

The forgotten countries

Poverty does not restrict itself to the lenses of the world media. It reaches all corners of the globe, and affects hundreds of millions of people. Invariably, when a disaster strikes, the world media will descend to capture and publicise the unfolding events. This ritual happens so often, it is now expected. After all, it generates millions in donations and makes the west feel good about itself. I suppose in that respect those nations are the lucky ones.

Not everybody is so fortunate, however. What about the forgotten countries? Several of them are also affected by disaster, humanitarian crises and severe poverty, but hardly a word is mentioned about their plight.

In this series, I wish to explore and reveal some of those forgotten countries caught in the grip of severe and complex poverty. Then maybe, more can be done to help.

(1) MALI

Mali is a landlocked Sahelian country with an annual per capita income of \$1,500 and a population of 10 million; it has an agriculture based economy in which cotton, livestock and cereals play an important role. Mali is one of the poorest countries in the world, ranking 160th in the United Nations' Human Development Index of 169 countries.

According to UN and World Bank data Mali's development challenges include:

- a rapidly growing population with a fertility rate of 6.7
- a continuing threat of civil war in the north of the country
- an adult population with 75% illiteracy
- a low level of agricultural production with limited infrastructure
- a fragile natural resource environment with a high vulnerability to unreliable rainfall
- a population with 72.8% living below the poverty line
- the fourth highest rate of infant mortality in the world
- the thirteenth highest maternal mortality rate in the world

Having mentioned the development challenges, it is important to also underline the progress the country has made in transforming itself from a dictatorship into a stable, democratically governed country with well established regulatory institutions which have successfully reformed the economy, reduced financial imbalance and liberalised internal markets.

However, all the gains Mali has achieved through ensuring stability, establishing democratic governance and economic reforms are being drained away due to a combination of external factors, such as foreign debt, climate change and an unfair global trade regime, which do really fall outside the power of the Malian government and people to change. For example, the current national annual GDP of Mali is \$3.2 billion, while its foreign debt is \$2.8 billion (acquired under previous regimes and greatly exacerbated due to compound interest), that is 88% of the national GDP. The debt repayments could be spent on essential public services

such as child and maternal health, education and healthcare, infrastructure and agricultural development.

Climate change does heavily affect Mali and as we have witnessed in other parts of the world, internal conflicts increasingly stem from competition for resources such as water and grazing lands. And as tension remains high in the north of the country with the Tuareg population grappling with the adverse effects of climate change, this will not only put people at risk of malnutrition but may also reignite the conflict of early 90s.

An unfair trade regime denies Mali hundreds of millions in income from cotton exports as developed countries continue to provide heavy subsidies to their local cotton producers and put high thresholds and challenges for exports from countries like Mali due to national protectionist policies.

Islamic Relief has been working in Mali since the early nineties and has implemented a number of projects, tackling the immediate and long term needs of the people in Mali. Islamic Relief is also addressing external as well as internal factors that keep 72% of the Malian population under the poverty line. The organisation continues to focus the international community's attention on debt relief, climate change and trade justice as well as importance of coordinated sustainable action on internal causes and consequences of poverty.

Droughts, increasingly exacerbated by climate change, seem to be the biggest threat to the people of the region and in this respect Islamic Relief is looking at finding sustainable solutions to the problem. For instance, Islamic Relief is funding and implementing a large scale, three-year long irrigation project in semi arid northern Mali. A year and a half after the start of this project, a recent evaluation confirms increased food production as well as increased income to the beneficiaries of the project.

In order to avoid a crisis like the current one in the Horn of Africa, in Mali, Islamic Relief has identified the following sectors that need immediate attention in Mali:

- Food security and climate change mitigation through infrastructural and capacity based agricultural development and investment
- Water resources management (including rainwater harvesting within the very short rainy season)
- Improvement of provision of primary health care services
- Support to the development of the educational infrastructure and capacity
- Capacity development of communities to enable them to improve their livelihoods

Mali is a very special country that can serve as a role model for most of the developing countries in terms of democratisation, good governance and budgetary transparency – those are the key cornerstones of the development framework. With a little more support and concessions from the international community, the country can achieve an even better economic performance and reduce shortcomings in key indicators of the UN Human Development Index and provision of essential public services. If we are to let another

drought cause massive hunger and a subsequent crisis we may lose the progress Malian people and government have made.

“Prevention is always better than treatment and in this respect we must not forget the development challenges of countries like Mali and stop the trend of treatment when we, as an international community and humankind, have an opportunity, the tools and resources to prevent a humanitarian crisis.”



Dr Hossam Said

Director of International Programmes
Islamic Relief Worldwide