Famine isn't an extreme event, it's the predictable result of a broken system

From the Horn of Africa to the Sahel, we must learn to be honest about the nature of a fundamentally flawed global food system.
A child suffering from malnutrition in Mirriyah, Niger. Flaws in the global food system demand greater attention.

Photograph: Sia Kambou/European Commission

Drought and famine are not extreme events. They are not anomalies. They are merely the sharp end of a global food system that is built on inequality, imbalances and – ultimately – fragility. And they are the regular upshot of a climate that is increasingly hostile and problematic for food production across huge swathes of the developing world.

For the third time in seven years, the Sahel region of west Africa is facing a toxic combination of drought, poor harvests and soaring food prices. In Niger, 6m people are now significantly at risk, together with 2.9m in Mali and 700,000 in Mauritania.

An immediate response is needed in order to avert a devastating food and nutrition crisis. In responding, however, we must also redefine the vocabulary of food crisis. It is our global food system that is in crisis. Last year’s famine in the Horn of Africa, and the current woes in the Sahel, are the surface cracks of a broken system. These regional outbreaks of hunger are not, as such, extreme events.

Beyond semantics, this is a crucial distinction. In viewing these events as extreme and unexpected, we fail to acknowledge the regularity and predictability of hunger. This flaw is fatal, for it means failing to acknowledge that the food system itself is broken. It means failing to build readiness for persistent famine into international development and humanitarian policy. And it means waiting until people starve before doing anything.

The worst hunger crisis in a century hit Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia and Djibouti last year, affecting 13 million people and taking thousands of lives. International aid came thick and fast from mid-2011 onwards, by which point mass displacement, malnutrition and death had already taken hold.

Yet, according to a damning report from Oxfam and Save the Children, early warning
systems flagged up the crisis as early as August 2010. A full response came only after
decision-makers could see evidence on the ground of the failed harvests and starvation
that had been accurately predicted.

Poor local governance is part of the story. Governments in the Horn of Africa – with the
help of international relief and development agencies - should have set up
comprehensive anti-drought plans in advance, and should have sounded the alarm
earlier. Signs are already more promising in the Sahel. Aside from Senegal and Burkina
Faso, all affected governments have been quick to declare an emergency, devise plans,
and call in international aid.

But the international community must also ensure that its crisis response tools are fit
for purpose. Food aid is often counter-cyclical: donors are more generous when prices
are low due to significant harvests, which tends to be when needs are lower. So standing
regional food reserves should be set up to enhance access to affordable stocks as soon as
needs begin to rise. This would allow emergency stocks to be pre-positioned in
risk-prone regions, so that – when local purchases are not possible – humanitarian
agencies have access to food stocks below the market rate.

The problem is not just about governance shortcomings in Africa, and it is not just about
the modalities of delivering food aid. It is also a problem of principle. For decades, we
have taken the wrong approach to feeding the world. In many poor countries,
investment in agriculture has focused on a limited range of export crops. Too little has
been done to support smallholders, who produce food for their local communities. Yet,
by supporting these poor farmers, we could enable them to move out of poverty, and
enable local food production to meet local needs.

Diverse farming systems, agroforestry and reservoirs to capture rainfall are sorely
needed in drought-prone areas such as the Sahel. This requires a real commitment to
local food systems, and an acknowledgement that trade and aid cannot provide all the
answers, especially when international grain prices are so high.
The solution is therefore twofold: we must plan adequately for the food crises that emerge within our broken food system, and we must finally acknowledge how broken it is. Only when we are honest about hunger will the world's most vulnerable populations receive the short-term aid and long-term support that they need.
Flamenca  
30 January 2012 9:06AM  

Overpopulation isn't even grasped by the supporters of this foundation.... as they had three children, so what hope is there for Africa?.....

urardo  
30 January 2012 9:11AM  

Response to Mike5000, 30 January 2012 8:46AM  
...which means we don't have to do anything about it, huh? Well done.

Waynflete  
30 January 2012 9:19AM  

I get very tired of people shouting 'overpopulation' as a kneejerk reaction to serious issues like this. There are plenty of countries in the world whose populations exceed their own capacity to produce food, yet people do not starve to death because they are rich.

There is enough food in the world. The problem is inequality. Letting people in Africa starve to death because they are poor, then claiming it is unavoidable because of 'overpopulation' is pathetic.
I guess the UK must be *under*populated then since we have a lot of food. I’m sure we could fit more of these people in over here.

Unfortunately we have thrown money and aid at Africa for decades and nothing appears to have got better. Africa should be able to feed itself but just does not seem to be capable of doing so. War and corruption appear to be responsible for many of Africa’s problems. If they can sort that out then they can feed themselves.

I agree with most of your points but I think that by shifting the focus away from food purchases and reserves towards cash and vouchers - where appropriate - we can allow people in the developing world to make their own choices and encourage the development of local markets. This helps to avoid the intrinsic problem of food aid, which is that it can destroy local means of production and erode agricultural skills.

I would be interested to hear your views on cash and vouchers and where they can be expanded and better utilised.
Uh-oh, look out: more uses of the just-world fallacy incoming. I guess Africans just can't feed themselves 'cause they're stoopid and stoopid people deserve to starve, amirite?

Or maybe it has something to do with speculation and other dodgy practices of global capitalism.
Great question **SamEast**, this is something we’re looking into on the global development site at the moment. We also had something on this topic in August. **Cash transfer scheme will help plight of malnourished children in Kenya:**

A sharp rise in severely malnourished children has prompted the launch of an emergency aid programme in the slums of Nairobi. Against the backdrop of severe drought in Kenya and throughout east Africa, Concern Worldwide plans to use cash transfers to enable people to buy food. It is hoped the initiative, which comes at a time of rocketing food prices, will help 20,000 people over the next five months.

Concern says it began noticing an increase in cases of severe malnutrition among children under five in the slums of Korogocho and Viwandani in January, as the worst drought in some areas of east Africa for 60 years caused severe food shortages. The charity has just rolled out the programme, which it developed in June and July.

At the heart of the initiative is a cash transfer scheme, under which carefully selected beneficiaries are allocated sim cards. Concern then deposits 1,500 Kenyan shillings (£16.20) on the sim card at the start of the month. The beneficiaries, who must have an
Flamenc
30 January 2012 10:16AM

This comment was removed by a moderator because it didn't abide by our community standards. Replies may also be deleted. For more detail see our FAQs.

mike944
30 January 2012 10:32AM

Response to Newbunkle, 30 January 2012 9:53AM

Or maybe it has something to do with speculation and other dodgy practices of global capitalism.

Apart from a spike in 2008 most food prices have been dropping year in year out. thanks to the dodgy practices of global capitalism.

Check out the price of wheat, the worlds biggest crop. It has dropped over 40% in 5 years.

http://www.google.co.uk/finance?q=LON:WEAT#
I don't disagree that a growing population, urbanisation and climate change are massive issues that are having and will continue to have big impacts. We should try to address them.

My point is that screaming 'overpopulation' at these issues implies (intentionally or otherwise) that when people starve to death it is somehow their own fault for having too many children. That is clearly wrong, when so much food is available in more wealthy places.

There is also the well-established point that if we're worried about overpopulation, the way to get birth rates down is to reduce infant mortality; something every GCSE geography student knows.

Readers here might also find this look at global hunger data by Claire Provost last week of interest - Global hunger: do the figures add up? 'While the Food and Agriculture Organisation's estimated figures on global hunger often grab headlines, the uncertainty surrounding the numbers receives relatively little media attention'
My "inconvenient" comment has been removed as usual. Every GCSE geography student was already taught when I went to school that by reducing infant mortality you reduce birth rates, and it didn't. Vaccines etc have had a huge effect on reducing infant mortality but birth rates are culturally entrenched. Add into the mix religion and you know the mix is toxic.

You have candidates campaigning for the highest office in the States..., stating they don't want abortion - even in the case of rape - that contraception should not be used etc....

Going back to Africa you have a Jacob Zuma who defines his virility by the number of offspring he has sired!!!!

At the same time fish stocks are collapsing world-wide. Just like locust we are removing one food source (and other resources) after another no longer leaving enough time for things to recover.
"For decades, we have taken the wrong approach to feeding the world. In many poor countries, investment in agriculture has focused on a limited range of export crops. Too little has been done to support smallholders, who produce food for their local communities. Yet, by supporting these poor farmers, we could enable them to move out of poverty, and enable local food production to meet local needs".

So please right the wrong and start supporting initiatives that are already working with local farmers promoting local rich in nutrient food production. Less talk more action is the need of the hour!!!!!
I too am sick and tired of the extremely lazy knee-jerk reactions to reports on hunger in Africa. If those of you shouting over population would just bother to do a little reading, check up on some figures and maybe even think for a moment, you’d very quickly see that over population has absolutely nothing to do with the problem of hunger in Africa.

The average population density in most African countries ranges between 12 and 20 people per square km, compare that if you will to England, Germany, Holland or any other north European country of your choice. Check out Singapore. There are roughly 4.5 lbs of nutritious food produced every day for every single person on the planet, millions of tons of food are destroyed every day; cereals are used to fire power stations or go to feed cars.

Thanks to IMF and IBRD imposed conditions, the best agricultural land in Africa is used for growing cotton, coffee and other cash-crops, providing western companies with cheap raw resources.

In a Neo-Liberal global political economy 30,000 people die every day from hunger and hunger-related causes not because there are too many people on the planet but simply because these people can’t afford to buy food; a problem greatly exacerbated since western banks discovered they can make a lot of money from betting on food prices. Put more bluntly, these people die simply because they are not economically viable in the current system.

@Flamenca: Study after study has shown that the best way to curb population growth is increased prosperity. Simple.
By far the best solution to the food problem in Africa is to leave it up to Africans.

Virtually all intervention in Africa by well meaning Westerners ends up exacerbating the issues they are trying to address.

Famine in Africa wouldn't exist if there had been no historical intervention. Why? Because the World Food Program dis-incentives local farmers from producing food at all. Let alone the surpluses that are needed to provide for inevitable rain failures. It is IMPOSSIBLE to compete with the World Food Program.

And now to make matters worse, so called philanthropic rich individuals are getting in on the act. I see this blog is supported by The Gates Foundation. My message to them is simple. Stay out of Africa.

Stop pitying Africans. Stop sending food. Leave us alone.
The British and other European countries fucked up the African continent totally in the race for more gold, diamonds etc...we owe them...big time...rolling your eyes and saying that it isn't our problem is just plain fucking typical and self centered......how can we let people starve to death and act so fucking blase?

Response to harrykipper, 30 January 2012 12:02PM

The British and other European countries fucked up the African continent totally in the race for more gold, diamonds etc...we owe them...big time...rolling your eyes and saying that it isn't our problem is just plain fucking typical and self centered......how can we let people starve to death and act so fucking blase?

Unfortunately this is exactly the kind of attitude which is totally counter productive. The arrogant West think they are the only ones who can "solve" hunger. Rubbish. They merely drive local producers out of business. The World Food Program's slogan is "50 years on the frontline of hunger". Should be changed to "50 years of impoverishing Africans".
It's clear that in the past early warning systems and alarm bells have not been heeded, and indeed lessons will have to be learnt and applied following the East Africa crisis last year.

As aid agencies there is a lot more we can all do to prevent these kind of crises affecting the poorest. In the case of drought, while we can't ensure enough rains fall and it comes on time for farmers, we can ensure that if it does fail we can mitigate the worst effects of drought for families.

Concern Worldwide’s cash transfer project here in Nairobi’s slums has targeted the most vulnerable families and it has protected them from the extreme effects of hunger as food prices rose during last year. Families are able to choose what they spend the money on, some use it for additional food for the younger children, which prevents them from becoming malnourished. Others use the money for school fees or medical fees, expenses that some people just can’t afford when the price of food rises. Cash aid like this puts the beneficiary in control and doesn’t distort the local market, something that food aid can often do.
This is the 21st century and Africa is still being described as "developing", to my mind, wherein the problem lies. Africa is not empowered to take care of itself but, although colonialists have, on the whole, left on the political level, I feel we are still in the grip of being 'kept in a corner' on the financial and other levels.

I took part in fund raising for one of Lenny Henry's initiatives and, some folks told me that the only thing they'd give Africans is a condom. This is deep ignorance!

Personally, I'd rather give knowledge than money in order for people to support themselves - at least by finding food on a daily basis for their families.

Could Europe & all those who have superiority feelings towards Africa and other places perceived as third world/developing also not look upon this as a news item for their entertainment? this is a very serious issue.

If I were a president of one of the African countries, I'd refuse handouts point blank, on the one hand and, on the other, I'd levy extremely high fees before giving a visa to those who want to go on safari.

Having lived in the UK since 1970, I do not perceive Europeans as cleverer or better individuals. what's more, I feel sorry for the homeless in London when, upon leaving one of the venues in the Strand, my evening gown brushes against the cardboard box of one of the homeless people sleeping in doorways...tbc
Personally, I blame heartless right-wing opinionating about black people in distant countries dieing (while said opionater lives a life of historically unprecedented affluence) on a failure to engage with issues in an informed and compassionate way. The answer? Read something written by someone who has at least taken the trouble to research the issue. Like this article. After that, I recommend this short book as a starter.

@postcolonial: whilst the no-nonsense guide series is pretty damn good for basic starter information, wouldn't it be better if people bought them directly from New Internationalist rather than going through Amazon? :-)

http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/poverty-matters/2012/jan/30/famine-pr...
"Study after study has shown that the best way to curb population growth is to increase wealth. Simple message: Poverty Kills"

Hmm, it would appear that the wealthy Chinese are the first who ignore rules on population limits as they are able to pay the fines. Which could indicate that a growth in wealth is leading to larger chinese families...

It would appear that China is buying up large tracts of land in all continents - and having known severe famine historically who would blame them? The increasing wealth of the Chinese is also sadly linked to the poaching of elephants and rhinos in Africa.

No, no the brain of the Human monkey is so complicated it is a miracle that we can stand up and walk at all, but maximum reproduction is as in any other species the end game, and it looks like we won't stop until we've reached collapse of our numbers but having taken every other living thing with us, which is a great shame.

As to poverty kills, that might be true but wealth can also kill, if you drive a Ferrari and smash it against a tree....
possibly economic too. IS wealth one side of the coin and the other poverty?

@Mike, overpopulation my arse.

There is by far and away enough resources on this earth to support our population. The problem is, dicks like us are consuming a disproportionate amount. You can get rid of a couple of billion poor people and that will have almost zero impact on the resource situation. Get rid of just 300 million middle class consumers like my, and you make a ten-fold difference.

You see - it's not about population, it's consumption.
Unfortunately, famine, along with any other issue in 'developing' countries are not caused by any single factor. As the article states, environmental conditions and the effects of the organisation of the global food system around commercial production are the preconditions making famine a constant feature in the 21st century.

Development institutions and policies still focus 'food security', aimed to ensure the provision of sufficient quantity and quality. Rather than addressing the broader, structural changes to promote local production for local markets, not export. This approach for the past 30-40 years is now creating contempt among citizens in donor countries towards international aid, and continued resentment from the countries who are still suffering.

A major issue is the western government subsidised 'dumping' of agricultural products in 'food insecure' countries, destroying local producers competitiveness and rural economies. Large donations, financial or material, of food aid by donors are often offset by the gains from this dumping, meaning European governments emerge better off than if apparent 'free' trade policies were not imposed on so many countries.

Unless these structural issues are addressed we are going to continue in the same cycle indefinetly.

It is unfortunate that the organisation of food systems, and the famine and environmental degredation it creates has become so entrenched that articles such as this are relegated to the bottom of a long list of articles when there impacts should be daily, front page news.
@ philstyle
You see - it's not about population, it's consumption.

Not quite.

It is: population x consumption x aspirations...

Response to RossCopeland, 30 January 2012 11:54AM
these people can't afford to buy food; a problem greatly exacerbated since western banks discovered they can make a lot of money from betting on food prices.

Staple food prices such a cereals are dropping and have been for many years thanks to capitalism.

is the west still dumping food in Africa to ruin the local economy?

Somali pirates were originally defending their territorial waters from western raiders
mike, with all due respect, you are talking out of your arse. Staple food prices are rising and have been for a number of years, thanks to capitalism.


better still the complete UNCTAD report for 2011

Why, what's wrong with Amazon? NI presumably consent to have their books retailed there.
mike944  
30 January 2012 5:10PM

Response to RossCopeland, 30 January 2012 2:48PM

mike, with all due respect, you are talking out of your arse. Staple food prices are rising and have been for a number of years, thanks to capitalism.

Long term crop prices adjusted for inflation.  

RossCopeland  
31 January 2012 10:30AM

Response to postcolonial, 30 January 2012 3:21PM

Nothing terribly wrong with Amazon but why not buy directly from NI?
RossCopeland
31 January 2012 10:41AM

Response to mike944, 30 January 2012 5:10PM

My my, now that was an informative Blog I must say, seems to be the real expert on food prices. Can't quite figure out why he seems to be the only analyst in the world that believes food is getting cheaper, although of course he was only looking at cereal prices in the US, not international cereal prices. In other words, has absolutely nothing to do with your totally erroneous (I'm being kind) comment that capitalism is leading to cheaper cereals globally. My last response to you still stands, as it were.

Now for some real information, try this

RossCopeland
31 January 2012 10:56AM

Charlie Brooker - 410 comments
Suffering, despair and slow painful death of dark-skinned people - 36 Comments

SHAME
Response to Flamenca, 30 January 2012 9:06AM

Yeah but the 3 kids in the West eat and consume and throw away far more than kids in the South. So it isn't that simple as populations numbers. There is enough food.
At the risk of being accused of being negrophobic (I have been accused of this for my views), Africans leaders look at Europe or Japan or the UK and see wealthy countries with such high population densities but they fail to realise that these countries can only sustain such high population densities because they are highly industrious countries that are able to pull in resources from around the world (particularly true in the case of the UK which is largely due to the legacy of their "successful" colonialism which gives their companies a type of preferred access privilege in some cases) and export their products (particularly true in the case of Japan and Germany), their knowledge and expertise to the world. The world only has a place for one Germany, one Japan and one UK. For a country in Africa to achieve such wealth with high population density would means it needs to knock one of them off its perch. Which would be a very tall ask.

A much better comparison for Africa could be Canada or Australia which largely rely on their natural resources for the wealth of their people. Canada has 34 million people in an area about 1/3 the size of Africa, so if Africa was to have a similar standard of living to Canadians based on Africa's natural resources then you would be looking at a population of about 100 million people. Australia has about 22 million people in an area about 1/4 the size of Africa, so this would equate to an African population of about 90 million people.

One country I hold out hope for in Africa is Namibia. They should build a fence around their country, control immigration
I think that too many people focus on overpopulation and not the underlying real issues that cause poverty and famine. It is difficult to control a population in general, much less one that comes from a continent with little to know infrastructure. The baseline issue is that Africa needs to be stable, economically and generally, before they can conquer things such as famine and poverty. Africa is a wonderful country filled with culture and diversity, but they need leadership and unity in order to grow successfully in the right direction.

I think hunger in Horn of Africa is not coming from overpopulation because there are many countries that have huge population and does not suffer from hunger. I agree with the author when he says that hunger is not an extreme event. We need to understand it is the result of a broken food system and take action before people start to die because of lack of food.

Sign in to comment or create your Guardian account to join the conversation.
Famine isn't an extreme event, it's the predictable result of a broken system | Global de...