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Last Updated: Friday, 26 August 2005, 14:52 GMT 15:52 UK



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## Can aid do more harm than good?

By Henri Astier  
BBC News website

**When Niger's president accused aid agencies of exaggerating his country's food crisis for their own gain, Western media reacted with shock.**



Dramatic pictures publicised Niger's plight in June

How dare he bite the hand that feeds his people, commentators asked. Many suggested the president was making excuses for the failings of his own government.

But according to some leading aid experts, Mamadou Tandja had a point.

His remarks may have been self-serving, they concede, but they also raised serious issues about the way aid emergencies are handled.

"I think NGOs and rich country media do have an incentive to paint too simplistic and bleak a picture, as was the case in Niger's food crisis," Professor William Easterly of New York University told the BBC News website.

There were localised food shortages this year - but they were not particularly acute, and are now easing.

**“ My concern about this is you either have an aid bonanza or you have nothing ”**

Tony Vaux

What Niger is experiencing is not a sudden catastrophe, but chronic malnutrition that makes people vulnerable to rises in food prices.

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Glib talk of famine backed by pictures of starving children may help NGOs raise funds, but it does nothing to address these basic problems, says Mr Easterly.

### Boom and bust

Tony Vaux, a former official with Oxfam, agrees.

Once an emergency is identified, he says, the NGOs' public relations machine takes over and "there is a terrible temptation to look around for the very worst stories".

"My concern about this is you either have an aid bonanza or you have nothing. There does not seem to be a middle ground," says Mr Vaux, author of the book *The Selfish Altruist*.



President Tandja caused an outcry when he criticised NGOs

One problem with dramatic appeals, Mr Easterly notes, is that they do not give you a big bang for your aid buck.

"The payoff is disappointingly low," he says. Getting the relief effort up and running takes time, and when the food arrives it is often too late - or the crisis has eased on its own, as appears to be the case in Niger.

Emergency aid may relieve the situation - but the same amount spent before children starved in front of the cameras would have saved many more lives.

Such poor returns were illustrated by the 2002 southern Africa "crisis".

After rains failed the UN warned that millions were at risk. Camera crews looked for starving babies and found some.

The aid bandwagon charged ahead.

“ Sometimes aid agencies overplay figures in order to sustain themselves ”

James Shikwati

But Zambia, worried that the US maize it was receiving might be genetically modified, banned all aid - unwittingly providing an interesting experiment.

Donors were aghast. But then something strange happened: nothing. "Cutting off supplies had no impact," former Zambian agriculture minister Guy Scott says.

There was no famine - only local shortages Zambia could deal with.

"NGOs flatter themselves into thinking that they save lives," says Mr Scott, who finds it "arrogant of the West to think that without whites, without pop stars, Africans would all be dead".

### **Dependency**

The West tends not only to overstate the effectiveness of aid, but also to underestimate its harmful effects.

A bonanza often undermine self-reliance.

"It is axiomatic that flooding the market with food drives down the price for local farmers," Mr Easterly says.



Too much of a good thing?

James Shikwati, who heads the Inter Region Economic Network, a Kenyan NGO, says drought aid to his country in the 1990s "killed production" in many areas and increased dependency.

Aid can also encourage misguided policies. Mr Shikwati says this has been the case in Ethiopia, where farmers are not allowed to own land.

Instead of introducing reforms, he notes, the government appeals for aid.

When donors respond, Mr Shikwati says, "they are subsidising a government policy that makes it

difficult for people to be productive".

Likewise, it can be argued that aid sent to Niger has helped obscure the role played by its neighbours in the crisis.

Nigeria and others - violating regional treaties - have banned grain exports to Niger, which in normal times would have alleviated shortages.

### **What is to be done?**

Mr Easterly and others are not arguing that the solution to perverse incentives lies in withholding emergency aid.

They contend that it could be made to work better in a number of ways, including:

- Providing compensation to local farmers
- Making sure aid stops when things improve
- Giving cash rather than food

But the most effective move would be to focus less on emergencies and more on chronic problems. Mr Easterly says this could be done cheaply in the Sahel.

Improving access to clean water and distributing re-hydration tablets, for instance, would help eradicate diarrhoea, which drains nutrients away and makes children particularly vulnerable.

Tony Vaux, for his part, calls on the media to present a balanced picture of the situation of the ground, and not see their role as promoting the NGOs public appeals.

But he does not hold out much hope.

"When I first joined Oxfam in 1972 there was a famine in the Sahel, exactly like the famine today," he recalls.

Three decades and umpteen appeals later the same emergencies keep recurring, he says ruefully.

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Perhaps the best and most honest analysis about aid in Africa. If famine in Niger was that bad, refugees would have trooped into Nigeria. The West and the media, urged on by Aid agencies, continue to have a misguided belief that without them Africans will die off. Well, that's far from the truth.

While it is true that people are malnourished and have a poor standard of living, widespread and calamitous humanitarian crises are not ubiquitous. If only the West can desist from distorting the reality on ground and allow the societies to develop their own coping strategies, I think we will have a better world.

***Emeka Obiodu, London, UK***

Tony Vaux is correct in his assessment that not much has changed in three decades. In the West we are bombarded by appeals for one disaster after another. Famine in Africa is a running sore that will never be cured by handouts, a new approach is needed. African governments have to take a more responsible role in the welfare of their own people - until that happens nothing will change!

***Steve Fleming, Toronto, Canada***

I fully agree that aid is wrong in the medium and short run. Aid had been more harmful than helpful to the African countries, which have become more and more dependent on it. Moreover only a fraction of the aid went to the targeted population. The problem with the African countries is not lack of aid or natural resources but lack of proper economic policies, especially exchange rate policies.

***J M Wong Sin Wai, Toronto, Canada***

This article is highly unfair to state that white

people are arrogant to think that without food aid Africans would die. There may not be a famine but children are clearly dying from hunger. African neighbours could be doing more as stated in the article that Nigeria and others have banned grain exports to Niger that would have help alleviate the crisis.

Was the West also not criticised for not helping earlier. I agree that the long term problems need to be addressed but if the governments are going to let their people starve don't have a go at those who can't bear to see babies and children suffer due to such corruption.

***Mc, London, UK***

This is certainly a thought provoking article. Much of it makes sense. Africa's biggest problem has been bad government (e.g. corruption, wars etc) - there is no need for famine to occur there it is a rich and lush continent. Aid props up bad government. While emergency aid is needed in the case of massive catastrophes - we in the West need to stop and think before we rush into things.

***Shyam Vyas, Morristown, NJ (ex UK)***

These leaders, be it of Niger, Ethiopia or CAR need to face the reality, they should look deep into the countryside where millions are starving and do whatever they can to circumvent the problem. If it is the case that NGOs do more harm than good then the government should be critical of only the harm it claims have happened and should not forget that each starved child, mother and elderly need bread on the spot just for survival. Indeed, for the one who is starved a single bread is more than anything. If the government had done that then the NGO would have no reason to be there.

***Kiros Awalom, Germany***

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