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# Concurrent Crises in the Horn of Africa

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## *Introduction*

The greater Horn of Africa, stretching from southern Ethiopia to northern Kenya and Somalia, is experiencing its worst drought in four decades. A fourth consecutive failed rainy season caused by the La Niña weather phenomenon has generated extreme drought conditions that have curtailed agricultural production, destroyed crops, and killed more than **3 million livestock**, threatening the livelihoods and lives of millions of farmers and pastoralists. Across the region, **more than 20 million people** currently face starvation, and nearly 6 million children under the age of five are acutely malnourished. The number of individuals impacted by acute food insecurity will likely increase to over 25 million by mid-2022, hitting conflict-affected Ethiopia and Somalia the hardest, potentially leading to widespread malnutrition and starvation.

Droughts in the region are not new, but they are becoming more frequent and severe, resulting in longer-term impacts. Climate models forecast the upcoming October–December rains to underperform, meaning the region will likely see an unprecedented five-season drought. Rangelands are unable to recover from increasing drought cycles and pastoralist livelihoods may no longer be viable in many areas. The current drought is the latest of many crises afflicting the Horn, including the Covid-19 pandemic, devastating floods, and locust outbreaks.

The Horn is also one of the most conflict-affected regions of the world. Each country in the Horn has experienced some measure of political strife for decades. Conflict and violence have compounded the effects of climatic shocks on affected populations by creating additional needs and barriers for international humanitarian organizations and frontline local actors. Women and girls are bearing the brunt of these concurrent crises due to prevailing gender inequalities, which hinder their participation in decisionmaking mechanisms and humanitarian response and recovery efforts, undermining the integration of local actors in humanitarian action.

While resilience-building efforts have made some progress in mitigating impacts from drought, they are not yet scaled to the overwhelming need. The combined effects of the climatic and political crises

necessitate both an emergency humanitarian response and the implementation of long-term climate adaptation and resilience strategies.

## *Famine and Conflict Implications*

According to the Famine Early Warning Systems Network, more than **81,000 individuals** in Somalia live in famine conditions (Integrated Phase Classification 5). In addition, 20 million individuals across **Ethiopia** will face food crisis conditions (Integrated Phase Classification 3) or worse by the end of 2022, due not only to drought but also to conflict in the north of the country.

The inflation of global commodity and food prices resulting from Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine is further exacerbating the situation across the Horn. Prior to the invasion, Russian and Ukrainian wheat stocks accounted for an overwhelming proportion of humanitarian food-aid procurements for the region and more than 90 percent of Somalia's wheat imports. As famine conditions intensify, the World Food Program (WFP) has **warned** of a "very real risk of famine" in the coming months. The threat of large-scale loss of life is rising, and immediate and sustained humanitarian action is necessary to respond at scale to this crisis.

The interrelation between climate, food security, and conflict is more prominent in fragile or developing contexts. Although countries such as Ethiopia and Kenya have made progress on key development metrics over the past decade, the intensifying climate crisis has fostered new vulnerabilities and exacerbated insecurities, destabilizing the Horn. In northwestern Kenya, along the country's border with Uganda and South Sudan, severe drought and food insecurity have triggered **conflict over scarce natural resources**.

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In Somalia, the combined impacts of climate change and conflict have left **7.7 million Somalis** in need of humanitarian assistance and protection as of 2022. Over the past three decades, the civil war has uprooted **2.9 million individuals** from their homes, making Somalia one of the five worst internal displacement and humanitarian crises in the world, with **2.2 million** in need of urgent assistance. In April 2022, the United Nations issued a stark warning, projecting that **350,000 children** could starve to death if urgent action is not taken.

In Ethiopia, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) estimates that **as many as 9 million individuals** experience severe food insecurity in the Afar, Amhara, and Tigray regions. In particular, the Tigray civil war, which began in November 2020, has undermined development gains and is creating extraordinary humanitarian need, with **at least 25 million** Ethiopians requiring humanitarian assistance and protection. According to a **recent report** from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, abuses by authorities and security officials are part of a systematic and widespread attack against Tigrayan civilians, amounting to crimes against humanity and war crimes. The Tigray conflict threatens peace and security in the Horn by spreading into the neighboring Afar and Amhara regions and by generating large-scale displacement, with **nearly 50,000 people** seeking refuge in eastern Sudan. Countless others have relocated to eastern Amhara, causing further insecurity along the border with Tigray.

## *Access Denial and Aid Exploitation*

Bureaucratic, logistical, and security challenges often impede the access and operation of humanitarian actors across the Horn of Africa. In Tigray, for example, persistent security risk in areas of humanitarian need creates significant obstacles to aid activities. In the second half of 2021, **72 percent** of humanitarian access incidents were attributed to active hostilities, security operations, and intercommunal conflict. The effect of these impediments on effective humanitarian response is often compounded by the coinciding collapse of public infrastructure in conflict zones as the widespread destruction of health centers, water systems, and schools worsens local humanitarian needs.

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By far the largest obstacle to humanitarian access, however, has been obstruction by state and non-state actors across the region. In Ethiopia, the warring parties have implemented a de facto blockade of the Tigray region since June 2021, severely limiting humanitarian access. Under the manufactured blockade, the volume of aid successfully delivered to the war-torn region was comparable to only **10 percent** of its humanitarian need. The federal government's declaration of a **six-month national state of emergency** in November 2021 compounded operational obstacles for humanitarian actors. Under the state of emergency, authorities arrested some aid workers and imposed severe restrictions on the movement of humanitarian supplies and personnel. While a truce was declared on **March 24, 2022**, eventually allowing for the reestablishment of humanitarian aid flows and service, the government-imposed security measures played a significant role in upholding the de facto blockade for nine months.

In Somalia, al-Shabaab continues to pose a significant threat to regional security and humanitarian operations. The group's legacy of attacking humanitarian personnel and co-opting aid to its benefit has inhibited funding from risk-averse donors for Somalia. Al-Shabaab has vacillated on the provision of humanitarian aid based on evolving interests and objectives, challenging the ability of aid organizations and donors to negotiate principled access effectively.

During the **East African drought of 2011**, al-Shabaab sought to capitalize on humanitarian resources through raids on local agency offices and intimidation-enforced taxation schemes. The group **banned several Western aid organizations**, including the WFP and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), following allegations of "espionage," "illicit activities," and "misconduct." In response, and out of concern of manipulation of assistance, donors imposed stringent operating restrictions on humanitarian agencies and withdrew their support. Between 2008 and 2011, humanitarian funding for south-central Somalia alone **declined by half**.

In the subsequent period, al-Shabaab has maintained opportunistic oversight of humanitarian assistance. As the group has expanded its operations across the Horn, it has exploited the **distribution of aid** as a mechanism to enhance support and legitimacy as a provider of basic services. Despite its forced evictions and violent attacks, the group has found success in its "hearts and minds" strategy, which capitalizes on crisis conditions by offering in-kind goods and resources to garner local support.

During the first Covid-19 outbreak in Somalia, al-Shabaab established an isolation center and started issuing health advice, urging citizens to "**be cautious**" of medical assistance from non-Muslims. Subsequently, in March 2022, the group formed a **seven-member committee** to visit communities affected by the drought and provide them with cooking oil, rice, sugar, and other aid. In addition,

increasing regional instability and worsening humanitarian conditions have left individuals in conflict-affected areas more susceptible to recruitment efforts. In the Somali states of Hirshabelle, Jubaland, and South-West, as well as Kenya's northeastern border regions, the insurgent group capitalizes on the vulnerabilities of young men and migrants, often [recruiting migrants from refugee camps such as Dadaab](#) under false pretenses. These efforts have been particularly durable in Kenya, where corruption within the police, military, and intelligence services further impede on efforts to combat al-Shabaab. Without sufficient humanitarian response, the drought's [anticipated displacement of over one million people in Somalia by the end of June 2022](#) could empower al-Shabaab in the region, bringing countless individuals under its control and influence.

Al-Shabaab's current efforts to exploit aid are part of a bleak history of humanitarian assistance in Somalia. While it is not rare for humanitarian assistance to become embedded in war economies, this has been a prominent feature in Somalia, which has had a culture of manipulating international funding to legitimize warlords [since the 1990s](#). The risk that humanitarian assistance indirectly aggravates conflict and consequently foils counterterrorism efforts creates a dilemma in balancing the motivation of agencies and actors to respond to humanitarian needs with the apolitical mandates of donors and international organizations alike.

## *Funding Gap*

Although consideration of conflict and environmental conditions is important for an effective humanitarian response, current insufficiencies of humanitarian aid in the Horn are primarily attributable to a lack of funding. As recently as 2016, [during the region's last major drought](#), the international community demonstrated its ability to effectively avert devastating famine through the early scale-up of humanitarian assistance. Over the past year, humanitarian partners have increasingly warned of the need for immediate action in response to the latest drought, but humanitarian contributions have declined significantly since 2016–17. Today, a lack of funding has constrained efforts to respond early to humanitarian need and avert famine in the Horn.

Recognition of the scale of need across the Horn is increasing. In 2022, the European Union [plans to allocate \\$134 million](#) to humanitarian projects in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia, and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) launched a [\\$130 million drought response plan in January](#). In April, at the High-level Roundtable for the Horn of Africa Drought co-hosted by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the European Union's Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), donor agencies pledged [nearly \\$1.4 billion](#). On top of this, the United States [announced an additional \\$200 million in humanitarian assistance](#) for the region at the roundtable, bringing its total pledge for fiscal year 2021–22 to \$361 million. However, these new funding mechanisms and programs account for only a fraction of humanitarian partners' [\\$4.4 billion funding appeal](#). In arguing for an urgent response, the [United Nations warns](#) that a continued scale-up of humanitarian funding will be needed to mitigate a looming humanitarian catastrophe.

For some international donor governments and organizations, however, earmarking donations has become difficult due to uncertainty over competing funding appeals. Among the United Nations' various organizations there are [six different funding appeals](#) for the Horn region. These overlapping appeals compete for limited financial resources and demonstrate a lack of coherence and coordination within the UN system, making it difficult for donors to determine the best route and method for allocating funding.

## *The Global Picture*

Despite the demonstration of solidarity among international donors at the high-level roundtable, there remain obstacles that undermine the ability to generate funding for humanitarian assistance in the region. Global instability and related humanitarian needs—in Ukraine, Afghanistan, and elsewhere—are on the rise, and there are an insufficient number of resources to respond. The Horn’s **protracted conflicts, emerging from the exploitation of deeply entrenched group identities**, have proven highly intractable. The fatigue of prolonged humanitarian engagement and the scale of global humanitarian need undermine political will among donor countries to respond to funding appeals.

Humanitarian action also competes for funds with development and military activities. The Somali government and African Union forces in Ethiopia have received significant financial support for “state building” and counterterrorism operations despite significant issues of corruption, lack of transparency, and failures to demonstrate meaningful governance capacity. Finally, inadequate accountability, transparency, and knowledge transfer between local partners and international organizations at times make investments in aid and stabilization unsustainable.

In recent years, humanitarian aid organizations and key donor countries have spent billions of dollars in assistance to the Horn, yet direct funding to local actors is nominal. In Somalia, for example, money provided by humanitarian aid organizations has been **spent on salaries of non-Somali UN personnel** rather than local actors who are leading the efforts combating the impacts of the concurrent conflict and drought. The complexity of operations and the need for organizations to ensure staff safety and security mean that substantial sums go toward logistics—laptops, secure conference rooms, and fuel for cars and generators. Even direct humanitarian cash-transfer programs, lauded as an effective way to support humanitarian needs, can be cost-ineffective. Aid organizations’ inadequate coordination with local actors creates gaps in aid allocation and delivery or overlaps in the distribution of scarce resources.

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Despite being severely underfunded, local actors are exceedingly proficient at leading resilience initiatives in the Horn. In Ethiopia, for example, local organizations played an instrumental role in **improving food and water security in the Abraha Atsbeha watershed**, one of the most drought-prone, food-insecure, and poverty-stricken areas in the country. Before the intervention, deforestation, overgrazing, and soil erosion caused the land to deteriorate rapidly. Several areas were uncultivable due to regular periods of drought, and recurrent crop failures caused widespread famine and hunger. In 2003, the community launched the **Managing Environmental Resources to Enable Transition Project** with support from the Ethiopian government and the WFP. The initiative consisted of community-led interventions to address soil erosion and pilot programs for water-harvesting technologies, which allowed the community to become food self-sufficient, transforming degraded land into productive farmland. Other outcomes include diversified income sources and increased household incomes, higher crop yields, and improved vegetation and forest cover, resulting in better soil quality. The Abraha Atsbeha village **received the Equator Prize** at the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development for excelling in integrated participatory watershed management.

Community-driven interventions create a sense of ownership and are more effective and sustainable at mitigating the impact of climate change and other shocks. **Recent USAID programs in the Horn of Africa**

engaging pastoral and agropastoral communities in peace and resilience efforts have also proven successful in “building adaptive capacity and community resilience in the face of adverse climate conditions, such as drought.” High-level political will is necessary to support the sustainability of such “bottom-up” approaches and to create an environment for broad multi-stakeholder participation in supporting local organizations undertaking resilience programming. Building synergies between local actors and other stakeholders is critical in establishing long-term resilience among agriculture-based communities threatened by the concurrent crises plaguing the Horn.

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### *Conclusion and Recommendations*

The WFP’s 2021 *Global Report on Food Crises* recorded the highest level of global hunger in the report’s history, and the global outlook for acute food insecurity is expected to deteriorate further. As drought conditions intensify, immediate and sustained humanitarian funding is necessary to prevent large-scale loss of life throughout the Horn of Africa. Humanitarian needs arising from climate change are unlikely to abate soon. To overcome the compounding challenges faced by the region, international donors need to sustain recent funding momentum. Platforms such as the Group of Seven summit should create space for leaders from all levels across the Horn to appeal directly to the international community and explain what is needed for an effective humanitarian response.

The scale of humanitarian need and the legacy of famine in the Horn serve as starting points in mobilizing international response. To motivate further funding, humanitarian partners should cooperate to deconflict funding appeals and advance strategies that demonstrate understanding of and preparedness to overcome challenges to humanitarian investments. In response to conflict-related barriers to aid and assistance, it is necessary to develop new creative models for the provision of services. Ensuring humanitarian access in insurgent-controlled areas may require donors to undertake bureaucratic and legal reforms that enable strategic engagement with non-state armed groups. Such reforms would need to be based upon reasonable and well-enforced risk standards that enhance the protection of aid resources and minimize the legitimization of insurgent groups.

While preserving space for humanitarian assistance remains the priority in the immediate term, humanitarian planning should also incorporate a long-term outlook toward climate adaptation and resilience building given the rapid deterioration of climate conditions. Conflict and insurgency are a symptom of regional insecurities, not the cause. It is necessary to address environmental, systematic, and social conditions that undermine peace in order to reduce humanitarian vulnerabilities.

Given the regional integration of conflicts in the Horn of Africa, conflict-sensitive humanitarian programming should incorporate equal considerations of localized needs and the regional context in which they manifest. A bottom-up approach should encompass not only immediate food-crisis support—including in-kind and cash and voucher assistance—but also market-based interventions to protect agricultural livelihoods, support adaptation, and promote the development of formal and informal social support systems. ■

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