

Famine in East Africa - a man-made disaster

Rachel Brooks Fri, 08/07/2011 - 11:15

Rachel Brooks

A terrible famine is gripping East Africa, writes Rachel Brooks, but why is food so scarce?

As the western countries, who have held African countries at ransom, battle with an economic crisis of profound proportions, the horn of Africa is facing its worst drought in 60 years. But the famine being inflicted on the eastern African region is nothing to do with supplies but everything to do with distribution. In short, the famine is not simply a horrendous natural disaster but in fact a 'man made' problem; a problem of international politics; it is a problem of imperialism. For any tangible problem there is a tangible solution.

The drought, the worst in 60 years, has hit countries in the horn of Africa the worst: Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and Uganda. In particular Ethiopia and Somalia are hit, and of course the instability of the governing of these countries has a huge part to play. It has caused many animals to die and the harvest has failed in many areas. As one woman in Somaliland explained, 'there is no fresh milk available because so many animals have died'. In northern Kenya children are walking 20 kilometers to find water. Many families cannot even find food for one meal a day.

The famine has forced people to flee to aid camps where they hope they can get food from international aid agencies. The world's largest refugee camp, Dabaab, is currently situated on the border between Somalia and Kenya, with an estimated 1,300 people arriving every day, to escape the starvation and violence that haunts Somalia. An estimated 370,000 people currently reside in this camp, putting pressure on already overstretched aid agencies. Oxfam aid workers claim that this is the worst human suffering they have ever seen, with many Somali children dying en route to the refugee camps in Kenya and Ethiopia. Rape and violent attacks are commonplace on the long journey to the camps.

It is hard to believe, that twenty years after Bob Geldof launched his mission to bring 'feed the world' we are still hearing stories of starvation and drought. Why is it, despite people in the Western world digging deep into their pockets, Africa is facing a food crisis of huge proportions. The Oxfam website takes you straight to the donate page where you can send £50 to buy food for a family for two weeks. The British government has pledged £38million in aid to counter this crisis, but when many of the countries involved owe billions in debt, this aid is a mere gesture. In the decades of 'drop the debt' campaigns, NGO's sending humanitarian aid, and charity singles, things have not improved, in fact they have gotten worse. But the question is whether there is no food or what food there is has been priced out of the reach of ordinary people.

Certainly there is a natural disaster happening with the severe drought, but the resulting humanitarian crisis is entirely the fault of the capitalist system and the inequalities that are at its heart.

Why is the question of food distribution and aid being left largely up to charities? There is food available in many parts of the region but because these resources are considered 'scarce' the prices increase dramatically. They are also subjected to the price distortions of the international market. The World

Development Movement highlights a particularly sickening trend in international finance capital: food speculation. Banks, hedge funds and pension funds bet on the price of staple foods in the international markets. Barclays Capital, Morgan Stanley and Goldman Sachs have been exposed as the worst offenders, not simply speculating themselves, but also enabling hedge-funds to do the same through pioneering financial products. Barclays Capital has profited an estimated £340 million from food speculation, which has driven the cost of staple products up across the world. The food price index of the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation has reached record highs. Deborah Doane, Director of World Development Movement believes that "the lack of transparency in these markets bears worrying resemblance to the behaviour that led to the 2008 financial crash. Like any irrational asset bubble, the investors pile their money in for short-term profits, in spite of the consequences." If WDM's evidence is to be believed then the starvation hitting Africa is largely the fault of people, not nature. And these people have names, faces and are part of institutions profiting from the misery and tragedy of human beings. These institutions do not simply need to be held to account, they need to be brought down and destroyed - their devastating effect on humanity deserves no forgiveness.

But the wider crisis of Africa must also be understood within the capitalist system. Africa is underdeveloped not through any innate 'backwardness' of the people who live there, it's constant crisis is directly linked to the plundering of the continent by western powers through the years. Many countries in this region, and its neighbouring countries, are subject to imperialist intervention, both historically and more recently. Historically Ethiopia and Somalia have been victim to the manipulations of the Western imperialist countries. Joseph Stiglitz, former chief of the World Bank, traced much of Ethiopia's poverty to an IMF intervention in the 1980's, creating a re-structuring of Ethiopian society that has left open wounds ever since. Somalia has not had government since the 1990's, and any attempt for Somalies to set up government has been met by imperialist intervention. Further to these countries historic problems, countries such as Yemen, also situated in the east of Africa, are in the process of revolution and therefore military intervention from the West. The right to self-determination in these countries is a crucial call for socialists around the world. Their brothers and sisters in north Africa and the middle east are leading the way, and their struggles should be shared and fought together.

Is there a global food shortage? Of course not. But there is a global crisis of capital and this has a huge impact on countries already stricken with poverty. The food crisis in east Africa must be taken in its global context. The people inflicting this torture on African's are the very people drawing up the austerity packages in Europe. These are the people who are being met by resistance in north Africa and the middle east. They are the people willing to pay a fortune to bomb Libya but will only pay a small amount in aid for people dying of hunger. These people are the international ruling class. They must be brought down and replaced with responsible economic planning based on human need, not profit for a few, run democratically. We must take this opportunity to build an international party of the working class, a party that can overthrow the institutions that benefit from human poverty and starvation.

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/famine-east-africa-man-made-disaster>