

East Africa Food Crisis: Humanitarian aid is more than food. It is a sign of hope.

Last Tuesday, as I was leaving Yirol in central South Sudan following a food distribution, an elderly gentleman in his late 60s kept asking why he wasn't on the list to receive food. He couldn't work and therefore couldn't earn a living. Clearly disabled, and using a walking stick he kept pleading "why am I not deserving?". This haunting refrain has echoed in my ears ever since. It is not that he is not deserving; we just don't have enough for everyone.

Having returned to this community after just a few months since the last food distribution, we found a bad situation far worse than we could have imagined. Although we are responding as best we can, it is beyond our ability to meet all needs.

I have witnessed several famines and it is never easy to turn someone away. The only way to deal with this situation is to tell people the truth; to tell them we don't have enough and work with them, as a community, to identify who is most in need and should, therefore, receive aid.

Cafod and our Irish equivalent, Trocaire, are working together, as the only agencies providing food in Yirol. We are working alongside a number of other agencies, each focusing on their own expertise by providing essentials like shelter and health and medical facilities, to meet the need. This coordinated approach is so integral to meeting the needs in the most efficient way, but there is still so much more to be done.

To date, Cafod and Trocaire's local Caritas partners have reached 12,000 people in Yirol with food supplies but it's just a drop in the ocean. The need is so great. In neighbouring county, Adior, 26,000 people are in need including internally displaced people from Unity State where famine and conflict collide in catastrophic proportions. But we can only reach 1,000 households there because we simply don't have enough.

Across parts of South Sudan, famine is taking hold. In Yirol, where our main food distribution programme is, the effects of famine are more visibly evident. In Juba the same hunger exists – but people wear western clothes that conceal their skeletal frames. However, in Yirol, people look very thin and gaunt. Their complexions are sallow. People are walking slowly everywhere; even children are moving slowly because they do not have any energy because of lack of food. It is heart-breaking.

Out of desperation, people are going to the forest to find wild vegetables and leaves. Women are boiling up leaves so they have food to give to their children. It is edible in the sense it won't kill you but it has minimal nutritional value. Mangoes are just starting to come into season but people are picking them off prematurely because of hunger.

The markets, which would usually be buoyant with fruit and vegetables including staples such as maize, beans and sorghum at this time of year, have next to nothing available. And what little is available, are out the reach of ordinary people because of sky-rocketing prices.

There is no choice but to import food, which is costly both in terms of transportation, tax, and the most precious thing of all: time. This is why a sustained commitment to international aid is absolutely necessary – so that people can have enough to eat and get the food aid distributed swiftly.

We are working through the local Church and their diocesan networks to respond to the need. Their partnership has been key. They are widely respected by the community because they treat every single person with dignity, and this commitment to the people shines through. This same welcome and respect is shown to us which is truly humbling.

Right now, food is undoubtedly our greatest need, closely followed by clean water, to prevent vulnerable communities from getting sick. This is why all our emergency projects are combined food, water and hygiene projects.

It is clear from my last visit to Yirol the situation for families as rapidly deteriorated - put simply people have gotten much hungrier. Yet, these very same families I meet again despite their hunger, now had a sense of hope because we had responded to their basic needs, this has built up trust which in turn opens up the possibility of hope.

And here lies the heart of the matter; humanitarian aid is more than food. It is a sign of hope. It is a sign someone is watching and listening to what they are saying. It is a sign someone cares, that they are not forgotten.

The people of South Sudan are longing for peace and security. To return to a sense of normality to return to their homes, for their children to return to school and to go back to farming their land....

But the truth is that conflict is the main barrier to progress. South Sudan is a beautifully fertile land naturally irrigated by the white River Nile, even with the difficulties brought by the current drought. It is simply just not safe for people to tend to their land due to the violence.



This July will mark six years since South Sudan became the world's newest nation. My prayer for the world's newest country is that peace will be restored to the land and that communities will be allowed to flourish once again.

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A South Sudanese woman holds a a Cafod and Caritas food voucher that she has exchanged for 50

kgs of sorghum, 50 kgs of beans, 10 litres of vegetable oil and 5 kg of salt

Michael O'Riordan - The Tablet