

What Africans are Doing for Themselves

During the course of seven missions to Africa, I have been deeply impressed by the response of Africans to their own crisis. Throughout the famine, African governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) assumed major responsibility for the transportation and distribution of food aid. Port capacity to receive the huge food shipments was increased rapidly: the port of Assab in Ethiopia achieved a threefold increase in the past year. That country's Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (12,000 employees and volunteers) has done an outstanding job in distributing food over the past two years. The Ethiopian people themselves have shown a remarkable sense of human solidarity.

Among Africans, from government officials to the peasants and nomads in the countryside, there is an intense desire to find ways of becoming self-supporting once again. We spoke briefly with a refugee from Tigray who had just arrived at the Wad-Sharrif camp in Sudan. He and his wife were exhausted after a five-day trip with their four children and everything they owned: a few pots, a skinny camel and an emaciated goat. After watching the situation steadily deteriorate during the previous two years, after selling his livestock and his tools, after eating his seeds, he had no choice: he began the long journey to the camp, where he joined 60,000 refugees who had undergone a similar experience. But he insisted that as soon as it rained he would be back in his country. He would work his field, once he found the tools and the seeds. His wife and children would stay in the camp and wait for him. He would come back for them when he had re-established himself.

The recovery of the people and the building of national economies are the prime concerns of an increasing number of African leaders. Many of those we met referred to soil conservation and livestock policies, development of unexploited natural resources and economic renewal as the top priorities for their countries: they talked about the kind of help that would allow them to help themselves. Said Mauritania's Minister of Agriculture: "We don't want our people to get used to hand-outs of food because it will only generate non-productive dependence."