# Aidland in South Asia:
# Humanitarian Crisis and the Contours of the Global Aid Industry in the Long 1970s

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**Abstract**
This article uses the experiences of expatriate aid workers in South Asia to examine the contours of the global aid industry in the long 1970s. It begins by outlining the impact of the crisis on the aid sector, before using case studies of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from three Anglophone states – Britain, Canada (Québec excepted) and Ireland – to examine the spaces of social experience, spaces of knowledge circulation and imagined spaces of belonging and solidarity in which ideas of aid-giving were made. The article is framed through a concept that ethnographers call 'Aidland': the mix of volunteers, experts and aid professionals that make up the aid community. Taking this model as its starting point, the article makes three claims about the aid community that emerged in South Asia and what its story tells us about transnational activism in the long 1970s. The first is to see this as a moment of acceleration for the sector, in which its activities radically diversified while simultaneously carrying with them the baggage of what had come before. Second, and related, it argues that while there were certain characteristics that were common to aid workers in every environment, we should be careful not to lose sight of the specific contextual factors and points of reference on which responses to humanitarian crises were based. Understanding that complexity, and its consequences, provides us with the basis for the final claim put forward here. By laying bare the processes through which 'Aidland' was constructed in South Asia, we can test how that community imagined and reinforced a particular (paternalistic) role for itself in the Third World.

**Keywords**
Humanitarianism; Non-governmental Organisations; Bangladesh; India; Development; Foreign Aid; Aidland

## Introduction

'The foreign aid types are pretty thick on the ground in Dacca these days', Nicholas Samstag observed of Bangladesh's capital city in December 1972, 'almost as thick as the Americans – and that's saying a lot in this city which seems to come as close as any to justifying the endemic CIA paranoia of the Far East.'[1] Two years after a devastating cyclone had killed 500,000 people in the Bengal Delta, and just over 12 months since the end of the brutal conflict that transformed East Pakistan into the independent state of Bangladesh, the country's reconstruction was in full swing.[2] At the heart of this transformation were hundreds of aid workers affiliated to European and North American non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Their days were spent designing projects, scoping out locations, and vying to win

[1] Nicholas Samstag, "Fading Flush", *The Guardian*, 23 Dec. 1972.
[2] For an introduction to the wars that created Bangladesh, see Bass, *Blood Telegram*; Moses, ed. "East Pakistan War, 1971"; Raghavan, *1971: A Global History*; and Saikia, "Beyond the Archive of Silence".

the new administration's approval for their operations. In the evenings, they gathered to make sense of what they had witnessed and to reminisce about earlier escapades. Dacca's local population, however, was a little more sceptical of the new arrivals:

> The aid people (those that are aid people) work pretty hard in their provincial fields and paddies, and when they get back to their villas in the upper middle-class suburb of Dahnmondi, where a certain élite used to live before the War of Liberation exterminated or displaced them, they tend to sit around and drink a lot or, which is worse, talk about the scarcity of drink in a puritanical Moslem [*sic.*] society. And when they've had enough to drink, or become morose enough because they haven't, perhaps they will begin to talk about the increasing evidence that they shouldn't be here at all.[3]

The presence of foreign aid workers in South Asia was not new to the 1970s. Missionaries, colonial officials, charitable volunteers and, later, health workers and development administrators, had long been associated with welfare provision in the region. The sense of collective endeavour that Samstag described in Dacca nonetheless marked a new departure for the aid sector. The world's first televised famine, in Biafra (1968-70), had prompted a massive expansion in non-governmental humanitarianism.[4] The crisis in East Pakistan and the move into independent Bangladesh provided an opportunity to consolidate that momentum. In the decade and a half that followed, NGOs developed from marginal actors in international politics to become the primary manifestations of global concern for the less well-off.[5] Aid workers were on the front line of this 'NGO moment'. The places they worked, slept and played (spaces of social experience); the locations where ideas about 'doing aid' were exchanged (spaces of knowledge circulation); and the sense of collective belonging they fostered (imagined spaces of belonging and solidarity), put into practice the ideals on which global humanitarianism, aid and development were made. The process of enacting those principles, in turn, shaped the sector's identity – not least by helping to define transnational activism by what it was not. As Nicholas Samstag's scathing criticism suggested, the good intentions of aid workers proved too little to overcome the hierarchies between donors and recipients or to translate 'aid' into 'solidarity' with local communities.

This article uses the experiences of expatriate aid workers in South Asia to examine the contours of the global aid industry in the long 1970s. It begins by outlining the impact of the crisis on the aid sector, before using case studies of NGOs from three Anglophone states – Britain, Canada (Québec excepted) and Ireland – to examine the spaces of social experience, spaces of knowledge circulation and imagined spaces of belonging and solidarity in which ideas of aid-giving were made. Those countries had different vested interests in South Asia: post-colonial concerns coloured British interventions to a far greater extent than in Canada or Ireland, for example. Nor were they alone in contributing to the relief effort; NGOs and religious organisations from France, Germany, Scandinavia, the United States and further afield were also among those delivering aid. The striking similarities that emerged in their experiences of life in the field, however, and the prominent role they assumed in the relief effort, helped give British, Canadian and Irish NGOs a disproportionate influence in shaping the narrative of relief. Aid workers from those countries were not only key

[3] Samstag, "Fading Flush".
[4] For an introduction to the Biafran humanitarian crisis, see Desgrandchamps, *L'Humanitaire en Guerre Civile*; Heerten, *The Biafran War*; Moses and Heerten, ed., *Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide*; and O'Sullivan, "Humanitarian Encounters".
[5] O'Sullivan et al, "Humanitarianisms in Context".

constituents in the aid community that emerged in this period, they also helped to generate it: in the relationships they fostered; in the language they used (technical discourse, but also the predominance of English as a means of exchange); in the physical infrastructure they sustained; and in the image of the Third World their activities created.

The recent explosion of scholarship on humanitarianism, human rights and development in the twentieth century has significantly broadened our understanding of 'aid' and its role in shaping the Third World. It has become clear, for example, that NGOs and international aid agencies contributed heavily to furthering imperial and internationalist agendas, and to ideas about how to 'organise' the poor.[6] These entanglements have, in turn, helped to illuminate the complex connections that underpin modern globalising processes.[7] Within that historiography, however, comparatively little attention has been paid to the aid workers who implemented those ideas.[8] What ethnographers call 'Aidland' – the mix of volunteers, experts and aid professionals that make up the aid community – was vital to sustaining a Western presence in many post-colonial territories.[9] Yet these individuals have been as silent in the histories that have been written about aid as they are marginalised in the copious correspondence, reports and campaigning materials that constitute NGO archives. This article attempts to address that imbalance, by tracing the everyday experiences of aid workers through a careful reading of newly released materials (including the records of Christian Aid, Oxfam, Save the Children, War on Want, Oxfam-Canada, Concern and Gorta), as well as interviews, media reports and government papers. Understanding those experiences, and the shared sense of purpose they generated, is, in turn, vital in describing the aid community's impact on the localities in which it was based. As Raymond Apthorpe, who originally coined the term, put it, 'Aidland' is just one of two 'foreign countries' that aid workers occupy while on assignment abroad: '"Beneath" lies the actual country of your assignment … [but] … It is on the language and speak of [Aidland] that you will depend to survive and get around'.[10]

Taking this model of 'Aidland' as its starting point, this article makes four claims about the aid community that emerged in South Asia and what its story tells us about transnational activism in the long 1970s. The first is to see this as a moment of acceleration for the sector, in which its activities radically diversified while simultaneously carrying with them the baggage of what had come before. Aid workers borrowed many of their ideals from their predecessors in the fields of charity and welfare, allied them to high modernist concepts in development and meeting universal needs, and adapted them to the realities of life in the field. Second, and related, while there were certain characteristics that were common to aid workers in every environment, we should be careful not to lose sight of the specific contextual factors and points of reference on which responses to humanitarian crises were based. The historical, organisational and faith-based foundations of the aid industry played

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[6] A rich new historiography of non-governmental aid in Europe and North America has emerged in recent years. On the late twentieth century period, see, for example: Davey, *Idealism Beyond Borders*; Glasman, *Humanitarianism*; Hong, *Cold War Germany*; Mann, *Empires to NGOs*; Nunan, *Humanitarian Invasion*; and Rossi, *Slavery to Aid*. For a broader introduction to this literature, see also Hoffmann, "Human Rights and History"; Hilton et al, "History and Humanitarianism"; Hodge, 'Writing the History of Development (part 1)"; and Hodge, "Writing the History of Development (Part 2)".

[7] Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, chapter 4.

[8] Notable exceptions include Reinisch, "'Auntie UNRRA" at the Crossroads"; Salvatici, "UNRRA Relief Workers"; and Taithe, "Cradle of the New Humanitarian System?". See also work from the fields of development and imperial history: Fischer-Tiné, "The YMCA"; Hodge, "British Colonial Expertise"; Muschik, "Art of Chameleon Politics"; and Pernet, "FAO from the Field".

[9] For an introduction to 'Aidland', see Fechter and Hindman, ed., *Inside the Everyday Lives of Development Workers*; Mosse, ed., *Adventures in Aidland*; and Smirl, *Spaces of Aid*.

[10] Apthorpe, "Who is International Aid?", 200.

out differently in South Asia than they had in Biafra, for example, or would do in subsequent crises in Cambodia (1979-81) and Ethiopia (1984-86). Likewise, although we can describe the aid community in terms of certain, easily identifiable, characteristics, its constituents were anything but homogeneous. Different organisations and actors, from a variety of social, political and religious backgrounds, understood and articulated their activities in different ways. Understanding that complexity, and its consequences, provides us with the basis for the third claim put forward here. The focus on British, Canadian and Irish aid workers (and the absence of recipient voices) in this article is not only deliberate, it is also instructive. By laying bare the processes through which 'Aidland' was constructed in South Asia, we can test how that community imagined and reinforced a particular (paternalistic) role for itself in the Third World. Finally, this reading of the aid industry also leads us to a more nuanced understanding of the concept of solidarity between the Third World and the West. In South Asia, solidarity existed not only between activists and the targets of their campaigning; it was also experienced within the non-governmental sector and in the various connections that bound aid workers to a broader 'humanitarian imaginary'. This produced a more complex set of entanglements than the plea to 'common humanity' – used as a calling card by many NGOs – suggested. Solidarity in 'Aidland' excluded those on the receiving end of outside intervention almost as often as it embraced them.

**The birth of a community**

The 1970s was a period of dramatic change for humanitarian aid and development NGOs.[11] The humanitarian crisis that accompanied the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70), and the outpouring of public sympathy for the separatist region of Biafra, precipitated a spike in the number of new NGOs founded in Europe and North America.[12] In Ireland, for example, the crisis led to the creation of Concern and kick-started the process of Catholic Church involvement with humanitarianism that culminated with the founding of Trócaire (the official aid agency of the Irish Catholic hierarchy) in 1973. Biafra also provided a considerable fillip to existing NGOs. In Britain, it prompted Christian Aid, Oxfam, Save the Children and War on Want to develop ever more ambitious aid programmes. Across the Atlantic, Oxfam-Canada had a similar experience – its role in directing a Canadian-sponsored airlift of aid to Biafra radically altered its public profile. With these changes came a massive expansion of the spaces of social experience and concrete political engagement inhabited by NGOs, aid workers and their supporters. Their understanding of where and how 'compassion' for the Third World could be directed broadened significantly in this period. Donations and increased budgets for non-governmental aid followed. Between the late 1960s and the mid-1980s, the combined revenue of Britain's largest humanitarian aid and development NGOs increased approximately five-fold.[13] Reputations changed too. The long 1970s culminated for the sector with the Live Aid concerts in 1985 and the global attention they brought to non-governmental aid.

We must be careful, however, not to over-state the novelty of these interventions. The period from 1968 to 1985 (the 'NGO moment') followed a similar pattern to earlier phases of 'accelerated' change in the sector.[14] The post-Enlightenment period, the foundation of the Red Cross in the mid-nineteenth century, and the aftermaths of the two world wars were periods of intense activity that helped to re-define the concept of 'aid'. At each step, the rapid

[11] For an overview of this period, see Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*; O'Sullivan, 'Global 'Nervous System'"; and Salvatici, *A History of Humanitarianism*.
[12] Chabbott, "Development INGOs", 227.
[13] Hilton et al, *A Historical Guide to NGOs in Britain*, 301.
[14] On the concept of 'the NGO moment', see O'Sullivan, 'Humanitarian Encounters"; O'Sullivan, 'Global 'Nervous System'"; and O'Sullivan, *The NGO Moment*.

expansion in the range and direction of humanitarian action was accompanied by marked continuities from earlier periods. New ideas and practices carried with them the legacies of past interventions.[15] The NGO moment was no different. Changing attitudes to 'expert' knowledge and the role of non-state actors in the delivery of welfare services generated openings for NGOs in a domestic context.[16] They were matched by new opportunities for intervention in post-colonial territories, new collaborations with states and international agencies, and by the dramatic expansion in NGO activity that followed them. For all that was novel about this globalisation of compassion, however, the upturn in the sector's fortunes it generated was equally defined by ideas that might be better identified as remnants of earlier eras. Concepts of 'progress', the 'civilising' imperative and the hierarchical (and proto-imperial) assumptions about humanity and the 'other' that accompanied them, were not easily eradicated from how NGOs (and those who worked for them) thought about aid.[17]

The crisis in South Asia was central to this NGO moment. In November 1970 a devastating cyclone struck East Pakistan, destroying infrastructure, claiming the lives of hundreds of thousands of Bengalis, and, in the process, drawing international aid agencies into a massive humanitarian relief campaign. The return of NGOs to the region the following March – to provide for the approximately 9.5 million people made refugees by the brutal war that eventually created Bangladesh – gave further momentum to the sector's transformation into a permanent fixture in the provision of aid.[18] An outbreak of cholera in early June 1971 focused international attention on the difficult conditions faced by Bengalis in the refugee camps in northern India. The UNHCR entered the region later that month, followed by the opening of a United Nations Pakistan Relief Operation (UNEPRO) office in Dacca. British, Canadian and Irish NGOs also began making plans to intervene – through fund-raising campaigns that paid for supplies and aid workers to be transported to South Asia. In June and July 1971, for example, War on Want, Oxfam and Save the Children sent medical teams to the region, while Christian Aid channelled support through the World Council of Churches. In Canada, Oxfam-Canada led the specially formed Combined Appeal for Pakistan Relief and sent its own representatives to South Asia. Further volunteers followed, including a group of Irish doctors and nurses sponsored by Concern.

The activities of these individuals helped to establish the broad contours of the spaces of social experience and concrete political engagement that NGOs would inhabit. But it was the move to newly-independent Bangladesh in early 1972 that secured a long-term role for the sector. Where emergency relief had given aid workers direction, rehabilitation and development allowed them to put down roots. Within just a few months of independence, the new state was awash with NGO projects, covering everything from basic health provision to adult education and technical assistance. The number of foreign aid workers that arrived in Bangladesh is difficult to calculate. At any one time, each NGO might have a field director and small groups of aid workers in the region, augmented by visiting officials from 'home' as well as by local staff and volunteers. The scale of their impact, however, was more easily discernible. Not only had house prices skyrocketed in Dacca by the mid-1970s, traffic conditions had also significantly worsened – the result, no doubt, of all those foreigners traversing the city on rickshaws.[19]

The continuities that shaped the NGO sector's presence in South Asia – mapping its spaces of social experience and concrete political engagement on to earlier exchanges

[15] O'Sullivan et al, "Humanitarianisms in context", 6.
[16] Hilton et al, *Politics of Expertise*.
[17] O'Sullivan, "Humanitarian Encounters".
[18] Figure from "Bengal Emergency: The Facts", memorandum prepared by Oxfam, 1 Nov. 1971, Oxfam Archive, Bodleian Libraries (Bodleian: Oxfam COM/2/6/4, fol. 5).
[19] Smillie, *Land of Lost Content*, 175-6.

(particularly those of the British Empire) – were most visible in the personnel employed to undertake aid work in the region. Oxfam's Brigadier Michael Blackman, for example, had served the British Army in several colonial contexts, including in Malaya. Concern's Fr Michael Doheny, Fr Aengus Finucane and Fr Raymond Kennedy – all Holy Ghost missionaries – spent most of the 1960s in Nigeria, taking prominent roles in the Biafran aid effort. Oxfam-Canada's representative, Raymond Cournoyer, was even more familiar with the South Asian context. In the late 1950s and early 1960s he had spent seven years as a Holy Cross brother, teacher and headmaster of a school in East Pakistan. That knowledge proved in high demand during the crisis. In 1971, Cournoyer became Oxfam-Canada's field director in India, and, in 1972, moved to Bangladesh as its first country representative. Living and working alongside this cohort was a group of lay organisers, professionals and volunteers – many of them also veterans of Biafra, and all bringing with them similar ideas about doing 'aid'. Their presence was evidence of a pattern that Uma Kothari identified among colonial officials who later became aid professionals: 'decolonisation, while a significant historical process, led to a *reconfiguration* of people, ideas and spaces rather than a wholesale epochal transformation'.[20]

**The physical contours of aid giving**

That sense of reconfiguration rather than transformation was also applicable to the spaces of social experience and concrete political engagement the aid community occupied. In the most basic sense, the arrival of dozens of foreign aid workers, first in India, and subsequently in Bangladesh, brought those individuals into contact with local communities in the towns, villages, and cities where they lived, and in the camps, clinics and myriad other spaces where aid was delivered. Those encounters were, in turn, mediated through the infrastructure that NGOs demanded to facilitate their presence. Cars, jeeps, trucks and rickshaws provided transport; houses, apartments and hotels were required for accommodation and administration; and a variety of buildings (temporary and permanent) provided the bases from which aid could be distributed. This 'landscape of aid' sat on the foundation of centuries of European and North American inhabitation of the region.[21] In the early 1970s, it became the bedrock on which the contours of the aid industry were constructed. The places where aid workers lived, worked and socialised determined how ideas and practices of aid were circulated, as well as whose voices were heard in making decisions about aid. They also proved vital in shaping the collective identity that emerged in that context.

The aid workers' presence was divided into three, overlapping spaces: work; administrative; and social. Most of their time was spent in work environments. In India this meant the system of camps established by local authorities to deal with the influx of refugees. The teams of volunteers (mainly medics) that arrived from Britain, Canada and Ireland in June 1971 operated in a variety of locations near the border between India and East Pakistan. Their task was not insignificant. By mid-July, Oxfam estimated that it was assisting 500,000 refugees across its programmes at Angortale, Barasat, Ballurghat, Bongaon and Jaipaiguri; Save the Children ran temporary hospitals and supervised feeding centres at Salt Lake Camp (Calcutta), Kalyani and Krishnagar; Oxfam and Oxfam-Canada volunteers worked on a joint cholera inoculation scheme; and the Concern team made its way to the Garo Hills region in Meghalaya, where it provided medical assistance to refugees.[22] Conditions were generally poor ('appalling', according to one Oxfam-Canada volunteer) and made worse by the

[20] Kothari, "Spatial Practices and Imaginaries", 235. Emphasis in the original.
[21] Smirl, *Spaces of Aid*, xiii.
[22] Figure for Oxfam taken from: "Oxfam Needing Big New Funds to Aid Refugees", *The Guardian*, 13 July 1971.

monsoon rains that threatened to swamp the camps' strained sanitation systems.[23] But the recurring note in descriptions of these spaces was one of urgency, of working to meet the needs of 'waves' of refugees and fighting a series of 'emergencies within emergencies', including regular outbreaks of pneumonia, gastro-enteritis and dysentery.[24]

While these teams of aid workers inhabited the camps during the day, in the cities a parallel administrative infrastructure emerged to support their activities. Offices were opened, meeting spaces were established, and living quarters were repurposed to provide for the flow of information and instruction about the crisis. It was in these spaces that formal networks of aid workers began to emerge. In Calcutta, for example, NGOs clustered together in areas close to local and international decision-makers. Oxfam kept an office in a suite at the newly opened Kenilworth Hotel, where its team also slept (in 'modest comfort and reasonable air conditioning').[25] Personnel from two other British NGOs, Save the Children and War on Want, were also based in the hotel, while the local Caritas agency ran an office across the landing from Oxfam, and another local partner, Cathedral Relief Services, was across the street. The sense of community this situation generated was strengthened by their close proximity to government and diplomatic circles. The British High Commission's offices were just around the corner from the hotel, a short walk away, and the hotel's location also gave them access to the nascent Bangladeshi administration in exile. Oxfam's Julian Francis, whose apartment in Auckland Square was five minutes in the other direction, remembered walking a similar distance to 'drop in for tea' at the Theatre Road office of Bangladeshi 'prime minister' Tajuddin Ahmad.[26]

The transitory nature of this infrastructure – Oxfam never sought out alternative office accommodation, for example, despite the considerable expense of staying at the Kenilworth Hotel – was replaced by something more durable in Bangladesh. The arrival, en masse, of so many foreign aid workers and officials in early 1972 transformed Dacca and its surrounding regions. One commentator termed it a 'race in charity': the desire to spend money for the sake of it.[27] The variety of projects that NGOs sponsored, and their diverse locations, made their presence appear so all-pervasive. Concern volunteers provided in-service training at Kumundi Hospital in Mirazpur; helped operate a mobile clinic in rural Jalchatra and another at Saidpur; assisted the orthopaedic surgeons at Sher-e-Bangla Hospital in Barisal; built houses at Dinajpur; sank tube wells at Mirpur; and offered vocational training for Bangladeshi women.[28] The programmes established by British and Canadian organisations were similarly eclectic. Save the Children ran child health clinics at Bhola, Daulatkhan and Lalmohan, and a training programme for local health workers at Bagherhat, along with several other initiatives, while Oxfam and Oxfam-Canada supported a clustered village scheme and the rehabilitation of agriculture and fishing in rural areas, as well as an adult literacy project.

These developments did not go unnoticed by the local population. Nor were they entirely welcomed. Deep frustrations emerged as a result of the divisions that 'Aidland'

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[23] Combined Appeal for Pakistan Relief (CAPR) press release, "Leslie Smith, Pharmaceutical Expert, Returns from Pakistani Refugee Camps in India", 9 July 1971, Oxfam-Canada Archive, Library and Archives Canada (LAC: Oxfam-Canada MG28, I270, Vol. 4, File 22).

[24] James M. Hollomon, "Oxfam and the Bengali Refugees, April-August 1971", 14 Aug. 1971 (Bodleian: Oxfam COM/2/6/4, Fol. 5).

[25] Philip Jackson, "Report on Visit to West Bengal – 20th-22nd June 1971", (Bodleian: Oxfam COM/2/6/4, Fol. 5).

[26] Julian Francis, "Remembering the Fallen", *BDNews24*, 2 Nov. 2019, https://opinion.bdnews24.com/2019/11/02/remembering-the-fallen-2/ (accessed 27 Nov. 2019).

[27] Clifford Longley, "Bangladesh Needs Cash, Not Surplus Goods", *The Times*, 9 March 1972.

[28] Aengus Finucane, "Concern: Ten Months in Bangladesh, February to December 1972", Department of Foreign Affairs Files, National Archives of Ireland (NAI: DFA 2004/7/57).

fostered between expatriates and the local communities they lived and worked in. It hardly mattered that most aid workers lived in accommodation that was far from luxurious by Western standards. Concern, for example, encouraged its volunteers to adopt a communal approach to living, sharing clothes, allowing out-of-city visitors to take their beds, and eating together every evening.[29] Of much greater significance was the sense of dislocation these patterns of work, sleep and socialising engendered. The fact that their presence was, by its very nature, a short-term experience, not only led aid workers to fall back on pre-established (and often colonial/neo-colonial) networks, it also reinforced the 'liminality' that characterised their presence in the field.[30]

Nowhere was this more in evidence than in how aid workers socialised in India and Bangladesh. Echoing their colonial predecessors, new arrivals plugged immediately into pre-existing networks – mainly those established by the NGOs they worked for or travelled with – and fell under the direction of, and learned their social habits from, those already in residence. This 'parochial cosmopolitanism' created a community that was not only self-perpetuating, but also sharply divided aid workers from their localities.[31] Some occasions, like the 'Nigerian evenings' attended by veterans of the Biafran crisis in Dacca, were inherently international in character.[32] For the most part, however, the sense of community that emerged was the result of socialising with certain people, in certain places, and in certain circles. Even the diverse social sub-groups that emerged in those contexts tended to look inward rather than include local participants. Some were the product of circumstance. Residents and visitors to Concern houses in Bangladesh entertained themselves with 'simple, frugal entertainments (Scrabble, the inevitable guitars)', as well as occasional amorous liaisons.[33] Socialising was also sometimes organised according to faith. At Christmas 1971, Concern volunteers at Salt Lake Camp decorated a tree in the hospital compound and arranged a choral service and midnight mass. Several of its members also prayed together in Bangladesh (Concern's first field directors were Fr Raymond Kennedy and Fr Aengus Finucane). National identity also mattered to how aid workers connected – and who with. Staff from Oxfam, Save the Children and War on Want found common purpose in down-time at the Kenilworth Hotel in Calcutta, for example, while Irish aid workers retained a strong sense of nationality, including marking their first St Patrick's Day in Dacca (17 March 1972) with a programme of traditional dancing and 'national songs'.[34]

That is not to suggest that the divisions between locals and expatriates were entirely rigid. Not all expatriates lived, worked or socialised in similar ways.[35] Some of them even deliberately sought out new experiences. In the quarter century after its programme began in Bangladesh, for example, five Concern volunteers married local men.[36] Likewise, we should be wary of erasing the agency of local actors in defining the boundaries of this aid landscape. Where and how Western aid workers could operate was frequently at the whim of local politics. At the end of July 1971, Indian officials sent letters to the expatriate staff of all

[29] Farmar, *Believing in Action*, 55.
[30] Smirl, *Spaces of Aid*, 16. See also Redfield, "Unbearable Lightness of Ex-pats", 358-82.
[31] On the concept of "parochial cosmopolitanism", see Rajak and Stirrat, "Parochial Cosmopolitanism and the Power of Nostalgia".
[32] Smillie briefly describes these events in *The Alms Bazaar*, 265 (n. 20).
[33] Farmar, *Believing in Action*, 55.
[34] "Confidential Diary of the Lady Alexandra Metcalfe, Vice Chairman, SCF, on her Visit to West Bengal, June 25th – July 2nd, 1971", Save the Children Archive, University of Birmingham (UB: SCF/OP/4/10/1); John Foley, "Irish in Dacca Celebrate on the Double", *Irish Independent*, 16 March 1972.
[35] On the importance of balancing this understanding of individual aid worker identities with the insights that the Aidland concept provides, see Eyben, "Fellow Travellers in Development"; Fechter, "Inhabitants of Aidland"; and Stirrat, "Mercenaries, Missionaries and Misfits".
[36] Farmar, *Believing in Action*, 55.

NGOs thanking them for their work, but instructing them to hand over their activities to local aid workers. Although this instruction was eventually amended to exclude managers and higher-ranking administrators, as well as some special exceptions for individual volunteers, it served as an obvious attempt to re-assert control over the relief operation. Bangladeshi officials also had considerable power in deciding where, how and in what sectors Western NGOs could operate. The over-riding image, however, is of a community apart – both in physical and figurative terms. The work places and administrative spaces in which aid workers operated brought them into direct contact with locals and refugees while simultaneously (and paradoxically) reinforcing their distance from those groups. Likewise, their patterns of socialisation largely (though not always) kept them separate from the local population. To borrow from John Heathershaw, the aid community was 'neither local nor global, neither fully qualified nor properly equipped … It creates professionals on the margins, both national and expatriate'.[37]

**How and where knowledge about 'aid' was circulated**

'Aidland's' spaces of social experience and concrete political engagement imposed their own logic on the aid sector. On their own, however, they were not enough to explain how that community was constituted, and the codes and practices it adopted. Woven into the 'parochial cosmopolitanism' that aid workers cultivated were certain ideas about the theory and practice of giving aid. They were rooted in past experiences and in ideas accumulated in more formal educational settings. But knowledge about aid was also performative, driven by cognitive and practical shifts that responded to the contexts in which aid was practised.[38] Taken together, the combination of delineated work and living spaces, and the social environments that aid workers occupied, not only conditioned how aid was undertaken, it also served to privilege certain forms of knowledge about aid, and in doing so reinforced the boundaries of the aid landscape.

What did this mean in the case of India and Bangladesh? The aid community was far from united in how it understood the crisis and the process of giving aid. This had practical implications. Aid workers who arrived in the region in the early 1970shad learned about 'doing' aid in a variety of places. They were missionaries, medical doctors, engineers, volunteers, former army officers and colonial officials, each with varying degrees of experience of working in the Third World and/or with poorer communities. It was also a question of politics. NGOs and their staff held divergent attitudes to South Asia geopolitics and their impact on the delivery of relief.[39] Concern and War on Want, for example, adopted a broadly pro-Bangladesh approach – albeit articulated largely in private – that led those organisations to develop close contacts with the exiled regime. Save the Children and its aid workers, by contrast, remained staunchly of the view that 'we should not become involved in political issues'. Neutrality, they reasoned, was the only way to ensure that they would remain 'free to do all we can to meet the needs of children, without considerations of nationality, race, or creed'.[40] Oxfam-Canada's Raymond Cournoyer largely agreed: taking a political stance, he wrote, was balanced against the risk of 'losing all opportunity of doing anything about the indescribable suffering' experienced by Bengali refugees.[41] His Oxfam counterparts in the UK drove a middle ground between these two viewpoints. In September

[37] Heathershaw, "Who are the 'International Community'?", 93.
[38] Smirl, *Spaces of Aid*, 9-10.
[39] For an overview of these diverging interpretations of the crisis, see O'Sullivan, *The NGO Moment*, chapter 2.
[40] Lord Paul Gore-Booth (chairman, SCF) to J.A.M. Graham (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), 22 Sept. 1971 (UB: SCF, Box A38).
[41] "Relief for Refugees from East Bengal: Bulletin No. 33", 17 Aug. 1971 (Bodleian: Oxfam, COM/2/6/4, Fol. 6).

and October 1971, for example, the organisation's director, Leslie Kirkley, spent days meeting journalists, television news programmers and UN officials, as well as engaging colleagues from British and international NGOs in discussions about the situation.

What unified the sector, however, was a common understanding of the ideological underpinnings of 'aid'. This was particularly visible in the emphasis it placed on the primacy of 'expertise'. In the same way that expert knowledge became an important currency for NGOs in many Western democracies – leading them to become providers of social services in welfare state systems – that principle was also used to justify intervention in places like India and Bangladesh.[42] The answer to what constituted 'expert knowledge' about aid was easily discernible. Rooted in high modernism, aid-giving emphasised the power of science, 'progress' and technology in tackling poverty.[43] These principles were also attached to the increasing importance accorded to professional credentials in defining who did – and did not – belong to the aid community. Several of those who worked in South Asia had received formal training in the practice of 'aid', as part of the first generation of aid workers to take degrees in social work and in the nascent academic field of 'development studies'. The international character of that body of ideas – similar practices conditioned policies and practices at the UN's humanitarian, development and health agencies, for instance – was matched by the trans-Atlantic world in which much of its formal training took place.[44] Fr Aengus Finucane, Concern's second field director in Bangladesh, for example, won scholarships to Swansea University and St Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia in the 1960s, before applying that knowledge to his missionary work with youth groups in Nigeria, then with Concern.[45]

Within those boundaries, however, interpretations of what constituted 'expertise' were anything but static. Knowledge about aid circulated in different ways. Meetings between NGOs, international aid organisations and government agencies provided a space for the exchange of up-to-date information about social, political and humanitarian conditions. Those gatherings were not limited to the immediate crisis context. The trans-Atlantic world, indeed, remained a hub for planning and policy decisions. In January 1972, members of the International Council for Voluntary Agencies (a representative body) met in Geneva with officials from the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the UN Relief Operation in Dacca (UNROD), the UN Children's Agency (UNICEF), and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), to discuss their plans for intervention in Bangladesh. Informal conversations in the field among aid workers, and between aid workers and diplomats, were also important in sharing information. Representatives from Oxfam, Save the Children and War on Want could hardly have avoided each other in the Kenilworth Hotel in Calcutta, and kept in touch with officials from the British High Commission a few minutes' walk away, while social networks like those in Dacca in 1972 helped to promote a similar sharing of ideas.

Humanitarian ideas and ideals were often re-drawn when faced with the practical realities of delivering relief.[46] The conditions in South Asia created myriad difficulties for aid agencies. In India, experiments with new technologies like Butyl septic tanks, amphicats, water purifying units, plastic insecticide sprayers, inflatable warehouses and a vitamin- and protein-enriched form of mashed potato (manufactured in Britain by Cadbury-Schweppes), met with varying degrees of success. Likewise, the impact of two much-hyped Proton Jet

[42] On the importance of expertise to the growth of NGOs in the twentieth century, see Hilton et al, *Politics of Expertise*.
[43] Glasman, "Measuring Malnutrition"; and Scott-Smith, "Beyond the 'Raw' and the 'Cooked'".
[44] Glasman, *Humanitarianism*; and Scott-Smith, *On An Empty Stomach*.
[45] Aengus Finucane, in discussion with the author, Dublin, 27 Feb. 2007.
[46] See Apthorpe, "Who is international aid?", 198.

Injectors used to inoculate against cholera in the refugee camps in summer 1971 – part of an Oxfam/Oxfam-Canada joint campaign – was hindered by the simple problem of getting people to file past the machine quickly enough.[47] Whether any of these lessons had any influence on how aid was delivered was another question.[48] NGO priorities too often remained skewed by what was expected of aid workers rather than what actually worked in the field. A report on Oxfam's refugee relief operations in India, undertaken in 1972, for example, questioned the balance of priorities induced by the medicalisation of humanitarian relief:

> it was medicine which was perceived as a cure for an epidemic and not environmental sanitation. This probably says much about the historical nature of relief work and underlines the continuing insistence on the value of medical aid, notwithstanding that there are perhaps other, more simple and less expensive ways of preventing suffering and saving lives.[49]

The cumulative effect was a spirit much like that which defined those who worked with refugees on the Thai-Cambodian border in the 1980s: 'a strong sense of community, shared values and good work against terrible odds'.[50] Distance from home could – and often did – reinforce this sense of common endeavour. This was sometimes visible within organisations. Aid workers frequently privileged knowledge accumulated through practice and on-the-ground intelligence over instructions sent from headquarters in London, Oxford, Ottawa, Toronto or Dublin. Oxfam-Canada's Raymond Cournoyer was particularly zealous in guarding what he regarded as the superiority of knowledge gathered in the field. 'We … cannot suffer being slowed down by red tapes and continual reference to headquarters', he wrote in a letter to management in May 1971, adding:

> [I]f you can feed us with money we will feed you back and heavily, now that that we know what to do, with all the information you need to keep your public aware of the situation and aware of the work of Oxfam.[51]

But he was not alone in bemoaning interference in the 'real' work that went on in the field. Differences of opinion over what projects Concern should prioritise in Bangladesh surfaced as early as 1972 and led that organisation to the brink of an internal crisis the following year.[52]

More often, however, ownership of expert knowledge was used to exclude those deemed not to belong to the aid community. The failures of two informal, and more radical, British volunteer collectives – Kastur and the Omega Group – were accelerated by the uncooperative attitude they met with from officials from other NGOs in South Asia.[53] But the boundaries of knowledge were most clearly pronounced in the relationship between British,

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[47] "Relief for Refugees from East Bengal: Bulletin No. 19", 22 June 1971 (LAC: Oxfam-Canada MG28, I270, Vol. 5, File 17).
[48] See Hilton, "Oxfam and the Problem of NGO Aid Appraisal".
[49] Julian Francis, "A Survey and Analysis of Administrative Organisational and Technical Experiences Accruing to Oxfam and to Other Voluntary Agencies Arising out of the Bangladesh Refugee Relief Operations, April 1971 to February 1972", (Bodleian: Oxfam, PRG/5/5/6, Fol. 1).
[50] Taithe, "Cradle of the New Humanitarian System?", 336.
[51] "Excerpts of Reports re Pakistan Refugee Situation", extract from letter by Raymond Cournoyer, dated 14 May 1971 (LAC: Oxfam-Canada, MG 28, I 270, Vol. 5, File 2).
[52] Farmar, *Believing in Action*, 63-4.
[53] On Kastur, see Simon Winchester, "'Hippies' Fly Home to a £14,000 Problem", *The Guardian*, 18 June 1971. On the Omega Group, see Hannig, "Negotiating Humanitarianism and Politics".

Canadian and Irish aid workers and local volunteers. Embedding expertise in the hierarchy of tasks associated with aid work served to distance the inhabitants of 'Aidland' from the local population. While British diplomats expressed admiration for the Indian authorities' system of dealing with the 9.5 million refugees ('little short of miraculous'), NGOs continued to bemoan the difficulty in finding 'capable and responsible' local staff.[54] The disavowal of local knowledge served to simultaneously underline the aid community's unity and its distance from its local contexts. In the immediate term this led aid workers to privilege solutions that frequently proved unsuitable for conditions in South Asia. Experimental jet injectors, inflatable warehouses and septic tanks proved unreliable; consignments of tents and blankets went unused and machinery ceased operating; and the absence of any Indian or Bangladeshi staff trained in the use of cutting-edge medical equipment simply accentuated their dependence on outside intervention. In the longer term, these patterns provided a template for interventions elsewhere in the Third World. Divorced from their local contexts, reliant on learning that was framed within the parameters of scientific rationality and constituted within specific communities of knowledge, ideas about aid-giving could be transported from South Asia to a variety of different emergency and development situations. The aid community, in effect, became transnational not only through its emphasis on the universality of need, but also, as Joël Glasman put it, 'with the much more ambitious and concrete task of overcoming the local nature of needs'.[55]

**Belonging in Aidland**

The image constructed here reveals strong commonalities between British, Canadian and Irish experiences of delivering aid. The globalised objective of their interventions – ostensibly, to save all of humankind – was an explicit product of the NGO moment. Less visible, however, was the parallel emergence of imagined spaces of belonging and solidarity among the aid workers who were the conduits for those concepts. Individuals from Britain, Canada and Ireland occupied spaces that encouraged the development of collaborations, friendships and (sometimes intimate) relationships. That common sense of purpose was reinforced by how knowledge was defined and the ways it was circulated. But how should we interpret those connections? And what can this 'humanitarian imaginary' tell us about the aid industry they created? It is plainly too simplistic to attribute the changes that occurred in South Asia to the aid community's physical presence alone – or, indeed, to its emphasis on expert knowledge. One could point to several cases of humanitarian intervention in the post-war era that were similar in character and scale, while many of the practices adopted in the region were also re-purposed from earlier eras. Rather, what distinguished this shift, and the longer NGO moment of which it was constituent, was the change in how aid workers imagined their roles in places like India and Bangladesh. The sense of collective identity they fostered and the continuity of relationships the crisis generated (most notably among Biafra veterans) underlined the feeling of an aid community in the middle of a significant transformation.

To understand how this new 'humanitarian imaginary' emerged, we need to examine the values that aid workers carried with them to South Asia. They were rooted in the transnational ideals on which aid workers leaned for motivation. Missionaries like Raymond Kennedy, Michael Doheny and Aengus Finucane viewed their actions as an extension of their faith. Others – notably several of the Oxfam representatives who signed up for a spell in South Asia – framed their contributions in terms of a late 1960s activist spirit. Still others

[54] Julian Francis, "A Survey and Analysis of Administrative Organisational and Technical Experiences Accruing to Oxfam and to Other Voluntary Agencies Arising out of the Bangladesh Refugee Relief Operations, April 1971 to February 1972", (Bodleian: Oxfam, PRG/5/5/6, Fol. 1).
[55] Glasman, "Measuring Malnutrition", 20.

combined altruistic motives with a thirst for adventure and a desire to put their professional training (for example, in engineering or medicine) to good use. The overarching narrative, however, was of a commitment to 'saving' and using expert knowledge to achieve it. The plea to 'common humanity' that drove faith-based, activist and altruistic aid workers (and those that fell into two or more of these categories) transcended national boundaries. In itself, that was hardly novel. But what allowed it to rise above the immediate context of crisis in places like South Asia were both the opportunities that the 'NGO moment' provided to aid workers (to collaborate in a variety of different post-colonial environments) and, relatedly, the communities of practice that emerged in those places. The familiarity that accrued from long periods spent working alongside, socialising and living with, like-minded individuals transformed forms of knowledge and practice into community principles.[56]

But values were also transmitted from the local, regional and national contexts from which aid workers originated. The 'liminal' spaces they occupied in the field, and the transitory nature of their presence, left the door open to influence from 'home' more than their missionary or colonial predecessors. The pressures that accompanied this connectivity were partly financial. Fund-raising imperatives required aid work to be described in specific ways. Newspapers, television, radio and, indeed, the public relations departments of the NGOs themselves, projected an image of aid workers as what Anne-Meike Fechter termed 'selfless heroes, who rescue others while potentially endangering their own lives'.[57] There was an obvious gendering of the roles filled by those individuals. The icons of the public narrative were white men who worked as doctors, engineers and technical experts, and white women nurses and administrators (with some exceptions). These dynamics were mapped on to how the aid community functioned in the field. Although some roles – such as socio-cultural analysis and consultancy on gender and social participation issues – were beginning to open to women in the 1970s, it took until the 1990s for stereotypes about the gendered nature of aid work to dissipate. As Rosalind Eyben observed in her study of five women who had worked in the development sector since the 1960s, many jobs were made for 'a man with a dependent wife, thus excluding or deterring women applicants'.[58]

The personalisation of aid, or 'people-to-people' action as many NGOs termed it, nonetheless became an important marketing tool in South Asia. Concern was particularly adept at this tactic. In 1972, it shipped a 16mm camera to Bangladesh, so that Michael Doheny, a dedicated amateur filmmaker, might take footage of its operations. The resultant film, entitled 'Concern in Bangladesh', was toured around Ireland – with Doheny present to introduce it. As one of Concern's founders, John O'Loughlin Kennedy, remembered, Doheny made sure to stress the role played by aid workers with connections to the town, village, city or county where the film was being screened:

> If there was an Irish nurse from a particular place working in Bangladesh, he set up with the local groups and borrowed halls and brought people in. The stunt was that people got in free of charge and then paid to leave – [Concern] took up a collection on the way out, yielding far more than if they had sold tickets on the way in.[59]

The degree to which this imagined world conflicted with the lived reality of aid-giving is striking. Not only did it tend to erase the political, social and economic realities in which aid workers operated, it also reduced the work of those individuals to a set of easily

[56] Green, "Calculating Compassion", 33.
[57] Fechter, "'Living Well' While 'Doing Good'?", 1481.
[58] Eyben, "Fellow Travellers in Development", 1407. On this topic, see also Möller et al, *Gendering Global Humanitarianism*.
[59] John O'Loughlin Kennedy, in discussion with the author, Dublin, 23 Nov. 2009.

recognisable characteristics.[60] This proved an incredibly powerful concept. Michael Doheny's claims to act 'on behalf of all you good people who have given through Concern … You were all with me in spirit' or to have been 'carrying the banner of Concern … and in fact the flag of Ireland too' were obviously exaggerated.[61] But they hinted at a vicarious experience of aid-giving that transferred from the public through the NGOs until those traits became as much part of the aid community's identity as the labels they granted themselves. These tropes were particularly common in the campaign for refugee relief in South Asia. The first group of Oxfam volunteers to reach India in June 1971 was venerated by the British press for its 'astounding' decision to ignore local warnings of 'the terrible conditions under which they would have to work' and instead go 'straight out into the field'.[62] Similar language was used to describe the Concern medical team that arrived in the country a month later. The *Irish Independent* (whose readers had part-financed the operation) published detailed accounts of the '900-mile trek' endured by the volunteers to reach their base in the Garo Hills and of the work they did there and on their return to Calcutta, where they established themselves in Salt Lake Camp at the end of July 1971.[63] The worse the environment, it appeared, the more admiration their activities accrued, and the better they seemed to fit donor expectations. When journalist Ernest Hillen visited Camp Banipur, 31 miles north-east of Calcutta, in July 1971, he found Oxfam-Canada's Raymond Cournoyer at work in dreadful conditions:

> Banipur looked much like other camps, no better, no worse. Long, tarpaulin-covered sheds, many with open fronts and sides, jammed with human beings. The same queues for food, medicine, toilets and pumps. The same incredible number of flies. The same slimy filth in ditches.[64]

From that morass, however, Hillen elevated Cournoyer to the position of saviour: he was 'the most effective aid worker' and had 'the stuff of heroes'. Canada, Hillen wrote, 'can be proud of him'.[65]

Hillen's description of life in Banipur points to the complex entanglements between professional identities, on-the-ground experiences and fund-raising imperatives that shaped the aid community's sense of collective belonging in the Third World. The drive to increase funding led NGOs to emphasise the effectiveness and transformative potential of aid. Donor-imagined geographies of South Asia stressed desperate, disease-ridden camps where starving refugees endured monsoon rains and appalling sanitation.[66] In keeping with the search for universal solutions to human needs that was visible in how knowledge was constructed in South Asia, the valorisation of aid reduced humanitarianism to the act of saving those imperilled by those conditions, and Western aid workers were the ones best placed to undertake it.[67] The marginalisation of Indian and Bangladeshi staff and volunteers from the popular narrative of aid served a similar purpose. At the height of the crisis in South Asia War on Want employed 400 Bengali and Indian staff, while Concern, Christian Aid and the

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[60] Mosse, "The Anthropology of Expertise", 21.
[61] Michael Doheny, "No. 7 Report from Bangladesh", undated [Dec. 1971/Jan. 1972?] (NAI: DFA 2003/17/51); Michael Doheny, "From the Bay of Bengal", 16 Nov. 1971 (NAI: DFA 2003/17/51).
[62] Dr H. Sahara, director of health services, West Bengal, quoted in Peter Hazelhurst, "Britain's Response to Cholera Crisis Astounds India as Deaths Fall", *Guardian*, 11 June 1971.
[63] See, for example, "The Irish Trek to Aid Refugees", *Irish Independent*, 12 July 1971.
[64] Ernest Hillen, "A Man in the Middle of Misery", *Winnipeg Free Press*, 21 Aug. 1971.
[65] Ernest Hillen, "So Many Will Die", *Winnipeg Free Press*, 31 July 1971.
[66] See, for example, "Editorial Copy: Oxfam of Canada: Betty Scott", undated [June 1971?] (LAC: Oxfam-Canada, MG28, I270, Vol. 4, File 22).
[67] On the labels that NGOs use to describe humanitarianism, see Dogra, *Representations of World Poverty*.

various faith-based organisations also worked closely with local actors, including Caritas India and the Christian Agency for Social Action (CASA). Oxfam and Oxfam-Canada drew similarly on local help, including more than 200 student doctors who delivered medical relief. When those Asian voices did appear in NGO narratives, their presence served only to reinforce the superiority of expatriate aid workers as experts and technicians; there to provide training or guidance. Raymond Cournoyer and his colleagues became heroes, in other words, while local volunteers operated under their watchful supervision, doing 'basic' work, 'assisting' Western aid workers, and providing 'subsidiary' services – as a report on Oxfam's activities put it in July 1971.[68]

This overlap between real and imagined worlds of aid work was significant. The relationship between knowledge formation and community belonging could be mapped on to expectations of what 'aid' looked like and the values imbued in it. Aid workers were not only connected by their belief in high modernity and scientific rationality; the roles they performed in South Asia served to highlight these commonalities by reducing opportunities to learn from local alternative ways of delivering relief and of 'doing' aid. 'Excuse me, friends, I must catch my jet / I'm off to join the Development Set', ran the opening lines of Ross Coggins' poem, 'The Development Set', first published in September 1976: 'In Sheraton hotels in scattered nations / We damn multi-national corporations … We discuss malnutrition over steaks / And plan hunger talks during coffee breaks.'[69] Coggins' scathing take on 'Aidland' strikes a familiar tone to anyone with knowledge of the contemporary humanitarian industry. Yet for a sector then in its infancy, it offered a telling critique of its current and future directions. Differences in national, organisational and religious cultures remained visible, but were secondary to the shared experiences that Aidland accentuated.

**Conclusion**

In *Spaces of Aid* (2015), Lisa Smirl described an aid landscape that was in constant construction and re-construction, reliant on aid workers and 'their voyages' to sustain itself.[70] The story of how Aidland was constituted in South Asia provides us with a glimpse of that world in formation. The aid community's spaces of social experience and concrete political engagement provided the most visible manifestation of its presence – and of the permanence to which many in the sector aspired. Just as important were the less readily visible spaces of knowledge circulation that helped to knit the aid community together just as they excluded others. While it would be wrong to dismiss the good intentions of these individuals and the impact of their interventions in terms of saving lives, the story presented in this article suggests that the meaning of 'solidarity' in those contexts was rather more complicated than the NGO sector's much-trumpeted concept of 'people-to-people action' suggested. The 'spaces of aid' constructed in South Asia came at a not inconsiderable cost for the local communities on whose behalf aid workers intervened. The rapid expansion of the global aid industry owed just as much to the well-established pathways and means of operating in which it was rooted as to the novelty of its scale.

This understanding of solidarity should lead us to further investigate Aidland's implications for how Western intervention in the Third World was constituted, what it meant, and for whose benefit it was ultimately undertaken. The aid community that emerged from the crisis was notably international in its outlook. Many of the individuals who found their feet in Biafra and Bangladesh went on to become leaders in an increasingly interconnected global network of aid agencies and NGOs. The model they established proved equally enduring. In the Sahel (1973-74), Cambodia (1979-81), Ethiopia (1984-86) and, to a lesser

[68] "Oxfam Needing Big New Funds to Aid Refugees", *The Guardian*, 13 July 1971.
[69] Coggins, "The Development Set", 80.
[70] Smirl, *Spaces of Aid*, 39.

extent, Central America (1979-92), the parameters of aid-giving, living and identity looked remarkably similar to what they were in South Asia. These crises, as Bertrand Taithe alluded to in the case of Cambodia, highlighted how 'humanitarian internationalists "invented" modern humanitarianism through their practices and through the facilitation of knowledge production'.[71]

There is still much to learn about the historical experience of aid work (individual and collective) and what it can tell us about the Global North's relationship with the post-colonial world. In following the path of the ethnographers and anthropologists that described 'Aidland', this article has stressed the need to look to the everyday in the reconstruction of how the aid community functioned. That process of looking beyond ideas and movements to the practices and physical environments that shaped them has important implications for how we study the contours of activism. To borrow from Frederick Cooper, while transnational analyses have allowed us to understand processes that took place beyond 'national or continental containers … to adopt a language that implies that there is no container at all, except the planetary one, risks defining problems in misleading ways'.[72] By placing individuals, rather than the organisations they worked for, at the centre of activist narratives, we can render visible not only the novelty of their actions but also the deep-rooted (and often hidden in plain sight) legacies on which they were constructed. And, in doing so, we can better appreciate how those complex entanglements constituted – or, more accurately, reconstituted – the meaning of 'Europe', the 'Third World', and the 'global' in the late twentieth century.

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[71] See Taithe, "Cradle of the New Humanitarian System?", 337.

[72] Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 91.

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**Notes**