



Drought does not equal famine

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After reading a lot of news and blog posts on the situation in the Horn of Africa, I feel the need to make something clear: the drought in the Horn of Africa is not the cause of the famine we are seeing take shape in southern Somalia. We are being pounded by a narrative of this famine that more or less points to the failure of seasonal rains as its cause . . . which I see as a horrible abdication of responsibility for the human causes of this tragedy.

First, I recommend that anyone interested in this situation – or indeed in food security and famine more generally, to read Mike Davis' book *Late Victorian Holocausts*. It is a very readable account of massive famines in the Victorian era that lays out the necessary intersection of weather, markets and politics to create tragedy – and also makes clear the point that rainfall alone is poorly correlated to famine. For those who want a deeper dive, have a look at the lit review (pages 15-18) of my article "[Postmodern Conceptualizations, Modernist Applications: Rethinking the Role of Society in Food Security](#)" to get a sense of where we are in contemporary thinking on food security. The long and short of it is that food insecurity is rarely about absolute supplies of food – mostly it is about access and entitlements to existing food supplies. The HoA situation does actually invoke outright scarcity, but that scarcity can be traced not just to weather – it is also about access to local and regional markets (weak at best) and politics/the state (Somalia lacks a sovereign state, and the patchy, ad hoc governance provided by al Shabaab does little to ensure either access or entitlement to food and livelihoods for the population).

For those who doubt this, look at the FEWS NET maps I put in previous posts ([here](#) and [here](#)).

Famine stops at the Somali border. I assure you this is not a political manipulation of the data – it is the data we have. Basically, the people without a functional state and collapsing markets are being hit much harder than their counterparts in Ethiopia and Kenya, even though everyone is affected by the same bad rains, and the livelihoods of those in Somalia are not all that different than those across the borders in Ethiopia and Kenya. Rainfall is not the controlling variable for this differential outcome, because rainfall is *not really variable* across these borders where Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia meet.

This is not to say that rainfall doesn't matter – it certainly does. But it is not the most important thing. However, when we focus on rainfall variability exclusively, we end up in discussions and arguments that detract from understanding what went wrong here, and what we might do going forward. Yes, the drought reflects a climate extreme . . . but this extreme is not that stunningly anomalous in this part of the world – we are getting similar (but not quite as bad) results quite often these days. Indeed, these results seem to be coming more frequently, and appear to be tied to a shift in the climate of the region – and while it is a bit soon to say this definitively, this climate shift is very likely is a product of anthropogenic climate change. So, one could indirectly argue that the climate change (mostly driven by big emitters in the Global North) is having a terrible impact on the poorest and weakest in the Global South. It will take a while to make this a firm argument, though.

On the other hand, it is clear that politics and markets have failed the people of Somalia – and the rainfall just pushed a very bad situation over the precipice into crisis. Thus, this is a human crisis first and foremost, whatever you think of anthropogenic climate change. Politics and markets are human inventions, and the decisions that drive them are also human. We can't blame this famine on the weather – we need to be looking at everything from local and national politics that shape access and entitlements to food to global food markets that have driven the price of needed staples up across the world, thus curtailing access for the poorest. The bad news: Humans caused this. The good news: If we caused it, we can prevent the next one.