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U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations

Hearing on:

East Africa's Quiet Famine.

March 28, 2017

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass:

Thank you for inviting me to testify before the Subcommittee today on the critically important issue of drought and famine in the East Africa region. I am here in my capacity as the Senior Foreign Assistance Policy Advisor for Bread for the World Institute. Bread for the World advocates for policies and programs to end hunger. Our 2017 Hunger Report focuses on the urgency of addressing hunger crises in some of the world's most fragile environments.

Bread for the World urges Congress to reject the administration's proposed "skinny budget" cuts to foreign assistance in the face of severe droughts and famine. The proposed cuts include slashing or eliminating the very accounts that finance the U.S. government emergency response:

- Food for Peace, which funds food aid
- International Disaster Assistance—which funds non-food assistance such as water and medical services
- The Migration and Refugee Assistance account, which provides U.S. support to Somali refugees in camps in Kenya and Ethiopia.

I will focus my remarks on three points:

- First, the crises in East Africa come at an unprecedented time of progress against hunger and extreme poverty in human history. It is in fact feasible to end chronic hunger by 2030. But we must work much harder to support the efforts of people caught in these very challenging and fragile environments.
- Second, the U.S. government has all the tools needed to help address the crisis in East Africa.
- Third, this is not the time to be cutting development and humanitarian assistance.

The famine comes at a time when we've made dramatic progress in reducing hunger and poverty around the world. In 1990, approximately one in four people lived with hunger on a daily basis. By 2015, the hunger rate was cut nearly in half and stood at about one in nine. Over the same period, extreme poverty was cut in half by even more, from one in three people in the world to one in ten¹ Finally, many countries have shown remarkable progress in reducing stunting, a serious form of child malnutrition that hampers those who survive for the rest of their lives. In Ghana, for example, stunting rates have almost halved – from 36 to 19 percent– in just 11 years. Malawi has made impressive progress on reducing anemia and promoting breastfeeding, which saves lives in poor countries.²

These trends reinforce my belief in the feasibility of ending hunger and poverty. At the same time, conflict and severe droughts related to a rapidly changing climate are creating near-famine conditions in some countries and threatening to reverse the world's gains of the past decades.

When I visited Kenya in December 2016 and January 2017, I saw the devastating effects of drought on communities across the country. Pastoralists in the north have been most affected, since there is little water for the livestock they rely on. More than 2.7 million Kenyans are now food insecure, a number that's likely to reach 4 million by April. The Government of Kenya, in collaboration with the United Nations, will soon launch an appeal for \$200 million to provide timely life-saving assistance and protection.

The Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET)³ analysis of Somalia finds that the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance is expected to increase from 5 million in September 2016 to 6.2 million between February and June 2017, at the height of the pre-harvest hunger season. That is more than half the population of Somalia. Somalia has one of the highest rates of malnutrition in the world. Even brief periods of hunger or malnutrition can cause death or lifelong damage to a child's growth and development. When these occur during the 1,000 days between pregnancy and his or her second birthday, the damage for those who survive is largely irreversible and can mean lifelong health problems, diminished physical and cognitive development, and a more difficult time earning a living.⁴ This is why measures to address the current crisis must reach that population quickly.

¹ [Bread for the World Institute 2017 Hunger Report: Fragile Environments, Resilient Communities](#)

² [International Food Policy Research Institute: 2016 Global Nutrition Report](#)

³ FEWS NET: Created in 1985 by USAID after devastating famines in East and West Africa, FEWS NET provides objective, evidence-based analysis to help government decision-makers and relief agencies plan for and respond to humanitarian crises.

⁴ [One Thousand Days: Fact Sheet](#)

According to FEWS NET, an estimated \$825 million is required from January to June 2017 to implement the Somalia Operational Plan for Pre-Famine Scale Up of Humanitarian Assistance. As of March 13, 2017, a total of \$183.8 million had been received—that’s less than 23 percent of what is absolutely essential.⁵

Complicating response efforts is the fact that large parts of southern and central Somalia remain under the control or influence of Al-Shabaab, a militant group. This has restricted access to markets, basic commodities, and services. People’s livelihoods are severely disrupted. Blockades of crucial facilities such as markets, and the extortion of “taxes” from already desperate communities, prevent farmers from transporting their grains to markets, disrupting supply of food and other essential goods and services.

It’s noteworthy, however, that in spite of the serious challenges in Somalia, there is much reason to believe we can avert the crisis if we respond thoughtfully and quickly. In 2011, when famine was declared in much of Somalia, the country was in much worse political turmoil and without a functioning government. Unfortunately, by the time the famine was declared and a robust response launched, it was far too late for many. About 260,000 people, half of them children under the age of 5, died in that famine.

The situation is much different today. Despite immense challenges, including an ongoing civil war, Somalia conducted peaceful elections in early 2017. The government recently declared drought a national disaster and has appealed for help from international partners. Lessons from the 2011 famine have helped strengthen data systems so that officials can assess the crisis more accurately. Humanitarian partners now have a better system in place to get people help in forms they can immediately use.

At a time of intense debate over the U.S. budget and proposed cuts to foreign aid, it is important to remember that investing in global food security and supporting developing countries’ own efforts to feed their people literally saves lives, promotes economic growth, and promotes global stability. We also save money in the long run. We know from experience that natural disasters such as drought can destroy crops and disrupt food production, but this does not have to lead to a crisis on the scale we are witnessing today if governments and aid agencies intervene in time.

The experience of East Africa, particularly, shows that effective safety net programs can pay off very dramatically. A good example is Ethiopia’s Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP).⁶ In spite of numerous challenges, this innovative program has played a significant role in reducing hunger and food insecurity in Ethiopia. Between 2005 and 2008, the PSNP in Ethiopia led to the construction of many community assets:

- 2.1 million kilometers of stone embankments to prevent soil erosion and improve water conservation;
- About 1 billion trees planted to restore degraded watersheds and improve soil and water conservation;
- 7,000 kilometers of small-scale irrigation canals and 191,600 ponds constructed to provide water for agriculture.

⁵ [FEWS NET](#)

⁶ [World Bank: Productive Safety Net Project](#)

As a result, during the 2010-2011 famine in the region, nearly 500,000 fewer people in Ethiopia needed external assistance than in past hunger emergencies.

We have all the tools to address the current crisis as well as to prevent similar ones in the future.

The United States has demonstrated leadership through a range of tools: long-term development assistance, as well as humanitarian assistance such as food aid, and non-food assistance.

Humanitarian and diplomatic assistance

The nature of the current crisis is largely man-made. We have the ability to stop the famine, and prevent millions of deaths. But the window of opportunity is very limited. We must act decisively—now—not later. The region's most immediate needs include interventions to improve food access and address health and nutrition challenges—particularly for children and pregnant women. The appropriate response strategy has to be rapid and comprehensive, and should prioritize three things: deliver a combination of food assistance, digital cash cards, and cash vouchers that allow people to buy food in local markets; provide specialized nutrition support for mothers and children; and increase financial and logistical support for peace building initiatives to countries and communities that are hosting refugees. This should be done through bilateral and multilateral programs, including agencies such as the through the World Food Program.

The flexibility to provide assistance in ways that people can immediately use—for example, food or cash vouchers—helps people get food more quickly, helps avoid disrupting local markets, and helps save money so that more people can be reached with the same funding. Working with refugee-hosting countries and communities is important because failure to address their needs causes disruption in local economies, increasing instability and the likelihood that conflict will spread across entire regions.

Long-term development assistance

The United States should continue to lead by example, providing encouragement and motivation for global actions that prevent the need for repeated humanitarian interventions. The challenge presented in East Africa—frequent, severe droughts related to climate change and weak governance institutions—requires sustained investments. While emergency aid is vital right now, we must think beyond the current crisis. We know that it is much more cost-effective to invest in building agricultural and economic systems that are sustainable in the long run. Over the past 15 years, U.S. foreign assistance has paid greater attention to long-term investments in women and children and in country-led initiatives that lay foundations for sustainable agriculture and livelihood strategies. This will pay off in the longer term.

A good example is Feed the Future, the U.S. government's global food security initiative. The program complements funding from partner countries themselves, and works with American businesses across sectors to improve livelihoods through agriculture value chains. Feed the Future takes a comprehensive, sustainable approach to agricultural development. Investments focus on country-owned plans and emphasize the importance of gender, nutrition, response to climate change, and natural resource management. In Kenya, through support from USAID, the

U.S. Department of State, and USDA, Feed the Future prioritizes resilience-building efforts in the face of erratic rainfall and frequent drought. Because food security and climate conditions are interrelated, Feed the Future targets areas of recurrent crisis that historically have had high humanitarian needs.⁷ Drawing on resources and expertise from 10 federal agencies, Feed the Future is helping countries, including 19 focus countries, transform their agricultural sectors and sustainably grow enough food to feed their people.

U.S. multilateral leadership—in collaboration with partners—is as essential as bilateral U.S. assistance in achieving positive results and preventing calamities in future. In our increasingly interconnected world, investments in programs such as the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund. In Somalia, The Fund promotes coexistence and peaceful resolution of conflict in, and aims to support the government’s priorities for stabilization and peace, including investment in jobs. Another important mechanism is the World Bank’s International Development Association (IDA). IDA, the World Bank’s fund for the poorest countries, is particularly critical in the face of climate change, fragility, conflict, and the worst refugee crisis since World War II. Strong U.S. support for IDA18 replenishment is critical, with particular attention to fragile and conflict-affected states.⁸ This is the time to redouble our efforts and accelerate progress to end hunger once and for all.

The administration and Congress should work together to review program time frames and establish a mechanism outlining appropriate oversight to ensure that U.S. assistance in fragile and conflict-affected situations takes into account the need for effective coordination and patient capital. The current crisis is largely political. To achieve lasting peace, political solutions—in addition to humanitarian assistance—are key. The United States could step up its power to leverage mediation efforts through its diplomatic ties and presence in affected countries. Mediators should work with local communities, regional leaders, and the international community to encourage dialogue at the community, national, and regional levels to find lasting peace.

It’s time to sustain progress, not cut foreign aid

U.S. leadership on global hunger and food security has been instrumental in leveraging substantial additional resources and reversing decades of decline in funding for agricultural development. The United States has significantly helped to raise awareness of the urgency of improving nutrition in the critical window between pregnancy and age 2. In July 2009, when G-8 leaders gathered in L’Aquila, Italy, to respond to the 2007-2008 global food price crisis, the U.S. proposal to invest significantly more effort and resources in agriculture leveraged support from other donor countries, who committed to providing \$22 billion in financing for agriculture and food security. U.S. assistance plays a catalytic role to leverage other partners, including the private sector. Initiatives such as Power Africa are mobilizing more than \$40 billion from private sector partners, delivering power to 6 million people to date⁹.

I would like to leave the Committee with a few recommendations:

⁷ [2016 Feed the Future Progress Report: Growing Prosperity for a Food-Secure Future](#)

⁸ [World Bank: The Demand for IDA 18 Resources and the Strategy for the Effective Use](#)

⁹ [Power Africa Annual Report, September 2016](#)

1. Launch a robust U.S. Government response: A massive, strategic response is urgently needed to prevent death, total loss of livelihood, and further instability. The administration and Congress should work together to review program time frames and establish a mechanism outlining appropriate oversight to ensure that U.S. assistance in fragile and conflict-affected situations takes into account the need for effective coordination and patient capital.
2. Support Multilateral Assistance: The U.S. should work with the international community to increase official development assistance to conflict-affected countries such as Somalia, including through multilateral mechanisms such as the World Bank's International Development Association, the World Food Program, and the United Nations Peace Fund.
3. Strengthen the humanitarian-development nexus by expanding social protection programs: Social protection programs have been critical to progress on reducing hunger crises in the region. Providing regular and predictable cash transfers to poor households often plays a critical role in terms of filling immediate food gaps, but can also help improve the livelihoods of poor families by alleviating constraints on their productive capacity.
4. Take the long view and work with local actors to address climate change: Work with affected communities, national governments, donors, and the private sector to improve access to new technologies, knowledge, and skills for climate change mitigation, as well as facilitate networks to share information and develop new adaptation strategies. Agricultural research and extension programs, for example, should pay attention to the affected communities' significant hardships as climate change causes their communities to suffer growing resource scarcities. Efforts must focus on increasing their adaptive capacity to deal with the shocks, while also providing the necessary support—such as social protection and financial and technical assistance—to cushion their communities against additional stressors.

I sincerely thank the Subcommittee for its attention to this important issue, and for extending me the honor of testifying today.