When Brian Walker was appointed Director of Oxfam, he was given to understand by senior trustees that what was needed was modern management and the smack of firm leadership.

Walker, a Quaker, had an impressive record as a man of conscience: he had worked for reconciliation in Northern Ireland as founder chairman of the New Ulster Movement, an alliance of moderate Catholics and Protestants, sometimes at great personal danger. But his management credentials (in an engineering company, Bridgeport Brass Ltd.) were also decisive in his selection. In Kirkley’s last years when he concentrated on the international arena, there had been some loss of direction on the domestic front.

Although Walker had been the Northern Ireland representative on the UK Committee of the United Nations Association, the field of overseas aid and development was relatively new to him. He was not, therefore, encumbered by doubts about Western economic models, nor did he perceive any dichotomy between Oxfam at home as a vehicle of British compassion and Oxfam overseas as an effective partner of the poor. Dichotomies and ambiguities were not his cup of tea. He liked clear lines of argument and decisive action. Over the next ten years, his singlemindedness, which could be a powerful force, made of Oxfam a more focused, businesslike, and less volatile organisation. As a personality he could be austere and defensive; privately he was capable of great kindness and no-one ever doubted the depth or sincerity of his commitment to the Oxfam cause.

Walker fully took over the reins in September 1974. He was impressed by the calibre of the staff, their liveliness and degree of motivation; by the part played by volunteers; and by the projects he visited on overseas familiarisation tours. But he did not approve of what he saw as the blight of make-do-and-mend which permeated Oxfam’s operational and institutional character. The shoestring mentality was natural to many working in the charity world, and it was laudable in its way, but lacked efficiency.
One of its worst symptoms was the lack of a personnel and training policy, either for staff or for volunteers; and the payment of salaries which, in some cases, were unbelievably low. This led to heavy dependence on staff who were young and left almost as soon as they became productive. Kirkley had accepted this because he saw them taking their Oxfam vision out into the world and expanding the community of like-minded. Walker, with a personnel background, saw things differently. He introduced a salary structure and other measures designed to develop Oxfam's own human resources; he wanted Oxfam to lead the charity world in creating a proper career path for the modern humanitarian.

Walker also identified a lack of long-term investment and solid financial planning as inhibiting to Oxfam's future prospects of healthy growth. Oxfam had always spent virtually its entire income as it was received, never holding back sums for capital investment or financial security. And in the effort to keep fund-raising and home-based costs below 20 per cent, there was a tendency to scrimp not only on salaries but on facilities in shops, offices, and the trading company. Some of the thrifty housekeeping practices amounted to false economy. Walker determined not only to make the operational picture healthier, but to set Oxfam on a growth curve. By late 1974, whatever qualms had been earlier expressed about growth-for-growth's-sake had been swept away by the oil crisis and high inflation. At his first trustees' meeting as Director, he announced changes in organisational structure designed to promote the drive for new funds. The three key fund-raising areas - Shops, Trading, and Appeals - were to be overhauled and upgraded. Walker's diagnosis - and it was correct - was that, with an investment of energy and resources, these existing routes for funds could be improved substantially.

The key was to professionalise by calling upon expertise available in the commercial world. This strategy was most pronounced in the Oxfam Shops, which were built up as a retail chain under the guidance of a National Shops Committee. In May 1975, a Shops Development Fund was set up so that shop properties could be improved and, in some cases, purchased. This marked the beginning of Oxfam's deliberate streamlining of its merchandising activity. The same drive to maximise on modern marketing methods was applied to the appeals machinery for covenants, legacies, cash donations, and goods such as blankets and clothing.

The new fund-raising broom had the effect of concentrating minds and energies. The only problem - and it was not a new problem - was that it placed great stress on the regional staff. The teams of volunteers and shop helpers they depended on for all their fund-raising activities
were a very special kind of workforce which could not be treated as pawns in the corporate game. The idiosyncrasies of their performance were integral to the free provision of their time; it took cajoling, not line management, to get them to fill in the right forms, notice which handicrafts sold well, put this month's posters in the window, and run the shop 'correctly'. Many regional organisers found themselves fighting to protect their volunteers from 'management by objective' and became somewhat bruised in the process.

However, the strategy paid great dividends to Oxfam. By 1978, shop income had tripled since 1973, to over £3 million. Improved professionalism was one reason for success. Jumble and bric-a-brac in temporary, rent-free premises had been abandoned in favour of permanent sites in good retailing situations, with proper facias and attractive displays. The Shops Unit in HQ introduced a common 'look', and offered advice on pricing, staffing, publicity, and other management functions. Special training schemes were introduced for shop helpers. Over the course of ten years, Oxfam shops became an institution in their own right, providing a service to the community as well as an important source of funds.

Although Walker's main thrust was financial growth, he by no means downgraded Oxfam's educational role. But he wanted the informational and educational role more strictly defined. He wanted to end what a report on communications policy described as 'the confused face of Oxfam' and to focus publicity resources on things which had a clearly definable impact on Oxfam's image or income. Philip Jackson, Communications Director, had been building up an Oxfam public information role with press and other media concerning development issues. Disaster relief remained the only context in which Oxfam itself could expect media limelight. Rapport with prominent journalists during an emergency – Alan Hart in the 1971 Bengal cyclone, Jonathan Dimbleby in the 1973 Ethiopian famine, Gerald Priestland in the 1974 Maharashtra drought – helped promote their interest in deeper Third World coverage. But Oxfam's role in development was too modest to command extensive coverage in its own right, a reality Walker did not find easy to accept.

This had been the reason for Oxfam's joint financial backing with Christian Aid for the monthly *New Internationalist* magazine, whose masthead declared it to be about 'the people, the ideas, and the action in the fight for world development'. The *New Internationalist* went in for interviews with Nyerere and Dom Helder Camara, clarion calls for the New International Economic Order, and exposés of the marketing practices of babyfood companies in the Third World; it was not meant to be a house organ for the overseas programmes of Oxfam and Christian
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Aid. But with Oxfam paying a large chunk of the bill, Walker sometimes found the editorial independence of these radical journalists disconcerting. In late 1975, the magazine was in financial difficulty having exhausted in two years the £80,000 provided for three. Eventually a new schedule of support was agreed by the Oxfam trustees. Walker accepted the decision with a good grace, but he was never really comfortable at the presence of this kind of loose cannon in the Oxfam fold.

Walker's dislike of broad brushstroke education and communications projects with other agency partners was not to do with fear of controversy or ideological perspective. It reflected his urge for corporate control, the discipline of the balance sheet, and a desire to push Oxfam's name. One important step he took was to set up a Public Affairs Unit in London. The PAU, which reported directly to him, set out to develop links with MPs, Trades Unions, and professional bodies over topics of mutual interest. This was a courageous step given that it meant that Oxfam would assume for itself a public information role located close to the grey area known as 'political activity'.

In the international arena, Walker showed similar instincts. Since 1974, when Oxfam Canada and Oxfam Quebec had decided to go their own way as far as overseas funding was concerned, the relationship with Oxford had soured. Their increasing independence of outlook had distressed Kirkley since it rang the death knell on his dream of a common international Oxfam programme. With Walker, it rang loud alarm bells. He disliked an alliance with organisations of the same name whose policies were radical and different, whose actions were beyond control, and which might do something prejudicial to Oxford's reputation. The relationships between the Oxfams remained fraught during Walker's directorship, particularly after he offered Canada financial compensation if they would drop the Oxfam name. In 1976, the six organisations (Oxfams in UK, USA, Canada, Quebec, Belgium, and Community Aid Abroad in Australia) reached an agreement designed to protect the name while accepting each other's autonomy. In time, this became the basis for looser, and warmer, co-operation.

Walker directed most of his international networking energies towards Europe and the EEC. This attempt to build up relationships with German, French, and Dutch agencies helped to fill the gap left by the loss of funds from other Oxfams, and also placed Oxfam UK in the forefront of European overseas aid non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In 1977, the EEC set up a mechanism for funding voluntary agency projects; Walker was a key member of the UK delegation to the EEC NGO Liaison Committee, and played a formative role in the emerging relationship between aid NGOs and the Community. He was also on the League of Red Cross/Voluntary Agencies Committee in
Geneva from 1974-83. These connections were to be of vital importance in late 1979 during the Cambodia crisis.

Walker also took on board a new and somewhat risky domestic venture developed by Guy Stringer, his Deputy Director. This was 'Wastesaver', a commercial project designed to capitalise on growing public disillusion with the throwaway society. Originally it had been Leslie Kirkley who, pondering the connections between environmental conservation and the progress of the poor, had asked Stringer to work out how items surplus to household requirements in the form of waste could be alchemised into development aid. The initial survey, into the re-usability of everything from LP records to little metal bottle tops, was carried out by Adrian Moyes.

The Oxfam Wastesaver Centre, launched in 1975, was the first comprehensive waste-recycling scheme ever set up in Britain. Kirklees Council gave it a home. Its premises were a derelict textile mill in the centre of Huddersfield. This was converted into a plant where 60 staff and 60 young people on Job Creation schemes sorted, processed, and packaged glass, tin, paper, aluminium, plastics, textiles, clothing, and furniture. Some of this junk mountain was cleaned up and sold in the 'biggest Oxfam shop in the world'. Most of the rest – tin chips, rag, paper, empty bottles – was resold to industry after being granulated, pressed, or shredded.

The basic unit for collection was the 'dumpy', a tubular stand with plastic bags in four different colours for different types of rubbish. Oxfam vans collected the sacks from co-operating households. The dumpy caught on, and 6,000 found homes with people willing to go to some trouble to sort and clean their waste. But within 18 months, inflation had wrought havoc with dumpy economics. The cost of collection had risen by 40 per cent and the cost of the dumpy itself by 60 per cent, while the prices received for waste end-products were static. Other means of acquiring waste were tried, including special containers in supermarket car parks. Oxfam Shops also sent aluminum scrap and unsaleable clothing to Huddersfield.

Oxfam's investment in capital equipment was £92,000 for the first two years. In the first year, sales reached £48,000 against costs of £98,000, a slightly better result than expected. The resourceful manager of the Wastesaver Centre, Jon Vogler, was optimistic that the Centre would soon show a profit. But it failed to do so because the market in waste continued so depressed. In July 1977 part of the building collapsed, along with morale and the price of paper. In early 1978 it was decided to drop household collection and set up a new centre specifically geared to the more modest recycling effort which Oxfam now knew was viable.

Wastesaver had turned out to be a useful adjunct to the 575 Oxfam
Shops, themselves now spruced up and becoming more profitable. It absorbed all the garments shops were unable to sell, processing them for resale in special ‘surplus’ shops, or selling them off for rag. This released more selling space in the shops as well as helping to reduce the volume of low quality stock they were carrying. In 1979, Wastesaver moved to smaller premises specially designed for sorting and handling textiles. They also sorted aluminium for processing – foil, ring pulls, bottle tops, cans – collected through Oxfam shops. Within a short space of time this venture repaid its capital costs and was making a profit.

Brian Walker’s first full financial year as Director was promising. In spite of inflation, in spite of salary rises, total income for 1975-76 burst through the £6 million barrier, helped by a hugely successful appeal in the wake of the Guatemala earthquake. During the next few years, the investment in shops and general appeals began to pay dividends. In 1978-79, income reached £9.7 million. This had not been achieved painlessly; but there was satisfaction that the end-decade target of £10 million was well within reach.

Five years earlier, Michael Harris had doubted whether the overseas programme could absorb a large injection of extra money and maintain its quality. It had done so because, spurred on by the search for alternatives, its direction had undergone major change.

By the mid-1970s, ‘targeting the poor’ had become the new orthodoxy in development philosophy. At every level, from the international to the micro-project, minds and budgets were exercised by the search for ways to reach the poor.

‘Targeting the poor’ was very difficult. Their condition of poverty was directly related to their lack of access to existing services and institutional structures. Logically therefore, such structures would either have to be by-passed; or they would have to be reformed. New structures would have to be created or existing ones adapted; but how and who by? And how could anyone be sure that, operating in the same environment, they would not soon manifest the same in-built inequities? In Oxfam, this period was one of ‘anti-institutionalism’ in its overseas programme, expressed both practically and philosophically.

One of the reasons why official aid donors were becoming keen on NGOs was that they were the only available route for bypassing existing structures. Official aid went to government services and, in a poor country, the reach of government services was often limited to those with economic and political muscle. The official donors therefore had no route into the places where the poor were to be found. But the NGOs, or some of them, were already there, if not actually in the village or slum at
least close by, with staff and an organisation. Thus while governments could be encouraged to reform their services so as to reach the mass of the people – a process bound to take some time – at least some good people were getting on and doing something.

But from Oxfam's perspective, from a position closer to the poor, the problem looked almost exactly the same. The good people, be they local or foreign, who had set up their ashram, their centre, or their clinic, in a particular locality, had done so for all sorts of reasons. Some – such as Mother Teresa's home in Calcutta and Irma Dulce's hospital in Salvador – were set up specifically to serve those singled out by indigence; others to serve leprosy cases, the disabled, refugees, or particular kinds of social distress. But many organisations were by no means positioned or geared to serve the really poor even if the people they served were poor by Western standards.

They might primarily serve a religious congregation; or, if they were agriculturally-minded, farmers; or, if medical, the sick; or, if vocationally-minded, the young; and so on. Most of those who enlisted in the course or went to the clinic already had some means, could afford the fee or the medicines and the bus-fare to get there. Such organisations were also very thin on the ground. Yet the location of their projects and the income-levels of those they served set limits to any donor agency's programme. These were major limiting factors even before one took account of programme quality.

There were thousands of villages in virtually every developing country which were not reached by any agent of social improvement, government or philanthropic. Inevitably, they included the poorest and most neglected. And within the poor communities covered by some of the best projects Oxfam supported, the poorest people were often excluded. A 1978 evaluation of the World Neighbors agricultural programme in San Martin, Guatemala, pointed out that contour ditches and fruit trees yielded benefits for the small owner-farmer; but that 50 per cent of the local population were landless. The programme concentrated on the most dynamic farmers assuming that they would bring along 'slow adopters' – another version of 'trickle down'. But landless farmers were 'slow adopters' for good reason: the benefit of any improvements on land they tilled went to their landlords.

Here was one of the eternal conundrums of trying to help the poorest. Handouts created dependency and destroyed initiative. But how did you invest in people who had nothing? You could give a farmer a loan to deepen his well and irrigate his fields. But what about the farmer who had no well? And if you left out the poorest, the gap between them and the slightly better-off would widen; the people you had helped might join the group exploiting the poorest, whose situation would then...
deteriorate. The San Martin evaluator found that the World Neighbors programme had indeed encouraged such a process. The landless in the area were asserting legal claims to land they had worked for years. But farmers in the World Neighbors programme had become well enough off to buy this land illegally from the landowners, thus helping to cheat the landless of their rights.

One response to the problem of how to reach the poorest was to try and encourage the growth of local indigenous agencies. This was the rationale behind support for FASE in Brazil, the Community Development Trust Fund in Tanzania, BRAC in Bangladesh, and many others. Meanwhile in India, John Staley began to pursue the problem from another direction: the almost total absence of awareness among educated and idealistic young Indians of 'development' as it was understood by Oxfam. Only a tiny handful of very special characters, usually Gandhian, such as the remarkable Vikhasbhai in Varanasi, took up this kind of development work as a personal mission or career.

Without such a workforce, how were local organisations to emerge which would pursue a vision distinct from the usual Indo-Victorian welfarism with all its built-in hierarchies? And how were project staff, and for that matter Oxfam's own, to be Indianised? Expatriates, unless they were saints on the Mother Teresa pattern, could not reach the poor whatever their commitment or aptitude. By 1977, five out of 11 Oxfam staff in India were Indian. They had not been easy to recruit, in a country of 600 million people.

In 1976 Staley left Oxfam to work with Indian colleagues in setting up an organisation called 'Search'. Search recruited apprentices, or trainees, from a number of different social backgrounds, and set out to engage their intellects and personal motivation partly by discussion, and partly by assigning them to work on projects. Staley saw their conversion to development – their conscientisation – as a developmental force in its own right. Oxfam had great faith in Staley and underwrote Search to the tune of around £20,000 a year, even though Staley's almost spiritual commitment to participatory principles tended to exasperate the management-minded. Gradually Search evolved into a training centre for development workers. Search also played a part in trying to communicate through Indian channels what 'development' meant when it had nothing to do with industrialisation or targets for the Five-Year Plan, but was to do with people and the human condition.

If reaching the really poor was difficult because there were no routes into the village and few educated Indians ready for the pilgrimage, there were more problems once you finally arrived. The poorest had almost no capacity to absorb funds. They had no land to improve, no bullock to yoke, no cow to fatten, no barn to make rat-proof; they were illiterate
and ignorant of the modern world. Their plea to any outsider was for help and they were clearly in need; yet how was their plea to be transformed into a viable project meeting minimum standards of competence? As one agonised paper from Bangladesh put it: 'Most of the proposals which come to us from village groups are so poorly thought out, so lacking in detail as to how the activities will be organised, who will participate, who will benefit, that there is no hope of us accepting them as they stand. A great deal of work in fleshing them out is required.' And there were leadership problems. 'Because of their organisational ineptitude the poor are likely to end up as employees in a business controlled by better-off members of the village. And this simply replicates the age-old pattern of authority and opportunity – not at all what we want to do.'

In 1977, ten years after the first operational programme in India was launched in the wake of the Bihar famine, Oxfam embarked on another major operational experiment, this time in neighbouring Orissa. This was a new evolution: not quite an 'integrated programme', not exactly 'barefoot technician', nor yet 'conscientisation', but with elements of all three. Orissa was one of India's poorest states, drought- and cyclone-prone, and the scene therefore of many Oxfam emergency relief efforts. In consultation with the Orissa government, Oxfam put together an ambitious scheme to surmount the barriers on the path to the poor. Theoretically, the programme would create a network of new participatory and popular structures which would generate micro-projects for Oxfam funding. The key philosophical architect of this was Andrew Clark, an Oxfam Field Director who had earlier worked in South Vietnam, and whose concern for the minutiae of social development was encyclopaedic. His key ally on the practical side was A.V. Swamy, the programme's Co-ordinator and a star of the embryonic Indian cadre in Oxfam's field service.

OXWORP, the Oxfam West Orissa Programme, chose for its home a neglected corner of the state where the railhead ended on the way to a dusty little town called Khariar. Apart from a mission hospital there were no local voluntary agencies; the partners were government officers at Block level (a Block is an administrative area of roughly 100 villages). In the years since OGAP began, Oxfam had reached a better understanding of the complexities of trying to transform the far from arcadian face of village India. Swamy was always begging patience of those who expected OXWORP to solve instantly the puzzle of how to reach the poorest. OXWORP did not fulfill all the expectations it raised; but it did many valuable things and, like OGAP in its day, was an important learning experience.

To reach the village, Oxfam invented a new kind of pilgrim: the
'Community Contact Person'. (Much of the programme terminology was new: Swamy was the 'Action Consultant'.) The CCPs were recent men and women graduates, rigorously selected, trained, and then posted to one of the Blocks within the programme area. Their job was to go into the villages and meet people, and gradually encourage interest groups – women, artisans, farmers – to coalesce. This might lead to an application to Oxfam for a loan fund for seed, basketwork, or irrigation channel construction. Having handled this successfully, the group might be put in touch with a government programme which they had not previously known about or felt able to approach. They were also introduced to banks and credit facilities whose tentacles did not usually extend beyond the towns.

As time went by, groups in several villages could combine in a Block-level association, which itself developed an organisational capacity to handle funds and projects. This was the vision: the growth of democratically run structures whose strength would endure when Oxfam removed itself after the predetermined span. In fact, an Oxfam review conducted in 1987, four years after they had withdrawn, found many village groups still operational. The number of mini-projects to have made an improvement in village lives ran into hundreds, and applications still flow into Oxfam today. Many of the OXWORP graduates went on in a development career, running their own projects, working for Oxfam or other agencies.

OXWORP, however, did not solve the problem of how to reach the poorest inexpensively. It was a classic illustration of one of the ironies of development aid: the costs of programme delivery tend to mount in proportion to the depth of poverty of those you are trying to reach. Over seven years, OXWORP cost Oxfam £700,000, including £200,000 for emergency drought relief in 1979-80. As a model for instigating social and economic change among the poorest, OXWORP – Oxfam felt – was too cumbersome to be cost-effective.

Other Field Directors in India pursued the same quest via a different route. In 1979, Tony Vaux in Ahmedabad took on a young Gujerati with a trades union background, M.D. Mistry. Gujerat had a large population of extremely poor tribal people living in areas where there were no agencies and few project possibilities. The political atmosphere was relaxed and there were special programmes budgeted by the state for the benefit of tribal people. Vaux and Mistry picked two districts, and Mistry set off by motorbike to make contact with the villages. His results were striking. In the early 1980s Mistry, as the personification of a new type of programming which did reach the poorest, became something of an Oxfam celebrity.

By visits and by letter, Mistry identified villages where there was an
existing nucleus of people wrestling with a common problem: an avaricious trader, who underpaid for farming produce and overcharged for inputs; a group of farmers who had thought about better irrigation but not known where to start. Often those he corresponded with were young and keen to try something. He helped them to register themselves as formal societies to become eligible for government finance. This was not easy, as Mistry explained: 'It requires a constitution, members, membership fees and approval either by the charity commissioner, in the case of yuvak mandals (youth groups) or mahila mandals (women’s groups), or by the registrar, in the case of societies. Such groups have to audit their accounts each year and submit them to the authorities.'

Not surprisingly, semi-literate people in remote villages stumbled on some of these hurdles. In one case, they collected the money and the papers and entrusted them to a man who conveniently lost the documents. In another, they could not afford the bus-fare to go 200km to Ahmedabad to take the papers for registration. Here, Mistry took on the role of facilitator, to help people overcome such hurdles and then go on to use their new group structures to dissolve or bypass the forces which held their lives in pawn. A small Oxfam loan might get them started. One village, for example, purchased a pair of weighing scales to replace those used by the local merchant and dramatically lowered his takings. Another set up a bank to enable dispossessed farmers to buy back their land from the exorbitant clutches of the moneylender.

The effect of this approach, which was soon to dominate the evolution of Oxfam’s India programme, was to spend proportionately more, but still a relatively modest amount, on the intermediary activities needed to reach the poorest: staff time, most of it spent helping villagers formulate ideas and proposals. Actual grants were small. An example was a lift irrigation scheme for a village called Tembda. After long preparation, the villagers put in a request for a Rs. 2.5 lakhs (around £14,000) subsidy from the Tribal Sub-Plan, a government programme. Oxfam’s contribution was a fee for a professional engineer to draw up the plan, and money to cover their transport costs to meetings with the officials. Few grants were for sums above Rs. 10,000 (£600).

The trap the field staff did their best to avoid was to create groups, or modify existing ones, which then became dependent on Oxfam. Mistry ensured by the way he worked with the groups that their own capacity to run their affairs was augmented, not diminished. He also insisted on all loans being repaid and all moneys accounted for. Dr. Anil Bhatt, a well-known Indian social scientist, evaluated Mistry’s work in 1985. 'I have never seen any effort, voluntary or governmental,' he said, 'which has made such impact on very poor people with such meagre financial input, in such a short time and with such limited manpower.'
In one adaptation or another, the Mistry experience became a major influence on Oxfam’s development approach, not only in India, but worldwide.

Of all the colonial disentanglements in the generation after the second World War, the most protracted and painful was in Indo-China. In 1975, Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese and the turmoil at last seemed over. Four years later in 1979, increasing signs of human distress began to filter through the bamboo curtain.

To begin with, the Vietnamese refugees, especially those setting out to sea, attracted the spotlight of public attention. But for the humanitarian agencies, the ultimate challenge came later in 1979 with the crisis that consumed Cambodia – then called Kampuchea. In its scale, this was not the most serious emergency in their experience; the birth of Bangladesh and the long years of African drought affected many more people. But in its intensity, Kampuchea was unique. Its attendant horrors were more awful and its political intricacies more complex than any in the post-war world.

In April 1975, the people of Cambodia had been ‘liberated’ by the Khmer Rouge, who had then closed the country off from the world and subjected it to a ruthless revolutionary experiment. In early 1979, ‘Democratic Kampuchea’ was again ‘liberated’, this time by the forces of their traditional enemy, the Vietnamese. By the autumn, when the enormities of four years of Kampuchean suffering began to be known, it seemed to the world that the entire nation was poised on the verge of extinction. A tiny handful of Western relief agents were holed up in Phnom Penh desperately trying to organise aid in the face of every conceivable obstacle. Oxfam was one of that handful. Because of this, Oxfam played a role in the Kampuchean crisis which catapulted it onto the international stage, hugely enhancing its reputation and resources. But in the process, its own efforts and those of others attempting to aid the Kampuchean people became swept up in the complex maze of Indo-Chinese affairs. From the crisis in Kampuchea, few of the players emerged unscathed.

Oxfam had been a very minor humanitarian player in the endless turmoil of Vietnam since back in the 1950s; its involvement had ended in 1975. With the build-up of US forces in the 1960s, opportunities for philanthropic activity became heavily curtailed; most charitable aid went to orphanages and hospitals run by US missionaries. In the late 1960s Oxfam took a different direction, channelling aid through Buddhist organisations. The Buddhists’ anti-war sentiments became famous in the West when monks began to burn themselves to death; but
in social welfare they were ‘silent workers, unknown and neglected’. Not only did their simplicity keep them close to the people, but their activities were integral to people’s beliefs and culture, and would, Oxfam believed, endure when the long years of war and madness ended.

Oxfam’s earliest connection was in 1966 with the Buddhist School of Youth for Social Service in Saigon, the only school of its kind in the country. Students went on village secondment to run literacy classes, health centres, sports clubs, and festivals. Oxfam regarded this work as important because of the disruption in the countryside caused by the war; but after the Tet offensive in 1968 this disruption consumed the programme itself, whose students were drafted into the army.

From 1970 onwards, an important ally was Dr. Thich Minh Chau, Rector of Vanhanh University, described by Don Shields, Oxfam’s Field Director in the Far East, as ‘the best of our co-operators in Vietnam’. With the help of two Buddhist nuns, Dr. Chau ran a Social Action Centre (SAC) which set out to ‘acquaint Vanhanh students with the misery of the lower classes, to inspire them with a spirit of responsibility and dedication to the poor’. Students worked voluntarily in day care centres, orphanages, refugee camps, and hospitals. From 1971, Oxfam funded annual courses for the volunteers in sociology, health, and administration, and helped the SAC in other ways with the mounting casualties of military havoc.

When the US forces withdrew from South Vietnam in 1973, Oxfam posted Andrew Clark to work with the Buddhist groups in Saigon in the expectation that peace would pave the way for rural development. Clark, an enthusiast for participatory approaches, tried to nudge the Buddhists in this direction. He hoped that day care centres in communities served by nuns and monks might be the launch pad for something less paternalistic than typical Buddhist social work. This turned out to be a non-starter, partly because the delicate and subtle Buddhist world was not susceptible to egalitarian dialectics; and partly because continuing hostilities destroyed all hopes of anything bar yet more relief.

By April 1975, Oxfam had spent £250,000 in Vietnam; Clark left when Saigon fell; North and South were unified in one communist-led Vietnam which had little use for philanthropy inspired by any religious system. The SAC closed down and Buddhist social work became strictly circumscribed.

At the beginning of December 1978, Brian Walker undertook a 10-day visit to Vietnam. This was prompted by a request from UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim that NGOs consider giving aid to Vietnam. The boat people exodus was already exacerbating Vietnam’s pariah status in
the West; but Walker was impressed by the scenes he witnessed in town and countryside. 'What made this tour the most thrilling I have ever made for Oxfam was to see in practice almost everything we are trying to bring about elsewhere in the world. Self-reliance, village co-operation, the sharing of resources, discipline, energy and ingenuity on a widespread and convincing scale, especially in terms of basic needs, was the order of the day. Nor was this grim, Marxist, bureaucratic collectivisation. Quite the opposite.'

A sympathetic attitude towards Vietnam was to colour Oxfam's response to the gathering crisis in Kampuchea.

Within days the Vietnamese army had invaded Kampuchea, reaching Phnom Penh after a hard-fought campaign on 7 January 1979. This invasion liberated 'Democratic Kampuchea' from Khmer Rouge domination, the nature of which was not then known except to a very few observers. The invasion was widely condemned in the West as an act of aggression against a neighbouring country, and the Vietnamese client government set up in Phnom Penh was not recognised except by the USSR and the Eastern bloc. The rulers of 'Democratic Kampuchea' had maintained a closed society; the new rulers of the 'People's Republic of Kampuchea' did the same. Meanwhile, attention shifted to the plight of the boat people.

Since 1975, the outpouring of refugees from Indo-China had reached close to one million. Increasing numbers were taking passage from Vietnam on crowded, leaking, ramshackle boats across the South China Sea. Faced with their own problems of poverty and overcrowdedness, the countries they were heading for – Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Indonesia – were strenuously resisting their entry. The International Red Cross Committee (ICRC) issued a statement in mid-1979 about Indo-Chinese misery they were powerless to help, which included that of 15,000 boat people then at sea for whom all permission to land had been refused.

Boat people who landed on the Malaysian coast were removed and dumped on the tiny offshore island of Bidong. By July 1979, Bidong was threatening to become a boat people graveyard. Normally uninhabited, the island was a steep-sided granite cone with a small strip of barren land. On this strip 42,000 men, women, and children were huddled under the flimsiest of bamboo and plastic shelters. All food and all water had to be brought 14 kilometres across the straits by barge; there was no storage and bad weather could hold up supplies for days.

The Malaysian authorities seemed unable to cope with basic public health, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) asked Oxfam to send a technical person to make an assessment. That person had to be Jim Howard. For some years Howard
– whose background was in engineering – had been functioning as a technical extension of Oxfam’s disasters office. Among other emergency aids he had developed a ‘fly it in and put it up in hours’ sanitation unit to use where influxes of disaster victims were crowded into makeshift camps.

On Bidong, Howard found a settlement of unbelievable squalor. There were no sanitation facilities; rubbish and excreta lapped the shore; the topsoil was so shallow that it was not even possible to bury the dead properly. Epidemic and fire threatened. Howard recommended the construction of water tanks, both fresh and sea, and latrines serviced by a simple sea water sewage pipe. A programme costing £500,000 was set in motion, towards which Oxfam offered UNHCR £125,000, and helped recruit instant engineering assistance.

A few days after his return, Howard went to Geneva to the International Conference on the Boat People. Even as he attended, the agonies of Kampuchea were beginning to emerge from the shadows. Since the Vietnamese had invaded in January, the natural vanguard of the international humanitarian community, ICRC and UNICEF, had been jointly trying to provide help inside the country without success. But by mid-1979, the Vietnamese authorities had become alarmed about the food situation. In early 1979, the collective agricultural camps set up by the Khmer Rouge had been disbanded and people had set off for their villages and to find lost family members. The Khmer Rouge, meanwhile, retreated towards the Thai border with the Vietnamese army in pursuit. The end-result of all this social and military disruption was that rural and agricultural life was thrown out of joint and little planting was done when it should have been. In July, the Vietnamese sought 129,000 tons of food aid from the UN’s World Food Programme on the basis that 2.2 million Kampucheans faced starvation.

This crude estimate of need was the only one available, then and for many months to come.

To prepare the way for the vast and urgent relief operation the Vietnamese had requested, representatives from UNICEF and ICRC were finally granted visas and flew into Phnom Penh on 17 July. But they were only allowed the briefest of stays and were able to make very little progress in verifying the scale of need or setting up the programme. Because the situation was sensitive, the two organisations imposed a total press and information blackout about the mission. Thus, very few people even on their own staff, let alone in the NGO community, had any knowledge of their efforts.

The secrecy surrounding the mission and its activities from July onwards was to give the impression, once Kampuchea hit the headlines, that the international agencies were dragging their feet and doing little
for suffering Kampuchea. The failure to take the NGOs into their confidence, justified or otherwise, set the scene for many of the actions subsequently taken by Oxfam. These were to cause a nearly disastrous rift in the international machinery of compassion.

In the late summer in Oxford, a Frenchwoman with long-time Cambodian connections, Louise du Plaud, was badgering Michael Harris. Two French doctors had visited Phnom Penh from Vietnam and returned with a horrendous story of medical breakdown. They were putting together a planeload of food and medicines. Would Oxfam help? Harris' proviso was that an Oxfam person accompany the plane. In Paris, through du Plaud's connections in the Vietnamese exile community, Jim Howard was given a visa for Kampuchea. The plane took on its cargo in Luxembourg and left for Phnom Penh on 24 August 1979.

Thus began Oxfam's engagement with a small and unfamiliar Asian country gradually emerging from a holocaust.

Jim Howard was overwhelmed by his encounter with the devastation wreaked upon a beautiful land. A passionate and big-hearted man, he found the evidence of physical and social pain beyond comprehension. It began at the airport. Apart from one decrepit mobile staircase there was no equipment of any kind. Everything had to be unloaded by hand, and those who manhandled the sacks of food down the steps were so weak that he opened up some packages to feed them on the spot.

The Khmer Rouge had plunged Cambodian society back into the Dark Ages. During the four years of their revolution, every institution belonging to the old way of life had been vandalised. They had emptied the cities at gunpoint; dismantled the country's administrative and intellectual structure; killed or driven into hiding all professionals including doctors and teachers; abolished money; banned religious worship and learning; disallowed anything tainted by Western influence. Every man, woman, and child was compelled to live under a system of rigid collective farming. The most trivial infringement of the rules – wearing spectacles, eating at the wrong time of day – was subject to fearful punishment, even death. Since the Vietnamese invasion had ended these horrors, the evidence of the 'killing fields' had been unearthed in mass graves. The torture chambers with their fastidious documentation had been left untouched, opened as a museum lest anyone doubt that the Vietnamese invasion had been necessary.

Amidst the upheavals of 1979, millions of acres of ricefields in what was a naturally fertile terrain had been left unplanted. Thus two huge problems compounded one another: a severe shortage of food, coupled with a lack of seed and agricultural inputs; and the almost complete
disintegration of the country's infrastructure – roads, vehicles, energy supplies, equipment, surveys, maps, communications, paper on which to write instructions, pens to write them with, and qualified people to carry them out – on which any rescue operation would have to depend.

The only significant organisational channel was the Vietnamese army; no relief operation based on the generosity of Western donors, governmental or private, could allow its supplies to pass into their hands. The hospitals, on which casualties of sickness and hunger were descending, were in a state of disrepair and lacked staff, drugs, and medical supplies. In Phnom Penh, a handful of Kampuchean officials were trying to reintroduce a semblance of administrative normality. Their experience was negligible, their dependence on the Vietnamese all but complete, their distrust of outsiders acute, their understanding of the principles governing Western aid non-existent, their needs vast.

All of this came across to Jim Howard in an accumulation of heart-rending incidents over the ten-day period he spent in and outside Phnom Penh. The conditions in hospitals, orphanages and clinics were universally awful: 'Children in bed in filthy rags dying of starvation; no drugs, no food, 550 beds with 600 patients. A high school next door used as a TB hospital with 250 dying people, depressing and hopeless. In one ward a boy of 13 tied down to the bed because he was going insane ...' Howard was convinced that what he was seeing was the tip of massive distress. He was also sure that the Kampucheans would deeply appreciate help: one woman doctor broke down when she understood that this was what he was promising: 'Her lips and hands quivered and we were shattered by the tragedy of it all.' What she asked for was not bandages or penicillin, but coloured cloth for clothes so that her dying patients could dress and feel human again.

Unlike the representatives from ICRC and UNICEF still trying to negotiate terms – staff, distribution channels, monitoring – for a massive input of international aid, Howard went around making lists. Drugs, medical supplies, and nutritional supplements for children, obviously; what else was lacking that Oxfam could supply? What was broken that Oxfam could mend? He took down the specifications of broken plant, in the city waterworks and the power station; he went to the textile mill and found them running out of yarn. He developed friendly relations with officials at the Ministry of Health; he discussed transport with ICRC/UNICEF with whom he committed Oxfam to full co-operation in the face of such disaster. But he did not much care about a formal agreement. Action was what mattered. He would take back his lists and his story and Oxfam would go urgently about its business.

It happened that when Howard arrived in Phnom Penh, John Pilger of the Daily Mirror was there making a television documentary, courtesy
of Vietnamese confidence in Pilger. Their encounter and the powerful impression Howard made on Pilger were to have an important influence on the public tumult soon to surround Kampuchean aid. From Pilger, Howard also took over the Kampuchean woman interpreter – Sopheak – who was to make an important contribution to Oxfam’s operation in Phnom Penh over the months to come. Not only did she have her own story of family tragedy under Pol Pot, but she was extremely committed to helping her people and invaluable in smoothing Oxfam’s path with prickly or obstructive officials.

Howard returned to Oxford on 7 September. A few days later, Oxfam held a press conference at which he described the Kampucheans’ suffering as ‘beyond tears’. They needed ‘100,000 tons of rice, 15,000 tons of sugar, 7,000 tons of vegetable oil’. Oxfam was planning to spend £250,000 on food supplies immediately; but this was a fraction of what was required which only governments could provide.

On 12 September, coincidentally with Howard’s report, the Daily Mirror devoted many pages to John Pilger’s account of ‘The Death of a Nation’. Oxfam was described as the one agency trying to do anything for a Kampuchea now in a state of terminal collapse thanks to Pol Pot, Western antipathy to the Vietnamese, and the woeful inadequacies of the international humanitarian machinery. Pilger was not in the least sympathetic to the difficulties presented by the Phnom Penh authorities to ICRC and UNICEF in their efforts to secure reasonable safeguards for the programme of full-scale relief.

The public response to the powerful Mirror coverage was stunning. Attention from other media began to build; Kampuchea’s tragedy was suddenly in the limelight, triggering a huge cash response to Oxfam, and giving its efforts maximum publicity coverage. On 16 September, there was a Disasters Emergency Committee television appeal for South-East Asia in which Jim Howard appeared. But the publicity – Oxfam’s oxygen, the international agencies’ anathema – had its negative side: it began to drive the whole operation.

For four and a half years a country at the periphery of the Indo-Chinese drama had been a black hole in the world’s consciousness. Suddenly an empty picture was being filled in, predominantly with description from a well-known popular journalist with undisguised leftist sympathies, and a deeply concerned Oxfam official. Their canvas was lurid, full of atrocity and death. A holocaust had occurred; concentration camp imagery was evoked. The legacy was imminent famine; another one to two million people out of an already decimated population of five million, including most of the children, would be dead by Christmas unless a vast tonnage of food was sent in. The basis for this scenario was largely impressionistic, backed by the original
Vietnamese request stating that 2.2 million Kampucheans faced starvation. Not just Howard and Pilger but all visitors to Kampuchea were convinced of this reality by the ruined state of the country, the stories of Khmer Rouge brutality, and the evident hardship they had witnessed.

Inevitably, the public response included an outcry against those allowing such a thing to happen. The candidates for this role boiled down to two: the uncaring West for allowing a genocidal Pol Pot to come to power and then washing their hands of the result; and the Vietnamese for occupying a weakened neighbouring country by military force and then obstructing efforts to bring its people help. The already fraught international climate in which aid for Kampuchea had to be mounted began to hum with recriminations. As in the case of the Nigerian civil war, passionate sympathy with the plight of the victims made it extremely difficult for those trying to bring relief to maintain a spirit of impartiality.

The new regime in Phnom Penh was desperate for international respectability, as had been the Biafran leaders. But the US, China, and the non-communist countries of South-East Asia continued to condemn what they saw as Vietnamese aggression and illegal occupation. Thus, Vietnam’s self-presentation as the liberators of Kampuchea from Pol Pot, and their desire for Western aid to help repair its destruction and consolidate the new regime’s position, had connotations other than simple empathy for the Kampuchean people. Any Western-backed relief effort was inevitably a weapon to be deployed in the propaganda war, as well as in the continuing civil war raging in the north-west where the Khmer Rouge were still in control. Indeed, the idea of neutral humanitarian aid was incomprehensible to officials in Phnom Penh.

In such a context, all statements about the country’s predicament were grist to the East-West propaganda mill. Oxfam, which by mid-September had become increasingly fired up about the fate of the Kampuchean people, aligned itself with the view that the chief obstacle to the relief of suffering was foot-dragging on the part of the Western-backed international establishment and its antipathy towards the Vietnam-installed Phnom Penh regime. Adopting the role of saviour of the Kampuchean people, Oxfam set itself the task of breaking the logjam in which international relief was grounded.

This role, however inspirational and well-intentioned, was much more operationally and politically complex than most in Oxfam realised.

Jim Howard’s Kampuchean report had not only fired up the Oxfam publicity people; it sent the overseas programme into top gear. On 21
September, a second charter flight took off for Phnom Penh, with a cargo of food and medical supplies and two Oxfam staff members besides Howard: Marcus Thompson, an ex-Field Director in India, and Dr. Tim Lusty. Lusty, who was also an agriculturalist, had begun his Oxfam career in emergency relief in Nigeria just after the civil war, and had worked in famine nutrition for Oxfam during the Ethiopian emergencies of the 1970s. Since 1976 he had been head of its health unit; with his particular range of experience and qualifications, Lusty was a special Oxfam asset.

On 18 September, three days before, Guy Stringer had left for Bangkok. Brian Walker had sent his Deputy Director to pursue the idea of buying food in South-East Asia and landing it at the Kampuchean port of Kompong Som. Sea-going routes, obviously, were the most apt for the huge tonnages regarded as necessary by all the relief organisations. Stringer later wrote up the story of his exploits in a report entitled: 'A slow boat to Indo-China, or the most expensive cruise in the world'. His undertaking must rank as one of the all-time exotic humanitarian adventures, an illustration of Oxfam's unique blend of flair, courage, and innocence, underpinned by British leadership and common sense.

The rounds of agencies and officialdom in Bangkok taught Stringer that the attitude of the Thai authorities towards their Vietnamese-backed neighbours in Phnom Penh made it impossible to clear a ship from Bangkok into a Kampuchean port of entry; or indeed a plane, unless assigned to ICRC/UNICEF. He therefore went on to Singapore. 'I was a man with a briefcase, $50,000 and one introduction to a shipping man.' He pondered ruefully whether any other organisation in the world 'despatched its servants on enterprises like this with such an air of nonchalance'.

The introduction was to an Irishman, David Moody of Asiatic Navigation Ltd., the tug and barge operation which had supplied the island of Bidong, and whom Jim Howard had encountered in July. Moody proved an invaluable ally. Everything known about Kompong Som – which no Western shipping had entered in years, was heavily guarded by the Vietnamese and thus unvisited by anyone in Phnom Penh – was negative. There were no cranes; the labour force was unskilled; unloading might take days, clocking up huge demurrage rates; there might be no tugs to manoeuvre a large vessel alongside. Stringer therefore decided to charter from Moody a sturdy tug and a large barge. The cargo, for ease of unloading, would sit on the deck of the barge sheltered by tarpaulins against unfortunate encounters with the monsoon.

Having chosen his boat, Stringer set out to fill it. Navigating his way
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through Singaporean markets turned out to be more hazardous than a typhoon in the South China Sea. The vexing question was whether to buy rice, the staple Kampuchean food. Rice, a strategic product, required an export license from the Singaporean authorities. As a member of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), Singapore was a hardline opponent of the installation by Vietnam of a government in Phnom Penh; this ASEAN was currently protesting about vociferously in New York where the UN General Assembly was meeting. Stringer feared that an application for an export licence might draw down a Singaporean embargo on his whole operation. In the event, a meeting at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs gave him cause for optimism that his 'cruise' would be allowed to proceed; but a frosty British High Commission made it clear that Oxfam was treading on political eggshells.

When Stringer had nearly completed his purchases of rice, maize, wheat, sugar, and oil, Jim Howard arrived from Phnom Penh and added seeds and hoes to the manifest: getting a good crop sown was essential to Kampuchean food recovery. Howard's presence and his eye-witness accounts helped confer authority on what seemed at moments even to Stringer a hare-brained do-gooding adventure. Asked by UNICEF to complete his load - 200 out of 1,500 tonnes altogether - in their name and at their cost, he did so. The total value of the cargo was £250,000; the insurance he obtained covered piracy and not much else.

Sack trolleys, wood, and carpenter's tools were purchased to make gangways for unloading; 200 foot of powered roller conveyor was ordered, but failed to show. Cooking utensils, firewood, and rations were laid on to feed the Kompong Som dockers. On 5 October, the specially fitted barge was towed round to the wharf; before loading could begin, Stringer had to give a personal assurance to the stevedores that the food would not reach Vietnamese soldiers. Prompted by Oxford, an army of journalists besieged the dock. The port and immigration authorities became distinctly nervous. To the last, Stringer feared his ship might not be allowed to sail.

On 9 October 1979, the 250-ton tug 'Asiatic Success' pushed the Oxfam barge out into the waterway and Stringer's bizarre voyage began. Oxford had sent out another staff member - Chris Jackson, ex-merchant navy - to accompany Stringer. The captain was Irish, the crew Filipino and Indonesian. They travelled at six knots towards the Gulf of Siam with the barge - 'the size of a football field' - 200 yards behind. It took four and a half days to cover the 640 nautical miles; weather and pirates were kind. Jackson, nonetheless, was constantly sick. Stringer, eating breakfast boiled eggs on the bridge, listened to the BBC World Service 'and heard our little expedition reported as the lead item among
all the major world affairs. It was strange to be part of something of that consequence, and to know that we now would almost certainly be the first Western input of a sizeable quantity of food into Kampuchea.'

Instead, he nearly landed his entire cargo and crew on the sea floor. On arrival outside Kompong Som on 13 October, he ran up from courtesy a Kampuchean flag purchased in Singapore, overlooking the fact that Singapore recognised the Pol Pot regime and that the flag they were flying was therefore that of the enemy. Fortunately the expedition was expected and the Vietnamese navy took no action. The only tug in port drew up next morning and 12 young officials, their jobs designated by cardboard tags pinned to their chests, inspected the manifest and wrote studiously in penny notebooks. Marcus Thompson and Tim Lusty were on the quay; so were three Ministers, of Economy and Reconstruction, Health, and Agriculture. After speeches, beer, and a ceremonial burning of the Pol Pot flag, unloading began.

This was a true moment of Oxfam triumph. Oxfam had pioneered a sea-going route with a large consignment of food; another barge was already loading in Singapore, and others were to follow up the Mekong River. The authorities had done more than welcome the Oxfam contribution. In fact, the level of the reception appalled Stringer. 'It gives some idea of the immense problems which Kampuchea faces in management if it needs the third most important Minister in the government [Ros Samay, Minister of Economy and Reconstruction] to arrange the detailed reception of a 1,500 ton barge.' Every truck in the country plus 50 extra from Vietnam – his crew demanded another assurance about Vietnamese intentions towards the cargo – had been sent down from Phnom Penh. The sacks were manhandled ashore by a motley gang of young men and women. The unloading took five days. There was no way, Stringer concluded, that major tonnages could be imported through Kompong Som. Logistics, not supply, were going to be the problem.

The following day, in a ruined villa of Prince Sihanouk, he talked with Ros Samay. The Minister gave him a personal assurance that 'the food will be used for the most needy masses of the civilian population.' There was no undertaking about when or how. Logistics were indeed to prove a problem; one of no mean dimensions.

While Stringer had been buying food in Singapore, events had taken several dramatic turns in Phnom Penh. These went some way to explain the grandeur of his barge’s reception.

On 21 September, the propaganda war over the legitimisation of the government in Phnom Penh between Vietnam and the USSR on one
side, and China, the US, and their Asian allies on the other, reached a climax. To the fury of the former and the incomprehension of the humanitarian world, the partisans of China won a critical victory: a majority of UN member states voted that the Kampuchean seat in the UN General Assembly be retained by the monstrous Pol Pot regime. By this act, the UN was seen in the outside world as having forfeited all claim to morality. The reaction in Phnom Penh was outrage. ICRC and UNICEF, still struggling to obtain agreement for their plans, took the brunt of Vietnamese and Kampuchean disfavour with a hostile international world. Their difficulties took a definite turn for the worse.

A pre-condition of any international relief effort supported by major government donors to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars was an adequate presence in the country to facilitate distribution and allow proper monitoring. This would apply anywhere, but especially in a country under military occupation whose regime was unrecognised in the West. The Phnom Penh authorities, on their side, were now more than ever unwilling to allow more than a handful of ‘unfriendly’ Western foreigners into Kampuchea or agree to country-wide monitoring. But these were not the major stumbling blocks.

The Kampucheans wanted ICRC and UNICEF to give an undertaking that they would not give any aid ‘to the other side’, to people under the control of the Khmer Rouge in the west of the country or in camps along the Thai border. This, neither agency would concede. The principle of humanitarian neutrality – aid above the political divide – was at the core of their organisational mandates. They had undertaken to Thailand to help Kampuchean refugees at the border, also a condition of Thailand’s use as a staging-post for aid into Kampuchea. At the time, the Thai army were operating a closed door policy and keeping all but a trickle of refugees at bay. Thus, although an important principle was seen by ICRC/UNICEF to be at stake, to all concerned the main practical problem was regarded as that of starvation inside Kampuchea itself.

At the end of September, now under great pressure as a result of the hue and cry raised all over the world, the ICRC and UNICEF negotiations were reaching a climax. On 28 September, Brian Walker, Oxfam’s Director, landed in Phnom Penh.

Up to this time, Howard and the other Oxfam people had been doing their best to work closely with their international colleagues, even though their inclination was for doing things first and sorting out the bureaucratic details later; they felt that ICRC/UNICEF’s obsession with ‘agreement’ was a wrong ordering of priorities. But Walker had another vision. Fired up by ‘two million dead by Christmas’ and the outpouring of public compassion at home, he had developed the idea of Oxfam at the head of a consortium of voluntary agencies rescuing the stricken
nation. Shortly before he left for Phnom Penh, he obtained the support in principle of several key European NGO partners. He now offered Phnom Penh a £25 million programme, to be overseen by a team of seven 'NGO Consortium' staff.

When it was put to him that: 'Our people would prefer to eat grass or die than share aid with Pol Pot', and that ICRC and UNICEF were in disgrace for 'helping Pol Pot by passing aid across the Thai border', he agreed to the demand that Oxfam would give no aid to those under Khmer Rouge control. He was under great pressure, keen to 'break the logjam', confident that other NGOs would deliver aid at the border and that it was therefore unnecessary for Oxfam to do so. Nevertheless, this agreement to drop the humanitarian principle UNICEF and ICRC were insisting upon cut the ground from under their negotiating position. It was also in breach of Oxfam's own principles and its policy towards victims of conflict, a policy articulated only months before.

Walker also agreed that co-operation between Oxfam and the UN and Red Cross programme should end forthwith; ICRC/UNICEF were under threat of eviction from the country and he hoped to spare Oxfam the same fate. Walker believed that he had private encouragement from the international organisations to do whatever was necessary to enable Oxfam to stay in Phnom Penh. He was unquestionably faced with an acute dilemma; one unprecedented in Oxfam's experience.

Inexperienced as the Kampuchean officials were, and desperate for signs of legitimacy from the West, they on their side did not properly understand the nature of a 'voluntary agency': they talked to Walker about signing a 'treaty', as if they were talking to a representative of a government or international authority. Oxfam was seen as a pawn to bring the other agencies to heel. Nor did they fully understand the relative scale of operations of which the different organisations were capable. Walker saw in the discomfited position of the internationals a gap that needed filling. But to imagine that an NGO consortium, no matter how many agencies joined it, could ever substitute for the combined weight of UN and ICRC donors and agencies was unrealistic. More immediately problematic to the Oxfam team in Phnom Penh, however, was the split in humanitarian ranks which a separate aid agreement created. Relations between the agencies, whose personnel were all obliged to live and work at the same hotel in what amounted to a foreigner ghetto, plummeted.

Walker's agreement with the authorities conferred on Oxfam a favoured status. Alone among representatives of the distrusted and distrustful imperialist West, Oxfam was an ally and a symbol of genuine friendship, as well as a channel through which something of a Kampuchean case might be put. For the next weeks, Oxfam was to enjoy
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a honeymoon period of relations with the authorities. This certainly eased the path of the Consortium Team in obtaining permission to travel around and carry out their work.

In between Walker's negotiations at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs he toured hospitals and orphanages and visited two provincial headquarters. Tim Lusty, Oxfam's emergency health and nutrition expert, accompanied him. Like others, Walker was bowled over by the Pol Pot destruction, the grotesque evidence in Tuol Sleng prison, and the atrocities recounted by Khmer Rouge victims. Everywhere, he heard of ration shortages; one provincial Governor claimed that '50 per cent of my people are starving', another that '260,000 of my people are hungry'. However, outside hospitals and other crisis centres there was little evidence of this. Lusty was by now beginning seriously to question emotive interpretations and anecdotal estimates of need.

The shocking nature of so much that Walker saw and heard, together with his feeling for the people, reinforced his augmented sense of the Oxfam mission. At this stage, the fact that he and Tim Lusty, his famine relief advisor, had seen no evidence of massive starvation did not deflect him from the conviction that there was widespread and urgent need, both for food and other inputs. Walker put what might well be only a temporary 'lift' in people's condition down to the distribution of Vietnamese food aid.

Walker flew back to Britain on 10 October. Relations with UNICEF and ICRC reached their nadir when he was reported in the Bangkok press as confirming that the two organisations were about to be thrown out of the country. On his return to Oxford, Walker pressed ahead with his plans for the NGO Consortium. In Brussels on 19 October, he put before representatives of 31 agencies a proposal for a six-month programme of aid for Kampuchea on the basis of the agreement reached in Phnom Penh. His presentation of this – that pragmatic action had won the day and 'broken the logjam' – was accepted. Among the key Consortium partners were Dutch and German CARITAS, the Lutheran World Federation, and other Oxfams: US, Belgique, and Community Aid Abroad.

The initiative Walker proposed was daring. Every month, on an operation for one country, Oxfam was to organise expenditure to the tune of £2 million, more than one-fifth of its annual income. Its experience with huge supplies operations was nil; its Indo-China expertise, negligible; it was unused to working through government channels, especially in a centralised communist country; the Consortium framework was unfamiliar and untried. Nothing daunted, Walker's case and Kampuchea's plight won the day. It was a brilliant achievement.

In Phnom Penh, meanwhile, ICRC and UNICEF had finally managed
to reverse their fortunes and reach agreement with the authorities on mutually acceptable – if antagonistic – terms. On 13 October, a daily relief shuttle began from Bangkok and cargoes set off from various South-East Asian ports. Guy Stringer, arriving in Phnom Penh on 16 October in a convoy of 23 battered trucks full of rice, met the delegates and was told that their $104 million programme had been accepted. He wrote later: 'Obviously their success, which is very much in the interests of the people of Kampuchea, meant that we had to re-jig our plans from the massive food delivery and distribution programme which Brian Walker had foreseen under totally different circumstances, to a supportive programme of the more traditional Oxfam kind.' Having confirmed with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that there was no longer any problem over co-operation with ICRC and UNICEF, fences were mended. The possibility of two competitive and overlapping humanitarian programmes was ended.

The programme of the 'more traditional' kind Stringer meant was one that filled in gaps in, or supplemented in special ways, the efforts of the international heavyweights. However, in few other ways could it be described as 'traditional'. Lusty was setting up feeding programmes in Phnom Penh hospitals and orphanages according to the emergency format; this might be typical but nothing else was. But then nothing about Kampuchea could be done in a typical way because the circumstances were altogether extraordinary. In meetings at various Ministries it was settled that a textile mill and a fishing-net factory would be put back in order; hundreds of pumps and diesel fuel for irrigation would be sent; 1,000 orphanage 'kits' would be made up; large tonnages of seed and agricultural supplies would also come in on barges sent up from Singapore. UNICEF was bringing in a fleet of vehicles; Oxfam ordered another 50 trucks, to be air-freighted from Turkey.

The speed and the scale of the Kampuchean relief operation were in a different league from anything done by Oxfam in the past. The impact on the organisational psyche was similar to that of 20 years ago when the Congo famine was at its height; those then at Oxfam had felt as though they were playing leading parts in an international crusade. The effort for Kampuchea was similarly gaining a heroic and folkloric stature.

At the end of October, the already high rev counter of Kampuchean relief wound up to a level which put Oxfam under a degree of pressure close to breaking-point.

On 10 October, the Vietnamese army had launched a new offensive against the Khmer Rouge in the north-west of the country. By 27
October, 130,000 Kampucheans trapped by the fighting had fled across the border into Thailand, and another 120,000 were right behind. They were sick, starving, and in a lamentable condition. The Thai government finally declared an ‘open door’ policy provided the UN would accept responsibility for their food and shelter. The principle of ‘aid on both sides’ suddenly took on a new significance. The flow of refugees did not slacken for many weeks, reaching around 650,000 in early December. Unlike in Kampuchea, where access and information were extremely limited, the Thai border began to swarm with journalists, aid people, and prestigious visitors.

On 30 October, John Pilger’s documentary about Kampuchea, ‘Year Zero’, made back in August, was shown on ITV – transmission had been held up by a television strike. For the first time, the British public – and later others all over the world – saw in spellbinding and awful detail the horrors perpetrated by the Pol Pot regime. They learned about the threat of famine, a threat apparently confirmed by the state of the refugees flooding across the Thai border, now daily in the news. They saw Jim Howard interviewed in Phnom Penh; and at the end, Oxfam’s address and telephone number.

The next day, the BBC’s Blue Peter programme launched an appeal for Kampuchea focused on Oxfam shops. The identification with a named charity was an unprecedented step, as it had been for Pilger’s film. From 7.30am the following morning and for weeks to come, the telephones at Oxfam in Oxford and in offices and shops throughout the country were never silent.

The Pilger documentary alone raised £500,000, half of which was spent on the contents of Barge No. 4, departing 24 November. Blue Peter, which had hoped to raise £100,000, reached that amount in four days; the money was spent on trucks and a ferry. The appeal finally closed in December having brought in over £3 million.

The need to save Kampuchea from the jaws of death had now become a cause célèbre all over the Western world. Barges and trucks plying sea and air, rushing to the rescue thanks to the public’s heartfelt generosity, were the subject of daily media exposure. What was not subject to exposure, however, was the actual situation inside Kampuchea itself. In the two months which had passed since John Pilger had taken his footage, much had changed.

The authorities in Phnom Penh were not enjoying the fanfare of attention and scrutiny unleashed by their request for food to relieve a famine. They particularly disliked the spectacle of aid being given to people under the control of the various opposition groups up on the Thai border. They began to accuse the West of inventing the famine as a cover for resupplying the Khmer Rouge – whose legitimacy the Western
nations still formally recognised – and enabling the opposition to fight on. They also began to impose tighter restrictions on the movements of the limited number of Westerners present, and were less than free with information in spite of promises they had made about regular reports. All agency officials tried for months to organise a proper system for monitoring the use of their relief goods. None succeeded.

This was not surprising, given the lack of skilled people in every department of government and the damaged state of the entire administrative infrastructure. The agencies did their best to compromise with deficiencies, towards which – given what the country had endured – they were naturally sympathetic. Oxfam was especially so; they prided themselves on their close relations with many ministry officials, including the senior Vietnamese advisor in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who regularly visited for tea. They developed these contacts much as an Oxfam Field Director would normally build up relations with local project partners expecting, perhaps naively, to enjoy a similar influence over the way things were done.

Nothing was easy. Understaffed, overstretched, often emotionally overwrought, confined to a curious hot-house life in the Hotel Samaki, teams of relief workers were trying in chaotic circumstances to see to the safe landing of their supplies and delivery to the storage facilities of the Ministries supposed to get them to their respective destinations. Even this proved taxing. Oxfam’s primary concern, like that of the other agencies, was to develop a semblance of order in their programme. What was actually happening out in the villages was largely a matter of speculation. Few were in a position to make a sound judgement about whether or not, as the Vietnamese now claimed, the threat of famine was exaggerated.

Tim Lusty left Kampuchea in late October and, back in Oxford, wrote up his report on the nutritional and medical situation in early November. Lusty was inclined from professional experience to apply epidemiological techniques in famine situations rather than rely on his eyes and emotions. There was little hard data available, as he freely admitted. But the limited nutritional and agricultural assessments he had been able to undertake had convinced him that there was no serious threat of famine. He described the nutritional status in the areas he had visited as ‘fair to good’; in one of the orphanages where children had been described as ‘starving to death’, he had taken arm circumference measurements and found that ‘the general state of nutrition of this vulnerable group is very good, certainly better than in an average village in Wollo, Ethiopia, in non-famine times.’

There were certainly still great needs and ‘no room for complacency’; but he believed – although he did not recommend this as a basis for
planning – that the rural population could scrape through without food aid. He based this on Kampuchea’s fertility, the ingenuity of the people, and evidence of agricultural revival; he believed that the provision of Vietnamese or Soviet food aid had had at best a marginal effect. This was mostly being distributed in the towns and to government officials. Rice, in the absence of money, was still the medium of exchange and thus food aid had been used to pay wages and re-start market life in the towns.

With the crescendo mounting in Britain in the wake of ‘Year Zero’ and the *Blue Peter* appeal, Lusty’s report was not well-received in Oxford. The NGO Consortium was at a critical stage of formation; Oxfam was riding the wind. In New York, a special UN conference had been called for government donors to pledge funds for a re-estimated $250 million relief programme over the next 12 months. The statements of delegates were strongly influenced by the reports of journalists and embassy officials in Bangkok. They had all drawn the same conclusion: that the misery of refugees reaching the Thai border was typical of millions more inside Kampuchea. In Oxford, Lusty’s view that there was no serious threat of famine was disbelieved. A speaking tour to Oxfam supporter groups was cancelled; he was asked not to speak to the media.

Other Oxfam observers later confirmed his view. In mid-November, Malcolm Harper, the Oxfam Consortium Team Leader in Phnom Penh, and Hans Page, an FAO agriculturalist, were given permission to make the first extensive tour of the provinces undertaken by any Western aid official. They saw and heard of food shortages; but nowhere was there outright famine. Harper’s view was that ‘things could easily slip back very quickly’, but fishing and farming were reviving, and there was a roaring market in goods coming across the border from Thailand. Robert Mister, Oxfam’s Disasters Officer, made a similar trip in December, and reported: ‘I saw no evidence of famine, starvation or serious hunger. In fact, I found it hard to believe that there ever had been famine or starvation on a massive scale in the parts of the country I visited. It is, however, clear that there are serious food shortages.’

What had happened to the famine so confidently predicted? In the first place, the people of the Kampuchean countryside, however dislocated by events, had not abandoned farming life on the suicidal scale imagined. The tropical climate and natural productivity of the soil were allies of long familiarity. They had cultivated maize, cassava, bananas in garden plots; they harvested fish from rivers and lakes; and they did manage to bring in a rice crop in November amounting to around one-third of the required 900,000 tonnes, much more than the one-fifth anticipated. The authorities in Phnom Penh also cancelled the grain tax which would have normally been exacted from the farmers to
feed the towns and government officials. Whatever they produced, they kept.

Meanwhile, those in the war-stricken north-west still under the control of the Khmer Rouge were in a very different situation. It was these people, whose care Oxfam had decided to leave to others, who genuinely faced starvation. Their only source of aid was from across the border with Thailand via an informal land-bridge: tens of thousands of Kampucheans who trekked there by foot, bicycle, and cart, were issued with 20 kilos of food and 10 kilos of rice-seed per person. Because of such unpredictabilities, the principle of ‘aid above the political divide’ turned out to be not only philosophically, but practically, vital. Although Oxfam never reneged on its agreement not to help those on the Kampucheans side of the Thai border under Khmer Rouge control, it did provide a grant of £250,000 to UNHCR for child feeding in refugee camps inside Thailand in late December 1979.

Oxfam’s public commitment to the prediction of famine and the questionable way in which the subsequent hue and cry drove many of its actions was a lesson it absorbed in time. Without ‘two million dead by Christmas’, there might not have been such a compelling sense of the ‘need to break the logjam’, the need to compromise the principle of humanitarian neutrality might not have seemed so pressing, and the programme might have been more carefully and more economically planned. Much later, after Lusty’s view was redeemed, it became accepted practice in Oxfam that no such famine clamour again be mounted without the full sanction of its own professional emergency health staff.

By mid-December 1979, the question of what had happened to the famine was exercising those in Phnom Penh less than the question of what had happened to their aid.

In the docks at Kompong Som, much of the relief sent on the first two Oxfam barges and UNICEF/ICRC ships was still languishing undistributed. Vehicles were arriving, flown in at considerable expense in Oxfam’s case; but there were not enough signs of their deployment on delivery of food and medical supplies around the country. When reports began to appear in the press accusing the Vietnamese of wilful maldistribution and diversion, Western inclination to give the liberators of Kampuchea the benefit of the doubt about their intentions towards the Kampucheans people swiftly evaporated. They had declared a famine and asked the West for help; help had been sent and it was sitting in warehouses.

Worst affected were the international programme’s shiploads of food,
piling up at the rate of 30,000 tons a month in congested Kompong Som: Stringer's observations about port handling capacity in October had proved sadly accurate. The Consortium's barges, despatched from Singapore by Oxfam's Geoff Busby, were now travelling up the Mekong River and off-loading at the better-run port of Phnom Penh. But the international hue and cry again put all the agencies under great stress. The continued belief in the famine made the outside world doubly incensed; but to suggest that the famine had gone away was not only to suffer loss of credibility, but also to risk cutting off the flow of aid. Whatever the precise degree of immediate crisis, aid in quantity was sorely needed.

Food distribution was still the priority, as well as seed and irrigation equipment to promote agricultural recovery. To those in Phnom Penh, the dwindling threat of famine did not detract from the crying need for rehabilitation of every conceivable variety. Bad roads, poor logistics, continuing shortages of trucks, boats, and all the administrative confusion went a long way to explain shortcomings. But the reality was difficult to explain even to their own headquarters, let alone to an outside world whose understanding of complex relief programmes is not sophisticated and whose commitment is fickle at best. Oxfam, trying to reassure the British public that the aid they had given was not being abused, was inclined to downplay the authorities' failures.

During the early months of 1980, the Consortium's emphasis was on seed, for rice, maize and vegetables; over 100,000 hoe heads had already arrived, as had 200 irrigation pumps and 36,000 handsprayers. Rat poison and 500 tons of fertiliser arrived in January on the seventh barge. The agricultural consignments were dealt with by a Consortium Team member assigned by the Lutheran World Federation; an engineer was sent by Bread for the World. In February, Dr. Nick Maurice, a nutritionist, joined the team from Oxford.

By this time, relations with the government were growing considerably cooler. Gradually, the degree of like-mindedness between the authorities and Oxfam was dwindling. In April, a nutritional surveillance survey carried out by Maurice showed that one-quarter of children were malnourished. When this was brought to the attention of the authorities with a statement regarding the need for better food distribution, they took the gravest exception. Maurice's attempt to carry out nutritional survey training for health workers in the provinces was obstructed, and he returned to Oxford in some frustration. At this point Oxfam believed that the government was no longer meeting the terms agreed for monitoring the Consortium programme. Relations were restored following a threatened rupture and a visit by Walker in June; but it had become clear that the agencies worked in Kampuchea on
sufferance, and on terms which suited the centralised and socialist political agenda, or not at all.

In June 1980, when Jim Howard visited Kampuchea with John Pilger to follow up 'Year Zero' with an anniversary television documentary, he was amazed by the improvements they found. 'The changes were quite breath-taking and show the incredible tenacity of human beings to survive and recover when given even modest opportunities and assistance.' Everyone had begun to feel that the crisis in the country was essentially over, or at least that it was on a secure hold. After this, the programme settled down and became less highly-charged. The crusade was over; but not before a few scales had fallen from certain eyes, nor before Oxfam had entered into a lasting love affair with the Kampuchean people.

By the end of 1980, the Oxfam-led Consortium programme for Kampuchean relief had brought into the country supplies worth £12-13 million, and 43 barges had shipped out of Singapore. The largest component was agricultural goods, including £4 million worth of seed for the 1980 planting. The second largest was 190 trucks and other transport items worth £2.25 million. £2 million had been spent on food; £1.3 million on industrial items. Freight had added around £3 million.

The Consortium wound up its operations in mid-1981. Oxfam set up a country office of its own and continued to support the long process of Kampuchean recovery. In the strange circumstances of that politically isolated land, it was always far from 'a traditional Oxfam programme'. Instead of projects carefully targeted towards the poor – employing OXWORP-type 'community contact persons' or sending Mistry to advise villagers about forming co-operative societies – the major emphasis was on infrastructural repair. There were large grants for Phnom Penh's waterworks, industrial plant, rural water supplies, irrigation equipment, and spare parts. This is not Oxfam's chosen type of programme. But while the Vietnamese occupation continued, and while the parties to the continuing civil war failed to reach a settlement, no support for Kampuchea from the international economic community was forthcoming. If humanitarian agencies like Oxfam had not been willing to help, no-one else would have done.

In 1983, Oxfam's Asia Committee commissioned an evaluation of the 1979-81 Kampuchea Oxfam-NGO Consortium relief operation. It was undertaken by Tigger Stack, connected to Oxfam since the Bihar famine in 1966 and a participant in the maelstrom of activity which took over the organisation at the height of the Kampuchea pandemonium. The task proved virtually impossible. By the standards of accountability
normally applied in Oxfam – whose standards for regular project funding are high – much of the programme and its style of management was subject to criticism.

There were over-expenditures; there was operational confusion; there was political naivety; expectations of Oxfam’s partnership with government were misplaced; above all there was a failure to recognise what pressures such a vast, unprecedented programme would place on Oxfam and expand administrative capacity fast enough to meet them. There had been great strains within Oxfam during much of the emergency period. Now they were re-evoked. Stack’s report was too painful; it was not widely circulated.

In time, Oxfam undertook a reappraisal of emergency procedures, and changes were introduced. But as Stack herself suggested, an attempt to extract ‘lessons learnt’ from many of the judgements in her report was almost an irrelevant exercise. In every way, Kampuchea was an exception. Many rules in the regular book had gone out of the window because it had been necessary to react creatively once the Kampuchean engagement was joined; therefore, the rules normally governing evaluation could not be applied. If Oxfam functioned according to the careful planning and administrative routines which would allow such an operation to run on rails, it would not be the organisation that it is. If a day comes on which the reports of a Jim Howard and a John Pilger could not set the Oxfam torch aflame, part of its soul will have died. Oxfam is ultimately a vehicle of British compassion towards suffering people overseas; in that capacity it performed heroically for the people of Kampuchea in 1979.

The Kampuchea crisis brought Oxfam a new visibility, high prestige, and a vastly greater income; some people on the international scene – who did not previously take such organisations very seriously – regarded the crisis as the time at which ‘the NGOs came of age’. Walker’s vision had propelled Oxfam into a stage of growth more dramatic than even he could have envisaged.

For people from the top to the bottom of the organisation and in partner organisations overseas; people in Britain, Singapore, and Phnom Penh; for people who had given their all for stricken Kampuchea, who had brought off incredible coups, who had done their best in chaotic and pressurised circumstances, who had felt great pride in the way Oxfam had risen to the challenge of a late 1970s holocaust, this was its finest hour.
By the late 1970s, the euphoria which had blown through Africa in the aftermath of independence had faded. The excitement of nation-building, of ujamaa and the other new doctrines of the freedom era, had slowly evaporated as their promise remained unfulfilled.

Disillusion came earliest in the political sphere. The crisis in the Congo and the Nigerian civil war – the events which first familiarised a mass audience in the West with the shocking face of famine and placed Oxfam’s name prominently before the British public – turned out to be the foretaste of a contagion of wars, coups and secessionist movements. The 1970s witnessed bloody internal conflicts in Burundi, Chad, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Uganda, many prompting clashes with neighbouring states. They caused terrible hardship and human dislocation. For Oxfam these crises frequently provoked emergency response, particularly where people were forced onto the move and fetched up, empty-handed, in relief camps.

Away in the south, the political struggle ground on in the pre-independence format. Rhodesian UDI in 1965 and Portuguese intransigence until 1975 blocked the onward rush of African freedom. During the 1970s, armed liberation struggle, first in Mozambique and Angola, then in Zimbabwe and Namibia, was a main regional preoccupation. After 1975, South Africa’s reaction to the advent of black socialistic regimes in countries on her borders, and the pressures building up inside her own society, was external destabilisation and internal clampdown. Social and economic progress in the ‘Frontline States’ was inhibited, in some places destroyed. As time went by, Oxfam found itself increasingly drawn into the human ramifications of apartheid’s last stand in the one remaining minority-dominated white redoubt.

In the rest of the continent, Africa’s patchwork of peoples faced a longer journey than those in other developing regions to become card-carrying members of the industrialised world. Development thinking was long dominated by the idea that what was required to make Africa
'catch up' was a transplant of Western technology and the instant construction of institutions which mirrored those of the colonial alma mater. There was neither time nor need for the paraphernalia of the modern economic state to grow organically; it could be parachuted in courtesy of aid and earnings from African minerals and agricultural commodities.

In the West, countries like Britain saw aid largely as a form of subsidised exports and long-term investment on concessionary terms. Africa's leaders were receptive. They had fought for independence to run the economic machinery set up by the colonisers – plantations, mines, mills, office blocks, governors' palaces – in the interests of Africans, not to dismantle it. The fact that its design connected it to international markets and financial systems instead of to the primeval ways of the African plains was seen as a blessing, not as a curse.

Thus, while the inherited political clothing was being cast off or patched beyond recognition, the economic clothing remained essentially intact. Until the mid-1970s, rapid rates of industrialisation and economic growth – some as high as 15 per cent a year – obscured the fact that the economic clothing was as poorly-tailored for its developmental role. Only after the shock of the 1974 oil crisis, along with the gradual realisation that terms of trade were never going to move significantly in Africa's favour, did it become obvious to those who examined these matters that you could not deposit modernisation, Western-style, onto an economic foundation as fragile as that in most of sub-Saharan Africa and expect it to flourish.

Gradually, the purveyors of official aid began to decry 'our failures in Africa'. Their almost exclusive focus on a small, modern, economic plateau, marooned above an ocean of semi-subsistence living, came under fire from all those who took part in the reappraisals of the 1970s and debunked the myth that the benefits of growth automatically 'trickled down' to the poor. A handful of Africans had managed to adopt the automobile-and-verandah lifestyle of the old colonial masters while most of the rest were still making do with huts and headloads. Power stations, showpiece hospitals, cement factories towering like cathedrals over the bush: nowhere in the world were such infrastructural totems more conspicuously irrelevant to most people's lives.

There was no connection between the economy of the jumbo-jet, and that of two hectares of maize and one of sorghum. Indeed, the planners had behaved as if the economy of Africa's subsistence producers did not exist. Traces of it might fleetingly be seen, in the interstices of crop production or cattle sales. Only in a handful of countries – Tanzania was the chief example – was the condition of the majority of people living in the rural hinterland the chosen focus of public policy. The fact that the
dynamics of the thatched hut economy, especially the contribution of its women members, had not been taken into account was one reason why many development ventures had proved so ill-conceived. In time, this realisation led the official aid community to look more carefully at projects funded by the voluntary agencies. Their activities were by their nature concerned with those living at or close to subsistence, and interacted with the economy the least well-off were living in rather than the one described in the national plan. Aid from charitable organisations, by definition, was designed to be poverty-focused.

Through the 1970s Oxfam’s grants to Africa mostly consisted of the good old traditional kind to clinics, flying doctors, school gardens, leprosaria, vocational workshops, and the occasional VSO-type technical team (notably in Zaire and Zambia). Projects were typically run by expatriates, most belonging to Christian missions. There were almost no indigenous organisations to work with: one or two enterprising village councils in West Africa; women’s self-help networks in Kenya; Tanzania’s Community Development Trust Fund; white-led welfare groups in Rhodesia and South Africa. Signals of a new direction came from Tanzania, and from parts of West Africa where ‘animation rurale’ drew its inspiration from a similar spring as conscientisation.

Some mistakes of the white elephant variety were made at the Oxfam level: broken pumps with nobody to mend them, high grade bulls stewing in the cooking pot, maize-shellers run by bicycle power which no-one would use because only women shelled maize and only men rode bicycles. The Africa hands did their best to correct the errors, setting off by Landrover for the bush where they tinkered with breeds and seeds and water-lifting devices copied from 19th century manuals.

Like counterparts elsewhere, Oxfam Field Directors in Africa began to use terms such as ‘technologically appropriate’, ‘cost-benefit’, and ‘self-sufficiency’. But their perspective, fixed in the semi-subsistence world of the African farmer, was mostly dislocated from the national development scene and the national balance sheet. By the same token, the national planners as yet took little account of what the humanitarians were up to. In the micro-project vineyard, life went on virtually untouched by rumblings in the political and economic firmament. Gradually, this was to change.

The first influence was the massive demand of emergencies. In 1973, six years of poor rains in the countries of the Sahel, the southern fringe of the Sahara, climaxed in a pasturage crisis which decimated livestock herds and brought starvation to 250,000 people. In the same year, drought in the northern Ethiopian provinces of Wollo and Tigray triggered a famine which cost 200,000 lives and, because of a television documentary by Jonathan Dimbleby, horrified the world. For Oxfam,
these two ‘natural’ calamities opened a new, more intense, chapter in Africa.

One aspect was the scale and type of disaster response: in Ethiopia’s famine camps, Oxfam medical people – notably Tim Lusty and Susan Peel – were closely involved in improving the methodology of emergency feeding for malnourished children, building upon the experience of Biafra and Bengal. This was repeated and enlarged upon in the refugee camps set up for nomadic ethnic Somalis from Ethiopia’s Ogaden region, dislodged first by Somalia’s disastrous Ethiopian military adventure in 1978, later by prolonged drought. When famine struck the Karamajong people of northern Uganda in 1980, Oxfam again fielded a team operation, running supplementary feeding centres in conjunction with SCF and UNICEF.

The close involvement in African emergencies led to the realisation that not only in a war did a famine have to be ‘man-made’, or at least ‘man-influenced’. The tragedies in Ethiopia, the Sahel, Somalia and Uganda were blamed not only on the weather, but on national and international neglect of peoples whose fate was marginal to the political and economic interests of those manipulating the levers of power. A closer look showed up something even more fundamental: the iniquitous impact of the forces of modernity – or ‘development’ – on ancient environmental equilibrium.

The crisis in the Sahelian countries was so severe that few governments survived it; in Ethiopia, famine cost Emperor Haile Selassie’s ruling dynasty its 2,000-year-old throne, and set in train years of strife and social breakdown. Population pressure on land becoming over-grazed and over-cropped, unaccompanied by any organised form of input into family agriculture, was beginning to overwhelm the farming base. Agricultural investment – what little there was – went into large-scale farms and plantations, mainly for non-food crops. Even when the rains returned to the Saharan fringe, the Ethiopian highlands, the Ogaden plains and other climatically vulnerable places, life limped along within steadily eroding margins.

Throughout the 1970s, although food production per head failed to keep pace with population growth and terms of trade worsened, some African countries still kept their economic chins up. The living standards of many people continued to improve, modestly. Housing, education, health, and social services managed – just – to expand. An upcoming generation of well-educated Africans waited in the wings. Talk of ‘basic needs’ and ‘poverty-relieving strategies’ prodded some investment into drains and schools instead of flyovers and factories. Gradually, it seemed, the dislocated development worlds were moving closer together. In Tanzania and Malawi, for example, Oxfam Field Directors
began to examine how to support the spread of primary health care within the national plan. The British Overseas Development Administration (ODA) began to support, through co-funding with Oxfam, simple training courses for Zairean cultivators in such arts as mulching, ridging, and rotation of crops. The poor, in their own right, were finally becoming a focus of wider attention.

In the early 1980s, the economic storm clouds began to build more ominously than before. As world recession struck, the house of cards against which Africa borrowed and Western institutions invested collapsed. The airports and highways, the showpiece hospitals and convention centres, could not be paid for, could not be maintained. Compromising its development prospects still further, Africa slid deeply into debt; and the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) which have since been supposed to pull countries out of it have undermined social services, raised the cost of imports, sent prices soaring. Even the traditional economy began to buckle. ‘We are SAPped,’ say the women in a West African market town.

For women, above all, the burden of development failure in Africa has been heavy. At times of upheaval, those who fetch up in the camp destinations of last resort are the weakest: the elderly and disabled; above all, the women and children. The menfolk stay with the cattle, or with the rustlers, or with the rebel army. When the family plot or the ancestral grazing grounds can no longer yield enough to fill the family larder, the men go off to the mines or the towns, leaving the women to farm the plot and manage the household on their own. In spite of women’s central role in family food production, many projects with an economic or agricultural focus – improved seed, training, fertiliser, credit – have been heavily biased in favour of men. Meanwhile, it is women who feel most strongly the impact of environmental degradation as they are obliged to walk further to fetch fuel and water. In the 1980s, Oxfam began to address the role of women in projects and programming more carefully; a Gender and Development Unit was set up in 1985, and since then not only have women recipients’ needs been addressed more systematically, but more women project staff have been taken on.

Africa’s poverty statistics have always been searing. Here are to be found 29 of the world’s 36 poorest countries; the highest average rates of infant mortality, the commonest incidence of child undernutrition, the lowest life expectancy, the worst illiteracy rates. Yet as any traveller in Africa knows, however basic the village lifestyle might be, however narrow its margins, and however empty its pockets of the usual means of exchange, the word ‘poverty’ with all its Dickensian overtones can seem pejorative and misapplied.

There is self-respect and independent-mindedness, still, in much of
traditional Africa of a type unusual in the brutal squalor of urban poverty, the rural slum of a plantation settlement, or the beggary of landlessness. These qualities do not show up in the economic and social statistics; yet they have borne the thatched hut economy on their shoulders and seen its members through bad times even as the jumbo-jet economy was begging for loans and mortgaging its future. In the past, the balance between humankind and nature maintained a rural lifestyle which might be desperately poor by Western material standards but at least was self-sufficient, self-contained.

The problem is now that the reverberations from a political economy inimical to the interests of these ‘poor’ have disrupted that balance. Not wealth but poverty – in the form of pauperisation, especially of women – is what has trickled down. Africa’s ultimate safety-net, the relationship between land and people, is collapsing. Nowhere in the world is the unskilled, undereducated, and underemployed population of urban squatter settlements expanding so fast as in Africa. More than 10 million Africans, two-thirds of the world’s toll of refugees, have been uprooted. Most camp in mud and wattle shanties along borders and in wastelands, living precariously on innate resourcefulness and hand-outs.

In the course of this heartbreaking chapter of African history, Oxfam and fellow agencies have found themselves groping after a new development role in Africa. During the 1980s, with more resources at its disposal and a wider set of horizons, Oxfam outgrew the ‘project-by-project on its merits’ approach which simply addressed small, unconnected oases of need. It looked for ways in which positive experiences in the intricate workings of the semi-subsistence world could be transferred into other locations or onto plans grander in dimension than its own: what it described as ‘scaling up’. It borrowed from experience elsewhere, helping local organisational capacity to emerge. It worked with the international big league in an effort to find ideas which worked for people, especially for women, as well as for national balance sheets.

Above all, Oxfam sought out partners trying to build new networks of mutual support based on adaptations of ancient survival skills so that the old indomitable spirit of Africa could yet win through.

A striking example of effective Oxfam aid is to be found in Burkina Faso, the country which used to be Upper Volta, in the dryland zone of the Sahel.

Twenty years ago, the Yatenga plateau, home of the Mossi people, was covered with woods and vegetation. Today much of the landscape is bare: denuded of trees, soil baked hard or turned to dust. The change
is partly due to declining rainfall, which reached an all-time low in the
drought of 1983-84. But population and economic pressures have encouraged creeping desertification.

The Mossi have always cultivated on a shifting basis, clearing a
stretch of grass and woodland to grow crops and moving on after a year
or two to let the land recover. Fallow periods used to last for up to 20
years. But as the human and animal population grew, these became
shorter and the demands of livestock on pasture more severe. The plant
cover shielding the soil was destroyed, and the torrential downpours of
the rainy season washed exposed topsoil away. Farming ways which
used to be in league with the landscape suddenly became its despoiler.
Patches of hard earth with a clay skim began to appear, spreading across
the Yatenga like an infection.

After the drought of 1973-74, the Mossi farmers of Yatenga began to
notice that their land was dying. Some resorted to an old technique of
containing soil by piling stones in lines across eroded fields and gullies.
Outsiders who came to help focused on the fate of the trees. Not only
was their loss contributing to desertification, but was presenting the
women with a serious domestic fuel problem.

In 1979, Bill Hereford, Oxfam's Field Director in the Sahel, hired a
forester, Arlene Blade. At first she encouraged farmers to grow trees,
using a technique she had studied in the Negev Desert. Species of many
kinds - shade, nuts, fruit, fodder, and especially fuel - were planted
within semi-circles of stones positioned along field boundaries and
designed to trap water around their roots. But it gradually became clear
that the farmers were more interested in harvesting water for food
production; it could not be spared for trees.

A new project director, Peter Wright, turned his attention to the
traditional lines-of-stones across the ground. If these were built more
solidly and aligned with the contours of the land, they dammed up
rainwater for up to ten yards behind, enabling it to soak in even where
the soil had formed a crust. The problem was the contour alignment. The
terrain's undulations were so gentle that they were hardly visible to the
eye. Without surveying instruments, the Mossi could not position their
stone lines efficiently. Wright concocted a supremely simple landscape
spirit-level: a clear hosepipe filled with water. The hosepipe was
attached at each end to a stake, and the stakes moved about until the
water level equalised; the stones were laid from stake to stake. This
instrument cost all of £3.50.

This stone dyke, or diguette, technique first emerged in 1981. By the
following year, 15 villages were dyking their fields. In the disastrous
drought years of 1983 and 1984, treated land produced crops when
adjoining fields grew nothing. There could be no better advertisement:
snaking lines of stones had managed to draw crops from land otherwise lost to cultivation. The *diguettes* retained soil particles and organic matter to nourish the soil, as well as precious water. Millet crops improved by 50 per cent.

Oxfam spread the technique by running two- to three-day training courses for farmers in contouring and the use of the hosepipe level. In 1984-5, Peter Wright and a Bourkinabe colleague, Mathieu Ouedraogo (subsequently manager of the programme), trained 600 farmers from 30 villages. The courses were in great demand; the technique began to spread. The Naam movement, Burkina Faso’s largest voluntary association, has since proselytised the idea among its 1,400 member groups. Oxfam itself held seminars and organised visits from farmers in other parts of the country. It has caught on as far away as Mali and Northern Ghana. This example of widespread consumer-driven development cost Oxfam a total of £350,000.

Some of the Yatenga farmers have now begun to grow trees in the *diguettes*. A decade after the project was launched as a tree and desert-reclaiming exercise, the people themselves have reached the point where its original idea is now embraced as their own next stage of agroconservation.

Another similarly successful enterprise, also launched in the Yatenga plateau, was a scheme for village cereal banks. The banks consist of village storerooms, constructed with the help of loans from Oxfam. But the buildings are not the critical part. The point of the programme was to enable farmers to retain control over their economic lifeblood – their food crop, which also served as their main means of exchange; to trade and speculate in such a way that they did not become the victims of other people’s market and pricing arrangements.

Immediately after the annual harvest when prices are at their seasonal lowest, African farmers normally sell part of their crop to the grain merchants in order to pay off their inputs. This means that, months later in the hungry season, they are obliged to buy back food grains from him at scarcity prices. The cereal banks that Oxfam supported, not only in Burkina but subsequently elsewhere, enabled the villagers to cut out the middleman. In the Burkina scheme, each village received an initial loan of 250,000 CFA (£466) to buy grain, mainly from farmers in their own community. If they did well enough in the first year to pay back a part of the loan, a second instalment materialised, and a grant to construct a simple cereal store: no building before an indication of sound financial management.

Five village cereal banks were launched tentatively in 1983, a year in which the harvest proved a disaster. An even worse season in 1984 underlined the need to enter into purchasing agreements with farmers in
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food-surplus areas elsewhere. The villagers, or rather the men since the banks are so far entirely male-dominated, swiftly caught on to the novel idea of travelling outside their vicinity to deal in foodstuffs. All the banks succeeded. ‘The main reason’, reported the Oxfam Field Director in 1986, ‘is that their revolving fund really does revolve. They continually buy and sell cereals, profiting from the change in prices.’

Here was another case where people’s own abilities had been given rein on the basis of small, manageable inputs which enabled them to develop confidence and organisational capacity. The results in terms of village numbers might be modest, but the model was viable and could be repeated. In 1987 Oxfam provided £7,556 for another five banks. The scale seems tiny, the sums absurdly low; but they illustrate the value of small beginnings, and how important it is for the economic worlds of donor and receiver to connect. Most official aid agencies cannot afford to spend time and trouble dispensing such small sums of money to a handful of communities. This is where, at their best, voluntary agencies such as Oxfam can trailblaze approaches which allow those locked into the shrinking traditional economy to cross the modernity divide.

Up until the 1980s the search for ‘alternatives’ within Oxfam’s Africa programme was fairly restricted. One notable exception was in the field of savings and credit, where Oxfam identified a need to teach people newly initiated to the cash economy – especially women – how to deploy money for family investment and security. Another area in which Oxfam was up among the pioneers was in its support to primary health care – simple preventive health for the many – within medical mission programmes, initially in Malawi, later in Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Zambia. But for various reasons, some internal and some to do with the business of Africa being ‘different’, Oxfam came to the challenge of structural poverty and working with non-expatriate partners – as well as employing indigenous staff – later in Africa than elsewhere.

The turning point came when, as the new decade arrived, white domination in the southern part of the continent suffered an important reversal. In April 1980, Zimbabwe became the latest independent nation to ‘emerge’ on the continent. From this event stemmed an important evolution in Oxfam’s southern African policy and a move towards a new style of African programme generally.

Up until Zimbabwean independence, Oxfam’s attitude towards the southern African liberation movements had been one of resolute Quakerish fence-sitting. Grants had been given both in Rhodesia and the Republic of South Africa for school-based feeding and agricultural training since the 1950s, and for people directly hurt by apartheid such
as families of those killed at Sharpeville in 1960. But the liberation movements were another matter. With the rarest of exceptions, involvement with the humanitarian activities of those who had taken up arms against white rule was scrupulously avoided on political grounds.

As the guerrilla war inside Rhodesia intensified in the late 1970s, and many rural people were herded into 'protected villages' or fled across the borders into camps run by the liberation movements ZANU and ZAPU, the question of whether Oxfam should help the refugees became pressing.

In parts of the world remote to British interests, it seemed possible to distinguish between the humanitarian and the political strands enmeshing aid for victims of conflict – at least in the eyes of British supporters. In Central America and Cambodia (where crisis erupted simultaneously with the final stage of the Zimbabwean struggle), keeping the strands separate could be extremely tricky; but if they did become tangled in the view of certain groups on the ground, and Oxfam-associated people or projects found themselves accused of being partisan, at least there was no echoing resonance of controversy at home. In Britain, Oxfam did not feature its work in Central America in fundraising literature, and until the late 1980s, at home the programme went unchallenged.

In parts of the world tied by history to British hearts and pockets, it was another story altogether. In all those countries of white-ruled southern Africa not previously run by the Portuguese there were close British business, professional, and family connections, and major British foreign policy considerations. In such circumstances, uncoupling 'the relief of suffering' from its underlying political dimensions in the eyes both of those on the ground and their allies back home, was almost impossible. As the demands for majority rule in southern Africa intensified, it became progressively more so.

For those in the countries affected, fence-sitting was untenable. The question, simply put, was: 'Whose side are you on?' In 1978, Mozambique made it clear to Oxfam that its aid was unwelcome because, from its perspective, Oxfam was tarnished by its links to projects run by Rhodesian and South African whites. Early in 1979, the question of whether it was a political act to give humanitarian support to refugees from the internal Rhodesian conflict caused echoing conflict within Oxfam's Africa Committee. It was eventually agreed that the principle of neutrality – aid on either or both sides solely on the basis of need, conditional on access for inspection of use – should be applied, as was consistent with Oxfam’s charitable objects and basic philosophy of non-discrimination. This decision turned out to be the prelude for others.
In July 1976, Brian Walker had sought the trustees' approval for an expanded Oxfam programme in South Africa. At this time there had been riots by students in Soweto against the imposition of Afrikaans as the language of instruction in school, followed by the rise of the Black Consciousness Movement. Walker, with his background of bridge-building amidst the troubles in Northern Ireland, was determined that Oxfam would not duck the increasing problems of operating a programme in the Republic. He won the trustees' approval for the appointment of a Field Director for South Africa, Joe Parsons, based in Lesotho (as had been Jimmy Betts many years before). The following year a black South African field worker, Alex Mbatha, was also taken on although he was formally employed by the South African Catholic Bishops' Conference.

Parsons consolidated links with those organisations whose work included welfare and education alongside their human rights and political activities. To protect those involved, most of his work and contacts were kept confidential. However, not everything was 'under wraps'. For example, Oxfam gave help for women and children dumped in the impoverished homelands, eking out existence on remittances from migrant-worker husbands. Oxfam also supported projects for women domestic servants, a category of workers with no legal rights or protection, miserable levels of pay, no family life of their own, and no educational or social opportunities. In time, SADWU (the South African Domestic Workers' Union) was to attract a membership of nearly one million; Oxfam paid salaries and costs for social workers.

After the murder of Steve Biko in 1977, Oxfam came under considerable pressure from anti-apartheid campaigners to cut off its South African grants and pull out with a loud public fanfare. That Walker insisted that Oxfam stay on and work inside an increasingly repressive South Africa, whatever the problems, was greatly to his credit, indicating a commitment to helping the disadvantaged in South Africa no matter how unacceptable the ideology of the regime under which they suffered. In mid-1979, he decided to articulate an Oxfam policy towards victims of conflict and political oppression.

Not only in southern Africa but in Central America, armed conflict was increasingly disrupting the Oxfam programme. Sandanista forces were on the point of overthrowing President Somoza, and the fall-out from the Nicaraguan revolution was polarising reformist and reactionary groups all over the region. The long nightmare of death squads and disappearances of individuals who championed the interests of the poor was descending on El Salvador and Guatemala.

In some parts of the world, educators and health workers working for church or voluntary groups could be routinely harassed, even
The island of Bidong, Malaysia, home to 42,000 Vietnamese boat people in 1979. Uncollected rubbish and human waste created a public health nightmare, which Oxfam helped to solve.

Phnom Penh, Kampuchea (now Cambodia), late 1979: a ghost town.

Roads and bridges in the Kampuchean countryside were wrecked or damaged, increasing the extreme difficulties of relief distribution.
Oxfam's intrepid Deputy Director Guy Stringer landed in Kampuchea in October 1979, having captained a barge full of relief supplies across the South China Seas. With interpreter Sopheak and Kampuchean officials.

The first Oxfam barge, the 'Asiatic Success', with the first sizeable relief cargo into Kampuchea, unloading at Kompong Som, a port closed to the world for five years.

M.D. Mistry, left, joined Oxfam's India staff in 1979. He set a new pattern in programme style and content among poor villagers, emphasising local organisation.
Oxfam's 'Wastesaver' centre in Huddersfield, set up in 1975, was an effort to alchemise household waste into development aid. Sorting rag for industrial use.


Nomadic refugees from Somalia arrive in Derwenagi camp in Ethiopia, 1991. In the foreground, an Oxfam 'fly it in and put it up in hours' emergency water tank.
The independence of Zimbabwe, 1980, opened a new Oxfam chapter in southern Africa. 74 Sithembiso Nyoni (right), consultant on rural community development, with colleagues.

75 Tea break in a training session for women run by ORAP, Nyoni's non-governmental network for rural progress in Matabeleland.
‘The Campaign for Rational Health’ was based on an Oxfam study into the supply and use of pharmaceutical products in the Third World. Dianna Melrose, centre left, presents signatures to the ‘Rational Health Declaration’ to Minister of Health Kenneth Clarke, centre right, 1984.

Chico Mendes, chairman of the Rural Workers’ Union in Xapuri, Amazonia. His organisational work to defend the living of the rubber-tappers of the Brazilian forests was supported by Oxfam in the 1980s, but Mendes was murdered in 1988.

22 October 1985, 20,000 people lined up outside the House of Commons, Westminster. The largest-ever lobby of the British Parliament was on the subject of Britain’s poor aid and development record.
The campaign for greater international recognition and response to the plight of the Cambodian people was the subject of Charity Commission criticism in their 1991 report on Oxfam.

Protesting: Sir Russell Johnston MP left Jim Lester MP third from left, Mary Cherry, Oxfam Chair third from right, and Ann Clwyd MP far right, with supporters.

82 In the aftermath of the Gulf War: suffering among the civilian population, and humanitarian relief on a tight rein. Frank Judd visits Kurdish areas in northern Iraq on his last field trip as Oxfam Director, November 1991.

83 India has always been in the vanguard of Oxfam’s development learning and programme experience. In conference with Indian project partners and staff: David Bryer, Oxfam’s fifth Director.
persecuted; the people they helped, forced to flee, even killed. In such places the forces supporting the status quo were upholding it with violence, usually without the formal backing of the law although with the complicity of law enforcement agents; uniquely in the case of South Africa, with legal backing. Where this was the case, the Oxfam mission to tackle, where practical, both the causes and effects of human suffering could not wholly escape the overlap between removing obstacles to people’s development, and protecting their human rights.

Drawing upon ‘Oxfam, An Interpretation’, Walker attempted to set up a conceptual and practical framework in which Oxfam could pursue solidarity with the poor in situations where their interests were being violently opposed, and yet remain within the charity law. He tried to steer an acceptable course with the Charity Commissioners, while recognising that poverty and rights issues were often inextricably interlinked and that this conundrum was very vexing from the point of view of charity law. With modifications, the paper was accepted by the Oxfam trustees in July 1979. This was the policy statement that articulated Oxfam’s notion of humanitarian neutrality – need above the political divide; in the case of Latin America, it was thought of as an effort to carve out ‘humanitarian space’ in which to work, without being ideologically labelled. Such labelling tended to arise from the fact that, in certain circumstances, Oxfam might only be able to provide help for people in need via an organisation – such as a union branch or local political association – whose primary function was not philanthropic.

In the autumn, a settlement to the 15-year long Rhodesian crisis was brokered at the Lancaster House conference in London. In January 1980, Michael Behr, the most senior member of Oxfam’s Africa staff, went to what was soon to become Zimbabwe to explore the possibilities of an Oxfam programme. He began by employing several expatriate doctors to restart medical services in rural areas whose mission hospitals had been closed because of war, and by supporting rehabilitation for the many thousands of people disabled by injury.

With formative West African experience behind him, Behr wanted to avoid in Zimbabwe simply responding to requests and letting the Oxfam ‘programme’ grow into a string of disconnected projects scattered about the countryside. He also wanted to avoid the usual state of friendly anarchy developing within the donor NGO community, whereby each vied to show off ‘their’ projects, all applying different rules about how much money to give, what it was supposed to achieve, and how the recipients should answer for their use of it. Thus, in the third area he selected for Oxfam involvement – rural development – he took time trying to find the way to assist.

Behr, who had a strong presence and tended to be outspoken, made it
clear to Oxford that he did not find it easy to establish links with Zimbabwean allies. He felt, in retrospect, that Oxfam had failed to grasp the depth of feeling with which the rural population had supported the independence movement, and the suffering experienced by those forced into protected villages or exile. The fence-sitting sustained almost until the very end provoked distrust of Oxfam's motivation among people now courted but previously ignored.

Zimbabwe's biggest problem was the vast wealth disparity between whites – and a few blacks – operating in the modern economy, and the rural poor relegated to impoverished and over-crowded 'tribal trustlands'. Oxfam's pet project of the past – the promotion of savings clubs – had appeared to condone the availability of credit and agricultural services for wealthy white farmers while expecting black farmers to make do with only their own meagre resources to pay for modern inputs.

Behr's perspective was strongly influenced by the Zimbabweans whom he brought into the Oxfam fold early on. One of these was Peter Nyoni, who later became Oxfam's first African Field Director; another was Sithembiso Nyoni. As a consultant to Oxfam, Sithembiso Nyoni developed a 'new strategy' for rural development in Zimbabwe. This was of great significance for the different type of role in Africa Oxfam was seeking. Her approach, forged in the fire of the independence struggle, centred on helping poor people understand and overcome their powerlessness in the face of the forces controlling their lives. 'Participation' was Nyoni's word, but she meant something close to conscientisation.

In 1981, Nyoni set up a Zimbabwean non-governmental development network called ORAP, the Organisation of Rural Associations for Progress, with headquarters in Bulawayo. ORAP's field workers helped village associations develop themselves; they did not merely reward communities – as NGOs had in the past – with a package of inputs (seed, fertiliser) if they agreed to co-operate by digging contour ridges and building feeder roads. Many associations grew out of committees which had been active during the war, when they had helped solve village problems as well as shelter guerrillas. They already had experience in running their own affairs. And they did not want the old paternalistic ways. As Nyoni put it: 'They do not want the kind of development that trains them to be good beggars and imitators of other people's way of life.'

Although Michael Behr was closely involved in ORAP, Oxfam wanted to avoid being 'in charge' and the initial funding came from War on Want. In 1982, however, Oxfam provided £59,000 for an office, field staff, and funds for group projects. By the following year, 220 villages were in the ORAP network.
ORAP's operational area was in Matabeleland, the old ZAPU stronghold. Many village groups endured terrible times during the period in 1982-83 when 'dissident' activity became the target of heavy security crackdown. The Zimbabwean government took Oxfam to task for favouring the Matabele people with the majority of its aid, to which Oxfam's response was that in the selection of recipients, poverty was the criterion, not tribal affiliation. Behr and a group of concerned agency representatives, including Walt Johnson of Oxfam America, went to see President Mugabe in an effort to protect ORAP's people. They protested that although ORAP was a popular grassroots movement it was in no sense political. Behr told the Africa Committee in April 1983: 'It is vital at this difficult time that organisations such as Oxfam do not waver.' Oxfam did not do so, committing around £210,000 to ORAP over the next few years.

In 1985, Sithembiso Nyoni addressed an Oxfam staff conference in Britain, and made a powerful impression. She described how ORAP attempted to express the vision of rural people themselves, the way they and their ideas, not 'projects' designed and deposited from outside, must be the starting point. 'Organisations like Oxfam have got to be clear about what exactly we are doing. Are we helping people to participate in their own oppression and to live in the ghettos; are we entrenching that which they have been and the confusion in which they find themselves? Or are we helping people to liberate themselves?'

Liberation: in southern Africa, the word and the issue were never far away.

In the early 1980s, following Behr's appointment in Zimbabwe, there was a gradual changing of the Oxfam guard in southern African. A new generation of Field Directors, and an intake of African field staff, began to make the country programmes more coherent and address wider policy issues. They also demanded that Oxfam take a clearer stance on aid to victims and casualties of the liberation struggle.

Zimbabwean independence had acted as a stimulus to the fight for freedom in Namibia and South Africa. But most of the programme in both countries had been kept under careful wraps. Its lessons, therefore, could not be incorporated into any view of the main problem in the region: the impact on the poor, directly in South Africa and Namibia, indirectly in the Frontline States, of the machinery upholding racist domination. Oxfam was also still prevaricating on aid to refugees and exiles under the protection of the South African and Namibian liberation movements, ANC and SWAPO. These two issues were interwoven and their sensitivities were acute, both because of the easy confusion in the
eye of the British or South African beholder of 'humanitarian' with 'politically motivated' aid, and because open support to projects run by those associated with the liberation struggle might place both projects and people in jeopardy.

In September 1981, the southern Africa Field Directors and the top decision-makers from Oxford met for a 'summit' in Harare. The stage was set for a dramatic shift in Oxfam policy. Zambia, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe were all hosting large camp populations of ANC and SWAPO refugees, and the relevant Field Directors were keen to respond to outstanding requests to provide assistance. Behr, the most senior, was determined that Oxfam's past record of fence-sitting in the Zimbabwean freedom struggle should not be carried over into the work inside Namibia and South Africa. This must be seen as a foundation for the day when freedom dawned and real progress towards a better society for the poor began. Over a fraught few days, the issues were thoroughly thrashed out and a new policy framework developed.

Very soon afterwards, an event took place which shocked Oxfam deeply and harnessed support for the anticipated stronger line. Before dawn on 22 October 1981, Alex Mbatha (who had attended the Harare meeting) and his wife Khosi were violently arrested in their home and taken into police custody, she with their small baby. Months later, no charges had been laid – they never were – and a wall of silence surrounded their detention. That one of their own should be brutally imprisoned had the effect of an electric shock on the Oxfam community, bringing home to supporters the realities of humanitarian work in South Africa more powerfully than anything else could have done.

In mid-1982, the new Oxfam policy towards southern Africa was presented to the trustees. Peter Wiles, the Desk Officer in headquarters, was its architect. His paper described the worsening situation and increasing outflow of refugees from South Africa and Namibia. 'In both countries, institutionalised violence against individuals, families and communities in the form of population removals, detentions, [and] bannings has increased.' The liberation movements had called upon the world to retaliate against South Africa with economic disinvestment and boycotts, calls which had been endorsed at the UN. These events obliged Oxfam to re-examine its position.

Whatever repugnance Oxfam felt against the evils of apartheid, it had never given direct support to the fight against the system *per se* and was not now proposing to do so. The target of Oxfam aid had always been the relief of suffering and poverty. But the apartheid system and poverty were two sides of one coin. In South Africa, the legal enforcement of human rights violations amounted to a structural enforcement of poverty. And this poverty was not the absence of modern goods and
services characterising the poverty of traditional African rural life, but pauperisation: poverty created by turning people into units of cut-price labour in a society over whose workings they had absolutely no say at all. As the liberation struggle gathered force, Oxfam had come not only to accept that apartheid was the main cause of suffering in South Africa, but to feel a moral obligation to bear witness to this reality in the effort to help change it.

Intense behind-the-scenes efforts were made by Harris and others to persuade Oxfam trustees with residual doubts that the motivation for policy change was humanitarian, not political. In June 1982, the policy was accepted by the Oxfam Council. In future, all grants must harmonise with the view that the ultimate obstacle to relieving poverty in South Africa and Namibia was the existence of apartheid. Preference should be given to those people who 'as a consequence of the struggle for change, suffer most'. Aid would no longer be denied to refugees and exiles because they were in the charge of ANC or SWAPO. Oxfam would also begin to talk more openly to supporters and the general public about the evidence concerning the links between apartheid and poverty that its programme in South Africa brought to light. The special ties between Britain and South Africa might mean that some supporters would be affronted by Oxfam's unequivocal line; equally, because of those ties, there was a possibility that greater awareness in Britain might contribute to international pressure for change.

In 1983, a new South African constitution was introduced which continued to exclude the country's 24 million black people from political representation. This triggered a new phase in the struggle against apartheid within the Republic. As the campaign for international pressure intensified, Oxfam felt obliged to examine its own 'disinvestment' position. Since the Oxford Committee's earliest days, Barclays Bank had been an invaluable and trusty ally. But its involvement in the South African economy had become a strong focus of anti-apartheid campaigning in Britain. A special committee was set up by Oxfam in 1984 to examine the implications of withdrawing its accounts from Barclays. The issue was felt to be so sensitive that Lesley Kirkley, ex-Director of Oxfam, was invited to chair the committee.

After long deliberation and painstaking legal consultation, Oxfam announced in late 1985 that it had reluctantly decided to change its bankers. By this time, Barclays had lost accounts in Britain worth an annual turnover of at least £6 billion a year. A few months later it announced its own South African disengagement.

Meanwhile, a new spate of bannings and detentions had followed the imposition in South Africa of a State of Emergency in July 1985. Advice Offices for black township families in distress became a frequent
destination of Oxfam aid. One reported: 'We have had a constant stream of police-connected cases, between 500 and 600 people in the last two months. Of course, we have had the usual number of welfare cases as well, and a considerable increase in poverty cases. The unemployment figure in Port Elizabeth now is 56 per cent.' In 1986, Oxfam stepped up the level of its informational activity about township and homelands misery, about detentions of programme allies, and the mounting sense of crisis in southern Africa generally. In May 1986, a strong focus was put on conditions in Namibia, 'the last colony in Africa', with the publication of a report called: 'Namibia: A Violation of Trust'.

Later that year, Oxfam's trustees discussed their position towards the key instrument for exerting international pressure on South Africa: economic sanctions. The paper before them stated: The changing climate of public debate in Britain, following the government's own acceptance of the need for sanctions, means that we can now advocate sanctions with greater confidence within the constraints of Charity Law.' The decision that Oxfam should adopt a position advocating sanctions was not taken until March 1987, after further deliberation. But the view that it could do so and remain within the charity law was to prove sadly mistaken.

By the mid-1980s, the notion of 'campaigning' had become familiar among Oxfam's local staff and supporter networks. This activity began in the late 1970s. The drive for the 'educated pound', such a strong theme of the 1960s, had in recent years given way to a drive for the pound pure and simple via gifts, donations or Oxfam Trading profits. Oxfam shops, with their emphasis on merchandising, had become the almost exclusive volunteer activity.

In 1978, a new fund-raising campaign was launched called 'Move Against Poverty'. This was mainly directed at young people interested in Third World poverty as an issue, who would happily fast, collect signatures, or stage a 'happening' outside the Town Hall, but did not want to support Oxfam by selling goods in a shop. MAP was masterminded by the energetic Bill Yates, newly returned from Brazil, and it was a success: in the first year, 1,500 supporter groups were formed or reformed, and £220,000 raised. These funds went to specific MAP projects: slum colonies in Bolivia, meals for children of working mothers in Dominican Republic, wells in Ethiopia, destitute working women in Bangladesh.

By 1980, a strong push to take up specific issues on behalf of the Third World was emerging. The situation was quite different from that of a decade ago when Nicolas Stacey's proposals for a large Oxfam role in
public education had been rebuffed. In those days, frustration with the small size of voluntary agency projects and their ‘drops in the ocean’ impact had prompted demands that governments devote far more money to ‘aid’. Although not uncritical, the lobbyists had talked as if official aid was more or less the same as voluntary aid, only delivered in much bigger amounts. In the intervening years, a sharper distinction had emerged between the type of development normally promoted by official aid and Western investment, and the type of development promoted by humanitarian NGOs. The new impulse for public education arose from perspectives gathered by Oxfam as a result of the evolution in its programme philosophy, and was part of an attempt to bring these to bear on governments giving and receiving ‘aid’.

Oxfam’s overseas staff frequently found themselves confronting issues which demanded not only better programming skills, but required special advocacy inside the country and internationally. For example, a policy switch into primary health care, stressing simple preventive care for the many instead of high-tech curative care for the few, needed not only to be adopted in a handful of mission projects, but supported by a country’s health-care establishment. The lock-in of Western economic interests to those of the small minority living a Western-style existence frequently resulted in the poor being deprived of any real share of new opportunities or services. All the voluntary agencies in the world could not compensate for such discrimination via their projects and programmes, whose sum impact was minute on any national or international scale.

One classic illustration of the dilemma was presented by the vigorous promotion in Third World countries of breastmilk substitutes by Western babyfood manufacturers and their subsidiaries. In the hands of a mother who could read instructions, understood their importance, and whose kitchen contained fridges, cookers, and a sterilising gadget, infant formula was a nutritionally adequate babyfood. In the hands of a semi-literate and poverty-stricken woman, a tin of formula eeked out in weak dilutions with impure water not only starved the child but could easily cause fatal diarrhoeal infection. Many babymilks were being promoted without taking into account how hazardous they could be in such an environment, and often by highly dubious methods: giveaways in maternity wards, salesgirls in nursing uniforms, incentives to doctors.

The first shot across the bows of the babyfood manufacturers came from *New Internationalist* magazine with a cover story in 1973. The issue was taken up by War on Want, and by a number of American and European NGOs during the 1970s, the most prominent of which was the US Infant Formula Action Group (INFACT). In 1979, action within the international health community moved towards a climax. Although the
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babyfood manufacturers were beginning to self-regulate their more outrageous marketing techniques, their own 'code of conduct' did not go far enough in the view of WHO, UNICEF, and NGO activists.

A much stiffer 'international code for the marketing of breastmilk substitutes' was drafted to go before the World Health Assembly in 1981. This would place a ban on all infant formula advertising to the general public, and place its distribution in health facilities in the exclusive hands of health personnel for medically-approved purposes. If the Code was agreed by the WHA, it would become incumbent on governments to promote breastfeeding and control the marketing of infant formula by means of legislation. This offended the school of ideological thought which saw restraint on commercial marketing practice as restraint on natural liberty. Fears were expressed (especially in the US) that, if enacted, the Code would set a precedent – for example, for control of the marketing of pharmaceutical products by major international companies.

In the months before the World Health Assembly, Oxfam and War on Want ran a public information campaign about the Code, hoping that the British government – which initially seemed reluctant – would give it backing. This issue, a hungry child issue if ever there was one, was taken up by thousands of Oxfam supporters and shop volunteers. Jack Ashley MP led the case for British support to the Code in a debate in the House of Commons on 26 February 1981. A deputation visited Patrick Jenkin, Secretary of State for Health. Esther Rantzen, the popular TV campaigner, was recruited. Over 220 MPs signed a parliamentary motion. At the World Health Assembly, Britain voted in the Code's favour; only the US voted against.

The babymilk campaign was the first time Oxfam systematically mobilised its own network behind a cause close to its heart. The second occasion was in January 1982, when after weeks of silence from the South African authorities concerning the fate of Alex and Khosi Mbatha, a mass protest was mounted with CAFOD (the Catholic Fund for Overseas Development) and the British Council of Churches. At 4am on 22 January 1982, three months to the hour since the Mbathas' arrest, John Clark, Campaigns Manager, knocked on the door of South Africa House. The letter he delivered announced a vigil to draw attention to the Mbathas' plight. In the next 16 hours, MPs, peers, churchmen and celebrities took part and 2,512 signatures were collected.

After the Mbathas were released three months later, Alex described how, to his bewilderment, prison officers had asked him why he was so important in the eyes of people abroad. He thanked the campaigners for their letters, vigils, and protests. 'People saw for the first time the amount of goodwill that existed in other parts of the world for people in
my country smashed by the apartheid machine,’ he wrote from exile in Zimbabwe. ‘I wish to put on record that your efforts were not in vain.’

During the early 1980s, Oxfam also began to hone its machinery for taking up issues of specialist as opposed to popular concern. The lead came from the Public Affairs Unit, which had evolved into a research and information arm of the overseas programme. A number of useful reports and publications had emerged from the PAU over the years, but new ground was broken with the publication of *Bitter Pills* by Dianna Melrose in 1982. This study of the use and supply of medicines in the Third World was the cornerstone of ‘The Campaign for Rational Health’. Melrose’s work was instrumental in making the PAU an important Oxfam force; as was that of David Bull, author of *A Growing Problem*, which highlighted the dangers in misuse and overuse of pesticides marketed in the Third World by international companies. These two studies established an important principle of all subsequent Oxfam campaigns: thorough research before action.

These campaigns were not tub-thumping affairs but careful efforts to place solid information on a subject of Oxfam programme concern, based on experience in the field, strategically before those who mattered. The information in question might be quite technical; it was directed less at the public than at members of the professional, governmental and business community who were in a position to exert a beneficial influence on international marketing or export policies. The medicines issue in many ways resembled babyfoods; it also concerned the potentially pernicious entry of modern marketing techniques into a world of consumers whose poverty, illiteracy, and ill-health made them highly vulnerable, and whose interests were ignored not only by exporters but by many leaders in their own societies. As with babyfoods, wrong use could lead to suffering, even death.

This was also an issue which, as part of ‘primary health care’, was high on the international health agenda. WHO was elaborating a policy on ‘Essential Drugs’, matching the real health needs in poor countries with a priority list of 220 medicines and extolling the virtues of low-cost generic products. With the pharmaceutical industry set against another Code and the US on its side, powerful vested interests were keen to protect their activities in the South from the kind of scrutiny they could expect in the more regulated, consumer-conscious North. Meanwhile, millions of Third World parents were selling their possessions to buy brightly coloured antibiotics, tonics, and multivitamins, when a child dying of diarrhoeal dehydration could be saved by a salt and sugar drink, and did not need a medicine at all.
Over the next years Oxfam, a founding member of Health Action International, helped to put the weight of knowledge drawn from the voluntary sector and information from the field behind national and international activity. Not only was ‘rational health’ promoted at home, but it was supported with funds in the field. In 1982, amidst a furore from drug exporters, Bangladesh imposed a ban on 1,700 wasteful and potentially harmful medical products. This happened largely at the instigation of Dr. Zafrullah Chowdhury, a national primary health care pioneer consistently supported by Oxfam, which then helped support the local manufacture of essential drugs. In the Philippines, Oxfam helped Dr. Michael Tan’s Health Action Information Network (HAIN) off the ground to monitor the government’s National Drugs Policy.

In Britain, action reached a crescendo in 1984, in the run-up to a WHO Conference designed to overcome residual opposition to WHO’s Essential Drugs programme. Oxfam collected 2,000 signatures, mainly from medical professionals, to a ‘Rational Health Declaration’, and presented them to Kenneth Clarke, Minister of Health. Clarke subsequently wrote: ‘May I thank you for your patience in pursuing a constructive response from this Department and congratulate you on the creditable manner in which you have sought to highlight the problem of drugs for the Third World.’ In May 1986 the World Health Assembly finally passed the crucial resolution giving a green light to widespread WHO activity concerning the equitable and safe use of drugs worldwide.

In the 1982-83 Annual Report, Oxfam’s overseas and home activity were described as twin fronts of ‘the Oxfam Campaign’. The ‘determination to represent the poor who have no voice of their own in the decisions and councils of the rich nations’ was becoming integral to Oxfam thinking. In 1983, with income at the record level of £19.7 million, an increase in educational and campaigning staff was set in motion as part of a major reorganisation of Oxfam’s fundraising network throughout the country. To ensure that these ingredients of the overall programme remained within the range of activity permitted under Charity Law, Oxfam set in motion a revision of its charitable objects. The new clause was eventually accepted by trustees and the Charity Commissioners in 1985. To Oxfam’s mandate was added: ‘... to educate the public concerning the nature, causes, and effects of poverty, distress and suffering as aforesaid, to conduct and procure research concerning these and to publish or otherwise make the results thereof available to the public.’

Towards the end of 1983, Brian Walker departed after ten years at the helm, handing over to his deputy, Guy Stringer. In the autumn of that year, Oxfam launched a new campaign: ‘Weather Alert’. There had been a spate of freak weather all over the globe, causing an exceptional
number of droughts, floods, and cyclones. 'Weather Alert' pointed out that, for the really poor, freak weather patterns were not the cause of their problems but the straw which broke the camel's back. In one of BBC TV's Blue Peter programme's many associations with Oxfam, a 'Weather Beater' appeal raised £1.25 million.

In the case of drought, where farming people gradually sold their reserves – cattle, land, pots, jewellery – hoping for the rains to improve, a delay of up to a year could be expected before disaster became acute. Paddy Coulter, Oxfam's Communications Co-ordinator, did the rounds of television news producers to encourage coverage of crises in the making. Visiting Oxfam's South African programme, he called on Michael Buerk, the BBC's Africa correspondent, to discuss – among other things – the drought in Ethiopia.

In mid-1984, Oxfam put out three special 'Behind the Weather' reports. 'This year', the blurb read: 'the consequences [of bad weather] are causing widespread suffering. Some of the worst-hit places are going to be in the news. One of them, almost certainly, will be Ethiopia.' The failure to follow up more strongly on that conviction haunts some Oxfam consciences to this day.

On the evening of 23 October 1984, BBC television news carried a report from the northern Ethiopian province of Wollo. Its impact worldwide was explosive. 'Dawn, and as the sun breaks through the piercing chill of night on the plain outside Korem, it lights up a biblical famine, now, in the 20th century. This place, say workers here, is the closest thing to hell on earth.' With the agonising images accompanying these words, reporter Michael Buerk and cameraman Mohammed Amin succeeded in bringing to global attention famine of an intensity unimaginable in contemporary times. Western audiences watched in glazed disbelief as children with ravaged faces and stick-like limbs died before their eyes.

The impact of this seven-minute report, subsequently shown by 425 TV stations all over the world, is a supreme illustration of how powerful a role the media has come to play in international humanitarian affairs.

The numbers of those who died of hunger and disease from the long accumulation of crop failure, social breakdown, and inadequate relief in Ethiopia during 1983-85 are thought to be between 500,000 and one million. The international relief operation, which geared up properly only after the television footage and public outcry shamed Western governments into providing adequate quantities of aid to a country whose Marxist regime they abhorred, kept alive around seven million. But all the accomplishments of this effort, in which Oxfam played a small but significant part, failed to wash from the humanitarian
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conscience the stain of having let this apocalypse occur. In Oxfam’s case, it led in time to a radical overhaul of its whole approach to disasters and disaster relief.

Eleven years before, identical faltering, emaciated figures had thronged the main road of Wollo province and crowded helplessly in identical camp locations. After the 1973-74 famine, the government set up an early warning system to forecast food shortage in the parts of the country where agriculture was precarious. Life was hardest amidst the wild topographical extravaganza of the north where rugged escarpments, deep gorges, table-top mountains, and mighty rivers presented a farming landscape over-burdened and eroded to its margins. That the Emperor Haile Selassie had lost his throne because he had let his northern subjects starve was a political lesson not lost on the new revolutionary regime. The task of monitoring scarcity and seeking international food aid was assigned to the powerful Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC). During the late 1970s and early 1980s, reports of impending crisis succeeded each other with numbing monotony; but the RRC’s effectiveness on the ground and regular supplies of foodstuffs from the international aid community managed to maintain farming families on their precipice of need, preventing any widespread plunge into the abyss.

During the 1975-76 drought in the south-eastern Ogaden, Oxfam was actively involved with the RRC in supplementary medical and feeding programmes; but in the late 1970s as the regime became committed to Soviet-style socialism and more xenophobic towards the West, Oxfam wound down its programme until it only supported a handful of well-tried Christian missionary health and nutrition projects. In 1982, with organisational resources and vision in their post-Cambodia flood, Hugh Goyder, a Field Director previously based in India, was posted to Ethiopia to try and foster the kind of self-generative grassroots structures by now regarded by Oxfam as the mandatory prescription for genuine rural development. This, with mixed success, was what he was busy doing as catastrophe crept up.

During 1983, reports from various parts of Ethiopia began to indicate alarming pockets of food scarcity. But only after widespread failure of the November harvest was it possible to predict something in an altogether different league from typical endemic hunger. To complicate matters, parts of the north were under the control of rebel insurgents. At Korem, a camp close to the edge of government-secured territory, early 1984 saw a sudden rapid rise in the numbers of malnourished children registered for supplementary feeding by Save the Children Fund (SCF), and an increase in the numbers of those already reduced to matchstick fragility.
At a fateful meeting on 30 March 1984, Commissioner Dawit Wolde Giorgis, head of the RRC, informed the representatives of UN agencies and donor governments in Addis Ababa that a situation of the utmost gravity was developing. He presented a detailed request for 450,000 tonnes of food aid. This was only half the 900,000 tonnes the RRC believed was needed, but it represented the amount it thought it could distribute. Five months later, only 95,000 tonnes had been pledged in response, and none had yet reached RRC food stores. The reason for the lacklustre response was partly that the donors were almost inured to hearing prophecies of doom from a regime they distrusted; and partly because the UN estimate of need, compiled by a World Food Programme mission, implied that the RRC was guilty of exaggeration. The UN appeal was for 125,000 tonnes. By July, the RRC had run out of grain to distribute and widespread deaths were being reported in Wollo.

On 19 July, a documentary film called 'Seeds of Despair', made by Peter Gill, about famine in the south of the country was shown in Britain. In the wake of the film, a Disasters Emergency Committee TV appeal for Africa raised a record £8.5 million, of which Oxfam's share was £1.8 million. Having so far resisted a major Ethiopian emergency involvement, Oxfam now found itself under pressure less from demand of distress from the field, where the magnitude of requirements was way beyond the charitable remit, than from supply of compassion from the British public.

In August, Marcus Thompson, Oxfam's Disasters Officer, went to Ethiopia to see how the relief programme might be expanded. Because the government had imposed a ban on all travel to the north in the run-up to celebrations of the tenth anniversary of the Ethiopian revolution, Thompson was unable to visit Wollo. But every office he went into, every person he talked to, repeated the same story. There was serious famine, and no food. He therefore made a devastatingly simple proposal to Oxford: charter a ship, fill it with grain, and send it to the port of Assab. That the procurement and export of foodgrains in thousands of tonnes was way outside Oxfam's normal or desirable operational range - or indeed its immediate financial resources - seemed irrelevant. Something exceptional needed doing not only because of the crying need for food but as a spur to get the laggard international food aid machinery whirring.

In Oxford, the idea was immediately acted upon. Oxfam first ascertained that, in spite of a European bumper harvest, few major donors were planning to ship large amounts of food aid via the normal UN World Food Programme or EEC channels. Nor were they receptive to the notion. The decision that Oxfam should ship food was taken with trustee approval. Guy Stringer, Oxfam’s Director, signed the necessary
grant for upwards of £3 million in faith that Oxfam would manage to find other partners to help offset the extraordinary expense. This marked the transition for Oxfam into an unprecedented league of disaster response – and not just for Ethiopia but for any major emergency. By the time Michael Buerk’s report and the subsequent barrage of media attention burst upon the world, the MV *Elpis* was on the high seas with a cargo of 14,000 tonnes of grain.

When Oxfam announced the shipment on 10 September, it pulled no punches in pointing out that it was undertaking this extraordinary action because major donors, including Britain and the EEC, were not making the deliveries of staple foods normally provided by the international community in a famine emergency. As anticipated, the response of voluntary agency friends and partners was positive. Most of the costs of the food ship, which left Hull on 10 October, were jointly met by a consortium including Norwegian Church Service, Norwegian Save the Children, and Dutch NOVIB. The EEC gave £400,000, and at the request of its own representative in Addis, the British government contributed 4,000 tonnes of grain to the cargo. The cost to Oxfam was £500,000.

In Addis Ababa, the RRC was grateful, not only for the food but also for the pressure exerted on other donors by the publicity, which also enhanced Oxfam’s profile. By 31 October when the ship docked at Assab, philanthropic air cargoes were being mounted from Britain. But these amounts were negligible against the necessary 60,000 tonnes a month. Not until after a UN donors’ meeting in New York in December was food aid on the scale required committed in earnest. The new estimate of need, 1.3 million tonnes over 12 months, was drawn up by Kurt Jansson, the UN Secretary-General’s Special Representative in Addis Ababa, on the basis of RRC and WFP figures.

Jansson had been appointed in early November in the wake of the media and public uproar. This was another indication of the world’s seeming inability to act without the goad of a real life television horror show of human tragedy, which only occurred – seemingly could only occur – at a point when, for many of its victims, the situation was already past redemption. The shortage of food in the relief pipeline remained a serious problem for those running food distribution and supplementary child-feeding programmes for many months to come. However, Jansson’s appointment as UN relief co-ordinator brought a coherence to the overall operation which was welcomed by everyone, including the voluntary agencies. Unlike at the time of the Cambodian crisis five years before, the UN agencies engaged in a proper dialogue with the NGOs from the moment a full-scale relief emergency was declared.
In November, the British Government reacted to Ethiopia's plight by lending RAF aircraft for the airlift of food to camps and inaccessible mountain-top areas. The scale of the compassionate response in Britain was overwhelming, and the government's actions reflected this concern. Many groups of citizens launched their own initiatives. The *Daily Mirror* sent its own mercy flight, with Robert Maxwell on board. Bob Geldof, the Irish pop singer, galvanised the popular music and entertainment world behind Band Aid, and raised an extraordinary £50 million over the next year. Band Aid deployed a small fleet of mercy ships and, over the coming months, took on Oxfam and other agency cargoes for free.

In Newcastle, the Oxfam office under the energetic leadership of Karen Schofield became the nerve centre of a city-wide drive to send a 'People's Plane' from Britain's North-East. So successful was this campaign that a Christmas appeal on local TV raised half the costs of a £3.9 million shipload on the *Link Target*; the 'People's Boat' departed Newcastle on 11 January 1985.

Rarely had Britain witnessed such an outpouring of concern, particularly among the young, for the world's dispossessed. Through its local networks of shops and fundraisers, media contacts and celebrities, the staff and volunteers of Oxfam and many other charitable agencies worked around the clock to transform people's compassion into support. Ethiopia and its problems became a part of many people's daily pre-occupation. In the four months following Michael Buerk's report from Wollo, Oxfam received £12.5 million in donations. Supreme efforts were also made in other parts of the world. Oxfam Hong Kong raised over £1 million for Ethiopia and Sudan, and a fund-raising drive in Bermuda produced £110,000 from an island of only 55,000 people.

The crescendo of concern for Ethiopia happened to occur just at the time when Oxfam was launching a major new popular campaign called 'Hungry for Change'. This was a bigger, bolder successor to MAP, an attempt to attract people into a network of Oxfam support groups whose fund-raising would dovetail with self-education and the presentation of issues to the public. The theme of the campaign - the unfairness of a world that produced more than enough food to feed the global population but managed to let 500 million people go hungry - could not have been more timely.

On 10 October, the line-up for the national launch included David Owen, Ted Heath, and Roy Hattersley from the political parties, as well as leading churchmen, journalists, and showbusiness stars. At the Press Conference, David Owen summed up the campaign's purpose: 'A million people combining together under the guidance of Oxfam committed to doing something about hunger could have a major effect on this country, and through this country, the world. The people of this
country can make this, once more, a political live issue.' Not only in London, but in cities all over the country, events were staged in which celebrities held up billboard letters spelling 'Hungry for Change'. The publicity was immense and much of it reflected a new willingness to address the underlying causes of Third World hunger on the part of both the media and the public.

Within a few weeks, over 200 ‘Hungry for Change’ groups were formed, with back-up from a new network of campaigning staff based in Oxfam’s local offices throughout the country. Thousands of people took part in locally-organised fasts on a week-end in late November. The images from Ethiopia gave the campaign both a heartening boost and a sickening poignancy. One channel to which the response was directed was pressure on the British government to increase its own aid for Ethiopia and to urge other governments to do the same. MPs, MEPs and government offices were deluged by letters and calls from members of the public angry about the months of international inertia in the face of impending catastrophe.

On 21 November, Oxfam published the results of an opinion poll which showed that three-quarters of people in Britain thought that official aid should be increased or maintained, and that its main purpose should be for long-term development to prevent famine. In the face of this kind of public sentiment, a government proposal to make further cuts in the aid budget was threatened by a parliamentary revolt from within its own ranks. The planned cut was dropped. Even under the Wilson government, when aid had enjoyed a heyday of post-colonial popularity, the Third World lobby had never achieved such a victory.

At the same time, Oxfam stepped up its programme in Ethiopia. A team of health and nutritional workers were sent to Wollo to establish a feeding programme ‘off the road’, in the countryside, to avoid the descent of hunger-stricken families into the crowded and disease-ridden camps. Large tonnages of a high energy ‘Oxfam biscuit’, developed by Oxford Polytechnic and manufactured by a British firm, Fox’s of Batley, proved invaluable as an easy-to-eat child-feeding ingredient. Oxfam water engineers Paul Sherlock and Ben Fawcett were despatched with Oxfam kits for setting up instant water supplies — pumps, tanks, pipelines, taps — and worked with the Ethiopian Water Authority to deploy these in 40 camps. In December, Oxfam joined with SCF in setting up a trucking fleet for shifting food and relief supplies from main depots to points deep in the rural hinterland. In Addis Ababa, Hugh Goyder successfully lobbied the main relief operation to have sufficient basic foodstuffs sent up for off-the-road distribution.

Oxfam also worked through the rebel movements in Tigray and Eritrea to take supplies through to places which convoys under
government and UN auspices could not reach. In one unconventional operation, an Oxfam Field Officer, Karen Twining, was sent in from Sudan with a convoy of lorries and a pillowcase of currency to an area in the northern Ethiopian highlands. She hired 3,400 donkeys and a camel caravan to distribute 366 tons of grain and tools for soil conservation works in mountain villages.

By the turn of the year the famine crisis had spread to Sudan. Here too, after some of the same initial delays which had dogged the international response to the growing disaster in Ethiopia, Oxfam contributed to the overall relief operation with special feeding and water teams, both in the west of the country and in eastern camps where 300,000 drought refugees from Tigray province had congregated. The emergency programmes in Ethiopia and Sudan absorbed £21.7 million in the 12 months between late 1984 and late 1985: a scale of activity completely unprecedented in Oxfam's history, even in Cambodia.

In November 1984, Oxfam's long-standing Overseas Director, Michael Harris, retired. The combination of the change in senior personnel with profound organisational self-criticism over its failure to detect in time the depth of the Ethiopian and Sudanese famine crises led to an overhaul of Oxfam's disaster response mechanisms. The new Overseas Director, David Bryer, requested a full post mortem on what had gone wrong; and the lessons of the evaluation were accepted and institutionally acted upon.

For many years, Oxfam had wrestled with the conflicting claims of disaster relief and development work on its time and resources. Although in the public mind Oxfam's paramount role had always been to spirit instant succour across the world to victims of emergency, there had long been an ideological resistance within the organisation to elevating its 'curative' work in disaster relief to a level of importance near that of 'preventive' development. In Ethiopia up to 1984, for example, Hugh Goyder had been told to concentrate on creating rural self-help networks like ORAP in Zimbabwe, and not to allow Oxfam's resources to be frittered away in the perennial saga of emergency relief. This, it was thought, was best left to the international donors.

Valuable work had been done by the health and technical units in developing Oxfam disaster 'packages' - water supply kits, including a suitcase laboratory for testing water quality in the field; feeding kits, including the new Oxfam biscuit - which made sure that whatever the relatively small size of Oxfam's input in any disaster relief effort, that input was maximally efficient and effective. But the overall organisational response to disasters, even of the slowly-building kind, was typically reactive. It often depended on requests from the Field Director or other field agencies. In a major emergency, it also depended
on the kick start of television exposure, the pressure of British generosity, Oxfam’s reputation as an emergency relief agency, and its highly responsive fundraising apparatus.

Oxfam’s allocation of aid for 1984-85 described one reality, however much the organisation might prefer another: 69 per cent of its aid went on emergency assistance; social development absorbed 17 per cent, and health and agriculture, 14 per cent combined. This was exceptional; but in the previous year emergencies had accounted for one-third of aid – the second largest category – and in the following year (1985-86) they would account for nearly half. In terms of income, there was no question that Oxfam’s major spurts of growth were disaster-related. Just as Cambodia jumped Oxfam into an entirely different financial league, so did Ethiopia; from £23.9 million in 1983-84, income rose to £51.1 million in 1984-85. Although there tended to be a drop-off in subsequent years, most of the growth was retained as donors brought in by the emergency maintained their support.

The reality was that Oxfam’s role as an agency for disaster relief was neither negotiable nor decreasing. Historically, this was the context in which Oxfam had become a household word in Britain, and because disasters make news, this was the context in which it was most visible and well-known. Given the parlous state of environmental, economic, and political affairs in Africa, as well as in the turmoil-stricken Middle East and Central America, disasters and emergency relief were bound to be a continuing preoccupation.

From 1985 onwards, Oxfam no longer struggled with the disasters versus development dichotomy. It set up an expanded disasters unit under Marcus Thompson and began to monitor upcoming emergencies from headquarters. Both programmatically and in terms of advocacy with governments, international agencies, and the media, it adopted a pre-emptive approach. It maintained on staff a handful of experienced water engineers and emergency health and nutrition workers ready to go wherever needed; seldom have they since been underemployed.

As the 1980s gave way to the 1990s, as Liberia erupted, Somalia imploded, Sudan disintegrated, as war clouds gathered over the Persian Gulf, as Bangladesh was inundated by cyclonic floods, the agony of millions of disaster victims had never been more compelling. The recognition that disasters must be taken fully and systematically on board has meant that there has not since been a case when Oxfam was caught unprepared.
On 22 October 1985, a crowd of 20,000 people lined up outside the House of Commons to take part in the largest-ever lobby of the British Parliament. Their unlikely cause of complaint: Britain’s record on overseas aid. In a year when the British people had given over £100 million from their own pockets for famine in Africa, they had come to express dismay that such a small proportion of the official aid budget was similarly spent on measures to prevent hunger and starvation.

The lobby was co-ordinated by the World Development Movement (WDM) and supported by the aid agencies and churches. Around 15,000 people filed through to the central lobby in the Palace of Westminster to speak personally to their MPs. The leaders of the three opposition parties – Neil Kinnock, David Owen, and David Steel – pledged dramatic increases in aid towards the UN target of 0.7 per cent GNP should they ever be in a position to deliver them. The Conservatives, the party in power, actually felt obliged to make an increase in aid of £57 million for 1986-87 as a result. In a budget of £1,100 million this was not financially impressive, but it represented an important psychological victory.

The reaction to tragedy in Ethiopia had ushered in a mood of concern about world hunger in Britain not seen for 20 years. Much credit was due to Bob Geldof and the ‘Aid’ craze with which he fired up a new generation of young people: Band Aid, Live Aid, School Aid, Sport Aid. Although British generosity tended to peak in emergency-generated spasms, yet it seemed to be more sustainable, and to be underpinned by a more positive popular attitude, than for many years. The long years of agency-promoted development education in the classroom and the cultivation of interest in the media seemed at last to be paying dividends. Princess Anne’s work for Save the Children was also important in lifting a long-standing cause out of its rut. Suddenly disc jockeys, actors, and all kinds of celebrities wanted to be identified with it. MPs of all parties began to respond to the popular mood on a subject usually seen as of negligible political importance. The government, having treated aid with disdain since 1979, began to change its tune.
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This was marked by the appointment of the highflying Chris Patten as Minister of Overseas Development during 1986.

With appropriate symmetry, it was at this time of renewed political interest in aid that upon Guy Stringer's retirement Frank Judd, an ex-politician, took over the Directorship of Oxfam. Judd came from an 'internationalist' family; his father worked at the League of Nations Union (precursor of UNA) from the 1920s through to the war-time days when its leading lights, including Gilbert Murray, were protesting the rights of the hungry in enemy-occupied Europe. After six years as Secretary-General of International Voluntary Service (IVS), Judd was elected Labour MP for Portsmouth West in 1966. He served in government from 1974-79, first at the Ministry of Defence, latterly as a Minister of State at the Foreign Office; for a few months in 1976-77 he was Minister for Overseas Development. After losing his Parliamentary seat in 1979, he became Director of VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas).

Thus Judd was not only the most prominent figure to be employed by Oxfam since Nicolas Stacey, but his career had embraced overseas aid in both the official and the voluntary spheres. He had been instrumental in establishing a government fund for development education in the late 1970s, and had done much both in and out of Parliament to promote the cause of British aid. At 50, he brought to Oxfam his Westminster contacts and populist instincts; also passion, energy, and respect for an organisation whose concentrated calibre and commitment he initially found quite daunting. Judd was very much cast in the non-patrician, let's-get-on-with-it, tradition of Oxfam leadership. But, although carefully non-partisan, he tended to adopt a more political line than previous Directors, slipping effortlessly into the role of a peripatetic 'alternative' Minister of Foreign Affairs with a mandate from the Compassionate Party.

Judd had strong views about where he wanted to take Oxfam. From a charitable organisation which had gained its reputation helping the poor he wanted to shift its profile to that of an organisation speaking out for the poor. Oxfam's size and presence in the developing world had grown considerably in the early 1980s in the wake of the Cambodian and Ethiopian crises, and now he hoped to use this enhanced capacity to create a role for Oxfam in the wider task of building international understanding around the ideals of peace and justice in one interdependent world. In his view, Oxfam's programme experience permitted - even required - it to champion humanitarian values in the international political arena.

Judd's earliest field trip as Director of Oxfam was to Central America. In El Salvador, he was much affected by witnessing the damage of conflict to human lives. He also visited Nicaragua, and on his return
spoke out strongly against the US government's desire to provide military aid to the Contras. He justified his stand on the suffering endured by the poor as a result of the fighting, and on the fact that the war forced Oxfam to shift its funding emphasis from long-term development to short-term relief.

Such a statement, made as publicly as possible, showed that under its new Director, Oxfam was not afraid to sail close to the charitable wind regarding legitimate lobbying activity. Sincerely believing in the morality of the case, Judd and his advisers hoped that the official weathercock was pointing in a favourable direction.

In the mid-1980s, the slate of contemporary Oxfam campaigning concerns was not primarily connected to political hotspots and civil wars but to the parlous state of many African countries. A few weeks after the October 1985 Parliamentary lobby against famine, Oxfam's second annual 'Hungry for Change' fast took place, involving 50,000 people and raising over £300,000.

Although the overt theme of this campaigning activity was the same 'hungry millions' concern of the 1960s, the subtext was the tangled skein of much more complex Third World issues: debt, aid, and trade and how they interacted with conditions of hunger overseas. By a careful dissemination of briefing notes, reports, and literature of various degrees of sophistication, Oxfam was helping its own supporters to bone up on these subjects enough to mount fundraising and attention-seeking events around them. The fine print of its presentations was quite technical; Oxfam's specialists, employee or volunteer, were equipped to discuss campaigning issues cogently with policy- and decision-makers. But the popularisation of the issues was the key dimension.

The incorporation of aid and trade into campaigning activity had begun with the 'Campaign for Real Aid', in which Oxfam was a leading partner alongside Christian Aid and WDM. In 1981, the publication of the Brandt Commission report on North–South relationships had helped rekindle the dormant debate on development assistance and led to the setting up of the 'Independent Group on British Aid' (IGBA). IGBA's own report entitled 'Real Aid: A Strategy for Britain' was published in 1982. This marked the maturity of the voluntary agencies in demystifying 'aid' – the use of public funds in countries overseas – and distinguishing between the use of 'aid' for investment purposes, and its use for the kind of development that helped the poor.

By this time, the voluntary agencies no longer thought of themselves, as they had in the early 1970s, as mere suppliers of pennies from heaven, calling for governments to 'give more aid' in self-confessed frustration
with the puny dimensions of their own impact on world poverty. A decade of ‘alternatives’ had given them a new sense of self-worth, a body of experience on which to erect their own aid and development philosophy and to evolve a less emotional, more objective and scientifically-based critique of others’. The IGBA report set the agenda for challenging the nature and content of British overseas development assistance over the next decade.

The cornerstone of the critique was that a far greater proportion of government aid should be spent in the poorest countries or on schemes directed at the poor. Not only was this what the public expected of ‘aid’, but – the agencies argued – it was ultimately the most effective way of investing in famine prevention as well as in international social, economic, and environmental stability. An Oxfam briefing paper of mid-1985 took up this theme. A special target of criticism was the volume of aid used to promote the subsidisation of British exports. Investments in large-scale infrastructural schemes – major dams instead of small irrigation works, for example – were also attacked because their effects were often damaging both to the poor and to the environment.

It was time, the voluntary agencies suggested, that government took on board that modern sector investment of a type suited to industrialised economies, while it might apparently coincide with the short-term interests of investors and exporters, was not necessarily developmental as far as poor countries and poor people were concerned. The growing burden of Third World debt, much of which had its roots in slaphappy investment in economically dubious ventures, showed that they had a point, and that even assumptions about the interests of investors were illusory. Change in the way British aid was deployed could not alone alter the pattern of disastrous Third World investment and its negative impact on the poor; but it could make some difference, it did represent some form of leverage with both recipients and other donors.

The following year, 1986, Oxfam focused on the debt crisis in Africa as the theme for the annual ‘Hungry for Change’ fast. John Clark, Campaigns Manager, prepared a short book: *For Richer For Poorer: An Oxfam Report on Western Connections with World Hunger*. This described in comprehensible layman’s terms how the poor were affected by international policies on debt, aid, trade, arms, and agriculture, and how such policies might be reoriented to reduce their negative impact on the poor. The analysis coincided with the call by UNICEF and others in the international sphere for adjustment programmes to take their human consequences into account. In the case of African debt, Clark cited Oxfam’s own experience in countries such as Zambia, where the austerity imposed by the government’s attempts to meet creditors’ demands had forced dramatic food price rises and reductions in health
care and social service provision. President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania put things in a nutshell: 'Should we really let our people starve so that we can pay our debts? ... If African governments are really representing their people, they cannot accept conditions that would lead to more hunger, to social chaos, to civil war.'

It was the combination of well-researched positions with the involvement of a nationwide supporter network which gave Oxfam campaigning its edge. To hold Oxfam's intellectual head up with bankers and bureaucrats, and at the same time enable volunteers to engage with confidence in a drive on an issue such as debt, required extraordinary flair. John Clark's ability to render arcane material into popularese was exceptional. The African debt theme was reduced to a neat and compelling formula: 'For every £1 the world contributed to famine relief in Africa in 1985, the West took back £2 in debt repayments.' Although some feared that the message would provoke the public to feel that there was no point in giving at all, the injustice of the equation worked in its favour. In 1987, Nigel Lawson, Chancellor of the Exchequer, put forward to the Group of Seven a set of proposals for reducing the debt burden of the poorest African countries. The debt campaigners claim a share of the credit for Britain's forward attitude on debt relief, then and subsequently.

In 1987, 'Hungry for Change' turned its attention back to aid, with the help of an Oxfam 'White Paper'. The focus was still on the high degree of linkage between aid and exports and the primacy of British commercial interests; in 1986, according to Oxfam estimates, as much as 79 per cent of the UK aid budget been spent on UK goods and services. Although Chris Patten, now Minister of Overseas Development, defended the linkages, the atmosphere around government policy had definitely thawed. The aid budget was rising at a rate ahead of inflation; and the amount of government money available for 'Joint Funding' of projects with voluntary agencies rose from £6 million to £9 million in 1988-89. (Oxfam was one of the four main charitable recipients of grants under this programme, receiving nearly £2 million in 1987-88.)

Their critique might sometimes be publicly brushed aside, but the dialogue between government and voluntary agencies, and their willingness to seek common ground, was steadily increasing. Gradually, the particular merits of NGO programmes, especially their greater capacity than government schemes to promote equitable and sustainable development among the poor, was beginning to command wide recognition. But in the high noon of Thatcherism, this sudden rush of official enthusiasm for the voluntary sector was to bring less welcome attentions: a greater degree of official scrutiny and an incipient desire to contain.
Oxfam's campaigns on aid and debt raised no question of propriety from the Charity Commissioners. As in the case of babyfoods and rational health, the clear intent was to pursue its charitable purposes by a change in public policy; but the self-evidently political as well as informational content of the campaigns went unchallenged.

However, questions did arise over Oxfam's identification with disarmament, which had re-emerged after a long spell in the wilderness during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The disarmament campaigners, canvassing a 'bread not bombs' position, linked their cause with that of world poverty and looked for endorsement to the aid agencies. Brian Walker, a convinced anti-militarist, responded positively. In 1980 and 1981, he gave two £10,000 grants to the World Disarmament Campaign run by the veteran Brigadier Michael Harbottle. The Charity Commission, alerted by an angry Oxfam supporter, found these grants legitimate only so long as they promoted the elimination of poverty in the Third World.

Although this response hardly amounted to a ringing endorsement, Walker read it as support for the thesis for which he gained the approval of Oxfam's trustees. This maintained that excessive world expenditures on armaments negatively affected the lives of millions of poor people by consuming resources which might otherwise have been spent on social and humanitarian activity. In 1985, Oxfam gave wide circulation to a leaflet supporting the Campaign Against the Arms Trade (CAAT), which extrapolated this idea into the slogan: 'The arms trade kills.' In the view of the Charity Commissioners this was a leaflet too far.

At a meeting with Oxfam trustees, the Charity Commissioners suggested that there was no provable direct relationship between purchases of arms and the lack of development in a country since there was no guarantee that money not expended on weapons would be spent for the benefit of the poor. Oxfam could cite field experience to back legitimate protest about the effects of armed conflict on people and projects; but opposition to the arms trade itself was a different matter. However, the Commissioners did not deliver an actual reprimand; merely expressed their reservations. The position they adopted, not only with Oxfam but with other charities associated with CAAT, was that any cause for which a charity campaigned must be directly covered by its main charitable objects.

In September 1986, the Commissioners issued new guidelines to charities about how far they might engage in 'political' activity, elaborating this line. A charity concerned with the elderly, for example, could present reasoned arguments to government about defects in the social security system as it affected the elderly; it could publish material based on reasoned research and direct experience. 'But it would not be
proper for such a charity to advocate a particular line of policy or legislative change unless this is justifiable as entirely subsidiary to the achievement of its charitable purpose, and the manner and content of that advocacy is appropriate to that end. And it would not be open to a charity for the relief of the elderly to campaign on some completely different cause like apartheid or defence policy.'

A number of impulses had put the perennially vexed question of the dividing line between permissible and impermissible political activities by charities up for public airing. One was the government’s new interest in the voluntary sector; another was the scrutiny to which the official watchdog body on charities was itself being subjected. A 1986 National Audit Report criticised the Charity Commission as lacking in teeth, both in the instruments it applied and the administrative zeal with which it used them. A 1987 public inquiry under Sir Philip Woodfield revealed that British charitable activity was in need of tighter regulation, and the recommendations were made for toughening the law and revitalising the Charity Commission.

In 1989 came a Home Office White Paper. With possible legislation in the offing, the question of a statutory definition of charitable activity (not attempted since 1601 and avoided in the 1960 Charities Act) might again be raised. A case was likely to be made by those who thought that certain charities made too much of their role as analysts and opponents of social policy. Hardly anyone close to the charitable world, including the Commission, wished for such a definition to be placed on the statute book. Its effect would almost certainly be to restrict the flexibility with which legal precedents could be interpreted and reinterpreted in the light of changing social and political attitudes when cases came to court; also, it must be said, in the light of the views of those occupying the offices of the Charity Commission at any given moment. These views were usually kindly disposed towards the charities’ tendency to push interpretation outward, but not inevitably.

In 1988, a new Chief Charity Commissioner was appointed. Robin Guthrie, previously head of the Joseph Rowntree Memorial Trust, was welcomed by the charities as ‘one of us’. Guthrie took what he called ‘a robust view’ of matters concerning the overlaps of charitable with political activity. In the 1988 Goodman lecture, delivered at the invitation of the Charities Aid Foundation, he said: ‘Charity is a part of the life of the nation. It cannot avoid influencing or being influenced by the politics of the day, whether it be 1601 or 1991.’ But while he essentially repeated the position established in the 1986 guidelines, he added a caution: ‘If [charities] are working in circumstances adverse to their objects, they should seek to influence and encourage change in those circumstances if they can. But how far should they persist ...? Not very far in my view.’
When they sought guidance from the Commission, the charities were used to being told: 'Much depends on style'; hence the emphasis in the 1986 guidelines on reasoned argument, reasoned research. Now Guthrie was adding persistence. How far was the 'not very far' he thought they should go? Oxfam was the charity fated to find out.

During the late 1980s, a new tendency emerged in Oxfam campaigning. From debt, aid, trade, from babyfoods and health, Oxfam moved further into geopolitical issues. Such campaigns – as in the case of South Africa – were perceived as extensions of Oxfam's overseas programmes currently obstructed by conflict or repression; hindrances which might be susceptible to pressure from Britain or an international grouping in which Britain played a part, such as the European Community. To begin with, activity was limited to careful research and its dissemination in Public Affairs Unit publications. The first case history was a 1983 pamphlet by David Bull: The Poverty of Diplomacy; Kampuchea and the Outside World. This was followed in 1985 by Nicaragua: The Threat of a Good Example by Dianna Melrose, and in 1986 by Namibia: A Violation of Trust by Susanna Smith. Although the two latter publications generated a few complaints to the Charity Commissioners (who take up issues on a reactive basis), the Commissioners examined the publications closely and took no exception to what they contained.

With the benefit of hindsight, however, these were portents of what was to come. Once geopolitical issues were moved out of the rarefied air of targeted work with decision-makers into the popular arena, and thereby became much more visible, the volume of such complaints was almost bound to increase. For it is very hard to find a place in the world about which any given presentation of facts will not seem politically partisan to one or another ideological, strategic, or 'kith and kin' interest group.

In 1988, a right-wing group called Western Goals UK, with close links to the anti-Communist, pro-Contra lobby in the US, began an orchestrated effort to portray Oxfam, Christian Aid, and War on Want as dominated by extreme left-wingers. They complained to the Charity Commission about the charities' involvement in 'Central America Week 1988', an educational programme, and called in question their charitable status. Given its ideological derivation and agenda, this initiative was not a cause of serious concern either to the charities or the Commissioners, however upsetting.

The following year came another series of complaints to the Commission. After making grants on and off for 40 years to projects on the West Bank of the Jordan, and Gaza, Oxfam had decided to put out more information to staff and supporters about the situation of people and projects as a consequence of Israeli occupation. Central America was
not a part of the world which had a strong constituency in Britain, and statements about the situation in that region could pass unchallenged except by fringe extremists. Statements about the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East were quite another matter.

The refugee problems stemming from the creation of Israel in 1948 had been the earliest concern of the then Oxford Committee for Famine Relief beyond the continent of Europe. Over the next decades many grants had been made for the displaced people of Palestine, especially for clothing and vocational training to UNRWA (the UN Relief and Works Agency). There had also been support for agricultural, health, and educational projects in various countries, mostly under church and mission auspices. But as a sphere of importance to Oxfam, the Middle East had increasingly taken a back seat to Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

In 1975, in the wake of the changes wrought in the Arab world by the explosion of oil wealth, Oxfam began to reconsider its role. The expectation was that Arab money would soon take over the role of Western aid: 'The prospects for the poor in the Middle East are a great deal better than in most countries where Oxfam operates,' suggested a contemporary report. 'We should increasingly face south to less developed areas such as Yemen. Otherwise we should only respond to exceptional situations as in Lebanon and the Occupied Territories, and be prepared for emergencies.' This recommendation became the basis of future activity.

At this point Oxfam appointed David Bryer, a specialist in the region, as its Director for the Middle East. Bryer's background was academic, and his inclination was for systematic programming for targeted populations rather than project-delineated, philanthropic pot-pourri. Initially he confronted a familiar constraint: a lack of suitable local partners, especially within the Moslem community. Two key initiatives were a primary health care training programme in Yemen, carried out with CIIR (Catholic Institute of International Relations); and support through the Egyptian Coptic Church to improve the living and working conditions of the Zabbaleen, Cairo's traditional garbage-collectors. The only group in Israel in future to receive support - Israel could not be regarded as a third world country - were Palestinian bedouin in the Negev.

Earlier, Oxfam had virtually phased out its work in Lebanon, also on the grounds that this was no longer an underdeveloped country. But the civil war which erupted in 1975 led to increasing involvement in emergency relief and reconstruction. Many grants were made to UNRWA, church organisations, and the Palestinian Red Crescent, and
links built with local community groups. After the Israeli army invaded in 1978 and 170,000 people had fled to Beirut and Sidon, the situation in southern Lebanon became increasingly violent and unstable. The absence of central control meant disruption of health and social services; people were in great distress, yet few aid agencies were prepared to help rebuild camps or undertake rural reconstruction in such a volatile environment. In 1979, Chris Dammers, the new Middle East Field Director based in Cairo, argued strongly that Oxfam must maintain its programme. He felt it important psychologically and in other ways not to desert those trying to uphold community cohesion and build a non-sectarian Lebanese society.

In 1982, when the Israelis launched their push for Beirut in an attempt to wipe out the Palestinian liberation forces in Lebanon, Chris Dammers happened to be in the south when the army swept through. Along with many thousands of refugees, he escaped to Beirut. Within days Oxfam launched an appeal for £250,000, and Dammers was able to give money directly to community, student, and first-aid organisations to buy food and drugs, deploy ambulances and set up blood banks during the siege of Western Beirut. A public health programme followed in the devastated refugee camps around Tyre and Sidon, restoring water supplies and sanitation. Blankets and health care were also provided to 60,000 Lebanese and Palestinians who had fled to the Beqa’a Valley. Seedlings were given out to farmers struggling back to their ruined smallholdings.

In the aftermath of the Israeli occupation, Oxfam attempted to raise international consciousness about the lawlessness in southern Lebanon and the threat to civilian and camp populations. But its most important contribution was still to support those community groups providing health and education services, clearing rubble from camps with unexploded ordinance, running women’s income-generating projects, helping disabled people and abandoned children. Between 1982 and 1984, Oxfam committed over £1 million to Lebanon, of which more than half was spent on emergency relief. The Israelis began to withdraw in early 1985. Over the next years, with the state disintegrating and internecine violence increasing, Oxfam maintained an office in Beirut and kept up support. But efforts to move away from damage control into development were persistently interrupted by the endless state of crisis.

By 1986, aid agencies were coming under increasing pressure because of a deteriorating security situation. Oxfam’s expatriate Field Director had to leave, but local staff were recruited and carried on. In a divided and fragmented Lebanon, the task of networking between groups and building a non-sectarian consensus on however small a scale was seen as important. This belief was to prove its value in an extra and unforeseen dimension.
In March 1988, Oxfam was suddenly plunged into an abduction crisis. Peter Coleridge, the Oxford-based Area Co-ordinator of its Middle East programme, and the Syrian head of Oxfam’s Lebanese operation, Omar Traboulsi, were arrested by the extreme revolutionary Abu Nidal group while visiting Palestinian refugees in Sidon. Their release was the result of pressure mounted by Oxfam’s 30-strong network of Lebanese and Palestinian partner organisations. The publicity concerning the two men’s disappearance was intense. On hearing of the arrests, members of partner groups set off for Sidon from places as far away as Tripoli in the north. A series of escalating protest measures was agreed, including sit-ins and hunger strikes, to put pressure on the abductors. After five days, to everyone’s intense relief, Coleridge and Traboulsi were released into the custody of Mustapha Saad, the Sunni Moslem leader in Sidon.

Of all the communities in the Middle East, the Palestinians in the Israeli-occupied Territories of West Bank and Gaza consistently attracted the highest level of non-emergency Oxfam support. The level of poverty, at least in Gaza, is among the most acute in the region; but just as important a subsidiary reason were the specific needs progressively induced by the 25 years of the occupation itself.

The impact of the Israeli presence on projects long associated with Oxfam and on their political, economic, and social environment had a telling effect on the organisational conscience. A 1974 report by a visitor to the Arab Development Society in the Jordan Valley, still presided over by the ageing but indomitable Musa Alami, recorded the following: ‘There are still some 100 boys, but the Society is under continuous pressure from the Israelis. They want to take over the property. Owing to the destruction of the ’67 war he can only farm one-third of the land; of the six wells, he now has only the third working. As we drove up the avenue the devastation was tragically plain on every side. A good portion of his land is occupied by the Israeli army.’

Musa Alami talked of ‘sticking things out’; and a windfall of Swedish technical assistance helped put the Society’s desert holding back in bloom. But the overwhelming tenor of Oxfam field reports from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s was pessimistic about development prospects, reflecting the atmosphere of depression and fatalism which the occupation engendered. The end of occupation was seen as the precondition for genuine development; but in spite of the 1978 Camp David agreement that Palestinians in the West Bank would be granted some form of autonomy, its end was nowhere in sight. The programme of Jewish settlement and the full incorporation of the Territories into Israel’s economic and political system moved inexorably ahead, and the human environment became so charged with antagonism that peaceful co-existence and development seemed extremely remote.
In the 1970s, with little community or self-help spirit around, Oxfam mainly supported traditional charitable activities – vocational training, child care, aid for people with disabilities. Some more adventurous projects began to run up against restraints familiar elsewhere. An example was a scheme run by the Mennonite Central Committee to introduce drip irrigation for small farmers in the north Jordan Valley to combat growing vulnerability to water shortage.

Much of the land in the Jordan Valley was poor and rocky. By the late 1970s, extensive well-sinking for new Jewish settlements had drawn water away from the traditional wells of the Palestinian farmers. If farmers were forced to give up cultivation, Israeli land regulations meant that after three years their holdings could be confiscated. Thus drip irrigation, which was able to raise vegetable productivity by as much as five times, could make the difference not only between a good crop and a poor crop, but also between a farmer’s title to land and its seizure and loss to Jewish settlers.

Oxfam remained committed to the Mennonite programme, but by the early 1980s technical problems and the high overhead costs of drip irrigation encouraged greater emphasis on land reclamation, terracing, rainwater conservation, and other forms of appropriate small-scale investment. Oxfam also helped agricultural groups market their produce for export, another context in which economic fortunes tended to be dictated by Israeli policy. The retention of their land became more and more critical for Palestinians in the face of Jewish settlement, both psychologically and economically. The alternative to farming was a job across the border in Israel; but wages for unskilled workers were low and Palestinians valued their economic and personal independence.

By 1982, over half the land in the West Bank had been taken over for Jewish settlement. The only recourse for a farmer whose land had been seized was to protest his title in the courts. Oxfam provided support to the American Friends’ Service Council (AFSC) Legal Aid Centre in Jerusalem to help contest smallholder land cases as well as cases of harassment. In 1979, a local chapter of the International Commission of Jurists was set up: Law in the Service of Man (LSM). In 1982, Oxfam began a long association with LSM, providing support for an investigation into the legal status of co-operatives, voluntary and humanitarian associations.

By the mid-1980s, a new note of optimism had begun to enter Oxfam’s reports. The dark side was an increased level of violence and tension, and reports of human rights violations. But its corollary was an upsurge of volunteer committees of all kinds through which people were shaking off their ‘blame-the-occupation’ attitude and taking action on their own behalf. ‘These committees represent the most promising
and constructive approach to the problems of development under indefinite occupation,' commented Peter Coleridge in 1985.

Volunteer Works Committees were providing help to farmers threatened by debt, land seizure, or marketing problems. Doctors and nurses disturbed by the poor health care in refugee camps and villages and at people's lack of basic knowledge of hygiene and nutrition, set up Medical Relief Committees to run mobile clinics and collect health data. Women's Committees ran kindergartens and women's literacy courses. With such action came growing self-awareness and community expression. By 1986, Law in the Service of Man, now called Al Haq, had gained international acclaim and financial support for its legal rights work. Coleridge wrote: 'The momentum for personal and social transformation now so evident in the area is breathtaking. What is happening on the West Bank and to a lesser extent in Gaza is an increasingly clear focus on real development, with more and more people engaged in serious debate about the issues.'

Towards the end of 1987 the Palestinian uprising, or intifada, began. In January 1988, Frank Judd visited the West Bank and Gaza, and pronounced himself 'appalled' at some of the events he witnessed or that were described to him at refugee camps in Gaza. He visited the Medical Relief Committees, to which the crisis had brought hundreds of volunteer doctors and health workers and which had become a mainstay of medical services in the Territories. The Committees responded to SOS calls from villages under pressure from the Israeli army, and carried on their regular outreach clinics as well as running first-aid training in how to cope with tear gas, fractures and bullet wounds. The volunteer teams showed great bravery, occasionally suffering arrest by army patrols on their way to villages where clinics were due to be held. Some in the network were detained without charge for several months.

In spring 1988, four fieldworkers of Al Haq were detained in the wave of arrests undertaken by the Israeli authorities attempting to quell the intifada. This event fuelled an ongoing discussion in Oxfam about whether it should develop a communications policy stemming from what had become a £400,000 a year programme in the Occupied Territories, Israel and Jordan. The rationale – that a certain exercise of political power was causing human suffering – was the same as that which had inspired its outspokenness concerning Central America, and its decision to underscore publicly the links between poverty and apartheid in South Africa. Coleridge, and other Oxfamers including Judd himself, found it hard to maintain a sense of detachment from the Palestinian cause when so much of the humanitarian activity Oxfam supported stemmed from or was affected by some aspect of Israeli control of certain lands in the region.
In a paper prepared for internal discussion, Coleridge suggested that Oxfam should establish a ‘clear position’ towards the Israel/Palestine issue. It should educate its supporters, start to introduce more material on the Middle East into its regular newsletters, possibly as a prelude to carefully circumscribed informational activity among a wider public. In September 1988, this policy proposal was put to Oxfam’s trustees, and endorsed by 32 votes in favour with six abstentions. In December, a year after the intifada began, Oxfam associated itself with a joint statement from a group of organisations including Christian Aid, SCF, and UNA International Service condemning the closure of schools and repression of education in the West Bank and Gaza, measures which were affecting 300,000 school-age children.

The following year another step was taken towards a wider dissemination of information to the Oxfam constituency about policy and projects in the Middle East. Oxfam News of autumn 1989 carried an article describing programme priorities in the Middle East – land rights, agriculture, legal aid, health, pre-schools, children with disabilities – as well as the reasons for its decision to raise the profile of its work in the Occupied Territories. This provoked a flurry of complaints to the Charity Commissioners. The issue had already been taken up in the Jewish Chronicle, which had earlier printed passages from the internal Oxfam discussion paper. A Jewish Chronicle interview with a bullish Judd in November 1989 was followed by a riposte written by an ex-Oxfam trustee, who was extremely put out by what he perceived as Oxfam’s engagement in ‘contentious political debate’, and determined to make his views public.

By this time, conciliatory meetings had taken place between Oxfam and leaders of the Jewish community in Britain. It had become clear that Oxfam could not present information to supporters and the public which implied identification with the Palestinian case against Israeli occupation, and be seen as non-political by those with pro-Israeli convictions.

Since then, the efforts of organisations in the Occupied Territories to promote community development, protect landholdings, secure markets for agricultural produce, and maintain basic health and education services have continued to receive Oxfam support. Meanwhile, attention to humanitarian problems in the region, courtesy of Iraq’s President Saddam Hussein, has spread elsewhere.

On 25 April 1990, the Charity Commissioners dropped a bombshell on Oxfam. They had decided: ‘to hold an inquiry into whether, in advocating and campaigning for political change whether in this country or abroad, the trustees are acting in accordance with their trusts
and the restrictions of charity law in England and Wales'. The announcement came at the moment when Oxfam was about to launch a popular campaign about southern Africa, guaranteeing that the campaign opened in a barrage of media publicity; but hardly of the kind desired.

A formal inquiry of this kind into a charity's activity in the political arena was a highly unusual step for the Charity Commissioners to take, and it was viewed by the Oxfam trustees – whose discharge of their responsibilities was being called in question – with the utmost gravity. Should such an inquiry find against Oxfam, the trustees would be bound to suffer reprimand. On top of this, they might be obliged to refund to the Inland Revenue money spent on the activities deemed non-charitable, plus any related tax for which exemption had previously been given. This could add up to a tidy sum – for which the trustees would be personally liable. At the worst, if the findings of the inquiry were unacceptable to Oxfam, they might feel bound to defend the charity's reputation and their own stewardship of its behaviour in court. Whatever happened, the publicity surrounding the inquiry could easily sully Oxfam's name in the eyes of supporters and the general public.

In the world beyond Oxfam's immediate perimeter, the inquiry had a wider significance. Its effect was likely to be to define more strictly for charities generally the furthest political limits of 'educational and information activity'. The outcome would be pertinent for all charities who considered participation in public debate on government policies connected to their purposes an important part of the contemporary humanitarian role: a role which the Thatcher government was currently subjecting to other extra strains. Given the government's attitude towards the nation's charitable affairs, the prospect of new legislation, and the desire to avoid a statutory definition of 'charitable activity', all interested parties – including the Commissioners – were suffering from raw nerves and public sensitivity. While the inquiry would demonstrate that the Commission was pursuing its regulatory functions with diligence, it could also become itself the subject of controversy which might redound to the Commission's disfavour.

The process which led to the Commissioners' decision to undertake the inquiry had its roots in the geopolitical campaigning themes which Oxfam had begun promoting in the mid-1980s. In concrete terms, it had actually begun the previous autumn, with the unusually large number of complaints to the Commissioners – around 40 – about Oxfam's 'position' vis à vis Israeli activities in the West Bank and Gaza; complaints which the Commission had upheld. Following various exchanges, the Oxfam trustees and the Charity Commissioners agreed to meet to discuss 'matters of mutual concern'. The meeting took place on 6
April, and the Oxfam group included Mary Cherry, Chairman of the trustees, Frank Judd, and Bruce Coles, a barrister and senior trustee. Cherry, with Coles' support, was to prove tireless in the energy and care she brought to the defence of Oxfam in its most serious brush with charitable law.

At this meeting, the Chief Charity Commissioner, Robin Guthrie, indicated that he was not willing to take a relaxed view towards the complaints against Oxfam about overly political behaviour, even though Oxfam believed that most of these were unjustly based on public discussion of an internal position paper on the Middle East which did not represent actual policy. However, the occasion was seen by all parties as an opportunity for a useful exchange of views on the acceptable limits of charitable advocacy. Oxfam knew that it was under scrutiny, but did not detect serious alarm signals.

In late April, mindful of the discussions which had so recently occurred, Oxfam decided to take the precaution of showing the Commissioners the materials to be used in its upcoming southern Africa campaign a few days before this was launched. The campaigning theme was: 'Frontline Africa: the Right to a Future', and the full exposition of its rationale was laid out in a book of the same name. This drew upon Oxfam experience in the Frontline States, showing how the fate of peoples in the whole of southern Africa was jeopardised by the existing political economy of South Africa, and argued that Britain and the European Community should exert maximum pressure on the South African authorities to create conditions for peace and development in the region.

Among the prescriptions suggested were extra aid to Frontline States; cancellation of their debts to Western lending institutions; and the maintenance of economic sanctions against South Africa until apartheid had been dismantled. When the campaign literature outlining these prescriptions was shown to the Commissioners, they took the view that for Oxfam to adopt a public stance on sanctions was inconsistent with its charitable status.

Oxfam's position on sanctions had been elaborated in the period following the 1985 declaration of a State of Emergency in South Africa. Until a change of premier in February 1989 opened the door to a new era in South African affairs, the authorities had pursued an intensive crackdown on all organisations opposed to apartheid. Such figures as Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Beyers Naude, Chairman of the South African Council of Churches, had emphasised to audiences in Europe and North America that public support for sanctions was seen as crucial by those desperately trying to maintain the non-violent liberation struggle inside the country.
Oxfam, which had a more extensive programme of aid to grassroots organisations than any other European voluntary agency, felt keenly the need to express the solidarity its partners were calling for. But cognisant of the legal implications, it reached the view that it should back sanctions only after the British government declared its own support for them, and only after lengthy internal discussion and an effort to research the impact of sanctions on South Africa's poor. The trustees agreed the position in 1987; but not until preparations for the 1989 campaign did Oxfam plan to go public with its view. The line on sanctions was not seen as an important element of the campaign, but an issue on which the campaign had to have a view because it was at the top of the anti-apartheid international agenda. If it was going to campaign on southern Africa at all at this particular historical juncture, Oxfam did not see how it could make 'no comment' on the most publicly prominent southern African issue of the day.

The Charity Commissioners took a very straightforward line on Oxfam's stance. No causal connection could be proved between the imposition of sanctions on South Africa and the enhancement of public benefit or the removal of immediate obstacles to the relief of the poor. In the short term, the imposition of sanctions was likely to lead to more hardship, not less. This meant that, by definition, it would be non-charitable to press for the maintenance of sanctions. Therefore, 'in seeking to influence the Government in relation to the retention of sanctions, the trustees would be acting outside their trusts.' In the light of this advice, Oxfam immediately instructed its campaigning staff to drop all comment on the sanctions issue. But the Commissioners did not decide to drop their inquiry.

Although sanctions and southern Africa was the precipitating factor, the volume and, more particularly, the range of recent complaints had finally led the Commissioners to the conclusion that the whole sweep of Oxfam's campaigning needed review. The complaints that concerned them referred to statements made or activities undertaken by Oxfam on issues related to British foreign policy; all went beyond calls for more or better quality overseas aid, or debt relief for destitute countries. Around the same time as the Commission had been alerted to the Oxfam News article on projects in the Israeli-occupied West Bank in late 1989, some protests had also been received about Oxfam's campaign on behalf of Cambodia.

Ever since the effort mounted by Oxfam in late 1979 to bring aid to a country devastated by the Khmer Rouge, Oxfam had retained a very special feeling for Cambodia. Here was a country stricken in a very particular way. Victim of inhuman persecution by auto-genocidal leaders, its ultimate misfortune had been to be 'liberated' by Vietnam,
the pariah of South-East Asia against whom China, the US, and their regional allies were implacably hostile.

As a result of the continued Vietnamese occupation, the regime in Phnom Penh was boycotted by the entire Western world. Only aid defined as humanitarian could be supplied by the international community. The Khmer Rouge as a military force was sustained by arms from China, and the precarious internal situation meant that it might yet fight or manipulate its way back into power.

Oxfam’s campaign on Cambodia, launched in 1988, had been originally proposed by its own Country Office. Those running the programme felt that the lack of external support for rebuilding Cambodia’s infrastructure increased its vulnerability and placed extra pressure on the aid provided by non-governmental agencies such as Oxfam. The campaign drew attention to Cambodia’s ostracisation by the West, and to the tacit support this implied for China’s ally, the horrendous Pol Pot and his murderous Khmer Rouge.

The campaign was coincidentally well-timed. The announcement that Vietnam would shortly withdraw its troops from Cambodia led to a flurry of diplomatic activity to produce a settlement between the opposing parties, without which the country would almost certainly again be convulsed in civil war. Oxfam capitalised on these opportunities to put across the idea that afflicted Cambodia needed international economic assistance and must at all costs be saved from a further chapter of Khmer Rouge control. European and North American NGO members of the original 1979-80 Cambodian aid consortium joined the campaign to give it international strength and cohesion.

Against expectations, the campaign in Britain was a wild success, more effective than any previously undertaken by Oxfam. The tragic story of Cambodia caught the imagination of Oxfam supporters all over the country – not just the ‘Hungry for Change’ groups but regular volunteers as well. The annual fast in 1988, in which thousands of people – including the actress Julie Christie – lit candles at a vigil at St. Martin-in-the-Fields and made their sympathies for the Cambodian people known to Westminster, produced £300,000. A Blue Peter appeal attracted an extraordinary response, raising £1.3 million from children’s Bring-and-Buy sales and enticing Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to appear on the programme. Although it was unrealistic to expect that Britain, a country with no special links with Cambodia, would break ranks with the US and Chinese position, Cambodia did join the UK foreign policy agenda and some additional humanitarian aid was released.

The campaign came to the notice of the Charity Commissioners in November 1989. A television documentary by John Pilger precipitated
thousands of enquiries to Oxfam and a deluge of 16,000 letters to the Foreign Office expressing concern. Discontent was targeted on the UN General Assembly, where a coalition of opponents to the existing regime, including the Khmer Rouge, occupied Cambodia’s seat. Thus, the Oxfam campaigning agenda could be said to have embraced notions beyond the specific lack of international assistance to Cambodia. In early January 1990, local Oxfam networks in Yorkshire, Humberside, and Kirklees ran a mock referendum asking the public what they thought of the British government’s lack of action on behalf of Cambodian peace and reconstruction. The subsequent Charity Commission inquiry found that the wording of the mock referendum questions ‘went too far’. Overall, the campaign ‘far exceeded the Commissioners’ guidelines’ on permissible political activity.

The Commissioners’ report of its inquiry into Oxfam campaigning was issued on 9 May 1991. They had not been able to accept Oxfam’s own rationale for its recent campaigning activity, set out in a lengthy and carefully-argued memorandum. The report found that, in recent years, Oxfam’s trustees had exceeded the limitations placed on them by the restrictions of charity law. They appeared not to differentiate ‘between stating a possible solution to a problem in reasoned fashion and campaigning to have that solution adopted’. Some Oxfam campaigns were found to have overstepped the line in style, content, and degree, and the Commissioners ruled that the ‘unacceptable political activities of the charity must cease’. As a result, certain items of campaigning literature were withdrawn from public distribution. The actual penalties imposed on Oxfam were, however, mild. The trustees were not liable for financial compensation for breach of their trusts since they had acted in good faith; financial penalties would, however, be considered if further cases ensued.

Since the report and its reprimand, Oxfam has been in dialogue with the Charity Commissioners to ensure that all its campaigning and information work remains within the law. Although the inquiry sent shock waves through Oxfam and the charity world – shock waves which continue to reverberate – its impact has not been ultimately harmful, and may even have had some positive effects. Once the dust settled, Oxfam was able to come to terms with the delineation of what is, or is not, deemed permissible in terms of campaigning activity in the public policy arena. Since advocacy has been acknowledged a charitable activity so long as its target is directly connected with an organisation’s existing charitable objects, there is still plenty of room for humanitarian practitioners to participate in public policy debate in areas of their concern. No taint of bad faith clings to Oxfam’s reputation; in fact, in the financial year during which the results of the inquiry were published
(1990-91), Oxfam's income reached an all-time record of £69 million. This can be interpreted as a resounding vote of public confidence.

The charitable world as a whole — in spite of some alarm that the official spotlight has been cast on areas previously left conveniently grey — has probably profited from a thorough airing of the issue. Sharper definitions may be seen by some as a restriction; but they can as well be interpreted as clarifications. Those clarifications cannot be said to represent a reversal in the historical evolution of British charitable activity. Charitable status is not to be tackled in the Charities Act; the inquiry certainly helped to show that the Charity Commission can regulate effectively, and thus to reinforce the tradition of relying on charitable case law and its interpretation when arbitration is necessary. The main effect on the overseas aid charities has been to inhibit them from becoming an alternative voice in foreign policy on issues beyond those reasonably closely related to aid and humanitarian activity.

Certainly, campaigning has not left the Oxfam agenda. In early 1991, with public attention consumed by the Gulf War and the disintegration of the old order in the USSR and Eastern Europe, Oxfam ran one of its most successful campaigns to date: 'Don't Forget Africa'. No-one suggested that the prospect of severe food shortage and famine affecting 30 million people in that much beleaguered continent was not a fitting subject for Oxfam to raise. Frank Judd's personal lobbying helped to push the fate of Africa's people up the agenda, in Britain, in the European Community, and at the United Nations. Resources on a scale far outstripping those of the voluntary agencies were mobilised as a result.

The voice of the new humanitarians, on behalf of victims of conflict, against famine, speaking up for the poor, is not about to be silenced. And as environmental issues climb higher up the international agenda for the containment of human crisis, their voice will also increasingly be heard in another public debate: how to promote the kind of development that protects and sustains both our fragile world and the lives of its least privileged inhabitants.

In April 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development, a successor body to those led by Pearson and Brandt, published what was known as the Brundtland Report: 'Our Common Future'.

In recent years the acute pressure of modern technology and consumer demands on the planetary fabric, an issue which had been smouldering away unobtrusively since the early 1970s, had suddenly erupted as a matter of global concern. Like over-expenditure on arms, the plunder of the environment was often linked with world poverty:
instead of 'bread not bombs' the suggestion was 'bread not waste', or pollution, or the over-consumption of resources whereby humankind squandered the planet's natural wealth when it might instead do something helpful for the poor. Brundtland linked the twin concerns in a different way. 'Our Common Future' stated that poverty was both a cause and effect of current environmental degradation. The insensitive kind of technological transfer which pauperised land, people, and natural systems would lead to no common future at all; only 'sustainable' forms of development could blend the fulfilment of human needs with the protection of soils, waters, air, and all forms of life.

Oxfam's focus on the poorest groups in the poorest corners of the world had necessarily led it into some of the most marginal environments: deserts and forests, mountains and dryland plains. Its concern in any environment was to marshal and top up existing resources – physical, technical, managerial, and financial – instead of substituting misguided, if well-intentioned, outsider money and know-how. Thus Oxfam, like others in the voluntary sector, had put its efforts into 'sustainable development' without any conscious deliberation; here was another case where the 'alternative' way of development was, to the humanitarian, not an alternative at all but the only logical – and practicable – way to proceed.

Among some Third World audiences, an approach which tried to exploit the inherent values of traditional ways of doing things was not always appreciated. Why reinforce the backward and second-rate? Why not bring in the modern and mechanised? Why should only the First World be allowed to enjoy the jumbo-jet economy and lifestyle? But the people on the lower rungs of the global society, who cannot afford processed fuel, chemical fertilisers, exotic breeds of edible plant or creature, flush toilets, or proper shoes, see things rather differently. Where their activities reinforce environmental degradation, as on the eroded hillsides of Nepal or in the dryland scrub of the Sahel, it is because the adaptive capacity of their traditional systems has been overwhelmed by forces outside their control and no-one has helped them to protect or enhance it. If the Mossi of the Yatenga Plateau can save their soil with lines of stones; or their womenfolk save firewood by using a fuel-efficient stove; or the Palestinian farmers of the Jordan Valley save their land by terracing, be sure they will practise 'sustainable development'.

In some parts of the world, efforts to promote 'sustainable development' confronted the same political obstacles as social organisation elsewhere. One of the many witnesses to appear before the Brundtland Commission in 1985 was Jaime da Silva Araujo, President of the Brazilian National Rubber Tappers' Council. Araujo came from Amazonas, a part of the world where the tropical forest was being felled
The Amazonian forest is being destroyed by large projects, financed by foreign banks and planned by Brazilian interests, that do not take into account the living beings in the forest,' he said. '... We live from the forest. We insist that it be preserved. We agree with the Indians, who in our view share our struggle, who struggle for the preservation of the forest, as well as their customs, and their culture.' In their enthusiasm for 'development', the government had overlooked existing sustainable extraction of rubber, nuts, and other forest products. The result was unsustainable development; continuous conflict between the rubber-tappers and ranchers, who seized land which had been successfully managed by seringueiros and Indian peoples for generations; and who quickly ruined it because its arable life was so limited.

In October 1985, the Rural Workers’ Union of Xapuri in the state of Acre, whose chairman was Chico Mendes, organised the first national conference of rubber-tappers. Out of this came a proposal for 'extractive reserves', protected forest areas based on the Indian model, managed by the seringueiros, which would allow them to carry on their rubber-tapping life, with legal protection from invasion by ranchers. In 1988, the government signed a decree to set up the first 'extractive reserve', near Xapuri. This victory was the fruit of hard organisational work by the rubber-tappers over many years.

Oxfam was an enthusiastic supporter of this long struggle to gain recognition for an alternative, sustainable, way of life. It funded both the Xapuri Rural Workers’ Union and the National Rubber Tappers’ Council, paying for land surveys, conferences, and meetings; and it helped the Xapuri Union to set up schools, health posts, and co-operatives. Between 1981 and 1989, Oxfam spent nearly £100,000 on these projects. Chico Mendes, by then a figure of international renown, was murdered in December 1988 by a rancher; but his work for the forest people is not so easily destroyed.

If the fate of people living off the Amazon forests, and the preservation of the rights of Indian populations in countries such as Peru and Bolivia, were among the more conspicuous of Oxfam’s environmental concerns, there were many projects all over the world whose original impulse was economic but whose context was creeping environmental loss. Among the economic victims of the erosion of soils and the depletion of plant life, the most invisible were women. In most African and Asian rural societies, household utilities and much of the
family food supply were provided by women’s cashless engagement with river and woodland, field and furrow. As the resource base shrunk, they were forced to walk further and expend more energy to collect fuel and water; cultivation and livestock tending became more problematic. Yet because these activities were outside the cash economy their importance was disregarded; helplessly, women felt the environmental pincers tightening around them.

In the 1970s, in the villages of the Himalayas, a movement began among women which at first raised eyebrows but in time was taken in deadly earnest. Women of the Chipko Movement began hugging trees to stop their wholesale felling by timber firms. In the 1980s, Oxfam began to fund exchanges of experience between Himalayan women in India and Nepal seeking to control deforestation. In eastern Africa and in the Sahel, where many environments are vulnerable to soil erosion, women have been similarly mobilised around enterprises which support their domestic economic role, establishing fuelwood lots and tree nurseries, providing creches which free up their time and energy for what is now labelled ‘primary environmental care’. The economic role of women, even in notoriously conservative societies, has been carefully incorporated into work in arid lands, a special focus since the late 1980s. Women project officers are now employed in many Oxfam overseas offices to try and redress the marginalisation of women which skewed economic development and environmental degradation have combined to foster.

At the other end of the spectrum, among the expanding city slums whose growth is the outcome of declining rural incomes and which present an environmental nightmare of a different kind, women and their children are also the worst affected by low incomes, crowdedness, squalor, debt, and family breakdown. In the mounting clamour of green concern about tropical forests, ozone layers, species depletion, and global warming, Oxfam’s concern is that the lot of people impoverished by a crumbling resource base should not be overlooked. ‘Sustainable development’ and ‘primary environmental care’ are ideas whose time has come. In the run-up to the ‘Earth Summit’ to be held in Brazil in June 1992, they have become the latest context in which the voluntary agencies are gaining ground for an ‘alternative’ development agenda.

On 2 August 1990, the forces of President Saddam Hussein of Iraq invaded Kuwait. This act of war brought into being an international alliance of a scale and unanimity of purpose unseen in the world since the group of Allies then called the ‘United Nations’ took on the Axis powers during 1942-45. The subsequent Gulf War was similarly waged under the auspices of the ‘United Nations’, institutionally created in
1945 to promote peace, but ironically recast in the post-Cold War climate of international harmony as a military and political alliance much like that of 50 years ago.

The first action taken by the United Nations in response to the invasion of Kuwait was to impose a total trade embargo on Iraq. When Saddam proved unamenable to non-military methods of persuasion, an air and ground assault was launched in early 1991 to force the eviction of his army from foreign soil. But although Kuwait was liberated, and although Shi'ites in southern Iraq and Kurds in the north both rose in rebellion, the regime of Saddam Hussein survived. In the aftermath of the shooting war, terms of peace were imposed by the United Nations designed to ensure that Iraq's military might was permanently impaired; Saddam's military machine and arsenal – chemical, biological, nuclear – were to be dismantled in the interests of world stability. To impose those terms of peace, the less visible economic war declared the previous August continued unabated. The weapon used to reduce Saddam to a more profound level of impotence than that achieved by bombs and armour was the application of UN sanctions, or – in age-old terminology – blockade. Because of the degree of international unanimity against Saddam, UN sanctions were – for once – rigorously enforced. The dependence of the Iraqi economy on oil exports and imported goods meant that the blockade was highly effective; by mid-1991 it seemed that Iraq's economy and support system was edging towards paralysis.

Here, too, were echoes of the second World War. In its 50th year Oxfam, along with other agents of humanitarianism, was confronted with the same dilemma that brought together that group of citizens called the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief in a church library one evening in October 1942. The problem then discussed – delicately, because it was controversial – was how to persuade the Allied war leaders that the claims of innocent Greek and Belgian civilians to be relieved from famine overrode military considerations.

The humanitarian case, as with Iraq in 1991, was that Greece and Belgium normally imported up to 70 per cent of their food requirements, and that those who bore the brunt of shortage were the vulnerable: the sick, the elderly, women, and especially children. The dilemma was the same: how to bring aid to these victims without helping the perpetrator of their suffering out of the trap specifically set to drain his power and thereby bring their travails to an end.

In the early stages of the Gulf Crisis, it was the refugees and returnee migrant workers from Kuwait and Iraq fleeing through Jordan who commanded humanitarian attention. Iraq's huge oil wealth – without which there would have been no military adventure – disqualified its citizens from serious relief concern in the pre-fighting period. But after
the battle for Kuwait was won, the consequences to the Kurdish Iraqis of their uprising against a far from declawed Saddam quickly changed the agencies' theatre of concern.

As the Iraqi army and airforce attacked their towns and villages, over one and a half million villagers fled in terror into the mountains towards the Iranian and Turkish borders. The spectacle of hundreds of thousands of shivering people stranded on snowbound passes in early 1991 brought the world's humanitarian community, including Oxfam, into action inside Iraq itself. From that point onwards, in response to the needs both of the Kurds in the north and the Shias of the south, Oxfam engineers and health workers have been playing a role in relief and rehabilitation programmes operated under the United Nations' humanitarian umbrella.

If the emergency brought the humanitarians into Iraq, it was essentially the UN trade embargo that kept them there. By late 1991, the prices of basic foodstuffs – rice, sugar, milk – had rocketed to 10 or 20 times their pre-war levels. Much of the medical, electrical, and public health infrastructure was either wrecked by the war, or reduced to disrepair by lack of spare parts and materials for reconstruction. In the south, the disruption of power supplies brought irrigated agriculture to a standstill. In many towns, raw sewage lay in the streets and polluted the water supply. Everywhere, members of a once relatively prosperous population were selling their assets and descending into poverty.

Although food and medical supplies were supposed to be exempt from the trade embargo, in effect only a fraction of the country's needs was getting through. By mid-1991 a calamity seemed to be in the making, a perception reinforced by reports from an 87-strong Harvard University team of lawyers and public health specialists. This study into the effects of the war and sanctions on the Iraqi people was commissioned by UNICEF, Oxfam, and other international agencies. The experts reported that deaths of Iraqi children under five from malnutrition and water-borne disease had risen by five times since August 1990 and that at least 100,000 were threatened with starvation. In the interests of humanity, UN and other voices demanded, ways must be found to allow more aid through the blockade.

In September 1991, the UN Security Council passed a resolution which allowed Iraq to sell $1.6 billion worth of oil. This sum would cover the costs of war reparations and of $934 million (£522 million) in aid. But the terms of the deal, which allowed Iraq no control over the oil sales nor of purchases from them, were too humiliating for Saddam to accept. Nor was the amount acceptable, a view in which the UN Secretary-General concurred. The sum was roughly half the $1.73 billion for aid alone recommended to the Security Council on the basis of
estimates drawn up by the UN Special Envoy to Iraq, Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan.

As 1991 drew to a close, the situation on humanitarian relief for Iraq remained deadlocked. New diplomatic initiatives were needed to renegotiate the relief deal so that its terms – the value of oil to be sold, methods of purchasing and accounting for aid, monitoring of its distribution – would be acceptable to both sides. In November 1991, Frank Judd, the outgoing Oxfam Director, now Lord Judd of Portsea, went to Iraq on his last overseas tour on Oxfam's behalf. On his return, he spoke out about the human damage inflicted by blockade in an effort to keep the humanitarian issue before policy-makers and the public.

It seemed that, in half a century, Oxfam had come full circle.

On 1 January 1992, David Bryer, Director of the Overseas Division since 1984, took over the reins at Oxfam. The crisis in Iraq was only one of many humanitarian conundrums Oxfam and its local, national, and international partners confronted. Many examples around the world could be found besides Iraq to show how the deeds of their own and other people's leaders still plunge the most vulnerable of the world's people into misery and want; and how lacking, still, is the political will to recognise their rights and dignity as human beings by fixing – or enabling them to fix – a safety-net beneath them.

It is to compensate for such deficiencies in the affairs of humankind that organisations such as Oxfam exist, and from the injustices of such deficiencies that they derive their moral force. But if, after half a century, the principle at the heart of the Oxfam mission appears stillborn, then appearances are deceptive. Because the deficiencies are immense and the struggle against them seems ever more urgent and complex, the vast distance that principle has travelled in 50 years can easily be overlooked.

In today's world a policy of 'total war', which makes no distinction between combatants and civilians, which metes its punishment upon oppressors and oppressed alike, which accepts by implication the concept of 'an enemy child', would be universally condemned at the bar of international opinion. In 1942, the Allied blockade was hermetically sealed not only against relief for the vulnerable in enemy countries, but against relief for those in friendly countries enduring enemy occupation. Starvation of civilians was still regarded as a legitimate weapon of war, as was mass bombing of ordinary people in their homes.

After 1949, when the fourth Geneva Convention was passed, this kind of warfare was outlawed, and rules laid down for the care and protection of civilian populations under foreign occupation. Since that time, even when the world is united against a Saddam Hussein, our
leaders no longer insist that the starvation of innocent civilians under the enemy's control is his responsibility alone and that we – members of the ‘United Nations’, fellow creatures in the human family – may do nothing to prevent it.

The existence of international instruments by no means guarantees their application, even by those who have sworn to uphold them. There are those who say that the opponents of Saddam Hussein are in breach of articles of the Geneva Convention governing food supplies and medical relief. That they are permitted to say such things without accusation of disloyalty; that they have access to information which allows them to make such a judgement; that teams of distinguished academic experts and television journalists take the ‘adversary’s side’ and record the agonising drama of ‘enemy’ human beings with whose country we are to all intents and purposes still at war: all these things denote a world changed beyond recognition.

Public attitudes are very different from the days when Churchill ordered the bombing of Dresden and Victor Gollancz called upon Britons to take pity on starving and defeated Germans in the bitter winter of 1946-47. During the Gulf War, the unintentional bombing of civilians and the deaths of women and children sheltering in an underground bunker provoked shame and outrage. Under the terms of UN sanctions, what Bishop Bell’s and Edith Pye’s 1942 national Famine Relief Committee described as ‘controlled relief’ enters Iraq, to be distributed by the Red Cross and the humanitarian agencies of the United Nations system. Whatever the shortcomings of controlled relief in the 1990s, it has helped to stave off epidemic and famine; and it has provided a route whereby agencies such as Oxfam can ‘breach the blockade’ and thereby contribute to the relief of suffering without having to raise their voice or plead their case with the British War Cabinet of the day.

Throughout Oxfam’s history, the principle of humanitarian neutrality – human need above the political divide – is a constantly recurring theme. Most conspicuously it surfaces at times of war, particularly in times of war-induced or war-exacerbated hunger: in the Congo and Biafra in the 1960s, in southern Africa, Central America, and Cambodia in the 1970s, in the West Bank and Ethiopia in the 1980s and 1990s. In the immediate future, it may become the basis of new emergency initiatives in Eastern Europe and the ex-USSR. The same principle also increasingly provides the ground on which ‘development’ initiatives are launched. Support to a rubber tappers’ co-operative in the Amazonian basin, a rural association in tribal Gujerat, and a legal advice centre in a South African township are attempts to uphold the rights of the poor against policies or practices which reinforce their suffering. The principle of
humanitarian neutrality is the basis for an advocacy role on their behalf, even if others mistakenly attach to the humanitarian defence of their rights a political label.

The ideals of 'internationalism', first articulated by liberal and humanitarian thinkers in the years between the two World Wars, have come a very long way in subsequent decades. Married to philanthropy, imbued with missionary zeal, co-opted by the egalitarian spirit of the post-colonial era, a new humanitarianism has come into being. It has its own organisational entities, its codes of practice, and its authentic vision of how to invest in a better, fairer, and more user-friendly world. Oxfam is one context in which that evolution of ideas and institutions has found expression.

To have played a part, great or small, in the attempt to etch a new ethic into the collective 20th century conscience is something of which to be immensely proud.