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Africa: moving beyond chronic emergency

By CESAR CHELALA
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NEW YORK -- The current crisis in Niger, where 3.6 million people are at risk of starvation, shows how badly prepared the country is to respond to the emergency. The food shortage is affecting 800,000 children under age five in some 3,815 villages. Acute malnutrition rates have risen to 13.4 percent in the southern part of the country and 2.5 percent of this group is severely malnourished. A new initiative by the U.N. Millennium Project and the Japanese government could help avoid this kind of situation in the future.

The project, called "Millennium Villages," will be located across a wide range of agro-ecological zones, each presenting a different challenge to poverty reduction. The goal of the initiative is to promote human and food security by empowering African villages to implement integrated rural-development strategies.

The way in which international aid is provided is critical if it is going to be effective and make a difference in the lives of the poor. The Millennium Villages initiative is designed as an escape from the poverty trap and as a way to allow villagers to lead healthy and economically productive lives.

A significant aspect of the project is a stress on the need for an African Green Revolution that will lead to increasing food yields and will enable rural communities to achieve food security initially, and later start production diversification into commercial agriculture and into nonagricultural sectors.

According to professor Jeffrey Sachs, special adviser to U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan and director of the U.N. Millennium Project, "Right now, the rich countries are handling emergencies in Africa every year -- but we are not solving the problem. In fact, the objective evidence is that African living standards have declined on the average in the last 20 years. So giving food aid or giving emergency medical relief is very expensive without solving the underlying problems."

The goal of the Millennium Villages project is to empower villagers to improve agricultural production, and allow them to contribute to building public-health institutions with an emphasis on the prevention of disease. Under these conditions, emergencies would be abated.

Two villages -- one in Sauri, Kenya, and the other in Koraro, Ethiopia -- have already begun their activities with support from the Earth Institute at Columbia University, which has been working on poverty-alleviation issues. Sachs' vision is echoed by UNICEF's insistence on the need for long-term assistance and working with communities in countries such as Niger to avoid chronic food scarcity.

A proposal is being brought forth in Kenya for farmers to repay the subsidies they receive to improve soil and irrigation by providing agricultural products to schools and hospitals. This would eliminate the need for "food aid" and reserve that aid for emergency situations, such as the one in Niger today. It is estimated that this approach could increase the demand for agricultural products while at the same time increase agricultural productivity.

Positive results could also be obtained with relatively modest investments. The U.N. Millennium Project estimates that each villager will need \$110 annually to break out of the poverty cycle. This may also allow them to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, a set of quantitative, time-bound targets for indicators such as poverty, education and health in developing countries adopted unanimously by the United Nations in 2000.

The challenges facing developing countries are immense. But it is through initiatives that empower people at the local levels to become the architects of their own futures that those challenges will be successfully met.

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