



The search for justice: NGOs in Britain and Ireland and the New International Economic Order, 1968-82

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**The search for justice:
NGOs in Britain and Ireland and the New International Economic Order, 1968-82**

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of the international humanitarian NGO community in the long 1970s brought with it much soul-searching on how NGOs could move beyond charity and towards genuine solidarity with the Third World. Drawing on evidence from non-governmental organizations in Britain and Ireland, this article examines the role played by the NIEO and the pursuit of global economic and political reform in shaping those debates. It argues for the enduring importance of the liberal economic paradigm in shaping Western attitudes to justice, but concludes that we should pay more attention to the role of the Third World and the Christian churches in shaping the worldview of humanitarian NGOs.

Introduction

On May 10, 1974 representatives from six leading British NGOs sat down to a meeting with Prime Minister Harold Wilson and three of his cabinet colleagues at 10 Downing Street. Their aim was simple: to persuade Wilson’s Labour Party government of the inherently global nature of poverty and the need for an appropriately global response. Coming just nine days after the UN General Assembly approved the G77’s “Declaration for the Establishment of a New International Economic Order” (NIEO), this ad-hoc Group for Action on Poverty (GAP) spoke readily to the agenda of economic and political reform. The stage was set, it warned, for “a fundamental shift in the balance of wealth and power.”¹ With it came a need to re-think the West’s world role. But GAP’s reading of reform was shaped by something more than the formal demands of the G77. For the organizations it represented – the domestic-focused Child Poverty Action Group, Help the Aged, and Shelter, and the more internationally-minded Oxfam, United Nations Association and War on Want – the NIEO was merely one strand in a growing campaign for a more just global order. The woman in England who “surrenders her children to the social services because she just can’t cope” and the old man in Asia “who has gone without food for days [and] huddles in a gutter to die” belonged to the same narrative, they argued: “the price we pay for poverty.”² Their solution was equally wide-ranging: “a re-distribution of wealth ... on an international as well as a national scale.”³

GAP’s efforts ultimately fell short of its ambitious aims. Positive noises from Wilson dissipated as the group struggled to articulate a coherent vision for reform. Yet its yearning for something beyond charity marked a significant change. The rise of humanitarian and human rights norms in international discourse in the last quarter of the twentieth century – what Kathryn Sikkink later termed the “justice cascade” – was accompanied by the NGO community’s embrace of social and economic justice as an ever greater part of the global

¹ “A Six Party Coalition,” undated pamphlet [1975?], Special Collections, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, (hereafter SOAS), Christian Aid Papers (hereafter CAP), CA2/D/27/4.

² Ibid.

³ “Joint Agency Appeal to PM on Poverty,” *Oxfam News*, June 1974.

anti-poverty campaign.⁴ The G77 played an important role in that process. Away from the high-level diplomacy of the North-South Dialogue, the NIEO came to embody a spirit of global reform that proved highly attractive to those seeking a new model of non-governmental aid. Its language of interdependence opened up new ways of thinking about poverty and development. Most of all, this “NIEO imaginary” brought with it the alluring possibility of a more just world order.⁵ As Trócaire, the official aid agency of the Irish Catholic hierarchy, put it in 1976: “The NIEO is really a shorthand and not very elegant way of describing a new mood in international affairs ... a realization that politics and economics are inextricably linked, and a growing awareness that international affairs are now of vital significance to every one of us.”⁶

This essay explores that search for “justice” and its implications for our understanding of the global humanitarian turn in the 1970s. In addition to the language of rights, and the notion of a “common humanity” that emerged in that period, it argues for the prominent role of economic reform in shaping that change. But it also points to the myriad opinions, approaches and tensions – not least between advocates of old-fashioned “charity” and those in search of more fundamental reform – that defined the early years of that narrative. In Britain and Ireland – the two case studies outlined here – the response to reform ran the gambit from largely disinterested (Concern, Save the Children) to faith-based (Trócaire, Christian Aid) to more radical (War on Want) approaches. To them was added a tension between cultural difference (British post-imperial benevolence versus Irish anti-colonialism) and a set of social and political values that produced a very Western imagining of the Third World. Unpacking those layers allows us an important insight into the ideological foundations of non-governmental aid.

We begin by locating the roots of NGO attitudes to the “NIEO imaginary” in two discursive spaces: in the language of liberal development that shaped the discourse of global poverty in the post-Second World War era; and in the Third Worldist/New Left-tinged agenda that radicalized debate within the NGO community from the late 1960s. To differing degrees, and from different ideological starting points, both narratives sparked an important shift in the way that NGOs conceived of charity and aid. They came together under the umbrella of global justice – our third theme – and the search for solutions to poverty that looked beyond the philanthropic response. But not all NGOs, or, indeed, not all of those who worked for those organizations, were equally enamored by this pursuit of justice. The final part of this essay examines the alternative cultural models and ideological counterpoints that proved so influential in shaping the “NIEO imaginary” and the NGO reaction to reform. The debates they precipitated created an international NGO community that was complex and at times paradoxical. And in so doing they involved those organizations in a process of global governance exerted through the medium of non-governmental aid.

The discovery of global poverty and the making of the “NIEO imaginary”

⁴ Kathryn Sikkink, *The Justice Cascade: How Human Rights Prosecutions are Changing World Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2011). See also the wealth of recent literature on the significance of this period for the history of human rights, especially Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2010); Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, ed., *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Akira Iriye, Petra Goedde, and William I. Hitchcock, eds., *The Human Rights Revolution: An International History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁵ The term “NIEO imaginary” was coined by Joseph Slaughter and developed by participants at the Kandersteg seminar organized by the Remarque Institute, New York University, May 1-3, 2014.

⁶ “Campaigning for a better world,” *One World*, winter 1975-76.

Between the Biafran humanitarian crisis in the late 1960s and the famines that swept through the Horn of Africa a decade-and-a-half later, NGOs moved from minor providers of disaster relief to key players in the delivery of development aid.⁷ Those organizations spent most of this “NGO moment” on a voyage of discovery of their own. Expanding budgets brought with them a search for new territory (figurative and physical). An explosion of popular interest in ‘human’ issues (from rights to environmentalism) raised the possibility of new *raison d’être* for non-governmental aid. With them came an increased interest in development, advocacy, and a whole range of activities beyond the world of disaster relief.

Their soul-searching took shape against the backdrop of almost three decades of theorizing, practicing, and, in many senses, mythologizing the concept of aid. The story began with the “discovery” of global poverty in the aftermath of the Second World War and the transformation of the Third World into a site for modernization, organization and development.⁸ That principle found a ready ally – and influence – in the “Great Society” program launched by Lyndon B. Johnson during his presidency of the United States. Built on a foundation of liberal economics, Johnson’s “war on poverty” and its attempt to build a *pax Americana* through a global “new deal” necessitated even greater development in the Third World.⁹ But it also prepared the ground for new ways of conceptualizing poverty by re-emphasizing the principle of welfare and by re-defining the parameters of international action. By 1980, what the Independent Commission on International Development Issues (known more commonly by the surname of its chair, former West German chancellor Willy Brandt) termed the “assault on international poverty” included a far-reaching discussion on economic and political interdependence, global anti-hunger and anti-poverty strategies, and the primacy of development aid.¹⁰

That globalization of poverty shaped NGO attitudes to reform in three ways. First, by describing development’s domestic and international contexts as inextricably linked, it transformed *all* of the poor world into a site for concern. GAP’s attempt to build “the united front which the war on poverty demands “provided a ready example of this discourse.¹¹ But it was not the first to view the world through this lens. Once NGOs became more interested in

⁷ For a history of humanitarian NGOs in this period, see Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Kevin O’Sullivan, “A ‘Global Nervous System’: The Rise and Rise of European Humanitarian NGOs, 1945-1985,” in *International Organizations and Development, 1945-1990*, ed. Marc Frey et al (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 196-219; and Ian Smillie, *The Alms Bazaar: Altruism Under Fire – Non-profit Organizations and International Development* (London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1995).

⁸ On the concept of “global poverty”, see Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); and Sheyda Jahanbani, “One Global War on Poverty: The Johnson Administration Fights Poverty at Home and Abroad, 1964-1968,” in *Beyond the Cold War: Lyndon Johnson and the New Global Challenges of the 1960s*, ed. Francis J. Gavin and Mark Atwood Lawrence (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 97-117. On the rise of modernization and development discourse, see also Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America’s Cold War Battle against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010); and Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

⁹ See Patrick O. Cohrs, “Towards a New Deal for the World? Lyndon Johnson’s Aspirations to Renew the Twentieth Century’s *Pax Americana*,” in *Beyond the Cold War: Lyndon Johnson and the New Global Challenges of the 1960s*, ed. Francis J. Gavin and Mark Atwood Lawrence (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 44-75.

¹⁰ International Commission on International Development Issues, *North-South: A Programme for Survival* (London: Pan Books, 1980), 285.

¹¹ “A Six Party Coalition,” undated pamphlet [1975?], SOAS CAP CA2/D/27/4.

issues of development in the late 1960s, their conversations (internal and external) were filled with what Oxfam termed a “belief in a welfare world.”¹² Interventionist though it may have been, that Keynesian reading implied the need for something more than charity as the palliative for the inequalities faced by the Third World. It transferred easily to the world of global reform. In the run-up to the fourth UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in 1976 Oxfam described the North-South Dialogue to its supporters in terms of a “new deal for the poor”: “A cup of tea, a piece of copper wire and a cotton shirt are just three of the things which link you to poverty in the Third World.”¹³

The complex and, at times, contradictory nature of that response was partly explained by the second key legacy of the liberal development order: fear. Just as Johnson’s global designs for the “Great Society” were built on the idea that inequality, if left unchallenged, would lead to instability and insurrection (probably of a socialist kind), so the G77’s demands for economic justice sparked anxiety at the potentially revolutionary power of the poor. Fear – and its corollary, the “othering” of the Third World – had been a feature of the NGO community for a much longer period, of course. But the transition from relief to development brought those anxieties to the fore. “Poverty *anywhere*,” Irish NGO Gorta told its supporters in 1972, “is a threat to prosperity, happiness and world peace.”¹⁴ Those concerns were only heightened by the NIEO. “The party is clearly over,” Trócaire warned in 1975.¹⁵ The following year that organization adopted the slogan “It’s my world too” for its annual Lenten fund-raising campaign, arguing that inequality between the Third World and the wealthy West would “have to be changed or the whole world will be rent apart.”¹⁶ And though Trócaire placed itself firmly on the side of reform, its language suggested something more than charity but less than solidarity with that “other” world. In a period of global economic malaise, “It’s my world too” carried a distinctly threatening ring.

The final inheritance passed down by the post-war development model was the (unshakable) logic of the liberal economic order. As Sheyda Jahanbani put it, the discourse on global poverty in the post-war period was built on a simple ideological premise: “what poor people need is more capitalism, not less.”¹⁷ That assertion found a surprising, but ready, collaborator in the NIEO. The G77 demanded the right to control national resources in the belief that “[b]olstering the state and state sovereignty would fend off private investors, market forces, and unrestricted trade.”¹⁸ Yet it stopped far short of overthrowing the existing capitalist system. The consequence of that dynamic was to place much of the NGO reaction in the realm of liberal reform. On the one hand, organizations like Save the Children remained firmly committed to sustaining the economic status quo: “a divided world where the division between rich and poor grows” owed less to global structural deficiencies and more to “a lack of capital in the poor countries.”¹⁹ On the other, even those organizations that proved more committed to moving beyond the charitable response – Oxfam, Trócaire and Christian Aid –

¹² Guy Stringer (deputy director, Oxfam) to ed., *Guardian*, April 3, 1972.

¹³ “A New Deal for the Poor: What a New International Economic Order Would Mean for Britain and the Third World,” *Oxfam News*, March/April 1976.

¹⁴ “Discussion Point: Charity Begins at Home, So Why Should I Help the Poor Overseas?” *Gorta News*, August 1972.

¹⁵ “A New World Order on the Way?” *One World*, autumn 1975.

¹⁶ “Trócaire’s Lenten campaign: ‘It’s My World Too’,” *One World*, winter 1975-76.

¹⁷ Jahanbani, “One Global War on Poverty,” 112.

¹⁸ Vanessa Ogle, “State Rights Against Private Capital: The ‘New International Economic Order’ and the Struggle Over Aid, Trade, and Foreign Investment, 1962–1981,” *Humanity* 5, no. 2 (2014): 211-212.

¹⁹ Brian Morrell, “How to be Rich,” *The World’s Children*, summer 1968, Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham, Save the Children Archives, Box A676.

did so largely within the boundaries of the liberal development order. They emphasized the need for equitable trade with the Third World, with some re-distribution of wealth at its heart, but their approach fell far short of advocating more radical reform. Rather, they remained wedded to what Peter Adamson termed the “New Testament” of development: “Meeting basic needs is its god; redistribution with growth is its church on earth; people’s participation is its holy spirit.”²⁰

Charity versus advocacy: NGO radicalism and the NIEO

It would be misleading however to describe the NGO response to the NIEO solely in terms of the liberal development paradigm. Adamson’s cutting postscript – “in case you hadn’t noticed, the poor are still with us” – suggested that space still existed for those who dissented from the accepted vision of global poverty.²¹ At the very least, it provided a reminder that the NGO community – and, indeed, individual NGOs – were anything but unified. The conversation began in the radical social and political debates of the late 1960s (more radical in Britain than Ireland). It was a critical time for NGOs. The first wave of young volunteers who had travelled to the decolonized Third World with volunteer-sending organizations like Voluntary Service Overseas in Britain and *Viaiores Christi* in Ireland returned with ideas of their own for a rapidly expanding NGO sector. They were joined by a new generation of aid workers emerging from the increasingly radicalized environment of European university campuses. Both groups brought with them a discursive energy, but it was the latter’s ideological verve – what British government officials described as “a certain divisiveness [that] is pulling at the overseas aid movement” – that chipped away at the edifice of charity.²² In less than two years the Haslemere Group (formed in 1968), World Development Movement (1969) and Third World First (1969), among others, emerged in Britain with a mandate for change and the demand that the West begin the immediate reform of the existing political and economic order. Their reference points reflected the mix of Third World-ism and the language of the New Left that was beginning to play an ever-more important role in shaping attitudes across the NGO community. They drew inspiration from Raul Prebisch, the Argentine economist whose work as secretary-general of UNCTAD focused attention on the disparities between the First and Third Worlds. They spoke in terms of “exploitation,” political campaigning, and the West’s “political responsibilities to the Third World.”²³ They even, in the case of the Haslemere Group, went as far as reinforcing the principle of revolution in its support for self-determination and violent resistance.

Too radical to precipitate any meaningful change on their own, those organizations nonetheless provided the spark for the more established NGOs to begin questioning their approach to aid. When the Haslemere Group’s members returned to Christian Aid, Oxfam, and their other parent NGOs, they brought with them new ideas to be teased out in internal debates on the future of non-governmental aid. The result was an intensely fought discussion over the sector’s approach to advocacy, reform, and the demands of the Third World. Oxfam again proved an important battle site. On one side were the acolytes of Nick Stacey, an Anglican rector who came to Oxfam in 1968 with a strong reputation for social activism. Their argument was simple: NGOs were “not compensating in any serious way for the

²⁰ Peter Adamson, “Trickle Down: A Sticky Business,” *New Internationalist*, Nov. 1980.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² “Voluntary Committee on Overseas Aid and Development: Informal Meeting to Discuss Political & Parliamentary Contacts Held on Wednesday, 29th May [1968?] at 2-30 pm,” The National Archives of the United Kingdom, Overseas Development files, 15/72.

²³ See, for example, The Haslemere Committee, *The Haslemere Declaration* (London: The Haslemere Committee, n.d. [1968?]), 3-6, SOAS CAP CA/J/1.

economic and political tides that work every minute, every day, against the poor countries in favor of the rich.”²⁴ They were countered by an equally vocal grouping for whom charity and material assistance to the poor came first. What became a “quarrel over whether they should act as radical, conscience-stirrers, or play a cautious game that might improve help, in the long run, to the developing countries” was largely concluded by the time of Stacey’s departure in 1970.²⁵ The moderates, it seemed, had won. Yet the experience of those years of turmoil suggested an altogether more complex story. In August 1968 Christian Aid Director Alan Brash wrote to Leslie Kirkley, his counterpart at Oxfam, to express his concern at the tensions that were shaping the sector: “It is quite clear that if on the one hand, our image as an organization remains, despite our best efforts to expand it, that of a ‘relief charity’, we will be increasingly regarded by our very best constituents as irrelevant. If, on the other hand, we become too active, too aggressive, or too radical, in the political field we will undermine the structures and support by which we currently live and work.”²⁶

More of a dribble than a cascade, Brash’s comments marked the beginnings of the shift towards a more holistic understanding of non-governmental aid. The immediacy of the G77’s demands altered the context of these debates still further, by provoking a very localized response. In Ireland Trócaire used the language of the Catholic Justice and Peace movement to critique the inequalities of the world system, but it also described the G77’s aims in terms of Ireland’s own history of colonialism. The Irish land reform movement of the late nineteenth century was viewed in the same vein as the campaign for the fair distribution of global wealth: “A society built on this assumption will be far removed in its power structures, its politics and its culture from one where property is for the few and the rest are clients.”²⁷ The ideological ferment that informed the NGO community in Britain, by contrast, continued to influence debates about the future of non-governmental aid. Some, like War on Want, became more radical than the radicals themselves. In 1975 that organization’s director Peter Burns flagged its intention to re-shape its operations overseas “in a way that encourages their determination to achieve their own social and economic liberation.”²⁸ His successors, Mary Dines and, later, Terry Lacey, steered an ever more leftward course. In the late 1970s War on Want produced a short-lived magazine, *Poverty and Power*, which quickly fell foul of Britain’s charity laws and the restrictions they placed on political campaigning. If its title did not provide enough evidence of its approach, a piece in its second issue on the impact of transnational capital made sure: “The multinationals can be seen as part of the disease of the Third World, but they are being recommended as a cure.”²⁹

What were the implications of this shift? The radicalism that led War on Want, World Development Movement, Third World First, and others to argue that “[t]o organize *for* change inevitably means organizing *against* the present holders of economic and political power in their societies and in our own” continued to spill outwards to more moderate proponents of reform.³⁰ The “NIEO imaginary” provided a language of economic justice that proved highly attractive to organizations like Oxfam and Christian Aid. The fortunes of the *New Internationalist* best embodied that change. From its launch in February 1973, the

²⁴ Jonathan Power, “Will Oxfam Tame Nick Stacey?” *Oxfam News*, June 1968.

²⁵ Carol Dix, “Hard Sell or Soft Option?” *Guardian*, February 21, 1973.

²⁶ Alan Brash to Leslie Kirkley, August 6, 1968, SOAS CAP CA/1/12/2.

²⁷ “Development Structures: The Choice Ahead,” *One World*, autumn 1976.

²⁸ Peter Burns, “Towards Liberation,” in War on Want, *Yearly report, 1974-75* (n.p., n.d. [1975?]), 1, SOAS, War on Want Papers (hereafter WOW), Box 109.

²⁹ “Remaking the World,” *Poverty and Power* 1, no. 2 (n.d. [1978?]), SOAS WOW Box 147.

³⁰ “Third World First: Towards a Strategy for Development Education,” November 1977, SOAS WOW Box 108.

British-based magazine offered an important discursive space for NGOs. More than liberal but less than Marxist, it was often more radical than its financial backers Christian Aid and Oxfam may have been able to publicly admit. Its brand of progressive thinking symbolized the impact of the G77 on conceptions of global justice. As Peter Adamson, the magazine's editor and one of the founders of Third World First, told readers in 1975, the NIEO's demands had become "the main hope and rallying point for change towards a more just, and therefore less hungry, less crowded, less violent and less physically degraded world."³¹

NGOs, the "NIEO imaginary" and the pursuit of global justice

The reference to "justice" was significant. More than the language of "rights" - which British and Irish humanitarians used primarily in a Latin American context, and almost never to refer to the social and political demands of the Third World - the pursuit of economic and social justice provided the framework for the rapidly evolving attitudes of NGOs.³² They drew from the Rawlsian turn to justice in a global context.³³ They benefited from the rise of a new humanitarian and human rights discourse in the 1970s. Most of all, however, they understood from the NIEO that NGOs could (and should) be about something more than aid. That conclusion changed the playing field for NGOs, leading aid workers and administrators to "question [their] ordering of priorities" and to seek out "an alternative approach - one rooted in an appeal to justice and right, rather than charity."³⁴

What did this mean in practice? Like the reform agenda, the NGO community's reading of global justice drew from a variety of traditions. At its most basic it was a reaction to what the World Bank's *Partners in Development* report (1969) described as the "moral" reasoning behind increased aid to the Third World: "that it is only right for those who have to share with those who have not."³⁵ In the late 1960s and early 1970s the leaders of centre-left governments in Europe - Willy Brandt (West Germany), Olof Palme (Sweden), and Bruno Kreisky (Austria) prominent among them - were to the forefront of calls for increases in foreign aid as a matter of justice for the global South. Socialist International became an important location for these discussions, expanding to include intellectuals and activists from Latin America and further afield. NGOs drew widely on that discourse, involving themselves in the push for increased resource transfers from the West in the form of the UN Special Fund established in the mid-1970s, for example, but also as part of a more general campaign to force governments to reach international targets for foreign aid.

But there was something more to the turn to justice than pressure for increased government spending. As Amartya Sen put it, the most compelling motivation for change was not "the realization that the world falls short of being completely just - which few of us expect - but that there are clearly remediable injustices around us which we want to eliminate."³⁶ From the late 1960s that realization began to take root. It manifested itself in an inquisitiveness about alternative approaches to development: the Chinese model, Gandhian economics,

³¹ Peter Adamson, "The Case for the New Economic Order," *New Internationalist*, October 1975.

³² On the relationship between humanitarian NGOs and human rights, see Daniel P. Chong, *Freedom from Poverty: NGOs and Human Rights Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); and Matthew Hilton, "International Aid and Development NGOs in Britain and Human Rights Since 1945," *Humanity* 3, no. 3 (2012): 449-472.

³³ See, for example, John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

³⁴ Bronwyn Leebaw, "Justice, Charity, or Alibi? Humanitarianism, Human Rights and 'Humanity' Law," *Humanity* 5, no. 2 (2014): 261.

³⁵ World Bank. Commission on International Development, *Partners in Development: Report of the Commission on International Development* (London: Pall Mall, 1969), p. 8.

³⁶ Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), vii.

appropriate technologies, Ivan Ilich's pedagogical revolution, and the state-led Ujamaa program in Tanzania all appeared on NGO agendas.³⁷ Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) was eagerly consumed by aid workers inspired by the transformative potential of "conscientisation" and its model of local empowerment.³⁸ At Oxfam, where Freire's work was passed widely between staff members, a new "Quiet Revolution" campaign was launched in the early 1970s, accompanied by a call for the "elimination of social injustice" and the degradations of poverty.³⁹ Oxfam applied the same framework to the growing clamor for economic reform. The NIEO, it concluded, only highlighted the denial of social justice as one of the principal causes of an unequal world: "There is a crying need not just to patch up the old system but to build a new international economic order."⁴⁰

This secular concern with justice told only part of the story however. In both Britain and Ireland a parallel shift in Christian teaching brought with it a sense of social awareness and social radicalism that became crucial to understanding the "NIEO imaginary" and the values imbued in it by NGOs. The debates that surrounded the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s marked the beginning of Catholic interest in development. The publication of *Populorum Progressio* (1967), Pope Paul VI's encyclical on economic inequality and the "development of peoples," brought that debate into the realm of economic reform. It was followed by the Synod of Bishops-produced *Justice in the World* (1971), which reiterated the Church's desire for a world free from oppression and abuse.⁴¹ For those paying attention - and in predominantly Catholic Ireland they had a large audience - it made the shift away from simple charity difficult to refute. As Trócaire Director Brian McKeown put it in 1978, the Catholic approach to development *necessitated* a commitment to justice and reform: "you can't be a full Christian without being political. It's not enough to give alms; we also have to look at the causes of under-development in Third World countries."⁴² By then his organization was also involved in the so-called International Coalition for Development Action, a transnational pressure group formed in 1976 to raise "awareness of the injustice prevailing in the world today."⁴³ The voice of the Third World - whether through liberation theology or the G77's call for reform - was inseparable from those debates. Trócaire later referred to *Justice in the World* as containing "the same basic message" as the NIEO.⁴⁴

The Protestant churches, led by the umbrella World Council of Churches (WCC), were equally concerned with these issues of "world-wide economic justice."⁴⁵ In Britain their interest manifested itself in Action for World Development, a late 1960s attempt to create an ecumenical grass-roots movement that would campaign on poverty and justice. It was only

³⁷ See, for example, the development models described in Jonathan Power and Alice Clark, *Alternatives* (n.p.: Christian Aid and Oxfam, 1975). Oxfam's relationship with Tanzania is documented in Michael Jennings, *Surrogates of the State: Non-governmental Organizations, Development and Ujamaa in Tanzania* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2008).

³⁸ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970).

³⁹ "10,000 More Workers Wanted," *Oxfam News*, November 1973.

⁴⁰ "A New Deal for the Poor".

⁴¹ On the relationship between the Catholic Church and issues of development, justice, and rights, see J. Bryan Hehir, "The Modern Catholic Church and Human Rights: The Impact of the Second Vatican Council," in *Christianity and Human Rights: An Introduction*, ed. John Witte and Frank S. Alexander (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 113-34; and Ian Linden, "The Language of Development: What are International Agencies Talking About?" in *Development, Civil Society and Faith-based Organizations*, ed. Gerard Clarke and Michael Jennings (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 72-93.

⁴² Quoted in Elgy Gillespie, "Brian McKeown," *Irish Times*, June 10, 1978.

⁴³ "Campaigning for a Better World."

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Circular note from Alan Brash to all Christian Aid secretaries, Nov. 1968, SOAS CAP CAI/15/3.

moderately successful in that aim, but its very existence testified to a rapidly expanding interest in those issues among those of a Christian faith. People in the West, Christian Aid told its supporters in 1971, “still grow richer largely at [the Third World’s] expense.”⁴⁶ The core tenets of Christian theology made it easier to make that conceptual shift. While talk of an interdependent “welfare world” and its corollary, an interdependent economic order, shaped attitudes to poverty as a global issue, the Christian attitude to reform was understood in equally transnational terms. By the mid-1970s Christian Aid had begun to apply the concept of “one world” in order to overcome “the condescension and patronage still prevalent in this country [Britain] towards other countries.”⁴⁷ Support for the NIEO was a natural next step, followed closely by Christian Aid’s embrace of the more political side of aid: “the freeing of people from abject poverty must and does have political implications.”⁴⁸

The significance of those faith-based campaigns in negotiating the move away from charity should not be under-estimated. Christian teaching was important to NGOs simply because its influence was so pervasive. The moral frameworks bequeathed by the churches to British and Irish society made their influence inescapable - even to an organization like War on Want. Yet we must be careful not to assume that the NIEO inspired equal levels of engagement across the NGO community. There were many that simply did not wish to make the shift beyond charity and into the world of justice and reform. Concern’s Overseas Director Hugh Byrne was one of them. The role of NGOs like Concern (Ireland’s largest operational NGO), he argued in 1980, was less to challenge the existing order. Rather, they could “not stand by and watch people live and die in misery while the benefits of a major economic restructuring ‘trickle down’ to the poor.”⁴⁹ He was not alone. In Britain Oxfam’s supporters were not slow to criticize the organization for what they saw as a dangerous shift away from aid and towards something altogether more political. Veronica Booth (Oxfam supporter, trustee, and former manager of one of its shops) pleaded at the organization’s 1981 annual staff conference not to “get too sophisticated and forget that many supporters join us because of an emotional response to poverty - to the sight of a pitiful baby dying - and not because they know anything about land reform or the politics of aid, or have ever heard of Brandt.”⁵⁰ And Booth was among those that actually engaged with the question. Many organizations, including Save the Children in Britain and Goal in Ireland, simply ignored the NIEO altogether.

NGOs, the NIEO and the mechanics of a liberal world order

That response can be explained, in its most basic terms, by what Tim Brodhead termed “a kind of organizational schizophrenia, as an agency tries to reconcile its own learning about changing development needs ... with fundraising imperatives.”⁵¹ NGOs struggled to balance what was expected of them by supporters with a commitment to more radical change. But it was also a symptom of NGOs belonging to a “world culture” that was decidedly Western in construction.⁵² In 1977 Third World First condemned those organizations that “find it

⁴⁶ Christian Aid, *Hunger – or Justice?* (London: Christian Aid, 1971), SOAS CAP CA/J/2.

⁴⁷ Alan Booth, “‘One World’ – but with Differences: Reflections on Discussions at the National Planning Conference,” 27 Sept. 1973, SOAS CAP CA2/D/10/7.

⁴⁸ Christian Aid, *What a Year! Report on the Financial Year 1st April 1979 to 31st March 1980* (London: Christian Aid, n.d. [1980?]), 10, SOAS CAP CA/J/1.

⁴⁹ Hugh Byrne, “Concern and the Brandt Report,” *Concern Newsletter*, autumn 1980.

⁵⁰ Veronica Booth, “The Way We See It,” *Oxfam News*, August/September 1981.

⁵¹ Tim Brodhead, “NGOs: In One Year and Out the Other?” *World Development* 15, suppl. (1987): 4.

⁵² See John Boli and George M. Thomas, “INGOs and the Organization of World Culture,” in *Constructing World Culture: International Nongovernmental Organizations Since 1875*, ed. John Boli and George M. Thomas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 13-48.

necessary to present their development aid as ‘non-political’ or politically inoffensive, in order to retain the support of the majority of their supporters.”⁵³ It could hardly have been surprised at that approach. Even within those organizations that occupied the middle ground of global reform, differences existed as to how the non-governmental community should approach the politics of a new economic order. The dominant ethos of the British NGO sector was the pursuit of “solutions that promote either individual initiative or are based upon assumptions of liberal individualism.”⁵⁴ That mindset was not too far removed from the experience of Ireland’s NGOs. Many of them, like Concern, rejected the structural argument in favor of the immediacy of the charitable response: “the Third World needs food rather than theory.”⁵⁵

Extending that analysis further, the dismissal of the reform agenda also pointed to a deep-rooted interventionism that remained at the heart of the NGO community. The depoliticization of aid, the consolidation of North-South hierarchies of humanity, and the emphasis on disaster relief - all of which took shape alongside the “discovery” of justice in the 1970s - suggest that we need to ask a further question of the “NIEO imaginary.”⁵⁶ What *kind* of solutions did it generate? We have already witnessed the influence of liberal development discourse on NGO attitudes to reform. Once we begin to extend that discussion, we can also begin think more deeply about the nature of governance and the role of NGOs in propagating powerful liberal norms. The publication of the first Brandt Report in February 1980 provided an indication of just how far (or how little) the sector had come. It spoke of justice, interdependence, inequality, the fear of social unrest - all the major themes of the liberal anti-poverty agenda. But in so doing it only highlighted the enduring tension at the heart of the NGO sector. It offered an important middle way for those organizations searching for something beyond charity: Oxfam, for example, organized a “Mass Lobby on Brandt” to draw attention to its implications in 1981; in Ireland the umbrella Confederation of Non-governmental Organizations for Overseas Development welcomed it as “the way forward to a politically realistic program for negotiated change.”⁵⁷ Yet Brandt did not go far enough for those who saw it as a liberal solution to an illiberal order.⁵⁸ War on Want Director Terry Lacey was particularly scathing: “The fine hopes of the Brandt Report will not prevent revolution in Central America. Handouts and sympathy will not bring self-reliance and self-determination to the people of the Horn of Africa. We will not bring peace to our own British inner cities until we conquer the cycle of poverty and deprivation.”⁵⁹

The missing piece in this conversation, of course, is the role played by states and inter-governmental organizations in shaping the language and parameters of the “NIEO imaginary” and what justice could achieve. First came the G77. For a period, the “norm entrepreneurs”

⁵³ “Third World First: Towards a Strategy for Development Education,” Nov. 1977, SOAS WOW Box 108.

⁵⁴ Matthew Hilton, James McKay, Nicholas Crowson and Jean-François Mouhot, *The Politics of Expertise: How NGOs Shaped Modern Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 220. On the link between NGOs and liberalism, see also Thomas L. Haskell, “Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, part 1,” *The American Historical Review* 90, no. 2 (1985): 339-361.

⁵⁵ Paraphrased in Gail Seekamp, “White Wisdom – Black Problem,” *Irish Times*, 30 Dec. 1985.

⁵⁶ See Mark Duffield, *Development, Security and Unending War: Governing the World of Peoples* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

⁵⁷ Confederation of Non-governmental Organizations for Overseas Development, *The Brandt Report* (Dublin: Congood, 1980), 4.

⁵⁸ See Vijay Prashad, *The Poorer Nations: A Possible History of the Global South* (London: Verso, 2012), 64-76.

⁵⁹ Terry Lacey, “WOW Campaigns Annual Review [1980/81]: General Secretary’s Review,” SOAS WOW Box 247.

from the South succeeded in pushing the question of economic reform close to the top of the global agenda.⁶⁰ Support from a number of Western states – the Nordic countries and the Netherlands prominent among them - helped it to stay there, while the global visibility of UNCTAD translated it into an international language. Following the model of NGO action put forward by Kim Reimann, it becomes possible to view this growing engagement with the questions raised by the G77 as a response to newly-created opportunities and a “top-down structural environment” that created the space for, and encouraged NGO action with, the question of global reform.⁶¹ The “NIEO imaginary”, in effect, was created by states and capitalized upon by NGOs. But the very speed at which those debates emerged underlined the fragility of their support for economic restructuring. Far from an all-out revolution, those organizations’ attitudes to the NIEO remained couched in language and frameworks that were decidedly Western in form.

The recommendation contained in Brandt that “[p]riority must be given to the needs of the poorest countries and regions” pointed to another major influence on the report that had significant consequences for NGOs.⁶² It was the language of “basic human needs”, a concept promoted by World Bank President Robert McNamara in the early 1970s.⁶³ Its aims were simple: to focus attention on nutrition, maternal health, access to education and all of the indicators that reinforced poverty among the poorest of the poorest communities in the Third World, and in so doing to promote the economic advancement of the individual rather than some abstract notion of growth. It proved an attractive concept for international organizations, states - and NGOs. The emphasis on community-level development gave non-governmental actors a language in which to discuss their role as “pioneers rather than backwater philanthropists.”⁶⁴ In NGO eyes, *they* were the agencies, as Concern director Aengus Finucane put it in 1980, whose “basic interest is in the poorest people living in the world’s poorest countries.”⁶⁵ They were the ones that operated the kind of bottom-up, village initiatives and rural development projects that basic human needs called for. And they knew it. Christian Aid Director Alan Booth told one of his colleagues in December 1974 that to implement those policies “governments *need* the assistance of voluntary agencies.”⁶⁶

Yet the rise of “basic human needs” represented a shift in development thinking that was, to put it mildly, not always in tune with the more fundamental reforms projected on to the NIEO. If the program appeared familiar, it was because McNamara had been a member of Lyndon Johnson’s administration in the previous decade and shared with Johnson a reliance on the advice of British economist Barbara Ward. At the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD it was openly recognized that “basic human needs” was “viewed with some concern and perplexity by developing countries as possibly an alternative to the far-reaching structural reforms called for under the New International Economic Order Concept

⁶⁰ This concept of “norm entrepreneurs” is borrowed from Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, “International Norm Dynamics and Political Change,” *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998): 887-917.

⁶¹ Kim D. Reimann, “A View from the Top: International Politics, Norms and the Worldwide Growth of NGOs,” *International Studies Quarterly*, 50:1 (2006), 47.

⁶² International Commission on International Development Issues, *North-South*, 271.

⁶³ For an introduction to “basic human needs,” see Gilbert Rist, *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith* (London: Zed Books, 2011), 162-69.

⁶⁴ Michael Harris, “To Have More and to be More,” *Oxfam News*, February 1974.

⁶⁵ Quoted in “Refugees, Charity and Politics,” *Concern Newsletter*, autumn 1980.

⁶⁶ Internal memorandum, Alan Booth to Vernon Littlewood, 13 Dec. 1974, SOAS CAP CA2/D/22/4.

or yet another form of interventionist paternalism.”⁶⁷ But that very argument only reinforced the deeper reality inherent in the “basic needs” approach. Here was a major new development strategy, framed in terms of a very Western reading of the new economic order that legitimized the kind of outside interference resented by the G77 and dismissed outright by the NIEO. And it was one in whose propagation NGOs played a prominent role. In this way, the late 1970s witnessed the consolidation of the liberal development order after the brief interlude of the NIEO. In the afterglow of the NIEO came Brandt and liberally-grounded reform. And with it crystallized a more formalized role for NGOs.

Conclusion

The story of the “NIEO imaginary” and the NGO embrace of economic and social justice adds an important layer to our understanding of the 1970s as a global humanitarian moment. NGOs were present at, and played an important part in, the birth of that “common humanity” narrative.⁶⁸ The rise and rise of international humanitarian relief in the fifteen years after Biafra renewed the connection between the West and the post-colonial Third World. The parallel expansion of the human rights discourse made it possible to think about ‘humanity’ in global terms. Yet both of those campaigns fell some way short of providing the kind of solidarity with the Third World that many in the NGO community craved. Disaster relief and the move into development, NGO-style, were couched in a language and practice that was interventionist by its very nature. Human rights, by contrast, occupied an important space in international discourse but a more marginal role in the operational strategies of most NGOs.

The pursuit of economic and social justice provided a vital middle way. More than charitable but less overtly political than the campaign for rights, the “NIEO imaginary” became a natural focal point for NGOs at a time when rapid expansion in the sector precipitated the search for new ways of thinking about non-governmental aid. Justice, in that reading, offered the tantalising possibility of solidarity with the Third World that many in the non-governmental community craved. The response was anything but uniform. Those organizations, and those who worked for them (whose opinions were equally diverse) drew their influences from many quarters: from the “Great Society” and the G77, to Christian theology and the language of the New Left. What Christian Aid Director Alan Booth called the “move from warm, personal ‘charity’ to serious partnership in the transfer [of] resources” left many NGOs caught in a confusing space between “basic needs” and structural reform.⁶⁹ Its outcomes were not always clear. Writing in 1981, Concern’s Hugh Byrne was typically sceptical of the move away from charitable relief: “Do the goals of increased production, increased justice in distribution of benefits and decreased incidences of poverty, actually lead to the same objective? Surely not.”⁷⁰ Progress in any one of those areas, he concluded, might be arrived at without benefiting the others in any appreciable way.

The search for justice nonetheless suggests three important lessons for our understanding of the “justice cascade.” The first is the enduring significance of the liberal economic paradigm in shaping the humanitarian turn. The many disappointments of postcolonial development, the failures of the first UN Development Decade, and a succession of prominent (and mainly

⁶⁷ “Development Assistance Committee: Issues for the Meeting on Development Programmes and Policies for Meeting Basic Human Needs (Note by the Secretariat),” 30 Aug. 1977, OECD Archives (hereafter OECD), DAC(77)23.

⁶⁸ See, for example, Bruce Mazlish, *The New Global History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 42-52.

⁶⁹ “Consultation on ‘Development and Salvation’: Background Paper by Alan Booth, Director of Christian Aid – Giving and Receiving with Respect,” undated note [February 1974?], SOAS CAP CA2/D/6/2.

⁷⁰ Hugh Byrne, “Just How Different are the Voluntary Agencies?” *Concern Newsletter*, autumn 1981.

pessimistic) reports - from *Partners in Development* to Brandt - focused attention on the shortcomings of aid. The search for economic justice grew out of that debate, allowing NGOs to think beyond charity in seeking out palliatives for the Third World. Yet the logic of economic liberalism also placed limits on where and what kind of justice NGOs could pursue. In the same way that the language of development allowed those organizations to think about poverty in global terms, and precipitated a global “welfarist” response, the re-assertion of the liberal paradigm from the mid-1970s set definite parameters to what form that justice would take. The postscript to the “NIEO imaginary” - the rise of what Mark Mazower termed the “real new international economic order” (neoliberalism) - reduced the space for reform still further.⁷¹

By then, the influence and unity of the G77 had fallen away. But that should not distract us from the second lesson of this narrative: the role played by the Third World in shaping the worldview of Western NGOs. For almost a decade-and-a-half the “NIEO imaginary” provided the inspiration and discursive space for a debate on the very purpose of non-governmental aid. “Reform” was translated in many different ways, yet the common denominator remained: justice, as the NGO community understood it, evolved predominantly as a reaction to the G77’s claims. That response leads us to a final lesson for our understanding of the global humanitarian turn. The language and moral frameworks advanced by organizations like Trócaire and Christian Aid blurred the lines between secular and faith-based conceptions of humanitarian aid. More than that, however, the churches’ ability to conceive of poverty, and each individual’s responsibilities towards it, in global terms, led to a simple but inescapable conclusion: “Injustice is the main cause of under-development.”⁷²

⁷¹ Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), 343.

⁷² Trócaire Chairman Bishop Eamon Casey, quoted in “Bishop Hopes Rights Stance Will Continue,” *Irish Times*, February 24, 1982.