

## **Droughts and Famine in Ethiopia – Past and Current**

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**Abstract** Droughts are common in Ethiopia with drought records as far back as 250 BC as derived from Nile flow observations. In recent years, the frequency of drought occurrence was every six years from 1900 to 1990. Severe droughts that caused mass famine death are the 1888–1892, 1973–1975 and 1983–1985 droughts with the latter two causing 100s of thousand deaths. Northern Ethiopia droughts are associated with the El Nino climatic condition. The current El Nino is closely matched to the 1972 event. The 1983–1985 drought drew international attention with association of Ethiopia with famine. Population growth that is not matched by food production growth exposes more people to famine. Any responsible government must accept this fact and organize itself to mitigate drought impacts through land reform, agricultural production improvement, improved food storage, food processing, transport and marketing, emergency food storage, capable emergency management institutions, early warning system and timely request for food and medicine aid. But the history of the past four Ethiopian governments’ reaction to drought and famine has been more or less similar. First, denial of the occurrence of drought and second the denial of death from famine. Blocking access to foreign reporters and keeping the lid on news of drought and famine has been practiced. Drought and famines also have contributed to shortening the tenure of the governments. The use of drought and famine as a military strategy has been reported and observed. This is expressed by denial of famine, delaying of aid, blocking of aid, imposing political condition to receive aid, and by turning the region to conflict zone and inaccessible for food aid agencies. Recent reports show diversion of food aid and corruption in the distribution system is a major problem. Currently, it is reported that the government gave instruction not to talk about drought and famine. In a recent statement by the person in charge of disaster management, Shiferaw Tekelemariam, stated that he has no knowledge of anyone dying of famine in Ethiopia while interviews of starving people and reports of death from famine are on you tube (Ethio Forum, December 22, 2023).

Drought and famine management is time sensitive where the final stage of mass famine death can’t be contained before heavy losses. The fall is harvesting season. The famine will be worse in late spring and summer specially if Belg rain also fails.

Chronological progression of Ethiopian drought as observed in the 1973-1975 drought and famine.

1. Farmers plant their summer seeds and the crops fail due to extended lack of moisture
2. Farmers consume their supply from storage
3. Farmers sale their animals and other materials to buy food
4. Famine ensues and non-edible vegetation and soil are consumed
5. Migration in food search starts usually to the closest urban areas and highways
6. Mass famine death starts with in a week of the last meal
7. Food aid arrival after few days of starvation accelerates death through diarrhoea and vomiting as the body is compromised.

Ethiopia’s drought and famine show a picture contrary to the fat or political farm propaganda by the government making it hard to acknowledge the famine in the country and get timely assistance to the people. A country that produces “surplus wheat” and “exports” is not expected to starve. The fat farm is the political

demonstration farm where inputs as fertilizer, improved seeds, machinery, and labour are abundantly provided for showing the world a success in agriculture that should be envied as stated many times by the country's officials. These kinds of statements discourage food donors. These are farms that operate under economic loss where hard currency is spent on improved seeds, fertilizer, tractors, harvesters, and other input while the peasant farmer watches from the side of the farm. Wheat is not a high value crop with current market value of \$26 for 100 kg (1,430 Eth. Birr). These farms are one time operation as it is cheaper to buy wheat. The plan to buy the wheat from the farmer, and export to recover hard currency, fired back when the farmers hid their product and caused high cost of wheat in the country. It is a fundamental responsibility of any government to gather objective data and make economic based decisions in food production and other decision making to be sustainable economically and in other aspects. This seminar presentation will cover historical droughts, drought management, and the potential risk of the current drought and famine. The myth and science of cloud seeding or artificial rain making will be discussed.