Starvation in the 21st Century? It is not right!

Meetings and conferences will not rid the world of this scourge called hunger. In my last editorial for issue 45, I described the effects of the drought currently ravaging the Horn of Africa on human beings and especially on children. Who is to blame for the recurrence of the drought, of the famine? Should anyone be blamed? Should anyone take responsibility? United Nations estimated nearly 14 million people being affected. Has this famine attracted as much attention and support like previous famines of similar magnitude? It is doubtful, given the economic hardships donor countries are going through, and other threats to human peace that are taking centre stage.

"An Assessment of the Response to the 2008-2009 Drought in Kenya" by ILRI (International Livestock Research Institute) recommends migratory herding as the best way to deal with the effects of recurring drought in the North of Kenya [1]. The Kenya Government commissioned the study. The recommendations would clearly apply to the Horn of Africa, which holds an estimated population of 70 million people.

The report argues that the expansive area in question is too important to ignore, and that turning herdsmen into sedentary populations is not the answer. Nomads do not like sedentary lifestyles; it makes them miserable and pushes them to abject poverty. They have survived for generations in these types of environment and one would think that they would be involved in discussions concerning their welfare. In Kenya, for example, efforts to settle the pastoralists have been going n since independence in 1963. It is as if that was the only solution, settling down everyone to practice agriculture. Yet, the greater part of the country (80%) is either arid or semi-arid. Each time there is a drought, the whole country is affected.

One wonders what we would be seeing today if major investments had been made to develop these desert areas right from the start. Exploration oil and minerals could have started a long time ago, to create both jobs and wealth. Also, rather than wait to focus on this region only when there is severe drought and people are moving, an earlier focus could have been on how to convert it to a favourably habitable environment, into a mega city, for example. What a great tourist destination that could make!

Would we be seeing pictures of starving children if these types of investments had been made earlier? Would Kenya still be depending on foreign aid for its development? Who knows, maybe and just maybe, the now
desolate, "non-productive" region might be the one providing Kenya's wealth, instead of the "burden" it has become. Successive Kenyan governments have tried to do something meaningful for the people of North Eastern Province, but the distance from the centre, the harsh climate, and the now porous and insecure borders make it a difficult region for the government to commit adequate resources to develop it even halfway.


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