
II. Famine: Moving Beyond Aid

Ethiopia's China-Built Railway as a Model The Role of Infrastructure in Fighting Hunger, Moving Beyond Aid

by Hussein Askary and Marcia Merry Baker

Oct. 30—The global community, as reported by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in July 2019, was already “[off-track](#)” in terms of reaching the UN's Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number two: zero hunger, by 2030. When the COVID-19 pandemic overwhelmed the world, matters got even worse, as global supply chains were severely affected by the preventive lockdowns in almost every part of the world from February 2020. The import-dependent nations, also the poorest, were impacted more than others.

The problems of hunger and poverty are not new, but have been neglected for many decades. The means to mitigate them are available, but need a concerted effort by all nations, especially the industrial ones, to launch a coordinated, three-tiered effort, a “World War on hunger and poverty.” The steps are, rationally, to prioritize emergency relief, but also to move immediately to enable recipient communities to grow food themselves for the next season. This involves, for example, providing seeds and fertilizers—sometimes in the very same shipments as food relief. As for the longer-term strategy, we must build the necessary infrastructure to ensure that societies in the most affected regions are made capable of producing in a sustained manner, at least the minimum requirements of their food security.

Famine—Of Biblical Proportions

David Beasley, Executive Director of the World Food Programme (WFP) has repeatedly sounded the alarm in 2020, about the “multiple famines” in the



WFP/Michael Tewelde

Heads of UN agencies in drought-stricken Ethiopia, September 1-4, 2017: David Beasley, Executive Director, World Food Programme (squatting center); José Graziano da Silva, Director General, Food and Agriculture Organization (far left); and Gilbert F. Hounbo, President, International Fund for Agricultural Development (blue jacket).

making “of Biblical proportions.” On October 9, his agency, the world’s largest food relief organization, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for its efforts to combat hunger. In an October 25 [commentary](#) in *Fortune* magazine, “Our Nobel Peace Win Is an Honor and a Tragedy,” Beasley stressed that there are no grounds “to celebrate”:

Despite our resolve to achieve zero hunger by 2030, the sad truth is that hunger has been rising over the past several years, and there is no end in sight. COVID-19 has only exacerbated an already bad situation. This Nobel Prize is a call to action at a critical time. COVID-19 is threatening to create a hunger crisis of Biblical propor-

tions—worse than anything we’ve seen in our lifetimes—unless we do something about it. This is not hyperbole; this is the blunt reality.

Beasley called for resources from all sectors, including the private sector and “billionaires,” writing:

We need to raise \$5.1 billion more, now, to feed the people affected by the ripple effects of the coronavirus crisis for the next six months.

Beasley had [briefed](#) the UN Security Council April 17 on the hunger pandemic unfolding in 2020, likening the need for food relief resources today, to that of the humanitarian aid crisis after World War II. But adequate resources and mobilization have not come.

On October 13, Beasley shocked the world in his opening address to a world food conference of the FAO, saying that so far this year, “seven million people have died from starvation.” He said that if proper action is not taken, this could increase several times over, even reaching 30 million people within months. Already last year, 815 million of the world’s 7.5 billion were food insecure, with 100 million people totally reliant on food aid to survive. Now the number of those totally reliant is approaching 270 million, for whom provision of food is the difference between life and death.

While governments in the industrial world poured out trillions of dollars and Euros to save financial markets and banks, the few billion dollars demanded by the WFP were not secured. The WFP is not the only UN organization that is involved in providing food aid, but there is a plethora of organizations, governmental and non-governmental, working each on its own in a different part of the world. Given the severity of the crisis, a concerted international operation is required to meet the immediate needs of the hungry in the world, most of whom are located in Sub-Saharan Africa.

It is important to note, on the prospects for such concerted action, that the United States has been unwavering in its backing of the WFP so far. U.S. contributions to the WFP have been rising, to the extent that the U.S. share of its funding is now over 50%. Beasley himself was nominated for his position in 2017 by President Trump. Beasley, a former Republican governor of



UNAMID/Albert González Farran

Community members of the Nifasha camp for Internally Displaced Persons unload bags of sorghum from a World Food Programme truck, North Darfur State in western Sudan, February 11, 2014.

South Carolina (1995-1999), was a Trump backer in the 2016 primary election. Jack Kingston, a former adviser to the Trump campaign wrote that, “the WFP shows we can still support good programs” in the October 26 issue of *The Hill*. Kingston, also a former member of Georgia’s House of Representatives (1993-2015), [continued](#), “Winning the Nobel Peace Prize is an accomplishment in which Americans—Democrats and Republicans—should take pride.”

The Role of the Military

One ironical aspect of collaborative international effort to combat hunger, is that the logistics of aid delivery should involve the military forces of NATO and other world powers, particularly Russia, China, and India. Most of these nations, especially NATO, are involved in costly anti-terror or peace-keeping operations in the most affected regions of the world. That includes nations outside Africa such as Afghanistan, Yemen, and Iraq.

These [operations](#) involve a large degree of logistical infrastructure and coordination. The same infrastructure can be utilized for delivering food, and later, a COVID-19 vaccine when available. The logistics involved in these operations include sea, air, and land transports.

Although the “[Oslo Guidelines](#)” of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) argues that military relief operations are more costly, and should not be preferred to civilian operations, in certain situations, it argues, the superior logistic capabilities of the military could become more important in

providing timely life-saving assistance, overriding cost considerations.

An emergency appeal for military logistics and full-scale food aid was issued October 13 from South Africa, from Ramasimong Phillip Tsokolibane, the leader of the LaRouche movement there. His [statement](#) is titled, “A Matter of Life or Death—Call for International Mobilization of Food Resources to Fight Starvation in Africa.” In it, he states:

... [T]he issue we face, if we want to save lives, is securing massive amounts of food, as soon as possible, to hungry and starving people. Given the state of infrastructure on the continent, and the fact that much of this starvation is occurring

ing, while deploying the vast resources of the U.S. military on this mission of mercy to bring food to those who need it on my continent.

This call gets automatic support among American farmers. In South Dakota, for example, the October 24 “Letters” page of the *Mitchell Republic*, led off with a letter from Mt. Vernon cattleman Ron Wieczorek, headlined, “Mobilize Food Delivery to Fight Starvation in Africa,” which ends:

America can save these lives. We did it once before, when we got food to starving Europeans in 1945: the CARE (Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe) program.



NATO

NATO cooperates with the African Union in sustaining the African Standby Force. This primarily military organization could quickly be repurposed for food relief.

in isolated, rural areas, the distribution that must take place is well beyond the means of individual governments and those of relief agencies.

I believe we must mobilize the logistical capacities of the world’s most capable military forces and design a strategy to bring food supplies from such food-producing nations as the United States and Canada, and bring them directly to those who need them. Let allies and adversaries alike, join forces, in this greatest of all humanitarian efforts.

Mr. Tsokolibane appealed directly to President Trump:

Take up this challenge. Give America’s farmers the mission to produce the food to feed the starv-

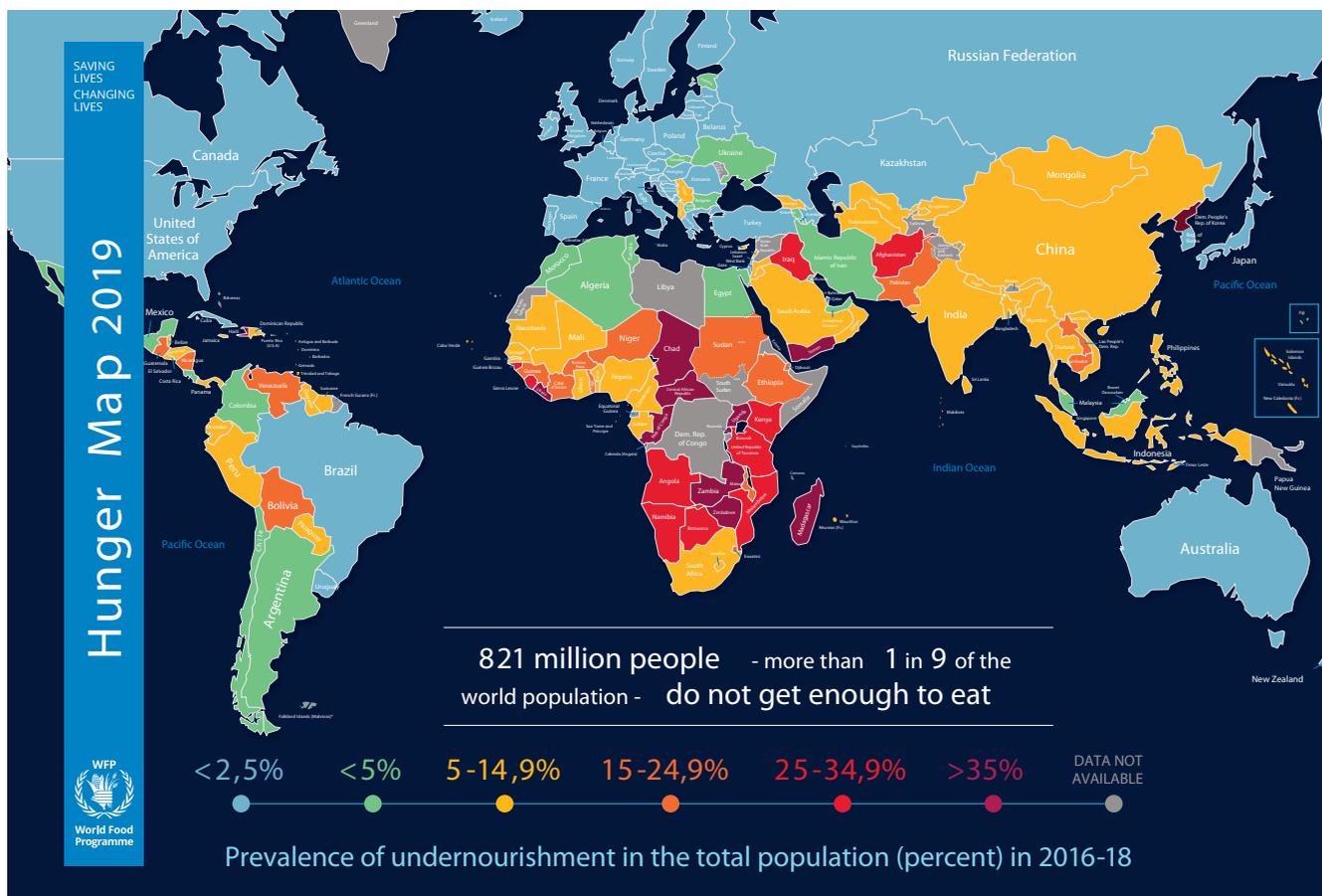
Moving Beyond Aid

Although dealing with the immediate pandemic situation and relieving the hunger crisis are the most moral and practical matters at hand now for the world community, a *long-term solution* is urgently required. The downside of humanitarian aid is that many societies in affected regions, as in southern Sudan, have become dependent on food aid for survival for decades. While there are political and security reasons for certain such conditions, the general problem is the lack of infrastructure, technology, and skills for producing more food locally for the local population.

Therefore, hunger is connected to its Siamese twin, poverty. It was for this reason that eradicating poverty comes as Number One among the UN SDGs and ending hunger as Number Two.

Humanitarian aid is inherently expensive, because the areas that need to receive this aid often lie far away over rugged terrain from the transport and logistics lines and hubs, as in the case of the landlocked sub-Saharan African nations. The WFP’s [“Hunger Map”](#) shows the prevalence of undernourishment in the most affected nations.

The lack of transport infrastructure to bring large quantities of food to the affected communities makes it imperative to use airlifting. With the absence of adequate airstrips and airports in these regions, light aircraft are in order to transport small, “well-packaged” portions. The packaging is often done in the nations of origin such as



The World Food Programme's Hunger Map 2019 shows the prevalence of undernourishment in the total population in 2016-18, from less than 2.5%, to greater than 35%. WFP

the U.S., China, Australia, or Europe, etc. This makes the cost of transport, logistics and administration of the humanitarian aid larger than the cost of the food itself. As food begins to be produced in nearby regions and better transport means are built, the effort will become a much less costly and time-consuming matter.

China-Built Ethiopian Railway as an Example

In 2015, Ethiopia suffered from one of the worst droughts in its history, but unlike 30 years ago, hundreds of thousands of people did not die of starvation. In the 1983-85 famine, when Ethiopia had a population of 38 million, it lost close to a million people—the exact numbers are not even known.

The difference in 2015 can be attributed to two important changes:

First, the government has aggressively implemented an economic development policy that is focused on eliminating poverty and reforming the agricultural sector.

Second, a 750 km railway connecting the port of Djibouti and the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, was built

by Chinese companies. As of 2015, the final touches were being put on the rail system by the China Railway Group (CREC, the acronym of its predecessor and parent company, China Railway Engineering Corporation) and the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC). This involved finishing work on two stages of this standard gauge railway (SGR).

That same year, Ethiopian farmers suffered crop failures varying between 50% and 90% due to the disastrous drought, and the population of more than 100 million braced for the worst food crisis in decades. When food aid and food purchased by the Ethiopian government arrived in the Port of Djibouti, shipments were jammed in the port. In the harbor, ships waited for days to unload their cargoes of wheat and other grains. Thousands of trucks that were to carry the food, spent many days crossing the poorly-maintained roads in the mountainous terrain to Addis Ababa.

That completely changed when the contingency was activated to use a completed section of the railway. Although construction was still in progress on some

stretches, the completed portion of the railway from Djibouti to Merebe Mermersa, 112 km south of Ethiopia's capital, was put into emergency operation in November 2015 to carry grain. A costly trip by trucks that took between 8-10 days, now took 8 hours by train. Larger volumes could also be transported by the train compared to trucks. The official opening of the railway did not take place until 2017, but it had bought life for many Ethiopians and life-saving time for the Ethiopian nation.

The Ethiopian government has developed a plan to connect all parts of the country by rail and modern roads, and some projects, like the 420 km north-south Mekele-Wildaya-Awash railway (built jointly by Chinese and Turkish-European consortia, are now nearing completion. Beyond its borders, Ethiopia is planning to connect to its neighbors—Sudan, Kenya, and landlocked South Sudan. From there, other landlocked nations such as Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, (eastern) Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, and Chad can also be connected to the shores of the Indian Ocean. All these nations are among the nations on the WFP Hunger Map 2020.

Today, the Djibouti–Addis Ababa railway has become a two-way route for food security and prosperity for Ethiopia. It is not merely transporting imported grains for its needs, but more importantly, fertilizers and machinery to be able to grow its own food. Besides, Ethiopia exports fruits from its newly developed agricultural projects to balance its trade. Well-known Ethiopian coffee is also an important export item.

In an [interview](#) with Xinhua, Tilahun Sarka, Director-General of the Ethiopia-Djibouti Standard Gauge Railway Company (EDR), said that in just the first few months of 2019, the railway was able to carry more than 70,000 tons of fertilizer from the Djibouti port to Ethiopia, just before the start of the main harvesting season and the beginning of a new season:

Fertilizer is a very important commodity to Ethiopia's socio-economic well-being. It is by far considered as a major imported priority item by the Ethiopian government.



CC/Skilla1st

When still incomplete in 2015, the China-built Djibouti–Addis Ababa railway brought life-saving grain as far as Merebe Mermersa, 112 km south of Addis Ababa. Today, the electrified railway is a two-way route for food security and prosperity for the country.

Xinhua reported that Ethiopia imported a total of about 1.3 million tons of fertilizer during the 2018-2019 fiscal year.

While Ethiopia enjoyed adequate weather conditions for a good harvest season in the last year and this, the locust invasion that overwhelmed the Horn of Africa over this same period has destroyed many crops and pastures. In addition, severe flooding occurred recently. Large quantities of food imports are now a necessity once again. And the farmers need seeds and fertilizer for re-planting, and pastoralists are desperate for live-stock feed. An estimated 6.9 million people need food relief from now through December, at the very least, according to the latest FAO reports.

Good Infrastructure Correlates with Food Security

As we have explained in previous writings, good infrastructure correlates with provision of resilient health care, as shown in the context of COVID-19 pandemic. The same principle applies to food production and distribution.¹

A scientific [paper](#) on that correlation in Ethiopia, titled “Port Rail Connectivity and Agricultural Production: Evidence From a Large Sample of Farmers in Ethiopia,” proves this point both positively and negatively. It

1. See Hussein Askary, “The Role of BRI in Building a Global Healthcare System,” *BRICS Information Portal* May 16, 2020.



UNIDO

Tilahun Sarka, Director General of the Ethiopia-Djibouti Standard Gauge Railway Company.

does so negatively by showing the disastrous effects caused by the collapse of the old transport infrastructure and the ending of the old railway's operation on the same Djibouti–Addis Ababa railway now rebuilt by China.

One important focus of the study is on the import of fertilizers. “In theory, railways have the advantage of shipping bulky freight, such as fertilizer, at low costs,” it indicates. The study surveyed over 190,000 households in Ethiopia from 2003 to 2010, concluding that the deterioration of the transport routes from Djibouti to Addis Ababa, especially the shutting down of the old narrow-gauge railway in 2009, severely impacted agricultural activities and food security for the majority of the population sample. Calculating the correlation of the transport costs and agricultural production functions, the paper concludes:

It is found that deteriorated transport accessibility to the port had a significantly negative impact. The use of fertilizer particularly decreased with increased transport costs.

Regarding Africa generally, the study laments the collapse of the railway systems in the 1990s:

This must have significant negative impacts on African economies, particularly landlocked countries. In the region, there are 15 landlocked countries.

The study compares the cost of transport and trade and their impact on agricultural input, showing that the

high costs become prohibitive for agricultural activities:

For Malawi, a landlocked country, the cost of importing a 20-foot container of goods from East Asia is USD 2,895 and takes about 39 days. The cost and time for Tanzania, which has a port on the Indian Ocean, is USD 1,615 per container, and takes 26 days. For Ethiopia (other than through Djibouti), the importing cost is as high as USD 2,960, in contrast to Djibouti, which is USD 910 because of the seaport.

The Djibouti-Ethiopia railway was and is today the main route for 95% of Ethiopia's imports and exports. In a [report](#) published by the Berlin Institute for Population and Development, titled “From Land of Famine to Land of Hope: Will Ethiopia Become a Model for an African Upswing?” the authors indicate that Ethiopia's economic rise hinges to a great degree on its investments in infrastructure. Although the report suffers from a few typical misconceptions about Chinese loans and strategies, it does convey the point of the importance of infrastructure in Ethiopia's economic rise:

Besides the service sector, which acts as a magnet for jobseekers, huge investment in infrastructure is another component of the government's strategy that has likewise created jobs and boosted the economy. The combination of population growth, productivity gains in agriculture, massive infrastructure investment and the shift of labor to sectors with more value added has been key to Ethiopia's growth for more than a decade.

Concerning the China-Ethiopia joint project, the report indicates that major projects “such as the railway line from Addis Ababa to Djibouti, the most important link to world trade, and the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, the largest reservoir in Africa, will help drive the economy forward and attract investors.”

Contribution of the Belt and Road

As proven by the case of Ethiopia, the current drive to extend the Belt and Road Initiative into all parts of Africa is the policy under which Africa's vast agricultural potential can be realized.

Until now, the constraints on farming, resulting from various political, economic, and geopolitical factors, have meant the continent has been forced to be a net importer of food staples, and home to millions of people in desperate need of emergency relief.

However, now the vectors for full-scale agriculture



CC/Skillat1st

The container terminal in the Port of Djibouti, commissioned in 1985, is strategically located at the entrance of the Red Sea from the Gulf of Aden.

development can take off, based on the coming-into-being of a new economic platform of production, based on building modern transport, irrigation, power generation, and new production techniques. The circumstances can come together for potentially spectacular farm output across whole regions of the continent, given its outstanding agro-climatic features.

The present-day situation of inadequate staple food production in Africa shows that in recent decades, the import dependence for grains—all types: wheat, rice, sorghum, etc.—has increased. In 1990, African nations imported 26% of their staple grain needs. As of 2014, this import dependence had gone up to over 40%. Over 90% of the wheat imports come from nations outside the continent. This means that 10% or less of wheat imported by African nations, comes from other African nations, and even then it may originate abroad, and transit through a hub nation, such as Djibouti.

In a world of economic growth and mutually beneficial trade, this reliance on distant sources—even long-distance—for food necessities, might represent a favorable and deliberate worldwide division of labor in supplying people’s “daily bread.” However, that is not at all true of the present situation.

A Sign of Hope

In August of this year, Ethiopia inaugurated its first refrigerated food export operation, thanks to the Djibouti–Addis Ababa electrified railway. The pilot project

is part of the National Cool Logistics Network, launched from Modjo Dry Port, south-east of the capital. The first refrigerated containers, carrying avocados bound for the European market, were launched in the August ceremony. The fruits were produced by dozens of farmers, and later collected and packed by Koga Veg Agricultural Development, owned by Belgian investor Durabilis.

The General Manager of Koga Veg, Jan Michielsen, is [cited](#) on Fruitnet as saying:

With reliable and competitive logistics solutions and lead times, we will be able to increase our export of fruit and vegetables rapidly in the coming years.

In the same location, Aboubakar Omar Hadi, Chairman of the Djibouti Port and Free Zone Authority, explained that the shipment marks a major milestone in the development of a cool logistics corridor by sea freight via the Port of Djibouti:

This innovative Modjo-Djibouti-Europe cool supply chain for fruits, vegetables, flowers, and other perishables will balance the trade and maximize the use of Ethio-Djibouti railways.

Africa is forced, by the lack of adequate infrastructure for enough food production, to seek imports and food aid. Yields per hectare for most crops in Africa are far below half of the world average. Moreover, much food is lost to spoilage, pests, and lack of logistics for handling and transportation, and for lack of power for drying, storing, refrigerating, and irradiating crops and foods of all kinds.

With the availability of more and more such infrastructure, as proven by the case of Ethiopia, more signs of hope can emerge to end, once and for all, the scourge of hunger on the continent. The cooperation among all nations—especially between China and the West—in line with the vision and principles of the Belt and Road, is key to achieving this goal.