A world in hunger: east Africa and beyond

Paul Rogers

A drought across much of east Africa in mid-2011 is causing intense distress among vulnerable populations, many of them already pressed by poverty and insecurity. The range of the affected areas is extensive: the two districts in Somalia that are now designated as famine-zones are but the most extreme parts of a much wider disaster that stretches from Somalia across Ethiopia into northern Kenya, and as far west as Sudan and even the Karamoja district in northeast Uganda.

The numbers put at risk in this, the worst drought in the region since the 1950s, are enormous. At least 11 million people are touched by the disaster. In the Turkana district of northern Kenya, 385,000 children (among a total population of about 850,000) are suffering from acute malnutrition (see Miriam Gathigah, 'East Africa: millions stare death in the face amidst ravaging drought', TerraViva / IPS, July 18, 2011). In Somalia, the conflict between the Islamist Shabaab movement and the nominal government makes conditions even more perilous for those affected.

The world's largest refugee camp, at Dadaab in northern Kenya, offers a stark illustration of the consequences of the drought. The population of Dadaab, which was designed to cope with 90,000 people, has increased in recent months to 380,000 — and 1,300 more are arriving daily (see Denis Foynes, 'Eleven million at risk in horn of Africa', TerraViva / IPS, July 19, 2011).

The lessons of crisis

But just as striking is that this is part of a recurring phenomenon. Major warning-signs of malnutrition and famine were already visible in April 2008; among them were climatic factors, steep oil-price increases, increased demand for meat diets by richer communities, and the diversion of land to grow biofuel crops (see 'The world's food insecurity', April 24, 2008).

What made these ingredients more perilous was the way that (as is so often the case) they acted synergistically. The clearest example of this was the sustained world food crisis of 1973-74, when (at its peak) some 40 million people in thirty countries were at risk. The overall predicament derived from a combination of two long-term and five more immediate factors.

The long-term issues were the relative neglect of rural development since the 1950s, and the fact that many countries were just starting to make the demographic transition (meaning that they still had 40 per cent or more of their population under the age of 14). These were intensified by the short-term problems: the coincidence of poor weather conditions (including the seven-year drought in the Sahel and floods in south Asia), a huge increase in oil and fertiliser prices, increased demand for meat in northern countries, the failure of the green revolution to deliver sufficiently robust new crop varieties, and rampant commodity-market speculation that also forced up prices.

In the event the crisis of 1973-74 did not tip into real disaster. A transnational famine was avoided, partly because a few states (notably the newly wealthy middle-east oil-producers) belatedly provided enough aid. But the most significant aspect was that throughout, the world's grain reserves were substantial; they did fall to around half of the usual stocks, but even at the peak of the crisis still averaged around 100 days of supply. The problem the crisis revealed was that far too many people could not grow enough of their own food and could not afford the inflated prices in local or national markets. At the heart of the emergency were issues of poverty and economic marginalisation.

The lessons of a near-catastrophe were never learned. The then United Nations plan for a major increase in tropical agricultural research and development was costed at the equivalent of

2 percent of world military expenditure per year, yet barely a third of the money needed was actually raised.

There have since been nearly four decades of 'development', with contrasting outcomes: the world has grown very much richer yet the great bulk of the new wealth has benefited the richest 1.5 billion in a global population that the United Nations estimates will reach 7 billion in October 2011. A far wealthier world is more divided, and contains nearly twice as many malnourished people, as was the case in the early 1970s. These facts alone are a damning criticism of the way the world economic system has evolved, and in particular of the neglect of food security for tens of millions of poor and vulnerable people.

The climate factor

What makes this situation even more pressing is that it is now reinforced by the existing and likely impacts of climate change (see 'The climate peril: a race against time', November 13, 2009).

There is abundant evidence that the rate of temperature increase in coming decades will be faster over the tropical and sub-tropical landmasses — as much as three times the worldwide average in many such regions. The early effects will include a marked decline in what Lester Brown has called the 'reservoirs in the sky': the glaciated regions of the high Andes and the far greater water-stores locked up in the Himalaya and the Karakoram (sometimes termed 'the third pole') (see Lester R Brown, 'Rising temperatures melting away global food security', TerraViva / IPS, July 6, 2011).

The dry coastal areas of Peru and other parts of western south America depend on the Andean glaciers. But the value of the south Asian glaciers is hugely greater since they feed the Ganges, Indus, Brahmaputra and other river systems on which hundreds of millions of people depend for food. When the 'reservoirs' shrivel and temperatures rise, the result is increased heat- and water-stress in crops, causing yields to fall and thus food shortages. Such shortages already exist, as the east African crisis shows; on present trends they will become far worse in the coming decades (see 'A century on the edge: 1945-2045', December 29, 2008).

A degree of adaptation is in principle possible, not least through key technological and political changes: improving water conservation and the breeding of drought-resistant crops, and reforming the world economy to ensure far more equity and economic emancipation (see Amartya Sen, Development as Freedom, Oxford University Press, 1999). These innovations alone would be near-revolutionary — but still not enough to solve the problems. This requires bringing climate change under control via a 'great transition' to ultra-low carbon economies.

The current crisis in east Africa requires immediate coordinated action to alleviate the widespread suffering. It is also a powerful reminder of the far larger efforts needed here and elsewhere, which are amplified by the preceding decades of neglect and waste. The ability to achieve the great transition — with all it entails in terms of sustainable livelihoods and social organisation — will determine whether the planet's next generations are guaranteed the food and other resources to enable them to survive and build fulfilled lives.

Paul Rogers is professor in the department of peace studies at Bradford University.