

# We Were Warned: Unlearned Lessons of Famine in the Horn of Africa

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*Cover Photo Caption: People are seen in a drought affected area in Manderu, Kenya on December 02, 2022. Photo by Gerald Anderson/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.*

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## Executive Summary

Almost 40 million people in Somalia, Ethiopia, and Kenya face an unprecedented food and nutrition emergency. This crisis is driven by five failed or below-average rainy seasons and a looming sixth in 2023. In Somalia and Ethiopia, the rain failure is exacerbated by protracted conflict. The region has also suffered from the negative impact of COVID-19 and the Russia-Ukraine war. Many of the countries in the region are net food importers, and the Ukraine crisis has led to an increase in the price of food. In a region where most rely on rain-fed agriculture and pastoralism, cyclic drought has eroded community resilience, leading to a grim humanitarian crisis.

Poor funding is hampering efforts by humanitarian groups to address the crisis. As a result, some groups have resorted to making painful choices of [“taking the food from the mouths of hungry people to the mouths of starving people.”](#) According to the World Food Program in Somalia, [7.1 million](#) people face acute food insecurity, and 213,000 people are facing catastrophic hunger levels. In Kenya, Somalia, and Ethiopia, 7.46 million children under the age of five are estimated to face acute malnutrition, including [1.85 million](#) facing severe malnutrition.

Regional governments and international donors know how to respond to the drought but have failed to apply lessons from the past. Indeed, the current crisis echoes the devastating 2011-2012 famine in Somalia when over a [quarter million people](#) died, half of whom were children under the age of five. By the time famine was declared, [half of the people](#) experiencing famine had [died](#). Donors, humanitarian agencies, and the governments of Kenya, Somalia, and Ethiopia learned hard lessons from the famine and adopted a “No Regret” funding posture during the region’s ensuing 2017-18 drought. They did not wait for the formal declaration of famine to upscale their aid delivery to people in need and [deferred to quick](#), on-the-ground expertise in their field offices rather than onerous decisions from headquarters at key moments. Ultimately, they saved many lives and livelihoods.

Today, these hard-learned lessons have failed to hold. For over a year, there has been a sustained early warning of a new drought and its consequences for the Horn of Africa. However, those warnings have yet to trigger a response that matches the scale of need. If urgent actions are not taken, history is set to repeat itself on an even larger scale. This does not have to be the case. Lives and livelihoods can still be saved.

Experts know what works: adequate empirical evidence shows that early action, relief, and social safety programs, especially Emergency Cash Transfers, save lives and livelihoods and offer dignity to those in need. National safety net programs can be used to prevent the acute impact of food insecurity and, in the medium term, a path to longer-term poverty reduction. Somalia, Ethiopia, and Kenya each have social safety programs designed precisely for situations like this. These systems have worked during past droughts. Donors, humanitarian agencies, and national governments should therefore view social safety programs as the connective tissue that links humanitarian aid and development.

In Somalia and Ethiopia, internal conflicts are the [chief barrier](#) to delivering humanitarian aid. In 2011, humanitarian groups feared falling afoul of the sweeping counter-terrorism regimes, and Al-Shabaab’s onerous and arbitrary requirement to program in the areas under their control inhibited humanitarian access in southern Somalia. Initially, most areas that experienced famine were predominantly areas under Al-Shabaab’s control, although it spread to the government-controlled areas later. Today, Al-Shabaab does not control as many areas as in 2011. However, between 700,000 and 900,000 people still live in regions controlled by the group, making humanitarian access difficult.

Ethiopia has historically suffered from chronic food insecurity, and the government has addressed some of its causes through the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP). The absence of large-scale conflict has also helped. But the outbreak of conflict in late 2020 between the Tigray authority on one side and the Federal Ethiopian government, the Eritrean military, and various militia on the other side has diverted resources towards the war and weakened community resilience. The federal government's humanitarian blockade has also denied people in need of aid. Additionally, the killing of humanitarian workers and looting of humanitarian aid by parties to the conflict has exacerbated the already perilous situation.

The length and severity of droughts in the Horn of Africa are increasing. However, experts know how to address drought, and the 2017-2018 drought response offered a workable template. Early response, sufficient timely funding, and a combination of humanitarian aid and social safety nets save lives. Regional leaders must heed these lessons, starting with convening a regional summit to sound the alarm and take urgent action to address the ongoing crisis and halt the avoidable cycle of suffering.

## Recommendations

### Donor countries should:

- **Fund the over \$3.7 billion in requirements set out in the UN Horn of Africa's Drought Call to Action and commit to flexible multiyear funding.** Funding for the drought response stands at 72 percent for Somalia and 55 percent for Kenya, and 52 percent for Ethiopia of the respective 2022 annual requirements for each country. These gaps need to be closed immediately. The current drought has now surpassed the 2010-2011 and 2017 droughts in its length and severity and will only cost more if action is not funded now.
- **The European Union should increase its funding to address the humanitarian crises resulting from the regional drought.** Currently, the United States is funding the lion's share of the response. It has provided almost US\$1 billion to Somalia and is funding over 70 percent of the UN Children Fund's Horn of Africa nutrition response.
- **Invest in social safety programs and resilience across the Horn of Africa.** These programs can complement humanitarian aid by helping to prevent acute food insecurity and by creating pathways out of the crisis. However, donors will need to strike a careful balance between humanitarian aid and financial support for social safety programs to reflect the realities of different countries in the region.
  - In Kenya, donors should give top priority to shoring up the country's relatively robust Hunger Safety Net Program (HSNP). In the financial year 2020/2021, the Kenyan government allocated US\$308 million to social protection, but because of the increasing scale of need, more money will be needed.
  - In Ethiopia, donors should complement their support for the UN's humanitarian drought appeal with funding for the country's Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP). The PSNP has proven effective in addressing food insecurity in the past. However, two years of war and the Federal Government's blockade of the Tigray region have destroyed much of the PSNP infrastructure in the north of the country. As a result, the program cannot be relied upon to deliver results in the region hit hardest by food insecurity.

- In Somalia, donor funding should prioritize the UN's humanitarian drought appeal. Somalia's social safety program – Baxnaano or Uplifting in Somalia – is still in its nascent stage and not yet sufficiently robust in capacity or reach to play a central role in warding off famine.
- **Consider relaxing the U.S. Treasury and State Department's sanctions regime for humanitarian agencies delivering aid in the Al Shabaab-controlled area in Somalia.** The relaxation should be followed by Comfort Letters explicitly stating that humanitarian agencies acting in good faith are exempt from prosecutions for food, medicine, and other essential supplies, including cash, that unintentionally ends up in the hands of Al-Shabaab.

### **The African Union, the United States, the European Union, and the UN Security Council should:**

- **Impose targeted sanctions on those violating the terms of Ethiopia's Ceasefire Agreement,** including those denying humanitarian access and starving civilians in violation of Ethiopian and international humanitarian laws.

### **Humanitarian actors should:**

- Activate an IASC System-Wide Scale-Up for Kenya and extend the IASC System-Wide Scale-Up for Somalia and Ethiopia through to the end of the next rainy season, which starts in March and ends in May 2023. The Scale-Up should be accompanied by a surge in resources, funding, and technical expertise. This should not wait for the formal declaration of famine.
- The UN Secretary-General should immediately visit the three countries, Somalia, Kenya, and Ethiopia, to raise the profile of the humanitarian situation.

### **The governments of Somalia, Kenya, and Ethiopia should:**

- **Urgently convene a regional summit on food and nutrition insecurity in the region,** via the IGAD extraordinary Assembly of Heads of State and Government, to increase the profile of the situation and bring much-needed attention, pledges of support, and political focus to the issue.

## **Research Overview**

Refugees International traveled to the region in September 2022 to assess the humanitarian response to food and nutrition insecurity and explore policy solutions. The team also visited regional refugee camps. This report is informed by dozens of in-person and phone interviews with representatives of UN agencies and local and international non-governmental organizations working to provide humanitarian assistance in Somalia, Ethiopia, and Kenya.

## Background: Famine in the Horn of Africa

The Horn of Africa has a history of food insecurity. A mix of catastrophic drought and ongoing conflict plunged countries in the region into crisis twice in the previous decade. The 2011 drought and famine in Southern Ethiopia was a turning point in how donors and humanitarian agencies address food insecurity in the Horn of Africa. Several key lessons emerged from the 2011 crisis, including the importance of early responses; the need for timely and flexible funding; and the imperative to couple humanitarian response with services delivered through social safety networks. Emergency Cash Transfers (ECT) proved to be particularly important because they save both lives and livelihoods. When famine conditions threatened in 2017–2018, EMC was deployed to great effect. Unfortunately, these lessons have not been applied as drought ravages Kenya, Ethiopia, and Somalia today.

However, it is important to acknowledge the complexity of the operating environment. Drought is not the only challenge confronting the Horn of Africa. Indeed, the region is being buffeted by multiple crises, both natural and manmade. These crises have eroded community resilience, making large portions of the population vulnerable to food insecurity. Conflict, political instability, and climate change have long been drivers of the region’s food insecurity and displacement. Somalia, for example, has not had a stable central government since 1991. With the help of the African Union peacekeeping mission, the Somali government has been fighting the Al Qaeda-affiliated jihadi group Al Shabab. The presence of the terrorist group and instability in large areas of the country has complicated efforts to adequately respond to both past droughts and the ones gripping the country today.

Ethiopia had been largely stable since the mid-1990s, registering impressive economic growth. Yet for the last two years, it has been mired in a civil conflict pitting the Tigray region against the Ethiopian federal government, Eritrea, and an assortment of local and regional militias. Millions of people have been displaced, and millions face a lack of medicine, food, and access to cash and telecommunications. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), more than [5 million](#) people need humanitarian aid inside the Tigray region.

### 2011 Famine

In the case of the 2011 famine, the initial warning came as early as August 2010; “La Niña events are associated with drier-than-normal conditions during the October–December rainy season in the eastern sector of [East Africa](#)”. A few months later, in November 2010, the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) issued another [warning](#) stating rainfall during the October–December period was “likely to be below average,” indicating severe food insecurity for southeast Kenya and Somalia, particularly after January and February.

In its March 15, 2011, warning FEWS NET and Food Security Nutrition Analysis Unit stated that in the eastern Horn of Africa, households: “[face moderate](#) to extreme levels of food insecurity due to an ongoing drought, deteriorating purchasing power, and, in some areas, limits on the delivery of humanitarian assistance. Based on the findings of a multi agency scenario building process, the likely poor performance of March–May rainfall is expected to result in further deterioration in food security.”

The warning continued, “even if March–May rains are average, food security in the region’s eastern sector is expected to remain critical through at least May/June 2011. Large scale emergency assistance to address current and likely food insecurity is needed; additional contingency planning, given the possibility of a major crisis, should also be [implemented](#).”

Unfortunately, these early warnings were not heeded. As a result, 260,000, half of them children under the age of five, died in Somalia. At least half of the deaths had occurred by the time the Somali famine was declared in 2011. According to OCHA, the median rate of acute malnutrition in southern regions in Somalia rose from 16 percent in August 2010 to 25 percent in January 2011 to a record of 36 percent in August 2011, a month after the declaration of the famine. This means in January, it was at [25 percent](#) already – six months before the famine declaration; (15 percent mortality is an indicator of a serious humanitarian crisis and the threshold for triggering a response.

In the wake of the famine, leaders committed to never letting this happen again.

## 2017-2018 Drought

During the 2017–2018 drought, donors and humanitarian agencies worked together to avert the worst by taking early action, including the provision of cash. Donors and humanitarian agencies took a “No Regrets” funding policy rather than a “wait and see” approach. The forward-learning policy averted the crisis during the drought. The pace of the response in Somalia was swift. Aid agencies began to respond in November 2015 in the North (Somaliland and Puntland areas) and in November 2016 in the rest of the country after the bad 2016 Gu season (rain season starts the second half of March). Unlike in 2011, aid agencies did not wait for an official famine declaration to scale up. The donors were more responsive and flexible in granting authorization to allocate “resilience money for Emergency Cash Transfers and emergency water trucking to limit the need to [move animals](#).”

The Department for International Development (DFID) made money available in March after consultation with the Somalia country office. The headquarters was following the country office’s lead. Such a swift response, and allowing the in-country office’s advice to take precedent was in part driven by the determination to [avoid a repeat](#) of the 2011 famine situation. While the funding levels were necessary, so too was adopting a risk management approach: if there is a probability of high impact occurring, an intervention must begin immediately. In the case of Somalia, avoiding a repeat of 2011 was crucial.

## A New Famine in 2022

### Early Warning

Despite having learned from the past for the 2017–2018 response, the current response in the region looks a lot like the failed 2011 approach. The slow response is not because of a lack of early warnings.

FEWSNET’s first alert for 2022 was issued on August 13, 2020, indicating “worsening acute [food insecurity](#).” Mid-May 2021, FEWS NET issued another alert indicating Food assistance needs are “sharply increasing in the [Horn of Africa](#),” raising the likelihood of a third consecutive season of [below-average rainfall](#).” Food Security and Nutrition Working Group (FSNWG) alert in October 2021 indicated Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia will likely grow.” In November, FSNWG issued another warning raising the prospect of acute malnutrition. In November 2021, FEWS NET issued a [warning](#), and another in December, stating over 20 million people will need urgent humanitarian aid, which is 70 percent more than in 2017–2018, especially in [Northern Ethiopia](#). In April 2022, FEWS NET warned that approximately 7.1 million people across Somalia would likely experience



high levels of acute food insecurity, 4.7 million were facing a crisis, and 2.1 million people were facing an Emergency. The World Meteorological Organization warned of a drought of a length not experienced in the [last 40 years](#).”

## The Crisis Takes Shape

These increasingly dire warnings are now taking shape on the ground. According to the UN, “across the Horn of Africa, at least 36.1 million people will be affected by severe drought in October 2022, including 24.1 million in Ethiopia, 7.8 million in Somalia, and 4.2 million in Kenya. This represents a significant increase from July 2022 (when an estimated [19.4 million](#) people were affected), reflecting the impact of the drought in additional areas of Ethiopia and rising needs in Somalia and Kenya.”<sup>1</sup>

The severity of the crisis is perhaps most evident when it comes to child nutrition. Food insecurity ravages entire communities, but often hits children the hardest. Failure to get the daily calorie intake affects children’s long-term cognitive development. Children usually get some of their meals through the School Feeding Programs (SFP). SFP predominantly relies on donor funding, and some of those programs have run out of money. Thus, children do not have adequate food at home or school. Food insecurity negatively impacts education outcomes. Many children have stopped attending school because of a lack of food. Some children are forced to engage in child labor to supplement the family’s income.

Child malnutrition provides a good indicator of the food and nutrition situation in each area at any one time. The table below sets out the nature and extent of child malnutrition in the three countries in question. There are three main categories for measuring children’s malnutrition: children who are Moderately Acutely Malnourished (MAM); children who are Severely Acutely Malnourished (SAM); and aggregate Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM) for children. Global acute malnutrition (GAM) is the total number of child ages 6-59 months in each population considered severely acutely malnourished (SAM) and moderately acutely malnourished (MAM). According to UNICEF, as of September, over 13 million children are experiencing various forms of malnutrition. In the Tigray region, because of the lack of access, the numbers could even be higher.

## Early Action Can Change Lives

Today, humanitarian early warning systems and indicators are clearly blinking red across the Horn of Africa. The 2011 famine and the 2017–18 drought underscored the need to translate such warnings into early action. Such action saves lives and livelihoods. It is also cost-effective. The literature on this score is also clear. A study commissioned by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) demonstrates that “a more proactive response to avert humanitarian crises could reduce the cost to international donors by 30% while also protecting billions of dollars of income and assets for those [most affected](#).”

In Somalia, an early humanitarian response would save an estimated “US\$220 million on the cost of humanitarian response alone over 15 years. When avoided income and livestock losses are incorporated, an early humanitarian response could save US\$460 million, or an average of [US\\$31 million per year](#).” The Inter-Agency Standing Committee offered a verdict on Kenya, Somalia, and Ethiopia’s 2011 famine stated “Prevention via national safety nets, and concerted DRR gives the best value for money in areas of chronic emergency. The cost of routine support to 7.2 million

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1 OCHA, Horn of Africa Drought: Regional overview, September 2022

people via Ethiopia’s PSNP was \$270 million compared with \$822 million for relief to 5 million people.”

An analysis of supplementary livestock feeding programs in northern Kenya in 2011 compared the cost of replacing these animals by restocking them after the drought. The feed program cost approximately US\$82,353, whereas the restocking would have cost US\$258,065. In other words, it was around three times more expensive to restock than to keep sheep and goats alive during the drought through [feed supplementation](#).

Early warning programs that combine humanitarian response with social protection have also proven successful. For example, it is estimated that every \$1 spent on social protection and resilience programming in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia, when combined with early intervention around the time of the crisis, results in net benefits (savings) in the order of \$2.30–\$3.30 compared to a costly international humanitarian response delivered after a crisis [has occurred](#).

## A Lackluster Donor Response

Governments in the region finally began to acknowledge the drought in the latter part of 2021. On September 8, 2021, Kenya’s President Uhuru Kenyatta declared the drought in Kenya [a national disaster](#). On November 23, 2021, Somalia’s Prime Minister declared [a state of emergency](#). Unfortunately, donors and aid agencies have yet to respond with the necessary speed and generosity. The lack of funding is having a devastating impact on both lives and livelihoods, particularly for the more vulnerable communities.

The drought response plans remain significantly under-resourced. The latest iterations of the funding appeals are set in the UN’s Horn of Africa Drought [Call to Action](#) issued in November 2022. According to the Call to Action, humanitarian agencies need over US\$3.7 billion to respond to drought across the three countries. The drought appeal for Ethiopia calls for US\$1.7 billion and is 52 percent funded. The drought appeal for Kenya requires US\$290 million and is 55 percent funded. The appeal for the Somalia calls for US\$1.8 billion and is 72 percent funded. It is worth noting that the current drought in the Horn of Africa has now surpassed the droughts in 2010–2011 and 2016–2017 in both duration and severity and will only cost more if action is not funded now.

The response by donors has varied dramatically. USAID has been the principal donor for the Horn of Africa humanitarian response. In 2022, USAID/Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) provided \$1 billion. On September 21, 2022, USAID provided more than \$151 million in new assistance to the people of Somalia. \$146.5 million is for food assistance, as drought pushes more than 7 million people to the edge of starvation. The United States is providing over 70 percent of the UN Children Fund’s (UNICEF) regional humanitarian response funding.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the EU’s contribution stands at a mere [€108.2 million \(US\\$112 million\)](#) for the regional drought response.

The funding deficit for the Horn of Africa points to a broader inequality in global aid distribution. Most notably, it sharply contrasts with the financing the Ukraine appeal receives. After just three months, the Ukrainian appeal was funded at 85 percent. Similarly, in the UK, the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) of non-governmental organizations has collected more donations for Ukraine and neighboring countries than its nine previous appeals combined.

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2 Refugees International Interview, UNICEF, September 18, 2022, Nairobi

Because of limited funding, humanitarian groups have been forced to make difficult decisions. In Somalia, the World Food Program (WFP) scaled back its nutrition program to deal with malnutrition. Refugees in camps relying on WFP were not spared either, as WFP cut the ration for refugees by up to 50 percent. The move affected three-quarters of all refugees living in Ethiopia and Kenya. One UN official told Refugees International they are all hands-on deck but still cannot get traction with donors.

The failure of European and other traditional donors to respond to the drought's early warning and the Horn of Africa appeal is disappointing. The [Ukraine and COVID-19 responses demonstrated that](#), with the requisite political will, bilateral and multilateral donors can properly resource humanitarian responses. However, European countries are now grappling with their own domestic and regional challenges, including the energy crisis and hosting millions of Ukrainians who fled the Russian invasion.

All this underscores the need for a surge of humanitarian diplomacy to focus attention on the regional crisis. The WFP Executive Director David Beasley visited [Somalia](#) in August 2022. The Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Martin Griffiths visited Somalia in the spring of 2022—the [epicenter](#) of the drought in the Horn of Africa. USAID Administrator Samantha Power traveled to the Horn of Africa to underscore the gravity of the situation. It is time for the UN Secretary-General to do the same. While donors are doing their bit, albeit inadequately, there is a role for the Inter-agency Standing Committee (IASC), and regional leaders and bodies like the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in Eastern Africa. The provision of adequate food for their citizens is the primary function of the state, and the leaders need to step up. Like December 2020 when it convened an Extra-Ordinary Summit of Heads of State and Government coronavirus, IGAD should host a summit on food insecurity.

## Social Safety and Humanitarian Crisis

Besides early action and adequate and timely funding, social safety nets are the other pillar of dealing with food insecurity. Social safety nets can be important tools owing to their quick turnaround in their disbursement—especially cash transfers—and can provide critical avenues for cushioning communities against the severe impacts of food insecurity and enhancing their resilience. Over the years, Kenya, Somalia, and Ethiopia, with the help of donors, have developed and deployed social safety in the face of humanitarian crises. The [African Union Social Policy Framework](#) (2008) provided the guiding principles and stimulus for developing social policy across the continent. These programs target the most vulnerable households through cash transfers. Ethiopia's social safety program is more robust than Somalia's. Somalia's program is still evolving.

### Ethiopia

Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) was launched in 2005, targeting the four regional states (Amhara, Tigray, Oromia, and Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region [SNNP]). The program is designed to address both chronic food insecurity among Ethiopia's poor and shorter-term shocks, mainly droughts. The PSNP targeted approximately 5 million chronically food insecure people living in 262 "chronically insecure food *woredas*"<sup>3</sup> in 2005.

The PSNP's objectives include smoothing household food consumption and protecting assets, strengthening household and community resilience to shocks, and breaking Ethiopia's chronic

3 Woreda is a district in Ethiopia.

dependence [on food aid](#). The two guiding principles of the PSNP are predictability (“A safety net delayed is a safety net denied”) and avoiding dependency (“by requiring able-bodied beneficiaries to provide labor in exchange for program [transfers](#)”).

One of the innovative aspects of PSNP is the Risk Financing Mechanism, which allows a scale-up in times of crisis. RFM is designed to reduce the typical timeline for a humanitarian response so that households receive assistance before a situation becomes acute. Humanitarian funding does not have that discretion, and the timeline from when a disaster is declared to when the funding or aid arrive is longer. The key to the RFM is the Early Warning data collection. Based on the early warning data analysis, a committee determines if RFM should be triggered. Once the committee releases the fund to the most vulnerable households, up to the Woreda (district) or Kabele (Ward) level. Depending on the level of need, the committee will decide where the cash or food requirements still need to be provided through the PSNP RFM or the traditional humanitarian system PSNP. Its level of granularity and quick turnaround make RFM such an important tool.

## The RFM in Action

RFM’s quick turnaround and the response window compared to the humanitarian appeal make it better suited for responding to the quick onset of an emergency.

By early February 2011, indications of drought and possible crisis began to emerge in Ethiopia.

Typically, PSNP cash transfers were done between February and August. For the families that still need food support, PSNP Contingency Budget is the avenue through which their needs are met. This applies to those who live in the highland areas between August and the harvesting month, November, which falls outside the PSNP months. Outside PSNP months, The Ethiopian government triggered the RFM in August 2011 to address the food needs of approximately 9.6 million people in PSNP districts.

The humanitarian appeal for Ethiopia was launched in March 2011. The appeal resulted in some resources being available for response; as of December 2011 (nine months after the appeal was launched and some 13 months after the original assessment), 94 percent of the funding for the humanitarian appeal was in place. When regular PSNP transfers stopped in August, the RFM completed a rapid need verification within a month of requesting RFM resources. Financing was disbursed within two weeks of the request. From request for disbursement took six weeks.

Over the years, Ethiopia has made some strides in addressing food insecurity, but the ongoing conflict in its second year has eroded those gains.

## Kenya

Despite being broadly peaceful and without an active civil conflict like Ethiopia and Somalia, Kenya faces cyclic food insecurity, especially in the northeastern and western regions. These regions have the country’s lowest development indicators and the highest incidence of poverty. The two areas are predominantly arid and semi-arid and constitute 80 percent of Kenya’s land mass. Rain-fed pastoralism is the primary mode of livelihood. Eighteen of the 20 poorest constituencies in Kenya, where 74 percent to 97 percent of people live below the poverty line, are in [Northern Kenya](#). As a result, any change in the weather pattern has an acute bearing on the region’s food insecurity.

Kenya launched the Hunger Safety Net Program (HSNP) in 2007 and was piloted until 2012. During this stage, the program targeted 69,000 households in four districts in northern Kenya's Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASAL). Phase II, from 2013 to 2018, targeted 100,000 [poorest households](#). The program provided each target household with cash transfers via biometric smart cards once every two months.

HSNP's goals were: 1) to increase consumption expenditure and reduce poverty, 2) to reduce food insecurity and malnutrition, and 3) to promote asset retention and accumulation. Several evaluations of the first and the second phase of the program have shown the program has achieved some of its objectives, significantly reducing food insecurity. According to one study, "Eighty-seven percent of HSNP households report eating more and larger meals. HSNP households spend approximately KES213 (US\$1.74) more on food per month per adult equivalent than [control households](#)" on average, resulting in a rise in food expenditure and [dietary diversity](#). Despite droughts in 2017, Kenyan food insecurity was less than in 2011. In 2011, the number of severely hungry Kenyans was 2.8 million. In 2017, it was 1.75 million. An estimated 500,000 fewer people needed humanitarian assistance [in 2017](#) than had been [expected](#).

## Conflict and Food Insecurity

Early warning, rapid funding and humanitarian action, and social safety programs are the essential pillars of effective drought response and famine prevention. However, they may not be enough to stave off catastrophe. The overall humanitarian response will also need to be sensitive to the history and impact of protracted conflict across the Horn of Africa. In Ethiopia, conflict since November 2020 has created a dire humanitarian crisis in Tigray and the adjacent regions. Somalia has not had a stable government since 1991. The government has been battling Al-Shabaab since 2006. During conflicts, warring parties deliberately destroy farms, livestock, and other civilian infrastructure. Conflict causes food shortages and disruption of economic activities, threatening populations [means of survival](#). Conflict can also significantly complicate relief efforts.

### Al-Shabaab and Humanitarian Crisis

Since the collapse of the central government in 1991, Somalia has been a net recipient of humanitarian aid. Between 1999–2008, Somalia received US\$2.3 billion in humanitarian [aid from donors](#). Still, relief groups are constrained in delivering aid because Somalia remains one of the most dangerous places for aid workers to operate. In 2008, the United States [designated Al-Shabaab](#) as a foreign terrorist organization. Since then, counter-terrorism sanctions have loomed large over humanitarian delivery in Somalia. Humanitarian agencies have long struggled to deliver aid while navigating the conflict and the risk of running afoul of counter-terror finance laws.

Over the years, there has been a relaxation of the Al-Shabaab sanctions regime to facilitate aid delivery in Al-Shabaab-controlled areas in Somalia. In August 2011, the United States [announced the easing of some restrictions](#) on U.S.-funded organizations delivering aid in Somalia, but [denied requests](#) to extend them to non-U.S.-funded groups. Further, the new policy still failed to protect humanitarian groups from prosecution for violating "material support" laws. Thus, the counter-terrorism sanctions regime even when designed to help humanitarian groups still had a [chilling effect](#) on the response.

Even when aid agencies can obtain the needed exemptions, they had to deal with Al-Shabaab's punishing restrictions and registration fees. The fee could be as steep as \$10,000, administered

as a Humanitarian Coordination Office (HCO), responsible for monitoring, regulating, registering, and ‘taxing’ aid agencies operating in [Al-Shabaab territory](#). Before the 2011 famine, a few of Al-Shabaab’s top commanders cultivated ties with relief agencies, granted them limited access after payment of “fees,” and used their influence to secure the release of abducted [aid workers](#). However, the 2011 famine coincided with the major offensive by the African Union’s stabilization force in Somalia ([AMISOM](#)), which forced the terrorist group out of key urban strongholds. There was accompanied by an increase in U.S. attacks using drones and special forces operations. In response, Al-Shabaab severed links to relief agencies and banned foreign aid agencies and their local partners from its territory, accusing them of [espionage](#).

Together, these factors led many humanitarian groups to stop delivering aid in Al-Shabaab-controlled areas. As a result, many of the 2 million people under Al-Shabaab’s control at the time died during the 2011 famine. Today, Al-Shabaab maintains a smaller geographic footprint but still controls large swaths of land in [southern and central Somalia](#). Since there is no formal census, humanitarian groups Refugees International interviewed estimate that between 700,000 to [900,000](#) people currently live under Al-Shabaab control.

There is a very real possibility that both the sanctions regime and Al-Shabaab itself will limit the effectiveness of humanitarian action in response to the drought. Indeed, a [mix of insecurity and Al-Shabaab’s behavior](#) significantly hampered early efforts to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Tigray Conflict and Humanitarian Crisis**

Ethiopia has a history of chronic food insecurity because of recurring droughts. Some of the droughts have led to famine. The [1980s Ethiopia famine](#) was one of the worst humanitarian events of the twentieth century. According to the United Nations, Ethiopia’s food shortages and hunger crisis from 1983 to 1985 led to an estimated 1 million famine deaths. The crisis was preceded by the civil conflict pitting rebel forces from Ethiopia’s Tigray region against the central government. The conflict contributed to already precarious food insecurity and helped to trigger the [famine](#).

Decades later, a similar situation has been playing out in Ethiopia. In November 2020, after a series of public confrontations, the Ethiopian government and the Tigrayan authorities entered a civil war. In support of its military campaign, the Ethiopian government established a blockade of Tigray, cutting off basic services and denying access to humanitarian aid. The net effect was to turn food into a weapon of war by starving civilians. In addition, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and their affiliate militia have also destroyed Tigray’s agricultural and food systems. According to the Tigray Institute of Policy Studies, [81 percent](#) of farming households have been affected by wide-ranging destruction such as looting, burning, and destruction of crops and farm implements.

The conflict in northern Ethiopia has left millions of people in a dire humanitarian state. According to the World Food Program, 2 million people are severely hungry, and [50 percent](#) of pregnant and breastfeeding women are malnourished in the Tigray region. Because of a two-year media and internet shutdown, assessing the full extent of the devastation of the war on food insecurity is difficult. However, according to the estimates by researchers from the University of Ghent, between [385,000 and 600,000](#) people died directly or indirectly because of the war. Aid workers have become a target. By the end of 2021, [23 aid workers](#) had been killed in the Tigray region since the start of the conflict.

The November 2 signing of the [Cessation of Hostilities Agreement](#) between the Ethiopian federal government and the Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front in Pretoria and a further November 12 [Nairobi agreement](#) on the road map implementation of the Pretoria deal gives some cause for hope. Under the deal, Tigrayan fighters are to demobilize and submit to the rule of the federal government in trade for an effective lifting of the blockade. A symbolic amount of humanitarian aid has begun to make its way into the embattled region. However, the amount entering the region [does not match](#) the needs. The deal faces other significant challenges, not least the continued presence of Eritrean forces in Tigray. An international relief effort for the drought must be accompanied by meaningful and sustained humanitarian access to the traumatized and starving civilian populations of both Tigray and neighboring regions affected by the conflict. Further, there should be accountability for those who violate the agreement, including the denial of humanitarian access to people in need.

## Conclusion

Thousands of people, especially children, will die in Somalia, Ethiopia, and Kenya in the next few months. Not because there was no adequate and repeated warning of the impending drought, and not because humanitarian agencies do not know how to program in those countries. They did so in 2017–2018. It will be because of inaction and a lack of political will to fund the Horn of Africa humanitarian plan.

The Ukraine-Russia war has demonstrated that the humanitarian donor system can be mobilized quickly with the requisite political will. The Horn of Africa region, which staved off famine during the 2018 drought through early action and No Regret funding from donors, should receive more attention, especially from the Europeans. Early anticipatory actions save lives and livelihoods and are cost-effective compared to delayed response.

In the long term, as the impact of climate change becomes severe and frequent, the perennial Horn of Africa food insecurity will increase and will require an approach that transcends the purely humanitarian response. A fusion of humanitarian and social safety networks could set the stage for greater community resilience in the face of future shocks.

## About the Author

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## About Refugees International

Refugees International advocates for lifesaving assistance, human rights, and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises around the world. We do not accept any government or UN funding, ensuring the independence and credibility of our work.





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