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IMPROVING POLICY RESPONSES AND FINDING SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS TO DROUGHT IN KENYA

PHILIP OSANO

SUMMARY

- The 2011 drought in Kenya resulted in an estimated 3.75 million Kenyans and 500,000 refugees requiring food aid, while over 300,000 children were affected by acute malnutrition
- The Government of Kenya's response to the drought crisis was necessarily robust and focused on humanitarian relief, but was slow to be implemented and poorly coordinated on the ground.
- Future responses to drought events could be improved by investing in long-term planning (including food storage practices and facilities) and taking advantage of local community participation and new technology applications that enable mitigation management.

BACKGROUND: THE 2011 DROUGHT AND HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY

Leaders from across East Africa gathered in Nairobi in September 2011 to participate in a high-level conference to devise lasting solutions to the hunger crisis in the region. The summit, "Ending Drought Emergencies: A Commitment to Sustainable Solutions," was necessitated by the drought and deteriorating humanitarian conditions affecting over 13 million people across Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia (UN-OCHA, 2011: 1).

The effects of the drought and resulting food crisis have been disastrous; in Kenya an estimated 3.75 million Kenyans and 500,000 refugees required food aid, while over 300,000 children were affected by acute malnutrition (UN-OCHA, 2011: 2-3). There were also huge losses of livestock — the mainstay of local rural economies — and widespread pastoralist migration in search of pasture

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and water. An influx of refugees from Somalia overstretched refugee camps such those in as Dadaab, which hosted over 500,000 refugees (UN-OCHA, 2011: 4) and became a source of further insecurity due to the smuggling of small arms and other weapons (Joselow, 2011).

This article reviews the Kenyan government's response to the drought and discusses related grassroots initiatives by the public and private sector, the role of technology, and concludes with policy lessons for better long-term management of drought situations.

KENYA'S 'SLOW AND INADEQUATE' RESPONSE TO DROUGHT

In May 2011, Kenyan President Mwai Kibaki declared the ongoing drought a national disaster, but was slow to enact a policy response aimed at addressing the humanitarian crises that it had created. The Ministry of Special Programmes, which handles food relief supplies and emergency disaster relief, allocated \$22 million (all figures USD) a full three months later for drought response and intervention programs (RoK: Ministry of State for Special Programmes 2011:1). Funds were used for food provision, sanitation and hygiene in refugee camps, water trucking services, emergency school feeding programs and livestock off-take programs. The government also provided cash transfers to over 60,000 people living in drought-affected parts of the country (Mitchell, 2011).

Despite this seemingly broad intervention, senior officials have criticized the Kibaki regime for its slow and inadequate response (Opiyo, 2011). This includes failing to heed early warnings of impending drought in 2010, and running a lethargic and poorly coordinated drought intervention effort hampered by government bureaucracy (Tatalovic, 2011; FEWSNET, 2011:1). Criticisms were specifically leveled at the government's Drought Management Initiative, which is aimed to consolidate drought responses at the national and community levels, but lacks proper coordination. Its main shortcomings are weak linkages between early warning signs and resource mobilization to enable rapid responses to drought emergencies. To overcome this challenge, the government is in the process of creating a Drought Management Authority and a National Drought Contingency Fund charged with improving planning, coordination and funding of drought mitigation.

More troubling is that mismanagement of funds has also arisen as a concern with this initiative. It was reported, for example, that \$4 million allocated to the Ministry of State for Development of Northern Kenya to help pastoralists has been lost in suspicious circumstances (Ross, 2011). Furthermore, anti-corruption advocates claim that unscrupulous businesspeople have taken advantage of loose procurement processes during emergency food importations, increasing their profit margins unfairly (Ross, 2011).

Finally, long-term government planning is also an issue. While millions face food insecurity on a regular basis in northern Kenya, farmers in the country's higher potential farming regions often produce annual surpluses of maize, milk and fodder, much of which is lost due to poor storage facilities and practices (Republic of Kenya 2008: 22). Building appropriate infrastructure for surplus storage is necessary to ensure food availability during drought periods.

EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES FOR TACKLING DROUGHT AND HUNGER

East African countries prone to drought have traditionally have relied on food aid provided by international humanitarian agencies and Western governments, but little has been done to tap local sources of relief. It is therefore a welcome development that the 2011 drought generated philanthropic initiatives led by the Kenyan private sector. A prime example is the Kenyans-for-Kenya Initiative (K4K) — a mobile-friendly fundraising campaign launched in July 2011 with the aim of raising \$5.55 million within one month to provide relief for those affected by drought in northern Kenya. The initiative received an overwhelming response, which saw the target realized in just 14 days, and eventually brought in \$7.5 million (Delloite, 2011). The role of technology in facilitating K4K is noteworthy, in particular because mobile cash transfers allowed donors to contribute using mobile devices (BBC, 2011). This innovative initiative strengthened Kenya's domestic response to the drought, and is hopefully a sign that the country can move towards further self-reliance in emergency relief situations.

TOWARD LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS

Tackling future drought occurrences effectively will require solutions that go beyond the short-term measures described in the backgrounder. Lessons

can be drawn from the 2011 East African experience. The involvement of local communities in the design and implementation of drought contingency plans is critical (De Leeuw et al., 2011). There is also a need to enhance the application of technology for drought management and mitigation. In addition to the mobile K4K effort described above, early warning systems can be improved with use of remote sensing technology (Ottichilo 2009). Ideally, drought interventions should be linked to long-term development priorities, such as improved food security and surplus storage. Planning ahead is critical as Kenya's northern regions face a sustained increase in demographic pressure, shrinking areas of arable land and reduced access to forage and water for livestock.

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