

Dire straits: The Horn of Africa faces deepening crises

(Source )

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The international community must ensure that measures are in place to deal with the food and health crises unfolding in the Horn region



At a time when the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the United States (US)-China great power competition is grabbing most of the limelight in mainstream media, the shocking reality of the unfolding food and health crisis in the Horn of Africa (HOA) continues to be overlooked.

The Horn of Africa is facing its worst drought in more than four decades. Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, and Eritrea have each experienced five failed rainy seasons consecutively. The United Nations (UN) estimates that more than [37 million people](#) in the Horn are facing acute hunger. Nearly 7 million children under the age of five are malnourished in the region. The Global Hunger Index estimates that nearly 52 million, 3.5 million, and 1.8 million people in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia, respectively, are finding it difficult to access food. Subsequently, it comes as no surprise that African countries are attempting to strengthen resilience in nutrition and food security across the continent. This is why the year 2022 was declared as the [Year of Nutrition](#) by the African Union (AU).

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The health situation is indeed worrisome with numerous outbreaks threatening the lives of already fragile populations. The crisis of drought and food insecurity is being compounded by climate change, cyclical bouts of conflict, rising food prices and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. On top of that, Ethiopia's northernmost region of Tigray was the center of a [year-long armed conflict](#) since November 2020 involving ethnoreligious militias, the federal government, and neighboring Eritrean military. The conflict led to the displacement of many populations, diverted the delivery of essential humanitarian supplies, and contributed to the further destabilization of the already volatile HOA region.

The regional situation in the Horn

The HOA region has a history of food insecurity. In the last decade, the region entered a food crisis twice, once in 2011 and again in 2017-18. If the region continues to receive below-average rainfall, there is a likely possibility of a sixth consecutive failed season in March-May, 2023. Subsequently, large swathes of Somalia, northern and eastern Kenya, and southern and south-eastern Ethiopia may, unfortunately, face acute food insecurity. Many women, especially the ones in their reproductive age also face dangers to their health and aggravated risks of gender-based violence due to the drought. Additionally, more than 9.5 million livestock, on whom pastoralist communities depend for sustenance and livelihood, have died across the region. This poses an existential threat to such communities, as it may take years for pastoralist families to rebuild their herds after such long spells of drought. Worryingly, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) [estimates](#) that without proper international attention and support for the displaced populations, certain districts in Somalia may face famine. Even if no famine emerges in Somalia, the drought could lead to high mortality rates.

Getting access to water is [another challenge](#). According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), around 23.75 million people in the Horn cannot access enough water for drinking, cooking, cleaning, or for hygiene and sanitation. Many water points are drying up or are diminishing in quality, which heightens the risks of water-borne diseases and infections. Diseases like cholera and measles are on the rise, further impacting fragile and overburdened health systems.

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Africa's macroeconomic performance and its attempts to integrate countries on the continent with the global economy continue to be hindered by exogenous shocks like the Russo-Ukrainian war and the COVID-19 pandemic. Rising fuel and food prices, inflation, financial instability, and declining currencies relative to the dollar are disrupting the continent's recovery from the pandemic.

It is no secret that various African countries are dependent on agricultural imports. Russia and Ukraine are major exporters of items such as wheat, sunflower oil, barley, and soybeans to a number of African countries like Egypt, Sudan, Nigeria, Tanzania, Kenya, South Africa, and Algeria. However, the disruption in trade and supply chains caused due to Russia's decision to block exports of grains through the ports at the Black Sea resulted in the prices of wheat skyrocketing. This development had a profound [impact on African countries](#) that are already struggling to cope with the multiplier effects of drought, COVID-19, and climate change.

A regional response to the food crisis

As the drought continued to evolve from 2020-2022, humanitarian actors within the countries of the Horn which are most affected, have to an extent acted swiftly in response to the crisis. This, in turn, helped save many lives. Across Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia, nearly 500 humanitarian organizations, most of which are locally led and community-based, are currently engaged in the drought response. The experiences gained and lessons learned from dealing with similar crisis situations, as was the case in 2011 and 2017, helped these three countries to act swiftly. This was most evident in the manner in which early warning systems were put in place and vulnerable populations were relocated to safer areas.

The Government of Ethiopia put in place a Drought Response Plan in July 2022, which called for a funding of US\$1.66 billion to respond to the food crisis.

One of the primary way to galvanize and mobilize resources to respond to the crisis has been consolidated appeals at the country-level. The Government of Ethiopia put in place a [Drought Response Plan](#) in July 2022, which called for a funding of US\$1.66 billion to respond to the food crisis. In Kenya, a “[Flash Appeal](#)” has been in place since 2011. This appeal has been revised now and calls for US\$290 million. Although the Kenyan government has received some amount of this appeal, critical sectors like health, protection, water hygiene and education, continue to remain underfunded. In neighbouring Somalia, the situation is similar to Kenya. While the [Somalia Humanitarian Response plan](#) calls for US\$2.6 billion in funds, sectors like education, protection, and water hygiene continue to be underfunded.

Response of the international community

The most prolonged drought in recent history is continuing to deepen in 2023. To prevent the declaration of famine in the Horn of Africa, urgent, immediate, and coordinated action from the global community is required. Governments, international agencies, international community, NGOs, civil society, and humanitarian actors must band together and act now. However, delays and inadequate funding and the constant deepening of the crisis have made the task for the humanitarian actors to deal with this crisis difficult.

Several humanitarian agencies have also published calls for action for the HOA region. These include UN Food and Agricultural Organization, UN Refugee Agency, the International Organization for Migration, the World Health Organization, the World Food Program, United Nations Children’s Fund, the Food Protection Agency, among others. However, the donor response continues to remain lackluster.

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The drought response has unfortunately had to predominantly rely on a single donor—the US. The US has contributed to each of Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia’s humanitarian response plans. Most of these fundings have been channeled through the UN and United States Agency for International Development (USAID). China has entered into conflict mediation efforts in the Horn. It [sponsored](#) the Africa Peace, Good Governance and Development Conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in June 2022. The United Kingdom [allocated](#) US\$156 million in funding for humanitarian aid in East Africa in order to play a more proactive role in the continent. India, for its part, has spearheaded the proposal to declare 2023 as the International Year of Millets. Unlike other staples, millets require less water and agricultural inputs and is a traditional food that is consumed by millions of people in Africa.

Whatever the international response has been so far, it has been largely inadequate. There is a clear funding deficit for the HOA region as compared to funding that the Ukraine appeal has received. This points toward a broader inequality in global aid distribution, much along the same lines as ‘Vaccine Apartheid’ which African countries were subjected to. In the long run, the impact of climate change is going to become more severe and frequent. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the international community to ensure that funds, social and humanitarian safety networks, and early anticipatory appeals are in place if the Horn of Africa is to prevent a famine in 2023.