



Special Report



Oxfam in East Africa

During the last half century, Oxfam International—composed of 13 Oxfams, including Oxfam America—has worked across East Africa in Tanzania, Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia, Uganda, and Eritrea. Our primary focus has been on programs to improve basic education, peace-building efforts, drought management, and initiatives that enhance people's ability to make a decent living. We have also provided emergency support during conflicts and natural disasters. Through our work, our aim is always to help those people who are most vulnerable, particularly subsistence farmers and East Africa's many nomadic herders.

It is among these groups that recent erratic weather patterns in the region have had the most serious consequences. "The situation is as bad as I can remember," said Abdullahi Maalim Hussein, a Somali elder, late last winter. "People are dying.

...There is simply no water available for them to drink." The worst drought conditions in six years meant little rain fell across much of East Africa last year, creating a severe food crisis in early 2006.

Effects of Erratic Weather

Although subsequent rain has brought some relief, the drought weakened animals and killed many of the camels, cattle, sheep, and goats that herders in the region depend on for food and income. In the hardest hit areas, more than 70 percent of the animals died. Some families lost entire herds. Shortages of water and pasture sparked violence last winter when

groups from Ethiopia and Kenya clashed, leaving 40 people dead.

During the height of the drought, the market value of animals dropped precipitously because of their poor condition. In Wajir, Kenya, for example, cattle that once sold for \$69 a head, now gaunt, commanded barely \$4 each. As meat and milk became scarce, grains—particularly those high in protein, such as lentils, beans, and chickpeas—doubled and tripled in price, putting them out of reach of herding families whose income had dried up with the death of their livestock. Last spring, in parts of Kenya, up to 35 percent of children under the age of 5 were undernourished.

Photo: Tato Boru, who lives in a small village in southern Ethiopia where drought conditions created a severe food crisis earlier this year, is the leader of a women's peace council. Boru knows firsthand the effects that limited resources have on communities: Violence can erupt when critical supplies, such as life-sustaining water, grow scarce. Members of the peace council, which was founded by a local Oxfam partner, act as mediators during conflicts and raise awareness about the human costs of violence. "Peace is life," says Boru. "We cannot live without peace."
Brett Eloff/Oxfam America

Oxfam's Response

By the time the food crisis hit the headlines, Oxfam was already delivering assistance—extra food and water—to some of the hardest hit communities. As the emergency escalated, we broadened the reach and scope of our programs, and we have helped in excess of 1 million people, including more than 415,000 in Kenya, about 150,000 in Somalia, 200,000 in Tanzania, and almost 300,000 in Ethiopia. In mid-April, Oxfam launched the biggest food crisis appeal in its history, asking the public to give an initial \$38 million to fund its work in East Africa.

In Somalia, where the search for water sent some families trekking more than 43 miles in temperatures pushing 104 degrees Fahrenheit, Oxfam began trucking supplies to communities in the southern districts. We also worked with a local partner to repair water sources and subsidize fuel to keep pumps at some of the deep wells operating. About 150,000 people now have improved access to clean water.

During the height of the drought, school enrollment plummeted in parts of Tanzania. As Oxfam education program officer Jennifer Mhando explained at the time, "The children used to take food to school in small tins, but now they have nothing to bring because there is no food. ... Several schools are now reporting that children are fainting in class because they haven't had anything to eat." One primary school in Ngorongoro saw a 65 percent drop in attendance.

In response, Oxfam launched a school feeding program. About 85,000 children in the Shinyanga district have benefited from Oxfam's school lunches, which include porridge or corn, beans, oil, and salt—and school attendance has shot up to 85 percent.

In Kenya, around the areas of Turkana and Wajir, we have been providing more than 400,000 people with monthly distributions of food. Additionally, we are helping another 22,000 people in Turkana with cash grants that are allowing them to make fishing nets and produce charcoal.



Like many in the region, this cattle herder near Finchawa village, Ethiopia, depends on his animals for food and income. Large numbers of livestock died when pasturelands shriveled and water sources disappeared during periods of drought earlier this year. Oxfam helped by distributing feed for livestock as well as providing veterinary care. *Brett Eloff/Oxfam America*

And in Ethiopia, we have been assisting nearly 300,000 people by hiring some of them to rehabilitate ponds that are critical sources of water for them and their animals. We have also been distributing feed for livestock and providing veterinary care.

Looking Ahead

Spring rains delivered a bit of relief, but they were spotty. Water remains in short supply in certain areas, fueling concern that it might run out before the next rains come. In the meantime, sheep and goats will take half a year to recover enough strength to produce an adequate supply of milk to support household nutrition. Cattle need a year to gain back their health, and camels need two years.

The road to a permanent recovery lies in addressing the poverty that saddles the region. In northern Kenya, southern Somalia, and southern Ethiopia, the rate of absolute poverty—where people are living on less than \$1 a day—is as high as 80 percent. Repeated shocks like this food crisis deepen that poverty. That's why Oxfam designs its responses to do more than just address the immediate emergency: We tackle its triggers and invest in programs that have long-term benefits

that help people and their communities achieve self-sufficiency.

For example, we worked last spring with one of our local partner organizations, the Gayo Pastoral Development Initiative, to restore a pond in the village of Bokolo in southern Ethiopia. The goal of the project was twofold: to offer a way for local people to earn money so they could buy some of the staples they sorely needed to tide them through the drought, and to improve a local water source on which they all depended. Deepening the pond allowed it to hold more water when the rains finally returned.

Eighteen-year-old Chukle Lis was one of those hired to dig dirt from the pond's dry bed. With the money she earned—\$50—Lis bought food for her family and a new cow. When the rains came, they filled the pond with water—and filled the locals with hope that there would now be enough to last until the next wet season. Besides feeding families and hope, the project fed the determination of the people of Bokolo.

"We don't give up," said Lis. "We will find ways to cultivate our land and find more cattle. We don't give up."



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