Kenya Red Cross

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Climate, Nature & Humanitarian Diplomacy in Kenya

How do we reframe Humanitarian Action for a Never-Ending Climate Disasters?

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Summary Points

The policy brief is informed by evidence from climate, nature, and humanitarian practice in Kenya to discuss how climate and climate-induced disasters have ceased being a cyclical shock to a frequently occurring humanitarian shocks every two years, and at times overlapping. It frames this dilemma through new arguments of humanitarian diplomacy, anticipatory action, and ethical prioritization amidst climate change.

The highlight of the brief is the following policy implications:

- Humanitarian systems focused on short-term emergency relief are no longer sufficient in reoccurring climate-induced disasters
- Anticipatory action is the best and least cost-effective solution to reactive humanitarian response.
- Early warning and climate information systems are already developed and sufficient, whereas policy and financing mechanisms are not pacing up scientific competence.
- The governance of droughts and other climate-induced disasters should combine disaster, climate related and environmental policies.
- Humanitarian diplomacy needs to be changed to deal with fairness, prioritization and burden-sharing in a scenario of chronic climate vulnerability.

Introduction

Across Kenya and the wider Horn of Africa, drought, floods and other shocks as a result of climate, environmental degradation, food insecurity and displacement have become the hallmark of humanitarian need. These problems are prominent especially in the arid and semi-arid regions where climate variability coincides with poverty, vulnerable livelihood systems and limited access to public service delivery.

Climate-induced shocks such as drought have been exacerbated in Kenya because of poor performance of recent rainfall seasons. By the beginning of 2026, more than 2 million individuals are in acute food insecurity in arid and semi-arid counties[1]. The same trends are found in other neighbouring nations of the Horn of Africa highlighting the regional and transboundary impact of climate risk[2].

[1]National Drought Management Authority (NDMA), Drought Situation Update: December 2025 (Nairobi: Government of Kenya, 2025).

[2]IGAD Climate Prediction and Applications Centre (ICPAC), Greater Horn of Africa Climate Outlook Forum (GHACOF) Reports (Nairobi: ICPAC, 2024).

This humanitarian landscape is currently defined by a paradoxical relationship between economic resilience and systemic vulnerability. While Kenya's inflation declined to 4.5% and real GDP growth is projected at 4.9% between 2025 and 2027, the national poverty headcount rate remains high at 39.8%[3]. This creates a critical threshold where any sudden-onset disaster exploits persistent vulnerabilities, evidenced by the fact that nearly 1.8 million people experienced high levels of acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 or above) between July and September 2025[4]. Furthermore, the government has officially recognized climate change as the "fifth threat to national security," a designation that mandates the integration of disaster risk reduction into all levels of development planning.

Notably, these conditions are not episodic anymore. Climate change and the projections of the regions reveal that climate-induced disasters are increasingly becoming more frequent, more serious, and with impacts on communities being felt for longer periods[5]. However, the systems of humanitarian response are still highly organized by short term emergency appeals and temporary relief, which results in the endemic discrepancy between risk, response and resilience.

This policy brief suggests that the climate disasters such as drought in Kenya must now be seen as a structural humanitarian situation in need of a complete reassessment of humanitarian diplomacy, funding and governance.

The Policy Problem

The current hazard profile is dominated by a 90% likelihood of drought for the late 2025 season, a critical period since the October–December (OND) rains contribute up to 70% of annual rainfall in parts of Kenya. As of late 2025, 1.8 million people are experiencing high levels of acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 or above), a figure projected to rise to 2.1 million by early 2026[6]. Nevertheless, humanitarian cases of extreme weather events keep on increasing despite substantial investments in humanitarian response. The present policy problem is characterized by three issues that are interrelated.

To start with, response is reactive. Even though warning mechanisms and seasonal weather forecast systems are quite predictable at predicting climate disasters risk several months before it happens, humanitarian funding and response support systems are often triggered only after a crisis-triggering threshold is achieved[7][8].

[3]World Bank Group. (2025, November 24). Kenya shows economic resilience, but sustained progress depends on accelerating procompetitive reforms. World Bank. https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2025/11/24/kenya-shows-economic-resilience-sustained-progress-depends-on-procompetitive-reforms

[4]Integrated Food Security Phase Classification. (2025, September 8). Kenya: Acute food insecurity and acute malnutrition analysis (July 2025 - January 2026)

[5]World Meteorological Organization (WMO), Multi-Hazard Early Warning Systems: A Checklist (Geneva: WMO, 2023).

[6]Kenya: Acute food insecurity situation for July - September 2025 and projection for October 2025 - January 2026 (ASAL) | IPC - Integrated Food Security Phase Classification. (n.d.). https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/details-map/en/c/1159707/?iso3=KEN

[7]United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Anticipatory Action in Humanitarian Response (New York: OCHA, 2021).

[8]International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), Anticipatory Action: Acting Early to Alleviate Human Suffering (Geneva: IFRC, 2020).

Second, the systems of financing are incompatible with the climate realities. There is a lot of short-term emergency appeals in managing eco-disasters response, which restricts investment in preparedness, early action and resilience. It leads to increased long-term expenditure and preventable human suffering[9].

Third, there is a growing ethical and political tension. Prioritization dilemma is inevitable among humanitarian actors whenever climate impacts are experienced globally and on a massive scale. The question of what people are supported or not, those who wait and those who do not are more debated, and seldom are they shaped by any clear and agreed ethical principles[10].

These issues combined are an indication of the necessity of the policy change that will involve climate science, humanitarian ideals and foreign policy.

Key Findings and Evidence

1. Climate Disasters are Foreseeable but Under-Responded.

Projections made by ICPAC and national meterorological services are always predicting Increasing climate variability, including heightened risks of climate-induced disasters across the horn of Africa[2]. International organizations like the Early Warnings for All of the United Nations demonstrate that climate disaster risk is not a mystery any longer, but a predictable trend[11].

2. Early Warning Does Not Equate to Early Action.

Although initiatives have been enhanced through programmes like the UK-supported Weather and Climate Information Services (WISER) to empower African countries to increase the production and consumption of climate information, it is demonstrated that forecasts have little effect on initiating early finance or early response[12].

3. Preemptive Response Decreases Humanitarian Effort.

The experience of Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has proven that pre-disaster funding is more economical than reactive response, as anticipatory action, under which funding is released upon agreed-upon triggers, is shown to be more cost-effective than responding to emergencies[5][13].

[9]Overseas Development Institute (ODI), Bridging Climate Adaptation and Humanitarian Response in Protracted Crises (London: ODI, 2022).

[10]Hugo Slim, Humanity, Nature and Obligation in the Climate Era (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2023).

[11]United Nations, Early Warnings for All: Executive Action Plan (New York: United Nations, 2022).

[12]Weather and Climate Information Services (WISER), From Forecasts to Decisions: Using Climate Information for Preparedness and Policy (UK Met Office / FCDO, 2021).

[13]International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and German Red Cross, Forecast-Based Financing: Mitigating the Humanitarian Impacts of Drought in East Africa (Geneva, 2022).

4. Co-ordination weaknesses in Governance Structures are an issue which influences the effectiveness of response to Climate-induced disasters.

Climate-related disasters governance is still decentralized among the humanitarian, climate, environmental and development agencies. This disintegration is a weakness to coordination, accountability and long-term reduction of risks[6].

Policy Implications

1. The governments and donors are supposed to incorporate anticipatory action in the national systems of managing disasters, and the triggers should be determined beforehand and associated with the climate predictions and pre-disaster warnings[54].

2. Areas prone to climate-induced disasters should be prioritized for humanitarian funding through multi-year, flexible instruments that bridge humanitarian response with climate adaptation and resilience[6].

3. Local institutions and counties should be placed in a position as first responders, and there should be direct access to funding, climate data and decision-making power[12].

4. Humanitarian risk reduction strategies should be seen as protecting the environment and restoring the ecosystem, rather than developing it on the same scale.

5. Humanitarian diplomacy should cease focusing on access negotiation and should focus on ethical debate on prioritization, burden-sharing and responsibility in a climate-altered world[7] .

Policy Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Institutionalize Anticipatory Action within National climate governance frameworks.

The government through the support of Non-Governmental Organizations, ought to incorporate forecast-based triggers in the systems of disaster management so that early responses and finance can be achieved.

Recommendation 2: Align climate financing with long-term and flexible instruments.

The donors are advised to focus on funding mechanisms to bridge between humanitarian response, climate adaptation and resilience in climate disasters prone areas.

Recommendation 3: Enhance climate-induced disasters preparedness and response, that are locally led.

The National and County governments are to invest more resources and decision-making power in the local institutions in the ASAL counties.

Recommendation 4: Incorporate protection of ecosystem into planning.

The protection of rangeland, water, and ecosystem should be considered the humanitarian risk reduction by environmental actors and humanitarian actors.

Recommendation 5: Employ humanitarian diplomacy to overcome prioritization and burden-sharing.

Humanitarian actors ought to lead a coordinated discussion between governments, donors, and regional organizations to settle on sensible prioritization principles in a permanent climate crisis.

Recommendation 6: Expedite the assenting of the National DRM Bill 2023 to secure a predictable National DRM Fund.

Conclusion

Climate-driven shocks in Kenya and in the larger Horn of Africa are no longer a once-in-a-large-crisis, but it is a humanitarian constant condition, as influenced by climate change. The science is unmistakable, the dangers are familiar and human costs of an inaction are increasing.

The decisive policy issue is not that there should be changes in humanitarian systems, but that they will change in time before the next disaster that is only expected is experienced. This challenge must be met through anticipatory action, better financing, a new form of governance and a new humanitarian diplomacy, based on justice, foresight and shared responsibility.

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