

INGSA CASE STUDIES

REPUBLIC OF ESTRELA: INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE AND PLANNING

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ESTRELA

INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE AND PLANNING

Context and background

Estrela is a large, low-income country that after half a century of internal conflict and political uncertainty has now seen a stable decade with the first peaceful transition of power in decades (elections 3.5 years ago) and a rapprochement with neighbours. These stable political conditions have now opened up a space for social and economic development; however the country is facing a number of challenges.

Estrela is a predominantly agricultural country with about 85% of its 80-million population living rurally. The geography of Estrela is diverse, with high mountain peaks, mountain plateaus, river valleys, coastal plains, rainforest and semiarid areas. These distinct geographic areas have been settled for generations by ethnic groups with distinct cultures and languages, and practicing different religions. While in the past clashes between ethnic groups were frequent, recent efforts to ensure equitable political representation and free cultural expression have resulted in a period of peace. However this interethnic peace is potentially fragile.

Estrela's population is growing rapidly. While infant and maternal mortality have fallen significantly, the fertility is decreasing much more slowly (at still nearly 6 children/woman), through early marriage and long reproductive span as well as limited uptake of modern birth control methods. The rapid population growth is putting a pressure on the resources of the developing country: family farms are not able to sustain such large families. This in turn is leading to young people moving to cities where they are met by high unemployment, little or no housing, and generally poor prospects. Youth emigration is on the increase but so is crime and also animosity towards migrants, seen as competitors for scarce jobs and housing. Environmental changes caused by the increased urbanization and expansion of agricultural land (both causing deforestation and pressure on water) are further complicated by the changing climate, that is wetter in some areas, drier in others (with desertification of the semiarid areas), and overall warmer and more unpredictable.

Problem

Last year a category 5 cyclone hit the coastal province of Tatinya. The initial destruction by high winds was then followed by protracted rain. Arriving after a long drought that made the surfaces impermeable, the heavy rainfall caused extensive flooding, leading to further home destructions but also to the devastation of the crops and a cholera outbreak. Nearly a million of the inhabitants of Tatinya (25% of the population) left the province and sought refuge in other provinces.

The province of Madasa received the largest share of the displaced Tatinyans. Madasa has traditionally been seen as a wealthy, peaceful region with a welcoming culture. It is encompassing forest-covered mountains and a highland plateau, with fairly favourable climate and significant water sources. Its inhabitants mostly practice subsistence economy using archaic agricultural and other production techniques. Coffee has been grown in Madasa for centuries for internal consumption and is now the main export crop. A few decades ago some local entrepreneurs with international experience have also started growing tea. It was soon found that the Madasan “pink” tea, grown in the highest areas of the province, has health benefits and exceptional flavour. International demand has surged. Tea and coffee bring the much needed cash into Madasan economy however they have displaced some of the traditional crops used in human nutrition. Together with the fast growing human population and the climate that is becoming drier, these developments are causing for the first time serious pressure on the environmental resources, with Madasa not being able to produce enough food for its inhabitants.

Displaced Tatinyans are largely living in temporary camps, the largest of which is situated just outside the Madasan capital, Yuli. Conditions in the camps are harsh: although Madasa has enough water, access is difficult; food is scarce and of poor quality, mostly supplied by international aid organizations; and while infections have so far been contained, there is a danger of an epidemic outbreak (food and waterborne but also respiratory such as meningococcal meningitis) that could spread beyond the camp. There is little paid work available for Tatinyans as unemployment is high even among local Madasans. Clashes between Tatinyans and citizens of Yuli have been reported: according to a TV reportage Tatinyans are behind the recent increase in crime in Yuli. The attempt to interview someone from the camps has failed because migrants are afraid of retributions by the local population.

The PM has called an urgent cabinet meeting on how to solve the problem that may explode in multiple directions: as an epidemic, ethnic conflict, crime and even famine. Governors of both Tatinya and Madasa provinces have been invited too. Minister of Foreign and Ethnic Affairs is proposing a quick return of Tatinyans to their home province. She is saying that the government

cannot risk ethnic conflict in particular in the run up to elections (scheduled to take place in 6 months). “This country has been peaceful and prospering under our government,” she argues “We owe it to all Estrelans to stay in power a little longer, to make sure that the democratic order is fully established. Let’s not jeopardize our chances.” She has the support of the Minister of Health who has secured a large international grant (by a private foundation established by an IT billionaire-turned-philanthropist with interest in global health) to rebuild the destroyed areas of Tatinya.

However these two ministers are opposed by the Minister of Environment. “I understand the Minister’s viewpoint,” he says, “I share her fears. But these short-term solutions are a waste of money; in two years’ time we will be having the same conversation.” Cyclones are not new to the coastal regions of Estrela. It is true that the climate change is making them and their impact stronger, but much of the worsening impact is caused by human practices: rampant deforestation, ongoing urbanization, construction of buildings and homes too close to the sea and riverbeds. “Instead of rushing to build a cheap version of the former Tatinya only to be destroyed three years later, let’s consider this disaster as an opportunity to rethink how people may live in future and how we may plan for that.” The Minister is proposing to bring together a team of natural and social scientists to create a plan for new Madasa. He has the cautious support of the Minister of Food and Agriculture, who has been arguing that the country must think seriously about its food production: although monocultures are very important for economy, abandoning traditional crops and mixed farming could expose farmers to high risk should climate turn more unpredictable. However the governors of both Madasa and Tatinya are strongly against this proposal, both wanting to resume the previous state (for different reasons). Minister of Health is worried that the government’s taking time to plan could be interpreted as internal disarray and incompetence by the international donor, who could withdraw the offer.

The PM is undecided: unofficially he likes the Minister of Environment’s proposal but the needs of the displaced population are great and the political pressure to do something quickly is huge.

What would you suggest?

Notes for the mentors

Stakeholders from whose perspective the problem should/may be considered:

1. Federal government of Estrela and different Ministers: of Environment; Health; Foreign and Ethnic Affairs; Food and Agriculture.
2. Provincial authorities: Madasa, Tatinya
3. Experts from different disciplines: climate science; environmental science/biodiversity; agriculture; architecture and urban planning; social science/public policy.
4. International organizations

Considerations:

1. How to balance the political and economic cost of responding quickly (e.g. in the case of natural disaster) vs the need to spend both time and money in assessing the (shifting) situation and planning for (uncertain) future?
2. How can we reconcile the difference in views (likely to be) offered by different disciplines: environmental scientists, economists, agricultural or political scientists? How can we understand the causes of difference in views (Different questions? Different goals? Philosophies?)
3. How to communicate scientific evidence involving a contested issue in a politically charged atmosphere?



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