



“We Have Nothing to Eat”: Further Reflections on the Famine in Turkana and the Government’s Food Security Policies

By Rasna Warah



Images in the Kenyan media of starving people in Turkana County have left many rich and middle class urban Kenyans as shocked as they were in 2011 when a declaration of famine prompted individuals and corporates such as Safaricom and the Kenya Commercial Bank to raise a whopping Sh700 million (\$7 million) towards the famine relief effort in Kenya’s arid and semi-arid northern territories. Led by media and corporate celebrities, the Kenyans for Kenya campaign was touted as a sterling example of Kenyans’ self-help (harambee) spirit that did not rely on foreign aid to fix internal problems. (How the funds raised were used, and whether they were successful in averting future famines is debateable, and perhaps the subject of further investigation.)

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However, unlike in 2011, there has been no outpouring of largesse from ordinary Kenyans towards the relief effort. Moreover, government officials have been reluctant to declare a disaster, with politicians citing various reasons for the deaths reported in Turkana, ranging from sickness to climate change. When deaths were reported in Baringo County, the deputy president said they were “fake news”. Meanwhile, the head of state has not said a word about the looming catastrophe.

The recognition by some government officials that hundreds of thousands of people in the country might not have enough food has laid bare the gross inequalities that have defined the Kenyan state since independence - devolution notwithstanding - and has brought to the fore the fact that Kenya is still a deeply divided country economically and socially, a fact that Jubilee mandarins are reluctant to acknowledge

The current famine in Turkana and in several other Kenyan counties is perplexing at various levels. Firstly, it is happening at a time when the Jubilee government is congratulating itself for taking Kenya into the digital 21st century and for carrying out a very expensive Sh400 billion (\$4 billion) Big Four agenda that includes improving food security.

Secondly, the recognition by some government officials that hundreds of thousands of people in the country might not have enough food has laid bare the gross inequalities that have defined the Kenyan state since independence - devolution notwithstanding - and has brought to the fore the fact that Kenya is still a deeply divided country economically and socially, a fact that Jubilee mandarins are reluctant to acknowledge. It is not lost on many people that while granaries in some parts of the country are overflowing with maize, other parts have no food to eat.

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Thirdly, the famine has become evidence of yet another embarrassing scorecard of failed national and county government projects, including non-performing irrigation schemes, non-existent dams and gross neglect of the agriculture sector - all the result of theft or mismanagement of project funds.

Fourthly, the famine has underscored the fact that there are many parts of this country where people are eking out a hand-to-mouth existence in regions where lack of infrastructure and basic services have exiled communities that are difficult to reach during a crisis. After all, droughts do not automatically lead to famine; the recent droughts in the west coast of the United States, for example, did not result in people dying due to hunger. Famine usually means that people cannot afford to buy food, that the food they rely on for sustenance is not available or that the food cannot adequately reach the starving.

The government’s ambivalence towards the food insecurity situation is understandable. Declaring a famine is no easy choice for a government. It is deeply embarrassing for any government to announce a famine because it is an acknowledgement that the government has failed to make the country food secure. Essentially it says that the government not only failed to prevent the famine, but also did not prepare for it, suggesting a lack of leadership in disaster preparedness. Secondly, a declaration of famine in a poor country usually unleashes an international famine relief effort - and no self-respecting government would like to admit that foreign donors and NGOs should do what it should be doing, i.e. making sure that all its citizens have enough food to eat.

Misguided policies and poor governance

I do not know much about Turkana, having never visited the area. To me, it has always seemed like a remote part of the country that is difficult to access. Stories of three-day trips on very bad roads and scary rides to Lodwar on very tiny planes put me off visiting a place that has attracted more humanitarian workers and NGOs than government officials, thanks to the Kakuma refugee camp bordering strife-torn southern Sudan and the Lokichoggio Airport (popularly known as “Loki” among the international NGO and foreign correspondent set) that served as a logistics hub for organisations that used to support rebel movements in Sudan.

The fact that Turkana County attracted the second largest share of devolved funds (after Nairobi) in 2015/2016 has not increased its fortunes. The discovery of oil in the region and images of a stunningly beautiful Lake Turkana have also not made the region more attractive to the vast majority of Kenyans. For people like me, Turkana will for a long time remain the Great Unknown - like north-eastern Kenya and other parts of the country that have remained so marginalised that most Kenyans see the pastoralist people and communities living there as aliens. Our outpouring of sympathy during famines in Turkana is akin to the compassion a Londoner might feel for the emaciated African child he sees in TV commercials by organisations such as Save the Children - shock followed by a small donation. It is embarrassing to think that others might be starving while we gorge ourselves on Kentucky Fried Chicken and pizzas. Forget the fact that most famines are man-made and the result of bad politics and poor governance, not food scarcity.

Alex de Waal, author of *Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa*, shows that in every known case of famine across the world, a breakdown of democratic institutions and lack of freedoms - particularly the right to criticise, publish and vote - have been key reasons for large-scale deaths during a famine.

Deliberate government neglect of a region, censorship of the press and misguided policies have also exacerbated food crises. The 1958 famine in China, for instance, was the direct result of Chairman Mao's “Great Leap Forward” that resulted in the collectivisation of agriculture. The large death toll during the 1943 famine in Bengal, India, was the direct result of the British colonial government's reluctance to take responsibility for famine relief in its most prized colony. The recurrent famines in Somalia can also be attributed to the breakdown of governance structures and the collapse of farming communities, many of which were massacred or forcibly removed by militias during the country's civil war.

Countries that successfully deal with a potential famine or food security crises often do so to avert a political crisis. The rising cost of food and other commodities has been the reason for protests in many countries (including in Sudan recently) and many governments respond quickly to the mounting crises in case they lead to full-blown rebellion. Keeping the cost of food low to keep citizens happy is also the reason why European countries and the United States heavily subsidise their farmers.

De Waal shows how in 1985, when the Kenyan government was facing a huge national food deficit, President Daniel arap Moi made a decision to import food commercially, reversing a 1983 policy, and thereby averting a food crisis. Although foreign donors were contributing to the relief effort, Moi took no chances; he knew that a food crisis could provoke dissent against his repressive regime, and he was not willing to risk that happening. Food insecurity is often an indicator of poor governance and can often lead to riots and political unrest. Keeping citizens fed is, after all, a primary responsibility of governments; those that fail to do so risk being overthrown, a fact that Moi was acutely aware of.

Moi then turned the crisis into an opportunity by installing a network of political patronage linked to food supply and distribution. The National Cereals and Produce Board (NCPD) became highly politicised and was used to break the power of farmers' associations and cooperatives, especially in opposition strongholds.

"Senior government officials benefitted both politically and commercially from the monopolistic position of the NCPD," says de Waal. Cartels in the NCPD and lack of adequate distribution networks made food distribution and supply more politicised. When people died in a famine, the government attributed it to the "backwardness" of local communities, not to the fact that food distribution had become a goody that depended on the whims of Moi's lackeys on the board.

Moi also used the food shortage crisis as an excuse to postpone critical reforms in the agriculture sector. In his paper, "Markets, Civil Society and Democracy in Kenya", published in 1992 by the Nordic Africa Institute, Peter Gibbon explains how Moi's system of ethnicised politics and political patronage worked (and, sadly, continues to work to this day):

"The grain crises...were used as an excuse for appointing a large number of inefficient cooperatives in Luyha areas as agents for the NCPD to the benefit of certain Luhya populist politicians. It was also used to break the power of the Kenyan Farmers' Association, the main base of the politicians in the Rift Valley independent of Moi. It was thirdly used to consolidate the bases of Moi's 'home area' allies in Nandi by tripling the number of NCPD employees there and increasing farmgate prices to uneconomic levels. Finally, the cost of this predation was transferred to the coffee and dairy farmers in Kikuyu areas, who were forced to transfer the savings accounts of their cooperatives to the Cooperative Bank, which had run up large losses in covering the NCPD's grain purchases."

The Mwai Kibaki government that succeeded Moi's did try to reverse the damage Moi had inflicted on the agriculture sector, but the sector has still not fully recovered from short-sighted policies that sacrificed productivity at the altar of loyalty to the government in power.

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The internationalisation of famine relief

To their credit, all Kenyan governments have tried to avoid going the international food aid route to address food insecurity. Though foreign aid is welcomed, the country has generally been reluctant to be part of massive international campaigns that have accompanied famine in places like Ethiopia and Somalia - perhaps because Kenya likes to view itself as the economic powerhouse of the region, not a basket case dependent on foreign aid.

This is a good policy because when international humanitarian agencies come in to provide food to starving people, bad governments are let off the hook, and are allowed to continue with their bad policies that can lead to more famines in the future. "Internationalising" the responsibility of food security to UN institutions, international NGOs and foreign governments makes practically everyone across the globe a stakeholder in famine relief.

"The process of internationalisation is the key to the appropriation of power by international institutions and the retreat from domestic accountability in famine-vulnerable countries," says de Waal. He says that reliance on international humanitarian organisations has led to the "internationalisation" of famine relief. Governments of poor countries are thus no longer solely

responsible for the food security of their citizens; this task has been appropriated by what he calls the “disaster industry” or “humanitarianism international”.

The appropriation of what should ideally be a government’s key responsibility makes governments of aid-receiving countries less accountable to their own citizens. Moreover, when a famine strikes and large numbers of people die, governments can easily blame the lack of foreign aid for the deaths, not poor governance on their part or their failure to put in place systems and programmes that could have prevented the famine in the first place.

Officials of international and local NGOs and UN agencies, like their government counterparts, are also not immune to corruption. “Somebody always gets rich off a famine,” Michael Maren, a former food aid monitor in Somalia, told *Might Magazine* in 1997. When he was in charge of monitoring food aid donated by the US government to refugees fleeing the Ogaden war of 1977/78, he found that about two-thirds of the food went missing. Trucks would arrive at the Mogadishu port, collect the food and disappear, never to be found again. Even when food arrived at the refugee camps, much of it would be stolen. (Given the track record of Jubilee government officials, it is likely that some of the food donated by the government to Turkana’s starving will also disappear.)

Food aid thus becomes a profitable source of income for criminal elements. Maren believes that international aid not only sustained Siad Barre’s dictatorial regime but also facilitated the dismantling of Somali society. In his book, *The Road to Hell: The Ravaging Effects of Foreign Aid and International Charity*, he quotes a former civil servant working for Somalia’s National Refugee Commission who told him that traditionally Somalis never relied on food aid, even during droughts. There was a credit system: the nomads would come to urban areas and take loans that they would pay back when times were good. Nomads and agriculturalists also shared natural resources. Aid essentially destroyed a centuries-old system that built resilience and sustained communities during periods of hardship. The former civil servant blamed foreign aid for the distortions in Somali society, not the Somalis who responded to the distortions.

Moreover, the international response to famine is more often than not technical, rather than political, with a whole range of experts, from nutritionists to statisticians, brought in to assess the scale of the famine and to offer solutions. Yet, recurrent famines often require a long-term *political* solution, which is much harder to achieve.

As de Waal emphasises, famine is both a technical and political challenge. Effective prevention and relief measures require a long-term vision, sound planning (based on sound data and research) and good management devoid of corruption, all of which are key elements of good economic policies, which are sorely lacking in the current Kenyan government.

Famine in Turkana and other Kenyan counties may not have yet caught the attention of the international media, but domestic dissatisfaction with the famine response may force the government to alter its food security policies. The more likely scenario, however, is that this government will, like most Kenyans, pray for the rains, and hope that the food crisis will go away all on its own.

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