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## [The Middle East](#)

66

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THE POOR ALWAYS COME OUT WORSE OFF THAN THE rich when natural disasters strike and the devastating earthquake in Pakistan proved no exception. How can we turn the momentum created by a wave of human sympathy into generous donations to relief funds--with Islamic and Christian agencies forging a common front--into a long-term sustainable programme to address poverty itself? Such a programme, if successful, could make the impact of the next natural disaster less painful. However, if recent reports are anything to go by, established charities are having real trouble convincing some would-be donors that their largesse will not somehow end up in the coffers of Al Qaeda.

Poverty, experts argue, has been a problem of an inequitable distribution of resources and technology. Even generous gestures from the G8 leaders this summer to write-off billions of dollars of Third World debt is still a one-off donation. What is needed to reduce poverty are long-term policies and the opening up of western markets to the produce of the poor, as well as providing the latter with the means to reach those markets at competitive prices.

Shipping a tonne of corn from a farm in Iowa to Mombassa, at \$50, costs half of the price of transportation from Dar-Es Salam, just 650 miles away, explained Mohammed Beavogui, director of Western and Central African operations of **IFAD** (International Fund for the Agricultural Development), a United Nations initiative launched three decades ago, to help the rural poor, worldwide.

Millions of rural Africans are the poorest people in the world, says **IFAD** President **Lennart Bage**, warning that agriculture gets the least attention from the ruling elite, despite employing 70%-80% of Africans and, generating 60% of the continent's exports.

So why then, doesn't **IFAD** contribute to improving the transport system in Africa or linking missing parts to connect Africa's main cities, reviving Cecil Rhodes' dream of a Cairo to Cape Town Railway, and its offshoot Cairo to Casablanca? The benefits could prove enormous.

"It is not within our job description," says Dr Mona Bishay, an Egyptian who speaks several languages and is in charge of the Near East and North Africa (NENA) division. There are limits to what **IFAD** can contribute to construction, "infrastructure projects are in the hands of other agencies and investors."

UN bureaucracy sets strict remits for its agencies. They cannot get involved in war-torn Iraq, which has been both donor to and recipient of **IFAD** grants and loans, as part of an ambitious donor partnership with OPEC. The latter agreed last month in Doha to contribute \$50m to funds over the next five years--in addition to other contributors like the World Bank, the IMF and the UN itself.

The OPEC-**IFAD** partnership started at the time of the 1973 oil boom that turned OPEC into a powerful cartel. Hence, the **IFAD** drive now to get OPEC to pledge more funds, with the unexpected windfall from the current oil prices boom reaching \$60-70 a barrel.

Although OPEC donors don't reap material gains from this partnership, it gives them prestige and experience, especially in research and technology projects such as rationing the use of water resources and developing new irrigation techniques,

In the NENA, where **IFAD** started in 1978, there are 14 borrowing nations and five non-borrowers, with a total \$1.2bn **IFAD** commitment. The strategy, says Dr Bishay, is management; diversification of production and finding other sources of income; empowerment of the rural poor by developing their skills; targeting the needy; addressing the gender issue and furthering equality between the sexes; and participating in the agricultural and rural policy-making both regionally and nationally.

**IFAD** invested in post-Tsunami projects to start agricultural and other rural projects from scratch and is planning a similar programme to help farmers and rural people, in places like Pakistan and Kashmir, after relief agencies have finished their mission. Success stories, like these and **IFAD's** projects in Somalia, will act as blueprints for **IFAD** officials to follow in Iraq when the UN lets it back in.

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