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The Remote Crisis— Solving Lake Chad’s Food Insecurity

Chad has been at the forefront of “suffering countries” for decades, and has become known as one of the most corrupt, hungry areas in the world. The numbers speak to the crisis: with a population of over 16 million, approximately 66.2 percent live in extreme poverty. Food insecurity, specifically in the Chad¹ Lake Region, has elevated due to the presence of conflict involving Boko Haram, a jihadist terrorist organization connected to ISIS. Aid organizations have been struggling to alleviate hunger insecurity, and the full complexity of Chad’s situation is yet to be recognized. Chad’s lake region faces some of the gravest problems as far as poverty and hunger is concerned due to conflict with armed groups. Effectively directing aid to disregarded areas and investigating the success of such programs can assist in relieving the burden of hunger on countries ridden with conflict. Aid specific to the needs of a particular region, such as providing books and fishing boats, can impart sustainable means for the growth of a community.

Within Chad’s rural population percentage of 76.7, of which only 2.49 percent have access to electricity, agriculture is the principal, and often necessary, profession. The conditions, however, are not ideal for² agriculture. Children frequently leave school to work on their family’s farms, leaving a proper education behind. The educational institutions present for many communities does not prepare students for work that requires much skill or knowledge. The majority of Chadians struggle to make a living, earning on average 740 US dollars a year. Those who are able to survive through rough harvest years also must combat low quality healthcare, with few medical professionals and hospitals. Illness can stem from sanitation related disease, which is prevalent in Chad, having one of the lowest rates of access to clean drinking water. The country’s autocratic president Idriss Deby of Chad’s presidential republic and its ineffective, corrupt government do not assist in resolving these issues, but rather focus on policies which will keep their power in place.³

Chad’s climate is hot and tropical, with differing and unpredictable rainy seasons depending on the region. Chad consists mainly of the desert biome, with a more fertile savannah in the south. Lake Chad is located in the west, covering territories of Chad, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Niger. The body of freshwater is

¹“Chad.” *Chad | World Food Programme*, World Food Programme, 2019, www.wfp.org/countries/chad. ²“Rural Population (% of Total Population).” *The World Bank*, World Bank Group, 2018, data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS?view=map. ³“Chad: Government.”

GlobalEDGE, Michigan State University, globaledge.msu.edu/countries/chad/government.

surrounded by sand dunes, with several inhabited islands. Roughly 30 million individuals from the ⁴ surrounding countries occupy areas near Lake Chad. The lake affords diverse ways of life for those living in the region, offering drinking water and many other resources like its reeds, which are used for weaving marketable items like baskets. Differing from the mainland’s main exports of cotton and cattle, those in the lake region mainly profit from fish. Communities also practice flood recession farming, where subsiding floods leave behind fertile soil.

For the most part, areas surrounding the lake have been undisturbed by urban development, allowing preservation of biodiversity. However, since the sixties, Lake Chad has receded by over 90 percent. The water has subsided by dozens of kilometers. As a result, there has been a disruption of irrigation and a reduction of trading routes and fish quantity. Climate change has worsened these conditions, not only by lowering water levels, but also by causing unpredictable weather. Thus far, climate change has resulted ⁵ in heavy rainfall over shorter lengths of time. This change has heavily impacted agricultural seasons and productivity. With Chad’s communities in a fragile state, made worse by climate change and low economic stability, they are prime victims for extremist groups seeking to take advantage of vulnerability.

Boko Haram built its recruiting regime around the frustration and poverty of those in countries with corrupt, weak governments. Haram often targets younger citizens by promising money and food if they join. Some recruits feel as if they will have access to resources that were not previously available to them or have grievances against their disorganised government and wish to rebel. Yet if people are not willing to join, violence is the immediate option for Haram leaders. In 2015, Boko Haram attacked the unstable Chadian islands, kidnapping villagers for military purposes and destroying fishing and agricultural equipment. Communities fled to the mainland, leaving most everything behind. Most islands had small populations and no means of fighting the armed group. More islanders relocated to the mainland when it was announced that those who did not leave would be considered Boko Haram members. The current situation is still detrimental to the livelihood of the Chadian citizens. Chad is subject to ongoing cruelties, such as the bombing of markets. The conflict against Boko Haram is fought with allied soldiers, who have difficulty communicating and coordinating with allies. ⁶

⁴ National Commissions for Museums and Monuments. "Lake Chad Cultural Landscape (Nigeria)." *UNESCO World Heritage Centre*, United Nations, 11 July 2018,

whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/6360/. ⁵ UNFPA/WCARO. "Demographic Dynamics and the Crisis of

Countries around Lake Chad." *UNFPA*, 22 Feb. 2018,

wcaro.unfpa.org/en/publications/demographic-dynamics-and-crisis-countries-around-lake-chad. ⁶ Taub,

Ben. "Lake Chad: The World's Most Complex Humanitarian Disaster." *The New Yorker*, The New Yorker, 27 Nov. 2017,

www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/04/lake-chad-the-worlds-most-complex-humanitarian-disaster.

The millions of Chadians who have fled from their homes due to the violence of Boko Haram are placed in displacement camps, which depend almost completely on humanitarian assistance. While refugee ⁷ camps receive the necessary amount of funding and legal protection, those who have fled from one part of Chad to another do not have the same privileges. Those in displacement camps on the mainland cannot generate incomes and support themselves while there, so they end up relying on aid. This displacement has the effect of decreasing the number of individuals devoted to working the farms and thereby lowers food production. With the growing population and increasing numbers of refugees from Sudan and Central African Republic, food supply is put in further risk, causing prices to rise dramatically.

Food and farming aid is the prime solution many organizations turn towards in such desperate situations, yet the hunger crisis in the Lake Region has been largely neglected. Those who fled to the mainland displacement camps and returned home have no means of income or materials. Aid is typically sent to the mainland and is rarely dispersed to further regions. The journey through the lake is dangerous and demanding, especially with perishable items, such as vaccines, and large items which are difficult to transport. The populations in the lake region are at a disconnect not only from their own government, but also from those willing to aid in their struggles. Chadians who have been displaced in unmarked areas due to conflict do not receive the same aid given to easily accessible areas with clear communities and villages.

Outside aid is necessary at this point in the crisis, but some is more helpful than others. Providing sustainable aid must be at the forefront of organizational priorities. Simply providing the mainland and lake regions money to buy sanitation, food, and water is a temporary solution. Although this may help in

providing the means of survival till the next harvest, long term aid helps communities as a whole and can boost economic stability. Education and health of the young can in a sense be a form of long-term solutions to hunger, for children can become able-bodied, productive individuals, able to provide income for future generations. Organizations providing further education, as well as social unity programs, to Chadians can discourage them from joining armed groups like Boko Haram. Education past primary school, which is rare for many children, can be provided by NGO and government organizations. Schooling in the form of sexual education, such as informing citizens about birth control, can help reduce the ever growing population in Chad. Not only do developing populations tend to have larger families, but Chadians take pride in having several children. Eight to nine direct family members is normal for a Chadian family. These large family groups place stress on the ability of a family to support themselves, especially with diminishing resources. Organizations such as Books for Africa can provide the means for

⁷Masciarelli, Alexis. "Troubled Waters: Attacks Raise Fears of Prolonged Hunger in Lake Chad Communities." *Medium*, World Food Programme Insight, 6 Nov. 2017, insight.wfp.org/troubled-waters-attacks-raise-fears-of-prolonged-hunger-in-lake-chad-communities-19322c41b9b5.

education in areas where schooling is limited, such as the Chadian displacement camps. Individuals can ⁸benefit educationally from the organization's donated books ranging from textbooks to children stories. Opportunities of this sort will help to uplift communities, discourage young Chadians from joining extremist groups, and elevate the possibility that future generations of Chad will be able to make progressive changes in their government to benefit struggling areas.

Although it may seem favorable to solve issues at their root cause, security based responses have shown negative results. Ongoing conflict, such as that of Boko Haram, is difficult to target effectively due to its complexity. Military engagement can create further problems, generating an increasingly dangerous, insecure situation. For example, military conflict in Syria with the Taliban destroyed the country, with millions of refugees fleeing their homes. Converting weak villages into battlefields would further Chad's issue of resource-scarce camps with displaced people. More aid would be needed, since individuals would be leaving their homes and means of livelihood, put in positions where they can no longer support themselves.

After being in displacement camps on the mainland, many began to return back to the lake region and islands. With little-to-no money, most individuals have no access to the equipment they once had after it had been destroyed by Boko Haram or left behind. Directly diverting such aid to areas in need is crucial, for aid sent to the mainland with the intention that it be dispersed to the lake region is often not effectively distributed. Harsh conditions, the presence of armed groups, and the absence of maintained roads make it

difficult for unprepared organizations to deliver aid, particularly in situations in which secluded regions are in need of perishable items. The strenuous journey also means that many of the issues faced in the lake region go unnoticed. By marking areas of populations living on islands and displacement camps in Lake Chad and their needs, humanitarian data organizations can help in the decision-making of where aid needs to be directed. The data collected by these organizations will allow developed countries' governments and humanitarian groups to access information on which areas are most emergent, safe-traveling routes, and the specific aid needed for a particular region's unique issues. For example, in the lake regions damaged by Boko Haram, fishing equipment and boats can be provided to allow families to support themselves and assist in healing the economy. Aid organizations can overcome transportation challenges by constructing infrastructure for reaching secluded areas, including roads, bridges, and increased helicopter use. Faster ways of getting perishable items to regions also needs to be determined before those items are distributed.

Simply funneling money to the corrupt Chadian government in an effort to alleviate poverty will not help the Chadian people, but rather increase resources for the executive branch to sustain its oppressive power. Instead, financial donations and volunteer help towards organizations such as the Red Cross of Chad and The Lake Chad Basin Commission will directly improve the lives of those in displaced peoples camps and

⁸“Books For Africa, Administrative Headquarters.” Books for Africa, 26 Aug. 2020, www.booksforafrica.org/.

Chadians who have returned to the lake islands. Such organizations have the resources to administer proper help, along with the knowledge of underlying crises and experience with overcoming Chad's conflict barriers. To aid communities recovering from conflict, the Red Cross of Chad provides medical supplies and assistance. Being the largest humanitarian network worldwide, the Red Cross meets needs of those suffering from malnutrition and the victims of attacks through their extensive number of volunteers trained in food security, disaster services, first aid, etc. The Lake Chad Basin Commission works with ⁹Lake Chad's fisheries sector to regulate the use of the lake and reintegrate citizens back into the region. The Commission imparts Chadians with tactics on sustainable use of the lake and farmland and partners with organizations to rebuild infrastructure destroyed by extremist groups. ¹⁰

To better understand the true situation in Chad, I contacted Camila Wuensch, participant in the REACH organization, working towards providing information for aid contributors for crisis decision-making. ¹¹ Upon her visit to Chad in 2018, Wuensch studied firsthand the effectiveness of current efforts against poverty and food insecurity. I incorporated many of the main points she gathered into the proposed solutions. Further research investigating the effectiveness of various aid measures, like that of Wuensch's, is essential in solving hunger insecurity. Taking into consideration the specific needs and areas of profit for specific regions, past ineffective aid, and unreached communities, organizations can maximize their contribution to hunger alleviation. “Durable poverty and food insecurity in Chad will be difficult as long

as there are unstable human crises,” Wuensch stated. “But both need to be tackled at the same time, humanitarian and underlying poverty.”

Working on this project and having the opportunity to speak to someone with firsthand, on-the-ground experience deepened my understanding of the complexities of struggling developing nations, where hunger is only one aspect of intricate, intertwined issues. Taking the long view and ultimately supporting efforts for political change and encouraging an effective democratic government may be ideal in resolving the Boko Haram conflict crisis, but the Lake Chad displacement emergency must be addressed now through people and organizations with the means to help. The solution to hunger is deeper than simply providing food to developing countries— we need to assess specific needs and continue to gather information on regions with ongoing crises.

⁹“Red Cross of Chad.” *IFRC*, International Federation of Red Cross, 26 Aug. 2020,

www.ifrc.org/en/what-we-do/where-we-work/africa/red-cross-of-chad/. ¹⁰“Inland Fisheries: A New

Management Plan for Lake Chad's Fisheries Sector.” *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*, 27 Aug. 2020,

www.fao.org/blogs/blue-growth-blog/inland-fisheries-a-new-management-plan-for-lake-chads-fisheries-

[sector/en/](http://www.fao.org/blogs/blue-growth-blog/inland-fisheries-a-new-management-plan-for-lake-chads-fisheries-sector/en/). ¹¹“Who We Are.” *REACH*, REACH, 2019, www.reach-initiative.org/.