Love Without Borders:  
**Recent Projects from the TaiwanICDF in South Sudan and Kenya**

- **Introduction**

  In 2011, two events in eastern parts of Africa made headlines around the world.

  Firstly, there was the independence of South Sudan, which, while being cause for great optimism, also led to a period of intense conflict in certain regions of the world’s newest nation, blighting the lives of those involved due to a serious threat to local food security.

  Secondly, there was the “Horn of Africa Crisis,” as it was referred to by the development community and the world’s media, a drought of widespread and historic proportions which wrought devastation upon an already fragile region, leading to a major call for emergency assistance from the UN and governments around the world.

  The TaiwanICDF became involved in the response to both of these events after being approached by Mercy Corps, our long-term partner, to fund rapid-relief projects in Kenya, one of the four countries affected by the Horn of Africa Crisis, and South Sudan.

  Recently, two of our TaiwanICDF colleagues, Regine Liu and Mini Kao, had the opportunity to visit the project sites to conduct project completion missions.

  As part of their 16-day mission, Regine and Mini conducted extensive interviews with members of local communities and the project staff who implemented these initiatives, which allows us to piece together the background to these events and tell much of both stories in the words of those directly involved.
• Support to IDPs, Returnees and Host Communities in South Sudan

The story in South Sudan is one of competing resources and historical, intercommunal issues complicated by problems concerning South Sudan’s newfound independence, which led to a crisis in Abyei, a region along the northern border of the country.

To understand how the TaiwanICDF project came about, or why it was needed at all, it’s worth taking a quick look back over some of South Sudan’s recent history.

South Sudan, the world’s newest nation, officially came into being on July 9, 2011, following a referendum in January 2011 in which an overwhelming majority of voters chose to declare independence from Sudan to the north.

Mercy Corps has been working in the region which became South Sudan since 1985. So the organization was well placed to react to a growing crisis which had begun to unfold shortly before independence, in May 2011, in Abyei, a contested area roughly one-third the size of Taiwan.

Mercy Corps personnel with local knowledge of the area’s complicated history explain that Abyei is the traditional homeland of nine chiefdoms of the Dinka people, who count among their number South Sudan’s first president, Salva Kiir Mayardit. Historically, however, Abyei has also been home to the nomadic Messiria people, who would travel down from the north for at least six months of the year, moving, together with their cattle, to find water and pasture during the annual dry season.

The fact that the region has accommodated peoples who would become citizens of two distinct countries explains, in part, why this area was and remains contested. Abyei has a history of intercommunal conflict which, until May 2011, had been kept in check by the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, or CPA,
signed in January 2005 between the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement, a political party representing the interests of those in the south of Sudan, and the government of Sudan.

- “People Running for their Lives, Without Shoes on their Feet”

The recent crisis in Abyei began when Sudanese armed forces stormed the area from the north, making headway as far as the banks of the River Kiir, which lies about two-fifths of the way into the territory. The ensuing violence displaced an estimated 110,000 Dinka, who fled further south, across the river, as well as into neighboring states.

Mathieu Rouquette, Mercy Corps’ South Sudan Country Director, who has worked for three years in both Sudan and what is now South Sudan, picks up the story from here, describing the plight of those who fled: “That displacement shattered their livelihoods. They left everything behind. When the northern army came, it was only a matter of hours for them to get out of their homes, leaving pretty much everything behind.”

“When we hear the story of the people that the TaiwanICDF assisted, there are heartbreaking stories of despair and people running for their lives, without shoes on their feet.”

So the issue here is essentially one of massive – and often violent – disruption. Crucially, this led to massive disruption to local agricultural production in a region where 90 percent of the population relies on the sector for its living.

Abyei has always been a particularly fertile area. Local officers from the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry describe the region as a breadbasket, saying that while the CPA was in effect, the area had been self-sufficient, and normally yielded a surplus which could be provided to neighboring states. The primary...
grain here is sorghum, which, along with other staples such as cowpea and maize, is grown from May to October. A second, vegetable-growing season supporting crops such as pumpkin, eggplant and tomato runs from November to April.

Yet people who had fled from north of the River Kiir had left at a moment’s notice, abandoning their fields and arriving at temporary settlements further south empty handed, with no resources to prepare for the coming vegetable-growing season. Arrangements for the year’s second round of planting should have been underway by September, but people were afraid to return to their homes, with access to areas north of the river all but impossible due to the continued threat of shooting and unexploded ordinance. Severe, localized food shortages began to set in due to the standstill in local production.

- **Timely Intervention Restores Day-to-day Well-being**

It was at this point that Mercy Corps approached the TaiwanICDF to suggest a rapid, limited intervention to address the crisis. The objectives of the proposed project were to reestablish agricultural systems and maintain food supplies, alleviating the pressure being placed upon host communities while a degree of stability could be returned to the lives of internally displaced persons (IDPs).

To achieve this, program staff established three farming groups comprising a total of 199 households, and provided agricultural skills training to 50 households. They also distributed agricultural production materials, such as seeds and basic farming equipment, to 357 households, and provided contract farming services to 332 households.

Acuil Atem, Mercy Corps’ Program Manager in Abyei, who works out of the organization’s office in Agok, the largest town in the area, oversaw the implementation of the project, which was completed in January 2012. He says
that people were not dependent on food assistance prior to the most recent round of conflict, and explains that in general, locals would prefer not to rely on such assistance, but for the fact that their plight, on this occasion, was desperate. He says that now that the situation has improved, local people are eager to produce their own food and raise their incomes primarily through their own efforts.

Thanks to the timely intervention of the TaiwanICDF and Mercy Corps, and the subsequent implementation of the project, many IDPs who have settled in the area can now look forward to a much higher degree of day-to-day well-being.

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- **Drought Relief in North Eastern Kenya**

It’s hard to imagine quite what it means when somebody says that it literally “never rained a drop, for three years.”

But that’s what residents say happened in parts of Wajir District, Kenya, where the flat, rust-colored landscape stretches for miles toward the horizon, punctuated by the dark greens and browns of tough, gnarled trees. For Kenya, it was in this part of the country, an arduous 13-hour drive from the capital, Nairobi, that the impact of the recent drought in the Horn of Africa was most deeply felt.

Even before the onset of the crisis, life here could be tough. The region is home to many pastoralists, whose traditional way of life sees them eking out a living amidst this harsh terrain by grazing their livestock far and wide, sometimes into neighboring Ethiopia and Somalia, lying not far to the north and east.

Throughout 2010 and 2011, when the annual Gu and Deyr rains began to fail not just in Kenya, but across the whole of the Horn of Africa, the residents of this
The remote, arid corner of the country began to find themselves more isolated than ever. The quality and quantity of grazing land became increasingly poor, forcing pastoralists to retreat toward Wajir Town, the district’s largest community, even as most of their livestock were dying or ill. By the time they arrived, their herds had been decimated and they were in a truly desperate state. And with local government services already few and far between, as settlements around Wajir Town began to swell, this influx exacerbated the problems that the drought was inflicting upon the town’s permanent residents.

This was the situation developing as the TaiwanICDF and Mercy Corps arranged to intervene, agreeing to implement a project whose objectives were to rehabilitate and provide functioning water supply systems in targeted communities, construct sanitation facilities, and increase knowledge of health and hygiene.

Although these objectives would eventually be realized, Mercy Corps’ personnel on the ground at the time were becoming increasingly aware of the growing acuteness of the crisis. As such, many of the financial resources originally earmarked for a wide range of WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) services had to be focused on allaying the area’s most pressing humanitarian needs.

- “**Overwhelming Need from the Community**”

“When the ICDF project kicked off, it was actually at the height of the emergency response,” explains James Akai, Mercy Corps’ Program Director for Wajir. “The major demand then was just water.”

“The Horn of Africa Crisis came at a time when there was a global crisis of fuel prices, so that just imposed on business people, increased the cost of water trucking,” he says. “So that was the main challenge, getting enough trucks.”
“It was a phase at which we had to save lives, and so we couldn’t focus on the other resiliency programming, the recovery programs. So the major challenge was the cost of water trucking. That had an effect on everything else that we had planned to do. It was quite expensive.”

Achuti Mochama, the Mercy Corps WASH engineer responsible for overseeing the distribution of water resources and infrastructure provided through the project, agrees: “The major challenge was overwhelming need from the community. I had chiefs, government officials in my office: ‘Our people are dying. Please, can you give us one [water] kiosk? Can you give us one pump house? Can you give us one storage tank?’”

“That was the major challenge,” he says. “It was really hard to target, to say, ‘Which one? Should I take this one? Or should I take this one and this one, and leave this one?’”

With much of the TaiwanICDF’s initial grant of US$200,000 having been used to bring in water from as far afield as Nairobi, to provide water tankers and bottled water in 16 villages, the project was extended into a second phase in October 2011, with a further grant of US$500,000 being allocated toward activities that would move the initiative forward from the emergency response to cover a wider scope for recovery, as was originally envisaged.

This was really when the implementation of WASH services began in earnest, throughout nearby communities such as Handaki, Barmish, Shanta Abaq and Abdiwako.

- **Infrastructure, Resiliency Programming Bolsters Fragile Communities**

  Specifically, the project saw the construction of two open-air reservoirs, 12 underground concrete water tanks, and eight reservoirs for livestock, 10 pit
latrines, and two generator rooms for pumping stations. The project also funded the purchase of three pumping-station generators, and the repair of three others. Much of this work was carried out as a cash-for-work program, which provided local people with an income to offset the financial losses caused by the death of their livestock.

In addition to water-related infrastructure, this phase of the project saw Mercy Corps hire local specialists to deliver courses on personal hygiene, environmental hygiene, food hygiene, water hygiene and environmental sanitation, as well as to provide training to government Community Health Committees, building the capacity of 120 officers from the Ministry of Public Health and Sanitation.

With the recent drought the worst to hit Wajir District in 60 years, the local economy had inevitably taken a major hit, too. Women, traditionally responsible for collecting water, found themselves walking twice as far to fulfill this task, which restricted their capacity to work, while young people who would normally be grazing their herds of livestock, now decimated, found themselves with few opportunities. To address this problem, the project funded the work of economic empowerment officers, who helped to mobilize what savings locals do have by forming village savings groups. Some 76 groups are now operating throughout Wajir District.

Representing the “resiliency programming” referred to by James Akai, activities such as these bolster fragile communities by improving the way that they use the scarce water resources that they have, and by preparing them for the potential “shock” of dealing with droughts in the future.

Thankfully, regular spells of rain have now returned to the region, and with project activities having been completed in October 2012, Randy Martin, Mercy
Corps’ Director at Large for East Asia, who accompanied TaiwanICDF personnel during their mission to Africa, summarizes what the initiative achieved from Mercy Corps’ point of view.

“There’s a special challenge to drought emergencies that we don’t see with earthquakes, typhoons and tsunamis, where there’s a rapid-onset emergency that galvanizes public attention, and galvanizes people’s desire to help and to contribute.

“Droughts are these silent things that sort of slowly evolve, and sort of slowly do their damage. And particularly in such a remote corner of the earth as this, people just don’t notice it.

“The thing for me that I really, really appreciate was the fact that we were able to get your attention to this, to get the support and to work here the way we have,” he says, referring to the involvement of the TaiwanICDF.

“I think we’ve been able to achieve some remarkable things in a way that we wouldn’t have been able to do otherwise. We just wouldn’t have been able to find the resources.”
• Support to IDPs, Returnees and Host Communities in South Sudan

Acuil Atem, Mercy Corps’ Program Manager in Abyei, South Sudan.
(Credit: Regine Liu/ TaiwanICDF)

Project beneficiaries in Waucien, Abyei, South Sudan, gather to display some of their produce.
(Credit: Regine Liu/ TaiwanICDF)

• Drought Relief in North Eastern Kenya

Project beneficiaries in Ibrahim Urey, Wajir District, Kenya, gather to discuss project outcomes with TaiwanICDF and Mercy Corps personnel.
(Credit: Regine Liu/ TaiwanICDF)

A boy in Abdiwako, Wajir District, Kenya, plays with water drawn by a generator repaired through TaiwanICDF funding.
(Credit: Regine Liu/ TaiwanICDF)

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