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University of Arkansas · System Division of Agriculture

NatAgLaw@uark.edu · (479) 575-7646

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Africa – An End to Famine

by

M. Peter McPherson

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AFRICA—AN END TO FAMINE

M. PETER MCPHERSON*

INTRODUCTION

As the rains return and the long drought retreats before the advance of new growth and life-giving harvests, it is instructive and useful to reflect on the tragic events of the past many months in order to best understand what must be done to prevent a repetition of famine in Africa. There is a need to clearly define the causes of famine, to review the quantity and quality of our response, to confront the ethical questions that have arisen, and to refocus attention on the steps that must be taken to achieve sustainable food self-reliance throughout the African continent.

I. RESPONDING TO DROUGHT AND FAMINE

For the major part of a decade, drought crept across southern Africa and spread through the sub-Saharan countries virtually unnoticed by the outside world. By 1984, the continent was deep in the grasp of a rapidly accelerating catastrophe involving 200 million people in twenty-two countries. That number included 30 million whose lives were in immediate jeopardy.

As the full impact of the suffering became known, the American people responded through their government with one of the most massive relief efforts in the history of our country. In keeping with the inherent quality of compassion and generosity that has become a hallmark of our nation, the government moved with imagination and haste to meet the need that had become starkly apparent. During 1984, the United States more than tripled food aid to Africa. In 1985, food assistance increased nearly tenfold. During the 1984-86 period, our government provided more than six million metric tons of food and relief assistance valued at more than \$2.2 billion.

* Administrator of the Agency for International Development (A.I.D.). A former Peace Corps volunteer, he was appointed to head A.I.D. by President Reagan in 1981. On April 7, 1987, Mr. McPherson was nominated by the President and confirmed in August of 1987, to serve as Deputy Secretary of the Treasury.

To the credit of a uniquely American "can do" approach to complex problems, the United States consistently contributed the greatest volume of emergency food aid to starving people in the hardest hit regions of Africa. With the continuous cooperation of Congress, the Agency for International Development (AID) and other government agencies, unprecedented agreements were reached by international organizations, other donor nations, private voluntary groups and host country governments to allow the saving of literally millions of lives.

II. IMPROVING THE RESPONSE

To make the claim, however, that the African relief operation was carried off without a hitch would be inaccurate, and to expect as much would have been naive. With the certain knowledge that delays meant lost lives, there was little time to craft precise strategies. Food and other emergency needs assessments had to be determined quickly, and they were sometimes based on incomplete—even flimsy—data. Relief commodities, once they arrived at overtaxed ports, had to be hauled hundreds of miles over mountains and deserts, by decrepit railroads, along washed out roads and often through terrain where no roads existed. There was a severe shortage of relief staff in place to set up feeding stations and monitor the distribution of food.

The logistics of mounting a relief operation that spreads across the borders of several countries to serve millions of people, who are thousands of miles from the sources of supply, present not only a huge challenge but an important opportunity to benefit from experience. During the course of the emergency, we devoted a great deal of attention to documenting a body of knowledge that will help quicken the pace and enhance the efficiency of similar, future emergency responses.

It is evident that better forecasting of famines is one important key to the improvement of our emergency response to the cyclical drought conditions that plague the African continent. In terms of donor government and United Nations planning, the added lead time that results from reliable forecasting can make an important difference in providing food assistance where and when it will be needed most urgently.

International meteorological data is available from the continuous global monitoring done by the World Meteorological Organization.

logical Organization which assembles and transmits national and regional data. That data can be analyzed in conjunction with data from meteorological satellites which give an indication of the vigor of vegetation and permit crop condition forecasting as much as 30 to 60 days before harvest. Even earlier indications of possible drought conditions have been made possible by the operational modeling and assessment capabilities of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to identify areas where unusually dry conditions may be expected four to six months in the future.

In the context of the most recent drought, these efforts were commendable but dealt only with data on meteorological conditions and the vigor of vegetation. Part of what was missing was the integration of this extraneous physical data, with data on human conditions and social factors which are available only through traditional, earthbound methods of data gathering. This combination of physical and social indicators is the core of a new famine early warning system now being developed and tested by AID in several African countries. This effort also includes a component for monitoring food emergencies in their later stages by tracing the trend in the nutritional status of children, particularly those under five years of age. Young children tend to respond more quickly to changes in food availability than do adults, partly because they tend often to be last in line for whatever food is available to the family. Nutritional surveillance systems, then, can be an important indicator of worsening food situations at the family level.

As in other areas of famine relief, the critical issue in developing and maintaining early warning systems will be the degree to which these are incorporated in the funding priorities and institutional structures of the African countries themselves. AID has provided technical assistance, and will continue to do so, in the planning, methodology, and training of personnel involved in establishing a capacity for performing country food needs assessments. To the degree this capacity is maintained—in Africa and by Africans—it can have long-term benefits in supporting agricultural policy-making, as well as serving as a means of alerting country and donor decision makers alike to the likelihood of food shortages.

When early warning systems have alerted decision-makers to trouble spots that require relief actions, a broad array of logistical tools must be put to work. Transport, handling, storage and communications systems must be activated and

integrated to achieve optimum movement of relief commodities in minimal time.

In underdeveloped countries, the very existence of an adequate transportation infrastructure is often doubtful, and where it does exist, maintenance of these facilities is often neglected. Roads that have deteriorated due to lack of maintenance must be rapidly restored to usable condition. In some areas, emergency efforts must be made to build roads to remote areas. Bridges and other drainage structures may require maintenance or replacement.

Mobilizing private transportation service has proved to be an effective means of maintaining the movement of relief supplies. Often additional trucks must be leased or purchased to supplement those already in the country. Fuel dumps, spare parts depots, and repair facilities with qualified mechanics must be placed at key points to service transport fleets to minimize lost time and keep the flow of food moving rapidly.

Port operations can be hampered by lack of or poorly maintained unloading, bagging, and handling equipment. We have learned hard but valuable lessons in packaging and port facility systems; bags must be properly sewn to prevent leakage of grain during shipment. The material, from which the bags are made, must be of sufficient strength and of the proper material to resist the rough handling and rapid deterioration that results from exposure to the tropical sun. Furthermore, these problems must be addressed prior to the arrival of ships at the ports.

Communication systems, both land lines and radio, are often of little help for lack of maintenance, or even worse, for lack of a two-dollar battery. Modern radio sets have proven to be an effective means of long-range communication over long distances between base stations and mobile land and air transport systems. By coordinating transmission bands, all pertinent parties can be in rapid voice communication on common problems. As a result, the coordination of food and other relief commodity deliveries has been more effective.

III. CONFRONTING THE ETHICAL QUESTION

As in all great undertakings that are conducted in an environment of geographical, ideological, and political diversity, ethical questions invariably arise. They are serious questions that go far beyond the immediate and understandable

desire to rush in and help stamp out the fires of famine that have engulfed a country or a continent. Emblematic of these questions is the realization that the magnitude of our response carries with it a great potential for exacerbating the underlying causes which have been major contributors to the disaster.

A. *Providing a Decent Future*

Hungry children today need food, but they also deserve a decent future. The provision of emergency aid meets the immediate need. It is required and it has been accomplished. But the immediate response is only the first step. Without a political, economic, and attitudinal foundation supportive of sustainable improvements, such humanitarian efforts, while appealing to our better nature, can create long term dependencies which degrade rather than empower beneficiaries.

Thus we support what a number of countries in Africa—such as Gambia, Mali, Senegal and Burkina Faso—have done in drawing up food sector strategies which address long-term development issues and may reduce their vulnerability to future food crisis conditions.

Against this background, emergency assistance to Ethiopia has presented a unique challenge. There has been a danger that an unconditional aid response may only reinforce a vicious cycle of ever worsening famine and degradation because of the ideologically motivated, counterproductive agricultural policies of the government, its political priorities, and its alliances. Some have concluded that humanitarian assistance in the context of Ethiopia was a contradiction in terms. They believe assistance only strengthens the hand of the Ethiopian Government and extends its life, thereby creating conditions of increasing suffering over the long term.

Between the extreme positions of unreflective generosity and complete denial of assistance, AID has attempted to strike a responsible approach. This has not been a simple task.

A pervasive dilemma has been the indifference of the Ethiopian Government to the plight of its own people. For months, in 1984, the Government suppressed news of the spreading famine as preparations were made for lavish celebrations of the tenth anniversary of the Ethiopian revolution. When the Government finally acknowledged the severity of the problem, it then berated the donor community for its indifference and lack of generosity. It has been apparent that

prior to, and throughout the worst of the famine, emergency food aid was not the highest priority of the Ethiopian Government. Rather, responding militarily to various insurrections, maintaining tight political control of urban areas, and resettling rural populations from the north to the southwestern regions of the country, took priority over the real and immediate needs of the starving. The resettlement program, now suspended, has been ill planned, coercively implemented and has diverted scarce resources from the relief efforts. After all of these agenda items, relief efforts finally appear on the Government's agenda.

In practical terms this has meant that the Government of Ethiopia has done neither its fair share of relief work nor allowed relief agencies to be completely effective. AID and the people of the United States, along with the donor community, cannot and should not take all of the responsibility for dealing with starvation in Ethiopia. Our basic challenge was to find a means to ensure that immediate needs were met, with all concerned parties bearing their fair share of the responsibility. In this light, the actions of the Government of Ethiopia have been disappointing. The Government has consistently made it difficult, if not impossible, to deliver food to large parts of the contested areas in northern Ethiopia. Government owned or leased trucks to move food have not been made available on a consistent basis. Important roads have not been kept open. The Government has generated a substantial profit from the presence of relief efforts. This has included such things as high port fees for donated relief goods and a double standard of hotel charges for foreigners. Cumbersome bureaucratic procedures frustrate relief efforts. Travel, for example, is by permit only; importation procedures for relief goods are lengthy. The Government has acted unilaterally to close relief camps prematurely. As noted above, it has also forced famine victims to resettle in the south against their will. Along with the resettlement program, the Government is conducting a much more extensive and fearsome program called "villagization." This program will move more than 30 million farmers, in all parts of Ethiopia, to concentrated villages. On occasion, the Government has made promises to do more to aid the relief effort, but these promises have frequently not been kept. Clearly the Government is not only not doing its share, but by its policies and programs, it has consistently and seriously impeded the speed and effectiveness of famine relief efforts.

In spite of these impediments, the United States has pro-

vided over 900,000 metric tons of food to Ethiopia—one-half of all emergency food donated to Ethiopia by the free world. Concurrent with our emergency assistance, we have tried to stimulate a broad based recovery from the effects of the famine. This has led us to support programs providing seeds and other agricultural supplies to farmers. The better weather of 1985 and 1986 has resulted in better agricultural production. But despite the better weather in Ethiopia, the policies of the Government preclude the kind of progress that would overcome a growing structural food deficit. Without basic agricultural reforms, there is no chance that such a basic and necessary transformation will begin to take place. Typical of the policies of the Government, that are discouraging production, are restrictions on the price of basic commodities and free trade incentives within Ethiopia.

We have worked hard to provide the basic assistance to help Ethiopians survive the famine and return to their farms. It is the responsibility of the Ethiopian Government to work to create an environment which will allow further assistance to lead to sustainable development. Without such a willingness, our continued assistance would be counterproductive and actually increase suffering.

B. Providing Relief in the Midst of Hostilities

The presence of hostilities and contested areas, within various countries where relief programs are being conducted, poses yet another ethical/moral dilemma. Donor nations and some private relief agencies are often seen, by both sides of the conflict, as a threat. If aid is destined for an area held by rebels, the government is likely to fear that the food will be diverted to rebel troops. If the food is to be distributed in areas held by the government, rebel forces are likely to hold similar fears. Indeed, it is possible—even probable—that humanitarian food assistance can become a weapon of war when it is successfully diverted by either side. We have been successful, in some areas, in channeling our food aid to the legitimate recipients through non-aligned, international organizations such as the Red Cross and the U.N. World Food Organization. However, even those organizations are often frustrated in their attempts to deliver and distribute food in adequate quantities in, for example, southern Sudan. Last year, two Ethiopian nationals in the employ of World Vision were shot and killed by rebel troops in the organization's compound in Tigray Province in Ethiopia. Trucks carrying

food through contested areas have been hijacked or burned; drivers have been shot at and even killed by bandits and rebels alike.

Thus the dilemma: is it reasonable or even moral to send trucks into areas where guarantees of safe passage by both sides of a conflict cannot be obtained? What of the thousands of people who will perish if we do not? The United States continues to seek the means to safely deliver food to hungry people in these contested areas. From time to time, we and other organizations have been successful in negotiating periods of safe passage. However, we must ask ourselves if, in our humanitarian desire to feed starving people, we are inadvertently providing support to those who are making war at the expense of the very people we are trying to help. And, just as importantly, are we willing to exploit the need of drivers to feed their families at the risk of their own lives?

C. *How Much Relief is Enough?*

Yet another ethical factor, in the equation of disaster assistance, involves the determination that conditions have improved sufficiently to allow termination of emergency aid. To cut off such aid, at the first sign of diminished need, can extend and intensify the duration of famine; for example, farmers may be physically unable to resume production, even in cases where rains have returned to normal. On the other hand, to continue emergency assistance too far into the recovery stage fosters an environment of psychological and economic disincentives to renewed production—why plant when food is free? In emergency disaster assistance programs, as an emergency winds down, it becomes increasingly important to carefully monitor human, climatic, supply, and other relative conditions that signal the need to withdraw emergency aid and, where applicable, resume the focus on long term economic development.

IV. ACHIEVING FOOD SELF-RELIANCE

In an address to the students and faculty of the Notre Dame Law School, I spoke to the issue of Africa's future and its need to become food self-reliant. The great human suffering experienced by millions of people in Africa during the famine dramatically underscores the need to find long-term solutions to Africa's development problems.

The problem of achieving food self-reliance in Africa is complex. There are no quick and easy solutions. Food self-

sufficiency will not come as the result of international assistance alone. It requires the long-term commitment and dedicated efforts of both the donor nations and the African governments.

I am convinced that sub-Saharan Africa can produce sufficient food for its people. The experience of India is evidence that nations can move from recurring famine to grain self-reliance, if certain steps are taken. Only 20 years ago, India had a famine worse than Africa's famine. Now India is grain self-reliant and has donated some grain to Africa.

Nevertheless, efforts to ultimately achieve food self-reliance for Africa must realistically take into account the magnitude of problems unique to Africa. Over the past two decades, per capita food production has declined by 20 percent. This is not surprising considering that most African nations have, until recently, neglected agriculture and stifled private initiative. For example, prices to farmers have been kept artificially low to satisfy the demand for cheap food by politically powerful urban populations. Inefficient state marketing monopolies have been slow to collect the crop or pay the farmer. Country-to-country agricultural trade within Africa has been restricted by unrealistic exchange rates and self-imposed trade barriers. Additionally, a population growth rate, of more than three percent, is outpacing food production and contributing to such problems as the loss of forest lands and the erosion of top soil. The cumulative effect of these and other forces has been to create food shortages, poverty and malnutrition in the household, and retarded growth of countries.

It must also be recognized that improving agricultural production in Africa may be a more difficult task than in some other regions of the world. For example, Africa grows a wide variety of food and cash crops such as coffee, vanilla and cotton, compared to the almost single-crop production of rice in Southeast Asia or wheat in India's Punjab. African rainfall is erratic, there is very little irrigation, and soils are typically fragile. The development of seed and other technologies adapted to these conditions is difficult and time-consuming. To further complicate matters, farmers are generally widely scattered and rely heavily on manual labor, rather than draft animals or machinery. And there is a lack of farm-to-market roads which limits distribution and sale of surplus production. In addition, we find unresponsive agricultural institutions, service delivery and extension systems, and a limited supply of scientists, managers and technicians.

Despite these and other difficulties, the potential is present for adequate food production. I should note that in years of good rainfall, Africa has achieved near self-sufficiency in aggregate, continent-wide production. The 1985-86 bumper harvests, of certain parts of Africa, are estimated at about 54 million metric tons of food grain. This is compared to an estimated total demand of about 57 million tons in 1986. This near balance is the result of large surpluses in such areas as Kenya, Zimbabwe and eastern Sudan.

Thus, the picture is not hopeless. But a long term self-reliance program requires implementation of proper farm price policies; the development of high yielding crop strains; the creation of production and marketing infrastructure; and better management of African natural resources, such as its soils and trees. Let me take these requirements one at a time.

Policy reforms offer one of the most effective and quickest ways to increase production. We are encouraged about what is happening. There is a growing awareness and desire among Africans to undertake needed policy reforms, especially in agriculture. AID is providing special assistance in policy design and our assistance programs are geared to assure that such reforms are made. In the past few years, many countries have begun to implement an impressive array of reforms. These include increased prices paid to farmers for their crops; reforming or turning over to the private sector inefficient state-run agricultural enterprises; devaluing their currencies and liberalizing trade to stimulate external trade; and reducing subsidies on agricultural tools, seeds and fertilizers. The results of these changes are already being felt. For example, dramatic increases in food production have occurred in Malawi, Somalia, and Zambia as a result of increased prices paid to farmers and greater reliance on the free market. Specifically, in 1981, Malawi increased prices paid to farmers for corn. Within a year, farmers sold twice as much as they had in the previous year.

Next, agricultural research deserves high priority. The U.S. is providing strong support here—about \$75 million a year. Our efforts are focused on selected countries, crops and animal production problems, where the greatest results can be expected. I should point out that African governments must provide more support for agricultural research.

There are success stories. Sorghum, a major African cereal crop, demonstrates the potential payoff we can expect from agricultural research. A new drought-tolerant hybrid sorghum has been developed in Sudan. Field trials have pro-

duced twice the yield of traditional varieties. A new white corn variety developed in Nigeria has generated yields nine times greater than other corn strains. This was done despite drought conditions and a severe outbreak of corn virus. Improved varieties of cassava—a root crop which currently provides half the caloric intake for over 200 million Africans—have out-yielded local strains by 200 to 1,800 percent. These are only a few examples. But they illustrate the immense potential of new seed strains designed for Africa's widely varying climate, soils, and plant diseases.

The availability of water and the frequency of rainfall is always a major consideration in improved crop production. Africa has less than two percent of its cultivated land under irrigation. Irrigation development has proved difficult and costly. But there is considerable untapped potential for irrigation that could significantly reduce the threat of recurring drought. It needs to be harnessed, but in ways that are cost-effective and beneficial to the small-scale farmer.

Better management of Africa's natural resources is vital. The advance of the desert, the destruction of forests, and the depletion of soils are working to undermine agricultural production and increase the incidence of drought. These are caused by a combination of climatic change and misuse or overuse of land by people and livestock. National resource problems are further aggravated by rapid population growth that depletes productive land and pushes people into marginal lands. This resource degradation process, known as "desertification," is partially man-made. Because it is man-made, it can be arrested by human intervention. AID is working extensively in this area to improve technology, institutions and policies in the African countries.

Most recently, the United States joined with other donors in an attack on a major outbreak of grasshoppers and locusts that threatened to cause critical food shortages and renewed famine in Africa. Due to the rapid and widespread relief response, the infestation was largely contained in West Africa. However, it is anticipated that the Horn of Africa, and Botswana and Zimbabwe, in the south, could experience renewed heavy outbreaks if large numbers of eggs hatch during the coming months. Resources are currently being marshaled and plans formulated to launch an effective multinational control effort in those regions. At this writing, the United States has provided a total of nearly \$9 million for aerial and ground spraying, logistical and technical support, and the purchase of environmentally safe pesticides.

Population growth rates are an important factor in the African food development equation. Many leaders of African countries are becoming increasingly aware of the consequences of continued growth at current rates. Demands for AID assistance are growing, and we are now supporting voluntary family planning activities in 40 African countries.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, there is hope for progress in Africa. America's scientific and technical expertise is finding solutions to problems that previously were considered insurmountable. Economic reforms are being designed and implemented. Institutions are being built or strengthened. Increasing food production in Africa—as well as more even distribution of what is grown—is going to take time and hard work by donor nations and, especially, the African countries themselves.

In the past several years, we have met the short term challenges of responding to the famine in Africa. This year and in the future, we need to work to be equally forthcoming with the even more challenging and complex tests of long term, equitable and sustainable development. It is a hard task, but it is the only effective insurance we have against a generation of ever worsening food crises.