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FOOD FOR WORK -- A KARAMOJA PROJECT

by Epajjar Ojulu

UGANDA, IDRC--"Food for Work" is the name of a new multipurpose rural development programme designed by Uganda's Ministry of Rehabilitation to fight repeated threats of famine in the north-eastern region of the country, Karamoja.

The main idea behind the new programme is that food donations to Karamoja should be applied to foster development in the area and reduce the persistent dependency on external assistance. According to the Ministry of Rehabilitation, studies have shown that free distribution of food to the Karamojong raises expectations for their continued reliance on external assistance, and inhibits the spirit of self-reliance and productivity.

The Ministry is, however, soliciting financial support abroad to put the programme into effect. The project has also been presented to the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) and the World Food Programme (WFP) for funding.

Intensive studies in the Karamoja region by aid organizations indicate that there are unlimited possibilities for "food for work" programmes, but that there are many constraints to be overcome before they can be implemented. As a result, introduction of the programmes will be a gradual, step-by-step process.

As a first step, pilot projects linked to village resettlement schemes will be run concurrently with free distribution of food. These pilot projects have been conceived as a means of trying to change the ways of the people of Karamoja from the nomadic life to a settled, self-sufficient agricultural community.

Part of the reason why the people of Karamoja flee their homes during drought is that they are nomadic by nature. Settlement is therefore seen as a means by which the people may be persuaded to abandon the traditional way of living that subjects them to the vagaries of nature and frequent cattle raids for survival, and to seek a new way. Ten settlement villages, scattered all over the areas where environmental conditions are most favourable, are proposed as a start. The nucleus of the settlers will be composed of displaced Karamojong presently seeking refuge in neighbouring districts.

Each village will have adequate water, and equipment will be provided for digging boreholes for wells. There will be enough farmland to be divided into 11-acre farm plots, one per family. For ease of management, each village is to have not more than 2,000 families, or 10,000 inhabitants. Basic farming tools, household goods, and some relief food for the initial six months of settlement will also be needed. In addition, schools, health facilities, and feeder roads will be necessary.

Persuading the nomadic Karamojong to join the settlements is not likely to be an easy task. As cattle keepers do not willingly part with their animals, facilities for cattle rearing, such as cattle dips, watering places, and land for grazing will also have to be provided.

To ensure that the new ideas percolate into the youth of the district, there are plans for incentives to improve school attendance. In the early 1970s, Oxfam established that school attendance in the region rose with the supply of free food in the schools. After Oxfam withdrew its feeding programme, as a result of difficulties during the Amin regime, there was a drastic fall in school attendance.

The WFP has agreed to provide daily rations to pupils of 114 schools. The resulting savings to the schools are to be invested in horticultural activities or small-scale animal husbandry projects at the schools. In addition, the WFP is supporting 25 schools in the most fertile parts of Karamoja for more extended programmes of farming activities.

To raise nutritional standards for children and lactating mothers, the Uganda government has also requested the WFP to continue to assist institutions and centres catering to these groups beyond the present emergency period. The WFP has agreed to provide continuing food assistance to four area hospitals and 34 related institutions. Additional assistance for hospitals in the Karamoja is coming from medical teams working under the auspices of various non-governmental organisations from France, Ireland, Italy, the United Kingdom, and West Germany. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) continues to supply drugs and other medical supplies and facilities. This combined effort aims to keep the people of the Karamoja healthy and productive, and prevent the outbreak of epidemics.

If it succeeds, the "food for work" programme is expected to raise agricultural production in this region and eventually lead to food self-sufficiency. The Ministry of Agriculture will provide assistance to the people in clearing the land and preparing it for farming. The Ministry will also open up blocks of land totalling 400 acres as demonstration farms to show the application of advanced cultivation practices, and will help in the construction of grain storage facilities.

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