Can aid do more harm than good?

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| By Henri Astier  BBC News website |

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| Mother and child waiting for food aid  Dramatic pictures publicised Niger's plight in June |

**When Niger's president last year accused aid agencies of exaggerating his country's food crisis for their own gain, Western media reacted with shock.**

How dare he bite the hand that feeds his people, commentators asked. Many suggested the president was making excuses for the failings of his own government.

But according to some leading aid experts, Mamadou Tandja had a point.

His remarks may have been self-serving, they concede, but they also raised serious issues about the way aid emergencies are sometimes handled.

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| http://newsimg.bbc.co.uk/shared/img/o.gif | http://newsimg.bbc.co.uk/nol/shared/img/v3/start_quote_rb.gif**My concern about this is you either have an aid bonanza or you have nothing** http://newsimg.bbc.co.uk/nol/shared/img/v3/end_quote_rb.gif  Tony Vaux |

"I think NGOs and rich country media do have an incentive to paint too simplistic and bleak a picture, as was the case in Niger's food crisis," Professor William Easterly of New York University told the BBC News website.

What Niger experienced in 2005 was not a sudden catastrophe, but chronic malnutrition that makes people vulnerable to rises in food prices.

Glib talk of famine backed by pictures of starving children may help NGOs raise funds, but it does nothing to address these basic problems, says Mr Easterly.

**Boom and bust**

Tony Vaux, a former official with Oxfam, agrees.

Once an emergency is identified, he says, the NGOs' public relations machine takes over and "there is a terrible temptation to look around for the very worst stories".

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| Niger President Mamadou Tandja  President Tandja caused an outcry when he criticised NGOs |

"My concern about this is you either have an aid bonanza or you have nothing. There does not seem to be a middle ground," says Mr Vaux, author of the book The Selfish Altruist.

One problem with dramatic appeals, Mr Easterly notes, is that they do not give you a big bang for your aid buck.

"The payoff is disappointingly low," he says. Getting the relief effort up and running takes time, and when the food arrives it is often too late - or the crisis has eased on its own, as appears to be the case in Niger.

Emergency aid may relieve the situation - but the same amount spent before children starved in front of the cameras would have saved many more lives.

Such poor returns were illustrated by the 2002 southern Africa "crisis".

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| http://newsimg.bbc.co.uk/shared/img/o.gif | http://newsimg.bbc.co.uk/nol/shared/img/v3/start_quote_rb.gif**Sometimes aid agencies overplay figures in order to sustain themselves** http://newsimg.bbc.co.uk/nol/shared/img/v3/end_quote_rb.gif  James Shikwati |

After rains failed the UN warned that "at least 10 million people in four southern African countries are threatened by potential famine".

Camera crews went in to film starving babies and aid flooded in. According to UN agencies and many commentators, this played a crucial in averting disaster.

But others are not so sure.

Take the case of Zambia, which at the time banned aid because it worried about genetically-modified US maize.

Donors were aghast. "Leaders who refuse to let their people have food, should be put in the dock for the most serious crimes against humanity," the US ambassador to Zambia said.

But then something strange happened: nothing. Cutting off supplies did not trigger famine.

The UN World Food Programme point out that it would be wrong to conclude that Zambia was better off left alone: the country did receive non-GM food aid from Europe, which helped alleviate local shortages.

But at the very least, it seems clear that Zambia did not need a massive food influx to avert catastrophe.

"NGOs flatter themselves into thinking that they save lives," says former Zambian Agriculture Minister Guy Scott, who finds it "arrogant of the West to think that without whites, without pop stars, Africans would all be dead".

**Dependency**

The West tends not only to overstate the effectiveness of aid, but also to underestimate its harmful effects.

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| Two girl talk near piles of bags of groundnuts in Maradi, Niger  Too much of a good thing? |

A bonanza often undermine self-reliance.

"It is axiomatic that flooding the market with food drives down the price for local farmers," Mr Easterly says.

James Shikwati, who heads the Inter Region Economic Network, a Kenyan NGO, says drought aid to his country in the 1990s "killed production" in many areas and increased dependency.

Aid can also encourage misguided policies. Mr Shikwati says this has been the case in Ethiopia, where farmers are not allowed to own land.

Instead of introducing reforms, he notes, the government appeals for aid.

When donors respond, Mr Shikwati says, "they are subsidising a government policy that makes it difficult for people to be productive".

Likewise, it can be argued that aid sent to Niger has helped obscure the role played by its neighbours in the crisis.

Nigeria and others - violating regional treaties - have banned grain exports to Niger, which in normal times would have alleviated shortages.

**What is to be done?**

Mr Easterly and others are not arguing that the solution to perverse incentives lies in withholding emergency aid.

They contend that it could be made to work better in a number of ways, including:

* Providing compensation to local farmers
* Making sure aid stops when things improve
* Giving hungry families cash rather than food

But the most effective move would be to focus less on emergencies and more on chronic problems. Mr Easterly says this could be done cheaply in the Sahel.

Improving access to clean water and distributing re-hydration tablets, for instance, would help eradicate diarrhoea, which drains nutrients away and makes children particularly vulnerable.

Tony Vaux, for his part, calls on the media to present a balanced picture of the situation of the ground, and not see their role as promoting the NGOs public appeals.

But he does not hold out much hope.

"When I first joined Oxfam in 1972 there was a famine in the Sahel, exactly like the famine today," he recalls.

Three decades and umpteen appeals later the same emergencies keep recurring, he says ruefully.