

**Memories and Reflections:**

**USA for Africa's Experiences and**

**Practices: The First 20 Years**

**An Institution's Journey Using Oral History Tradition**

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## The Famine in Africa: A Defining Moment

This oral history project was framed to examine the history of the United Support of Artists for Africa's [hereafter called USA for Africa], and several interviews with pioneers were conducted to formulate this composite story.<sup>1</sup> Reflections focus on the organization's development model or philosophy, taking into account the context or historical events in which this evolution took place. Interestingly, while harvesting memories from those involved in mounting and organizing USA for Africa, all begin with the famine that struck the Horn of Africa.

"Famine, caused by drought, will kill hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians [and other Africans - added], unless a major relief operation is mounted immediately, according to private Western aid agencies....'. [The Horn of Africa], which has suffered from drought for decades, but most acutely since 1974, 'has not experienced a food shortage of this magnitude within living memory.' According to aid workers relief staff and government officials, some six to seven million people are now threatened by drought, which has spread to most of the region since concern was first expressed three years ago.....There is no doubt that, if substantial quantities of food are not forthcoming immediately, hundreds of thousands of people will die."<sup>2</sup>

The adapted newspaper article above encapsulates the passion that many felt when looking at the television tage of starvation victims in the Horn of Africa in 1984. Indeed, it was a famine that struck the consciousness of all those who watched it on television, and Harry Belafonte was one of those people who felt so much compassion that he was moved to take action. Harry Belafonte made a telephone call one December morning before Christmas to Ken Kragen – a well-connected and known entertainment industry manager/producer – which had momentous impact.

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<sup>1</sup> Please see the methodology section for more information about interviews and overall methodology.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Andrew Hill's article entitled, "*Plea for relief for famine victims*", The Guardian Unlimited, Monday October 1, 1984. This quote was modified to expand beyond Ethiopia and apply to the entire Horn of Africa.

In addition to Harry Belafonte's infamous call to Ken Kragen, memories about the beginning of USA for Africa start with a legendary, young folk singer/activist named Harry Chapin.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, it was Harry Chapin's fundraising model which inspired the fundraising of millions of dollars to address starvation in Africa, through USA for Africa, and in America, through Hands Across America.

Harry Chapin was heavily involved in issues of homelessness and poverty, and his model included a) bringing artists together in concert, b) presenting a social message for mass consumption, and c) organizing people at the grass roots level to reinforce social messages. All the components of this model were borrowed to get USA for Africa underway. It is intriguing that the vehicle through which millions of dollars were raised to later finance African and American aid organizations originated from the visions of an American folk singer/song writer who advocated to help and to service the homeless.

## **Making THE Song: We are the World, We are the Children**

People recount that the famine had been on-going earlier than December 1984, although the heartbreaking footage was indistinct in the media. A famous cinematographer – Mohammed Amin – went to the Horn of Africa and filmed this tragedy. Interviewees recall that Mohammed Amin worked tirelessly to get this footage aired, and indeed the footage had what one would call a 'stirring effect'. In particular, an Irish artist – Bob Geldof – took action and recorded a record called '*Do they know it is Christmas?*' which included many British and Irish pop music performers.<sup>4</sup>

Many interviewees cite that Harry Belafonte saw the footage of the famine and decided that something had to be done or funds had to be raised. He followed the news of Bob Geldof and other British and Irish artists and wanted to do something similar. At the time, there were so many popular African-American artists (e.g., Lionel Richie, Michael Jackson, Prince); it seemed like a logical solution to put on a concert.

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<sup>3</sup> He was only 38 years old when he died in a car accident in 1981.

<sup>4</sup> For additional information about Bob Geldof's journey to raising funds through Band Aid, please see <http://www.bobgeldof.info/Charity/bandaaid.html>.

Without a proper introduction, Harry Belafonte called up Ken Kragen three days before Christmas and explained the idea of organizing a concert. Ken Kragen had already experimented with organizing concerts – reminiscent of the past work of Harry Chapin – and had experienced limited success. Ken Kragen, as an alternative, reasoned with Harry Belafonte, explaining that the path that Bob Geldoff chose of producing a song would bring them closer to their calling of raising funds. He notes that he told Harry Belafonte that “we [Americans] have bigger artists – some of the biggest in the world, [why not] pull them together and lets do our own recording here?” Creating a recording was the seed of inspiration which enabled them to raise millions of dollars for the famine in the Horn of Africa.

Many interviewees clearly recall and admitted overtly that the events leading up to writing and producing the song took place rapidly. Ken Kragen approached the popular stars who comprised his immediate network at the time *first*, including Lindsey Buckingham, Kim Carnes, Lionel Richie, and Kenny Rogers. A few days later, he initially encouraged Lionel Richie to work with writing the song with Stevie Wonder, but ultimately Michael Jackson became the co-writer with Lionel Richie. Producing and recording the song at the time of the American Music Awards (AMA) was strategically envisioned, as this minimized logistics, since all the artists would *already* be in town [Los Angeles] for the big event.

The week between Christmas and New Years was difficult, as it was not possible to reach anyone. In spite of the challenges, however, Ken Kragen set a goal to get two artists on board every single day. This was his plan until he reached fifteen artists. He dependably remarked that “there is a saying our industry ‘you are who you hug.’ For instance, when Bruce Springstein came on board, others jumped on board”. This saying means that stars, who are interested and want to be associated with artists who are more popular than they are, lend their support”. Ken Kragen explained that after Bruce Springstein agreed to become part of the project, the opposite problem of turning people down surfaced, as the group of artists grew to about 28 or 30. The last couple of days, the group mushroomed to about 45 people.

Many interviewees recall that “everything on this project was donated” – the recording studio, media to film or document the process, manufacturers, distributors, and of course the talent. Though Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie worked together on the song, it was Lionel Richie who came up with the opening line. *We are the world, We are the children.* Ken Kragen stated that

Lionel Richie had 'the hook', and a scratch vocal was developed just prior to the planned recording session. Quincy Jones produced the song.

During this period, Ken Kragen also contacted Martin Rogol – the first Executive Director of USA for Africa – and, together, they developed a broad strategy for spending the money to be generated from the song/album. As a public response was anticipated, there was effort put forth to create the organization - United Support of Artists for Africa [USA for Africa]. USA for Africa was subsequently incorporated in January 1985 – the song production phase. The broad strategy for funds disbursement covered three areas: a certain proportion would be directed to (1) relief, (2) recovery, and (3) development. All participating artists were informed about how the money, once raised, would be spent.

At the recording studio, certain artists' voices were organized in purposive places, and many of those interviewed remember how Quincy Jones crafted a memorable letter and sign for everyone about "checking your ego at the door." The parts of the song intended for different people were printed on the music, including the solos. Forty-five musical superstars recorded the single *We are the World* on January 28, 1985. Ken Kragen remembers vividly the tearful and intense emotions experienced with Quincy Jones and Diana Ross while sitting on the studio floor at eight o'clock on the morning after everyone had left.

The response to the song was overwhelmingly inspiring. Many recall how the project took on a life of its own. For instance, Life Magazine, presented a feature story, including an eight-page spread. A global simul-cast, comprised of 8,000 thousand radio stations, was organized by two local disc jockeys – one in Rome, Georgia and the other in Salt Lake City, Utah – who launched the song all over the world *at the same time* on Good Friday, April 5<sup>th</sup>, 1985. There were countless spin-off activities in the media, dramatic and visual arts, schools, and communities that reflected peoples' concern and motivation to do something to help.

## **Hands Across America (HANDS)**

When uncovering the story of Hands Across America, or affectionately referred to as 'Hands', those interviewed have comparably fewer mental images from which to draw. The altruistic purpose of Hands was equally as riveting however. Interviewees linked the beginning of Hands with a spin-off activity.

A ballet in New York was developed using the music from the *We are the World* album. During the intermission, an unnamed publicist approached Ken Kragen and suggested organizing a continuous line of Americans holding hands, from New York to Los Angeles, and singing *We are the World*. Ken Kragen recalls thinking at that very moment "this [idea] is just impossible enough to be possible..." Hands was launched in October 1985 or nine months after the *We are the World* recording session. People who wanted to make a financial contribution to fight hunger in America could pledge using an 800 number or through the mail. This pledge secured a position in the line as well as a t-shirt. There were field offices all across the United States, organized like a national election to confirm pledges and places in line.

Interviewees also recollected that the overall programming strategy used for Hands was similar to that of USA for Africa, as each State's hunger profile and needs determined where funding was targeted. A committee was formed within each sub-region or region, and this committee was requested to recommend how funds could be best spent. Joint ventures were encouraged, as the Hands staff incited community-based groups to think strategically about how best to maximize their contribution, rendering their roles as effective as possible. More money went to the States that gave the most, because in the Hands process, "we were able to segment [pinpoint] where the money came from." Each region or sub-region presented a unique plan characteristic of its own unique hunger problem.

## **USA For Africa – The Organization and the Journey To Provide Support**

By May 1985, the first royalty payment to USA for Africa arrived, it was \$6.5 million. Those interviewed report that their initial and primary expectation was to generate a moderate amount of funds, which at that time was "a couple million dollars", and then distribute the funds to a few organizations. However, a sage advisor encouraged Ken Kragen to release an album which included previously unreleased tracks in efforts to boost fundraising, citing "you have to give people true value for what they buy." This strategy resulted in a level of funds raised beyond what was originally anticipated. By December 1987, the *We Are the World* project had raised over \$58 million which was and *still is* considered a remarkable accomplishment.

Prior to examining how USA for Africa allocated funds as an institution, it is important to note that many popular artists, including those who formed part of the USA for Africa team, went to Africa on a three-week fact-finding trip. The purpose of this initial trip was many-fold, but the critical reasoning was to:

- 1) deliver personally relief supplies (food and medicine) to famine-stricken communities/villages (which also included witnessing food drops),
- 2) consult and engage with representatives from relief organizations working on-site to hear what they believed the most pressing needs were, and
- 3) examine the landscape for future projects.

The reflections of those interviewed who participated on this initial trip to Africa had a notably self-critical tone. For instance, one person mentioned that “the learning experience was tremendous”, while another said “we were so naïve.” Another example of a staff member’s decisive tone when recalling the beginning of USA for Africa’s work was

“[We] had no clue about the logistics, the knowledge base of what was on the ground, the liability of not being in the field, and it was a voluntary spirit – ...but we had .....no level of scrutiny...”

Even within the video footage, board members found fault in their ability to help hunger victims. One interviewee recounted that this trip made him realize that there was very little physical infrastructure to accommodate their good will. Hence, rather than focusing on food, USA for Africa’s assistance to those struck by hunger took on a different shape: non-food related items, such as medicine or equipment.

Given the magnitude of funds generated and reflections from the fact finding trip, it was evidently clear that a different approach to distribute funds was warranted. The USA for Africa senior leadership considered many ways to distribute funds, and they steered clear from the idea of grantmaking for an indefinite amount of time. In particular, Martin Rogol recalls that “what [we] did not want to get into was the traditional foundation game where, we sort of sat up there on Mount Olympus and people would come and beg us for money and do the traditional proposals.” Martin Rogol continues,

“So what was decided was to “identify key areas where we wanted to work in and then ask the organizations working on [those areas] to essentially ..... work together and submit joint plans. For example, one of the things that came out of that was that all of the aid organizations which were working in Ethiopia did not have a way to fix their vehicles, and so they jointly came to us and said that we needed a repair garage and provided funds to build a repair garage – this was supported through relief funds.”

According to the first three-year report, summarizing milestones and achievements from 1985 through 1987, USA for Africa “decided to continue in the spirit of partnership that had begun when *We are the World* producer Quincy Jones posted a sign outside the recording session which read *Check Your Egos at the Door*. USA for Africa asked non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that normally compete for funds to check their *institutional* egos at the door and pretend that they were one agency working toward a common goal.” It is duly noted in the report that this was the first time for many relief organizations operating in different parts of Africa to engage in collaborative planning and joint-operations exercises. Interviewees believed that USA for Africa was a conduit in this respect. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as a result of shrinking budgets and the scarcity of resources, the international development arena automatically *assumes* inter-agency cooperation and collective functioning. In 1985, however, collaborative work took place infrequently and was considered far from normative.

Thus, USA for Africa requested international organizations to formulate joint plans for projects, and InterAction, a coalition of NGOs, served as the only intermediary. Programming funds through such collaborative efforts was applied consistently and primarily to United Nations agencies and NGOs/relief organizations. When reviewing funding applications, two advisory-boards – called Africa Program Review and Medical Task Force – both composed of experts (e.g., sociologists, health professionals, and poverty specialists), also provided technical assistance. After USA for Africa’s leadership realized their naïveté about *how* they initially responded to the humanitarian crisis, they made rapid attempts to build up internal capacity, including staff and organizational systems. The first Executive Director succinctly described the organization’s “naïve” approach:

“One of the things that we quickly realized was that we were a little late to the game. The government [of Ethiopia] had stepped up to the plate, and one of the things that was happening was that there was food being delivered to one of the areas...where we could make a greater difference was by delivering medicine.”

In line with the stimuli of the worldwide humanitarian response to the hunger situation in the Horn of Africa, world politicians and leaders were also reacting. Specifically, in 1986, interviewees noted that the United Nations held a Special Session on the Critical Economic Situation in Africa – the first United Nations General Assembly Special Session to focus on the needs of a single continent. The same interviewee also credited the song for increasing momentum in the United States Congress to expand appropriations for the famine in the Horn of Africa.

Ultimately, the initial allocation of funds delivering emergency-related supplies to Africa was remarkable. The three-year report from 1985 through 1987 delineated that “\$17.5 million designated for emergency aid was targeted to eight African countries identified by the United Nations as those most severely affected by the drought: the Sudan, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Niger, Mozambique, and Mauritania. Included in the allocation was \$2 million for a rapid-response emergency fund to provide instant money for emergency situations.”<sup>5</sup>

Grants were provided to international NGOs through legitimate funding mechanisms, and many African organizations and advocates for Africa began to appeal and petition USA for Africa to increase investments to African NGOs. As noted, the advisory board was composed of poverty experts (e.g., sociologists, and health professionals) and development specialists, and they too began to raise concerns about curtailing support for relief-related funding and investing in recovery through African institutions. One interviewee concisely described this turn in programming strategy: “a new paradigm was needed [at that time].”

External pressures influenced USA for Africa’s shift to investing in African-led organizations. There were dynamics taking place *within USA for Africa as an organization* that also set the stage for and predisposed this philosophical or

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<sup>5</sup> USA for Africa: Three Year Report. The Africa Grants section. 1987.

paradigmatic change. M. Scott and M. Mpanya's report entitled *We Are The World: An Evaluation of Pop Aid for Africa* termed this momentous occurrence as "centrifugal pressures".<sup>6</sup> In addition, when asked to describe the period of change the organization experienced, all those interviewed engaged in protracted, comprehensive, and analytical discussions. This data is summarized in the next section.

### **"Centrifugal Pressures"**

The following section presents and elaborates on five major factors that directly or inadvertently influenced the organization to shift its philosophy to investing in African-led organizations directly, and they are:

- 1) The physical location of USA for Africa's two offices;
- 2) Establishing an organizational identity;
- 3) Expanding the capacity of the program staff.
- 4) Traveling to Africa and strengthening networks; and
- 5) Committing to fund African-led organizations.

### **Two Office Locations**

At the time of USA for Africa's inception, there were two offices; one was located in Los Angeles and the other in New York City. The rationale for having two offices was one of practicality. Simply put, the president and other board members resided in Los Angeles, while most of the staff responsible for relief and development programming worked in New York, "the center of program activities".<sup>7</sup> Most, if not all, of the partner organizations were headquartered in or around New York, Boston, or Washington, DC, and they include CARE International, *InterAction*, the United Nations, United Nations Development Programs (UNDP), and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The majority of the Medical Task Force members also resided on the East Coast. While maintaining two offices was admirable, showing flexibility and responsiveness, the physical distance placed undue strain on the staff,

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<sup>6</sup> USA for Africa, *The 1988 Report*, 1989, page 36.

<sup>7</sup> USA for Africa, *The 1988 Report*, 1989, page 36.

some of whom commuted back and forth from Los Angeles to New York City regularly.

Former staff members interviewed labeled the period where USA for Africa had two offices as “anarchy” or “difficult”. USA for Africa’s operating parameters were limited and the famine was no longer a situation demanding urgent relief, all of which necessitated *different* action, a new identity. Specifically, the organization’s primary concern was to be “good stewards of that money”, operating on the leanest possible administrative budget, although USA for Africa’s position in the public spotlight became less frequent. As circumstances changing the nature of the crises in the Horn of Africa evolved, so too was the need to formulate a considerably more cohesive strategy and corresponding organizational structure. One interviewee encapsulated the core of the problem at that time, “[USA for Africa] was not a development agency and was not supposed to be one. It was going through an identity crisis...” Ultimately, the New York City office was closed in 1987.

### **Establishing an Organizational Identity**

In USA for Africa’s three-year report, covering the period from 1985 through 1987, the initial response to the famine featured extensive relief efforts (e.g., food, clothing, shelter, medical supplies, logistics) *and* longer-term grants consummated through traditional proposal review processes. To recall, the initial longer-term grants, carried out through collaborative efforts, were allocated to international organizations (including the United Nations).

Interviewees mentioned several influences which shaped USA for Africa’s decision to focus on and invest in African-led organizations during the recovery phase. First, compelling arguments from Africa advocates, including experts from the advisory boards and outspoken African individuals and intellectuals, demanded investments in African organizations. Notably, in May 1986, “the United Nations held a *Special Session on the Critical Economic Situation in Africa*, the first United Nations General Assembly Special Session ever to focus on the needs of a single continent. Most significant to the Session was the presence of an organized delegation of some 24 African voluntary development organizations (AVDOs) and the vision they carried with them.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> USA for Africa, The 1988 Report, 1989, page ?

Second, the collective thinking from the USA for Africa staff responsible for grant disbursements underscored a necessary shift in allocations from international to “indigenous” organizations, and their reasoning appeared to have been governed by social justice issues. For instance, during interviews, former staff members were exceptionally outspoken when this issue was raised. For example, one interviewee stated: “our [USA for Africa’s] shift to funding them [African-led NGOs] was a strategic and political choice to back them.” Another former staff member recollected, “what surprised me was how disproportionate the money to gratify the UN system was and...to international NGOs and [then] very little went to African NGOs.”

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the USA for Africa board members whose work was firmly rooted in the private sector – the entertainment industry, had an abstract view on how to spend the funds.<sup>9</sup> They viewed the money as charitable funds to be used as “venture capital”. In recalling that the original intent was to avoid becoming an established foundation, USA for Africa had limited reservations about taking risks, being open, and thinking outside of the box. Their position was unique and so too were the choices available to USA for Africa at the time. Given the board’s position, they were not vested in a traditional model of development grants. In fact, all those interviewed unanimously confirmed that this approach to spending – first demonstrated in the recovery [second] phase – was USA for Africa’s primary strength. One staff member added that *because* USA for Africa was willing to take risks, this attribute distinguished them from many other organizations.

“One of the things that we came to realize was that USA for Africa had this one great form of money .....we wanted to see it as venture capital and as money which could be used for more risky things, because we weren’t an organization which was constantly raising money and trying to justify its on-going existence, and so it was a lot easier to look upon that money **with a higher degree of risks and take chances that a lot of other organizations were not able to take.**” [Emphasis added]

Indeed, predominant thinking during the mid 1980s was to stay risk averse and invest in the grantee that could implement the project in a cost-effective, transparent manner. USA for Africa’s strategy included investing in African-led organizations, and this did not preclude building up these organizations so

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<sup>9</sup> The term abstract is used to highlight that the USA for Africa board perspectives were unequivocally distinctive when compared to the conventional thinking about development *at the time*.

that they could *become* recipients of the money. This notion not only countered conventional thinking at that time, but it challenged traditional power structures by decisively discontinuing the generous funding that international NGOs had grown a sense of entitlement for and accustomed to receiving.

Naturally, USA for Africa's identity, grounded in social justice issues and an openness to take chances, was met with some resistance. One staff member fondly remembered that many of the international NGOs that received large grants during the relief stage actually wrote letters advocating *against* the new funding strategy – investing in African organizations directly. The interviewee noted that the letters highlighted that “*those* [African-led] organizations have no capacity, were not legitimate, and all of that sort of stuff...and we used to laugh about that...”

Another interviewee recalled that the decision to invest in African-led NGOs prompted some development professionals to question USA for Africa's capacity and prowess in development issues. Specifically, the organization was criticized in that they were “rock stars...in charge of all of this money” who lacked experience and expertise. Finally, American racial attitudes also surfaced during this pivotal event. Coincidentally, during the shift to invest in African-led NGOs, the organization went from having a White male director to a Black female one. Suddenly, not only was USA for Africa managed by inept, inexperienced music artists, but the organization was perceived as a ‘Black Organization’ with its new Black female executive director. Indeed, USA for Africa's decision to give directly to African-led NGOs subjected them to criticism from American aid organizations.

In the African development arena, however, USA for Africa's announcement that future grants were going to African-led organizations *directly* was applauded and welcomed, particularly newly-created African NGOs. In the mid 1980s through the 1990s, many African countries were actively experimenting with various policy models designed to remedy fiscal imbalances called Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs). Essentially, in order to borrow or obtain lower interest rates on existing loans from bilateral organizations (i.e., International Monetary Fund, World Bank, etc.), African governments were encouraged to adopt a cluster of economic and fiscal policies that included the privatization of social services. One former USA for Africa staff member's analysis underlined the critical importance of SAPs at the time when USA for Africa changed its philosophy. He believed the pressures on African governments to reduce public sector expenditures subsequently

encouraged former government workers to establish their own NGOs. He noted "...then, the discourse between the African and International NGOs developed, and USA for Africa was right in the shift."<sup>10</sup> Hence, the period during which USA for Africa decided to invest in African NGOs was fortuitous, as the supply of new African-led organizations committed to resolving their own problems in their own communities was burgeoning. One staff member remembered that once this strategy and ensuing program got underway, "there were many legitimate organizations which came out of the woodwork."

## **Expanding the Capacity of the Program Staff**

The new strategy to provide grants directly necessitated an increase in international program staff capacity. Prior to this phase, *InterAction* was the primary intermediary. The second Executive Director – Marcia Thomas – was originally hired as Director of Administration, and her central role was to assist in setting up systems and internal processes to administer funds for African projects. For instance, formal review processes were established, systematic board meetings were scheduled, and Requests for Proposals (RFPs) were advertised regularly. Those interviewed noted that the RFP system underwent changes to simplify the process (including applications and reporting forms) to "make the grant application more accessible." These forms were later translated into French and Portuguese.

In addition to setting up internal systems, Marcia Thomas worked steadfastly to hire staff who would ultimately take responsibility for grantmaking to African NGOs. Initially, the program staff who were responsible for overseeing funding in Africa consisted of consultants, most if not all of whom were based in New York City. Later, some of those consultants became full time staff members and relocated to Los Angeles. Marcia Thomas stated that "things were happening so fast [at that time]."

## **Field Travel**

All those interviewed recalled and made note of the importance of their travels to Africa to monitor on-going projects and/or to identify new African-led

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<sup>10</sup> Note the dual meaning to interpret from this former staff member, indicating that USA for Africa's decision to invest in African NGOs was timely given the result of high unemployment from SAPs and that he supported the new strategy during his tenure.

NGOs. For instance, one interviewee remembered a trip where he found a local sociologist who had 'revolutionary ways of dealing with rural development in Africa.' Specifically, the sociologist started a group called the Six-Ss, and the organizations worked in several locations throughout West Africa, including Bamako, Dakar, Niamey, and Ouagadougou. The founder had ideas about solar energy, mud brick, beekeeping and honey-making, and his development approach stressed that poor Africans should engage in activities that they already know how to do. The interviewee concludes, "This was the kind activity [that] USA for Africa was out to support. Africans doing for Africans."

The program staff conducted numerous site visits, and the 1988 Annual Report delineates the specifics of its importance. First, field monitoring offered staff the opportunity to interact directly with receiving communities, including leaders, grantee representatives, and other notable key informants. Second, USA for Africa invited community residents and leaders to engage in a participatory project assessment process. Since USA for Africa did not have field presence, it was very important to draw on local knowledge and wisdom to assess the appropriateness of an initiative as well as to identify additional community needs which may have warranted additional financial support. Finally, the USA for Africa staff frequently served as information conduits, alerting African NGO representatives and/or communities about the efforts that other NGOs were doing.<sup>11</sup> Former staff interviewed also highlighted that they became part of the development network – attending meetings and contributing to discussions and coordinating with others working in the field.

### **Proposal Review Process**

Contrary to critics, there were no longer any artists actively serving on USA for Africa's Board of Directors at the time when the momentous decision to invest in African-led organizations took place. Most of the Board of Directors was made up of members from the entertainment industry, the private sector, and international development experts; indeed, their sense of responsibility to the project was strong. In fact, board members were keenly interested in all the proposals submitted. One interviewee recalled reading all proposal materials provided and sometimes seeking additional information. The board was

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<sup>11</sup> The 1988 Report. USA for Africa, 1989. page 4.

comprised of dedicated individuals, and so "it was not just a rubber stamp kind of thing".

Further, the board was eager to make sure that all the funds went to famine victims or to those in desperate need of assistance. One board member describes this concern:

"The organization was intent and committed to managing the money properly, so that...the money did not get caught up in any administrative processes (with governments or other organizations), and that as much money as possible went to the end user – all of which was to ensure that there would be lasting impact....So if someone gave one dollar, as much as that dollar went to the end user."

The decision to invest in African NGOs also had financial implications. At the time, there was roughly \$30 million remaining to distribute. The largest grant to an African NGO may have ranged between \$100,000 to 200,000 *over two years*, and so "\$30 million was still a lot of money left over." Most of the projects were in the ballpark of \$30,000, \$50,000, and \$100,000, and these were allotted in two installments. Most wanted only half of the funds because "they wanted to know that they had more money coming." For example, if there was a commitment for \$50,000, then that NGO or community group would only get half, or \$25,000, and the remaining would only be distributed after showing the work undertaken with the first installment.

The Executive Director recalls "because we funded differently did not necessarily mean that the processes were not formal. There were standard grant agreements and progress reports, monitoring reports. If the grantee purchased something, then we would want to see evidence of that purchase. People still had to be accountable."

## **PROGRAM AREAS**

In recalling that funds were divided into three areas, relief, recover, and long-term development, after the emergency period, USA for Africa instituted a multi-phase Recovery and Development (R&D) Funding Program, targeting ten countries, including Angola, Burkina Faso, Chad, Ethiopia, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Niger, Senegal, and [the] Sudan. Essentially, the R&D projects covered different themes: agriculture, economic and environmental development, health, recovery for refugees or displaced populations, and institutional development activities for African-led organizations (the grantees themselves). In addition to R&D, several other funding programs were instituted, concentrating on specific themes across the three targeted African regions (East, Southern, and West Africa), and they were the health assistance grants, refugees, block grants, development education, and women (and youth) in development. Each is described briefly in this section.

### **Health Assistance Grants**

The grants that fell under this category stemmed entirely from the famine which created an enormous health crisis. The Medical Task Force, spear-headed by a board member – Dr. Lloyd Greig – endorsed funding for projects focusing on primary health care and training, disease control, health facility upgrades, the establishment of a prosthetics workshop, and the delivery of basic community-based health care services.

### **Refugees and Resettlement**

Similar to the health assistance grants, the famine and continuing civil war in the Horn of Africa left many Africans homeless and/or placing exorbitant population stress on resident communities. The grants that fell under this program were designed to help people “to get back into their villages and back into regular life.” For example, USA for Africa provided grants to an American NGO, Save the Children, to provide assistance to Sudanese villagers so that they could return to their previously productive activities and roles in agriculture.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The First Three Year Report, 1988.

## Block Grants

Essentially, these unsolicited grants, ranging from \$50,000 to \$250,000, were to be spent according to what the African-led NGO believed was most relevant *to them*. The intent was to provide flexible and mutually supportive funding to Africa-led organizations. One interviewee recalled how “not normal” the idea was, “because we gave them [African NGOs] money when no one else would give them money.” Another staff person interviewed reflected on how “this was a very significant thing to do.” A special committee was established to review eligibility for receiving a block grant, and decisions were based on the adherence to specific criteria. For instance, an African-led NGO in need would have goals and objectives that were consistent with those of USA for Africa or the grantee would be working toward a sustainable and lasting goal and using a “grass roots” approach in carrying out activities. Other uses of the block grants included technical assistance which enabled the grantee to become less dependent on another [international] funding agency. Finally, funds were also used to contribute to strengthening regional NGO networks.<sup>13</sup> Interviewees remembered that grantees also purchased a building, created a new component for their programs, developed a distinctive campaign, or even created an endowment where the NGO simply accessed the interest from the principal balance over time. On balance, block grants enable African-led NGOs to innovate.

Many interviewees recollected different things about the block grants. For instance, one overriding theme about the block grants was that the African NGO invested in training or strengthened staff capacity to work more effectively which was progressive thinking in the 1980s. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, expending funds for skills development and “capacity development” is commonly accepted, even quotidian or clichéd. In 1989, however, granting funds to African NGO staff, so that they could educate themselves was far from the mainstream. One staff person succinctly described the rationale of investing in African NGO staff:

“We were talking about increasing capacity even before that was a buzzword..because if you wanted Africans to be in a better position to help themselves, they needed to have greater capacity...”

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<sup>13</sup> The 1988 Report, Page 12, 1989.

Thus, investing a certain amount of money on training which enabled the NGO's staff to perform more effectively was central to strengthening that NGOs capacity "to implement and achieve."

Another prevalent memory from several of those interviewed was the notion that the Block Grants offered African-led NGOs the opportunity to "demonstrate that they had capacity". For instance, when a grantee was successful in their community work and qualified for a block grant, the USA for Africa staff would advise them with "these are the kinds of things you should be doing with this money." The NGO, however, would not be obligated to follow any specific direction, as the investment was *at their discretion*.

One staff member reflects how many NGOs used the block grant funds to create different opportunities for themselves, opportunities that demonstrated other facets of their organizational ingenuity and resourcefulness. It was necessary to create their own record of achievements or performance, because "they [NGOs] had always [been] told that there needed to be someone else coming to make sure that things could get done right..." Hence, the block grants assisted African-led NGOs to remodel their programs, transpose themselves, and advance their own ideas.

Finally, many interviewees look back on the block grants as significant contributions to creating strong and lasting NGO internal and regional networks. One specific example, cited repeatedly, focused on the development group called the Forum for African Voluntary Development Organizations, or FAVDO. This group consisted of fifteen members representing twenty African NGOs. Through FAVDO, African-led NGOs had the opportunity to voice their opinions about strategies and solutions to address problems in their communities.<sup>14</sup>

The block grant program also supported collaboration and cooperation between FAVDO and InterAction. Essentially, over the course of two years, NGO leaders and program officers were tasked with (a) setting up a discourse on educating people in Africa and the United States about development, (b) establishing stronger networks to include all NGO members, and (c) supporting other processes which would inspire collaborative working relationships. Hence, one interviewee succinctly summarized the collaboration as "this

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<sup>14</sup> M. Scott and M. Mpanya. *We Are The World: An Evaluation of Pop Aid for Africa*, InterAction: American Council for Voluntary Action: Massachusetts, 1994, page 132-133.

created an educational and dialogue space about African and US NGO issues...One that did not exist before." This example also shows how an African-led NGO – through the block grant program – could demonstrate its capacity. Since FAVDO had a leadership role in this "educational and dialogue space", "...it helped to endorse the notion that Africans had a voice. The former staff member concluded, "there was a lot of engagement and sincerity to bring in those voices."

## **Development Education**

In 1988, USA for Africa allocated funds to twenty-four US organizations to engage in a public education campaign about Africa and African development issues. Funded projects included films, television and radio programs, and a series of printed media. The objective of these projects was to break down negative images, misconceptions, and stereotypes about Africa and Africans, presenting a more accurate portrayal. Many organizations who received this funding were encouraged to feature Africans voicing their opinions and to collaborate with the African-led NGO grantees.

In addition to formal campaigns, USA for Africa funded several meetings and discourse around [development] issues through various exchange programs and *People-to-People Tours*.

## **Women (and Youth) and Development Program**

The USA for Africa staff strongly believed that supporting women was essential. Given the integral and vital roles that women play in African society and family, it was paramount to create a program that specifically targeted women-led and managed initiatives. At the time of program inception, the former staff interviewed drew attention to the fact that there was a movement on-going to support projects that helped women and their families, organizations led and managed by women, and networks to facilitate informal exchange among women. USA for Africa folded into this movement. For example, in Mozambique, USA for Africa granted the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) to subsidize the construction of a child care center in the destitute Homoine District. With extremely poor sanitary conditions in the area, disease was prevalent. The child care center provided adequate health care and

education for the children as well as basic health and nutrition education for the mothers.<sup>15</sup>

USA for Africa also funded a US and African NGO partnership between the National Council for Negro Women, Inc. (NCNW) – one of the oldest African-American institutions – and the Federation of Senegalese Women’s Association (FAFS), a Senegalese women’s group serving a community of 60,000. This flagship project had the objective of strengthening the staff capacity of FAFS, while the NCNW served as a mentoring agency. The NCNW had been collaborating with FAFS since 1977, and so the connection was an established one. Further, the integrated project had several components, including improved water access, animal husbandry, poultry raising, and basic health care.

To establish and strengthen networks among women’s groups, USA for Africa provided a grant to the International Committee of African Women in Development (CIFAD) to sponsor a conference in Cameroon, where over 100 delegates from seventeen African countries attended.

USA for Africa’s funding advanced numerous women – focused projects and exchanges. One staff member interviewed looked back at how comprehensive USA for Africa’s funding approach was, pointing out that many of the projects funded did not focus exclusively on women. She noted, “we were not excluding men, because we realized that if men are not involved collectively, then things [would] not happen. Dealing with men was an integral part of the program too.”

Youth programming emerged as an offshoot to the Women and Development Program. “They [the USA for Africa board] were concerned about young people being left out” and so several projects were funded concentrating on advancing youth endeavors and facilitating networks among youth groups. For instance, USA for Africa financed the establishment and expansion of vocational training schools focused on agriculture, mechanics, carpentry, and sewing, all of which were designed to promote productive activities.

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<sup>15</sup> First Three Year Report, 1988.

## Programming Through the 1990s

Throughout the 1990s, USA for Africa had no special funding target or overall strategy guiding the direction of funding activities. The only predominant theme over the course of the 1990s was that "USA for Africa would not dissolve completely but rather become dormant". The current Executive Director explained that all previous grant commitments were simply paid in full, and funding was limited.

From 1990 through 1995, there was roughly a couple million in principal. Only a few African grantees were awarded funds during this period, including a grant to a Somali NGO undertaking humanitarian activities during the crisis period (1993-1994). During this period, the Executive Director also left the organization to pursue other career aspirations for two years and later returned.

In 1995, the Board of Directors rejoiced the tenth year anniversary of the organization, and during this time a public thank you was made. The Board of Directors finally decided that the organization would spend remaining funds through RFPs to international organizations. In 1995-1996, all grants were subsequently paid out, and an institution - called the California Community Foundation - was identified to which USA for Africa could fold into and transfer all assets.

Prior to signing the contractual agreement with the California Community Foundation, however, the Board of Directors had a change of mind, citing that "*maybe* this [dissolution] was not the right time" [emphasis added]. To compensate for their time and efforts, USA for Africa gave the California Community Foundation a grant for \$10,000 in the form of a "living trust" which maintains their name forever.

In 1996, the board of directors decided to keep USA for Africa open and operating on a limited scale until the Millennium, so as to be remembered as one of the great media events of the twentieth century. During these four years, Marcia Thomas identified groups to support, taking into account that funds were limited and that monitoring activities would be somewhat compromised. A program called *Small Grants Funds* – created primarily for US-based Africa focused groups – was intended to help NGOs cover costs for which they would not ordinarily receive support. Grant size ranged from \$1,000 to \$5,000. For

example, funding covered travel grants for Africans to come and attend meetings, conferences, make presentations, or logistics-related costs for scholars to participate in focus groups meetings. In addition to administering the Small Grant Funds, Marcia Thomas continued to travel to Africa “a couple times per year”, under the aegis of continued interaction, assessing current issues, and maintaining/establishing links with NGO networks.

In 1998, Marcia Thomas conducted outreach in the US for a UK-based debt relief organization that was a major advocate for debt cancellation in Africa – a new initiative at that time. She claimed that their efforts helped to put this issue on the “US radar screen”. In essence, throughout the ten year span (1990 – 2000), USA for Africa still issued grants, although the size of the grants had been comparably smaller. According to Marcia Thomas, the philosophy of supporting new initiatives and pioneering activities has remained unchanged.

## **REFLECTIONS: Pinnacles in the Journey**

When presenting interviewees with a series of questions to inspire reflection about USA for Africa's organizational journey, including its establishment, the response to the famine, and later, the longer-term development support, several elements and ideas surfaced. This section presents the pinnacles, or the trials and triumphs that former staff and board members believed had influence over USA for Africa's experience as an organization. Three main elements shaped USA for Africa's journey, and they were the media and various advantages and challenges. Many respondents also had different ideas about what USA for Africa's final legacy was, and all are discussed in this section.

### **The Media: Constantly Under the Watchful Eye of the Public**

Interviewees and the authors of the report *We Are The World: An Evaluation of Pop Aid for Africa* highlight interferences emanating from the media. In USA for Africa's history, the media played a strong and powerful role, first inspiring Harry Belafonte and later broadcasting the popular response to the *We are the World* song, which resulted in generous donations for African famine victims. One former staff person characterized this phenomenon as "THE most successful entertainment and media event of all time...it was a convincing power that... they really cared." As pointed out by the former staff member, the awareness of the stars and the American people – or that "they really cared" – was monumental.

M. Scott and M. Mpanya thoughtfully noted that 'there is a shadow side to the brightness'.<sup>16</sup> This shadow was characterized by reporters who questioned the organization's sincerity, integrity, and capacity to be financially accountable for the donated funds. Many interviewed thoughtfully pointed out that USA for Africa had to endure a significant amount of public scrutiny. In spite of this public scrutiny, however, the organization forged a non-traditional path by investing in African organizations. One interviewee credited the board stating that, "the board was very courageous to agree to do more risky funding in terms of the African organizations...This different strategy, which emerged at the end, was courageous on their part."

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<sup>16</sup> M. Scott and M. Mpanya. *We Are The World: An Evaluation of Pop Aid for Africa*, InterAction: American Council for Voluntary Action: Massachusetts, 1994, page. 125.

## Advantages

When interviewees were asked to reflect on the advantages that USA for Africa had along the journey, there were several benefits mentioned the most important of which was the spirit of humanity that engulfed the experience. For instance, one board member passionately described this spirit with, "here was an organization [USA for Africa] that was bringing attention to a world cause, and there were relief efforts [which followed]." Another staff member remembered USA for Africa during the emergency period, "I think that our value was the visibility we brought to [the famine]". Similarly, the staff noted that working with individuals and a board that was ideologically aligned with the motive of "just wanting to help" was admirable and considered "heartfelt".

Many also called attention to how USA for Africa was able to *keep the social issues of famine and poverty* in the public's eye long after the media had moved onto other events, since the organization was frequently in the media spotlight. A former staff person gave the example that during the first fact finding trip when supplies and food were delivered to famine victims in the Horn of Africa, the media accompanied them to Africa. The images of poverty and starvation stayed exposed "in a way that would not have otherwise been, and we showed that the money that they [the public] contributed was in fact well spent." Hence, not only did the staff and general public care about the victims of war and famine, but they were able to *continue caring*.

On an organizational level, many of those interviewed saw USA for Africa's primary advantage was that it was an entity, uncontrolled by any government or rules that governed standard aid organizations. The resources were leveraged from the public and public's sympathy, and initially there was no intention of becoming an institution or an aid organization. One board member stated candidly, "We did not want to be one of those players [relief and aid agencies]. We wanted to raise the money and go on living our lives." Thus, the original intention was to give the money away, but after the first fact-finding trip, the board discovered that outdated infrastructure, physical limitations, and corruption would prevent them from spending the money as originally conceived. One board member recalled, "we couldn't just throw money on [the problem]". The organization had the flexibility to change course and consider alternative strategies. Traditional aid and relief organizations would not have had such an advantage.

When an organization does not have to worry about long-term fundraising needs, the implication is a “fair amount of freedom”. Many former staff interviewed recalled, “there was a great deal of freedom and flexibility in terms of how we approached everything.” First, there was no need to build up any infrastructure or a large bureaucracy, which in turn allowed the staff to be considerably responsive. For instance, the format used for grant applications was simple, soliciting a two-page concept paper from NGOs initially. A full proposal was requested later, if the initiative was acceptable. The staff spoke and read applications in French, Portuguese, English and Arabic, and “we were able to verify and speak directly to the [grantees].” Respondents recollected that in the late 1980s, such practices within an aid organization were considered liberal and innovative.

The program direction was also “open”, as the board was not vested in any one traditional model of development grants. As a result, the staff were allowed some experimentation. For instance, the decision to distribute funds to African-led organizations ultimately contributed to a shift in power balance between African and non African NGOs. Before, African NGOs would get the funds *through* the non-African NGOs, but the new funding strategy enabled African NGOs to gain and hold power. Finally, one respondent raised a thoughtful point recalling that administering small grants for African NGOs was very advantageous, and perhaps, more appropriate given the small size of these organizations.

## **Challenges**

As seen, USA for Africa benefited from several advantages throughout its legendary journey of appropriating funds to help Africans. The trials and challenges, however, were admittedly greater. Interviewees cited several challenges which adversely affected the organization’s ability to administer funds, and interestingly the majority of challenges mentioned surfaced during the emergency funding phase. The recovery and development funding phases only had one risk that all respondents raised; That is, “USA for Africa was not on the ground” or the organization lacked field presence. All challenges are discussed in this section.

In recalling that the primary incentive of the project was altruistic, and so board members wanted to guarantee that all funds went directly to African famine victims. Initially, individual stars were contributing their own funds to cover

overhead costs associated with fundraising efforts. Ken Kragen reflected that in the beginning, the lack of funds placed an 'undue burden' but had to be done because public perception was very intense and paramount at the time. After the first couple of million dollars "trickled in", this burden diminished as the interest from the principal balance was sufficient to pay for subsequent running costs. The overhead costs in the beginning, however, were high and presented challenges while attempting to raise additional funds.

In the beginning, several artists also formed part of USA for Africa's Board of Directors, and this strategy was deliberate for the sake of credibility. Interviewees admitted that many board members at that time had limited experience in Africa and in relief and development programs. Many noted that the *real* problem, however, was that the stars were unaccustomed to collaborating with each other in an organizational setting. While many were well-meaning, inspired by compassion, and committed to "the cause", this positive energy turned to discord. One board member gives a succinct narration:

"They were stars and they were all used to having all the people around them go with whatever they think...Then, people started disagreeing with each other, and one star even brought one of his lawyers to one of the board meetings. This was the single biggest mistake. Later, we brought on board people who were dedicated to the solution. So, although these stars on the board brought credibility and showed commitment externally, internally, it brought us a lot of headaches."

Hence, the initial organizational strategy – to continue showing solidarity among the artists to help Africans – was intentional; it later presented several unforeseen challenges in its practicality and viability.

In addition to internal issues that emerged from the celebrities working together, the board had to be highly sensitized to media perceptions and how funded [relief] projects were perceived publicly. One board member explained how this challenge surfaced. "...we were limited in what we could do, because we didn't want to embarrass the artists." He cites the example of giving money to an entity and *if* that project failed miserably, the consequence was "really bad press". Hence, the reputations of the famous persons involved on the Board of Directors were very important and had to be protected, and this challenge, in turn, limited what and how funding was administered in the beginning.

Unlike the 21<sup>st</sup> century, “really bad press” in the mid 1980s had shattering repercussions. If the relief project failed miserably and “really bad press” ensued, the organization and the artists would have been embarrassed. A few interviewees explained that this sense of embarrassment may have influenced a star’s “willingness to step up and do another event in the future for another kind of organization like USA for Africa”. Therefore, board members went through great lengths to ensure that the celebrities on the board and the organization as a whole were not subject to unfavorable media attention. This challenge initially limited funding practices.

One board member reflected on the organization’s ‘naïveté’ in what the artists believed they could actually do for famine victims. From retrospective video footage and in-depth interviews, it was clear that those who served on the board of directors genuinely *believed* that they could help famine victims immediately, until after they took their first fact-finding trip. As mentioned earlier, they quickly discovered the extent of their naïveté.

In hindsight, however, the board member admired the power of the organization’s naïveté, drawing attention to the fact that without it, no one would initiate any mammoth project. He used the following caveat:

“Naïveté can serve you well...the reason being that you don’t know why it cannot be done. If you have not had the experience of being turned down or running into a wall, you believe that you can pull it off. This works advantageously. Who would ever do anything, if they really knew what it entailed?”

Moreover, the staff interviewed underscored that the *We are the World* song was a “mega-media and entertainment event”, and the corresponding expectations from Africa to respond to the famine and fix problems were equally as colossal. Indeed, not only was the expectation to “do something” elevated but managing that expectation was a great challenge, and USA for Africa was a new organization with limited experience. One former staff member pointed out that compared to other relief and development organizations in Africa, USA for Africa had a distinctively different face: “they [people in Africa] confused us with the artists. People were familiar with the artistic side of that image”. The relief and development side, however, featured less prominently. Nonetheless, the appreciation of the commitment from artists was acknowledged. One African grantee interviewed emphasized how “a group of artists, who had

contracts to respect and fulfill, took time to get together and dedicate their popularity for an activity [as such goes] beyond the normal.”

Finally, there was almost unanimous agreement that USA for Africa’s lack of field presence was a very big risk factor. The prospect that USA for Africa would finance an African NGO which was not legitimate or that there was the potential abuse of stealing funds consistently shrouded the programming experience. For instance, one former staff member interviewed described the dilemma:

“There is always the risk in funding something, that the organization is not going to do what it said that it was going to do. So that risk is always there...Obviously, you try and put systems in place to monitor what they are doing, get appropriate reports, as a funding source, you are not on the ground to watch what is going on....so there is always a risk in that.”

Similarly, another concern a consultant raised was if the grant provided – although considerably small in size – would “drive the NGO over the edge.” Many of the African-led NGOs were very small, and USA for Africa was giving them the opportunity to *demonstrate their capacity*, in many cases for the first time. Since USA for Africa had no field presence, a few former staff interviewed admittedly wondered how long it would take before the NGOs would prove themselves. It was for this reason that many grants included a technical assistance program component, so that the NGO staff could educate themselves to work effectively.

## Legacy

Many respondents believed that USA for Africa had a legacy in two distinctive areas: the development field and the entertainment industry. This section delineates how those interviewed described the areas by which USA for Africa could be most remembered.

## Development

When Harry Belafonte first saw the images of famine stricken Africans on his television, he was filled with compassion and his primary motivation was to help. Several interviewees connect USA for Africa's legacy to Harry Belafonte's initial call for action. This action took the form of either becoming inspired by the song or motivating oneself to get involved and aid those who were hungry, homeless, or suffering because of a natural calamity or war. Interviews revealed that in the beginning "issues of hunger and Africans in poverty were brought out of hiding", which was only the first step. The momentum of action which followed, however, was what many interviewed believe that USA for Africa should most be remembered for. That is, a fairly large group of artists – but still a minority of altruists – "galvanized support by just believing."

In the end, the *We are the World* project inspired people to get involved and to learn that any contribution – no matter how small – was significant. One board member explained the valuable lesson learned about giving,

"It turns out that most people have [had] a desire to help others. Everybody should and can help problems in the world and should not be limited to just their neighborhood or their community. *Even if everybody does a little bit and donates this, it can become a big effort after a while.* USA for Africa showed me that it is possible to help."  
(Emphasis added)

In the end, individuals, when properly motivated, can make a difference and the events that gave birth to USA for Africa demonstrate the power of human compassion when responding to a call for action. It should be noted that USA for Africa and Hands across America are reflections America's compassion for those who are hungry or/and homeless. Another board member fondly recalls how once the energy was galvanized, a domino effect was created. People not

only wanted to help hungry Africans, but they also wanted to help hungry Americans. He described the energy:

“Pretty quickly, we got a lot of people saying you know you have done this wonderful thing for Africa, what are you going to do for the United States? And, while still putting together the approach for Africa, we started organizing for Hands across America.”

Indeed, many of the interviewees connected USA for Africa and Hands across America with inspired people who acted selflessly and supported a cause by contributing locally. For example, one former staff person candidly pointed out that this energy actually continued in Africa when USA for Africa decided to provide grants to African-led NGOs directly. In recalling that the grants went to community-based African NGOs, Africans also had the opportunity to find solutions to their own problems in their own communities and demonstrate their capacity. The staff person noted that community leaders and local NGOs had the motivation and inspiration to create change “by just believing”, and USA for Africa’s financial support gave them the means through which to help themselves. Hence, the energy that created USA for Africa also transpired in Africa.

In addition to the call for action and inspiration to act, interviewees also connected the memory of USA for Africa with the appeal of collaborating with and supporting Africans directly. Indeed, many former staff persons believed that the decision to grant African-led NGOs directly was a courageous one and necessary. One should remember that collaborating with **and** funding Africans directly was not mainstreamed in the late 1980s, and so such a development model was far reaching, if not radical. A former staff person interviewed believed that USA for Africa should have the legacy of nurturing the trend of “collaborating on African vision”:

“The legacy is that indigenous organizations can be good and they better understand their own problems. Wherever possible, their solutions are real, and having this critical nature, saying to someone who is African ‘I think I understand your vision, let’s try to go with that and see if we can make it work...collaborating on that vision...and this is the best legacy USAFA could have.”

Therefore, the approach to working with African-led NGOs and supporting *their* solutions to *their* community problems should form part of USA for Africa's legacy.

Finally, being "good stewards of the money" is another memory many of those interviewed thought of when inquiring about USA for Africa's legacies. For instance, one interviewee cited that all operating costs were covered by the interest from the principal, indicating that less than ten percent was used for administration or fundraising. She proudly stated, "We stayed very lean as an organization." In addition, one former staff member emphasized that as part of being "good stewards of the money", there was a need to "report back to the people who bought the record....and an [effort was made to] report back to the public – or in a public way." When reporting to the public, spending the money "for what we said it was going to go for" was the notion consistently put forth.

### **Entertainment Industry**

The most prominent topic interviewees mentioned was that USA for Africa's beginning is a phenomenon which could never be replicated. Basically, the experience could not reoccur for several reasons. The spontaneity – or "truly special moment" – of creating a song and subsequently generating revenues is something interviewees thought could never happen again. When asked why this event could never be replicated again – as it was done to establish USA for Africa – those interviewed emphasized two major differences between the 1980s and the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the 1980s, there was more of a charitable spirit, whereas now, society is less caring. One respondent pointed out that "society is more 'me-focused' now... there was more of that charitable spirit to tap then compared to now...It is a 'what-is-in-it-for-me?' generation now." Further, though the generations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have considerably more access to information about the developing world, natural calamities, and images of war, it was mentioned that American society is simply less interested in helping [people].

Similarly, the experience which gave birth to USA for Africa could not be repeated because the entertainment industry is less likely to be as generous as it was in the mid 1980s compared to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In recalling that the public empathized with African famine victims and responded to the *We are the World* song, those who helped to raise funds – including the singers, producers, recording studio(s), retail outlets, radio, print media, and television – all

waived their right to profit in *everyway*. One staff person summarizes this point, stating "a lot of the people [in the industry] who would have normally made a lot of money off of it didn't make any money off of it [the song]..." Interestingly, although the experience of recreating the song and subsequently generating funds could not be replicated to USA for Africa's scope or magnitude, Ken Kragen raised this important point that "people [still] want to [try and] copy this project again and again."

Finally, many interviewees believed that given the extraordinary number of artists who participated in producing and singing the *We are the World* song, this event unintentionally set precedent for involvement in humanitarian and philanthropic causes. Artists, particularly American artists, *must* be involved in a cause now. One interviewee stated, "it is hard to be an artist today and NOT get involved; It is not just an option anymore."

Thus, the We Are the World experience and corresponding media events which gave birth to USA for Africa are unlikely to be replicated in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The attitudes of the current generations are less generous as are those in the entertainment industry. One could also remember USA for Africa for setting a new and higher standard for artists who *in addition to* following their artistic pursuits must be involved in humanitarian efforts and/or good causes.

## The Last Years

In the year 2000, the Board of Directors reconsidered the organizational dissolution issue but was hesitant to finalize the process. Interestingly, in 2003, a Japanese firm contacted USA for Africa who wanted to convert *The Making Of We are the World* to DVD and distribute it in Japan. *The Making Of We are the World* and the Music Video has been one of the top DVDs sold in Japan since then.

One year later, in 2005, USA for Africa celebrated its twentieth anniversary and a twentieth anniversary DVD was produced. This DVD includes previously unseen footage of the recording session, a documentary narrated by Harry Belafonte, their first fact-finding trip, among other media clips (AMA awards for best song and Quincy's receipt of award for Best Producer), and karaoke, etc. It should be noted that the DVD generated \$500,000 which also added to the principle figure of total dollars earned by the organization. Naturally, with the increase in the principle balance, it made dissolving more difficult.

## Final Remarks

This oral history project offers readers the chance to understand reflections about the organization's journey based on the perspectives of the individuals who were directly involved.

At the end of every year, since 2000, the USA for Africa Board of Directors come together with the Director to assess and determine if the organization will continue for another year.

Currently the Board is looking at and discussing the possibility of organizing a re-make of *We Are The World*, which would be done with a mix of contemporary artists along with select few artists from the original recording effort. A final decision is expected in spring of 2009.

## **Methodology**

### ***Why the Oral History Tradition?***

The oral history methodology records historical events. USA for Africa has rich experience in promoting change in Africa. The reflections about the effectiveness of different forms of assistance warrant open exploration, and the idea for this project was framed to examine the history of the organization's development model or philosophy, taking into account the context or historical events in which this evolution took place.

The oral history methodology is most appropriate for the following reasons: Specifically, the methodology

1. may be used to analyze and document important turning points in the organization's history of providing or facilitating assistance in Africa;
2. enables the reader to understand experiences and reflections through the lens of those who contributed heavily to USA for Africa's direction; and
3. drew from interviews with key informants, so that they could provide commentary on the historical significance of major events within USA for Africa's history.

Interestingly, philanthropic organizations have notable experiences documenting the development of the organization, moments of innovation, and the growth of ideas through the oral history methodology. Indeed, foundation-funded oral history projects are variable, ranging from specific and narrowly-defined efforts concentrating on one particular topic to wide ranging broad investigations, covering multiple subjects.

### ***Parameters and Challenges of USA for Africa's Oral History Project***

The interviewees selected were purposeful (see appendix 1 for a list of those interviewed). It should be noted that not all accounts were *completely* verbatim, and the analysis was focused primarily on USA for Africa's practices of *assisting Africans*. Indeed, there were many achievements also experienced while

carrying out activities for Hands across America, but they were not fully explored in this oral history exercise.

The instrument (see Appendix 2) was developed in consultation with the Marcia Thomas, and all those interviewed received the questionnaire several days prior to the telephone call/face-to-face interview.

When interviewing, every respondent noted their difficulty to recalling specific details about events. Indeed, the process of harvesting memories, particularly those which span more than twenty years ago, is perforated with recall problems. To minimize error associated with recall, all accounts used to compose USA for Africa's story were similar in content to ensure consistency and validity.

In sum, the oral history methodology was used to capture substantive information about USA for Africa's historical legacy, experiences, and role as one of many key players within the international development field.

## **Appendix 1 – List of Those Interviewed**

Names are listed in Alphabetical order.

Ambassador (former) Valeriano Ferrao

Ken Kragen

Jalal Latif

Karimu Johnson

Mutombo Mpanya

Mark Randazzo

Martin Rogol

Marcia Thomas

Michael Turner

## Appendix 2 – List of Questions Used for In-Depth Interviews

The questions below are split into three substantive areas, including a) the event of *We are the World* song which generated revenues and funds for relief/development in Africa and subsequently gave birth to USA for Africa, the organization and b) the organization's birth and ensuing journey, and c) advantages, challenges, and any other factors influencing its grant making practices.

1. The *We are the World* song and ensuing revenues:
  - a. In your words, describe the history of how USA for Africa got started. Please focus on the ideology behind creating a song to address poverty;
  - b. In your words, describe how you understand the ideology behind creating a song to address poverty and the history of how USA for Africa got started.
  - c. Generating the funding:
  - d. What were the expectations?
  - e. Were the expectations met? If not, why not?
  - f. Whose ideals or ideology determined what was priority?
  - g. Describe how the organization got started. . Broadly and in your opinion, what were the challenges? Were these challenges recognized or unrecognized as such?
  - h. Describe the interaction and input and feedback from the board (stars) and the institution? How did this relationship evolve over the years?
  
2. Generating the funding:
  - a. *In your view*, what were the expectations when funds were generated?
  - b. *In your opinion*, were those expectations met from the onset? If not, why not?
  - c. Please discuss how you became involved on the board or as a staff member and what your initial impressions were to serve in this capacity at the time?

- d. What sources of information did and do you use to develop and nurture a frame of reference about development in Africa? For instance, how did you know what was a 'good idea' and what was 'not a great idea'?
- e. How do/did you [the board] collectively determine what was priority? Was there any ideology used? Retrospectively, what challenges did you see influencing this process? (if any)
- f. As staff member, how was the system or process of establishing what was priority worked out or agreed upon? (Probe: process consultative, collaborative, or other)?

3. Funding Projects and USA for Africa's Strategy/Direction:

- a. What advantages do you think USA for Africa had while and supporting African-led organizations throughout the years?
- b. How do you see USA for Africa as different compared to other entities 'out there' working in international development in Africa?
- c. What challenges or things which potentially threatened USA for Africa's funding patterns/focus?
- d. What do you think USA for Africa's legacy is or will be?

