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INTRODUCTION

The emergency food situation in some African regions, which reached crisis proportion in 1984, aroused public opinion throughout Europe and led to a series of fund-raising initiatives to help the stricken populations through the dispatch of 'aid'.

In many ways the mobilization was on an unprecedented scale, and the initiatives in general turned into a huge success from the point of view of the quantity of money and resources collected.

But at what a price! "It cannot be denied", states the report of January 1987 prepared by the African researchers who have participated in the research, "that emergency aid saved many thousands of lives. That said, however, we must utterly reject the image of Africans as individuals incapable of dealing with their own problems".

Campaigns to promote emergency aid turned the spotlight on one or two countries only and concentrated on the symptoms (famine and drought), giving a one-sided image. The campaigns were therefore seen by those regularly concerned with cooperation as a success, but also as a failure. Some people hailed them as one of the most important initiatives ever taken for the Third World. Others regretted the heavy costs compared with the objectives of development education. Such considerations led to the project, "Image of Africa", involving research by NGOs from seven countries of the European Community, and consultants from six African countries.

They planned the research on the "Image of Africa" in collaboration with the Freedom from Hunger Campaign/Action for Development (FAO), with a view to identifying the messages put across during the crisis by the media and by non-governmental cooperation organizations and their reception by the European public; and analysing, from an African point of view, the effects of such messages on aid policies. The work involved researches from 13 countries: Belgium, Denmark, the Federal Republic of Germany, France, Ireland, Italy and the United Kingdom in Europe; and Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Niger, Senegal and Zimbabwe in Africa.

This report summarizes the studies conducted in six European countries (the French study, which arrived late, has not been taken into consideration) and reflects the three guidelines along which the European research was conducted:

1. Analysis of information on Africa in the press and on television, with particular reference to the six African countries that were partners in the research;

2. Analysis of the activities and information policies of NGOs during the emergency period;

3. Analysis of the perception of African problems by the public.

The report is divided into three parts. The first describes the main research findings; the second reconstructs the material conditions in which the information on Africa was produced; and the third studies the stereotypes underlying the public perception of the African reality.

References to national reports are indicated in the text by the abbreviation for the country concerned.

PART I

Research findings

1. The image of Africa in the media

This section of research on the press and television drew attention to the way in which the famine was presented: the causes advanced, the space allotted to a description of African efforts to overcome the crisis, and the space allotted to the African point of view.

The analysis covered periods when the activities of aid campaigns in the various European countries were most significant.

The research, as shown in Table 1, analysed a period around the end of 1984 in which there was maximum information coverage in all the countries. The research also analysed one or more previous and subsequent periods, taking into consideration a sample of the most widely read daily and weekly papers and national television.

TABLE 1

PERIODS OF ANALYSIS OF THE PRESS (#) AND TV (§) IN THE VARIOUS COUNTRIES

	1984										1985										1986									
	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O
DEN	#	#	#	#				#	#	#	#	#	#																	#	#	#
	§	§	§	§				§	§	§	§	§																		§	§	§
IRE								#	#	#	#							#	#	#	#			#	#	#	#					
								§	§	§	§													§	§	§	§					
IT	#	#	#	#	#	#		#	#	#	#	#	#					#	#	#	#	#										
	§	§	§	§	§	§	§	§	§	§	§	§	§	§	§	§	§	§	§	§	§	§	§	§	§	§	§	§	§	§	§	§	§
FRG										#	#	#	#	#	#																	
								§						§										§								
UK	#	#	#	#	#	#		#	#	#	#	#	#			#	#											#	#	#	#	#	#
BEL								#	#	#	#	#	#								#									#	

In each country the research concentrated on several major initiatives for the provision of aid which succeded in attracting the attention of the public and of the media; this was mainly around the end of 1984 and the beginning of 1985.

On 23 October, English television transmitted the reportage by M.Buerk that marked the start of the intensive information campaign by the English and Irish press and television, and the humanitarian initiatives. In October the "Africa sulter" campaign was launched in Denmark. On 22 December the Italian Government passed a decree allocating Lit. 1 900 thousand million for emergency aid, which after a few months became an 'ad hoc' law. In the Federal Republic of Germany 23 January was "Africa Day".

A quantitative analysis shows how in the period October-December 1984 there was an appreciable increase in news about Africa, particularly on the dramatic famine situation, which reached its peak on the days on which, in each country, the most important initiatives were taken.

The quality of the reporting was not, unfortunately, as satisfactory as the quantity. Researchers in all the countries are unanimous on this point. Looking at the subject matter in terms of percentages, it may be observed that for the most part (63 percent in Italy, 74 percent in FRG) it consisted in a description of local events, without linking them to underlying causes. Only a small percentage of the news was based on surveys or interviews intended to go deeper into the problems. Most of the reports simply provided empirical data without supporting background.

As regards the type of news published, pride of place in all countries went to:

- The 'famine' and the delivery of aid, almost always with reference to Ethiopia (in all countries, and in Italy also for Sahel zone).

- The internal political tensions in some African countries (particularly when European citizens were involved, or kidnapped, as in Mozambique and Ethiopia).

- Exchanges of official visits between European and African authorities.

Broadly speaking, there was no continuity in the information on Africa, and news came out intermittently, when anything exception happened.

With regard to the subject matter, this was often African political institutions (government bodies, military groups, institutional summits) or European political institutions (parliaments, governments, parties): The dominant news items covered legislation with regard to the dispatch of aid [IT], the delivery of emergency aid [BEL, and, to a considerable extent, all European countries], coups d'état, revolts, struggles between military groups. The base groups, the non-governmental or international organizations, on the other hand, were seldom the main news item. In particular, the impact of international organizations on the media was reduced to that of "reliable sources" for statistical and quantitative data only [BEL, IT]; the programmes [IT] and their view of interdependence

[BEL] were not used as sources of information. There was practically no reference to African government or community initiatives to weather the crisis; if there was any mention of local communities it was only to highlight the precarious conditions of survival, or provide a background for the dispatch of 'aid' from the donor country [IT, UK, BEL]. The subject of self-development was almost totally ignored.

One distortion noted everywhere in the information sprang from concentration on a few subjects and countries: the food shortage in Ethiopia and, to a lesser extent, in the Sudan. There was little or no mention of other countries: only in the case of South Africa was the information sufficiently systematic as regards both time and subject matter to provide the public with the rational elements to situate and understand the underlying causes of events [IT].

In many cases (60 percent in FRG) there was talk in general terms of a crisis 'in Africa' without further specification. The prevailing images were therefore those of an apathetic Africa, full of problems and crises; of an exotic and dangerous Africa, in which very different laws were in force from those in 'civilized' countries, ravaged by revolts and disturbances; of a hungry and thirsty Africa, without hope; lastly, of an Africa inhabited almost exclusively by Ethiopians and Sudanese.

The same conclusions were reached by English research on 'keywords' and photographs. The word most often used was 'rebel' in reporting the news on insurgency and coups d'état. In a series of reports from Zimbabwe the words were 'homicide', 'atrocities', 'kidnapping' and 'dissidents'. More generally, an emotive terminology tended to show Africa and the Africans as extreme stereotypes: the 'rebels' had no voice, were represented as 'uncivilized' or 'primitive warriors', while the Europeans involved in the disturbances were 'innocent victims' or 'hostages'. The campaign conducted by the Daily Mirror to raise funds for Burkina Faso showed the same dichotomy in its approach: the African country was the 'poorest and hungriest', inhabited by desperate, suffering families, by children dying of hunger; the response of the 'dear readers' was 'magnificent' and 'generous'.

From Belgian studies it emerged that in the construction of the phenomenon 'famine' there were two systematic identifications: generalization and naturalization of the phenomenon.

The same sensation was transmitted with the photographs accompanying the services, which usually showed people as pitiful victims of uncontrollable events. This effect was achieved through pictures taken out of context, close-up, emphasizing body language and facial expressions. The photos seemed to be taken from above, without any eye contact, so as to give an impression of apathy and despair, contrasting with European ability to take action. The photograph of the "mother and child" was used for explicitly emotive purposes, as were those of starving children or old people. Other pictures showed camps built with aid, or the arrival of food commodities.

These are images that have the power to obscure any positive aspect of life; and when this does appear in the photo (peasants or families at work), the commentary highlights the negative aspects: 'poor things', 'a miserable life' ... [UK].

As regards the causes of the food shortage, even when they were not mentioned, the impression was given that they consisted in bad harvests and drought; that these countries had been struck by natural events over which they had no control. In some cases the media drew attention to the EEC cereals surplus, implying that the problem consisted in unequal distribution of commodities and in the need for redistribution of surpluses [IRE]. Apart from the most obvious causes (drought and food shortage), the commonest explanations, in the few cases where some attempt was made to give any, emphasized excessive military expenditure (particularly in Ethiopia) and inadequate local administrations. All this leads to the conclusion that the prevailing image of Africa in the media during and after the 1984 crisis was that of a continent in permanent need of assistance, of salvation from outside. The Africans were reduced to the level of consumer apprentices, incapable of analysing their own problems or becoming the protagonists of their own development.

It would be a mistake to limit discussion of the role played by the media to these aspects alone. Although it is indeed true that the image described so far is the one put across most frequently and therefore most strongly, research has also revealed the existence of attempts to go deeper into the problems and escape from a stereotyped image. This was usually information material directed to a more qualified and restricted public, only occasionally appearing in the papers and specialized press, or else it took the form of television or filmed documentaries seeking the underlying causes of the famine or tackling the problem of long-term development [IT, IRE]. Research shows that these messages were "reserved" for a selected portion of the public, because of the style of their headlines or the time slots they received on television [IT, IRE, BEL].

The exceptional prominence given to the famine meant that a space was created for African questions in sectors of the media that would not previously have been interested: music, children's press, fashion weeklies, etc. [UK]. Nevertheless, national research shows how marginal African culture is on the European scene.

Lastly, it emerged that some journalists and photographers tried to introduce a more radical approach in their work, becoming aware that, if they could not change the rules of the game, they could at least contribute to opening a debate [IRE, UK]. A debate that in the English case took the form of self-analysis, of articles and television programmes discussing the approach of the media to the famine. Such a process of reflection will be valuable if it leads to a different image of Africa, one that takes account of Africans, of the reality and diversity of their conditions in countries that have a past, a present and a future [UK].

2. The image of Africa put out by the NGOs

NGO activities during the African crisis were analysed through the dispatch of questionnaires [UK, IT], interviews [UK, FRG], and a study of materials published by them [UK, DEN, FRG, IRE, BEL].

The NGO messages coming across in information on the African crisis varied considerably and depended to a certain extent on the different ideological orientations. In most cases the declared objectives were to

highlight the less obvious causes of the famine (70 percent in UK), to analyse the role of European Governments, and to provide information on long-term development policies and self-sufficiency (50 percent in UK). The keywords of their action show that they were obliged to drop this type of structured information and use the same biased, stereotyped but effective images as the press and television. Linguistically, most of the NGO messages fell into the category, 'underdevelopment/aid' [BEL].

This contradiction in NGO information during the crisis springs from the material conditions in which they work. On the one hand, for many of them survival is closely linked to collecting money from the public, which obliges them to operate in an undiscerning information market, on the basis of the stereotypes already familiar, to appeal to emotions, since "people give with their hearts rather than with their heads": in that short period, people were far more generous when faced with photographs of famine victims [UK]. On the other hand, NGOs are usually involved in long-term programmes and in 'development education' intended to provide a more complex and realistic view of problems and to challenge these very stereotypes. The contradiction emerges also from the analysis of published material: in that intended for aid campaigns there is a large percentage of photographs of victims, mostly women and children (60 percent in the UK), and attention is focused on very few realities: Ethiopia (50 percent), Sudan (20 percent); the same image of the Africans as passive receivers of aid is put forward again. In the educational material, on the other hand, the opposite image prevails: the Africans are shown as active and participating in the development process (95 percent of the photos in the UK), attempts are made to understand what lies behind the food shortage and the operations of European and African politicians are analysed.

All this leads to some considerations on the NGOs' ability to influence public opinion positively with regard to problems of underdevelopment in Africa.

If in fact it is considered that the latter type of more structured image is intended for a restricted public whereas the stereotype information is directed to a far vaster public, and if it is also borne in mind that the NGOs' information resources are not comparable with those available to major newspapers and television, it may be concluded that the NGOs' role in providing a less biased and false image is very limited. IN many cases NGOs have admitted finding themselves saddled with a large-scale publicity campaign whose contents were not programmed by them; having served rather as a channel for enthusiasm generated by the media than as producers of independent responses; not having been able - or perhaps not even having tried - to carry people beyond the initial enthusiasm by raising some basic questions [UK].

Many European NGOs say that, during the period analysed, they lived with two contradictions: first, the contradiction between fund-raising based on emotive themes and the conduct of complex long-term projects; and secondly, the attempt to harness the 'emergency' for development.

Reconciling the contradictions took various forms: in some cases, fund-raising was on the basis of requests that had nothing to do with NGO programmes, or development education activities; in the Italian and Irish cases, there was a form of specialization among NGOs, who were divided

into one group concerned with humanitarian aid, and another mainly concerned with development projects.

In many cases attempts were made to link aid to more broadly-based projects; there emerged, however, a widespread mistrust of the use of the 'emergency' category in launching new programmes [IT].

More generally, short- and long-term strategies coexisted dramatically within the same NGOs; the methods of conducting the emergency campaign came dangerously near to thwarting the objectives of correct development education, while the long-term work consisted in dismantling the stereotypes thus disseminated.

3. The image of Africa in the public mind

This part of the research was conducted in four countries [DEN, UK, FRG, IRE] with various methodologies: free association hinging on the word 'Africa' [DEN, UK], asking for a description of photographic images previously selected [DEN] or their classification according to how 'typical' they were considered in describing the African situation [UK, FRG, DEN], and through written interviews [FRG]. German researchers also made an analysis of school textbooks to check the content of one of the principal sources of information about Africa for young people.

In some cases the sample was chosen with the criterion of the representativity of the whole population (IRE: 1 400 adults in 50 different places); others covered particular sectors of public opinion: 'donors' previously reached through the solidarity campaign (FRG, 112 interviewed; DEN, 84) and secondary school pupils (FRG, 732; DEN, 54; UK, 75).

The findings of national research in each country are surprisingly similar and - if we limit ourselves to considering the general trend - undoubtedly discouraging for anyone who really cares about mass understanding of African problems. Asked to associate freely ideas that sprang to mind in connection with the word 'Africa', many (85 percent of young people in DEN) said 'hunger', 'famine', or (75 percent) 'poverty', 'underdevelopment' or, to a lesser extent, 'apartheid' (30 percent), 'war', 'dictatorship' (15 percent) [DEN]. For four-fifths of Irish public opinion, Africa was identified with Ethiopia and to a lesser extent (two-fifths) with Sudan [IRE]. With regard to the assessment of the photographs showing various aspects of the African reality, the ones universally accepted as 'most typical' were those of the mother with a sick child. Other pictures picked out were the arrival of aid for needy populations: a white nurse among black refugees, trees planted in the desert. At the other end of the scale, images considered 'less typical' reflected the cultural and political life of African countries: political rallies, street scenes in a town [DEN, FRG, UK].

It emerged that there was greater diversity in the image held by educated adults, while adolescents were more conventional and rejected any aspect indicating self-organization on the part of African peoples [DEN]. Paradoxically, the latter fact was accompanied by a generally higher response by young people to appeals for aid and solidarity [FRG]

and this could be a confirmation of the bias in the content of aid campaigns, and of the distortions these could lead to in the common mentality. Distortions confirmed by the German survey on what lingered in the memories of young people and donors of the "Africa Day" campaign of January 1985, at one and at two years' distance. Fifty-six percent of students still remembered it after two years; but among these only a small proportion (16 percent) could indicate the specific problems or the crisis areas. Most of them remembered only the internal aspects of solidarity: the concert, the fund-raising. The same concentration on internal aspects appeared in Ireland, where 76 percent of the sample considered Bob Geldof, the Irish organizer of the Live Aid concert, the person who had contributed more than anyone else to solving African problems.

As regards the causes, the great majority did not go beyond the most obvious aspects: the drought, the poor harvest (90 percent), or bad government and local incompetence (60 percent) [IRE].

In public opinion, the prevailing image of Africa did not, therefore, differ from the one constantly put out by the media: the commonest models were those of an Africa dying of hunger, a primitive and dangerous Africa. All this was often accompanied by an extremely scanty knowledge of geography. Even for Ethiopia, the country most frequently in the news, the only facts known were about the aid supplied [UK]. These biased and distorted images are largely due to the role played by the media, and in many cases the NGOs themselves, in providing information during the crisis. As mentioned above, most of these pictures of the famine were completely out of context, without any reference to African history, culture or economic life. Political analysis was conducted solely in terms of alliances between African countries and Western countries. North-South relations were seldom mentioned and South-South relations considered non-existent. The difficulties of colonial relations with Europe were completely ignored, except by the specialized press and an occasional article here and there.

This amazing uniformity between the image put out and the one received prompts a few questions. Why did the public seem so ready to absorb such misleading ideas? Why did some pictures, such as that of the mother and child, have such a huge success as to blot out any other aspect of reality? Why did many people find it natural to identify African with Ethiopia? This leads to another basic question: Does the public react like a mirror, reflecting whatever image comes its way? The third part of this report will attempt to reply to all these questions.

PART II

Production of the image

1. The role of the journalist

To understand the reasons for the fairly unsatisfactory information situation revealed by the survey, it would be useful to take a close look at the material conditions in which news about Africa was produced in European countries, and at laws governing the information market.

As regards the first point, the fact that emerges most clearly is the lack of adequate structures to collect information in the countries of sub-Saharian Africa. In most cases there were no resident correspondents for newspapers or national television in any Africa State. Editorial staff explained this by a loss of motivation for information - gathering in a post-colonial phase of 'withdrawal' by Western countries and a decline in Africa's strategic interest, due also to the effect of exclusion as a result of the alliances and economic systems of the industrialized countries [IT]. In such conditions, information coverage was almost always based on two 'sources' : the news provided by the big international agencies; and the reports by 'special correspondents', who in turn relied only on news provided on the spot by European cooperation organizations (in the English case, this was 90 percent). In the Italian case, reporting was based mainly on empirical data, with extremely little investigative activity. In the absence of local sources, moreover, commentaires on the news usually came from European personalities, representatives of aid organizations, European expatriates, but hardly ever from Africans.

The generally low awareness of the less obvious problems of the African reality led to very little editorial specialization, and insufficient preparation of journalists dealing with these problems. For example, only one of the Irish 'special correspondents' on the spot during the famine had been in Africa before. In Italian television there were no specific competences in the problems of underdevelopment, and services were assigned on the basis of 'personal choices'. The lack of specialists had a marked influence on news programmes: the 'special correspondent' had no time to rely on immediate impressions, and was not in a position to check the reliability of his sources.

"The Third World", said an Italian reporter interviewed in the course of the research, "is not very attractive: travelling can be very uncomfortable, and above all it remains in the margin of the information system, which concentrates on the political and economic happenings nearest home, and the major problems we share with the rest of the industrialized countries. So that when a journalist approaches the problems of underdevelopment, he does so without preparation, is struck by the most exotic and superficial aspects, and sees things with the eyes of a tourist instead of a professional". As well as this lack of background knowledge there is a certain intellectual, but also physical, laziness: "Parachuted by his paper into the scene of the disaster, the journalist suffers such a violent impact while under so much pressure (his constant working condition) that sometimes he simply gives up trying to understand reasons and reactions; perhaps there is even some official from an international organization on the spot, so the journalist stops looking for an African to interview

(which would require a conspicuous dose of energy, time and good will). He photographs the disaster mentally and goes back to the office with the following equation in his head: Africa equals disaster".

The most 'normal' occasion for journalistic reports on the African reality are very often an official visit by a Minister from a European country, or the inauguration of large-scale public works by European companies which, as well as the routine protocol, provide a chance of coming into contact with the host country [IT]. Other factors that could influence the journalist are the economic interests linked to 'cooperation'. To the extent to which 'underdevelopment' also means 'cooperation', it is easy to imagine the pressures and flattery to which journalists are subjected by major interests hovering around the cake of 'cooperation'. All this accounts for the limitations of information which, even when it is dealing with the African poor, remains Eurocentric, moving exclusively within our cultural and mental patterns [IT].

The journalist is also shackled by specific limitations and the more general rules governing the field of journalism and determining what is or is not 'news'. A phenomenon becomes 'news' much more easily when it has 'exceptional' feature outside the usual run of events. It would therefore be unthinkable for a newspaper to speak only of incorruptible politicians or misfortunes due to fate alone. The media seek and spread news; in a faraway country totally unknown to the European public, a famine or civil war is 'news', whereas a normal food situation or social stability is not. The way in which the Third World is treated is often in line with this general rule, which is at least partly responsible for much of the distortion and bias in information (see the interview with P. Veronese, IT).

In the African case, moreover, for the reasons already given, the threshold above which news breaks is higher than for other countries or areas. Reporting therefore remains restricted to major items, particularly those involving the life of citizens of the country where the report is written. The bus blown up by guerrillas with 50 coloured people on board does not make news, whereas the kidnapping of a Catholic nun in Mozambique does. The death from starvation of 100 children does not make news, whereas the death of 100 000 does. The journalist has absolutely no chance of bringing into play ethical or humanitarian factors: these parameters are now accepted not only by the information media but also by Governments and Western public opinion [IT].

2. The information market

Another factor that weighs heavily on the content and form of news about the African situation is the way the information market functions in European countries. In a reality still dominated by the media, in which information comes from outside, to a major extent from television, aid to famine-stricken populations necessarily competes with the mass of other information. This means that the promoters of initiatives such as "Africa Day" in the Federal Republic of Germany, "Live Aid" in England and Ireland, or "Afrika sulter" in Denmark, or the supporters of the Italian law on emergeny aid, were unable to avoid the general rules in force in this market. The allocation of resources to 'needy' countries

had to take its place in a specific scale of individual and collective priorities which, bearing in mind the limited resources, was however respected. The subject matter therefore had to be something that directly concerned the citizens of donor countries and would arouse their interest, that entered the political debate, and took the form of an 'emergency' that could not be ignored. In view of prevailing conditions in the information market, arousing political forces and public opinion inevitably meant harping on the 'dramatic' or 'spectacular' aspects, such as hunger, famine or infant mortality, that struck the imagination more forcibly, but obscured other aspects that not infrequently lay behind the 'disaster'.

Resorting to the 'emergency' category is not altogether typical of aid policies to Third World countries, but is in European societies the commonest way in which the media and politicians present internal economic, social or political problems. The term 'emergency' implies an exceptional and abnormal situation, and is intended to arouse fear and general concern, thus diverting the attention of the general public.

As the research conducted in the different countries showed, all this consolidated a view of the world in which importance was attached only to what emerged - the tip of the iceberg - and in which chance or fate played a primary role, through a process of 'deification' of 'hazards', such as drought, and of progressive deresponsibilization of human beings, of society and of the ruling classes. 'Normal', everyday mechanisms which lay behind the continuous process of 'famine' were, however, complex and required precise analysis and in-depth studies that were not easily 'saleable' to the general public.

Journalistic coverage of the African crisis was the same in the various European countries and could be summarized as follows:

a) The original situation was a 'normal' one of scarce and episodic information, limited to 'exceptional events'; a situation which in our case lasted until September 1984. The food shortage already existed, but did not make news because it had not yet passed a certain "critical threshold".

b) The shortage became a disaster, and the news broke, set off by one fact, one journalistic service or another. In Ireland and in Great Britain this role was played by Buerk's dramatic reportage on Ethiopia shown in October 1984 on English television. That set in motion the information mechanism that would lead to a proliferation of special correspondents and news on the African situation.

c) There followed a period of competition between the media to scoop the most sensational news items; problems were increasingly dramatized in the hope of emotionally involving the maximum number of people. Spectacular reporting was so much in demand in this phase that even many European NGOs traditionally pursuing information policies of a higher standard were obliged to have recourse to it to ensure the success of their campaigns.

d) Next came the cathartic moment, the great initiative to "solve the crisis", reaching a peak in media output and voluntary contributions. In the Federal Republic of Germany the quantity of information published on "Africa Day" was more than in the 21 following days, and almost the same as in the 21 previous days. In other countries a similar situation pertained as a result of other national initiatives: the approval of the law on emergency aid in Italy, Live Aid in England and Ireland...

e) End of the news cycle. The cathartic moment had passed, the sense of guilt was lulled by the act of giving, the anguished tension built up by the media was released, and the situation rapidly returned to a new 'normality'. The number of news items fell sharply and donations ceased almost entirely. There remained, however (as German, Irish and Italian research clearly showed), a general interest in African subjects. It was in this period that the most interesting reflections and far reaching studies on underdevelopment were made by journalists who took advantage of the relative calm to go more deeply into the problems.

PART III

Reception of the image

1. A reassuring image

The similarity between the images prevailing in the media and the stereotypes at the basis of the public's perception of Africa could give grounds for thinking that people passively received whatever aspect of the African reality the media decided to portray, and limited themselves to reflecting pre-packaged images. Research in some countries has, however, shown how the ability of some news items to strike the right chord was no mere chance, but should rather be considered as the result of the marriage between the message put across and the mindset of the recipient.

If the media provided exclusively images based on the European point of view and on the most immediate expectations of the public, this was not solely because of ill will, thinly-veiled interests or laziness; it was also due to the fact that these images were more readily acceptable, since they answered an implicit request for reassuring messages that confirmed the stereotypes. The media prefered not to run the risk of uncertain acceptance by providing critical images corresponding to another point of view, or stimulating thought or challenging clichés, nor were they equipped to obtain such images. This is another reason for the non-existence of stable information structures in Black Africa and the usual lack of interest in political or economic events that cannot be related to a civil war, a coup d'état or poverty. In news-gathering, it is almost always Europeans that are interviewed: to let an African speak would require more effort, not only from the interviewer but also from the target recipient of the information, who would have to put this conversation in context, and understand the background to the specific interests involved, etc. Efforts that could be avoided by continuing to provide an image based on negative events: war, hunger, famine, coups d'état, that confirm our stereotyped way of seeing things.

Other aspects to which the public has shown itself sensitive are those that confirm universally accepted moral values at a conscious or subconscious level. One of these, highlighted by the Irish research, was national sentiment. Here Ireland's status as a former colony and the food shortage in the 19th century, resulted in a solidarity based on a common experience, a moral point of departure for the huge Irish contributions to the 1984-85 campaign, together with pride at being the most generous contributor.

All this did not, however, lead to a better understanding of the problems since, as shown by the research, 76 percent of those interviewed thought that the most effective response to the crisis was that of Bob Geldof, the Irish organizer of the Live Aid concert.

A universally acknowledged ethical value is the duty of 'charity' widely used in campaigns that often emphasized the quantity of aid provided, praising humanitarian sentiments that were more or less directly linked to the evangelical message (in the Danish campaign, the caption to a photo-

graph of a naked child lying abandoned on a bed was: "Give them this day their daily bread"), working on the sense of guilt of citizens in 'rich' or 'exploiting' countries.

It is, however, no chance that the word 'charity' has disappeared from the European dictionary of international cooperation; this was probably because of a tacit recognition of the gravity and vastness of some situations of 'underdevelopment', for which it was no longer possible to use methodologies of a personalistic nature.

Another value that public opinion seems to want to see confirmed is the stereotyped idea of democracy that tends to reject any political organization different from the one prevailing in European countries. This was observed in the German research, in the widespread refusal to accept as typical of the African situation the only photograph (a political meeting) that gave any idea of the institutional reality of an African country.

Rather than link Africa with politics, correspondents preferred to return to the immediate aspects of the crisis: hunger, poverty, etc.

The Italian report also showed that the only political event in African countries recognized - but only just - by the mass media was that of institutional summits, usually understood as meetings between two individuals. This is as though in Italy, for example, people who spoke of 'politics' were referring only to the President of the Republic or of the Council, excluding the entire political dynamics of civilized society, its organized expressions and its representatives.

Another reason for the readiness to accept messages from the media was the public's deep-seated need to confirm its own social and cultural identity by reference to the contrasting categories of 'us' and 'them'. This way of thinking, according to English research, reached its peak in the case of Ethiopia and explained the ease with which African problems were identified with the food and military crisis in that country.

The Ethiopian famine 'victims' could be contrasted, in the campaigns organized by the newspapers, with the 'kind-hearted readers' who brought 'hope and joy'. In the news coverage, the efficiency of aid was contrasted with the "appalling chaos prevailing in the country". The contrast between 'aiders' and 'aided', 'powerful' and 'powerless', 'us' and 'them' was also a driving force behind the highly publicized Band Aid initiative and the Live Aid concert on 13 July 1985 [UK].

The same contrasting vision emerges from another gold-mine for journalism on Africa - documentaries and services about nature, the animals of the savana and primitive populations - whose success bears witness to the need for a reconfirmation of the 'self' as opposed to the 'other', to the 'different': Africa is seen as a place where lions still prowl, where civilization has not yet arrived and people live in the wild [IT].

Every culture, every human being, needs a certain amount of 'otherness': only by rejecting 'the other' can 'the self' be confirmed. If Western civilization has not given us the opportunity to live in a healthy

and simple way, the image of Africa meets the desire for something different combined with a confirmation of our own tranquil lives. Fears about the economy and the social and environmental future become less acute when seen against the background of hunger and disaster in Africa. The image of Africa therefore expresses European needs today far more than it reflects the African life and reality, confirming that we are still needed: the 'primitiveness' attributed to these populations means that 'we' should help them economically and culturally [DEN].

2. Stereotypes and aid

The collection of clichés underlying the European perception of Africa, although it may inspire generosity, is less useful, or frankly counter-productive, so far as making any effective contribution to the development of the countries most exposed to the risks of 'underdevelopment' is concerned. In the first place, the reassuring effect of the biased and negative images put across by the emergency campaign often makes people disinclined to receive any further information or make any further donation. The stereotype of starving child or suffering mother and child, because of its profound hold on the imagination and fears of the European citizen, serves as the final confirmation of his way of seeing Africa, and makes him deaf to more complex messages. The emotional response created by this type of information in fact imposes a strain on the donor, and this emotional tension is finally released with the donation, without any further interest in the results achieved. The stress suffered could also lead many people to avoid involvement in similar situations in the future [DEN].

Aid provided in the form of 'charity' often does nothing more than make the aided population increasingly dependent. "Many Africans today", observed Zanotelli in an interview granted to Italian researchers, "do not feel well-fed if they have not eaten wheaten bread, a product alien to local culture". If we are to tackle the real problems without interpreting them in accordance with our own scale of values - or, worse still, the economic interests of the donor countries - we must first shed our comfortable assumptions, for example, the value of 'charity', since the more we give the less we contribute to solving the problems. Expensive and sophisticated equipment often proves useless or counter-productive. "For example", continued Zanotelli, "if the Africans need hoes it is pointless to give them tractors, even if Italian companies have surpluses they can't place. Small sums of money for grassroots communities already on the road to self-development are far more useful than large sums splashed around indiscriminately: too much money fouls up the development process".

The temporary response of the image carried by the mass media to the expectations of the public should not, however, allow us to conclude that "this is how things are" and it is best they remain so. An understanding of the conflicting methods and merits of the collection of "easy" funds, and the development policies of European and African NGOs, should pave the way for reconciliation of strategic objectives and tactical choices.

First of all, media coverage of Africa should be more concerned with the concept of development. Some European reports indicate that the problem lies in the 'mythology' of development [IRE], in the idea of the

industrialized countries being 'higher up' on a hypothetical ladder of cultural values that everyone is climbing. This view excludes attitudes and activities that could give rise to technical, political and cultural exchanges between countries of the North and countries of the South, bringing the problem back into the realms of 'charity' or even 'aid'.

The subject of self-development, background for most European NGOs activities, finds no echo in the mass media and even tends to disappear in fund-raising campaigns organized by NGOs for emergency aid projects.

The cultural background to African life is systematically ignored, which means that the European public sees Africa people in preconceived setting which has nothing to do with their local reality. This certainly reduces the substance of Western culture itself, which continues to fuel itself without any possibility of comparison; also - and this is certainly the most disturbing aspect - it prevents any understanding of African events.

Rational analysis of African problems is conspicuous by its absence from the information put out by the mass media. Some research has shown that both the mass media and the NGOs assume the existence of two distinct target groups for news about Africa: the general public, which is governed by the laws of the channels putting out 'negative' news and disinformation; and a limited and more educated segment, whose interest in African problems - or more generally, in the Third World - is not governed by these laws. The differentiation, however, seems mainly intended to facilitate the editorial work of newspapers or television, or even the NGO information networks, since there is no evidence that the general public is not interested in self-development or the more vital aspects of African society, or in the mechanisms governing international relations. The complexity and difficulty of some subjects and of the historical and contingent causes underlying the situation of the African people cannot be resovled by ignorance, silence and disinformation.

The fact that Africans have no say in information about Africa - a fact that emerges from the European research as a whole - minimizes the chances of arriving at an image of Africa closer to reality and consonant with interdependence. If Africa is newsworthy only insofar as it concerns Europe; if its public and political vitality is reduced to coups d'état, to external cooperation activities or the holding of political summits; if only Westerners and expatriates are invited to talk about Africa, the image we shall have of it will be only our own, further and further away from the real Africa, a continent brimming with life and culture.