

Send Them Your Heart:
USA for Africa, The Eritrea Shallow Wells Project, and a Song That Defined
American Pop Culture

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In one room, 46 of the top musical artists of the 1980s gathered together. First up to the microphone were Lionel Richie and Stevie Wonder. Each taking turns, the two began singing one of the most iconic songs in American popular culture, starting with a call to action:

*There comes a time when we heed a certain call
When the world must come together as one
There are people dying
And it's time to lend a hand to life
The greatest gift of all¹*

Recorded on the night of January 28, 1985, and released March 7 of the same year, the single “We are the World” was born.² At the time of its creation, the song was a hit, selling more than 20 million copies and topping the charts for four weeks from April to May.³ In the music video, artist after artist appeared, recalling stories of children in need and conveying a sense of hope for the world.⁴ But why did this song resonate so deeply with American listeners at the time?

During the 1980s, Ethiopia, a country seemingly on the periphery of American consciousness, experienced a devastating famine. This famine would become one of the worst humanitarian crises of the twentieth century and created a sense of urgency among the international community. Initially, cries for aid appeared in Britain. Singer Bob Geldof, of the Boomtown Rats, felt especially called to the crisis and created the single “Do They Know it’s Christmas?” in order to raise awareness and funds for Africans in need. This effort quickly led to the Live Aid concert at Wembley Stadium on July 13, 1985, which also spread news of the famine in Ethiopia globally. American artists were equally inspired by the stories from Africa

¹ USAforAfricaVEVO, “U.S.A. for Africa – We Are the World,” April 12, 2010, music video, 7:11, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AjkUyX0rVw>.

² “‘We Are the World’: A Minute-by-Minute Breakdown,” *Rolling Stone*, last modified March 6, 2015, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/we-are-the-world-a-minute-by-minute-breakdown-54619/>.

³ “‘We Are the World’ at 30: Where are they now?” CNN, last modified January 25, 2015, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/01/28/entertainment/feat-we-are-the-world-30-years-where-are-they-now/index.html>.

⁴ See appendix for full lyrics.

and Geldof's commitment to aid. What resulted was the organization United Support of Artists for Africa, better known as *USA for Africa*. This group was instrumental in creating and marketing the "We Are the World" single. By using powerhouse vocalists, such as Wonder and Richie, *USA for Africa* projected its goals through a catchy tune to an enormous audience. Over time, they raised more than \$100 million dollars for causes throughout Africa.⁵

While the dollar amount raised is impressive, one question that lingers is where the money actually went. Is the legacy of *USA for Africa*'s commitment to the Ethiopian people just a pop song, or was it actual, positive change in the lives of those living in poverty? The song that defined the musical experience of an entire generation and still permeates popular memory, begs the question of whether the concrete actions *USA for Africa* made their mission a reality. In the broader context of foreign aid during the 1980s, *USA for Africa* was relatively successful in its endeavors. Looking back, there will always be room for improvement, however, the group provided necessary aid and worked diligently positive change in the world. More importantly, however, *USA for Africa* jumpstarted the United States government's response to the famine by first igniting interest in the minds of American citizens.

A study of *USA for Africa* helps illustrate the history and consequences of foreign aid. Contemporary criticism of international assistance dominates the literature on foreign aid and appears most often in books or academic journals with an emphasis on political science. However, a historical approach to aid demonstrates some organizations were able to make a positive contribution to those in need and helped change the way people think about aid. Western society's impact in Africa specifically is complicated and needs to be assessed in order for organizations to be better prepared for future actions or involvement. Governmental actions are

⁵ USA for Africa, accessed November 29, 2018. <http://usaforafrica.org/>.

also critically assessed more often than those of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Many of these groups are heralded as being able to do no wrong, but they can also be problematic. An analysis of *USA for Africa* after the success of “We Are the World” can help fill in the gaps of existing literature and trace the funds raised to the actual work that was achieved. Moreover, *USA for Africa*’s role as one of the first major forms of celebrity aid is an important story that can help explain aid as a contributor to popular culture.

This paper begins by exploring the roots of the Ethiopian famine in order to contextualize further the extreme need for assistance. The timeline for the famine is key as is a discussion of its causes. Here, authors Thomas Keneally, Peter Gill, and others provide helpful insight to the politics of crisis. Also included is an evaluation of foreign aid itself. Literature on aid often falls into two distinct camps. One side hails international aid’s immense capabilities for good. Authors on the other side are deeply skeptical and argue that aid often does more harm than good for a country. Works by Jeffrey Sachs, William Easterly, and others help evaluate the state of foreign aid and act as a guide to see how *USA for Africa* fits within these perspectives. Have opinions regarding aid dramatically shifted since the organization’s inception? Could *USA for Africa* exist today under these conditions?

In addition to the general discussion of famine and aid, a study from InterAction provides more information about *USA for Africa* as an institution and its impact. This study provides some insight on whether the aid community at the time saw the organization as effective. In this essay I draw especially on the USA for Africa Records, 1986-1989, located at UCLA to explore the organization’s impact. *USA for Africa* donated its materials to the Special Collections Department of the Charles E. Young Research Library in 1990 and 1991. This paper examines grant proposals, rejections, and other to answer questions about *USA for Africa*’s legacy. I argue

that *USA for Africa* made a positive impact on the aid community—and based on the grants they chose to fund (Africare Project 03004) or reject—the organization was able to support grassroots efforts and inspire lasting change in Ethiopia beyond the famine. Although foreign aid has justly received ample criticism, studies of organizations such as *USA for Africa* and their history can lead to improvements in the future.

Background: The Ethiopian Famine

Although “We Are the World” was released in 1985, evidence of the horrific Ethiopian famine existed for much longer. The famine is estimated to have lasted from roughly 1983 to 1985, during which close to one million people died of starvation.⁶ However, signs of distress emerged as early as the mid-1970s, when the country experienced a similar food shortage. This smaller crisis is important to the story of the 1980s, because it provided a stepping stone for future political leadership to implement new policies, negatively impacting its citizens.

Author Thomas Keneally details the connection between these two events in his book, *Three Famines: Starvation and Politics*. Beginning with the 1970s, Keneally describes the environmental and political causes of Ethiopia’s first major food shortage. In terms of nature’s triggers, the explanation is simple. From 1973 to 1974, farmers in the Ethiopian highlands experienced rain failure, proving detrimental to their *teff* crops. Additionally, an infestation of army worms affected flocks in the lowlands.⁷ However, the political causes are much more complex and impactful on this and the latter famine. At the time, Ethiopia was ruled by Haile Selassie, an emperor who had been in power since 1930. According to Keneally, Emperor

3. ⁶ Peter Gill, *A Year in the Death of Africa: Politics, Bureaucracy and the Famine* (London: Paldin, 1986),

⁷ Thomas Keneally, *Three Famines: Starvation and Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011), 23-24.

Selassie was oppressive and his ruling style was a major contributor to the famine. For example, in order to repress political dissidents, the emperor chose to starve specific regions of the country known to harbor rebellious subjects.⁸ Additionally, Selassie kept city dwellers ignorant of the hunger plaguing rural populations and refused to let journalists travel to the most affected regions.⁹ Because of this, many people outside Ethiopia were uninformed about those suffering and could not offer assistance. This lack of aid would be one of the major differences between the 1970s famine and that of the 1980s.

During the mid 1970s, a group of rebels unsatisfied with Selassie ousted the government leadership. From this group, Mengistu Haile Mariam rose to power. This change would prove devastating for the Ethiopian people. Most scholars point to Mengistu's leadership as the most responsible for the 1980s famine. According to Kristin Urbach's article, the Derg government and Mengistu's quest for power purposefully created the famine. Calculated military strategies among other policies negatively affected human rights, leading many into suffering.¹⁰ While the environmental factors were similar to that of the 1970s, the Mengistu era government played a more integrated role in food distribution policy than Emperor Selassie's.

The Ethiopian famine may have happened regardless of this action, due to drought, but there were several miscalculations and decisions made by administrative powers that aggravated the suffering of the local people. First, actions taken by Mengistu against Eritrea may have led to a higher likelihood of famine.¹¹ At the time, Ethiopia and Eritrea were experiencing deep conflict regarding Eritrea's desire to become an independent nation. Guerilla warfare and military

⁸ Keneally, *Three Famines*, 102.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁰ Kristin A. Urbach, "Famine as a human rights violation: the case of Ethiopia and the Great Famine of the 1980s," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Human Rights Law* (2006): 27.

¹¹ Keneally, *Three Famines*, 119.

assaults were constant, and the fighting did not appear to be ending soon.¹² Mengistu wanted to end the Eritrean revolt, leading him to kill many political enemies, displacing many members from both nations.¹³ Because of this disruption, access to food became much harder, especially with Mengistu using this aid as a tool against his political enemies. The second major issue that may have increased the likelihood of famine was Mengistu's resettlement project. The purpose behind the project, was for Mengistu to create this idea of the "perfect" state.¹⁴ However, the resulting humanitarian crises exhibited that the villagization was far from close to achieving this idea. Collectivizing people together made populations far less capable of growing and surviving on a specific crop.¹⁵

In 1974, the Ethiopian Derg, officially the Provisional Military Government of Socialist Ethiopia, created the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) in order to be better prepared for future humanitarian crises.¹⁶ The RRC became a key organization during the famine in the 1980s, however, the RRC's implementation did not go as smoothly as hoped. It was clear from the beginning that the RRC was ill equipped to deal with this national emergency.¹⁷ Peter Gill has equated the organization to a licensed beggar, encouraged by the Mengistu regime to raise funds from the international community.¹⁸ While it is normal for countries to seek assistance among the international community, many authors question the true intentions of the RRC. Keneally notes that the group's connection to a government known for choosing who receives relief based on politics was a major problem for aid agencies. As Keneally states, "For voluntary

¹² "Eritrea profile-Timeline," BBC News, last modified November 15, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13349395>.

¹³ Keneally, *Three Famines*, 119.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 184.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁶ "Humanitarian Governance in Ethiopia," Humanitarian Practice Network, last modified July 2009, <https://odihpn.org/magazine/humanitarian-governance-in-ethiopia/>.

¹⁷ Keneally, *Three Famines*, 264.

¹⁸ Gill, *A Year in the Death of Africa*, 10.

agencies throughout the world, Mengistu's famine and war raised the question of how far an NGO should go in cooperating with a tyrannous regime."¹⁹ Issues such as this would provide *USA for Africa* with many ethical questions on how their aid would be distributed in Ethiopia and other countries. In line with Keneally and Gill's line of thinking, the organization was aware of political leadership's impact on the famine in 1985. In the words of the Board of Directors' update brochure to donors, "The holocaust of the African famine was not just some cruel hoax of nature that happened spontaneously, catching an unsuspecting world unaware. It had been there for a very long time developing methodically."²⁰ Despite this fact, however, *USA for Africa* decided it was more important to act and send aid than to sit idly by.

Over time, the case of struggling Ethiopians became extremely dire. However, even as images of starving families leaked little by little to the West, help seemed to be far on the horizon. It is clear that assistance from the United States and the United Nations could have helped turn the tide against famine much sooner, saving thousands of lives. In 1984 alone, the United States government gave \$27.39 billion dollars' worth of aid globally, comprising just 1.5% of its total budget.²¹ However, many scholars agree that both institutions held back from offering their full support to the African country. In the case of the United States, Gill notes that the fight against communism played a major role in how the superpower approached Ethiopia. The US was duly criticized by the *Washington Post*, for example, for not endorsing Ethiopia's close ties to the Soviet Union.²² Peter Schraeder reinforces this idea, arguing that the United

¹⁹ Keneally, *Three Famines*, 282.

²⁰ USA for Africa, *Three Year Report*, (Los Angeles: USA for Africa, 1988), p. 2, Box 118, Folder 4, USA for Africa Records (Collection 1669), Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA (hereafter cited as USA for Africa Records).

²¹ Congressional Research Service, "U.S. Foreign Aid Since 1977," *New York Times*, October 3, 2011, <http://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/interactive/2011/10/04/us/politics/us-foreign-aid-since-1977.html?ref=politics>.

²² Gill, *A Year in the Death of Africa*, 58.

States saw the region purely as a geographically strategic place to control the spread of communism on the continent.²³ While the UN did offer limited support through organizations such as UNICEF, it could have done more in 1984 initially to send aid. According to Gill the UN had failed to understand the problems afflicting Northern Ethiopia, the region hit hardest by the famine.²⁴

Eventually, as more footage from the famine entered the West's news outlets, thanks mostly to journalist Michael Burek's groundbreaking broadcast in October 1984, regular people across the world decided that enough was enough. In a time before social media, Burek's rare footage managed to air on 400 television stations worldwide.²⁵ News reporting was highly regulated and staged by the Mengistu government, so for images of famine to make it to the UK changed the game. It was time for the people to shake their own governments from complacency and take matters into their own hands. Generous private endeavors such as Bob Geldof's Live Aid, and eventually musician Harry Belafonte's *USA for Africa*, stepped up to ignite passion over the issue and encourage audiences and listeners to catalyze their governments into action.²⁶ The age of celebrity aid entered full swing, and the famine in Ethiopia became an unforgettable moment in time. The famine became every part a pop cultural memory in the case of "We Are the World" and a reevaluation of international relations.

²³ Peter J. Schrader, "The End of the Cold War and U.S. Foreign Policy toward the Horn of Africa in the Immediate Post-Siyaad and Post-Mengistu Eras," *Northeast African Studies* 1, no. 1 (March 1994): 91.

²⁴ Gill, *A Year in the Death of Africa*, 49.

²⁵ Amelia Butterly, "Thirty years of talking about famine in Ethiopia – why's nothing changed?" *BBC*, November 11, 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/article/34776109/thirty-years-of-talking-about-famine-in-ethiopia---whys-nothing-changed>.

²⁶ Keneally, *Three Famines*, 270.

The Organization: USA for Africa

When the “We Are the World” recording finished and the participating artists celebrated in their achievement, the next challenge faced by the event’s creators was how to administer the record’s potential royalties. In just a short amount of time, on February 13, 1985, United Support of Artists for Africa (*USA for Africa*) was born.²⁷ The Board of Directors—a mix of celebrities, music producers, doctors, and other professionals— led the “non-profit public benefit corporation” to aid Africans in need.²⁸ While Ethiopia was the country that initially drove *USA for Africa*’s creation, the organization had a broader scope of counties they chose to assist, focusing on those found in the Sahel, Horn, and Southern Africa.²⁹ These countries included: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Ethiopia, Niger, Mauritania, Mozambique, Senegal, Sudan, Angola, Tanzania, and Uganda.

It is clear from all sources that *USA for Africa* wanted to be very mindful about their activities on the continent. This can be seen first in their decision to integrate themselves into the larger aid community. In a letter to RRC Deputy Commissioner Taye Germu, *USA for Africa*’s Executive Director Marty Rogol stated that instead of imposing their own ideas abroad, the organization asked for the United Nations and InterAction’s (another NGO) most urgent needs.³⁰ By building a close relationship with the world’s top agencies first, a mutual reliance formed with other organizations, helping *USA for Africa* connect further with local groups.³¹ *USA for Africa* also demonstrated its commitment to ethical practice with its decision to be a short-lived program by design, a unique endeavor for groups working in aid or assistance at the time.³² The

²⁷ Michael Scott and Mutombo Mpanya, *We Are the World: An Evaluation of Pop Aid for Africa* (Washington DC: InterAction, 1994), 3.

²⁸ Scott and Mpanya, *We Are the World*, 3.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁰ Marty Rogol to Taye Germu, February 6, 1986, Box 37, Folder 12, USA for Africa Records.

³¹ Scott and Mpanya, *We Are the World*, 132.

³² *Ibid.*, 3.

Board of Directors elaborated on this idea in a brochure they produced by stating that they vowed to only stay in business as long as they were effective.³³ Although, “effectiveness” can be interpreted in many ways, this essentially meant if the organization was still getting donations, royalties were collected from the “We Are the World” single, or if the situations abroad were so dire that they required extraordinary help from abroad.

The specific goals of *USA for Africa* evolved over time, but still adhered to a similar ethos across the board. About a year after the organization’s creation, the general goals of the program were in the short-term to save lives and in the long-term promote self-reliance in the aided communities. Additionally, the organization believed that it was important to educate the American public on why and how to end hunger.³⁴ The song “We Are the World” is essential to this last point not only in that the lyric’s themes talk about starvation, but also that its prevalence in the 1980s kept the issue on listener’s heart for an extended period of time. An illustrative example of this idea is demonstrated in the repetition of the chorus which reads:

*We are the world
We are the children
We are the ones who make a brighter day, so let’s start giving
There’s a choice we are making
We’re saving our own lives
It’s true we’ll make a better day, just you and me*³⁵

Here, *USA for Africa* makes it clear that the power to stop hunger is not only in the hands of the average American, but also a responsibility of the entire globe. Although the self-reliance piece is not noted in the song, a notion of reciprocity is evident.

³³ USA for Africa, *Three Year Report*, (Los Angeles: USA for Africa, 1988), p. 6, Box 118, Folder 4, USA for Africa Records.

³⁴ “Reorganization,” Index to USA/FA Projects, Box 100, Folder 6, 1985, USA for Africa Records.

³⁵ USAforAfricaVEVO, “U.S.A. for Africa – We Are the World,” April 12, 2010, music video, 7:11, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AjkUyX0rVw>.

While the initial goals of the organization were broad and optimistic, the stated mission of *USA for Africa* by 1988 was much more specific and descriptive. First, the organization vowed, “to make hunger and homelessness in the US, and famine and poverty in the developing world, unacceptable to everyone.” At this point, the Hands Across America program was established to fight hunger at home; however, Africa was still the main focus. Second, *USA for Africa* felt called, “to take action to reduce the causes and consequences of hunger and deprivation throughout the world.” Third, the group wanted, “to demonstrate the power and importance of individual participation and collective action in solving the problems of our time.”³⁶ While *USA for Africa* did not solve the problem of hunger in its entirety, its power to catalyze the American government should be recognized for its success. By using celebrity participation, *USA for Africa* inspired American citizens to act, donate, and listen to issues affecting each global citizen. Additionally, while global issues surrounding starvation or poverty were not erased, the organization raised awareness of countries in need. Moreover, inspired by the consumer culture of the 1980s, the organization initiated a new type of aid model that emphasized helping by purchasing. In the minds of Americans one record equaled to a life saved, or direct participation in the international aid community.

Over the course of its existence, *USA for Africa* funded a mix of relief, recovery, and development programs. In order to do so, the organization partnered with a multitude of multinational and private agencies as well as African national organizations. By working across sectors, this NGO had the opportunity to fund projects with an emphasis from the environment to grassroots movements.³⁷ This scope is impressive and in order to send the correct amount of

³⁶ USA for Africa, *Three Year Report*, (Los Angeles: USA for Africa, 1988), p. 3, Box 118, Folder 4, USA for Africa Records.

³⁷ Scott and Mpanya, *We Are the World*, interaction, 9.

funding, *USA for Africa* followed a specific process. Starting broadly by looking at the countries in the most need, a selection committee decided what issues affected each individual country the most (in conjunction with the UN). Moreover, the organization wanted its donations to fit within the recovery plans for that individual local government.³⁸ From the list compiled during this search, *USA for Africa* then chose which groups to recommend funding.³⁹

USA for Africa was open to individual organizations writing its headquarters asking for grants as well. In this grant writing process and search, USA for Africa specifically wanted to support projects that focused on the specific needs of the local people as well as ones that were economically feasible.⁴⁰ This latter point is especially important to an organization that relies on donations and does not have an endless supply of resources. While the money the NGO had to give away was large, it had to make smart choices on grants that would have the largest and longest lasting impact. Here are some of the guidelines *USA for Africa* chose to adhere to. First, in relation to finances, it was more cost effective to cost-share with other agencies, so this was a priority. Second, the projects chosen “should operate at the village or micro-levels.” Third, “the project must address basic needs, reach a significant amount of people in the needy area, and help them become self-sufficient.”⁴¹ This concept of “self-sufficiency and institution building in Africa, providing funds to strengthen African voluntary agencies” became much more important in *USA for Africa*’s final stages, setting up for a future without the organization.⁴² However, it is important to note that these former goals were created in the beginning stages of *USA for Africa*’s creation, around the end of 1985. The grants addressed in this paper will provide

³⁸ Marty Rogol to Taye Germu, February 6, 1986, Box 37, Folder 12, USA for Africa Records.

³⁹ “Relief,” Index to USA/FA Projects, 1985, Box 100, Folder 6, USA for Africa Records.

⁴⁰ “1985 Overhead,” Index to USA/FA Projects, 1985, Box 100, Folder 6, USA for Africa Records.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Scott and Mpanya, *We Are the World*, iii.

evidence and insight as to whether the organization achieved or adhered to these ideas about aid. With a plan like this laid out for distributing funds, was the organization successful in making meaningful change in Africa?

The causes *USA for Africa* chose to endorse are important to understand the organization, but what was the actual financial status of the NGO? The mix of memoranda, financial statements, and updates to donors leave a complicated trail of clues; however, by the end of 1988 the organization had accumulated and donated upwards of \$40,000,000.⁴³ Throughout the process, *USA for Africa* made it clear its “plan for distributing millions of dollars throughout Africa and the US intentionally always walked a fine line of responding to immediate need, while seizing every chance to get at the root of the problem-building toward long term change”⁴⁴ and to do so in the most effective way was to “spend it right.”⁴⁵

One of the first ways *USA for Africa* chose to spend the money in “the right way” was to keep overhead costs as minimal as possible. Both Ken Kragen and Martin Rogol, key members of the Board of Directors, mentioned several times throughout their personal papers and memorandums that their organization was under immense scrutiny from other aid organizations, so it was crucial to spend little on general operations. In the 1985 Index to *USA for Africa* projects, as of November 30 of that year, just under \$500,000 was spent on overhead. The board had approved a total of \$650,000, so they underspent slightly in the first year. According to the organization’s calculations, the percentage of funds this comprised was just one percent of the total.⁴⁶ Members of the Board did mention that this was too little to operate to the best of their

⁴³ USA for Africa, *Three Year Report*: financial report, (Los Angeles: USA for Africa, 1988), p. 5, Box 118, Folder 4, USA for Africa Records.

⁴⁴ USA for Africa, *Three Year Report*, (Los Angeles: USA for Africa, 1988), p. 1, Box 118, Folder 4, USA for Africa Records.

⁴⁵ Ken Kragen to All participants in the “We Are the World” project/USA for Africa, December 31, 1985, Index to USA/FA Projects, Box 100, Folder 6, USA for Africa Records.

⁴⁶ “1985 Overhead,” Index to USA/FA Projects, 1985, Box 100, Folder 6, USA for Africa Records.

ability. However, for the first year it appeared better to understand what the organization was capable before over spending.

While Hands Across America, a benefit event for hunger in America, became an integral part of *USA for Africa's* donation efforts, Africa was still the emphasis for funding. This is illustrated by the way the organization decided to split the “We Are the World” royalties. 90% of funds were directed toward Africa, while just 10% went to American projects.⁴⁷ As donations, or “income,” fluctuated overtime the cumulative unrestricted assets given in grants to programs in each continent represented a more 70/30 split. For example, the cumulative (unrestricted) grants allocated to African programs circa 1988 was \$46,312,426 and was \$20,705,608 to domestic programs.⁴⁸ *USA for Africa* was fairly open with their financial statements. They kept detailed financial records, which are preserved in the special collections at UCLA. While most of these statements were used for internal purposes, information sent to donors was detailed. However, while there is a plethora of information, putting together a definitive, complete financial record is still difficult since records span several years and are found scattered among grant receipts, balance sheets, and memorandums. *USA for Africa* wanted others to know of the progress they were making abroad and at home, and while it is easy to be skeptical of charity organizations spearheaded by celebrities and not experts, this group constantly tried to prove themselves as serious contenders in the larger aid community.

⁴⁷ USA for Africa, *Three Year Report*, (Los Angeles: USA for Africa, 1988), p. 7, Box 118, Folder 4, USA for Africa Records.

⁴⁸ USA for Africa, *Three Year Report*: financial report, (Los Angeles: USA for Africa, 1988), p. 6, Box 118, Folder 4, USA for Africa Records.

Foreign Aid: A Contentious Debate

There are many opinions inside and outside the aid community regarding the impact foreign assistance makes. In order to understand *USA for Africa*'s direct interaction with the aid community, it is important to first understand aid in a broader context. First it is helpful to understand the commonly held beliefs held about aid in the academic community, which usually fall into two camps: one optimistic and favorable to aid and the other deeply skeptical. Two scholars who typify this debate are economists Jeffrey Sachs and William Easterly. While the works referenced by these authors were both written in the early 2000s, they use many historical examples of aid to draw their conclusions. Because of this, the themes and inferences made by both works can be used in assessing *USA for Africa* and aid to Africa generally during the 1980s.

The optimistic opinion on aid is best represented by Jeffrey Sachs's book *The End of Poverty: How We Can Make It Happen in Our Lifetime*. Sachs originally wrote this book in response to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were created by the United Nations in 2000, forming a blueprint to dramatically reduce poverty by the year 2015.⁴⁹ As a proponent of the MDGs, Sachs argued that the "key to ending extreme poverty is to enable the poorest of the poor to get their foot on the ladder of development."⁵⁰ In his opinion, a needs-based approach is essential in order to uplift a population most effectively.⁵¹ It is clear from his writing that Sachs believes it is possible to end poverty or at least live up to the MDG goals by 2015, but what does the author mean by extreme poverty?

⁴⁹ "News on Millennium Development Goals," United Nations, accessed March 1, 2019, <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>.

⁵⁰ Jeffrey D. Sachs, *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities of Our Time* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 244.

⁵¹ Ibid.

According to Sachs, extreme poverty should be the key target of aid organizations. As of 2005, about one-sixth of humanity is living under this condition, struggling for survival on a daily basis with minimal means to do so.⁵² Often the economic stagnation of a country contributes to this poverty problem for several reasons. First, the formation of a poverty trap prevents families from saving for the future, keeping generations in the same financial situation with seemingly no hope for the future. Second, the physical geography of a country can provide specific challenges such as a susceptibility to drought or lack of natural resources. Third, a government trap can contribute to ongoing poverty if a government lacks the ability to pay for infrastructure, which usually happens because of government corruption or a lot of debt. Other causes for this stagnation also include cultural barriers, geopolitics, lack of innovation, and a demographic trap. The extreme poverty that emerges from these situations provides a unique challenge to attempt to fix, and has been a longstanding issue. According to Sachs, between 1981 and 2001 the number of extreme poor rose in sub-Saharan Africa specifically.⁵³ The case of Ethiopia is representative of this trend, with the 1980s famine providing an excellent example of the challenges geography and government control create.

In addition to the causes of extreme poverty, Sachs also discusses the response international agencies have taken in the past to combat the issue of sending aid to countries struggling with a large population of extreme poor. According to Sachs, he has “increasingly understood the yawning gap between what the rich world claims to be doing to help the poor and what it is actually doing.”⁵⁴ One example of this trend is the impact of the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) structural adjustment programs, a form of “free market” economic

⁵² Sachs, *The End of Poverty*, 24.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

policy reform. These types of programs had good intentions, but in reality did more harm than good in the 1980s. In addition, what the West claimed to be doing in places like Africa on the exterior did not match up with the reality of their actions behind the scenes. For instance, as the Cold War was heating up, countries such as the United States sent in agencies like the CIA to meddle in politics, but not invest in long-term economic development.⁵⁵ While the actions of these agencies may not have been obvious to the creators of *USA for Africa*, their frustrations were valid. Looking back, an individual non-governmental program during the 1980s would need to be the force to exact actual change globally.

In response to the pattern that aid has taken in the past, the conclusion Sachs makes on the state of aid is to ensure that aid is not just money, but an actual investment for the future. Not only are individual investments in a population key, but also investing in sustainable development and creating systems of mutual accountability.⁵⁶ Some of these ideas are relatively new developments in the realm of foreign aid; however, based on the mission and goals articulated by *USA for Africa* in the 1980s, a similar ethos was infused into the programs funded by the organization.⁵⁷ It is also important to assess how the group fits into the attitudes of the skeptical opinions on aid.

William Easterly's book *The White Man's Burden Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good* takes a very critical stance on aid and on Sachs's argument. Easterly is cynical about how aid has been distributed thus far in history, writing that, "it is heartbreaking that global society has evolved a highly efficient way to get entertainment to

⁵⁵ Sachs, *The End of Poverty*, 190.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁵⁷ "Reorganization," Index to USA/FA Projects, 1985, USA for Africa Records.

rich adults and children, while it can't get twelve-cent medicine to dying poor children."⁵⁸ When talking about the patterns of aid distribution in the past, Easterly diverges from Sachs by claiming that there are two distinct groups in the implementation of aid. First, there are planners who "announce good intentions but do not motivate anyone to carry them out."⁵⁹ Second, there are searchers who assess what need is in demand, accept responsibility for their actions, and do their research from the ground up.⁶⁰ Throughout his book, Easterly makes it clear that searchers are what people should strive to be. However, looking back on the history of different organizations, it is difficult to be this black and white about aid. By Easterly's standards, *USA for Africa* takes on both characteristics. On the side of the planner, *USA for Africa* announced an extremely ambitious plan to raise awareness and funds for the Ethiopian famine. At the beginning, the song, t-shirts, and fundraising efforts may have been idealistic; however, as the organization grew and collected millions of dollars for distribution, *USA for Africa* also developed characteristics of the searcher. Here, *USA for Africa* took care to research the grants they chose to fund, emphasized the importance of supporting people on the local level, and respected the time they needed to end their efforts when they were no longer needed.⁶¹ There were some areas where *USA for Africa* could have improved, like having more direct African representation on their board of directors; however, no organization is perfect. *USA for Africa* walks a fine line between the two groups Easterly describes.

The planner and searcher distinction is a complicated one, but throughout his book Easterly continues to demonstrate more cynicism about aid. In direct opposition to Sachs's

⁵⁸ William Easterly, *The White Man's Burden: Why The West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 4.

⁵⁹ Easterly, *The White Man's Burden*, 5.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶¹ USA for Africa, *Three Year Report*, (Los Angeles: USA for Africa, 1988), pp. 1-2, Box 118, Folder 4, USA for Africa Records.

model, Easterly calls out the West's implementation of aid. For one, the MDGs to Easterly are a grandiose plan to end poverty.⁶² In relation to the motivations governments and organizations have to fund international assistance programs, Easterly emphasizes the transition from colonialism by stating that the, "White Man's Burden emerged from the West's self-pleasing fantasy that 'we' were the chosen ones to save the rest."⁶³ "Self-pleasing" is an extreme way of putting it. Yes, there are some legacies of colonialism that have created certain systems of oppression or uplift certain privileges; however, it is difficult to conclude that all aid is to fulfill some sort of savior's complex. The reality is that there is a population of extreme poor in the world that need assistance. To the average person, it is not a crazy idea to believe that there are good people in the world with good intentions, who do want to assist others not because it is their "burden" but that it is actually the right thing to do.

The ideas Easterly includes in his book are generally negative and call out Sachs's approach to aid directly. However, both authors share similar ideas when it comes to the focus aid should have. That focus is about local, specific, and grassroots movements. In Easterly's opinion aid agencies should focus on a specific problem in a particular country rather than operation as an agency responsible for everything aid related.⁶⁴ *USA for Africa* represents this idea in how they operated as an organization, looking for issues unique to each country they worked in and providing assistance in that way instead of just a one-size-fits-all aid program. An aspect to aid organizations which needs mentioning that Easterly emphasizes in his book and Sachs did not is the need for accountability. According to *White Man's Burden*, aid should be more responsible for its actions through evaluation.⁶⁵ By Sach's and Easterly's standards *USA*

⁶² Easterly, *The White Man's Burden*, 11.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 195.

for Africa excelled in this aspect by reaching out to InterAction, an alliance of NGOs committed to working with the world's poor, to assess how their efforts to support Ethiopia and other African countries impacted the region. Many people in the world are skeptical, like Easterly, about the effect that aid can have on a population. The fact that *USA for Africa* was bold enough to have their finances assessed demonstrates a need to be respected and a genuine commitment to development.

Scholars have also closely examined the role of food aid specifically. Although at the end of *USA for Africa's* tenure grants covered several issues from health to the environment, problems surrounding drought and starvation are what initially drew in their interest. A study written by Nathalie Ferrière and Akiko Suwa-Eisenmann asks whether food aid disrupts the local food market enough to hurt a country in the long term. The researchers used Ethiopia as a case study because the country is on the world's top aid recipients. In the past, food aid used to be a one-size-fits-all transfer, and because of this many scholars worried that this aid could negatively impact production and sales. Additionally, a fear prevailed that repeated aid would create dependency and move customers away from buying indigenous foods. This fear is valid; however, Ferrière and Suwa-Eisenmann's study demonstrated that food aid only had a slight negative impact and did not undermine the utility of aid.⁶⁶ One area that did show concern was the impact of political connections at the local level. Here, the researchers illustrate the same issues Keneally and Gill mention in their works, that allegiance to a certain party did play a role in who did or did not receive aid. In the scheme of things, there was little to no overall impact. Thus, *USA for Africa's* contributions to food aid through organizations such as UNICEF or Africare were able to successfully stop hunger for some Ethiopians. But the issues surrounding

⁶⁶ Nathalie Ferrière and Akiko Suwa-Eisenmann, "Does Food Aid Disrupt Local Food Market? Evidence from Rural Ethiopia," *World Development* 76 (December 2015): 114-131.

politics is represented in the organizations general policy to support self-sufficient and infrastructure focused programs over direct food aid.

A study written by Nathan Nunn and Nancy Qian argues that food aid had a more negative impact, however, in their article "US Food Aid and Civil Conflict." In this paper the authors contend that food aid from America is directly connected to an increased incidence of conflict as well as an increase in its duration. This conflict might arise from the selective distribution of aid.⁶⁷ In the case of Ethiopia, it is hard to say whether or not food aid is a direct influencer of the conflict they experienced. Nonetheless, *USA for Africa's* contribution to aid in the country was able to help some populations survive and continue to build a better future for their country.

The works *USA for Africa* funded and completed illustrate a story of support and positive change. However, this organization, and many like it during the 1980s, walked a very fine line between telling the story of those in need and misrepresenting Africa to the general public. Yes, lives were saved by donations made to *USA for Africa*, but some advertisements risked perpetuating the stereotype that Africa was always helpless and hopeless. In his work, *Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind*, Kurtis Keim argues that Americans often lump images of Africa into categories that are dangerous and exploitive. For instance, the West often looks to itself as a global super power and to Africa as continent struggling and failing to finally develop.⁶⁸ These ideas have been seamlessly integrated into pop culture and American's understanding of Africa over a long period of time and have changed the way westerners react to stories such as the Ethiopian famine.

⁶⁷ Nathan Nunn and Nancy Qian, "US Food Aid and Civil Conflict," *The American Economic Review* 104, no. 6 (2014): 1630-666, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42920861>.

⁶⁸ Curtis Keim, *Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009) 9.

Charles Quist-Adade and Anita van Wyk tackle the issue of misrepresenting Africa arguing that NGOs assist in keeping Western hegemony in the globalization of Africa. This is done by aid organizations using “development pornography,” images of starving children and insufferable living conditions. NGOs turned to “poverty porn” largely during the 1980s to secure donations through mass media and popular culture. Africa is portrayed this way to justify a need for an NGOs continued presence in the region. According to the authors, “large amounts of money, goods, and time are donated by ordinary people to help re-make the so called inferior traditional lifeworlds of Africans in accordance with Western Visions.”⁶⁹ Although *USA for Africa* tried to stay away from this ethos within their organization, there is a visible difference in how they portray themselves to big donors and to the average public. Collectively throughout their annual reports to big donors, *USA for Africa* relied on open financial statements and positive messages from the Board of Directors as an appeal for members to continue sending donations.⁷⁰ Photographs of the communities being assisted are sprinkled throughout these reports. However, in comparison to materials used to advertise to the general public, generally less of these “poverty porn” images were used. Some critics may find this donation tactic is troubling. In the case of Ethiopia, visibility was essential in putting the issue of famine on the map and sending desperately needed aid. However, looking retrospectively, organizations such as *USA for Africa* could have improved their practices as to not perpetuate negative stereotypes about Africans to American audiences.

In the end, there are varying opinions on the subject of international assistance, but each converge to create a holistic view on aid which one can use to draw their own conclusions on a

⁶⁹ Charles Quist-Adade and Anita van Wyk, “The Role of NGOs in Canada and the USA in the Transformation of the Socio-Cultural Structures in Africa,” *Africa Development* 32, no. 2 (2007): 66-96.

⁷⁰ USA for Africa, *Three Year Report*, (Los Angeles: USA for Africa, 1988), Box 118, Folder 4, USA for Africa Records.

specific organization. In understanding *USA for Africa*'s potential role as a "searcher" or grassroots supporter, it is helpful to return to the organization's grant approval process. By evaluating approved and rejected grants, *USA for Africa* can be more accurately placed within the Sachs-Easterly debate and ideas about aid as a whole. In assessing a specific project chosen and funded by *USA for Africa*, it is possible to be one step closer in understanding the impact it made on global poverty. In the end, did *USA for Africa* stick to its original goals and mission of tackling issues from a ground up and sustainable approach?

Projects: Accepted and Rejected

One specific project from the *USA for Africa* collection at UCLA that sticks out as a typical example of the organization's funding procedure, is Africare Project 03004. Because the information collected on this undertaking is fairly characteristic of the other projects curated by *USA for Africa*, it acts as a good representation of the organization's overall commitment to sustainability. Additionally, this project was one of the few included in the donated collection that also has a quarterly report to follow up on the progress of a grant. Although there is no paperwork in the *USA for Africa* records that allows determination of the ultimate success of Africare Project 03004, this case is still helpful in assessing *USA for Africa*'s impact on the African continent because its selection process demonstrates its commitment to foreign aid.

Africare Project 03004, also known as the Eritrea Shallow Wells Project, was originally submitted to the *USA for Africa* offices on January 31, 1986.⁷¹ Africare, which still operates today, is a private, non-profit development and relief organization that established itself in rural

⁷¹ Africare/Ethiopia, "Eritrea Shallow Wells Project Ethiopia," January 31, 1986, Box 43, Folder 16, USA for Africa Records.

Africa in 1971.⁷² The members of the Board of Directors represented a mix of United Nations country representatives, clergymen, lawyers, United States senators, college presidents, and American physicians. The honorary chairman of the organization was Dr. Kenneth Kuanda, President of the Republic of Zambia. Beyond this top level representation, Africare operated in its early stages with a professional staff of fifty-five, two-thirds of which worked directly from Africa.⁷³ The mission of the organization was to improve, “the quality of life in rural Africa through the development of water resources, increased food production, and the delivery of health services.”⁷⁴ From the surface it is easy to see why this non-profit was drawn to assist Ethiopians during the 1980s famine. Within Ethiopia specifically, Africare established its office in 1984 and worked to distribute medicine, blankets, food supplements for women and children, and more.⁷⁵ Broadly, as an organization Africare tried to identify grassroots needs when donating its time and effort to the famine.⁷⁶ Because this is a commitment *USA for Africa* emphasized in their grant guidelines, it is clear why this project from Africare was selected.⁷⁷ Besides, sharing a similar ethos though, the Africare project had to show it was rigorous, and underwent several adjustments before final approval from *USA for Africa*. The grant proposal submitted had to detail extensively the budget, implementation, and anticipated impact of the Shallow Wells Project. Receiving funds from *USA for Africa* was competitive, and Africare Project 03004 demonstrates the extent of their competition.

⁷² Africare/Ethiopia, “Eritrea Shallow Wells Project Ethiopia,” January 31, 1986, p.10, Box 43, Folder 16, USA for Africa Records.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷⁴ William T. White, Jr. to Ron Elliott, October 10, 1986, Box 43, Folder 16, USA for Africa Records.

⁷⁵ Africare/Ethiopia, “Eritrea Shallow Wells Project Ethiopia,” January 31, 1986, p. 16, Box 43, Folder 16, USA for Africa Records.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷⁷ “Recovery and Development Guidelines and Proposal Format,” Index to USA/FA Projects, 1985, Box 100, Folder 6, USA for Africa Records.

In order to justify their project, Africare began its grant proposal with a rationale. According to the non-profit, Eritrea was chosen specifically because it was identified by the RRC and Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) as a region which would face extreme food shortages by the late 1980s, with about 630,000 people expected to need assistance.⁷⁸ In order to combat this problem, it was identified that hand dug wells used for irrigation and storage would be the best and most economical solution. The plan was to construct four wells every three months for a total of twenty-five wells in the span of about twenty months.⁷⁹ According to Africare, the end goal would be to have “25 villages...become totally self-sufficient in water supply needs.”⁸⁰ Additionally, in a broader sense, “the project would reduce the need for relief and allow the Ethiopian government to use more effectively its scarce resources for long-term development in the agricultural sector.”⁸¹

Those identified who would benefit from this program the most were farmers and people pushed into migration by drought. The wells would allow farming even during times of drought, and in the end effect the entire population of a region. Because food can continue to be produced year-round, other communities would not be burdened by an influx of starving families, putting a strain on their resources.⁸² Essentially, Africare claimed in this grant proposal that helping villages on the micro-level would have a broader impact across the entire country of Ethiopia.

In the pursuance of constructing the wells, Africare would send an expatriate engineer, but rely heavily on non-skilled labor contributed by local villagers in a “food-for-work”

⁷⁸ Africare/Ethiopia, “Eritrea Shallow Wells Project Ethiopia,” January 31, 1986, p. 1, Box 43, Folder 16, USA for Africa Records.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 2.

exchange.⁸³ Connected to its grassroots emphasis, local participation in the project was encouraged through discussions with farming associations and service cooperatives in the villages.⁸⁴ Throughout the rest of the proposal, the idea of local participation permeates the writing and appears to be extremely important to Africare. For example, in the section which details the factors contributing to the “projects sustainability,” grant writers mention that “local participation in the construction of the shallow wells by the villagers will serve to heighten the self-esteem of the villagers.”⁸⁵ In the end, through the efforts of the non-profit and villages receiving wells, it was anticipated that water would be provided for sanitation, drinking, cooking, bathing, and agriculture.

At the end of the original grant, the total request for aid came to \$169,000, about \$42,250 distributed every five months. The money would cover the cost of the expatriate engineers, labor, and materials.⁸⁶ However, this was not the final budget to be approved. In a letter dated September 3, 1986, Africare country representative William T. White, Jr. wrote *USA for Africa* liaison officer Ron Elliott to discuss the financial changes necessary before final grant approval. In the letter, White understood that Africare needed to reduce the cost of their program. For example, *USA for Africa* asked for the cost per well to be reduced from \$5,800 to \$4,500, a sizable reduction. A few of the ways proposed to make this change were to eliminate an expatriate engineer, use subsistence allowance from another project, and eliminate other direct project costs.⁸⁷ The financial statement attached to the letter demonstrates that the salary for project staff after the change still represented 19.7% of the total budget.⁸⁸ This salary portion of

⁸³ Africare/Ethiopia, “Eritrea Shallow Wells Project Ethiopia,” January 31, 1986, p. 4, Box 43, Folder 16, USA for Africa Records.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁸⁷ William T. White, Jr. to Ron Elliott, September 3, 1986, Box 43, Folder 16, USA for Africa Records.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

the finances must have been larger before the request to readjust the proposed budget. It is inferred here that *USA for Africa* was concerned with Africare's overhead costs to run their program, wanting money to be spent on more, quality wells rather than labor. This example demonstrates *USA for Africa's* strong commitment to funding projects focusing efforts on local communities rather than administration.

This financial change was eventually approved, but Africare Project 03004's story was not over. The "USA for Africa Shallow Wells Project Quarterly Report" from January to April 1987 reported some significant changes which needed to be evaluated. The report was prepared by program officer Dr. Barry J. Colley and initially responded to *USA for Africa* positively that the grant from the organization was received on December 9, 1986, for \$150,000.⁸⁹ However, the rest of the paperwork revealed several significant changes not initially anticipated by Africare employees. As described in the report, "because USA for Africa guidelines stipulate no overhead, it became very clear that the cost would be prohibitive for implementing and monitoring the project in Eritrea." In response, Africare decided to move its project to the southern region of Hararge.⁹⁰ Although this was not the initial plan, Africare respected the ethos of *USA for Africa* to maintain funding and continue to assist Ethiopians throughout the famine.

This change in region was positive for the relationship between the two charity organizations, however, the impact the project had on relations with the government of Ethiopia was difficult. In the report's assessment, it would take one full year to consummate a negotiation between Africare, the MOA, and the RRC. The government's typically slower pace for getting

⁸⁹ "USA for Africa Shallow Wells Project Quarterly Report," January--April, 30, 1987, p. 1, Box 43, Folder 16, USA for Africa Records.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

things done in comparison to the NGO made it difficult for the project to get off the ground.⁹¹ Additionally, problems of sustainability arose. Although Africare wanted real grassroots involvement, the Ethiopian food-for-work program proved too shallow and temporary to Africare officials. In the words of the report's author, "often it has been our experience that these measures only serve to incite or heighten existing local conflicts." Furthermore, the author notes that this system harbors hidden agendas and people seeking to climb the "government career structure."⁹² It is discouraging to hear these words from a non-profit organization's report, however, it is impossible to assume that every project was implemented flawlessly. What can be taken from this report, is that Africare tried to stick to its intention of creating projects truly for local populations, thinking deeply about its impact in Africa. Moreover, *USA for Africa*'s role in this interaction was to support this mission and uphold its own, similar values as well.

This accepted grant proposal is beneficial in understanding *USA for Africa*'s motivations in Africa, however, rejected grant proposals are equally as enlightening. In the rejections among the *USA for Africa* archival collection the thoughts of the grant liaisons are crystal clear and jump off the page. There is no guesswork required. One project in which these views are apparent is the evaluation of French organization Enfants Sans Frontieres's (SOS) submission for consideration. SOS was an aid organization that previously provided medical care to refugee camps in Africa. Moving forward from this project, SOS hoped to assist Ethiopians during the famine by "strengthening the existing health system," sending in expatriate doctors, and providing immunizations, safe water, and latrines. In order to implement this plan, SOS asked for help in getting essential equipment to existing clinics, training community health agents, and

⁹¹"USA for Africa Shallow Wells Project Quarterly Report," January--April, 30, 1987, p. 5, Box 43, Folder 16, USA for Africa Records.

⁹²Ibid., 6-7.

building a new clinic. Additionally, SOS was to partner with the Ethiopian Ministry of Health, the RRC, and expatriate officers.⁹³

The project was slated to begin in 1987 and last for three years. SOS asked for \$288,000 from *USA for Africa* in order to fund the total budget of \$863,363.⁹⁴ While medical care was needed in Ethiopia at this time, *USA for Africa* officials quickly spotted several problems with the primary health care and water project that needed to be reconciled before funding could be given, if at all. For one, the *USA for Africa* personnel reviewing this proposal noted that most of the money dictated in the budget was allocated to expatriate overhead and travel costs.⁹⁵ This proposal was in direct contradiction to *USA for Africa*'s core values. In the case of the Africare project, this point specifically was a "make or break" moment in whether or not project 03004 received final approval. The second problem *USA for Africa* noted in the SOS proposal was the fact that the region SOS had identified already had five health stations and nine health assistants already in place.⁹⁶ *USA for Africa* wanted to reach as many people as possible, and this project was an oversaturation of a region which would prove not helpful in the long term. In addition to an underscored "NO," the *USA for Africa* liaison ultimately decided against the project because of, "not enough involvement from ground up for me to believe that the general population will be interested in the success of this project."⁹⁷ This note underscores *USA for Africa*'s hesitations with this project. However, this feeling trends across most projects rejected. For example, an awareness program for STDs and AIDs by the International Partnership for Human Development

⁹³ Project Summary Sheet for Primary Health Care and Water project in Ethiopia, Ethiopia rejected proposals, Box 160, Folder 3, USA for Africa Records.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

was rejected by *USA for Africa* because “cost primarily for transportation, per diem, overhead,” and the impact was “unspecified.”⁹⁸

Report on USA for Africa Activities

The above examples demonstrate *USA for Africa*'s strong commitment to funding impactful, positive projects. While part of this view was about doing good works, it is argued that *USA for Africa* wanted to also maintain legitimacy among the foreign aid community and its donors. By having a strict grant approval system, the group could prove that it was ethical and a sincere professional aid organization. Another way in which *USA for Africa* opened itself up to criticism, was through its evaluation by InterAction. At the end of its tenure, *USA for Africa* commissioned a report on its activities and finances by the organization in order to genuinely know how successful it was (or not) as an aid organization. Although this study was specifically asked for by *USA for Africa* itself, the authors of the InterAction report ensured that the assessment of “the agency’s approach and an examination if lessons learned by its [USA for Africa’s] experiences,” were critical and as unbiased as possible.⁹⁹

Although it is hard to directly measure their direct impact, InterAction noted that *USA for Africa* overall did well as a new aid organization. The song, and eventual organization, catalyzed a lethargic government and “by and large funds were appropriately placed.”¹⁰⁰ Additionally, *USA for Africa* challenged the status quo within the larger aid community. InterAction noted that at first *USA for Africa* struggled to be taken seriously, probably connected to the fact that founders were musical artists and had little expertise on Africa in the beginning. However, the

⁹⁸ Project Summary Sheet for Awareness Program for STD’s & AIDS project in Ethiopia, Ethiopia rejected proposals, April 14, 1987, Box 160, Folder 3, USA for Africa Records.

⁹⁹ Scott and Mpanya, *We Are the World*, vii.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

organization's quick formation and professionalism raised questions in the aid community about how long it takes to create an "expert opinion."¹⁰¹ With the millions of dollars the group had available to divide up, others likely soon had to answer to *USA for Africa* to fund their own projects related to the famine.

Even though the group stunned old school aid organizations, InterAction was concerned that *USA for Africa* was a phenomenon or bandwagon that did not advance an understanding of the issues facing Africa and Africans.¹⁰² With a group organized and championed by celebrities, the report's authors had a valid concern about the long-term impacts of the non-profits charitable giving and distribution. However, InterAction did note that the organization helped bring the notion of a greater global village into reality. In fact, by partnering with so many organizations ranging from the UN to Africare and individual villages within Africa, *USA for Africa* did help create stronger NGO partnerships with Africa.¹⁰³

Conceptually and looking at *USA for Africa* as a broader institution, positive changes occurred to better the global community. But what about the specific goals and assumptions put forth by *USA for Africa*? Were these met? In relation to saving lives, addressing acute problems, and building up local African voluntary organizations, the answer is yes according to InterAction. *USA for Africa* did provide aid and save people from starvation during the 1980s famine. Additionally, by emphasizing local connections and grassroots efforts, the organization helped build up groups within Africa by choosing to fund them specifically.¹⁰⁴ In relation to *USA for Africa*'s function as a short term foundation, it is noted that it remained active for slightly longer than anticipated. Moreover, in connection to *USA for Africa*'s promise to help existing

¹⁰¹ Scott and Mpanya, *We Are the World*, 10.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 132-133.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

relief organizations cooperate and improve services to Africa, InterAction reported that this goal was partially met.¹⁰⁵ While there are areas where *USA for Africa* could have improved, it did make several important steps to empower others. In the words of the InterAction reporters, “It was as if USA for Africa, by following the natural course of its own talents and tendencies, stumbled onto the right path... [it] did well. The next ones should do even better.”¹⁰⁶

Conclusion

USA for Africa encapsulates a unique time period in American history. No other event like this has been able to totally encapsulate an entire nation’s attention and perpetuate itself among popular memory. Ask any college student today to sing “We Are the World” and they can recite a few lines or at least hum the tune. Even the 2010 “We Are the World 25 for Haiti” did not have the same cultural impact as its predecessor. The original tune topped the Billboard Hot 100 within four weeks, one of the fastest number ones at the time and stayed consistently at the top of the charts for weeks. Compared to this, the remake only maxed out at number two and has not stayed within popular memory in the same way.¹⁰⁷

In a time where foreign aid was transforming, the organization played an important role in shaping the direction non-profits and charitable action went. For example, the actions *USA for Africa* took to partner with local African organizations was a positive step towards the greater grassroots movements. In the context of the Sachs and Easterly debate, the organization was moving in the right direction. There will always be room for improvement, however, *USA for Africa* represents a non-profit organization to look up to for others in the future. One area of

¹⁰⁵ Scott and Mpanya, *We Are the World*, 15-16.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 132-133.

¹⁰⁷ “‘We Are the World’ Returns to the Upper Reaches of the Hot 100,” Billboard, accessed March 7, 2019, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/959358/we-are-the-world-returns-to-the-upper-reaches-of-the-hot-100>.

improvement that should be considered is the use of “poverty porn” as a fundraising tactic. If there was an area that needed the most improvement, it would be this one. However, the use of images depicting starving children was common for charitable organizations to use at the time and *USA for Africa* cannot be completely to blame. While these images do represent a misconstrued idea of Africa in the minds of Americans, *USA for Africa* did work hard to participate in ethical practice in distributing funds. Donations did enact change and assisted brothers and sisters across many nations.

In relation to *USA for Africa*'s financial practices, the organization worked diligently to place funds appropriately. It was important to the creators and Board of Directors to keep overhead costs to a minimum. Although it was noted previously that this decision was largely due to the scrutiny this new group was under from other aid organizations, this practice helped send as much money to those in need as possible. Sometimes, this minimal operational cost proved to be challenging, but in the end *USA for Africa* was able to fulfill their mission to help others.

Through the grant proposals that were accepted and funded by *USA for Africa*, one can also see the commitment to low overhead cost. In the case of Africare Project 03004, this was one of the positions which required updated budgets and plans. *USA for Africa* chose projects which similarly upheld their mission, and ensured that charities were whole-heartedly committed to this practice. For weaker proposals, poor financial planning to too much money designated to salary were largely the reasons for rejection, as in the case of the Primary Health Care and Water project by SOS or the awareness program for STDs and AIDs by the International Partnership for Human Development. From each of these examples, *USA for Africa* demonstrated that their job was not over once their song was recorded, and that real transformation in Ethiopia and other

locations took a strong commitment to ethical funding that would have the widest impact. While there are no documentations included in the *USA for Africa* manuscript collection outlining the result or conclusion of some of these funded projects, the grant funding process and financial information of *USA for Africa* still illustrates an organization striving for a better world and one that had good intentions.

The role that *USA for Africa* had within Africa itself was important, however, *USA for Africa* also had a large impact on America. Their ability to shake everyday Americans and encourage them to act was impressive. It is hard to say exactly what the American government would have done about the Ethiopian famine if it was not for the people who brought this issue into the forefront and the average citizens who chose to champion the cause. There are numerous stories of everyday people who were impacted by “We Are the World”. In one letter written in January 1986, Timothy P. Kay wrote to the *USA for Africa* committee saying, “every time I listen to ‘We Are the World’ I get a feeling of happiness, of knowing that when I bought this record I helped save a life.”¹⁰⁸ Here, the consumer of the record felt like they helped change the world just by supporting the cause. In another way, people all across America felt inspired to get creative and fundraise on their own. For example, in Colorado, an elementary school donated five cents per book read by their students.¹⁰⁹ Although the result was just a small amount, *USA for Africa* sparked a feeling of giving across the United States. Will another charitable organization ever be able to accomplish the same impact on popular culture as *USA for Africa*? That is difficult to say. In an era shaped by the internet and characterized by excess, with so many things happening at once grabbing someone’s attention, it is hard to imagine one

¹⁰⁸ Timothy P. Kay to USA for Africa Committee, January 30, 1986, Box 9, Folder 1, USA for Africa Records.

¹⁰⁹ USA for Africa, *Three Year Report*, (Los Angeles: USA for Africa, 1988), p. 4, Box 118, Folder 4, USA for Africa Records.

organization collectivizing the masses for the greater good in the same way. However, it may be possible and perhaps one day a new group will call attention to a cause for groups to come together as one and support.

USA for Africa is just one organization among many in the aid community, but were unique in their ability to organize without prior expertise on international assistance. Historians and others should look toward this group and others in the future, because their story contributes much to the story of how the world has united, aided, and supported each other in the modern era. There is still much to discover about the impact and role of foreign aid, whether it be positive or negative, on the communities they aim to assist and the groups they gain donations from. In the case of *USA for Africa* during the 1980s, aid experienced a shift to grassroots movements. Additionally, the group was able to connect Americans to a nation and cause they knew little about before the crisis. How have other groups done the same and what is the trajectory of aid in the future? There is room to grow here, and the possibilities are endless.

Back in the A&M Studios in Los Angeles, Michael Jackson jumps in at the chorus of “We Are the World”. Al Jarreau contributes a few syllables, then Bruce Springsteen steps up to the microphone adding grit to the musical track. Each artist takes a turn singing their line, culminating at the end of the song in a united chorus, imploring the American people to make a change in the world. As the song fades out Lionel Richie gives a thumbs-up signaling the end of the session.¹¹⁰ At the time these artists were not sure what would come of their tireless night or work, but as the song still rings in the heads of Americans today and one gets the sense that yes, we are the world.

¹¹⁰ ““We Are the World’: A Minute-by-Minute Breakdown,” *Rolling Stone*, last modified March 6, 2015, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/we-are-the-world-a-minute-by-minute-breakdown-54619/>.

Appendix

[Verse 1]

There comes a time when we heed a certain call
When the world must come together as one
There are people dying
And it's time to lend a hand to life
The greatest gift of all

[Verse 2]

We can't go on pretending day by day
That someone, somewhere will soon make a change
We are all a part of God's great big family
And the truth, you know
Love is all we need

[Chorus]

We are the world, we are the children
We are the ones who make a brighter day
So let's start giving
There's a choice we're making
We're saving our own lives
It's true we'll make a better day
Just you and me

[Verse 3]

Send them your heart so they'll know that someone cares
And their lives will be stronger and free
As God has shown us by turning stones to bread
So we all must lend a helping hand

[Chorus]

[Bridge]

When you're down and out, there seems no hope at all
But if you just believe there's no way we can fall
Let us realize that a change can only come
When we stand together as one

[Chorus 2x]¹¹¹

¹¹¹ "We Are the World," Genius, accessed March 8, 2019, <https://genius.com/Usa-for-africa-we-are-the-world-lyrics>.

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