount Chief Moshoeshoe II, and thereafter ran short courses on everything from bee-keeping to book-keeping, pisciculture to child nutrition. Up to 40 farmers at a time could stay in residence, each paying a token fee for board and lodging.

Betts and his colleagues in the government service were ahead of their time in recognising that many African farmers were women. This was particularly conspicuous in Basutoland, where low agricultural incomes meant that 46 per cent of the menfolk went off to seek work in the South African mines, leaving their wives behind to cultivate the family plot and tend the family cow. Some women attended not only home economics but the farming courses and – as seemed worthy of comment in a 'Freedom from Hunger' film – turned out to be as capable of using the information as the men.

Bechuanaland – later to become Botswana – presented a very different set of agricultural problems. Here, instead of a high and eroded sierra, the arid landscape of the Kalahari Desert stretched away endlessly into
the horizon like the sea. Ragged scrub and wispy grassland supported migratory herds of cattle on which the farming economy depended. In the early 1960s, a succession of drought years afflicted this most marginal of grazing land. Many of the 600,000 people – 90 per cent relied upon farming – lost livestock: a third of the country’s 1,200,000 beasts died in four years. The conditions concentrated cattle around the remaining water holes and destroyed the pasture. Changes were needed if the traditional ranching economy was to survive.

In Bechuanaland, too, Betts took on government departments as Oxfam’s main partners. One of the earliest grants he recommended was for £5,070, to pay for building repairs to 21 small catchment dams. These were positioned so that water courses which seasonally ran dry would leave behind a reservoir large enough to last until the next rains. The cost was low because dam construction was done by employing human labour on public relief works, which also enabled some drought victims to receive an income during difficult times.

Stabilising herds in smaller numbers around particular watering places and pastures also made their owners captive for another service: advice from agricultural extension teams. These moved from community to community to talk up the virtues of deticking, dehorning, castration, all-day grazing, bonemeal diets, and other attentions to bovine health. The creation of this Animal Husbandry Extension Service was another Freedom from Hunger project, to which Oxfam gave £60,000 in 1964, and continued support for many years. Training centres for short residential courses were also built; as in Basutoland, graduates were dubbed ‘Progressive’ and eligible for small loans; they could even go on to become ‘Master Farmers’ with a smart diploma to hang on the wall.

Persuading farmers to fence pasture was the most tricky of all improvements to introduce because fencing tribal land was diametrically against landholding tradition. The idea of fattening cattle before slaughter was peculiar: old, feeble, animals no longer up to life on the hoof were the ones normally sent to the abattoir. To hype the advantages of the fat and profitable carcase, Oxfam paid for the Department of Agriculture to set up seven livestock holding grounds in tribal areas. Each was endowed with a small demonstration herd to cross-breed with local stock and show what a plump cow looked like. At Mahalapye, the local agricultural officer was surprised that, in the first year, nearly 200 local Tswana beasts joined his health farm. When they went to the abattoir six months later their owners found they were worth an extra £15 a head. Within three years, 450 farmers had taken advantage of the holding ground pastures at Mahalapye.

During the 1960s, Oxfam invested around £500,000 in Botswanan dam construction and agriculture, getting on for £1 for every member of
the population. In every dimension – size, scope, coherence – this was a comprehensive development programme in a different league from the past, and Oxfam was proud of its contribution to rural Botswanan livelihoods. By the end of the decade Jimmy Betts had gone off to Nairobi and left Oxfam. But the seeds he had planted had born fruit. Out in the thatched hut settlements of the Kalahari, so it was said by officials in town, ‘a farmer tilling his field knows about Oxfam’.

However favourable the climate for Oxfam’s great leap forward in the early 1960s, it could not have happened without the creativity and hard work of certain individuals. Among these was Richard Exley, the most dynamic of Kirkley’s bright young men. Exley originally joined Oxfam in 1957 as a substitute for national service, from which he was exempted on conscientious grounds. In 1959, after a year away, he wrote to Kirkley outlining a new fundraising scheme. Kirkley, who was always open to ideas, simply said: Come and do it.

The idea for ‘Pledged Gifts’ came to Exley when he was wandering round Manchester contemplating its rows of back-to-back houses and trying to work out how to interest their occupants in an Oxfam appeal. They might be unsusceptible to newspaper advertisements for covenants and cheques, but a monthly doorstep request for a small but regular amount to save lives in Leribe or Bhagalpur would surely not be refused. Exley started by advertising for door-to-door collectors. When people responded, he went to see them personally, travelling all over the country to visit and cajole.

‘Pledged Gift’ collectors gave out cards and stamps to a circle of donors – neighbours or workmates – who gave a shilling a month in return for a tiny Newsletter. In its first year the scheme scarcely covered its costs, but Kirkley had confidence in Exley’s determination. Within another year it had taken off and in three more, nurtured by its own officer, Joan Chapman, yearly proceeds had risen to £200,000 from over 300,000 subscribers and 26,000 collectors. ‘Pledged Gifts’ was seen as the most promising source of increasing regular income, particularly from those not in the usual social band of charitable givers. It was promoted as a way of meeting people while doing good. In 1963 Stella Humphries, a collector in Stockport, ‘won’ an air fare donated to Oxfam and an adventure trip to a mission hospital in the Sierra Leonian bush. A film was made – ‘Mrs. Humphries goes to Africa’ – to encourage other housewives to join.

Exley – still only in his mid-twenties – injected a burning urgency into whatever he did. He helped foster the sense of an organisation ready to take on the problem of world poverty as if every little counted, now,
today. Oxfam was part of a new consciousness about the world. Just as the image of the starving child of the Congo was new, so too was the image of the ‘progressive farmer’ leaving hunger behind on the basis of a sum well within the reach of anyone’s comprehension.

Press advertising became more hard-hitting. This was the heyday of the hungry child. Between them, Harold Sumption and Richard Exley began to fix Oxfam’s identity with that child, blasting something uncomfortable and unforgettable into the British conscience. The strong hint of accusation in the message might put some people off and probably added to Oxfam’s aura of controversy; but any negative impact was more than outweighed in financial terms. In the 1950s, Sumption reckoned to raise £5 for every £1 spent on a press advertisement. In the early 1960s, the ratio peaked at £31 to £1. Exley capitalised by bumping up the advertising budget at key psychological moments, particularly at disaster times.

As the Oxford Committee’s income rapidly rose – from £500,000 in 1958-59 to £1,400,000 in 1960-61 – success built upon success. The index of supporters had grown to well over 200,000 by 1960. On 9 July 1961, Richard Dimbleby made the fifth BBC Radio appeal for the Oxford Committee on the Week’s Good Cause and, with the push given by supplementary advertising, raised a record £105,941. In many ways this particular year, the Congo year and the year Jimmy Betts went to Basutoland, was one of the most significant in Oxfam’s history.

The rise in income enabled – indeed, forced – Oxfam to take on more staff. In 1960, Kirkley appointed a second in command, Henry Fletcher. In the early sixties expansion was rapid: from around 30 paid staff, the total grew to 200 by the end of 1963, of whom 40 were regional organisers fostering 250 voluntary groups. There was a geographical spreading of wings: offices opened in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. There was also a greater degree of specialisation in the allocation of responsibilities among the staff.

Early in 1962, Bruce Ronaldson joined as Secretary; Ronaldson had been a colonial administrator in Tanganyika, now reaching independence. As the paid establishment grew, the relationship with the trustee and advisory bodies changed, as did their role in decision-taking. As advisors and policy-makers, their role remained important; but they became less involved in day-to-day affairs. Ronaldson eased these transitions, bringing a quality of kindly patience and administrative tidiness to an organisation rapidly growing and gaining a national reputation, but still loyally surrounded by many of its original sponsors.

Another recruit from the shrinking requirements of the colonial service in Africa was Humphrey Hilton, who acted as the intermediary between Betts in the field and the African submissions to the Grants
Sub-Committee. This pattern became set for other geographical areas as the programme expanded and other Field Directors were appointed. By 1960, grants had been made to 56 countries; by 1963 the figure had risen to 73 – not the most useful gauge of expansion considering the size of some of the grants but nonetheless one in which Kirkley and Jackson-Cole took considerable pride.

Although there were some highly professional people on the staff and serving in a voluntary capacity, Oxfam was still a family of individuals whose links were forged by motivation and idealism. Credentials for employment owed more to commitment to the cause and an enthusiasm to use abilities in its service than to any notion of building a career in the charity world or in the still nascent science of ‘development’. No-one joined the staff for financial reward: salaries were low and many who could afford to gave up most or all of their entitlement. Joining Oxfam was rather like joining a church, although it was a distinctly secular organisation and its shared creed open to many interpretations.

Unlike many other charities, its senior ranks were never dominated by public servants, civil or military, pensioned and in early retirement; although there were some. Nor did any particular social background prevail: those from the gentry and the odd progressive aristocrat assumed a kind of spiritual and social camouflage among more typical ordinary folk. In the regional offices the range was particularly wide, with former steelworkers and Methodist lay preachers rubbing shoulders with retired Majors and leftist sympathisers with double-barrelled names. Much has been made of the Quaker influence, but although this was a part of the genesis, the Committee was always a broad church in which no one denomination prevailed. Many of the influential Friends in Oxfam were so by conversion, inclined by personal philosophy to take that particular spiritual path rather than another, sometimes before they joined the organisation, often afterwards.

Whatever the elusive quality of Oxfam fellowship and however ill-defined its articles of faith, for many of those who joined its crusade then or since, membership – even temporary membership – of this ‘church’ has been the most important influence in their lives. It has not only helped to fashion their world view but its values have affected their personal lifestyle and aspirations. An underlying element of fervour helped power Oxfam’s physical and perceptual expansion; it has also been a yeast fomenting away inside the organisation, always creatively but sometimes divisively as well. Controlling and channelling this fervour has given more than one Director headaches; it did not however faze Kirkley very often – in fact, he rather enjoyed it.

In late 1962, in a psychologically important way, organisational size brought unity and a sense of permanence. The staff moved from five
scattered locations in central Oxford to a new purpose-built Oxfam House in Summertown, a northern Oxford suburb. The move entrenched Oxfam in its *alma mater*: a move to London was contemplated but rejected.

The site on the Banbury Road was negotiated with the help of Jackson-Cole and Leslie Swain, and funds raised specifically for the purpose. An existing house was demolished to make way for the £75,000 office block, whose ground-floor shops were leased out to help recover costs. There was, inevitably, criticism from those who imagine that professionally-managed charities can somehow run cost-free. The investment in a proper headquarters quickly repaid itself, helping promote a Summertown boom in retailing which multiplied the site's value many times over.

In the 19th century, Matthew Arnold described Oxford as ‘the home of lost causes and forsaken beliefs’. Fair and square in its new office block along the Banbury Road, Oxfam had convincingly broken with any such tradition.

The last three months of 1963 witnessed the most frenzied and exciting campaign of Oxfam’s history. This was the 21st anniversary year, and plans were long in the making. It was Oxfam’s good fortune to come of age with the groundswell of public opinion running its way. At no other time has it more completely caught the crest of a popular wave in its favour; but not only by luck, by good management too.

The campaign was launched on 6 October at a Bread-and-Water lunch in Trafalgar Square. This 21st birthday party event was organised by Philip Barron, Oxfam’s Press Officer, and it set the ball rolling magnificently. Around 2,000 supporters turned up. Messages of congratulation came from HRH Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh; Trevor Huddleston, Bishop of Masasi in Tanganyika; and Felix Schnyder, UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Peter Finch, Susannah York, Sylvia Sims, and Mike Sarne the pop-singer were there, collecting one-pound notes on African spears. But the real star of the show was three-year-old Moses, a refugee child from the Congo, held aloft on the shoulders of Ted Willis and grinning bemused into the lenses of half the press cameras in London.

Oxfam announced that it would try to raise £1 million by the end of the year in aid of urgently needed projects. This ‘Hunger £Million’ campaign managed to inspire an extraordinary surge of activity. The £1 million target and whether it could be reached by the New Year became, as December wore on, truly matters of national preoccupation.

The campaign’s chief architect was Richard Exley, and he drew upon
A crusade for our times

A number of other similarly energetic Oxfam people, including his press officer, Pat Davidson. The Daily Mail acted as the Hunger Million sponsor, and press advertising and the regional network of Oxfam organisers were used to orchestrate a gradual climax of local and national attention. But the name publicly associated with the campaign’s most strenuous effort is that of Jeffrey Archer.

Archer was then a student in Oxford. One day in December he breezed into Oxfam House, and convinced Exley that he could distribute 10,000 collecting tins among Oxford and other university students. Pat Davidson had managed to persuade Brian Epstein to allow the Beatles to lend their name to the campaign. With the help of Nicholas Lloyd, editor of the University Newspaper, Cherwell, and a stringer for the Daily Mail, this guaranteed the Mail’s sponsorship. Archer went up to Liverpool to secure the necessary photograph. This picture, in which Ringo, Paul, George and John grinned from behind an Oxfam poster and held up ‘Hungry Million’ cans, was endlessly hyped in the Daily Mail and made a big difference to momentum. It helped bring in a number of other figures from the entertainment industry, including Adam Faith, Harry Secombe, and Stratford Johns. The Daily Mail built up the story, incidentally giving Archer a generous share of accolade.

The high moment of the campaign was a ‘carol service with the stars’ on Sunday 22 December, again in Trafalgar Square, complete with showbiz float and Christmas tree. Leading the singers were Acker Bilk, Dennis King, Bert Weedon, Pearl Carr, Vince Hill, Frankie Vaughan, Matt Monro, Bruce Forsyth, Alan Freeman, Lionel Blair, and Kathy Kirby. Blaring ‘OXFAB!’ across its front page, the Mail reported a crowd of 60,000, with Jeffrey Archer and 300 Oxford students jangling collecting tins.

A snowball effect had been created and the campaign had taken on a life of its own. The Sunday Telegraph put the ultimate Oxfam dream into words: ‘Something is starting which transcends politics and religion. For the first time the people of the affluent countries have been aroused to a sense of responsibility for their less fortunate brothers. There is every indication that a new Crusade is in the making, a Crusade animated by duty and humanity.’ On 31 December, Oxfam announced that the targeted million had been raised.

These were heady times for those involved with Oxfam. No door seemed barred, no appeal met with indifference, no great name in any field of endeavour turned them down. Just a few weeks back, days before his assassination in Dallas, John F. Kennedy had spoken to the UN General Assembly in support of a ‘world food policy’ that would ensure for every child in every country a healthy and plentiful diet. The British Labour Party, soon to win a general election, supported the same
policy as a part of its political programme. Truly, it seemed, the day had dawned when the world had committed itself to 'Freedom from Hunger' in our time.

Not for another decade would there again be a sense of such unanimity about the appalling injustice which allows children to starve in a world of plenty. But by then, the banners were no longer new and some painful lessons had needed to be learned.
THE SHOALS OF CONTROVERSY

The Hunger £Million campaign gained Oxfam widespread national recognition. But public visibility also brought controversy and less welcome attentions. In late 1963, while the campaign was at its height, the Charity Commissioners delivered a bombshell. They called in question Oxfam's right to provide 'development' aid – grants given to long-term prevention of hunger overseas rather than to its direct relief – suggesting that such grants, now absorbing 40 per cent of its assistance, might not be charitable.

There were a number of ways in which Oxfam's activities had recently been bothering the Commissioners, and these had become the subject of ongoing dialogue between the Chief Commissioner, C.P. Hill, and Leslie Kirkley. Kirkley was at his best in handling the protracted awkwardness these enquiries engendered, consistently helpful in manner while non-confrontationally standing his ground. He calmly pursued the view that long-term projects to prevent hunger had to be charitable. As the storm widened, bringing in other overseas aid charities, his Quaker spirit persisted in believing that if the parties were not driven to take stands from which they could not retreat, the fuss would die down and consensus emerge around the only sensible viewpoint. His low-key handling of the affair meant that operations were hardly affected and many staff and supporters were scarcely aware that, for over a year, Oxfam's mission balanced on a knife-edge.

One of the Commissioners' concerns mirrored the Oxford Committee's own sense that larger expenditure overseas – now over £2.25 million a year – needed closer scrutiny. Jimmy Betts' appointment as Field Director for Africa showed the Commissioners that Oxfam was doing something on this score. His overseas appointment was followed by others. Bernard Llewellyn went out to Hong Kong as Field Director for Asia in 1964, promoting a new pattern of on-the-spot inspection.

But the Charity Commissioners found a lot else to question. They complained that Oxfam's appeals were 'vaguely worded'. Unlike charities such as the Red Cross or Save the Children, who themselves
ran their projects or did so through sister organisations, Oxfam entrusted a wide variety of others to do so on its behalf. But this was by no means obvious in its press appeals for funds. Who were these unnamed organisations which carried out the work in far-flung corners of the world beyond the reach of British jurisdiction? If Oxfam did not itself feed 'the starving child', if the individual child pictured was an idiom for hunger generally, then some advertisements were arguably misleading.

Also queried were calls for more international concern to be given to the problem of world hunger. Taking its cue from the Freedom from Hunger Campaign, Oxfam frequently took pains to point out that world poverty was too large a problem for private philanthropy alone and should be a concern of governments. Propaganda and advocacy for legislation, whether in this country or overseas, have been described by the courts as political, and not charitable; so, too, has the promotion of international friendship', stated the Report of the Charity Commissioners for England and Wales for 1962. This report announced that the activities of overseas aid agencies would come under active investigation during 1964. They were not named, but Oxfam and the UK Freedom from Hunger Campaign were the twin targets.

The Commissioners' multiplying questions were, in fact, symptoms of a more general malaise about what it was right and proper to do in the name of charity in the contemporary world. The Charities Act of 1960 – which had for the first time legally defined the Charity Commissioners' functions and brought all charities within their purview – had done much to tidy up the law and its administration. But the Act had chosen not to lay down a definition of 'charitable', preferring to leave the courts to make decisions as and when cases arose. Such decisions could only be based on previous judicial pronouncements; the key ones dated from the 19th century, and they were based on a statute dating back to 1601.

During the recent past, attitudes towards helping the victims of social distress had undergone important changes. The 20th century had done away with the old language of indigence and pauperism; modern society reached beyond the condition of destitution to understand its causes and how they might be removed. The second World War brought to a head the growing feeling that dealing with social distress must be a state responsibility. The war had been fought to ensure freedom; Sir William Beveridge, main architect of the Welfare State, defined five freedoms: freedom from want, from disease, from ignorance, from squalor, and from idleness. What else was 'Freedom from Hunger' but the same notion of mankind's entitlements writ large into the international context?

Oxfam drew attention to itself because it did not behave in the circumspect way of conventional charity. With the discovery of the
The shoals of controversy

‘Third World’ – a phrase coined around this time – it had come to regard its cause as larger than itself and had set about building momentum behind ideas belonging to the realm of public policy. In its fundraising and publicity it persistently broke new ground, motivated by conscience and by Cecil Jackson-Cole’s drive for the application of business techniques to voluntary action. At the same time, the objects of its charity were very far away, and increasingly the subjects of countries outside British control. Oxfam’s word had to be taken largely on trust both concerning their needs, and on the means to relieve those needs deployed by partners similarly outside British jurisdiction.

Patient explanation of the system whereby grants were screened by trustee committees, and some modification of advertising copy, did something to assuage the Charity Commissioners’ protests. But on the issue vital to the evolving character of Oxfam’s overseas programme there was a serious problem. The press caught wind of it. ‘We interpret our general charter as being for the relief of distress and suffering,’ Kirkley told the Oxford Mail. ‘Not only feeding hungry people today but helping them to be fed tomorrow. We haven’t rigidly separated this in the past.’ Nor would he wish to do so in the future. However, if the Commissioners took the opposite view, then the options were to accept it, or to contest it in the courts. Neither was attractive.

At the Chief Commissioner’s instigation, the Inland Revenue requested a list of grants made for projects of the ‘public works’ variety. Oxfam was instructed that, until a decision was reached about whether such projects constituted a proper use of charitable funds, no further grants should be made for purposes other than relief and welfare. Oxfam had recently increased its commitment to Freedom from Hunger from £500,000 to £1.8 million, and had just completed a triumphant campaign in which £300,000 extra income, much of it destined for FFH projects, had been raised. Under the moratorium, how was this to be spent? Worse, if the Inland Revenue found previous development grants ‘non-charitable’, the trustees would be liable to pay the taxes due on the amount spent on these non-charitable purposes.

The interpretation of the law applied by the Charity Commissioners had been laid down by Lord Macnaghten in a judgement of 1891. To be charitable, something had to relieve poverty, provide education, advance religion, or be otherwise beneficial to the community. Many of the development projects supported by Oxfam fell into the first two categories; training courses for farmers, for example, promoted education. Here the Commissioners’ complaint was that Oxfam’s formal name – ‘Famine Relief’ being the key phrase – and its ‘objects’ clause implied that donations would be spent on direct relief, not on education or other measures to obviate its need.
The law bound a charity and its trustees to stay within the remit of its stated purposes. The expression of these and their evaluation by the Charity Commissioners decided whether or not an organisation could be registered as a charity, and thereby gain the tax-exempt status to which charities were entitled. There were, therefore, two separate but interrelated issues: Could aid for development be charitable? And could Oxfam rewrite its 'objects' clause to cover the full range of its grants in wording that the Charity Commissioners would accept? In early 1964, legal work to draw up a new clause for approval by the trustees was set in motion.

Meanwhile, the charitable outlook for development aid did not look good. In February, Mr. Hill addressed a meeting of the Standing Conference of British Organisations for Aid to Refugees, chaired by Lord Astor, whose members included Christian Aid, War on Want, Oxfam, and the FFH Committee. Counsel's advice was still pending, but Hill was not reassuring. Shortly afterwards, the Inland Revenue required Oxfam's trustees to sign an indemnity for £20,000 covering tax refunds from covenanted income, which might have to be recalled. This the Executive Committee agreed to do, but many members strongly resented the imputation that they were lacking in responsibility towards Oxfam's donors, or had acted illegally.

What type of projects were those for 'public works' and 'general economic improvement' to which the Charity Commissioners took exception? Hill's view was that money given to people to dig irrigation canals, terrace hillsides, or build roads in neglected rural areas was unconnected to charitable purpose.

One Oxfam/FFH grant to fall under scrutiny was a 24-mile stretch of road in Western Kenya close to the shores of Lake Victoria. Here, the local community development officer, a British colonial servant, had encouraged some farmers on marginal land to plant sugar cane as an experiment. In 1962, the first marketable crop was harvested from 180 acres of previously eroded soil. Unfortunately, the farmers found themselves unable to take their crop to the sugar mills: the earthen track could not withstand heavy vehicles. To wait their turn on a government road-building list would have doomed their cane and the venture.

Although major road works were outside a voluntary agency brief, this small stretch of 'feeder' road to reinforce a very local effort at self-improvement was rather different. This was just the kind of scheme in which a modest input from Oxfam – the sum requested was £6,000 – could fill a gap, setting up for the future not only the initial group but perhaps a whole community. This grant was made in August 1963, and
the community development officer reported enthusiastically on progress. Could it really be that the Inland Revenue would not accept that the road was *bona fide* charitable?

Similar projects already approved by both the FFH Project Committee and Oxfam's own Overseas Aid Committees were held in abeyance. One of these was a £1,000 proposal for building a small bridge across the River Khubelu in the Basutoland mountains. Villagers high in the sierra were isolated and unable to get crops to market or people to hospital. But they could not have their bridge: it was a 'public work'. The next winter was phenomenally cold and emergency supplies had to be flown in. Jimmy Betts made an emergency grant – following due procedures. The grant was for £1,500, some for relief works; with part of it, the villagers built a bridge across the River Khubelu. Betts duly reported back on the use to which the money had been put; he elicited no comment.

On 6 May 1964, the question of whether humanitarian aid for development was charitable was raised in the House of Lords during a debate on 'Refugees, disasters, and international aid'. Lord Astor was to lead the debate, but was summoned away at the last moment. Baroness Elliot of Harwood, Chairman of the World Refugee Year in Britain, took his place. She pointed out that it would be ironic indeed for the government, after encouraging the voluntary societies to join the WRY and Freedom from Hunger Campaigns, now to describe the long-term projects they advocated as uncharitable. Lord Dundee, speaking for the government, agreed. He said that the lawyers had now told the Charity Commissioners that 'the great majority' of projects brought to their notice did meet charitable criteria. The agencies breathed a sigh of relief.

The Commissioners themselves reported in detail to Lord Astor. Measures 'reasonably closely connected with the relief of poor people' were now seen as charitable anywhere in the world. But the charities must be satisfied 'that the poverty to be relieved actually exists in observable cases and is not merely inferred from statistics'. Most of Oxfam's activities were now covered by the charitable umbrella, with the understanding that there must be better 'observing' of needs and checking on expenditure on the ground. But public works and projects for economic improvement were still beyond the pale.

The Commissioner's opinions were only semi-judicial, unlike findings laid down by the courts. As far as Leslie Kirkley was concerned, this meant that they could and should continually be re-argued with the Commissioner until his position - already dented - gave still further. While quietly exerting pressure, every effort should be made in other areas - publicity as well as grant-making - not to antagonise.

In early June 1964, Kirkley and his new Overseas Aid Officer, Ken
Bennett (replacing Llewellyn who had left for Hong Kong) paid a visit to the Charity Commissioners to reiterate the case for development aid. Some room for manoeuvre began to appear. For public works, the Chief Commissioner informed his visitors, Macnaghten’s final charitable heading – ‘purposes beneficial to the community’ – was the only applicable principle. This applied in the UK, by extension in its dependent territories, and perhaps throughout the Commonwealth as well. Thus, bridges and roads in Kenya and Basutoland might, after all, clear the hurdle.

But there was no way in which ‘the community’ could be interpreted to include people who were not British subjects and who never had been British subjects. Such a usage of charitable funds would have the effect of relieving taxpayers in foreign countries. That there might not be too many of those in the poorest corners of the developing world was a point the Charity Commissioners did not consider. Questions of scale were similarly overlooked. The Aswan High Dam – quoted as a palpably uncharitable public work – was in no way analogous to a small stretch of road costing £6,000, built by poor farmers to earn a bare living from a crop of sugar cane.

Threatened by the indictment on aid to non-Commonwealth countries was Oxfam’s growing portfolio of FFH and other projects in Latin America. An example was a £100,000 scheme to research and introduce better strains of tuber and grain crops among Indian farmers on the Andean plateau in Bolivia. This project, however, scraped past the Commissioners’ indictment because both they and the Inland Revenue agreed that commitments made before the argument arose should be honoured. But Oxfam and the other overseas aid-giving charities were determined not just to find ways of protecting existing programmes, but to gain acceptance of the charitable principle.

On 16 July 1964, shortly before the Charity Commissioners were due to publish their Report for 1963 and the results of their investigation, the 15 members of the Standing Conference of British Organisations for Aid to Refugees met to discuss its anticipated conclusions. Lord Astor had received a letter from the Commissioners. Their position on economic improvement, public works, and the idea that the charities should restrict their activities to British Commonwealth countries, incensed the international thinking of many present.

Some of their views appeared a few days later in the Sunday Times ‘Insight’ column. Donald Tweddle, Director of UK Freedom from Hunger, was particularly exasperated. ‘What the government is saying’, he pointed out, ‘is that it is OK to indulge in short-term palliatives, but illegal to do anything more fundamental. This conflicts with the whole trend in British charity work overseas. It is only by public works that we
can tackle the problem of poverty at its roots.' Lord Astor adopted a fighting tone: 'The government must make legal the present emphasis on long-term operations. If they can not amend the law, they should change it altogether.' Others muttered about testing the Commissioners' opinion in the courts, and the sooner the better.

A few days later the Chief Charity Commissioner wrote to Kirkley. Having examined grants made during 1962-63, the Inland Revenue, Hill was glad to say, had found that 'the greatest part of Oxfam's income in the period covered was expended on projects that are charitable in law', and that tax rebates on covenants would therefore now be upheld. However, there was a clear discrepancy between the purposes of some expenditures, notably those on health and education, and the purposes - 'relief of distress' - expressed in the Memorandum of Association. The relevant clause should be changed, with the Commissioners' guidance; it could then cover all types of grants made by Oxfam with the exception of public works and economic improvement outside the Commonwealth.

By early the following year, even this stricture had been relaxed. But not because Kirkley continued to argue the case. A new 'objects' clause had been drafted. This, with amendments now suggested by the Commissioners, now by the trustees, now by the Inland Revenue, finished its rounds in March 1965. It stated that Oxfam's main object was: 'to relieve poverty, distress and suffering in any part of the world (including starvation, sickness or any physical disability or affliction) and primarily when arising from any public calamity (including famine, earthquake, pestilence, war or civil disturbance), or the immediate or continuing result of want of natural or artificial resources, or the means to develop them, and whether acting alone or in association with others'. This was broad enough to encompass anything Oxfam was likely to want to support, inside or outside the Commonwealth.

The Executive Committee congratulated Kirkley on his handling of the negotiations, and rightly so: he had achieved what he wanted without the Charity Commissioners having to climb down explicitly from the line they had taken. The storm had blown over.

The new clause was adopted at an Extraordinary General Meeting of the trustees, held on 6 May 1965. At the same time, the old official title - the cumbersome and by now inaccurate 'Oxford Committee for Famine Relief' - was legally dropped in favour of the simpler 'Oxfam' by which, anyway, the organisation was now widely known. That the word was technically meaningless was a legal advantage.

The changes were widely reported in the press as a natural updating of Oxfam's affairs to match its contemporary role. No-one mentioned the crisis about the charitable nature of development aid which had
prompted the necessity. Hill retired at the end of 1965. And no-one ever mentioned it again.

While Kirkley was busy dowsing this bout of organisational heat, he was trying simultaneously to keep a rather different pot from boiling over. Should Oxfam, or should it not, provide support to family planning?

In the early 1960s, the issue of population control took on the dimensions of an international *cause célèbre*. Alarm about the failure of the world to increase its food production fast enough to keep pace with population growth became widespread. During the 1950s, public health improvements brought about dramatic declines in the death rates in developing countries without any corresponding declines in their birth rates. The lack of data from such countries meant that the scientists and statisticians took some time to notice what was going on. When they did, their slide-rules told them that the kind of population increase that took Europe three centuries would take only 50 or 75 years in parts of today’s world – invariably the hungriest parts. Malthusian prophecies of doom were suddenly on their way to fulfilment.

Dr. B.R. Sen, FAO’s Director-General, was keenly aware of the implications for world agriculture. The demographers’ rising tide of numbers required food production to grow by much more than the current 2 per cent a year even to combat existing levels of poor nutrition: hence the FFH Campaign. Now the image of too many mouths to feed was given new drama by the scaring notion of a population ‘crisis’.

Oxfam already saw itself as making an important contribution by its involvement with Freedom from Hunger and the philosophy of hunger prevention for which – as we have seen – it was prepared to defend a new piece of charitable turf. But by early 1964, support to one side of the equation only – the food side – began to seem to some wholly inadequate. Bernard Llewellyn, whose vast Asian Field Director patch included the most populous and poorest corners of the world, found himself confronting the population crisis at what the Charity Commissioners called an ‘observable’ level, as a genuine human problem, not an ‘extrapolation of statistics’.

In the shanties of Hong Kong, Macao, and a growing number of Asian cities, crowdedness added greatly to squalor and suffering. Llewellyn described a visit he made to a settlement in the seasonal mud-flats of the Han River on the edge of Seoul, filled with Korean families with six or more children. ‘The social worker accompanying me enquired about their needs. For long Korea had been corrupted by relief hand-outs and I expected to be asked for all the usual things. But no. The women wanted money for abortions which cost more than they could hope to earn. They
wanted help to avoid future pregnancy. And one mother, her two-weeks-old baby lying on the mud floor at her feet, asked me to take it away. She couldn’t feed it.’ His eloquent voice continued to demand that family planning should become an object of Oxfam grants.

Since time immemorial, human society had found ways of dealing with unwanted births. Much of the pioneering effort devoted to birth control had been undertaken not only to free women from the bondage of endless childbearing, but to replace abortion, infanticide, and child abandonment with better ways of dealing with unwanted pregnancy. In the early 1960s, new contraceptives – the pill and the inter-uterine device (IUD) or loop, easier to use and more reliable than older techniques – were just entering millions of people’s lives. They appeared to offer the means of helping the world cope with a crisis of human surfeit, as experienced in the family and in society. When Llewellyn put the case for support to family planning to Oxfam, he did so for strictly humanitarian reasons.

Unfortunately, the case was impossible to make in such straightforward terms. Roman Catholic theologians objected to artificial tampering with the sacred process of creating new life in the womb. Moralists believed that widespread availability of the pill and the loop would mean a relaxation in the codes controlling sexual behaviour. Many developing countries still associated large families with national virility and questioned why they should enforce a policy of fertility restraint when no Western government did so. Left-wing ideologues perceived the whole idea as a means of diverting attention from the main problem, which was one of too much poverty rather than too many people. From every direction, persuasion and conviction, the issue inspired passion and emotion.

Because of the financial support lent from Christians of all persuasions, including Catholics, the overseas aid charities had all ducked the family planning issue. Oxfam’s line was that this was a matter for those specialist organisations set up to deal with birth control. But Kirkley, in spite of the fact that the Pope had just made him a Knight Commander of the Order of St. Sylvester, decided that it was time to grasp the nettle. The second Vatican Council (1962-63) was blowing fresh air into doctrinal debate, and it was widely assumed that Rome would soon modify its position on contraception. But the first attempt to change Oxfam’s stance – in 1963 – was defeated in the Oxfam Council of Management: those not bound by conviction believed that Oxfam stood to lose too much support by a pro-family planning stand. Kirkley persisted with a campaign of quiet persuasion. Among his allies were Sir Arthur Rucker, whose Korean experience predisposed him to Llewellyn’s reports, and a Lancashire businessman, Frank Kershaw.
In March 1964, Kershaw introduced a new resolution at the Council. It stated that Oxfam would not in principle refuse a grant application submitted by the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF). Family planning – despite what some might have wanted – would not be among Oxfam’s main purposes, and supporters with conscientious scruples might restrict their donations to other schemes; but they should not be allowed to impose their views on others who felt that some measure of family planning was essential to the overall aim of relieving suffering. After a day of heated debate, the resolution was passed by 11 votes to seven.

The passage of this resolution – an agreement to disagree – was an illustration of Kirkley’s gift for compromise. He would have preferred to avoid a vote; his Quaker instinct was always for consensus. But with people of strong conviction on the Council, a vote was unavoidable. In putting the new policy into effect, however, there was a convenient breathing space. The decision came at the height of the tussle with the Charity Commissioners over whether development aid was charitable. In order to avoid muddying the waters still further, action on the policy decision had to await the redrafting of the ‘objects’ clause. It was nearly a year before the policy was publicly announced, and by then passions had cooled and public opinion was known to be on Oxfam’s side.

The groundwork for the announcement was carefully laid. The Indian High Commissioner, Dr. J.N. Mehta, was enlisted to make the case in its favour. India was deeply aware of the way in which what Mehta called ‘a vast bottom bulge’ of youngsters in the population was threatening to derail economic progress, and was leading a campaign at the UN to persuade member agencies to aid family planning; as yet, not even the World Health Organisation did so. But Oxfam, in the bulletin announcing its policy, gave equal space to the alternative view. Father Arthur McCormack, a leading Catholic authority, wrote persuasively that family planning was no panacea, and that converts to the doctrine of mass contraception must not be allowed to distract the world from the main tasks in the war on poverty: boosting agriculture and economic life.

Before the announcement was made, Kirkley went to see Archbishop Heenan at Westminster, through the good offices of Father Thomas Corbishley, a Jesuit member of the Oxfam Council of Management. Corbishley, a liberal among the Catholic clergy, had abstained in the Oxfam Council vote. He took the line that, since family planning would absorb a very small proportion of Oxfam’s future grants – at most five per cent – there was a great deal that Catholics could still support and should be encouraged to do so. The Catholic hierarchy endorsed this view, as long as Oxfam fulfilled its promise to respect the wishes of any
The shoals of controversy

donor who specified that their contribution was not to be spent on birth control. By this procedure, Kirkley hoped that the damage to Oxfam's support – and everyone anticipated damage – would be minimised.

The uproar that greeted the announcement on 14 February 1965 took Oxfam by surprise. 'OXFAM BOMBSHELL' was the front-page lead in the Sunday Mirror, and the story was prominently carried everywhere. The mollifying tone of the Catholic establishment, in comments from Father Corbishley and Archbishop Heenan's spokesman, Mgr. Bruce Kent, was helpful. At this time, 'Humanae Vitae', the Papal Encyclical on contraception, was due out and it was widely expected that it would liberalise the Church's position. It was finally issued after long delay in 1968; if it had already been out in 1965, Catholic leaders would certainly have felt more constrained.

When the furore had died down, the tenor of the reaction, even in Catholic newspapers, was gauged as almost universally favourable. The population 'crisis' was a major contemporary issue and Oxfam's courage in taking it up ahead of UN and other British aid organisations was applauded. On 24 February, The Times reported that only four Catholic groups, three schools and a youth club in Birmingham, had so far found it necessary to withdraw their support from Oxfam. The Oxfam spokesman commented: 'We are saddened to lose them but fully understand their feelings.'

Immediately, grants for family planning projects were sanctioned by the Asia Committee. The Family Planning Association of Hong Kong received £625 to run a three-month radio propaganda campaign; this was designed to increase attendance at birth-control clinics. The Planned Parenthood Federation in Seoul was given £6,680 to establish two model clinics and train 200 doctors and other medical workers in IUD insertion and follow-up. This project, in which family planning was added to an existing maternal and child health service, was a pattern later followed in grants to the Christian hospitals in India and other medical programmes. Oxfam aid to family planning soon rose to between £30,000 and £40,000 a year.

The passionate urgency many felt about the need to dispense contraceptives among the multiplying millions of the Third World turned out in a sense to be misplaced. Entrenched cultural mores, particularly where intimate physical relations were concerned, meant that couples whose hopes of wealth and personal security were founded on the need to produce a large number of healthy children, did not seize joyfully upon pills and loops as their answer to a prayer. And it took time for many developing countries to recognise the effect of rapid population growth on their economic prospects. The crisis of overpopulation was not susceptible to a contraceptive fix; modern
technology, it transpired, had a role to play but was not the determinant many had assumed.

Like the disappointments connected to so many remedies devised by industrial mankind, for solutions to problems perceived by industrial mankind – and to a large extent created by industrial mankind – the false expectations attached to family planning took a while to uncover.

An issue raised during the saga with the Charity Commissioners was the complaints they had received about ‘high pressure fundraising’. Oxfam was the prime culprit. When a Committee was set up by the Commissioners to examine the substance of these complaints, Leslie Kirkley and Harold Sumption – both members – learned that nearly half the complaints came from other charities. With its application of modern marketing techniques, its hard-hitting press ads, its sophisticated set-up for postal appeals, and its audacity, Oxfam was cutting a new style in charity fundraising. Where some organisations carped, others imitated.

In the mid-1960s almost anything Oxfam did attracted attention. The word ‘Oxfam’ appeared in films and plays, and was tossed about by newspaper columnists to indicate their affinity with a world view that took in the immorality of widespread human suffering alongside ‘the affluent society’. The organisation was treated as a phenomenon; its activities prompted commentary on the nature of modern charity, even philosophical ruminations on the new philanthropy as the inheritor of instincts that organised religion used to attract.

Offers of assistance poured in from every side: everyone wanted to be identified as a supporter. Plane fares, services and facilities, goods of all kinds, were given free of charge or at knock-down rates without demur. Officiodom and governments were unhesitatingly supportive, as was the press. In 1964, *The Economist* published a graph showing the dramatic upward curve of Oxfam’s income since 1949 without adding even a caption of explanation. Some Oxfam staff kept scrap-books of press cuttings, mesmerised to find that almost everything undertaken by their humanitarian employer took place in a fish-bowl of publicity.

Oxfam’s go-getters had touched that special spring in the British conscience that attaches to different causes at different times. Kirkley’s young enthusiasts were always looking for another hill to climb, another barricade to lean on. They did so with the confidence gained from the conquest of the last. But they had to keep out in front, be there before other charities caught up and presented givers and providers with competing demands. Charities such as Shelter, another creature of the 1960s, were following hard on Oxfam’s heels.

In establishing Oxfam’s name before a much wider public, the *Daily
Mail's sponsorship of the 1963 Hunger £Million campaign was very important. The relationship had worked out well for both organisations, and it continued. In February 1964 Richard Herd, a Mail reporter, was despatched on a tour of Africa, and wrote a series of splashy articles under a masthead of 'your OXFAM money in ACTION!' With headings like 'These twins would have been THROWN OUT TO DIE' and 'It isn't often you meet a man you REVERE', Herd's articles introduced readers to the small miracles their pounds and pennies made possible. Jeffrey Archer continued to help, inviting the Beatles to tea in Brasenose College and pulling off the kind of stunts which gave the Mail good, exclusive, copy.

Came the autumn of 1964, and the Mail again agreed to sponsor Oxfam's Christmas push. This time, readers were invited to send in gifts. This cross between Antiques Roadshow and the bric-a-brac stall at the Parish Fair built on another part of Oxfam's fundraising machine: the Oxfam Gift Shop. By 1964, three more Gift Shops had been opened around the country, the first in Guildford in 1960, then in Leeds and Cheltenham, both in 1963. These shops were all run by a small staff under Joe Mitty, the first Manager of the Broad Street Shop in Oxford, and modelled on the original.

Although willing to turn around almost anything - dentures, old spectacle frames, and broken fountain pens were on Mitty's list of desirable items - he was a stickler for quality. He was able to find a buyer for a houseboat, a donkey, or a stuffed porcupine if that was what turned up. But he preferred jewellery and silver teapots - things of finery and value. These, naturally, came in more slowly than books or records, china or cutlery. What he was not prepared to run for Oxfam was a junk shop or a second-hand clothing stall. One line he added was Oxfam Christmas cards. The first of these were designed in 1957 by Leslie Durham, who later became Mitty's assistant. Sold both through the shops and by mail order, the cards quickly became a flourishing business, bringing in £18,500 profit by 1963.

In 1959, Oxfam hired a Gift Appeals Organiser based in Leeds, and in 1963 another was taken on to look after the south. The main problem was to keep the shops stocked with an adequate supply of good merchandise. Shop income grew steadily. In the financial year 1962/63 they brought in £79,000, almost doubling their proceeds in only two years.

One of the attractions to Oxfam of the 1964 Daily Mail gift appeal was that of providing the shops with a tremendous boost in stock. The Mail ran a series of classic human stories about giving: the unmarried elderly lady of 80 who gave 'my dearest earthly treasure', her mother's engagement ring; the Brownies who held a toy party; the Crufts' habitué who gave her pedigree poodle puppy; the poultry firm who gave a champion turkey weighing in at 61lb. The Mail enjoyed itself: 'When I
met Joe Mitty at the Oxfam headquarters reception depot, he was rubbing shoulders with a full-sized stuffed brown bear, a set of glass domes, a Victorian snow scene more than 8ft. long, several sets of wooden-shafted golf clubs, an 18th century fowling-piece, enough battered violins to equip the Philharmonia and, on a plinth, an alabaster lady called Giuditta.

The biggest lift came from the celebrity presents. Harold Wilson gave a Gannex mac. Sir Alec Douglas-Home, a cricket bat. Jackie Kennedy, Harold Macmillan, and umpteen others gave signed copies of books by them or about them. Mary Rand gave her winning Olympic running-shoes, Cilla Black her teddy bear, the Rolling Stones an electric guitar, Sir Laurence Olivier a copper bracelet he wore in 'Othello'. Jeffrey Archer was in his element. Courtesy of PanAm, he dashed to Washington and managed to get President Johnson to autograph an album of Sir Winston Churchill's records. These, along with the cream of the gift crop, were sold at a grand auction at Mansion House hosted by the Lord Mayor.

The Mail gift drive raised about £225,000. Even the Queen gave a cash donation, and her Christmas Day message that year included some stirring words about 'the fight against poverty, malnutrition and ignorance'. Meanwhile Oxfam's regional organisers put their energies into distributing door-to-door five million collapsible cardboard 'Family boxes' with an appeal to put in £1 by Christmas. £150,000 was raised but the returns – as with the Daily Mail gift drive – did not rise to the heights of Hunger £Million the year before.

Not only Oxfam's prominence but its conspicuous willingness to risk money to raise money inevitably excited controversy. Small charities without the resources to do the same resented the way Oxfam seemed to be cornering the market in British generosity by up-front investment in publicity. Wary of criticism about overhead costs, Oxfam publicised its expenditure ratio ad nauseam. Canon Milford, frequently quoted, was always slipping in that only 'a penny-ha’penny in the shilling' was spent on fundraising, 'and another ha’penny on administration'. But the visibility gave another impression. A Gallup Poll of 1963 found that 43 per cent of middle and upper income respondees thought the expenses ratio was higher. For whatever reasons – higher competition, a publicity backlash – the momentum of rising income slackened and dropped around the mid-1960s. A report prepared at the end of 1964 on 'publicity and the changing patterns of response' commented that the organisation had been over-optimistic in its forecasts. Graphs drawn heading dizzily upwards had in fact flattened out. 'It was easy to mistake the successes of the time', wrote the author, 'for the bottom rungs of a ladder, when in fact they were the crest of a wave.'

In 1965, a fall in income of £300,000 on the previous year's £2.7
millionrangalarmbells. Theshortfallrepresented amuchbigger drop
onprojectedincome,andanS.O.S.—bynomeneans thelastinOxfam’s
history—went out to the field that grants would have to be held back. In
the meantime, the entire range of fundraising and publicity activities
was examined. The trend was downward on press ad. returns—the
‘starving child’ had lost some of its shock impact; and the return on
PledgedGiftexpenditure had begun to fall after reaching a peak in 1963.
It seemed that the days of the cut-price donation were over.

The most promising outlook was in the local offices around which the
network of support groups was steadily growing. By 1964, Oxfam had a
presence in 20 towns and cities including Edinburgh and Belfast. The
‘Familybox’ campaign, with its dependence on local publicity and
volunteer action, was designed to bring the regional fundraisers behind
a unified national effort. Some grassroots stalwarts were inclined to run
their own, individualist, shows and resisted attempts to orchestrate
them from Oxford. In spring 1965, an Assistant Director—Philip Jackson
—was taken on. From this point onwards, a major attempt was made to
weld the disparate machinery of local appeals into a more coherent and
productive team effort. With a marketing and sales background, Jackson
was expected to wave an organisational wand over the ‘home front’—
including all fundraising and publicity—and make it march in unison.

Quite a number of Oxfam supporter groups had begun to engage in a
new kind of activity: running temporary shops in premises lent for a few
days or weeks. The first were in Reigate and Redhill in 1962. To begin
with, these volunteer-managed shops were quite different from Joe
Mitty’s fiercely professional enterprise. Unlike Mitty, they usually took
in clothes, selling those unsuited for sending overseas, and were less like
a down-market version of an antique shop than an up-market version of
a jumble sale. Gradually, the two types of Oxfam Shop fused; it took
some time to persuade Mitty that the sale of second-hand clothes would
not detract from the Gift Shop image and performance.

At the end of 1964 a trading company was set up to market Christmas
cards and other products through the shops. Oxfam’s involvement in
trading came about—like so many of its activities—more by piecemeal
involvement than grand design. In 1959, Pastor Ludwig Stumpf of the
LutheranWorldService in Hong Kong was invited by Oxfam to speak at
their World Refugee Year Conference. He brought with him a suitcaseful
of pincushions and embroidered boxes made by Chinese refugees.
Initially, Oxfam itself showed little interest, but another conferee seized
upon them with enthusiasm. Elizabeth Wilson of the Huddersfield
Famine Relief Committee—the only other such Relief Committee to
survive since 1942—took Pastor Stumpf’s handicrafts back to the north
andthereafterimportedandsoldthemwithconsiderablesuccess.
Within a year or two, Oxfam picked up the idea. Lynn ten Kate, an energetic Gifts organiser, not only began to import from Pastor Stumpf, but bought African handicrafts from British suppliers for sale in the shops at Christmas time. She then persuaded Jimmy Betts to bring beads, bowls, and ornaments from Bechuanaland and anywhere else he was travelling. This turned out to be the start of another major charitable enterprise by Oxfam: the import and sale of Third World crafts as a means of benefiting their producers.

The formation of the trading company, Oxfam Activities Ltd., later to become Oxfam Trading, formalised the framework for selling both manufactured goods and those imported from overseas. With legal advice and after consultation with the Charity Commissioners, articles were drawn up for what was then a novel kind of business. The company functioned as did any commercial concern, but covenanted back to Oxfam all of its profits, allowing its operations to escape taxation. Imported craft goods entered the country without levy, initially at the discretion of HM Customs; later the principle was established at law.

The birth of the trading company encouraged supporter groups running temporary shops to take up merchandising. They were able to put up attractive window displays of cards and handicrafts to front their trade in second-hand goods. Shops caught on with volunteers and with customers; by mid-1966 around 50 were functioning at any one time, paving the way for the charity shop bonanza of the 1970s.

In the spring of 1963, an enterprise long nurtured by Leslie Kirkley and Cecil Jackson-Cole bore fruit. The international extension of the Oxfam family of organisations took its first step with the establishment of a Canadian Committee in Toronto. The next year saw the inauguration of Oxfam-Belgique. The latter was the creation of a wealthy Belgian aristocrat, Antoine Allard, an idealist of pacifist and internationalist persuasion. Allard heard of the British Oxfam, presented himself and his ideas for inspection, and – with Kirkley’s support – set up a modest imitation with the patronage of his Queen. But the Canadian move was different, very much promoted and inspired from Oxford as a planned démarche to spread worldwide the Oxfam crusade against world hunger.

Kirkley and Jackson-Cole had begun to think in terms of internationalisation back in the 1950s. Jackson-Cole’s was an evangelistic perspective. He cherished some words once spoken to him by Gilbert Murray: ‘There is a responsible spirit behind the universe who is seeking to remedy the suffering.’ Jackson-Cole believed that if this spirit could work through the British, it could surely also be summoned from the peoples of other countries.
Kirkley had a less ethereal vision. Ever since 1959 he had been a member of the formal non-governmental network, attending meetings in Geneva as a guest of UN agencies and, from 1962, playing an active part in the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA). He yearned to set up like-minded bodies in Oxfam’s non-sectarian image, one day to become an international federation such as the Save the Children network or the World Council of Churches. Kirkley’s dream occupied much of his own and no little organisational energy during the 1960s and beyond. Although an international Oxfam network of sorts emerged, it fell far short of Kirkley’s ambitions.

His initial hopes lay in the US. After a preliminary visit by Colonel Widdowson, Kirkley set off for North America in 1962. He did the rounds of friendly organisations, having breakfast with Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, being interviewed by the *New York Times*, and travelling to a number of cities. After all, Kirkley decided, the place to start was Canada. He took on a retired Salvation Army Officer, Colonel Albert Dalziel, to set up an embryonic organisation in Toronto. This Dalziel accomplished, gaining the patronage of key people and negotiating the all-important tax deductible status. To obtain this, the new organisation had to undertake charitable activity in Canada. Accordingly, a grant of C$10,000 was made for Salvation Army work with Canadian native peoples. Costs were met by Oxfam UK on the understanding that donations overseas would, initially at least, be channelled through Oxford.

Unfortunately, the assumption that the Oxfam UK momentum would buoy up an Oxfam of Canada was a misjudgement. Dalziel withdrew in 1963 and the small National Committee became moribund. So Kirkley sent across Lynn ten Kate, a forceful and energetic lieutenant. She set up a number of local fundraising groups, but after she left in mid-1964, they became directionless. Kirkley’s deputy, Henry Fletcher, then began a series of visits to try to get things moving. Hot from success in Britain, he found it incomprehensible that the same spirit and energy could not be tapped. In spring 1966, he accepted an invitation to go out and run Oxfam of Canada himself, and from this point onwards things began to look up.

This was only one aspect, if the most significant, of Kirkley’s efforts to develop co-operative ties, at home and internationally. He formed a relationship with the Austrian Freedom from Hunger Campaign Committee; he fostered links with an Italian group, Manitese. But the truth was that, however impressed potential allies were with the Oxfam story, this was a peculiarly British animal and it did not thrive easily in other environments. Organisations which transplanted well were those which had a very definite constituency – children, the elderly – around
which support could coalesce. Oxfam was an idea, and it was not a tightly defined idea. Neither the idea nor the marketing methods used in Britain instantly moved the spirit which Kirkley and Jackson-Cole had counted upon.

It took the radicalisation of North American youth in the late 1960s, largely wrought by Vietnam and a sense of disgust with Western imperialism, to create a more conducive climate. And then the Oxfams that flourished in such a hothouse were different, radically and controversially different, from the careful balance of British pragmatism and passion.

In its desire to open up hearts and minds as well as purses to the problem of poverty in countries overseas, the Oxford Committee took seriously the task of public information and education. Kirkley was a strong believer in 'the educated pound'. But efforts went further with a programme specifically directed at the nation's youth.

In 1959, World Refugee Year, Stella Dyer was appointed as Oxfam's first Schools Organiser to co-ordinate what had been up to then a haphazard series of classroom appeals and competitions. She set about forging systematic links with schools, universities, colleges of further education, teacher training institutions, and the whole educational establishment. Then came the Freedom from Hunger Campaign with its strong focus on putting across the facts of world hunger in the classroom. Oxfam's education team grew, one of its key recruits being Bill Jackson who joined in 1962. By 1964, Oxfam was in touch with 12,000 schools and the department was raising around £150,000 a year.

As they hopped from school assemblies to staff rooms to lunchtime talks at training colleges, Oxfam's education staff were constantly asked for materials for classroom use. Other than FFH materials, there was virtually nothing ready-made for teaching young people about world poverty. In 1963, Oxfam was contracted by UNESCO to produce a series of teaching resources for primary school teachers, and this set off yet another area of pioneering activity. To begin with, the Oxford Committee had seen schools mainly as a source of money. But by the mid-1960s, the importance of the educational role in schools had outstripped the fundraising one. Oxfam materials were produced in close co-operation with Freedom from Hunger.

Stella Dyer and Bill Jackson took the line that no direct appeals should be made to students. The emphasis should be on laying the facts about hunger, disease, and deprivation before young people, and letting them respond in the way they wanted. That this would often redound to Oxfam's advantage was axiomatic. But a very important part of the educational message was that the problems were too large for charities
like Oxfam to handle; that only governments and international organisations commanded resources on the necessary scale. That there could be tension between education for development and fundraising for the overseas programme soon became apparent. When Jackson proposed to Kirkley that Oxfam should set up a separate educational trust, he was told: 'Nothing doing'. The idea was premature. It was to re-emerge in the future.

In 1965, the year marking the formal end of the five-year Freedom from Hunger Campaign, a co-operative mechanism between the overseas voluntary agencies was set up: the Voluntary Committee on Overseas Aid and Development (VCOAD). This Committee, which included ODI, UNA, and FFHC, as well as the relevant charities, was expected to become the mouthpiece of the voluntary aid sector, succeeding the Standing Conference of British Organisations for Aid to Refugees. Its inspiration came from Barbara Castle at the Labour Government's new Ministry of Development, who hoped that it would serve as a joint platform with the government on aid issues, as well as prevent duplication among the burgeoning charity programmes.

In spite of a number of meetings by a working group, the areas in which the agencies were prepared to work in a truly co-operative spirit appeared to be few. Oxfam was one of the members which saw the creation of VCOAD as a chance to stimulate educational and fundraising action throughout the entire private sector. But, like others, it was very unwilling to move towards any merger of its overseas aid programme. In the upshot, this attempt to build co-operation – as in the international arena – did not fulfill what appeared to be its potential. But VCOAD did undertake seminal work, particularly in relation to the formal education system. It provided a useful forum for the agencies, and a clearing-house for the growing range of materials each was generating.

Oxfam's education programme derived great strength from the decision to create a separate information department both to service organisational needs and to field public enquiries. In early 1963, Elizabeth Stamp, previously with the Economist Intelligence Unit, joined Oxfam as Information Officer. Her great-uncle, Dudley Stamp, was a well-known geographer, and one of the earliest academic writers to popularise the notion of 'a developing world' in books foreshadowing those by Ritchie Calder, Gunnar Myrdal, Paul Streeten, Hans Singer, and others establishing 'development' as a new field of scholarship.

Elizabeth Stamp played a very important part in positioning Oxfam intellectually, between the simplest response to world hunger – 'I am 79, I can't spare much but here is 6s. I saved on fuel' – and what was fast becoming a subject of significance and complexity, spawning new disciplines and professions. It was not easy to straddle, almost single-
handedly, an exhortation to ladies knitting blankets, and a background briefing on the implications of GATT negotiations for developing economies which would pass muster with statesmen.

The information service was an earnest of Oxfam’s intention to play a role in bringing the many issues connected to world hunger to a wider audience. The information literature developed – for use with supporter groups, in schools, by speakers, for organisational sponsors – presented a view of the world which chimed with the standard geographic ‘land and people’ text, but which differed in one important respect: its point of view emanated from the need to eradicate poverty and hunger, and incorporated projects Oxfam was supporting towards that end.

Gradually, image by image, Oxfam was helping develop a new way of looking at the world, an ideologically charged view of other countries and cultures, a more considered version of the predicament symbolised by the starving child.

It is difficult to appreciate just how novel this was only a generation ago. It is a great tribute to Oxfam that, in today’s Britain, almost no-one’s idea of the world beyond Europe and North America is untouched by the perception of humanity in need. However, the redefinition of ‘lands and peoples’ in the light of poverty and underdevelopment, and the attempt to market a new notion of international friendship – help for the poor – had an effect both on organisational consciousness, and on Oxfam’s public image.

At that time, for any audience other than the academic, the main source of information about world poverty was the overseas aid charities, among which Oxfam was the pacesetter. Thus, not only did its information output help fill the information vacuum left by the end of empire, but it also had a tendency to convey a grander importance of Oxfam projects in the scheme of things, and a greater belief in Oxfam’s ability to solve the problems of world poverty, than was realistic.

However carefully Oxfam proclaimed ‘this problem is too large to be solved by philanthropists like us’, the implication was that villagers in Africa, Asia or Latin America turned the corner out of poverty thanks to an Oxfam grant. Problem and solution were married, intentionally or otherwise; the organisation which brought people’s attention to world hunger was identified as the mechanism for solving it. The scale of the problem and the proportionality of the Oxfam response became blurred. Thus the importance of Oxfam as a weapon in meeting mankind’s greatest contemporary challenge was unconsciously overstated. This tendency was reinforced by the need to maximise fundraising, and by the passion Oxfamers brought to their cause.

One reason why Oxfam images took such a powerful hold was that, except for a handful of ex-colonial servants, intrepid travellers and
foreign correspondents, few people had any alternative images with which they had to conform. Television had not yet penetrated the mysteries of the Third World; few people went abroad for their holidays, nor if they did were they likely to travel somewhere so exotic nor witness the workings of an Oxfam-type project at first hand. This was still an age of innocence as far as the average British view of distant foreign parts was concerned.

In 1966, Bill Jackson conceived the idea that 800 schoolchildren should be given a development education tour: they should visit the Oxfam version of ‘abroad’. This was a brave idea. On a concessionary basis, Oxfam chartered the Devonia, a ship fitted out for educational cruises; and for £49 a head, offered places on ‘Operation Oasis’. Teenagers prepared for the trip by learning about Algeria’s geography and economic problems in the aftermath of civil war; stepping ashore at Algiers, they would visit Oxfam-funded projects in action. The venture was non-profit-making; but it taxed Oxfam’s information and education staff to the limit.

Oxfam had provided aid to Algerian refugees for many years, and since 1962 – the year of peace and independence – to Algeria itself. Feeding and medical schemes, particularly ‘Gouttes de Lait’ mobile milk stations, had been set up for the children of returnees. In the Saharan south, Oxfam had given £3,000 to the White Fathers to equip vocational training centres for boys. These in their oasis settings provided the final destinations of parties of British schoolchildren, camping under the stars like their nomadic Arab hosts.

‘Operation Oasis’ was a successful adventure, as well as an introduction to the problems of poverty. The authorities in Algiers started by treating the arrival of a ship-load of schoolchildren as an early swallow of the tourist season, and conducted the party around the smartest city ‘developments’ newly independent Algeria had to offer. When they set off in bone-rattling buses for villages on the edge of the Sahara, the poverty they had come to witness was masked by an Arabian Nights fantasy.

The children were greeted everywhere by cavalcades of Arab riflemen on camels firing volleys into the air. Surrounded by hordes of friendly faces and waving hands, they enjoyed traditional desert hospitality – mountainous feasts of couscous and roasted sheep. Bill Jackson and his Oxfam colleagues tried to compensate for the contradictory impressions of desert pride and poverty, while White Fathers shepherded youngsters round their modest training workshops, and Save the Children workers gave them cups of milk to hand out to crowds of friendly children.

‘Operation Oasis’ was an educational experience for everyone concerned. It was not an experience Oxfam attempted to repeat. The
effort was out of proportion to the benefit to Oxfam and the cause of development. The complexities of poverty were not easy to unscramble while you were simultaneously warding off marauding bottom-pincher from crocodiles of schoolgirls and trying to keep 800 youngsters dysentery-free. On the way home, the children wrote essays, and the journalists on board wrote copy. The *Sunday Mirror* reporter, John Knight, quoted Peter Smith, 17, of Hackney Down School, London: 'I felt choked when two little Arab girls without two halfpennies to rub together gave me a souvenir. It was a wonderful gesture, but I wish they were taught more how to look after themselves.'

The complexities of development aid caused less soul-searching in Oxfam in the early 1960s than parallel questions of scale.

Year by year, Oxfam recorded the expansion of its overseas programme: 'last year Oxfam funds were spent in 89 countries' declared the annual report for 1965. But to say: 'We now work in 89 countries', however true it might be, and couple the statement with global or national statistics, was misleading. The few thousand pounds spent in many countries, on a clinic extension here, a consignment of high-protein food there, the salary of an agriculturalist in some mission outpost, was negligible against mass poverty.

On any physical scale above that of a particular individual, family or small community, it had to be clear to the thoughtful mind that a typical Oxfam grant could exert no conceivable influence on the problem of poverty. For those it helped, it might represent – as Bernard Llewellyn pointed out – 'the most important thing that ever happened in their lives', and on that basis alone was absolutely justifiable. But increasingly there grew up a school of thought for whom helping a handful in an ocean of need provided an inadequate sense of reward, whose unhappiness with the modesty of the Oxfam aid achievement led them in new directions.

As early as November 1962, Peter Burns, a young writer working with Richard Exley, put up to Kirkley a set of radical proposals. Burns quoted Aldous Huxley on the threat posed by world hunger: "'We will go through poverty to social unrest, through chaos to dictatorship'; continuing apocalyptically: 'In 40 years our civilisation could be usurped. I believe that these prophecies are felt, but not generally understood. Their significance has not penetrated deeply enough for people to take the steps that must be taken now – whilst there is still time.'

Burns' idea was that Oxfam should step up its role as a pressure group and a moulder of public opinion. He even suggested that the current publicity and fundraising style might be having a damaging
effect: 'It is not enough to ask people to adopt a herd of buffaloes. It is possible, in fact, that this last tactic may lull people into a false sense of security by making them feel that the adoption of a project will, in itself, solve the problem of world hunger.' Burns wanted extraordinary pressure to be put on the British government. He envisaged a petition with a million signatures, and a delegation of 'respected minds' calling on the Prime Minister. 'I further suggest that Oxfam should present its case for world action directly to the United Nations.'

As Burns well knew, this kind of action would propel Oxfam further into the jaws of controversy than it had previously ventured. It would antagonise certain political and religious leaders and excite accusation of engagement in politics. 'I feel', he said, 'that Oxfam must be prepared to enter into such a controversy. The war against world hunger is, after all, a political war. It must be fought on that level.'

Burns' ideas were discussed at a special Executive Meeting on the future of Oxfam held over the course of two days in January 1963. The meeting, after long discussion, 'accepted in principle that propagandist activity is a function of Oxfam'. But this consensus was reached at a time when the Charity Commissioners were hovering menacingly over Oxfam's charitable status and any such public action as Burns suggested was put under wraps until times improved. As a start in building 'political' support, Kirkley despatched Burns to work in London as Oxfam's first lobbyist. He developed useful contacts in both Houses of Parliament, as well as in the Trades Unions and the Co-operative Movements.

As the 1960s progressed, Oxfam put increasing stress on the role of educating people about world poverty, but without de-emphasising its aid programme. The idea that Oxfam was one of the standard bearers of a new movement - inheritors of a fading CND, a philosophical catchment area for 1960s' energy and idealism - continued to appeal. Overseas aid was popular, and - more important - 'with-it'. In 1964, a youth department was set up as an extension of education work. The idea was to capture young people's enthusiasm outside the confines of school and the classroom project.

David Moore, who built up 'Young Oxfam', had an infectious sense of fun, and he prompted Young Oxfam groups to go in for all sorts of stunts and record-breaks - non-stop knitting, distance hikes, dance-ins - for which they obtained sponsorship from parents and friends. By 1966 there were over 100 'Young Oxfam' groups, a 15,000 circulation 'Young Oxfam Bulletin' - YOB - a name calculated to rile conservatives, and a series on Radio Luxembourg. And there was an epidemic of marathon walks.

CND had established the long-distance march as a form of popular political statement. Oxfam's version was an altogether softer vehicle,
primarily an enjoyable outing with a social purpose. From Oxfam’s point of view sponsored walks had many attractions, not least their high rate of return. David Moore and the regional organisers expended energy on logistics – police, wardens, refreshments, first aid posts – but the young people themselves obtained their sponsors and raised the money. In 1966, sponsored walks brought in £50,000; in 1967 a Food Trek in relays around the country raised nearly £100,000.

But here too controversy struck. A girl lost her life in Newcastle United Football Stadium when a crowd of 12,000 marchers surged against the gate. After this, mass starts and appearances by pop stars were banned. Worries about safety turned walks into less free-wheeling affairs. In April 1967, 500 Young Oxfamers pushing prams from Tolworth to Brighton were stopped by the police because of the nuisance they were causing to traffic. Nick Cauldwell, 18, the organiser told the press: ‘This has completely dampened our efforts.’ Dampened or otherwise, the surge of youthful enthusiasm for Oxfam’s cause continued on throughout the decade.

In July 1966, 200 Young Oxfamers, kitted out in badges which read ‘Make Love, not War’, met up in an Oxfordshire School for their second annual discussion week. The mood was distinctly militant. Trevor Huddleston, then Bishop of Masasi in Tanzania, was the principal guest speaker. He delivered a slashing attack on the West’s patronising attitude towards the developing countries and received an ovation for demanding justice for the world’s have-nots.

Like some of their elders in the Oxfam ranks, the mismatch between the scale of Oxfam’s aid programme and the problem of world poverty was bothering the Young Oxfam activists. They passed a resolution condemning the government’s threat to cut back by 10 per cent on overseas aid: any such cutback would nullify at a stroke the programmes – gauged in financial terms – of all the agencies together. There were calls for Oxfam to become a political pressure group, a rallying-point for radical opinion on international justice and peace.

The debate about the weight Oxfam should give to public information and education as opposed to overseas aid was to rumble on for many years. Indeed, it has never died down, merely evolved. And the key question – how much pressure can a voluntary agency exert within the political arena without jeopardising its charitable status – will always remain open to revised adjudication. It, too, is subject to the evolution of attitudes in society at large.

In 1966, these issues had not yet reached boiling point. That happened a few years later, when the conundrum of education v. aid reached its most dramatic expression at the hands of the then Deputy Director, the Reverend Nicolas Stacey.
6

ACTS OF GOD AND ACTS OF MAN

Earthquake, wind, flood, fire, war, pestilence, drought, famine: whatever else the starving child of the 1960s might symbolise, to most people it meant catastrophe, disaster. Oxfam was seen as a fire brigade for dousing distress overseas, ‘always ready,’ in the words of Richard Dimbleby’s 1961 radio appeal, ‘day and night, to send immediate help to any danger point’. Emergency relief, Oxfam’s genesis, has always been the activity for which it is best known.

Kirkley — at the Hungarian border, in the Congo — had built up a reputation for responding fast to crisis whether of the natural calamity or man-made variety. The emergency relief role was integral to the organisation’s psyche and programme as well as its image in the public mind. As Oxfam grew and necessarily became more bureaucratic, financial management and grant-screening procedures had special circuits built in to safeguard the treasured flexibility, which permitted speedy reaction to disasters. Planning for the unplannable was a part of the Oxfam repertoire.

Every month, a number of small grants were made to help house, feed, or tend victims of floods, crop losses, blights, epidemics, and other localised disasters in faraway places. The aid-giving machinery, originally supply-driven by the concern at home to send help overseas, gradually became more demand-driven from the field as the Field Directorate became established. Oxfam became increasingly better known as an instant source of help to mission outposts suddenly confronted with drought, monsoon floods, or an influx of refugees in their parish. The grants list, issued annually, enumerated these inconspicuous emergency actions: ‘Congo: medical programme for people who left their villages following rebel activities, £2,000’; ‘Brazil: stoves, mattresses and roofing materials for flood victims in Recife, £5,165’; ‘Laos: to purchase corned beef after crops destroyed, £1,000’; ‘Uganda: food and blankets after earthquake, £62.’

In the case of major disasters, special initiatives were taken: for the Algerian refugees; the victims of the 1960 earthquake in Agadir,
Sunrise over the Third World: the 1960s

Morocco; earthquakes in Iran, Turkey (1966), and Sicily (1968); refugees fleeing Vietnam and Tibet; war in the Middle East (1967); drought in many parts of Africa. Besides any other consideration, responding to major disasters was a matter of organisational credibility, whatever the new emphasis on development. Disasters were also a time for emotive fundraising appeals. Money thus raised could be used among the victims not only for immediate relief but for longer-term purposes – schemes which built a better future.

Britain’s response to major calamities in remote places was transformed by the media revolution. In the 1960s, the television camera became part of the dynamics of disaster relief. For the first time, people in the West were confronted with images in their homes of other peoples, many in unfamiliar settings, undergoing traumatic crisis right before their eyes. The effect on the viewing public was an outpouring of compassion in the form of cash donations for disaster relief, and demands that the government rush to give aid. In the capacity of angels of mercy, the charities were part of the news event, both as purveyors of help and as anguished critics of the sluggish nature of officialdom’s response.

A less fortunate aspect of the media’s growing influence was the tendency of charitable emissaries to rush to a scene of devastation and compete for publicity – and the funds it produced – while doing things of dubious usefulness on the ground. Although the horror stories about diversion, chaos, and wasted aid – ‘relief goods piled on docksides’ – were often exaggerated, there was amateurishness and inefficiency. The government and Charity Commissioners had an uphill battle trying to persuade Britain’s overseas aid agencies to co-operate with one another, but their efforts did bear some fruit. In 1963, in the wake of the Skopje earthquake in Yugoslavia, a Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) was formed consisting of the five main agencies: the British Red Cross Society, Christian Aid, Oxfam, Save the Children Fund, and War on Want.

In the past, the charities had run their own appeals at disaster times; the argument in favour of competition was that the total amount of money raised by several appeals must be larger than the amount from one single joint one. But television’s new importance changed things. Although commercial advertising for charitable causes was not allowed, the TV authorities were prepared, for a major disaster, to run a peak-time appeal for the victims. What they would not do was to run several different appeals or give one charity preferential treatment. It was therefore agreed that, in future, the five agencies would mount joint DEC disaster appeals and split the proceeds. They were pleased to co-operate thus far; hopes that collaboration would extend to joint field operations mostly proved stillborn. They tried to avoid overlap, but all
wanted to stay within their own mandate, help their own constituency, use their own partner network on the ground.

In the mid-1960s, two influences were pushing Oxfam towards a more operational role in disaster situations. One was a supply-led impulse, in the form of the large sums of money produced by DEC appeals: the first, in the wake of a 1966 earthquake in Turkey, raised £495,662. Even split five ways, this was a considerable sum by the standards of the time. The other was Oxfam’s desire to develop a more active disaster response than shipping goods into the maelstrom of relief or making cash grants to the local Red Cross or Crescent Society. A case, it was felt, could be made for an exception to Oxfam’s usual rule not to become operational.

After the earthquake at Skopje in 1963, Oxfam came to an arrangement with a team of Bristol Civil Defence volunteers. They were set up as a disaster-ready, stand-by team, able to set off for the scene at a moment’s notice. Oxfam provided three Landrovers and other emergency equipment, while Civil Defence paid for uniforms and training costs. Oxfam would pay the team’s travel and living expenses to and at the disaster site. The 22-member team went on training weekends in the Welsh mountains, practised first aid, emergency feeding, and sharpened up their rescue skills.

The team was eventually called into use in 1966, in the aftermath of a Turkish earthquake. Within 48 hours of its departure from Bristol, the team had set up a feeding station and was giving out 2,000 meals a day. Some of the Bristol volunteers performed a similar exercise after the 1968 Sicilian earthquake. But shortly after this, Oxfam withdrew its backing. The Landrovers were costly items to keep sitting around, and since air freight would be inordinately expensive, they could not be sent to a disaster further afield than Europe. Oxfam had also learned that a Civil Defence team from Britain could not perform more usefully or cheaply than volunteers recruited on the spot. This was not the first nor the last Oxfam emergency relief experiment to merit an entry in the ‘lessons learnt’ disasters ledger.

In 1965, India suffered a failure of the monsoon rains. The drought, one of the worst of the century, covered a large belt of central and southern India. Crop damage was extensive and, by early 1966, there was acute food shortage in a number of states including Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and Mysore.

At this time, before the ‘green revolution’ had transformed the output of its grain harvest, India was struggling to overtake its annual increase in population with a corresponding increase in food production. The
year 1964-65 had set a record in foodstuff production of 88 million tons; but even so, India had imported six million tons of grain from the US on the concessionary terms laid down by US Public Law 480. In late 1965, President Johnson announced a stepping-up of exports over the next few months, and efforts were set in motion to increase Indian port capacity to handle the forthcoming armada of grain shipments.

In 1966, the monsoon failed again. This time the drought was less widespread but particularly intense in the two north-eastern states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Bihar, one of the poorest, most densely populated, and worst administered states in India, was the most vulnerable. Nine-tenths of the 53 million inhabitants lived entirely from the land, and more than a quarter were landless and without reserves of any kind. Every year in Bihar was a food shortage year. Less than 7 per cent of the land was irrigated and therefore shielded from the impact of a bad monsoon. From June onwards when the rains should have come, the sun beat down relentlessly. The autumn crop produced next to nothing. By now the ground in the south was too hard to be turned by the farmers' wooden ploughshares and in extensive areas the spring crop was not sown. By October, famine began to threaten.

In November 1966, Mrs. Gandhi toured Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in response to an outcry in the Indian press about the failure of the Bihar authorities to respond to the crisis. The first reports of death from starvation – 13 were admitted – coincided with Mrs. Gandhi's visit. According to The Hindu, 48 million people in Bihar were affected by shortages of food, fodder, and water. There were stories of villagers eating grass, giving away their children, and committing suicide. Oxfam's Field Director, Jim Howard, wrote from Bihar in the same month: 'It is quite clear to me that the wolf is through the door and we are faced with a massive disaster. The failure of the rice crop is 85-95 per cent. Prices are up 300 per cent. In some of the villages, groups of people are already prostrate with starvation.' He argued that Oxfam's usual rule about not becoming operational on the ground was inappropriate and should be ignored. Kirkley agreed.

Jim Howard, the third Field Director to be appointed by Oxfam, had set off for India in January 1965. A water engineer by training and a Quaker by conviction, he had already spent from 1956 to 1960 in India working in rural development with the Friends' Service Council. For Jim Howard, the opportunity to go back to India for Oxfam came simply as a calling. This rough-hewn figure, big-hearted and gifted with a passionate eloquence, epitomised the Oxfam spirit at its best. Howard threw his energy into the unfolding tragedy in Bihar, and set up an operation based in Patna, the state capital. This quickly developed into by far the largest relief programme Oxfam had ever contemplated.
In India, the word 'famine' has special connotations. According to the 100-year-old Famine Code, a state declaring famine took upon itself responsibility for feeding the victims, remitted all land taxes, suspended credit repayments, and gave extra power to magistrates and district commissioners to carry out relief. The declaration also entitled a state to be given extra food grains from the national stocks. 'Famine' is thus a sensitive issue in India, and whether true famine exists or not can become a matter of contention between central and state governments. Although a famine was not declared in Bihar in late 1966, government relief efforts were dramatically stepped up after Mrs. Gandhi's tour.

A Bihar Relief Committee was set up under J.P. Narayan, a celebrated Gandhian and Indian elder statesmen. The authorities creaked into action, setting up 150,000 'fair-price' food ration shops, one for every four villages, in the worst-hit areas. Public works were established; to help solve the drinking water problem, a crash programme of borehole drilling and well-digging was instituted. With their wages, victims of the drought were – at least theoretically – able to buy a ration of 8oz of food grains a day.

With his engineering background, Howard had already fixed upon village water supplies as a main plank of Oxfam's general programme of aid to India. From the small network of water projects already helped by Oxfam, Howard sought to redeploy water-well specialists from elsewhere. John Macleod, a Scottish missionary in Jalna, Maharashtra, brought in his driller and the rig – a Halco Tiger – already provided by Oxfam. Halco Tigers became quite a feature of Bihar famine relief; Oxfam ordered two others, one on behalf of the Vatican; UNICEF airlifted in another nine. But these were high-speed percussion machines for hard rock; much of Bihar's geological terrain was soft, and shallow wells were as important. Over the crisis period, half a million shallow wells were dug and 10,000 old wells deepened.

Howard's November visit to the South Bihari hinterland made him deeply concerned about the state of the children. Children's bodies are a barometer of scarcity, showing nutritional stress long before those of adults, and becoming extra susceptible to infection. At that time, the instinctive reaction to the predicament of the hungry child was high-protein foods, especially milk. So Howard cabled Oxford for milk, and Oxfam determined to send him as much milk as possible.

The British government was asked for help, not with purchase but with shipment. In December 1966, the Royal Navy loaded 300 tons of dried milk on board the Hebe, displacing military equipment to do so. The Hebe docked in the southern Indian port of Cochin on 31 December, and a special milk-train left for Patna. A young British VSO called Simpson, temporarily commandeered by Howard, was put on board to
fend off pilferers for the 15 days of its journey and delivered all 12,000 bags of powdered milk miraculously intact. Howard wrote: 'If you could see the truckloads of milk arriving from the station you and all of Oxfam would feel as grateful and as pleased as we are. Now comes the task of feeding it into the right mouths.'

By this time, an assistant Field Director, Bert Stringer, and four Oxfam volunteers had arrived from Britain. The Bihar Relief Committee was planning a feeding programme through the state's 25,000 elementary schools, based on grain provided by the US organisation, CARE. Oxfam offered its milk as a supplement. Another 300 tons of British milk was soon in the pipeline. Difficulties in finding further supplies ended when Community Aid Abroad, Oxfam's sister organisation in Australia, tracked down 1,100 tons and shipped it to Calcutta. Within weeks, the Oxfam-organised part of the programme was feeding 90,000 children in Gaya, one of the worst-hit districts. The volunteers supervised stocks and distribution.

Meanwhile, the wife of a British businessman in India, Tigger Stack, had been searching the country for supplies of locally-manufactured high-protein foods. Stack had spent most of her life in India, moving in the privileged circles of post-Raj society. She believed that it was possible to harness the social conscience of Indian businessmen and professional people through a channel such as Oxfam, and had offered her assistance at any time it might be useful. As crisis loomed in Bihar, Jim Howard decided to take up her offer.

Nutritional thinking of the time – later modified by the recognition that calories mattered more – was then heavily focused on protein deficiency as the root cause of child malnutrition. In India, as in other countries where dairy produce was a luxury commodity, Food Technology Institutes had been experimenting with mixes of local pulses and legumes for manufacture as a 'tonic' children's food. Existing contacts with the Central Food Technological Research Institute in Mysore led Howard to pin his trust in 'Multi-purpose food', a bran-like substance with a 46 per cent protein content, made of peanut and chick-pea flour with added vitamins and minerals.

MPF had been manufactured in India for some years but only in a small quantity. For the emergency, production needed to be dramatically increased. Tigger Stack visited factories in Mysore, West Bengal, and Sitapur, both closer to Bihar. A gracious and persistent operator, Stack used her contacts in government and business circles to unblock logjams and confer an aura of VIP status to speed things along. She obtained scarce peanut flour for the food factories so that they could raise their output; she borrowed vehicles and sent the MPF up to Bihar at minimal cost. The first loads arrived in December 1966, and by mid-January,
The scale of need remained severe. In January 1967, Howard reported: 'I cannot find the words to describe the misery and starvation I have seen. It staggered me that so many people in Patna are so unaware, so misinformed, accept so casually the authorities' inertia.' Everyone was preoccupied by the general election, due in February. In Patna itself, markets were bursting with fruit and vegetables. But 20 miles to the south, the bright green of irrigated paddy field gave way to a brown, concrete-hard wasteland. In the villages, hunger was becoming daily more visible.

The spring wheat crop, as expected, failed throughout most of the state. On 18 April 1967, the government of Bihar finally declared that a state of famine existed in seven districts, including Gaya. This was the first time since Independence in 1947 that any state had invoked the Famine Code. Against opposition from central government – from whom 400,000 tons of food a month were sought – the authorities had assumed responsibility for feeding 13 million people, one quarter of the state population. No-one believed that the administrative or distribution system could manage such a load.

As the heat of the pre-monsoon season in India built up and many remaining streams and wells went dry, observers believed that a calamity of Biblical proportions was in the offing. But somehow, the threatened calamity passed by. Deaths from starvation, and far more deaths from epidemics of smallpox and all the infections to which the weak and starving are prone, did occur; the full mortality toll probably reached a few thousand, an unexceptional hot season figure in one of India's poorest states.

Where did the Bihar famine go? Disaster was kept at bay mainly by the massive scale of food imports from North America and Australia. The US sent nine million tons of wheat, one quarter of the annual US crop, with ships docking at the rate of three a day. And that wheat, against all the odds, travelled the full length of the relief pipeline. For all its slow-moving start, the Government of Bihar managed to make the relief machinery – public works and ration shops – function adequately. The supporting agencies played a valuable part; but in the end it was the Biharis themselves who saved their people from mass starvation.

At the peak of the relief effort, five million children were being fed daily, 450,000 with a meal that included Oxfam milk and nutrition supplements. A correspondent for the Birmingham Post wrote: 'Famine in Bihar has brought into being a relief operation of unparalleled magnitude and complexity. Oxfam crops up all over the place – I saw its ration-cards in a village of half a dozen huts.' An ITV documentary, 'Famine', which showed the scheme at work, produced £32,000 in donations and 10,000
letters to Oxfam. Between December 1966 and November 1967, Oxfam spent £345,500 on drinking water supplies and child feeding. Howard and his team were justifiably proud of their effort.

The distressing feature of the relief programme was that there was more milk to drink in Bihar in 1967, more healthy children, and more people vaccinated against disease, than there had ever been in the past. In a report prepared at Mrs. Gandhi’s request, her adviser, George Verghese, wrote with only slight exaggeration: ‘In a normal year, these people hover on the breadline. They are beyond the pale, nobody’s concern, they starve. In a famine year, they eat. Their health is better and the children are gaining weight. For them this is a year of great blessing. This was the deep irony, the grim tragedy of the situation.’

In July 1967, after a slow start, the monsoon broke and a new round of planting – the first for a year in parts of Bihar – began. The rains were good. Within three months, crops were being harvested and feeding centres closed. The next year, 1968, produced a bumper crop. The new hybrid seeds of the ‘green revolution’ were gradually transforming India’s food deficit problem and helping to fill the national granary, even though poverty and malnutrition remained.

India has not since faced drought without sufficient grain in hand to avoid mass imports from elsewhere. Bihar 1966-67 was a historic landmark. Verghese wrote: ‘The famine has been a revelation, a trial, a shame; but also an opportunity and an awakening.’ It had aroused the conscience of many better-off Indians and government officials and given a new impetus to efforts to conquer child malnutrition.

For Oxfam, the deep involvement in Bihar famine relief was also a turning-point. It opened a new chapter in the evolution of its aid, both to the sub-continent and elsewhere.

In April 1967, just as the Bihar famine was reaching its climax, Oxfam launched one of its largest campaigns to date. Posters on 9,000 hoardings ambiguously declared: ‘Help Oxfam STOP feeding hungry children’ and ‘Oxfam HATES hungry children’. This was Oxfam’s most brazen effort to use mass advertising to put across the message that – with hunger as with disease – prevention is better than cure. The campaign was entitled ‘Food for Tomorrow’ and attracted much attention.

1967 was Oxfam’s 25th year. The highlight of Anniversary celebrations was a National Hunger Lunch in the Banqueting Hall in Whitehall, with Reg Prentice, the new Minister of Overseas Development, as chief guest. Prentice was committed to raising Britain’s level of overseas aid, which – with economic problems at home – had lost popularity with the Wilson government since the 1964 election.
Prentice told his audience that he wanted to be pressured by demands that Britain give more overseas aid. 'The kind of effort we can put into helping development throughout the world is going to depend on public opinion, and this government and governments of the future ought to be nagged and bullied by those who care strongly about these things.' This was music to the Oxfam ear. 'I want to live in a world where Ministers of Overseas Development are considered more important than Ministers of Defence.' Amidst cheers, the Minister of Defence, Dennis Healey, nodded agreement. The heyday of overseas aid as a political issue might be waning, but it still packed some moral and political punch.

Meanwhile in Bihar, Oxfam was entertaining David Frost. Frost, approached to front the pre-Christmas 25th Anniversary appeal, and to do it from the field, accepted enthusiastically. He doled out milk into small brass cans held by lines of Indian children. He was photographed in the rain to show joy that the drought had broken. He wrote: 'I shall never forget some of the scenes – the mother appealing for more food as her child lay dying on her breast, the old men waiting all day for a children's emergency feeding to end, in the hope that there might be something left over for them.' On 26 November, Frost launched the campaign in London. The appeal was a success. For the first time, in 1967-68, Oxfam raised over £3 million.

As the 25th year of Oxfam's existence gave way to the 26th, another emergency was building. This was no natural calamity of drought and crops withering in the earth, but a bloody and man-made affair: the Nigerian Civil War.

The end of British rule in large chunks of Africa left a political legacy with many in-built flaws. To suit their imperial ambitions and administrative convenience, the colonisers had knitted together in unitary states peoples of widely different cultures who, left to their own devices, found the national flag and national anthem less compelling than their many ancient rivalries.

One of the national patchworks with poorly-sewn seams was the Federal Republic of Nigeria. By the historical accident of British rule, and because Lord Lugard had favoured the common destiny of the desert kingdoms of the Moslem North with those of the Christianised farmers and traders of the South, Nigeria came to independence in 1960 as one gigantic country. Britain, the creator, and nationalist Nigerians, the inheritors, were proud of their achievement. But the varnish of unity quickly began to crack.

A military coup in 1966 brought to power a group dominated by Easterners, the Ibos. A backlash of violent reprisal led to another coup,
and a young Northerner, General Yakubu Gowon, took over. Continuing massacres of Ibo's living in the North profoundly scarred the collective Ibo consciousness. While Gowon tried to exert control and redesign the federal structure, Ibo from all parts of Nigeria began to converge on their homeland, swelling the population by one-third, to around 12 million. In May 1967, Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, Military Governor of the Eastern Region, announced the secession of the independent Republic of Biafra. Biafra happened to contain Nigeria's oilfields. In July, the Federal forces of General Gowon attacked.

When the fighting began, the problem was seen by the outside world as a tribal rebellion of concern only to Nigeria. But as the months went by and Colonel Ojukwu's Biafran troops continued to hold out, world opinion and the ex-colonial powers began to line up on either side of a bitter civil war. At stake was the ability of the largest independent African country to resist the forces of disintegration – forces which, as the Congo had demonstrated, were explosive elsewhere. Early in 1968, however, Tanzania and Zambia accepted the claim to Biafran self-determination. Their recognition of the breakaway state was in breach of continent-wide agreement to uphold pre-independence borders, and it transformed the Biafran adventure into an issue of international significance. This was enhanced by international involvement in the oilfields.

Britain, as the ex-coloniser, the head of the Commonwealth, and a key Nigerian trading partner, was bound to support the Federal side. But domestic opinion – and these were the turbulent 60s, with the Vietnam war at its height and student campuses in turmoil – took the underdog's side. There was much sympathy for the Ibo and the massacres they had endured: an industrious, go-ahead Christian people had been put to a savage Moslem sword. The Wilson government, supplying arms to the Federal side, was painted as the partisan supporter of formalised brutality. In vain did Michael Stewart, the Foreign Secretary, point to international backing in the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), and suggest that to cancel arms agreements with a Commonwealth ally in their hour of need would amount to active support for the rebel group and the abandonment of British commitment to African nationalism.

General Gowon, a self-effacing Christian, young and Sandhurst-trained, was far from the ogre his critics implied. To him, the principle of Federal unity was as important as it had been to Abraham Lincoln. Ojukwu was as uncompromising. Sovereignty for a separate Ibo-dominated state was, he claimed, vital for the very survival of his traumatised people. Gowon claimed that pacification and integration, not Ibo extermination, were his aims. Ojukwu told the Biafrans that the Federal Army was out to kill every one of them. They, and much of the world, believed him.
The photo that launched the earliest outpouring of British generosity towards people in newly-independent Africa: Congo 1960, the first famine horror.

Early grants (1956) to South Africa were for a cup of classroom milk for black children suffering from the effects of a new Bantu Education Act.
24 Botswana 1963: Oxfam's first major involvement with comprehensive agricultural development. 'Progressive farmers' took to the tractor.

25 Oxfam's 'Hunger £Million' campaign of 1963: on the crest of a wave of popular support for its cause, scores of celebrities gave their support. Acker Bilk and Frankie Vaughan.

26 The launch of the Hunger £Million campaign in Trafalgar Square: Susannah York collects pound notes on the tip of an umbrella.
The picture of the Beatles, used to good effect by the Daily Mail, Hunger £Million sponsor, made great impact.

Susan Hampshire, Rupert Davies, Jon Pertwee, with heart and voice: a 'carol service with the stars'.

Sunday night in Trafalgar Square: the 'carol service with the stars' on 22 December 1963, was front-page Daily Mail lead story.
30 Anand Dairy Co-operative, Gujerat, India: one of the 'Big Four' Freedom from Hunger projects supported by Oxfam.

31 The Family Box - to be put on the table at meals - was the mainstay of the Oxfam campaign for 1964.

32 By 1964, Oxfam had 20 local offices and an active grassroots support network. Delivering the Family Box on horseback.
Gifts on display by Oxfam helpers at a Christmas Gift Fair in Yorkshire, 1964.

Rev. Austen Williams blesses gifts donated to Oxfam’s 1964 appeal on the steps of St. Martin-in-the-Fields.

Joe Mitty, Manager of Oxfam Giftshops from 1949 until 1971 and an architect of the charity giftshop idea, had a keen eye for items of value.
36 The heyday of Young Oxfam and the sponsored walk. In 1967, a ‘food trek’ all over Britain brought in £100,000.

37 Oxfam was one of the charities to pioneer support for family planning overseas. By 1970, the Christian Medical Association of India had received £58,000 for IUD insertions.

38 The Halco Tiger drilling rig on emergency duty by night in villages in Bihar, during the drought of 1966-67.
Polio victims at the St. Antony's Home, Bombay. Oxfam Field Directors insisted on the value of social welfare in spite of the new fashion for 'development'.

Bihar drought: 300 tons of Oxfam milk arrive at Cochin in December 1966. Jim Howard second from left and colleagues on the dock.

David Frost visits the slums in Delhi to bring his own eye-witness account to the appeal for Oxfam's 25th anniversary, 1967.
42 A 25th anniversary event at the Whitehall Banqueting Hall in London. The theme: 'Food for Tomorrow'. Key speaker was Reg Prentice, Minister for Overseas Aid.

43 The Park Lane Giftshop: by the late 1960s, more than 50 Oxfam Shops were operating in temporary premises, paving the way for the charity shop bonanza of the 1970s.
This polarity of views affected not only the conduct of the war and every effort made to negotiate a peace; it also ensnared every effort to bring relief to its victims.

In early 1967, when Ibo people from the North had been fleeing homewards to find sanctuary, Oxfam had given help to them through the Irish Holy Ghost Fathers in the Eastern Region. After the war began in earnest, several trucks were provided to the Nigerian Red Cross for medical relief. Tim Brierly, Field Director for the vast area of West and Equatorial Africa, had set up an office in Lagos in early 1966. Before this, through its Catholic relief contacts, Oxfam had had a relationship with the missions in eastern Nigeria, one of the most Christianised parts of Africa. Some Biafran emergency grants went directly to the Irish Fathers inside the embattled territory, where increasing numbers of people were retreating as the fronts hemmed them in.

However, Brierly was careful to ensure that a near equal amount of Oxfam aid was channelled to areas re-taken by the Federal Army, especially through the National Relief Committee, a co-ordinating body he helped to set up. As an ex-Colonial Officer, and having served in the Congo during the famine crisis, Brierly was sensitive to the political ebb and flow. He made every effort to emphasise ‘help to victims on both sides of the conflict’, in keeping with the Oxfam mandate to give aid according to need, without political or religious consideration. By February 1968, £59,300 had been spent.

At this stage Oxfam’s aid to Nigerian civil war victims reflected the careful attempt at political neutrality of the efforts made at the international level. Under the terms of the UN charter, no UN agency can meddle in the affairs of a member state by providing relief to those in rebellion against it (although, over time, the humanitarian agencies – UNHCR, UNICEF, and the World Food Programme – have established a de facto right to do so). Under the circumstances, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was accepted as a neutral umbrella for all UN, government, and Red Cross aid to ‘Nigerians on both sides of the war’. With Federal agreement, ICRC teams were sent to Biafra, and a relief airlift was organised from the (Spanish) offshore island of Fernando Po.

As the Federal forces tightened their noose around the enclave in March and April 1968, the disruption to farming and market life, the swollen numbers of people in a compressed area, and the blockade by land and sea, began to put pressure on the food supply. People were short of the protein foods – stockfish, meat, and legume sauces – which normally accompanied their starchy yam and cassava diet.
The Irish Fathers, distressed by the increasingly malnourished state of their parishioners, took a radical step: they began to airlift relief goods into Biafra along with the rebels' arms supplies. Through Caritas International, the Vatican relief organisation, an agreement was made with Ojukwu's gun-runner, Captain 'Hank' Wharton, to carry mercy cargoes on his missions from Lisbon and the Portuguese island of Sao Tome. The ICRC had promised General Gowon to keep their air route separate from that used for Biafra's arms supplies. The churches felt under no such obligation. Nor were they internationally criticised for their action. On the contrary. The key organiser, Irish Father Tony Byrne, was known as 'the Green Pimpernel'. In March 1968, Oxfam made a first £10,000 grant for goods to go in on the Wharton/Caritas run.

On 21 May 1968, Port Harcourt fell to the Federal forces. This meant that Biafra had lost the oilfields; also its link with the sea, and the airport used for bringing in arms and relief supplies. Surrender looked a matter of weeks away. Peace negotiations under OAU auspices began in Kampala, while the Federal forces waited, poised for a final assault. The hope was that Ojukwu would agree to withdraw the claim for sovereignty so as to avoid the bloodshed and the bitter legacy a conquest would entail. To put pressure on Ojukwu to come to terms, Gowon peremptorily withdrew permission for the ICRC airlift. The blockade was tightened.

But Ojukwu had no intention of coming to terms. His emissary to Kampala, Biafran Chief Justice Sir Louis Mbanefo, had no brief to compromise the sovereignty issue. As the talks dragged on into early June with neither side willing to shift, not only did the prospects of a cease-fire dwindle. The ICRC-led relief operation also became deadlocked. Gowon would not accept an airlift through Federal airspace from islands outside his jurisdiction. Ojukwu would not hear of a land corridor from Federal territory - the only sensible route for the necessary 200 tons a day - under ICRC supervision. With the relief pipeline all but cut off, conditions in the rebel-held area drastically deteriorated.

Two months back in Oxfam News, Dame Margery Perham, a famous authority on the area and a member of Oxfam's Africa Committee, had written about 'Nigeria's Agony'. 'A terrible and bloody war is going on. Why do we hear little or nothing about it in the Press or on the radio?' She pleaded for aid for the victims. 'But the need must be known. The strange silence in Britain about this war must be broken.'

In June 1968, the silence was indeed broken. It was broken with the force of a thunderclap. First in the Sun, then elsewhere, came the horror exposures of starving Biafran children. On 12 June, the ITN News at Ten carried a film to tug a thousand heartstrings, unleash a thousand angry voices, launch a thousand mercy ships. The statistic of 3,000 child deaths
a day was widely quoted. The words 'genocide' and 'extermination' were used to describe the prospect of death by slaughter, or death by starvation, imminently facing the Ibo people. Passions in Britain began to run high. The clamour to save the Biafrans became deafening.

What was not immediately obvious was that Ojukwu was playing the 'starvation card' in a desperate gamble to stave off defeat. The version of the Biafran situation which burst so spectacularly upon the world in mid-1968 was put out by a European public relations firm hired by Ojukwu to present the Biafran case in its most heartrending light. While there certainly was great suffering and dying in the enclave, the more sensational – and unverifiable – claims about death rates and atrocities were being made by the entirely partisan, and by journalists and missionaries passionately persuaded in their cause. Ojukwu, who understood the power of the press, wanted to exert pressure via public opinion on the British and other governments to stop the supply of arms to the Federal side. He still hoped to change the international – and thus the military – tide in his favour.

The relief agencies were unscrupulously, and unwittingly, to be used as Biafra's allies and spokesmen. In their humanitarian zeal and naivety, many took on trust the Biafran claims of 'genocide' and the 'thousands dying daily'; they accepted British complicity in an act of mass criminality; they fell for it, hook, line and sinker.

On 6 May 1968, a new Deputy Director joined Oxfam: the Reverend Nicolas Stacey. The position had been vacant since Henry Fletcher set off to revitalise Oxfam of Canada.

Stacey was a bird of brightly coloured plumage, out of the run of Oxfam's more stolid senior statesmen. He had made a national name for himself, first as a runner in the Roger Bannister class; then as Rector of Woolwich. He had tried to shake decades of solidified dust off the Church of England by a mix of showmanship and radicalism designed to regenerate its role and replenish its congregation. After a self-publicised declaration of failure, he applied for the Oxfam job, and won it from a large field of candidates.

Stacey was the new look for the 1960s generation, an energetic dazzler, a young people's leader for the aid lobby. He was well-known as a television and newspaper journalist, and soon began to use his publicity talents on behalf of Oxfam's cause of the moment: the starving children of Biafra.

Earlier, in March 1968, Tim Brierly had been home on leave from West Africa. He had attended a meeting of the Africa Committee to take part in a discussion of the war in Nigeria and how best to provide relief to
the victims. Brierly had explained the Federal authorities' extreme sensitivities about aid to Biafrans, with its implicit connotations of support for Ojukwu's cause. He pointed out that there was suffering not only within the enclave, but also in parts of the 'Biafran' countryside recently taken over by Federal troops – which he had just visited.

It was agreed that Oxfam would continue to give aid on both sides, but that no publicity should be given to direct aid to Biafra. In time the rebellion would almost certainly be defeated, and Brierly believed that nothing should be done to prevent Oxfam taking part in the major post-war relief and rehabilitation effort which would be desperately needed.

In the weeks following, Oxfam and the other members of the Disasters Emergency Committee – the British Red Cross, Christian Aid, Save the Children, and War on Want – discussed whether to ask the BBC and ITV for a national television appeal for Nigeria. A decision was taken that the agencies should jointly hold back, waiting for the ICRC relief pipeline to be fully secured, and then commit the results of a joint appeal to the Red Cross-led programme.

In mid-June, when the popular press in Britain set up its clamour about starving Biafra, Oxfam threw its agreed policy line, its understandings with the other agencies, and its caution to the winds. With the pressure of '3,000 dying daily', carefully-worded statements of neutrality seemed to many Oxfam crusaders like so much foot-dragging. There was a humanitarian tiger to ride and, since its partners in the business of compassion were holding back, Oxfam would ride it alone. On 13 June, it announced that 1,000 tons of milk was being purchased for immediate shipment to Biafra, and launched an appeal for £100,000 to cover the costs. To the other DEC agencies, Oxfam's sudden assumption of the 'Saviour of Biafra' role was a breach of previous understandings.

Popular opinion – fired up by the Biafran propaganda campaign – blamed the starvation in the enclave on the Federal army and its British backing. It was hard to believe that the Biafran leader himself could be obstructing the mass import of relief foods: as the Guardian pointed out, it was his people who were starving. Accordingly Kirkley, in a blaze of publicity, went to Lisbon to fly into Biafra on a Wharton arms run to persuade Ojukwu to let in relief. Somehow Oxfam believed that a voluntary agency, representing nothing but a compassionate section of British opinion, might succeed where the massed ranks of governments, the OAU, the UN, the Pope, and the Red Cross establishment had so far failed.

Kirkley did manage to see Ojukwu. He took part in a meeting set up by Red Cross negotiators. No dice. No land corridor: anything coming from Federal territory, whoever brought it in, would be poisoned in
Ojukwu’s view, literally or metaphorically. No mass mercy airlift. Only a vague promise about permitting the use of Biafra’s last airstrip for daylight relief flights if this did not interfere with the landing of the most important cargoes: arms. The promise about daylight flights was never fulfilled.

The problem with Kirkley’s mission was not only that it did not succeed; by going direct to Biafra without passing first through Lagos in the correct diplomatic fashion, he had imperilled Oxfam’s relations with the Federal government by clearly identifying Oxfam with the Biafran cause. This might be good for fundraising at home, and highly popular with the anti-arms-to-Nigeria lobby. But for a voluntary agency claiming to be non-partisan it was, at best, unwise.

The pro-Biafra impression was reinforced by press activity at home. Nicolas Stacey took to the airwaves and newspaper columns in typically ebullient style and – new to the delicacies of parleying relief in situations of great sensitivity – told the world that Oxfam would fulfill its mission to save the Biafran people from starvation in ringing ‘come hell or high water’ tones. In early July, the Wilson administration, putting together a humanitarian mission to Nigeria under Lord Hunt to try and unblock the obstacles to aid on both sides, included representatives from the Red Cross and Save the Children, but pointedly left Oxfam out.

In Lagos, Tim Brierly found himself in a very uncomfortable situation. Oxfam’s statements were making angry Nigerian headlines – ‘Oxfam a hostile agency says Gowon’, and ‘Do-gooders we don’t want’. Not only the Federal authorities but a furious British High Commission wanted to know why Oxfam was taking unilateral action in support of the rebels instead of working through the same channels – ICRC and Nigerian Red Cross – as everyone else. Brierly was extremely annoyed by Oxfam’s behaviour – in breach of all agreed policy and adopted without reference to himself – and he did his best to explain to Oxford that more of this kind of public statement would jeopardise Oxfam’s entire response to the civil war, not to mention his own credibility in Lagos. In vain. Ken Bennett, Director of Overseas Aid and the voice of caution within Oxfam, was unable to generate calm.

Oxfam was trying to establish its own airlift into Biafra, and was negotiating the use of a Canadian Hercules carrier. This initiative collapsed when the Federal authorities announced that planes on unauthorised missions over their airspace risked being shot down. On 5 July 1968, Oxfam publicly demanded that Harold Wilson put pressure on Gowon to have this announcement rescinded, and embarked on a new flurry of ‘Britain must stop this apocalypse’ publicity. From the Nigerian perspective, Oxfam was acting as if the Federal desire to defend the nation’s integrity was irrelevant and the colonial sun had
never set. But this was not intentional on Oxfam's part. To a protest from the Nigerian High Commissioner in London, Kirkley replied on 5 July: 'We never take political sides, and our one and only concern is to help those in greatest need.' He insisted: 'An appeal on purely humanitarian grounds ... does not involve us in political judgements on the rights and wrongs of this tragic situation.'

By this time, Kirkley had seen that a more careful tone was required. Brierly in Lagos had found his position untenable and asked to be relieved. Kirkley flatly denied to the press that 'our man in Lagos' had resigned, but Brierly's protest had registered. Kirkley did the rounds of Whitehall and Westminster, and sent Bennett to Lagos on 11 July to fence-mend. The feedback from senior British officials was salutary. From this point on, Oxfam became more circumspect in its statements and worked more consistently within the ICRC-led operation. Brierly returned to England a few weeks later, but not before receiving a carpeting from Gowon. 'Oxfam apologises', screamed the Nigerian press.

Throughout July 1968 and into August, the relief situation remained deadlocked and the hue and cry carried on while protein-deficiency disease – kwashiorkor – reached what was seen as epidemic proportions. The Biafran child, with a grotesquely swollen stomach, was becoming a metaphor for 20th century African misery. Neither Lord Hunt, nor Henry Labouisse, Executive Director of UNICEF, nor Dr. Auguste Lindt, the Swiss ex-UN High Commissioner for Refugees heading the ICRC effort, managed to put forward a plan for relief that both Gowon and Ojukwu would agree to. Meanwhile, shiploads of grain and protein foods from all over the world were arriving in the Gulf of Guinea. By August, 10,000 tons – including Oxfam's 1,000 tons of milk – was sitting, some of it perishing, on island docksides while thousands of people were starving just a few hundred miles away. To the humanitarian conscience, the situation was appalling and incomprehensible.

Abandoning the land corridor idea, Auguste Lindt began to focus once more on the airlift. While the ICRC waited in vain to gain clearance from both sides for a schedule of flights from Fernando Po, the churches, led by a Scandinavian consortium, began to build up their illegal airlift from Sao Tome. They recruited as their squadron-leader Count Carl-Gustaf von Rosen, a Swedish pilot who performed heroic feats of hazardous flying at treetop height to break the Nigerian blockade. Cargoes were landed at night on the last remaining Biafran airstrip at Uli, half-lit by flares, taking turns with arms shipments. At times the operation became a chaotic combination of zeal and daredevilry, attracting humanitarian adventurers of every kind.
The Oxfam cargo in the ship *Mitropa* was off-loaded at Fernando Po in late July for onward passage via the ICRC route. Kirkley sent his unflappable Company Secretary, Bruce Ronaldson, to see the milk safely landed and to do anything he could to speed it into Biafra. Ronaldson found a frustrated Auguste Lindt shuttling in and out of Biafra and Lagos. Except for the odd sortie, planes sat on the runway while the Federals refused to agree not to shoot them out of the air. The Biafrans continued to balk about anything coming in by day, which would expose their operations more fully and make them more vulnerable to Federal attack. Finally in early September Lindt announced that he would start the airlift, threats notwithstanding, and would personally go in the first plane.

On 4 August, Ronaldson and a relief worker, Duncan Kirkpatrick, managed to fly into Uli with the first seven-ton cargo of Oxfam milk. They travelled to Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Umuahia to meet Biafran Red Cross and UNICEF people who were setting up feeding programmes in which the Oxfam milk could play a part. Along the roadside, markets were functioning and people looked well-fed. But in the refugee camps things were very different. The condition of many children was terrible; their distended stomachs, spindly legs and red hair indicated advanced kwashiorkor. The Red Cross was mobilising teachers and professional people as helpers to run feeding schemes and child rehabilitation programmes.

By September, the two airlifts were functioning effectively and no planes had been attacked. Both the ICRC and the churches gradually increased their carrying capacity, and over the month 3,500 tons of supplies were flown in. This was little more than half the lowest estimate of need, but the death rate began to decline and the children’s condition to stabilise. In October, the church airlift became regularised when the Scandinavians set up a special ecumenical umbrella organisation – Joint Church Aid – to run it. Support groups sprang up in a number of countries. Canairelief was one of these, through which Oxfam of Canada provided two Super Constellation aircraft. (Tragically, one of these crashed on the Uli runway, killing its entire crew.) Running up to 12 planes between them, the airlifts landed 200 tons of goods a night.

By this time, the prospect of an early end to the war had receded. After the failure of more peace talks, first in Addis Ababa, then in Niamey, a Federal ‘final push’ began. Advances were made, but Gowon’s troops failed to clinch the conquest. Ojukwu’s strategy for cultivating influential allies was finally paying off. In September, France took Biafra’s side and started airlifting arms into Uli via Gabon and Ivory Coast. No matter how small his shrinking domain – less than 100
miles in any direction – Ojukwu was clinging on. The secession was by no means over.

While worldwide attention had been focused on the Ibo heartland, other victims of the war were – genuinely – equally in need. Already by mid-1968, much larger parts of ‘Biafra’ were in Federal than in Biafran hands. Although there were some incidents of atrocity, the much talked-of massacres by Federal troops had not occurred. Once reassured that they would not be butchered, villagers had re-emerged from the bush and returned to their normal rounds of yam barns and market days. But there were many in a sorry condition.

To the south and east towards Calabar, the ‘Biafrans’ were mostly other peoples over whom the Ibo had assumed domination. Many were pleased to be liberated – they were not ‘Biafran’ by choice; but the process left great disruption in its wake. The area was remote, the terrain riverine, and the destruction of bridges during the Biafran retreat had made the movement of goods and people along roads and waterways even more tortuous than usual. Representatives from aid organisations found mission hospitals full of children in a pitiful state. Close to the front, people were fleeing, hiding out and camping in the bush for days without food or water.

By August 1968, not only Sao Tome and Fernando Po but Lagos too were awash with food aid, sent by donors scrupulously sticking to ‘aid to both sides’. In an effort to improve the situation in the stricken south-east, many agencies now offered to provide relief teams under the ICRC umbrella. Brierly was inhibited from visiting the area because of Oxfam’s still suspect status; but through the Red Cross he gave support to a Salvation Army team, in July 1968. This was one of the earliest relief teams to reach the area.

Oxfam then recruited its own group of seven medical and relief workers. This was only the second time – the first was in Bihar – that Oxfam became operational, and the first on which the team included doctors and nurses. Led by Patrick Kemmis, an ex-colonial officer with 15 years of Nigerian experience, the team arrived in Lagos in October. It took time for them to gain permission to move out into the field.

In November, Kemmis and company set themselves up in a small town called Itu on the Cross River, three miles back from the Federal frontline. They distributed by truck ICRC and UNICEF food rations – milk, stockfish, gari (cassava meal), rice, beans, CSM (corn-soy-milk, the US equivalent of India’s high-protein food) – to camps of refugees. Altogether, around 50,000 people were under their care. Kemmis split his medical people into two teams and supplemented them with local
Nigerian volunteers. By a system he described as ‘appalling medicine – it would send shivers round all the professional bodies’, they managed to treat 1,000 patients a day. ‘With the numbers involved – 10,000 need urgent treatment – perfectionism isn’t on. Kwashiorkor is such a rapid killer – untouched, it has 70 per cent mortality, but if caught, you have 80 per cent chance of recovery in a few days.’

The most tragic part of their work was the discovery of children hiding out along the roadside, in disused buildings or pockets near the fighting, many orphaned, some in too bad a shape to have any hope of survival. They dug many graves in their first few weeks, but thousands of children began to recover. What they initially expected – a Federal military advance which would bring crowds of starving Ibos through the lines and into their care – did not materialise. By mid-December, Kemmis reported that the worst of the emergency was over. Of the 5,000-8,000 lives at risk when they had come, he reckoned that 750 had died, 250 were still at risk, and the rest were out of danger.

Following Bruce Ronaldson’s visit to Biafra in August, Oxfam also provided staff support to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Umuahia. Dr. Bruno Gans, a leading paediatric consultant, helped Dr. Aaron Ufekunigwe, chief of Biafran paediatric services, develop an extensive child recovery programme in schools and clinics. They also ran a measles inoculation campaign starting in December 1968 with joint support from UNICEF and Oxfam, which managed to reach 350,000 children by March 1969. The density of population in what remained of Biafra at least had one advantage: once stocks of medicines and protein foods were available, the logistics of feeding and child health monitoring were relatively straightforward.

In March 1969, a new uproar developed in the British press about Biafra, this time against Federal bombing attacks on civilians in the embattled territory. In another debate in the House of Commons, the government was once more attacked over its policy of military support to the Federal side. This policy was still almost universally condemned in the press, and treated – thanks to the Biafra propaganda machine – as if it was the major determinant of the outcome of the war.

In the run-up to the debate, the Oxfam propaganda machine, led by Stacey, was itself highly active. Speaking on behalf of the humanitarian conscience, Charles Coulson, Chairman of Oxfam, issued a public statement which effectively added Oxfam’s voice to the chorus of opposition. ‘What Britain – both the government of Britain and the people of Britain – must now face is that the price for a united Nigeria is likely to be millions of lives.’ Still the muddled assumption persisted
that the suffering in the enclave was the fault of only one of the hostile parties, and that this starvation conferred a moral superiority on the Biafran cause. Nonetheless, the government won a substantial majority. Later in the month, Harold Wilson visited Nigeria nominally in the role of peacemaker. He was welcomed by Gowon; predictably, therefore, Ojukwu snubbed him.

In spite of the doom-laden prophecies, the basic supply of harvested yam and cassava and the airlifted tonnages of protein foods held starvation in Biafra – just – at bay. The US government stepped in to help finance the stupendous costs of the airlifts, and by April 1969, 8,000 tons a month was being landed at Uli. But the situation was fragile: around the fighting lines, one million people were dependent on food relief, and within the enclave, another 1.5 million of the seven million remaining. Any break in the supply-line, and famine on the scale of mid-1968 would once again threaten.

Crisis descended on the whole operation in June. It was prompted by a new round of derring-do by the Swedish Count von Rosen, the churches’ blockade-busting flier. Von Rosen put together a ‘Biafran Air Force’ of tiny single-engined planes and began hedge-hopping attacks on Federal aircraft on the ground. This was proof to the Federals that the humanitarians were absolutely partisan; their military commanders also became jumpier about who and what was flying around. On 5 June 1969, an ICRC plane crossing the coast just before dusk was shot down by a Nigerian fighter.

Lindt protested vigorously in Lagos and ICRC flights were suspended. Tensions had been mounting for some time between the ICRC and the Federal authorities. The latter were increasingly frustrated by their inability to bring the war to an end and they blamed the agents of humanitarianism for inhibiting their efforts to do so. A few days later Lindt was unceremoniously declared persona non grata. Agency representatives in Lagos were informed that, from now on, all assistance for victims of the war must be channelled through Nigerian relief organisations.

Great heat was generated in Geneva, London, New York, and elsewhere by this Federal decision. A new spate of negotiations began for land corridors, sea corridors, and daylight flights. Ojukwu, now hard-pressed, initially seemed accommodating; but however much his people were suffering, he would not accept a neutral land corridor nor flights by daylight into Uli. In September, with 8,000 tons of relief supplies still stockpiled in Fernando Po and starvation in the enclave imminent, the endless attempts at negotiation collapsed. The role of the ICRC – or anyone else – as a neutral co-ordinator of international succour acceptable to both sides was over.
This failure was devastating to the humanitarians. In spite of all their efforts, a population of several million civilians was to be starved to death in a futile sacrifice to the political intransigence of Federal and Biafran leaders. But the plain fact was that, from a military point of view, a blockade or a siege cannot with precision make a distinction between combatants and civilians; and the gaping hole in the blockade created by the relief operation was actively aiding the secessionists and helping to prolong hostilities.

The idea that the humanitarian principle of saving the innocent can transcend the rules of war is a modern, and a Western, concept; it was not surprising that both belligerent parties in Nigeria found it incomprehensible and ultimately rejected the right of the outside, ex-imperial, world to impose it upon them. It is more surprising that, for such a long period, Gowon allowed the relief effort to go ahead. At the time, a few observers in the West recalled the Allies’ use of blockade in the first World War to defeat the Germans. No-one recalled its use in the second, an even more intransigent use, and one which, incidentally, was the genesis of Oxfam’s existence. Shock might be expressed at Federal behaviour; no-one recalled that Churchill’s war cabinet had taken the same line.

The collapse of the relief effort for the people in the enclave opened the final chapter in the war. During the late summer and autumn of 1969, the Joint Church Aid airlift continued to operate, but under great strain. Those agencies – Oxfam included – which had previously assisted the ICRC airlift quietly transferred their support to the unofficial Sao Tome operation. Gradually the tonnages taken into Uli by night began to creep back up to their previous levels. But after more than two years of warfare and siege, the people in the Ibo stronghold were exhausted in mind, body and morale.

More important still, the potency of the genocide threat as a Biafran propaganda weapon had waned. Since late 1968, international observers invited by the Federal side to view military operations and judge for themselves the genocide claims had declared them specious. Half of the total Ibo population of 14 million were living in reasonable security in Federal Nigeria, and the property of those who had fled to Biafra was being protected. As this became more widely known, Ojukwu’s refusal to compromise on sovereignty lost credibility. Those who had backed the moral case of the Ibo to their own state not for pragmatic reasons but out of sentiment, as an expression of sympathy with their suffering, began to wonder whether their goodwill had been exploited.

In mid-December 1969, the Federal advance began again. By Christmas, the enclave had been cut in two. On 10 January 1970, Ojukwu fled abroad and the Biafran secession finally ended. The bloodbath, so
often predicted, did not occur. Nor did Biafran fighters retreat into the bush for a guerrilla struggle. The universal reaction to the end of the war was relief. Gowon expelled from the ex-rebel territory all foreign journalists, relief workers from overseas, and Catholic missionaries. The only external assistance organisation allowed to remain was UNICEF. Gradually, administrative authority was established, and through the Nigerian Red Cross and with help from abroad, a programme of post-war relief and rehabilitation began.

Oxfam had withdrawn its original team from the south-eastern war zone area late in 1969 when emergency conditions no longer prevailed. Now the new Field Director in Lagos, Derek Robinson, offered Oxfam support to the Nigerian Red Cross, and another emergency input of relief was set in motion. As well as despatching vehicles, food, and drugs, to support the Red Cross programmes, eight doctors and two nurses were sent out from England to work in various hospitals in the area where staff were short due to the withdrawal of medical missionary personnel. Most stayed for around two months until the post-emergency phase was over.

During the period of the Nigerian civil war, Oxfam spent around £500,000 on relief for victims on both sides of the conflict; another £100,000 was given to Oxfam to spend by the British government in the final stage of the war when, because the ICRC programme was no longer operational, governments had no official route for helping Biafrans other than through Federal channels. Altogether, the relief effort cost the international and voluntary community an estimated $200 million. It also cost many organisations, including Oxfam, their innocence regarding the politics of relief in independent Africa.

When the reckonings came to be made, no-one really knew or will ever know how many Biafrans lost their lives, from starvation or war-related causes. Some estimated two million in 1968 alone; another authority placed the figure much lower, at 600,000 for the entire period of secession. Like everything to do with the Nigerian civil war, estimating the size of the tragedy in human lives was an exercise inextricable from the competing propaganda claims.

The story of Biafran relief leaves an outstanding question. Did the mobilisation of the world’s concern for the starving children of Biafra in mid-1968 – a mobilisation in which Oxfam played an important part – have the effect of prolonging the war and thereby increasing the suffering? The criticism that their concern was achieving the very opposite of their intention plagued the churches and relief agencies in the last stages and the aftermath of the conflict.

The most that can be said is that the maintenance of the food airlifts was one factor among many that helped to keep the war going. In the
balance of military forces, the relief of hunger in the enclave – where starvation was being used as a weapon – cannot rate higher than the arms delivered by the French; the inexperience of the Federal forces; or the bravery – spurred by the conviction that they were fighting for their very survival – of the Ibo.

In the end, the principle that the lives of innocent civilians count for more than the political aims of belligerents must be the mast to which the agents of humanitarianism nail their colours. Whether or not actions based on that principle may subsequently be manipulated by players of the political game is immaterial as far as humanity's wider interests are concerned. In the bewildering maelstrom of the Nigerian civil war, prey to one of the most extraordinary public relations campaigns in the history of warfare, Oxfam hovered at the brink of abandoning that principle. It was not the only relief organisation to do so.

The problems of bringing relief to the victims of the first major civil conflagration in independent Africa was a fiery baptism for other conflicts, in this and other continents, yet to come.