

Across Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia, a severe drought and food crisis have ensnared more than 13 million people. Parts of the region are the driest they have been in 60 years. But punishing weather is not the only challenge families here face: deep poverty and decades of marginalization have left them with few resources on which to fall back as the price of food soars and water shortages persist. In Somalia, the crisis has escalated into famine.

Background

Food crises have continued to hit Africa with unsettling regularity in the 21st century—in Ethiopia, Malawi, Niger, South Sudan—even as we have the means and know-how to prevent them. Changing weather patterns, conflict, skewed trade rules, and poverty can all threaten a nation's food security.

But the debilitating hunger these circumstances fuel is no more inevitable than it is ethically acceptable.

Our global challenge is summoning the will—political and financial—to tackle the root causes of these crises. Rapid donor support for emergency response, social protection programs backed by long-term funding, greater investment in rural development, assistance for small-scale food producers—these are the steps we need to take to put an end to the disasters like the one now hitting East Africa.

East Africa now

Successive seasons of poor rain this year and recurring drought in others have eroded the ability of farmers and herders in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia to recover after each hit they take. Countless animals on which people depend for food and income have died. Cereal prices have spiked astronomically in some places, and people's purchasing power has dwindled as the value of their livestock—equivalent to money in the bank—has plunged.

Coupled with these hardships are years of neglect and economic underdevelopment in a region that sorely needs basic infrastructure such as the water systems, roads, and health care services that would help people weather crises like the current one.

And in Somalia, violent conflict has made the situation worse. Hundreds of thousands of Somalis have made their way into refugee camps in Kenya and Ethiopia. Dadaab, in Kenya, is now bursting with more than 460,000 people, making it the largest refugee camp in the world.



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We are poor because the season is always dry. Everything dies, every day, every day, every day.

Tede Lokapelo, 85, Turkana, Kenya

Some rain: Hardships and blessings

Rain has started to fall in parts of the region, bringing both a few blessings as well as increased challenges for many people. The availability of food in the coming months will depend in part on rainfall during the October-December wet season. But heavy downpours in northern Kenya have made roads impassable, delaying the distribution of food in some areas and wiping out more of the livestock. Camps in Kenya and Ethiopia have been inundated, and with rain comes an increase in the chance that waterborne diseases will spread. In Somalia, during the first two weeks of October, more than 2,800 cases of acute watery diarrhea—and 66 related deaths—were reported in the south and central zone, according to the UN.

But rain also means more for people to drink, allowing Oxfam to stop trucking water to some localities. In certain places, the pastureland is benefitting, too, improving the grazing for animals.

What is a famine?

The UN uses a five-step scale to assess a country's food security, or the ability of its people to access sufficient food to meet their needs. A situation reaches stage five—"famine/humanitarian catastrophe"—when malnutrition rates climb higher than 30 percent, when more than two people out of 10,000 die each day, when food is limited to less than 2,100 calories per person per day, and when each person has access to less than four liters of water a day.

Rarely does one overriding factor cause a famine; usually a series of circumstances in concert are the trigger, including poor amounts of rainfall, desertification, poverty, and limited infrastructure that hampers the delivery and storage of food.

A few facts

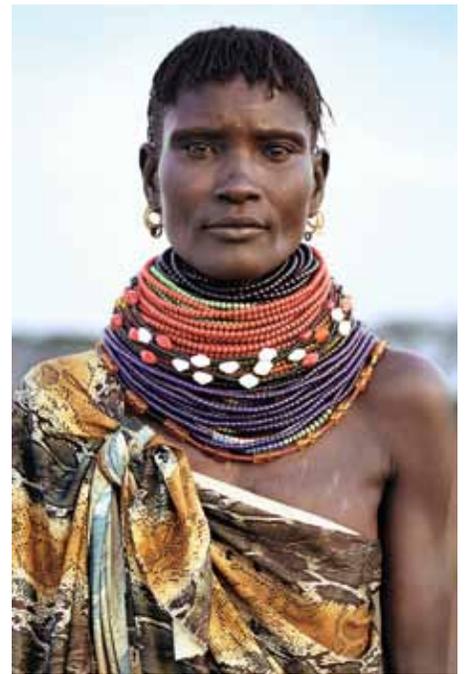
- A person is malnourished if he or she does not have the energy to grow, recover from disease, become pregnant, lactate, or do physical work.
- Approximately 450,000 children under the age of 5 in Somalia are malnourished.
- Herders in Kenya have lost eight million animals as a consequence of the drought.
- In Ethiopia, the price of corn climbed between 60 and 120 percent in the four months between February and May this year.
- In northern Kenya, milk is rarely available and costs three times its normal price, which means children are making do with less than a quarter of their usual intake.

What Oxfam is doing

Since July 1, Oxfam has helped more than 2.4 million people in the region. Our goal is to reach more than three million with clean water, food, and basic sanitation services. We are drilling deep wells and rehabilitating existing water supplies, vaccinating animals to ensure their strength during this time of great stress, providing people with cash to buy food, and offering sanitation and public health promotion to stem the spread of waterborne diseases.

"Emergency response can only be effective if it's linked to development and helps build resilience to disaster," says Nazereth Fikru, Oxfam America's regional humanitarian coordinator for the Horn of Africa. A key to breaking the downward spiral of drought for millions of herders and farmers in the region is to combine emergency assistance with measures that protect their household assets and strengthen their communities—lessons Oxfam has been applying in Ethiopia. Through cash-for-work programs, for instance, Oxfam has engaged local people to plant trees, giving degraded hillsides a chance to recover and become a resource for villagers. Others are working to rehabilitate ponds, enabling their communities to capture and store rain when it falls.

Beyond these immediate measures in Ethiopia, Oxfam America is also working on longer-term initiatives aimed at building lasting solutions to the challenges many farmers and herders across the country face. One of those solutions is the Rural Resilience Initiative, launched in Tigray and set to expand deeper into Ethiopia and into other countries. It's working with farmers to improve the management of local resources; gain better access to credit; build their savings; and offer weather insurance for their crops—even to farmers too poor to have cash on hand. Those without money can pay with labor on community projects.



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The longest we have gone without food is four days. On the fifth day the children couldn't even stand up so I had to ... kill one of our last goats so that the children could have something to eat.

Akiru Lotege (above), Turkana, Kenya

Above: Akiru Lotege, 33, is a widow and the mother of seven children. She recalls the time when the land was green and there was plenty of food for her family. Rankin / Oxfam

Front: The pastoralist communities of Turkana, Kenya, are experiencing one of the longest periods of drought in their history. Andy Hall / Oxfam

What can you do to help?

DONATE

Thanks to the generosity of our supporters, we have already been able to reach more than one million people, but there is still great need.

To support our efforts, donate at oxfamamerica.org/drought or (800) 77-OXFAM.

JOIN OXFAM'S GROW CAMPAIGN

You can also help by joining Oxfam's GROW campaign: a global movement to seek solutions to hunger, wherever they may be found, and based on the understanding that we can't wait until the next crisis to do something about it. Take the GROW pledge or learn more at oxfamamerica.org/grow.

Working together to end poverty and injustice

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