

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 12, 2012 at 7:23am

Kenya fights climate change, hunger while taking in refugees

by Chris Herlinger



Esther Wanjiku Wanjohi (Photos by Chris Herlinger)

NAIROBI, KENYA -- The trek Somalis fleeing famine take into neighboring Kenya is sometimes called the road of death, because it is marked by mounds of soil where the fallen, many of them children, are buried.

Along the way, mothers often have to decide to leave sickly children behind. "The agony that is experienced by these mothers is devastating," said Asha Hagi, who heads the humanitarian group Save Somali Women and Children. "Nothing is more painful than to choose which child to take and which one to leave."

For those who do survive it, the trek can end with relief -- food and shelter at Dadaab, site of one of the largest refugee encampments in the world. For Somalis fleeing the horrors of famine and drought, political instability and day-to-day insecurity, the Dadaab camps, and indeed Kenya as a whole, are seen as symbols of hope.

Yet Dadaab is an overrun and often dangerous place; late last year it was the site of a number of grenade and landmine attacks. And while it rests in a country that offers succor to Somalis, Kenya itself is facing its own considerable challenges of hunger, drought and climate change.

In the Kiamaiiko slum of Nairobi, fruit vendor Esther Wanjiku Wanjohi, a single mother of three, says she and others have felt enormous pressure in the last half year as the prices of essentials -- rent, food, water, fuel -- increased by as much as 50 percent or even doubled.

In an area of Nairobi where many sections are without electricity and sidewalks are narrow, muddy walkways during the rainy season, Wanjohi's monthly rent has increased from \$12 to \$18 and the price of rice has more than doubled to about \$1.50 a kilo.

To American ears, that may not sound like much. But it is when you consider that Wanjohi's profit comes to about 25 cents per day after paying off debts and buying the fruit she sells.

"It's been so difficult," Wanjohi said, noting she and her family often go to bed on empty stomachs. Meals are now down to twice a day: tea in the morning, and a corn cake and a little vegetable for dinner. Lunch is now a rarity, as is meat.

"We haven't eaten yet today," she said one day recently. She said she can see her children's health deteriorating. "They were in good health once," she said. "Even plump. But now you can see the change."

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While it is often triggered by natural events like drought, more often than not famine is the result of other factors -- human-caused problems rooted in politics and economics. Kenya (as well as neighboring Ethiopia) has, by nearly all accounts, been able to prevent famine that has afflicted strife-torn Somalia in an overall humanitarian crisis affecting more than 13 million people in the Horn of Africa.

The end of 2011 brought a slight improvement in the region. In November, the World Bank, citing rains and humanitarian assistance, among other factors, said both Kenya and Ethiopia were no longer experiencing "a humanitarian disaster phase" -- though both countries still faced a crisis. More ominously, though, at least 750,000 persons in Somalia could still die from food-related problems through early 2012, the world body said.

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But while Kenyans acknowledge they are far better off than their Somali neighbors (and certainly talk far more freely and critically of their political leaders than do Ethiopians about theirs), they also sound frustrated about a recent cycle of rising inflation and food prices that is affecting all stations of life. These frustrations are heard in the context of lingering animosity from a 2007-2008 political crisis that some, like the United Nations, warn could spill over into this year's national elections.

While mindful of its tradition of assisting Somalis who have crossed its borders, Kenyans say they must now deal internally with the country's own problems over food and hunger, as well as long-term problems like climate change.

For some in Kenya, the symbolism of Dadaab is problematic. "People in the camps are eating rice and

people outside the camp are not eating," one Kenyan humanitarian worker said. "We often forget that in situations like this, those in the host country or community can become disempowered."

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You can feel the worry when you talk to Fr. Paulino Mondo of Holy Trinity Parish in the Nairobi slum of Kariobangi. As a priest whose peace-building work -- supported by such groups as Catholic Relief Services -- has included battling such ills as gun violence, Mondo has a new worry for his neighbors: the gnawing, day-to-day problems stemming from rising food prices.

"You have to give people an alternative -- life without such violence," Mondo said in November. "But the food crisis is turning everything upside down."

The food problems in Kenya stem at least partly from the political instability in Libya and elsewhere in the Middle East that caused oil prices to rise last year. That prompted a chain reaction of rising costs for everything from transport to food. "It was a disaster for the poor," Mondo said. Also contributing to the problem: Unlike in 2008, when food reserves helped soften the blow of food shortages that year, there have not been enough in reserves this time to help lower the cost of food.

"It's a great crisis," said Ruth Wanjiru Mbugua, a social worker and teacher who works with the Holy Trinity community. As one example, she says that less food is being given to church and school feeding programs for hungry children.

"The problem of food," she sighed. "Food becomes everything."

Mondo worries that violence due to the food pressures will continue and worsen in 2012, and blames urbanization for much of what ails Kenya at the moment. Day-to-day life can be better in rural areas, where access to food may be greater, he argues; the crisis in urban areas is more pronounced because of the competitive nature of life in the city.

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As both a humanitarian worker with the U.S.-based humanitarian agency Church World Service and as a Kenyan who wrote a master's thesis on the issue of urban slums, Sammy Matua knows all too well the pressures facing Kenya.

First, there is the growing fear of climate change. It used to be common to feel that once March had arrived, people could count on rains. No more.

Pointing to a map of the country, Matua says the fertile valleys south and east of the capital were once "wet" areas where vegetables and sugar cane grew in abundance. But as areas have dried up and as land has become consolidated, reducing employment in rural areas, people have been forced to move to Nairobi in hopes of finding work.

Meanwhile, in northern Kenya, areas where once cattle roamed, the land needed to raise livestock is becoming scarcer, increasing the price of meat, a beloved but increasingly rare food on tables in Kenya. Fights over cattle are on the rise, putting additional pressure on food markets.

Another problem: the tensions and increased insecurity throughout northern and eastern Kenya because of Kenya's uneasy relationship with Somalia. Meanwhile, farming in western Kenya is becoming more perilous because of rising costs of fertilizer and the overuse of land.

Then there are the problems of urban Kenya. If there is often a feeling of expectation in coming to the city -- "it must be good" is a frequent hope, Matua said -- the reality of urban life is that it is difficult and arduous.

"Everybody is coming here," Mondo said of Nairobi. "But we cannot feed everyone here. We are now stepping on each other's toes." Urban centers find themselves filled with one-time rural residents and farmers who know how to feed themselves but now can't manage in urban areas.

When one-time food producers find themselves struggling to even find food, "they feel shame," Matua said. "People lose their backup support." While they may be surrounded by thousands like themselves, paradoxically "in the city you find yourself dropped in the middle of nowhere." The result? Broken families, desperation, the turn to things that would seem unimaginable in rural settings, like prostitution.

"All of these problems are interconnected," Matua said, noting that at the level of personal economy, they amount to real tragedy. "It's extremely expensive to be poor," he said of the cost of living in Nairobi. "You can't sustain your life here."

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Kevin and Rosalyn Ouma of Nairobi's Mathare slum know too well that truism.

The parents of three children, ages 10 months to 13 years, and both originally from rural Kenya, the couple has been feeling the pressure more and more as they struggle to support their family on Kevin's \$2-a-day salary as a day laborer and delivery man.

Meals come less frequently now -- lunch and a little porridge in the evening. Things have gotten so tight that the family has to choose between flour or sugar. (Flour is winning out, though the complaints about the rising cost of sugar are heard everywhere.)

Complicating life for the couple is that both are HIV-positive and are taking antiviral medicines on empty stomachs, making them feel depleted and tired. Luckily, they receive medicine and counseling from the nearby Baraka Health Center, a local clinic that receives funding from Catholic donors.

While the visits from Baraka staff are welcome, there are still undeniable problems. Everyone in the family is losing weight, for example. "The children realize it, too," Kevin Ouma said. How do they respond to the children's questions and complaints about not enough food? "We just say that we'll eat later," he said. Lately there has been one modification though -- better to eat at night so as not to go to bed entirely hungry.

The stress is palpable. "As a father I feel I should provide adequately for the children," Kevin Ouma said, looking blankly down at the floor and at his feet. But he feels trapped in a low-paying job amid a

contracting economy, rising food prices and living in an area that often doesn't feel safe.

Nor does it always feel neighborly. Recent tensions have put barriers up between neighbors, resulting in a lonely, privatized life in which there is often not much comity. Rosalyn Ouma hates it when others ask, "Why aren't you cooking today?"

"Everyone is keeping to themselves," Kevin Ouma observes. In such an environment, he added, Kenya's political leaders -- widely perceived as doing little to ease the food crisis -- seem detached and very far away indeed. "Our leaders, they are so distant from our problems," he said.

The Oumas take inspiration from their Christian faith and in hopes of something better for their children. "We hope our daughters will go to the best schools so that they will not suffer like their parents," Rosalyn Ouma said. "There is chance for a better life for those who go to college."

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That is precisely the message Fr. Pius Kyule, a Roman Catholic priest in

the Machakos district, a rural area southeast of Nairobi, tells his congregants and neighbors. He is advising parents to focus on education for their children because he sees little future for farming or cattle-raising. "With an education," he said, "you can help a whole village."

He sees life in rural Kenya as becoming less and less sustainable. More and more people are coming to him daily, asking for food.

Kyule and his diocesan colleagues, who are working with Catholic Relief Services in implementing a food security program, note that many households are doing their best just to maintain a diet of about a kilo of beans for six people.

The mounting problems are partly due to the rising food prices and partly due to drought, which is causing huge headaches for subsistence farmers. "It's getting worse every year and people are suffering," Kyule said.

In another sign of the interconnectedness of these problems, more and more people are cutting down trees in order to produce charcoal in order to buy food. "They're not replanting," Kyule said, resulting to the increasingly denuded countryside now seen in parts of Machakos.

It is a stark contrast when the cleric, 60, first visited the area in the 1950s -- when wild animals roamed and hills were verdant. Now, with little rain falling, more and more people are finding it hard to sustain a living in the desiccated region. "It's like there is no hope," he said.

While farmers like Joshua Muvizu, 33, have not given up hope entirely, it is also true that the cycle of planting and replanting with few rains has not helped the land.

Muvizu, who farms on seven acres, has to work as a day laborer to support his family; he hopes to join other farmers who have begun terracing as a way to conserve land and expand crop lands. But in the meantime, he sees a quiet crisis developing -- "sometimes in the market, there's no food -- no beans, no corn."

It is those realities that make many Kenyans want more from their government in terms of planning so the country is not lurching from crisis to crisis.

Mondo believes the country needs a dual track: urban planning in the cities and priority given to job creation in rural areas.

Sammy Matua seconded that, saying Africa as a whole has not enjoyed the benefits of long-term planning. "It's like fire-fighting -- fires are put out but there is not any overall approach other than dealing with crises. The long-term is never addressed.

"Governments in Africa only react to crises, but there needs to be more of an emphasis on being proactive," he said. "Because climate change, development and food -- they're all interconnected."

Mondo notes a cruel paradox in one aspect of Kenyan economic priorities: Among Kenya's most profitable exports are flowers, which are grown in large greenhouses outside of Nairobi.

"If half of the greenhouses had tomatoes or beans [for local consumption], we'd solve a lot of problems," he said. "Right now, Kenyans need food, not flowers."

Next issue: A way forward; possible solutions.

[Chris Herlinger, a writer for the humanitarian agency Church World Service, is a New York-based freelance journalist. He was recently on assignment in Kenya and Ethiopia for NCR. His book *Rubble Nation: Haiti's Pain, Haiti's Promise* was just published by Seabury Books.]

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