Preventing and Mitigating the Effects of Drought in East Africa

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Introduction
East Africa is the eastern region of the African continent that includes 20 countries such as Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Ethiopia, and Somalia. While droughts are not new to this region, they became increasingly frequent and intense, thus threatening millions of people. The successive large-scale droughts in East Africa from 2010 were reportedly the region’s worst in over 60 years and left more than 12.4 million people in urgent need of humanitarian aids. Even worse, the droughts are becoming more and more severe, so they will have disastrous impacts both on the economies of East Africa and the livelihoods of the people.

There are mounting scientific analyses that climate change exacerbates the impacts of drought. Temperatures in East Africa are continuing to rise, and higher temperatures result in greater evaporation, which reinforces drier conditions and intensifies the impacts of failed rains. Typically, East Africa has a 3-month raining period from October to December. However, from 2010, the rains were erratic and ended in early November. Part of the explanation lies with a climate phenomenon known as the Indian Ocean Dipole, an irregular oscillation of sea-surface temperatures. The atmosphere above the eastern Indian Ocean has a high level of moisture, which causes the air to become cooler. To equalize the differences in temperature due to this unusually cool air, warm and dry wind blows towards East Africa. As the dry air combines with high temperatures, it results in an extremely dry condition and failure of the rain. As a result of this phenomenon, two-thirds of East Africa received less than 75 percent of normal rainfall, and the pastoral regions experienced terrible loss of soil moisture.

Background
Droughts in East Africa led to food shortages and livestock deaths by reducing crop production and depleting pastureland and cropland in the region. As the expected amount of rainfall across the region was either insufficient or failed completely, crops and pasture received less water, and the chance of failed harvests and the death rate of livestock skyrocketed. More than 220,000 cattle, which is about 60 percent of all cattle in the region, died, and the value of livestock rapidly went down in the market as there was no longer the same demand for livestock.
Rising malnutrition level is a key problem caused by food shortages and livestock deaths. Because food is becoming less available and affordable, people are unable to meet the basic food and water needs, and their coping mechanisms (reducing portions, looking for labor opportunities, or selling household assets) are no longer viable. Countries in East Africa like Somalia, Kenya, and Ethiopia have some of the worst malnutrition rates in the world, with nearly two and a half million people in the country needing humanitarian assistance. The hunger in East Africa is especially evident among children. According to the Department for International Development (DID), between 50,000 and 100,000 people died in East Africa due to malnutrition, and more than half of them were children under five. Moreover, according to the United Nations (UN), one in four children in East Africa are reported to be malnourished, and at least 5.5 million children were affected by the lack of food and contaminated water supplies.

**International Actions**

*United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA)*

UNOCHA works in East Africa by providing financial aid to the countries that are suffering from severe drought. In Kenya, UNOCHA provided $208 million to assist response efforts in the country. In Ethiopia, the government and UNOCHA launched the 2017 Humanitarian Requirements Document (HRD). In South Sudan, UNOCHA’s declaration of famine brought greater global attention and pledges of financial assistance for the country’s crisis. In Somalia, the organization launched an $864 million humanitarian response plan that was successful in saving thousands of people. Internationally, UNOCHA issued a “Call to Action for the Horn of Africa” to collect $1.9 billion to unfold crisis with droughts.

*United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)*

UNHCR launched an emergency appeal for $136.3 million and built refugee camps in East Africa to provide humanitarian aid. The refugee camps provided basic supplies and medical care to the malnourished people who were in appalling conditions and even saved those who surpassed their intended capacity months before coming to the camp. The most important and largest refugee camp, which is located in Dabaab, Kenya, receives about 2,000 new people each day, and it currently hosts more than 380,000 refugees.
Places of High Concern

Somalia

Somalia is one of the four identified nations that are currently at risk of extreme hunger, famine, and acute food crisis. It is experiencing severe droughts that are worse than the one from 2011, which left a quarter of a million people and vast herds of livestock dead. Within the borders, the people in Somalia are suffering from malnutrition with at least 360,000 children who are malnourished and 70,000 of them in danger of starvation; its malnutrition level is six times what the UN considers an emergency. More than half of the population depend on food aid, and thousands of Somalis lost their lives due to illnesses related to malnutrition.

![Severe drought in Somalia](image)

The droughts had especially severe effects on food production in Somalia. Cereal production has dropped by 45 percent, and livestock, which accounts for 17 percent of the country’s economic output, declined by 60 percent. The Drought Impact and Needs Assessment estimates the total effects of the drought to be $3.25 billion and the total recovery needs to be $1.77 billion. In response to these impacts, Somalia and its international partners spent about $4.5 billion to save lives and launched a Humanitarian Response Plan, which protected the most vulnerable populations and helped to avert another famine in 2017.

South Sudan

According to the United Nations (UN), more than 100,000 people in South Sudan are on the verge of starvation and almost 5 million are in need of urgent assistance. In South Sudan, the military conflict and war that began in 2013 are both the drivers and results of the drought. The conflict led to millions of displacements, which hampered humanitarian access and made it even harder for people to cultivate land, causing South Sudan to become the first country in East Africa to declare a famine. On February 20, 2017, South Sudan’s government declared portions of Unity State in famine or high likelihood of famine due to war and a collapsing economy. Since the official famine declaration means that an exceptional number of people have already begun dying of hunger, urgent action is needed to prevent additional deaths.

Kenya

With the continuing failure of rains and intensifying drought, Kenya declared a national emergency, but the situation is likely to continue to exacerbate. In Kenya alone, millions of people are impacted by drought, and 3.5 to 5 million people are reported to be in urgent need of food assistance. Because droughts destroy crop production, kill livestock, and dry water sources, most families do not have enough food supplies and are unable to meet the basic needs. At the same time, drought also aggravated existing tensions in places like the Rift Valley because increasingly scarce resources led to growing violence between pastoralists and farmers.
Stance of the P5 Nations

United States of America

The United States is one of the largest donors of humanitarian assistance in East Africa. In 2017, it allocated more than $169 million to support the people in Ethiopia and Kenya, and this additional funding, including $137 million in Ethiopia and $33 million in Kenya, brings its total humanitarian contribution in East Africa to be more than $458 million. With this new funding, the United States is providing food assistance, specialized nutrition supplies for malnourished children, safe drinking water, and essential health services. It also works with local partners such as Oxfam America and Africa Humanitarian Action to provide purified water and ensure child health, food security, and community development.

United Kingdom

The United Kingdom has provided lifesaving aid for over 3.5 million people across Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia, and played a leading role in the international response to the East African drought. Across the region, UK has provided food for more than 3.5 million people, vaccinations for 2 million people, clean water and sanitation for 1.2 million people, and seeds to plant for more than 200,000 farmers. It also provided refugee camps for thousands of people in Somalia, Kenya, and Ethiopia. The aid agencies are continuing to expand their activities in East Africa to help the people who are at risk of starvation.

France

Through the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU), France has been providing €4.8 million and various humanitarian aids to East Africa. EU allocates an average of €170 million each year to development projects in four main areas: governance, education, the social sector, and economic development. The funding from the French Treasury is aimed at alleviating the ongoing drought in East Africa and protecting the people. In 2017, France provided humanitarian assistance to populations, especially the farmers, who are affected by drought and supported the fight against maritime piracy.

People’s Republic of China

China has historically exerted major economic and security presence in East Africa through contributions to United Nations peacekeeping missions. For instance, in South Sudan, China contributed 700 troops to the UN mission, UNMISS, and for Djibouti, it has lent money that is equivalent to 75 percent of Djibouti’s GDP. Recently, China has taken direct military action in Africa by monitoring Somali pirates in the Indian Ocean and opening its logistics and military base in Djibouti. China also shifted its engagement from countries in West Africa to emerging economies in East Africa like Kenya and Ethiopia. As its focus has moved to East Africa, China has been providing financial and military assistance to the countries.

Russian Federation

Russia has been striving to become another major player in Africa. In East Africa, Russia has begun prospecting for markets and political influence, and the region’s natural gas deposits are Russian energy companies’ particular interest. For example, Kenya and Uganda’s nuclear-power ambitions have been identified by Russia’s state-owned Rosatom Corporation as offering
opportunities for major investments. However, many critics see this Russian involvement in East Africa as Russia’s attempt to take advantage of the numerous openings that have arisen in the newly independent countries and point to Russia’s failures in East Africa in terms of providing assistance.

**Possible Solutions**

Even though some early warning systems and methods in East Africa have been improved since the 2011 crisis, coordination and response mechanisms need to be developed much further so that the countries will be financially and technically capacitated to quickly respond when droughts strike again.

Because people cannot control the Indian Ocean Dipole and the climate, they should instead focus on changing communities to become more resilient to climate change. For example, to ease the impact of droughts, livestock farmers can share large communal areas to reduce the risk of pasture failure, and pastoral movements should be managed to ensure that areas do not become overgrazed. Since studies show that droughts are becoming more detrimental as farmers settle down and become increasingly reliant on sedentary farming, people in East Africa should diversify their livelihoods and the types of crops. They can switch to crops that are better at coping with climate variabilities, such as cassava or sorghum, because maize, the primary crop grown in East Africa, frequently fails during drought years. By planting drought-tolerant crops that can withstand insufficient rainfall and diversifying their livelihoods, the farmers can greatly reduce the chance of crop failures and food shortage.

Increased strategic integration and coordination between the governments and international organizations can also build resilience to drought and climate change for the people in East Africa. With the organizations’ humanitarian assistance, people can access sustainable water sources, implement improved risk-reduction strategies, receive education on new technologies to grow crops on dry land, and increase animal disease surveillance, which can all greatly mitigate the impact of drought in East Africa.

**Glossary**

*Drought*: a prolonged period of abnormally low rainfall or below-average precipitation in a given region, leading to shortages in the water supply

*Famine*: extreme scarcity of food; it refers to the failure of food production, people’s ability to access food, and political response by the government

*Indian Ocean Dipole*: an irregular oscillation of sea-surface temperatures in which the western Indian Ocean becomes alternately warmer and colder than the eastern part of the ocean

*Horn of Africa*: a peninsula of north-east Africa that lies between the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean; it includes Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti
Timeline

February 17, 2011 – The UN sends humanitarian aid to the people in malnutrition crisis

June 9, 2011 – The Dabaab refugee camp faces an emergency due to severe overcrowding

July 20, 2011 – The UN officially declares famine in Somalia

August 11, 2011 – The United States increases its aid on East Africa to $580 million

November 28, 2016 – Indian Ocean Dipole has a severe impact on East Africa

May 31, 2017 – The UNHCR reports that there are 739,000 drought displacements and 3.2 million people who are severely food insecure

September 24, 2017 – The World Bank increases funding for the drought in the Horn of Africa to nearly $2 billion to provide humanitarian assistance
Sources


