

The African Union and the Unfolding Disaster in The Horn Of Africa

Written by Jonathan Makuwira

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JONATHAN MAKUWIRA, AUG 30 2011

The recent catastrophe unfolding in the Horn of Africa has, over the past few months, caught global attention and commentary. In one of my interviews with the ABC News 24 (Sydney), the presenter's first question was "How this could be allowed to happen?" I could not give a definitive answer as there is no singular response to such an open-ended question. I do, however, remember mentioning the African Union (AU) taking a leading coordinating role in the humanitarian operation. It is against this background that I highlight the role of the AU in famine relief efforts and importantly, in facilitating long-term development programs in Somalia and, indeed, the region and continent at large.

The famine in Somalia, and indeed the food shortages in the neighbouring states of Kenya and Ethiopia, is not a new occurrence. The only difference this time is that it is declared official. It is the United Nations, not the African Union, which has made the declaration. This, in itself, is a platform to start the analysis of the institutional and/or structural failures of the African Union. Yes, changing weather patterns, prolonged conflicts, rising food prices, growth in population (in the case of Ethiopia) are among the factors exacerbating the situation. However, there are other factors worthy analysing in this context: culture, colonisation, global politics, poor development policies, dependency, just to highlight a few. With limited space, it is not possible to accommodate all these factors but I would like to highlight, albeit briefly, the linkages between famine and the factors mentioned above.

The legacy of colonisation is at play in many African states, Somalia included. Predominantly agrarian, many African states during the colonial era were forced to focus their attention on cash crops for export in order to earn more foreign currency to repay their debt which, since the introduction of the structural adjustment programs (SAPs) in the 1970s and 1980s, has resulted in diminishing production of subsistence crops. The Horn of Africa, as is the case with many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, has often been food insecure, with no coping mechanism during drought periods. The practice of traditional grain storage has since diminished. The new technological advances in 'early warning systems' on changing weather patterns have proven a failure, subsequently opening up a corridor of foreign intervention under the banner of UN system, like the World Food Program which, in many cases, has been and continues to be influenced by the US-based grain companies. Besides the dynamics of global politics on the continent, there seems to be a complete failure, domestically, to learn from the past experiences. There has been a glaring lack of anticipation and forecasting to the impending crisis. If there have been any lessons learnt, then there is little that has been used to avert the current situation amidst state collapse in Somalia.

The role of the African Union

The role of the African Union in facilitating the current humanitarian operation in Somalia can be analysed from two different lenses. First, from its historical context and, second, from a global political economy perspective. Of course, there is an overlap in analysing the two perspectives. The AU, unlike its predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), has an extended mandate of enhancing unity, strengthening cooperation and coordination, as well as equipping Africa not only with the legal and institutional framework but also to spearhead a new paradigm of development. To achieve these, regional stability is critical. However, since its inception in 2002, the AU has been fraught with competing ideological and differing political interests from its member states which have weakened its political position to proactively respond to the challenges and opportunities on the continent. While the OAU was

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incapacitated by a narrow interpretation of sovereignty and territorial integrity based on non-interference in the internal matters of member states, the AU constitutive act gives the Union the right to intervene in member states in order to restore peace and stability. However, over the past decade, the AU's intervention in such matters in, for example, Somalia, has not been followed with a political solution. The political stalemate and statelessness in Somalia is a complex situation fuelled by geo-strategic interests. For example, the US failure to restore a credible government in the early 2000s, and its unceremonious departure exposed the AU's incapacity to deal with domestic issues due, in part, to lack of financial resources and political will by its members who are dependent on the western donor agencies to finance their own development programs. This cross-cutting issue is cancerous particularly on a continent reeling to the ground by the legacy of colonisation and globalisation.

With this background, there are no quick fixes to the current situation. However, the AU should lead the humanitarian operations backed by the international aid agencies. The major challenge to the task is how to develop and execute transparent operation and reasonably sustainable logistics. Security is paramount. While a military-led humanitarian operation may be the only solution to reach those trapped in the paddocks of Al-Shabab enclaves, the AU should establish local level traditional networks led by traditional leadership (although local leadership may be non-existent given the ongoing factionalism). This can create a sense of ownership. The major challenge in this approach is to build trust among tribal factions. This is where local and international NGOs muster their efforts to hasten such an initiative. The point is, the AU should coordinate all these initiatives and monitor progress collaboratively with the rest of the local and international community.

The optimism of the long-term development, spearheaded by the African Union, is not an easy undertaking. Nonetheless, the success of the AU's development agenda lies on four fundamental issues, namely: geographical and historical issues; sustainable politics and legitimacy; security; and the manner in which the economy is handled.

Historically, the partition of Africa into countries with different sizes, demographic trends, economic development, culture, societal norms and natural resources endowment, is crucial to its future development. As a Union, the prospects of sustainable development should take into account all these disparities. Africa's development impasse exacerbated both by African leadership and the international community has resulted in human insecurity, with nearly 75% of Sub-Saharan Africa's population being vulnerable or living on less than \$2 a day. The link between poverty and conflict cannot be overstated in the context of Africa. That said, it is not surprising that the Horn of Africa, for a long time ravaged by conflict, has seen recurring waves of famine and food insecurity. The increasing prevalence of poverty has become a favourable ingredient of unrest, discontent and anarchy in Somalia. While political security (as is in the absence of conflict) is critical, human security is highly important. Unless the African Union addresses the fundamentals of collective security both in terms of politics and social development, the Horn of Africa risks being in a perpetual state of instability.

Africa is the only continent with the least interstate trade relations. Asia, for example, has interstate trade activities of over 50% while Sub-Sahara Africa is only 10%. In addition, there are very little inter-regional collaborative development efforts. This situation leaves Africa largely defined by outsiders who perceive Africa as a continent that needs the world rather than being a continent that mutually benefits regionally and internationally. Ultimately, Africa has been forced to restructure its economies around export commodities which, in the long run, have created dependency. The Union's failure to envision Africa independent of international economic interference renders the continent porous to international trade policies largely driven by the Bretton Woods Institutions. The AU needs to strengthen regional and interstate trade among African countries. However without infrastructure, it is impossible to achieve any success.

The politics of foreign aid in Africa has taken twists and turns, with the current shift from the 'West' to the 'East'. Individual African countries have found themselves prey to the conditionalities imposed by the western donor agencies. While these are meant to engender accountability and transparency, the opposite has prevailed. However, recent shifts in seeking aid from donors with 'soft' policies, like China, have given many African leaders the space for malpractice. The African Union needs to quickly readjust its internal policies on the collective interests of its membership to implement a measure of discipline within its own social, economic and political structures to ensure utmost accountability and transparency regardless of which donor(s) individual countries are dealing with.

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