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The famine in East Africa – how far are climate change and the long neglect of agriculture to blame?

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The famine in East Africa – how far are climate change and the long neglect of agriculture to blame?

At present, 12 million people in East Africa are affected by the worst drought and consequent famine for 60 years. The drought is due to La Niña, a wide-ranging climatic phenomenon over the Pacific, which, at irregular intervals, causes a sharp decline in rainfall, even in East Africa. Whether and to what extent climate change is exacerbating La Niña and whether matters are likely to become worse in the future is currently under discussion. But, on the whole, it must be assumed that there will be a significant increase in fluctuations, a long-term change in climatic parameters and sustained adverse effects on agriculture.

Climate variability coincides with a lack of development and marginalisation

The serious effects we are currently observing result from the fateful interplay of an extreme climatic event, a vulnerable agricultural sector and a lack of development. Many of the people affected are nomads, whose freedom to roam is becoming increasingly restricted, preventing them from simply moving to areas where water is more plentiful and pasture is better. The decades of neglect of rural areas has led to the growing marginalisation of the people, and especially ethnic minorities, and to the stagnation of agricultural productivity. Farmers have hardly any influence on decision-making processes relating, for example, to land use and infrastructure measures. Plans for the construction of a dam in Ethiopia, for example, are having an adverse effect on the livelihoods of pastoralists and farmers in the area, and the introduction of large-scale, commercial farming by domestic and foreign investors is disrupting migration routes and alienating valuable arable land.

Arable farmers and pastoralists have many traditional strategies for adapting to climate variability. But with extreme events occurring at ever shorter intervals, their ability to cope with such situations is constantly coming under excessive strain. They are losing their animals and their crops and, therefore, their livelihoods, too. Because of climatic

changes and overuse, land that can be used for agriculture and the amount of water available are continuously shrinking, while the number of people depending on these resources to live continues to grow – sowing the seeds of conflict. In the border area between Ethiopia and Kenya clashes between different tribes are becoming more frequent as evaporation reduces the area of Lake Turkana and Ethiopian nomads cross into Kenya in search of water. The continuous overuse of resources is reducing the productivity that was already low in semi-arid areas. Yet, with scarcely any alternatives to agriculture, all that remains for the mostly poorly educated people is emigration to other regions.

Stronger engagement in rural areas needed

Although the need for adaptation to climate change is accepted, both donors and African governments are finding it hard to provide the funds needed to support rural areas and agriculture. But gradually a process of rethinking is beginning: as long ago as 2003, for example, the member countries of the African Union undertook to invest more heavily in agriculture. Despite this undertaking, food security and rural development often have a low priority for governments, with the result that they frequently rely on international aid. Some parts of Kenya produce food surpluses, which are not, however, transported to regions short of food. Consequently, it is partly left to the World Food Programme to ensure that the people in those regions receive enough to eat.

Some of the aspects that help to exacerbate existing problems are not being addressed. Most African countries, for instance, still have the world's highest population growth rates, and adaptation aspects have yet to be integrated into development strategies. Many possible problem-solving approaches are not new, but have been used for many years in rural development and the promotion of agriculture. Yet, as a rule, the relevant national institutions do not have enough financial resources or influence for this purpose. The most

recent failing, nationally and internationally, was to ignore the early warnings of the coming drought. Although the Kenyan and other meteorological services issued an early warning of the danger no precautions were taken.

Adaptation and resilience must both be strengthened

Emergency aid must be accompanied by long-term strategies that enable people to help themselves over the long term. Given the uncertainties of the future climate trend and the multiple challenges for agriculture and rural areas that have been outlined, the aim in Africa must be not only to adapt agriculture to the effects of climate change, but also to increase the overall resilience of people when faced with disruptions. The distinction between these two aspects is often fluid, as is apparent from activities to protect the soil and increase fertility (by planting trees, for example) and the use of appropriate crops and livestock (such as camels and goats, rather than cattle). Early-warning systems are another valuable adaptation measure - provided that they trigger an

adequate response. More broadly based measures for generally improving livelihoods are the continuing training of farmers and pastoralists, the promotion of opportunities for the marketing of agricultural products and access to microloans.

Many people in marginal areas want help with the development of alternative life strategies that do not depend on land and climate. For this they need better infrastructure, access to such basic services as water, health and education and employment opportunities outside agriculture. This will enable a number of goals to be pursued at the same time: adaptive capacity will be increased, the pressure on natural resources will be reduced, and rural areas as a whole will be economically and socially upgraded.

Anticipatory adaptation to climate change is an expensive business, but if action is not taken until the consequences of climate change are already visible, the cost will be far higher, and for many people it may already be too late, as the present situation is making abundantly clear.



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