

Relief, Development and the Eritrean War of Independence: Subverting the Anti-politics Machine

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L'auteur

Eleanor Davey écrit sur le militantisme, les manières dont les individus appréhendent leurs responsabilités et leurs engagements, et le rôle de la mémoire. Dans ses travaux universitaires, elle a examiné l'influence de la décolonisation sur les courants de pensée ayant trait à l'humanitaire, aux droits de l'homme et au droit international humanitaire. En travaillant avec *l'Overseas Development Institute*, elle a aussi interrogé l'importance de l'histoire pour l'élaboration des politiques et des pratiques humanitaires contemporaines. Elle est l'auteure de *Idealism beyond Borders : The French Revolutionary Left and the Rise of Humanitarianism, 1954–1988* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), qui a reçu le prix du livre de la section éthique de *l'International Studies Association* (2017). Elle est également lauréate du Prix de Recherche de la Fondation Croix-Rouge française.

Résumé

« Aide humanitaire et développement lors de la guerre d'indépendance de l'Érythrée : subvertir la machine anti-politique »

Cet article retrace l'histoire d'un collectif d'agences humanitaires ayant brièvement opéré entre les années 1980 et le début des années 1990 : le Eritrea Inter Agency Consortium (EIAC). Au cours de la guerre civile qui aboutit à l'indépendance de l'Érythrée, ce groupe, composé essentiellement d'organisations européennes, facilita l'envoi de secours et la mise en place d'une aide au développement à destination de cette région. Ces opérations furent montées en partenariat avec le mouvement de libération de l'Érythrée, et plus particulièrement avec sa branche humanitaire – l'Eritrean Relief Association (ERA) –, mais aussi avec le Front populaire de libération de l'Érythrée (FPLE) lui-même. Cet article examine le travail mené par le Eritrea Inter Agency Consortium – ses débuts, ses relations avec les interlocuteurs érythréens et les défis auxquels il fut confronté lors du développement de ses programmes. Il met notamment en lumière la manière dont la politique de libération nationale fut débattue et les modalités de la campagne menée au nom de l'Érythrée.

Mots clés : Érythrée ; aide humanitaire ; développement ; libération nationale ; opération transfrontalière ; Eritrea Inter Agency Consortium.

Abstract

“Relief, Development and the Eritrean War of Independence: Subverting the Anti-Politics Machine”

This article tells the story of a short-lived collective of aid agencies that operated during the 1980s and early 1990s, the Eritrea Inter Agency Consortium (EIAC). This fluctuating group of mostly European organizations facilitated relief and development aid for Ethiopian citizens who lived in or

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had fled from the secessionist region of Eritrea, during the civil war that resulted in Eritrea's independence. The consortium's only partner for this aid was the Eritrean liberation movement – nominally its « independent » aid wing, the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA), but frequently the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) itself. The article discusses the work of the Eritrea Inter Agency Consortium – its inception, its relationship with its Eritrean interlocutors, and the challenges it faced as its programmes expanded. It highlights how the politics of national liberation were debated in the Eritrean case and the campaigning done in Eritrea's name.

Keywords: Eritrea ; Relief ; Development ; National Liberation ; Eritrea Inter Agency Consortium ; Cross-Border Operation.

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This article discusses an understudied part of the cross-border operation into Ethiopia during the famine and conflict of the 1980s. It takes as its main focus the Eritrea Inter Agency Consortium (EIAC), a group of aid agencies and activist organisations, some long-standing, some single-issue, that funded relief and development projects of the Eritrean liberation movement. Contemporary aid analysts considered the international mobilisation for Ethiopia a particularly important case for understanding the role of non-governmental organisations and it has retained attention as an example of aid “gone wild”.¹ The cross-border operation specifically became “a subject of mystique and admiration among those who participated”.² Yet short-lived initiatives such as the Eritrea Inter Agency Consortium have received only limited attention from historians.

Historicising these *ad hoc* initiatives can contribute to understandings of contemporary aid practices. Despite the blurred line between them, the operational fields of development and relief work have generated distinctive practitioner and scholarly literatures.³ Around the beginning of the 1990s, influenced by the rise of market ideologies in the 1980s and the shifting of Cold War frameworks at the end of that decade, long-standing development debates gave rise to a wave of critical studies. These studies took development itself as a subject of (often historical) inquiry, highlighting both its appeal and its seeming failure. As Joseph Morgan Hodge has argued in a survey of the historiography of development, the “postdevelopment” critics conceived of development as a discursive construct, a predominantly Western, and especially American invention.⁴ Around the same period –some a little earlier, some later– scholars of emergency relief were putting forward a critique of its insufficiencies and lack of engagement with politics. This was when many organisations’ “relief” or “emergency” departments began to use the term “humanitarian”, a sign of the rising influence of legal frameworks and the expanding

¹ John Borton, *The Changing Role of NGOs in the Provision of Relief and Rehabilitation Assistance: Case Study 3 - Northern Ethiopia and Eritrea*, ODI Working Paper, London, Overseas Development Institute, 1993, p. 5; Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2011, p. 156. I am indebted to Roger Briottet for sharing his personal archive, without which this study would have been impossible. I am grateful also to Skage Alexander Østberg for invaluable research assistance, to archivists at the collections cited, and to the British Academy for vital funding through its Postdoctoral Fellowship scheme. I have presented aspects of this research at Keele University’s Modern History Seminar ; the Modern European History Seminar at the University of Cambridge ; the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute at the University of Manchester ; and the International Humanitarian Studies Association conference and am grateful for all those discussions and the feedback I received. Finally, I would like to thank the editors of this issue and the anonymous reviewers for the invitation, comments, and support.

² Alex De Waal, *Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa*, Oxford, Bloomington, Currey, Indiana University Press, 1997, p. 131.

³ The discussion below focuses on Anglophone scholarship. For an introduction to Francophone scholarly and aid debates proximate to the period under discussion see, for example, Jean-Christophe Rufin, *Le piège, quand l’aide humanitaire remplace la guerre*, Paris, Hachette, 1993; Pascal Dauvin and Johanna Siméant, *Le travail humanitaire: les acteurs des ONG, du siège au terrain*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2002; Philippe Mesnard, *La victime écran: la représentation humanitaire en question*, Paris, Textuel, 2002; Laëticia Atlani-Duault, *Au bonheur des autres: anthropologie de l’aide humanitaire*, Nanterre, Société d’ethnologie, 2005; Philippe Ryfman, *Une histoire de l’humanitaire*, Paris, La Découverte, 2008 ; See also Eleanor Davey, *Beyond the “French Doctors”: The Evolution and Interpretation of Humanitarian Action in France*, London, Overseas Development Institute, 2012.

⁴ Joseph Morgan Hodge, “Writing the History of Development (Part 1: The First Wave)”, *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, vol. 6, n° 3, 2015, p. 443, 449.

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influence of four key principles (humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence) as a marker of humanitarian identity. The brief exploration of a “new humanitarianism” that would lift the taboo on political intervention gave way to a more enduring line of critique about the perverse consequences of aid as exacerbating the suffering it seeks to assuage.⁵

If the postdevelopment scholars challenged the idea of progress in aid, the second set of critics addressed its claims to purity. These two sets of literature –on development and relief– have also tended to organize their studies around different “aidland” actors.⁶ While they recognised that development discourse requires multiple organisations and groups to participate, the postdevelopment scholars emphasised development’s central, self-referential, top-down characteristics: the role of the state. In contrast, studies of the paradoxes of relief aid are most likely to adopt the normative position of the aid organisation. The primary motivation of humanitarian organisations is more or less taken for granted, even as the unintended consequences of their actions, and some of the perverse organisational pressures they face and create, are recognised and analysed. The best interests of people affected by conflict are hence conflated with the priorities of relief organisations, often non-governmental organisations (NGOs), even as studies recognise the gap between them.⁷

A further challenge to narratives of progress and purity comes from the scholarship on “non-state armed actors”, a field which has sought to understand the politics, workings, behaviours, and evolution of armed groups of different kinds. The category is heterogeneous and may include such diverse groups as militias, urban gangs, criminal networks, warlords, militant groups, transnational networks, private security companies, and insurgent groups.⁸ From the perspective of aid studies these armed groups are often treated in relation to the risk of misuse or instrumentalisation of aid.⁹ But the distinction between state and non-state actors must be treated with caution; groups that aspire to statehood often seek to dissemble their “non-state” status through practical and symbolic measures that facilitate their image as a state-in-making.¹⁰ Symbolic processes are integral to this insurgent governance and of particular importance in aid work. Like the case of Algerian

⁵ See Joanna Macrae, “The Death of Humanitarianism?: An Anatomy of the Attack”, *Disasters*, vol. 22, n° 4, 1998, p. 309-317; Fiona Fox, “New Humanitarianism: Does It Provide a Moral Banner for the 21st Century?”, *Disasters*, vol. 25, n° 4, 2001, p. 275-289

⁶ David Mosse (ed.), *Adventures in Aidland: The Anthropology of Professionals in International Development*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2011.

⁷ See for example Abby Stoddard *et al.*, *The State of the Humanitarian System*, London, ALNAP, 2015, p. 72-73; Jennifer Rubenstein, *Between Samaritans and States: The Political Ethics of Humanitarian INGOs*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016.

⁸ Keith Krause and Jennifer Milliken, “Introduction: The Challenge of Non-State Armed Groups”, *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 30, n° 2, 2009, p. 202-220.

⁹ Sarah Kenyon Lischer, “Collateral Damage: Humanitarian Assistance as a Cause of Conflict”, *International Security*, vol. 28, n° 1, 2003, p. 79-109; Antonio Donini (ed.), *The Golden Fleece: Manipulation and Independence in Humanitarian Action*, Bloomfield, Kumarian, 2012.

¹⁰ Zachariah Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life during War*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2011; Klaus Schlichte, *In the Shadow of Violence: The Politics of Armed Groups*, Frankfurt; New York, Campus Verlag, 2009; Keith Krause, *Armed Groups and Contemporary Conflicts: Challenging the Weberian State*, London, Routledge, 2010.

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independence in the 1950s-60s,¹¹ conflict in East Africa in the 1980s offers a fruitful terrain for exploring aid as symbolic power, material resource, and diplomatic support. In Eritrea specifically, the combination of a self-determination cause and a self-reliance ideology contributed to the powerful appeal of an aid partnership with the Eritrean liberation movement.

It is often difficult to access consistent documentation on conflict roles of aid organisations, due to the wartime setting, the need or perceived need for secrecy, the adoption of don't-ask-don't-tell ways of operating, and the limited investment in establishing or maintaining archives. This study was made possible by access to a set of documents from the Eritrea Inter Agency Consortium, shared by the consortium's chair, Roger Briottet. An international jurist, educator and solidarity campaigner, Briottet had a long-standing engagement with Ethiopia.¹² The minutes and planning documents that constitute much of this personal collection also left traces in the archives of organisations that contributed to the cross-border operation such as War on Want, Christian Aid and Norwegian Church Aid.¹³ The documentation is significantly less complete for the later years of the consortium, a period that also has limited coverage in some other archives. However, it is not only operational documents that help to understand the politics and practicalities of aid –the article also uses additional public materials like press releases and marketing material from the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and its aid arm; published sources, particularly related to the advocacy campaign for Eritrean independence; and grey literature on the aid mobilisation. These materials are drawn largely from the British side, due to the important role of the anti-poverty campaigning organisation War on Want –which was the lead agency of the EIAC– and the network of Eritrean supporters amongst intellectuals, activists, and aid experts in Britain. Established in 1952, War on Want had roots in socialist, pacifist, internationalist circles. Its name was derived from a campaign calling for spending on the Cold War arms race to be reallocated to international development. Over time, its willingness to take on social justice campaigning has given War on Want a complex relationship with less overtly

¹¹ Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002 ; Jennifer Johnson, *The Battle for Algeria: Sovereignty, Health Care, and Humanitarianism*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.

¹² Born in France, Briottet travelled to Algeria as a volunteer following the Orléansville earthquake of 1954 and was later redeployed as a French military conscript during Algeria's War of Independence. He served with International Voluntary Service (IVS) and was President of the Coordinating Committee of the IVS 1962-64. After moving to the UK he taught at South Bank University –this period overlapping with his time as chairman of EIAC and the Tigray Transport and Agriculture Consortium (TTAC). He worked for the United Nations in Haiti and East Timor and was also director of the World Development Movement and of Mines Advisory Group. In Ethiopia after the fall of the Derg he was advisor to the Special Prosecutor for alleged crimes against humanity, subsequently serving as chargé de mission for the European Union in Ethiopia and observer at the trial of opposition leaders from 2006. Roger passed away in 2019.

¹³ Unless otherwise indicated, documents relating to the EIAC were accessed courtesy of Roger Briottet from his personal collection. These materials are not currently catalogued or organised and so no accession numbers are used. The War on Want and Christian Aid archives are both held in the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) Archive Collection, London; that of Norwegian Church Aid [Kirkens Nødhjelp] is held in the Norwegian National Archives [NNA].

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politically positioned aid organisations.¹⁴ This campaigning edge was, however, crucial to the EIAC.

The article argues that the consortium's collaborative make-up allowed for a combination of technocracy and activism, alternately evacuating and emphasising political agendas. The Eritrea Inter Agency Consortium and the wider cross-border operation thus subverted the mechanisms that make of development discourse –to take James Ferguson's phrase–an “anti-politics machine”.¹⁵ In his classic study, Ferguson, a key postdevelopment critic, argued that aid discourse drew power from its claims to be technical and hence apolitical. While development projects had the effect of expanding state power, he argued, they did this through “the suspension of politics from even the most sensitive political operations”.¹⁶ However, in the work of the Eritrea Inter Agency Consortium, rather than reinforcing the Ethiopian state, the technical expertise coexisted with support for the Eritrean independence struggle. In this case, therefore, the state-centric workings of the anti-politics machine benefited an armed opposition movement. The article first explains the establishment and workings of the consortium, before turning to how the politics of solidarity shaped the consortium's positioning. It concludes by reflecting on the consortium's place in historical perspective.

The Eritrea Inter Agency Consortium in the cross-border operation

EIAC's projects were set within a complex, long-running conflict.¹⁷ Eritrea and Ethiopia were federated by United Nations (UN) mandate in 1950, provoking Eritrean resistance that turned towards guerrilla warfare following the creation of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in 1960; two years later Ethiopia annexed Eritrea in violation of the UN mandate. The EPLF emerged as a rival from within the ELF in 1970, and conflict intensified –between the Eritrean liberation fronts and between them and authorities in Ethiopia– after the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974 by a military junta. By the late 1970s, the war in Ethiopia pitted the Provisional Military Government of Socialist Ethiopia (also known as the Derg), against multiple rebel fronts from different regions. By the mid-1980s the two most powerful of the armed groups, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), were active across large rural areas in northern Ethiopia, with the Derg holding towns. Around this time, drought combined with the conflict conditions to produce severe famine across large parts of the country. Following an initial refusal to allow external aid and then a major transnational mobilisation, the Derg under Mengistu Haile Mariam used relief projects to facilitate its collectivisation and counter-insurgency campaigns.¹⁸ While the EPLF and TPLF

¹⁴ Hannah Miller, “A Change in Charity Law for England and Wales: Examining War on Want's Foremost Adoption of the New Human Rights Charitable Purpose”, *The International Journal of Human Rights*, vol. 16, n° 7, 2012, p. 1003-1022.

¹⁵ James Ferguson, *The Anti-politics Machine: 'Development', Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

¹⁷ See Ruth Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence: Domination, Resistance, Nationalism, 1941-1993*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

¹⁸ Peter Cutler, *The Development of the 1983-85 Famine in Northern Ethiopia*, PhD, University of London, 1988; Alex de Waal, *Famine Crimes*, *op. cit.*, p. 106-132; Eleanor Davey, *Idealism Beyond*

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had had different military strategies, both adopted a strategy of “people’s war” in which social support and reform strategies were integral to their ideologies and independence campaigns.¹⁹ The cross-border operation as a whole increased the resources and capacity of the rebel fronts even as –indeed, partly because– it was focused on supporting civilians.²⁰

Each of the movements opposing the Derg had a relief wing devoted to requesting, receiving and delivering aid.²¹ The EPLF’s was called the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA). Created in 1975, ERA was a transnational organisation that channelled support from the highly active Eritrean diaspora and foreign networks to the EPLF’s relief and social services. ERA had a head office in Khartoum and a “foreign office » in Cologne, which coordinated its international supporters and affiliates. It had branches in Australia, the Middle East, Europe, and North America. According to one of its publicity brochures, ERA had expertise in logistics, relief, research and information, finance, administration, and field projects. It was presented, in language echoing much NGO marketing, as a “nonpolitical, nonreligious organization which solicits and distributes material aid for Eritreans” and “the only multi-purpose agency working in 80% of Eritrea”.²² Nonetheless, it was (in David Pool’s words) a “para-EPLF organization” and inseparable from the political and military struggle for independence.²³

The relief wings worked closely with different groups of western NGOs and church agencies in the cross-border aid effort that operated out of Sudan and, illegally, into Ethiopian territory. Cold War politics fuelled the cross-border operation: with Mengistu’s Ethiopia backed by the Soviet Union, operations in northern conflict zones presented a way of responding to famine without channelling resources to the Derg; the famine response, particularly after the publicity of 1984, presented a way of undermining the Derg while playing a humanitarian card.²⁴ The largest and best-

Borders: The French Revolutionary Left and the Rise of Humanitarianism, 1954-1988, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 215-247.

¹⁹ Lionel Cliffe and Basil Davidson, *The Long Struggle of Eritrea for Independence and Constructive Peace*, Nottingham, Spokesman, 1988; John Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia: TPLF, 1975-1991*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 172-196.

²⁰ Ondine Barrow, “International Responses to Famine in Ethiopia 1983-85: Christian Aid and a Political Economy Framework for Action”, in Ondine Barrow and Michael Jennings (eds.), *The Charitable Impulse: NGOs & Development in East and North-East Africa*, Oxford, James Currey, 2001, p. 77; Mark Duffield and John Prendergast, “Sovereignty and Intervention after the Cold War: Lessons from the Emergency Relief Desk”, *Middle East Report*, n° 187/188, 1994, p. 9-15; Mark Duffield and John Prendergast, *Without Troops & Tanks: The Emergency Relief Desk and the Cross Border Operation into Eritrea and Tigray*, Lawrenceville, NJ, Red Sea Press, 1994, p. 14, p. 29; Barbara Hendrie, “Cross-Border Relief Operations in Eritrea and Tigray”, *Disasters*, vol. 13, n° 4, 1989, p. 357-358; Terje Tvedt, *Angels of Mercy or Development Diplomats? NGOs and Foreign Aid*, Oxford, Trenton, James Currey, Africa World Press, 1998, p. 115.

²¹ The Eritrean People’s Liberation Front operated through the Eritrean Relief Association; the Eritrean Liberation Front, which had also participated in ERA, formed the Eritrean Red Cross-Crescent Society (ERCCS); the Tigray People’s Liberation Front ran the Relief Society of Tigray (REST); and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) had the Oromo Relief Association (ORA).

²² Hoover Institution Archives, Box 3. Eritrean Relief Association, brochure, undated, p. 2. Eritrean subject collection, 1941-2014. For a similar description of REST which also acknowledges the importance of the TPLF’s political programme, see Kirsty Wright, “Combating Famine: A Revolutionary Strategy”, *Review of African Political Economy*, n° 30, 1984, p. 102.

²³ David Pool, *From Guerrillas to Government: The Eritrean People’s Liberation Front*, Oxford, James Currey, 2001, p. 142-43.

²⁴ See Alexander Poster, “The Gentle War: Famine Relief, Politics, and Privatization in Ethiopia, 1983-1986”, *Diplomatic History*, vol. 36, n° 2, 2012, esp. 415-423; Martin Plaut, “The Ethiopian Famine: War,

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known cross-border consortium was the Emergency Relief Desk (ERD), made up of mostly Protestant agencies. The ERD was responsible for more than half the total cross-border operation, providing cash and in kind assistance worth approximately US \$ 350 million.²⁵ The ERD served as a supposedly apolitical “buffer” for other agencies and especially for donor governments that did not wish to openly violate Ethiopian sovereignty by engaging directly with the rebel fronts –notably the United States, which from 1985-90 provided on average more than half of the relief assistance channeled through ERD.²⁶ The ERD worked with the relief wings of both the EPLF and the TPLF, which it referred to euphemistically as “implementing agencies”.

The Eritrea Inter Agency Consortium, which this article focuses on, was less concerned with neutrality. It had its origins in the Ethiopian relief programmes of Euro Action Acord (EAA, now known as ACORD), another collective of mostly European NGOs.²⁷ EAA funded programmes for the support of Eritreans as early as 1977, three years after the end of Haile Selassie’s rule. Approached by the Eritrean Relief Association to expand from relief work and refugee assistance into development, in June 1983 it sent two consultants to undertake an investigatory mission. Their report acknowledged that the work “may be controversial” but argued that “a decision not to programme in Eritrea will possibly have as many repercussions as a decision to go ahead and provide support²⁸ With EAA deciding not to go ahead, however, some of its member organisations formed a new grouping to take up the call.

The “consortium supporting the Eritrea Agricultural Programme” (EAP, later called EIAC, also “the consortium”) had its first meeting in August 1983. A Steering Committee was set up shortly afterwards.²⁹ War on Want became the “acting agency” –that is, the motor of the consortium’s activities, supplying the secretary and intermittently deploying organisational resources such as grant-writers and accountants. War on Want was able to take this on because it did not have any aid operations based in Addis Ababa. Indeed, this was an ideal cause for them: the EPLF’s ideology of self-reliance matched War on Want’s framework of left-wing solidarity and made it possible to emphasise urgency in the war and famine without resorting to the begging bowl imagery that War on Want disliked. The other member agencies at the first meeting were the Comité belge de secours à l’Érythrée (Belgian Committee for Relief to Eritrea, Belgium), Novib (Holland), and Oxfam (UK).

The consortium operated solely through the Eritrean Relief Association. Despite being officially a “partner” rather than a member, ERA played a crucial role in shaping the consortium’s strategies. An agreement on responsibilities, signed in January 1984, laid out the roles of the consortium and the Eritrean Relief Association. The former was responsible for raising funds, the latter for

Weapons and Aid”, *The RUSI Journal*, vol. 162, n° 6, 2017, p. 40-41. Poster also highlights US funding channelled to the International Committee of the Red Cross.

²⁵ Duffield and Prendergast, *Without Troops & Tanks*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 67. Other donors included the European Community, European governments, and Canada.

²⁷ Alan Fowler, *1976-2010, ACORD’s Transformation: Overcoming Uncertainty*, London, ACORD, 2012, p. 13-14.

²⁸ Ian Robinson and Chris Wardle, *Mission to Assess and Identify Agricultural Programme Possibilities in Eritrea*, Report for Euro Action Acord, June 1983, p. 44-45.

²⁹ James Firebrace, Letter to Roger Briottet, London, 20 October 1983.

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implementation and reporting³⁰. ERA representatives regularly attended meetings, providing briefings and answering questions about implementation requirements and priorities. At the outset, consultation with ERA established that –of four proposed projects –the water supply project (well digging) was the most urgent, followed by in order of priority: veterinary care (animal health and vaccination); agricultural inputs (providing seeds and tools); and support for displaced persons in ERA-run camps (a poultry-raising project to provide personal income).³¹ The fundraising strategy was also strongly influenced, arguably even directed, by ERA leadership, which requested that the consortium seek its approval before establishing new contacts with other agencies and NGOs.³² This attitude reflected ERA’s strategy of maintaining multifaceted contacts with as many groups as possible (tellingly, by 1983 they had links of different kinds with over 120 agencies³³). Over time ERA negotiated to receive a proportion of the budget for administrative costs, which initially went to War on Want and Oxfam.

There appears to be little doubt that the consortium operated effectively. In October 1983, the fundraising target was £281,541.³⁴ Four years later it was ten times that amount. A small proportion of the increase was caused by unexpected changes in costs and difficulties in accessing supplies –hikes in seed prices or parts that couldn’t be found locally.³⁵ More importantly, the addition of new projects meant that targets rose significantly as the consortium’s work consolidated. The number of “supporting agencies” (that is, NGOs involved in the consortium) went from four to fifteen.³⁶ A number of these were left-wing organisations, including Norwegian People’s Aid, Entr’Aide ouvriere internationale, and other union-affiliated groups; most were European (including Britain) although Oxfam Canada and US also participated. ERA wished to be consulted before any new organisations joined.³⁷

For aid organisations, working collectively appeared more efficient in terms of accessing information, consolidating fundraising, and cutting down on paperwork.³⁸

³⁰ Agreement between the Eritrean Relief Association and the Steering Committee of the Consortium supporting the Eritrea Agricultural Programme, undated. The signatories were: Paulos Tesfagiorgis, Chairman of ERA; Roger Briottet, Chairman of the Steering Committee; James Firebrace, Secretary of the Steering Committee; George Galloway, on behalf of War on Want, the acting agency. The consortium’s role was similar to that of ERD although the mechanics of the agreement differed. See Tvedt, *Angels of Mercy*, *op. cit.*, p. 153; Duffield and Prendergast, *Without Troops & Tanks*, *op. cit.*, p. 47-49, 80-82.

³¹ Minutes of Meeting of Steering Committee of Agencies Supporting the Eritrea Agricultural Programme, held at War on Want, 11 November 1983; Minutes of the Meeting of the Steering Committee of Agencies Supporting the Eritrean [sic] Agricultural Programme Held at NCOS, 29 June 1984.

³² Minutes of Meeting of Steering Committee of Agencies Supporting the Eritrea Agricultural Programme, held at War on Want, 11 November 1983, p. 2.

³³ Duffield and Prendergast, *Without Troops & Tanks*, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

³⁴ Summary Minutes of meeting between War on Want and ERA at War on Want offices, 7 October 1983, p. 1.

³⁵ On seed prices, see Summary Minutes of Meeting about “Send a Tonne to Africa Appeal” and Eritrea Agricultural Programme, War on Want, 2 July 1984, p. 3.

³⁶ These were War on Want, Oxfam, Christian Aid; Send a Tonne to Africa Development Fund (UK); Comité Belge de Secours à l’Érythrée, the National Centre for Development Cooperation (Belgium); Entr’aide Ouvriere Internationale, Group d’Aide aux Realisations pour le Developpement (France); Arbeiterwohlfahrt (Germany); Mani Tese (Italy); Novib (Netherlands); Radda Barnen (Sweden); Norwegian People’s Aid; Danish People’s Aid; Oxfam US; and Oxfam Canada.

³⁷ Roger Briottet, Memorandum to James Firebrace, 21 April 1985.

³⁸ Minutes of the Eritrea Inter-Agency Consortium Steering Committee Meeting, held at War on Want, 19 June 1986, p. 5.

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In contrast, as a rule, ERA preferred bilateral relationships with NGOs to conducting its business *via* consortia. The reason given was that the relationships with consortia tended to become (in their words) “impersonal” and led to agencies making decisions without consultation.³⁹ Others have pointed out that the strategic position of some consortia as “buffers” between donors and the Eritrean independence fighters made them unlikely to do any public advocacy, which was a source of frustration for the EPLF.⁴⁰ This is one of the aspects in which the Emergency Relief Desk differed from the EIAC, which adopted a more partisan position.

Aid in a Liberation War

Support for the independence cause coloured the consortium’s approach to the relief and development work they facilitated. However, the difficult line between political engagement and technocratic dissemblance that the consortium had to walk during its cooperation with the Eritrean Relief Agency was, on the whole, more of a challenge for its external image than its internal functioning.

While much has been made of the cross-border operation’s violation of Ethiopian sovereignty in contrast with the UN’s more conservative position, for Eritrean supporters the violation had already taken place with the denial of Eritrean statehood. The argument for Eritrean independence drew upon a combination of historical claims, social and political agendas, and victim narratives. According to this argument, Italian colonisation of Eritrea dating back to 1889 cemented an experience, identity and trajectory distinct from that of Ethiopia (which was never colonised).⁴¹ The EPLF assertion of Eritrea’s “just and legitimate national question” cited its socio-economic system, historically specific experiences, foreign oppression, political consciousness, and the sacrifice of Eritrean “martyrs”.⁴² Late in the war sociologist John Sorenson, who studied societies in the Horn of Africa and who participated in the relief effort, summed up that “Eritrean identity has been strengthened to the precise extent that it has been forcibly denied and repressed”.⁴³ With the return of famine in the 1980s came an opportunity to emphasise the innocence of the civilian victims as well as the urgency of the goal of self-reliance. Politically and logistically, the civil war shaped much of how the consortium was designed and operated. Consortium documents referred to potential sites of intervention as “liberated” and “semi-liberated”, adopting the language of the rebel fronts. Consortium members often expressed admiration for the skills and commitment of the EPLF and its functionaries, who were described as highly educated, highly proficient, and socially diverse. For example, in the context of its

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Duffield and Prendergast, *Without Troops & Tanks*, *op. cit.*, p. 7; Tvedt, *Angels of Mercy*, *op. cit.*, p. 154; Barrow, “International Responses to Famine in Ethiopia”, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

⁴¹ Zdenek Červenka, “Eritrea: Struggle for Self-Determination or Secession?”, *Africa Spectrum*, vol. 12, n° 1, 1977, p. 37-38; David Pool, *Eritrea – Africa’s Longest War*, London, Anti-Slavery Society, 1979, p. 17-20; Richard Sherman, *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution*, New York, Praeger, 1980, p. 32-36.

⁴² The Right of the Eritrean People to Self-Determination, April 1978, published in Pool, *Eritrea*, *op. cit.*, p. 61-62.

⁴³ John Sorenson, “Opposition, Exile and Identity: The Eritrean Case” » *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 3:4 (1990), p. 302.

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expansion the consortium steering group noted that external agencies need not seek an operational role as “local organisations are strong and technically self-reliant”.⁴⁴ The intertwined tropes and multiple channels that connected the relief effort to the independence campaign are epitomised in the 1984 book, *Never Kneel Down: Drought, Development and Liberation in Eritrea*. The book was based on a visit to Eritrea of Stuart Holland, Labour Spokesman for Overseas Aid and Development; Jenny Holland of the *New Socialist*; and James Firebrace. Firebrace was Programme Officer for the Sahel and Horn of Africa at War on Want and the Secretary of the EIAC. On 10 February 1984, he asked ERA head Paulos Tesfagiorgis to communicate on their behalf with EPLF representatives and to make arrangements for the Labour parliamentarian to meet with members of the EPLF Politburo, while also requesting that Paulos accompany the visitors to ensure that his relief credentials shaped perceptions of the trip.⁴⁵ The subsequent account of this visit, *Never Kneel Down*, linked Eritrean independence with humanitarian goals, declaring that “Peace is a precondition for an Eritrea free from famine”.⁴⁶ *Never Kneel Down* was followed in 1985 by *Eritrean Journey*, a reportage by four European women of women’s experiences of the liberation struggle and associated social programs.⁴⁷ The book was recognized for challenging portrayals of East African politics and societies based on passivity and victimhood.⁴⁸

In addition to this advocacy, the consortium and its member agencies became involved in different supporter campaigns. When in 1988 an opportunity arose to join a newly established European Working Group for Peace in the Horn of Africa, the consortium steering committee noted: “It was generally felt that EIAC as such could not join this working group because [it] was a ‘partial’ organisation whose sole partner was ERA. Furthermore, the mixture of development and ‘political’ work could alienate some funding sources. However, EIAC could recommend that all member agencies join the Working Group and could also document the impact of war [...] and exchange information”.⁴⁹ So, somewhat paradoxically, a collective agency that enabled donors to support projects run by a secessionist opposition movement also seemingly allowed its member agencies to push for peace free from this partisan reputation. This reversed the ERD’s model of collective neutrality, although both left space for individual agencies to take public positions.⁵⁰

The aid effort also contributed to the EPLF’s struggle for independence by providing an opportunity for what Zachariah Mampilly has termed “insurgent governance”.⁵¹ As Mampilly has argued, “the use of symbolic processes to bolster sovereign claims” is an area in which armed groups invest significantly, showing the importance of the symbolic domain as part of a multifaceted struggle that goes beyond military

⁴⁴ Minutes of meeting of the steering committee of agencies supporting Eritrean [sic] Agricultural Programme, at War on Want, 13 April 1984, p. 1.

⁴⁵ James Firebrace, Letter to Paulos Tesfagiorgis, London, 10 February 1984, p. 1.

⁴⁶ James Firebrace and Stuart Holland, *Never Kneel Down: Drought, Development and Liberation in Eritrea*, Nottingham, Spokesman, 1984, p. 89.

⁴⁷ Doris Burgess, Jenny Pierce, Jenny Rossiter, and Trish Silkin, *Eritrean Journey*, London, War on Want, 1985.

⁴⁸ Tina Wallace, review article, *Review of African Political Economy*, 35 (1986), p. 96-97.

⁴⁹ Minutes of the Eritrea Inter-Agency Consortium Steering Committee, CBSE, October 26 1988, p. 4.

⁵⁰ Duffield and Prendergast, *Without Troops & Tanks*, *op. cit.*, p. 50; Barrow, “International Responses to Famine in Ethiopia”, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

⁵¹ Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers*, *op. cit.*

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conflict.⁵² The performative aspects of the relief campaign offered the EPLF, through its relief arm, a chance to demonstrate its capacity for independent rule. ERA produced needs assessments that described the situation in Eritrea, identified relief and development gaps, and quantified the requirements that followed from this analysis. It was required to submit bi-annual reports to the consortium and to provide receipts and justifications of spending; subsequent release of funds was supposed to be conditional to these accountability measures.⁵³ There were many problems with the irregularity and coverage of the reports, and they were supplemented with field visits by consortium and NGO staff members, although it was impossible to undertake independent visits to Eritrea for any purpose.⁵⁴ As has been more explicitly shown in the case of REST and the TPLF, this created the potential for the direct appropriation of aid, and certainly created the conditions for fungible resources to be reallocated towards the military effort, thanks to the receipt of aid, without real oversight from external donors.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, ERA's materials were valued for their professionalism. While the reporting burden reflected concerns about potential diversion of aid, it ultimately contributed to ERA's standing as a credible and effective aid partner.⁵⁶

EPLF press releases also show the importance of aid in its public positioning. Diplomatically speaking, the famine offered Ethiopia an opportunity to present itself as a victim of natural forces and to reinforce its discourse about Eritrean claims as secessionist and illegitimate.⁵⁷ In 1987, the EPLF proposed an agreement between itself, the Derg, their respective relief wings, and other aid organisations, to allow safe passage for relief activities, illustrating its use of spaces of aid for diplomatic recognition.⁵⁸ It condemned the Derg's failure to take responsibility for "the disaster that was to a large extent of its own making" and, in 1988, criticised aid agencies for "working to promote the schemes of the regime" which bent aid to its counterinsurgency and population transfer goals⁵⁹. The EPLF also tied aid to its own military victories. For instance, after capturing the port of Massawa in February 1990, it called for increased aid through the port as well as the cross-border route.⁶⁰ Later that year, EPLF leader Isaias Afwerki issued a joint communique with US Senator Humphrey Gordon, calling for more relief supplies.⁶¹

⁵² Zachariah Mampilly, "Performing the Nation-State: Rebel Governance and Symbolic Processes", in Zachariah Mampilly, Nelson Kasfir and Ana Arjona (eds.), *Rebel Governance in Civil War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 77.

⁵³ Agreement between the Eritrean Relief Association and the Steering Committee of the Consortium supporting the Eritrea Agricultural Programme, p. 1.

⁵⁴ Trish Silkin and Barbara Hendrie, "Research in the War Zones of Eritrea and Northern Ethiopia", *Disasters*, 21:2 (1997), p. 166-76.

⁵⁵ See Plaut, "The Ethiopian Famine", *op. cit.*

⁵⁶ Duffield and Prendergast, *Without Troops & Tanks*, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

⁵⁷ Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence*, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

⁵⁸ Hoover Institution Archives, Box 3. EPLF, "Statement on international relief efforts in Eritrea", press release, 27 October 1987. Eritrean subject collection, 1941-2014.

⁵⁹ Hoover Institution Archives, Box 3. EPLF, "Second statement on emergency relief operations", press release, 28 November 1987; EPLF, "An urgent call to all relief agencies", press release, 6 April 1988. Eritrean subject collection, 1941-2014.

⁶⁰ Hoover Institution Archives, Box 3. EPLF, "Urgent appeal to concerned governments and donor agencies", press release, 19 April 1990. Eritrean subject collection, 1941-2014.

⁶¹ Joint communique from Senator Gordon J. Humphrey (R-NH) and Secretary General Isaias Afwerki of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, 16 June 1990. Hoover Institution, Eritrean subject collection, 1941-2014, Box 3.

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By the late 1980s, there were three consortia being led by War on Want: one for Eritrea, one for Tigray, and one for refugees from Western Sahara. In this context, the seeming success of the Eritrea Inter Agency Consortium came alongside marked instability. In October 1988 –which was more than two years after an ERA request that the consortium specialise in water programmes– the steering committee discussed two new requests from ERA. Neither of the new proposals involved water and each of them alone was bigger than any of the consortium’s previous projects.⁶² The first required £2 million for locust control, including emergency measures and a long-term component.⁶³ The second project was to improve transport through purchase and maintenance of trucks, plus supply of road construction materials⁶⁴. Though forms of these projects went ahead, the consortium’s investigations following the initial request arrived at a budget of £7 million or more –a leap in scale and logistical challenge that provoked significant concern amongst Steering Committee members.⁶⁵

Throughout the consortium’s lifespan, War on Want had been a controversial organisation, headed by a polarising figure, and riven by internal conflicts. In the financial year 1988-89, War on Want’s annual income was just over £8.7 million, of which £3.4 million was income for the three consortia. However, it spent £4.7 million on the consortia, while also overspending on its total accounts.⁶⁶ Late in their existence, before being transferred to the full control of the rebel fronts, the Eritrea and Tigray consortia were moved out of War on Want and, in the case of EIAC at least, moved into Novib, transiting through Christian Aid.⁶⁷ According to one participant, this was in part because they were perceived as being too politically close to the rebel fronts and needed to be administered more neutrally.⁶⁸ Conversely, War on Want’s “authorised history” suggests that moves to establish projects with the Ethiopian Derg so offended the consortia that their committees decided to end War on Want’s lead role.⁶⁹ It was also a function of War on Want’s instability at the time: by the start of the 1990s it was on the verge of insolvency, closing off programmes in an attempt to stay afloat. By mid-1990 War on Want had asked that it no longer be considered a member of EIAC.⁷⁰

Around this time, however, the balance of the war in Ethiopia was changing. By 1989, the EPLF was gaining ground, besieging and winning key government-held towns in Eritrea including the port of Massawa and the capital, Asmara. With rainfall in 1989-90 severely insufficient, ERA requests for relief show mounting needs caused by

⁶² The final budget was £1,933,249 over more than three years. Minutes of the Eritrea Inter Agency Consortium Steering Committee meeting, held at War on Want, 4 June 1987, p. 4.

⁶³ Minutes of the Steering Committee Meeting, held at CBSE, 26 October 1988, p. 2-3.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Summary minutes of the EIAC extraordinary steering committee meeting, undated.

⁶⁶ Mark Luetchford and Peter Burns, *Waging the War on Want: 50 years of Campaigning against World Poverty: An Authorised History*, London, War on Want, 2003, p. 162.

⁶⁷ SOAS Archive Collection, War on Want collection, Accession Number 00436, Box 93. EIAC Executive Committee Meeting of 26/03/90; NNA Kirkens Nødhjelp collection, RA/PA-1641/E/Ea/LO115f/0002. Eritrea, folder 2. Summary of Decisions Taken, 2 April 1990, p. 2. See also EIAC Administration and Relocation Budgets, 30 January 1990, with figures in gilders. By this time the Chair was Paul Meijs and the Coordinator Martine Billanou.

⁶⁸ Interview with a contributor to the cross-border operation, 20 April 2017.

⁶⁹ Luetchford and Burns, *Waging the War on Want*, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

⁷⁰ NNA Kirkens Nødhjelp collection, RA/PA-1641/E/Ea/LO115f/0002. Eritrea, folder 2. EIAC Membership and Administration Income, Paper no. 5 for General Assembly meeting 19 June 1990, p. 1.

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drought famine, ongoing displacement, and increasing numbers of civilians in EPLF-controlled territories.⁷¹ Ethiopian air raids on Massawa after it was captured by the EPLF had a dire effect on food aid in the area and reinvigorated calls to work through the rebel authorities,⁷² but may not have directly affected consortium programmes which were largely not based in the towns. Asmara fell to the EPLF in May 1991. With the war ending in the defeat of the Derg later that year, aid programmes either wound down or changed in nature, transferring over to EPLF control.

Short-lived initiatives like the Eritrea Inter Agency Consortium can be hard to place against the longer time frame of many organisational histories. Nonetheless, this article reminds us that these initiatives are not opposed to longer narratives but form part of them and can shed light on key moments in their passage. As Ann Laura Stoler has underlined, “ ‘minor’ histories should not be mistaken for trivial ones” and do not function as major histories in miniature.⁷³ In fact, from many perspectives the long-lasting organisations that tend to attract researchers –historians and others– are the exception rather than the rule within a shifting ecosystem of local and transnational engagements.

In this case, the challenges of working as a consortium of aid agencies at times appeared greater than the political complications that arose from working with an armed group. Tension seems to have been just as likely amongst different aid agencies, or between agencies and donors, as between them and their interlocutors in the rebel front. Perhaps predictably, most of these tensions were around money, with periodic concerns about the consortium seeking funding from some of the same donors as its own member agencies.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, collaborative work enhanced the capacity of smaller organisations and enabled the cross-border operation’s challenge to Ethiopian sovereignty. The consortium for Eritrea carved out an effective space for itself, increasing the ambition and scale of its operations in the face of difficult logistics and delicate politics. Its expansion, within that of the cross-border operation more widely, was shaped by the Cold War agendas of the major donors. While others’ Cold War concerns brought resources, however, these concerns were not the driver of the cross-border consortium. Its embrace of the politics of solidarity reflected the agenda of certain member agencies as well as optimism about the future of an independent Eritrea.

When aid takes hybrid forms, and embraces partisanship rather than neutrality, it can sit uncomfortably within debates about the politics of aid and the role of humanitarian principles. The case of Eritrea, outside the major decolonisation phases

⁷¹ See for example Emergency Relief Budget; A Preliminary Request for 1990, ERA, October 1989; A Preliminary Assessment of Relief Needs in Eritrea, ERA, 30 August 1990. Both held in NNA Kirkens Nødhjelp collection, RA/PA-1641/E/Ea/LO115f/0002. Eritrea, folder 1.

⁷² Borton, *The Changing Role of NGOs*, *op. cit.*, p. 33-34; Victoria Brittain, “Food aid ‘should go through rebel area’”, *The Guardian*, 6 April 1990, p. 12.

⁷³ Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009, p. 7.

⁷⁴ For example, James Firebrace, Letter to Richard Leonard, London, 18 November 1983; James Firebrace, Letter to Michele Falisse and Luis de Cavalho, London, 19 November 1983. Finance structures also made it difficult for the EIAC to receive funding from Band Aid. Minutes of the Eritrea Inter-Agency Consortium Steering Committee meeting, held at War on Want, 14 June 1985, p. 6.



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yet in the tradition of the national liberation agenda, presented a subversive use of development's "anti-politics machine" in favour of an independence struggle. The story of the EIAC thus helps us better understand the stakes of political solidarity in an era when the Western "saviour syndrome" structured most images of suffering in the global South. Eritrean ideologies, expertise, and implementation were crucial to the functioning of the consortium. These negotiated, hybrid practices and their complex institutional arrangements challenge any neat narratives about purity and progress in the work of development and relief.