

Worsening food insecurity in Africa

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A report by the development charity Oxfam, “Causing Hunger: An Overview of the Food Crisis in Africa,” finds that the food crisis in Africa is continuing to worsen. In the 1960s Oxfam provided part of the impetus to set up the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation’s (FAO) Freedom from Hunger Campaign, aimed at reducing food insecurity. That campaign has failed miserably in Africa.

According to the Oxfam report, whilst the average “developing world” figure for under-nourishment is 17 percent, in sub-Saharan Africa the figure is 33 percent. For Central Africa it is 55 percent. On average the number of African food emergencies per year since the mid 1980s has tripled.

The report acknowledges that the situation is not going to improve. It states, “Another failure is on the horizon. The commitment ... to halve hunger by 2015, as part of the Millennium Development Goals, will not be met by in Africa at current rates of progress.”

The central reason why the situation has not improved, according to Oxfam, is the major powers’ failure to respond speedily and appropriately to the emergency food situations. Citing Niger as an example, the report observes, “Although the earliest warnings came in late 2004, it was only when pictures of suffering children were shown on television in June 2005 that the international community was galvanised into action. By the time aid arrived, 3.6 million people were suffering from hunger.”

It is a regular occurrence that emergency financial appeals by bodies such as the United Nations get a slow and partial response. “Most UN emergency appeals receive only 30 percent of the requested funds in their first month,” explains the report.

For example, earlier this year the UN launched the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) so that the response to future emergencies could be immediate—under the previous setup, the funds had to be collected before any action could be taken. The UN suggested that \$500 million was needed, but Oxfam argues this figure should be at least \$1 billion. According to a recent UN news

report, the fund has raised just over \$260 million.

The Oxfam report notes, “The UN estimates that 16 million people are at immediate risk in ten neglected and under-funded emergencies in Africa, which include the prolonged tragedies of northern Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo.”

Most of the aid provided to Africa is given as food, and related non-food needs are generally not met. It can take four to five months for food to be delivered. While purchasing food locally would be a cheaper and more efficient method of giving aid, the governments of donor countries have their own reasons for shipping food instead: “For some donor countries it has been a useful way of offloading their own agricultural surpluses and providing commercial benefits to their own agricultural and shipping companies: 79 percent of total food aid is sourced in donor countries. In the case of rice and wheat, for example, the buying up of food stocks for use as foreign aid is a form of domestic subsidy, and can actively harm farmers in the developing world.”

Increasing poverty is a key factor in the hunger crisis—in some food crises food may be available but is simply unaffordable. Since 1981 the number of those living on less than a \$1 a day in sub-Saharan Africa has increased twofold to over 310 million people. A food crisis which emerged in the northeast of Kenya in 2005 particularly affected pastoralist peoples. While the country saw a 15 percent increase in the harvest yield and a 5 percent rise in GDP, the proportion of the population living on less than \$1 a day had risen to 66 percent, up from 40 percent in 1990.

Over the last two decades sub-Saharan Africa has had “inadequate debt cancellation, declining and poor quality development aid, flawed advice from donors, conditions attached to aid that forced countries to adopt damaging agricultural policies, and unfair trade rules . . .”

The report finds that the root cause of Africa’s ongoing food insecurity is the lack of investment in agricultural production. Sub-Saharan Africa has a predominantly rural economy, with 70 percent of the population living in rural

areas and providing the livelihoods of two-thirds of the population. Whilst immediate food aid from the West has been increasing, aid for agricultural production in sub-Saharan Africa dropped by 43 percent in the 1990s.

According to the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), it would require an investment of \$18 billion a year into the rural infrastructure to achieve the World Food Summit goal to cut hunger by 50 percent. Much of African agriculture remains rain-fed only, and those irrigation schemes that do exist are concentrated in large commercial agribusiness estates.

Another major factor in the food crisis is the continuing AIDS epidemic, which interacts with food insecurity giving rise to so-called “new variant famine.” The sub-Saharan region has 26 million people living with the virus and this led to nearly 2.5 million deaths in 2005.

A vicious circle has been established as the disease hits young adults who work on the land. “Death prevents parents passing on vital agricultural or other skills to their children,” the report notes. “Those ill from the disease are debilitated, reducing their ability to tend the land and so leading to food insecurity which in turn exacerbates the symptoms of the disease.”

“Maize production on communal farms fell by 54 percent between 1992 and 1997, largely because of AIDS-related illness and death,” Oxfam explains.

In spite of the devastating effects of the disease, the response from the major powers has been minimal “Only one in every ten Africans needing AIDS medicines was receiving them in 2005. It will cost at least \$55 billion over the next three years to provide prevention, treatment and care.... Donors must dramatically increase their financial assistance.”

The report also found that international trading policies had a substantially negative effect on the African continent. “Rural poverty in sub-Saharan Africa is exacerbated by dependence on the export of a small number of agricultural commodities, many of which face volatile and falling world prices. In 2002-2003 .. a collapse in coffee prices contributed to the Ethiopian food crisis that same year.”

Development charities such as Oxfam generally believe that “fair trade” policies are a way to tackle poverty in the undeveloped countries. This featured heavily in the Make Poverty History campaign around the Gleneagles G8 summit held last year in Britain. The recent collapse of the Doha round of World Trade talks, however, means that “fair trade” is no longer even formally on the agendas of the world’s major powers.

Another factor exacerbating the crisis of food production on the African continent is global climate change. Research carried out by the British government’s International Development Department on the effects of climate change in Africa predicts that by the year 2050 there will be severe changes in southern Africa, the Sahel, Great Lakes, and the coastal strips of west and east Africa.

The department’s chief scientific advisor, Gordon Conway, was quoted by the *Independent*: “It is a phenomenon that occurs in a world that is already challenged. This is especially true of Africa where the existence of widespread poverty, hunger and poor health already affect millions of people. All prognostications suggest climate change will make their lives even worse.”

According to the Oxfam report a temperature increase of 2.5 degrees centigrade by 2080 will put an estimated 60 million additional people in Africa at risk of hunger. A higher rise would put 80 million at risk. A separate report by Christian Aid estimates that climate change in Africa could lead to a further 185 million deaths from disease by the end of the century.

The Oxfam report ends with an appeal to the major powers to commit greater emergency assistance more rapidly, to purchase food locally, and to secure more long-term aid for agricultural investment. However, as Oxfam itself demonstrated in a recent report on last year’s Gleneagles G8 summit, most of the promises made by Western governments failed to materialize. Their current appeal will also fall on deaf ears.



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