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SEMINAR ABSTRACT

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The Humanitarian Industry in Britain: An early history of the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC), 1963-1985

This paper explores the rise of the contemporary humanitarian aid industry in Britain, in the period between 1963 and 1985. It does through a focus on the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC), an umbrella body created in 1963 by what were then the five largest British humanitarian non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The DEC is a familiar and popular humanitarian actor in Britain, due to its regular high-profile fundraising campaigns on television for major overseas disasters. This paper explores how the DEC helped fuel the growth of its members, on the basis of the populist appeal of provocative television images of human suffering. This was problematic, as many principal aid agencies also wished to shift their focus away from this apolitical disaster work, to focus upon tackling the long-term structural causes of global poverty instead. It is argued that, despite an increasing political focus, a series of structural constraints led the DEC agencies to maintain a focus throughout the period on short-term, apolitical relief initiatives. Specifically, these were the institutional and technological development of television; a perceived lack of public support for tackling the structural causes of global poverty; the creation of a wider infrastructure for emergency relief from the 1970s onwards by the British government; and competition between aid agencies in a crowded marketplace. This analysis complicates linear narratives of a transition from emergency relief to development aid in post-war British humanitarianism, instead presenting the period as characterised by competing and contradictory trajectories. It is ultimately suggested that the rise of NGO humanitarianism captured in the history of the DEC also sheds light on broader trends in contemporary British history, such as the nature of public engagement, the impact of decolonisation, and the legacies of empire in the post-imperial era.