



**Church World Service Assessment Report on
Food Shortages and the Threat of Starvation in Kenya**

January 2009

On January 9, 2009, the government of Kenya announced that over ten million Kenyans faced starvation due to massive food shortages. In a country of only thirty-six million, ten million people facing food shortages means that one out of three Kenyans are facing starvation in 2009. The reasons for the lack of food are many and varied. Violence following the disputed Presidential election in December 2007 stalled maize production across the Rift Valley, including Kenya's Western and Nyanza provinces. In 2008 a massive drought struck large sections of Kenya's Eastern Province, leaving farmers with failing crops. The general lack of an overall food security plan for Kenya has further exacerbated the situation.

In January of 2009, Church World Service decided to travel to parts of Eastern Province to assess the effects of the massive food shortages on the ground in Mwingi, Kitui, Machakos, and Makueni Districts. In addition, the team sought to assess the impact of the 2008 drought upon local Kenyan communities. The situation in all of the districts visited was desperate, with the area around Mwingi, Makueni, and parts of Machakos in critical danger.

Cattle on the way to the market in Kitui, being sold for less than \$100. Normally they would be sold for over \$250.



When one first arrives to Kitui, a small town in Eastern Province, the stature of livestock being brought to the market catches the eye. Cattle and goats number in the dozens, but all appear sick and emaciated, ribs protruding from under dust-caked skin. Travelling further on, getting off the straight main paved road onto the winding dirt road, a world of desperation awaits the visitor.

Drought is evident at first glance. As the road draws closer to the community of Kaikungu, field after field of ploughed land lies desolate, with fits and spurts of stunted maize crop protruding from cracked earth.

This is a land of dried up riverbeds, of dry fields and no crops. The terrain is rocky, hilly and generally not well-suited to farming. Everywhere along the road barren fields follow. No one is to be seen along the road until the office of Cosmas Kitumbi, the Area Councillor, appears.

Blighted fields of Kaikungu



At a meeting with Councillor Kitumbi and local elders, the full extent of the crisis striking the area around Kitui and Mwingi Districts, becomes evident. The situation is very similar in Machakos and Makueni districts.

- In Councillor Kitumbi's ward there are over seven hundred households, with an average of eight people per family. Ninety percent of those households depend on agriculture for their livelihoods, aiming to grow enough food to not only survive on, but to sell at a profit as well. According to Councillor Kitumbi,

eighty-five percent of people in his ward are facing starvation. The “long rains” of November and December, upon which people plan their harvest for the upcoming year, proved infrequent and erratic. In fact, as each of the ten elders in attendance attested, December saw no rain fall at all.

Jones M.A. Ndumu

- Jones M.A. Ndumu, an elder of the Kaikungu community related, “I have never seen a situation like this before in all of my seventy years”, adding with a slow shake of his head, “December has never been completely dry.”



The lack of rain led to a total crop failure across many farms, with few farmers able to claim small amounts of maize growth. People in Kaikungu are becoming desperate. Levels of debt and crime have soared as food supplies run ever lower.



Dead maize in Makeni District

Masses of hungry people come to Councillor Kitumbi’s office seeking food handouts from the Kenyan Government, but even government supplies are not sufficient to feed all whose crops have failed. A shattered local agricultural economy proves a vicious cycle of depleting incomes and starvation for farming families.

Many farmers turn to raising cattle and goat as a vehicle for income. This method of circumnavigation has proved fatal in that it has generated an over abundance of emaciated livestock in the marketplace. Farmers are forced to sell their animals at radically low prices to meet the market demand. As a result, very little return in profit is being made on livestock investment and money continues to be lost. Hope is fast becoming a rare commodity.

Speaking to Kaikungu's farmers at their homes paints a personal picture of what hunger does to a family. Women and men, husbands and wives blame each other for the lack of food and money.



Children from Kaikungu, desperate for food, have dropped out of school in Mwingi District.

Small children go days without having meals. Teenagers are leaving home in droves to find food wherever they can. Some men leave home to travel to large cities in search of work, returning with money as well as HIV on occasion. . Speaking to the women of the community, the repeated message is “Food, please, we need food.”



Blind Kwela Mwanzili walking cross her fields to her home.

Kwela Mwanzili is blind, deaf, can't remember when her husband died, and head of a household of ten. In years when the rain comes, Mama Mwanzili would be leading the harvesting of her fields with her children and grandchildren. This year, with no rain, she experienced a total crop failure. Her sons have disappeared, leaving her responsible for two daughters-in-law and seven grandchildren. Her grandchildren

now fall asleep hungry, and she sleeps with tears in her eyes. "There is no food, there is no hope. If things do not improve, we will die."

The "short rain" season of March-May may provide some relief, but expectations are not high. According to Councilor Kitumbi, the "short rains" are typically even more erratic than the "long rains" and no harvesting plans can be based off of them. Even if rains do fall in March-May, 80% of all crops will fail to reach maturity due to the lack of rains in November-December. In short, the situation seems critical, with starvation becoming a deadly reality. Between and now and the next expected rains, and the time that it takes crops to mature (three months in this area), food supplies are desperately needed in Mwingi, Makueni, and parts of Machakos.

Reported by Henry William Coates

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