

DECLINING FOOD SECURITY IN SUDAN, AND SOME POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR
NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

Richard Graham

Famines are not unknown in Sudan. Five major famines have been recorded in the past century. Yet none were so severe as the most recent one of 1984/85, when as many as 100,000 people were reported to have died in one region alone. The unprecedented suffering drew the attention of the Western media and millions of dollars of voluntary contributions for famine relief. After the crisis it was felt that suffering on this scale must never be allowed to happen again. Five years on, there are clear indications that a famine of 1984/85 proportions is imminent. As appeals for contributions are launched in the media, many individuals must be asking; why has this happened again?

I wish to argue that the 1984/85 famine and the imminent food crisis of 1990/91 are not 'freaks of nature'. They are the most extreme examples of a serious decline in food security, by which I mean the ability of all people to gain sufficient food to lead a healthy life. Declining food security has been caused by the disastrous policies pursued by the Sudanese government and the international donor community.

These policies have eroded the resource base of many pastoralists and peasant farmers, making them more vulnerable to food insecurity and limiting their ways of avoiding destitution. During a food crisis, the strategies employed by the poor are geared more towards avoiding destitution than simply 'surviving'. For example, during the 1984/85 famine, many families in Darfur buried their seeds to prevent their hungry children from eating them.

I will go on to suggest that NGOs must look beyond the standard response of managing food aid distributions, and respond in ways that fit more closely with the strategies of the vulnerable groups themselves.

The pattern of agricultural investment

Agricultural investment has been the key factor in creating food insecurity by neglecting the majority of rural subsistence farmers, and pastoralists.

Significant agricultural investment has always been restricted to the geographical, political, and economic centre of Sudan; that is to say, close to the banks of the White and Blue Niles, the Atbara, Dinder, and Rahad rivers. In the 1920s the British invested in large-scale cotton production in the Gezira between the two Niles, and in the 1940s, in large-scale sorghum production started in the areas around Kassala, Gedarif and Damazine. A clear imbalance emerged between these irrigated or mechanised rainfed sectors, and the peripheral 'traditional' rainfed sector. The same pattern of investment continued after independence. In 1973, the Food and Agricultural Organisation declared that Sudan and Australia were set to become the "breadbaskets of the world". In the early 1980s, the mechanised sector received over 90% of the total agricultural budget, yet it employed only 8,000 people out of a total agricultural workforce of 2.5 million, and produced less than half of the nation's total food output. Funds for this investment came largely from Western and Arab donors. By 1985, Sudan had an international debt of \$11 billion, and a range of poorly planned, badly implemented agricultural schemes where yields were falling, and increased production was only possible through horizontal expansion. Loan policies tended to favour the rich, often absentee landlords or investors, whose interests were in short-term financial gain, rather than longer-term national food security. A corollary of this loan policy is that the bulk of Sudan's grain surplus is held in the hands of a few influential merchants.

This investment strategy has in effect devalued food production in the 'traditional' sector. Poor peasants have been forced to compete with the the mechanised sector on grossly unequal terms. Without access to tractor hire and purchase, easy credit, and other advantages, the peasant economy started to degenerate. Many traditional farming practices, such as crop rotation, were abandoned,

causing soil degradation and falling yields. Widespread migration disrupted the family as the unit for food production, making households less able to be self sufficient in food, and more reliant on cash, and the market economy. These migrants became the first of many waves of vulnerable poor, dependent on the large agricultural schemes for seasonal work.

Pastoralists have also suffered from this trend in agricultural investment. The agricultural schemes, in particular the more recent ones in south Kordofan, have squeezed pastoralists off their summer pastures. The result has been growing environmental degradation as herds are forced to concentrate in more semi-arid areas. In addition, the breakdown of peasant agriculture has undermined the symbiotic relationship between the two groups. Many pastoralists with small herds have been unable to survive, and have migrated to the towns and agricultural schemes. This has indirectly contributed to desertification, as the migrants collect firewood and make charcoal for sale to the growing urban populations.

The effects of war

The resumption of the civil war in 1983 has had a significant effect on food security. If the North has been bankrupted by economics, then the South has received the same treatment by politics. Thousands of predominantly pastoral Southerners have been wrenched from viable subsistence economies to form another wave of migrant poor, competing for the same limited opportunities. Being pastoralists, their whole social, religious, and political framework has been destroyed through the loss of their cattle. As Southerners, they are likely to be severely discriminated against in the North.

War has also had a more general effect on food security. Food priorities have moved from the civilian to the military population. The cost of the war, estimated at \$1 million a day, has left the government without hard currency reserves, and has exacerbated the problems of massive debt, spiralling inflation, and a grave fiscal crisis. Inevitably, investors have looked elsewhere. The war has

destroyed many of the resources employed in food production, disrupted markets and means of supply.

In the past few years, a 'cycle of destitution' has emerged. The civil war, and the conflicts in neighbouring Chad, Uganda and Ethiopia have created an environment conducive to escalating civil insecurity. Governments have cynically exploited tribal, national or religious divisions with weapons provided by the West. Sudan has witnessed several horrifying massacres, banditry, the re-emergence of slavery, and tribal conflicts. Animals have been killed, crops burned, and property and equipment destroyed. There has been enormous loss of life, and further waves of migration. The destruction caused by this conflict leads to intensified competition over a dwindling resource base. Competition is often particularly acute between farmers and pastoralists. This fuels further conflict, and as the cycle continues, increasingly large numbers of people become more vulnerable to destitution.

The 'naturalisation' process

The 1984/85 famine was blamed on 'natural causes' - the failure of the rains and ensuing drought. Environmental degradation was acknowledged as a contributing factor; peasant farmers and herders were implicitly blamed for their 'bad' farming and herding practices. This 'naturalisation' process absolved the two main culprits, the government and the international donor community, from any blame. It has also enabled these culprits to continue the same policies that have been impoverishing the poor over the past few decades.

Since 1985, the government and donors have set up a system of food aid. Surpluses produced by big farmers in the East are purchased by the government at highly subsidised rates. The donors then purchase this grain and transport it to deficit areas in the West and South. The procedure therefore props up an inefficient production system in the mechanised sector, and promotes dependency in the traditional sector. It also maintains the status quo, by favouring the rich merchants, and further impoverishing the poor.

Growing vulnerability; the food crisis of 1990/91

Famines rarely occur in a democracy. Sudan is no exception. The tactics employed by the totalitarian regime of President Bashir bear a very close resemblance to the embattled President Nimeiri of 1984/85. Bashir has denied the threat of famine despite appeals from the Governors of Kordofan and Darfur for assistance. He has attempted to repatriate the tide of migrants entering the towns and cities from rural areas. He has handled the economy disastrously, stepped up the civil war, and has already exported 300,000 tonnes of grain this year.

However, there are two factors that make a crucial difference between the scenarios of 1984/85, and that of 1990/91. The first is that the international donor community is refusing to give humanitarian aid to Sudan. This is partly because of the governments efforts to frustrate the ongoing relief work in Sudan. Travel permits and visas are seriously delayed, Clearing items through customs can take up to two years, and an unfavourable exchange rate makes programmes highly cost-ineffective. These, and many other factors, have hindered the work of non-Islamic NGOs and the UN-sponsored Operation Lifeline. But Sudan's support for Iraq in the Gulf crisis has perhaps been a more critical reason for the lack of humanitarian support. Interestingly, the two strongest opponents of food aid, Britain and the United States, are also those most hostile to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

The second and more important factor, is that the number of people vulnerable to famine are likely to be significantly larger, and without the same range of anti-destitution strategies they possessed in 1984/85.

The degree of an individual's or household's vulnerability can be assessed in terms of their 'investments, claims and stores'. Investments include items such as health, education, trees and property. Claims relate to demands that can be put on local leaders, kinsmen, neighbours and government for support. Stores incorporate things such as gold, cash and food.

Claims and stores are the two spheres in which the poor have dramatically lost out. The fall in claims is primarily due to the increased role of the state in poor peoples lives, and the comensurate decline in the responsibilities of the traditional social structure, in particular the sheikhs, in providing a safety net. Yet the role of the state is an ambiguous one. Although its involvement in peoples' lives is greater, it does not guarantee a safety net, at least not to the majority of rural people and urban poor. The decline in social structures has made people more dependent on an unreliable market system and a network of manipulative traders.

Stores have been depleted by the failure of many people to recover much of their gold and other household assets sold during the last famine. Cash incomes have fallen as the availability of work, and therefore a fall in real wages, becomes more scarce. Remittances from the Gulf have plummeted as Sudanese expatriates from Kuwait flood back home, and others working in the Gulf are encouraged to leave. The poor rains of the past two years have meant all food stocks are exhausted.

A new role for NGOs

Despite this very bleak scenario, NGOs must consider a fresh, more creative approach to famine relief, rather than applying the same old medicine of managing food distributions. This is especially true this year as food is likely to come too little and too late. This was the case for 1984/85, when food aid was assessed to have only a limited impact on mortality.

The great asset NGOs possess over other aid bodies is that they are generally closer to the people and their environment. Using this asset, NGOs should consider examining the priorities and strategies of vulnerable groups. These groups need to be identified separately as men and women, households, villages, clans and regions. Research at this early stage would be an invaluable aid to implementing appropriate programmes. In 1985, research concluded that self respect may be a more decisive factor in a strategy than obtaining a regular supply of food aid, supporting an argument that food aid failed to influence peoples anti-destitution strategies.

Most deaths in 1984/85 were due to disease and poor sanitation and polluted drinking water. Diarrhoea was the most common cause of death, so that health programmes should stress oral rehydration therapy. The second most common cause of death was measles. Immunisation campaigns, and the provision of vaccines should therefore feature prominently. Given that most deaths occurred in the 1 - 4 age range, supplementary feeding programmes using locally procured food would be advisable. Diarrhoea was often caused by poor sanitation or drinking from polluted water. Thus well digging, the rehabilitation of wells, water yards and hafirs, establishment of water filtration systems and pit latrines, especially in or close to displaced camps, would help to reduce mortality. The timely provision of seeds and tools well before the rainy season would facilitate an early return to 'normality'. Other options that would need government approval and support could include purchasing at a minimum price, household assets and maybe animals that would otherwise be sold on the open market for next to nothing. The collection of wild famine foods could be built up as a cash-for-work scheme. While food aid will no doubt be forthcoming sooner or later, NGOs may use their energies more productively in prioritising these areas.

Conclusion

Sudan is one of many countries facing growing food insecurity. Despite regional variations, the 'naturalisation' of famine has been a common theme. This myth, maintained by governments and the international community, has allowed policies that erode food security for the poor to continue, and sustained the rich minority who stand to gain.

30 November 1990

REFERENCES

Abdel Ati H A The process of famine: causes and consequences in Sudan in Development and Change Vol 19 No 2 1988

Eush R Hunger in Sudan: the case of Darfur in Journal of the Royal African Society Vol 87 No 348 Jan 1988

Cater N The Roots of Famine Oxfam Oxford 1986

De Waal Famine that Kills Clarendon Press Oxford 1989

Duffield M Food security in Sudan mimeo 1988

Graham R Food security analysis of Sudan mimeo 1990

Holt P M and Daly M W History of Sudan Weidenfield and Nicholson London 1979

International Labour Organisation After the Famine ILO Geneva 1986

Swift J Why are rural people vulnerable to famine? in International Development Studies Bulletin Vol 20 No 2 1989

17
18
19