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‘The credibility of our humanitarian effort is at risk’: Tensions between Solidarity and Humanitarian Aid in the Late 1960s

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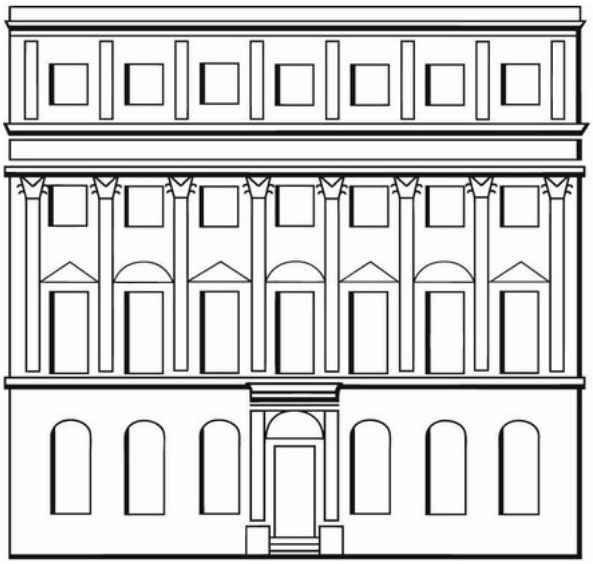

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'The credibility of our humanitarian effort is at risk': Tensions between Solidarity and Humanitarian Aid in the Late 1960s

Konrad J. Kuhn

The Biafran War (1967–70) is widely regarded as a key event in the history of humanitarian aid in the aftermath of decolonization. This war between Nigeria and its secessionist province Biafra resulted in a severe famine that evoked the largest humanitarian aid campaign since the Second World War and the first of its kind in the 'Third World'. The widespread images of children dying of hunger acted as a stimulus for a broad and heterogeneous range of people in Western countries to become engaged with 'Third World' issues for the first time. It was therefore a central moment for mobilizing protest groups, humanitarian aid workers, and thousands of donors. For the churches and their aid agencies, Biafra was a turning-point with strong implications for future humanitarian aid work. Although as an African conflict Biafra had many political interlinkages, these were not widely discussed. Nevertheless, Biafra enhanced the broader public's awareness of decolonization and 'Third World' issues, raised by collective actors beyond formal politics. Biafra thus forms a historical conjuncture that opened up a search for new forms of politics dealing with universal moral issues. At stake were the broad concepts of 'solidarity' and 'global justice'.

This also holds true for the second issue discussed in this essay. Starting in 1969, the construction of a gigantic hydroelectric dam on the Zambezi river in Portuguese East Africa had extraordinary

I am grateful to Johannes Paulmann and Nadja Scherrer for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay. All quotations have been translated by the author. First thoughts on this subject were published in Konrad J. Kuhn, 'Liberation Struggle and Humanitarian Aid: International Solidarity Movements and the "Third World" in the 1960s', in Samantha Christiansen and Zachary A. Scarlett (eds.), *The Third World in the Global Sixties* (New York, 2013), 69–85.

resonance beyond the country's borders, and generated a wide range of transnational solidarity efforts and humanitarian aid commitments in Europe and North America. The dam, situated in a remote, underdeveloped area of northern Mozambique, allowed the newly emerging protest groups to denounce the involvement of major European corporations, revealing their support for colonial power in Africa and apartheid in southern Africa. Thus the dam bridged different contexts and geographically wide distances by connecting liberation movements in Africa with emerging solidarity movements in European countries.[1] This fostered attempts to create solidarity with the 'Third World' by the student protest movements of the late 1960s in Europe and the USA, which had commitments to international solidarity, anti-colonialism, and anti-imperialism. Along with activists from the peace movement and critical theology circles, the student groups formed heterogeneous and varied solidarity movements. The armed struggles of liberation movements were taken as an inspiration for general resistance to the capitalist system, not only by members of radical leftist groups but also by the newly emerging broad student and church solidarity groups. The church itself was increasingly concerned with political and ethical issues, while development became a priority and was understood as a means of structural change with the aim of achieving social justice and social liberation. The churches, influenced by liberation theology, were an important foundation for the formation of solidarity movements. These new development policy and solidarity groups, characterized by dependency theory analysis, demanded structural change in the relationship between the rich north and the poor south. Equality and freedom from hunger and oppression were the central and universal motives for their commitment.[2]

As symbols of injustice, Biafra and Cabora Bassa became moral issues that enabled new actors beyond formal politics to frame conflicts in the 'Third World' and bring them into various domestic political arenas via publicity campaigns. By reducing the complexity

[1] Cf. Marco Guigni and Florence Passy (eds.), *Political Altruism? Solidarity Movements in International Perspective* (Lanham, Md., 2001). See also Hanspeter Kriesi, Ruud Koopmans, Jan Willem Duyvendak, and Marco G. Giugni (eds.), *New Social Movements in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis* (Minneapolis, 1995).

[2] An overview of the imaginative power of the concept in the 1960s is given in Christoph Kalter, 'A Shared Space of Imagination, Communication, and Action: Perspectives on the History of the "Third World"', in Samantha Christiansen and Zachary A. Scarlett (eds.), *The Third World in the Global Sixties* (New York, 2013), 23–38.

of these issues, these campaigns helped to spread a common view according to which humanitarian approaches to solidarity were not enough. For the sake of equitable development, global justice, and international solidarity, the influence of corporations and European governments had to be criticized. This is how Biafra and Cabora Bassa mobilized protests and political actions in the name of fundamental aims and moral claims.

In the first part of this essay I will show how Biafra functioned as a formative event for a new kind of humanitarian aid that strongly shaped the view of the aid-receiving 'Third World' within Western societies.[3] Central players in the creation of this new view of the problem were a multitude of recently emerged action groups concerned with Biafra. They were highly active and thus gained a new form of visibility in the public arena, including the press.[4] Second, I will take the actions directed against the Cabora Bassa dam as an example in looking at the transnational dimension of protest activities and the reciprocal references and implications of this new form of solidarity. I will argue that both demonstrate the transition at the end of the 1960s from humanitarian aid to new demands for solidarity with people in the 'Third World'. These transitions and the blurred boundaries between humanitarian relief and large-scale development projects become visible in studies that scrutinize different examples rather than separating them into case studies, as has been usual hitherto. It is precisely the solidarity and action groups acting in a transnational context that make this uncertain distinction between the notions of humanitarian aid and development visible long before the end of the Cold War. In this perspective Biafra and Cabora Bassa form two connected events in a specific conjuncture of humanitarianism in the twentieth century. Investigating these two examples of humanitarian action, drawing on sources from action groups in Switzerland, makes this point even stronger: moral claims are translated into political action via nationally formed ties. Swiss-based corporations, acting globally, were a means of reducing transnational conflicts into a political and thus moral scheme.[5] Within the Swiss context, the connection

[3] See John Iliffe, *The African Poor: A History* (Cambridge, 1987), 258.

[4] Christoph Kalter, *Die Entdeckung der Dritten Welt: Dekolonisierung und neue radikale Linke in Frankreich* (Frankfurt a.M., 2011), discusses the reciprocal formation of solidarity action groups and the concept of a 'Third World'.

[5] The fact that Switzerland, although never a colonial power, nevertheless provided

with multinational corporations was quite feasible. Many Swiss corporations were involved in post-colonial Africa because of the country's non-colonial past and the Swiss economy's high level of internationalization in the years after the Second World War.[6]

The Biafran War: The Emergence of Humanitarian Aid and Action Groups for the 'Third World'

After the declaration of independence in Nigeria, severe internal conflicts led to a military coup in July 1967 and the secession of the eastern provinces known as Biafra.[7] A violent and brutal civil war was conducted with cruelty, resulting in countless casualties among the civilian population.[8] The reasons for the war combined economic interests with ethnic frictions that had been kept in check during British colonial rule. The Ibo, traditionally resident in the Biafra region and early Christianized by British and Irish missionaries, were favoured by the colonial administration, creating envy among the Hausa and Yoruba.[9] The Ibo had little influence in the newly emerging state after the independence of Nigeria in 1960. Nigerian military tactics, which confined the secessionist Biafra to a landlocked circle of rainforest in order to cut it off from supply routes,

a home base for international coroporations became apparent during the same period. See Patricia Purtschert and Harald Fischer-Tiné (eds.), *Colonial Switzerland: Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins* (Basingstoke, 2015); Konrad J. Kuhn, 'Im Kampf gegen das heimliche Imperium: Entwicklungspolitik und postkoloniale Kritik in der Schweiz seit 1970', in Patricia Purtschert, Barbara Lüthi, and Francesca Falk (eds.), *Postkoloniale Schweiz: Formen und Folgen eines Kolonialismus ohne Kolonien* (Bielefeld, 2012), 267–87.

[6] Margrit Müller, 'From Protectionism to Market Liberalisation: Patterns of Internationalisation in the Main Swiss Export Sectors', in ead. and Timo Myllyntaus (eds.), *Pathbreakers: Small European Countries Responding to Globalisation and Deglobalisation* (Berne, 2008), 113–49.

[7] John J. Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War 1967–1970* (Princeton, 1977); John de St Jorre, *The Nigerian Civil War* (London, 1972); Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe, *The Biafra War: Nigeria and the Aftermath* (Lewiston, NY, 1990); and Axel Harneit-Sievers, Jones O. Ahazuem, and Sydney Emezue, *A Social History of the Nigerian Civil War: Perspectives from Below* (Hamburg, 1997).

[8] Laase Heerten and A. Dirk Moses, 'The Nigeria–Biafra War: Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 16/2–3 (2014), 169–203, show how the Biafran events are in different ways closely interlinked with the concept of genocide. In doing so, they present an overview of the debate and publications on the Nigeria–Biafra War.

[9] For the changes in religious and ethnic affiliation within the Ibo community caused by the civil war see Douglas Anthony, 'Islam Does Not Belong to Them: Ethnic and Religious Identities among Male Igbo Converts in Hausaland', *Africa*, 70/3 (2000), 422–41.

resulted in a severe famine with countless victims among the population, especially children. Estimates of the death toll are around a million.[10] For a long time almost no information about the ongoing catastrophe leaked out to the world public, while Biafra gained only minimal support from the governments of other states.[11] Starting in spring of 1968, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and a number of Christian churches organized airlifts from São Tomé, which supplied the enclave with food and medicines.[12] In October 1968 the ecumenical Joint Church Aid was founded by thirty-three church aid organizations from twenty-one countries to provide ad hoc co-ordination for humanitarian aid in Biafra.[13] Biafra was the largest humanitarian aid action for all involved organizations since the end of the Second World War, with an estimated total amount of $166.3 million given in aid by May 1970.[14]

[10] Axel Harneit-Sievers, 'Nigeria: Der Sezessionskrieg um Biafra. Keine Sieger, keine Besiegten: Eine afrikanische Erfolgsgeschichte?', in Rolf Hofmeister and Volker Matthies (eds.), *Vergessene Kriege in Afrika* (Göttingen, 1992), 277–318, at 284–5.

[11] Britain and the Soviet Union provided Nigeria with arms as well as military and diplomatic support, while the USA intervened in favour of Nigeria in the Biafra conflict, but supported Biafran independence by granting a great deal of humanitarian aid in response to public pressure. See Levi A. Nwachuku, 'The United States and Nigeria 1960–1987: Anatomy of a Pragmatic Relationship', *Journal of Black Studies*, 5 (1998), 575–93; Joseph E. Thompson, *American Policy and African Famine: The Nigeria–Biafra War 1966–1970* (New York, 1990); and Victor Julius Ngoh, *The United States and the Nigerian Civil War, 1967–1970: An Analysis of the American Policy toward the War* (Ann Arbor, 1984). See also Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe, *Conflict and Intervention in Africa: Nigeria, Angola, Zaire* (New York, 1990), 11–68. For China, France, and African states see Ndubisi Obiaga, *The Politics of Humanitarian Organizations Intervention* (Dallas, 2004).

[12] For this airlift see the memoirs of one of the key actors: Tony Byrne, *Airlift to Biafra: Breaching the Blockade* (Dublin, 1997); also J. A. Daly and A. G. Saville, *The History of Joint Church Aid*, 3 vols. (Copenhagen, 1971). See further the 'history', welcomed by the ICRC, by Thierry Hentsch, *Face au blocus: histoire de l'intervention du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge dans le conflit de Nigéria 1967–1970* (Geneva, 1973); and the sources by former ICRC President Ambassador Paul Ruegger, 'Documents of the meeting organized by the ICRC for the benefit of the victims of the conflict in Nigeria, 8th November 1968', in the Swiss Archive for Contemporary History Zurich (hereafter AfZ), NL Paul Ruegger, doss. 28.3.36.1 and in 'Operation Nigeria–Biafra 1969–1970', ibid. 28.3.36.2.

[13] Matthias Schmidhalter, 'Der schweizerische Caritasverband zwischen Beständigkeit und Wandel 1964–1991', in Caritas Schweiz (ed.), *Von der katholischen Milieuorganisation zum sozialen Hilfswerk: 100 Jahre Caritas Schweiz* (Lucerne, 2002), 175–210. For the numbers see also E. Urhobo, *Relief Operations in the Nigerian Civil War* (Ibadan, 1978), 23–4. For the ICRC activities led by Swiss diplomat August R. Lindt see the sources 'ICRC-General Commissioner in the Biafra-War, 1968–1970', in AfZ, NL August R. Lindt, doss. 10.3.173–207. See also Rolf Wilhelm, Pierre Gygi, David Vogelsanger, and Esther Iseli (eds.), *August R. Lindt: Patriot und Weltbürger* (Berne, 2002), 143–61.

[14] Thompson, *American Policy and African Famine*, 130 and 167.

The main factor in gaining support and raising funds for this costly and time-consuming aid action was the images of children dying of starvation which were increasingly shown in the print media and on television during the summer. Strong emotions were evoked and the desperate fight for survival of the locked-in republic of Biafra stirred up public opinion and had an extraordinary impact on fund-raising. The images mostly showed starving children, reduced to walking skeletons with distended bellies and faded hair because of malnourishment—'Biafran babies' as a 'new "Third World" icon'.[15] In Western eyes, these pictures were connected with their viewing experiences and cultural memories of the Holocaust.[16] Based on this propaganda and these deliberately distributed images, it was believed that the militarily defeated Biafran leadership intended to use the famine to generate aid deliveries and to present the civil war as an Ibo genocide—an accusation that was invalidated by an international team of oberservers.[17] After the defeat of Biafra, it became obvious that the Nigerian military had not massacred its population.[18]

This is how the war in Biafra became an international media event, putting the governments of most Western countries under heavy pressure, with public opinion demanding that they supply aid, diplomatic support, and sometimes even weapons.[19] A central

[15] Heerten and Moses, 'The Nigeria–Biafra War', 176.

[16] For similarities in the representation of Biafran children and Holocaust victims see Lasse Heerten, '"A" as in Auschwitz, "B" as in Biafra: The Nigerian Civil War, Visual Narratives of Genocide, and the Fragmented Universalization of the Holocaust', in Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno (eds.), *Humanitarian Photography: A History* (New York, 2015), 249–74; and Michal Givoni, 'Des victimes pas comme les autres: Réactions israéliennes face à la catastrophe du Biafra', in William Ossipov (ed.), *Israël et l'autre* (Geneva, 2005), 195–242. Heerten points out the ambivalent effects of a comparison with the Holocaust, which runs the risk of not fulfilling public expectations of a genocide.

[17] See e.g. the highly effective report 'Nigeria's Civil War: Hate, Hunger and the Will to Survive', *Time Magazine*, 23 Aug. 1968. These media reports were organized by advertising agencies hired by the Biafran leadership. See Rony Braumann, *L'Action humanitaire* (Évreux, 2000), 59; and Morris Davis, *Interpreters for Nigeria: The Third World and International Public Relations* (Urbana, Ill., 1977).

[18] Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War*, 110–77 and 366–7. See also Harneit-Sievers, 'Nigeria: Der Sezessionskrieg um Biafra', 298. This changed assessment is reflected in the fact that an application for asylum by the military commander General Ojukwu and his family was rejected by Switzerland in 1970 since there was allegedly no danger. This is how diplomatic problems with Nigeria, which would have affected the 450 Swiss expatriates in Nigeria, were avoided. See Swiss Press articles Oct. 1970, in AfZ, PA Ojekwu.

[19] For the impact on Western goverments see the convincing Danish case study by

factor in this intense solidarity was that the secessionist Biafrans, the Ibo, were Christian. The first to draw attention to the hunger catastrophe in Biafra were Catholic missionaries, who created the public image of a religious war between Christians and Muslims.[20] This resulted in church aid agencies making discriminatory and racist calls for donations, characterized by elements of religious war. This recreated the colonial preference for the Ibo, as the example of the Swiss Catholic aid agency Caritas clearly shows:

> The Ibo are characterized by their intelligence, energy, and efficiency, while the mostly Muslim Hausa are not capable of the same achievements. Thus, jealousy leads to war and murder in Africa, especially because 60 per cent of the Ibo are Catholics. This is reason enough for the Muslims to use the opportunity to get rid of as many Ibo as possible.[21]

Thus it was admiration for the Christian, independence-loving Ibo, the perception of the conflict as a religious war,[22] and the horror evoked by pictures of starving children that led to a unilateral commitment to Biafra in the public opinion and perceptions of Western Europe and North America.[23]

Biafra as an African conflict had various implications and retroactive effects for the humanitarian organizations in the north. The huge amount of money donated, the logistical challenge, and rapid growth caused structural problems and confusion among the operating aid agencies and led to reorganizations within the ICRC, Caritas

Claus Kjersgaard Nielsen, 'Biafrakrigen og Dansk nødhjælp', *Historisk Tidsskrift*, 108/2 (2008), 142–74. For the enormous impact of the Biafran War on Irish involvement with Africa and overseas aid see Enda Staunton, 'The Case of Biafra: Ireland and the Nigerian Civil War', *Irish Historical Studies*, 31/124 (1999), 513–34.

[20] Ken Waters, 'Influencing the Message: The Role of Catholic Missionaries in Media Coverage of the Nigerian Civil War', *Catholic Historical Review*, 90 (2004), 697–718.

[21] Spendenaufruf Caritas 1968, quoted in Urs Altermatt, 'Caritas Schweiz: Von der katholischen Milieuorganisation zum sozialen Hilfswerk 1901–2001', in Caritas Schweiz (ed.), *Von der katholischen Milieuorganisation zum sozialen Hilfswerk*, 15–42, at 29. For a religious discourse see Protokoll der Kommission für internationale Angelegenheiten des SEK, 11 Mar. 1968, in Swiss Federal Archives Berne (hereafter BAR), SEK-Archive, J 2.257, 2001/124, vol. 10, doss. 151.

[22] For an analysis of the rhetoric of religious war (and its unintended effects) in the mainly Christian breakaway region and its Western sympathizers see Nicholas I. Omenka, 'Blaming the Gods: Christian Religious Propaganda in the Nigeria–Biafra War', *Journal of African History*, 51/3 (2010), 367–89.

[23] Striking examples of this view of the Biafran conflict are Jean Bühler, *Biafra: Tragödie eines begabten Volkes* (Zurich, 1969); and Tilman Zülch and Klaus Guercke (eds.), *Soll Biafra überleben? Dokumente — Berichte — Analysen — Kommentare* (Berlin, 1969).

Internationalis, and even Caritas Switzerland.[24] The structures of these aid agencies, which had originated during the reconstruction of war-torn Europe, were reshaped for their new mission in foreign aid in the 'Third World' as a result of events in Biafra. Biafra was thus a crucial focal point for the practice of humanitarian aid, evoking political awareness among the volunteers in Biafra and strongly adding to previously existing feelings in European and North American public opinion.[25]

At local level, the Biafran conflict led to the creation of a multitude of action groups. Aktion Pro Biafra (Frankfurt and Zurich), the Joint Biafra Famine Appeal (Dublin), Biafra Actie Comité (Amsterdam), the Britain–Biafra Association (London), the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive (New York), and Aktion Biafra-Hilfe (Hamburg), for instance, were all founded during May or June 1968.[26] These groups mostly grew out of student environments, but workers, physicians, and priests were also active in collecting donations on the streets and in public relations campaigns to 'make the public aware of the urgency of aid by using press, television, radio, posters', as Aktion Pro Biafra stated.[27] The motive was to combine political action with humanitarian aid, as in the case of Ruth Bowert, a West

[24] For Caritas and Biafra see Matthias Schmidhalter, 'Die Hilfsaktion für Biafra: Wendepunkt in der Auslandshilfe des Schweizerischen Caritasverbandes', *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Religions- und Kulturgeschichte*, 98 (2003), 171–82; and Nicholas Omenka, 'Hilfe für Biafra: Die Feuerprobe für die Katastrophenhilfe des Deutschen Caritasverbandes', in *Caritas '97/Jahrbuch des Deutschen Caritasverbandes* (Freiburg i.Br., 1996), 69–76. An example of the turbulence caused by the Biafran War is the ICRC's unsuccessful attempt to prevent the publication of a book by its former General Commissioner, August R. Lindt, fourteen years (!) later. See 'Debate on the Manuscript by August Lindt, 1982–1983', in AfZ, NL Paul Ruegger, doss. 28.3.36.3. The book was, however, published: see August R. Lindt, *Generale hungern nie: Geschichte einer Hilfsaktion in Afrika* (Berne, 1983).

[25] For Biafra as starting-point allowing Médecins sans Frontières in 1971 to conduct humanitarian aid under a new 'morality of urgency' without the restrictions of state or legal obligations see Patrick Aeberhard, 'A Historical Survey of Humanitarian Action', *Health and Human Rights*, 2 (1996), 30–44; and Jean-Christophe Rufin, *Le Piège humanitaire* (Paris, 1993), 60. For a critical perspective on humanitarian aid see François Broche, *Au bon chic humanitaire* (Paris, 1994), 50–4; and Alex De Waal, *Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa* (Oxford, 1997), for Biafra 72–7.

[26] For 'Aktion Biafra-Hilfe' (with a foreword by Golo Mann, a critic of the West German student movement) see Tilman Zülch and Klaus Guercke, *Biafra: Eine Dokumentation* (Berlin, 1968). The Archive of the Biafra Actie Comité 1968–1971 can be found in the International Institute of Social History Amsterdam. For the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive see Thompson, *American Policy and African Famine*, 75–9.

[27] Aktion Pro Biafra, Leaflet 1968, in Swiss Social Archives Zurich (hereafter SozArch), SWN QS.

German.[28] All the money collected was used to support the airlift established by Joint Church Aid, and some of the young activists even managed to visit the war-stricken region themselves. These activist groups were very well received in the public sphere of the time, and were publicly supported by academics, politicians, writers, business leaders, and editors- in-chief. Aktion Pro Biafra had a high-ranking (exclusively male) committee of patrons and was officially supported by the mayors of Frankfurt and Zurich. This support led the way to close co-operation between Biafra groups and established aid agencies, and resulted in common calls for donations 'in the spirit of philanthropy and love of neighbour'.[29]

Clearly, the sympathies of all activists were always on the Biafran side. Explicit political criticism of neo-colonial structures and of the involvement of the former colonial power Britain was expressed in demonstrations, but never had much success because of weak support among the heterogeneous supporters and action groups concerned with Biafra.[30] Especially when the war continued and it became clear that Biafra was not just a case of the genocide of a weak David by a strong Goliath, but a complex political conflict between two warring parties, both of which skilfully used media propaganda and modern communications, the Biafra action groups refrained from making political statements.[31] The Swiss Labour Assistance organization (SLA), for instance, responded defensively to a letter criticizing a statement on Biafra that the SLA had unilaterally published: 'It

[28] 'Rettung durch die Stockfisch-Bomber: SPIEGEL-Report über die Hilfsaktion für Biafra und Nigeria', *Der Spiegel*, 25 (1969), 104–16, at 114.

[29] See 'Communiqué der Caritas, HEKS, SAH und der Aktion Pro Biafra', 29 June 1968, in SozArch, SAH-Archive, Ar 20.971.115, doss. Biafra.

[30] e.g. in Basle with around 5,000 participants shouting anti-British slogans: cf. BAR, SEK-Archive, J 2.257, 2001/124, vol. 10, doss. 156. See also Frederick Forsyth, *The Biafra Story: The Making of an African Legend* (Barnsley, 2001), 274.

[31] The strong support for Biafra was mostly humanitarian and not explicitly political. The Biafran cause was thus never supported by the more political student movement organizations of the 1960s; cf. Tilman Zülch, 'Die anderen 68-er: Von der Protestbewegung zur Menschenrechtsorganisation, 40 Jahre Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker', *Medienmitteilung*, 5 July 2007 ⟨http://www.gfbv.de/pressemit.php?id=979&highlight=biafra⟩ [accessed 7 Jan. 2014]; Joschka Fischer, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Rupert von Plottnitz, *et al.*, 'Kopfschrott oder Gefühlsheu? Eine Diskussion über Internationalismus', *Kursbuch*, 57 (Oct. 1979), 199–221. For an explicitly anti-imperialistic study see Paolo Antonello *et al.* (eds.), *Nigeria gegen Biafra? Falsche Alternativen oder über die Verschärfung der Widersprüche im Neokolonialismus* (Berlin, 1969); Lige Marxiste Révolutionnaire (ed.), *Biafra: bilan d'une sécession* (Lausanne, 1970); and Stefan Miller (Harry Gmür), 'Biafras Ende', *Vorwärts*, 29 Jan. 1970, 3, in SozArch, NL Harry Gmür, Ar 165.10.18.

is anyway very difficult in the case of such actions to consider all political aspects.'[32]

Nevertheless, criticism of arms exports to Nigerian troops and the rarely broached topic of the involvement of multinational oil corporations in the Biafran delta were matters raised on several occasions. After the downing of an ICRC aircraft in June 1969 by the Nigerian army, illegally equipped with anti-aircraft guns built by Swiss arms manufacturer Oerlikon-Bührle, arms exports were discussed in Switzerland in a broad campaign, resulting in a political initiative to ban them.[33] It was this campaign that moved humanitarian groups to adopt new political positions on the 'Third World'. Thus Swiss Protestant pastors wrote about the inherent contradiction in humanitarian aid and arms originating from the same country:

> We have been collecting money for Biafra in our parish for several months. Coin by coin, sums have been accumulated to ease the war suffering. At the same time, our country's arms factory has been earning a huge amount from the same war. The credibility of our humanitarian effort is at risk. This is a cause for great concern.[34]

In this way, Biafra was a 'key event' for some of the younger generation of activists from church and university circles interested in development issues. The civil war in Nigeria and the severe famine motivated them emotionally to participate in 'Third World' issues for the first time, although Christian paternalism towards African suffering remained.[35] In view of the war's political dimensions and the involvement of governements and European corporations, these new players adopted a point of view which asked critical questions regarding the political implications of one's own behaviour and made

[32] Letter from Robert Risler (Schweizerisches Arbeiter-Hilfswerk, Zurich) to Hans F.-v. W. (Zollikon), 16 July 1968, in SozArch, SAH-Archive, Ar 20.971.115, doss. Biafra.

[33] Obiaga, *The Politics of Humanitarian Organizations Intervention*, 56–9. The initiative started in 1969 and was put to the vote in 1972, but was defeated by a mere 50.3 per cent. See Ruedi Tobler, 'Wenn Schweizer Kanonen auf IKRK-Flugzeuge schiessen: Der Bührle-Skandal', in Heinz Looser and Hansjörg Braunschweig (eds.), *Die Schweiz und ihre Skandale* (Zurich, 1995), 93–104. Monica Kalt, *Tiersmondismus in der Schweiz der 1960er und 1970er Jahre: Von der Barmherzigkeit zur Solidarität* (Berne, 2010), 347–400. See also documents in SozArch, EvB-Archive, 430.26.2.

[34] Resolution by pastors of canton Aargau, 26 Dec. 1968, in BAR, SEK-Archive, J 2.257, 2001/124, vol. 10, doss. 156.

[35] As Swiss activists put it in their memoirs: see Anne-Marie Holenstein, Regula Renschler, and Rudolf Strahm, *Entwicklung heisst Befreiung: Erinnerungen an die Pionierzeit der Erklärung von Bern* (Zurich, 2008), 90–3.

demands for development policy and solidarity. The initial impulse to give urgent humanitarian support to those starving in Biafra was extended by taking a global view of the forms and origins of injustices in the 'Third World'. The emergence and dissemination of this new political analysis were mainly triggered by protests against the Cabora Bassa dam.

Cabora Bassa: The Dam as a Protest Catalyst for Solidarity Campaigns

The gigantic Cabora Bassa dam, with an output of 2,000 megawatts, a retaining wall 160 metres high and 30 metres wide, and a reservoir with a surface area of 2,700 square kilometres, was built between 1969 and 1979. It remains one of the largest hydroelectric plants in the world.[36] Planned by Portugal, largely financed by South Africa, and supported by Rhodesia, the Cabora Bassa scheme was intended to be a strategic undertaking in defence of the white minority regimes in southern Africa. Starting in 1961, Portugal as the last colonial power in Europe was challenged militarily by the independence movement, requiring enormous government expenditure. In the anti-imperialistic view of the European solidarity groups, Portugal, poor by Western European standards and a developing country itself, was oppressing its colonies with the support of industrialized countries. Promoting the dam and its irrigation projects as a white development zone, Portugal hoped to attract settlers and investors to exploit its plentiful mineral deposits in the Zambezi valley, thus halting the advance of the Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO) liberation movement into southern Mozambique. In the sense of 'social engineering', Cabora Bassa was thus part of a larger development plan, which held out the promise that Portugal's colonial rule would be economically and politically strengthened.[37] Early on, opposition to the power plant had already stirred in the ranks of FRELIMO and was supported by the independent

[36] Keith Middlemas, *Cabora Bassa: Engineering and Politics in Southern Africa* (London, 1975). See also Allen Isaacman, 'Displaced People, Displaced Energy, and Displaced Memories: The Case of Cahora Bassa, 1970–2004', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 38/2 (2005), 201–38; and id. and Chris Sneddon, 'Portuguese Colonial Intervention, Regional Conflict and Post-Colonial Amnesia: Cahora Bassa Dam, Mozambique 1965–2002', *Portuguese Studies Review*, 11/1 (2003), 207–36.

[37] For a denunciation of this policy see Al Imfeld, 'Cabora Bassa: Staudamm gegen die Schwarzen', *Neue Zürcher Nachrichten*, 17 June 1970, 1–2, in SozArch, EvB-Archive, Ar 430.25.3, doss. 4; and Stefan Miller (Harry Gmür), 'Cabora Bassa und die BBC', *Vorwärts*, 29 Apr. 1971, i. 11, in SozArch, NL Harry Gmür, Ar 165.10.18.

African states, the Organization of African Unity, and the World Council of Churches.[38] This protest by the rural population and the young political independence movements is comparable to the actions against the Kariba dam in Northern Rhodesia in the 1950s, although it never gained a wider audience, precisely because of the lack of responsive student movements in Western Europe and North America.[39] In the late 1960s multiple UN resolutions against the Cabora Bassa dam made the international public aware of the situation.[40] In various European countries, the newly emerging solidarity movements, consisting mainly of church youth groups, some already active on the Biafra issue, responded by denouncing Portuguese colonialism in Africa and condemning the participation of European companies in the building of Cabora Bassa. These links between various governments and the colonial war allowed the solidarity movement to tie the 'common struggle against imperialism' to concrete starting-points. The struggle against 'one's own government and economy' gave the theoretical debate on imperialism a specific reason for confrontation. It was only the delivery of materials from European corporations that created the specific connection which was necessary for a concept of assumed links of solidarity. Solidarity thus created a common adversary in an imaginary common struggle.[41]

In Switzerland, opposition to Cabora Bassa first became apparent on the occasion of a private visit by the South African prime minister and finance minister to the Swiss Federal Council and

[38] The World Council of Churches provided direct financial aid to FRELIMO and other liberation movements, and gained a wider audience by issuing a pamphlet on Cabora Bassa in 1971; see World Council of Churches (ed.), *Cabora Bassa and the Struggle for Southern Africa* (London, 1971).

[39] Julia Tischler, *Light and Power for a Multiracial Nation: The Kariba Dam Scheme in the Central African Federation* (Basingstoke, 2013); ead., 'Negotiating Development: The Kariba Dam Scheme in the Central African Federation', in Peter J. Bloom, Stephan S. Miescher, and Takyiwaa Manuh (eds.), *Modernization as Spectacle in Africa* (Bloomington, Ind., 2014), 159–83; ead., 'Cementing Uneven Development: The Central African Federation and the Kariba Dam Scheme', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 40/4 (2014), 1047–64; ead., 'Resisting Modernisation? Two African Responses to the Kariba Dam Scheme in the Central African Federation', *Comparativ*, 21/1 (2011), 60–75.

[40] The building of Cabora Bassa was condemned in UN Resolution 2507, XXIV (21 Nov. 1969), by the colonial commission of the UN General Assembly in document A/73-20 (Nov. 1970), and in UN Resolution A 8022, XXV (16 Dec. 1971). The 26th General Assembly finally condemned Cabora Bassa on 20 Dec. 1971 in UN Resolution 2873, XXVI.

[41] For the campaigns against Cabora Bassa in West Germany, Sweden, Italy, and Britain see Kuhn, 'Liberation Struggle and Humanitarian Aid'.

Zurich-based banks in June 1970, which raised the possibility of negotiations for Swiss equity participation in the power plant.[42] No Swiss corporations were directly represented in the construction consortium, but one of its members, Brown Boveri & Cie (BBC) Mannheim, was a German subsidiary of a Swiss corporation, in which the parent company held a 56.6 per cent stake.[43] Swiss criticism of the dam project focused on this indirect participation because it was assumed that the Swiss BBC Baden was involved in supplying electro-technical equipment, or that it at least hoped to take over parts of the project freed up by the withdrawal of the Swedish, British, and Italian companies as a result of public protests. With regard to the UN resolutions and the international opposition to Cabora Bassa, Jean Ziegler,[44] a member of the Swiss National Assembly, broached the subject in a parliamentary inquiry to the Swiss Federal Council on the construction of the dam, and called for action to be taken against the participating Swiss corporations.[45] This interest in Cabora Bassa was quickly adopted by the young solidarity movement in Switzerland, among them some of the church youth groups already involved in the relief efforts for Biafra. The activities of these Cabora Bassa working groups included writing articles and letters to the editor, organizing informational meetings, conducting research, and analysing data. Opposition was directed mainly at BBC Baden and the Swiss banks, which were called on not to participate in Cabora Bassa by supplying either equipment or equity.[46] Furthermore, the Federal Council was advised not to award export risk guarantees for equipment, and warned that this was 'an affair that contains all the elements of

[42] 'Was sucht der südafrikanische Ministerpräsident in der Schweiz? Schweizer-Geld für Rassen-Bau?', *Zürcher AZ*, 15 June 1970, 1.

[43] The files of the BBC's communication department in the archive of (what is today) ABB Switzerland indicate clearly that the campaign against Cabora Bassa was very well documented. See Corporate Archive ABB Group Baden (hereafter ArABB), B 0.8.100.539 Kommunikationsabteilung/Cabora Bassa 1970–9.

[44] Jean Ziegler (born 1934), Senior Professor of Sociology (Geneva), Member of Parliament for the Social Democrats in the Swiss National Assembly (1967–83 and 1987–99), United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food (2000–8), since March 2008 adviser to the UN Human Rights Council.

[45] Kleine dringliche Anfrage Jean Ziegler, 10 June 1970, in BAR, EPD-Abteilung für Politische Angelegenheiten, E 2001 (E), 1980/83, 536, AZ C.41.111.0.Uch.

[46] See e.g. Arbeitsgruppe für Kirche und Gesellschaft der evangelischen und römisch-katholischen Universitätsgemeinden Bern und Arbeitsgruppe Angola (eds.), *Was geschieht in Cabora Bassa? Dokumentation* (Berne, 1970), 2, in SozArch, EvB-Archive, Ar 430.25.3, doss. 4.

an international scandal'.[47] Swiss industry was intensively occupied with the project. The Swiss BBC's delivery of electrical equipment for the power plant to a value of approximately SwF 25 million is a case in point. This was not known at the time, but the solidarity movement's claims of involvement by Swiss industry later proved to be accurate.[48]

A medium of the transnational connections between the broad and diversified solidarity movements active in the campain against the Cabora Bassa dam was the widely distributed Dutch booklet *Cabora Bassa: een dam tegen de Afrikanen*, published by student activists. It was translated into German and English, and contained background information and the addresses of organizations in the solidarity movement.[49] The Cabora Bassa groups were also in direct contact with liberation movements in the Portuguese colonies via information offices in exile and English-language newspapers, and found recognition as northern contacts and feedback groups for an imagined common concern. At this point the campaign against Cabora Bassa was beginning to offer African liberation movements direct material support through the solidarity movements. Country-specific and often clearly Maoist or Communist-oriented solidarity committees arose from this direct involvement, providing ideological and material support for the liberation movements, especially in southern Africa.[50]

Involvement in the campaign declined noticeably around 1973. Solidarity work focused on new issues, and with FRELIMO's election victory and accession to power in 1975, the topic disappeared completely from the focus of solidarity movements. The complexity

[47] Open letter from the Arbeitsgruppe Angola and the Arbeitsgruppe für Kirche und Gesellschaft Bern to the Swiss government, 13 June 1970, ibid.

[48] See ArABB, B 0.8.100.539, Information über Cabora Bassa, Hr. Bernhardt und Dr. Rinderknecht, 7 Jan. 1971, 11. During the debates Eric Bernhardt (Sales Director) stated that BBC Baden had contributed only SwF 11m. (decided on 21 Apr. 1970). See 'Cabora Bassa im Meinungsstreit', *Der Bund*, 1 Feb. 1971; Evangelische Studentengemeinden Berlin (ed.), *Oekumene Rundbrief 2*, 15 July 1970, quoted in Martin Stähli, Hans K. Schmocker, and Rudolf H. Strahm (eds.), *Cabora Bassa: Modellfall westlicher Entwicklungspolitik* (Berne, 1971), 69–70.

[49] The German versions were published in 1971 and 1972; see Sietse Bosgra, *Cabora Bassa: Ein Damm gegen die Afrikaner* (Göttingen, 1971; Berlin, 1972). The English pamphlet was published in Berlin in 1972.

[50] For the case of West Germany see Reinhart Kössler and Henning Melber, 'The West German Solidarity Movement with the Liberation Struggles in Southern Africa: A (Self-)Critical Retrospective', in Ulf Engel and Robert Kappel (eds.), *Germany's Africa Policy Revisited: Interests, Images and Incrementalism* (Münster, 2002), 103–26.

of the situation was apparently too great, and it did not match the world-view of the activists, who often projected romanticized notions and dreams of simplicity onto the liberation movement.[51] After independence, the new FRELIMO government was in urgent need of foreign currency from energy exports to apartheid South Africa. It therefore allowed the power plant to be completed by the original consortium, after being repackaged as a Portuguese entity.

Concluding Remarks

The late 1960s witnessed a new interest in the decolonized parts of the world, now seen as the 'Third World'. Because of controversial issues such as Biafra and Cabora Bassa, the 'Third World' became a major focus of concern and activity not only for development aid policy-makers, but also for emerging new groups in the church and student environments. With mass media bridging the distance between spectators and those who suffered, a distinct public image of the 'Third World' soon emerged. The new groups used new forms of political protest and thus expressed a change in the understanding of politics.

The Biafra operation was the first example of a new kind of humanitarian aid. Support and participation via aid donors became truly global, and this is an early example of the 'Third World' as a field of operation for humanitarian aid agencies. Furthermore, the Biafra operation was a crucial event for humanitarian interventions and marked a general turning towards secular activities on the part of church actors in the field of emancipatory development aid. At the beginning, a commitment to Biafra was motivated by humanitarian dedication, often fed by religious feelings and the players' feeling of urgency, which was not specifically defined but demanded action and commitment. What is more, the political implications and high complexity of the situation were disproportionate to the improvised manner of the commitment. Starvation

[51] Cf. Bahman Nirumand, 'Sehnsuchtsräume: Warum die Revolution ausblieb', in Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Rüdiger Dammann (eds.), *1968: Die Revolte* (Frankfurt a.M., 2007), 223–34. The complete absence of any ecological criticism of the project is notable. Apparently the anti-imperialistic point of view allowed these connections and problem areas to be overlooked; see Allen Isaacman and Chris Sneddon, 'Toward a Social and Environmental History of the Building of Cahora Bassa Dam', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 26/4 (2000), 597–632. See also Patrick McCully, *Silenced Rivers: The Ecology and Politics of Large Dams* (London, 1996).

and famine had an emotional impact on activists as well as donors, and thus aid efforts in Biafra were highly structured by the public. The mass media played a central role in mobilizing public opinion by producing images of and information about this African conflict. These images of Africa as aid-receiving, starving, and struck by war were long-lasting and are still recalled today. Political aspects were largely absent from campaigns and were discussed only selectively. As a realm of experience, all the same, Biafra facilitated a political analysis which saw inequality as a consequence of imperialistic penetration. In particular, the numerous solidarity and aid groups established in the wake of Biafra, some with the involvement of students, remained connected with 'Third World' issues and often engaged in practical solidarity work and transnational campaigns.

Cabora Bassa deepened this global view on the discussions of imperialism and the analysis of the global economy. 'Third World' conditions were ideally concentrated in the dam: the construction of a technocratic mega-project in an African colony with the direct participation of European corporations, guaranteed by European states, supporting both white domination in southern Africa in general and Portuguese colonial rule in particular through the sale of electricity to the apartheid regime. With the dam, the protest movements were able to illustrate globally effective connections of oppression with a specific example, and to identify the participation of their own corporations at national political level. In this way, the regional, pragmatic, and activist connections of Cabora Bassa led to the politicization of what were formerly the purely Christian humanitarian objectives of many of the young development policy groups in Europe. Opposition to Cabora Bassa caused a change in the political structure of the solidarity movements, in that the gap between church actors and the new student groups on issues of development policy could be bridged. In addition, the existence of militarily active anti-colonial liberation movements meant that solidarity, a sense of identity, and even support for the armed liberation struggle in the Portuguese colonies became possible. Cabora Bassa was thus the expresion of a connecting common struggle characterized as follows in a leaflet: 'the fight of the disenfranchised there is our fight here!'[52] The dam served as a focus for denunciation of those processes which the young action

[52] Symposium of Solidarity, Berne 1981, in *Südwind: Schweizerische Arbeitsgruppen für Entwicklungspolitik Safep*, 5 (1981), 5–6.

groups considered responsible for underdevelopment. Cabora Bassa also shows the point in time when this new view of the situation, which started with Biafra, emerged and became widespread. This view was connected with a reduction in complexity, and aimed to mobilize political protest in the name of fundamental aims with concrete examples. Campaigns to support Biafra and oppose the Cabora Bassa dam referred to moral issues which demanded human rights in the form of political action. At the same time, the political players were against a depoliticized view of the 'Third World' which approached humanitarian catastrophes on the basis of urgent action. In fact, a new sense of responsibility was at stake that wanted to legitimize actions in a universal discourse of justice and solidarity. The starting-point had been a thought which the Brazilian archbishop and liberation theologian Dom Hélder Câmara, among others, addressed to the European solidarity movement in a later appeal: 'The best help you can give us is to change the unjust structures in your place.'[53]

What is interesting is the connection between domestic politics and international or even transnational issues. It was the respective nationally oriented political spheres that framed the conflicts, and on which campaigns, criticisms, and political activities were focused. Swiss connections with Biafra or Cabora Bassa are therefore not accidental, but a case in point: the activities of Swiss corporations gave church and solidarity groups an opportunity to denounce involvement in morally unjust business relations. 'Neutrality' as a highly symbolic concept and discourse did not block this political perspective,[54] but added another argument to the highly complex interplay between national framing and international occasions. All the same, the examples had a transnational scope. Thus it could be argued that development policy built a resonance network in the north that picked up these issues and translated them for their respective national situations. The notion of a Third World was crucial for the perception of this common issue, as Christoph Kalter puts it for the case of the new radical left in France: 'The Third

[53] Quoted in Comité de soutien aux prisonniers politiques au Chili — Fribourg (ed.), *Chili — Argentine — Bolivie: Bulletin d'information*, Jan. 1977, BAR, EJPD, E 4320 (C), 1995/391, 923/336, doss. 244.

[54] Thus it is incorrect to state that 'empathy and support (for the liberation movements) were completely absent, for example, in neutral Switzerland'. See Piero Gleijeses, 'Scandinavia and the Liberation of Southern Africa', *International History Review*, 2 (2005), 324–31, at 329.

World idea was the expression of a global awareness, but also the reference point of transnational, transcontinental, and ultimately global actions.'[55] By doing so, the new solidarity groups attempted to strengthen discourses against the depoliticization of the conflicts in Nigeria and in southern Africa, and created ambivalent projections and imaginations on the 'Third World' that fostered Eurocentric perspectives and hierarchical views. Nevertheless, the 'Third World' thus became a political and social laboratory and performative tool for forming new concepts of solidarity and justice. These universal concepts justified the commitment against injustice and hardship.

[55] Kalter, *Entdeckung der Dritten Welt*, 484.