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Adapting to survive

Climate change and famine in Somalia



Two young boys carrying water walk down a road next to an IDP camp near the town of Jowhar, Somalia
© [World Humanitarian Summit's Photostream](#)

Adapting to survive remains the only option for millions of Somalis as their country is on the precipice of yet another famine, the third in three decades. This paper examines how the adverse effects of climate change combined with weak governance and spiralling insecurity have left hundreds of thousands of Somalis food insecure, with women and girls paying the highest price.

How climate change affects Somalia and the Horn

Somalia as a country is infamous for its designation as a [fragile state](#) and history of instability that continues into the present. In recent months the situation reached a boiling point when the UN [warned](#) that Somalia was on the verge of famine due to an ongoing

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multi-year drought being made more likely by [climate change](#). Rural populations are increasingly [migrating](#) to the relative safety of cities that are either aligned with or held by the central government, which risks further destabilising an already volatile security situation.

Drought and famine are not new in Somalia; as recently as 2012 the country experienced a harrowing [famine](#) that led to the deaths of over 200,000 Somalis. This regularity of disaster is a worrying trend and bodes ill for the future, especially taking into account the fact that Somalia is [considered](#) the country most vulnerable to the effects of a changing climate. Research [suggests](#) that climate change has upended reliable weather patterns in the south Indian Ocean. The gradual rise of average global temperatures has played [havoc](#) on the winds that have powered rains and increased their irregularity. Rainfall has become more likely to fail entirely – leading to a disruption of herding routes and loss of harvests.

However, climate change alone is not the main cause of Somalia's problems. It coexists with wicked problems of [civil conflict](#) and [aid abuse](#), in which local elites use international food aid as a way to further their own interests at the cost of national stability. Resolving these issues will require locally led reforms that address the institutional shortcomings of the current political regime and that offer a viable alternative for a country plagued by corruption and violence. In this alert, we seek to identify these shortcomings and look at how Somalia could overcome them in cooperation with international partners.

The aid business in Somalia

Not only is Somalia prone to experiencing the adverse effects of climate change, but also its governance system is not prepared to respond to those effects. The country has been engulfed in civil unrest and conflict for the past [30 years](#). Reliable and efficient governance has all but vanished to be replaced by a state of civil war with the internationally recognised federal

government in Mogadishu unable to exert much control beyond the capital. As such, the federal government is highly [dependent](#) upon foreign aid and financing to continue to operate.

Since the last famine in 2011/12, Al-Shabaab, an Islamic extremist group formed in 2006, has [expanded](#) its influence across significant rural areas, although its territorial control has [shrunk](#) somewhat in the last year. The group now exerts control over supply routes by setting up checkpoints to collect fees; it also raises taxes in major urban centres. Although Al-Shabaab has established a form of ['shadow governance'](#), with a highly developed intelligence and judicial system, the group continues to spread instability throughout Somalia, resulting in 895 casualties in 2019 alone.

Despite repeated international efforts by the African Union and the United States to dismantle this armed group, Al-Shabaab still controls a large part of the Somali territory and population. The general framework of severe political instability and security challenges in which Somalia finds itself today is bound to further aggravate the numerous climate-related challenges, specifically concerning food security. For example, the conflict with Al-Shabab has [degraded water infrastructure](#) throughout the country, leading to water supplies being limited, particularly in rural areas. Climate change-driven factors exacerbate such vulnerabilities. As a result, rural inhabitants are forced to migrate to the relative safety of cities under the control of the Somali government, with over a million Somalis being internally displaced according to the [UNHCR](#).

During Somalia's first large-scale famine in the 1990s, food aid became one of the biggest ['business opportunities'](#) due to 'collusion between transporters, the World Food Programme (WFP), and implementing partners to win contracts and divert food'. To this day, those profiting from the business of aid in Somalia remain among the richest and most powerful elites of the country. Large food importers have also benefited from the disruption of internal agricultural production and the increasing reliance on food imports.

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Controlling most of the rural and cultivable land, Al-Shabaab has indirectly fuelled this ‘business of aid mechanism’. It has exacerbated the local populations’ need for aid, driving many to flee and migrate to cities in south-central Somalia where humanitarian aid is provided.

The cost of food in Somalia rose by [36%](#) in 2022, making basic food products unaffordable for the local population. In the past two decades, some changes have been made to focus more on the nutrition needs of Somalis. The main [change](#) was moving to cash transfers rather than food aid, with the aim of involving more local and small-scale traders.

However, this change has achieved only limited results, as Somalia remains highly dependent on major suppliers. Furthermore, this method arguably focuses on the immediate needs of individuals, rather than addressing the underlying root causes of scarcity. It escalates the humanitarian situation but does not allow Somalia to build sustainable resilience to food crises, as the humanitarian crisis has become a source of profit for some. This overreliance on corrupt elites, while simplifying aid provisioning, minimises the net benefit that Somalia’s most vulnerable could gain, thus prolonging climate-related famine.

International aid has mainly focused on providing immediate assistance, thus overlooking longer-term sustainable initiatives. This creates a vicious cycle which does not offer long-term solutions to food insecurity, leaving the Somali population exposed to other crises. With the recent impacts of climate change, the already precarious situation of Somalia is only bound to worsen if no effective action is taken.

One of the most significant outcomes of the COP27 summit was the creation of the Loss and Damage Fund, which would have, *a priori*, the potential to deal with such emergencies. However, many remain sceptical of its effectiveness, as it would again focus on providing international assistance through cash

transfers rather than setting up or supporting nationally led long-term disaster response initiatives.

Gender inequality: a significant determinant in Somalia’s food security crisis

As mentioned above, the ongoing food insecurity in Somalia has led to thousands of people becoming displaced and in need of assistance. According to the [World Food Programme](#), since August 2022, 7.1 million people have not had enough food to get by daily. Two hundred thousand people face severe hunger and 1.5 million children under the age of five are exposed to malnutrition; 386,000 of them could become gravely ill or die.

A study conducted by the humanitarian organisation [CARE](#), between 2014 and 2021, showed how the number of women facing food insecurity and suffering hunger in 109 countries was 8.4 times higher than that of men. This figure is in sharp contrast to the fact that women tend to represent around half the labour force in the agricultural sector in ‘developing countries’. On top of that, worldwide, it is women who predominantly [purchase and prepare](#) food for their families and communities. Instead of empowering them, their role as major food producers and caretakers can be disadvantageous, especially when facing food insecurity. Research found that gender norms impose on women the so-called ‘[triple burden](#)’ as they are bound to their often unpaid “productive, reproductive and community” responsibilities. As main caretakers, women have limited time to work in the private sector. As such, they are constrained to take on informal work or engage in petty trading in a low-paid and ever more at-risk sector such as the agricultural one. On top of that, as men are considered the head of the household, women have little control over the family finances and their revenue which puts them in a vulnerable position in times of crisis.

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In Somalia, in times of food insecurity, women have reported having [fewer meals or skipping them completely](#), while men have reported eating less or smaller portions.

[Plan International](#), which conducted a study in the region, is also concerned about the increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence that women and girls face when searching for water, as they now have to walk longer distances to get it. 46 percent of the women interviewed reported that they now have to undertake daily journeys of over one hour to fetch drinkable water. With growing food insecurity, women become the first victims of their families' or communities 'negative coping strategies'. To meet the basic food needs, women might be forced into prostitution, or forced marriages. It has now been widely researched that during food crisis, child marriage rates increase as they can bring economic benefits to the families, but also as early marriage is seen to protect girls from sexual abuse, which would otherwise damage the ['family honour'](#). The consequences of such crisis have disproportionate impacts on women and girls, and bear long-term consequences on entire generations, reinforcing gender inequality, but also hindering the next generation's physical well-being as studies also show that pregnancy in famine-like conditions increases the risk of babies developing chronic diseases later in life.

In the assessment of Somalia's food crisis, the many links between gender inequality and food insecurity and their implications on the country's most vulnerable population are often omitted. Food insecurity disproportionately affects women and girls, reinforcing gender inequality. This important nexus must be recognised by response mechanisms and development programmes to appropriately tackle the disproportionate impacts of Somalia's food crisis on women and girls. In addition, the response must ensure that deeply rooted gender inequality, which exposes women and girls further, is not reiterated or reinforced in the aftermath of the crisis. This is crucial, as the effects of food insecurity are multifaceted and can span entire generations. While some

international aid and development organisations include gender equality as a central focus in their work, their activities are often out of touch with the reality on the ground, as they are set up from a Western interpretation which does not always account for local cultural, social and religious contexts.

Somalia's long history of famine and food insecurity has had a detrimental humanitarian and social impact, often hindering efforts to achieve gender equality. While action plans at the national level should be reviewed and reinforced to offer more agency and legal protection to women and girls, disaster response mechanisms should also take into account, and better respond to, the gendered nature of food insecurity.

How Somalia can address underlying causes of food insecurity

Key to the improvement of food security metrics in Somalia will be the expansion of capacity building programmes that support rural populations and domestic food production such as herding. Somalia must ensure that rural provinces experience less conflict and must work in tandem with international partners to reform aid schemes. In large part, the reason Al-Shabab continues to experience local support is that their shadow governance has proven more stable and predictable than that of the Somali government, despite being harsher. The Somali government can only challenge Al-Shabab's control of rural provinces by providing stable and reliable governance.

Somalia will have to [follow through](#) on pledges to institute judicial reform and tackle economic injustice at both local and national levels. The tackling of law-and-order deficits will help to demonstrate the benefits of the Somali government, and help to erode support for radical groups. Pacification of rural areas would help to limit pressure on urban centres and rehabilitate displaced people and promote domestic food production. International assistance will be key to this. If Somalia is to successfully transition towards a more peaceful

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and stable future, external funding will be required, mainly to help expand the reach and service provision of the federal government. Initiatives should be carried out in close collaboration with customary and religious authorities, as key stakeholders, to ensure the success and sustainability of capacity-building projects. They will allow for bridging the gap between international bodies, government officials and local populations.

To mitigate the impacts of food insecurity, comprehensive, sustainable and gender-sensitive reforms of humanitarian aid systems are crucial. Activities focusing on including women's economic and decision-making power are key to stepping out of poverty and becoming more resilient to food crises. However, more research, reliable data and indexes are needed to properly address the many gaps between gender inequality and food security. This should be done by including intersectionality as a framework of analysis, to recognise and understand intersecting power relations which reinforce diverse social inequalities not just based on gender, but also race, class and sexuality. This could lay strong foundations for the successful inclusion of gender-responsive policies of disaster response and prevention mechanisms. Nonetheless, it is important to note that these measures cannot replace the need to invest in women's rights to access education, land and decision-making power.

Efforts to improve food security among vulnerable populations and in the face of an escalating climate crisis will rely on the repair of degraded water infrastructure, and ideally its expansion to better distribute the country's limited stores of water. Repair projects could source funding from the COP climate financing mechanisms, namely the [Green Climate Fund](#), which has funding streams dedicated

to the construction and renovation of water infrastructure in countries highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. The end goal should be to reduce the country's reliance on food imports, minimising people's vulnerability to food price inflation.

The current aid regime is stagnant and does not provide the buffer and support Somalia needs to support longer-term capacity-building programmes such as those mentioned above. There is insufficient overlap between these short-term and emergency aid provisions and long-term projects. Emergency food donations to the country should be coupled to long-term development projects with established goals that seek to reform and improve existing aid schemes. Current UN programmes in particular would benefit from reviewing their current distribution and provision methodology, and identifying partners and actors that are detrimental to their goals and cut out those who are dependent on the status quo.

Aid should not merely be seen as a one-time transfer in the form of food shipments or personal payments. The volatile security situation in Somalia requires an overlap between emergency assistance and development aid that would allow for a seamless transition to security and food security. Aid schemes will need to be designed as long-term interventions to address systemic injustices and scarcities with the end goal of tackling the underlying causes of conflict and insecurity rather than their symptoms. This means going beyond providing for the immediate needs of the vulnerable Somali population and looking at what societal hurdles, such as a lack of infrastructure, gender inequalities and the growing threat of climate change, prevent the country from providing basic services and a stable security environment.

About the Planetary Security Initiative

The Planetary Security Initiative sets out best practice, strategic entry points and new approaches to reducing climate-related risks to conflict and stability, thus promoting sustainable peace in a changing climate. The PSI is operated by the Clingendael Institute in partnership with Free Press Unlimited and The Hague Center for Strategic Studies.

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