International Affairs

Stars Above Africa

Celebrities have thrown their arms around Africa. Has the continent benefited from this awkward embrace?

by Chris Tenove
painting by Ezra Wube

JOURNEY TO MARKET/RETURNS, 2006, OIL ON CANVAS, 46 × 46 cm

There's a world outside your window
And it's a world of dread and fear
Where the only water flowing is the bitter sting of tears

— BAND AID, "DO THEY KNOW IT'S CHRISTMAS?" (1984)

They looked to the sky, but God's tears did not fall. The heavy rains of the *meher* season had failed in the highlands of northern Ethiopia. The hillsides were parched and leafless; a yellow dust blew across the heat-cracked plateaus. Some villagers left their farms to look for work in desert salt mines or town markets. Some stripped the thatch roofs off their homes to feed their livestock, but still their herds died.

A year passed, and they waited again for the meher rains. But above them, God's eye remained a clear, hard blue. Everything that could be consumed was eaten. Thistles, sandals, everything. Soldiers hunted rebels in the hills, but the government sent no food to the villages. Faced with starvation, people began to walk. Those who reached Mekele, the provincial capital, were directed to a field outside town. Here, the migrants saw thousands of reflections of their own condition: limbs thin as acacia branches; children with swollen bellies, flies swarming at their eyes; and expressions of pain or resignation. They chased after false rumours of food during the day, and at night they huddled together against the aching cold, too weak to shiver. When dawn came, the newly dead were collected and buried in shallow trenches.

In Europe and North America, newspapers ran sporadic stories about a growing pan-African drought, but the Ethiopian government banned journalists from the northern highlands, where the famine was intensifying. The Dergue, the Communist "committee" that ruled Ethiopia, was preparing for a multi-million-dollar party that year. September would mark the tenth anniversary of the revolution that brought them to power, and comrades from around the world were dropping by to celebrate. Reports of mass starvation would have been embarrassing.

In late October, after the streamers had come down, the government relaxed its restrictions on journalists. Michael Buerk of the British Broadcasting Corporation talked his way onto a World Vision plane, which landed on a dirt airstrip near Mekele. On the drive into town, he saw crowds of hobbling migrants, caked in dust. A woman dashed in front of his truck, laid her baby down, and then ran away. Buerk's driver, familiar with this ruse, calmly drove around the rag-swaddled infant.

When they reached the main camp, Buerk's cameraman, Mohamed Amin, wandered through the crowds of starving and dying, his camera lens panning slowly across the scene. Buerk, a seasoned journalist, knew he needed a comment from a foreign aid worker. He found a feeding centre run by the International Committee of the Red Cross, a rickety shelter with corrugated iron walls and dirt floors. Claire Bertschinger was the nurse in charge. Petite and blond, wearing a loose sundress, her arms and legs covered in flea bites and scabies sores, she was, for Buerk's purposes, perfect.

Bertschinger explained that there was enough dried milk, sugar, oil, bread, and rice to feed about 500 people. Then she confessed to Buerk — and the camera — her terrible responsibility. Every few days, several dozen children would graduate from the feeding regimen Bertschinger had helped to establish, and she could replace them with new patients. She would step outside, where more than a thousand people sat waiting in the sun. When she appeared, there would be murmurs and cries, but the migrants remained seated in orderly rows. Bertschinger would examine children sitting alone or held aloft by a pleading parent. She would grasp their biceps to feel bones wrapped in leathery skin. Most importantly, she would search the children's eyes for a spark of life. If she didn't see that glint she passed on by — there was no point wasting food on a child who would soon be dead.

When Bertschinger made a choice she took out her black marker and drew a cross on an arm or a forehead. The mark meant protection from the hunger that stalked the migrants. It meant life. If she left no mark, it often meant death.

Buerk's journalistic training kicked in. With the camera fixed on Bertschinger's face, he asked how that made her feel.

When I met Bertschinger recently, in her office at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, she described the guilt she'd felt after looking into the eyes of starving children and passing them by. "I felt like a Nazi condemning innocent people to the death camps," she said. "I've lived with that ever since."

But that morning in 1984, staring fiercely at Buerk, she said, "What do you expect? It breaks my heart."

Buerk knew that he had captured a profoundly affecting scene. Here was a white woman, surrounded by the poor and powerless, and with the

On TV sets around the planet, a boy wailed and a girl appeared to take her last breath. It was perhaps the first time that millions wept at the same moment, for the same reason.

stroke of a pen she could decide life or death. But at that moment, he didn't know that his report on the Ethiopian famine would become one of the most influential pieces of television ever broadcast. It would help to mobilize an unprecedented amount of attention for an African calamity. And it would provoke into action a powerful, quixotic force—one that has transformed (some say warped) the way that the Western public relates to Africa and its burdens.

Three days after he left Mekele, Buerk arrived in London with a sequence of shots cut together from Mohamed Amin's footage. His report led the BBC's six o'clock news. That night and the next, scenes from northern Ethiopia flickered across television screens in Britain and around the world. One of those sets belonged to a minor Irish rock star, who watched from his home in London's Chelsea district as Claire Bertschinger made her unthinkable choice. "In her was vested the power of life and death," Bob Geldof later said, "[which] is unbearable for anyone." What he had seen sparked in him a righteous fury. He started to phone his friends.

Four weeks later, Geldof and Midge Ure, singer for the band Ultravox, coaxed the syrupy lyrics of "Do They Know It's Christmas?" from the golden throats of Britain's pop-music royalty. It became the fastest-selling single in UK history, and all the money earned—over $8 million (all figures US)—went to famine relief. Then came the American version, "We Are the World," and Canada's "Tears are Not Enough."

Geldof was both rebel and prophet—the rock-star ideal. He channelled public anger at the Cold War geopolitics that had prevented a timely response to the famine. Europe and North America had produced bumper crops that year, and reports emerged that mountains of stockpiled grain and lakes of wine were simply going to waste. On television, Geldof interrupted Margaret Thatcher during one of the Iron Lady's smug defences of the status quo. "But Prime Minister," he said, hair tousled, anger barely checked, "there are millions of people dying, and that's the terrible thing."

Schools held bake sales. Union leaders, clergy, and comedians worked their audiences for donations. Inuit communities in Canada raised thousands of dollars and sent a delegation to Ethiopia. Politicians decided to ride the tidal wave of public interest, and soon air forces from European countries, the United States, and the Soviet Union were competing with each other to air-drop food into the Ethiopian highlands.

The climax of all this attention was Live Aid. On July 13, 1985, less than nine months after Buerk's broadcast, Geldof and Ure herded dozens of pop stars onto stages at Wembley Stadium in London and JFK Stadium in Philadelphia. U2's Bono, pallid and dressed in a faux-Tudor jacket, delivered a searing performance of "Sunday Bloody Sunday." Phil Collins sang in London and then rocketed across the Atlantic in a Concorde, arriving in Philadelphia in time to drum for a reunited Jimmy Page and Robert Plant. The live broadcast of this "global jukebox" lasted for sixteen hours and reached an unprecedented 1.5 billion viewers.

The day's iconic moment came when David Bowie introduced a short video shot by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in Ethiopia. On the stadium Jumbotrons and on TV sets around the planet, an emaciated boy wailed in anguish and a three-year-old girl appeared to take her last, gasping breath. It was perhaps the first time that millions of human beings wept at the same moment, for the same reason.

Live Aid, together with spinoffs like Fashion Aid and Sport Aid, ultimately raised more than $140 million. Most of the money went to large humanitarian organizations, though several months after the concert Geldof flew to Ethiopia to oversee a flotilla of Live Aid trucks as they delivered food to the highlands. In addition to private donations, the sustained public outcry leveraged huge amounts of aid out of governments: in 1985, they gave 1.27 million tonnes of food to Ethiopia and doubled the country's official development assistance to $720 million. That sudden influx of aid saved hundreds of thousands of lives in a part of the world that just one year earlier had been almost completely ignored.

"The interesting question," said Michael Buerk when I met him at the posh Reform Club on London's Pall Mall, "is why people reacted in a way that had never happened before and has never happened since." Buerk, one of Britain's most prominent journalists until his recent semi-retirement, believes that the widespread generosity was in part a backlash against the greed that characterized the Thatcher and Reagan era. Technological change also played a role. Brian Stewart, the CBC Television journalist who followed up on Buerk's report, notes that new video and satellite technologies led audiences to feel as though they were watching the distant tragedy in real time.

But most important were the images themselves. The shuffling skeletons. The shrivelled babies. Viewers hadn't yet developed any immunity to scenes like these. "Somehow it got through to people that this was a situation they could do something about," said Buerk. "And out bursts this clapped-out pop singer, Bob Geldof, who articulated the feelings people had in a way that was intensely disrespectful but charismatic. People thought, 'There are millions dying in a world full of food. Bugger the complexities, let's save lives.'"

The West's response was far from perfect. For many Ethiopians, the aid came too late—it is estimated that between 300,000 and one million people died from the famine. And the aid effort never addressed the Ethiopian government's complicity in the famine, which was caused in part by misguided land policies and harsh counter-insurgency

ILLUSTRATION: ISAAC KING

At that moment, we might make predictions: That aid would continue. That Africa would retreat from the precipice of ruin. Instead, our eyes glazed over. Attention drifted elsewhere.

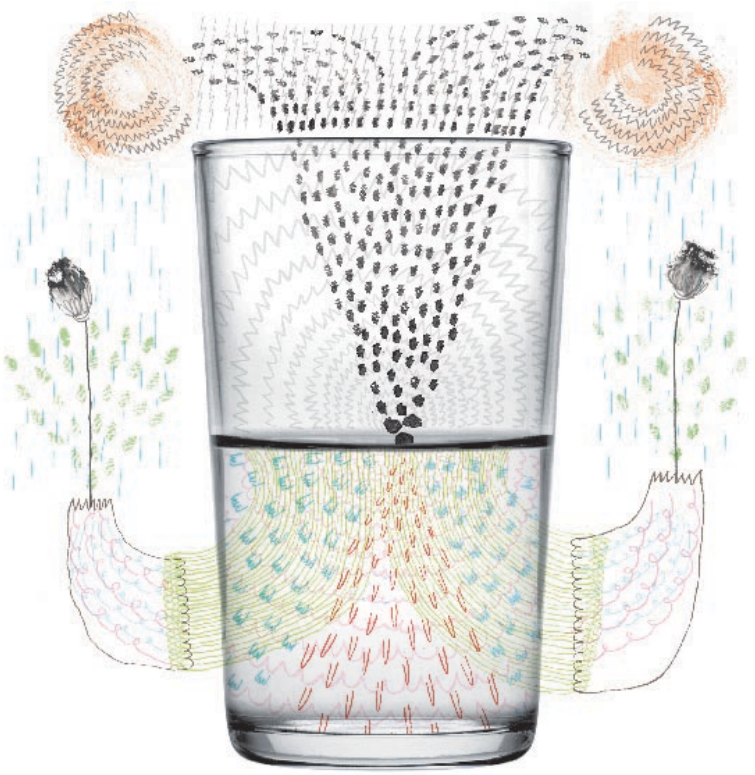
operations. Making matters worse, the Dergue had also conducted a poorly planned and often violent "resettlement" of hundreds of thousands of highlanders during the famine. Thousands died.

But let's say we paused the tape as the crowds roared at the end of Live Aid, or as rock star and rock fan alike went to bed thinking, "A new era has dawned." At that moment, we might make some predictions: That aid would continue to flow. That Western political parties would make African development a central policy plank. That Africa would retreat from the precipice of economic ruin and public-health catastrophe.

Those predictions would, of course, prove wrong. Instead, our eyes glazed over. Politicians' attention drifted elsewhere. Africans were subjected to domestic misrule and the lacerating fiscal regimes of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Most of us simply turned away. In retrospect, David Bowie got it right in his last song at Live Aid. "We could be heroes," he sang, "just for one day."

Can I take it for granted that you are aware of Africa's plight? That you know that nearly half of sub-Saharan Africans — more than 330 million people — live on less than $1 a day, the World Bank measure for extreme poverty? That the number of Africans who must survive on this pitiful amount is increasing even as the rest of the world gets richer? Surely you are familiar with the epidemics that prey on the continent: About 3,000 children die each day from malaria. Nearly 25 million people are living with HIV, and AIDS has orphaned an estimated 12 million children. The predicted life expectancy for a child born in Botswana in 2010 is less than thirty-five years.

Yes, we know all this. Figures like these are tucked into almost every article on Africa. They make us sad and a little outraged, but above all exhausted.



Editors and producers respond quickly to any hint that their audiences are fatigued by foreign tragedies, observes Susan Moeller, a journalism professor at the University of Maryland and the author of *Compassion Fatigue*. "Media are part of the entertainment industry," Moeller told me. "And to make a profit they need to anticipate what an audience wants and how long they want it for." As a result, persistent problems such as AIDS in southern Africa or civil war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo don't get the attention they deserve. In her book, Moeller quotes an African-American mother with AIDS who struggled to figure out this "compassion fatigue" among the well-to-do. "I don't understand," the woman says, "what they have done to get so tired."

But to sympathize with the fatigued, try this thought experiment. Say you're doing the dishes one morning and through your window you see a pickup truck smash head-on into a sedan. Bang! You run out to help while punching 911 on your cellphone, right? But what if, for some reason, you can't get out your door to help. All you can do is phone. And the emergency-response operator says, in her calm voice, "We'll do something right away." But looking out your window you don't *see* the ambulance coming to jaw the sedan driver free or paramedics bent over the bodies on the road. Nothing is happening.

Next morning, same time. Crash! Another accident. Right outside. Still you can't get out there, and when you call you're told, "We're taking care of it." But there's a family, cut by broken glass, children crying, and no one is helping them. Same thing the next day and the day after that. How many days would it take before you just kept the blinds closed in the kitchen, so that when the crash came, your eyes would barely flicker? If you kept rushing to the window, you just might go insane.

Since Buerk's report from Ethiopia in 1984, journalists have produced an almost ceaseless torrent of stories about African misery. Somalia. Angola.

ILLUSTRATION: E. F. RICHARDSON

Rwanda. Sierra Leone. The country names alone evoke images of war and deprivation. The Africa constructed from these stories becomes a place where cultures and countries blur together, where the only settings are deserts or pestilential jungles, scabrous villages or urban slums.

As Moeller points out, media accounts of Africa often make use of a repertoire of stereotypes—the brutal tyrant, the sympathetic aid worker, or the innocent orphan. These stereotypes in turn suggest political responses, whether it is humanitarian assistance (so heroic doctors can help the orphans) or military intervention (to stop the tyrant or marauding paramilitaries). But even if these actions are taken, we seldom see the results. What's more, we rarely glimpse African communities *not* in need of Western intervention.

How do we justify ourselves, when we turn away from the seemingly endless stories about Africans in pain? We begin to think, subliminally perhaps, that Africans don't suffer the way we do, because surely if all they do is suffer then their cultures or their neurological systems must adjust. And, really, aren't *they* sort of responsible? If their leaders didn't steal, if the people just pitched in and worked hard and had fewer children, couldn't they improve their own lives? Besides, nothing the West has done seems to help.

To short-circuit these rationalizations and to avoid the spread of compassion fatigue, journalists and aid groups try to provide the occasional positive image of Africa (note the ubiquitous scene of plucky schoolchildren singing). And increasingly, they are using a spoonful of sugar to make the medicine go down. The new ingredient wasn't hard to find—it was standing right there in the spotlight.

While the extent of compassion fatigue can be debated, there seems to be no such thing as celebrity fatigue. Sure, the public may get bored of one starlet's kleptomania, but by that point we're ready to collectively obsess over the subtext to the marriage between a toothy, ambisexual Scientologist and his child-wife. Celebrities play the role of ancient Greek gods in our culture, beings with both our flaws and our virtues writ large, whose hyperbolic lives show us funhouse versions of our own. They are the focus of our hard-wired craving for gossip. Back when we lived in villages, we spread rumours about the hereditary chief or the potter's wife. Now the only people we all "know" are celebrities. Advertisers pay millions for star endorsements, and publishers know that newsstand sales soar when they slap an airbrushed celeb on their covers.

It is Raakhi Shah's job to harness this infatuation. I met Shah in a glass-and-concrete office in a business park out past the stone cathedrals and medieval colleges of Oxford, England. This is where Oxfam, one of the world's largest humanitarian organizations, has its global headquarters. Shah's business card identified her as an Oxfam Artiste Liaison Manager.

"Artiste?" I asked.

"Often celebrities don't like being called celebrities, because they are artists in their own right," explained Shah. A young woman with sleek, bobbed hair and a tight blue V-neck sweater, she came across—like many of her coworkers at Oxfam—as idealistic but far from naive. This, she said, is her dream job. She reads entertainment magazines and gossip rags to identify potential partners for Oxfam, preps soccer stars and famed chanteuses on foreign policy, and coordinates photo shoots and publicity tours.

What, exactly, can celebrities do for Oxfam? They can help raise money quickly in case of a humanitarian disaster. They can take obscure campaigns, such as the attempt to make global trade fairer, to audiences beyond the activist community. And they're great for lobbying power brokers. "Politicians are just like anybody else," Shah said. "They want to go home and tell their kids that they met a famous actress that day."

Different celebrities have different levels of commitment, of course. Bono is the best known and perhaps the least typical celebrity activist. He treats his activism as a second career, runs his own organization, spouts policy like a UN technocrat, and knows which biblical passage to quote to which Republican senator on the US Foreign Relations

ILLUSTRATION: ANNA LINDER

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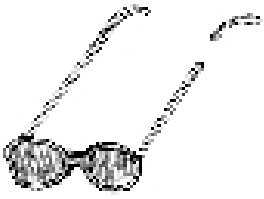
Committee. By contrast, most celebrities will only commit to the occasional press conference or television commercial. "The more famous they are, the busier they are," Shah said. "And we want them to be famous."

In April, Oxfam convinced Keira Knightley to auction off the dress she wore to the Academy Awards. The gown — Vera Wang, deep-claret silk taffeta — raised $7,900, which according to an Oxfam press release is "enough to feed 5,000 children for a month in Tanzania." More importantly, said Shah's colleague, Doug Keatinge, the auction launched a flurry of press coverage. "Sometimes I think this is crazy," said Keatinge. "All this work I do to explain to journalists in poignant and analytical terms what's going on, and then I stick Keira Knightley's dress out there and I get 100 times the interest. But that's modern media, and we have to work with it."

Why do celebrities campaign for Africa's poor? Self-promotion plays a role. In the competitive arena of stardom, you can't afford to stand aside while your peers burnish their halos before the camera's adoring gaze. It's not as if celebrities need to go looking for causes, however. Causes come looking for them. Non-governmental organizations compete for publicity, government contracts, and charity dollars, and a celebrity endorsement can mean as much to an aid organization as it does to a sportswear manufacturer. But a more profound motivation lies at the heart of celebrity involvement. I can say this with confidence because I, too, was once a celebrity.

In March 2005, I rode in a dilapidated Mercedes Benz down a jungle trail in eastern Sierra Leone, bound for the village of Tombodu. Along with a translator and the local chief's nephew, I coasted into a hamlet of ruined houses, gaunt livestock, and malaria-ridden children. Tombodu bore the sad distinction of being the site of the country's largest mass grave, a product of the recent civil war. I had come to research a story on war crimes for Radio Netherlands but had a second aim in mind: to improve one person's life. I turned to the chief's nephew and said, "Help me find someone who needs a medical operation."

The chief's nephew introduced me to the village elders, who in turn took me to Mr. Bangura (not his real name). Mr. Bangura was a dour-looking seventy-three-year-old, dressed in a threadbare crimson T-shirt and loose-fitting pants. Their bagginess was essential: Mr. Bangura had an infected and grotesquely swollen scrotum. The injury was several years old, but he hadn't been able to raise the $150 needed for an operation. When an elder explained that I would provide the money, Mr. Bangura turned to me and said, "You are like an angel."



Dozens of villagers gathered around, shouting and laughing, some draped languorously over my car. "You must say something before you take this man away," the chief's nephew told me. I stood on the bumper and hollered for their attention. "I am Chris from Canada!" I shouted. "I am here to take your friend to be cured!" The villagers began to cheer. Three boys whooped and danced, grinning wildly and kicking up dust with their bare feet. At that moment I felt like an avatar of the wealthy and compassionate Western world. I was famous (in Tombodu) and I was fabulously rich (by Sierra Leonean standards). My gaze saw suffering, and I turned it into joy. I was Angelina Jolie.

We took Mr. Bangura to a clinic in a nearby town. While raindrops pounded like rubber mallets on the building's tin roof, Mr. Bangura told me about his grandchildren and about the time he found a diamond as big as his fingertip. He hoped that after the operation he would no longer be "a boring old man."

Why had I done it? In part it was the realization — familiar to anyone who has travelled in poor countries — that my good fortune is more a consequence of my birth country than hard work or talent. In the face of this stark injustice, I felt as though I needed an alibi. Celebrities must feel this too. Not only are they part of the wealthy world, but at some point in their lives they were transformed — like a street urchin who is suddenly recognized as the long-lost prince — into an object of secular veneration. If a celebrity has any self-candour, he knows that teenage groupies scream his name in part because he had the right agent at the right time, because he inherited unusually prominent cheekbones, or because his guitarist developed great licks rather than a drinking problem. How to cope with this precarious fairy tale? Drugs, gurus, and narcissism for some. But if those don't appeal or stop working, then an attractive justification for fame is to wield it for good ends.

Several weeks after I left Tombodu, I sat in Sierra Leone's tiny international airport and told a veteran aid worker about my feat. He cocked a cynical eyebrow and said, "Yeah, but what happens in that village when the next guy pops a scrotum?" I wanted to answer, *Who cares, I made one man's life better*. But he was right. I hadn't improved the health-care system in Tombodu or boosted the local economy so villagers could afford their own treatment. Instead, I reinforced an impression that if you want to improve your condition, you might as well pray for an angel.

This is the problem with short-term charity. No matter how good it feels, it is like a sudden downpour in a parched land — the next afternoon's sun will burn it away. At least, that's what happened when a faux celebrity appeared for one day in the village of Tombodu. But what was the long-term impact of Ethiopia's year in the celebrity spotlight? To find out, this March I travelled to the highlands of northern Ethiopia.

ILLUSTRATION: YUNMEE KYONG

"I am Chris from Canada!" I shouted. "I am here to take your friend to be cured!" I felt like an avatar of the wealthy and compassionate Western world. I was famous. I was Angelina Jolie.

How to describe Tigray, the Ethiopian province that was ground zero for the 1984–85 drought? In a word, rocky. Picture endless ranges of blond limestone mountains and bluffs of ochre sandstone. Oxen strain to pull wooden ploughs through fields that are more rocks than soil. Houses are built of stacked stones. Most impressive are the terraced hills, ringed with waist-high rock shelves built to prevent the brief, torrential rains from sweeping soil off the slopes.

The Tigrayan countryside is harsh—a palette of donkey grey and dust-bowl beige, with cracked fissures instead of rivers—and it's getting harsher. The climate is changing and droughts are becoming more debilitating. Despite the rock terraces, each year millions of tonnes of topsoil are swept off hillsides, along rivers, and into the Red Sea. While the land deteriorates, the population it supports is rapidly increasing. Between 1984 and 2006, Ethiopia's population grew from about 43 million to 75 million people.

The result is that the challenge of addressing the country's "food gap" has become even greater. In 2002, the year of the last bad drought, approximately 14 million people required food aid. But even in good years, when rains come at the right time, more than 7 million people fall into the food gap. To put this in perspective, the 1984–85 drought created a food gap that affected about 8 million people. Every year, if not for food aid from the Ethiopian government and foreign donors, millions of Ethiopians would starve.

This situation explains a well-known joke in Ethiopia. A young farmer confronts his elders and says, "No one is ploughing their fields, and no one has saved enough grain. If the rains fail, we will go hungry!"

"Don't worry, my son," responds a laconic elder. "We will be fine, so long as it rains in Canada."

The joke nicely illustrates what Canada and other donors do *not* want to see happen in Ethiopia.

To learn what can be done to reduce Ethiopia's dependence on food aid, I went on a tour of some Canadian-funded projects with Awash Mesfin. Awash (Ethiopians are formally addressed by their first names) is a field monitor with the World Food Program (WFP), the UN agency responsible for distributing emergency food aid in Ethiopia. The WFP also supports a program called MERET, which operates on donations of about 30,000 tonnes of grain a year, most of it from Canada. MERET uses this donated food to "pay" villagers to work on environmental rehabilitation programs. Awash described the program's goal quite lyrically: "We must make the land sweeter for people and livestock."

Although the day seemed as hot as a potter's kiln, Awash led me through fields wearing a leather jacket, grey slacks, and dress shoes. As we travelled, he sucked greedily on Rothmans and evangelized for MERET. He showed me fruit and vegetable plots being irrigated by newly dug wells. He pointed out barren hillsides that were being protected from grazing and wood-harvesting so that vegetation could regenerate. He waved an unlit cigarette at kilometres of new stone terraces. And he drew my eyes to his favourite exhibits: gulleys whose forward progress had been defeated by planted trees and huge barriers of stacked rocks. "With our help," Awash said, "the men are fighting nature to win back the land!"

On another day, I travelled with Hadera Haile, from Tigray's Water Resources Development Bureau, to a valley between rugged, khaki-coloured bluffs. In exchange for Canadian grain, farmers had built an irrigation system that drew water from a nearby creek. Running along the valley was an oasis of jade-green fields. Hadera stood with one foot on a pile of rocks and made a sweeping gesture. "This is your Canadian grain at work," he said grandly. "I hope you are happy."

Back in Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa, Volli Carucci, at the time a program manager with MERET, told me that environmental rehabilitation projects like these could transform the countryside. As the land improved, subsistence farmers would escape from dependency on food aid. But that won't happen, he said, without a major change in thinking by the international community. He drew a circle representing the 700,000 tonnes of food aid sent annually to Ethiopia. The vast majority is given as emergency aid, a last resort against hunger. Just 50,000 tonnes—here he marked off a thin slice of the pie—go toward long-term development programs like MERET.

For years, Carucci said, donors have used food aid to deal with crises, but they have made little progress on the underlying structural problems that cause them. "Ethiopia has a history of getting Band-Aids," he said, punning on Geldof's "Do They Know It's Christmas?" supergroup. "Maybe it's because of the stereotype people have of Ethiopia as a place of cracking soil and dead cattle. People don't realize that this is a country with incredible potential."

Tamene Tiruneh, an environmental adviser to the Canadian International Development Agency, agreed. "We have a problem with image," he said. "People don't know that Ethiopia is a wet country. Every time I travel I am always counting the rivers and lakes. You want a dry country? What about Israel? What about Egypt? It has just one major river. But these countries can feed themselves."

Ethiopia could do the same, Tamene said, with more irrigation and better infrastructure. To achieve that would require a massive investment from the international community, however, and Ethiopia currently receives a third less than the average figure for per-capita development aid in sub-Saharan Africa. Why? Tamene thinks that Live Aid might have something to do with it. "I am grateful to Bob Geldof for helping to feed so many hungry people," he said. "But no one ever forgets those television

ILLUSTRATION: MICHELANGELO IAFFALDANO

pictures. They only think Ethiopia is a dry place, a barren place. Donors assume that we will never be able to feed ourselves, so they don't bother to help us develop. They help us bail out water when we are about to drown, but they never help us repair the boat."

Ethiopian development faces other obstacles, of course. For decades, the country has been cursed with bloody conflict and bad leadership. The leaders of the Dergue presided over seventeen years of disastrous rule and civil war until rebels overthrew them in 1991. Then, in the late 1990s, the country fought a devastating war with neighbouring Eritrea.

Following the war, Ethiopia seemed poised to turn the corner. Its prime minister, Meles Zenawi, was hailed as one of Africa's most promising leaders. But after Meles nearly lost an election in May 2005, his government jailed opposition politicians and detained thousands of their suspected supporters. Donors now fear that the country has turned away from democracy.

Ethiopia is also hobbled by corruption and excessive government interference in the private sector. Education levels are low, and the best-educated often emigrate. The price of coffee, Ethiopia's principal export, has plumbed record lows for most of the last decade. AIDS, malaria, and other diseases are rampant. Civil wars in neighbouring Sudan and Somalia threaten to spill over into Ethiopian territory.

Diplomats, development experts, and Ethiopian politicians often disagree over how to navigate this minefield. The situation is far from hopeless, but clearly we are a long way from the simple moral call articulated by Geldof: "Bugger the complexities, let's save lives."

Just after dawn on October 31, 1984, Claire Bertschinger climbed onto the elevated wooden hut that served as the navigation tower for Mekele's airstrip. From the roof, she surveyed the dirt runway, where herders wrapped in grey cloaks stood quiet watch over their cattle. It was ten days after Michael Buerk's visit to the feeding centre, and an unexpected delivery of supplies was on the way. Bertschinger didn't know there was a connection between the two.

She scanned the sky and saw a black speck hovering over the distant mountains. It grew larger and larger, until at last a British Royal Air Force Hercules transport plane touched down in a blizzard of stones and dust. The pilots waved to her from the cockpit. "When I came on board, they offered me a cup of tea and a Marmite sandwich," Bertschinger recounted. "The plane was absolutely jammed with food. They told me, 'There's more where that came from.' And I thought, 'We're saved.'"

Bertschinger and I were sitting in a university cafeteria that smelled of boiled vegetables and scalded coffee. She wore a candy-cane blouse and blue jeans, and her blond hair curled over her shoulders—not the look one might expect of someone who has worked in Ugandan prisons, Afghan war zones, and West African countries in the throes of rebellions. A near-fatal bout of malaria ended her field career in 1992, and she now trains nursing students to work during wars and epidemics.

Until recently, Bertschinger didn't appreciate the impact of Buerk's initial reports. The first time she heard "Do They Know It's Christmas?," on her crackling short-wave radio in Mekele in 1984, she was furious. Geldof, she assumed, was cynically using Ethiopia's misery to make a fast buck. Bertschinger returned to England shortly before the Live Aid concert in July 1985, but while the crowds cheered, she was alone in her parents' house, the television turned off. Her experience in Ethiopia had left her feeling depressed and alienated from friends and family. The last thing she wanted to do was watch a rock concert. Still, Bertschinger told me, the media exposure did help humanitarian organizations get the resources they needed to save lives. Starting with that first RAF Hercules, cargo planes of food began to arrive every day in Mekele.

In 2003, Bertschinger returned to Ethiopia to participate in a new BBC documentary by Michael Buerk. Back in Mekele, she was delighted to be reunited with healthy men and women she had chosen as children from the starving crowds. But she also saw firsthand the abject poverty the country was still suffering.

ILLUSTRATION: MARK OWENS

"Ethiopia is a wet country," Tamene said. "I am grateful to Geldof for helping to feed so many hungry people, but no one ever forgets those pictures. They think Ethiopia is a barren place."

I asked Bertschinger, "Does this mean that celebrities can raise food or money for a crisis, but aren't much use in the long term?" She answered with an allegory. Imagine, she said, that you are walking down the street and you see an old deaf lady, a neighbour, waiting at the corner of a busy road. She doesn't seem to know when to cross. You ask if she needs help, but she can't hear you over the din of the traffic. When the light changes, you take her wrinkled hand and guide her across the intersection. There, she tugs at your sleeve and says, "I was waiting for the bus on the other side of the road."

Now what do you do? Leave her where she is? Help her across the street again so that she's back where she started? Or do you give her even more of your time? Drive her home yourself, maybe, or help her buy batteries for her hearing aid?

"What you do doesn't really matter," Bertschinger told me. "There are no firm rules, just do it with the right thoughts and the right intent." And, one might add, the point is not how good you feel walking across the road, but whether the old lady gets to where she needs to go.

In 2005, humanitarian organizations, grassroots activists, and churches joined forces to push Africa's plight to the top of the international political agenda. Many believed that this was the year when the continent's stars would finally align. British Prime Minister Tony Blair, a self-proclaimed "Africaphile," would head the G8 summit and assume the presidency of the European Union. The United Nations General Assembly would revisit its anti-poverty targets, the Millennium Development Goals. And, as part of the Doha Round of negotiations, the World Trade Organization would reconsider the agricultural subsidies and tariffs that were hampering African farmers' attempts to compete on the global market.

The Global Call to Action Against Poverty (known as the Make Poverty History campaign in Canada and the UK and as the ONE campaign in the US) of 2005 was vastly more sophisticated than the Live Aid strategies of 1984 and 1985. The slogan this time was "We're not asking for your money, we're asking for your voice." Instead of raising funds for specific projects, the campaigners wanted to generate waves of public pressure that would force politicians to enact three structural reforms: a large and sustainable increase in foreign aid, a shift in the international trade regime to make it fairer for poor countries, and the cancellation of foreign debts owed by the world's poorest nations.

To bring the public onside, the campaign deployed celebrities as if they were special-ops units. Tom Hanks and Sarah McLachlan snapped their fingers to show how often a child dies needlessly in Africa. REM's Michael Stipe and Coldplay's Chris Martin had milk and rice poured over their heads to illustrate the unfair "dumping" of subsidized food. The celebrity campaign reached a crescendo at the eleven Live8 concerts held in July before the G8 conference in Gleneagles, Scotland. Once again, Geldof worked himself into a frenzy of moral outrage, then took the stage as the world's most powerful master of ceremonies. The celebrities had taken the old lady's hand again. But did she get any closer to her destination?

Without a doubt, the 2005 campaign attracted widespread attention to poverty in Africa. A new generation had experienced its "Live Aid" moment, and at first politicians seemed to respond. The G8 leaders posed together at the Gleneagles Hotel and promised to cancel the foreign debts owed by eighteen of the world's poorest countries, to increase their combined foreign aid by $50 billion annually by 2010 (with $25 billion earmarked for Africa), to reform trade rules, and to make anti-HIV drugs as close to universally accessible as possible in Africa by 2010.

But just over a year later, the Gleneagles legacy is in doubt. Eighteen countries, fourteen of them in Africa, have indeed had their debts cancelled, but a lack of resources will likely doom the goal of near-universal access to anti-HIV drugs by 2010. France is the only G8 country that appears to be on track to meet the target of $25 billion for Africa by 2010. Critically, the G8 governments have made no progress on trade reform — meaning they have failed to improve on the opportunities for Africans to work their own way out of poverty. American cotton was subsidized by $4.8 billion in 2005, for example, driving down world prices at the expense of farmers in poor countries, and particularly in West Africa. European cows are still subsidized to the tune of $2 per day. This failure to reform trade is part of a pattern. When Western governments are forced to choose between Africa's poor and corporate sectors in their own countries, they tend to shy away from battles at home.

Celebrities have a proven track record when it comes to fundraising, particularly in response to short-term crises like the famine in Ethiopia. They are not, however, able to tackle the structural roots of Africa's poverty. "What we don't have is real political leadership," says Stephen Lewis, the United Nations special envoy on HIV/AIDS in Africa. "As valuable as celebrities are, they don't compensate for insufficient political and government support, because that's where the money and clout lie."

Lewis's statement suggests one of the most significant impacts celebrities have had on public debate about African poverty: they have taken the spotlight away from politicians. Of the G8 leaders, only Tony Blair has made African development a focus of both his rhetoric and his government's policies. Canada's last prime minister, Paul Martin, promised much but delivered little during his two years in power. Stephen Harper's Conservative government, meanwhile, has concen-

ILLUSTRATION: ISAAC KING

trated on a small list of international priorities, and Africa is simply not one of them.

It is tempting these days to let celebrities take the lead on African poverty. To let Bono lobby Congress, let George Clooney push for UN troops in Darfur, and let Keira Knightley's dress feed Tanzanian children. But clearly, there are limits to what celebrity campaigns can accomplish. And there is also the possibility, indeed the likelihood, that the era of celebrity involvement in Africa will end. What will kill it? Celebrity activism could wither under the constant mockery directed at its ubiquity, its occasional inanity, and its instances of crass self-promotion. Or celebrities could get too political, becoming partisans rather than advocates for the voiceless. Both these paths lead to public cynicism. Both have begun to happen.

The danger is that this cynicism will extend from the celebrities to the very causes they represent. But then again, we don't care about Africa simply because rock stars and actors tell us to. Celebrities draw from the same zeitgeist we do, and their concern for global poverty is a reflection of our own.

How, in the coming years, will we act on that concern? That depends, in part, on whether the existence of poverty in Africa exhausts or incites us. When I spoke to Claire Bertschinger, she told me that for years she was haunted by the memories of the Ethiopian children she wasn't able to feed. She constantly asked herself why, in a world of plenty, so many people suffer from want. Ultimately, she said, there is no excuse, but there is a response. "My answer," she said, "is that I take action."

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