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The Democratic Republic of the Congo: Assisting Vulnerable Populations and Improving the Effectiveness of Humanitarian Relief and Food Aid

Introduction

The world's population is nearing 7 billion people. About 925 million of this total is undernourished. In the Asia and the Pacific region alone there are 578 million undernourished people, while Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for another 239 million, mostly the result of ongoing political and armed conflicts there that have lasted for decades (UNFAO; *The State of Food Insecurity in the World, 2010*). To help meet the United Nations' Millennium Development Goal of halving world hunger by 2015, much greater focus must be brought to bear on addressing the causes of global hunger and looking for bold solutions to the problem.

One country in "protracted crisis" concerning food security is the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (*The State of Food Insecurity in the World, 2010*). The DRC is home to vast amounts of natural resources worth up to US$24 trillion, making it capable of becoming one of the wealthiest countries in the world (Washington Times); however, its 71 million people experience some of the worst poverty and most dangerous living conditions on the planet (US Department of State). Since Belgian imperialists first exploited the country's rubber and ivory and committed horrific crimes against its people in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the country has struggled to develop. Today the people of the DRC continue to be victims of poor governance, high levels of corruption, and violence from competing militias. In 2010, three quarters of the DRC's people—about 54 million—were undernourished, the highest proportion of national hunger in the world (International Food Policy Research Institute). Many of these people were children. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)'s *The State of the World's Children 2011*, the DRC ranked second in the world in 2009 in the mortality rate of children under five.

The goal of this essay is to examine food security in the DRC specifically from the perspective of how humanitarian relief and food aid are assisting the DRC's people, and how this aid can be improved. Although many people in the world's advanced countries are aware of the food security crisis in the DRC and other parts of Africa, many also are not aware that the billions of dollars they donate to foreign aid often falls short of their target of eliminating hunger. In its current status, food aid to conflict zones and disaster sites, such as the DRC, is not as effective as it should be.

"Typical" Subsistence Farm Family

Several factors make defining a typical subsistence farm family in the DRC difficult. First, up to 250 different ethnic groups live throughout the DRC, among the largest being the Kongo (southwest), the Luba (south-central), and the Mongo (west-central) (*Democratic Republic of Congo in Pictures*, p. 41-42). Second, the DRC is topographically very diverse, which means that the methods for gathering food among the 250 ethnic groups may vary from subsistence farming to hunting and gathering. Third, and most importantly, long-standing and widespread civil unrest has produced approximately two million internally displaced people in the DRC, and up to 450,000 people have fled to neighboring countries as refugees. More than 80,000 of the DRC's eastern farmers now live in camps in northern Uganda (The World). Rebel groups have established themselves in remote areas in North Kivu, South Kivu and Orientale Provinces, which contain the DRC's best agricultural lands, and have forced subsistence farm families to flee their homes (Refugees International). Along with internal displacement, the DRC also

hosts some 180,000 refugees from neighboring countries who occupy both rural and urban areas. The Second Congo War, which began in 1998 and officially ended in 2003, involved eight countries and about twenty-five armed groups. Over five million Congolese died in the war. But despite the war's official end fighting continues, in particular in the country's eastern regions (Internal Displacement Monitoring Center).

Despite the difficulty in defining a "typical" subsistence farm family in the DRC, the mean ideal family size is 6-7 people, according to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (USAID); however, families are much larger as Congolese families define themselves by kinship groups, rather than by nuclear family members. Kinship groups may include grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and nieces and nephews (Australian Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship). The fertility rate in the DRC is about 5 children per mother (International Rescue Committee). Though child mortality is very high, this nevertheless contributes to a large child population with a projection of about 8 million 0-4 year old boys and girls each for 2020 (USAID). Although polygamy is illegal in the DRC, it is still practiced in many rural areas.

The nutritional value of the typical Congolese diet is inadequate, especially for children. In refugee camps, children suffer from protein deficiencies that stunt growth and cause muscles to deteriorate. Many adults and children alike owe their malnourishment to cassava, the country's staple food. Easy to attain and fertile throughout the DRC, cassava comes from the roots of the cassava tree, which may be ground into flour and used for baking. Cassava is rich in starch and vitamin C but lacks in protein and vitamin A, which makes a primarily cassava-based diet unwholesome. Many Congolese eat what is available such as tree-living grubs, monitor lizards, bats, and rats (*Democratic Republic of Congo*, p. 123-125). According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (UNFAO), 75% of the total Congolese population suffers malnutrition, and 16% suffers severe malnutrition, according to the Congolese Ministry of Public Health (Doctors Without Borders).

Health care in the DRC is alarmingly scarce. According to a 2005 survey by Doctors Without Borders (MSF), the majority of Congolese cannot afford health care even when it is available, usually in cities. Most Congolese live in absolute poverty, earning a low average of $0.30 daily. People who fall ill typically do not expect help from the state; more commonly they turn to their families and communities, which still use traditional and unreliable remedies for treatment. The ineffective health care sector is the cause of many unnecessary deaths, and it is responsible for the world record of mother-child mortality with 1,289 deaths per 100,000 births. Internationally displaced persons have the least access to health care. Where health centers are available, they are usually poorly staffed and equipped.

For all the DRC's size, only 3% of its land is used for agriculture (US Department of State). Farm size per family averages 1.6 hectares. Agricultural practices still include slash and burn techniques. The eastern mountainous regions of North Kivu, South Kivu, and Orientale the agricultural breadbasket of the DRC, provide the best agricultural land in the country. Yet these are also the areas with the greatest rebel violence. When agriculture is uninterrupted by rebel fighting, plantains, maize, groundnuts, sugar cane, palm oil, bananas, and other various fruits and vegetables are grown in addition to cassava (*Democratic Republic of Congo*, p. 124-125). However, due to decades of internal conflict by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), the National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP), and Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), among more than a dozen other groups, farmland has been transformed into battlegrounds, forcing hundreds of thousands of Congolese from their homes into refugee camps and internationally displaced persons camps (Refugees International). For this reason, farmers cannot grow crops and earn living wages for themselves. The long-term and severe disruption to stable agriculture in the DRC has resulted in a loss of access to adequate nutrition for the country's people, as well as a stagnant economy.

Food Aid, and Agricultural Productivity and Food Availability and Quality

Food assistance to the DRC does not directly play a role in causing its "typical" subsistence farm family "to not produce enough food, earn sufficient income to purchase food, or access adequate nutrition" (*World Food Prize 2011 Global Youth Institute Essay*). Outside food assistance also cannot permanently fulfill the food needs of the typical subsistence farm family. The surest way to do so is to guarantee the family's self-sufficiency in meeting its needs so that it must not rely on outside agents to satisfy them (*The State of Food Insecurity in the World, 2010*, p. 32).

Yet if the past is a guide, family self-sufficiency will take many years to achieve. The DRC is in a state of "protracted crisis" concerning adequate food availability in the country, as are twenty-one other countries around the world. According to *The State of Food Insecurity in the World, 2010*,

> "Protracted crisis situations are characterized by recurrent natural disasters and/or conflict, longevity of food crises, breakdown of livelihoods and insufficient institutional capacity to react to the crises. Countries in protracted crisis thus need to be considered as a special category with special requirements in terms of interventions by the development community." (*The State of Food Insecurity in the World, 2010*, p. 12)

Of the twenty-two countries in protracted crisis, the DRC has the highest Global Hunger Index of 39.1, characterized as an "extremely alarming hunger problem." The Global Hunger Index is made up of a composite of undernourishment data, the prevalence of underweight, and the under-five mortality rate. Finally, because of their specific characteristics, countries in protracted crisis are some of the most difficult for the international community to engage with (*The State of Food Insecurity in the World, 2010*, p. 12, 14-16).

Nevertheless, continued food assistance to the DRC is critical to avoid an even deeper food security crisis than exists currently:

> "Humanitarian food assistance is a significant feature of protracted crisis environments. It saves lives and helps address the scarcity or deprivation that underlies many protracted crises. Humanitarian food assistance is also an investment in a country's future. Emergency food support that safeguards nutrition and livelihoods and supports education provides a strong basis for food security in the longer term and represents a potentially crucial investment in future development." (*The State of Food Insecurity in the World, 2010*, p. 32)

Humanitarian assistance to countries in protracted crisis rose five-fold between 2000 and 2008, from US$978 million to US$4.8 billion. Per capita humanitarian Official Development Assistance (ODA) for the DRC rose from about $7 in 2000-2002 to $10 in 2003-2005 and still higher to $13 in 2006-2008. Overall, humanitarian ODA fluctuates from year to year, though it is clear that countries in protracted crisis receive more than the average among least developed countries (*The State of Food Insecurity in the World, 2010*, p. 27-29).

However, humanitarian assistance should not be confused with development assistance. Development ODA equally rose roughly 60 percent from 2000 to 2008, from US$59.2 billion to US$95.2 billion. Regrettably, agriculture, so vital to the economies of countries in protracted crisis, received only a small fraction of development ODA. In the DRC, agriculture received only about 18 percent of development ODA as a percentage of total ODA from 2005 to 2008 (*The State of Food Insecurity in the World, 2010*, p. 27, 30).

Understandably, the DRC will be in need of outside assistance to satisfy its food needs currently and for the foreseeable future. Though typical subsistence farm families would prefer to be self-reliant in food production, they can only reach this point if the DRC's political situation stabilizes to the point that its economic system and infrastructure may develop to broadly support agricultural development. And for this to occur, war in the DRC must end.

In light of this, it is also important to recognize how humanitarian relief and food aid are affected by international variables. Specifically, two variables do so. First, an increase in significance in the international community's roles in stopping armed conflicts by rebel groups would cause more subsistence farm families to enter on the path of eventually providing their own food needs—thus, reducing the need for aid altogether. A second important issue that may affect food aid to the DRC is the ongoing global economic crisis. Though it appeared to have ended in early to mid-2011, a new stage of that crisis has unfolded. As certain Western countries face debt problems—the U.S., Greece, Italy and a number of others—and as the evolving global debt crisis sends shockwaves through the global financial system, humanitarian relief and food aid to the DRC and other poor countries may be curtailed. Only time will tell if this will be the case.

Recommendations to Improve Food Assistance; Role of Other Actors, Institutions, and Agencies

The DRC is in protracted crisis and has very little food security. The following actions—carried forward in an integrated fashion by international governmental and non-governmental aid agencies, the DRC government, as well as the people of the DRC—can improve its humanitarian relief and food aid:

1) "Support further analysis and deeper understanding of people's livelihoods and coping mechanisms [in the DRC] in order to strengthen their resilience and enhance the effectiveness of assistance programs" (*The State of Food Insecurity in the World, 2010*, p. 47). In the DRC, "assessments carried out by aid and development agencies are often narrowly focused on identifying immediate needs, while the capabilities and potential roles of local organizations in programme planning and implementation are frequently ignored" (*The State of Food Insecurity in the World, 2010*, p. 26). For example, in eastern regions of the DRC, numerous communities have developed their own institutions for resolving disputes over land. These institutions, called *chambres de paix* (peace councils), are led by community elders and work to create compromises among concerned farmers. Additionally, local associations have begun to inform farmers about property rights and to provide them with the legal framework to manage access to land, even turning to the national government to ask for the modification of certain property laws. Unfortunately, neither the *chambres de paix* nor the local associations have received much attention from aid agencies, thus losing their full potential for impact on development. Aid agencies should not ignore the capabilities of such local grass roots initiatives; rather, they should endeavor to learn more about them and incorporate them into their own activities (UNFAO, 24-25; (*The State of Food Insecurity in the World, 2010*, p. 25).

2) "Support the protection, promotion and rebuilding of livelihoods, and the institutions that support and enable livelihoods, [in the DRC]" (*The State of Food Insecurity in the World, 2010*, p. 47). "Humanitarian aid has predominantly focused on saving lives; it has not always been designed to support longer-term livelihood-protection goals and food security." In the DRC as in other countries of protracted crisis, livelihoods have been severely disrupted and people have responded with both remarkable human resilience and in harmful and unsustainable ways to these disruptions. For example, on the positive side, fisher folk near Lake Edward, which was once the fishing reserve of the entire province of North Kivu, moved in large numbers to the Virunga National Park and began cultivating rice, maize, soya, bananas and manioc to create an agriculture-based livelihood for themselves when fish output at Lake Edward declined precipitously (11,000 tons in 1954 to 3,000 tons in 1989). On the negative side, in eastern DRC

farmers moved from central Lubero to West Lubero to regain land lost to armed conflict and institutional breakdown, and tensions with local communities and landlords in West Lubero led to the marginalization of the newcomers. Livelihoods and food security in the DRC can be improved by continuing "livelihood provisioning," with free food distribution being the most common type of intervention; "livelihood protection," which is intervention aimed at protecting and supporting people's assets and preventing negative outcomes, such as the deprivation of productive assets (e.g., animals and tools); and "livelihood promotion," the most important of the three strategies, which "aims to improve livelihood strategies and assets, and to support key policies and institutions that can boost livelihoods." For example, providing vocational training to the DRC's internally and internationally displaced people "can enhance their skill levels and thus employability once the crisis is over." Also, in the DRC the nongovernmental organization Action Contre la Faim (Action Against Hunger) has provided agricultural services and seed multiplication to improve farming practices. These types of "long-term" activities must continue and be enhanced (*The State of Food Insecurity in the World, 2010*, p. 18-21).

3) "Revisit the architecture of external assistance in [the DRC] to match the needs, challenges and institutional constraints on the ground. This could entail the organization of a High-Level Forum on [the DRC] followed by the development of a new 'Agenda for Action'" (*The State of Food Insecurity in the World, 2010*, p. 48). Effectively assisting vulnerable populations in the DRC may also be done through the example of Afghanistan. Left with poor infrastructure, high unemployment, and widespread poverty after decades of conflict and droughts, the UNFAO and the United Nations World Food Program (UNWFP) created a food-security cluster, jointly working with an Agricultural Task Force led by members of the UN country team to address immediate-, medium-, and long-term food insecurity. Together, these two interventions effectively integrate programs specializing in relief/recovery aid in the form of nutrition, food security, biodiversity preservation, and livelihoods objectives into relevant government policies and institutions (*The State of Food Insecurity in the World, 2010*, p. 40-41). Such coordination could also play a significant role in increasing the effectiveness of aid to the DRC, as it would encourage the Congolese government to work more closely with international aid agencies, allowing them in turn to further develop the very few national aid agencies. This approach would also increase the coherence of humanitarian relief and food aid overall in a country scattered with various aid agencies (*The State of Food Insecurity in the World*, p. 46-47).

Conclusion

By 2015 the United Nations Millennium Development Goals aim to reduce world hunger by one half compared to early 1990s levels, when the goals were formulated. Though a formidable challenge given the current global economic crisis affecting all countries in some way, significant measures can still be taken to reach this goal, especially in the heavily undernourished and conflict ridden Democratic Republic of the Congo. The DRC, recognized to be in "protracted crisis" with about 54 million of 71 million people suffering malnutrition, has been the victim of conflict since its colonization by Belgian imperialists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Today these struggles continue, now fueled by multiple armed militias seeking to profit off of the vast mineral wealth of the DRC.

With 250 ethnic groups varying in culture and agricultural practices throughout the country and civil unrest causing the internal displacement of two million people, a "typical" subsistence farm family in the DRC is difficult to define. Though the mean family size is 6-7 people, families tend to grow much larger by kinship groups. Women mother an average of five children, contributing to a very large child population. Children suffer most from malnutrition, as the country's staple food, cassava, provides very little nutritional value besides starch and Vitamin C.

The greatest challenge the "typical" subsistence farm family in the DRC faces today in achieving agricultural self-sufficiency is the various armed conflicts scattered throughout the mountainous

farmlands of North Kivu, South Kivu, and Orientale Provinces. These provinces in eastern DRC, fortunate for their rich soil, are the traditional home of most of the country's agriculture; however, this is also where the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), the National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP), and the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), along with other rebel groups, continue to fight and to destabilize the entire country. Rebel fighting has forced more than 80,000 Congolese farmers into displacement camps in northern Uganda, advancing widespread undernourishment as farmers abandon their land in fear of attacks.

The DRC holds an immense capacity to attain food security. Despite its stifled agriculture, it has an untapped store of an estimated US$24 trillion in minerals; theoretically, the DRC can be one of the world's wealthiest countries. For now, however, it must rely greatly on outside agencies for food assistance. Yet this assistance can be improved. Humanitarian relief and food aid, while focusing on meeting the immediate needs of undernourished people, must also incorporate long-term developmental goals that would strengthen local as well as national infrastructures, preparing families for independence from aid agencies. On the other hand, international support must also increase to help end the country's armed conflicts, the main catalysts for undernourishment.

Achieving food security in the DRC is not impossible; aid agencies must only address the multifaceted problems affecting food security there in a more comprehensive and holistic manner.

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