

Editorial

The Horn of Plenty in the Horn of Africa

In their preface to Robert Paarlberg's book entitled "Starved for Science: How biotechnology is being kept from Africa"¹, two Nobel prize winners, agricultural scientist Norman Borlaug and former U.S. President Jimmy Carter stated that

"Responsible biotechnology is not our enemy; hunger and starvation are. Without adequate food supplies at affordable prices, we cannot expect world health, prosperity, and peace."

The recent famine in the horn of Africa, especially in Somalia where poor health, poverty and desperate pirates fulfill the urgent prophecies of these wise men.

As of this month, the United Nations has officially declared famine in at least five regions of Somalia. In all likelihood, thousands of people, especially children have already succumbed to hunger, and at least 10 million more people are vulnerable. With the world economy tethering on the verge of a nervous breakdown, international supply of funds to address emergencies in developing countries is shrinking. It is all the more interesting that Paarlberg puts the blame for the seemingly unstoppable devastation of hunger in Africa to "donors" and "global pressure groups" that have collectively advocated withdrawal of support for the use of genetically engineered organisms in agriculture. The anti-GEO campaign appears to be succeeding against the backdrop of complicit African governments. It is not clear that these governments are getting anything in exchange to support their famished populations.

Famine is not a new development in the horn of Africa, and we cannot blame the recent devastation on population size. The population growth rate of Somalia today remains about the same as it was 50 years ago, at less than 2.5%. In comparison, Qatar, also situated in a geographical desert has a population growth rate of nearly 10%. But something happened in Somalia in the decade between 1972 and 1982 when the growth rate suddenly shot up to 10%, only to crash to below zero percent in 1986. Are we in for another crash in 2011? If we survive this particular famine, when should we expect the next one? Despite all the noise about technology and early famine warning systems, how should we prepare to respond to the next episode? Are we still to rely on donors and global pressure groups? How will the debate between agriculturalists and environmentalist resolve? What would be the status of indigenous environmental technology research and development? How are African governments going to respond individually and collectively? When will the African Cornucopia stop being a figment of global imagination and return to reality?

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¹ Paarlberg, R. 2008. Starved for Science: How biotechnology is being kept from Africa. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 256 pages.