World leaders' African failure


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Europe must take the lead in ensuring that aid arrives to the millions of people starving in Africa's Sahel region, writes Kirsty Hughes

At the twin G8 and G20 summits in Canada this weekend, the world's leaders made no mention of an acute crisis that has placed ten million people in western Africa at risk of severe malnutrition and starvation.

That threat to food supplies – caused by a severe drought across the Sahel region, particularly in Chad, Mali and Niger – has also been largely off the radar of politicians across the EU. It is now a matter of weeks, not months, before reports put images of the most desperate hunger on their television screens.

International aid is arriving – but too little and much too late. Supplies of food to half of Niger's 7.1 million people are deeply insecure and millions of others are affected in Chad, Mali, Burkina Faso, northern Nigeria and northern Cameroon.

The European Commission has engaged with this crisis: Kristalina Georgieva, the European commissioner for international co-operation, humanitarian aid and crisis response, visited Niger a month ago and the Commission allocated an additional €24 million of emergency aid. This aid, though welcome, could have come sooner – early warning indicators started to flash red last autumn and we are now entering the worst phase of the 'hunger gap'.

At this point, only an urgent political push, at the highest level, can provide the impetus that is needed to make up for the cumulative delays.

In most of the affected countries, children under the age of five are the most vulnerable, with hundreds of thousands classified as severely malnourished. Many men have left their villages in search of employment in towns. Women are coping as best they can: in Chad, that means that some women are digging anthills to eat the grains and seeds the ants have stored.

The nomadic and semi-nomadic herders who rely totally on their animals also face desperate times – cattle are under-nourished and weak and, in northern Mali and Niger, the lower temperatures brought by the rainy season are now killing many of them.

In Niger, aid is getting through – but not enough of it. The World Food Programme's (WFP) distributions have been delayed, not least by the slowness with which funds are being committed – the WFP cannot order food until it knows it has the money. It is possible no food will be delivered in August and the arrival of the rainy season will make delivery harder, if not impossible.

In Chad, many may face a three-month gap, to October, before aid arrives.

This is not an unforeseen crisis – the Sahel area faces chronic problems of food insecurity. And, indeed, in Chad it is the EU's humanitarian arm, ECHO, that has been pushing international agencies and NGOs to gear up more rapidly to face the urgent and mounting challenges. Meanwhile, in Brussels and elsewhere, there are policy debates about how best to combine long-term development with urgent responses to acute crises. But the lessons are not being learnt fast enough for this and other emerging food crises.

In the long term, more genuinely new money will be needed. A year ago, at L'Aquila, the G8 promised $22 billion (€18bn) over three years for agricultural development in countries whose food supplies are most insecure, but overall almost three-quarters of the $22bn is repackaged 'old' money rather than new commitments. In Canada last week, the G8 said they had delivered just $6bn (€4.9bn) so far. That is not enough.

But at this point what matters most for the people of the Sahel is emergency aid. European leaders should have demanded the G20's attention last week. But they – and also Georgieva and Commission President José Manuel Barroso, in the past a leader in EU responses to food crises – still have a chance to apply pressure for a big, international political surge to push aid through. They should call for a UN special envoy to be sent to the region. That, though, should just be the start of engaging those politicians who last week failed so dramatically to heed a crisis they knew last autumn was probable.

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Unshackle a force for good

European philanthropy is proving its mettle in this crisis. With the EU's help, it could be of even greater value, write Gerry Salole and Luc Tayart de Borms

It may be a surprise to many, but the European foundations sector outweighs its American counterpart in terms of assets, expenditure and diversity. This is a sector – with foundations defined as purpose-driven, asset-based, independent non-profit bodies of public benefit – that has become a major force in the European economy in the past two decades.

In all, there are some 110,000 public-benefit foundations in the EU and some 43% of these have been set up since the early 1990s. The sector has proven resilient during the global economic downturn: European foundations have been hit by the crisis, but they have nonetheless maintained their levels of investment. Foundations have reliable sources of income, a fact that enables them to plan and carry out work over the long term. They have no shareholders (who require financial reward) and can spend their resources on their public-benefit mission, using not only their revenues but also their capital to meet their commitments in terms of investing in projects.

The sector is thriving, but it is not reaching its full potential due to deficiencies in European legislation.

What is needed – as a recent European Commission study suggests – is a European Foundation Statute. This would ease cross-border activities, add legal certainty, generate operational savings and bring clarity. The statute would allow a foundation to register as a 'European foundation' in one member state and at the same time be recognised and be operational throughout the EU. The statute would exist in parallel to the existing national legal forms and its use would be optional. It would maximise income from international foundations and corporations; the principal beneficiaries would – of course – be EU citizens. Reaching a consensus between member states is proving a challenge, but it should surely not be an insurmountable one, given that this is a statute with little downside and much of immediate value.

Looking towards the future, the European foundation sector must do much more to meet the challenges ahead. These are similar to those faced by all Europeans, as set out in the Europe 2020 agenda: foundations need to encourage smarter, greener, more sustainable and inclusive growth and more participatory and cohesive multicultural societies. To achieve these goals, foundations are increasingly working across borders (two-thirds of the European Foundation Centre's members alone work across borders and are active outside their country of origin), but a lack of appropriate legal tools sometimes means new European initiatives by foundations are delayed or abandoned.

European foundations are currently bearing costs, chiefly for compliance and legal advice, totalling between €90 million and €101m each year, according to the EU-commissioned study. This is money that could otherwise be spent on activities of public benefit.

Moreover, the value of a statute should increase. Baby-boomers are likely to give away some of their wealth, and the young are increasingly philanthropic: recent studies show that better educated young people are more inclined to want to engage in a good cause. So this statute would not just mean that donors' euros would do more; it would encourage more giving now, and more giving from two generations – the old and the young – that show every likelihood of being generous.

A statute is long overdue – the European Foundation Centre began calling for a European-level legal instrument of this sort in 2001. In the decade since then, the value of introducing a statute has become clearer still.

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