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Gay charity focuses on Africa food crisis

Larry Buhl, PlanetOut Network
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Fresh off a campaign to help tsunami victims, which raised nearly a quarter of a million dollars since December, the only LGBT world relief agency, Rainbow World Fund, is now focusing on aid for drought-ravaged Niger.

By partnering with the oldest and largest African-American humanitarian aid organization, Africare, RWF aims to help people at risk of starvation in the sub-Saharan African nation.

Niger is the second-poorest country in the world. With less than 3 percent arable land, maintaining a year-round food supply is a challenge even in the best of times. With a poor agricultural season last year, a massive locust invasion and the third year of a drought, nearly one-third of the country's total population -- or 3.6 million -- is at risk of starvation, according to Africare.

"Niger is always extremely food-vulnerable, but in some parts of the country it's worse than ever," said Thomas Chupein, a volunteer for RWF's Niger campaign. "They need to manage stocks better and use and manage their land

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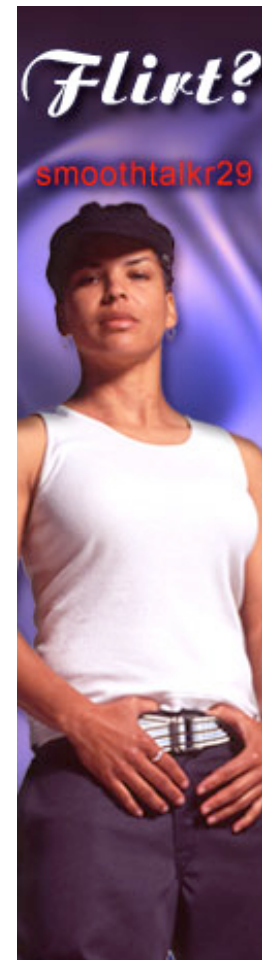
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Chupein said Africare, which has been helping Niger since 1970, is facilitating the delivery of food and educational programs for agricultural techniques that will ensure citizens have food throughout the year. Part of the funds for Africare's effort will come from exclusively gay and lesbian dollars donated to RWF.

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Why do gay dollars matter in humanitarian aid? And why should gays and lesbians give to RWF instead of directly to other groups, such as CARE or Africare? The answer, according to RWF founder Jeff Cotter, is to help our community while helping those in need.

"What we do, and the dollars we raise, provides a large, visible LGBT presence and a united front representing LGBT compassion throughout the world," he said.

"We also provide a link between the LGBT community and developed and developing nations," he continued. Finally, gay dollars have a way of helping the givers. "I want RWF to change the way we [the gay community] see ourselves."

Cotter admitted that the people who directly receive the aid usually don't know -- or care -- where it comes from. But the ground staff who administer the money do know the source, which provides a positive public relations effect in nations where LGBT presence is minimal. "It gives them a chance to think of gays, if they've thought about us at all in the past, as caring, which we are."

In some of RWF's projects, however, such as its Guatemala outreach, the goal is primarily to start a dialogue about LGBT issues.

One more reason to give to RWF, Cotter suggested, is that donors' dollars go further. Thanks to an all-volunteer U.S. staff and funds from RWF's board of directors and grants -- including one from the School Sisters of Notre Dame -- gay dollars donated to RWF are not eaten up by U.S. administrative costs. Administrative costs in the field (delivering food on the ground, etc.) are kept well under 10 percent, he said.

A spokesperson from Africare told the PlanetOut Network that the goal for the ongoing Niger food emergency is \$2 million. Cotter said he has no set target for RWF's part of that goal, but that "\$100,000 would be terrific."

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