

Press Feature: Famine Highlights Long-term Injustices

19. August 2011

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A meeting of governments, UN agencies and international organizations held in Rome on 18 August ended with a call for a twin-track approach that involves both meeting pressing relief needs as well as addressing the root causes of the problem and strengthening the affected populations' resilience in the face of future shocks.

"Feeding the hungry does not end hunger, unless we help people provide for their futures. If donors, development agencies and governments do not attend to the medium and long term, this kind of tragedy will happen again," said IFAD Vice President Yukiko Omura. "We cannot control droughts, but we can control hunger. To do so we must invest in the world's smallholder farmers so that they can feed their communities and their families."

The experience of EAA members and partners underlines these perspectives.

Members of the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance (EAA), an alliance of 80 churches and related organizations around the world, are deeply concerned by the tragic food crisis currently affecting several countries in the Horn of Africa. Many churches and related organizations – in the affected countries and internationally – are directly involved in responding to the emergency situation.

Triggered by drought resulting from the failure of seasonal rains, the food crisis is amplified by the effects of climate change, conflict, instability and high food prices. Says Bishop Peter Kihara, the Bishop of Marsabit in one of the worst-hit areas of Northern Kenya, "There is no question that we have a very desperate situation, and it is deteriorating rapidly. We urgently call to our brothers and sisters across the world to help us in this time of need." Yet while the exceptionally severe drought conditions and continuing conflict and instability in Somalia are key factors in this situation, the crisis has also brutally exposed longstanding structural and policy failures to ensure food justice in the region as a whole.

Through the Food for Life campaign, EAA members collaborate in promoting just food production, trade and distribution systems that are participatory and democratic, are environmentally, socially and economically sustainable, and support the right of all people to adequate food. In the context of the current crisis in the Horn of Africa, EAA members are working to address many of the underlying issues that predicate this disaster.

We believe that in addition to increased support for the immediate humanitarian needs of the millions of people affected and displaced by drought and famine in the Horn of Africa, this crisis highlights the urgent need for greater attention and a long-term commitment – nationally, regionally and internationally – to strengthening the agricultural sector, investing in rural development, ensuring the sustainability of the livelihood systems on which the people of the region rely for survival, controlling food price volatility, taking effective measures for climate change mitigation and adaption, and implementing the human right to adequate food.

“Our intention is not only to deal with immediate needs”, says the Most Reverend Ian Ernest, Chairperson of the Council of Anglican Provinces of Africa (CAPA) and Archbishop of the Province of the Indian Ocean, “but to find long term solutions.”

Supporting agriculture, rural development and access to water

In 2003, African governments committed themselves to allocating at least 10% of national budgetary resources to agriculture and rural development policy implementation within five years. But eight years later, still relatively few governments have fulfilled this commitment. The key constraint is lack of high-level political will to prioritize agriculture in national budgets.

Apart from the critical case of Somalia where the first challenge is to find a solution to the chronic conflict and instability that has beset the country, more could have been done in some of the other affected countries to protect their people against the impacts of the drought. In the future implementation of the commitment to support agriculture and rural development, the focus should especially be on small holder farmers; agricultural research and extension services; access to affordable credit and insurance facilities for resource-poor producers; and improved infrastructure for transport and processing, preservation and storage of agricultural produce.

Considerable investment is needed to apply simple, sustainable, low cost and low tech solutions to improving the retention of rain and ground water, replenishing underground aquifers, improving soil fertility, conserving rangelands, and increasing the use of drought-resistant seeds and natural fertiliser and compost. In a context in which only one percent of arable land is used for agricultural production due to lack of water, irrigation is a priority. A visit to a project supported by Caritas Ireland in Nakwalekwi, northern Kenya, demonstrates the potential. Thanks to a windmill powering an irrigation system, the sandy land is lush with vegetation. Crops such as maize, sorghum, green grams, cow peas, sugar cane, bananas and oranges are produced all year round. [1]

“The potential to lift entire communities out of chronic food insecurity and impoverishment, including in drought-prone areas, is enormous,” says Gary Kenny, Program Co-ordinator for Emergency Response and International Development for The United Church of Canada. Kenny cites the experience of Christian Care, a Zimbabwean relief and development agency, in rain-starved southern Zimbabwe as evidence of what’s possible. Christian Care has worked with small-holder farmers in Zimbabwe’s Nkayi District in a series of ‘conservation farming’ projects to lift entire communities out of chronic food insecurity and poverty. “The results have been astounding”, says Kenny. “Using simple technologies and locally-available inputs, many farmers have seen their crop yields increase tenfold.”

The face of East Africa doesn’t have to be one of dependency, drought and desperation. With adequate investment in sustainable and appropriate technologies coupled with traditional methods, communities can produce their own food and lead a less precarious and more dignified life.

Prioritizing vulnerable communities

“In the Horn of Africa, the situation of pastoralist communities demands special attention”, says Rev. Eberhard Hitzler, Director of the Lutheran World Federation’s (LWF) Department for World Service. The LWF is responsible for managing the Dadaab refugee camp, the largest refugee camp in the world, which in the context of the current crisis has been receiving more than 1,000 people a day fleeing from famine and instability in the region. According to Hitzler, “Pastoralist communities living in environmentally marginal situations such as many parts of the Horn are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity and famine in times of drought.

Especially when faced with the effects of climate change, ensuring sustainable livelihoods for pastoralists is a central challenge in this part of the world." Mohammed Adow, Christian Aid's Senior Advisor on Climate Change who originally comes from the affected region, underlines this concern. "In the pastoral regions - it's not just the pastoralists' lives that are at risk, but the future of the pastoral economy. This needs to be recognised so that we can effectively respond even after the cameras have moved on, through well-designed adaptation programmes that meet the needs of the 'drop outs' and 'pastoralists in transition', and to improve the livelihoods of the local people through enhanced agricultural production, food security, economic and social development across the affected region."

The Regional Enhanced Livelihoods for Pastoral Areas (RELPA) initiative provides a policy and investment framework for developing sustainability of pastoralist communities. But much more investment is needed to effectively facilitate access to markets and pasture, promote investment in infrastructure development, and put in place social protection measures targeting pastoralist communities.

Accountability, and a regional response

Indeed, there is no shortage of policy frameworks that, if effectively implemented, could do much to reduce the impacts of this sort of disaster. National-level implementation of the 2003 Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) needs to be rapidly scaled up – including its Pillar III addressing food insecurity, malnutrition and support for small-scale farmers.

"A regional crisis requires a comprehensive and coordinated regional response", stresses Walter Middleton, Partnership Leader, Food Security and Livelihoods at World Vision International, noting that the forthcoming African Union (AU) donor conference – now postponed to 25 August - is a "welcome but belated and limited first step". Since it is convened as a pledging conference, it is not expected to address the key longer-term policy and implementation issues in the region. But in confronting this crisis and especially the challenge of preventing its repetition, the AU, together with the leading regional economic and development organizations IGAD (Inter-Governmental Authority on Development), EAC (East African Community) and COMESA (Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa), must organize a comprehensive region-wide response to the longer-term challenges as well as to the immediate emergency situation.

Each of these authorities has existing policies and programs to address the underlying issues. "Both the problems and the necessary responses are well known," says Robert Schofield, Tearfund's Disaster Management Director, "and this crisis was a disaster foretold. What we need now is coordinated and effective implementation of what everyone knows needs to be done to prevent it happening again, and again, and again."

"This is the third major drought in this region in the past six years. A lot of the problem is due to chronic under-development and a lack of investment in farming and infrastructure. Until there's a whole programme of investment in agriculture and the environment, the rains will just continue to flow away", says Alistair Dutton, Humanitarian Director of Caritas Internationalis. [2]

This is of course a matter for national and regional action, but also a matter for the international donors whose support for the policy frameworks has not always been backed up with adequate financing.

Distribution issues, and food price volatility

The lack of infrastructure for national distribution of food resources is thrown into sharp relief by the crisis in the Horn. In

Kenya's Rift Valley, bumper harvests are going to waste – due to low prices, poor market access, lack of preservation facilities, and lack of transportation infrastructure – while over three million people face hunger and starvation in the north.

An IRIN news article quotes Lucy Biwott, a Njoro farmer, who harvested 16 bags of Irish potatoes from the family's 1.2ha field: "I have seen other farmers watch their produce rot in the farms for lack of a market. I wonder where the hungry people are, how I wish I would transport to them some of these potatoes." [3]

At the same time as low prices have caused farmers in the Rift Valley to struggle to cover their costs of production, high food prices in the drought-affected areas of the region have been a driver of the unfolding crisis. The dangerous combination of high food prices and low food reserves compounds the effects of the drought. While food price volatility has been recognized by the G20 as a major contributor to the global food crisis, plans on how to actually control the volatility in the market are still vague and will be a point of discussion for the finance ministers meeting in September. Often cited culprits of the volatility phenomena are the deregulation of the market which has led to unprecedented speculation in food commodities, as well as the use of food crops for energy (biofuels).

The implementation of effective controls on food price volatility would protect both the farmers and the hungry. "The commoditization of food lies at the heart of the matter", says Gisele Henriques, CIDSE's Advocacy and Policy Officer for Food, Agriculture and Sustainable Trade. "Until the human right to adequate access to food and freedom from hunger is respected and implemented, economic interests will trump humanitarian ones." **Food justice**

Overall, both the short-term and longer-term responses to the food crisis in the Horn of Africa need to be framed from a human rights-based perspective. The fundamental challenge is to implement the legal and moral obligation of ensuring that all people, without discrimination, have access to the means and ability to procure sufficient and nutritious food for themselves.

Inequalities affecting women are among the underlying issues to be addressed if the food justice challenge is to be met. While women predominate in the world's food production, they own less than 10% of the land and have minimal or no control over income from the agricultural sector. Land and inheritance rights for women are addressed in an AU Land Policy approved in 2009 – on paper. But national implementation of this policy framework in the Horn of Africa is lagging. In addition, according to Stineke Oenema, Specialist Food and Nutrition Security of ICCO/Kerk in Actie, "women's nutritional needs are too often only considered in the context of their ability to provide food for their family, rather than the critical role they play in food security. Women need to be recognised as farmers in their own right and not just as homemakers; women are rights holders first."

"Eliminating chronic hunger and discrimination in access to the resources necessary to feed oneself and one's family are fundamental issues of justice," says Rev. Malcolm Damon, Director of the Economic Justice Network of the Fellowship of Christian Councils in Southern Africa, "and of recognition of the God-given human dignity of every child, woman and man."

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