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Future hunger emergencies likely if business as usual continues

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The Current Column

of 10 October 2011

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Bonn, 10 October 2011. Every year on 16 October, the World Food Day reminds us that food is "a requisite for human survival and well-being and a fundamental human necessity" (UN resolution 35/70 of 5 December 1980). Yet almost every other year, somewhere in the world, in particular Africa, people are suffering from hunger. Out of the 29 countries requiring food assistance in March 2011, 21 of them are in Africa. In October 2010, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reported 925 million undernourished people – approx. 14% of world population. Besides the current food emergency (see "The Current Column" of 22 August 2011), Eastern Africa is one of the most food insecure regions of the world, characterised by a risk of famine, recent major famines occurring in 1984/85, 1991/92, 1999/2000.

We must ask ourselves the uncomfortable questions of why hunger persists in these areas, who is affected and why?

Marginality, poverty and neglect

The affected areas in Eastern Africa are marginal in most senses of the word. Environmentally, the affected arid and semi-arid lands are characterised by low agricultural production due to low and unreliable rainfall. Geographically, they are mostly distant from the centres of economic and political power, therefore difficult to control or be influenced by the centre. This geographic marginality is worsened by a lack of development relative to other areas – for example Kenya's North Eastern Province, a chronically food insecure region, has Kenya's lowest human development levels – one of its highest poverty rates, gender disparities and illiteracy levels, limited access to education, water and health facilities, electricity grid and tarmacked road networks.

Some measures are being taken, for example, Kenya's new constitution, its national free primary education, improvement of livestock services, and the establishment of its Ministry for the Development of Northern Kenya and Other Arid Lands in 2008. Ethiopia's social protection programme which started in 2006 and aims at sustainable

development and poverty reduction is another example. Yet, its short history does not allow for any conclusions yet. Reversing the decades of marginalisation and neglect will take time to become effective.

The continuous blame on drought

In view of this marginality and neglect, drought often translates to food crisis. Drought is a normal feature of climate in this region – it frequently occurs and should be expected to frequently occur. With climate change, droughts are also likely to increase in frequency, intensity and spread. Despite this knowledge and functional early warning on drought occurrence, droughts catch governments either unprepared or incapable. The example of the on-going drought-related famine in Eastern Africa is a case in point whereby government officers received early warnings about the impending crisis but preparations were inadequate and ineffective (see "The Current Column" of 22 August 2011). Of what use then are early warning systems when those that are supposed to act do not do so and adequately? How much and for how long can drought be blamed for chronic food insecurity in the face of this inactiveness? (see "The Current Column" of 25 July 2011)

Weak governance and corruption

Available financial resources and relevant human capacities are inadequate and weak governance threatens the success of interventions. The World Bank is likely to freeze funding of a critical drought management and food security project running in Northern Kenya since 1996 due to massive corruption and fraudulent transactions in about 29% of the currently audited cases amounting to Ksh362 million (ca. 2.6 Mio. Euro). Corruption frustrates development interventions and sows distrust among the involved, the donors as well as honest government officers, especially where there are no prosecutions.

From declining agricultural investment, increasing budget allocation to inadequate absorptive capacity

A recent move to increase investment is ham-

pered by limited absorptive capacity. For example, the Kenyan government has increased its budget allocation to agriculture, although not yet up to 10 per cent. However, in many cases funds are underutilised due to delays and bottlenecks in the disbursement process and limited absorptive capacity. Government officers are thus forced to return allocated funds at the end of the year even though the problems which the funds were meant to solve have not yet been addressed. The Ministry of Finance and Planning urgently needs to address these bottlenecks.

While the theme of the 2011 World Food Day is "Food prices – From crisis to stability", stabilising food availability and access is a long-term challenge that calls for targeted development measures. Poor people already spend a large part of their income on food purchase. The hike in global food prices worsens their access to food and has led to riots in Madagascar, Senegal and Zimbabwe. Currently, food prices remain generally high in the region and may further rise if the food producing regions do not receive adequate rains.

What next?

A combination of factors drives chronic food insecurity and must be addressed in an integrative manner, supported by massive resources. The momentum already started by the Kenyan and Ethiopian governments need to be sustained and

the challenges posed by weak governance addressed. Funding needs to be increased and redirected to the marginal areas. There are no short-cuts to food security without ensuring food availability through own production or accessibility through markets or incomes. Therefore, pillars of development such as human capacity building, infrastructure and social services are necessary to provide the basis for building the resilience of the affected populations. Development cannot be achieved in an environment where financial and relevant human resources are inadequate and where even under such limiting conditions corruption is rife. Hence, governments should seek more effective ways to curb corruption. Not only high potential areas and economic good governance should count but also equitable and inclusive development that supports human capabilities. Local peace islands need all the support they can get and as long as such conflicts continue to fester, so long will the civilians be subject to chronic food insecurity. The success of past measures can at best be described as being enough to have kept people alive, surviving and coping but unable to make significant strides in economic or human capacity development. It is also high time that interventions in Africa move beyond sustaining survival and coping to triggering development. Future hunger emergencies are surely to occur if business as usual continues.



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