

Anatomy of a Food Crisis:

Can Kenya rise above the perennial hunger?

Drought and famine in Kenya is an increasingly common phenomenon. Unless leaders rise to the occasion, food shortage will continue to persist

The Arid and Semi Arid (ASAL) region of Kenya is currently experiencing an acute food crisis. Recent statistics indicate that following the failed short rains (October to December) of 2018, the food insecure population in the country has been gradually increasing and is currently estimated at 1,111,500. Of these starving Kenyans, 865,300 are domiciled in at least 12 counties that have been identified as the most drought affected. These comprise Turkana, Baringo, Mandera, Garissa, Kilifi, Tana River, West Pokot, Marsabit, Makueni, Kajiado, Kwale and Isiolo. Anecdotal reports suggest that presently, Turkana and Baringo are the most severely affected counties facing drought and significant food shortage. The other ten counties are classified 'at risk' with large populations requiring immediate food assistance (NDMA, 2019). With the late onset of the March-April-May long rains season for 2019, the situation is likely to become even more precarious in the weeks and months ahead. Depending on the duration and intensity of rainfall, more and more Kenyans may have to contend with food and water shortages and the effects thereof on livelihoods and the economy (Kenya Meteorological Department, 2019).

Drought in Kenya is nothing new. Over the last five decades or so, the country has experienced recurrent drought episodes which have only increased in frequency and intensity as the years have gone by. Drought incidences in post-independent Kenya occurred in 1974 – 76, 1980-81, 1983-85, 1987, 1991-92, 1994-95, 1999-2000, 2004-2006, 2008-2009, 2011, 2016-2017 and currently in 2019. These incidences confirm the cyclicity and predictability of droughts, with the occurrences so close together that there simply isn't time to recover from one disaster to the next. This has rendered the country food insecure and is attributed, at least in part, to the effects of climate change (Huho & Mugalavai, 2010; CIC, 2017).

Climate change in Kenya has manifested in the form of rising temperatures and decreasing rainfall as well as decline in mountain glacier coverage and a concomitant rise in sea level. It is reported that on average, global temperatures are currently one degree Celsius higher compared to pre-industrial levels. As a result, there are increased evaporations and drier conditions which intensify the impact of failed rains (Oxfam, 2017).

““Drought may occur due to climate change (also the effect of human activity) but food shortage can be averted through proper planning and budgeting.”

Studies indicate that on average, a drought cycle used to be twenty years but this gradually decreased to twelve years; two years and eventually a near annual occurrence. This does not leave room for recovery hence the damages from drought are magnified from one cycle to the next (climate change strategy, 2010). The 2019 long rains delay in Kenya is attributed to the tropical cyclone Idai which, while causing floods in Mozambique and Zimbabwe, redirected moisture away from the East African region. Though cyclones are natural events that have been occurring throughout history, the intensity of devastation from the cyclone Idai has been attributed to climate change.

Drought is a natural event; but is famine a man-made disaster?

The impact of drought occurrences in Kenya has been worsened by lack of sufficient investments in agriculture. Despite the government's assurance of its commitment towards enhancing food security many strategies to revive agriculture continue to struggle.

Under the State Department of Irrigation, there are more than ten large scale irrigation projects that are targeted at enhancing food production and consequently, food security. Arguably, the most prominent of these projects is the Galana Kulalu Food Security Project which was developed mainly to enhance maize production and at maximum capacity, would reportedly contribute to 41% of the country's maize consumption. However, almost five years since its commencing and millions of shillings later, the project seems to have failed to meet its production target and recent audit reports revealed financial impropriety in the management of the project, notably, inflated costs in the leasing of land. This situation is replicated in numerous other irrigation projects which continue to face varying challenges, notable among them, lack of adequate water which raises questions on how or even whether feasibility studies were actually carried out.

Under the state department for crop development, projects geared towards enhancing food production include fertilizer subsidy programme; strengthening mechanization; Kenya cereal enhancement programme; youth and women empowerment in modern agriculture project; food security and crop diversification project; small scale irrigation and value addition project; drought resilience and sustainable livelihoods programme in the horn of Africa, among others. The fertilizer subsidy programme has been marred with implementation challenges such as poor targeting with the result that many small-scale farmers don't actually benefit from this programme; claims of contamination of the subsidized fertilizer leading to poor yields; as well as delays in distribution of the fertilizer which affects the planting season and consequently the yield.

Many ongoing agricultural projects are taking longer than envisaged to be completed and it is not very clear what their actual status or future viability is. It should be noted that many of the food security related projects are donor financed but have failed to progress well simply because the government has, more often than not, failed to honour its part of the bargain in provision of counterpart funding. As a result, donors do not release their funds and the projects end up as stalled, 'white elephant' projects; or they are simply overtaken by events due to changing circumstances and are therefore rendered unviable.

A review of government exchequer releases indicates a painfully slow release of funds towards development projects with recurrent expenditure continuing to be the more favoured avenue of expenditure by the government. No clear explanation is provided for this.

Development Budgets of Food Security Related State Departments (In Ksh. Millions)

	Original Estimates	Revised Estimates	Exchequer Issues as at Mar 2019	Funding gap (%)
State Department for the Development of ASAL	2,820.00	2,820.00	1,799.40	36.19
State Department for Water and Sanitation	23,577.64	23,577.64	7,475.97	68.29
State Department for Environment and Forestry	4,076.00	4,076.00	1,158.07	71.59
State Department for Livestock	2,963.74	2,963.74	2,663.11	10.14
State Department for Crop Development	13,847.99	13,717.99	6,715.80	51.04
State Department for Fisheries, Aquaculture and the Blue Economy	2,184.00	2,184.00	588.53	73.05
State Department for Irrigation	5,790.00	5,790.00	2,520.90	56.46
State Department for Agricultural Research	475.90	475.90	376.00	20.99

Data Source: The Kenya Gazette, 18th April 2019

County budgeting and food security...

The challenge of a non-responsive food security budget isn't just confined to the national government. A review of the 2018/2019 budgets of the top 12 drought affected counties, devoid of any in-year adjustments, reveals very interesting results in terms of the general policy direction of these county governments. Generally, it is observed that although all the 12 counties have budgetary allocations towards agriculture/pastoralism/fisheries sector as well as water/irrigation sectors, these constitute only a small portion of their total budgets.

“County governments have failed to improve food security within their jurisdictions as they are more focused on physical capital accumulation especially through road infrastructure development and construction of buildings.”

Majority of the spending is directed towards health and medical insurance service as well as emergency/disaster relief. It beats logic, for a county to put very minimal resources towards enhancing agricultural productivity, water supply among other food security related activities, only to spend a princely sum on relief supplies.

In terms of the development budget, most of the drought affected counties are more focused on enhancing their road infrastructure with only two counties, Makueni and Garissa, having significant capital investments in the water and irrigation sectors. Generally, water projects seem to be achieving some critical focus as the select county development budgets on water and irrigation appear to be reasonable, ranging between 17 – 39% of the budget for at least seven of the twelve counties. However, agricultural development has not enjoyed similar attention with seven of the 12 counties having allocated less than 10 percent of their development budgets towards agricultural investments. It is hardly surprising therefore, that these counties remain food insecure and continue to suffer greatly from the vagaries of drought.

“The top twelve drought affected counties are in the lower spectrum of contribution to GDP; underlining the significance of agriculture development to economic growth and enhanced livelihoods”

The pertinent question that arises from this analysis is why these counties are investing so much in road infrastructure, when there isn't much production going on. What exactly are these roads being built to transport? Is there any meaningful economic production activity in the county or are they simply roads to nowhere? Infrastructure investment that is beneficial should be geared towards solving a community need. Public investment in roads is without doubt a significant engine of growth and indeed a necessity but under the circumstances, food and nutrition security probably constitute a more pressing need. When a county population is too hungry, they may not be able to engage in any productive activity. The opportunity cost of choosing roads over agriculture and irrigation is telling in the starvation of the masses.

Impact of investing in agriculture on livelihoods...

An analysis of the macroeconomic impact of agricultural investment reveals that an increase in agricultural productivity by 5% is likely to have a significant positive impact on private consumption and investment, triggering higher revenue collection especially under the income tax head and progressively higher GDP growth (by 0.3 percentage points on average). Higher income tax collection implies higher income earned by households. Agricultural productivity driven economic growth appears likely to favour the lower income households as there is an observed increase in household expenditure under the agriculture sector as well as a movement of households from the informal sector to the agriculture sector.

“Disease Free Zones were supposed to change the outlook of the livestock sector but the project has failed to take off more than five years since it was launched”

In the medium term economic outlook, the National Treasury projects economic growth at 6.2 percent in FY 2019/20, 6.4 percent in FY 2020/21 and 6.7 percent by FY 2021/22. This growth is underpinned by, among others, strong performance in agricultural and manufacturing activities, favourable weather conditions, as well as ongoing public infrastructural investments. However, poor rainfall performance this year coupled with inadequate project/policy implementation is likely to seriously hamper agricultural performance. This is worsened by an unclear collaborative framework between the national and county government on matters agriculture, given that this is a devolved function. When agriculture underperforms, economic growth tends to dip substantially due to far reaching impact that agriculture has on livelihoods. Low absorption of development expenditure and reductions during supplementary budgets especially for infrastructure projects is the main risk to infrastructure as a key driver of economic growth. This is because the delayed completion of projects typically delays returns on investment.

Taking the prevailing risks and challenges into account, it is highly unlikely that we will achieve a growth higher than 6.0 percent. Indeed, it is estimated that economic growth will average 5.5 percent in financial year 2019/20 and 5.6 percent in 2020/21 and the medium term.

The importance of Agriculture to the economy cannot be overemphasized. On average, the sector accounts for approximately 24 percent of GDP as well as 75 percent of the labour force both formal and informal. Agriculture also plays a significant role in exports, most of which are agricultural products, reportedly accounting for more than 50% of export earnings. Majority of the rural population, more than 80 percent, make a livelihood from agriculture and agriculture related activities. Enhancing agricultural productivity will not only increase export earnings and general economic performance but will also greatly uplift the rural poor, resulting in more inclusive economic growth and development.

The fact that most of the top 12 drought affected counties are in the lower spectrum of contribution to GDP (Gross County Product) is indicative of the drag that poor agricultural performance can have on economic growth – even if the government is investing in other sectors of the economy. Investing in agriculture is investing in livelihoods; a move that is likely to have a more favourable impact on economic growth and human development, rather than investing solely on roads and buildings as has been the tendency. However, under current investment programmes, livelihoods are traded off for structures because structures are more visible and tangible investment projects that give an illusion of progress.

“Disease Free Zones were supposed to change the outlook of the livestock sector but the project has failed to take off more than five years since it was launched”

The tendency to invest very little in agriculture could also be based on the (misguided) notion that ASAL counties can never really be agricultural producers. However, with water harvesting, irrigation and visionary leadership, crop production is an actual possibility in these counties. In addition, many ASAL counties have a significant livestock population which if properly invested in, can yield significant returns for the population.

In 2010, the government launched the Agricultural Sector Development Strategy for the period 2010 – 2020. Among the various strategies explored for revitalizing agriculture was the need to improve livestock productivity through enhancing livestock breeds, improving feeds regulation, developing pasture and forage as well as improving research and extension services. With only a year to the conclusion of the ASDS, we are yet to see concrete measures being undertaken to improve the genetic makeup of livestock for better yields, enhance animal feed and nutrition including forage conservation which is especially important during unfavourable weather conditions, as well as strengthening livestock extension services.

In recent years, there has been much ado about the government establishing disease free zones (DFZ) across the country to enhance production of livestock for the exports market. However, a review of the sector reports and budget documents reveals continuous underfunding and a painfully slow progress of the entire project. At the beginning of the project, it had been indicated that the Disease Free Zone would produce additional 48000 MT of quality meat for both local and export market, contribute an additional Ksh. 16.2 billion to the economy, create 130,953 new jobs and produce an additional 160,000 high value hides. The Bachuma DFZ in the coastal region was to be implemented over a period of five years. More than five years later, the project remains incomplete, is seriously underfunded and the promised outcome is likely to remain an illusion under the circumstances.

It should be noted that the zoning sequence was to be implemented sequentially with a total of 6 zones created and operational by 2030. The coastal zone was to be operationalized between 2010 and 2014; Laikipia-Isiolo-Samburu zone, Southern Rift zone and larger Tana River district zone between 2014 and 2018; Makueni and Kitui zone and Central Kenya zone between 2018 and 2022. To date, only the coastal zone (Bachuma) is in the process of being operationalized and with the slow progress, it is doubtful that the other zones will be operationalized or if we'll even reap anything from this project.

“Our budgets and policies are reactive rather than visionary and this has hampered the ability of the government to improve livelihoods.”

“We do not need to reinvent the wheel in order to resolve the food crisis; rather, we need to go back to the archives, re-read the existing development strategies and begin to implement the projects contained therein again – this time more diligently”

Is our budget visionary?

The focus on relief food, disaster management and medical insurance is indicative of a reactive budget rather than a visionary budget. While these are, without a doubt, critical expenditures, they are responding to a crisis that could've been prevented by proper budget planning in the first place. The reactive budget is actually an outcome of poor policy direction and lack of adequate planning. A county with enough food production and adequate/reliable water supply may probably not have to spend so much on health services as people are likely to fall sick less often. In any case, higher food production may increase the income as well as productivity of the county population, which means more income for citizens to take care of their own medical insurance. Instead, many county budgets are focusing on the outcome of problems, and not dealing with the origins of the problem. As a result, the people remain hostages to a vicious cycle of hunger and remain entirely dependent on the (likely overwhelmed) government.

How do we achieve food security?

There is no silver bullet to the problem of food security but there are many viable solutions. These solutions exist in the numerous development policy documents that we have developed but are yet to properly implement.

Key documents containing viable strategies to enhance food security include the following:

The Vision 2030;
The Third Medium Term Plan 2018-2022;
Agriculture Sector Development Strategy, 2010 – 2020;
Kenya Climate Smart Agriculture Strategy 2017 -2026; and
Ending Drought Emergencies: Common Programme Framework (2015)

The real problem lies in the **lack of will** to implement the strategies contained therein. Projects are implemented half heartedly and many are abandoned along the way. Under the current circumstances, unless decisive steps are undertaken, food security as a vital pillar of the big four agenda will remain a mirage.

Investing in improving the livelihoods of the population is a lengthy process that can be very involving and quite taxing on both the national and the county governments. For the country to be food secure, decisive actions must be taken, more so on implementing the planned strategies. Leaders must stand and be counted.

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