

# Why questions about relief food for hunger victims lingers

**Queried.** The rains eventually came, crops grew and hunger eased, leading to the dying down of noises about food relief. But, as *Saturday Monitor's* Stephen Kafeero reports, there are still a number of unanswered questions about the relief food that the government and donor community mobilized to respond to the recent famine.

Several parts of the country were beset by hunger when, following prolonged drought and unpredictable rains, crops failed and animals starved. Even deaths were reported in some areas.

The government responded by mobilising relief food using the available resources and donations. But questions regarding how that food was distributed and whether all the allocated funds were put to good use still linger.

The government officials responsible for the food distribution were not keen to answer questions in detail when *Saturday Monitor* contacted them.

We requested Mr Martin Owor, the Commissioner for Relief, Disaster Preparedness and Management in the Office of the Prime Minister, for data on how food relief and funds, particularly the rice donated by China, had been distributed to the affected communities.

Specifically, he was requested to explain how the rice donated by the Chinese government had been distributed to the intended beneficiaries and the validity of the reports that it was either exported or sold on the local market.

"You get it from Hon Ecweru," he said. Mr Musa Ecweru is the state minister for Relief and Disaster Preparedness and Mr Owor's political head.

When contacted, Mr Ecweru, bounced us back to Mr Owor. "He should be the one to give you information because he has the records.

"It came when the country had a lot of starvation. We gave it to communities in all the districts of the country. It was completely distributed. I personally presided over (distribution) in a number of areas with the media present," Mr Ecweru said.

When we contacted Mr Owor again, he was less courteous this time. "There [is] are certain information which is ours, there [is] are certain information which is news," Mr Owor said.

He declined our request when we insisted that it was in the interest of the public to know what happened to the aid meant to benefit them or their kin.

"What you have is what you should

publish," he said, and when we still insisted, he said, "I don't have that information sir." He dropped the call.

## The accusations

Only a fraction of the aid, including money and food assistance, is reported to have made it to the intended areas with few of the supposed beneficiaries getting their share.

In places where the relief items reached, there are reports that some politicians, especially from the ruling NRM, took over the exercise and their supporters were the only beneficiaries.

Among the major donations received at the time by government, through the Office of the Prime Minister, was 119,660 bags of 50kgs of rice in 200 containers worth Shs22billion from the People's Republic of China for distribution to some people severely affected by this food crisis.

At the time, the minister of Agriculture, Vincent Ssempiija, told Parliament the number of Ugandans in need of food relief had risen from 1.3 million in November 2016 to 1.5 million people by February 2017.

He cited districts in Teso, Karamoja, Bukedi, Lango, Acholi, Busoga, and parts of central Uganda as the most in need of the said food aid.

If we are to use Mr Ssempiija's estimates, and taking a conservative estimate of an average of four people per family, the 1.5million people would translate to 375,000 households, implying that each family would get at least 15.9kgs of rice donated by China. We could not trace any beneficiary of the "China rice" at such a scale.

Instead, we got stories of districts and sub-counties receiving either maize flour, beans and in some cases rice in a few hundred bags and other places which were in need ending up with nothing.

## Voices from the ground

Such is the state of Isingiro South Constituency, in Isingiro District, which to-date requires food relief. The area, according MP Alex Bakunda Byarugaba, last received support in 2016 when there



**Hunger pangs.** A child looking for food in a granary in Nakapiripirit. PHOTO BY STEVEN ARICNG

were rampant reports of people at the brink of death as a result of starvation.

They, however, never benefitted from the aid which was collected at the start of this year despite Isingiro being one of the most affected districts.

"Even now as I talk, three people died (of hunger), a hailstorm devastated a whole sub-county. In Nyakitunda Subcounty, three people died, others lost their crops, properties and animals such as sheep, goats and cows."

"Four bridges are totally impassable, they were destroyed but no re-

sponse has been made to Isingiro South," he says.

Mr Byarugaba, a member of the ruling National Resistance Movement party, adds: "I am not at all convinced that the money was properly used. As far as my constituency is concerned, we never got anything and even now I am crying out. I can't remember any support ever extended to my people. I even put in a letter and request for support but nothing [has come of it]."

A week after Mr Ssempiija's announcement, it emerged that the government had raised at least Shs41billion to cater for purchase and distribution of food to the affected people. Some of the money,

**STOLEN?**

The contradictions. Shortly after Mr Onek's statement, it emerged that the food dispatched on paper in some areas was less than what was actually received in the districts. This is what happened in Bukedea.

On May 5, 2017, at least 800 bags of maize flour and 400 bags of beans were dispatched, according to records, to the district to be distributed to more than 10,000 residents reported to be starving as a

result of the prolonged drought that interfered with planting seasons and harvests.

However, local leaders in Bukedea, led by district chairperson, Mr Moses Olemukan, said only 400 bags of maize flour and 50 bags of beans were delivered. The authorities declined to distribute the supplies pending an explanation from OPM.

On May 2, 2017, it emerged that part of the relief food meant for hunger victims in Kola District had

been stolen. OPM had earlier, on April 28, disbursed 180 bags to the district. A case was opened by police for further investigations.

When a section of lawmakers from Teso Sub-region threatened to take to the streets over delay by government to equitably distribute relief food to famine stricken areas, Mr Onek said some of the relief food that the government disburses to hunger-stricken areas was not reaching the

intended beneficiaries because authorities in some of the affected districts were sharing it among themselves.

In May, it also emerged that senior government officials, including individuals at cabinet level, were involved in theft of relief food and repackaging it for sale on the local market. In one case, there were media reports that the said food items were being sold to dealers in Bwaise and Kikuuba in Kampala.

Finance state minister David Bahati said, was realised after the government made adjustments to the 2017/2018 budget.

**More queries**

In April this year, Mr Hilary Onek, the minister for Relief, Disaster Preparedness and Refugees, told Parliament that the number of people in need of food relief had increased to 5.5 million people by that month.

The Office of the Prime Minister, Mr Onek reported, had managed to reach 197 destinations in 74 districts with 33,360 bags of 100kgs of maize flour, 8,781 bags of 100kgs of beans and 38,370 bags of 50kgs of rice.

On May 13, this newspaper reported that the Finance Ministry was reluctant to honour a Cabinet decision to allocate an additional Shs50 billion for food relief to hunger-stricken areas.

The move, Finance Minister Matia Kasajja said, was informed by audit queries on the absorption of previous funds and whether the money was actually utilised and food items distributed to the affected areas.

In fact, Mr Kasajja challenged the media to "go down to the people and ask them whether they have received the food items being distributed."

At the time of the request, the disaster preparedness Ministry said it had spent Shs28.6 billion to provide "7,000 metric tonnes of maize and 20,000 bags of beans" to districts across the country.

**At least a little**

In some areas that have since received food aid, leaders say the food relief was insufficient but helped to avert what would have been a catastrophe.

"We received food. The Minister Eweru was there personally and delivered sacks of posho (maize flour). Other sacks of rice and posho were also distributed to Lwala Girls Secondary School students. Of course it wasn't enough but it was good enough because after the food was distributed, the rains came and our people were saved," MP Bichet-ero Isala Eragu Veronica, Kaberamaido County, Kaberamaido District, said.

"We had identified people who were badly off and when food was delivered, we distributed to each of them. Through our member of Parliament, Mr Michael Tusiime, we received 600 bags of rice for the six divisions in the municipality. It wasn't that much but our people were helped," Hajji Abbas Kazibwe Kakoba Division Chairman, Mbarara Municipality.

The 600 bags of rice to Mbarara Municipality became controversial after the move became public.

The Prime Minister's Office would later clarify that all urban poor in the Municipalities across the country benefited.

Mr Onek had earlier expressed ignorance about food distribution in urban centres yet Mr Owor, insisted that the distribution list was approved by Cabinet, which Mr Onek and his deputy Musa Eweru attend.



Not forthcoming, Martin Owor



**THE NUMBERS**

**Govt and donor response**

- Shs25 billion for 1,600 metric tonnes of maize flour and 400 metric tonnes of beans
- Shs8.475 trillion for strategic policy actions for food security in Uganda for next four years.
- Shs14 billion given to Karamoja by World Bank through NUFAS 3 under cash for work programme; commonly referred to as Disaster Risk Financing
- 5,983 metric tons of Rice from China worth Shs22 billion

**Relief. State Minister for Relief, Disaster Preparedness and Refugees Musa Eweru, Isingiro South MP Alex Byarugaba and Isingiro North Rtd Lt Col. Bright Rwamirama distribute posho last year.**

PHOTO BY ALFRED TUMUSHABE

**Some disbursements**

**Kalangala:** The Office of Prime Minister disburses 600 bags; each containing 50kg of rice to starving families in Ssesse Islands -Kalangala district.

**Kagadi:** Over 1000 bags of rice reportedly delivered as food relief to people in Muhorro and Mpefu sub-counties.

**Amuru:** OPM says 910 bags of relief food distributed to victims of Elegu flush floods in district. The items meant to benefit at least 20,000 victims included 100 bags of Maize Flour, 800 bags of Rice and 10 bags of Beans.

*This Week*

**On Perspective with Josephine Karungi.**

It is an unplanned journey but if you have to go it, where do you start? This Sunday, we talk about raising a child with special needs. The care and support they need, and the role those around them can play to raise them the best way possible. Join us at the Kampala Serena Conference Centre. Come be part of our studio audience or watch us live on NTV and Online, don't forget to download VidTV.

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