

Horn of Africa Food Crisis – Sounding the Alarm on Famine

The Problem

Across the world, **181 million people in 41 countries are forecast to experience crisis levels of hungerⁱ** in 2022. This is already the reality for 23 million people in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia in the Horn of Africa. **One person is likely dying every 48 seconds from hunger in the region.** Some 5.7 million children are acutely malnourished. In Somalia, where a famine is looming, recent UN predictions suggest **350,000 children could die in the next 3 months.**ⁱⁱ

That anyone anywhere should die of hunger in the 21st century is unacceptable. This crisis has not come without warning from the humanitarian community and is a result of repeated failure to learn from the past, address climate change, conflict, unsustainable food systems, and the economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. Now exacerbated by the disruption of the global economy as well as food and energy systems due conflict in Ukraine, **the threat of famine is above all a political failure.**

But we cannot wait for an official declaration of famine. Lives are already being lost. **We can end this hunger crisis if we act now,** and if we act collectively. Ireland, with its own experience and legacy of famine, is uniquely positioned to lead by example and mobilise the international community to respond at speed and scale.

Root Causes

Drought is not uncommon in the Horn of Africa. However, **the region has experienced four successive failed rainy seasons with the 2022 March-May season predicted to be the driest on record. This represents the most severe drought in 40 yearsⁱⁱⁱ attributed to the global climate crisis.** Drought prevents crop production, reduces the size of lake fishing waters, kills livestock, leads to population displacement, and increases competition and conflict for water. An estimated 3.6 million livestock have died due to this prolonged drought^{iv}. The consequence is an increasing erosion of the livelihoods of communities already living on the brink.

Eleven years ago, Irish NGOs sounded the alarm on a famine affecting 13 million people in the Horn of Africa^v. Delayed international response then led to the avoidable deaths of over 250,000 people^{vi} and we swore never again. Despite significant investment in early warning systems and growing acceptance of the merits of cost-effective early and anticipatory action, **governments and the international community have failed yet again to heed the calls for action.** Worse still, **clear, repeated, and credible early warnings have been ignored for more than two years** while the number of people facing crisis levels of hunger more than doubled in the last year alone. The UN estimates that humanitarian funding of \$4.4bn is required to provide life-saving assistance and protection in the region^{vii} and only a small percentage has been secured at this time^{viii}.

The climate crisis is spiralling out of control crippling the capacity of the poorest countries to respond. The most vulnerable communities are the hardest hit by climate related shocks despite being the least responsible. Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia, representing 2.5% of the world's population, account for just 0.1% of global carbon emissions. China and the USA are responsible for 45% of global carbon emissions^{ix}. It is estimated that Ireland produces nearly 54 times higher emissions than Somalia alone^x.

Women and girls bear the brunt while also carrying a disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care work. In times of food shortages, they reduce personal food consumption to provide for others, carry additional responsibility for sick family members, and undertake arduous journeys at personal risk to find water. In many cases, women and girls are subjected to sexual and gender-based violence or exploitation. Desperate families that have exhausted their reserves may be forced to resort to negative coping mechanisms as a survival strategy – this includes dropping out of school especially for girls and early and child marriage^{xi}.

Failure to tackle the climate crisis — coupled with interruptions to and gaps in development programming - is perpetuating an unsustainable reliance on humanitarian aid. Funding for UN humanitarian appeals associated with extreme weather is estimated to be eight times greater than 20 years ago. Yet, over the past 5 years, these appeals were on average only 54% funded resulting in a funding shortfall of as much as €33 billion. The aid system is neither designed nor resourced to respond to cyclical and predictable shocks at scale. As rich polluting countries fail to act immediately to cut emissions and provide additional financial support for poorer nations to adapt to climatic shocks or compensate them for loss or damage, the result is rising poverty and inequality. It is estimated that every \$1 invested in early response and resilience in Somalia saves \$3 in income and livestock losses.^{xii}

Conflict is violently spurring the hunger crisis, at times limiting the ability of the most vulnerable to access their farms and pastures, and to travel safely to markets or access life-saving humanitarian assistance. Political leaders and decision-makers have refused to acknowledge the seriousness and scale of the crisis and the need to put humanitarian access and a timely humanitarian response ahead of all other considerations. Complex entrenched bureaucracies and harmful political choices too at local, national, and international levels continue to prevent a pre-emptive global response.

The fragility of global food systems is laid bare by these converging crises. **East Africa imports 90% of its wheat – a staple food for most people in the region – from Ukraine and Russia. Related disruptions in grain supply, in addition to soaring prices of oil and fertilizers, are driving regional food prices to an all-time high^{xiii}.** In Somalia, the prices for staple grains are more than double those of last year. Some countries are imposing food export bans to protect local supply further increasing global prices. This is highlighting dangerous dependencies and unequal power relations in food systems that have been at the centre of repeated food crises for decades. These presently risk being further re-enforced in the absence of attention of policy makers in accelerating the necessary sustainable transformation of food systems.

Recommendations

1. Rich nations including Ireland must immediately scale up and release flexible multi-year funding to meet the UN humanitarian appeal for Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia, to help save lives now. Funding to those local organisations at the forefront of response, including women-led organizations, that are already responding to hunger in their communities must be prioritised. Each day of delay unnecessarily exacerbates human suffering, increases the scale of the crisis, and raises the cost of the response. An increase to funding is consistent with Ireland's ambition to increase its international development assistance contribution to 0.7% of GNI (currently at 0.32% of GNI) to the UN target^{xiv}.

2. Ireland should remain an outspoken advocate at the UN Security Council for accountability for those who seek to use starvation as a weapon of war. Parties to conflict should be called upon to respect international humanitarian law by facilitating unhindered humanitarian access and respecting the integrity of items essential to the survival of the civilian population which may include food stocks, productive assets, and transport infrastructure.

3. National governments in the region should be encouraged and supported to scale up investments in social protection programmes through support for the reduction or cancellation of national debt burdens. Such action, enabled by international financial institutions, in the face of economic and climatic shocks and/or conflict, is essential to **protect hard won, and easily lost, development gains.** When complemented by investment in sustainable livelihoods, especially for women and girls, capacity to absorb and recover from shocks and crises now and in the future is strengthened.

4. Major grain exporting countries must immediately refrain from imposing food export restrictions and protect WFP supply chains at risk as a result of the Ukraine crisis to help low-income, food-import dependent countries. Pending political resolution of the conflict, UN Member States must proactively identify new sources of staple foods and other commodities at scale to mitigate impact on regional (and global) food security. More broadly, Ireland should support more resilient and transformative global and national food systems and policy frameworks to prevent future crises. This includes supporting steps to rebuild domestic food production, greater self-sufficiency in key staple food production, and sustainable agriculture practices.

5. Rich polluting nations, including Ireland must do more and do better to lower global CO2 emissions, compensate East African countries for their climate losses and damages, and provide increased finance to support adaptation measures. This is a moral imperative and a political and legal obligation under the Paris Agreement. Ireland should publish a clear roadmap to meet climate finance obligations in line with Ireland's fair share of climate finance and the growing needs of developing countries and support the establishment of a Loss and Damage Finance Facility under the Framework Convention on Climate Change^{xv}.

6. The international community must be alert and responsive to the collective impact of Covid-19, climate change and conflict on the world's poorest who, through no fault of their own, are bearing the brunt of such shocks. Irish parliamentarians should champion their cause, amplify their voices, invite them to participate meaningfully in key discussions, and ensure decision making that protects the lives, security, human rights and well-being of those furthest behind.

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ⁱ <https://www.fsinplatform.org/sites/default/files/resources/files/GRFC%202022%20Final%20Report.pdf>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.oxfamireland.org/blog/food-hunger>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.fao.org/3/cc0312en/cc0312en.pdf>

^{iv} <https://www.fao.org/3/cc0312en/cc0312en.pdf>

^v <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/irish-leadership-over-somalia-urged-1.880718>

^{vi} <https://www.fao.org/somalia/news/detail-events/en/c/247642/>

^{vii} <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/horn-africa-drought-humanitarian-key-messages-25-april-2022>

^{viii} <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/overview/2022/plans>

^{ix} <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/greenhouse-gas-emissions-by-country>

^x <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/somalia-shows-horrifying-realities-of-climate-change-but-who-is-looking-1.4859434>

^{xi} <https://www.concern.org.uk/news/hungry-change-women-deserve-better>

^{xii} <https://www.oxfamireland.org/sites/default/files/bp-dangerous-delay-2-180522-en.pdf>

^{xiii} https://www.concern.net/news/verge-humanitarian-crisis-impact-drought-horn-africa?utm_source=LinkedIn&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=ct_horn_of_africa_blog

^{xiv} <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2021-11-18/4/?highlight%5B0%5D=budget&highlight%5B1%5D=budget&highlight%5B2%5D=budget&highlight%5B3%5D=budget&highlight%5B4%5D=budgets&highlight%5B5%5D=budget>

^{xv} <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-convention/what-is-the-united-nations-framework-convention-on-climate-change>