

Africa's Food Crisis in the 80s

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In this article Charles McCarthy, one of Trócaire's Project Officers for Africa, examines the African crisis by focusing on its most recent manifestation – the famine of 1984-85. The article gives a comparative overview of the situation at the height of the famine and in mid-1986 as well as outlining the prognosis for food production in Africa. It also examines the lessons to be learned, reviews the role of the international agencies and examines some of the factors in the progress of development strategies in Africa, especially in relation to non-governmental organisations.

The Crisis

“For most African countries, and for a majority of the African population, the record is grim and it is no exaggeration to talk of crisis. Slow overall economic growth, sluggish agricultural performance coupled with rapid rates of population increase and balance of payments and fiscal crises – these are dramatic indicators of economic trouble.”¹

In 1981 the word “crisis” was already being used in connection with Africa and the starkest evidence of the continent’s creeping economic paralysis was the increased need for food aid. In 1982 the United Nations’ Food Council warned of hunger and malnutrition in the same year that drought gripped many parts of the continent. By June 1984 the FAO identified twenty-four seriously affected countries in need of food aid and emergency relief.² This followed a number of lists from different monitoring agencies outlining the countries affected. In 1984 these countries had a total population of approximately 150 million and it was this figure that was used to indicate the numbers affected by the crisis.

The establishment in December 1984 of the United Nations Office for Emergency Operations in Africa (OEOA) brought more sophisticated coordination of the UN monitoring agencies and more accurate statistics. In their first detailed report the OEOA designated twenty countries as affected by the crisis. Ten countries were considered “most critically affected” and ten as “critically affected”. These categories were decided in relation to the scale of food and non-food needs. At that time 30-35 million people were considered at risk in those countries (see Table 1).

Table 1: The "Critically Affected" Countries

Country	1985 People affected	1986 People affected	Country	1985 People affected	1986 People affected
Angola	500,000	600,000	Mauritania	1,100,000	880,000
• Botswana	n.a.	648,000	Mozambique	2,500,000	1,850,000
• Burundi	n.a.	-	• Niger	2,500,000	460,000
• Burkina Faso	500,000	210,000	• Rwanda	3,000,000	-
• Cape Verde	n.a.	326,000	Senegal	n.a.	-
• Chad	1,500,000	400,000	• Somalia	n.a.	200,000
• Ethiopia	7,900,000	6,830,000	• Sudan	4,500,000	5,000,000
Kenya	2,000,000	-	• Tanzania	1,200,000	-
• Lesotho	n.a.	500,000	Zambia	n.a.	-
• Mali	1,200,000	420,000	Zimbabwe	2,000,000	-
				30,400,000	18,324,000

• Least developed country.

Source: UN OEOA

International response to the crisis

The most comprehensive programme of aid to the African countries most seriously affected by famine and drought was undertaken by the UN. The OEOA was set up to ensure cooperation between the United Nations' agencies, non-governmental organisations and other international aid donors and the recipient African governments, as well as to mobilise assistance and to keep donors informed of changing needs. Food aid and other emergency needs were provided to a total value of \$2.9 billion, which fulfilled 88% of the food and 83% of the non-food needs of famine victims. During the 1984-85 emergency in the twenty most seriously affected countries a total of 5.4 million tonnes of grain and 414,000 tonnes of other food were provided by the international community. In terms of total value Ethiopia and Sudan were the largest recipients.

In April 1984 the EEC launched an emergency food aid programme. This was followed in October by an allocation of 60 million ecu to 20 countries with allocations of cereal, skimmed milk powder and butter oil. In December at the European Council's meeting in Dublin a plan was launched to step up Community cereal allocations to 1.2 million tonnes. This aid was additional to the normal food aid from the Community which amounted to 126 million ecu in 1984. Of the drought stricken countries Ethiopia, Sudan and Mozambique benefitted most.

Irish response

In addition to involvement in international actions the Irish Government responded bilaterally. Official Irish direct assistance to Africa in 1984/85 amounted to almost IR£5.5 million. As the extent of the crisis became known the response of the Government increased quite significantly. The original

allocation for disaster relief in 1984 was IR£300,000; by the end of that year IR£990,000 had been donated. This figure increased slightly to over IR£1 million in 1985 with over half of the funds going to support the activities of Irish Non-Governmental Organisations.

Ethiopia – what was needed?

The figures for the major international donors such as the UN and EEC must be viewed in context. Throughout the build-up to the emergency warnings of the impending catastrophe were not taken as seriously as they should and the politics of aid played some part in slowing down the response. Ethiopia serves as an example of how unsatisfactory that response was.

In March 1984, the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) of the Ethiopian Government calculated that the country needed 900,000 tonnes of grain to avert starvation that year. But, considering its transport problems and possible security difficulties, the RRC pitched their appeal at half their requirements, 450,000 tonnes. The FAO then further reduced the figure by three-quarters. Thus the request for 900,000 tonnes became a UN backed appeal for 125,000 tonnes.

In October 1984, prior to the media's massive exposé of famine in Ethiopia, the RRC's Commissioner complained of the "very small percentage" of grain and supplementary food which had been pledged. At that time none of the calls for transport had received a favourable response. The subsequent campaign to rush emergency food supplies and to assist in transportation to remote areas carried out by all the major donors is surely diminished by such examples.

Situation in 1986

Despite fewer critically affected countries and people the crisis continues. This is in a year when the rains are generally good, the harvest promising, coffee prices (one of Africa's main earners) have firmed and oil prices fallen. The immediate threat of large-scale starvation faced by millions in 1984 and 1985 has receded. According to the FAO's April 1986 report on the world food situation, food production in Sub-Saharan Africa has recovered after the 1984 drought leaving twelve African countries with surplus grain harvests available for redistribution. Only four countries still require additional emergency relief. The outlook for food supplies in the region's other forty-one countries is relatively bright following good to record harvests last year. Even so, all the countries will experience some form of cereal deficit in 1985/86, mainly of wheat and rice. The FAO has called for further assistance from the international community with distribution of supplies from twelve countries which have surpluses available. Six countries, Benin, the Ivory Coast, Kenya, Malawi, Togo and Zimbabwe, had exportable surpluses totalling 1.6 million tonnes from the 1985 harvest.

But millions remain vulnerable to starvation and death. The UN estimates the number of those currently at risk to be 14.2 million from the four most affected countries: Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique and Sudan (Table 1).

According to UN sources, immediate provision of emergency relief assistance, particularly to the four countries most seriously affected, is essential.

Most critical countries

The four countries now most seriously affected share two characteristics: poor infrastructure and political upheaval expressed in varying forms of insurgency and civil strife. This combination of factors illustrates the difficulty of finding solutions to the complexities of famine. The destruction of communities and the growth of displaced populations make the return to normal agricultural life almost impossible.

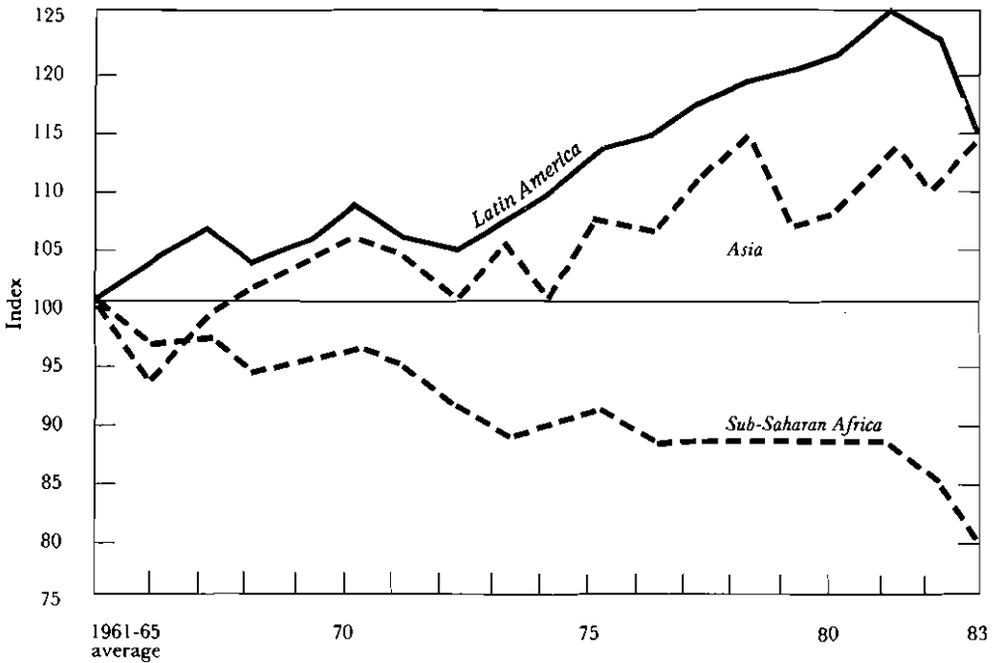
In Angola 600,000 people are directly affected by the war which has damaged transport and caused an almost total collapse of the health care system. In addition to the civil wars in Eritrea and Tigray, Ethiopia is still experiencing drought in the south and south-east. Unfortunately recent rainfall in other parts has increased the incidence of water-borne diseases. For those who can be rehabilitated there is a shortage of oxen but donated agricultural inputs have been provided for the planting season. Mozambique shares with Angola the impact of destabilisation forces and has half a million displaced people with an ever weakening transport system. Sudan continues to face a major political division between North and South while in the latter region two million people are affected by the sharp disimprovement in the situation. In the north food is available and emergency operations are taking place.

According to UN sources, immediate emergency relief, particularly to the four countries most seriously affected, is essential. It is clear that food aid is still needed by fourteen countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, specifically directed at 17.9 million people most seriously in danger, including 2.7 million displaced people. In addition it is crucial that non-food emergency needs be met as early as possible since the affected population remains extremely vulnerable to a recurrence of the acute emergency faced in 1985. Famine is still a real threat in Africa and is likely to remain so if the underlying factors causing it are not removed.

Overall economic context

The cause of famine is not drought but poverty and Africa's food problem must be placed in the context of its economic crisis. Most countries in Africa experienced some prosperity between 1945 and 1960. The economic recovery of Europe provided a rising market for Africa's agricultural products and for much of this period the terms of trade favoured primary exporters. Food output kept pace at least with population growth, and indeed, may have exceeded it. Since 1960 the situation has deteriorated and there has been a sharp fall in the rate of increase in output. Figure 1 shows the performance of Africa in relation to Latin America and Asia in the period 1965-1983.

Figure 1 Index of Per Capita Food Production, 1961-65 to 1983
(1961-65 average = 100)



Source: Based on data provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

In the early 1970s average income began falling in the poorest countries of Africa and food production fell behind population growth. Today if all the food available on the Continent including imports were divided equally it would not be enough to meet even minimum per capita requirements.

A special session of the UN was told in May 1986 that Africa needs \$26 billion per annum to rehabilitate its agriculture, build the infrastructure to support it, tackle the problems of soil erosion, desertification and provide appropriate training, yet these countries are crippled by their debt burden. The size of Africa's debt, though much smaller than Latin America's is growing faster. Sub-Saharan countries owed between \$90 billion and \$125 billion at the end of 1985 (Latin America's debt was \$370 billion). If African debtors were to pay what is due in 1986 and 1987, which is unlikely, they would hand over at least \$15 billion a year.

Future

In the next decade Africa's population will continue to grow rapidly: by 3% per year according to World Bank estimates. It is likely that it will grow even faster with improved nutrition and maternity services. This is already the pattern in Kenya, Zimbabwe and Zambia. Even if cities were to grow at unprecedented

levels they could only absorb a part of the rural increase. An expanding rural population will push more and more people into the cities, especially in countries where returns for traditional cultivation are diminishing. The question of food self-sufficiency will become more pressing. If the population grows at 3% per annum and per capita income grows between 1% and 2% there will be an increase in food demand of 4%. But in the 1970s agriculture grew at less than half this rate. Unless there is a radical increase in agricultural production more imported food will be needed.

Rain-fed agriculture will necessarily be the main source of incremental production in the great majority of African countries for some time to come. The long-term potential of agriculture is being diminished, in some countries seriously, due to factors such as more intensive cultivation, desertification and lack of fertilisation. Conservation of existing resources is crucial in the long-term. Reforestation is an important part of watershed management and erosion control but is also justified in most countries to maintain or increase the supply of fuel wood. The present planting rate of fuel wood species in Africa is in the order of 7,000 hectares per year but for African countries to gain self-sufficiency in fuel wood by the year 2000 this would have to increase at least fifteen-fold to one million hectares per year.

Non-governmental organisations

What then is the role of NGOs in the African setting? In terms of response to such emergencies the NGOs have some advantages. Their decision-making structures are more flexible and they are thus capable of reacting immediately to demands from their partner agencies or representatives on the ground. They are capable of using their contacts in one country to mobilize aid for another. In one instance, Trócaire used its contacts in Kenya to purchase goods available there for transportation to famine camps in Ethiopia and Sudan. The political dimensions of sending aid to Ethiopia and the rebel-held areas of Tigray and Eritrea were not an issue for those agencies whose work depends, as Trócaire's does, on assisting indigenous development groups. Such agencies have the freedom to provide assistance wherever it is needed. The criteria used relate to poverty, not to politics.

The NGOs maintain constant contact with their partner agencies or representatives in African countries. Such sources of information do not depend on official approval and can thus sometimes avoid disturbing political sensitivities when any government is faced with the threat of massive starvation. For example, the NGO network in Ireland was aware of the seriousness of the famine and launched a special appeal in July 1984, three months prior to the now famous BBC report from Ethiopia. In financial terms the response to this appeal, under £0.5 million, was relatively small, especially when measured against what was donated subsequently. However it does demonstrate the NGOs' foresight and their recognition of the fact that their resources could not meet the glaring needs in Africa.

In retrospect it does seem that a more powerful education campaign should have followed the initial appeal for funds to demonstrate the agencies' concern

and prepare their constituencies for the scale of the problem. The level of response three months later demonstrated the public shock at discovering the extent of the emergency. Concern was expressed by unprecedented levels of donations for Ethiopia, since most reports focused on it at the time. However, the general perception was of a disaster that had hit one country in the Horn of Africa and not a food crisis affecting twenty-two countries on the continent. The NGOs had not fully prepared their public and were overwhelmed by their generosity. There was a demand for education materials, situation reports, country profiles and maps illustrating the crisis from some agencies, but overall what the public wanted was evidence of what was being done by each agency to respond to the crisis.

The NGO response to a crisis may be qualitatively superior to that of larger bilateral and multilateral donors. However NGOs recognise that quantitatively they can never match the resources available to those official donors. Thus the NGO sector has a valuable role to play in pressurising their governments to provide resources on a larger scale. Irish NGOs did make representation to the Government through submissions on behalf of their partner agencies. At the European level a group of Catholic development agencies organised meetings between national church leaders and their respective heads of governments to emphasise the scale of the problem in Africa prior to the Dublin Summit meeting of the European Council in December 1984.

The crisis highlighted once again some important issues for agencies involved in Africa, especially those who believe that the promotion of equal partnership must be the cornerstone for development programmes to prevent famine in the future. The credibility of these NGOs depends on the quality of their relationship with their NGO partners in Africa. Such groups, whether church or community-based, provide a channel for support for the most deprived in their societies. The escalation of famine can allow outside agencies to set up programmes without due sensitivity to existing local structures.

African NGOs and the famine

A colloquium of representatives from African NGOs in 1985 highlighted a disturbing factor which emerged during the emergency in Africa. This relates to those interventionist agencies which set out to establish their own programmes in competition with their African counterparts. African NGOs have no legal instruments to prevent such foreign NGOs from establishing themselves in Africa. Their only option is to demonstrate that the programmes of African NGOs produce better results. There is now, more than ever, a need to break that chain of dependence which the traditional system of funding perpetuates and to forge new links aimed at giving responsibility to rural community organisations and NGOs at all levels.

It would be incorrect to claim that African NGOs were alerted to the scale of the problem long before any other groups. They are often operating in isolation and do not have the capacity to launch national campaigns of awareness; often too they work in difficult political climates. However once a disaster is declared

and the international response becomes evident, the operations of local NGOs tend to be adversely affected. Local initiatives are suddenly dwarfed by outside programmes; ex-patriate-run projects are set up which take little cognizance of the long term effects on local initiative.

What is true of the NGO sector in Africa is also true of government bodies; Mozambique serves as an example. Observers of the situation there have noted the adverse affect of outside agencies. Their well funded programmes have shown up the inevitably weak programmes of a government which is a target of South Africa and which inherited one of the poorest post-Colonial legacies in Africa.

Nevertheless NGOs face many constraints on their work in Africa. The absence of vibrant indigenous partner agencies is an obvious difference between Africa and other Third World countries. Many of the skilled and educated Africans who are products of the education system are often placed in the civil service of their countries. The emergent nations are in real need of such expertise which deprives the inarticulate (often silenced) rural poor of spokespersons and leaders. Cultural values and norms which result in discrimination against women while ignoring their dominant role in food production must be acknowledged and countered by agencies. The fact that only a tiny fraction of aid is directed towards women is a major issue which is increasingly being confronted in Europe. However many African partner agencies fail to see this as a priority, given the prevailing cultural attitudes to women.

Partnership

The relationship between Northern NGOs and their African counterparts is not ideal. The term "partnership" is too easily used. The Northern NGOs exist primarily to alleviate poverty and tackle the injustice which prevents the poor of the developing countries from reaching their full potential. The relationship remains essentially a donor/recipient one and the sense of collaboration which does exist is dominated by it. The hard question, too seldom asked, is how adequate this relationship is and how prepared NGOs are in the North to facilitate easier relationships. This would involve speeding up project funding, reducing complicated documentation, streamlining restrictions, and clarifying priorities for funding, and increased sensitivity to the difficulties which NGOs face in Africa. Where the project funding is integrated into an overall liberation struggle, as in Namibia or South Africa, the partners demand more than mere funding by the NGOs in the North. Their support for programmes is expected to be paralleled by education and lobbying at home and abroad.

The importance of channelling assistance to the more marginalised sections of society is a principal belief of most NGOs. The success of this approach is demonstrated in Zimbabwe which in 1984 was listed among the critically affected countries. Since independence Government policies have coincided with those of NGOs and a large number of locally run groups have been formed. The political climate in the country has encouraged such developments. It was the rural sector which brought about the recovery in the use of the country's

food resources. Prior to 1985 peasant production of maize had never exceeded 7.5% of production; in that year it was an estimated 35%. The factors which have contributed to this are increased credit facilities for farmers, higher prices for produce and improved extension and advisory services. While Zimbabwe still faces many of the problems of most other countries in Africa, it indicates one path towards development which might be adopted by others.

Lessons of the famine

Drought is an act of nature: famine is man-made. Given this premise we must assume that the scale of what happened in Africa could have been averted. There is cold comfort indeed in recalling the statements which emerged during the Sahelian drought in the 1970s promising that the hunger problem would have to be solved within the next ten years. The "next ten years" have now passed and we have again experienced a famine on a scale previously not recorded in this century. African governments, the international community, the non-governmental agencies in Africa and in the West must take some responsibility for what has happened. The real tragedy was not the famine but the inaction which allowed it to happen. The long-term development strategies proposed after that famine were not implemented. Even if we narrow the focus and accept that the roots of the 1984/85 catastrophe were evident towards the end of 1981 then the international community is even more guilty of inaction.

Any analysis of the famine must acknowledge the political instability which, almost invariably, accompanies the birth of nations. The fragile base on which many African governments are built, the fact that Africa is increasingly a playground for the superpowers, the searing effect of civil wars on the people and landscape of Africa and most obviously the maintenance of the apartheid regime in South Africa are all necessary preludes to an understanding of the gigantic scale of Africa's food crisis.

The famine was yet another shocking revelation to the world of the continent's pervasive poverty. In a year of abundant rains and normal levels of food aid over 100 million Africans were still living a life of chronic hunger and malnutrition. Thus when the media reported that 150 million Africans were affected by the famine in 1984/85 it was not a sudden escalation of horror but a revelation that things had been disimproving for some time. Throughout most of Africa the drought is now over but falling standards of living, dependency on foreign food imports, wars, civil strife, growing numbers of refugees and migrants displaced by the civil strife continue to be a problem.

Conclusion

The emergency which still prevails should never have been allowed to reach the level of catastrophe which it did. The international community must look honestly at the ineptitude with which it responded and design efficient early warning systems to prevent famine recurring. There is no one solution to Africa's overall crisis but the belated energy which was found to respond to the

emergency must be translated into the will to devise economic plans for recovery and development in Africa.

The non-governmental organisations (NGOs) might examine their own approach to Africa and discover how appropriate this is. It is not sufficient to bemoan the absence of partner structures similar to those found in other regions of the developing world. The funding of programmes in Africa should be examined for their suitability to the promotion of food production and their involvement of women. Perhaps it is also time to re-examine the efficacy of those partner agencies with whom NGOs work and to seek out those informal groupings of communities who do not proclaim their NGO status, yet in effect are models of community activity in Africa.

Finally, the NGO sector must see its role as a lobbying agent; pressurising those in control of the West's resources to accommodate the needs of developing countries. Unless those causes of famine which are rooted in the West are tackled here the response of NGOs will remain continuously hollow and we will soon be faced with another famine.

Footnotes

¹*Accelerated Development in Sub-Saharan Africa* (The World Bank 1981)

²These countries were: Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Ethiopia, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Lesotho, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Somalia, Swaziland, Tanzania, Togo, Zambia, and Zimbabwe (c.f. *Towards Sustained Development in Sub-Saharan Africa, World Bank 1984*).