



ARTICLE

The Tana-Beles Project in Ethiopia and the Making of Postcolonial Humanitarianism, 1938–1994

Silvia Salvatici 

Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Florence, Florence, Italy
Email: Silvia.Salvatici@unifi.it

Abstract

This article takes the example of the Tana-Beles project – a scheme sponsored by Italy to respond to the 1980s famine in Ethiopia – to demonstrate that postimperial international relief policies and practices were woven into the very fabric of the colonial past. Postcolonial humanitarianism emerges as the transformation of colonial practices and relationships into new policies, which did not depend on the interests only of former metropolises, but also of the new independent states and on the agenda of international organizations. Furthermore, this article contends that private companies had a prominent role in shaping postcolonial humanitarianism because they could benefit from both the favourable policies of donor countries and the relationships they established in the long run with the authorities of recipient countries. Finally, the history of the Tana-Beles project enables us to re-read the international response to the Ethiopian famine within a larger timeframe. On the one hand, this appears to be rooted in the previous colonial period, on the other it embraces the years thereafter when the schemes, relationships, and strategies set in motion during the famine were developed further.

I

In 1938, the most important Italian association for tourism released the first guide to ‘Africa Orientale Italiana’ (AOI, Italian East Africa), the official name for Italy’s colonial possessions in the Horn of Africa. The guide devoted a couple of pages to Lake Tana located in north-western Ethiopia, a body of water covering an area of around 4,000 km² and constituting the source of the Blue Nile River. The author of the guide referred to the lake as a natural resource to be fruitfully exploited. The most feasible plan to be carried out in the short term was to use the water from Lake Tana to produce

hydroelectric power and develop extensive farming.¹ This would have implied constructing an integrated system of canals, power plants, barrages, and irrigation arrangements, in line with many other schemes aimed to transform arid lands in Africa and worldwide.² However, the project never got beyond the planning stage. Three years later, in the middle of the war, the British army gained control over Ethiopia and thus brought to the end Italy's short-lived, disputed colonial rule of the country.

Almost fifty years later, Ethiopian representatives of the DERG (the Provisional Military Administrative Council – a military junta led by Mengistu Haile Mariam) asked the Italian government to help fund a scheme very similar to the project foreseen in the 1938 guidebook.³ According to the official request sent to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in August 1985, the scheme was designed to counteract the effects of famine in Ethiopia. Four months earlier, the Ethiopian authorities had appointed the Italian engineering firm Studio Pietrangeli to carry out a preliminary assessment, and had proposed that the company Salini Costruzioni be responsible for the project's implementation.⁴ Both Pietrangeli and Salini had already been in Ethiopia for at least twenty years, where they were in charge of infrastructural works. Both were among the major Italian companies, and both enjoyed a very good relationship with Italy's ruling political class. The Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs generously funded the project within the framework of an emergency programme aiming to 'defeat hunger in the world', launched in 1985.⁵ The project was named Tana-Beles since the water drained from Lake Tana for the production of hydroelectric power was due to then be channelled into the Beles River and used to irrigate the valley. The Tana-Beles project in particular qualified Italy as the largest single donor of non-food aid to Ethiopia during the period between 1984 and 1986.⁶

In 1987, the Italian emergency programme – designed as a temporary measure – expired, but the ambitious Tana-Beles project was far from having been completed. Ethiopian political events also affected its development. In 1991, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) overthrew the DERG and seized power; nevertheless, it demanded that the Italian government continue the work that had been started under the agreement with the previous regime. The Tana-Beles project received additional funding, it was reduced in scope, and although it was born as an emergency response to

¹ Consociazione Turistica Italiana, *Guida all'Africa Orientale Italiana* (Milan, 1938), pp. 368–9.

² Maya K. Peterson, *Pipe dreams: water and empire in Central Asia's Aral Sea Basin* (Cambridge, 2019).

³ Archivio Storico della Camera dei Deputati (ASCD), Commissione parlamentare d'inchiesta sull'attuazione della politica di cooperazione con i paesi in via di sviluppo (CPC), b. 39, doc. 464, 'Letter of the Provisional Military Government of Socialist Ethiopia Ministry of Foreign Affairs', 30 Aug. 1985.

⁴ ASCD, CPC, b. 39, doc. 464, 'Letter of the Provisional Military Government of Socialist Ethiopia Ministry of Foreign Affairs', 15 Apr. 1985.

⁵ ASCD, CPC, b. 39, doc. 464, 'Breve storia del progetto Tana-Beles'.

⁶ Norbert Götz, Georgina Brewis, and Steffen Werther, *Humanitarianism in the modern world: the moral economy of famine relief* (Cambridge, 2020), p. 65.

famine, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs re-labelled it as a ‘development work’.⁷ In 1994, the Italian Ministry officially stated the end of the project.

This article seeks to contribute to the multifaceted history of postcolonial humanitarianism, that is, the history of international aid policies, programmes, and practices after the end of formal colonial empires.⁸ In so doing, it connects to a recent strand of research that has looked at infrastructures and the management of water as a cornerstone of African states’ development and modernization plans. Most of these studies have analysed national and international discourses on scientific and technological progress and the implementation of individual large projects, assessing their effective (or missed) achievements.⁹ The aim of this article is rather to explore the making of humanitarianism as a complex process, which drew on colonial experiences but transcended the geographical confines of former empires. Although the Tana-Beles project, according to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was largely unsuccessful because it failed to relieve the plight of Ethiopians hit by the famine, this case-study serves very well the purpose for at least two reasons: it unveils the profound connections between colonial and postcolonial periods, and it brings to the fore the interplay between the various actors which shaped international aid in the long run. Italian enterprises were among these actors and they played a crucial role in the development of humanitarianism in the ‘Third World’.

The long history of the Tana-Beles programme not only offers further evidence about the colonial roots of large infrastructural works undertaken by independent states in postcolonial age.¹⁰ It also shows us the links between colonial policies aimed at boosting the Ethiopian economy and Italian post-war aid schemes, and how these contributed to shape the response of Italy to the famine in the mid-1980s. Furthermore, provisions of the late 1930s for building infrastructures favoured the penetration of Italian companies in Ethiopia,

⁷ For a short story of the project, see Francesca Agneta, Stefano Berterame, Mariarita Capirci, Loredana Magni, and Massimo Tommasoli, ‘The dynamics of social and economic adaptation during resettlement: the case of Beles Valley in Ethiopia’, in Michael M. Cernea and Scott E. Guggenheim, eds., *Anthropological approaches to resettlement policy, practice, and theory* (New York, NY, 1993), pp. 251–82.

⁸ Among recent studies on the history of international aid and decolonization, see Andrew S. Thompson, ‘Unravelling the relationships between humanitarianism, human rights, and decolonization: time for a radical rethink?’, in Martin Thomas and Andrew Thompson, eds., *The Oxford handbook of the ends of empire* (Oxford, 2017); Matthew Hilton, ‘Charity, decolonization and development: the case of the Starehe Boys School, Nairobi’, *Past & Present*, 233 (2016), pp. 227–67; Matthew Hilton, ‘Charity and the end of empire: British non-governmental organizations, Africa and international development in the 1960s’, *American Historical Review*, 123 (2018), pp. 493–517; Kevin O’Sullivan, *The NGO moment: the globalization of compassion from Biafra to Live Aid* (Cambridge, 2021); Emily E. Baughan, *Saving the children: humanitarianism, internationalism and empire* (Oakland, CA, 2022).

⁹ See among others Jennifer L. Derr, *The lived Nile: environment, disease, and material colonial economy in Egypt* (Stanford, CA, 2019); Allen F. Isaacman and Barbara S. Isaacman, *Dams, displacement and the delusion of development: Cahora Bassa and its legacies in Mozambique, 1965–2007* (Athens, OH, 2013); Stephan F. Miescher, *A dam for Africa: Akosombo stories from Ghana* (Bloomington, IN, 2022).

¹⁰ Miescher, *A dam for Africa*.

which in the following decades were to play a key role in planning and implementing large construction works in the country, hydroelectric plants and irrigation systems at Lake Tana included. International aid has been seen as the ground on which former motherlands and former colonies redefined their (economic, political, and cultural) relations,¹¹ as well as the mere continuation of Western dominance over the newly independent states.¹² This article takes the example of the Tana-Beles project to demonstrate that the colonial past was woven into the very fabric of international relief policies and practices developed after the collapse of formal imperial control. The approach to Ethiopian economic advancement which had distinguished Italian occupation in the 1930s re-emerged in Italy's aid programmes implemented from the 1950s onwards, but it took on different meanings and it served distinct objectives. Postcolonial humanitarianism appears therefore as the transformation of colonial practices and relationships into new policies, which did not depend only on former metropolises but also on the interests of new independent states and on the agenda of international organizations.

From the colonial period onwards, Italian large investments in infrastructural works paved the way for national private companies to Ethiopia. The role of private business remains still largely overlooked in the history of humanitarianism, while historians have recently started to tackle the role of foreign enterprises in postcolonial states and their links with local elites in the delivery of development goals.¹³ Bridging these two historiographies, this article contends that private companies had a prominent role in shaping postcolonial humanitarianism because they could benefit from both the favourable policies of donor countries, and the relationships they established in the long run with the authorities of recipient countries. National enterprises were crucial players first in the unfolding of Italian aid programmes for Ethiopia in post-war decades, and later in shaping the humanitarian response to the famine. Undoubtedly, Italian governmental policies favoured the overseas business of national firms, as it happened with Salini Costruzioni and Studio Pietrangeli. However, Italian companies benefited also from the familiarity with the environment and from the close relationships with Ethiopian authorities that they built and maintained in the long run, in spite of the local institutional and political changes.

The benefit was mutual, as the connections with Italian enterprises facilitated Ethiopian governments in pursuing their plans. Although with different goals, the emperor Haile Selassie, the leader of the military junta Mengistu Haile Mariam, and the EPRDF government saw the exploitation of natural resources and the management of the territory as powerful means to be deployed in the field of domestic policy and in negotiations with Western countries. The

¹¹ Corinna R. Unger, 'Postwar European development aid: defined by decolonization, the Cold War, and European integration?', in S. Macekura and E. Manela, eds., *The development century: a global history* (Cambridge, 2018).

¹² Michael Barnett, *Empire of humanity: a history of humanitarianism* (Ithaca, NY, and London, 2011).

¹³ Véronique Dimier and Sarah Stockwell, 'Introduction: new directions in the history of business and development in postcolonial Africa', in Dimier and Stockwell, eds., *The business of development in postcolonial Africa* (Cambridge, 2020), pp. 1–35.

Tana-Beles project, like other aid programmes implemented in Ethiopia, was not the mere outcome of Italy's political and economic interests in the region. It rather resulted from the interplay between Italian and Ethiopian authorities, with the recipients playing an active role in matching foreign aid programmes and their goals. Also from this point of view, the colonial age matters. In the early twentieth century, Ethiopia was itself an empire intent on expanding its possessions in the Horn of Africa, and it enjoyed good diplomatic relations with several Western countries. When the Italian invasion occurred, in 1935, the emperor Haile Selassie was granted asylum by the United Kingdom and armed resistance maintained the control of the country's large areas. In spite of the fact that it constituted a cornerstone of the fascist imperial plan, Italy's occupation of Ethiopia lasted only five years: after the liberation of Addis Ababa by the British army, the emperor re-entered the capital and regained the throne. Unlike other former motherlands of long-lasting colonial empires, in post-war decades Italy did not enjoy any long-established special diplomatic relations with Ethiopia. The relationship between the two countries was fluid, and Addis Ababa utilized its own room for manoeuvre while negotiating aid programmes.¹⁴ It did so also by virtue of its connections with the United Kingdom, France, the United States, and, during the DERG years, the Soviet Union. At the same time, Italy determined its aid policies towards Ethiopia in the frame of international organizations it belonged to, as it happened with the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).¹⁵ The DAC set specific standards for international aid and Italy, as a member, had to meet them. This article develops further the recently introduced 'three-sided perspective' on postcolonial humanitarianism, which connects the global context, the national donors of the former colonial power, and the internal dynamics of the recipient state.¹⁶ The case of Italy and Ethiopia demonstrates that postcolonial international aid was moulded by the interplay of multiple actors: governments of Italy, Ethiopia, and other nation-states, private companies, and intergovernmental organizations that developed the framework of international relief.

Implemented in the name of immediate reaction against starvation, the scheme to produce hydroelectric power and to irrigate the Beles Valley stemmed from Italian long-term belief in large infrastructures as being key to the economic advancement of Ethiopia. The response to conflicts and emergencies in the 'Third World' has been identified as the core concern of humanitarianism's postcolonial moment.¹⁷ An abundance of studies have demonstrated that the

¹⁴ On international aid as negotiation, see Lindsay Whitfield and Alastair Fraser, 'Negotiating aid: the structural conditions shaping the negotiating strategies of African governments', *International Negotiation*, 15 (2010), pp. 341–66.

¹⁵ The OECD was founded in 1961 as an intergovernmental organization to stimulate economic advancement and world trade. It superseded the Organization for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC), which had been established in 1948 for the administration of the Marshall Plan.

¹⁶ Hilton, 'Charity, decolonization and development'.

¹⁷ Johannes Paulmann, 'Conjunctures in the history of international humanitarian aid during the twentieth century', *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, 4 (2013), pp. 227–8.

famine in Ethiopia was a turning point in this sense, for several reasons: due to the support to aid-giving from all sectors of society; as a result of the powerful role of television in raising global awareness and compassion, and the engagement of pop-stars in campaigning for aid.¹⁸ In Italy, too, humanitarian campaigns exerted a decisive pressure on institutions, whose response was exceptional in terms of resources' mobilization yet significantly rooted in previously established schemes for development aid. The history of the Tana-Beles project enables us to re-read the response to Ethiopian famine within a larger timeframe which goes back to the colonial period, blurring the boundaries between emergency relief and assistance to development. This article argues that the connection between humanitarianism and assistance to development, currently invoked as the new frontier for managing humanitarian crisis,¹⁹ is an integral part of the very history of international aid.

The article will begin by examining the fascist plan for infrastructures in occupied Ethiopia as the background for the very first project on the construction of hydroelectric plants and irrigation systems at Lake Tana. It will then analyse Italy's aid programmes in Ethiopia in the decades after the Second World War and see how they favoured both the further penetration of Italian enterprises in the region, and the Ethiopian emperor's programmes of development. Finally, the article will turn its attention to the Tana-Beles project as Italy's main intervention to counteract the mid-1980s famine upon the request of the Ethiopian government led by Mengistu and in agreement with the Italian companies that were to be in charge of the work. In the conclusion, the article will consider the importance of this case-study for the history of postcolonial humanitarianism.

II

The Lake Tana region had been the focus of national and international interests well before the Italians arrived in Addis Ababa. Already at the beginning of the twentieth century, control over Lake Tana's water was on the table in the negotiations held between the British and Emperor Menelik II, who was intensifying Ethiopia's relations with European countries after he had defeated the Italians in Adwa.²⁰ In the wake of his successful resistance to a European army, Menelik aimed both at consolidating the position of his large empire in the Horn of Africa and gaining international recognition. The British authorities, in turn, were eager to control Lake Tana in order to preserve the regular flow of the Blue Nile in Sudan and its supply of water to the Nile. In 1902, Ethiopia granted England first rights to use Lake Tana as a Nile reservoir.²¹

¹⁸ See, among others, O'Sullivan, *The NGO moment*, pp. 158–274; Susanne Franks, *Reporting disasters: famine aid politics and the media* (London, 2013); Götz, Brewis, and Werther, *Humanitarianism in the modern world*, pp. 116–35.

¹⁹ See Jon Harald Sande Lie, 'The humanitarian–development nexus: humanitarian principles, practice, and pragmatics', *Journal of International Humanitarian Action*, 5 (2020).

²⁰ Bahru Zewde, *A history of modern Ethiopia, 1855–1991* (Oxford, 2001), p. 113.

²¹ This was a provision of the 1902 Ethio–British treaty establishing the Sudanese–Ethiopian border, which also obliged Ethiopia to guarantee the security of the Blue Nile's sources. Four years

In the mid-1920s, Ethiopia attempted to obtain the necessary funding to build the dam at Lake Tana from the United States, as part of a broader quest for co-operation with American authorities.²² Ten years later, Emperor Haile Selassie took advantage once again of Britain's interest in the lake's waters. In the spring of 1935, he promised the UK the concession for the construction of a dam at Lake Tana, while attempting to get London to help Ethiopia avert Mussolini's attack on the country.²³ However, diplomacy failed and war broke out a few months later. Subsequently, the Italian forces entered Addis Ababa, Haile Selassie went into exile in London, and resistance developed in large areas of Ethiopia.

Lake Tana continued to be regarded as a potentially major resource also during fascist rule. In 1937, the Italian Royal Academy organized a geographical expedition to the region.²⁴ The hydrographical survey carried out on that occasion showed that Lake Tana only contributed very little to the quantity of water that the Blue Nile poured into the Nile.²⁵ Thus, the largest lake in Italian East Africa could be used to irrigate land and generate hydroelectric power. The development of this 'new' source of energy was among the priorities of the Italian industrial plan for Ethiopia,²⁶ in the wake of European enthusiasm for hydropower as a renewable alternative to replace coal.²⁷

Italians' interest in Lake Tana was based on existing knowledge of its potential as a hydric resource; but it also epitomized the fascist view of Italy's imperial mission. The Italians looked at infrastructure as the means by which to 'master the challenging terrain and taxing climate' of African possessions, and they 'staked their right to rule and global status as an imperial power' precisely on the ability to dominate the hostile environment of the colonies.²⁸ According to Andrew Denning, whereas other empires treated the building

later, the Ethiopian Tripartite Treaty included Lake Tana in the British sphere of influence. See Edward C. Keefer, 'Great Britain, France and the Ethiopian Tripartite Treaty of 1906', *Albion: A Quarterly Journal concerned with the British Studies*, 13 (1981), pp. 364–80, at p. 379.

²² Peter Garretson, *A Victorian gentleman & Ethiopian nationalist: the life & times of Hakim Warqenah, Dr Charles Martin* (Woodbridge, 2012), pp. 156–62.

²³ Gaetano Salvemini, *Prelude to World War II* (New York, NY, 1954), p. 203. Many thanks to Annalisa Urbano for suggesting this source to me. For full details of the reservoir project, see The National Archives, Kew, Richmond, UK (TNA), Foreign Office (FO) 141/895, Lake Tsana Reservoir Project. Agreement between Egypt and the Sudan, 20 May 1935.

²⁴ Giotto Dainelli, *Missione di studio al Lago Tana promossa dal Centro Studi per l'Africa Orientale Italiana* (Rome, 1938).

²⁵ Giotto Dainelli, *La regione del Lago Tana* (Milan, 1939), p. 29.

²⁶ Confederazione fascista degli industriali, *L'industria in AOI* (Rome, 1939), pp. 149–56.

²⁷ Philipp N. Lehmann, 'Infinite power to change the world: hydroelectricity and engineered climate change in the Atlantropa project', *American Historical Review*, 121 (2016), pp. 70–100.

²⁸ Andrew Denning, 'Infrastructural propaganda: the visual culture of colonial roads and the domestication of nature in Italian East Africa', *Environmental History*, 24 (2019), pp. 352–69, at p. 356; on the relevance of environment-making processes for Italian colonialism, see also Roberta Biasillo, 'Socio-ecological colonial transfers: trajectories of the fascist agricultural enterprise in Libya (1922–1943)', *Modern Italy*, 26 (2021), pp. 181–98. On the economic weight of Italian investment in infrastructure, see Gianluca Podestà, 'Building the empire: public works in Italian East Africa (1936–1941)', *Entreprises et histoire*, 70 (2013), pp. 37–53.

of infrastructure as a means to an end, 'Italians made it their entire mission.'²⁹ Against this backdrop, the fascist government looked at water control as essential to 'fix' the colonial empire.³⁰

The outlay on infrastructure was particularly prominent in Ethiopia because the fascist government saw it as a country rich in natural resources and the flagship of Italian colonial possessions.³¹ Though condensed in a very short period of time, the construction of roads, bridges, and water plants involved the expertise of engineers, hydrologists, and geologists; it absorbed a significant share of the government's public spending and it engaged a large number of Italian enterprises.³² Three years after the war against Ethiopia, 193 construction companies were already at work in AOI. Fascist policies regarding infrastructure contributed to the establishment of a larger economic market, which familiarized Italian firms with the Horn of Africa.

The project for the construction of hydroelectric plants and irrigation systems at Lake Tana, mentioned in the AOI guide, was developed within this context. Despite the fact that it fell through, it was nonetheless important since it stemmed from the overall assessment, survey, and investigative work carried out under Italian auspices. All of this work was to be recast in several national programmes drawn up and/or implemented in Ethiopia in the following decades.³³ Therefore the return, in the mid-1980s, to the plan for Lake Tana and the Beles Valley formulated fifty years earlier came as no surprise.

After the British army defeated Italy, allied with Nazi Germany, Lake Tana once again became a key issue in the relationship between the Ethiopian authorities and the major Western powers. In May 1941, shortly after the liberation of Addis Ababa, the emperor Haile Selassie re-entered the capital and regained the throne he was subsequently to hold for a further three decades. However, only the end of the war marked the conclusion of Britain's substantial occupation of the country, and Haile Selassie looked to a partnership with the USA as the best counterweight to stringent British control.³⁴ Global geopolitics and the Cold War led the US government to try and expand its influence in the Horn of Africa. Furthermore, the new commitment to supporting Ethiopia was favoured by the great popularity the country had started to enjoy among Afro-Americans from the 1930s onwards.³⁵

Washington guaranteed Addis Ababa mainly military aid, although the Four-Point Agreement signed in 1952 laid particular emphasis on the development of infrastructure, along with agricultural and public health education,

²⁹ Denning, 'Infrastructural propaganda'.

³⁰ Angelo M. Caglioti, "'In this country, water means life": Eritrea erratic rivers and Italian irrigation projects between Adwa and Mussolini (1897–1934)', *Contemporanea*, 25 (2022), pp. 265–92.

³¹ Nicola Labanca, *Oltremare. Storia dell'espansione coloniale italiana* (Bologna, 2002), pp. 276, 300.

³² The total number of companies operating in AOI was 499, see Confederazione fascista degli industriali, *L'industria in AOI*, p. 351.

³³ Haile M. Larebo, *The building of an empire: Italian land policy and practice in Ethiopia, 1935–1941* (Oxford, 1994), p. 294.

³⁴ Zewde, *A history of modern Ethiopia*, p. 184.

³⁵ Fikru Gebrekidan, 'In defense of Ethiopia: a comparative assessment of Caribbean and African American anti-fascist protests, 1935–1941', *Northeast African Studies*, 2 (1995), pp. 145–73.

public administration training, and the awarding of scholarships.³⁶ Modernization was a priority for Haile Selassie, who saw it as both the way to adapt the country to the global system, and the means by which to entrench his own power.³⁷ In this situation, Ethiopian and American representatives arranged for a survey of the Blue Nile Basin, including Lake Tana as a source of the river.³⁸ The survey was meant to be the necessary precondition for a general plan for the production of hydroelectric power. The Ethiopian-American scheme for the Blue Nile and Lake Tana raised considerable concern among the British,³⁹ but it also implied new negotiations with Italy, because of the cartographic surveys carried out during the colonial period. The Americans requested these surveys in order to complete their work, while the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarded all the information in its possession as a possible asset for the national companies looking at Ethiopia as a potential market for their services.⁴⁰ Knowledge was a valuable legacy of the previous fascist empire, and one that the Italian Republic aimed to exploit in its attempt to re-launch the nation's economy following the war.

Yet, the issue of the cartographic surveys was a thorny problem for Italy, due to tense diplomatic relations with Ethiopia as a result of past aggressions; and also as a result of Italy's attempt to retain indirect control of the area by supporting Eritrean independence.⁴¹ Furthermore, at the time the two countries were meant to negotiate the exact position of the Ethiopian-Somali border, as established by the United Nations' agreement granting Italy powers as trustee of Somalia. They failed to do so, however, and the question was submitted to the UN in the mid-1950s, when diplomatic tensions started to ease.⁴² The understanding reached in 1956, when Addis Ababa and Rome agreed on the reparations that Italy had to pay because of the 1935 invasion, was therefore entrenched in the complex Italian decolonization process in Africa,⁴³ at the same time, it paved the way for aid policies that Italy was to develop in the following years. According to the agreement, Ethiopia was to invest the approximately 16 million dollars it had received from the Italian government

³⁶ Amanda Kay McVety, 'Point four in Ethiopia', *Diplomatic History*, 32 (2008), pp. 371–403; idem, *Enlightened aid: US development as foreign policy in Ethiopia* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 83–120.

³⁷ Christopher Clapham, 'Ethiopian development: the politics of emulation', *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 44 (2006), pp. 135–50, at p. 142.

³⁸ United States Department of State, Office of the Historian, Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1955–7, Africa, Volume XVIII, '113. National Security Council Report. Statement of Policy on Ethiopia', and '115. Memorandum of a Conversation, Addis Ababa, March 12, 1957'.

³⁹ TNA, FO 371/90202, African Department, Nile Waters Agreement, 9.6.51.

⁴⁰ Archivio del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Direzione Generale Affari Politici – Ufficio III 1948–1960 (Versamento I), b. 64, fasc. 187, 'Progetto per il rilevamento della regione del Nilo Azzurro', 5 May 1958; 'Dati delle triangolazioni eseguite in Africa Orientale dall'amministrazione italiana', 28 May 1958.

⁴¹ Zewde, *A history of modern Ethiopia*, p. 197.

⁴² On the relationship between Italy and Ethiopia in the post-war period, see Giampaolo Calchi Novati, 'Re-establishing Italo-Ethiopian relations after the war: old prejudices and new policies', *Northeast African Studies*, 3 (1996), pp. 27–49.

⁴³ Nicola Labanca, 'Exceptional Italy? The many ends of the Italian colonial empire', in Thomas and Thompson, eds., *The Oxford handbook of the ends of empire*, pp. 123–39.

in the construction of a cotton factory in Bahar Dar, and of a dam and a hydro-electric power plant at Koka on the Awash River.⁴⁴

The imperial government was supposed to entrust Italian companies with both works; thus, Italian enterprises were offered the opportunity to expand their presence in Ethiopia and their relationship with local authorities. The dam built in Koka was the most important in the country, and Impresit – the company in charge of the construction – participated in many other infrastructural works.⁴⁵ Furthermore, engagement in Ethiopia was part of Impresit's involvement in the 'Third World' market for major construction projects: in 1956, this Italian corporation signed the contract for the construction of the Kariba dam, on behalf of the Central African Federation.⁴⁶ It was a crucial step towards the Italian construction companies' global expansion, which was to emerge from transnational connections resulting from the entanglement of decolonization and post-empire international aid.⁴⁷

III

The unusual form of payment for reparations that Italy and Ethiopia agreed upon in 1956 was perfectly in line with the international aid policies established by the Italian government a few years later. Italy moderately contributed to a number of multilateral programmes sponsored by international organizations, but its membership of the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD contributed to shape the country's aid policies. Since its foundation in 1963, the DAC not only set standards for development aid and the amounts that industrialized countries were supposed to give, but it also introduced a review process aimed at evaluating, for example, the volume of aid, its geographical distribution, and the principal capital exporters for each member state.⁴⁸

For at least twenty years, the Italian authorities' aim was to keep a balance between the price that Italy was to pay for membership of the 'club of the

⁴⁴ Archivio Storico della Banca d'Italia, Banca d'Italia, Rapporti con l'estero, pratt., n. 397, fasc. 1, fasc. 2, 'Accordo e scambi di note per il regolamento delle questioni economiche e finanziarie derivanti dal Trattato di Pace e per la collaborazione economica tra Italia ed Etiopia, Addis Abeba, 5 Marzo 1956'.

⁴⁵ Giuseppe Faraci, *Etiopia guerra e pace* (Turin, 1965), p. 92; Giuseppe Fulcheri, 'Il lavoro italiano in Africa e in particolare nel Sudan e in Etiopia', *Africa. Rivista trimestrale di studi e documentazione dell'Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente*, 16 (1961), pp. 244–60; Umberto Girola, 'I grandi lavori italiani attualmente in corso', *Africa. Rivista trimestrale di studi e documentazione dell'Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente*, 17 (1962), pp. 62–6.

⁴⁶ Julia Tischler, *Light and power for a multiracial nation: the Kariba dam scheme in the Central Africa Federation* (Basingstoke, 2013), pp. 154–9.

⁴⁷ On the globalizing effects of decolonization, see Martin Thomas and Andrew Thompson, 'Empire and globalisation: from "high imperialism" to decolonisation', *International History Review*, 36 (2014), pp. 142–70; and Anthony G. Hopkins, 'Globalisation and decolonisation', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 45 (2017), pp. 729–45.

⁴⁸ Matthias Schmelzer, *The hegemony of growth: the OECD and the making of the economic growth paradigm* (Cambridge, 2016), pp. 227–38.

rich',⁴⁹ and the furthering of national interests. Membership of the DAC entitled Italy to participate in the drawing up of European policies relating to 'underdeveloped countries', and it strengthened its position among Western powers. At the same time, the government regarded the fragilities and contradictions of national post-war economic growth as a limitation on large-scale investment in international development programmes, and looked for solutions best suited to Italian circumstances. Hence, it devoted most of the budget for international aid to financial co-operation, whereby Italian enterprises willing to expand their business in the 'Third World' were offered financial support. Newly independent states enjoyed facilities for the importation of Italian goods, and also benefited from advantageous credit terms in regard to works (mainly industrial plants and infrastructures) carried out by Italian firms.⁵⁰

This approach shaped Italy's relationship with the Horn of Africa, which enjoyed a privileged position in regard to Italian aid, although the majority of such aid was provided to one country, Somalia.⁵¹ Nevertheless, Italy's financial co-operation favoured the engagement of national enterprises in Ethiopia as well. In 1963, when commenting on the agreement reached with the Italian government for a loan of 14 million dollars, Emperor Haile Selassie praised the activities of Italian companies and mentioned the construction of dams as one of their strong points.⁵² Notwithstanding the re-emergence of diplomatic tensions between the two countries,⁵³ Italy's financial co-operation with Ethiopia evolved in harmony with Haile Selassie's attitude towards the country's development. Great infrastructural works met his need 'to demonstrate progress without threatening the existing order'.⁵⁴

When the emperor gave his speech, Impresit was still at work on the Awash River project, and two years later the municipality of Addis Ababa commissioned Studio Pietrangeli and Salini Costruzioni to build the Legadadi dam, which was to regulate the flow of the Akaki River and provide the capital city with drinking water. Funding was provided by a credit institute financed by the Italian state (the Istituto di Credito per le Opere Pubbliche), in the measure of 24 million dollars.⁵⁵ The Legadadi dam was completed in 1971, and as the company's official history states, this undertaking provided Salini with 'a

⁴⁹ Matthias Schmelzer, 'A club of the rich to help the poor? The OECD, "development", and the hegemony of donor countries', in Marc Frey, Sönke Kunkel, and Corinna R. Unger, eds., *International organizations and development, 1945–1990* (Basingstoke, 2014), pp. 171–95.

⁵⁰ 'Memorandum dell'Italia all'O.C.S.E.', *Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali*, 31 (1964), pp. 617–40.

⁵¹ In 1960, Italian trusteeship ended and the Somali Republic was founded through unification of the former British Somaliland and the former Italian Somaliland.

⁵² Ansa, 'L'accordo economico e tecnico firmato tra l'Italia e l'Etiopia', *La Stampa*, 19 Feb. 1963, p. 11.

⁵³ Haile Selassie demanded the restitution of artefacts looted during the military occupation, such as the Axum Obelisk. See Richard Pankhurst, 'Ethiopia, the Aksum Obelisk, and the return of Africa's cultural heritage', *African Affairs*, 98 (1999), pp. 229–39.

⁵⁴ Clapham, 'Ethiopian development', p. 143.

⁵⁵ Ansa, 'Impresa italiana costruirà una grande diga in Etiopia', *La Stampa*, 9 May 1967, p. 14.

sort of diplomatic passport and a certificate of skills and efficiency' for operating in Ethiopia.⁵⁶

Italy's funding of international aid was very modest compared to that of other DAC members,⁵⁷ and the United States remained the major donor in Ethiopia until the early 1970s.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, the decades prior to the 1980s famine are key to understanding the response to emergencies as epitomized by the Tana-Beles project. Italian economic assistance to the Ethiopian empire stemmed from several interwoven elements. On the one hand, there were the DAC's development policies, which favoured the flow of capital toward southern countries as a way of binding them to Western economies. On the other hand, Haile Selassie's vision of development, together with his foreign aid policies, was also of key importance. From the post-war years onwards, co-operation with the United States remained crucial to the Ethiopian emperor, although he also relied on the financial support of several other Western countries for the completion of important infrastructure.⁵⁹ His diplomatic success in postcolonial Africa (the Organization of African Unity was funded and headquartered in Addis Ababa) undoubtedly helped him successfully diversify the sources for development schemes.⁶⁰

The 'diplomatic passport' that Salini and other Italian companies gained at the time of the empire was to retain its value in subsequent years, in spite of the dramatic political and institutional changes which occurred during that period. After the revolution had seen Haile Selassie overthrown and the DERG seize power, official relations between the two countries remained frozen for a while.⁶¹ However, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs re-launched financial co-operation with Ethiopia at the end of the 1970s. In Rome in February 1980, the Ethiopian minister of finance signed the first post-revolution agreement with a Western government. Italy guaranteed Ethiopia a loan of 15 million dollars to buy industrial equipment (in the textile and hydroelectric sectors); then in 1982 a second agreement was signed, for a further loan of 25 million dollars, to be spent on the modernization of Addis Ababa's aqueduct system.⁶²

⁵⁶ Salini-Impregilo, *110 years of future* (Milan, 2016), p. 42.

⁵⁷ Elena Calandri, 'Italy's foreign assistance policy, 1959–1969', *Contemporary European History*, 12 (2003), pp. 509–25.

⁵⁸ McVety, *Enlightened aid*.

⁵⁹ For example, Great Britain contributed to the development of the railway network, while Sweden helped fund telecommunications. See Zewde, *A history of modern Ethiopia*, p. 188; on American aid, see also Harold G. Marcus, *The politics of empire: Ethiopia, Great Britain and the United States, 1971–1974* (Lawrenceville, GA, 1995), pp. 79–115.

⁶⁰ According to Joseph M. Hodge, the search for various donors was among the strategies adopted by postcolonial states as they asserted their rights to determine how aid should be transacted: 'Beyond dependency: north–south relationships in the age of development', in Thomas and Thompson, eds., *The Oxford handbook of the ends of empire*, pp. 621–39.

⁶¹ Diplomatic tensions were due mainly to the nationalization of Italian residents' properties by the DERG.

⁶² Camera dei Deputati, doc. LII, no. 5 bis, 'Relazione sulla cooperazione economica e finanziaria dell'Italia con i paesi in via di sviluppo' (first semester 1981), p. 6; see also the report presented for the second semester of 1982.

New aid programmes replicated the characteristics of previous years' schemes (easy credit terms, selection of Italian companies for supplies and construction work). However, this additional aid now acquired a different meaning which at one and the same time followed and challenged the logic of the Cold War. The Soviet Union backed post-revolutionary Ethiopia, while the United States withdrew aid to the country. Soviet support was mainly military, while the DERG kept the door open to economic co-operation with the West.⁶³ European states filled some of the gaps left by Ethiopia's fallout with the USA. International aid became an increasingly important part of Italian foreign policy, and Rome was in the frontline of financial co-operation with Ethiopia despite the latter country being led by a socialist military junta.⁶⁴ Italy aimed at re-balancing the existing privileged relationship with Somalia by expanding its sphere of action to the whole Horn of Africa.⁶⁵ At the same time, Italian companies, who were already acquainted with the Ethiopian environment, sought to strengthen their business operations in the area. The economic crisis, in their view, made governmental help with the engagement of Italian enterprises abroad even more urgent.⁶⁶ Against the backdrop of all these changes, Italian and Ethiopian interests – in spite of their conflicting international alliances – converged, resulting among other things in the establishment of a Joint Steering Committee tasked with drafting three-year co-operation schemes.

IV

In the official request addressed to the minister of foreign affairs in August 1985, the Provisional Military Government of Socialist Ethiopia emphasized that the Tana-Beles River Basin was a priority project in counteracting the devastating effects of the famine. Studio Pietrangeli had already prepared a preliminary assessment of said project,⁶⁷ and Salini Costruzioni was ready to do the work on the project. The letter was obviously an official document formalizing previous informal agreements and ratifying those contacts that had already been established.

Negotiations with the Italian government took place when the international response to the risk of mass starvation in Ethiopia was at its peak. In October 1984, a BBC report – immediately broadcast worldwide by a large number of other television channels – showed shocking images of sick, starving children

⁶³ Christopher Clapham, *Transformation and continuity in revolutionary Ethiopia* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 220–35.

⁶⁴ Among the DAC member states, Italy was the largest donor to Ethiopia in 1980, and the second largest (after Sweden) in 1981; ASCD, CPC, b. 24, doc. 323, 'La cooperazione allo sviluppo in alcuni paesi donatori Giugno 1984', Nomisma Reports on development co-operation, table 10.2.

⁶⁵ Maria Cristina Ercolessi, *Conflitti e mutamento politico in Africa: il ruolo degli attori esterni e delle relazioni inter-africane negli anni Ottanta* (Milan, 1991), p. 59.

⁶⁶ Salvatore Bono, 'Rapporti commerciali e di lavoro fra l'Italia e l'Africa', *Africa*, 31 (1978), pp. 291–4.

⁶⁷ ASCD, CPC, b. 39, doc. 464, 'Letter of the Provisional Military Government of Socialist Ethiopia Ministry of Foreign Affairs', 15 Apr. 1985.

in an overcrowded feeding centre.⁶⁸ The exceptional visibility of the issue sent the 'Ethiopian crisis' to the top of the agenda of humanitarianism. Governments and intergovernmental organizations dedicated special funds and emergency programmes to it. Voluntary agencies immediately launched new campaigns to collect donations,⁶⁹ and in June 1985 numerous shipments of supplies arrived in Ethiopia's ports. Yet, governments, international agencies, and NGOs all had to tackle the problem of distribution. On the one hand, the civil war was unfolding precisely in the northern regions worst hit by the famine, which were therefore inaccessible. On the other hand, the Ethiopian authorities wanted to control all incoming resources, and donor countries were seriously concerned about the role aid was playing in facilitating the regime's policies.⁷⁰

The agreement between Ethiopia and Italy was meant to respond to the serious emergency, and took shape in the wake of global mobilization against the famine; however, at the same time it developed along the same lines as previous aid programmes. In the mid-1980, the Ethiopian government already enjoyed very good relations with both the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Italian companies operating in the country. Pietrangeli and Salini were used to working in Ethiopia. They were familiar with local institutions, and undoubtedly they could exert decisive pressure on Italian decision-makers. Furthermore, the core of the Tana-Beles project dealt with infrastructural works, which was the 'specialty' of Italian international aid, and this could now serve Mengistu's plan for a socialist Ethiopia very well.

Construction of the weir on Lake Tana (where the lake discharges its waters into the Blue Nile), the canal to divert water to the Beles Valley, the hydroelectric power plant, roads, health structures, and the extensive expansion of cultivated lands were all part of Mengistu's ongoing resettlement programme. While it was negotiating with Italian representatives, the Ethiopian regime moved people from the regions of Shoa and Wollo into the area. Italy's investment in a large construction project allowed the government to dramatically speed up the establishment of a new settlement in the Tana region, which in turn was a cornerstone of Mengistu's social engineering scheme.

Ethiopia was not entirely new to large-scale resettlement schemes, as such had already been attempted in the imperial age.⁷¹ The DERG drew on previous such experiences, although its programme was much more ambitious, since massive resettlement constituted a key part of the government's efforts to solve the 'peasant question'. The regime looked at the cultivation of new lands, mechanization, villagization, and the extensive redistribution of the population as crucial steps towards increased agricultural production and the establishment of a well-developed agrarian society.⁷² The plan derived

⁶⁸ Franks, *Reporting disasters*.

⁶⁹ O'Sullivan, *The NGO moment*, pp. 158–274.

⁷⁰ Götz, Brewis, and Werther, *Humanitarianism in the modern world*, pp. 191–213.

⁷¹ Wolde-Selassie Abutte, 'Social re-articulation after resettlement: observing the Tana Beles Valley scheme in Ethiopia', in Michael M. Cernea and Christopher McDowell, eds., *Risks and reconstruction: experiences of resettlers and refugees* (Washington, DC, 2000), p. 414.

⁷² Clapham, 'Ethiopian development', pp. 146–7.

from Ethiopia's adherence to the Soviet model of development,⁷³ although it was also regarded as the best possible response to the famine. It therefore received the greatest impetus in the mid-1980s, when the food crisis was at its peak.⁷⁴ In Mengistu's view, the emergency due to the famine, long-term relief, and development were all strictly interconnected, and he strove to curb international aid in order to achieve his aims. The Tana-Beles project was the first international project that openly supported his plans for resettlement and villagization, precisely at the time when non-governmental organizations such as Médecins Sans Frontières started criticizing the Ethiopian authorities for their instrumental use of international aid.⁷⁵

On the Italian side too, the entanglement of the emergency, long-term relief, and development played a crucial role. The famine appeal in Ethiopia was rooted in a wider campaign for the mobilization of Italian institutions against hunger in the world that starting from the late 1970s had gained the attention of the media and the support of several grass-root organizations. Some pressure came also from European institutions. After much heated debate, in September 1980 the European parliament ratified a resolution requiring all member states to allocate at least 0.7 per cent of gross domestic product to development aid.⁷⁶ One year later, 246 members of the parliament signed the Nobel Prize Winners' Manifesto Appeal against hunger in the world.⁷⁷

The issue was now on the Italian political agenda, with a specific emphasis on the food crisis in Africa. In 1985, the government led by the socialist Bettino Craxi issued an ad hoc law that allocated unprecedented funds to international aid. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs undersecretary, endowed with special powers, was in charge of selecting, funding, and supervising the projects designed to offer an immediate response to the risk of starvation. The 'emergency' label allowed special procedures to be adopted, as in the case of the Tana-Beles project: the company Salini Costruzioni was awarded the project without any public call for tender being necessary. The lack of transparency in the assignment of funds was precisely one of the main grounds for subsequent allegations of political patronage and corruption.⁷⁸

Italian authorities, however, did not design the emergency appeal simply to circumvent the standard procedures governing the assignment of funding: the entire programme in question, aimed at 'preventing mass deaths from hunger', was clearly an intermingling of emergency relief (to prevent such deaths) and the pursuit of

⁷³ Resettlement schemes were typical also of other regimes or one-party states and presented as the by-product of Africa's way to socialism. The case of Tanzania offers a relevant example; see among others Priya Lal, *African socialism in postcolonial Tanzania: between the village and the world* (Cambridge, 2015).

⁷⁴ Aboutte, 'Social re-articulation after resettlement', p. 415.

⁷⁵ E. Davey, 'Famine, aid, and ideology: the political activism of Médecins Sans Frontières in the 1980s', *French Historical Studies*, 34 (2011), pp. 547–57.

⁷⁶ *Official Journal of the European Communities*, C 265, 13 Oct. 1980, pp. 17 and 28.

⁷⁷ *Official Journal of the European Communities*, C 287, 9 Nov. 1981, p. 2.

⁷⁸ ASCD, CPC, b. 12, doc. 79, Camera dei Deputati – Gruppo della sinistra indipendente, 'FAI – ovvero quando l'aiuto allo sviluppo diventa spreco o anche peggio'.

economic development in the 'underdeveloped world'. On the one hand, it evoked the daily starvation of children, stressing the urgent need for a rapid response and entailing the shipment of rice, dried foods, and soya oil for the immediate relief of the suffering populations. On the other hand, it strongly focused on the need to support poor countries in the development of their economies and on the priority of 'structural actions', which mainly meant the construction of infrastructure.⁷⁹ The Tana-Beles project was no exception to this, as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs undersecretary spent half of the total funds assigned to bilateral programmes on contracts awarded to some of Italy's major construction companies.⁸⁰

V

Looking at Ethiopian and Italian intentions, we can safely say that the Tana-Beles project brought together various different aims and objectives, in terms of possible immediate benefits and long-term plans, at both national and international level. Work in the Beles Valley started in March 1986. The Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' undersecretary presented the programme as of an 'integrated' nature, aiming at local development through co-ordinated action in multiple sectors: infrastructure, education and professional training, healthcare, agriculture, and small-scale industry. Two Italian NGOs provided certain medical staff and were in charge of relief work, but the construction of infrastructure formed the majority of the project, and Salini Costruzioni together with Studio Pietrangeli were the central players.

One year after work had started, the water plant serving thirty-nine villages and a number of healthcare structures had been completed, together with the roads and the airport needed to transport the people, supplies, and machines required for implementation of the project. Deforestation had begun, and a small portion of the land had already been cultivated. The targeted 100,000 hectares remained some way off; yet the main problem was not the time needed to complete the work, but rather the limited fertility of the local soil. According to the report drafted by the Italian embassy's agronomist in Addis Ababa, the local soil was unsuited to intensive, constant farming, since fertility was low, and it had to be preserved through carefully planned crop rotation and periods of leaving it fallow.⁸¹ The two main consequences highlighted by this assessment were: the potential for the self-sustainment of resettled people was in doubt, and the land's management had to be designed on the basis of the requirements of the terrain.

For the time being, Italy provided the local population with food aid,⁸² but thereafter the 18,798 families who had already settled in the Beles Valley, and

⁷⁹ Atti parlamentari, IX Legislatura, Camera dei Deputati, doc. LXXXI, 'Programma di intervento straordinario nelle aree sottosviluppate presentato dal Ministro degli Affari Esteri', in particular pp. 114–15.

⁸⁰ 'FAI – ovvero quando l'aiuto allo sviluppo diventa spreco o anche peggio', p. 43.

⁸¹ ASCD, CPC, b. 39, doc. 464, 'Ambasciata d'Italia Addis Abeba, Unità Tecnica Sezione Agricoltura, Situazione e alternative di evoluzione dell'agricoltura del Tana-Beles', 1 Apr. 1987.

⁸² Atti Parlamentari, IX Legislatura, doc. LXXXI, n. 5, 'Relazione sulla realizzazione dei programmi di intervento nelle aree sottosviluppate (29 March – 29 July 1986)'.

the 21,414 families due to arrive by the end of 1987, would have to be self-sufficient in food. However, due to low soil fertility, the crops grown were not enough to fully ensure self-sustainability. In the view of the Italian embassy's expert, only long-term experimentation and analysis could lead to new farming methods capable of overcoming the problem of the soil's low fertility. Furthermore, cropping patterns had to be carefully re-determined on the basis of the soil's shortcomings and potential. In other words, sticking to the collective organization of work – previously introduced by the Ethiopian authorities – was detrimental to the development of agriculture in the Beles Valley.

The Italian embassy's expert reiterated his suggestions one year later. However, revising the programme with regard to farming methods and cropping patterns was not an option.⁸³ Studio Pietrangeli had drawn the Project Master Plan in agreement with the Ethiopian authorities, and any modification of this arrangement had to fall in line with the regime's vision of agrarian development based substantially on large-scale mechanization, intensive cultivation, state farms, and peasant associations in charge of land management. The aims of the regime and of the Italian companies concerned converged since the DERG's scheme entailed large-scale infrastructural works and the marketing of agricultural machinery and fertilizers. The dramatic increase in resources due to the response to the famine appeal consolidated the role that aid played in shaping relations between the African state and Italian private business.⁸⁴ Yet, this arrangement failed to achieve self-sufficiency and indeed hindered what was supposed to be the primary objective of Italian intervention, namely the eradication of hunger through 'structural actions'.

In spite of its shortcomings at the local level, the Tana-Beles project contributed towards strengthening Ethiopian-Italian co-operation. Italy had already further developed its international aid policies, which were now more prominent within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁸⁵ At the end of 1987, at a point when international efforts to fight the famine had sharply declined, Ethiopian and Italian delegations agreed upon a new country-wide programme, based on medium- and long-term plans and aimed at achieving food self-sufficiency.⁸⁶ The memorandum of understanding also ratified the continuation of the Tana-Beles project. However, while the meeting of delegations was ongoing in Rome, the EPRDF kidnapped two Italian technicians working in the Beles Valley. In fact, Salini Costruzioni relied heavily on Italian manpower, and 250 workers had moved into the area at the beginning of the

⁸³ See ASCD, CPC, b. 39, doc. 464, 'Progetto Tana-Beles: Nota di commento al Telegramma del MAE n. 678 del 18 luglio 88 and Lettera da Dr L. Corti all'Ambasciatore'.

⁸⁴ On newly independent states' influence over the business sector during the decolonization process, see the seminal work by Robert L. Tignor, *Capitalism and nationalism at the end of empire: state and business in decolonizing Egypt, Nigeria, and Kenya, 1945-1963* (Princeton, NJ, 1998).

⁸⁵ The law passed in 1987 (no. 49, 28 Feb.) set up, within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a specific International Co-operation and Development Department (Divisione Generale per la Cooperazione e lo Sviluppo, DGCS).

⁸⁶ ASCD, CPC, b. 20, doc. 264, 'Memorandum of understanding of the Third Session of the Ethio-Italian Joint Commission for Development Cooperation'.

project. The armed coalition against Mengistu released the two men after forty days, but despite the security measures put in place by the Italians, the 'rebels' kidnapped three more people in the following seven months.⁸⁷ Security issues slowed the programme down, and four years after it had started it was significantly reduced in scope. The main hydraulic sections of the project (the Blue Nile weir, the Tana-Beles tunnel, and the hydroelectric plant) were abandoned.

The entity of the work had been reduced, but in October 1989 Studio Pietrangeli and the Ethiopian government applied for additional funds in order to complete it.⁸⁸ The International Co-operation and Development Department (Divisione Generale per la Cooperazione e lo Sviluppo, DGCS) of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs examined the proposal, praised the accomplishments of the project in past years, but at the same time claimed that the emergency was over and demanded a change of approach. 'The Project – stated the DGCS – brilliantly dealt with the emergency phase by providing infrastructures and – in part – technologies needed for the intense development of the area', but it was time to move to the 'post-emergency phase' and pursue sustainability: local agriculture was still far from producing enough for peasants' sustenance.⁸⁹ The Italian–Ethiopian Joint Steering Committee discussed the issue on several occasions and it eventually agreed on new targets for the programme, namely: strengthening the villagers' role in the management of agricultural activities; enhancing the settlers' standards of living; fruitfully exploiting the infrastructure built in the area. In October 1990, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs funded the new scheme and renamed it the 'Development Project in the Beles Valley'.

A few months later, the guerrilla movement fighting the regime occupied the region and took control of project operations, while international personnel were evacuated. After overthrowing Mengistu and seizing power, the EPRDF negotiated with Italian authorities with regard to the programme's completion, which was to fall under the responsibility of the Ethiopian Ministry of Agriculture. In the meantime, around 30,000 of the 80,000 people resettled in the Beles Valley returned to their places of origin.⁹⁰ Settlers continued to leave over the following months, and in 1993 only 26,000 villagers remained.⁹¹ The depopulation of the area exposed the original programme's failure. Contrary to official statements, the infrastructure had not offered an adequate response to the famine, either in terms of immediate relief or as the premise for the agricultural development of the Beles Valley.

As planned, Salini Costruzioni completed the infrastructural works within the space of two years, but in doing so the company's operations were heavily criticized due to the project's enormous budget and the lack of transparency in

⁸⁷ Bruno Crimi, 'Sfamati all'Italiana. Etiopia, rapporto dal Tana-Beles', *Panorama*, Aug. 1989, pp. 150–7.

⁸⁸ ASCD, CPC, b. 39, doc. 465, 'Programma proposto dal progettista per il triennio 1990–1992', Oct. 1989.

⁸⁹ ASCD, CPC, b. 39, doc. 464, 'Proposta di finanziamento', pp. 4, 6.

⁹⁰ ASCD, CPC, b. 39, doc. 465/2, 'Rapporto di missione. Progetto di sviluppo nella Valle del Beles'.

⁹¹ ASCD, CPC, b. 39, doc. 465, 'Tana-Beles Project. Rapporto di missione 8–14 febbraio 1994', p. 2.

its management.⁹² In the meantime, families who remained in the Beles Valley received a portion of land (up to 0.75 ha) to grow rice, corn, and millet.⁹³ Though already part of the 1990 agreement, the review of cropping patterns was performed in line with the EPRDF's economic reforms – such as the privatization of public enterprises and the liberalization of trade – which facilitated Ethiopia's relations with Western donors.⁹⁴ During this period, those Italian NGOs involved in the Tana-Beles project assumed greater importance. In particular, they implemented a wide range of projects aimed at promoting community life and consolidating family-run enterprises. These projects concerned home gardening, the provision of microcredit facilities, grass-root management training, the development of handicrafts, and local seed production. Yet, the NGOs in question received only 7.6 per cent of total Italian funding for the 1991–4 period.⁹⁵ In spite of the change of approach, infrastructural work continued to absorb most of the funding available.

In November 1994, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent three experts to the Beles Valley to get a final assessment of the project: the company Salini Costruzioni had left two years earlier, and the contract of the NGO that remained in the field was about to expire. The lengthy report drawn up by those experts offered a detailed description of the conditions of villagers, infrastructure, agriculture, and other economic activities. The number of settlers had further decreased to around 20,000, while cultivated land only accounted for 7,000 of the 20,000 hectares available. Agriculture was still scarcely profitable, and self-sufficiency had not been achieved. However, the development of additional activities (home gardening, handicrafts, small-scale livestock breeding) was promising, and the experts recommended that the NGO's contract be extended. The overall evaluation of the project, which had started eight years earlier, was highly critical. The three experts underlined

the enormous effort of means and resources made in a large marginal area of the country and to the benefit of a population which is today of around 20,000 units. The area – they stated – has been equipped with an infrastructure complex that appears oversized compared to the real needs and management skills [of the local population].

The project, they concluded, 'did not achieve the initially expected objective of self-sufficiency and sustainability'.⁹⁶

The Tana-Beles programme failed to relieve the plight of local people and to stimulate agrarian development in order to prevent future food crises. Yet, it proved successful in strengthening the partnership between Italian companies

⁹² ASCD, CPC, b. 39, doc. 465, letter sent by Simonpietro Salini to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 18 Oct. 1993.

⁹³ 'Tana-Beles Project. Rapporto di missione 8–14 febbraio 1994', p. 3.

⁹⁴ Dereye Feyissa, 'Aid negotiation: the uneasy "partnership" between EPRDF and the donors', *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 5 (2011), pp. 791–2.

⁹⁵ 'Proposta di finanziamento', p. 12.

⁹⁶ ASCD, CPC, b. 39, doc. 465/2, 'Rapporto di missione novembre 1994, Maria Vittoria Migaletto, Marco Platzer, Giuseppe Spadaro', pp. 4, 31.

and the Ethiopian authorities and paved the way for further infrastructural works. On behalf of the Ethiopian Electric Power Corporation, Studio Pietrangeli drew up a new preliminary plan for the Tana-Beles interbasin water transfer, which was initially supposed to be included in the project sponsored by the Italian government and had been later abandoned. Starting in 2005, Salini Costruzioni built both the canal and the gigantic water plant (the second largest in the country) fed by the transfer of water from the lake to the river. The 'Beles multi-purpose project' was completed in 2011 and the World Bank's major investment in the area's water management facilitated its implementation.⁹⁷ The new project stemmed from the plan drafted in the mid-1980s, but was also an expression of the government's ambition to rapidly expand the production of hydropower. In fact, the exploitation of the country's water resources was seen as key to Ethiopia's economic growth.⁹⁸ The long-term presence of Italian companies in the country, and their relationship with the local authorities which had strengthened during the famine, entered a new phase.⁹⁹ In 2011, Salini Costruzioni¹⁰⁰ began work on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Blue Nile, the colossal and controversial project which is still ongoing and which resulted in strong diplomatic tension between Addis Ababa and Cairo.¹⁰¹

VI

The history of the Tana-Beles project developed along several decades and it connected the colonial and postcolonial ages. The fascist authorities saw the 'hostile nature' of their colonial possessions as a crucial challenge to be met, and at the end of the 1950s investment in infrastructure, in order to master the environment and boost the local economy, had become one of the cornerstones of Italian aid policies in Ethiopia. Thirty years later, it was the main pillar of Italy's response to the famine. Furthermore, the penetration in the Horn of Africa of private companies, which played a pivotal role in implementing relief programmes, was rooted in the colonial period. Yet, it would be misleading to see the continuities as essential and looking at postcolonial

⁹⁷ Document of the World Bank, Report No. 43400-ET, 'Project appraisal document on a proposed credit to the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia for a Tana & Beles Integrated Water Resources Development Project', 2 May 2008.

⁹⁸ Sofie Annys et al., 'Impacts of the hydropower-controlled Tana-Beles interbasin water transfer on downstream rural livelihoods (northwest Ethiopia)', *Journal of Hydrology*, 569 (2019), pp. 436–48.

⁹⁹ From 1997, Studio Pietrangeli and Salini Costruttori have been working on the hydric projects Gilgel Gibe I, II, III, IV, V, on the Omo River in south-western Ethiopia.

¹⁰⁰ In 2011, Salini Costruttori took over the Italian firm Impregilo, founded in 1994 through the merger of four companies, including Impresit (the company in charge of the Koka dam's construction, as stated above). The merger process was completed in 2014 and the new company was named Salini-Impregilo.

¹⁰¹ Fred H. Lawson, 'Egypt, Ethiopia and the Nile River: the continuing dispute', *Mediterranean Quarterly*, 27 (2016), pp. 92–121; on more recent events, see Sima Aldardari, 'Water politics and the Gulf States: the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam', The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 19 Aug. 2021, <https://agsiw.org/water-politics-and-the-gulf-states-the-grand-ethiopian-renaissance-dam/>.

international aid as the continuation of imperialism by other means. The story of the Tana-Beles project reveals a far more complex picture, and postcolonial aid emerges as the transformation of old practices and existing ties into new policies which were subsequently modified over time and brought together the aims and ambitions of various different actors.

In the case of the relief programmes that Italy and Ethiopia agreed upon, their respective national governments were undoubtedly the two major players. Italian authorities aimed at fostering their own interests in terms of the country's economic expansion, hegemony in the Mediterranean and the Horn of Africa, and – on the occasion of the famine – meeting domestic pressure for a prompt response to the problem of hunger in the 'Third World'. However, it was equally important to Italy to maintain its own membership of the 'club of the rich', and thus the decisions taken in Rome had to fit the DAC's standards. The OECD's Development and Assistance Committee was an influential indirect player in the history of Italian aid to Ethiopia, as was the European parliament, whose resolution encouraged Italy to implement a special programme against starvation during the mid-1980s. Ethiopia experienced radical institutional changes during the period in question, namely the revolutionary movement overthrowing Haile Selassie and establishing the DERG regime in the mid-1970s, and the later overthrow of Mengistu by the EPRDF in 1991. Visions of social and economic development changed accordingly, and they strongly influenced Ethiopian negotiations with Italy for aid programmes. Furthermore, Italy was not the most important donor for Ethiopia, and decisions taken in Addis Ababa depended also on its relations with London, Washington, and – in the DERG's case – Moscow. On the part of the 'recipient country' too, multiple indirect actors came into play in designing the aid programme agreement between Ethiopia and Italy. Throughout the course of the Tana-Beles project, postcolonial international aid emerged as a complex process of joint construction that not only illuminates 'the ways in which humanitarianism was appropriated resisted, rejected and subverted' by its 'beneficiaries',¹⁰² but also challenges the recurrent focus on the binary relationship between donors (former colonial states) and recipients (new independent states).

The long history of the project for the production of hydroelectric power and the development of agriculture in the Beles Valley sheds light on another important feature of postcolonial humanitarianism, as it brings to the fore the decisive role played by private enterprises. That prominent role was not simply the result of donors' plans being passively accepted by recipients. Drawing on the historiography of economics, which has highlighted the prominence of independent states' policies regarding the private business sector and foreign capital,¹⁰³ this article demonstrates that Ethiopian institutions and Italian enterprises concerned tailored their own relations, despite the regime changes. Partners re-negotiated their mutual interests over the course of time: Studio

¹⁰² Thompson, 'Unravelling the relationships', p. 455.

¹⁰³ On the abandonment of the neo-colonialist approach, see Tignor, *Capitalism and nationalism*; and Ichiro Maekawa, 'Neo-colonialism reconsidered: a case study of East Africa in the 1960s and 1970s', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 43 (2015), pp. 317–41.

Pietrangeli and Salini Costruzioni benefited from the significant Italian budget for emergencies, and Mengistu attempted to implement his resettlement scheme. A detailed investigation has already examined the relevance of the public–private partnership in the field of aid in the decades after the Second World War, with a focus on the interaction among different players within Western countries.¹⁰⁴ This study shows the transnational dimension of the public–private partnership linking institutions and business companies across the boundaries of donor and recipient states. Furthermore, co-operation between the Ethiopian authorities and Italian companies lasted well beyond the rule of the DERG and the emergency phase – as the involvement of Pietrangeli and Salini in the GERD project shows – and it accompanied the expansion of the two Italian firms in the global business of infrastructure construction.¹⁰⁵ The end of empires undoubtedly strengthened the international nature of humanitarianism,¹⁰⁶ but it also favoured its connections to globalization in terms of capital circulation, integration of markets, and movement of goods.¹⁰⁷

Seen from the perspective of the Tana-Beles project, the story of international mobilization against famine extends well before and beyond the mid-1980s. On the one hand, it embraces the years thereafter when the schemes, relationships, and strategies set in motion during the famine were developed further. On the other hand, the history of the humanitarian response to the famine is rooted in previous colonial period and in the decades after the Second World War, when ‘ordinary’ aid programmes regarding Ethiopia took shape. Reaction to the emergency did not erase the previously established policies and practices but rather reshaped, enhanced, and transformed them. There can be no doubt that the response to crisis in the new, fragile, unstable geopolitical context was a distinct feature of postcolonial humanitarianism.¹⁰⁸ Yet, this article places that response within a broader timeframe, as it explores the various forms of interaction between aid provision and decolonization. At the same time, it seeks to counteract the ‘tyranny of emergency’, meaning not only the policy whereby relief represents no more than an immediate response to ‘humanitarian crisis’,¹⁰⁹ but also the tendency

¹⁰⁴ Wieters Heike, *The NGO CARE and food aid from America, 1945–1980. ‘Showered with kindness?’* (Manchester, 2017).

¹⁰⁵ An overview of the works carried out by Salini and Pietrangeli is available in Salini-Impregilo, *110 years of future*.

¹⁰⁶ O’Sullivan, *The NGO moment*.

¹⁰⁷ Thomas and Thompson argued that ‘decolonization was as much a catalyst to global change as an outcome of it’ (‘Rethinking decolonization: a new research agenda for the twenty-first century’, in Thomas and Thompson, eds., *The Oxford handbook of the ends of empire*, p. 3), but they looked only marginally at humanitarianism as a globalizing force. Insights into the connection between decolonization, international aid, and globalization can be found in James Mark and Paul Betts, eds., *Socialism goes global: the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the age of decolonization* (Oxford, 2022), in particular in the chapters ‘Development’ (by Eric Burton, James Mark, and Steffi Marung) and ‘Health’ (by Bogdan C. Iacob).

¹⁰⁸ Lasse Heerten, *The Biafran War and postcolonial humanitarianism: spectacles of suffering* (Cambridge, 2017).

¹⁰⁹ Jérôme Bindé, ‘Towards an ethic of the future’, in Arjun Appadurai, ed., *Globalization* (Durham, NC, 2004), p. 91.

to look at ‘humanitarian crises’ as ‘exceptional’ moments in both the past and the present.

The Tana-Beles project officially ended in 1994, and the final assessment given by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs experts was generally negative: the hydroelectric part of the scheme had been shelved, and other infrastructural works had failed to encourage the foreseen development of agriculture. Public debate and scholarly literature have largely pointed to the disproportion between the amount of resources provided to the Ethiopian government and the effective benefits reaped by the starving population. Italy’s main project to combat hunger in Ethiopia could be included here. Nonetheless, the Italian experience is revealing since it challenges the narrative about famine in Ethiopia as the paradigmatic case of aid failure due to local political manipulation. The DERG’s instrumentalization of aid during the 1980s crisis is prevalent in the literature, and according to Michael Barnett humanitarianism was unsuccessful in Ethiopia because the ‘government manipulated aid for its own purposes’ and used it ‘as an instrument for its military and political campaign’.¹¹⁰ This view ends up reiterating the idea of a binary relationship between donors and recipients, translating it into the dualism of ‘the manipulated versus the manipulators’. As a consequence, the responsibility of beneficiaries in the accomplishment (or otherwise) of their own relief is overemphasized. The Tana-Beles project shows, on the contrary, that the provision of international aid and the resulting outcome stems from the interweaving of donors’ and recipients’ aims, actions, and strategies, which in turn involve multiple actors at national and international level. Thus, investigating the case of Italy and Ethiopia, this article further demonstrates the need to challenge the narrative of donor countries which still dominates the history of humanitarianism.¹¹¹

Acknowledgements. I had the privilege to present my research in several workshops and I am very grateful to the colleagues who stimulated my thinking and provided helpful comments: Cristian Capotescu, Ilaria Favretto, Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo, José Pedro Monteiro, Kevin O’Sullivan, Agnieszka Sobocinska, Bertrand Taithe, Heike Weiters, and the HumanEuroMed team, www.humaneuromed.unifi.it/index.html. Many thanks to Marco Bresciani, Corinna Unger, Annalisa Urbano, *The Historical Journal*’s editor Rachel Leow, and the anonymous reviewers who helped me rethink and sharpen my arguments.

Funding statement. This research was supported by the project ‘HumanEuroMed – Humanitarianism and Mediterranean Europe. A Transnational and Comparative History (1945–1990)’ funded from the European Research Council under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant Agreement 101019166).

Competing interests. The author declares none.

¹¹⁰ Barnett, *Empire of humanity*, p. 156.

¹¹¹ With regard to the hegemony of the donors’ narrative in the history of humanitarianism, see Matthew Hilton, Emily Baughan, Eleonor Davey, Bronwen Everill, Kevin O’Sullivan, and Theila Sasson, ‘History and humanitarianism: a conversation’, in *Past & Present*, 241 (2018), pp. e16–e18.

Cite this article: Salvatici S (2024). The Tana-Beles Project in Ethiopia and the Making of Postcolonial Humanitarianism, 1938–1994. *The Historical Journal* 67, 339–361. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X23000535>