

Famine in East Africa: Catastrophe threatens as food prices rise

Barry Mason
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The threat of starvation facing millions in East Africa is increasing. According to FEWS net (Famine Early Warning Systems Network), 11 million people across the region are in need of food aid.

A recent Oxfam press release was headed, “Spiralling food prices tipping millions in East Africa towards catastrophe.”

It quoted Oxfam’s Rob McNeil, who had just returned from assessing the situation in Somalia and the Afar region of Ethiopia. He said, “This is a catastrophe in the making; we have time to act before it becomes a reality. The cost of food has escalated by up to 500 percent in some places... People are increasingly becoming desperate... We fear that the worst could be yet to come as the crisis deteriorates across East Africa.”

The situation in Somalia is exacerbated by deteriorating security, making it dangerous for those trying to distribute food aid. The invasion by Ethiopia has displaced thousands of people.

The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) director for Somalia, speaking at a recent news conference in London, explained. “Somalia is at a dire crossroads. If sufficient food and other humanitarian assistance cannot be scaled up in the coming months, parts of the country could well be in the grips of a disaster similar to the 1992-1993 famine, when hundreds of thousands of people perished.”

An article in the *Guardian*, August 1, stated that Ethiopia is suffering most in the current crisis. In June the Ethiopian government has said around four and a half million people faced food shortages but now, “official estimates from donor agencies following recent nationwide assessments put the figure closer to 8-10 million people.”

The article continued: “The UN’s Office for the

Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Ethiopia warns that the country is facing ‘critical challenges’... those living in drought-affected areas are resorting to extreme measures including slaughtering animals, eating seeds meant for planting and migrating from their homes.”

The British Development Charity, Tearfund, commented on their website, “Ethiopia, Somalia, northern Kenya and Uganda are the worst hit areas with around 17 million people in need of emergency food aid. Drought, poor harvests and the continuing rises in food prices are the main factors driving a worsening humanitarian situation.

“If the current rainy season is also poor and the next harvest in a few months time also fails, the crisis will become catastrophic... In many areas there is a shortage of seeds to plant the next harvest, food on sale at markets is unaffordable and livestock lacks grazing land.

“There is already an urgent need to help those faced with severe hunger now. It is also equally important to act fast to help people to secure their next harvest and to maintain healthy livestock to prevent the crisis from deteriorating further.”

The development charity Christian Aid published a report in July, called “Fighting food shortages—Hungry for change”. It analyses the current food crisis. In its introduction it make the point that there is enough food grown to feed everyone, citing figures produced last year by the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organisation.

Yet the numbers lacking sufficient nutrition is increasing. Around 860 million of the world’s population were malnourished, but the effects of the recent spiralling food price rises have added another 100 million to this figure.

It explains: “A ‘perfect storm’ has now arisen... long

term problems affecting agricultural production have been exacerbated by other factors, sending global food prices soaring and causing acute shortages of staple foods in at least 37 countries.”

“In the first three months of 2008 all major food commodities hit their highest price in real terms for nearly 30 years,” it notes.

It is the world’s poor who are hit hardest, for they have to spend up to 70 percent of their income on food for themselves and families.

It goes on to highlight the major factors which have led to the recent spike in the global cost of food.

One factor is rising oil prices. Apart from increased transport costs, fertiliser has jumped in price. Josette Sheeran, executive director of the WFP, following a recent visit to Kenya said, “The world’s misery index is rising”. In Kenya fertiliser costs had more than doubled over the last few months, and seed prices have risen. She explained, “Farmers have no access to credit so when prices go up, they can’t afford to plant.”

Climate change is also affecting food production. In Africa it has led to more erratic and extreme weather events. The report says, “Across sub-Saharan Africa, more erratic rainfall has led to drought and frequent crop failure... evidence that the climate is changing is unequivocal.”

The increasing production of crops for biofuels is also having an impact. Biofuel production has increased from 1,300 million gallons in 1997 to 6,500 million gallons last year. John Lipsky of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) states that “biofuel policies in some advanced economies are spilling over to the price of key food items, particularly corn and soya bean. IMF estimates suggest that increased demand for biofuels accounts for 70 percent of the increase in corn prices and 40 per cent of the increase in soya bean prices.”

The role of speculation in commodities, which has moved into food production, is a major factor in the recent spike in food prices. Michael Masters, an expert on hedge funds, speaking to a US senate committee in May this year, said, “You have asked the question ‘Are institutional investors contributing to food and energy price inflation?’ And my unequivocal answer is yes... What we are experiencing is a demand shock coming from a new participant in the commodities futures market: institutional investors.”

He went on to explain that amongst the commodities

involved in speculative investment were agricultural products including wheat, corn and soya beans. The report continues: “So popular has this form of trading become that several banks, including Barclays and Deutsche Bank, have launched agricultural commodity index funds.”

Previous IMF loan conditions, such as the privatisation of emergency food stores in Malawi, have had a devastating impact on many sub-Saharan African countries. Their markets have been opened up for cash crop production for export to the major economies. The report notes that “The most productive land is then used to grow these crops, squeezing out domestic food producers. Although the intention has been to raise the income of marginal producers, such crops have reduced agricultural diversity and left countries reliant on importing staples.”

In sub-Saharan Africa 65 percent of the population are reliant on subsistence farming. The collapse of the recent Doha round of trade talks can only accelerate this process.



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