



Warn the world. Once, starvation in Ethiopia was blamed on war or dictatorship, and pop stars sang to save lives. Democracy and peace make a difference but today – ten years on from Live Aid – the country's food deficit is hundreds of thousands of tonnes even if the rains are good. Problems are structural and complex, about poverty, land tenure, soil erosion and more. National and international efforts – from food reserves to food-for-work road building – will help, but the warnings are urgent: when the next big drought comes, famine could kill a million.

Water carriers, Ethiopia, 1983 Chris Steele-Perkins/Magnum

Ethiopia: Ten years on, could it starve again?

The Hercules transport plane swings lazily round and roars in low, dropping food to a small crowd. A potent image of assistance, portrayed by the media and governments as the best a generous world can give. In fact, a vivid example of Ethiopia's relief shortcomings in the 1980s; too little, too late, too expensive – an admission of almost total failure to cope.

In 1984 and 1985, perhaps one million people died in Ethiopia's famine; in 1994, despite decades of aid, the end of war and economic reforms, 5,000 or more died, and millions of Ethiopians were again at risk from food shortages. This chapter will examine moves to reduce vulnerability, improve food security and increase disaster preparedness – and try to answer the question: Will Ethiopia starve again?

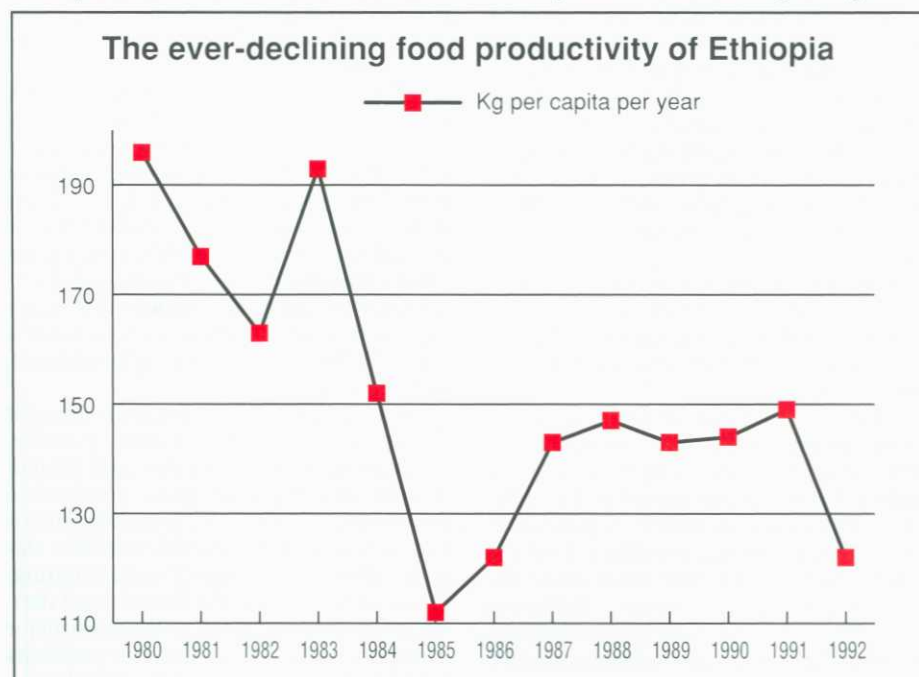
Ethiopia was once a Cold War casualty; today it may be a casualty of no Cold War. Competing global needs and lack of super-power conflict limit donor attention for development aid. A lack of hard cash limits

the benefits of peace, more open government and less restricted markets. War or drought can no longer be blamed for hunger; the food crisis is structural. By today's standards – a million tonnes of food aid a year – Ethiopia 1984 was just another bad patch.

Ethiopia is symbolic and symptomatic of Africa. One in ten Africans is Ethiopian, and amid an environment of desert, bush, forest and mountain, its 85 ethnic groups reflect Africa's human diversity. The country has suffered the erratic political, military and economic problems of many African states. For ten years, Ethiopia has avoided famine – a significant achievement – but its deep vulnerability can only be tackled by long-term commitment.

In late 1994, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) summed it up: "Only a few months ago, the Horn [of Africa] was once again bracing itself for an imminent threat of a massive famine, which has fortunately been averted." Efforts by donors and the region's govern-

Figure 10.1 Ethiopia's structural crisis: Decreasing food production. Ethiopia's per capita food production has been steadily decreasing for the past decade. With a highly disaggregated market system, fewer kilometres of roads per person than any other African country and very low levels of agricultural inputs, including fertiliser and improved seed, prospects for a swift and large increase in food production are poor.



Source: World Food Programme

ments, better weather and fewer pests, helped the Horn scrape by

Aggregate 1994-1995 cereal output in six countries – Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, Djibouti, Somalia, Kenya – was forecast at 16.4 million tonnes, 34 per cent above the previous year. But FAO added: "This favourable overall recovery of output masks the large-scale emergency food-aid needs of millions of victims of adverse weather and/or civil strife, the displaced and destitute without productive assets, refugees and returnees, demobilised soldiers and drought-affected people."

Ethiopia's 1993/94 harvest shortfall put 6.7 million people – 14 per cent of the population – at risk. Unfortunately, good harvests encourage relaxed attitudes and short memories. Ethiopia's 1992 bumper harvest meant donors cut back in 1993. When crisis loomed in April 1994, donors revised estimated needs up to 1.28 million tonnes, and they and the government had to move fast.

Not fast enough for Wollaita region, where – despite early warning systems and emergency reserves – about 6,000 people died in the Kindo Koisha area alone. The crisis was obvious, but it was missed; a 1994 household survey in Wollaita showed average daily consumption well below the 1,456 calories the same people ate in 1989/90.

Ethiopia has so many problems and opportunities that hunger could slip down the domestic agenda. One Ethiopian official said "We almost lost our way until the damned drought came along and reminded us what our priorities should be. Unfortunately, we paid in terms of lives. I hope we, and the international community, have learnt our lesson."

Economic transformation

The Derg military government's defeat ended almost 30 years of war. Ethiopia has begun a political and economic transformation. It includes market liberalisation, dismantling parastatal organisations, disengaging the public sector from economic management, greater democratisation, improving the rule of law and shifting spending from weapons to rural development

For the first time in two decades, international financial institutions are willing to invest in Ethiopia and support a "social safety net" to soften the impact of macro-economic adjustment

Despite arguments about land rights, greater market freedoms – selling crops, labour mobility, processing products and buying inputs – mean more land is cultivated. But yields are down, expansion is concentrated among wealthier farmers and market reforms may have made the situation worse for some. Better-off farmers have earned more, poorer farmers have earned less; the gap between rich and poor has grown fast

Ethiopia's population is also growing fast, up 15 million in ten years to almost 60 million, although low density limits economic development. Outside predictions of 2.9 per cent annual population growth are exceeded by Ethiopia's own Central Statistical Authority. In 1994 it predicted 3.8 per cent annual population rises for 1995 to 2000, 3.4 per cent until 2005 and then a slight reduction

Every year, up to two million births mean that Ethiopia needs an extra 320,000 tonnes of grain to stand still. Unless food output growth outstrips population increase, structural food deficits will deepen beyond today's 400,000-tonne average harvest shortfall. Figures vary for Ethiopia's agricultural growth in the 1980s – between 0.5 per cent and 1.9 per cent a year – yet to achieve the daily per capita calorie intake recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) and FAO, food output must expand 6.5 per cent a year for decades. One estimate suggests donors will need to ship in 650,000 tonnes of food aid every year until at least 2010.

This exposes Ethiopia to global food risks. It takes a large part of world food aid. World output growth is slowing and global food supply problems would threaten the entire country, especially if pessimistic forecasts – notably by the Worldwatch Institute – of peaking grain yields are correct.

After decades of assistance which unintentionally undermined agriculture, markets and coping mechanisms, Ethiopia's food-aid demands will not soon decline. In the 1980s it took two consecutive drought years to trigger famine, now deeper poverty means one bad year might be enough. The civil war only ended in May 1991. Even good harvests since then would not have been enough for families and the government to replenish food reserves, repay debts, build up cash, get rural markets going, increase jobs, invest in livestock, rebuild homes and be ready for another famine.

Ethiopians and their government are extremely poor, with crippling national and household debts. Life expectancy at birth of 46 years and labouring wages of three birr a day – just over half a Swiss franc – means millions are worse off now than at the start of the 1980s. Apart from coffee, Ethiopia has little to sell, and diversifying from an agricultural base is hard, especially with donors slow to finance a US\$1.2 billion five-year agricultural development strategy.

The climate is erratic; a serious drought within ten years is entirely possible. Drought cuts yields: ten per cent rainfall decline cuts national grain production 4 per cent and affects long-term productivity when draught animal numbers decline. Despite community road building, Ethiopia has almost the lowest road density per person in Africa, so there are major transport and communications problems for imports, exports or internal markets

Chemical fertiliser could raise yields but those poor roads, deep poverty and deforestation – animal dung now has to be used for heating and cooking – make it a luxury. Agricultural projects are exploring plough design, use of livestock and improved seeds, but for most farmers the only changes in decades have been negative: shrinking plots, falling yields, soil erosion and government interference.

The agricultural year has a May-to-October lean season before the main harvest. The annual donor cycle begins with the World Food Programme (WFP)/FAO crop assessment in November or December. Donors usually allocate food aid in January, with delivery to Assab or Djibouti taking at least four months, leaving a narrow window to position stocks before access gets tough when the rains start in June or July. More typically, from pledge to delivery can take up to eight months. Most years see late arrival of pledges and carried-over stocks. Costs rise, transport capacity gets blocked, and people go hungry or die.

After the 1993/94 effort, including government distribution of 100,000 tonnes from food reserves, FAO estimated Ethiopia's 1994/95 harvest at 7.7 million tonnes, 3 per cent up on 1993/4. Yields were down, but the cultivated area was up, with generally reduced deficits in traditional deficit areas but lower surpluses elsewhere. Commercial imports of 150,000 tonnes leave an 882,000-tonne deficit. Four million people need 427,000 tonnes of emergency food aid, then there are 455,000 tonnes for programme food aid. Late arriving 1994 pledges of 55,000 tonnes leaves donors to find 827,000 tonnes.

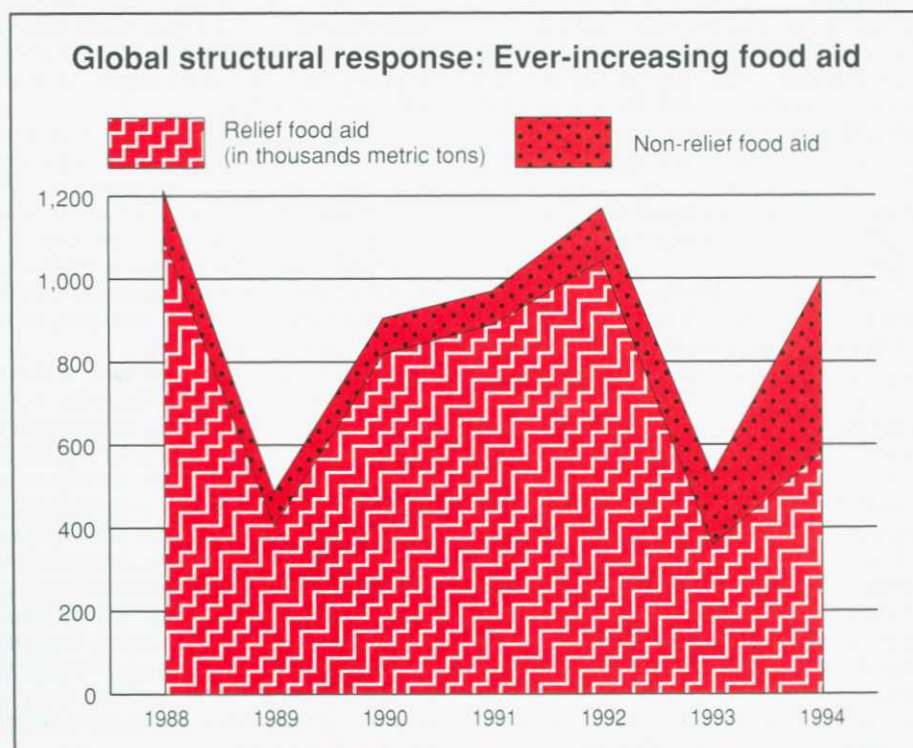
Ethiopia can grow more food, but it needs farmers with secure land rights, good tools and seeds, and working markets, able to pay for – and get – fertiliser. Logistics hamper fertiliser marketing, as does the lack of rural credit. Ethiopia's people have been getting poorer and more vulnerable for years; getting richer and less vulnerable will take years of commitment, with combinations of food aid, credit, agricultural research and better infrastructure. Food aid will not foster growth without the right policies, and long-term stability and donor support will be hard to find amid an annual cycle of hunger and appeals.

Working on food-for-work

Much Ethiopian food aid used to be free; now even most emergency food aid means food-for-work. The government would like to reach an 80 per cent food-for-work level over the next five years, but this may be optimistic. The new Employment-Based Security Net (EBSN) aims at filling gaps between relief and development as a self-selecting food security mechanism for the most vulnerable, while building community resources. The old, infirm, disabled, pregnant, young, and those looking after others, are entitled to free food. Since those excluded from food-for-work are the most vulnerable, EBSN and free food supplies must be integrated so none are missed.

Food-for-work's significant costs and complexities – managerial, logistical, administrative – include the need for timing that feeds people when they need it, offering work when the farming load is low,

Figure 10.2 Global structural response: Constant food aid. For decades Ethiopia has been given a regular supply of food aid. It now receives nearly a million tonnes of food aid both programme and emergency per year in an attempt to fill the gap between what the country produces and what its people need to eat. But for how long will the international community be willing or able to continue this effort?



Source: WFP