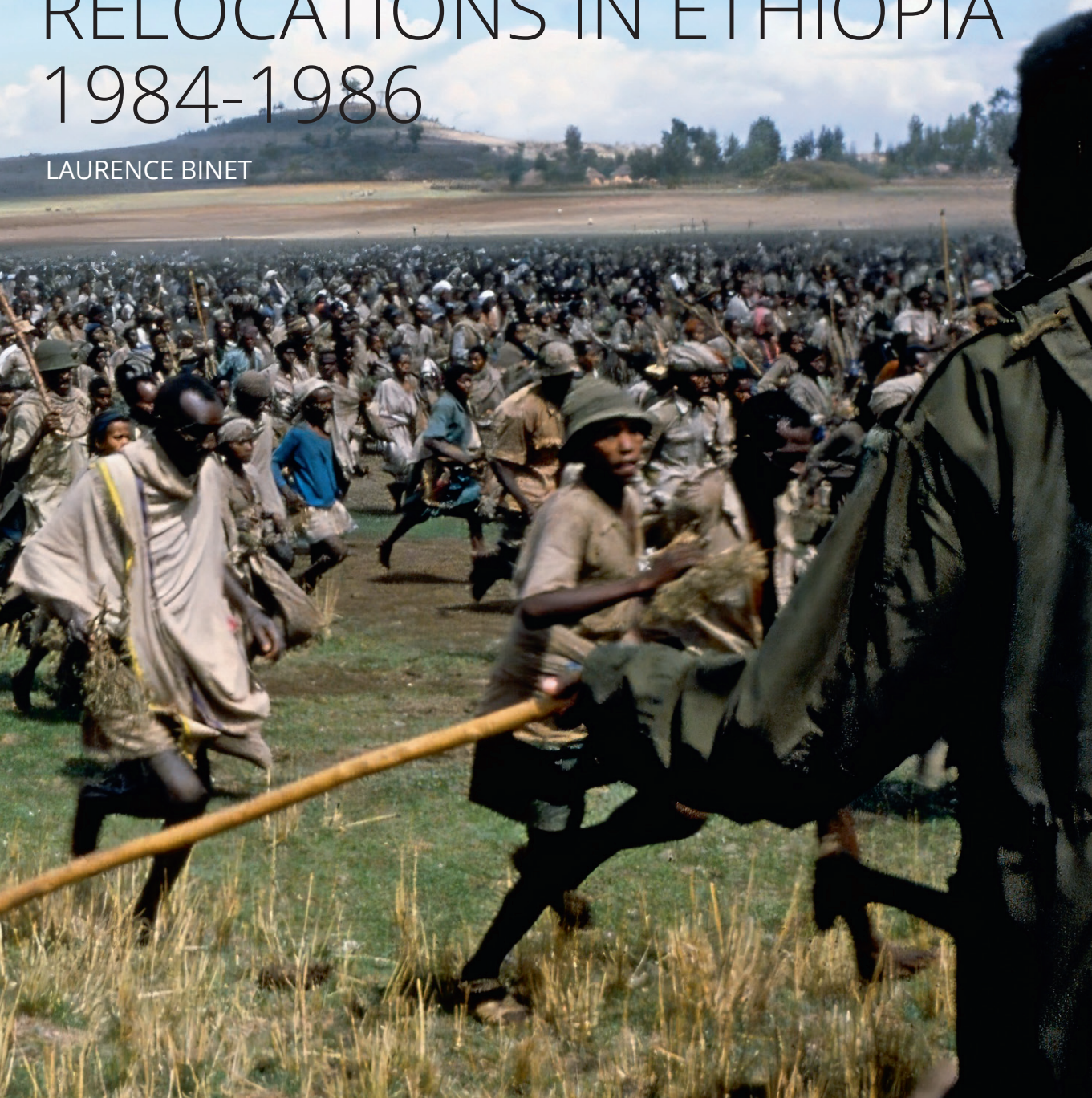


SUMMARY

THE MSF SPEAKING OUT CASE STUDIES

FAMINE AND FORCED RELOCATIONS IN ETHIOPIA 1984-1986

LAURENCE BINET



The summary lays out the context and the content of MSF's public statements and the key dilemmas they sought to address.

It is part of a more detailed case study that reconstructs the events using excerpts from documents taken from the MSF archives or from media coverage at the time, as well as interviews with MSF personnel.

You can download the full case study on our website:

www.msf.org/speakingout/all-case-studies

The MSF Speaking Out Case Studies is a project of MSF International. All our materials are available open access in English and French

SUMMARY

In 1983, a famine began in Ethiopia's northern provinces that would affect millions of people. It resulted from the combined effects of a two-year long drought throughout the Sahel, the Eritrean war, and the forced agricultural collectivisation policy pursued for years by the pro-Soviet regime in Ethiopia led by Colonel Mengistu.

Tens of thousands of farmers fled with their families to food distribution centres set up by the authorities. Yet the government waited until after the September 1984 celebration of the revolution's anniversary to officially acknowledge the famine's existence. The spirit of solidarity engendered by media coverage of the catastrophe led to an unprecedented amount of international aid from institutional donors and individuals in the West.

However, the Ethiopian regime diverted a portion of that aid to forcibly displace people from rebel areas of the arid, high altitude, northern plateaus to the more fertile plains in the south of the country where the population could be more easily controlled. When the rural population headed to distribution centres in search of food, they were loaded onto trucks, often those that had been requisitioned from aid organisations, and transported like livestock. This further hampered delivery of aid to the south. Conditions en route were appalling and no preparations were made to resettle the families when they arrived in the malaria-infested regions. In 1985, an estimated 100,000 people died during resettlement operations.

In April 1984, MSF France teams opened medical programmes in camps in the northern Wollo region, near the Korem distribution centre, followed by programmes in Kobo (September 1984), Kelala, and Sekota (June 1985). The authorities began a program of forced resettlement of people to the south, regularly impeding the teams' work. On several occasions, the teams were forbidden to treat certain individuals or to distribute blankets. MSF teams also witnessed round-ups carried out by the Ethiopian army among the camp populations. Periods of accelerated population transfers alternated with periods when transfers were suspended.

On several occasions, the authorities refused to authorise MSF's request to open a therapeutic feeding centre in Kelala, which could have prevented the deaths of several thousand children. In October 1985, MSF France publicly denounced the government's refusal to open a therapeutic feeding centre, along with its misuse of international aid for forced population transfers, and the shocking conditions under which transfers were being carried out. In the days that followed, the Ethiopian government expelled MSF France from the country.

The majority of the other aid organisations working in Ethiopia, some of which agreed with MSF's analysis, did not take a public position on the forced resettlements. Others criticised MSF's position, which they described as "political". Bob Geldof, founder and spokesperson for Band Aid and the organiser of the 'concert of the century' for Ethiopia, agreed. In 1986, following its expulsion, MSF France conducted a campaign in

Europe and the United States to explain its actions, which received considerable media coverage. The Ethiopian authorities suspended the transfer operations temporarily.

MSF Belgium's teams had been working in Idaga Hamus in the Tigray since March 1985 and in Zambalessa since the summer of 1985. Team members did not witness forced transfers, and thus did not take a public position. They continued to develop their programmes with the agreement of Ethiopian authorities. Similarly, MSF Holland, which had been created in September 1984 and was working with Ethiopian refugees in Somalia, did not take a public position either.

During the same period, the Belgian and French sections broke off relations over a disagreement regarding Liberté Sans Frontières (LSF), a think tank created by MSF France. MSF Belgium attributed political motives to LSF, linked to MSF France's analysis of the Ethiopian situation.

MSF DILEMMAS AND QUESTIONS

These events occurred within the context of an unprecedented humanitarian mobilisation and media attention and confronted MSF with a series of new dilemmas:

- ▶ What should be done if it appears that aid is being used against the populations for whom it is intended?
- ▶ Could MSF's denunciation endanger international aid operations in Ethiopia?
- ▶ By taking such positions, could MSF put its own existence and thus its other activities at risk?

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Thank you for reading.

If you would like to explore these events further, we invite you to consult the SOCS project website where you will find:

- the complete case study
- maps showing where MSF worked
- a detailed chronology
- MSF videos and extracts from the period

Some case studies have also been adapted into podcasts and online courses

Find all the MSF Speaking Out Case Studies materials here:

www.msf.org/speakingout/all-case-studies