When Gandhi was killed in 1948 he left behind many disciples, who embraced his ideas as a political and personal philosophy. Their vision of a regenerated India required a process of non-violent change in which the poor, the landless, and the outcast discovered their dignity as human beings. The locus of these efforts must be 'the village', those thousands of social units dispersed throughout the plains, highlands, jungles, and deserts of the subcontinent, whose eternal rhythms underpinned the appalling poverty endured by so many of their inhabitants.

As a social and political campaigner, Gandhi centred on the village in his championship of the poor. In this, as in his credo of non-violence, he was a spiritual forbear of much voluntary agency thinking, including that of Oxfam.

Among many well-known Gandhian followers, the mantle of leadership fell upon two men in particular. The political inheritance was assumed by Jaya Prakash Narayan, for many years a prominent socialist politician, whose services Mrs. Gandhi called upon in 1966 when famine threatened his native Bihar. The spiritual succession fell to the saintly Vinoba Bhave. Bhave personified the Indian ideal of the sage purified by a life of simplicity in service to the poor.

In 1951, at the scene of village disturbances in Andhra Pradesh, Bhave witnessed a landowner make a bhoomi a gift of land to local untouchables in an attempt to extinguish the touchpaper of communist agitation. This gesture of reconciliation inspired his bhoomi or 'land-gift' movement. For the rest of his active life, Bhave adopted the Gandhian expedient of the march, walking the byways of India with his entourage, in a crusade of land redistribution on behalf of the poor. If a number of villagers pooled their holdings (this was usually among the poor or untouchables whose holdings were uneconomic), this was gramdan - 'village gift'. Bhave's crusade was celebrated in India and overseas as an attempt to reform and democratise rural Indian society. He even appeared on the cover of Time magazine, over the caption: 'I have come to loot you with love.'
In Gandhi's footsteps

The pivotal centre of the *gramdan* movement was Bhave's ashram at Khadigram in Bihar, set up in 1952. From here, he attracted groups of Gandhi's disciples into a federated body, the Sarva Seva Sangh – The Society for the Service of Truth. *Gramdan* became an established formula, mainly suited to *harijan* or untouchable villages: for caste Hindus it had little appeal. Three-quarters of the landowners in the community must commit their land, and over half the village land come under the sway of the *gram sabha*, a representative council, which redistributed a portion of the land to the landless. By 1968, 50,000 villages in India had officially joined.

During the Bihar famine of 1966-67, J.P. Narayan's Bihar Relief Committee set in motion a two-year programme of minor irrigation works – hand-dug wells, catchment tanks, dams, and borehole drilling – both as a means of employing the drought-afflicted and to reduce Bihar's future vulnerability to a bad monsoon. Oxfam's participation in Bihar famine relief created a close contact with J.P., and Jim Howard needed no persuading that small-scale water development was the key – alongside improved agricultural practice – to helping India's villagers transform their fortunes.

For some years, Oxfam's Asia Committee had been pushing the Field Directorate to seek out a higher number of 'indigenous agencies' as channels for assistance. Apart from the neo-colonial overtones of working almost exclusively through expatriate bodies, most of them were church-related. Christians represented a tiny proportion of India's population; yet almost all Oxfam grants were made to Christian missions, whose future in India was precarious. In its effort to identify itself as a partner in Indian development as well as a source of charitable funds, Oxfam was keen to find organisations working within India's social and economic fabric which represented an essentially Indian impulse for social improvement.

This sounded wonderful at a distance, but in the field it was far from easy. At the end of 1964, when India was still part of his Asian beat, Bernard Llewellyn complained strongly when Oxford – without reference to himself – gave £35,000 worth of milk and vitamins to the Indian Red Cross in response to world news headlines about Indian food shortages. 'The reputation of the Indian Red Cross is not very good and among foreign-based agencies there is much suspicion of the integrity of its distribution agents. For Oxfam to be using such a channel on such a scale at a time when the Indian papers are full of corruption stories scarcely enhances our reputation.' There was no control over such a grant, no way of being sure that all the milk would get into the right mouths, however admirable and sincere the Major-General Llewellyn called upon at Indian Red Cross headquarters. Llewellyn
disliked his presence in Asia being used as an alibi to British donors to support the claim that ‘we know every penny gets there’.

If one needed to be certain of organisations to which emergency grants and foodstuffs were consigned, it was even harder to be sure of a local group’s credentials and competence where the much more nebulous process of development was concerned. Jim Howard wrote to Oxford soon after he arrived in India: ‘I am at one with the Committee in its desire to seek out and support reliable indigenous groups. Over these past months I have looked very hard and found very few. There are many people appealing for funds who are obviously dishonest. In my recent visit to Nagpur, the talking point of the town was the deliberate misuse of substantial funds given by a foreign agency to local groups.’

Both Howard and Llewellyn were forceful spokesmen on behalf of the traditional recipients of charitable aid. ‘The size and quality of the work by the Christian missions is unparalleled in the sub-continent,’ wrote Howard. Was Oxfam to allow the fashion for development aid to eclipse the needs of those who would otherwise be forgotten? ‘Often it is only the Christian missionary who will tackle some of the desperate needs we see around us in leprosy work, medical work, and among the destitute.’

In those days a Field Director had to cover a vast geographical area and check up on scores of projects. The most he could do was to visit each one for a matter of hours or a day at most, and make a judgement about everything from technical suitability to likely social impact before moving on. At that time, exercises in planning, surveying, technological review, or field-testing, were rudimentary. However dedicated they were – and most Oxfam Field Directors were exceptional individuals – they had to depend on instinct, their field of expertise, and the record of a project manager’s performance; their own checking-up process was not scientific, nor more than cursory. Regular reports were mandatory; but they had their limitations. ‘When a visit is at most a twice-a-year phenomenon, this is neither supervision nor control, which must be left to the operating agency,’ advised Llewellyn.

The relationship which developed with J.P. Narayan and the Gandhian ashrams in Bihar during the 1966-67 drought provided Howard with the indigenous agency opening for which he had been searching. The Gandhians, with their concern for the very poorest members of Indian society, the untouchables or harijans; their ascetic lifestyle in close proximity to the villages they worked amongst; and their advancement of gramdan provided impeccable credentials.

Discussions between Jim Howard, the ashrams, and the Sarva Seva Sangh led to a joint rural development programme, the Oxfam Gramdan Action Programme, or OGAP. Activities were to be based on four ashrams within 132 miles distance, and the villages involved were
gramdan villages. Promoting social change was the Gandhians' affair; Oxfam was more concerned about economic improvement in the communities which – it was assumed – were already pre-selected by the Gandhians for their poverty and need. Each project area was to contain irrigation schemes and agricultural extension – the twin technological pillars of the Green Revolution. Oxfam would provide funds for seed and equipment, and pay the costs of several United Nations Association (UNA) volunteer technicians to work with the Gandhians. These were seen as the vital lever for precipitating the Bihari village economy into the 20th century.

This programme was an important new departure for Oxfam. Not only did OGAP represent the first in-depth collaboration with an agency authentically and inspirationally Indian. It was also Oxfam's first attempt to be operational in the development context, to put people to work in a programme which was actually situated in 'the village', thus becoming much more pervasively involved than usual. OGAP was launched in excellent faith and a pioneering spirit; it was, as many commentators remarked, a natural. But new ventures often fail to flourish in quite the way expected. OGAP was to prove a laboratory in which Oxfam came face to face with some of the flawed assumptions on which its development aid was based.

As in other geographical regions, Oxfam's 'programme' on the Indian sub-continent was not a programme in any formal sense. Built up in response to ad hoc requests, it bore no resemblance to the plans negotiated for this sector or that by government administrators and international bodies. Rather, it consisted of a miscellany of projects of every variety. Oxfam's policy of maximum flexibility meant that almost any scheme, so long as it helped the needy, could be included – agriculture, water supply, education, welfare, medical.

A project location might be a clinic, a home, a hospital ward, a settlement scheme, or a training centre; it might take the form of equipment, instruments, vehicles, buildings, stipends for training; aid could supply a poultry house, a vegetable garden, a fish pond, a set of tools, a drilling-rig, a camel cart, or a spinning-wheel. The beneficiaries were as heterogeneous; they might be children, women, landless farmers, leprosy patients, adivasis (tribal people), the handicapped, the unemployed, the low caste. And a Field Director had to be a jack-of-all-trades. A typical tour would find him inspecting rice paddy and irrigation works in the morning, orphanages in the afternoon, refugee camps, family-planning clinics, and skills training for destitute women on the day after and the day after that.
In spite of the demands such incredible multiplicity put upon him – 117 grants were made to India in the financial year 1967-68 – a Field Director was naturally inclined to influence the programme in certain directions. Although its grants were so tiny as to make no difference on a large scale, Oxfam could not fail to be aware of the major problems of poverty in a country such as India. So it tried to help combat such problems at the localised village or family level where its funds could make a difference. Very often, a Field Director's own background – professional, personal and ideological – affected the general course he steered.

In the India of the 1960s, the constant nag of food shortage led Jim Howard, with his water engineering background, to focus on technical inputs to farming and small-scale irrigation. There were two achievements about which he was particularly enthusiastic. One was known as the 'fertiliser scheme'; the other was concerned with technical inputs to agriculture.

During the 1965 countrywide food shortages which preceded the Bihar famine, Oxfam provided the foreign exchange for the purchase and import of 5,300 tons of fertiliser for a crash food production programme in Mysore State. The scheme was run by the University of Agricultural Sciences in Bangalore, which repaid the £105,000 cost to Oxfam in rupees, which were then used for other grants.

All sorts of calculations were made about the fourfold increases in crop yields, and the 600,000 mouths for six months that this dramatic rise in output would feed. These sums proved wildly optimistic; but the crop yield was doubled and the fertiliser introduced local farmers to the benefits of high-yielding maize. Howard was bowled over. 'I went out to our project area and saw acres and acres of beautiful maize at all stages of growth. The crops are as good as or better than I have ever seen them. The market is good, the prices attractive, and the demand is leaping up.' The scheme was 'Food for Tomorrow' incarnate; Oxfam felt that it was helping to make the Green Revolution happen.

Howard also enthused over the creation of a joint organisation for giving technical guidance to food production projects run by voluntary agencies. This was AFPRO: Action for Food Production, and Oxfam was a founder member. 'At last,' wrote Howard, 'there is an organisation where concerned people, Catholic and Protestant, Hindu and Moslem, can plan together with Government and share the skills available.' He went on: 'Alone we have little to give India, whereas in consultation and joint efforts we are slowly coming to grips with the massive problems that confront her 500 million people.' He looked forward to a time when each agency might opt for complementary specialisations, 'rather than the hotch-potch that everybody tries to cope with now'. AFPRO went
through many ups and downs. But it remained a worthy attempt to make the total impact of voluntary efforts for food production add up to more than their constituent parts.

The other side of the food equation – every year, 12 million more mouths were added to the population – was also a major concern. Oxfam’s main contribution to family planning was to support the Christian Medical Association of India (CMAI) in promoting the IUD through mission hospital family-planning clinics. By the end of 1966, more than 100 mission hospitals had joined the CMAI scheme, and of these 33 had received Oxfam funds for loop insertions. The CMAI could not on its own work the miracle of fertility control in India. ‘What it is doing is to reduce the population pressure at specific points, making it easier for a family to feed its children and the wage earner to cope.’ By 1970, Oxfam had given the CMAI £58,000, and support continued throughout the 1970s.

Oxfam’s assistance to the Christian missions was not confined to hospitals and health programmes. In his sturdy defence of the Christian missionary, Howard had pointed out that many undertook welfare work that others would not touch. Mother Teresa of Calcutta, with her homes for the dying and destitute, was one compelling example. Major Gardiner of the Salvation Army, who delivered thousands of daily meals from a mobile canteen in the heat and stench of the Calcutta slums, was another remarkable servant of the poor. Oxfam regularly supported the ministries of both these exceptional individuals. But there were others out in the countryside whose activities were less well-known, and whose commitment was the more extraordinary for the isolation in which it was fulfilled.

Like the Gandhians, certain priests and missionaries lived and worked in village India, as close to the people as they could get. Although they became de facto development workers, they did so as a specific response to local problems of which they had personal knowledge. These were often set before them by farmers and villagers whom they knew, and who regularly lamented the vagaries of the monsoon, the rapaciousness of the moneylenders, or the inadequacy of their landholdings. To such people, ‘helping the poor’ by means of economic inputs was not initially perceived as categorically different from ‘helping the indigent’ by means of social welfare.

Here was no master plan to solve India’s problems of food production or population growth, developed in Delhi or Bangalore with the aid of experts and statistics, to be put into action on a mass scale. The scheme worked out by a priest sitting under the shade of a peepul tree might be a rough and ready affair, but what it lacked in scientific application, it gained in local knowledge of what the real – not the assumed – obstacles
were to the improvement of villagers' lives. Some missionaries were technical wizards in their way; others were efficient managers and entrepreneurs; a few had a profound understanding of the cultural environment.

Because some outstanding individuals brought special strengths of local acceptance and close community relations, their initiatives were often more successful than those dreamt up by the professional planners and imposed from outside. Thus some of Oxfam's partners became pioneers on the development frontier, even though their perspective was limited, the scale of their activity extremely localised, and their impetus purely humanitarian.

A humble priest trying to break the mould of poverty in village India had few other options than 'small-scale technology', 'low costs', and 'maximum self-sufficiency' – ideas later embraced by all the development pundits. A classic example was a project started in 1968 by a Breton priest, Father Godest, attached to the Catholic diocese of Mysore. The construction of a major dam had forced thousands of Tamil people to move to a remote valley and set up new communities, one of which was the village of Otterthotti. During the droughts of the mid-1960s, the water table dropped and Otterthotti's 254 village families no longer had enough well-water for irrigation, with disastrous consequences for their crops.

Father Godest came from a farming family in the hard, rocky conditions of Brittany, and had made himself something of an expert in groundwater management. A number of streams flowed into the valley, and at the height of the rains their swollen waters poured away and were lost. He devised a system of small check dams to capture their flow in order to raise the water table and recharge local wells. Villagers manoeuvred boulders large enough to withstand the torrent across the river beds, and piled smaller stones in the gaps. When the rains came, the flood filled the interstices with sand and clay, making the dams impermeable. Elsewhere, by blasting and digging, existing wells were deepened.

The Otterthotti farmers were also gradually persuaded to try high-yielding varieties of seed, fertilisers, and new crops – maize, sorghum and bajra. But nothing was given free. Farmers took out loans for well-deepening, to purchase bullocks for ploughing, to buy seeds and fertilisers, and repaid them out of harvest profits. The progress of repayment was painfully slow, but the principle was nonetheless maintained. Godest also ensured that harijans were eligible for loans, and insisted upon some sharing of water sources with the less fortunate by those whom the project had helped.

By 1970, 1,300 acres of Otterthotti land were under constant irrigation,
producing three crops a year and quadrupling many incomes. With £6,000, the humble Breton had wrought a miracle which successive Oxfam field staff applauded without reserve. One visitor wrote: 'Father Godest is so obviously a model for others in development that one must ask: What is the secret of his success?' Part of his winning formula was to ensure that all the changes in Otterthotti were within the villagers' own technological and organisational grasp. 'He is a man of foresight but essentially practical, never trying to make people do more than is realistic,' the visitor continued. 'And, perhaps as a consequence, he has a relationship with the community of quite unusual mutual affection and trust.'

At the end of 1967, Jim Howard moved to Delhi and a second Field Director, John Staley, took over responsibility for Oxfam in the southern part of India. An economist who had taken the unusual step of obtaining his doctorate from the University of Lahore, Staley was the first Oxfam Field Director with a primarily academic background. Unlike Howard, the man of action, Staley was quiet-spoken and naturally inclined towards reflection. In a different way, he was as remarkable a person and his influence on programme thinking – and on many Oxfamers – was to be profound.

His first reaction to the 150-odd projects he visited on his southern beat was that those selected for support were remarkably successful, judged in relation to their own criteria and intentions. But he pointed out that there was very little data, and it was difficult to have any objective sense of their value. As time went on, his doubts increased. In August 1969, he told Oxford that, with hindsight, he could not justify some of the grants he had earlier recommended. There simply was not enough evidence that good intentions and worthy ideas had produced the desired results, nor that the benefits had accrued to those whose neediness was the justification for the project in the first place.

Staley found the lack of information which characterised the planning of projects and the making of grants 'astonishing and crippling'. He believed that Oxfam was inclined to put a misplaced emphasis on the 'project holder', as if the project holder and the project's capacity to improve poor people's lives were the same thing. Oxfam's aims and the project holder's aims were not necessarily identical; the latter's priority might be to build up his own institution. Without proper information before a project started and regular evaluation as it went along, there was no guarantee that an Oxfam grant was making any truly meaningful contribution towards transforming the lives of the poor, even though it might well be helping some badly-off people.
Oxfam must give more attention to these matters, Staley believed, and more funds. ‘What, for example, do we know of the impact of the University of Agricultural Sciences’ extension programme upon poor farmers? It is not enough to know only the acreages under high-yielding varieties. What do we know about the increased farming output from the Oxfam-financed well-sinking projects? It is not enough to be told the numbers of boreholes drilled. Is Oxfam’s contribution to leprosy work helping to control or reduce the incidence of leprosy? It is not enough to know the number of ulcers treated.’ Not having answers to the questions did not necessarily nullify the benefit of Oxfam’s aid; but answers, and the means to get those answers, must be found. Too much was being taken for granted as far as the beneficiary was concerned.

The notion of accountability for Oxfam’s overseas expenditure was changing. Field Directors were beginning to ask questions about the impact of projects which took accountability far beyond ‘the money has arrived and the farmers are thrilled’. In fact, many of the questions Staley was asking were ones that many donors and fundraisers would not have dreamt of, and which some might find confusing, even off-putting. To ask such questions was an earnest of Oxfam’s sense of responsibility about its contribution to ‘development’. To fundraisers, however, organisational self-doubt is not easily marketable as a reason for charitable giving, whereas boreholes drilled and maize harvested show simple and solid achievements.

Thus, accountability to satisfy the needs of ordinary donors and fundraisers, and accountability to satisfy overseas aid programme criteria were beginning to part company. Ultimately, Staley was saying, Oxfam must be accountable to the poor themselves, not to the image of the poor which happened to be marketable in Britain.

In an echo of Bernard Llewellyn’s frequent admonitions, Staley underlined that development was difficult and risky, that it required preparation, research, evaluation and professionalism. ‘It is not enough for Oxfam simply to announce a shift in emphasis from welfare to development: if the intention really is to contribute to development the implications must be accepted – otherwise opportunities will be limited, the effort partly wasted, and the results doubtful.’

In Bihar, at the four OGAP locations, the tensions between technical inputs and social benefits, between the goals of project holders and the goals of Oxfam, between wishful thinking and proven results, were beginning to show.

When Sarva Seva Sangh and Oxfam sat down in late 1967 to plan the OGAP programme, a sense of great urgency had driven them on. The
famine had sent shock waves through the rural system and the Gandhians had been energised by their work in famine relief. They believed that speed was of the essence, that the drought had stung the villagers out of their usual apathy and inertia, ready to embrace change with alacrity.

The project document read like a classic blueprint for rural development. It talked of ‘setting in motion a process of integrated development’, of supporting agro-industrial inputs with ‘a strong educational movement of value and attitude change’, of drawing up area plans with ‘the participation of the people’; of credit and technical guidance, of self-help construction of schools, roads, dams, and community centres, of mobilising local resources for production, of marketing and consumer co-operatives. The problem with this vision of village nirvana was that it was elaborated by outsiders, British and Indian, without proper data about local situations or local needs. Here was a case of wishful thinking substituting for realistic project planning and preparation.

The British volunteers seconded to OGAP were given the opportunity to live and work truly at village level. This had its rewards, but life in the ashrams was primitive and tough, and the heat and dust of Bihar took their toll on health and morale. In spite of culture shock, lack of language training, and the difficulties of working in uncharted waters, the group did well. Most were agriculturalists or mechanics; an irrigation expert was later added. Four were based at Khadigram, Vinoba Bhave’s original headquarters. Others were based at three other ashrams.

The OGAP management structure was far from tidy. Sarva Seva Sangh was nominally in charge; in practice, the ashram leaders – all individualists with their own versions of Gandhian service – were the men who counted. Few sprang to attention with the vigour anticipated by OGAP’s devisors; they had their own priorities. Many felt their main task was to achieve converts to gramdan, help the landless gain their rights, and whittle away at the landowning and debt-bonding systems enslaving the poor. They did not want to go around extolling the benefits of modern farming methods.

The volunteers – supposed merely to be technical advisers – found themselves obliged to take the lead. Oxfam placed an Assistant Field Director, Alan Leather, in overall charge of the four OGAP areas; but it was not really clear who, if anyone, reported to him. A great deal depended on personal relationships, which could easily be strained by the volunteers’ urge for activity, clashes in perspective, and the lack of workable project plans.

Many volunteers established great rapport with Gandhians and villagers; but there were also frustrations. Unable to accept the irrationalities and convolutions of the world in which they had been
plunged, some complained that the ashrams were the wrong medium for the urgent delivery of an agro-industrial revolution. In this they were almost certainly right; but it took time for anyone to admit that an imported agro-industrial revolution might have been the wrong prescription in the first place.

John Hunt, a farmer from Dorset, set up a training programme in improved agricultural techniques for young village farmers. He put together special manuals for imparting basic techniques and adjusted his teaching programme to suit local conditions. His aim was to promote cultivation with the Green Revolution ‘package’ of new seeds, special varieties, extra crops, fertiliser, irrigation, and the associated technological and management frills. Results on the Khadigram demonstration farm were good. But non-trainee farmers were most unwilling to follow suit. They had their own reasons – which no-one had attempted to discover in advance – for not wanting to grow bigger plants or different crops; for not using more water for irrigation, or harvesting three times a year. Some simply could not afford to go further into debt to do so.

This was not ‘peasant apathy and inertia’. After the devastating experience of the drought, farmers had fewer means and less enthusiasm for taking risks; what they wanted was to feel more secure within the system they knew. So the British agriculturalists found that customers for their ‘package’ were painfully slow to come forward. And then the maize yields were disappointing, partly because the new seed was still experimental in local conditions and its cultivation needed great care. In 1970, only on half the plots planted to maize did the farmers’ profits cover their extra inputs.

Nevertheless, some farmers persevered and some fortunes flourished. But rarely the very poorest. John Hunt cited the case of a traditional farmer from a low-ranking caste with a small landholding. ‘His family has owned the land for generations. He has two buffaloes, six cows giving plenty of milk, and two bullocks for ploughing which also provide manure. He has farm implements, all his family work regularly in the fields, the yields are good and they live a good life.’ Twenty low-caste families in the same village had recently acquired plots of land under bhoomdan – plots as large as the traditional farmer’s. ‘But they used to be landless labourers. Few have bullocks, none have cows, there is no milk and no manure; none have farm implements, and their women and children rarely go to the fields. Their farm gives poor results and they are poverty-stricken.’

What Hunt and his co-workers were discovering – that within the ranks of low-caste Indian villagers there were great differentiations of means, capacity and aptitude – was only to be expected. But in those
days it was a revelation, at least to those addressing problems from the narrow perspective of ‘technological backwardness’. The evaluations of OGAP carried out by Alan Leather in the late 1960s and early 70s were pioneering documents of their time; to begin with, they were greeted by the practical idealists as too academic and nit-picking by half. But these analyses and others taught Oxfam a very great deal.

Designing OGAP so as to target the poorest farmers had not been attempted; indeed without data about patterns of income, landholding, employment, and indebtedness, such questions did not surface until the programme was underway. The assumption had been that the glittering new farming technology – with some local investment to get it established – would aid all; in fact, such technology, its costs, and the sophistication with which it had to be applied belonged to another planet as far as most poor Bihari farmers were concerned. The co-operative banks and marketing enterprises which would underpin the new farming economy also turned out to be pie in the sky. A declaration of gramdan did not suddenly implant durable co-operative institutions in one of the most stratified rural cultures in the world.

OGAP obtained supplies of relief wheatflour to use as wages on public works. The flour was difficult to preserve, so dam construction, land levelling and well-digging works were swiftly mounted. Too swiftly and amateurishly in some cases; without geological data, hard rock strata confounded some of the well-digging plans. Worse, the distribution of the flour was influenced by the Gandhians’ desire to spread their influence. Food went to families who were by no means in need. Some volunteers were upset, and outraged by Oxfam’s unwillingness to take on the role of food policeman.

In fact, the employment of villagers on these public works provided the necessary security for many to take the risks OGAP volunteers were pressing upon them. This was positive; maize did become an established crop. In one area, regular ‘wages’ had a much more profound consequence. Alan Leather found that the security of a regular income had helped bhoodani farmers break away from their crushing subjugation to the landlords. He wrote: 'I believe the psychological change in the attitude of the ex-landless labourer towards the landlord is one of the most important achievements of OGAP. They are aware of their rights and prepared to fight for them. This provides a good base for future development.'

OGAP was Oxfam’s first full immersion in the complexities of rural development, in India or elsewhere. It led to the discovery that the main barriers to the transformation of opportunity for the rural poor had more to do with entrenched social attitudes and structures than with the ability to use a pumpset, plant in rows, or dismantle the insides of a truck. The course of true development did not run smooth; in fact,
unless it ran bumpy, it was unlikely that any lasting developmental change which would help the poor was underway.

For £150,000 invested in OGAP, Oxfam could feel that some successes were achieved, if on a more modest scale than envisaged. Above all, when it was prepared to face them, there were lessons to be learned. By the early 1970s, in their own different ways, many Oxfam Field Directors had begun to absorb these lessons, and to tread more carefully where once the technical angels had rushed in. In southern India, an important new corner was turned when John Staley took on an Indian Assistant Field Director, Srikanth, to help reorient Oxfam away from its old alliances towards a more satisfying partnership with Indian organisations. In Bihar, another Indian – Subramanian, a Gandhian associated with OGAP – was appointed as Field Director in 1972.

With all the shortcomings and mistakes, Oxfam was one of the earliest overseas voluntary agencies to take on the difficult challenge of development in ‘the village’, and have the conviction to press on towards the new Jerusalem.

If Gandhi was the first Indian thinker to describe the village as the linchpin of social regeneration, the first to do so in Africa was President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania.

On 6 February 1967, Mwalimu – Nyerere’s title meant ‘Teacher’ in Swahili – spoke for two and a half hours to an audience of 50,000 in Dar es Salaam on ‘African Socialism and Self-reliance’. The policy he outlined – known as the Arusha Declaration – represented a turning-point in Tanzania’s affairs and was applauded by development enthusiasts the world over. Here was an authentically African vision of the national way forward, a rejection of the route designed, and still largely controlled, by the ex-colonial masters.

The cornerstone of Nyerere’s drive to create a just, equitable social structure aimed at the advancement of human well-being was his philosophy of *ujamaa*. The word meant ‘the oneness of brothers and sisters together’, and evoked the tradition of co-operation and sharing within the extended African family. The same notion, Nyerere argued, must now guide Tanzanians towards national unity and progress. Tanzania’s only political party, TANU, was to be the instrument for ensuring that the spirit of *ujamaa* governed the management of community resources in such a way as to promote equitable growth, and did not allow the already rich and powerful to decide matters on everyone else’s behalf.

At the national level, the means of production were placed in public ownership. This was to ensure that Tanzania, not the manipulators of
foreign capital, controlled the Tanzanian economy. At the community level, every citizen would be able to participate in the creation and distribution of wealth, by membership in TANU. Over 90 per cent of Tanzania’s population were subsistence farmers living in the countryside. Not only did their voices play little part in decision making, but their agricultural productivity was low. Nyerere hoped that by redesigning the power structure so that they could have a genuine say in their own and in national affairs, and by redirecting social investment to meet the needs of the majority, he would create both a more egalitarian society and a more productive one. It was a brave vision, and extraordinarily influential in development thinking in Africa and internationally.

The philosophy of *njamaa* was music to the ears of voluntary agencies like Oxfam, particularly those busy repudiating the colonial inheritance. It was centred on the need to uplift the poor; although nominally socialist, it was democratic; and it was heavily influenced by Nyerere’s Christian faith and his belief – like Gandhi – in the power of the injunction to ‘love thy neighbour’. Here was a Third World leader who articulated as national policy the precepts guiding the Oxfam world view and, increasingly, its programme of development aid. Because of this, the relationship with Tanzania was to be very different from that with any other developing country. In Tanzania, the indigenous agency Oxfam could embrace as funding partner was the government itself. In some countries, such as Botswana, grants had been made to specific government agencies for specific projects. Tanzania was different. The whole country was perceived as an Oxfam-type project magnified to national scale.

The relationship did not begin as a direct partnership, although personal contact with Nyerere was established by Jimmy Betts in 1961 when newly-independent Tanganyika was afflicted by drought. A grant of £35,000 was spent on supplies for famine victims, and this was followed up by help to refugees from Rwanda resettling in western Tanzania.

Gradually, Oxfam had built up a typical portfolio of grants to Tanzania, most of them concerned with health and nutrition through mission hospitals and government clinics. Agriculture and community development were supported through the Anglicans at Masasi in Mtwara Region, where Trevor Huddleston was Bishop during the 1960s; and through the Ruvuma Development Association in the remote southwest. Here, a group of educated young idealists tried to transform the nascent idea of *ujamaa* into practical living and working arrangements. This experiment, the test-tube for much of Nyerere’s thinking, was much praised for the way in which it involved and enthused local farmers in
dynamic co-operative enterprise. Oxfam contributed £22,500 up to 1969. But Ruvuma then ran foul of local TANU party politicos, and regretfully, Nyerere banned it.

For many years, Oxfam’s single most important partner in Tanzania was an organisation called the Community Development Trust Fund (CDTF). This ‘indigenous agency’ was originally set up by Marion Lady Chesham, one of the relatively few British farming settlers in Tanganyika, a great sympathiser with the independence struggle and a friend of Nyerere’s. Originally she put aside £300 to help local villagers with water problems – pump repairs and well-deepening. Under the umbrella of the Prime Minister’s Office, CDTF began to receive funds from voluntary agencies all over the world and channel them into rural development. Within some years, Lady Chesham handed over the directorship to a Tanzanian, Martha Bulengo, under whom CDTF flourished.

The administering agents of CDTF-supported schemes in the villages – the choosers of sites, the deliverers of materials, the inspectors of works – were the district development officers and other local functionaries. CDTF was a facilitator, sometimes an extra source of advice; but its essential role was to enable overseas charities to support Tanzanian development via the government, and yet keep tabs on the actual projects to which their funds were committed. From the late 1960s, after the Arusha Declaration triggered the liberal love affair with Nyerere’s ideas, CDTF enjoyed a boom. From the Tanzanian perspective, CDTF funds gave a useful boost to the official development budget down at village level where budgets and benefits tended to run out.

The CDTF’s Field Officer and Martha Bulengo’s right-hand man was the colourful figure of Daudi (David) Ricardo. During the War, Ricardo was invalided out of the Hussars after the back of his head was shot off. To recover the use of his faculties he began walking about the African continent. He eventually decided to settle in Tanganyika and became a highly unconventional farmer, ranching cattle, befriending his pastoralist rivals, the Masai, and personally herding his cattle to market on foot over the length and breadth of the country. After independence, he gave up farming, converted to Islam, and – at Marion Chesham’s request – joined CDTF. Ricardo spoke many local languages as well as Swahili, and the wise and wiry figure of Daudi was known and respected in many unlikely corners of his chosen country of citizenship.

Among Tanzania’s development goals were the provision of basic services to the entire population: one medical dispensary for each 10,000 inhabitants; universal primary education; and safe, permanent water supplies for every village. But except in the country’s few intensely fertile areas, Tanzania’s population was widely scattered, making service provision virtually impossible. This led to Nyerere’s carrot-and-stick
policy of ‘villagisation’, encouraging and, in the early 1970s, compelling people to relocate into villages where they would have access to schools, roads, clinics, wells, and other facilities. If villagers worked together on communal farms and enterprises, they were seen as moving towards *ujamaa* and received favoured treatment from party and government.

CDTF appealed to Oxfam to help provide villages with water. One part of their case was that unsafe water was a public health hazard, spreading bilharzia, malaria, dysentery, and typhoid. But CDTF put even greater emphasis on the burden of water-carrying for village women: ‘In thousands of villages and settlements the woman of the house must walk in the hot sun to the nearest water hole, sometimes as much as five miles away, and carry on her head a heavy pot or ‘debbie’. She cannot carry in one trip enough water to last her household 24 hours so she spends a disproportionate time trudging back and forth. This is slavery, and leaves her no time to learn the best way to bring up her children, keep her house clean, or go to adult literacy, cookery or hygiene classes. She is held back in every way and this in turn holds back improvement in her family and development in her village.’ This focus on the importance of women in the development process was in advance of its time.

The first, modest, Oxfam grant to CDTF for well-digging was made in 1967. In 1968, after the arrival of a new Field Director in East Africa, Malcolm Harper, Oxfam made a major commitment of £31,000 for 233 wells and ‘supervision costs’ – Ricardo’s salary, vehicle, and inspection safaris. The villages selected by the Tanzanian Water Development Division for new wells were all committed to *ujamaa*, and were expected to provide labour for digging, burnt bricks or stones for well-lining; concrete rings for lining were only used where nothing else was practicable, and made on-site. All this helped to keep costs low and was meant to give villagers a feeling of responsibility for ‘their’ well.

The programme was very popular. By 1971, it had expanded to the point where 430 wells were constructed in a year, costing between £120 and £175 depending on depth. When each well was approved by Ricardo and the Water Department, it was covered to prevent contamination and to stop people falling in, and a simple handpump installed. The District Medical Officer from Nachingwea wrote: ‘The wells have been very helpful in improving hygiene and reducing diseases like conjunctivitis and scabies.’ Another, from Sumbawanga, commented that dispensaries in local villages with wells were seeing fewer cases of bilharzia, dysentery and gastro-enteritis.

Oxfam had so much confidence in CDTF and Ricardo that £145,000 was committed over a period of ten years to help water-supply construction. But as time went by and the number of schemes mounted, it became clear that too little attention had been given to maintenance.
Enthusiasm was all for new wells; when pumps on old ones broke down or the well silted up, neither government nor villagers did much about it. In 1975 as a condition of a new grant, Oxfam insisted that someone from each village be sent for maintenance training before the well was sunk and the pump installed. This helped, although it did not entirely solve the problem.

In 1973, Oxfam – still in partnership with CDTF – moved a step closer to a direct relationship with the government. A ‘Development Secretary’, Adrian Moyes, had recently been appointed in Oxford to explore ways of enhancing the impact of project assistance on the poor. Ricardo helped Moyes identify a suitable district in Tanzania for a more concentrated Oxfam programme, and a more direct exposure to, and partnership with, the intricate mechanisms of local government and the ujamaa village. The district was Chunya, one of Tanzania’s poorest, in the southern Mbeya region.

Oxfam committed £20,000 to the district development authorities in Chunya, to be used for small-scale co-operative village enterprises as an addition to the family food production and cash crop schemes already in hand. One such enterprise was a carpentry workshop for making furniture out of local mninga wood; there were others for goats, pit-saws, bee-hives, and poultry. Ploughing oxen were provided to be managed communally by villagers who did not own draught animals.

This modest handful of enterprises inspired great theoretical excitement: they would help newly-settled villagers still unfamiliar with joint activities to learn how to organise their affairs. They were the beginning of a step-by-step process which would flower into self-sustaining equitable growth. But for all the visits and discussions and the strivings with the district staff over the complexities of ujamaa in action, the modest handful of projects, some successful, some less so, remained no more than that.

Working hand in hand with government, even Tanzanian government, was not necessarily a dynamic or scientific process, as people like Ricardo were sagely aware. On their side, the Tanzanians did not understand why, having made such a modest contribution to their grand Chunya district plan, Oxfam agonised so long and hard about a few goats and beehives and asked so many detailed questions. They were used to the larger sums and more detached behaviour of the international donors; the World Bank was also active in Chunya. The modus vivendi for a useful partnership between voluntary agency and local government, even where both were aligned with the poor, needed a lot more time and effort to work out.

Nyerere expressed his confidence in Oxfam when he visited its headquarters in Oxford in late 1975. He also knew that some of ujamaa’s
In the early 1970s, as Oxfam Field Directors in different parts of the world were evolving a more thoughtful perspective on the application of charitable aid to ‘development’, those in the Indian sub-continent were suddenly distracted by a series of calamities natural and man-made. For well over a year, staff and resources were consumed by emergencies; OGAP's structure never fully recovered.

The first catastrophe was in the Bay of Bengal. On the night of 12 November 1970, a cyclone of unprecedented intensity struck the coast and the off-shore islands in the low-lying Ganges delta. Half a million people were drowned, crops on a million acres were destroyed, and homes, boats, and livestock swept away by a tidal wave. More than four and a half million people were affected.

In the chaotic aftermath of the worst natural disaster of the century, international sympathy fuelled a massive relief operation. In Britain, an appeal by Richard Attenborough for the Disasters Emergency Committee raised the unprecedented sum of £1.4 million. Oxfam, which did not at the time have a Field Director in Dacca, joined British partner agencies in airlifting out tents, and water purification and medical equipment. Further supplies were sent up from Singapore, consigned to CARE and to the East Pakistan Red Cross. Altogether, £375,000 was spent on flood relief.

In the aftermath of the cyclone, existing political tension erupted into turmoil, and within a few months civil conflict engulfed the Bengali half of Pakistan. A terrorist campaign for secession began and the Pakistani army retaliated, clamping down mercilessly throughout the countryside. From March 1971 onwards, hundreds of thousands of people began fleeing across the border in search of sanctuary in India. Providing them all with shelter, food, and care presented the Indian authorities with problems of almost inconceivable magnitude.

Late in April 1971, Oxfam's Alan Leather set off for Calcutta from Bihar armed with $10,000 from Oxfam of Canada. The enormity of the...
influx and the problems it posed only came home to him after he had travelled out of the city. On 3 May he reported: ‘The first place we stopped was a small town between Krishnanagar and the border. All the talk about numbers and the state of some camps had not prepared me for suddenly finding 6,000 people clustered along verandas, under trees, around handpumps, queuing for food, ration cards, registration, spilling out of makeshift offices.’ And every hour, every day, more were arriving. ‘The camp started seven days ago. The Block Development Officer was organising it as best he could, but was extremely worried about news of another 10,000 people on the roads. 500 had arrived that morning.’

The picture everywhere was similar. The refugees arrived on foot with little more than a few bundles. Many were in a state of shock. The only shelter was in a nearby school or under tarpaulins stretched over bamboo poles. At another stop ‘we found that 13,000 had gathered at a site for a new camp. Here again there was no shelter, just a great mass of people waiting to be fed ... ‘This was to be the story, endlessly repeated, in the areas around the East Pakistan border for the next seven months. After the rains began, and the monsoon was unusually heavy that year, canvas and bamboo offered little protection. The camps were quickly reduced to a muddy squalor sprouting umbrellas and harbouring every agent of infection.

Alan Leather’s three years of experience in India were of immense value in guiding the course he took on Oxfam’s behalf. This was a determined step away from the old, neo-colonial way of doing things. All the priority needs – shelter materials, medical supplies, clothing, transport, and trained administrative and professional personnel – were available in India. He therefore cabled immediately to Oxfam for money with which to purchase goods and hire helpers. Tarpaulins, clothing, baby foods, medical supplies, ambulances, petrol, and daily allowances for volunteers, were distributed to Indian agencies, Gandhian and others, already working in the camps alongside government personnel. He told Oxford: ‘No expensive and inappropriate expatriate inputs, either goods or people,’ though he did bring up from Bihar the remaining OGAP volunteers.

In this early stage of the crisis when the world had not yet grasped what was happening, Leather found that Oxfam’s speed and flexibility were invaluable. Until large-scale aid was mobilised, there were important gaps to be filled. In early June, an outbreak of cholera in a district near Calcutta rang alarm bells around the world, unleashed a deluge of international attention, and prompted action on a massive scale. Appeals were mounted, and in Britain the DEC again raised over £1 million. The pressure on Oxfam to fly out relief goods – dried milk, plastic sheeting for shelter, medical equipment, and large butyl septic
In Gandhi's footsteps

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tanks for sanitation – became for a while overwhelming. Meanwhile, Leather recruited 250 young doctors and medical students to carry out mass vaccinations in camps and villages. In a month, 100,000 people were inoculated, helping to contain the outbreak and prevent it entering Calcutta.

Although the attention of Oxfam supporters in Britain was absorbed by the drama of RAF mercy missions and DEC charter flights, the real merit of Oxfam's Bengal programme was its Indian-ness, characteristics that do not fit with the rescue mission mentality which fuels British generosity to disaster relief. The advantage of the upsurge in donations was that Oxfam could begin to consolidate its programme and plan ahead.

As the monsoon rains started to beat down, the condition of the weakest, especially the children, began to deteriorate. In July, Oxfam decided to concentrate on five areas with a refugee population of around 500,000, supplementing the basic food rations from the Indian government with medical care, sanitation, clean water, child feeding, clothing, and shelter. The programme teams were all made up of Indian volunteers and refugees, including doctors, nurses, and social workers who came from as far away as Bombay and Gujarat. Between July and October 1971, £350,000 was spent by Oxfam on maintaining these teams in the field and keeping the programme supplied. This sum represented almost as much as was spent in those months on the entire Oxfam programme in the rest of the world. But no-one doubted its value. Senator Edward Kennedy was so impressed when he visited the camps that he invited Alan Leather to make a presentation later in the year to the US Senate Sub-Committee on Refugees.

During the summer, Oxfam in Britain worked hard to publicise the plight of the Bengal refugees and to raise money. But as autumn approached and press interest died, a cash and attention-span crisis developed. By the end of August 1971, Oxfam was beginning to wonder how it could possibly go on finding an extra £120,000 a month to maintain its work in the refugee camps. But the spectacle of international generosity faltering was even more alarming. The cost to India of refugee relief was running at over £1 million a day. The Oxfam headquarters team, led by Communications Director Philip Jackson, therefore felt that an attempt must be made to reawake the conscience of the world. A campaign was mounted – the first of its kind: a public information campaign aimed at governments and the UN.

Remembering Nigeria, and worried that Oxfam would be accused of overstepping the political line, Kirkley was initially hesitant. But the humanitarian predicament of eight million uprooted people called for something special. Kirkley undertook a round of meetings with the Editors of major newspapers and media news programmes. A bus-load
of Oxfam staff and volunteers called personally on the Ambassadors of all UN member countries, to ask that they raise their aid contributions and do more at the UN itself.

Advertisements were placed in the press, inviting people to sign a coupon and send it to their MP: 'I add my plea that the United Nations use the power invested in it to press for an urgent political solution to the Pakistan problem, and immediately organise the relief programme desperately needed to avert further suffering.' In late September, Michael Rowntree, Chairman of the Oxfam Council, and Ken Bennett, Director of Overseas Aid, went to New York to lobby at the General Assembly. Other NGO partners around the world, especially the church organisations and the other Oxfams, were invited to join this international lobby, and did so.

The campaign's centrepiece was a publication, *The Testimony of Sixty*, to which 60 aid workers, politicians, and journalists contributed eyewitness accounts of the misery in the camps. Its contributors included Senator Edward Kennedy, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Nicholas Tomalin, Martin Woollacott, James Cameron, John Pilger, Bishop Trevor Huddleston, Gerald Scarfe, Donald McCullin, Michael Brunson, Clare Hollingworth, and many foreign journalists. This plain but eloquent document was published on 21 October 1971, and distributed worldwide. J. Banerji, an Indian social welfare worker, wrote: 'Imagine the whole population of Scotland trekking south, leaving hearth and home with a basket on their heads. Leading their old parents and ailing children by the hand in continuous streams day after day, and finally taking shelter under improvised sheds, only God looking after them. Imagine heavy rains, cholera, and death on the roadside. This is the picture. How will the world accept it?' The concern of many writers was the unendingness of the problem. What was the refugees' future? How could they go on being cared for? Yet who would persuade them to go home?

By late November, the exodus from East Pakistan had swollen to over nine million people. On 3 December, India took matters into her hands and despatched her army across the border into East Pakistan on the side of the secessionists. On 16 December 1971, Pakistan surrendered, and the exultant Bengali freedom fighters declared independence. The new state of Bangladesh was born.

The bleak underside of their triumph was that the world's newest country was also its poorest. The land once celebrated as Golden Bengal in the poetry of the great Tagore had not only been devastated first by cyclone, then by warfare, but had become overburdened with people and poverty. As the millions of refugees swarmed back across the border to home and freedom, a new development challenge awaited.
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BARGAINING FOR A BETTER WORLD

By the late 1960s the cause of the hungry world was faltering. At the beginning of the decade, the ‘rich world’ had shouldered a new version of the white man’s burden and set out enthusiastically to fulfill its obligations towards what was now no longer the ‘colonial world’ but the ‘poor world’. In Britain, the image of the starving child with which Oxfam popularised the new mission had caught people’s imagination and inspired a heartfelt response. By 1970, things had changed. While Oxfam’s own torch continued to burn strongly, out in the wider world among politicians, commentators, and the public, the lustre of ‘overseas aid’ had faded.

One reason was the violent and chaotic events in Third World countries such as Congo, Nigeria, and in a different way, Vietnam and the Middle East. In the midst of such turmoil and political intractability, it was hard to believe that aid and charitable giving were able to provide any lasting solution to distress. Another problem was that, as an instrument of ‘development’, the record of ‘aid’ was disappointing. In their different ways, economists, social scientists, administrators, and plain humanitarians were discovering that ‘development’ – however you defined it – was much more complex than they had realised. Some of the old colonial hands might have given them a hint or two; but views from those quarters were distinctly out of fashion.

The euphoria of the early 1960s, the excitement of ‘Freedom from Hunger’ and the ‘Development Decade’, had raised unrealistic expectations about what overseas aid could do. Analogies had been made with the Marshall Plan; but this had been a massive short-term investment programme to rebuild what had been destroyed by war. Aid for the Third World was supposed to do something much more fundamental: to help launch a process of economic and social transformation which, in the European context, was already part of history. In many poorer parts of the world, such history had yet to be made.

At the beginning of the Development Decade, people had looked for a twentieth century miracle, a crusade using space age technology to
banish poverty from the face of the earth. When the fantasy began to recede, the prospect of a long and grinding haul did not have the same appeal. Governments, including the British, became more half-hearted about overseas aid as domestic issues beset them. Bad aid stories affected public attitudes, which became distrustful about largesse towards the poorer world. 'Charity begins at home', with the implication that it also ended there, was a sentiment Oxfam found itself increasingly contesting. Oxfam had difficulty adjusting to the new climate, in which it was harder to find allies, launch appeals, and make headlines than it had been a few years back.

To rekindle international enthusiasm, the World Bank under its new President, Robert McNamara, launched a 'grand assize' into why the development cause had run out of steam. Lester Pearson, recently Prime Minister of Canada, was invited to head an international commission which published its findings in late 1969. Their report *Partners in Development* disputed the notion that the Development Decade had been a failure and that overseas aid did not work. Some aid had been thoroughly inappropriate, either because it was ill-conceived or because it had been given for short-term political or trading gain; but there was no call to be so down-hearted when many Third World countries were getting richer at a rate far exceeding that of industrialised countries at a similar stage of their own development.

Pearson called for revisions in the why, what, and how of aid, and for its rapid increase. He suggested that all donor countries should raise their allocation as soon as possible to one per cent of their GNP. The Commission also called for an end to the restrictive import policies which kept many developing countries' key products out of first world markets, reflecting a growing emphasis on trading relationships as well as aid as a vital part of the 'rich world, poor world' equation. The Pearson Report was influential in setting the agenda for the next UN Development Decade, declared by the General Assembly in 1970, particularly the one per cent GNP aid target; it was also seized upon by those who had picked up the development banner in the 1960s in a spirit of conviction and were determined not to abandon it. Quotes from Pearson sprinkled Oxfam's and others' literature for many years.

Almost simultaneously with the late 1969 publication of the Pearson Report, the British overseas aid charities launched a joint campaign entitled 'Action for World Development' arguing for many of Pearson's precepts. Its keynote was struck by a *Manifesto on Aid and Development*. The agencies had decided to take a radical step. Since the British government and others were going off the boil about aid, they would have to be put under pressure. Political pressure. This meant straying into pastures where the law said that charities were not supposed to go.
This decision had been many years in the making, and it derived from an accumulation of forces.

The rumblings in Oxfam about the need to take on a stronger educational and propaganda role dated back to the early 1960s. The 1963-64 brush with the Charity Commissioners had quelled them, but only temporarily. Harold Wilson’s government, which had put overseas aid high on its agenda after coming to power in 1964, cut the aid budget after its second election victory in 1966, by £20 million. This, as Oxfam’s activists pointed out, was a larger sum than the amount the organisation had spent on aid in its entire history.

The proverbial drops in the ocean provided by Oxfam’s £3 million annual expenditure seemed a puny response to the massive problem of world poverty. The scale of the poor world’s predicament was too vast, its iniquities too entrenched. Evidently, only those operating on a massive scale – governments and international monetary and trading institutions – could make a major difference. A report prepared for Oxfam in 1967 by Dr. Cyril James, ex-Vice Chancellor of McGill University, then Secretary of Oxfam’s Council, stated: ‘It is clear that the relief and development of peoples in all parts of the world cannot be accomplished by voluntary agencies alone. Massive effort by all governments is essential, and to encourage such effort, Oxfam must sometimes play the role of Socrates and be a gadfly to sting the State to action.’ The James Report, as this document was known, reflected important trends in Oxfam thinking.

In the late 1960s, not only was Pearson conducting his grand assize, but figures such as Barbara Ward were talking of the population time-bomb ticking away, and other prophets of environmental catastrophe were starting to make their voices heard. The sense of crisis, of time running out, was palpable and it affected thinking in all the aid agencies. True, to lobby for a change in public policy was to undertake political action, and this might lead to a clash with the Charity Commissioners. But so overwhelming did the case for action on behalf of humankind appear that many believed the Commissioners could not be so unenlightened as to interpret the law about political action against them. Where a charity was convinced that public policy in its area of expertise needed correction for humanity’s sake, surely it would be lacking in responsibility not to seek the necessary changes?

Although mass popular interest in eradicating hunger had dwindled, informed minority interest was growing. This owed a great deal to the long-term education and youth programmes of Oxfam and other agencies. Some of their key people – Og Thomas who headed up Oxfam’s educa-
tion work from 1966-71, for example – were also influential in helping set up ginger groups on aid and development issues outside the formal charity network. The most important of these – because it had the backing of many influential names – was the Haslemere Group. In mid-1968, the Group issued a ‘Declaration’, price 1/-. It sold out immediately, to the membership of a growing network of World Development and Poverty Action groups. This call to arms took a radical line on the causes of underdevelopment, essentially adopting the Marxist critique of the evils of colonialism developed by writers such as Renée Dumont and Frantz Fanon, then becoming highly fashionable in left-wing circles.

In this view, the rich world was not merely obligated to help the poor world because it happened to be better off; it was itself responsible for the poor world’s parlous condition, and must redress the imbalance as a matter of justice. Although the Haslemere Group included many Oxfam sympathisers, their analysis suggested that aid of the kind Oxfam gave was almost irrelevant, a sop to the conscience of the donor which might even be shoring up the oppressive structures crushing the poor. Socialist analysis and a vision of the Third World in justifiable revolt against exploitative Western capitalism were beginning to characterise an ideology of development whose primary context was neither economic nor humanitarian, but political.

The activity propelling the agencies towards a propaganda role was diffuse and emerged in a spontaneous fashion. At Oxfam, the arrival of Nicolas Stacey as Oxfam’s Deputy Director in 1968 helped to stoke up the debate. Kirkley was a very steady type of person. He liked the feeling of organisational energy generated by his young hotheads, but he was inclined to let the thunder roll around him and wait for it to subside without feeling the need to bring matters to a head or reach any definitive conclusion. Stacey, a far more dynamic figure, had quite opposite instincts. He wanted to fire up the debate and encourage the forces he saw as Oxfam’s main source of vitality; he wanted a driving sense of excitement and action.

Kirkley never paraded his views and rarely expressed them except in the most general terms. In a middle-of-the-road kind of way, he believed that – although the wider educational role was important – nothing should be done which risked damage to the raison d’être of Oxfam, its overseas aid programme. The Haslemere-ists, at one extreme, saw the programme as good so far as it went, which was almost nowhere at all; education and public policy change were far more important. The view at the other extreme, whose champion was Ken Bennett, Overseas Aid Director, was that all the hot air generated over socialism, self-reliance, and sisal quotas achieved very little that was concretely detectable for the poor – unlike Oxfam’s aid, which did things of great importance to
those individuals whose lives it touched. Meanwhile the trustees had endorsed the James Report's recommendation that Oxfam engage in public opinion-forming, to 'sting the state to action'. Nic Stacey threw himself into the fray with gusto.

Stacey had been asked by Kirkley to take overall charge of the Oxfam 'home front' – fundraising, regional staff, volunteer groups, education, youth, shops, advertising, press, PR. Within all this, the high energy ex-Vicar was willing to do his duty and exploit his publicist talents by opening charity bazaars, kissing celebrities, and giddying up gift shop helpers; but something of real significance such as championing development as a political cause was much more up his alley. Stacey was an enthusiast for big ideas and good at making things happen. He was very bright, had a handy network of contacts and ready-made fame as a TV and newspaper commentator. If anyone could push aid and development back up the political agenda, from second in command at Oxfam, surely he could.

Stacey (who had just turned forty) identified with the younger, activist elements within Oxfam and on its fringes. Early in 1969, a group of Oxford students arrived at his house one evening. Peter Adamson and his wife, Lesley, and Philip (son of Robert) Maxwell wanted Oxfam's backing for a campaign. Their idea echoed the theme of '1 per cent of GNP' being sought internationally for development. They believed they could persuade Oxford undergraduates to sign banker's orders worth at least one per cent of their student grants to overseas aid charities. If the campaign worked, it would be financially worthwhile for Oxfam and the other agencies, and would secure a platform for further educational activity. After a bottle of wine round Stacey's kitchen table, he agreed that if they could collect one thousand signed promises in three weeks, Oxfam would take them on. They did so.

This led to the creation of 'Third World First' with its own accommodation, office and staff, established on the strength of a grant from Oxfam. By the end of the first year, 3W1 had managed to start a support group in every university in the country, and 16,000 students had signed a banker's order to Oxfam, Christian Aid, War on Want, or some other charity. The financial results paid off; within three years, 3W1 brought Oxfam over £50,000 annually. Adamson, never at a loss for ambitious ideas, began to produce a good-looking, thrice-yearly magazine for members: the Internationalist. In 1973, he persuaded Oxfam and Christian Aid to back the New Internationalist, the first monthly magazine on development issues available to the public. Establishing the magazine was to cost the agencies more than they had bargained for; but, somewhat to their surprise, it became in time a successful independent concern.
During 1968-69, Stacey's first year as Deputy Director, Oxfam made plans to launch its own political campaign. Position papers were prepared on a variety of topics – aid, trade, agriculture, population. Oxfam also drafted a 'manifesto'. But Kirkley was not entirely happy with the way things were headed. Gradually, he steered Oxfam away from a go-it-alone campaign towards joint action with other members of the Voluntary Committee on Overseas Aid and Development (VCOAD).

This co-ordinating group had been set up in 1965 largely at the instigation of Barbara Castle, then Minister of Overseas Development, as a new mechanism for agency collaboration. As well as the usual allies, it included the Overseas Development Institute, UNA, and the UK Freedom From Hunger Committee, and it offered a joint platform for representations to government. VCOAD's purpose was to dovetail the agencies' educational and opinion-forming work, and Kirkley – always seeking to build a common front in a co-ordinated voluntary sector – vigorously supported it. In the context of active political work, VCOAD offered a ready-made umbrella under which the agencies could shelter from Charity Commissioner storms; and if legal opinion happened to blow their way, joint action would add a puff in the right direction.

Thus the stage was set for the 1969 'Action for World Development' initiative in the wake of the Pearson Report. Its Manifesto on Aid and Development was a redraft of the manifesto originally prepared by Oxfam. Oxfam and Christian Aid were the prime movers, seconding members of staff and paying the lion's share of the budget. The position papers originally prepared by Elizabeth Stamp, Oxfam's Information Officer, were now issued as AWD materials, under the rubric 'Stamp on Poverty'. The Churches also launched a 'National Sign-In on World Poverty', inviting congregations to sign a declaration to be presented to MPs throughout the country. This supported the allocation by 1972 of 1 per cent of GNP to overseas aid, and the negotiation of more favourable trading arrangements with the poorer countries.

In Oxfam, once the commitment had been made not just to the idea, but to the implementation of the 'wider educational role', a great deal of energy was consumed in reaching lift-off position. The experience was sobering. People began to discover that it was relatively easy to agree on the moral imperative to try to save the world from hunger, disease and illiteracy, and to sit up all night penning ardent declarations to this effect; it was much more difficult to develop an effective strategy for actually doing something about it. It required producing authoritative position papers on complex subjects to which several agencies could subscribe; arguing a convincing case for real policy alternatives; avoiding the politics vs. charity minefield; reconciling voices within each agency, and those of several agencies with different agendas. All of this
was merely a preparation for the main task of conjuring into existence a 
popular mass movement clamouring at the gates of Westminster.

The launch of the Manifesto was something of an anticlimax. There 
was no echoing roar as there had been for Hunger £Million, for Biafra, 
and for other emergencies. A hundred or so committed development 
action groups – Haslemere emulators – beavered away, trying to disen-
tangle growth rates from commodity agreements, unearth the mysteries 
of ODAs and GATTs, unhook multilaterals from intergovernmentals, 
and work out where the poor fitted in. They helped to collect over a 
million signatures for the churches’ National Sign-In, and presented 
these to some 500 MPs. But for all the achievements of the emerging 
development lobby, no-one could pretend that ‘1 per cent of GNP’ and 
‘fair trade’ evoked in the public mind the passionate concern that a 
Biafran child could conjure.

In a January 1970 report to the Oxfam Executive Committee, Kirkley 
spoke of ‘teething troubles and a slow start’; but he was convinced that 
backing AWD was the right course of action. Others were disappointed. 
After all the efforts and the internal discussions, the plans and the policy 
documents, the mountain had laboured and brought forth a mouse.

The casualty was Nic Stacey. His vision of Oxfam at the head of a 
national movement on behalf of the hungry millions, himself holding 
aloft the leading banner, was slipping away.

In October 1969, Stacey set out his views on the future of Oxfam in a 
confidential memo to Kirkley. His analysis of the social trends influencing 
Oxfam’s fortunes was wide-ranging. He saw the tide on which Oxfam 
had swept to success as turning, with threatening implications for future 
income and ability to keep expenses below 20 per cent. ‘Oxfam policies 
must again catch the prevailing tide, which is so different from that of 
ten years ago. To do this demands a radical reappraisal of Oxfam’s 
priorities and policies at a much more fundamental level than has been 
envisaged up to now.’

Stacey’s prescription was a major restructuring of the entire home 
front. The prevailing tide he wanted to ride was the demand among ‘the 
articulate liberal minority’ for lobbying and propaganda work, a task he 
described as essential for any organisation which took its commitment to 
the Third World seriously. (Stacey was among those who believed that 
Oxfam’s aid programme was too tiny to be useful on any scale that 
mattered.) He regarded AWD as an under-funded, mealy-mouthed 
response to the demand for educational activity; the action groups could 
make no real headway without more funds and backing. Stacey argued 
that only Oxfam was big enough and powerful enough to carry the
political torch effectively. He also undoubtedly thought that the movement needed him, not some anonymous committee of well-meaning agency deputees.

He suggested to Kirkley that Oxfam should commit around £500,000 for educational work annually. He saw that a public appeal for this amount of money for educational work would be certain to fail. His suggestion, therefore, was that the income from Oxfam’s trading company and from the growing network of shops should be put into an Oxfam Educational Trust. He believed that the middle-aged women volunteers who ran the shops did so because they liked running shops, and that they were not fussy about how the money they raised was spent as long as it went to a good cause. He saw the shops as a way Oxfam had found of raising money ‘which involves neither commitment nor sacrifice’, and that this liberated Oxfam from the obligation of spending the proceeds directly on relief and development overseas.

Independently of the main questions – whether such a high proportion of income should be allocated to educational work and what the Charity Commissioners would have to say about it – there were a number of flaws in this proposal. As Stacey himself pointed out, all fundraising efforts were currently under stress, with the exception of the shops. The loss to the overseas programme of Oxfam’s most promising source of income would have to be compensated in some way. This Stacey recognised; but the solution he proposed – a kind of sponsorship scheme with town-twinning and intensive campaigns by ‘mobile flying squads using Kennedy-type election techniques’ – was fanciful. Too many of his ideas were not sufficiently grounded in the mundane realities of Oxfam’s existing organisation and public profile. His urge to think big and visionary was his undoing. And many regional organisers were deeply opposed to their own eclipse as the backbone of Oxfam’s motivational presence in Britain’s towns and cities. In Stacey’s scenario, they would be confined to the management of shop networks selling second-hand goods and Oxfam products.

Stacey was too loyal to Oxfam to mount an internal lobby on behalf of his proposals. To do so would have been to set himself up in opposition to Kirkley in a leadership contest, a contest he neither sought nor could be expected to win. He counted on the force of his ideas and the internal momentum behind campaigning to win the day. But whatever tide he had identified, he had misjudged the strength of the one running in his favour. Kirkley wanted campaigning to be altogether more circumspect and was very disinclined to court the Charity Commissioners’ wrath, or alienate the other agencies recently enlisted in AWD by taking a separate, unilateral initiative.

Stacey’s proposals never explicitly reached the trustees although their
tenor was well-known. Instead, Kirkley put up his own case for discussion. In February 1970, the Council of Management reconfirmed that Oxfam's primary purpose was to raise money for overseas aid and development, endorsing Kirkley's suggestions and thereby consigning Stacey's - at that time and in that form - to the organisational out-tray.

The tensions in Oxfam reached the Sunday Times. Stacey's own visibility had helped sustain Oxfam's visibility; now his dissension with a key decision on organisational priorities could not remain invisible. Stacey was a public figure, a far better-known one than Kirkley, whom he had been expected to succeed. That could no longer happen. Although Stacey stayed on for a few more months, and even went on a trip to Tanzania to try and interest President Nyerere in town-twinning, the writing was on the wall. Without being able to commandeer a sizeable chunk of resources to set about what he saw as the vital challenge of the day, Stacey lost heart. Cutting ribbons, opening fetes, chairing meetings, and worrying about expense ratios did not ultimately satisfy. His departure came a respectable few months later.

Meanwhile, after a pause for thought, the Charity Commissioners decided to take issue with the AWD Manifesto. Although couched in the most cautious terms, its suggestions about government aid targets and trade deals had used the phraseology: 'We call upon'. Direct calls upon government for policy change were uncharitable, according to the Commissioners. Their June 1970 Annual Report warned charities that if they strayed into the field of political activity, 'their action will be in breach of trust', and that 'those responsible could be called on at law to recoup to the charity any of its funds which have been spent outside its purposes.' If the agencies had hoped that the moment had come for a more liberal interpretation of charity law, they were now disabused.

In late 1970, the action groups and the parties to AWD decided that it was in all of their interests to set up an independent non-charitable body, the World Development Movement. This would allow the groups to develop a separate identity: they were finding the agencies' concerns restrictive. Freed from the constraints of charity law, WDM could develop its own positions and campaigning strategies, calling on the agencies for support where appropriate. Oxfam, Christian Aid, and some others helped to fund WDM, letting go their co-ordinating role and conceding - for the moment - that campaigning in the political arena could not legally be undertaken in their name by their own volunteer constituencies.

WDM developed as an organisation, but its numbers did not significantly grow. By the 1970s it was becoming clear - if not easily admitted - that the momentum within the aid and development constituency was not gaining the kind of strength required for a mass
movement. Radical sentiment among the young focused on the overtly political, not the social and economic: Vietnam and Southern Africa, not kwashiorkor and textile quotas. Most development issues were too complex and too remote from the day-to-day preoccupations of most people, even among the liberal intelligentsia. The prevailing current in favour of political action at home on behalf of the poor overseas had been less a flood tide than an eddy.

The Nicolas Stacey episode was an important passage in Oxfam's story. The question of how much money and energy should be given to educational activity on the domestic front was a big contemporary issue among Third World sympathisers, and has continued to be so in one form or another ever since. Stacey was not the only person to leave Oxfam because of its refusal to adopt a more radical stance or risk alienating middle-class, middle-aged, middle-of-the-road supporters. Given his independent status as a public figure, Stacey could have split the organisation and caused lasting damage. That he did not do so is in part a tribute to Kirkley and the respect and affection in which he was held; but credit must also go to Stacey himself, who conducted himself in such a way as to minimise the impact of the parting of the ways.

Stacey or no Stacey, the campaigning issue continued to be hotly debated. In November 1974, a new proposal cleared the upper reaches of the policy-making apparatus. The Council of Management decided that in future, public information and education should be regarded not as an organisational cost, like fundraising expenditure; but as an organisational purpose, like overseas aid. From this time onward, Oxfam allocated five per cent (later raised to six per cent) of its donated income to educational activity, a sum roughly akin to what had previously been spent as a cost. The principle argued by Stacey five years before had now been established; but the effort came nowhere near the scale he had envisaged.

Nor did regular educational work take on a political character. In certain specific instances, such as the 1971 campaign on behalf of aid for the Bengal refugees in India, Oxfam invited supporters to 'write to your MP' and sent senior representatives to see government and UN officials. But ongoing campaigning work on aid and trade was firmly left to WDM, 3W1, and the New Internationalist, all of which Oxfam continued to support financially through the 1970s. It was to be another ten years before Oxfam again tried to advance the barriers constraining its own role as a critic of public policy in the international arena that it believed to be against the interests of the poorer members of the human race.

Although Nic Stacey did not achieve the fundamental shake-up he looked for at Oxfam, he did help to bring about some much-needed
reorganisation. Kirkley always preferred the back of an envelope and a hand-shake to structures and lines of bureaucratic command; and he was content to allow staff extraordinary freedom both of expression and action. But Oxfam had grown rapidly over the past decade and sorely needed not only the coherent statement of priorities which Stacey had forced upon Kirkley and the trustees, but a more streamlined organisational structure.

The next few years saw various consultants trying to make sense of this erratic organisational animal. This was far from easy; where idealism was the essential ingredient of job motivation, and its expression an important component of job satisfaction (salary levels were way below market rates), whatever structures were erected were constantly in danger of being undermined in the name of the latest moral imperative. The larger Oxfam became, the more unwieldy and potentially anarchic. The problem was exacerbated by the vast scope of Oxfam's philanthropic remit – poverty and distress arising out of any cause anywhere in the world – which meant that there was no new issue – population, environment, trade – that it could bear to leave alone. This made of its own body of energy a diffuse and volatile mass, constantly surging off in new directions.

The modest 1970 programme of reorganisation established a directorate to head up the key organisational activities. There was no more home front supremo in the form of a Deputy Director. A system of divisions was developed which, with reshuffling and consolidations, has remained the essential Oxfam structure. The regional network of local organisers had been already given some shape and a pecking order; they now came under a Regions Director, Richard Matanle. All the opinion-forming work – press, education, information – came under Philip Jackson as Communications Director. Administration was under Bruce Ronaldson; Finance under Gordon Rudlin; Overseas Aid under Ken Bennett. The sixth division was under Oxfam's newest senior recruit, Commercial Director Guy Stringer.

Within a year or two, Guy Stringer was to become Stacey's successor as Deputy Director. A bluff, quintessentially good-hearted person who described himself as 'a commercial man with a conscience', Stringer came to Oxfam in 1969 to beef up Oxfam Activities Ltd. and generally put Oxfam on the map in the commercial world. His background was in business, as managing director of a Pilkingtons ceramics firm, and before that, in the army. It was his wife Mary who converted him to Oxfam; she ran an early Oxfam shop in Dorset. Stringer, who ended his career with Oxfam with a spell as Director, always remained a little startled that he had been persuaded to abandon a successful business career to work for such a problematic and wilful creature as Oxfam. But the simple
conviction that led him to do so never dimmed, and its eloquent expression on public platforms down the years won many hearts and minds to the Oxfam cause. Like Kirkley, he inspired great affection.

By the early 1970s Oxfam was increasingly finding fundraising tougher. An unfortunate episode took place in 1969, when Oxfam dumped 50 sacks of shoes left over from jumble sales and judged unsellable on a rubbish tip in the Oxford area. A few good pairs of plimsolls donated by a manufacturer were mistakenly included, and their discovery led to a national scandal in which Oxfam was accused of everything from wastefulness and ingratitude to lack of charitable instinct towards people at home. The impact of this negative publicity was out of all proportion to the misdemeanour, and its bad effect clung to Oxfam's reputation for some time. Oxfam-bashing – 'they spend everything on administration' and other myths – became familiar on the public grapevine.

There were also by now a number of new charities, notably Shelter under Des Wilson, using the aggressive marketing techniques that Oxfam had pioneered. The whole business of modern philanthropy was changing and becoming more competitive. Oxfam's advertising revenue continued to decline. With the new emphasis on solidarity with the Third World, there was now resistance within the organisation to starving child images except during real emergencies. In their oversimplification of the world poverty problem, such images perpetuated an inaccurate and offensive picture of day-to-day life in the Third World, and a wrong idea of Oxfam's overseas programme. However, advertisements with more educational messages did not yield as well, sometimes barely covering their costs.

By 1970, half Oxfam's income was being raised in the regions, where the long-term build-up of staff and support groups was paying dividends. The most promising area of financial growth was the Oxfam Shops, of which there were now 250. The decision to promote the Oxfam Shop had been taken in 1968, when the existing Giftshops were handed over to local organisers. In future, organisers encouraged volunteer groups to replace gift drives and coffee mornings with retailing.

The average Oxfam shop's weekly income – £42 in 1970 – might sound small; but on a year-round basis it was far higher than the returns from a group which organised an annual tin rattle and sale of work. Shopkeeping was a more focused and regular activity. It was also less up-market. Shops needed a different kind of person from those used to genteel meetings with a speaker, slides and a few well-chosen remarks from the Chair. Shopkeeping required scrubbing floors, fitting shelves, sorting garments, and minding the till. Organisers had to be able to find enough helpers to take on these responsibilities; some shop rotas ran to 70 members. And whatever some headquarters staff airily thought about
middle-aged ladies' desire to run shops, helpers needed motivating. They had to open and close on time, they had to be disciplined about cash and stock control, and since they gave their time free they must enjoy the experience or they would drop out.

By 1973, the number of shops had risen close to 500, and their total profits to over £1 million. With their increasing numbers and the day-to-day nature of their dealings with the purchasing public, shop volunteers also became the most frequent standard-bearers for Oxfam's cause. This had an impact on Oxfam's overall presentation of its message. However well-motivated, few shop helpers matched the image of the articulate radical that some Oxfamers were keen to mobilise. In fact, some shop managers – with the protection of some regional organisers – were reluctant to devote more than minimal space either in the window or on the counter to Oxfam's information material: their twin priorities were to raise money and service their bargain-hunting clientele.

The degree to which Oxfam Shops should be utilised as education and information centres continued to excite debate for many years. Bill McGuire, Director for Scotland, reflected on the issue in a 1971 edition of Oxfam News: 'Could our army of shop helpers become so intent on keeping their heads down over their work that they have no time to gain a real understanding of what Oxfam is about? Is Oxfam in danger of losing its heart?'

In opting for shops as the fundraising way forward, Oxfam subconsciously made a choice about what kind of organisation it would be in terms of the character of its support and the broad public perception of its activities. Shops assumed in the 1970s and 1980s the role that advertising hoardings had played for Oxfam in the 1960s. In fundraising terms, the Shops were by far the largest contributor to Oxfam income, their proceeds peaking in 1988-89 at £19.5 million from over 800 sites. They were the vehicle through which most of Oxfam's 27,000 volunteers made their contribution of time and effort, the means whereby its name was placed constantly before the public, and a model for fundraising and community service copied by hundreds of charities in Britain.

The decision to boost the Oxfam Shops also paved the way for the expansion of Oxfam Trading. Under Guy Stringer's directorship, sales of Christmas cards and a range of other special Oxfam products – tea towels, toys – began to climb. Between 1970 and 1975, the company's annual sales rose from just under £300,000 to nearly £750,000. The most important growth area was the sale of handicrafts from the developing world, whose share of the total rose from 9 per cent to 46 per cent. What had begun with a few orders for bags or cushions made by refugees and
the destitute had grown into an import scheme called 'Helping by Selling'. This enterprise was developed and run by Roy Scott, who combined enthusiasm for the handicrafts with a very particular commitment to equitable trading.

At this time, a new theme associated with the nuts and bolts of poverty in the developing world was emerging: unemployment. The overabundance of manpower for the available jobs in most developing economies was seen as an outcome of the population explosion, and of the export of inappropriate capital-intensive Western technology. In 1971, Oxfam published a report called: 'Unemployment: the Unnatural Disaster' written by Peter Adamson. Quoting Hans Singer of the Institute of Development Studies at Sussex University, the report pointed out that 30 per cent of the potential workforce in developing countries were either out of work or desperately short of it. Some were seasonally unemployed in agriculture, others earned far less than the minimum wage, and many barely survived on the margins of the economy, shining shoes, washing clothes, and selling a few of this and that from a stall, a tray, or a roadside pitch.

This picture of the competitive, and often exploitative, conditions in which so many men, women and children tried to scrape a livelihood, was Roy Scott's inspiration. Small-scale handicrafts enterprises were often set up by missionaries trying to provide occupational activity for their social welfare caseload: widowed and abandoned women, people with disabilities. 'Helping by Selling' originally offered an overseas market for these products, many of which came from workshops and training centres which Oxfam grants had helped set up. Scott wanted to go further: he wanted, through Oxfam, to help such enterprises establish themselves as viable businesses, enhancing their capacity to provide employment to people from very low socio-economic groups in a way that increased their opportunities and improved their lives.

A typical example of a Helping by Selling producer was a women's training centre or *kendra* in the slums of Ahmedabad set up by Sr. Lucia Carabias, a Dominican nun, in 1970. Oxfam originally gave a grant to cover the costs of staff to teach tailoring for two years. When Sr. Lucia saw that the women were already skilled in Gujerati embroidery and mirrorwork, she diversified. The first retail order came from Oxfam: 5,500 embroidered wall-hangings. This provided regular wages for 75 workers, and helped to get their products established. Oxfam continued to place orders, and the *kendra* branched out into cushion covers, shopping bags, table linen, and bedspreads, using hand-woven cotton cloth and the designs that Gujerati women traditionally embroider onto the clothes and linen of their dowry.

From 1972 onwards, Scott began to develop an idea for a business
partnership with handicraft producers such as these. In his view, simply picking up pretty items off the ethnic shelf on which Oxfam could turn a useful profit did not guarantee help to producers of any but the most transitory kind. For example, if Oxfam Trading made a large order for a mirrorwork shoulder-bag for the Christmas Mail Order catalogue, this could put a producer under pressure to expand the workforce to fill it; once completed, there might be no new order for years until existing stock was sold. If the fashion for shoulder-bags died, that was that. How could Oxfam justifiably claim to be helping poor producers if it boosted their prospects and then dropped them flat? Something must be done to offset their vulnerability.

Scott was also concerned about the nature of the enterprises from which Oxfam purchased. The poor and illiterate, particularly if they were women, were easy victims to exploitative labour practices. In many Third World countries they were not in a position to assert their rights to decent wages or a share of profits, even where laws existed for their protection. Child labour and indentured labour were not unusual. For Helping by Selling, Scott had always preferred to buy products from enterprises with a co-operative structure, and avoided middlemen at all costs. This allowed Oxfam to develop a direct relationship with the producers, an essential ingredient of the venture he now proposed.

Scott called his concept ‘Bridge’ because it exemplified the philosophy of a new kind of trading relationship in which the underlying theme was partnership. ‘Bridge’ was truly radical and visionary, and it took time to persuade Oxfam’s policy-makers to accept it. The key principle was that Bridge’s reason for existence was to serve the producers, not to serve Oxfam. In the first place, prices must be fair and up to 40 per cent of an order’s value must be pre-paid. But much more important, profits from the sale of handicrafts would not simply fetch up in the general pot for Oxfam’s aid programme. Instead, they would be ploughed back into the producer enterprises themselves. A small proportion would also be spent on educational work about ‘fair trade’ in Britain.

Bridge was, therefore, to be an independent operation; this was the feature that many of the Oxfam policy-makers and trustees found hard to swallow. Up to this point, the overseas aid programme under the scrutiny of the Field Directorate had been the sacrosanct destination of profits earned by Oxfam, on handicrafts or any other item. The claim about ‘helping’ by selling had been taken at face value; the idea that Oxfam might be failing the makers of those attractive hanging baskets and leather sandals by participating in their exploitation – rock-bottom wages, no security – was not easy to convey. Some sceptics thought that Scott was a dreamer trying to tinker by remote control with societal or market relationships which were none of Oxfam’s business.
Eventually, with backing from Guy Stringer, the Bridge proposal won approval in mid-1975. In the future, suppliers of handicrafts to Oxfam would occupy the same slot as projects did in the aid programme: small craft enterprises would be seen as a context in which 'development' could be fostered and their employees' quality of life improved. Unlike most trading companies, Bridge would single out the weakest, the least secure, the least confident suppliers, and try to elevate their manufacturing and business skills to the point where they could become successfully self-sufficient. At the same time, Bridge would try to keep its own balance sheet healthy and its customers satisfied.

Bridge's policy was to build up producers' capacity by ploughing its profits back into their activities in the form of capital investment, expertise, and dividends. One quarter of the profits went directly to the producers. The rule was that this dividend should be spent by them as a group, not split up between employees individually; and they must tell Oxfam what they had spent their dividend on. This was a revolutionary idea; in very few handicraft workshops, including those run by missionaries, would anybody consider giving a say in affairs to the humble basket-makers or embroiderers themselves. This was a means of making them take at least one decision about their enterprise in a democratic manner. The first dividend in the Ahmedabad kendra caused quite a stir among the women workers. Reaching a decision about what to buy took an entire day; Oxfam's Guy Stringer happened to be present. 'When they finally agreed to buy a large, lidded cooking pot with a ladle to prevent the children putting their hands in, a huge frisson went through the hall.'

Most of the rest of the profits went into the Bridge Development Fund. From this, grants were made to producers for equipment, the construction of a warehouse or stockroom, or social improvements in the workplace. Others needed technical advice: what kind of kiln to buy, how to weave wool instead of cotton, how to fix dyes, how to size shoes to fit British feet or label skirts to go in German washing machines. On the marketing side, Bridge might help a group prepare their own catalogue or open a local shop. But the most important advice was on product design. A consultant might spend two weeks with a group of caneworkers developing a range of furniture. A weaver from one project might be sent at Oxfam's expense to develop new textiles on the loom of another. In a way that other charitable importers of handicrafts did not, Bridge spent time and effort working with producers to make their business viable, their products saleable, and the future of their workers secure, independently of whether Oxfam ever bought another pincushion or batik tie from them.

In the early 1980s, Bridge sales rose to over £1 million annually. It
took on its own field officers in India and Bangladesh, countries which together provided 50 per cent of orders; these were later followed by others in Thailand and Mexico. Their main task was to select the groups Bridge bought from and invested in, and thereby to develop closer links and a better understanding of who producers were, and their real, as opposed to assumed, needs as workers and as people.

Like all idealistic ventures, delivering on Bridge’s promise was fraught with pitfalls, given that commercial viability rather than charity was the underlying requirement. However immaculate their embroidery or carving, those artisans weakest in education and means were, by definition, also weakest in business and marketing skills. Bridge tried to deploy most of its resources in helping the weaker groups; but as in the aid programme, investing in the poorest is difficult and risky. Whereas in the aid programme an ill-judged grant could be written off, in the case of Bridge, if investments went wrong the company and its dependents—suppliers and customers—suffered. Thus there was an unavoidable tension between the concentration of Bridge’s resources in accord with its philosophy, and the need to remain profitable.

Although there were still many practical and philosophical bumps to be flattened, Oxfam’s experiment in ‘alternative trading’ grew from strength to strength during the 1980s. By 1990, Oxfam Trading’s 25th anniversary year, Bridge was importing items from 295 groups of producers in 43 countries, and its annual turnover was £8 million. It was now just one member of an international network of ‘alternative traders’ with links to the consumer—and green consumer—movements. Roy Scott’s dream of commercial activity between North and South which did not exploit the poorest and weakest had proved infectious among the socially concerned, and successful enough to boost the contemporary taste for ethnic wares.

Not only in Britain, but in North America, Lester Pearson’s grand assize into the Development Decade coincided with a profound awakening to the problems faced by the world’s poorest people. In the late 1960s, when US involvement in Vietnam was opening the eyes of the young to the nature of international relationships between the powerful and the weak, Oxfam of Canada suddenly found its fortunes blossoming. In 1967, Canada’s centennial year, its Ottawa Group introduced the sponsored walk to North America. ‘Miles for Millions’ raised money for well-drilling in Bihar, attracting 4,000 walkers. At their head was the then Prime Minister: Lester Pearson.

Sponsored walks took off in Canada like brush fire. In 1968, Oxfam more than quadrupled its income, to $680,000, as a result of walks and
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the publicity they generated. The following year, 250,000 walkers turned out simultaneously, in cities and towns across the country from Vancouver to St. John's, Newfoundland. In Britain, Oxfam's big national event of the year was also a sponsored walk, 'Walk '69', in which thousands of walkers converged on Wembley Stadium; but the total never even came close to the 45,000 who walked in Toronto alone. In 1969, Oxfam of Canada's income not only topped $1 million for the first time; over $1 million was raised just from walks.

Oxford, which had nursed Oxfam of Canada into existence, spending £60,000 and lending Henry Fletcher to tide it through its awkward early years, now saw its investment amply repaid. By the end of 1970, Canada had spent £1,200,000 on overseas aid, of which £600,000 had been channelled directly through Oxford. No-one was more pleased than Kirkley, who still strove after the vision he had shared with Jackson-Cole of an international network of Oxfams representing a non-sectarian and non-partisan constituency as the new character of worldwide voluntary endeavour.

Canada was the jewel in the crown of the extra-Oxford network, but the 1960s had seen a consolidation of links elsewhere. Oxfam Belgique had developed its own identity, and by 1970 contributed a useful annual £30,000 to the Oxfam programme. In 1965, instead of attempting to start an Oxfam Australia, Kirkley had been persuaded by David Scott, Chairman of Community Aid Abroad, to forge a mutually beneficial partnership and regard CAA as the Oxfam of down-under. CAA similarly promoted the development goal of 'helping people to help themselves'; like Oxfam UK, it also had a trading arm which imported and sold handicrafts in Australia; and its 160 voluntary groups carried out an energetic educational programme about the lives of neighbouring peoples in Asia. In 1971, without changing its name, CAA became a formal member of the Oxfam international fold. Oxfam America was also newly launched, and there were Oxfam fundraising groups in Italy, Denmark, Bahamas, Gibraltar, and Hong Kong.

Kirkley also made every effort to develop Oxfam's credibility in the international world, particularly among UN member agencies. Contacts were often made during emergencies - Congo, Nigeria, and East Pakistan/West Bengal - when an Oxfam-style voluntary agency had a freedom of movement denied many international bodies because of their intergovernmental character. In 1971, Kirkley was elected President of the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), and he used the opportunity to try and gain the whole voluntary sector a higher degree of recognition. His aim was always to promote humanitarian fellowship based on the principles that Oxfam stood for; and to demonstrate that this spirit was capable of generating a methodology of aid which made a
special contribution. Kirkley always claimed for voluntary assistance something far more elevated than marginal do-gooding which merely saved a few extra lives.

In a 1971 paper for the trustees Kirkley described Oxfam’s high international reputation as deriving from: ‘the quantity and quality of our aid programme, and the internationalism inherent in the humanitarian approach of Gilbert Murray and his co-founders’. The quantity of the aid programme rested on the organisation’s ability to raise funds, and to underpin fundraising with longer-term education; its quality depended on the careful grant-making and project-checking procedures developed over the years, and the linchpin role in that process played by the Oxfam Field Directorate. So high a value was placed by Kirkley, and by Oxford generally, on the quality this system guaranteed that it did not really occur to him that other Oxfams might see things differently.

Where Oxfam support groups overseas raised money for Oxford to spend, there could be no divergence of view on eligible projects and beneficiaries: they chose a project on the Oxfam list and, goodness knows, the choice was wide. Problems could only arise where there was a separate, autonomous Oxfam. These had been encouraged: in their domestic programmes, other Oxfams needed an identity suited to their own fundraising, cultural, and political climate. It was also assumed that they would make some grants directly to projects of their own choosing: central control was not intended. A network of autonomous bodies in an international federation – like Save the Children or UNICEF – had been Kirkley’s dream.

For a while, all went smoothly. Oxfam Belgique was content to pass its funds for overseas aid through the regular Oxfam machinery. CAA maintained a separate identity; so while it might participate in projects or share field services, what it chose to spend its money on was its own affair and need not affect Oxfam because it was not done in Oxfam’s name. But the rapid growth of Oxfam of Canada in the increasingly radical North American climate began to disturb the Oxfam peace.

In the late 1960s, Canada began to assert its own independence of view about project funding. During the Nigerian Civil War, for example, some funds were channelled through Oxford, but a far larger amount was spent quite separately. Canadian support for the Scandinavian churches’ airlift into beleaguered Biafra was extraordinary. In the mood of the moment, Henry Fletcher and the head of the Presbyterian Church in Canada bought a plane, set up an organisation called Canairelief to run it, and then bought three more. These four planes, manned by Canadian crews, carried 11,000 tons of relief goods into the Biafran enclave between January 1969 and the end of the war a year later.
This extraordinary $3-plus million effort, run by a volunteer board of Directors who neglected their own jobs and businesses to do so, was a profoundly formative experience. It was maintained entirely by public generosity. The loss of a Canairelief plane, which crashed on the approach to Uli airstrip killing its crew, was a moment of national tragedy.

By the turn of the decade, Oxfam of Canada was showing the same internal tensions about its political and educational role as Oxford was experiencing. The Canadian radicals, influenced not only by Pearson, by Vietnam, by Biafra, but by their dislike of Oxford’s paternalistic attitude towards its colonial offspring, made a much stronger showing than their counterparts in Oxford. The crucial policy document, agreed by the Board in mid-1969, read: ‘Oxfam must strive continuously to awaken the conscience of the public so as to develop a deep concern for the underprivileged peoples of the world. ... The organisation must be prepared to undertake activities which are sometimes of a political nature; the basis of development aid is one which calls for political decisions.’ However, as in the UK, this agreement on the principles governing the Canadian Oxfam’s way forward left open many questions about how to give them practical application. Far from dying down, the debate went on gathering steam.

Their new self-confidence encouraged Canada to flex their muscles in the public policy arena. In 1971, a submission was made to Canada’s Parliamentary Committee on External Affairs, attacking a government White Paper on Foreign Policy produced in response to the Pearson Report. This had failed to recommend the adoption of any of Pearson’s goals or recognise a need for change in Canada’s trading or public investment relationships with the developing world. From this point onwards, Oxfam Canada began to become much more vocal in its criticism of federal policies, forcefully adopting the type of activity Cyril James had called ‘the role of gadfly to sting the State to action’. But it also became a recipient of government resources for project aid: the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) was the first official donor body to channel funds through voluntary agencies.

Now under entirely Canadian management – Jack Shea took over from Henry Fletcher in 1971 – Oxfam Canada continued the process of redefining its own aims and policies. The process was ideologically driven and was a deliberate effort to distance Oxfam Canada from Oxfam UK. A signal that this might lead to trouble came when a grant was made to an institute run by FRELIMO in what was still the Portuguese colony of Mozambique. Oxford wanted discretion; it was anxious about the potential damage to its name and programme if it was known that ‘Oxfam’ support was associated with the armed southern
African liberation struggle. To Oxfam Canada, however, most of the point of making the grant was to express publicly its solidarity with the victims of Portuguese colonialism.

A full-scale showdown between the Oxfams finally erupted in early 1973. The immediate cause was a ‘White Paper on Political Affairs’ produced by a leading Oxfam Canada radical, Professor Meyer Brownstone. (Brownstone subsequently became the Oxfam Canada Chairman.) When this document arrived in Oxford it provoked instant alarm. Its analysis derided what it saw as Oxfam UK’s devotion to charitable rather than ‘developmental’ aid, allocated through paternalistic structures – Committees in Oxford – mostly to projects run by missionaries and other expatriates. These were overseen by a Field Directorate more concerned with technical questions than the political and social inequities which ought – in Brownstone’s view – to be their starting point. ‘Developmental’, in Canada’s interpretation, could only mean the pursuit of social justice by the undermining of existing power structures. Oxford would have not narrowed the definition so far, although much current thinking was similar. The difference between the two Oxfams lay in the prescription; and in the fact that Oxford had what by voluntary agency standards was quite a large programme to protect, and Canada did not.

Oxfam Canada was already committed to a domestic education and political action programme which drew attention to the inequities governing relationships between the rich and poor worlds. Now it wanted its overseas aid programme to reflect the same preoccupations; the inequities governing the relationships between the elites in Third World countries (and their Western capitalist allies), and the poverty-stricken majority. This meant concentrating its aid both in type and in place, and spending it through those indigenous groups – decidedly not expatriates or missionaries – working to ‘eliminate the material and political poverty of the oppressed’.

Decisions about project funding would be made by special committees set up in the countries in question ‘composed of nationals with the relevant skills and a strong commitment to social justice’. Oxfam Canada realised that this course of action might not endear it to the authorities in many countries. But it welcomed the idea of becoming known as a critic of right-wing governments. It singularly failed to recognise the full implications of what it was proposing for those whose cause it was intending to champion.

As far as Oxfam UK was concerned, public campaigns about projects which were trying to change the balance of social forces stacked against the poor were out of the question. Delicately, it was trying in many countries to shift its aid in this direction, often under the umbrella of the
liberal, missionary church. Shouting about projects which were already in dubious political odour was hardly likely to ease their already difficult passage. One result might be that 'Oxfam' — and who would recognise the difference between the Canadian Oxfam and any other? — would be thrown out of a country. Worse: in certain countries, Oxfam-funded projects and the people running them might find themselves in serious danger.

In early 1973, Oxfam Canada announced its intention of 'withdrawing' from Brazil, then under military rule, as a prelude to mounting a public attack on Canadian investment in Brazil and the policies of the regime itself. Oxford was appalled; this action would jeopardise the safety of just the kind of projects and indigenous personnel Oxfam Canada said it wanted to support. To Oxford, the value of the programme and the modest help Oxfam offered came above all other considerations; Canada, which did not have the same long-standing and intimate contact with a programme on the ground, saw mainly a bossy, centralist and neo-colonial Oxfam UK presuming to tell them what to do.

Eventually, the action campaign on Brazil was modified. The breach between the two agencies was patched up, but not resolved. The sense of divisiveness within the Oxfam family increased when the Quebequois arm of Oxfam Canada broke away to form a separate Oxfam Quebec. Oxfam Canada decentralised into regional groups within a federal structure, and suffered further deep divisions. Oxfam America, still in its infancy, was also beset by problems of every kind. In the absence of a common framework of policy governing activities overseas carried out in Oxfam's name, the viability of an international Oxfam network was in doubt.

Early in 1974, a working party was appointed by trustees in Oxford to consider the future of 'Oxfam International'. This attempt to put the growth of an international movement back on track was an effort to salvage Kirkley's dream. Although a joint Disasters Unit was set up as a result of its recommendations, little harmony greeted the rest of the working party's proposals. The best that could be achieved was agreement on the need for proper consultation and information-sharing; the opening up of the Field Directorate to candidates from other Oxfams; and common assent that alliance with like-minded agencies, such as Community Aid Abroad, was in future to be preferred to any extension of the Oxfam name.

The original Kirkley vision of a worldwide Oxfam with a shared overseas programme and field staff had to be put aside. The idea of non-confessional assistance to community projects in the vast reaches of the developing world was too loose a concept to be centrally controlled,
especially by that reconstructed colonialist, the British philanthropist. This does not mean that new Oxfams in other countries have not subsequently emerged, nor that special relationships within the Oxfam fold cannot survive; but in a world increasingly full of competing views of the rich world/poor world divide, and of how to tackle it, the Kirkley dream of Oxfam International with a unified structure and policy was doomed.

Kirkley himself, at this moment of disappointment, was on the verge of retirement. After 22 years at the head of Oxfam, and at the age of 63, he felt that the moment to hand over had come. The succession had been in the back of his mind since the appointment of Nic Stacey; now an external candidate was appointed: Brian Walker, 43, Manager of an engineering company in Northern Ireland. His selection exemplified the need felt for the modern management man with professional organisational skills who could weld the disparate energies of Oxfam into a more disciplined unit.

Leslie Kirkley's legacy to Oxfam was - Oxfam. In the early days, when he had sat every morning at the table in the office above 17 Broad Street, opening the mail with the volunteers and feeling bucked if the day's take was high, Jackson-Cole had provided the vision and much of the driving force. But Kirkley had absorbed that vision and given it enduring organisational expression.

In 1951, Oxfam had been a successful local charitable committee. Under Kirkley's stewardship, it had become one of the largest, most creative, most widely respected voluntary aid agencies in the world. It had helped to transform the business of philanthropy in Britain. Overseas, its Field Directorate, both as a means of accountability to donors and of shaping an effective programme, was the envy of many other organisations with a similar mandate.

HLK never claimed, as some have tried to do on his behalf and others would certainly have done in his place, the credit for Oxfam's extraordinary success. The climate of the early 1960s in which Oxfam surged to prominence was not a climate anyone in Kirkley's position could independently have created. There was a degree of luck in being there at the right time. Kirkley recognised this. But his canniness, and his particular style of management, in which he led not from in front but from the middle, enabling the energy of brighter stars to radiate, allowed Oxfam to catch the mood and harness its power to its own advance. And when the tide receded in the late 1960s, leaving a residue of Haslemere activists and Stacey acolytes who wanted to challenge the first principles of Oxfam's existence, it was Kirkley's performance which
kept the organisation steady: the tortoise caught up with, and overtook, the hares.

In his cardigan, saying 'Well, I don't know really' in answer to some impassioned exposition, windbagging the trustees around to consensus, eating his lunch unceremoniously in the Oxfam canteen, HLK did not always indicate his mettle. He certainly did not set out to impress, and as a public speaker did not impress; he did not 'director' his way about. But all those who had the chance to find out what he was made of had enormous respect for him, and for what he achieved. No-one has ever done, or could ever do, as much for the organisation he nurtured, or for the voluntary aid sector in which he earned it a leading role. In 1977, his continuing contribution to the British overseas aid and charitable world was recognised with a knighthood.

Sir Leslie died in 1989. There are people all over the world who remember him plodding his Oxfam path with feelings of gratitude and deep affection.
TO HAVE MORE AND TO BE MORE

The early 1970s were a time of great intellectual and spiritual energy concerning the theory and practice of development. Thinkers of heroic stature strode about the world stage unleashing a maelstrom of ideas, inclined to challenge every prevailing orthodoxy about underdevelopment and poverty in 'the South'. Their inspirations were many but they shared a common ingredient: rejection of the Western economic model as the one and only instrument of human advancement. In all directions of the compass, and under a number of different disciplinary and ideological banners, the search for alternatives was on.

One of the earliest icons to tumble was rapid growth of GNP, previously the patron saint of instant social transformation. Up to this time, few had questioned the application of Western standards to the process of 'development' decision making. Economic expansion, brought about by the march of Western science, technology, and industrial know-how into developing societies, had been expected to sweep more and more people into its embrace as it spawned jobs and services, upgrading the quality of life for all.

No such thing had occurred. What had tended to happen instead – with different emphases in different places – was that a small section of the population had become educated, modern, and outward-looking, their fortunes and life-styles integrated with the Western economic system. Meanwhile, the traditional economy, which still supported the overwhelming majority of people, had become downgraded, even as the numbers of those depending upon it swelled. This had not been the typical end-result of the industrial revolution in the West whichever ideological model you looked at. Something – and it was not just the unprecedented rate of population growth – was going drastically wrong.

In 1972, Robert McNamara made a landmark statement to the Board of Governors of the World Bank. He suggested that the governments of the developing countries should reorient their policies to attack directly the poverty of the poorest 40 per cent of their citizens, and that the world’s financial and investment machinery should reorient itself to
help them do so. Traditionally, economists and planners looked down on social expenditures - food, welfare, health, education - as 'consumption'; their business was with productive enterprise, with the build-up of technological and managerial capacity. This, according to McNamara, must change. Since the fruits of growth were not 'trickling down' to them, ways must be found of targeting the poor with investment policies that paid dividends in their lives. In other words, McNamara suggested, what was happening to the poor mattered; it was a sickness in the international body politic and needed a cure.

McNamara was only one of many contemporary figures to champion an attack on world poverty as the challenge for the 1970s. Academics such as Hans Singer, Gunnar Myrdal, Raoul Prebisch, Michael Lipton, and Richard Jolly characterised the new line of economic thought with slogans such as 'redistribution with growth' and 'meeting people's basic needs'. The international community countered with a series of global UN conferences, on the environment (Stockholm, 1972), population (Bucharest 1974), food (Rome 1974), women (Mexico 1975), human settlements (Vancouver 1976), water (Mar del Plata 1976), desertification (Nairobi, 1977). At all these fora the voluntary agencies made their presence felt, playing their 'gadfly, to sting the state to action' role.

The countries of the Third World were beginning to make their own voices heard more strongly. In the wake of the 1973 oil crisis, the possibility of using their control over certain commodities - of joint action to raise the price at which they sold raw materials, to match the price at which they were obliged to buy Western products - seemed for a while to open new bargaining horizons. The 'Group of 77' - the developing countries - demanded a 'New International Economic Order', a call endorsed at the UN in 1974. There was much sympathy in the development lobby towards the Third World's desire to escape the chains of economic dependency which decolonisation had failed to unshackle. Aid, in whatever form, was a poor substitute for a fair deal; and it could never do more than top up the national development budget.

By now, the major league players - government and international - had accepted that most of the aid-for-development plans and blueprints had so far made a negligible impact on the condition of the poor. This had important implications for the minor league, the voluntary agencies. Reaching poor families and engineering some small but lasting improvement in their lives was all that the philanthropists had ever aspired to do; they could not have afforded to invest in hydroelectric dams and groundnuts schemes even if they had wanted to. The scale of their activities might be modest, but they had developed special skills and expertise. Casting around for alternative models in which the benefits of a scheme managed to reach people at the bottom of the social
ladder instead of bunching higher up, the economists – with some prompting – began to notice that some of the projects funded by the charities met this criterion rather well.

The most progressive of the voluntary agencies, of which Oxfam was but one, had developed a methodology of aid which made its own special contribution. The programmes they supported did not simply succour the destitute; neither were they mini carbon copies of ‘aid’ as defined by government, but were qualitatively different. They were certainly smaller, even lilliputian by government and international standards. The miniature size of their operations both in population coverage and geographical spread was, however, the source of their most striking advantage.

The philanthropists tended to be better at reaching the poor. This was not because of their brilliant grasp of economics and sociology, but because the poor were their deliberate target. In keeping faith with their donors to ensure that ‘the money really gets there’, they distributed their resources as close to the poor as they could reach. The projects they supported focused on the specific needs of a specific group of people, not on the overall needs of a large administrative area. This meant that they were by definition designed – if sometimes amateurishly – to fit a particular micro-environment. The sensitivity of most voluntary agency projects to the human condition – what people thought, how they behaved, whether they were motivated, what they themselves could contribute – was beyond that of large impersonal government programmes. The latter’s planning and management procedures rarely reached closer to their poorer clientele than a provincial urban centre; their agents in the form of government functionaries were often regarded with mistrust by local people, whom they in turn treated with disdain.

It took many years for the special characteristics of voluntary agency programmes to be fully appreciated by the ‘experts’; indeed, the mutual admiration of official and voluntary aid protagonists has always remained ambivalent. But the role of informal structures and ‘barefoot’ technicians began to gain widespread recognition, as did the ‘micro projects’ of the voluntary agencies now identified as a special breed. In Britain, a dialogue began between the agencies and the Overseas Development Administration about whether the government should follow the Canadian and Scandinavian example in channelling some official aid through the charities.

Oxfam first submitted a proposal to the Select Committee on Overseas Development for a suitable framework for co-operation in mid-1973. In 1975, Judith Hart, Minister of Overseas Development, introduced a scheme whereby £500,000 a year from the ODA was offered for the co-funding of approved voluntary agency projects. Oxfam, now
under the leadership of Brian Walker, played an important role in helping to bring this partnership to fruition. Walker also took a lead among non-governmental aid organisations in Europe in promoting similar arrangements with the EEC’s assistance programme.

While the official development establishment pursued ‘basic needs’ and other alternative strategies, the agencies’ own quest was propelled forward from other directions.

One thinker whose ideas were of seminal importance was E.F. Schumacher. In the mid-1960s, Schumacher set up the Intermediate Technology Development Group, the first organisation from North or South to seek out and build upon existing technological capacity within traditional societies instead of behaving as if they were pieces of pre-Iron Age paper on which modernisation and mechanisation must be written. His treatise *Small is Beautiful: A study of economics as if people mattered* was published in 1973. Its criticism of the assumption of power by large impersonal institutions in extensive areas of people’s lives so resonated with audiences around the world that Schumacher rapidly developed a worldwide following.

In the development context, the concept of ‘appropriate technology’ – (‘intermediate’ had connotations of second-class unwelcome in the Third World) – contained a self-evident truth of blinding simplicity: the tools of development, whether artefacts or social arrangements for deploying them, must be reconciled with the needs and the capacities of the people they were meant to serve. This required that those trying to introduce them should acquaint themselves properly not only with the real parameters of a given problem, but also with the locals’ usual methods of dealing with it. Control over technology was a factor in the distribution of power, and people’s interests were likely to be best served when their own hands were on the levers.

Although Schumacher attacked the spiritual emptiness of the modern behemoth of progress, his ideas were essentially secular. The voluntary agencies, rooted in Christian and humanist persuasion, were as strongly influenced by currents of thinking emanating from the churches. One of the most pervasive moral influences in Oxfam had been the ideals of pacifism and consensual fellowship espoused by the Quakers. In the 1970s, its thinking – in common with many other agencies – began to be affected by the radical energies in the Catholic Church unleashed by Vatican II. Like the Gandhians who articulated an alternative Indian vision, and Nyerere’s philosophy of *ujamaa*, the voice of those demanding the ‘preferential option for the poor’ came authentically from the Third World, this time from Latin America.
This was an urgent voice and a revolutionary voice, a voice which described the Christian duty to ‘love one another’ as inseparable from active rejection of the socio-economic injustice deeply ingrained in Latin American society. Bestowing crumbs of charity upon the poor was not enough, especially now that the existing pattern of development could be seen to be entrenching, not diminishing, the gulf of wealth discrepancy. No longer was it possible to pretend that under-development was merely retarded growth and that everyone would catch up in due course. Underdevelopment and poverty were structural phenomena; the poverty of many was a natural corollary of the social, economic, and political system controlled by a few.

In Latin America, those forces, internal and external, which designed and upheld these structures were strengthening their grip. The rise of socialist movements throughout Latin America following the 1959 Cuban revolution had led to rapid polarisation within societies. Liberal and leftist tendencies received a setback when the Brazilian government was militarised in 1964; thereafter many countries followed suit, stamping out democratic expression. The darkest day for the South American reformist movement dawned when, in Chile in September 1973, Salvador Allende’s government was violently overthrown by General Augusto Pinochet. The flight of hundreds of thousands of refugees, not only from Chile but from other Latin American dictatorships, was to have an important effect on awareness in North America and Europe about the agonies suffered in many countries during the 1970s and 1980s.

The repressive actions accompanying military rule made a profound impact on the Latin American church, and on the attitude of many originally conservative bishops towards the reformist movement. An important expression of their position came with the rejection of rich world ‘developmentalism’ at an international meeting of Roman Catholic bishops held in Medellin, Colombia, in 1968. From this point onwards a new school of doctrinal debate developed a ‘theology of liberation’, and many priests strove to realise its radical precepts in partnership with their poorer congregations. The gospel was henceforward to be propounded as an instrument of self-realisation; those marginalised by the forces of modernisation would discover their worth as human beings, and become the subjects of their own version of development instead of the victims of someone else’s. In the new definition of pastoral function and duty, the foot soldiers of the Latin American church found a convergence of view with partners in Europe and North America. The Oxfams and many other funding agencies became their keen supporters.

Despite its Marxist rhetoric, liberation theology did not envisage a
direct and violent challenge to the status quo so much as an erosion of the mechanisms whereby the status quo was protected and perpetuated. The most important of these was the colonisation of the human spirit by which the poor were bound into acceptance of a miserable existence and abject dependency. The word ‘education’ could not be used to describe the enlightenment they needed, because the existing educational system was part of the philosophical and institutional framework enforcing their oppression. For this reason Ivan Illich, an influential ‘alternatives’ prophet based in Mexico, went so far as to advocate – in Deschooling Society (1970) – the removal of schools altogether. ‘The mere existence of school,’ he wrote, ‘discourages and disables the poor from taking control of their own learning.’

Illich was prolific in his condemnation of institutionalised social progress. Like Schumacher, he developed a following among the disciples of development; on visits to Britain, many Oxfamers were to be found in his audiences, although he consistently excoriated the humanitarians for being wide-eyed and gullible extensions of the system causing all the damage. For this he received their adulatory applause. His combination of arch-conservatism and subversive radicalism embodied the schizophrenic attitude towards philanthropic aid that tangled many debates in Oxfam at that time, acting as both stimulus and depressant. To help was to interfere, sometimes with unforeseen and negative consequences. But if even the humanitarian establishment contained more potential for social damage than for repair, what hope on earth was there?

On the positive side, Illich helped put the emphasis back on people as the rightful subjects, not the objects, of their fate. All the new prophets agreed that development could not, and should not, be done to people or for them; the campesino (peasant farmer) and the slum dweller must carve their own path out of their predicament. But for this to happen, they would first have to abandon their passive and fatalistic outlook. A new type of learning was needed which would spark an awakening within the abject mind. This was why so much importance was attached to the concept of ‘conscientisation’.

Although many efforts were made – not least in Oxfam – to translate the Portuguese conscientizacão more comfortably into English, no other word really worked. Invented in the early 1960s by Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator, and adopted into liberation theology, the concept embraced intellectual and spiritual nourishment as in learning, awakening, becoming motivated; and practical action such as organisation for some kind of project. Freire described the poor as submerged in a ‘culture of silence’. Learning to read and write – Freire mounted literacy campaigns in his native north-east Brazil before being
Father Godest, a Breton priest, whose simple but effective groundwater management technology transformed the lives of the villagers of Otterthotti, in Mysore, India.

Living and working truly at village level: Adrian Marshall, an agricultural ‘volunteer’ in Oxfam’s first operational development enterprise, the Gramdam Action Programme in Bihar.
President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania at Oxfam House, 1975, with Brian Walker (Director) left, and Michael Rowntree (Chairman). 'If we state that some new Jerusalem is where we are going, our friends should not be disappointed if they find we are still in the desert.'

In 1973, Oxfam embarked on an unusual partnership with Tanzanian local authorities to boost development in the ujamaa village: a carpentry workshop in Chunya for making furniture out of mninga wood.
1971: refugees in India from what was then East Pakistan, soon to become Bangladesh. Oxfam’s largest-ever relief programme, costing £150,000 a month.

Lester Pearson, left, Prime Minister of Canada, steps out with Henry Fletcher in Oxfam of Canada’s first national event: ‘Miles for Millions’ in 1967.

Nicolas Stacey kisses Rita Tushingham: an Oxfam ‘Fun Run’ in 1970. The extrovert Deputy Director had great publicist talents, but his real ambition was frustrated.
51 The Oxfam Shop, high-class jumble sale variety. In the 1960s, many volunteer groups ran temporary shops in end-of-lease premises, raising a few hundred pounds a year.

52 In the 1970s, Oxfam modernised its shops operation, investing in premises, marketing, and volunteer training. Shop income topped £1 million in 1973 and never looked back.
53 ‘Helping by Selling’ 1970: in Ahmedabad, 75 women who would otherwise have been destitute and unemployed made mirror-work wall-hangings, and sold them to Oxfam.

54 Combining fundraising with fun. Youngsters taking part in a 1972 event to ‘Find the Monuments’, map read with Maggie Black.

55 The launch of ‘Bridge’ in 1976 brought Third World handicrafts into the shops via a fair-trading policy that invested profits back into producers instead of donating them to Oxfam.
1977: with Archbishop Helder Camara in Brazil. Left to right, Brian Walker (Director), Michael Harris (Overseas Director), Lesley Roberts (Field Director, Caribbean).

 Irma (Sister) Dulce, Brazil’s Mother Teresa, who ministered tirelessly to the sick and destitute of the city of Salvador. Oxfam began helping her in 1969.
58 Agricultural trainees in Guatemala. Oxfam set up an office in Guatemala in 1975; it was closely involved with an early ‘integrated development’ programme based in Chimaltenango.

59 Illiterate Indian villagers in the remote highlands of Ecuador tune into ‘classes’ on animal husbandry, hygiene, and child care.

BRAC in Bangladesh, set up after the liberation of 1971 and supported by Oxfam. Cheap materials, low-cost technology, and a focus on women gave BRAC staying power.

1973: Oxfam tried to draw attention in Britain to drought in India and raise funds for an imaginative, developmentally conscious, programme. Above, a vigil on the steps of St. Martin-in-the-Fields; left, Judith Hart MP doles out relief rations – bowls of porridge.
jailed and subsequently exiled in 1964 – must not only equip people to wield a pen; more significantly, it must equip them with the energy and creativity to be able to reflect upon their own environment as a step to changing it.

Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was published in Britain in 1972. Like Ivan Illich's outrageous propositions, Freire's ideas were very difficult to follow, but this did not make them any less popular. Their impact on the more radical minds in Oxfam was profound, particularly since this quest for alternatives invited not only the poor, but everyone, to challenge the values inherent in their own *status quo*. Among many senior Oxfam staff and trustees, this latest form of preoccupation with intellectual, left-wing precepts within the ranks was greeted with misgiving. This new debate had all the hallmarks of subversion; it was not only about an alternative vision of the Third World, but of society as a whole and the role and relationships of every human being within it.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, as this whirlwind of ideas gathered force, Oxfam had begun to build up its programme in the Americas.

The Oxfam programme in the Western Hemisphere began in the mid-1950s in the traditional way: help for victims of a hurricane (St. Lucia), and a famine (Haiti). These emergency grants were given via the Methodists and the Salvation Army, and once these contacts had been made there was a gradual increase in requests for assistance. It took time, however, for a programme to develop. Compared to Asia and Africa there were few British ties with a part of the world whose conquest by sword and cross had been accomplished by Spaniards and Portuguese. The Americas were also more developed than most ex-British colonies, and wealthier.

The Freedom from Hunger Campaign opened up a range of new projects to Oxfam funds. One of the largest of these was the Bolivian venture for improving traditional Indian crops, that caused so much vexation to the Charity Commissioners. In 1964, great Oxfam excitement was generated by a big-spending Jimmy Betts tour of British Guiana in which his intention was to set up a programme similar to that in Lesotho; it languished for want of a locally-based Field Director. In 1965, Oxfam began to support village credit co-operatives in north-east Brazil for small farmers normally fleeced by local merchants. A range of health, nutrition, and other projects followed in other countries of the region, many funded through Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and missionary bodies.

By 1966, Oxfam had become enthused by radio schools in Ecuador
and Peru. These ‘schools’ enabled illiterate Indian villagers living in inaccessible mountain areas to tune in to classes in agriculture, animal husbandry, hygiene, and child care. One request read as follows: ‘The Prelature of Yauyos plans to open 87 new radiophonic schools. They asked us to transmit to Oxfam their ardent wish and petition to continue to help them with their generosity. It means progress for their simple and good population.’ The Vicar General of Yauyos resolutely visited these far-flung communities on muleback, recording his long rides in the mountains in a diary he sent to Oxfam House. This was still the old world of calm, sometimes stoic, beneficence; not yet the confusing one of deschooling and conscientisation.

Like Asia and Africa, Latin America had its saints. One of these was Irma (Sister) Dulce, a nun who dedicated her life to the poor in the city of Salvador, Bahia, on Brazil’s east coast. Her first ministry was to a group of derelicts sheltering under a bridge. When their space was condemned as an eyesore she found a small, empty, dilapidated house, invited an astonished passer-by to break in, and took it over. This was the start of her ‘Albergue’, or refuge. Within a few years she was also running a shelter for destitute migrants from the countryside, an orphanage and a hospital, somehow managing to persuade local benefactors to stump up £30,000 a year.

Irma Dulce came to Oxfam’s notice in 1967, and a grant of £10,000 was made for a new hospital building. In 1969, Oxfam’s first Field Director in the Americas, Peter Oakley, visited Bahia and was deeply impressed by Sister Dulce’s work. ‘She overcrowds her wards with the sick and begs everyone who will listen to help her do more for the only free hospital in the State. There are 14 doctors and surgeons working for her voluntarily, including Professors from the State University. The new hospital is now built and ready for use ... all Irma Dulce needs is equipment.’ £4,000 was duly sent, and the building opened that year. Her work continued to be admired and supported by Oxfam through the early 1980s.

By 1970 the Americas were absorbing £276,000 a year, 13 per cent of Oxfam’s total aid overseas. The comparative scale of programmes in different regions was largely a product of history. By far the largest amounts were spent in the Indian sub-continent (one-fifth) and in Africa (nearly half) where Field Directors had been first on the scene. But by now, the rate of programme growth in South America was among the fastest. As Field Offices opened up – Brazil 1969, Peru 1970, Mexico 1971 – the pattern was set for change. By 1974, the proportion of Oxfam aid going to Central and South America and the Caribbean was 22 per cent.

North-east Brazil, the poorest and most climatically vulnerable swathe in the hemisphere, was selected as the location for the first Field
Director. In 1969, Peter Oakley – young, confident, energetic – took on the role of Oxfam itinerant in a vast parish which included problems as varied as threatened Indian tribes in the Amazonian rain forests, drought in marginal rural lands, peasant land dispossession, the proliferation of slums and shanties in the cities, child abandonment, prostitution, as well as poverty’s basics: low income, low skills, illiteracy, hunger, and ill-health. It was no coincidence that this was the crucible of radical thinking on the continent. The Archbishop of Recife was Dom Helder Camara, a leading voice for the progressive church, later to become known worldwide for his championship of liberation theology; Recife was also Paulo Freire’s home town and thus conscientisation capital.

Like Field Directors in other parts of the world before him, Oakley at first had great difficulty in identifying indigenous agencies with whom to work. This was mainly because, in the prevailing climate of repression, the church was the only institution able to defend the interests of the down-trodden. Oakley’s difficulties were not made any easier by the fact that Oxfam was almost entirely unknown in Brazil. Some of those who did get to hear that there was a new source of funds in town had a tendency to arrive on his doorstep talking in vague and ethereal terms; concrete projects rarely materialised. Oakley therefore depended heavily on priests and missionaries to build up the programme, despite a wish to do otherwise. Both because of their courage in the face of threats to their activities, and because of their commitment, he deeply admired their work: ‘In many areas the missionaries constitute the only hope that many people have.’

One promising development was the creation of an entirely Brazilian voluntary agency, the Federation of Organisations for Social and Educational Assistance, or FASE. The brainchild of a priest working for CRS, this was an attempt to set up a Brazilian equivalent to run its own projects and raise its own funds from church and non-governmental sources. In 1970, FASE separated from CRS, and became a secular organisation. Two of its offices were in the north-east, in Recife and Belém.

FASE had its fair share of early difficulties and relations with Oxfam were sometimes strained. But as Oakley constantly underlined to the Latin American Committee back in Oxford, FASE was one of the only private Brazilian organisations working in community development: ‘In FASE, Brazilians are helping Brazilians.’ Therefore this was a special kind of partner, and if its behaviour did not always conform to Anglo-Saxon attitudes about project formulation or accountability, Oxfam must be understanding. How to encourage the evolution of local agencies by supporting their projects without being directive or culturally judgemental, and yet adhere to procedures devised in Oxford, posed constant dilemmas to the Field Directorate.
FASE's modus operandi was to appoint teams of 'tecnicos': agriculturalists, social workers, hygienists, teachers, to act as advisers and community organisers in the barrios - slums - and in rural parishes. By 1972, FASE's full complement of Brazilian staff was 133. Oxfam supported health activities, housing improvements, work with leprosy patients, village cooperatives, and small-scale irrigation schemes for marginal lands; it also paid salaries and costs of one group of tecnicos, and helped pay for a national research and development team. Thus, Oxfam not only aided FASE projects, but helped support its core establishment.

During the early 1970s, Church and the military-dominated State in Brazil seemed set on a collision course. Radical priests were being arrested and detained. 'Base communities' set up by the liberationist clergy represented the only popular democratic structures of any kind and this progressive Christian movement was constantly under pressure. Oakley, while hopeful of its potential for the poor, alerted Oxfam to the implications. 'The essence of the clash is the word "concientizar". A lot of priests preach the need to wake the people up from their dormant acceptance of their miserable lives, to point out to them the injustices of Brazilian society and in many cases to urge them to 'right the wrong'. All of this is a slap in the face for the stern, disciplinarian right-wing government which is openly suspicious of grassroots community movements.'

FASE, and other recipients of Oxfam grants such as MOC (the Movement for Community Organisation) in Feira de Santana, Bahia, were right in the thick of things. In 1972, several FASE-Rio personnel were arrested. Oakley wrote: 'This is an indication of the authorities' determination to control any organisation melodramatically called "subversive".' Already, some projects supported by Oxfam had aroused the authorities' suspicions. This was a new ingredient in the careful balance of forces governing Oxfam aid: however obviously humanitarian a grant to basic literacy or slum improvement might be in the eyes of British donors or charitable law, their intent might be quite differently interpreted by those in power in countries at the receiving end. In some parts of the world, development was becoming a very sticky business. And, since in such places much project work was labelled 'subversive', it became extremely difficult to publicise it in Britain or elsewhere for fear of placing in jeopardy both the work and the safety of those involved.

In mid-1972, another Portuguese-speaking young British dynamo, Bill Yates, took over the north-east Brazilian beat. Yates had spent his early childhood in Brazil, worked in marketing, and been an energetic
Pledged Gift collector for Oxfam. This was his first appointment in an organisation to which he was to make a very important contribution, not only in Brazil.

He joined at an exciting time. Freire fever was invading Oxfam House, and he was the man posted to the place whence the infection was blowing. It fell to Yates to shift Oxfam's Brazil programme into a wholehearted commitment to conscientisation and alignment with – he called it 'caminhar junto', 'walking with' – those organisations trying to put the concept into practice. He also had the task of persuading the Oxfam powers and the Oxfam constituency back home that this pursuit of the unpronounceable and incomprehensible was not just an addiction to intellectual hot air but the adoption of a sound and effective strategy on behalf of the poor.

Yates' own 'conscientisation' took place against the backcloth of continuing repression and courageous Christian activity. Every few months news came that a priest or worker involved in an Oxfam-supported project had been detained. Oxfam itself was suspect and the need for discretion complicated a process of communication with Oxford already befogged by the growing lexicon of -isms. One of Yates' most testing moments came when, early in 1973, Oxfam of Canada announced its intention to campaign against Brazilian development policy and its backing by Canadian business interests. Yates went to Quebec to explain that, if an organisation called Oxfam campaigned publicly in this fashion, the safety of some of Oxfam's partners and those they were helping would be threatened. His eloquence was persuasive.

Yates' condemnation of 'assistencialism' – a misplaced notion of doing good while actually shoring up the forces oppressing the poor – echoed certain other Oxfam voices around the world. Alan Leather described the violent tactics of Bihari landholders against a powerless labouring class in much the same terms. The importance of this analytical starting point was that it gave an entirely new purpose and meaning to the concept of community development.

In the past, a community development project – such as Father Godest's catchment dams in Otterthotti or Daudi Ricardo's wells in Tanzania – had envisaged the community coming together to construct or grow something which would augment their collective and individual fortunes. The management of this activity and the technical know-how were provided by the project-holder, as were money and materials. At the end of the activity, there would be a product: a dam, a well, a bund, a field of waving corn. After the next harvest, the value of this could be counted, in bushels of extra crop, in cash value, in improved health and nutritional standards. Material advance was the natural measurement of success.
'Small is beautiful' dethroned the miracle of glittering Western technology from its previously hallowed role: technology must be affordable and manageable by the community. Conscientisation – as interpreted by Oxfam – did the same for project design, organisation and management. To be effective and long-lasting, development must emanate not from outside the community, but from the beneficiaries’ own articulation of their needs, by activities they themselves had planned and were committed to carrying out. The role of outsiders in this scenario was to try and help the community develop the capacity to do this, and lend support appropriately, preferably from an increasing distance as the community’s capacity to handle its own development expanded.

The ultimate goal here was to precipitate a process; whether an extra crop of waving corn was harvested this year or next was seen as a by-product – an essential by-product nonetheless and not the key measure of ‘success’. Measuring the process was less a matter of counting physical outcomes than monitoring the strength of community groups and how well they were led and organised. As Yates was fond of repeating, it mattered not what people did – they might build a chapel, a jail, even a football pitch if this was what they wanted. (He actually submitted a request on behalf of a mountain-top village that wanted to blast away part of its perch to build a football pitch, rendering his counterpart in Oxfam House temporarily speechless.) What mattered was the self-confidence, and the sense of fellowship, and the know-how a group garnered in the process of doing.

This would not occur if the group saw themselves as employees on a venture dreamed up by someone else. If someone else drilled the borehole, built the latrine, constructed the community centre, there was no sense of community ownership or responsibility; if it leaked or broke down, no-one bothered. So if they wanted to build a cinema, let them build it. Once they had made a start, their sense of achievement would lead them on -perhaps to start a loan fund, a community clinic, a co-op, or something else more solidly within the usual Oxfam frame of reference. Of course this would all take time; but gradually a new, mutually supportive society would emerge to build a better and a fairer world. This was the dream, and it was a potent and an optimistic dream.

Yates argued the case for the dream from a profound and passionate conviction which deepened as his experience of north-eastern Brazil lengthened. Visiting the MOC (Movement for Community Organisation) programme in Feira, in 1973, he described how the community associations were developing their muscle and taking initiatives. But witnessing the process could be painful. ‘The meetings take an hour to get started; someone with important information does not turn up; the subject under discussion gets lost; the meeting goes on for hours. But
decisions are taken, people are appointed to do things, and a little progress is made each time.' He concluded: 'Personally I have no doubt that this kind of activity – by FASE, MOC, and others – is the most important development work we are supporting.' Some members of the Latin American Committee, not to mention Oxfam's own senior establishment, found such statements hard to swallow.

Not all Oxfam's partners in Latin America maintained the same implicit faith that this process would lead to concrete results. One Bolivian organisation set up in 1971 by Jesuit priests, the Centre for the Study and Promotion of the Campesino (CIPRA), began with conscientisation, training peasant leaders to become 'active agents of social and economic transformation': the project proposal read like a text from the gospel according to Paulo Freire. Within a few years came the discovery: 'Conscientisation is not enough.' Soon, CIPRA was also offering technical assistance, and encouraging the campesinos to form cooperatives to produce and market their most important crop, potatoes. Awareness-building had been a first step along the road, but was not able to propel the campesino and his family the entire distance.

Within Oxfam, an important advocate for the incorporation of conscientisation into a wider economic strategy was the newly appointed Development Secretary, Adrian Moyes. Moyes joined the Overseas Aid Division in 1972 to try and develop a handful of special projects in which Oxfam aid would be concentrated geographically. This was an attempt to overcome the random effects of supporting whatever projects happened to be submitted from a country or area provided they met Oxfam criteria. This had led to a scattergun programme with few internal links or connections, often very widely dispersed. The notion of 'concentrated aid' quickly evolved. The new fashion in development thinking was 'integrated development': projects whose economic benefits would dovetail with social improvements in an area of geographical concentration.

The theory behind 'integration' was that investments in different activities – carpentry workshops, tinsmithing, poultry-raising, beekeeping – would reinforce each other; the overall economic benefits would enable communities to enhance social services such as schooling, health care, or water supplies. This would multiply the impact of aid so that small amounts of money made larger differences. Moyes, who had a worldwide remit and was a great absorber and disseminator of ideas, was quick to take on board conscientisation (he insisted on calling it 'alertment', for which he won few converts). Conscientisation, in his view, was another force for multiplication; but via an analysis stressing attitudinal transformation and the growth of organisational capacity rather than one stressing technological or economic change.
One of the places Moyes selected for an ‘integrated project’ was north-east Brazil, under the auspices of FASE. Yates and Moyes and the FASE office in Belém took some time to develop a project that the Latin America Committee would support. The area they picked was a flat, riverine peninsula called Curucambaba at the junction of the Rio Tocantins with the mighty Amazon. FASE’s preparatory team drew up a plan for a pepper cultivation scheme whose proceeds would fund what the local people really wanted: health care. The Committee agreed with the idea in principle but tore several large holes in the plan’s economics, particularly in its dependence on pepper. Support for a team of técnicos was agreed, but on a temporary basis on condition that more information be collected.

The development musketeers Yates and Moyes went back to FASE, back to the team in Curucambaba, back to their dug-out canoes on the lower Tocantins, back to the drawing board and the budgetary plan. In January 1976, Yates made a concerted effort to persuade his mentors back in Oxford not just to back the team for another 12 months but to make a forward commitment for at least two years. In the period since the scheme had first been under discussion, FASE’s, his own, and Moyes’ ideas about how to go about the business of aid had undergone considerable change. But the Committee’s absorption of the new thinking was not yet complete.

Yates submitted that grants to FASE and similar teams should not be made as if to finite projects with time-bound objectives, but as allocations to a budget period of an ongoing process. The idea of an ‘integrated programme’ had evolved. It was no longer a pre-planned programme with interlocking parts, but a framework within which linked projects could emerge as the local people wanted and planned them.

In response to the Committee’s queries on the economics of black pepper production, Yates dutifully produced an essay on the local costs and prices of pepper trees and peppercorns, but added: ‘The Committee appears to interpret the programme very much in economic and materialist terms – produce more crops for stable markets.’ This sounded depressingly like the strategy for Brazil’s ‘economic miracle’, everyone’s least favourite model of how to help the poor. He went on: ‘FASE’s analysis does not allow the problem to be reduced simply to a need for economic growth. The objectives are social and structural.’ The team’s main focus was on educação de base, ‘popular education’, which would gradually extend the programme’s outreach and reinforce its social and economic impact. He concluded: ‘Leaving crystal balls aside, FASE’s presence in the region can only be seen as indefinite.’

Yates’ words proved prophetic; and the Committee’s misgivings
To have more and to be more

equally justified. 'Integrated development' and the lower Tocantins never seemed to gel; the idealised image of harmonious group dynamics around carefully dovetailed activities remained elusive. It turned out that, with or without educacao de base, such activities were not what the farmers wanted. However, they were quite keen on pepper trees. By 1978, 23,000 pepper trees had been planted by the farmers of one community, their loans had all been repaid and they were doing nicely. By the old numbers yardstick, something was going well. But as a model of 'integrated development' inspired by a conscientisation process, the project was a flop. Conscientisation could not substitute for proper planning, nor could economic factors outside the project's control – such as the fluctuating market price of pepper – be ignored.

In the late 1970s, the emphasis of FASE's Tocantins team changed. In the past few years, powerful commercial interests had been enclosing land in the north-east for cattle ranching. Effects on the campesinos were disastrous. They were thrown off land they owned but to which they held no written title and treated as if their existence was merely an impediment to the march of progress. To defend their rights, the Rural Syndicates or unions – originally a tool of landowner control – were transformed and revitalised into representative bodies. Membership grew rapidly as land seizures and disputes increased. A lawyer joined the Tocantins team to hold courses on tenure and help sharecroppers obtain documented title to land rightfully theirs but often taken from them by practices of dubious legality.

Elsewhere in the north-east, FASE teams similarly began to focus less on educacao de base as a stimulus to economic improvement, promoting it instead in the Rural Syndicates as a means of helping farmers defend their rights and livelihoods. By 1980, support to FASE's teams in Tocantins, Maranhao, Garanhuns, and Recife, and helping FASE itself become more financially self-sufficient, was one of Oxfam's largest commitments in the hemisphere, amounting to $200,000 a year.

By the early 1980s, many of the social education programmes supported by Oxfam in Brazil had similarly begun to concentrate on human rights and legal aid. In Salvador, Bahia, Oxfam supported the Centre of Study and Social Action (CEAS) set up by Jesuits 'to develop and adapt Christian social doctrine to respond to the reality of north-east Brazil'. CEAS worked with factory workers and plantation labourers on collective bargaining and labour legislation; it also mounted a strong campaign through the church to highlight the violent expulsions of campesinos from their land. In Aratuba, Ceara, Oxfam had long supported the highly respected programme of educacao de base run by Father Moacir Leite, which up to 1979 concentrated on loans and technical assistance. Here too, the emphasis abruptly changed when the
The age of alternatives: the 1970s

seizure of their lands became the campesinos' chief concern. Without land, there was nothing to improve. So all effort was redirected into strengthening Rural Syndicates and registering land titles.

During the 1970s, Oxfam's programme in Brazil had gone through a major evolution, exemplifying trends and currents of thought some of which were specific to the Brazilian environment, many of which were mirrored elsewhere. This evolution from support to missionary projects of the traditional kind, into support for a multifaceted development process based on educational enlightenment, was a product of the passionate convictions of the times; and of the special contribution made to Oxfam by having people in the field who were highly responsive to local problems and opportunities.

In Oxford meanwhile, Freire fever had given rise to another process of critical awareness. The questions it raised back home not only concerned the need for an alternative model for development assistance; certain voices in the organisation were asking whether Oxfam needed an alternative model for itself.

On 1 August 1972, Michael Harris took over from Ken Bennett as Director of Oxfam's Overseas Aid.

Harris was a Quaker who detested conflict and injustice, a person of deep convictions which he carefully hid behind an idiosyncratic style modelled somewhere between George Bernard Shaw and Bertie Wooster. During the second World War Harris had been with the Friends' Ambulance Unit in China and the Far East, an experience he shared with Bernard Llewellyn and Ken Bennett, and which gave a unique grounding in the complexities of relief and welfare work in distant and unfamiliar environments. He then joined the Colonial Service. After some 16 years in Africa he came to Oxfam in 1964, and in 1967 went out to Lesotho as Field Director for Southern Africa. In 1969, he returned to become Bennett's deputy.

His long experience with Oxfam and his instinctive flexibility were useful attributes at the head of the Overseas Division at a time of ferment. Harris always listened to his Field Directors, took great pride in them and defended their judgement through thick and thin. He therefore encouraged a climate in which innovative ideas and action flourished; and where civil conflict or human rights violations caused terrible pain on the ground – as in Central America and South Africa – Harris was never one to protect Oxfam at the expense of its mandate to relieve human suffering. Although at the start of his tenure, the Field Directorate was uniquely male and almost entirely British (the first woman Field Director, Gaby Taylor in Zaire, was not appointed until
1977), this gradually changed during the 12 years of Harris' overlordship of the Oxfam aid programme.

As always in Oxfam, activity in the Indian sub-continent – the new interest in Latin America notwithstanding – was at the frontier of policy evolution. The fiery creation of Bangladesh in January 1972 was greeted by Oxfam with the largest aid package in its history: £1 million for water transport, re-housing, and agricultural rehabilitation, to which the other members of the Oxfam family – Canada, USA, Belgium, Australia – gave a generous share. In the heady aftermath of independence, with the charismatic figure of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman struggling to repair a birthright of upheaval and devastation, there was enormous pressure to spend too much too quickly. Oxfam made mistakes. But it backed one venture which was to write a chapter in community development as important in its own context as anything elsewhere in the world.

BRAC began life as the Bangladesh ‘Rehabilitation Assistance’ Committee, later changing its name to ‘Rural Advancement’. F.H. Abed, its founder, had worked as an accountant in Dacca, becoming involved in relief following the 1970 cyclone. He and 11 colleagues picked Sulla, a remote area of their native Sylhet, for a rehabilitation programme. One-fifth of Sylhet’s four and a half million people had fled to India; many returned to find their villages in ruins and no boats, fishing nets, or housing materials with which to restart their lives. The BRAC team ran a reconstruction programme which avoided the trap of dependency with cheap materials, simple technology, and affordable loans. Unlike some other ventures BRAC had staying power; its approach to reconstruction provided a base for a solid development programme, and Oxfam’s initial grant of £161,000, including £69,000 from Oxfam Canada, was a more than worthwhile investment.

Like FASE, all of BRAC’s staff were nationals. The team in Sulla promoted fishing and agricultural co-ops so as to generate income for health care, family planning, women’s groups, and literacy: in other words, ‘integrated development’. The second phase of the project, which began in 1973, had as its objectives: ‘to create and develop the human and institutional infrastructure in the project area to make development activity self-generating and self-sustaining. It is hoped that ... a long-term change in attitudes will be achieved.’ Here were ideas echoing those from halfway round the world.

And in Sylhet, too, a programme could run foul of the authorities for threatening ‘subversion’. BRAC and Oxfam were forced to withdraw from a new project area, Rowmari, in 1974. A local landowner found their activities undesirable because they bypassed the power structure he dominated and emphasised women and children over men. So he harassed the field workers and laid false charges against them until they
went away. But BRAC survived and prospered, becoming a well-known and much copied force for village-level progress throughout the country. Its success helped to establish local voluntary agencies as an important vehicle for Bangladeshi development, attracting funds from UNICEF, CIDA, and other bilateral agencies.

Another type of crisis, the Indian problem of drought, pushed Field Director John Staley several leagues along his own path of conscientisation. Late in 1972 he toured Maharashtra in western India, where the monsoon had failed for three consecutive years. He described the scene as 'May in December': the dry river-beds, dust and glare, were typical of the period just before the rains. But there were six months to go, six months in which wells would dry up and hunger take hold.

The drought relief programme mounted for Maharashtra in 1973, backed by a fundraising and publicity campaign in Britain, was a testing experience for Oxfam. Staley moved his establishment to Poona, took on extra Indian staff, and made an intensive effort to supplement local government and agency relief for 100 villages in the worst-hit districts. Apart from well-drilling, Oxfam's efforts went into a daily feeding programme for children under five, nursing and pregnant mothers. The scheme was operated by a group of organisations running medical projects, some previously well-known to Oxfam, some new. The formula was developed by Drs. Raj and Mabelle Arole at the Comprehensive Rural Health Project at Jamkhed. Its basis was local wheat and pulses in varied menus; villages had to contribute with labour, premises, cooking pots, and firewood; the food – a helping of porridge providing 500 calories – had to be cooked and consumed on the spot. At its height, a daily meal was given to 23,000 mothers and children through 25 different organisations.

Staley, the overall co-ordinator, was strongly influenced by this daily contact with Indian organisations and workers, and the unaccustomed proximity to those on the receiving end. He was specially impressed with the vision of people like the Aroles who were developing a methodology for working with people at the grassroots, and who stuck to their principles of local effort and self-sufficiency even in the face of crisis. The intensive experience of several months convinced him that 'development' in India must be defined, initiated and managed by Indians. He found himself rejecting the usual hierarchies of donor-recipient relationships, and felt out of tune with the old paternalism of disaster relief – helpless victims, mercy missions, Western know-how and largesse – which fuelled the Oxfam fundraising machine.

The Maharashtra programme – and Staley's whole approach – were keenly admired inside and outside Oxfam. But his scruples presented
the fundraisers and the publicists with a serious headache. There was a
drought and there was a human damage-limitation programme of great
importance: Oxfam was spending £400,000 it badly needed to recoup.
But this was not Bihar 1967 and there was no famine. The Maharashtra
authorities were paying wages for stone-breaking on public works, and
however back-breaking and unpleasant it was, no-one was starving.
Staley was determined not to allow any publicity which gave the
impression that, in the face of widespread hunger, inert and incompetent
India stood by while the Oxfam fire brigade rushed in to help.

Oxfam had sculpted the image of Third World suffering in the public
mind; now, when it did not follow the visual and verbal code used to
denote disaster, neither press nor public responded. By mobilising its
regional teams Oxfam managed to raise an extra £100,000 for
Maharashtra relief. But there was almost no media coverage; and some
of what there was caused offence in India. With a modulated message
about long-term prevention and building on local capacities, Oxfam
could not put an emergency on the media map. Judith Hart, then
Shadow Minister of Overseas Development, dutifully doled out cracked
wheat porridge in Trafalgar Square; Rita Tushingham paid her ‘tap tax’,
and no-one took the slightest notice.

A tension had arisen between the obligation to the compassion of the
donor, and the obligation to the dignity of the receiver. Staley’s view was
that singlemindedly serving the former ruled out any hope of an
equitable relationship between them. Whom ultimately did Oxfam exist
to serve? Bill Yates posed the same question. ‘Is Oxfam primarily a
service to the Victorian charity ethic in Britain, or is it a service to the
marginalised populations of the world?’ When asked by the fundraisers
how they could put across the idea that Oxfam was paying for the poor
to discuss their problems because it did not itself know what to do about
them, Yates responded: ‘Have you tried?’ No they had not, and most did
not wish to do so.

During 1974, this tension, articulated in the new language of the
alternative order, convulsed Oxfam House in the way that the aid vs.
public education debate had done in the Stacey era. That the concept of
conscientisation was of vital importance in working with the poor had
by this time gained some acceptance with the Oxfam establishment, in
spite of its radical and Marxist undertones. This was largely due to
Michael Harris, on whom Adrian Moyes’ encapsulation of its purpose,
‘to have more and to be more’, made a deep impression. Harris himself
helped to communicate this idea to the organisation’s supporters. Even
the new Director, Brian Walker, on his first field visit to India in early
1974, returned talking of ‘motivation’, his choice of pseudonym for the
new enlightenment.
Rather less welcome was the idea that if conscientisation was so important that Oxfam must encourage the process in others, then surely it should engage in the process itself. If the poor old poor were supposed to ‘reflect upon their reality as a first step to changing it’, then many Oxfamers felt that they too should reflect on their reality and their roles and relationships in society. This also meant reflecting on the – to them – very important part of society represented by the organisation they worked for. How equitable and participatory was Oxfam’s structure? Was it truly championing the wretched of the earth, or simply reinterpreting the white man’s burden to coincide with British charitable impulses?

Oxfam was in the middle of a major change: the handover to a new Director, the first such change since its inception. A recent working party on fundraising had talked of doubling Oxfam’s income to £8 million within five years. To Walker, the incoming Director, the target made eminent sense. But a number of staff, including Harris, were by no means sure that rapid growth was inherently desirable, nor that large amounts of extra money could be well and wisely spent. There was a worry that the quality of the programme and its still embryonic new philosophy might be sacrificed to the assumption that the only thing that mattered was growth. In development circles, growth was distinctly out of fashion.

In May 1974, a number of middle-level staff formed a study group on Oxfam policy, and set about their own consciousness-raising exercise. The group’s informal leader was Reggie Norton, Field Secretary for Latin America, a radical in thought and theology but a figure respected at all levels in the organisation. He saw the group’s task as: ‘To explore our own ideas on what Oxfam should be for the Third World, and see whether there can be an ‘Oxfam vision of the world’ to which we could all subscribe with enthusiasm and genuine commitment.’ He saw the range of views within Oxfam as divisive and unhealthy. ‘To have a vision of the world means to have one vision for the whole world. At present, we are inclined to preach one gospel overseas and another at home. Many of us feel that we must try not just to eliminate such contradictions, but to have a clear and coherent policy reflecting an authentic and prophetic view of the world.’

The policy group drew in opinion from all parts of the organisation, including Staley, Yates, and others overseas, as well as education and fundraising staff at home. By the time Walker took over the reins of directorship from Kirkley in September 1974, a dialogue had begun with trustees and senior management. A commitment had been made to reach organisational consensus around a new definitive statement of Oxfam’s raison d’être.
A draft was discussed by the trustees in January 1975, and agreement to a final version of 'Oxfam: An Interpretation' reached in March. Many minds, including Brian Walker's, bent themselves earnestly to its articulation. The setting down of this 'Oxfam vision of the world' was - in the spirit of conscientizar - important as a process as well as for its product. It represented the moment at which the maelstrom of alternative ideas reaching Oxfam was tamed and incorporated into its institutional character.

'Oxfam: An Interpretation' begins: 'Oxfam believes in the essential dignity of people and in their capacity to overcome the problems and pressures which can crush or exploit them. ... Oxfam is a partnership of people who share this belief - people who, regardless of race, sex, religion or politics work together for the basic human rights of food, shelter and reasonable conditions of life.' The statement did away with 'we' and 'they', with all implicit notions of superiority and double sets of values. There was to be no more muddling of 'poverty' with supine helplessness; no more confusion between accountability to the givers and accountability to the receivers.

This statement was an important marker in Oxfam's evolution, recording a turning-point in its own perception of the world and of its mission. The sense of solidarity with the poor, supplanting the old idea of beneficence towards them, was to lead Oxfam in new directions and has remained ever since at the heart of its philosophy.

Soon after the acceptance of 'Oxfam: An Interpretation', Reggie Norton left Oxford to become Field Director for the Caribbean and Central America. Late in 1975, he moved Oxfam's field office from Barbados to Guatemala. His purpose was to position the office closer to the regional epicentre of human need. Half of Guatemala's population of six million were native Indians, whose subjection to Spanish conquest and settlement over 400 years had deprived them of most of their land, banished them to the highlands, and exploited them as dirt-cheap labour in coastal sugar fields and fruit plantations. Their vulnerability was acute; but this was not the whole of it.

On 4 February 1976, a devastating earthquake struck the small and mountainous country. In the steepest parts of Guatemala City, the flimsy dwellings of the poorer inhabitants plunged wholesale into gaping ravines. Landslides cut off all forms of communication with much of the surrounding highlands. Repeated tremors in the following days provoked terror and pandemonium. When all the dust and debris had settled, 25,000 people were dead, 80,000 injured, and one million homeless.
When the earthquake struck, Norton rushed back from Haiti where he was on a field visit. Managing to beg a helicopter ride, he reconnoitred the mountain areas close to Guatemala City; thousands of little fires out on the cold hillsides indicated the extent of homelessness and fear among the villagers. Emergency aid arrived from Oxford: water storage tanks, a sanitation unit, marquees and medical supplies. His presence on the spot encouraged other British agencies and Oxfams to use Norton and the team gathering around him as a channel for assistance. Large sums became available from a DEC television appeal and energetic fundraising. But no-one in Oxford was prepared for the scale of the rehabilitation programme the normally sanguine and dependable Norton suddenly sprung upon them.

The area he focused upon consisted of four municipalities in the department of Chimaltenango, a poor and perilous part of the Western Highlands where Oxfam was already working with the US agency, World Neighbors. Over the past eight years one of the municipalities, San Martin Jilotepeque, had become well-known to Oxfam as the site of another ‘integrated development’ scheme. Since 1972, Oxfam had spent £45,000 on an agricultural and community health programme run by World Neighbors. The programme was regarded by Oxfam as one of the brightest stars in its firmament. It had all the right ingredients: appropriate technology, capacity-building among membership groups, co-operative structures; and it had generated enthusiasm for new techniques among farmers who could have been expected to be fiercely conservative and highly suspicious of outside ideas.

San Martin's success had much to do with the methodology developed by World Neighbors. Dr. Carroll Behrhorst, the programme's founder, and Roland Bunch, its agricultural director, were pioneers of the 'barefoot' approach later adopted internationally as the model for extending all kinds of services into the community. They trained volunteer farmers from the villages to become promoters of soil conservation measures critical to highland farming. Targets were set for contour ditch construction, soil analysis, fertiliser use, and for their end-product: doubled yields of maize, healthy fruit trees, improved incomes and diet. The strategy worked. Not only did the ideas spread, but some promoters – notably the leading instructor, Anacleto Sajbochol – joined the project staff, which gradually became completely indigenous.

In the early 1970s, the use of villagers as extensionists in farming or public health was seen as revolutionary, particularly since it originally emanated from Maoist China. The approach contained the shocking suggestion that local people, even the barely literate, were better agents of development than highly-qualified outside 'experts'. Bunch thoroughly agreed with this perception, and argued the case persuasively on
behalf of Anacleto and his team: 'The Indian promoters are able to teach their classes at times when they don’t interfere with work in the fields, and they all know the people they are working with.' They understood local attitudes, were more plausible among their fellows, and also much less expensive. At Jamkhed in Maharashtra, the Drs. Arole were pursuing an identical strategy for the same reasons, as was Abed at BRAC.

When the ‘quake struck in February 1976, San Martin was devastated. Hillsides collapsed, the roads were blocked, and the town of San Martin Jilotepeque was flattened. Nearly 3,000 people lost their lives in its rubble and every single house was wrecked or damaged. The same story was repeated in many surrounding villages. The area of San Martin and three other equally devastated municipalities therefore became the focus of Reggie Norton’s attention. Not only did both Oxfam and World Neighbors have a natural desire to help those with whom they were already so closely involved, but the network of promoters and cooperatives built up over the years could form the basis for post-earthquake reconstruction.

Any rebuilding programme for temporary or permanent shelter would require materials, the most important of which was roofing. Norton and Bunch on their visits to the San Martin area were told repeatedly by the extensionists that people’s most critical need was corrugated iron sheeting, or lamina. After the ‘quake, Oxfam’s office in Guatemala had become a mecca for helpers from the aid agency network. One of these was Bob Gersony, a young US entrepreneur-philanthropist working in Central America, extremely bright and business-minded. At Norton’s request, Gersony worked his contacts and came up with a large and cut-price supply of lamina in El Salvador. This material was in great demand. So without a moment’s hesitation Norton bought the entire supply for Oxfam. As a Field Director, his discretionary spending limit was $5,000; the lamina cost $845,000.

Although there was no possibility that the DEC appeal and other earthquake donations could cover this amount, Michael Harris and the Oxfam trustees took a large gulp and swallowed Norton’s proposals. Never in Oxfam’s history had such a large amount of money been spent on one item, nor at such speed and by so unconventional a procedure. Here was ‘flexibility’ stretched to its limits. As a result Oxfam had cornered the market in a sorely needed item at a critical moment; the risk of being landed with unusable rehousing materials was almost nil. The plan was to recover part of the cost by selling the 157,000 sheets at half price to the 10,000 homeless families of San Martin and surrounding areas. Here, Oxfam and World Neighbors became responsible for housing reconstruction at the request of the government.

From the start, the lamina was in hot demand. Its distribution along
with other materials - timber, nails, wire, creosote - was organised through the San Martin promoters, farmers' groups, and co-operatives. Those who had no money to purchase their entitlement of ten sheets earned it on 'lamina-for-work' road works, while the elderly and those unfit for manual labour obtained their roofing free.

In the run-up to the wet season people used the sheeting for temporary repairs. But the long-term plan was to help people build better houses with cross-braced supports, safe against the kind of tragedy they had just endured. So an educational programme was started to teach people how to rebuild their houses from scratch according to a design easily mastered by local masons and carpenters. In July 1976, a school for training builders was set up, and over the next two years 191 students were launched into a new profession.

The post-earthquake programme around San Martin was not confined to housing; the key to its entire organisation was that all action was based upon close consultation with the community, and depended not on giveaways but on reinforcing the earthquake victims' own efforts and resources. It drew upon years of lessons in local organisation and managerial experience. As with the Aroles in Maharashtra and BRAC in Bangladesh, the programme upheld the vital principle that a condition of dependency must not be created in a misguided effort to speed up disaster relief.

Amidst all the post-earthquake problems, commitment to agricultural improvement did not flag. Contour ditches, the planting of retaining grass, soil analysis and composting were not forgotten. An Oxfam visitor in November 1976 found it hard to believe that farmers showing off their six-fold maize increases and neat terraces topped with fruit trees had suffered such ruin only months ago. One villager explained: 'You can't destroy what is now in the minds of men and women and what we have learned to do for ourselves.'

Although an earthquake could not wipe out the work at San Martin, darker forces could cause damage of a still more terrible kind. World Neighbors had tried to keep their scheme for community agricultural improvement at a distance from the political struggle between the reformists and the reactionaries in Guatemala. The attempt turned out to be futile.

During the late 1970s, the political climate in Central America began to change. In Nicaragua, a radical opposition movement gained widespread support and after a violent civil war, the hated dictatorship of General Anastasio Somoza was sent packing in July 1979. Other regimes in the area, equally elitist and authoritarian, saw in the demise
of their neighbouring strongman a possible portent of their own future. In El Salvador and Guatemala, extreme repression began.

Their governments held that the world was riven by two opposing and warring forces: evil atheistic communism and Western Christian civilisation. The need to defend the latter was used to justify the most grotesque violations of human rights and freedoms. People who worked for any kind of social improvement — even literacy or family planning — were branded as subversives. Those who defended the rights of peasants to their land, who sought to alter the traditional balance of power, who called for the rule of law and the growth of democracy, were systematically hunted down. Many priests and religious who had ‘opted for the poor’ were singled out. The outrage which most shocked the world was the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero, gunned down while administering mass on 24 March 1980.

No regime in the region was more cruel or repressive than that of Guatemala. In 1979 began a long night of brutality which over five years was to see 50,000 Guatemalans (mainly Indians) slaughtered, hundreds of villages destroyed, and one million people on the run, 200,000 of them across the borders. The leader of any group, even agricultural promoters like those in San Martin, risked being ‘disappeared’ and shot. Anacleto Sajbochol and many others fled to Mexico. Their families left with them or vanished into the anonymity of Guatemala City. In spring 1982, at the height of the terror, the army surrounded the municipality of San Martin for several months, and in the course of its occupation massacred over 5,000 people. Their victims included many who had been active in the earthquake reconstruction programme.

By this time Oxfam had been forced to close its office in Guatemala and move to Mexico. Its staff, now led by a Guatemalan, Rolando Lopez, were at risk and the programme in ruins. The ‘partnership of people committed to a process of development by peaceful means’ envisaged in ‘Oxfam, An Interpretation’ was extremely difficult to realise in an environment where social and political injustice were so inextricable that even a contour ditch and a lemon tree could inspire state murder in the name of security and civilisation. Instead, Lopez and his team offered humanitarian and emergency support for refugees and those displaced inside their own countries; and tried to find ways of upholding human rights against the deluge of misery being poured upon those whose only crime had been to be poor and oppressed and to want to be less so. In their efforts to work in such a politically charged environment, their target was to create ‘humanitarian space’: to respond to human need in a way that took account of political reality, but was firmly based on humanitarian intent, independently of unavoidable association with individuals or organisations belonging in certain ideological or political camps.
The 1970s, the era of alternatives, had begun in a spirit of excitement and optimism. There had been a sense that the old moulds of power and privilege were crumbling and that a new order was emerging. Some people had glimpsed a vision in which the poor nations and the poor within the nations could 'have more and be more', could become participants instead of spectators of this thing called 'development' pursued in their name. There had been heroes, there had been martyrs, there had been great hope and deep disillusion. Oscar Romero had championed the rights of the poor on the grounds that human dignity was all-important, more important than any struggle between communism and capitalism, atheism and Christianity. For this belief he had given his life, joining thousands of others for whom the hope of 'having more and being more' had ended in persecution, torture, imprisonment, and death.

However bleak the future in many countries, events at the end of the decade had their positive side. The Nicaraguan revolution had succeeded. In one country at least, the Christian leftist and liberal movement had achieved a victory. The 'liberation theologians' flocked to take part in the Sandanista experiment; land and labour reform was introduced; basic health care and education for all were incorporated into national policy. Not surprisingly, many of those voluntary agencies committed to solidarity with the poor became stalwart allies of the Sandanista regime, some of the more idealistic among them heralding a socialistic utopia. As in Tanzania, Oxfam found itself able not only to support small-scale local projects, but to add its modest contribution to the general thrust of social action nationwide.

But the threat of destablisation by forces opposed to the Sandanistas and the mounting oppression in countries nearby confronted the humanitarians with continuing problems and dangers. One reaction in Oxfam was to speed up the indigenisation of the local staff, who with their deeper understanding of the political environment, could carve out 'humanitarian space' more successfully than less personally vulnerable expatriates. Another was to re-think the range of policy options that charity law, safety, and practicality would permit in the face of conflict, oppression, and violent infringements of human rights.

By the end of the 1970s, not only in Central America, but in South Africa and to a lesser extent elsewhere, the ways in which Oxfam could work in deeply polarised societies had become a major preoccupation.