

East Africa Food Crisis

Poor rains, poor response

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Mother-of-four Khad ja Acoil, Somaliland, 2011. Severe shortages of food and water, along with spiralling food prices and the deaths of livestock, have plunged many families into destitution. © Oxfam/Alun McDonald.

East Africa is facing the worst food crisis of the 21st Century. Across Ethiopia, Somalia, and Kenya, 12 million people are in dire need of food, clean water, and basic sanitation. Loss of life on a massive scale is a very real risk, and the crisis is set to worsen over the coming months, particularly for pastoralist communities.

The overall international donor response to this humanitarian crisis has been slow and inadequate. According to UN figures, \$1bn is required to meet immediate needs. So far donors have committed less than \$200m, leaving an \$800m black hole.

While severe drought has undoubtedly led to the huge scale of the disaster, this crisis has been caused by people and policies, as much as by weather patterns. If more action had been taken earlier it could have helped mitigate the severity of the current crisis. It is no coincidence that the worst affected areas are those suffering from entrenched poverty due to marginalisation and lack of investment.

A rapid increase in emergency aid is needed right now to save lives and protect livelihoods, so that people can rebuild once the crisis is over. National governments and donors must prioritise addressing the issues that make people vulnerable in the first place.

There's no time to waste. We must not stand by and watch this tragedy unfold.

Introduction

East Africa is currently experiencing a severe drought, with 2011 being recorded, in some locations, as the driest or second driest year on record since 1951.¹ The devastating impact of the drought has been compounded by rising food prices, creating a food security and acute livelihood crisis for almost 12 million people. The regions that are worst affected are in northern Kenya, southern Ethiopia, and south-central Somalia.

Successive poor rains this year and recurrent droughts have dramatically weakened the resilience of pastoralist and farming communities. The UN has already warned of pre-famine conditions in some parts of Somalia. Severe malnutrition rates have been recorded in the worst affected areas, and in displaced populations these are up to four times higher than standard emergency thresholds. In certain areas, 60 to 90 per cent of livestock have died, meaning that, even after the dry season ends, people's livelihoods will have been destroyed.

But the drought comes on top of a deeper crisis of poverty and marginalisation. Some of the worst affected areas and communities have endured decades of economic under-development. In particular, the pastoralist way of life is under severe pressure across the region. Pastoralists argue that their vulnerability to drought has grown because of restricted access to key resources, in particular grazing areas traditionally relied on during dry seasons. Competition and conflict over resources is increasing, often resulting in conflict and loss of life.²

Whilst the drought cannot be definitively attributed to man-made climate change, it shows the vulnerability of poor people in the region to climate variability. Communities say seasons are changing and this is a major cause of food insecurity in the region. According to anecdotal evidence from local communities, change is taking place. Borana communities in Ethiopia report that whereas droughts were recorded every six to eight years in the past, they now occur every one to two years.³

The Somali population has already suffered decades of conflict, lack of governance, and limited access for humanitarian agencies to reach those in need. Malnutrition rates are rising, yet the only hospital in the town of Doble, Lower Juba region, was bombed and destroyed during fighting a few months ago. There is no access by road to many other parts of Somalia, so no food can be transported from areas where it is available. Hundreds of thousands of Somalis are fleeing to Kenya and Ethiopia in search of food and safety.

"I think that in Somalia we can find the worst humanitarian disaster of this year. [...] High levels of malnutrition, combined with ongoing violence in the war-torn Horn of Africa nation, are threatening a human tragedy of unimaginable proportions."

Antonio Guterres, Head of UNHCR, July 2011.⁴

The overall international donor response to the crisis has been slow and inadequate and is well below what would normally be expected at this point in a crisis. With two months of the dry season to go, the consequences of this underfunding will only become more desperate. For example, the UN appeals for the three affected countries are only 50 per cent funded, with an aggregate shortfall of close to \$1bn.

Our collective understanding of droughts has improved. Early warning systems can work and were triggered for this drought. Assessments at the end of 2010 strongly indicated that there would be a severe drought this year – enabling some donors and international aid agencies to respond early to the drought.⁵ Yet, insufficient action of the necessary scale was taken to prevent already vulnerable communities from facing crisis once more.

Responding to this crisis and preventing future crises will require above all the political will of governments in the region to change national policies, and for international donors to provide adequate long-term funding to address the root causes of the issues and to fully invest in building the resilience of communities.

The crisis in facts

Funding:

- According to the UN Financial Tracking Service, the UN appeals for Kenya and Somalia are 47 per cent funded and the Ethiopian Government led equivalent is only 44 per cent funded, leaving a total funding shortfall of over \$1bn across the three countries. Current pledges to fund this gap add up to less than \$200m.⁶

Number of people affected:

- Total of almost 12 million affected so far: 4.5 million in Ethiopia, 3.5 million in Kenya, 2.85 million in Somalia, and 600,000 in Uganda. A further 7.5 million people in Ethiopia are receiving targeted food or cash-based assistance through the government run Productive Safety Net Programme.

Malnutrition:

- Malnutrition figures across the region show many affected areas are far beyond the 'very critical' threshold of 20 per cent General Acute Malnutrition (GAM) and 5 per cent Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) established by the WHO. A survey conducted in Bokolmayo camp in Ethiopia found GAM rates amongst new arrivals of 47.2 per cent and SAM rates of 23.6 per cent.

Food prices:

- Prices of staple cereals in the region remain much higher than last year. In southern Somalia, red sorghum prices have risen by up to 240 per cent over the last year.

Displacement:

- The UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) currently estimates 750,000 Somalis are outside of the country, with as many as 135,000 displaced this year, and a further 1.46 million displaced within Somalia. There are currently nearly 500,000 people in huge camps inside the Kenyan and Ethiopian borders, with thousands more arriving daily.

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Prospects for the coming months

Overall food security conditions across pastoral and marginal agricultural areas will likely deteriorate further in the coming three to four months, with late and below-average summer harvests expected, early depletion of pasture and water, and continued high food, water, and fuel prices. The climatic conditions, known as La Niña, that are said to have triggered these dry periods within East Africa have begun to dissipate increasing the likelihood of normal to above-normal rainfall in areas that receive rains later this year. While this bodes well for the next harvests, it may also lead to flooding in certain areas, with flash floods already reported in areas of Ethiopia.⁷ While pastures should improve in October if rains fall, overall food security conditions are not set to improve until early 2012 when the first harvests arrive after the rains. For pastoralist communities, full recovery will only take place when remaining livestock begin breeding and producing milk at the end of 2012.

If a catastrophic crisis across the region is to be averted there must be urgent action now to ensure that appropriate and timely assistance is delivered in a way that saves both lives and livelihoods...

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Saving lives – a response to a crisis of food availability...

Drought has had a severe impact on food production in East Africa, with two failed harvests already. A small harvest in August may deliver a temporary boost in food availability, but a substantial harvest will not come until January next year. Livestock deaths not only devastate the prospects for pastoralists' future livelihoods, but also leave an immediate gap in meeting the nutrition needs of their owners, through milk production and availability of meat. The impact of reduced food availability has been magnified by soaring food prices, which reduce communities' purchasing power and their ability to buy basic food requirements. In Kenya, maize prices were 30 to 60 per cent above their five-year average for May in most pastoral markets, but 80 to 160 per cent above in Garissa, Trans Mara, Baringo, Laikipia, and Turkana.

National governments must be at the heart of efforts to increase food availability in drought-affected areas. Strategic grain reserves in Ethiopia and Kenya should prioritise getting food to those populations most affected by drought. Import taxes and restrictions must also be temporarily removed to increase in-flow of resources and, where necessary, there must be stronger engagement by regional associations such as the East African Community (EAC) and the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD). This can help ensure effective regional co-ordination, building on the positive examples of strong engagement from within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in response to the drought in West Africa in 2010.

However, in such crisis circumstances, international support and funding will be key to ensuring lives currently at risk are saved.

Funding imbalance

Whilst overall funding commitments for this crisis to date have been woefully inadequate, it is important not to overlook the imbalance in funding to priority sectors. The Kenya UN Emergency Appeal (ERF) provides an example for trends across the region; the appeal is currently funded at 48 per cent, yet sectors such as water / sanitation (28 per cent), nutrition (12 per cent), health (9 per cent), and agriculture/livestock (12 per cent) are most critically underfunded. For the water sector, although rainfall in June temporarily eased the situation in some areas, north-east Kenya did not receive rain. With three months remaining until the next rains, and high demand on water points that did receive water, water shortages are likely to re-appear in August and September, requiring further water-trucking and water collection points to prevent severe water shortfalls for animals. Hygiene and sanitation

measures could also make a crucial difference, preventing further outbreak of disease, particularly in view of the increased risk due to population movements and increased vulnerability of already weakened populations. Sufficient investment in health, agriculture, and livestock will be key to the transition from emergency response to rebuilding livelihoods.

The UN World Food Programme (WFP), together with other agencies involved in food distribution, must build upon government-led interventions, ensuring that adequate food supplies arrive in time for the critical July to October hunger gap period. At the same time, however, in some areas markets are still functioning, and effective redistribution of food, supported by cash-based programming, will also play an important role in ensuring that food that is available in the market can reach those most in need. Grants and guaranteed payments will encourage traders to bring food into the deficit areas. This food can then be exchanged for vouchers given to vulnerable people in the community. Through this approach supply and demand are better balanced, minimising the risk of inflation and ensuring food availability for all affected communities.

Due to ongoing conflict and severe access restrictions, operating conditions in Somalia are likely to remain extremely challenging, placing considerable constraints on the potential scale-up of the response. As humanitarian needs in Somalia continue to grow the level of food distributions within country are at an all time low. One of the major warring parties has announced that it will allow international organisations to operate in drought affected areas in the south, but this offer has yet to be reliably tested and is unlikely to provide an immediate solution to the desperately high level of need in this critical three month period. However, cash interventions can play an important role in bridging some of the gap, enabling those targeted to purchase grains or to pay off debts with traders, so they are able to purchase food arriving in markets and facilitating movement to areas where food availability may be greater.

Fleeing in search of food and safety

Whilst trends of displacement and migration were already prevalent in Somalia, the impact of conflict, compounded by drought, has forced this to even higher levels, with UNHCR estimating that 1.46 million people are displaced within Somalia, in search of food, shelter, and security.

Many are embarking on the long and dangerous journey towards camps in southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya. UNHCR has reported a surge in refugee numbers with an additional 135,000 people leaving Somalia this year, bringing the total number of Somali refugees to 750,000 globally.

Dadaab refugee camp on the Kenya-Somalia border is the largest refugee camp in the world, with more than 360,000 Somalis sheltering in overcrowded conditions.⁸ With the escalation of the food crisis, almost 10,000 people are arriving each week, putting further strain on existing resources and limited space and shelter within the camp. With more arriving each day, UNHCR and humanitarian agencies must step up efforts to address unacceptable delays in the registration of arriving refugees, make further progress on plans to expand services to meet the needs of current and future camp populations, and take steps to tackle rising insecurity, particularly on the outskirts of the camp. This will require additional funding from donors and the full co-operation of the Government of Kenya in planning for and approving camp extensions where necessary. Two additional camp extensions have already been approved, and the first of these, Ifo II, has been ready for use since the beginning of the year; however, it currently stands empty and unused. A statement made by Kenyan Prime Minister, Raila Odinga, on July 14th, suggesting that Ifo II could be open within 10 days represents a welcome and positive first step towards addressing these urgent needs.

In Ethiopia, up to 2,000 Somali refugees are now arriving each day, taking the total number in the Dolo Ado camps to over 100,000 already, with this increasing to perhaps as many as 300,000 by the end of the year. The Ethiopian Government has provided permission for a fourth and fifth camp, and the humanitarian community must now prioritise resourcing and preparing these sites as soon as possible for expected new arrivals.

In Somalia, continuing insecurity will make it impossible to ensure the safe provision of adequate assistance for extremely vulnerable populations.

Saving livelihoods – building resilience and looking to the longer-term

The severity of this crisis is exceptional, but in no way is it inevitable. The solutions exist to ensure that crises on this scale are avoided. Governments and the international community urgently need to break the current cycle of emergency response, which leaves donors and affected communities limping from one crisis to the next, by addressing the long-term problems.

Decades of marginalisation, neglect, and under-investment in pastoralists and smallholder food producers have contributed to the current crisis. Successful responses to ongoing drought need to combine emergency assistance with livelihood protection measures which address the issues that make people vulnerable in the first place. These should include supporting the mobility of herds, protection of household assets, supply of seeds and tools (to those who engage in agriculture) and supplementary feeding of cattle. Where possible, assistance should be delivered in a way so as to build national capacities and reinforce ongoing resilience programming.

Whilst it isn't possible at this stage to say whether or not the drought can be attributed to man-made climate change, it shows the vulnerability of poor people in the region to climate variability. Communities say seasons are changing and this is a major cause of food insecurity in the region. According to anecdotal evidence from local communities, change is taking place.

The challenges facing the region could intensify significantly over the coming decades as a result of climate change and other resource pressures. Without urgent action to slash greenhouse gas emissions, temperatures will continue to rise and rainfall patterns will continue to change, which could create major problems for food production and availability. Much of East Africa will likely suffer a decline in the length of the growing period for key crops of up to 20 per cent, with the productivity of maize likely to fall by nearly 20 per cent and beans by nearly 50 per cent by the end of the century.⁹

In this context, investment is needed to help people cope with a changing climate, rocketing price rises, and other shocks. These efforts must focus on long-term investment in smallholder food production, disaster risk reduction, and climate change adaptation.

National governments need to resolve ongoing tensions between agricultural and pastoral land-use systems, in order ensure that mobile livestock production can continue to take advantage of the variable rainfall patterns in dry-land areas and invest in developing livestock marketing businesses and veterinary services to ensure pastoralists make more money from smaller herds.

Recommendations: What needs to be done?

Primary responsibility for responding to the drought and delivering services and assistance to vulnerable communities lies with national governments. Yet given the scale of the crisis, with 12 million already affected, it will also require the engagement of the international community, a large injection of emergency relief, and a deep commitment to tackling the root causes. National governments and the international community must hold each other to account for the adequacy of their response.

1. National governments

All governments in the region, with the support of the UN and donor community, must:

- Ensure an accurate assessment of needs, effective co-ordination of the drought response, transparent responses, and the provision of funding corresponding to government capacity to support affected populations;
- Co-operate to ensure food for humanitarian purposes can rapidly reach those in need and removing import taxes;
- Guarantee access to humanitarian relief and that humanitarian principles are fully respected within responses, ensuring that any administrative burden is kept to a minimum and requests for visas and official permissions to operate are swiftly expedited;
- Protect people's rights to land and other natural resources and ensure communities have a say in the decisions that affect them;
- Ensure that refugees are allowed unimpeded access to humanitarian relief and that no refugees are forcibly returned to insecure areas.

In Somalia, the absence of a strong central government capable of meeting these responsibilities, places a greater emphasis on the need for the donor community to support and work closely with local authorities and community structures to ensure an effective response.

2. International response

The international community should:

- Rapidly provide money to fill the \$1bn funding gap. With 12 million lives on the line and three more months until rains may arrive, now is the critical juncture for a scale-up of the international response. No delay can be afforded;
- Look beyond headline figures for appeals and ensure adequate funding for priority sectors that are seriously underfunded, such as water, sanitation, and agriculture, and balanced funding for food distribution, with funds for market support to encourage traders,

and targeted cash distributions to strengthen the functioning of markets;

- Prioritise funding mechanisms and activities that allow speedy disbursement and quick scale-up to reach populations most affected by the drought as quickly as possible;
- Commit immediate and adequate resources towards building the resilience of pastoralists and smallholder food producers in East Africa. These efforts must focus on long-term investment in livelihood protection measures, smallholder food production, disaster risk reduction, and climate change adaptation;
- Work with the WFP to bring forward plans to expand its operations from the current caseload of 6 million people, ensuring adequate ration sizes and addressing any problems in the pipeline to guarantee food reaches communities in the crucial July to October hunger gap period;
- Engage with national governments to both ensure effective humanitarian responses for national and refugee populations and to support and prioritise funding that addresses the issues which make people vulnerable in the first place.

Notes

- ¹ UN OCHA East Africa Drought Humanitarian Report No.4, 15/07/2011
http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Full_Report_1717.pdf
- ² "Broken lands: Broken lives?" Causes, processes and impacts of land fragmentation in the rangelands of Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda: REGLAP (Regional Learning and Advocacy Programme), June 2011
- ³ SCF, CARE, IISD, IUCN (2009). Climate-related vulnerability and adaptive-capacity in Ethiopia's Borana and Somali communities. http://www.elmt-relpa.org/FCKeditor/UserFiles/File/elmt/201003/Climate%20Change%20study,%20Full%20Assessment%20Report_FINAL.pdf
- ⁴ <http://www.unhcr.org.uk>
- ⁵ USAID-FEWSNET: Executive brief: La Nina and Food Security in East Africa, September 2010
http://www.fews.net/docs/Publications/La_Nina_Brief_East%20Africa_Sept_2010_final.pdf
- ⁶ UN Financial Tracking Service. <http://fts.unocha.org/pageloader.aspx>
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- ⁸ UNHCR Press briefing 24/06/2011 <http://www.unhcr.org/4e0475f69.html>
- ⁹ Thornton, P. *et al.* (2011) 'Agriculture and Food Systems in Africa in a +4C World,' in Phil. Trans. R. Soc. 369, pp 117-136, <http://rsta.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/369/1934/117.full.pdf+html>

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