

1982  
Africa's hungry are fed bad policies

FROM DISEASE TO CIVIL STRIFE, SUB-SAHARAN Africa has a host of troubles. But in the last five years, the problem of hunger also has come to the top of the list of woes. Developed countries have responded both bilaterally and multilaterally to help African farmers through policy interventions and humanitarian aid — though with debatable success. While grateful for the help, the countries find some of the solutions of dubious long-term value. The US, in particular, has been blamed for using the situation to promote inappropriate agricultural policies through international institutions and to propagate genetically-modified products.

In the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation's October 2004 assessment report, twenty-three countries in the Sub-Saharan Africa region are listed as requiring emergency food intervention. Malawi stands out as a country that has been in dire straits for some time, with the situation worsening during the past three years. This small, impoverished, landlocked country of 12 million generally fed itself until the late 1990s. What is the real root cause of the drop in food production?

Natural climatic factors have obviously contributed to the fall in production. Malawi, like most of the Southern Africa countries, has only one rainy season. At the same time, production of its staple food, maize, depends on a good pattern of rainfall. Erratic rainfall means that the farmers have to carefully determine when to plant, apply necessary inputs, preserve the available water in case of reduced rainfall, and create good drainage systems in case of excess rains. Other factors, such as deteriorating soil fertility and population growth, also contribute to lowering the food availability.

While the above factors seem to provide adequate explanation for the decline, many observers blame the policies of the developed world. To access

concessionary loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Malawi had to complete the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) from the late 1980s, a programme replete with troublesome conditionalities. One of the conditions under SAP was full liberalisation of the economy, the IMF's prescription for improving economic growth; the actual results, however, were cuts in social services and the removal of all agricultural subsidies. A bag of fertiliser that cost farmers about \$5 in 1990 more than doubled its price by 1998, rendering it unaffordable for most Malawians, half of whom live on an income equivalent to less than a dollar a day.

In 2002, during the country's worst food crisis, when hundreds of Malawians reportedly died from hunger and hunger-related diseases, the government revealed that the IMF had given inappropriate advice about maize reserves. A Reuters story reported that the Malawian President Bakili Muluzi "rebuked" the IMF, "blaming it for a biting food crisis and a reform agenda he said had failed to improve the lives of his people". He went on to claim that "the IMF asked his government to sell maize from strategic reserves to enable the state food agency to meet obligations on a commercial loan". The result was shortage of food for the people.

Further fuelling the controversy is the perceived hypocrisy of the more influential IMF members. At the peak of the 2002 food crisis, while the Malawian government was suffering the results of the IMF's anti-subsidy policies and inappropriate agriculture advice, the US government passed an agriculture bill that increased subsidies to its domestic farmers.

The \$190 billion bill provides, among other things, increased subsidies for US grain and cotton growers over a ten-year period. Each year, these farmers receive more financial assistance than the US government pro-

*Poor countries' options for dealing with food crises on their own are narrowing. It is becoming clear that developed countries are increasingly fostering dependency, whether by influencing national policies that fail to benefit citizens or by controlling microeconomic processes through the heavy influence of multinational corporations. This reliance is only increasing with the farmers switching to GM products*

PAUL KWENGWERE

vides to the entire African continent. Reacting to the passage of the bill, the minister of agriculture from Zambia, a neighbouring country of Malawi and also a victim of SAP, observed, "They are the same people who tell us not to subsidise production, but do exactly that". The farm bill was indeed a clear sign of domestic protectionism, completely contrary to the standard IMF prescription for developing countries: freeing the market is universally optimal for growth.

Despite these circumstances, most countries still look to the United States, as a world power, for solutions. The United States generously responded to the 2002 crisis by shipping tonnes of genetically-modified maize to Malawi and most of Southern Africa. What was supposed to be a kind gesture, however, sparked a debate on genetic engineering. What seemed certain was that the United States wished to promote genetically-modified products to Africa, a thing that worried countries like Malawi.

Considering that genetically-modified (GM) products have higher yields than produce from normal hybrid seeds, one may ask why developing countries are worried. A farmer in Malawi does not buy seed; he saves seed from the previous harvest. With GM products such as those advertised by multinational biotechnology corporation Monsanto, he cannot save seed; he will have to buy them each year at higher prices. This farmer is also likely to face marketing problems since certain countries will not accept GM products. The EU just lifted the six-year ban on sale of GM products within the member states earlier this year. But GM as a solution to food security problems among poor countries remains bleak.

NGOs, like the Third World Network and Greenwatch, provide a lot of information on genetic engineering and modification. According to soon-to-be-published results by the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, genes from genetically-engineered grass can spread much farther than previously known. This finding raises concern that the grass could spread to areas where it is not wanted or transfer its herbicide resistance to weedy relatives, creating super-weeds that would be immune to Roundup (the most widely used weed killer — also a Monsanto product).

Poor countries' options for dealing with food crisis on their own are narrowing. It is becoming clear

that developed countries are increasingly fostering dependency, whether by influencing national policies that fail to benefit citizens or by controlling micro-economic processes through the heavy influence of multinational corporations. This reliance is only increasing with the farmers switching to GM products from the developed world.

Indeed, Malawi's National Seed Company, a company that has produced hybrid seed for Malawian commercial farmers for years, recently sold off the majority of its shares to Monsanto. Farmers are no longer able to depend fully on hybrid open-pollen-variety seed, perhaps fundamentally changing both their environment and livelihood. The future of Southern African farmers is thus uncertain, but is sure to be deeply dependent upon GM products.

Malawi is just one example of policies that adversely affect agricultural productivity. As the Sub-Saharan region looks for viable solutions to chronic hunger, it will be necessary to involve local farmers. During hunger situations, communities devise coping mechanisms using simple and practical initiatives. Utilising these measures to develop appropriate policies can greatly help. Furthermore, it is right and proper to allow input from farmers when dealing with issues that affect them. Handouts from outside or imported policies often have negative future implications; in many cases, the optimal solutions must come from inside a country's borders.

*Paul Kwengwere is a 2004 Yale World Fellow and policy director for ActionAid International, Malawi. This article appeared in YaleGlobal Online ([www.yaleglobal.yale.edu](http://www.yaleglobal.yale.edu)), a publication of the Yale Center for the Study of Globalization, and is reprinted by permission. Copyright (c) 2003 Yale Center for the Study of Globalization*