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PROF. DR. KIRAN KLAUS PATEL



Global Food Aid for Ethiopia in the 1970s and 1980s

PD Dr. Tobias Hof

In 1973/74 a devastating famine struck Ethiopia, leading to the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie. Almost ten years later another famine occurred, after the new Marxist government had also failed to control the food crisis. Despite the immense international attention thanks to Michael Buerk's October 1984 BBC report and Bob Geldof's *Live Aid* concerts over half a million people died.

Famines have regularly occurred throughout history, their intensity determined by climate change, agricultural policies, population growth and social and military conflicts. They force us to (re-)examine established patterns of humanitarianism, demand new responses to human suffering and question longstanding visions of humanity. The latter are not abstract concepts but are constructed and (re-)negotiated within a web of historical meanings and experiences. Examining how the international community reacted to past humanitarian crises promises insights into how people and institutions conceptualize humanity, human suffering, and global relationships today and in the future. Such an analysis offers new insights into the key question of humanitarianism: When and why do people come together to help strangers in need?

My project is the first comprehensive global history of the response to the Ethiopian famines of 1973/74 and 1984/85. The scale of the disaster and the multifaceted global relief aid not only offer new perspectives on ever-changing visions of humanity, but also provide insights into the evolution of humanitarian aid during emergency situations and the transformation of relations between the West and the Global South. In order to address these issues, the project is divided into four interrelated topics:

First, it examines the actors involved in hunger relief programs and their cooperative and competitive interdependencies. **Second**, it looks at the changing normative and

ideological framework that guided the actors. **Third**, it analyzes the interests, goals and various strategies of the actors and examines whether they changed and if so why. And **fourth**, it looks at the practices of famine relief on the ground, the impact of worldwide media and fundraising campaigns, and the coordination between global and local campaigns.

In order to examine these issues, my project uses two methodologies in particular: the “global governance” approach and ideas drawn from post-colonial studies. The combination of these methodologies enables scholars to grasp the increasing interdependence of the world since the 1970s, analyze the agency of actors within the polyvalent network of international relations, and to reconstruct and evaluate relations between donor countries and Ethiopia. By examining the four topics within this theoretical framework and based on a wide range of sources, my project promises to complement and broaden the current state of research in five areas:

1) The project examines the entire network of global food aid by taking into account interactions between the recipient country Ethiopia, major donor countries (e. g. Canada; Italy; UK; U.S.A.; West Germany), multilateral organizations (e. g. FAO), as well as selected NGOs and not just nation states or international organizations.

2) The project questions “modernization theories” by visualizing breaks and continuities in emergency relief for Ethiopia and enables us to look beyond the East-West conflict, because the famines occurred under different ideological regimes. Humanitarian aid is not simply a success story of Western modernity or a geostrategic tool. Only a critical examination will reveal the multifaceted interests of all actors.

3) The project analyzes how experts, the media, and celebrities framed these crises and what emotions they appealed to in order to expand the circle of concern necessary for successful fundraising. Images, songs, concerts, and TV spots shape the complex cultural representation of complementing and/or competing visions of humanity and offer insights into the political and social cultural self-understanding of a society.

4) The project analyzes the political macro-level and contrasts those decisions and plans with activities on the ground. The multiplicity of aid organizations involved in relief work left evidence of the aid workers' lives as well as the indigenous scope of action in Ethiopia.

5) Given that most archival documents are only now declassified, my project will be the first that draws on a broad empirical foundation. By doing so it builds on historical studies about the global food crisis in 1974 and the Biafra famine and continues them chronologically.

Initial research results show that the visible suffering of the Ethiopian population called into question the habits and efficiency of the "help to self-help" development approach popular since the 1960s. Confronted with the Ethiopian famines it seemed easier to abandon an inclusionary concept of humanity and fall back on an exclusionary one rooted in the belief of a helpless/passive Ethiopia and a Western civilizing mission. Ideological factors as well as the belief that the famine, if viewed as a product of overpopulation, threatened the prosperity of Western societies reinforced this paternalistic thinking in the 1980s. Together with pictures and stories of suffering and Western aid distribution, these notions legitimized calls for Western intervention in the name of "humanitarianism," laying the groundwork for further humanitarian interventions in the 1990s. Those dynamics expose the immense public pressure the media and celebrities can create in order to influence foreign policy, although they were lacking any democratic legitimacy, paving the way for what is known today as a post-democratic order.

My project focuses on global food aid in a humanitarian emergency and is not another historical study on development aid in Africa. It examines the mechanisms, changes and consequences of emergency relief and how relations between the West and the Global South were influenced by it. Such insights illustrate how new global relationships develop and how "thinking globally" when confronted with a humanitarian crisis has generated action.

In light of the humanitarian crises currently facing the global community – the UN warns of multiple famines of “biblical proportions” –, a more critical understanding of the history, evolution and mechanisms of humanitarian assistance is important. My project seeks to unmask how the ostensible act of “helping” in times of humanitarian emergencies might enforce global inequality and it problematize the motives behind it and the outcomes.