Ethiopia relief effort: lessons from Kampuchea

In 1979-80, Oxfam America participated in a major relief effort in Kampuchea (Cambodia). Joel Charny, Southeast Asia projects officer, discussed lessons from that experience at a recent Oxfam America staff briefing. Excerpts from his talk follow.

The trigger for the Kampuchean famine was the Vietnamese invasion in 1978, during the rice harvest, which compounded the severe food problems that had been forced on the people under Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge.

Oxfam America has a fairly long history of work in Ethiopia and elsewhere in Africa. By contrast, before 1978, we had no significant experience in Southeast Asia. Our first big effort in that region was to aid the boat people — refugees, many of them ethnic Chinese, who began leaving Vietnam in large numbers in 1978. We held press conferences, we did a fundraising campaign about it. But this did not give us any problems later with the Vietnamese government — even though the Vietnamese were extremely sensitive about the boat-people crisis.

A key lesson from this is that relief agencies tend to underestimate their strength and their ability to work on both sides of conflict situations. The Vietnamese, despite the criticism they received from agencies that played up the boat-people crisis, later enabled these same agencies to get access to Kampuchea.

Just as there are different sides in Ethiopia — the Eritrean and Tigray Peoples Liberation Fronts against the Ethiopian government — there were two sides in Kampuchea: on one hand, the Vietnamese-backed government, with the help of the Vietnamese army, controlling the fertile central area where most of the population traditionally lives; on the other hand, the Khmer Rouge, other resistance movements, and plain refugees fleeing into Thailand all along the border.

One positive aspect of the Ethiopian situation is that the government there, unlike the Vietnamese-backed regime in '79, has diplomatic relations with most countries. It's a large aid recipient. It's used to dealing with nongovernment organizations, as are the relief arms of the

Child in Kampuchea

resistance movements in northern Ethiopia.

So the requirement that aid be monitored comes as no surprise to the Ethiopians. Already, Oxfam America has received more detailed monitoring reports from OXFAM (U.K.) in Ethiopia — on how food came in and where it was distributed — than we got during the whole Kampuchean relief effort. OXFAM (U.K.) has a monitor in Ethiopia who followed a food shipment from the port to the distribution centers, counted bags in the warehouse, and so forth. That kind of thing never happened in Kampuchea, partly because of the disorganization of the government, partly because they didn't understand the needs of the outside agencies.

An important obstacle in Ethiopia is that we are dealing with vast arid spaces where people have no capacity to live off the land.

In Kampuchea, however, the famine was fairly short-lived because as soon as there was a bit of stability in the country, people could begin to forage for food. In Kampuchea even in the dry season there are rivers that can be fished, there are papayas and banana trees, a whole range of forest products.

So in Kampuchea we began emphasizing reconstruction assistance, long-term aid. But I believe one of our errors was to let ourselves be seduced by the "technical fix." The OXFAM Consortium had $40 million, and we tended to spend it on technology that normally we would not spend it on.

An example was the small diesel irrigation pumps that we sent in. Yes, they were necessary, but they did not last very long before breaking down, and obviously, they were not a long-term solution. Still, we put a lot of money into them.

The lesson here is not to be deluded by the dollars you have. In spending the African drought-relief funds, we should try to maintain the same values and standard approaches that we do with a $20,000 project in the Philippines, or a $50,000 project in Nicaragua.

One of Oxfam America's best responses in Kampuchea came after we sent an agriculturalist, John Dennis, to the border area and he began looking at some possibilities of aiding farmers directly.

John created a program called "The Subsistence Agricultural Package," similar to what we provided recently in Mozambique and to what we're hoping to provide in Ethiopia. Oxfam America provided oxen, an ox cart loaded with several hundred pounds of seed, hoes, plows, and a rope to pull the cart out of the mud. The farmers walked up the trail, collected the oxen, the carts, and drove them home, where they divided the seeds and tools.

To many of us, this program represented what Oxfam America should be. □

OA staff photo by Michael Scott

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