

Turkana: A Drought Emergency Response that Boosts Local Markets

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In an emergency situation, ensuring access to food is critical and must be thoroughly analyzed. In some cases local markets are completely disrupted, but in other they continue to operate and can be used to respond or can be strengthened through a variety of interventions.

In some instances, food is delivered as a ration or a basket of basic foods. When appropriate, cash is also given out to people in need. This gives them a choice for the type of food they wish to buy. Another alternative is food vouchers that can be used to purchase specific goods only.

“The bottom line is how to best to ensure that households are able to access enough food; this must be evaluated carefully and within the broader market context,” says Sara Mchattie, Food Security Advisor with the European Commission Humanitarian Aid department.

People who receive in-kind food rations are grateful, but they are not usually very proud of being in such a position. They accept as they have no other way of helping themselves. This is why ensuring access to food can, and should be, done strategically.

Turkana, a region in the northern part of Kenya close to the border with South Sudan and Ethiopia, has been dependent on food assistance for decades. This is primarily due to the impoverished landscape in which the Turkana people live, one that limits sustainable income generating activities.

The region is part of the arid dry lands, an area that is both geographically and politically isolated from the rest of the country. The Turkana are herders who travel across regional borders in search of pasture and water for their animals. Their diet consists primarily of camel milk and animal blood. Violent conflicts over scarce resources are frequent and incidences have increased as a result of the current drought.

On a good year, acute malnutrition rates in Turkana hover around 20 percent. This year acute malnutrition rates have skyrocketed to 37 percent and herds have been decimated by the worse drought in sixty years.

It is in this context that Oxfam, a partner of the European Commission in Turkana, has launched an innovative project that provides food assistance to the most vulnerable households while simultaneously stimulating local markets.

Lake Turkana is the world's largest desert lake. This immense stretch of water represents a lifeline to 350,000 people and to a fragile eco-system. Although some of the communities living around the lake have always fished, consumption of Tilapia fish was never high and the produce was being sold in far away market towns like Lodwar and Kisumu.

Fishermen spent a good deal of time and money selling their catch in distant places because there was not enough demand locally. After conducting extensive market research, Oxfam decided to boost the local fish market by increasing demand for dried fish, which also has a high nutritional value.



Food vouchers have been distributed to 750 vulnerable households to purchase dried Tilapia, while five shop owners have been selected to be the focal point between the fishermen and the voucher users. Because of higher local demand, the fishermen now have an incentive to sell locally and can save on both transport and storage costs.



"My monthly revenue is much higher than before," says Peter Abwel, a fish trader who is tasked with drying the fish he purchases from the local fishermen and selling it in his shop. "Now it is easier for me to store the fish, and the project has helped me obtain a fish license."

Throughout the day, Turkana women with their colorful stacked bead necklaces come to his shop to pick up their share of dried fish. According to Oxfam staff, dried fish stores well and is an important source of nutrition for the entire family. Furthermore, this type of project ensures

that benefits are spread equally throughout the community and not only to those who most need them. Traders buy the fish at a lower price than what they are paid with the food voucher.

"We have seen a significant improvement in household income levels for the traders as well as the fishermen," says Joseph Akure, Oxfam Deputy Program Coordinator in Turkana. "The money they make is used for the education of children. When this happens, the household poverty level is bound to improve."

The Oxfam project plans to reach 4,500 households with food vouchers over the next few months. Akure says the traders will continue to do their business long after the food assistance project is over. "Because of the profit these traders are making, they will manage to stock up their supplies. Food will be available in the local markets, and people will be able to access it easily."