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Kenya — Starvation and Food Insecurity in the Land of Plenty

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My last month in Kenya has been sobering. Ten million Kenyans were reportedly facing starvation. There were daily reports on affected districts, those most vulnerable, and the government's mishandling of the disaster. Newspapers reported heavily on the incompetency of the National Cereals and Produce Board (NCPB), which is responsible, under the guidance of Trustees, in maintaining a Strategic Grain Reserve of about 6 million bags of maize cereal. How best to do this? An obvious way is through purchase of local grain supplies. Despite drought and resultant famine, poor infrastructure, high farm input costs, serious planting disruption after last year's post-election violence, and destruction of grain stores in the same violence – food is available. Maize, a Kenyan staple, is available.

Despite maize in the fields, it is widely known that farmers are hoarding stocks in many districts. Farmers are refusing the NCPB/government price of Sh1,950 per 90-kg bag. They are waiting to be offered at least the same amount of money as that which was being assigned to imports (Bii, 2009b). "The country will continue to experience food shortages unless the Government addresses the high cost of farm inputs to motivate farmers to increase production," said Mr. Jonathan Bii of Uasin Gish (Bartoo & Lucheli, 2009; Bii, 2009a, 2009b; Bungee, 2009).

Pride and politics, racism and corruption are to blame for food deficits (Kihara & Marete, 2009; KNA, 2009; Muluka, 2009; Siele, 2009). Clearly, what are needed in Kenya are food system planning, disaster management planning, and protection and development of agricultural and rural economies.

As we well know, the availability and distribution of emergency food and water supplies is of crucial concern during civil conflict and following major natural disasters such as drought. Experience shows that during disasters, regional governments working with international humanitarian aid organizations for, say, coordinating the shipment and distribution of food, and providing accurate data regarding food availability and deficits, is most effective. Kenya is no exception. Much blame for the inadequate food reserves lies in the centralized management efforts, which invariably, have led to considerable corruption, graft, and inefficiencies.² By

² See (Shaw, 2009) for a chilling discussion of the origins of the crisis in the failure of the long- and short-rains in most districts but also the panic selling to Tanzania and elsewhere that followed.

February 2008, the country's stock was only about 20 mill bags, which represents a 7 months reserve since the country consumes about 3mill bags/month. The meaning of this was clear, even a year ago. Food would need to start being imported as of early fall 2008. Many other indications pointed to the same conclusion -- planting disruptions, erratic long rains, high fertilizer prices, high food prices – which indicates much risk for a vulnerable population already importing over half its wheat and rice and a significant amount of sugar. Shaw (2009) argues that the government blundered terribly in its underestimation of supplies needed and suggests that serious questions need to be asked about abysmal failing of the “sieve-like cereals board” tasked with import, domestic purchase, management and distribution of subsidized maize flour.

Even though not all are in agreement, even in the best of times, it is clear that emergency food aid and food distribution can result in long-term negative consequences for local food systems (Shaw, 2009). Emergency food aid titles in donor nation-agriculture and food policies can, in effect, prioritize the needs of the donor country by creating markets for domestic food production. For example, in the United States the price supports and programs for (powdered) milk, certain varieties of wheat, and other grains, has been a boon for US farmers, at times allowing for what can be best seen as the dumping of food stockpiles (Berardi, 1985). It is ironic that food aid can function mostly as donor-country farm aid, allowing for more certainty and steady market access in grain-producing donor countries than in the crisis affected areas.

Regional economic agents and forces are left out of the loop, which is ironic given the cost efficacy and ease of logistics that market distribution mechanisms focusing on local and regional food supplies could bring the possibilities of reducing post-harvest losses, as with cases of aflatoxin poisoning (NATION Team, 2009a; Ndirangu, 2009).

Further, the issue of cultural appropriateness of emergency food is particularly important. To be sure, acceptability of the provided food must be considered (see recent work by Tuorila and Monteleone). The acceptance or rejection of food, even during severe food deprivation, may even be somewhat adaptive, relating to a normal biological function that prevents consumption of potentially harmful foods (FitzGibbon & Hennessy, 2003). Concerns about acceptability are especially visible when applied to genetically modified grains or milk powder from dairies using BGH (Pew 2002).

Looking at the cultural acceptance of food is an important part of food security. This is true in times of food surplus, when considering policy to enhance production, as well as in times of food deprivation. One approach is to consider favorite staples, as well as foods less common but nevertheless familiar to those receiving food aid: cassava, cow peas, and sweet potatoes, which do well even in drought areas. Mbugua (2009) discusses increasing millet flour and cassava, and green bananas in the diet, as well as arrow roots, sweet potatoes, millet, and sorghum. In “To beat hunger, Kenyans urged to change their diet,” Peter Orengo (2009) discusses citrus, bananas, paw paws, passion fruit, avocados, pear, plum, potato, onion, tomatoes, carrots, capsicums, cucumbers, and common vegetables include cowpea leaf (*vigna unguiculata*), East African spinach (*amaranthus hybridus*), pumpkin leaf (*curcurbita pepo*), Nightshade (*solanum nigrum*), Swiss chard (*beta vulgaris*), Red kidney beans (*phaseolus vulgaris*), kale (*brassica oleracea var acephala*) and Bush okra (*chorchorus clitorius*) as keys to resilience. Other traditional and familiar foods include pumpkins or *malenge*.

Still, the fact remains that today, as many as 10 million Kenyans face starvation. George Munene and Edward Koech (2009) question how long can herds people migrating, searching for pasture and water near the Uganda border, live on porridge and wild tubers. It is alleged that one in every three Kenyans may experience severe food deprivation, including 1.5 m children under school feeding programs, 2.5m with diseases such as HIV and Aids and orphans, 3m in arid/semi arid areas, and 2.5m poor in town slums.

There are description of plans to import maize, duty-free, with negative implications for local food supply chains. At the same time, the need for increasing extension services and availability of fertilizers is recognized (Shimoli & Kiplagat, 2009). In addition, the following is to be part of an inter-ministerial relief effort:

1. Relief in the form of maize and beans to affected areas,
2. Purchase of livestock from drought-affected areas,
3. Hay to be given to livestock herders in most affected areas,
4. Water to be provided in most severely-affected areas,
5. Six thousand tonnes of fertilizer to be supplied to poor farmers free of charge,
6. Provision of seed at a reduced price,
7. Twenty-five thousand tonnes of “orphan crop distribution” (cassava, sweet potato, yam, arrow root, millet, sorghum, among others) to be provided to farmers in arid and semi-arid areas, and
8. Government provision of 90 new tractors for plowing, to supplement the 85 at the Agricultural Development Corporation.

But, will this enhance food security? What is meant by food security, at any rate? For some, it has to do with the Strategic Grain reserve. This reserve is alleged to have, at best, 700,000 bags of maize, compared to the mandated 6 million bags it is to have in stock for emergency (Ongiri, 2009). This state of affairs has not gone unnoticed by donor agencies. Many are demanding an investigation into irregularities in the maize sector (Mathenge, 2009a, 2009b). The Board, while reporting a 1.3 million-bag supply, still refused to pay domestic farmers the Sh2,500/90-kg bag even as the government would be importing grain for Sh2,700 per kg bag. Any similar price to be paid to local farmers was seen as unsustainable for future dealings (NATION Team, 2009b).

Clearly, there is enough food available.

Quite frankly, the concept that severe food deprivation needs to be met with some kind of centralized response, based in institutions long known to be flawed creates a vicious cycle of deprivation and dependence, underdevelopment, and hopelessness. Clearly, the only way forward is reliance on regional, and in the case of Kenya, provincial institutions, to manage food systems and provide unconditional commitment to support regional food production. In a current grant proposal we are developing, we recognize the critical need of agricultural institutions to not only provide food security, but to continue to support agriculture for both the jobs and tax revenue it generates. Baseline studies to ensure accurate data in planning for food cycles and systems is crucial. Clearly, food security, poverty reduction, and disaster management are important components of any food deprivation relief strategy.

It is our belief that regional producers and distributors need to be systematically utilized for a coordinated response to emergency food need, food for work programs, voucher, or economic post-disaster recovery stimulus programs – programs that integrate food security, development, and disaster management. Such a plan allows for the improved nutritional value of emergency rations, increased cultural appropriateness of emergency food, and enhanced social networking among local community agencies and individuals. This also mitigates, to some extent, the collusion and corruption, especially during times of extreme food insecurity, which NGO and government representatives necessarily must deal with (Kihara & Marete, 2009). It is a possible way forward.

Citation

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