

# Buying a sisal bag can make a real difference to Africa's starving millions

Already many are trading their way out of poverty and hunger – there is scope for far more to do so, says the archbishop of York



- [John Sentamu](#)
- [The Observer](#), Sunday 31 July 2011



*A mother carries sisal on her head along with her baby. Growing a cash crop makes a real difference to communities in Africa. Photograph: Dan Chung for the Guardian*

We have all seen reports of tens of thousands of Somalis in desperate search of food and [water](#). [Somalia's](#) foreign minister, Mohamed Ibrahim, has warned that more than 3.5 million people may starve to death and the UN estimates that more than 1.5 million Somalis are internally displaced by hunger – most of them in Mogadishu, but also in neighbouring Kenya and Ethiopia.

Images of children starving, of militant regimes and of refugee camps seem an all too familiar and deeply frustrating reoccurrence. Yet again, dozens of experienced local aid organisations are forced to confront "compassion fatigue" as many ask whether [Africa](#) is just a bottomless pit into which endless aid is poured, with little to show for it in the end. I have long argued that we need not only to tackle global poverty through charity, but also through practical measures that enable people to help themselves. Is it actually possible to see real progress towards sustainability and a better life for the world's most vulnerable people?

The problems of east Africa are complex, and require a far greater degree of co-ordination than has so far been possible. The political will of national governments, the support of the international community, the engagement of non-governmental organisations, private sector investment and grassroots initiatives are all critical to the success of development.

All too often the international community, or more specifically, the former colonial powers, get blamed for interference, and for the destabilisation and disincentivisation of local initiative in these regions. And yet when children are dying, and food and water need to be provided fast, it is often the international community that is best equipped for a rapid response.

In Britain, we can be encouraged by the swift response from the Department for International Development, and it is my hope that governments of other nations respond as generously – especially countries of the African Union. They cannot vicariously leave it to Kenya and Ethiopia.

But this is not the only response, and not, ultimately, what is needed to secure a better future for the region. In eastern Kenya, the people in most desperate need are often those outside the refugee camps. They see the refugees inside benefiting from World Food Programme handouts, while they struggle to feed themselves and keep their goats and cattle alive. Despite the horrors of life in the camps, there is real security there – the promise of food, water and some medical care. We should not forget there is a real need to ensure that those living on the edge, who year after year must eke

out an existence in those dry and barren landscapes, are not forgotten. It is also crucial that people get support locally so that they don't have to make such perilous journeys to find aid.

To those who want to give up on east Africa, I want to say that progress is indeed being made, and much more progress is within reach. It is amazing how much of a long-term difference a small amount of money makes to these local self-help groups. Small, relatively low-cost initiatives can radically alter the future for local communities. Advances depend largely upon local initiative, as churches, co-operatives, NGOs and other institutions equip local people to organise and address the intense challenges.

For example, the Anglican diocese of Mbeere is planning to install water run-off tanks on tin-roofed churches and schools throughout the diocese. Local farmers dig trenches and lay pipes to bring water to their communities. North of Mount Kenya, in the more arid areas, communities must be helped to construct dams and dykes where there are dry river beds, to catch and retain the flash floods when they come. In the very dry areas boreholes and wells provide water for the livestock of nomadic farmers, while churches foster more stable residential communities around their centres where the young and the very old find security and learn some basic horticulture. Along with this goes the challenge of changing the food habits of generations as pastoralists make the shift from cattle to goats, which are better able to withstand [drought](#), and farmers exchange maize for millet or sorghum, more suited to semi-arid conditions.

And yet for the time being there is a continued need for food aid. Currently I hear schoolchildren in these semi-arid areas are faced with being sent home two weeks before the end of term as the schools have no more maize. [Maize has more than trebled in price](#) in recent months, and there is simply not enough to go around. Parents don't want their children out of school because they have no food at home either. As the price of maize rises, so the price of meat falls, as the condition of goats and cattle deteriorates with the extreme drought. It is no use trying to sell your goat to buy maize. The economics of survival are tough. We have a responsibility to help.

There are imaginative solutions coming from within Kenya, often piloted by women's co-operative groups. Recognising that more effort must go into ensuring that people in semi-arid areas can use their land for the best, these women's groups have planted sisal to make bags and other items. This is a cash crop which can help to raise their capacity to organise their own lives and plan for the education of their children.

If only we could ban all plastic bags and replace plastic with sisal in as many contexts as possible. Already many are trading their way out of poverty and hunger – there is scope for far more to do so. I would like to see UK supermarkets buying more sisal products from Africa. Sisal grows in very dry conditions and has great potential to raise local income. This would be better for the environment, and better for everyone. I challenge our designers and buyers – for the sake of the hungry, think sisal! Such a small change in behaviour could make a massive difference.

The one unspoken question is what happens if the rains do not fall this October, and if they fail next year too? Climate change is presenting the Horn of Africa with some stark choices. People are dying unnecessarily of hunger and preventable diseases – that is a scandal. But the fact that some choose to ignore the contributing underlying problems is an even greater scandal. It is amazing how much difference local people can make to sustainable development if trusted to put their ideas into practice. Let us be part of a global community in supporting the people of east Africa as they take a series of small steps to raise themselves out of poverty.

The archbishop of York visited Kenya in the post-election crisis in 2008, where hundreds of people were killed and 300,000 people forced from their homes to refugee camps. His chief of staff, the Rev Malcolm Macnaughton, has recently returned from visiting Kenya in July with the Peter Cowley Africa Trust and the Friends of the Diocese of Mbeere. Last Thursday, the archbishop of Canterbury launched an urgent appeal for donations to emergency relief activities in Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia.