

Urgent action needed to address drought and famine in Africa - Statement by Caritas Africa

Right now, across the Sahel and the Horn of Africa regions, many millions of people are facing drought and famine conditions. Whilst the global media and political spotlight is focused on the crisis in Ukraine, attention to the suffering of people in sub-Saharan Africa has dropped away and support for life-saving aid efforts is woefully inadequate. An estimated 15-16 million people across Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia are in need of immediate food assistance because of the drought. As one woman in Northern Kenya told a Caritas diocesan staff person, as she was sat metres from her livestock that have died during the drought (pictured to the right): *"So many people have lost their animals. Thousands of animals have died. There is no water for my family and me. Out of almost 300 goats, I have none, all died."*

Loss of livestock as a result of drought in El-Isako Mala; Marsabit in Northern Kenya. (Photo Courtesy: Caritas Marsabit)



On Tuesday 26th April, diplomats from governments and UN agencies meet in Geneva to take stock of aid efforts on the drought across the Horn of Africa region. Worryingly, the meeting, originally planned as a pledging conference, has been effectively downgraded to a roundtable discussion. OCHA has announced 30 million dollars will be allocated from the UN Central Emergency Response Fund, but this will leave humanitarian aid efforts still massively underfunded. With the exception of the US Government, other major donors have not yet stepped forward to increase their support.

Inadequate global funding for the drought and famine response is compounded by the impacts of the war in Ukraine on the global food supply chain; coming on top of conflict, forced displacement and Covid19 in the affected countries. Kenya and Burkina Faso buy 30%, Ethiopia 40% and Somalia 90% of their wheat from Russia or Ukraine. Increases in fuel prices are also impacting on food production, with small-scale farmers especially impacted.

Through consultation with Caritas national organisations in countries affected by drought and famine, including Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, Nigeria, South Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya, the following three priorities have been identified:

- **Address the funding gap.** According to figures gathered at the end of March, only 3% of the total \$6bn United Nations 2022 humanitarian appeal for Ethiopia, Somalia and South Sudan, has been funded to date. Kenya has only secured 11% of its UN flash appeal to date. Caritas national organisations in the Sahel region also highlight how inflexibility by some donors has obstructed them repurposing funding to the famine response. Inadequate funding is also compounded by the debt burden on many of these nations, where governments are struggling to service their debts and to cover deficits in their balance of payments. We live in a world in which billionaires can fly to outer space, and many billions of dollars are also marshalled to fight war. Yet the United Nations struggles to raise the funds to save lives. Wealthy nations of

the world, as well as African states themselves, the private sector and others with resources in Africa, should heed the call to save the lives of those facing drought and famine at this time.

- **Support local leadership of the crisis response.** The drought and famine conditions in the Horn of Africa and Sahel regions are impacting worst in rural parts of the affected countries; including on sections of society – such as pastoralists and agro-pastoralists – that have sometimes faced political and social marginalisation, and conflict issues. As such, it is essential that support for the humanitarian response is channelled through national and local institutions that have a presence and trust in these communities, including local faith-based organisations and the Church. In Kenya, for example, Caritas Marsabit has been engaging with the County Steering Group at the local level, including through supporting communities to raise their priorities with local government, to advocate for a more timely and effective response to the crisis. When it comes to donors and international humanitarian agencies - including both UN agencies and INGOs - partner with national organisations, Caritas national partners in the affected countries have highlighted the importance of increased longer-term funding to effectively address food insecurity and related issues. An example was shared of funding from the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), which remains limited to 3 to 4 months grants. Time that staff would like to spend with communities and implementing projects is wasted pursuing bids for funding. Much of what the FAO does and how it approaches issues of food security is very much aligned with the principles that Caritas national partners seek to promote, yet such short-term sub-contracting approaches undermine the scope for a more effective partnership. Likewise, Caritas partners point to the trend amongst some UN agencies and INGOs to pressure local NGOs to cut their budgets and staff salaries is resulting in a situation in which programme quality is compromised in the name of efficiency.
- **Address the underlying causes of famine and support community resilience in the longer-term.** Conflict, environmental degradation, bad governance systems are amongst the many, context-specific drivers of food insecurity, drought and famine risk across sub-Saharan Africa. There are no quick or simple fixes to these challenges, but it is clear that relying on ‘band-aid’, short-termist approaches – whether by the governments in these countries, or by the international community – bring ever-diminishing returns and, as a consequence, spiralling crisis. Inadequate action to address climate change at the global level is clearly having a dramatic impact on climate patterns, agricultural productivity and natural resources across Africa. More urgent and effective action must be taken to avert worse consequences of this.

To address the impacts of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on global food systems, an emergency meeting of the Committee on World Food Security should be convened to establish the necessary coordination and action plans by governments to mobilise action beyond humanitarian response. Additional could include through establishing new mechanisms to assess public stock levels, strengthening agricultural market information systems; suspension of debt payments; and freezing use of crops for non-food uses (e.g., biofuels, green plastics).

At the regional and national level, Caritas partners look to African states themselves to act on the commitments they have made to invest in social protection systems and other interventions required to stop the worst impacts of drought falling on the poorest and most vulnerable sections of society without adequate support to survive or cope. For example, in the Abuja Declaration of 2001, member states of the African Union committed to invest 15 percent of their national budgets into health services, and it has been proposed that the up-coming AU Humanitarian Summit would result in a commitment by African states to increase investment in agriculture to at least 10% of government budgets.¹ International humanitarian agencies should also work with national and local institutions during the response to the drought and famine, for example through cash programming, in ways that strengthen national systems, which could then be built on through longer-term social safety nets where possible.

Shake Wario with her grandchildren preparing Doum Palm fruit for lunch. Photo Courtesy: The Diocesan Caritas of Marsabit in Northern Kenya.



At the community level, both national governments and the international community must go much further in support to local NGOs and community structures, such as community development committees, in identifying, designing and implementing strategies that strengthen resilience. Local food systems should be supported to have a decentralized capacity to produce and distribute food locally, as well as connections to supply food pantries and other emergency relief organizations that serve marginalized communities. Caritas national and diocesan organisations continue to make important contributions to this; such as through promoting crop diversification, introducing low cost-irrigation systems and other methods that boost productive capacity. For example, in Ethiopia and elsewhere, the Caritas diocesan partners have worked on training of farmers on agroecology and environmental stewardship, such as through soil conservation techniques, which are instrumental to help them cope with the degradation of soil that undermines agricultural productivity and food security. These and other methods centred in community-led programming should be at the heart of national and international action to ensure that drought and famine risk are better averted or mitigated in future.

Next month will see the one year anniversary of the world's wealthiest donor nations adopting a G7 Famine Compact (5th May), and the African Union is hosting an AU Humanitarian Summit (25th-27th May) aimed at rallying collaboration and increased support for the crisis response.² Deliberations between diplomats, national governments, UN agencies and other stakeholders are welcome, but they must be assessed by the extent to which they translate into new and additional action and resources to tackle the scourge of drought and famine afflicting so many millions of people across Africa right now. As we head towards the summer, following the failure of three consecutive rainy seasons in East Africa and elsewhere in the continent, the clock is ticking and we look to our leaders at the national and international level to take the necessary action.

¹ <https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/32894-file-2001-abuja-declaration.pdf>

² https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/node/45716_hu