

LESSON LEARNED? AN URGENT CALL FOR ACTION IN RESPONSE TO THE DROUGHT CRISIS IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

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Wajir, Kenya, November 2016. Photo: Joyce Kabue/Oxfam



SUMMARY – KEY MESSAGES

- The failure of the 2016 October-December rains across parts of the Horn of Africa has led to a devastating drought in Somalia, south-eastern Ethiopia, and northern and eastern Kenya. More than 15 million people in these three countries are facing food and water shortages, and famine is now a possibility in Somalia.
- The drought follows one of the strongest El Niño events on record, and many of the affected areas have seen the failure of successive rains, with cumulative impacts that have exhausted the coping strategies of vulnerable communities.
- Forecasts suggest the next rains in affected areas – expected from March-May – may also be below-average.
- In **Somalia**, 5 million people need humanitarian assistance. In **Ethiopia**, 5.6 million people need emergency food assistance and 9.2 million require safe water. In **Kenya**, 1.3 million people are facing food shortages.
- Since the 2010-11 hunger crisis in the region, much work has been done and concrete gains made in terms of preventing the worst impacts of drought. However, in the face of overwhelming climate shocks, humanitarian interventions are still urgently needed.
- Governments, donors and the international community must act quickly on the lessons learned in 2010-11 to protect the hard-won gains of recent years and prevent this crisis becoming a catastrophe. Time is running out.



Faarah Hussein burning the corpses of his sheep, Qatab, Somaliland, November 2016.
Photo: James Firebrace

“I urge the international community to act quickly to save lives and prevent a massive human tragedy from happening” - Ahmed Mohamed Silanyo, Somaliland President

“The need is there and it’s alarming... We don’t need any more assessments – things are getting out of hand” - representative of Somali regional authority, Ethiopia

The large-scale failure of rains during October-December 2016 has led to a devastating drought across parts of the Horn of Africa. Central and southern Somalia, south-eastern Ethiopia and northern and eastern Kenya received less than a quarter of their normal seasonal rainfall.ⁱ Water levels are declining fast and crops and pasture have been ravaged; vegetation conditions are the worst on record in many areas, surpassing those observed during the drought of 2010-11.ⁱⁱ Deaths of livestock, an economic mainstay for many communities in the region, are now widespread.ⁱⁱⁱ

The drought follows poor March-May rains in the region, during which many vulnerable families saw their coping strategies eroded.^{iv} More than 15 million people in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia are facing food and water shortages^v. With early indications suggesting that the next rains may also be poorer than average, agencies are warning that we could see a third, consecutive, drought-affected season.^{vi} If that’s the case, famine is possible in Somalia.^{vii}

We’ve been here many times before; drought in the Horn of Africa is a recurrent event. In 2010 too, the October-December rains in the region were poor, and catastrophic impacts loomed if the following rains were also below average. But systemic failures on the part of the international community meant that it wasn’t until after the March-May 2011 rains failed and famine was declared in July that a humanitarian response at scale began. Nearly 260,000 people in Somalia lost their lives in 2011, and millions lost their livelihoods^{viii}. The world swore ‘never again’.^{ix}

The years since have seen some admirable efforts to build resilience in the region. The Inter-Governmental Authority for Development (IGAD) Drought Disaster Resilience and Sustainability Initiative (IDDRSI) strategy was developed to address the effects of drought and related shocks in the Greater Horn of Africa region in a sustainable and holistic way.^x Governments, in partnership with donors and humanitarian and development actors, have built response capacity, expanded

social protection programmes, strengthened access to sustainable water, improved natural resource management, and implemented early warning systems and insurance schemes. There is no doubt that concrete gains have been made.

However, these gains were severely rattled by a drought triggered by the 2015-16 El Niño, one of the strongest ever recorded^{xi}, which left around 10 million people in Ethiopia in need of food aid and led to the biggest drought response operation in the country's history.^{xii} El Niño was swiftly followed by the arrival of the strongest negative Indian Ocean Dipole^{xiii} in at least 50 years^{xiv}; the most influential weather system on the Horn of Africa regional climate, and a phenomenon closely associated with depressed rains across the region.^{xv} To cap it all, after months of uncertainty, a weak La Niña was finally declared in November^{xvi}, which is also associated with below-average rains in East Africa.^{xvii}

The combined impacts of these events across the region have been huge. With crops failing and water points drying up, pastoralist communities have been trekking further and further to find water and pasture for their livestock, in a desperate search to keep themselves and their animals alive. Women and children have – as always – been hardest hit, with women shouldering increased care burdens and girls dropping out of school and facing early marriage^{xviii}. Outbreaks of cholera and Acute Watery Diarrhoea (AWD) are a major concern; there were over 45,000 suspected cases in the region in 2016, and active transmission of the disease is ongoing in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia^{xix}.

Other countries within the IGAD region have been affected by the climatic shocks described here; in Eritrea, for example, where 80% of the population is vulnerable to recurrent drought, 2 million people are now in need – 1.2 million of whom are children^{xx}. Neighbouring countries within IGAD have also been impacted; in south-eastern Uganda, 55-85% of crop land is drought-affected in some areas, and 390,000 people are already food insecure^{xxi}. There are huge food assistance needs in other parts of the IGAD region - namely South Sudan and Sudan - as a result of conflict and insecurity, but our focus here is on those countries where drought is the main driver. (Tanzania is also affected by the current drought, but is not in the IGAD region.)

In the coming months, countries in the Horn of Africa are likely to see a rise in hunger and further decline in local livelihoods^{xxii}. Prospects for the next harvests are highly unfavourable and farming families are expected to enter the next lean season much earlier than usual, while pastoralists are faced with increasingly low milk and meat production and a struggle to keep their livestock alive, as the failed rains have done little to regenerate grazing pasture^{xxiii}. The outlook for eastern Kenya, south-eastern Ethiopia and southern Somalia is bleak, with forecasts suggesting that below-normal rainfall during the crucial next rains in March-May is now the most likely outcome.^{xxiv}

If governments, donors and the international community do not want to see history repeating itself - or the hard-earned resilience gains of the last few years lost - we must take action now. Emergency aid to provide water, cash, food assistance and support for livestock must be combined with increased recovery and resilience-building support.

The region is already in crisis. Time is running out. We cannot wait for the next rains to fail before we respond – we must collectively act now to prevent this crisis becoming a catastrophe, implementing the lessons learned from the 2010-11 drought.^{xxv}

Somalia

*“Severe drought is stifling all parts of Somalia in general and Puntland regions in particular”
– Abdihakem Abdulaahi Omar Amay, Acting President of Puntland, Somalia*

*“The landscape and the migratory routes are littered with rotting livestock carcasses”
– Ahmed Mohamed Silanyo, Somaliland President*

In **Somalia**, 5 million people have been affected by the drought, with 1.14 million facing Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or Emergency (IPC Phase 4) levels of food insecurity through December 2016, and this number likely to increase significantly over the coming months. Large areas of the country recorded less than 40% of normal total rainfall during the October to December season, and January harvests are likely to be among the lowest on record. The impacts of drought have worsened and expanded to new areas, with southern agricultural and agro-pastoral areas and north-eastern pastoral areas of greatest concern. Poor production has seen food costs rise as livestock prices and casual labour wage levels fall, resulting in declines in household purchasing power.^{xxxvi} With the dry Jilaal season now underway – and expected to be harsher than usual^{xxxvii} – food insecurity is expected to increase before the next rains, with the number of people in Crisis (IPC Phase 3) and Emergency (IPC Phase 4) expected to rise to more than 1.3 million by May 2017.^{xxxviii}

FEWS NET has warned that in a worst-case scenario - in which the next rains perform very poorly, purchasing power declines to levels seen in 2010-11, and humanitarian assistance is unable to reach populations in need - Famine (IPC Phase 5) would be expected.^{xxxix}

Over the coming months, more and more water sources are set to dry up, leaving those that remain congested and over-stressed.^{xxx} The decline in water levels has been matched by a steep rise in prices; since June 2016, the cost of water has gone from \$5 a barrel (200 litres) to \$15 a barrel. In some remote pastoral settlements in the Sanaag region, the price has risen from \$5 to \$30^{xxxi}, and the average distance to water points has risen to 50km, with some communities travelling as far as 125km. Water consumption has dropped to just 3 litres per person per day^{xxxii}, well below the lowest SPHERE minimum standard of 7.5 litres for basic water needs.^{xxxiii} In Gedo region in southern Somalia, 90 percent of villages are now reliant on unsafe water sources for drinking and domestic purposes.^{xxxiv} Fears are growing about the spread of water-borne diseases after cholera outbreaks were reported in 25 districts of Somalia late last year.^{xxxv}

The nutrition situation in Somalia is also deteriorating rapidly: 322,350 acutely malnourished children under the age of five are in need of urgent nutrition support, including 57,140 children who are severely malnourished.^{xxxvi} In villages in Qardho District in the northern Bari region, people and livestock are reported to be eating the same food and from the same container; in some cases, older children are being asked to skip meals and give their food to livestock, whose milk is crucial for younger children.^{xxxvii} Eastern Somaliland, which has suffered three years of erratic or poor rains, has seen livestock losses of 50%-100% in some areas and large population movements as a result of desperate water shortages; locals claim this is the worst drought in living memory.^{xxxviii} An estimated 58% of people who are acutely food insecure are internally displaced, many living in appalling conditions, and education is being severely disrupted; some 3 million school-age children are out of school.^{xxxix}

The humanitarian situation in Somalia is being compounded by other factors. Clan and sectoral conflicts in many areas have led to widespread population displacement, and at least 1.1 million people who are internally displaced or vulnerable are estimated to be exposed to protection risks.^{xi} Allegations of corruption have marred the ongoing electoral process, which has seen the election of the president postponed several times^{xii}, and the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops from a number of areas has seen the subsequent takeover of these locations by non-state actors. Over 35,000 refugees have returned from the Dadaab camp in Kenya following the Government of Kenya's announcement that it would close the camp down.^{xiii}

Ethiopia

“This El Niño drought was different to usual droughts... It affected both the highlands and the lowlands, so there was nowhere for pastoralists to move to” – NGO staff member, Ethiopia

“Some (pastoralists from Somalia) have stayed on, because they have nowhere to go. They follow the clouds, but now there is nothing to follow” – representative of Somali regional authority, Ethiopia

On the back of the worst drought in decades in 2015-16, Ethiopia has been hit by a new drought, this time affecting southern and south-eastern areas, with much of Somali, parts of Afar and some lowland areas of Oromia and Southern Nations, Nationalities and People’s Region (SNNP) most affected. Water shortages and livestock deaths due to late onset, erratic and poor autumn *Hagaya/Deyr* rains are already reported from these primarily pastoral areas.^{xiii} An estimated 5.6 million people require emergency food assistance as a result, while 9.2 million are in need of safe drinking water.^{xiv} Sharp falls in livestock prices are leading to declines in purchasing power for poor households, and combined with reduced access to milk from livestock, this is likely to cause food insecurity to deteriorate to Crisis levels (IPC Phase 3) before May 2017^{xiv}.

Food security outcomes have improved in parts of northern and western regions with the *Meher* harvests, but a significant number of people affected by the 2015-16 El Niño drought lost their productive assets and have been left destitute, including many of the beneficiaries of the 2016 Humanitarian Requirements Document (HRD) (of which there were 10.2 million in total, revised down to 9.7 million in the latter half of the year) and the 2016 Productive Safety Net Programme.^{xvi} The Ethiopia HRD 2017 does not include responses to recovery needs, which it says are expected to be captured in a separate document.^{xvii}

Dire water shortages have already seen emergency water trucking in 38 districts of Afar, Oromia, Somali, SNNP and Tigray regions.^{xviii} Nearly 500,000 people are in urgent need of water trucking in the Somali region alone^{xix}, with over 1 million people in the region facing critical water shortages. About 30% of boreholes aren’t functioning, and the deteriorating water quality is posing serious health risks in most areas; over 4,200 cases of Acute Watery Diarrhoea have been reported in Somali region, and the disease is still spreading.¹ The lack of water has also raised concerns about the spread of contagious skin diseases such as scabies.

An estimated 1 million pastoral and agro-pastoral households are facing livestock production and livestock losses and are in need of targeted livestock feed supplementation, animal health support and destocking (reducing a herd); both accelerated commercial destocking (the purchase of animals by traders), and slaughter destocking, in which animals are killed and the meat distributed to provide protein for households facing nutritional challengesⁱⁱ. Poor milk production and shortages of food and water have seen a rise in the number of Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) admissions to health centres; the government expects to treat 303,000 SAM cases in 2017, and 2.7 million Moderately Acute Malnutrition cases.ⁱⁱⁱ

A gender analysis of the impacts of the drought in Ethiopia found that women in general are more vulnerable than men. Their needs in terms of food are not given priority – even when they are pregnant or breastfeeding – and they are particularly vulnerable if part of a female-headed household, or one that is polygamous, in which humanitarian assistance may be shared out more thinly. Traditional women’s livelihoods such as selling milk products have been badly affected by drought, while the burden of reproductive and unpaid care activities for women has risen. At the same time, the need to travel further in search of water exposes women and girls to an increased risk of sexual violence,ⁱⁱⁱⁱ as do negative coping mechanisms such as child labour and early marriage.^{iv}

Kenya

“In 2010 the short rains also failed, but a key difference between then and now is that (in 2010) the coastal and eastern regions were in a better position”

– National Drought Early Warning Bulletin, January 2017, Kenya

On the back of poor ‘long’ rains in March-May 2016, the October-December rains in Kenya were too brief and weak to have any meaningful impact on recovery; none of Kenya’s 23 arid and semi-arid counties reported normal rainfall in December^{lv}. An estimated 1.3 million people in Kenya are now facing food shortages as a result of drought. While most poor households will remain Stressed (IPC Phase 2) through May 2017, some households, especially in parts of Kilifi, are likely to move to Crisis levels (IPC Phase 3). Most pastoral households also remain Stressed, after some rainfall in late November/early December, but in parts of Marsabit, Mandera, Tana River, Garissa, and Samburu, some families are already experiencing Crisis levels of acute food insecurity, and more households are expected to move to IPC Phase 3 before April 2017.^{lvi}

The prospects for the short-rains harvest in marginal agricultural counties are very poor; in the coastal town of Kilifi, less than 5% of farmers even attempted to plant.^{lvii} Many pastoralist communities have seen milk production fall sharply; in Baringo, Isiolo, Kwale, Mandera, Turkana and West Pokot, it has slumped to as low as 10% of the long-term mean in Mandera, while in Tana River it is just 4% of the long-term mean.^{lviii} In south-eastern zones, the return trekking distances pastoralists have to take their livestock to water is up to 60% above average at 15-20km.^{lix} Five counties are reporting drought-related livestock deaths,^{lx} and the terms of trade have become increasingly unfavourable for livestock keepers, as prices of staple foods are rising, while a flood of weakened sheep, goats and cows onto local markets has brought down livestock prices.^{lxi} In eight counties, the proportion of children under five at risk of malnutrition is above the 15% threshold of concern, with the highest rates seen in Meru North - at 28% - and Mandera, at 26.3%.^{lxii}

In arid counties, water sources are well below normal capacity, at only 40% in Mandera, for example, and 50% in Baringo^{lxiii}, where household distances to water increased by 70% in December on the previous month, and are now three times longer than average.^{lxiv} In Marsabit and Wajir counties, 95% and 80% of the water points respectively are reported to be dry.^{lxv} County governments are continuing to truck water to areas in need, including in Kilifi, Lamu, Mandera and Tana River^{lxvi}. Cholera outbreaks have been ongoing since December 2014, with a case fatality rate of 1.5 per cent, above the emergency threshold.^{lxvii}

Mandera, a drought-affected region bordering Somalia, continues to see attacks by militant groups, and with water and pasture increasingly scarce, conflict over resources within Kenya has increased. The most serious cases – resulting in death, displacement or the loss of livestock – were reported from Baringo, Isiolo, Kitui, Laikipia, Marsabit, Meru, Turkana and West Pokot. In the border areas of West Pokot and in North Horr in Marsabit, pasture is available but inaccessible as a result of conflict.^{lxviii}

What has changed since the 2010-11 drought?

“With the magnitude of (the 2015-16) drought, it was difficult to see what difference the increased capacity of people made, but it was there” – NGO staff member, Ethiopia

In the wake of the devastating 2010-11 drought in the Horn of Africa, governments and the international community recognised the need for transformative, systemic change to break the cycle of food insecurity in the region, including a shift towards drought risk management. After the IGAD Drought Disaster Resilience and Sustainability Initiative (IDDRSI) strategy was developed in September 2011^{lxi}, a second Drought Resilience Summit was held in 2014 which called for the strengthening of early warning systems, and flexible development funding which factors in drought risk. It also called for the establishment of common triggers and protocols to escalate early warning to decision makers at national, regional and global levels to mobilize early action; and for the institutionalization of and investments into scalable social protection schemes.^{lxx}

Over the past few years, real progress has been made on many of these fronts. Early warning systems across the Horn – such as the Livelihoods, Early Assessment and Protection (LEAP) system developed by WFP with the Government of Ethiopia - have been continually refined and fine-tuned. On early action too, the Government of Ethiopia has taken a lead, putting money into the 2015-16 drought response as soon as the early warning sounded in August 2015. Donors also showed admirable flexibility, with USAID and DFID among those who quickly brought forward money from 2016 to avert catastrophe.

However, there is still a huge need for readily available and quickly released funds specifically allocated to responding to disasters in their early stages. Evidence shows unequivocally that early response is cheaper and more effective than late humanitarian response.^{lxxi} A study of the 2015-16 drought in Ethiopia, for example, estimated that the late procurement of locally available food had cost donors an additional \$127 million-\$271 million when compared with the early procurement of international grains, which would have been cheaper in this case. The findings suggest the cost savings could have provided a nine-month food package to 1.4 million people in need of lifesaving support.^{lxxii} Similarly, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) says that by acting early to conduct the biggest emergency seed distribution in Ethiopia’s history in response to the 2015-16 drought, the government and humanitarian partners saved close to \$1 billion.^{lxxiii}

Longer-term resilience-building activities across the region – for example, water infrastructure programmes - have helped those targeted cope better with drought than their neighbours, and play a disaster risk reduction role for communities in which dry spells are a perennial threat. Consortia such as the Somalia Resilience Programme (SomRep)^{lxxiv} and Building Resilient Communities in Somalia (BRCiS)^{lxxv} have helped improve access to water for agro-pastoralists even during harsh dry seasons. In Ethiopia, the R4 Rural Resilience Initiative programme is enabling farmers to increase their savings and investments in productive assets,^{lxxvi} while the Index-Based Livestock Insurance programme being implemented in the ASAL Counties of Northern Kenya has highlighted the potential of providing risk management support to pastoralists.^{lxxvii} Enabling local communities to lead on preparedness and resilience-building activities, as the BRCiS Consortium in Somalia and BRIGHT Consortium in Kenya have done, is key.^{lxxviii}

The expansion of social safety nets in the Horn of Africa, such as Ethiopia’s Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) (launched in 2005) and Kenya’s Hunger Safety Net Programme (HSNP) (launched in 2009) have made it easier for those who benefit to absorb, cope with, and recover from damages caused by natural disasters. Evidence from Ethiopia’s PSNP, for example, shows that rural farmers affected by drought in 2005 and 2011 who were covered by the PSNP programme had consumption losses that were 25 percent lower than those of other rural farmers.^{lxxix} Kenya’s HSNP scaled up four times in 2015, the last of which, in October 2015, saw payments made to all non-routine beneficiary households as a crisis preparedness payment in advance of anticipated El Niño rains and possible flooding.^{lxxx} In December 2016, the HSNP made emergency cash transfers to an additional 26,482 households in response to the current drought.

These initiatives and many others besides have seen real gains in terms of increasing the ability of vulnerable communities to cope with droughts and other shocks. But in the face of the cumulative effects of possibly the strongest El Niño on record and the new drought now affecting the region, it's clear that their scope and scale is not yet close to what is required.

Furthermore, climate trends in the Horn of Africa show a long-standing pattern of lower rainfall and higher temperatures that looks set to continue as climate change accelerates^{lxxxix}; a pattern that will require profound change within the region to enable vulnerable communities to adapt and diversify their livelihoods. Such change will not be easy. But we know that not only is taking preventative measures and responding early the right thing to do; it also enables huge savings when compared with a crisis response.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR URGENT ACTION

IGAD and the UN should:

- Urgently lead and coordinate resource mobilisation through the IDDRSI platform, including the new Multi-Donor Trust Fund being established, and other IGAD mechanisms to raise the visibility of this crisis and prompt a greater response.
- Make special efforts to engage new donor countries in the Middle East and Asia in relation to the current drought, and ensure they make commitments in response.
- Lobby state and non-state actors to uphold humanitarian principles and the rights of civilians to access life-saving humanitarian assistance.

Governments and humanitarian actors should:

- Work with market actors to ensure urgent access to water through the provision of vouchers or cash to vulnerable people, and as a last resort undertake water trucking.
- Scale up social protection mechanisms, and work with market actors to implement cash-based interventions in response to urgent food, livestock and livelihoods requirements.
- Where necessary, provide direct food assistance and emergency support for livestock.
- Extend the categorization of vulnerable populations to include polygamous households, and provide higher quantities of humanitarian assistance to polygamous households and to pregnant and lactating women and girls.
- Support the recovery of those who lost their assets as a result of the 2015-16 El Niño.

Donors should:

- Deliver urgent funding to provide life-saving aid for people in need of food and water.
- Support the recovery of people who have lost their assets and livelihoods, including through the immediate expansion of social protection mechanisms.

IGAD and member states should:

- Revisit and urgently support IGAD's initiative to undertake regular joint humanitarian/development analysis at the regional level through its Programme Coordination Unit, to ensure that action plans are developed and implemented.
- Ensure close coordination through IGAD's newly established Regional Secretariat on Forced Displacement and Mixed Migration for the Horn of Africa.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SHORT-TERM ACTION

IGAD and member states should:

- Ensure that effective, evidence-based and costed national response plans are updated and fully implemented.

- Increase cross-border programming in recognition of the inter-connected nature of the region, in which pastoralist communities regularly cross borders in search of water and pasture for their livestock, and the potential for conflict over resources.

IGAD and the UN should:

- Mediate between opposing parties where free movement of pastoralists and their livelihoods assets is curtailed, such as along the Kenya-Somalia border, where trenches and walls are being built, disrupting traditional grazing patterns.

Governments and humanitarian actors should:

- Implement measures to provide sustainable water; for example, drilling and rehabilitating boreholes, creating reservoirs and irrigation systems, constructing hand-pumps and implementing water harvesting schemes.

Governments should:

- Waive debts held by vulnerable, drought-affected people with government institutions. Research shows rising levels of debt among communities struggling to cope with the impacts of the ongoing drought.^{lxxxii} There is a danger that emergency assistance such as cash transfers may be used to re-pay these debts, reducing the effectiveness of humanitarian programming.

Donors should:

- Increase their provision of flexible development funding that can be used in humanitarian interventions, such as 'crisis modifiers'.
- Explore and establish compliance mechanisms that reduce financial risk to partners operating in conflict areas of Somalia.
- Encourage cooperation between affected countries, through shared objectives and planning processes.
- Increase the dialogue with each other to enable better early-action interventions.

All actors should:

- Work together to develop mechanisms for the free movement of pastoralists and their livelihoods assets.
- Coordinate cross-border humanitarian interventions through the sharing of information.
- Increase their cooperation on funding with a wider pool of stakeholders, including private-sector actors, to address the huge funding gaps in the most affected countries.

NOTES

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