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Comic Relief 25 years on: why charitable giving is no laughing matter

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Today marks 25 years since the comedians Lenny Henry and Richard Curtis first launched Red Nose Day as the fundraising event for their charity, Comic Relief. There is every indication that it will be just as successful this year as all the others. The bake-offs, dances, TV shows and even 'hymnathons' are expected to raise more than £100 million for various causes around the world.

Much of the funds will be directed at saving lives and alleviating physical and economic suffering in both Britain and the less developed countries of the world, particularly in Africa. Here, Comic Relief has been part of a much more significant trend towards humanitarian charity since the 1980s. Live Aid and Band Aid triggered what might be referred to as a mass movement of philanthropic giving. The income of the leading aid agencies (Oxfam, Tearfund, CAFOD, Christian Aid, the Red Cross and Save the Children) has increased fourfold (taking account of inflation) over the period – their cumulative income now approaches £1 billion. At the same time, and despite concerns about so called 'aid fatigue', as a nation we have continued to expand our charitable giving. The total amount of donations to the international aid and development agencies reached the £1 billion mark in 2004 and has shown no sign of slowing down.

This massive support for humanitarian causes raises important issues about the nature of giving, the relationship between the developed and the developing world and how we tackle issues of global justice. Experts at the University of Birmingham are about to begin a collaborative research agenda to tackle these issues. 'Saving Humans' is to become an opening theme for the University's new Institute of Advanced Studies. Bringing together historians, anthropologists, social scientists, physical scientists and medics, the theme will address the central question: under what circumstances do individuals, organisations and states intervene to save human lives?

More specifically, Red Nose Day focuses our attention on the role of charity in humanitarian relief. An Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) workshop on **'non-state humanitarianism' (http://nonstatehumanitarianism.com/)**, held at the University of Birmingham on the day, reflected upon the huge growth of relief agencies since the 1980s and their increased prominence in conflict and disaster zones around the world. It considered questions such as: Is charity actually the best means for tackling emergencies and longer term development plans? Does giving to a charity reflect an increased awareness of the plight of others, or do our little acts of individual philanthropy indicate nothing more than a fleeting moment of compassion? Are we actually motivated more by our admiration of celebrities than by our concern for the plight of others? And what does charity have to do with human rights: does the work of truly enormous NGOs merely increase the right of kind-hearted philanthropists to intervene in the lives of others while doing little to systematically protect the rights of those less fortunate to enjoy the same comforts as ourselves?

Certainly, unpicking the rates of voluntary donations, cited above, is problematic for attitudes to charitable humanitarianism. Mass media events such as Red Nose Day grab our attention and our wallets, but for how long? Other data tell different stories. According to statistics collected by the voluntary sector itself, nearly 90% of adults surveyed in 1985 had given money to charity over the previous month. These rates have fallen steadily since such that, twenty-five years later, they had fallen below two-thirds and were heading for nearly 50%. Charities might be receiving more money but they are getting it from a smaller proportion of the population. The suffering of those less fortunate than ourselves will be very much in our minds on 15 March. But can we say this will still be the case in one month's time?

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