

Kebschull, Dietrich

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Hunger in Africa – A Worldwide Challenge

Millions of people in industrialised countries showed both their solidarity with and compassion for the starving in Africa during recent famine relief campaigns. The media, politicians and other opinion-leaders have all supported the good cause. However, the commendable successes seem little more than a drop in the ocean when compared with the vast dimensions of want and poverty.

The distressing pictures of undernourished and starving children and adults in Ethiopia are just the preliminary result of a development which has by no means passed its peak of disaster. Numerous other African states south of the Sahara are already known to be confronted by similar problems or are likely to be confronted by them in the near future. What is more, many other parts of the world also face food problems. Preventing these from getting even worse represents the major challenge to the world economy during this and the coming decades.

There is general agreement that although emergency relief in the form of food, clothing and medical supplies is essential, it cannot provide a lasting solution. The fight against poverty must tackle the roots of the problem which have been known for long enough even if this involves political confrontations.

The situation in most African states south of the Sahara has worsened considerably over the past two decades. Following an average annual GDP growth of 3.7 % during the sixties, the corresponding figure fell to 1.7 % during the seventies. With a rapid population growth of almost 3 % p.a. this has meant a clear deterioration in the situation of wide sections of the population. Without extensive birth control programmes, a fundamental long-term improvement of development prospects seems virtually impossible.

The inadequate progress made in the agricultural sector has had a particularly adverse effect on the situation. Africa has by and large been bypassed by the often spectacular successes of the "green revolution". At the beginning of the sixties, the region was almost in a position of food self-sufficiency. However, the destruction of the ecological basis and spreading desertification literally cut the ground from under its feet. In addition, the deliberate discrimination and exploitation of agriculture in order to promote industrialisation, *inter alia* via socially motivated low-price policies, made large parts of production unprofitable. The increase in agricultural output did not keep pace with the growth of population. Only eight of the thirty-nine African states south of the Sahara managed to increase their per capita food supply. There was a continually growing dependence on foreign suppliers in the case of the remaining countries.

These problems were aggravated by the serious economic policy errors made by inexperienced or corrupt governments. In some extreme cases, characterised by names such as Idi Amin or Bokassa, it is fair to claim that these governments consciously did not set out to enhance the well-being of their peoples; in other cases, the latter was apparently neglected as a result of efforts to satisfy allegedly urgent needs for arms, unproductive spending and unnecessary prestige projects. The result was growing unemployment, inflation and increasing uncertainty. Serious political conflicts – in many cases civil war – were often on the order of the day. Measures to stabilise the economy were only introduced in exceptional cases, and then usually too late. Governments generally opted for external

borrowing. As a result, almost half of Black Africa's current export earnings is needed to service debts and cannot, therefore, be channelled into extending production and export potential.

However, this indebtedness makes it clear that the difficult situation is not just the fault of the indebted countries themselves. One of the major reasons for the current situation was the impact of the two oil price shocks. They hit those African countries which are heavily dependent on energy supplies particularly hard. As, in addition, most of these countries primarily export raw materials due to their low level of development, the sharp fall in the price of raw materials in the wake of the international economic recession worsened their predicament. In many countries, problems were also exacerbated by high international interest rates and the development of the US dollar's exchange rate.

This wide range of determinant factors makes it clear that all attempts to resolve existing problems are extremely complicated and time-consuming. The world will have to accept that some of the countries particularly hard-hit by internal and external misdevelopments will remain the hardship cases of the international community for a longer period of time. Generous aid is needed to prevent catastrophes in future and provide a long-term basis for successful development prospects.

This realisation, however, does not mean that the countries in question should be entitled to claim international welfare benefits while at the same time failing to carry out their own urgently needed and long-neglected efforts to improve the situation. Successes in the economic field can only be achieved if the most important principles of economic behaviour are observed. Exaggerated exchange rates, negative real interest rates, substantial distortions of the prices of goods and services, and high rates of inflation are an expression of incorrect economic behaviour. Such errors are just as much in need of rectification as are government spending for unproductive purposes, blind faith in government planning and control, and the cancerous proliferation of administration and bureaucracy.

This will require fundamental changes in many countries. To avoid serious additional social conflicts, however, the corresponding measures must be taken on a step-by-step basis. One of the major tasks of development aid in future, therefore, must be to advise and support African countries – in so far as this is their express desire – in the field of economic policy-making. The intention should not be the dissemination of dogmatic views on the desirable economic systems, but the joint elaboration of measures designed to increase the efficiency of capital employed and help the needy in the countries concerned.

This requires concepts tailored to the needs of specific regions and based on detailed analyses of individual countries. General recommendations to satisfy basic needs or increase the orientation of economic policies towards domestic markets are just as meaningless as overemphasising export promotion strategies.

Once again, the main question in the case of famine in Africa is not the provision of more capital by industrialised countries, but putting this capital to more efficient use. Above all, greater coordination between the various bilateral and multilateral donors is essential if the efficiency of foreign assistance is to be improved. The lengthy discussions on the special fund for Africa initiated by the World Bank again revealed how difficult joint action is. Although there is apparent agreement on the urgency of increased support for Africa, the national egoism and self-interest of certain donors are all too obvious. The European Community and its member states, which have repeatedly stressed their special relationship to Africa, are called upon to take the initiative in this respect. The introduction of the system for the stabilisation of export earnings (STABEX) and the support for the UNCTAD's Common Fund are steps in the right direction. However, further steps, above all in the fields of foreign trade and agriculture, are needed to improve the framework for development in Africa. The willingness to give donations shown by the populations of industrialised countries demonstrates that there is general support for a policy to help the poor and the starving and that people are willing to make the necessary sacrifices. Politicians should take this message to heart.

Dietrich Kobschull