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Supporting Adequate Food Aid Organizations: Improving Food Stability in Africa

Introduction to the East African Food Crisis

The son of a farmer, Kenenisa Bekele of Ethiopia was recognized as a “Long Distance Prodigy” from an early stage in life (Bekele). Growing up in a country, struggling with poverty and famine, running was Kenenisa’s outlet. Less than a month ago, the world watched as Bekele competed in the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics. After his much anticipated win in the Men’s 10,000m race, Bekele was able to stand atop the Olympic podium with his olive branches and gold medal while his nation’s anthem was heard throughout the world. Back at home, however, 4.6 million of his countrymen are “resorting to extreme measures including slaughtering animals, eating seeds meant for planting, and migrating from their homes” and are in need of emergency food relief (WSWS).

In East Africa, the average household contains 4.6 people. Families much like Bekele’s are attempting to live on approximately 1.1 hectares of land (Actionaid 2). Historically, farms thrived with barley, wheat, lentils, beans, and peas grown locally and conveniently. Today, small farms struggle to produce enough maize and cassava and hope to refraining from relying on food aid (Actionaid 2). However, in African countries such as Ethiopia, farmland is “assigned according to the size of a family” and is redistributed every few years causing farmers to gradually obtain less and less land (Actionaid 2). With over 450 million small farms across the world supporting one-third of humanity (almost 2 billion people), those who rely on these struggling farms should do everything in their power to help them succeed.

Causes and Reasons behind the Problem

Although high food prices and general inflation are contributors to East Africa’s food crisis, the main food insufficiency issue is the “precariousness of pastoral conditions to below-normal March-May rains” (East Africa). Just as small farms in Iowa rely on sufficient levels of precipitation each season, subsistence farms in East Africa also rely on ample rains. However, farmers in Iowa have access to advanced planting and irrigation techniques, which still remain inaccessible to farmers in Africa. For example, Kenya’s chief crop, which is planted towards the end of April and contributes to about 8% of the annual staple food production, is heavily dependent on the anticipated rain between July and September (East Africa). Just as the United States could not recover from a lack of rainfall during the Great Depression, Africa remains incapable of recuperating on its own. In order to “break out of endless cycles of drought, poverty and hunger... Africa desperately needs to modernize its age-old farming techniques” (Feeding Africa).

With countries such as the United States, who are incredibly wealthy, concentrating on their own issues and ways to make themselves more powerful, countries such as Ethiopia are being ignored and are “in the grips of a disaster similar to the 1992-1993 famine when hundreds of thousands of people perished” (WSWS). According to the United Nation’s Food and Agricultural Organization, “there is enough food grown to feed everyone” (WSWS). This proves that there is an imbalance in both harvesting abilities and distribution throughout the world. So what do other nations do in an attempt to show their support? They ship over great quantities of food and contribute large amounts of money.

“[This is insufficient because] the chances of saving lives at the outset of a [relief] operation are greatly reduced when food is imported. By the time it arrives in the country and gets to people, many will have died...Evidence suggests the massive food shipments sent to Ethiopia in 1985 had little outcome of the famine...Studies of every recent famine have shown that food was available in-country- though not always in the immediate food deficit area.” Fred Cuny (Famine Relief).

In other words, people desiring to help need to contribute and assist the region in need in ways that the constituency can help itself:

“The public must be asking why, year after year, does this happen. The answer is that the world consistently fails to adequately address the underlying causes of these crises...Both Governments in the rich and poor world need to invest in a concerted action to tackle the underlying causes. We need to act to save lives in the short term but without investment in the long term as well then scenes of destitution will continue to haunt our shared conscience.” –Raymond C. Offenheiser, Oxfam America President (Oxfam).

Ways to Fix the Problem

Small holder farms need the world, its governments, and its people to make a significant investment in agriculture, not blindly, but with a long-term, educated commitment to agriculture in hopes of improving food permanence (Food Prices). With the proper investments, procedures, and developmental programs, the portion of humanity who relies on these farms will “have the potential to improve their lives and contribute to better food security” (Food Prices). What most people don’t realize is that there are plenty of food aid organizations who are implementing promising policies and making substantial investments within their limits. These associations and institutions need support financially and in other ways.

Actionaid, an agency aimed at improving food paucity throughout the world is “reaching over 13 million of the poorest and most vulnerable people” (About AA). This organization is unique in that they are not just taking the easy route and shipping money or food without taking into account how their contributions actually affect those in need. Actionaid doesn’t impose solutions; instead they “work with communities over many years to strengthen their own efforts to throw off poverty (About AA). This way, those areas inflicted by poverty can learn how to prevent famine conditions from reoccurring and slowly pull away from relying on food aid.

Similarly, the World Food Programme (WFP) focuses on helping hungry people rebuild their lives rather than carelessly offering up food relief packages. This organization believes that food is more than just nourishment and that “without food, there can be no sustainable peace, no democracy, and no development” (About WFP). After the immediate surge of relief has passed, the World Food Programme uses food not only to help improve living conditions but also to develop community relationships and rebuild lives. Although this assistance is far more beneficial than other methods of improving food security, the World Food Programme relies solely on voluntary contributions to implement its programs.

Oxfam International (a nongovernmental organization) believes that “all poverty is almost always rooted in human action or inaction” (Oxfam Mission). This institution realizes the value of helping needy nations develop self-sufficient ways to manage their own lives again. Because they believe that “poverty and powerlessness are avoidable and can be eliminated by

human action and will”, Oxfam is constantly striving to help others improve their own conditions (Oxfam Mission). This cannot happen without the support of others’ generosity.

The International Fund of Agricultural Development (IFAD) strives to improve food security in poverty stricken regions such as Africa and also help these areas achieve higher incomes and financial statuses (About IFAD). This organization has a close and unique affiliation with other associations such as the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) as well as the Organization of the Petroleum Exploring Countries (OPEC) (About IFAD). These two institutions (who focus on improving financial and economical situations) help enlighten IFAD about ways to improve pecuniary circumstances. This way, those who are seeking food aid will not only overcome the immediate emergency, but will be able to find ways to provide income in order to prevent famine from reoccurring. This is why IFAD is one of the largest sources of advancing financing for agriculture and rural expansion in many developing countries (About IFAD).

All of these programs are vital in improving food security in Africa. However, these organizations cannot do their work without ethical and financial assistance. Also, more programs need to be put into place in order to ensure that the correct amount of support is being applied in the correct areas and also that the appropriate measures are considered to make certain that famine areas will flourish again. By investing in new agendas, families like the Bekeles will be able to avoid future hardships.

In addition to these programs, organizations need to focus on improving the farming conditions and techniques in order to create agricultural stability. Today, African farmers tend to their minuscule fields in ways similar to the methods of their ancestors hundreds of years ago. One Ethiopian expresses that they “don’t want food aid...we need tractors, we need seeds, we need farm machinery” (Feeding Africa). Countries such as the United States are capable of sharing procedures such as modern irrigation system and implementing strategies such as how to effectively use fertilizer and pesticides. Although the United States is Ethiopia’s largest donor (giving \$570 million last year alone), “just over 1 percent of that money is going toward developing agriculture” (Feeding Africa).

The most exhilarating and heartening advancement that would contribute to agricultural stability in Africa is Drought Tolerant Crops developed by Arcadia Biosciences. A recent field trial revealed that “plants engineered for drought tolerance achieved significantly higher yields than the control plants under induced-drought conditions.” However, in normal (drought free) conditions both varieties produced similar yields (Arcadia). This indicates that if these advancements were implemented, even if an area was never threatened by drought again, crops would still thrive normally. In addition to developing crops capable of surviving in extreme drought conditions, Arcadia’s varieties also help reduce the carbon footprint produced by agriculture as well as the use of nitrogen fertilizers (Arcadia). These changes would not only provide stability, but would improve environmental conditions as well.

In Arcadia’s continuing research, along with their own Nitrogen Use Efficiency (NUE) study, they have collaborated with such organizations such as the Australian Centre for Plant Functional Genomics (ACPFPG) and the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO). This partnership has allowed the alliance develop “nitrogen use efficient wheat and barley varieties that will be commercialized globally” (Arcadia). Because these crops will require less nitrogen fertilizer to produce, “farmers are expected to benefit from reduced costs and enhanced yields” (Arcadia). This would allow places like Africa to become more globally competitive and, in turn, help their economic status amongst the rest of the world. The only downfall to this seemingly simple plan is that these pivotal crops and techniques are not

expected to be available commercially until 2016 (Arcadia). This advancement cannot wait that long. With the help of voluntary and government donations and support, Arcadia could potentially move up their release date and possibly expand their innovations to other crops such as rice or barley. With these breakthrough techniques, other organizations could use this new information to develop more and better approaches to helping improve food security.

Conclusion

Countries in Eastern Africa, especially Ethiopia are in desperate need of aid to end their seemingly unending cycles of famine. Years ago, farmers from these regions would walk miles across lush green areas to bring bountiful amounts of sorghum and maize to market. Unfortunately, today they walk across the same now parched areas to carry their starving children to feeding clinics. As Oxfam explains, these areas are dealing with a, “toxic cocktail,” with the ingredient of drought that have been responsible for killing entire crops and for the global inflation, among other things (New Famine).

So, in order to fix these issues, an effort must be made to make food stricken areas most self-sufficient. This self-sufficiency can be reached by providing tools such as various pieces farm machinery, irrigation systems and seed that is able to thrive in difficult climates so that these areas will be able to be more independent in providing ample staples of food for all their people.

If these actions were taken, it is only imaginable what success can come in the future. Perhaps we could look ahead to the next Olympics and envision Kenenisa Bekele atop the podium representing a new and flourishing Ethiopia. Perhaps he could represent an Ethiopia where farmers are able to harvest vast amounts of food to provide for all of the country’s people. And even larger than that, perhaps he could represent a hope, for all food stricken nations, that with adequate financial, moral and physical support, food stability can be reached.

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