Food Crisis in the Horn of Africa: The Underlying Causes of the Crisis

Less than four years from the 2015 Millennium Development Goals deadline - the date that world leaders gave themselves in 2000 to eradicate extreme poverty from the planet and reduce hunger by half - a new food crisis in the Horn of Africa is threatening the lives of 12 million people.

In what is being described as the worst food crisis of the 21st century, thousands of people are fleeing Somalia and parts of Ethiopia and Kenya, to seek food and shelter in overcrowded refugee camps in Kenya and Ethiopia. Around 1,200 people are arriving daily at the Dadaab camp in Kenya, which already holds 390,000 refugees. The ostensible causes of this new crisis, which has been defined as a famine by the United Nations, are severe drought which has decimated harvests, and skyrocketing food prices which prevent people from buying food. This is compounded by ongoing conflict in the dysfunctional state of Somalia and a siege on the Somali people by militias.

Yet while the Horn of Africa food crisis may be a direct result of natural disaster combined with the Somali militias’ stranglehold on the country, some of the root causes underlying this crisis are structural, and had they been tackled could have helped to avert a disaster on this scale. The human right to food, as set out in international treaties, is universally subscribed to by all nations and respect for this right compels us to take action to foresee and avoid such crises that threaten the lives of millions. The UN’s Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) has a set of voluntary guidelines which assist states to design policies and programmes for food security.

Moreover, Pope Benedict XVI has reminded Catholics of their duty to act on the injustices that are at the root of hunger today. He has said that ”Hunger and malnutrition are unacceptable in a world which has, in fact, levels of production, resources and knowledge sufficient to put an end to such dramas and their consequences.” In a July 2011 speech, Pope Benedict XVI also said: “Jesus reminds us of our responsibility to do everything we can to help those who are hungry and thirsty.”
We should now reflect on and learn from this crisis by considering some of the factors that have combined to produce such a huge scale famine. In this context, it is fitting to examine the systemic root causes of hunger in the world today, and how it is in the power of governments to tackle these and avert further similar food crises. These systemic issues include:

**Global Warming caused by climate change**

Although we cannot place the blame for the current drought in the Horn of Africa solely on climate change caused by global warming, there is anecdotal evidence in the region that points to unusual failure of rains and other weather patterns that scientists say are symptoms of global warming. However related this crisis may be to global warming, it underlines the fact that poor people who live in precarious conditions are particularly vulnerable to changes in weather patterns. The people of the Horn of Africa have barely been surviving for many years now, and were already vulnerable, neglected and virtually ignored. The lethal cocktail of drought, high food prices and conflict has pushed them over the edge. We know that climatic factors will get worse. The gradual climate change that has been predicted over coming years will result in decreased yields at harvest time, imperil animal production and reduce food currently available. Therefore, governments in the region and the international community need to address this predicted decrease in local food production, and take actions such as establishing and maintaining food reserves.

**International speculation on global markets and its effect on food prices**

In the months leading to the 2008 food crisis, food staples including wheat were allowed to become the objects of dramatically increased speculation on global financial markets. The successive collapses of the “dot com” and US housing market bubbles sent investors looking for new sources of profit in the relatively tiny international food market. The largely unregulated markets of the international financial system allowed the possibility of price manipulation of food staples such as wheat and rice and the creation of new investment tools such as food commodity index funds. These practices aggravated already existing price hikes, sending a windfall of profits to some investors and causing food riots by the hungry in cities affected across the globe. Although the 2008 crisis and the ensuing larger financial crisis has led to some efforts in the United States to regulate markets, and discourage hoarding and price manipulation, these efforts have largely been inadequate, and have not prevented the current food price crisis. Some price volatility among foodstuffs in certain poor countries is also more related to domestic policies rather than international markets, but nonetheless, changes on the latter also impact severely on the poor.

**Absence of a rules-based multilateral trading system that protects and takes into account the special needs of poor and vulnerable countries**
The WTO Doha Development Round, launched in Qatar in 2001, was supposed to put in place a multilateral world trading system that would work towards attaining the Millennium Development Goals of eradicating extreme poverty by ensuring that trade become an engine for development of the world’s poor. However, since WTO talks broke down in Cancun in 2003, the Doha Development Round has since not been revived, and this millennium pledge has not been met. WTO rules on agriculture still oblige many poorer member states to compete with wealthier economies by opening their markets to cheap food imports whose production is subsidized by G8 nations, which undermines local production. Poor countries have long argued that they should be allowed to impose a special tariff in these cases, in order to protect local food production, but this proposal has consistently been vehemently opposed by Canada and some other members of the WTO, including other G8 countries.

Inadequate steps taken by national governments and international aid to strengthen small farmers

A further cause of the current food crisis is the structural adjustment policies imposed by international financial institutions in the 1970s and 1980s that forced governments in the Global South to end investment in agriculture, and instead, has left poor communities to buy food at the mercy of market conditions. State support for local grain storage facilities, farmers’ cooperatives and local farmers’ marketing boards generally ended, while at the same time, the same structural adjustment policies gave fiscal incentives to transnational corporations for large-scale agribusiness operations. These policies left a legacy of serious damage to national food production in many countries of the Global South.

Not only do world trade rules currently fail to offer protection of the world’s poorest and most hungry people, but in general, the governments of poor countries have failed to put in place other systems that develop the local economy so that small landholders and pastoralists can have access to their own local markets. Instead, they must currently compete with cheaper goods from abroad, or be dependent on food imports when food prices surge, as we are seeing today in the Horn of Africa.

Governments have also failed to invest in efficient production systems, which provide storage infrastructure, resulting in post harvest waste. Although aid from wealthier countries has in some cases strengthened small farmers, the efforts have largely been inadequate ones, as small farmers are still vulnerable to the slightest external shock, and to the whims of international markets. Supported by international donors, Ethiopia has made some welcome changes with the creation of the Productive Safety Net Program, which delivers cash and/or food transfers to 7-8 million rural Ethiopians for six months every year. Although the program is a laudable effort, it is not yet implanted sufficiently in all of Ethiopia in order to assure food security for the country’s population of 80 million. Furthermore, the program has barely begun functioning in the areas most affected by the current famine. Similarly, a pilot program to provide weather-indexed insurance for smallholder farmers has been initiated in Kenya with significant success; unfortunately the program is still not widely implemented.
Failure of national governments to respect the customary land rights of pastoralists

All over Africa, different ethnic groups live a pastoralist or nomadic lifestyle, constantly moving and grazing their animals on traditional lands. In most cases, these groups do not have formal title deeds to such lands, which they use on a rotational basis, nor do they have any security of tenure. When pastoralists can have access to lands, they are able to survive by grazing their animals on different lands according to the seasons. However, when pastoralists cannot have access to their traditional lands, their livelihoods are threatened. Such threats are caused by conflict, such as in Somalia and bordering areas where conflict has meant that pastoralists can no longer use lands they once did.

Another cause is the sale of pastoralists’ lands by governments to commercial interests, a practice known as “land-grabbing”. African governments are putting increasing pressure on pastoralist peoples to abandon their nomadic way of life, and increasingly selling lands periodically used by pastoralists to foreign investors. Government sedentarization policies and land-grabbing are rendering pastoralists even more vulnerable to hunger, since in many cases they no longer have the lands to support their traditional lifestyle. While the displacement of pastoralists has taken place in both Kenya and Ethiopia, the affected communities are not directly threatened by the current famine. Nonetheless, their increased vulnerability has an overall negative effect on food security in the region and is a factor that could put them at risk for future food crises.

Recommendations

The governments of Ethiopia and Kenya, as well as the international community, including Canada, must take action now and fund emergency relief efforts to provide urgently needed food and supplies for refugees in the camps in the Horn of Africa. Canada has already played a key and leading role in the provision of additional aid, with a pledge of an additional $50 million for aid in the Horn of Africa. Canada is one of the signatories to the Food Aid Convention, an international agreement among major donors that commits signatories to provide a minimum amount of food aid each year, in order to reduce the UN’s need to rely on special aid appeals to address crises. However, Canada could improve its efforts to combat hunger in other areas, as outlined below.

The international community must collectively find the extra $2 billion USD funds necessary to provide emergency humanitarian assistance to the Horn of Africa. At the same time, although improving the delivery and the efficiency of food aid is a laudable goal in itself, instead of lurching from crisis to crisis, certain steps must be taken to tackle the issues, as identified above, that are underlying the food crisis and which allow the perpetuation of hunger and periodic outbreaks of food crises and famines. The following are priorities:
1. National governments must firstly invest in small-scale agriculture, to allow farmers to produce food to feed their communities. They should then take steps to protect small farmers and pastoralists by strengthening their resilience. This can be done by providing access to credit, subsidized weather-indexed insurance systems and ensuring that small farmers have access to markets to sell their produce locally. Programs such as the Ethiopian Productive Safety Net Program are welcome and should be further extended. National governments should also take steps to protect the rights of pastoralist peoples, ensuring that their customary land rights are recognized in national laws.

2. The international community must put in place a multilateral trading system that takes into account the importance of agriculture in poor and vulnerable countries. As was set out in the Doha Development Round of WTO talks, poor countries must be treated fairly within this system. They must be allowed rules tailored to their special needs, such as special agricultural safeguard mechanisms, which protect national agricultural production from surges of low cost food imports, and which allow governments to meet their legal obligations to protect the right to food.

3. Wealthy donor countries should work to realise the human right to food, as recognized in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, through the creation of a democratic and legitimate system of global food security governance. One way to do this would be to further strengthen the United Nations Committee on World Food Security (CFS) and to support the development of the CFS Global Strategic Framework that will be put in place to provide the increasingly necessary political framework to guide the global food system. Member states of the CFS, UN agencies and specialised bodies, as well as civil society voices, will be working together over the next year to develop the Global Strategic Framework. Canada must abandon its resistance to this process, a resistance that is sadly proving to be an obstacle to its development.

4. Governments must work harder to reform the international financial system by better regulating markets to discourage excessive price volatility of food staples such as wheat on the international trading system. Measures must be taken to ensure that the trading of food staple commodities is carried out transparently to discourage hoarding and speculation. Measures already taken in the US, such as the Dodd-Frank law on financial reform, are welcome ones and these should be encouraged on other commodity exchanges, particularly in Europe and in Asia. The recent discussions at the G-20 agriculture ministers’ meeting in Paris in June, on steps that could be taken to prevent excessive volatility of prices for food staples, were welcome, although too timid. As a leading member of the G-20, Canada should push for this community to take on
serious and far reaching reforms of the financial system, as part of its commitment to improved
global food governance.

5. With a view to tackling the rising temperatures driven by global warming and that are predicted
to play further havoc with African smallholder farmers’ harvests, the international community
should provide funds to the Green Climate Fund and other international climate funds, to be
channelled into adaptation projects, particularly targeting smallholder farmers and pastoralists.
The sustainable practices of both smallholders and pastoralists can actually contribute to more
ecological agriculture, and are thus a tool to help mitigate global warming. Canada must rise to
the challenge and provide its fair share in additional climate finance, which should be in addition
to Official Development Assistance (ODA).

\footnote{See Development and Peace publication Food System in Crisis: Hunger and the Pursuit of Profit, 2008, for fuller
documentation of the global food crisis (\url{http://www.devp.org/devpme/eng/advocacy/doc/DPFood.pdf})}

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