

Don't Desert

Dryland Peoples

PHILIP DOBIE says that good government, which supports the people of the drylands, is the most important element in beating desertification and hunger

Millions of people in the Horn of Africa face abject starvation this year. The rains have failed again and their livestock are dying. They have nothing to sell to raise money for food, and unless food aid arrives quickly, their future is bleak. Desperate famine is also endemic in many other parts of the world. Understandably people believe it is inevitable.

In the same way, economists looked at famines in India in the 1950s and deduced that no amount of assistance could save the country from starvation and decline. Food production was stagnant and the population was growing: nothing could prevent disaster. But an unknown scientist, Norman Borlaug, either never heard the doomsters, or ignored them, and set about creating high-yielding varieties of wheat. In collaboration with Indian scientists – under the leadership of M.S. Swaminathan – he brought about the Green Revolution. He won the Nobel Peace Prize, and India progressed to become an emerging economic giant. Since then, scientists and farmers around the world have continued to prove the sceptics wrong.

Enterprising farmers

The people of the world's drylands face the greatest development challenges. They survive in areas where rainfall can be as little as one tenth of the level in highly productive agricultural zones. Rain also tends to be erratic – with frequent droughts – and often falls all at once, causing brief but destructive floods.

Yet life can improve even in these dry places. In the 1970s, we were told that the deserts of North

Africa were moving relentlessly south. The new science of satellite photography revealed an expanding Sahara Desert. But recent work in the Sahel has shown both that the desert is now retreating, and that enterprising farmers have improved their management of the soil so much, that productivity is increasing and food production has improved beyond all expectations.

Market opportunities

Meanwhile, studies in Kenya and elsewhere have confounded experts who predicted that increasing population density would inevitably lead to over-using of land and to desertification. In fact people revelled in the new market opportunities presented by more people, and began to use the land much more carefully. It became apparent that the real enemy of development was not nature, but wrong policies that assumed that people were helpless. Wherever governments have put their weight behind their people and helped them to make the most of their environments, lives have improved.

In China and Latin America, hunger is now a thing of the past. Adults there show signs of being shorter than they should be, because they had hungry childhoods. But their children are growing normally, because they are better fed.

The famine-torn parts of the world contrast with those where it has been cured not so much in terms of their physical and meteorological conditions, but in the way they are governed. The Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen famously said that famines do not occur in democracies; he showed that people



usually starve not because there is no food, but because they are so poor and politically marginalized that they cannot afford to buy it.

Development failure

Similarly, drought – apparently the cause of all of the ailments of the drylands – should be seen not so much as a meteorological phenomenon, as a failure of development. There is every reason to believe that even the driest parts of Africa should be able to produce livestock as profitably as the even drier Australia. The semi-arid zones of the world could produce crops to compare with the equivalently dry North American prairies.

We should be shifting investment rather than food aid into the dry zones: veterinary services, cold

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Shehzad Noorani/Still Pictures

Human development, however, is not a story not of capitulation to the vagaries of nature: it is one of innovation and adaptability overcoming natural obstacles. There is no reason to believe that we cannot similarly overcome the challenges of the next century. But time is running out for the world to recognize that environmental management is not a luxury for rich countries, but a prerequisite for development.

Taking care of the environment is a vital component of poverty alleviation and is necessary for the sustainable development of the Earth. Humans can develop the technologies that will reduce our current abusive rate of resource use. We need to manage our ecosystems much better to maintain the services they provide – adequate water, clean water, clean air, good soil, and much more.

Immediate attention

Environmentalists have failed to convince the economists who set development priorities that environmental management is an investment, not a cost. Yet millions of starving people in the poorest parts of the world suffer from the environmental excesses of others and from development decisions that continue to isolate and impoverish them. They will be the first to suffer from changes in the world's climate, and should be the first to receive help to adapt. They need immediate attention to protect the sources of their water, to improve the state of their soils and the conditions of their rangelands. They need improved livestock breeds and enhanced crop varieties that can use water more efficiently.

Above all, they need decision-makers to stop treating them as hopeless welfare cases, but as people who have lived with difficult conditions for millennia. A blend of good policy and good environmental management will ensure that their children, like the rest of us, can benefit from development ■

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stores and access to the meat markets for the dry livestock-producing areas; agricultural diversification and market support for semi-arid parts. It can work if the policies are right. Recently, Mali became Africa's largest producer of cotton. It is of very high quality, in great international demand; yet Mali's cotton farmers are being driven to ruin by cheap subsidized cotton from OECD countries.

Better livelihoods

So, will better international and national policies lead to better productivity, better incomes and better livelihoods? The answer is probably "yes" – but Malthusian pressures threaten all the development improvements of the last generation.

Although population growth has reduced tremendously in developing countries, it is still huge in the poorest parts of the globe. World population is still expected to double in a generation. At the same time, the people of the world are consuming

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more as they become richer. Population growth and consumption are together leading to a scarcity of resources that could limit economic and social development. The goal of sustainable development could become even more elusive.

Water, already in short supply in poor and dry parts of the world, will become even scarcer in the near future. Over-use by agriculture has caused water tables to fall catastrophically around the world, while deforestation has reduced the flow from watersheds to plains. Our growing dependence on fossil fuels is leading to atmospheric changes that can be expected to change rainfall patterns significantly. Unless people can mitigate these phenomena – or adapt to them – much of our recent development is threatened.