

From Lake Chad to Somalia: wither the aid order?

Earlier this year, with reportedly some 13 million people facing severe food insecurity or being at risk of famine from the Lake Chad basin to Somalia, the United Nations appealed to a number of donor institutions for US \$3.55 billion in relief and rehabilitation aid for affected parts of Africa. This figure grows to US \$4.4 billion and a risk population of 20 million if one adds the Yemeni Civil War which is included in the same United Nations appeal but is not part of the geographic scope of this journal. At the time of writing this editorial position paper, some US \$1.4 billion, or roughly 40%, had either been pledged or committed by a wide range of donor countries. Of this amount, a little over \$383 million came from the European Commission and individual EU countries, almost \$374.5 million dollars from the United States and \$279 million from the United Kingdom¹. That means that so far, three-quarters of relief resources came and/or come from core donors of the 'DAC group' – the global 'champion's league' of official aid donorship, of sorts – who traditionally work through a plethora of specialized UN organizations and sub-contracted humanitarian NGOs². This pattern does not suggest that the DAC group's status as historically and globally the main funder of official aid will change anytime soon. Yet on the ground, things might slowly be taking another turn.

'Famine identity'

In terms of popular international perception, much of the region bears a 'famine identity' largely created during the highly mediatized Ethiopian famine of 1984-85 and the large relief operation in Somalia in 1991-95³. Some aid agencies and region-watchers have doubts about the current case load of people at risk, with so far famine having been officially declared in only one state, South Sudan. It may, however, objectively make sense to pre-emptively appeal for funds in order to build up a financial reserve so as to undertake action in case the more alarmist predictions become a reality, especially in relatively under-funded environments such as the Lake Chad region. Although 'famine' makes for good headlines, twitter blurbs or fundraising pitches, periods of actual famine

1 OCHA Funding Update, <reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/funding-update-nigeria-south-sudan-somalia-and-yemen-10-april-2017> The majority of this was for South Sudan and Somalia.

2 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development portal, 'Development Assistance Committee (DAC)', OECD Development Co-operation Directorate, <www.oecd.org/development/developmentassistancecommitteedac.htm>

3 See John Britnell, 'Misconceptions and myths of famine in Africa', The George Washington University – Elliott School of International Affairs, 2012.

are relatively rare and mostly limited in time and space. But when they do occur they are characterized by a high mortality among the general population. Chronic food insecurity is another matter and occurs much more often.

Moreover, only a handful of countries have learned to deal with food insecurity, and have adequate policies designed to deal with it, even though a lot of donors are all too willing to fund such endeavours. Furthermore, the African Union abounds in declarations pledging to structurally support agricultural, *sensu* food, production, but at the end of the day nothing is ever done. Have you ever heard about the Malabo declaration, for instance? Well, the Malabo Declaration on Accelerated Agricultural Growth And Transformation for Shared Prosperity and Improved Livelihoods, is part of a recent series of commitments made in 2014 in which the African Union's heads of state and governments committed themselves to end hunger by 2025, and to achieve this further resolved to halve the current levels of post-harvest losses by the year 2025. Sigh.

As we know, there are natural and climatic circumstances that impact the environment and the human inhabitants of food-insecure areas. But in addition to this the entire geographic area that considered food insecure and a possible famine area for 2017 is dotted with armed conflicts and what actually comes as a redefinition of political and social geography – we are referring to the presence of armed Takfiri-Salafi groups in the Lake Chad basin and in Somalia, the civil war in South Sudan, and the existence of the *de facto* state Somaliland. Usually, responding to a food crisis takes, first of all, the rehabilitation or improvement of access to supplies or to the production of food, provision of food or nutritional supplements to and for the more vulnerable sectors of the population, and treatment of the medical side-effects of malnutrition and related diseases.

Although the actual situation in portions of the African continent may suggest otherwise, food insecurity is not always or not necessarily the outcome of armed conflict. Of course, the latter undeniably and in many ways, disrupts agriculture, food production and access to food supplies and markets, can spark the looting of food supplies, and cause population displacements which, in turn, threaten food security. This is obvious in South Sudan, and in the southern and central parts of Somalia. It does not always have to be this way, however. Somaliland in the north of Somalia is comparatively much more stable and functional as an entity than the rest of the country. Yet, Somaliland reportedly has a food-insecure population of one and half million in the current crisis. Or take Ethiopia, which has been a near-permanent recipient of food aid for decades and has some 7 million of its 93 million inhabitants receiving some form of nutritional assistance.

Towards 'relief regionalism'?

Ethiopia is no longer affected by the armed secessionism and insurgency against the Marxist junta that formed the backdrop of the 1984-85 famine. For a number of years now the country has shown solid growth rates in GDP ranging from 8 to 13% per annum, making it one of Africa's emerging countries. That the country remains a destination for sizeable amounts of foreign food aid, has not so much to do with lingering effects of the 1984-85 episode nor with recurrent drought, but rather, with continuous land degrada-

tion, the presence of Somali refugees, a demography approaching the 100 million mark, and, not least, an underperforming agricultural sector characterized by structural factors related to domestic food production and agricultural policies that speak of a conscious preference for large-scale production and for the sale of large amounts of land to transnational investors and corporations for the sake of export agriculture⁴. Now, the latter could, paradoxically, make the country a regional food provider to the international aid industry operating in eastern Africa. This would certainly have the advantage of reducing long, expensive supply lines, but probably benefit corporations and agro-concerns more than the region's small and medium farmers.

This brings us to the fact that in the past, the massive presence of in-kind food aid has had dislocating effects on local and micro-regional agriculture in more than a few crisis areas. That is locally well-understood of course, and it has not been without political consequences. In 2011 and again in 2014, for example, al-Shabaab militants blocked foreign food aid and expelled a number of foreign aid groups in the agricultural regions of southern and central Somalia which they controlled. Whatever one may think of the movement and its societal project, the measure was not so much with a matter of the greed-driven confiscation of aid and the sadistic oppression of the population. Rather, it was meant to counter alleged – and less so – agendas of infiltration, espionage and anti-Islamic social engineering behind foreign aid.

Yet, and here we get to the core point of our position, it was also a reaction against the nefarious effects on Somali agriculture of the massive influx of food aid during previous crises, not least between 1991 and 1995. Indirectly, through a number of affiliated organizations, the group also set up some infrastructure activities such as canal maintenance, and warned international aid agencies to buy food from Somali farmers if they wanted to work in the affected areas again⁵. Another side-effect of masses of in-kind as well as other aid in conflict areas – and elsewhere – is that it supplies and sustains the armed groups that confiscate or tax it, and that authorities and armed opposition groups in control of certain areas come to leave food security and the provision of basic social services in the areas to the international aid sector instead of setting up a proper policy of their own. An example is the SPLA in what was then still southern Sudan during the secession war of 1983-2005⁶.

Redefining the humanitarian space

Though hardly featuring in appeals and in the headlines, there is the *de facto* state of Somaliland. Independent in practice from Somalia since spring 1991 and comparatively

4 Alain Gascon, 'Oublier Malthus : Éthiopie, la crise alimentaire surmontée ?', *Hérodote*, n° 131 – Les enjeux de la crise humanitaire mondiale, 2008/4, pp. 73-91.

5 Joe Belliveau, 'Red lines and al-Shabaab: negotiating humanitarian access in Somalia', NOREF-Clingendael Report, 2015.

6 See Marc Lavergne, 'Du Sud-Soudan au Darfour : loin des médias, l'aide humanitaire est-elle devenue le nerf de la guerre ?', *Communitas*, n° 2, 2005, pp. 69-82. The same SPLA came to form the backbone of the government when South Sudan became independent in mid-2011.

stable, it has most attributes of a state but internationally it is not recognized by anyone, even though Ethiopia has acted a patron state of sorts for it. This lack of diplomatic recognition excludes Somaliland a priori from featuring on the DAC list of aid beneficiary countries and, thus, directly receiving DAC aid⁷. Whether this is good or bad depends of course on the kind of aid and on the conditionality behind it. But at present, Somaliland somehow forms a prime space for alternative forms of relief that are, in any case, to become more and more important here and elsewhere. By this we mean relief funded from the large Somali remittance economy, aid by private international charities including from Africa and the Persian-Arab Gulf, and aid by non-DAC donor countries.

Can one actually still organize effective relief operations in the sort of volatile contexts that characterize the Lake-Chad-Somalia belt? It depends and varies widely. Numerous international aid agencies, whether inter-governmental agencies or non-governmental organizations, have been operating in and around these countries, areas and societies for decades, although many have outsourced their activities on the ground to local organizations, worked via ‘remote management’ and ‘commuted’ from bases in more stable neighbouring countries, or focused on the South Sudanese and Somali refugees there. The highly politicized nature of the food crises and the waning aura of impartiality and neutrality of aid workers make the task no easier. Undeniably, the humanitarian space for classical – that is mainly OECD-based – aid actors has been steadily shrinking due to a worsening security situation, the disappearance of moral and ideological constraints to target aid workers, and changes in the local and regional perceptions of what foreign aid is.

In terms of both politically motivated attacks and common law crime against aid workers in the year 2015, South Sudan and southern and central Somalia were respectively the first and third largest affected areas globally⁸. In turn, this generates ever-more restrictive security policies and thus decreasing mobility. There remain nonetheless ways to operate in conflict areas of this kind, through local organizations, the mobilization of support of informal authorities, through confessional institutions, and by keeping a low profile. It comes down to being able to identify and choose the right local partners and contacts even if their values and ways of operating are not those advocated by mainstream aid policies and their principles. It is also a matter of not creating unrealistic local expectations in terms of who or what is going to solve the political root causes of these crises. Such solutions will not be delivered by the foreign aid providers, but will be framed on a local and regional basis, if only because a number of conflict protagonists from Lake Chad to Somalia are beyond the reach of the international community.

This being said, the current issue of Afrika Focus would only seem to be partly illustrating the points outlined above. However, the articles also illustrate that rhetoric, the divide between promises and reality and the counter-productivity of international ap-

7 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development portal, ‘DAC list of ODA recipients’, OECD Development Co-operation Directorate, <www.oecd.org/dac/stats/daclist.htm>

8 Humanitarian Outcomes, ‘Aid workers security report 2015 – Figures at a glance’, Aid Worker Security Database <aidworkersecurity.org/sites/default/files/HO_AidWorkerSecPreview_1015_G.PDF_.pdf>

proaches and – standards that are at the core of the food security problem, also seem to pervade gender issues and the way these problems should be or are addressed in Mozambique, or the way Uganda’s politicians would seem to deal with homosexuality. Messy politics and -policies also form the basis of DRC’s problems, and Tshienda illustrates this quite convincingly. The two other texts are less... depressing? At least they illustrate the continent’s cultural resilience. Which might bring some hope in these dire days.

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