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Can aid do more harm than good?

By Henri Astier
BBC News website

When Niger's president last year accused aid agencies of exaggerating his country's food crisis for their own gain, Western media reacted with shock.



Dramatic pictures publicised Niger's plight in June

How dare he bite the hand that feeds his people, commentators asked. Many suggested the president was making excuses for the failings of his own government.

But according to some leading aid experts, Mamadou Tandja had a point.

His remarks may have been self-serving, they concede, but they also raised serious issues about the way aid emergencies are sometimes handled.

"I think NGOs and rich country media do have an incentive to paint too simplistic and bleak a picture, as was the case in Niger's food crisis," Professor William Easterly of New York University told the BBC News website.

“ My concern about this is you either have an aid bonanza or you have nothing ”

Tony Vaux

What Niger experienced in 2005 was not a sudden catastrophe, but chronic malnutrition that makes people vulnerable to rises in food prices.

Glib talk of famine backed by pictures of starving children may help NGOs raise funds, but it does nothing to address these basic problems, says Mr Easterly.

Boom and bust

Tony Vaux, a former official with Oxfam, agrees.

Once an emergency is identified, he says, the NGOs' public relations machine takes over and "there is a terrible temptation to look around for the very worst stories".

"My concern about this is you either have an aid bonanza or you have nothing. There does not seem to be a middle ground," says Mr Vaux, author of the book *The Selfish Altruist*.

One problem with dramatic appeals, Mr Easterly notes, is that they do not give you a big bang for your aid buck.



President Tandja caused an outcry when he criticised NGOs

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Can aid do more harm than good?

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"The payoff is disappointingly low," he says. Getting the relief effort up and running takes time, and when the food arrives it is often too late - or the crisis has eased on its own, as appears to be the case in Niger.

Emergency aid may relieve the situation - but the same amount spent before children starved in front of the cameras would have saved many more lives.

Such poor returns were illustrated by the 2002 southern Africa "crisis".

After rains failed the UN warned that "at least 10 million people in four southern African countries are threatened by potential famine".

“ Sometimes aid agencies overplay figures in order to sustain themselves ”

James Shikwati

Camera crews went in to film starving babies and aid flooded in. According to UN agencies and many commentators, this played a crucial in averting disaster.

But others are not so sure.

Take the case of Zambia, which at the time banned aid because it worried about genetically-modified US maize.

Donors were aghast. "Leaders who refuse to let their people have food, should be put in the dock for the most serious crimes against humanity," the US ambassador to Zambia said.

But then something strange happened: nothing. Cutting off supplies did not trigger famine.

The UN World Food Programme point out that it would be wrong to conclude that Zambia was better off left alone: the country did receive non-GM food aid from Europe, which helped alleviate local shortages.

But at the very least, it seems clear that Zambia did not need a massive food influx to avert catastrophe.

"NGOs flatter themselves into thinking that they save lives," says former Zambian Agriculture Minister Guy Scott, who finds it "arrogant of the West to think that without whites, without pop stars, Africans would all be dead".

Dependency

The West tends not only to overstate the effectiveness of aid, but also to underestimate its harmful effects.

A bonanza often undermine self-reliance.

"It is axiomatic that flooding the market with food drives down the price for local farmers," Mr Easterly says.

James Shikwati, who heads the Inter Region Economic Network, a Kenyan NGO, says drought aid to his country in the 1990s "killed production" in many areas and increased dependency.



Too much of a good thing?

Aid can also encourage misguided policies. Mr Shikwati says this has been the case in Ethiopia, where farmers are not allowed to own land.

Instead of introducing reforms, he notes, the government appeals for aid.

When donors respond, Mr Shikwati says, "they are subsidising a government policy that makes it difficult for people to be productive".

Likewise, it can be argued that aid sent to Niger has helped obscure the role played by its neighbours in the crisis.

Nigeria and others - violating regional treaties - have banned grain exports to Niger, which in normal times would have alleviated shortages.

What is to be done?

Mr Easterly and others are not arguing that the solution to perverse incentives lies in withholding emergency aid.

They contend that it could be made to work better in a number of ways, including:

- Providing compensation to local farmers
- Making sure aid stops when things improve
- Giving hungry families cash rather than food

But the most effective move would be to focus less on emergencies and more on chronic problems. Mr Easterly says this could be done cheaply in the Sahel.

Improving access to clean water and distributing re-hydration tablets, for instance, would help eradicate diarrhoea, which drains nutrients away and makes children particularly vulnerable.

Tony Vaux, for his part, calls on the media to present a balanced picture of the situation of the ground, and not see their role as promoting the NGOs public appeals.

But he does not hold out much hope.

"When I first joined Oxfam in 1972 there was a famine in the Sahel, exactly like the famine today," he recalls.

Three decades and umpteen appeals later the same emergencies keep recurring, he says ruefully.

Your comments:

Spot on! I live in Niger and could not agree more. While the interventions of MSF are laudable, there is no famine here. However, had the BBC and others not reported on the famine, the chronic gut-wrenching poverty would have gone unnoticed by the world. The challenge to the NGOs and donors should not be that they rush to Niger to help during a crisis, but that they remain here for the long haul to help the wonderful people of Niger reach their potential. Will the cameras be back in 6 months to see if anyone is still helping?

JD, Niamey, Niger

The laypeople of the West will never have a clear picture of what actually occurs in countries on the African continent. Unfortunately, the filter of the media does little to communicate their day to day lives. It seems that when African countries grace the news, they are usually on the threshold of imminent disaster. The need for higher ratings drives the media to seek out the more dramatic stories, or the appearance of one. I do not mean to say that famine, and death are sensationalized by the media, however, how many young children are dying in the United States today from hunger and disease? The West has certainly been generous in the face of Africa's many perceived problems. I think a time has been reached when we must allow Africa to use her own natural genius to counter her own natural problems. To

assume that she can survive on her own, is to assume a new posture of paternalism.

Calvin Exum, Baltimore

I agree wholeheartedly with this assessment. Welfare dependency creates ever more dependency instead of looking at changing policies that would promote self sustaining practices. This is why Africa has gotten poorer while other regions of the world have improved their standards of living.

Janet, Edmonton, Canada

A global body (perhaps the UN - what other purpose do they have) should monitor global development and set objectives for improvement of conditions. Countries should have the ability to foresee and plan for shortages so that emergencies do not happen. Aid agencies should encourage regular donations rather than emergency campaigns and explain the advantages. Aid agencies also need to work with local government and agencies and each other and listen to all before acting. This world has enough technology of prediction that an emergency never really needs to happen except in case of extraordinary natural events such as the Asian tsunami.

Trevor Rubinoff, Calgary, Canada

It would be a wonderful solution for NGOs and donor governments to give more cash to people caught in disaster situations - if that cash is edible. The fact is that the proposal to provide greater cash resources will only help if food shortages occur only at a regional level and if well functioning markets can respond to demand. Unfortunately the reality of the situation is that in many situations simply giving more cash, or subsidizing grain sales - as the Nigerian government did earlier this year - will not always solve the problem of food shortages. Sure, we can quibble over how aid is given, and whether it arrives in a timely fashion and gets to the people who need it. These are all important issues. These arguments should not, however, get in the way of providing food to people when they need it.

EM, USA

I think it's to balance out the pros and cons of giving aid and saying that it definitely causes more harm than good, or visa versa. Yet I think it's obvious that the NGO is not solving the problem by shipping in bread. The blame though, seems to fall more on the shoulders of the governments in Africa that would rather have that support than encouraging reforms that could solve the long-term problems. It is essentially a perpetual welfare system for countries that don't want to get off it and take care of their own. Blaming the West is missing the real point.

Mike Crill, Phoenix, AZ

I must unfortunately agree with the article. I am studying development policy in university and it is very interesting to look at the amount of money that continues to go to emergencies, when significantly less money goes to the ongoing emergencies. The worst thing about the situation is the exorbitant amount of conditions that are placed on EU and British aid. It is sad that developed countries will only help if it doesn't compromise their economy, their trade, their place in the world. It seems in the last decade that aid is conditional on the recipient country remaining underdeveloped and poor. 'We will feed you but we refuse to help you feed yourself because that is bad for business' - a mindset that is all too common in almost every development policy in the developed world. It is a shame that wealthy countries are using food and promises to remain wealthy.

Pam Provis, Ottawa, Canada

I am currently researching my PhD in Rwanda. During the 1994 genocide, and after, NGOs and the international community relieved their consciences, and their aging food stocks, by dumping dried maize husks on the refugees. The people did not have the machines to grind it into flour or the water to boil it. The children were so hungry that they ate it and suffered internal bleeding - some died. I totally agree with criticisms of the food aid culture in Africa made in this article and believe that unless we ask what is needed, before a crisis, we will continue to give what we want and escalate the crisis.

John Giblin, Isle of Wight, UK (currently in Rwanda)

Providing relief aid should only be temporary and where the situation warrants otherwise it will kill the economy. For example, Ssembabule, my home district, is a leading producer of maize in Uganda. If any part of the country is hit with food shortage, then that should be a lucrative market for food producers. But the foreign relief agencies always import free food and kill the local market. As my president Museveni said when he met the late Ronald Reagan in 1987, Africa will not develop because of aid but because of investment.

Ahmed Kateregga Musaazi, Kampala, Uganda

Perhaps the best and most honest analysis about aid in Africa. If famine in Niger was that bad, refugees would have trooped into Nigeria. The West and the media, urged on by Aid agencies, continue to have a misguided belief that without them Africans will die off. Well, that's far from the truth.

While it is true that people are malnourished and have a poor standard of living, widespread and calamitous humanitarian crises are not ubiquitous. If only the West can desist from distorting the reality on ground and allow the societies to develop their own coping strategies, I think we will have a better world.

Emeka Obiodu, London, UK

Tony Vaux is correct in his assessment that not much has changed in three decades. In the West we are bombarded by appeals for one disaster after another. Famine in Africa is a running sore that will never be cured by handouts, a new approach is needed. African governments have to take a more responsible role in the welfare of their own people - until that happens nothing will change!

Steve Fleming, Toronto, Canada

I fully agree that aid is wrong in the medium and short run. Aid had been more harmful than helpful to the African countries, which have become more and more dependent on it. Moreover only a fraction of the aid went to the targeted population. The problem with the African countries is not lack of aid or natural resources but lack of proper economic policies, especially exchange rate policies.

J M Wong Sin Wai, Toronto, Canada

This article is highly unfair to state that white people are arrogant to think that without food aid Africans would die. There may not be a famine but children are clearly dying from hunger. African neighbours could be doing more as stated in the article that Nigeria and others have banned grain exports to Niger that would have help alleviate the crisis.

Was the West also not criticised for not helping earlier. I agree that the long term problems need to be addressed but if the governments are going to let their people starve don't have a go at those who can't bear to see babies and children suffer due to such corruption.


Mc, London, UK

This is certainly a thought provoking article. Much of it makes sense. Africa's biggest problem has been bad government (e.g. corruption, wars etc) - there is no need for famine to occur there it is a rich and lush continent. Aid props up bad government. While emergency aid is needed in the case of massive catastrophes - we in the West need to stop and think before we rush into things.

Shyam Vyas, Morristown, NJ (ex UK)

These leaders, be it of Niger, Ethiopia or CAR need to face the reality, they should look deep into the countryside where millions are starving and do whatever they can to circumvent the problem. If it is the case that NGOs do more harm than good then the government should be critical of only the harm it claims have happened and should not forget that each starved child, mother and elderly need bread on the spot just for survival. Indeed, for the one who is starved a single bread is more than anything. If the government had done that then the NGO would have no reason to be there.

Kiros Awalom, Germany

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