

# East Africa: A climate crisis that is only expected to worsen | Credendo

## Endless droughts highlight the acute risks due to climate change in East Africa

Over the last couple of years, eastern Africa has provided a very clear illustration of [the impact of severe droughts](#) in economic, political and humanitarian terms. Six consecutive rainy seasons with low levels of precipitation since 2020 have impacted millions in Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya. This multi-season drought was produced by a multi-year La Niña event, which was most likely exacerbated by global climate change given that small changes in sea-surface temperatures can lead to bigger changes in weather patterns.

The immediate consequence of the drought that lasted until 2023 was famine. Between 2019 and 2022, the region also suffered from a locust invasion that has been described as the worst in 25 years for Ethiopia and Somalia, and the worst in 70 years for Kenya. Three years under these conditions resulted in more than 23 million people across parts of Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia facing severe hunger. And failed harvests were not the only factor pushing up food prices. Regional conflicts, such as the ongoing civil war in Sudan and Somalia's conflict around Las Anod, also played a role, as did higher global food prices amid Russia's war in Ukraine.

As more and more people left their homes in search of food for themselves or their cattle, refugee flows started to increase. The UN estimates that 2.3 million people have been internally displaced in Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya due to drought, and more than 264,000 refugees have crossed into neighbouring countries.

This movement of people can lead to [conflict between different groups](#), as witnessed in the north of Kenya's Rift Valley region. Long-standing tensions between herders and landowners have turned violent as the lack of rain has forced herders to travel further in search of pasture and water. This brings them in conflict with other herders and owners of large farms and conservancies.

The increased number of droughts also has an impact on electricity generation. A significant part of the region's electricity is generated by hydropower, so when water levels drop too far, the turbines will no longer spin. In anticipation of this problem, both Kenya and Tanzania have been reducing their reliance on hydropower for years. In Tanzania, the hydropower share of the electricity mix peaked in 2003 at 96%, but has since fallen back to around one third of total electricity generation. Kenya saw a similar evolution with hydropower, with 77% of electricity production in 1995 and 30% in 2021. It should be noted that this decrease was not caused by an absolute reduction in hydropower capacity, but rather the expansion of different sources of energy (mainly natural gas for Tanzania, and

geothermal and wind for Kenya). Tanzania is currently suffering from electricity shortages, even after the end of last year's drought, which shows that this vulnerability has not disappeared yet.

### **As La Niña leaves the scene, El Niño enters**

In mid-2023, the La Niña weather pattern shifted to a severe El Niño event, and the drought-stricken Horn of Africa began to experience high amounts of rainfall. As the arid soil could not absorb the water, this resulted in devastating floods across many areas, and since the current El Niño event is expected to last at least until spring 2024, rainfall is expected to continue.

As with the droughts, flooding has led to many people fleeing their homes. However, unlike a drought, this is not a gradual process but rather a very abrupt one, as floods destroy physical infrastructure, inundate fields and drown livestock. Refugees and internally displaced people have joined those fleeing armed conflicts in the region. The Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) have reported that the floods have now displaced nearly 1.5 million people across Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia.

Flooding can also cause considerable health impacts: floodwater can carry human waste, which in turn contaminates drinking water. This puts people at risk of diseases such as typhoid fever or cholera. Meanwhile, temporary pools of stagnant water provide ideal breeding grounds for Anopheles mosquitoes, the primary vector for malaria.

Governments are also affected by these natural disasters as they play an important role in tackling the consequences of disasters and preparation for possible future events. Both droughts and floods negatively impact public finances, since they result in lower tax revenues as well as higher spending to rebuild destroyed infrastructure or to provide aid to impacted people. Unfortunately, the public finances of the region are some of the most precarious on the continent: Kenya is considered to be at a high risk of debt distress by the IMF and the World Bank, while Ethiopia defaulted on its bonds in December 2023 and Somalia is already in debt distress. This severely limits their options to deal with the consequences of these extreme weather events, or to take measures to prepare for future occurrences. In 2022, the IMF established the Resilience and Sustainability Trust (RST) to help low-income and lower-middle-income countries build resilience to these external shocks, with SDR 407.1 million approved for Kenya under this arrangement in July 2023. This is a welcome development, but the region will require much more external funding in order to prepare. The countries have calculated their nationally determined contributions (NDCs) required to implement their climate goals under the Paris Agreement – for the period from 2021 to 2030, Kenya estimates that it will need USD 62 billion, while Ethiopia sets this figure at USD 316 billion and Somalia at USD 55.5 billion.

### **What is the impact of climate change in the long term?**

Looking forward, the El Niño weather patterns are expected to become more common and more pronounced. In the Horn of Africa, global warming is likely to bring longer and more intense droughts, while more El Niño events would cause more devastating floods. This cycle will accelerate environmental degradation, which in turn will push down agricultural yields, expand food insecurity, intensify disputes over land and water and create additional refugees looking for more habitable areas, both within and across countries.

The negative fallouts from climate change would inevitably raise the level of country risk in East Africa in the coming years, with an increase in the frequency and severity of extreme weather events. These events could hit agriculture production and economic performance, push up food prices (which are often associated with social unrest), increase the risk of violent conflicts and put further pressure on public finances. In addition, the increased frequency of extreme weather is likely to worsen current account deficits in East Africa, by, among others, decreasing the income generated from cash crops (such as tea, coffee or cashews) when harvests fail, or by keeping tourists away. There would also be an increased need for imports to rebuild destroyed infrastructure. Looking at all the interrelated risks caused by extreme weather in the region, it is clear that they cannot be ignored. Therefore, Credendo takes them into consideration when assessing the MLT political risk that represents the solvency of a country.

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