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Food Security and Belt & Road

Africa and Middle East Famines: How China Can Do More

By Stella Liu

Synopsis

The unprecedented outbreak of famine early this year in Africa and the Middle East can be traced to conflict as the root cause. Can China step in to help mitigate the calamity through its Belt and Road initiative?

Commentary

FAMINE BROKE out in South Sudan in March 2017. At around the same time, the United Nations announced that Nigeria, Somalia and Yemen were also on the verge of being hit by long draught, putting around 20 million at risk of starvation. The UN described this as an unprecedented humanitarian crisis and appealed to the international community to donate US\$4.4 billion -- with little success.

Conflict, the root cause of these famines, will need to be resolved. China's increasing involvement in the Middle East and Africa gives the country the incentive and the capacity to effectively deliver both short and long term food security interventions that can enable peacebuilding and economic growth.

Unprecedented Humanitarian Tragedy

These famines have no precedence in both need and scale. According to FAO Assistant Director-General Kostas Stamoulis, the UN has never before experienced four threats of famine in multiple countries simultaneously. Stephen O'Brien, the UN humanitarian chief, stated that this is the largest humanitarian crisis since the creation of the world body.

With countries contributing millions of dollars of aid and loans to Africa and the Middle East, the threat of famine seems contradictory. However, the conflicts in these countries have stalled economic growth and exacerbated food insecurity by displacing farmers from their livelihoods. Continued distribution of aid and hefty loan packages will have limited success if the countries cannot solve the root of their problems and receive long term investments.

China, an active aid contributor and investor in the Middle East and Africa, stands to gain the most if the countries can break the linkages between food insecurity, conflict and poverty. Given China's long-standing aversion to military intervention, food security interventions through humanitarian efforts are more aligned to its foreign policy principles and they can be levers that the country can pull both in the short and long term to aid peacebuilding and economic development.

China's Strategic Interests in Mideast and Africa

In recent years, Nigeria, South Sudan and Yemen have become strategic locations for China's long-term geostrategic plans. For instance, in Yemen, the country stands in the way of China's Belt One Road Initiative (BRI). The new Silk Road passes through the Bab al-Mandab strait, controlled by Yemen, to the Red Sea.

South Sudan, holding most of the region's oil, is important for China's strategy to secure new energy resources. China imports almost 46% of South Sudanese oil through Port Sudan. Since January 2014, oil production has averaged 163,000 barrels per day, with oil revenue equalling roughly US\$20 million per month.

Nigeria has been the flagship of China's overall Africa strategy, seen through the amount of investment China has made in this country. Earlier this year, Foreign Affairs Minister Wang Yi visited his Nigerian counterpart Geoffrey Onyeama and stated that China would be investing \$40 billion into the Nigerian economy with a focus on energy infrastructure and transportation.

Violence Trap

Unfortunately, war has hindered the countries' ability to break out of poverty and move toward a future of peaceful economic development. If conflict is not directly resolved, China's initiatives and investments are at risk. The World Bank's World Development Report in 2011 established that the constraint on development is not a poverty trap but a violence trap.

One case study used in the report looked at two African states: Burundi and Burkina Faso. Until 1990, both countries had similar levels of income and growth rates. But in the late 1993, a civil war overtook Burundi and 300,000 people died in the upcoming years. Burkina Faso remained at peace and is now two and a half times richer.

One can see this on the global scale; low GDP per capita is robustly associated with both large-scale political conflict and high rates of homicide. The key to the economic development lies in addressing conflict first.

In the short term, the World Development Report recommended restoring people's confidence in government as a critical initial step. If administered correctly, food assistance can play an important role. While food aid has been criticised for prolonging conflict, China's role as a key investor could help address the main driver of aid-related conflict: misappropriation of food by the powerful.

A recent widely read research article from Yale University studied the effects of US food aid on recipient countries and discovered that on average, food aid increased the duration of conflict because parties in power would steal aid or use it for their own benefit. For instance, in Afghanistan, aid organisations had to give over one-third of the food aid to the Taliban.

Twin-Track Approach

However, China's strong relationships with the countries' governments as a significant stakeholder would help provide the leverage needed to ensure that food aid gets to the populations in need. When food aid is distributed correctly, there are case studies that demonstrate its ability to restore confidence among communities.

In war-torn Liberia, an evaluation of a relief and recovery operation found that 90 percent of the 1,200 participants interviewed believed that the short-term jobs provided through the food-for-work programme helped reconciliation and the rebuilding of the community. There is no silver bullet to end conflict, but delivering relief for communities can provide the much-needed foundation to enable peacebuilding.

In the long term, investments into the agricultural sector will need to complement food aid to make communities more resilient and for the country to increase economic growth. The FAO calls this the twin-track approach. Hunger needs to be eradicated first to increase people's capacity for productivity. Once they are able to work, investments into agricultural technology and knowledge can help people become self-sufficient.

For long-term economic gains, the agricultural sector is an important entry point. Investment in the agricultural sector, according to the World Bank, is two to four times more effective in raising incomes among the very poor than growth in other sectors. When both tracks are invested into for the long term, the linkages between hunger and poverty can be broken.

Short and long-term food security interventions can therefore help China's strategic initiatives and investments bear fruit. The country's increasing role as an investor and aid contributor to Africa and the Middle East gives China special leverage and incentive to ensure that the interventions are done correctly. With the rest of the international community staying silent, China could be the countries' last hope.

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