

HORN OF AFRICA FOOD CRISIS

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Perfect Storm

The north eastern corner of Africa is again witnessing shocking scenes of deprivation. The Horn of Africa, from Sudan through Kenya and Ethiopia to Somalia regularly suffers from prolonged and devastating food shortages and this is one of the worst for many years. Preventing repeats of this suffering depends as much on the politics of the region as on aid and development.

aCCORDING TO THE WORLD FOOD Programme, around twenty million people in the Horn of Africa need food aid. Indeed the numbers are so great it is hard to take anything tangible and human from the statistics. Some commentators dispute these numbers; they say they have been subject to 'misery inflation' and hyped to help raise funds for relief agencies and non-governmental organisations.

Of course arriving at accurate figures is important, and crucial for effective counter measures, but even allowing for some exaggeration or miscounting, the number in need is staggering. This despite the intermittent attention for high profile cases of famine in the Horn of Africa, attention often galvanised as a result of concerted media campaigns and events like Live Aid or Live 8.

CLIMATE OF HUNGER

Climate is the most obvious and immediate cause. The dry areas of the Horn and East Africa are climatically unreliable and prone to long periods of drought. The regional environment is characterised by unpredictability,

ranging from flash floods to many months with no rain. And increasingly, locals and experts are concerned that climate change could exacerbate this, making the prospect of ending food crises in the Horn ever less likely.

Traditional coping methods allow many to try to deal with their difficult climate; methods such as moving herds to other areas, or taking paid work to generate cash to buy food. These may be effective in the face of one adverse situation, but when drought is compounded by conflict, or population movement, or war, they no longer suffice.

PROBLEM OF POLITICS

However, climate only provides a partial explanation, because food shortage and famine are also a problem of politics. In Somalia, for example, there are people driven from their homes by fighting in the major cities, pastoralists who have lost their livelihoods because of drought, people who were displaced from homes and farms earlier in the war.

Some are prevented from returning by economic factors: the loss of livestock or land. For others it is simply too dangerous to go back, or they find their traditional homes have been taken by better armed groups. In these situations the political factors

compound the environmental ones, making them even harder to deal with.

Indeed, many Mogadishu residents have painful memories of briefly returning to the city following the departure last January of Ethiopian troops, only to be caught in new fighting between government and opposition forces. With conflict in the urban areas, normal commercial food provision fails, and Somalia's chronic instability makes aid delivery exceptionally difficult.

The World Food Programme loses large quantities of aid between it landing at the port and arriving with affected populations. Shipments must pass roadblocks where passage has to be negotiated, costing money or goods. At times the Programme has had to suspend operations in Somalia because staff have been killed, or ships hijacked.

Fighting and political uncertainty, combined with massive displacement, mean that food aid is essential for many people's survival. But the United Nations is over \$300 million short of the funds it has requested for Somalia.

MEDIA SPOTLIGHT

The UN southern Sudan mission has struggled to raise sufficient money to meet the needs of an impending crisis. Poor weather, overspill from conflicts in other countries, and internal fighting and feuding between communities are converging into what one humanitarian official described as a 'perfect storm'.

The delayed arrival of rains meant crops were not ready to be harvested and localised fighting has made this situation worse, driving up the number of people needing food aid.

Half the food assigned to southern Sudan is destined for areas in Jonglei state where fighting has been worst. But the money needed to meet the aid requirements has been hard to come by, and operations have been scaled back to match the resources available.

Southern Sudan is precarious at the best of times as it continues recovering from decades of conflict, so populations are especially vulnerable to shocks like drought or displacement. Yet the media spotlight has been on Darfur, vastly easing the availability of funds for the mission in that part of the country. Darfur deserves and needs this attention, but less high-profile areas like southern Sudan cannot be ignored because they are less visible.

The response of the international community to crises like these often seems to be influenced as much by profile and coverage as by need. Most recent reporting on the food crisis in the

Horn has harked back to the Ethiopian famine twenty-five years ago, and the country has been much in the spotlight. The government has now called for international assistance to deal with a major food crisis.

Kenya is the most developed country in the region but communities living on the margins still struggle when the environment turns against them. Nairobi houses the majority of the international press corps for East Africa and, as in Ethiopia, the crisis there has received some international coverage. Like Ethiopia, Kenya has access to the important commodity of international sympathy; sometimes lacking for its neighbours Somalia and Sudan.

FROM ALL SIDES

At times politicians have exploited hunger to move populations, or put pressure on communities that may have been hostile. Politics abroad also affects relief efforts, the World Food Programme has less than half the funds it needs to feed millions of Somalis and the programme in southern Sudan is short of tens of millions of dollars.

The insistence by some countries on donating food rather than money to the Programme can reduce the effectiveness of operations as well as denying local farmers the chance to provide the necessary goods. Monetary support gives flexibility and makes for more useful assistance.

There are those who argue that food aid only perpetuates the problem of dependency: it discourages people from going back to work and undercuts local farmers. That debate is an important one and is receiving increasing attention. However, in southern Somalia or parts of southern Sudan, it is not food hand outs that keep people from producing their own, it is the continuing fighting around them that destroys what they produce and prevents them replacing it.

Neither Somalia nor Sudan need inevitably be places of hunger, and although more stable and peaceful politics in the region will not on their own end food crises, without such a development international and local aid will continue to be needed.

Relying on Bob Geldof to kick up a fuss is not going to work; aid needs to be available and consistent even when the rock stars have gone home. And international powers must apply consistent, considered attention to resolving the political problems that turn food shortage into famine, even in difficult areas like the Horn of Africa.

