How Foreign Aid Hurts Famine Relief in Somalia

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By: Ibrahim B. Anoba

The World Health Organization (WHO) recently warned that Somalia is at risk of experiencing their third famine within 25 years. In 2011 famine killed over 260,000 people, but once again the country is facing a humanitarian crisis. Half of all Somalis are in need of urgent assistance. In response, the United Nations and NGOs are seeking over $1.5 billion in donations.

Between 2009 and 2010, 70% of funds earmarked for development in Somalia were misappropriated.

This plea for aid recurs whenever the drought-prone country experiences famine. Unfortunately, donors have not helped Somalia prepare for long-term infrastructural sustainability. Rather donations have fuelled corruption and further weakened Somalia’s economy. As a country, Somalia is one of the top recipients of aid in the world, with over $55 billion received since 1991. Historically, the country has slid into a humanitarian emergency with every famine. Some believe this is because foreign aid has increased corruption. Donors who want to have a real impact should look at ways to build the country’s technological capacities and improve its security.

Money Falls into the Wrong Hands

In 2011, Somalia’s Public Management Unit reported that over $300 million of government funds and another $70 million from Arab donors were missing from its treasury. Months later, the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea (SEMG) revealed that 70 percent of funds earmarked for development in Somalia between 2009 and 2010 were misappropriated.

The SEMG further alleged that 80 percent of the funds initially deposited in the Somali Central Bank were unofficially withdrawn for personal use. This embarrassing incident, one of many, propelled Somalia to its last-place ranking in the 2014 Corruption Perception Index. Rather than putting donations toward affected Somalis, politicians have successfully used the country’s precarious situation to line their own pockets.

Political unsteadiness has resulted in a gross lack of accountability for donations. Besides being afflicted by corruption, the country’s executive arm is unpredictable in its instability. During the last 15 years, Somali has had four presidents, twelve prime ministers, and frequent cabinet reshuffles. This political unsteadiness has
resulted in a gross lack of accountability for the donations received during this period.

Since 2006, donors have flooded the country with over $300 million worth of aid – consisting mainly of clothes, food, and pharmaceutical products. During periods of low agricultural productivity, Somalia’s informal sector heavily depends on similar commodities.

Unfortunately, what starts off as well-intentioned giving often results in job losses for the local shopkeepers and an even weaker economy overall. Continuously giving away free stuff causes local businesses to confront a much tougher market, as they must compete with international donations to provide Somalis with goods and services. In Somalia, these conditions have increased unemployment and forced many to venture into agriculture, which often suffers during periods of drought.

Likewise, terrorism is another hindrance to aid for Somalia. The Al-Qaeda-affiliated Al-Shabab has perpetrated over 360 attacks, targeting government officials and aid workers. Not only did these threats prompt monitoring agencies to withdraw from the country, but insurgents also seized relief materials to use as weapons and to deny them from reaching their intended recipients.

Corrupt politicians get involved too, and worsen the situation by allocating donated goods to insurgent groups. For instance in 2014, the SEMG reported that presidential advisor Musa Mohamed Ganjab unofficially diverted frozen government assets and weapons to Al-Shabab. Ganjab denied the allegation.

**Tech Aid**

Somalia needs technological assistance, not aid. Numerous drought-prone African countries have made progress by investing in technologically-enhanced agriculture with less dependence on donations.

For instance, Kenya partially sustains its agricultural sector by focusing on drought tolerant seeds and collaborating with donors to procure these seeds for local farmers. Nowadays, there’s less of a decline in productivity during periods of low rainfall.

*Software has helped reduce crop losses by connecting farmers with a more accurate planting calendar.*
Somalia can follow suit and even go further by building artificial dams to support the modified seeds. Having water reservoirs to supply farms during dry seasons would greatly reduce the dependence on rainfall.

**Mobile phones** are a valuable technological solution for farmers across Africa. Software like Tigo Kilimo in Uganda and Kilimo Salama in Kenya has helped reduce crop loss by connecting farmers with a more accurate planting calendar. With only half of Somalis having access to mobile phones, the government can partner with donors to provide more of them to farmers. Donors can also support Somali engineers to develop simple software with forecasts and planting schedules. This strategy requires almost no government interference – meaning fewer opportunities for corruption and mismanagement.

Moreso, many Somali farmers are ranchers and having an innovation like the **Satellite-Assisted Pastoral Resource Management** can help them better adjust to famine. The system transmits navigation details to ranchers, which helps ranchers prepare better grazing plans and avoid diseases like trypanosomiasis, black quarter, and Contagious Bovine Pleuropneumonia. The pastoral resource system is currently quite successful in neighbouring Ethiopia, which is similarly drought-prone.

Improved security can also help Somalia become self-sufficient. Without significantly curbing the threat of Al-Shabab, development plans are unlikely to succeed. The east African bloc can reorganize regional security efforts to reduce the burden on the poor, similar to the **Lake Chad Basin joint-efforts** against Boko Haram in west and central Africa.

Somalia is on the verge of a catastrophic humanitarian crisis and it needs urgent assistance. However, donors should invest in long-term development projects instead of relying on the usual – highly ineffective – aid relief.

Published in [FEE.org](https://fee.org) on Wednesday, May 24, 2017 via: [https://fee.org/articles/how-foreign-aid-hurts-famine-relief-in-somalia/](https://fee.org/articles/how-foreign-aid-hurts-famine-relief-in-somalia/)