

Africa in 2006: The humanitarian hangover?

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Another year, another appeal. Or so it would seem for humanitarian workers, development agencies and NGOs working in Africa who have come to know the steady routine of annual appeals based on ‘needs assessments’ undertaken in numerous countries around the continent. From Niamey to Lilongwe 2005 saw its fair share of ‘emergencies’, including a famine in Niger and food shortages in the Great Lakes region and large parts of Southern Africa.

The current drought gripping the Horn of Africa is being described as the worst in 40 years and the cause of numerous violent clashes between sub-clans of pastoralists on the border areas of Somalia, Ethiopia and northern Kenya. These developments continue despite the high mark of optimism in

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2005 which was meant to be 'Africa's year' for poverty reduction, particularly emphasised by the UK's chairmanship of the G8 and Tony Blair's Commission for Africa. However, it is becoming increasingly evident that humanitarian issues affecting Africa are slipping off the international radar and are competing with major natural disasters around the globe. More and more it is geo-political brinkmanship in relation to the global war on terror and access to resources that defines engagement with the continent. Certainly, the 'war on terror' and its antecedents have meant that resources are now more tightly geared towards a hard security imperative. Making poverty history, it would seem, is just not sexy enough.

The fact that LiveAid 2005 marked 20 years since the Band Aid concert of 1985 with largely the same underlying theme – 'Africa in crisis' – brought into sharp relief what some like Alex de Waal have called the continuation of 'disaster pornography' – the use of crude imagery of Africans in dire poverty devoid of agency to raise funds for immediate assistance. No other country of the world is more synonymous with hunger in the popular mind than Ethiopia, and it is for this reason that the current drought affecting the Horn of Africa might be met with donor fatigue.

The question of food security nevertheless goes to the heart of issues surrounding chronic poverty and underdevelopment. At the time of writing an estimated 11 million people in East Africa and the Horn of Africa are facing critical food shortages owing to a prolonged drought – some 1.75 million people in southern Ethiopia's Somali and Oromiya regions alone. Experts predict that the coming rains will be insufficient.

The food debate is not a new one. From the 1970s development theory of agricultural underproduction to Amartya Sen's more nuanced appreciation of the gaps between production and access to food, the new millennium feels all too familiar for large parts of the continent. Seen in the larger context, food security in the Horn resonates not only with the compromise of human dignity of individuals, but also with a severe collapse of social capacity that is likely to destabilise political institutions.

So, while the current flash appeals for aid will make the headlines, it is the longer-term structural violence of poverty that undermines the 'democratisation' project. Out of more than 850 million chronically hungry people globally, an estimated 10 million will die every year of hunger – this accounts for more than tuberculosis, malaria, and HIV/AIDS combined.

According to Stephen Devereux of the University of Sussex, mass starvation is only one result of famine. Others include a drop in fertility, economic destitution, community breakdown, distress migration, and outbreaks of disease.¹

Increasingly the various factors underlying the creation, maintenance and attempts at alleviating famine and hunger must be viewed in the context of an enlarged paradigm of 'security'. The term

'human security' has gained currency over the past decade as analysts and development workers alike attempt to situate the seeming chaos of 'humanitarian' crises within the broader notion of political rights and freedom. Certainly the first main element to human security is that the traditional primary actor – the security of the state in military terms – is no longer the ultimate end. Rather it is the multi-dimensional freedom of the people that will determine the stability of political framework in the longer term. 'Freedom from want' is therefore intimately linked to 'freedom from fear'. The relegation of issues surrounding hunger, famine and drought to 'humanitarian' agency delinks those phenomena from broader debates of weak governance and in large measure denies that food insecurity is influenced by political developments.

Nature pleads not guilty – again

But does Africa have a monopoly on drought and food shortages? A recent discussion on the BBC website pitted two analysts against each other on the food crisis issue, with interesting results. The one emphasised broader factors such as global climate change, civil war, unfair trade and health issues such as HIV/AIDS. The respondent placed the blame for food crises squarely on the political 'powerlessness' of African citizens to determine their own future. It is argued here that the factors underlying deprivation and hunger are multi-faced and include interdependency and political powerlessness.² "Once an emergency is identified, the NGO's public relations machine takes over and there is a terrible temptation to look around for the very worst stories," says Tony Vaux, former Oxfam official.³

Indeed, even the concept of food aid has been questioned by development theorists, who see it as long-term damage to the mitigation of a natural disaster, rather than just the immediate benefit. Many would argue that the distorting impact of food aid on local markets points to the underlying vulnerability of communities to market mechanisms. Aid in the form of food also indirectly encourages weak policies, as has been the case in Ethiopia where farmers are not allowed to own land. Thus, governments appeal for aid instead of dealing with the situation on a political institutional level.

Moreover, there is no simple cause-and-effect link between drought and famine. A report by a group of international meteorologists in the 1970s entitled *Nature pleads not guilty* emphasised that Africa did not have the monopoly on drought – what was needed was an examination of policies that contribute to the overall vulnerability of populations in the face of changing weather patterns and resource reserves. This was powerfully expressed when the report argues: "In 1976 there was also a drought in Britain. We believe that nobody would have thought it 'natural' for thousands of British children to die because of the drought. The loss of even a few dozen children would have been nothing less than a scandal."⁴

A striking piece of information relating to the vulnerability of marginalised communities in Africa is that of the 20 most severe famines of the 20th century, none occurred in Africa. How then did Africa become the poster-child for media depictions of hunger? A focus on the underlying causes of vulnerability, such as the reduction of 'networks of affection' that are linked to macro-economic adjustments, the impact of an urban bias for access to services, increasing desertification of land, and the effect of HIV/AIDS on the agricultural labour force are all part of the dynamic mix of factors affecting local communities.

Defining vulnerability

Before looking at the issue of vulnerability it is important to consider the common-sense linkages between resource scarcity and conflict. Eruptions of violence as recently seen between the members of the Marehan and Majerteen factions of Somalia's Darod clan are explained using the resource scarcity paradigm. However, as Clover suggests, it is perhaps more revealing for policy-makers to turn their attention to the fragmentation of social networks that underpin vulnerability to environmental change. As Clover argues:

[T]he emphasis also needs to shift away from focusing on conflict as an outcome of resource scarcity. The focus should be on the prevention of resource scarcity, and being more concerned about social disruptions than about violent conflict as the principal sources of insecurity. This calls for the urgent need for mitigation against the causes, and management of environmental insecurities arising from threats such as degradation and climate change.⁵

So what is vulnerability? This question is thoughtfully considered by Yamin, Rahman and Huq in their conceptual overview of vulnerability and climate change in a recent article in the *International Development Studies Bulletin*.⁶ Their commentary also draws on the astute arguments put forward in 1989 by Robert Chambers who highlighted the need for a distinction between the terms 'vulnerable' and 'poor'. He explained that 'vulnerable' and 'vulnerability' are common terms in development, but their use is often vague and these terms are often used as convenient substitutes for 'poor' and 'poverty'. Instead Chambers defined poverty as "deprivation, lack or want" while 'vulnerability' is understood as "defencelessness, insecurity and exposure to risk, shocks and stress". The NGO ActionAid, for example, defines vulnerability as the factors that drive people into poverty and "block their exit routes from poverty".⁷

Certainly, this view offers a more nuanced perspective on the various factors influencing the 'poverty trap', including social exclusion based on gender, geography and education. It is also important to factor in the various forms of vulnerability that are evident outside of natural 'hazards'. As Yamin,

Rahman and Huq explain: understanding vulnerability should deepen our understanding of the climatic, social, generational, geographic, economic and political processes that generate poverty particularly chronic poverty.⁸ Certainly the need for environmental considerations in the drawing up of poverty reduction strategies for fragile states would go some way to linking policy and a constantly changing human security landscape.

At the time of writing the H5N1 avian flu virus is dominating the headlines – a phenomenon that will most certainly affect the most vulnerable of communities considering that poultry provides the most inexpensive form of protein for the poor, and is likely to impact upon livelihood strategies in the longer term. It is clear that in 2006 political will, responsive institutional frameworks and flexible mechanisms will be critical to addressing the long-term vulnerability that underpins chronic food insecurity.

Notes

- 1 S Devereux, Famine in the twentieth century, IDS Working Paper 105, January 2000.
- 2 BBC Special Report: Famine in Africa, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/africa/2002/famine_in_africa/default.stm> (February 2006).
- 3 F Yamin, A Rahman and S Huq, Vulnerability, adaptation and climate disasters: A conceptual overview, IDS Bulletin, 36(4), 2005, pp 1–14.
- 4 *New Internationalist*, Nature pleads not Guilty, September 2004 <www.newint.org/issue139/nature.htm>.
- 5 S Khagram, W Clark & D F Raad, From the environment and human security to sustainable security and development, *Journal of Human Development* 4(2), 2003, pp 289–313.
- 6 Yamin et al, op cit.
- 7 ActionAid, quoted in *IDS Bulletin* 36(4), 2005.
- 8 Ibid.