

SOUTH PACIFIC COMMISSION
TWENTY-THIRD REGIONAL TECHNICAL MEETING ON FISHERIES
(Noumea, New Caledonia, 5-9 August 1991)

AFRICAN AID - HOW NOT TO HELP

Condensed from "*Africa: Dispatches from a fragile continent*"

by
Blaine Harden

Originally published in *Readers Digest* - April 1991

On the moonish semidesert of northwest Kenya, there is a jade sea that boils with 40,000 crocodiles. Windstorms blast across the water, swamping boats and drowning fishermen. The temperature soars day after day to more than 35 degrees. Shimmering in the equatorial heat, the denuded lava hills that border much of the lake take on the appearance of monstrous black shark fins.

Welcome to Lake Turkana, one of the more remote and hallucinatory corners on earth. Here well-meaning, big-spending foreign donors have come to monumental grief inflicting aid projects on the Turkana—a pastoral tribe of some 200,000 tall, graceful people who herd cattle, goats, sheep and camels. These foreign-funded afflictions including a frozen-fish plant and an irrigation scheme deserve a close look, because they echo mistakes made across the continent by donors and African governments.

The hard scramble lives of the Turkana typify the existence of the 25 million or so other pastoral people who wander the arid belt of grassland south of the Sahara, known as the Sahel. When drought hits, these people are among the first to suffer and among the first to die. In the Turkana District, the rains fail one year in four, and a "wipe-out" drought strikes every decade. A frozen-fish plant was supposed to catapult the Turkana out of susceptibility to drought and into a commercially viable venture.

When the concept of the plant was hatched in the 1970s, the prevailing environmental orthodoxy across Africa said pastoralists and their herds of grass-chomping, milk-producing beasts were a threat to thin soils and fragile vegetation. "No solution of the Turkana problem is possible by which all the people can continue their traditional way of life," stressed a study by the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

Fish, it was thought, would remedy the Turkana's destructive, un-modern dependence on milk. Fish did not eat much grass or tear up rangelands with their hooves. And there was Lake Turkana—teeming with Nile perch and tilapia, a delicious fish with firm, white flesh. When the lake was blessed with a "tilapia boom" in the mid-1970s, the Kenyan Fisheries Department confidently predicted huge catches every year for decades.

Abandoned Nets. One nation that had committed itself to improving the lives of poor Kenyans was Norway. Because of its experience in commercial fishing, Norway was asked by the Kenyan Government to convert the Turkana into fishermen. The Norwegians accepted eagerly and their development agency, NORAD, stepped in. Its first volunteers arrived in 1971 to assist with boat building, training of fishermen and carrying out fishing tests.

The next year salaried NORAD fishing experts brought in 20 fibre-glass fishing boats, four motorboats, and the *Iji*, an 11-metre research vessel. Teams of Oslo-based consultants studied how to maximize fish profits and decided that the most desirable product would be frozen fish fillets. Accordingly, NORAD spent about \$2.2 million to build an ice-making, freezing and cold-storage plant. The Norwegians also helped build a \$20.8-million road connecting the plant to Kenya's highway system. The idea was for the Turkana Fishermen's Co-operative Society to sell quick-frozen fillets in Kenya's cities and abroad.

However, after the plant was completed in 1980, the Norwegians discovered that chilling the fish from more than 35 degrees to below freezing (with diesel-powered generators) would cost far more than the fillets were worth. Production also demanded more clean water than Turkana District had. The plant operated for a short time before its freezers were turned off. It became Africa's most handsome, most expensive dried-fish warehouse.

Then, as happens every 30 years or so, part of Lake Turkana disappeared. Ferguson's Gulf, where most of the fish were, dried up partly because the Omo, the major river that feeds the lake, was running low due to severe drought. Most of the 20,000 Turkana whom the Norwegians had lured to the lakeshore and taught how to fish were stuck. Much of their livestock died due to overcrowding on the barren, overgrazed banks. Many luckless Turkana fishermen abandoned their nets for food aid.

Donor Prejudice. In their attempt to show a "backward" tribe how to utilize a neglected resource, the Norwegians failed to consider climatic conditions or Turkana customs. "We had this development-thinking that technology would solve the problems," said a NORAD official in Kenya. "We didn't even know that nomads don't have a taste for fish."

Such ignorance is a long-standing component of Western development in Africa. Between 1967 and 1981, three out of five World Bank live-stock projects used no anthropological research during the life of the projects. In Turkana District the donors knew next-to-nothing about the people they pitied. Yet there was no great mystery about how the Turkana system worked. "To the Turkana, livestock are not just a means of livelihood, they are the very stuff of life," wrote British anthropologist Phillip Hugh Gulliver in a report compiled for the government of Kenya and published in 1951—a decade before the first donors showed up in substantial numbers.

When devising schemes for elevating the Turkana out of what they saw as unalloyed wretchedness, Western donors were influenced by their prejudices.

One prejudice held that live stock destroyed rangelands. Another said that nomadism was a lowly stage of development, beneath the kind of farming practised in Europe and America. Finally, there was the prejudice that the natives are stupid.

Even when foreign-funded development programmes succeed, they often sow seeds for disaster. For instance, in several Sahelian countries in the 1960s, cattle herds grew to record size partly as a result of internationally provided veterinary drugs. But as the huge herds picked clean pastures normally reserved for dry-season grazing, they were destroying a traditional life-insurance policy. When severe drought prevailed between 1968 and 1973, hundreds of thousands of animals died, sending the region into a tailspin of destitution and famine. Food aid had to be rushed in.

From this disaster, many donors concluded that livestock herding *per se* was bad. It was said that, because herds were individually owned while ranges remained communal property, a herder had no incentive to conserve rangelands. To make nomads responsible, foreign-funded schemes in Kenya and Uganda gave exclusive use of ranch-size tracts of rangelands to the herders. But, annoyingly, the recipients did not seem thankful when "their" land was hit by drought, they walked away and joined other nomads looking for greener pastures.

Donors assumed that Turkana herdsmen, starving for lack of rain, would be happier if their major source of water, the Turkwel River, could be harnessed to irrigate fields for food and cash crops. To that end the FAO and the United Nations Development Programme helped launch a series of irrigation schemes.

Problems began with the river. Highly erratic, the Turkwel breaks its banks yearly in a three-month flood and then dries up completely for about four months. Irrigation canals plug up with sediment and must be dug out. In drought years the Turkwel disappears and crops die.

To maintain the irrigation machinery, specialists were imported from abroad and from down-country Kenya. These outsiders used Turkana recruited from famine camps as a labour pool. While the Turkana stooped all day to clean out silt-choked canals, supervisors armed with sticks goaded them to work harder. Deeply offended, the proud Turkana referred to the irrigation schemes as *amana emoit* (the fields of the foe).

Despite the problems, donor money continued to flow. A 1984 Kenyan government study found that \$28,200 had been spent on each family in the irrigation schemes so that it could earn — in a good year — about \$130. The study concluded that "a family could be kept on relief for about 200 years for the cost of settling it on a sub-subsistence one acre plot."

Key to Survival. There were other unfortunate results. The Turkana's food crops usually failed, owing to the unreliable irrigation, and their cash crops didn't earn enough for them to buy food because of ill-managed bureaucracy. Consequently, participants in the schemes did not eat as well as other nomads.

To make matters worse, the standing irrigation water became a breeding ground for tropical diseases, and the participants' children were sicker than those of other nomads. "After 20 years of development," writes anthropologist Johan Helland in his 1987 Norwegian funded study, "the population on the irrigation schemes are worse fed and are worse off than the pastoralists."

Sadly, this attempt to save the Turkana through irrigation is typical of irrigation projects across Africa. In the Sahel, 26,000 hectares of land brought under irrigation through donor projects (developed at a cost of \$6000 to \$29,000 per hectare) are no longer farmed.

In the past few years, experts have come to recognize that livestock raisers like the Turkana, far from being the scourge of Africa's fragile rangelands, have sophisticated techniques to conserve their land. With their ability to move quickly, nomads can capitalize on fresh green grass, which is more than twice as digestible as dry grass. Studies have shown that African herdsmen can extract four times as much protein and six times as much food energy per hectare of dry rangelands as do modern commercial ranches in the arid regions of Australia.

In addition, grazing has been found to reduce moisture loss from African soil, extending plant growth by two months. "In much of the dry rangelands, livestock rearing may be the most efficient and productive use of the land," notes Lloyd Timberlake in his 1988 book *Africa in Crisis*, an authoritative survey of the continent's environmental problems.

When NORAD realized that livestock was the key to the Turkana's survival, the organization hired a livestock adviser and an arid land forestry expert. Money was allocated for camel development and animal-disease investigation. For the first time the Turkana were asked what they knew and what they wanted.

Other donors also began working with, rather than against, the values of the nomads. The British aid agency Oxfam experimented with distributing animals to Turkana families stripped of their herds by drought. The restocked families have returned to the pastoral sector and show a strong determination to stay there.

The Kenyan government, too, started listening to the Turkana, at least in theory. A national policy gave district administrators greater autonomy in catering government spending to the needs of their regions.

A few Norwegians still harbour hopes that something dramatic can be done to improve the lives of the nomads. "There must be more to development than just sustaining life," says Arne Dalfelt, who was in charge of co-ordinating NORAD's Turkana operation in the mid-1980s. "We are still experimenting, and there are still a lot of fish out there in the lake."

Most foreign donors in Turkana, however, have stopped dreaming. They accept the limits of Africa's most intractable land and have acknowledged the sophistication of the human beings who live there.
