

CHARITIES

The civil war in Nigeria's Biafra region in the late 1960s with its resultant famine brought home to many prosperous Westerners the horrors of genocide and starvation in Africa for the first time. Two important Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) owe their foundation to this seminal event in relations between Africa and the west.

In Ireland where links with Nigeria were, and still are particularly close, a small group of people set up a charitable organization called Africa Concern and in a short few months a quarter of a million pounds in charitable donations was raised. A ship, the Saint Colmcille was chartered to bring food aid which was distributed under war-time conditions and often under heavy fire.

"Africa Concern" developed into a major international Aid Agency which worked on a worldwide basis and called itself simply "Concern". In a further expansion of its activities Concern has become part of an alliance of aid-oriented NGOs which includes Italy's CESVI, Ibis from Denmark, Deutsche Welthungerhilfe of Germany, the Dutch organization Hivos and in a welcome development from the new EU states the People in Need Group from the Czech Republic.

In 2005 Concern estimated that it brought emergency help to 1.85 million people including assistance to those badly hit by drought in Niger, Malawi and Zimbabwe.

The Biafra disaster also had a major impact on the French speaking world. A group of French doctors had been recruited by the Red Cross to work in the area and they returned home horrified by what they had seen. On December 20th 1971 they, joined by a number of journalists, created an organization called Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders). In a symbiotic relationship the doctors worked in the field while the journalists raised international awareness of famine, disease and war throughout the world. As a result the organization's work was recognized with the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1999. Today MSF works on an international basis but is especially concerned with the struggle against AIDS in Africa.

Religious based charities are particularly active in Africa which is a

highly-religious continent. Caritas Internationalis is a confederation of 162 Catholic relief, development and social service organizations that operate in 200 countries worldwide. Amongst these are organizations, many with the Latin word Caritas in their titles, in every country in Africa as well as CAFOD in England and Wales, Trócaire in Ireland, Caritas Australia, SCIAF in Scotland, Development and Peace in Canada and a number of Catholic organizations in the United States.

Oxfam was founded in Oxford in England in 1942 in the middle of the Second World War as The Oxford Committee for Famine relief - a group of local citizens who campaigned for grain ships to be sent to relieve starving women and children in occupied Greece. Today Oxfam International is a group of 12 independent organizations dedicated to fighting poverty and related injustice on a worldwide basis. Oxfam programs are in operation throughout Africa.

Oxfam's theme of developing self-reliance has been reminiscent of the oft-quoted aphorism of the Chinese Philosopher Lao Tzu: "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.

The theme has been taken up in recent times by other, smaller, charities such as Bóthar in Ireland whose campaign to provide milk-producing goats to families in Africa struck a chord with Irish people from agricultural backgrounds. Bóthar has now diversified into providing bees, rabbits, breeding sows, laying hens, camels, guinea fowl, dairy cows and (yes) fish, to agricultural communities throughout Africa.

Since those days more than 40 years ago when the atrocities of the Biafra war brought the attention of the west to starvation in Africa there is hardly a European, North American or Australasian country that doesn't have its own charity concentrating on the problems of the third world in general and Africa in particular.

The current stress on self-reliance and the development of agriculture and industry in Africa can help lay the foundation for trade-based recovery in the continent.