

Address by Peter McPherson, Administrator
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Lessons Learned from the African Drought

Mr. Executive Director, Mr. Deputy Director General, Special Representative of the Secretary General, distinguished delegates of the Committee on Food Aid, observers and guests, it is a special privilege for me to be here today to share the United States experience in responding to the African drought emergency and to discuss how we can prevent a recurrence of another terrible famine in Africa. We know there will be another drought, but I ask, need there be terrible famine.

The African food relief effort last year was both a sobering and uplifting experience -- sobering because of the drought's toll on human lives; uplifting because of the extraordinary response. Clearly the efforts of African governments, the donors and nongovernmental organizations saved millions of lives.

Looking back, we can take great pride in our remarkable accomplishments.

By the fall of 1984 the continent was facing a near catastrophe involving 200 million people in 22 countries. The lives of 30 million people were in immediate jeopardy.

The crisis called for a global commitment. And that commitment was forthcoming. Emergency food and other assistance saved literally millions of lives and reduced the suffering of millions more. Contributions flowed unsparingly from many nations. The United States alone committed more than two billion dollars of emergency assistance. Americans contributed over \$200 million through their churches, schools, nongovernmental organizations, and corporations. Individuals from other nations did the same.

This overwhelming response offered a graphic demonstration of the willingness of people of many nations to work together to relieve human suffering.

Today's agenda -- for donors and recipients alike -- is to learn from this experience. We must improve our capacity to mitigate the effects of future food droughts. Moreover, we must address

the root causes of hunger and starvation in Africa. It has been said "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." It's because of this truth that our lessons learned from the recent African food crisis are so important.

Overall, the response of the international community was magnificent. Unfortunately, it was not perfect. We need to do better and, we can do better. We can learn from our mistakes.

I'd like to quickly summarize for you a few of the lessons that we have learned from our experience. I would add that many of our findings reinforce the conclusions of WFP's own analyses which will be discussed later during this session. We congratulate WFP's Evaluation Service for its excellent work in this regard.

Let me start by drawing your attention to several of our most compelling findings and conclusions:

Lesson 1: Key information that was needed for early warning such as needs assessment, targeting and impact evaluation frequently was not available.

Although the drought was in its third or fourth year, African countries and the international community were not fully prepared for the severe conditions experienced in 1984-85. As a result, food requirements changed rapidly, straining planning and implementation capabilities. At times, neither host governments nor donors were able to act decisively in the absence of timely and accurate information.

The facts are that we now know a great deal about how to detect approaching famine. Many of the methods were refined and tested during the last famine. These methods include satellites to check weather and crop yields, weighing children to monitor the amount of malnutrition and tracking prices of food in local markets.

Lesson 2: The initiative for managing emergency food responses rests with host governments.

Niger, Chad, Kenya and other countries did assume real responsibility. For example, the Chadian government set up a special Ministry for the Control of Natural Disasters and it made a real contribution. It should be noted that most governments, however, have limited capacity to handle such large efforts. Selective strengthening of their general administrative capability in the next few years should be considered. This should be done in a way that does not just expand bureaucracies.

LESSON 3: Donor and host government coordination is critical to ensuring a more rapid and concerted response to drought emergencies.

Such coordination worked especially well when in-country donor coordination had been established prior to or early in the drought cycle. For example, in Mali, donors had already worked together on agricultural policy issues. Therefore, it was a logical step for them to be collectively involved in identifying and assessing the food emergency. In general, donor coordination worked best when the host government assumed the principal coordinating role at the national, regional and local levels, as they did in Chad.

Lesson 4: The private sector -- and particularly the nongovernmental organizations -- played a key role in the distribution of massive amounts of food, for example, to remote areas in Sudan, Mali, Chad and Ethiopia.

Nongovernmental organizations, both local and foreign, helped identify groups and areas in need. They helped get the food to the countryside and monitored its distribution and end use. The private sector played a major role in the logistics arena. Private trucks were often a crucial link in delivering food to the rural population.

Lesson 5: Traditional coping mechanisms, such as community sharing and the consumption of famine foods, were of critical importance in extending available food aid to more people and preventing many deaths.

The availability of famine foods was especially important in keeping people alive during the summer of 1985, just before the last harvest. We need to be more alert to these coping mechanisms so that our food aid is planned to complement and not to undermine them. A better understanding of the stages of drought and the techniques people employ to cope with each stage would also help in determining appropriate and timely food interventions.

Lesson 6: Special expertise, administrative procedures and funding mechanisms are essential for the successful implementation of emergency programs.

The skills needed are not the same as those involved in carrying out a development program under ordinary circumstances. Emergency programs are different from,

not an extension of, normal development activities. Harmonizing the requirements of "business as usual" with the demand for immediate action is not an easy task for any manager. Nevertheless, decisions on these conflicting goals must be dealt with during a drought.

Lesson 7: Food alone is not enough: other resources -- including money, transportation, seeds, tools, and technical assistance -- are also necessary.

Food for Work requires a broader mix and additional resources than those needed for general food distribution programs. Where complementary resources are available and linked with food, the results will be more positive and development ties will be stronger. Similarly, the impact of general food distribution programs can be increased by adding supplemental feeding and health care. The lack of a health component will weaken the impact of the overall effort, especially in meeting the needs of those who are most at-risk. And finally,

Lesson 8: Emergency food aid programs need to be designed and administered so they support longer-term developmental objectives, as well as keeping hungry people alive.

The lack of adequate income is at the root of both underdevelopment and food emergencies. Household income is an essential link between development and emergency activities for those affected by drought. While development activities are aimed at increasing the income level of the poor, they do not always reach the groups most vulnerable to drought.

By the same token, emergency activities, which do reach those most at-risk, are usually designed simply to feed them and reduce their suffering. We should note that the Food for Work program in Chad did succeed in meeting the immediate food needs of displaced farmers and nomads while at the same time exploiting the potential for wadi cultivation. I conclude that with better targeting of our development programs and more lead time, it should be possible to better bridge the gap between emergency and development.

A.I.D. takes these lessons seriously. They have important implications for all of us - both donors and potential recipients.

I raise them today to get your reactions during the course of this session, and in the weeks and months ahead. The threat of famine clearly calls for a response far greater than individual nations can or should be expected to bear. We in the United States are determined to find ways to incorporate these lessons in our own program planning and implementation process. This will require action on a number of fronts. Included among our actions will be the following:

- First, the United States will help build and strengthen an apolitical highly professional early warning system or systems. These systems should signal when emergency food aid is needed. They should also indicate when emergency programs can be concluded. Such systems must be professionally and technically sound. They must be free of political manipulation. Only highly professional systems will have credibility with donor budget people and decision-makers. There is rarely disagreement when our professional systems determine that there is an epidemic. Why not try to achieve the same for famine determination.

The system must be inexpensive and relatively simple to operate and maintain. If it is not inexpensive and simple it will not be kept up. The point is, that we cannot prevent drought but we should be able to prevent famine. We have the technology to determine when a problem is approaching. This technology ranges from satellites to the weighing of children in drought areas. A lot of the work is already going on. What is needed is a means to fill in the gaps and pull all the information together. I don't think this requires some new expensive bureaucracy.

I am not here to suggest any particular approach, but I will say that donors, international institutions and vulnerable African countries need to work together to develop an approach to this problem. Let me be clear about one thing, FAO, WFP, donor countries and African countries draw upon resources, technical expertise, institutional systems and experience which can be put to collective use. Moreover, a great deal of this expertise proved invaluable during the last couple of years, but further steps are required.

We will cooperate with other donors to assist host governments expand local information gathering capability, and to document stages of drought responses.

- Second, we will continue to support strong donor coordination.

A.I.D. will support donor coordination efforts by host governments at central, regional and local levels.

We will seek and participate in donor coordination at the advance planning and need assessment stages and facilitate early concerted donor response to food emergency situations.

- Third, we will improve our management systems for drought emergencies.

Personnel inside and outside A.I.D. with food emergency experience will be identified. We will establish a locator system for keeping track of these people to enable us to draw on their expertise quickly in food emergency situations.

Jointly with the Canadians, the E.E.C. and WFP, we will be preparing a Food Aid Manager's Handbook.

A.I.D. will support efforts to improve the ability of nongovernmental organizations and other private sector entities to respond rapidly and to play expanded roles in future food emergencies.

As we think about the problems we face, we should keep in mind the experience of India as evidence that nations can move from recurring famine to grain self-reliance.

Only 20 years ago India suffered a famine worse than Africa's. India has now joined the community of nations donating grain to Africa. Africa too, can be self-reliant. In the 1985-86 crop year, but for bottlenecks in the distribution chain and the lack of income of the people, sub-Saharan Africa might have nearly enough production to cover its maize, sorghum and millet requirements. The technologies exist or can be developed. The resources of the international community, in concert with Africa's leadership, can sustain this momentum.

In closing, I have emphasized today steps that can be taken to improve future response to food emergencies. However, I must not conclude without acknowledging the outstanding performance of the World Food Program in addressing the famine. In particular, we owe a great debt to Jim Ingram and WFP for outstanding leadership in managing food logistics. We thank you, Jim. The WFP African Task Force Secretariat performed what appeared to be administrative miracles in overcoming serious obstacles that all too often threatened to shut off the food pipeline. Eric Moller, the head of the Task Force, deserves special recognition for his accomplishments and dedication in this regard.

I would also like to congratulate the United Nations Office of Emergency Operations in Africa for its leadership in successfully orchestrating the many voices of the United Nations in a concerted

attack on the African famine. Brad Morse and Maurice Strong were excellent. This is a model both at the headquarters level and in the field for future emergency situations.

For hundreds of years, records show a pattern of recurring drought and famine across Africa. This is a lesson we have clearly learned from the history books. But I have come here today with a sense of optimism and hope. There will, of course, be other droughts but I am firmly convinced that we have within our power the possibility to break the cycle of famine. I believe that we have a future where the scourge of terrible famine need never again ravage Africa. For the first time in the history of mankind we have the knowledge, the techniques, and the resources to prevent widespread famine.

The natural climatic cycles will always bring us more or less rain. The seven lean years and seven years of plenty which have been a part of man's history forever will likely continue. But the possibility of controlling our common destiny to prevent widespread starvation and famine is new to our generation. It is only now, in the last half of the 20th century that we can put in place the measures needed to ensure that millions of people will not die from hunger when the rains fail.

We have the tools, the experience and the commitment. Working apart, we will fall short of our purpose. Together, we can win the battle against famine.