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FOOD SECURITY

Famine strikes again

With no long-term solution in sight to the recurrent droughts in the country, the people of Turkana and their livestock are once again staring death in the face

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When will Kenya have enough to feed all its citizens?

For years the government has depended on relief food when famine strikes. Attempts to find a lasting solution to the recurrent droughts have ended in many policy papers being drafted, but none implemented. Famine is once again ravaging Turkana, and it seems history is about to repeat itself

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It is six o'clock in the morning in Turkana County, but the day is already blazing hot. We meet several pastoral families with their animals. They are moving towards the lake, and have been on the road for days.

Vast areas of land lie bare, and dry riverbeds have formed huge cracks. A young boy drives a herd of goats across the road to graze on some thorny bushes on the other side.

Twice, children holding plastic water bottles wave us down and ask for drinking water. Like the ground beneath their feet, their lips are dry and cracked.

Occasionally, there's a wind gust, with lots of dust from a

distance, we see tiny scattered structures, which turn out to be manyattas.

"This is Nakurio village in Kerio Division. It is one of those that are always hard hit by drought," our guide, Ngeli Son tells us.

The roar of the engine of our vehicles brings people out of their manyattas, some holding basins or baskets. "They think you are 'the food aid people'" he explains.

Brown fruit

In one of the homesteads a woman in her thirties, Selina Aroto, is hitting a brown fruit with a wooden pin. Beside her, two naked boys, both under five, fight for the falling pieces, before she gives each of them some.

Aroto and her eight children have never had sufficient food. She does not remember how

many times she has suffered because of drought, but recalls the three that have happened during their seven years in Nakurio village.

"For three days I have not cooked in this house. We have been eating only this wild fruit, mkoma," Aroto says.

Any time a drought hits, food prices rise, and poor Kenyans have to adopt survival tactics. Some migrate, while others resort to eating fewer meals a day and selling their land or livestock. The people of Turkana live in constant fear of famine, which has become cyclical.

"When the 'government people' announced that another drought was looming, we had to reduce the number of meals we eat from two to one a day. And food prices went up. We have now used up all the food we had," explains Aroto's husband, Musa Lodeiya.

Their three-year-old son, who looks stunted, rises and sits on Aroto's lap and begins suckling, breasts and starts suckling.

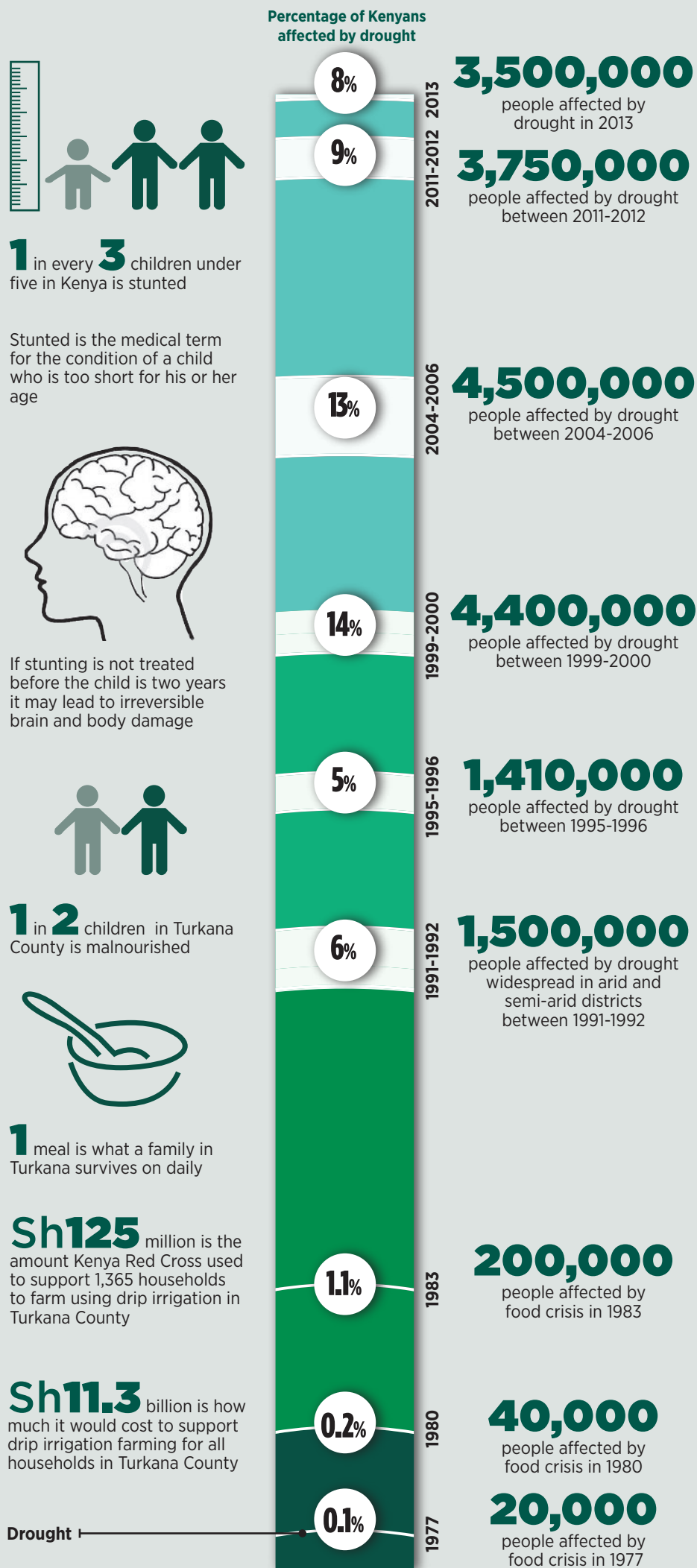
"He is doing it because he is hungry but there is nothing coming out. I feel a lot of pain because I have also not eaten but there is nothing I can do," Aroto explains.

The periods between droughts have grown increasingly shorter, with the most recent ones being separated by two or three years.

Prof Richard Odingo, the former Co-Chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, says that this cycle will continue, and possibly worsen.

"It is getting warmer globally

FOOD CRISIS IN KENYA



SOURCES: Ministry of Special Programs, Kenya Demographic Health Survey 2008 - 09, UNICEF, Ministry of Health, Kenya Red Cross. **GRAPHICS:** MICHAEL MOSOTA | NATION



Faces of hunger: The National Drought Management Authority in Turkana is still talking of reviving irrigation schemes, but there is no indication of when this will be done.

PHOTO | MERCY JUMA

and the climate is not constant, like we want to believe. Arid and semi-arid areas will always be the first to be affected. The dry spells will become more frequent in the coming years," he says.

Policy documents

But even with the recurrent droughts, no long-term solutions have been put in place. Many policy documents have been drafted, but none has been implemented.

"We always wait until the last minute to act, even when early warning signs are given. The government then starts looking for relief food, which sometimes come too late," says Prof Odingo.

For years the government has relied on food aid and donations in times of famine. USAID, a major food aid donor, spends billions of shillings feeding hunger-stricken Kenyans.

Mary Elim has been receiving food from USAID and other donors for a long time. But for some reason, the donations have not come for several weeks.

The mother of four returned home from the Lokichar Health Centre, where she had gone to give birth to her fourth born, only three days ago. She is weak from hunger and her breasts are dry.

"I don't remember the last time I ate. My throat is sore, and my stomach hurts. I cannot breastfeed my baby since there I don't have even a drop of milk," she explains.

"Sometimes passers-by give me goat milk for her. She cries a lot and there is nothing I can do, so I just give her water," says Elim.

The situation is has grave consequences. Turkana

County has a high number of malnourished children, with two out of every 10 children underweight, and three out of 10 stunted.

"We expect the cases of malnutrition to rise when the drought sets in," says John Ekiru, a nutritionist at Lodwar District Hospital.

"Yet even as a county, we have not set any money aside for nutrition."

Severe drought

Yet food security is possible in Turkana. In 2011, a severe drought, said to be the worst in 60 years, ravaged the horn of Africa. Kaikor Division in Turkana County bore the brunt. Women and children died of starvation and men cried because of hunger. A call was made, and was heeded by donors and well-wishers. Thus the Kenya for Kenyans initiative was born.

Amid-to-long-term integrated food security and livelihood project funded by Kenyans for Kenyans was started. The main aim was to provide another means of earning a livelihood to complement pastoralism, which has been marred by cyclic droughts and characterised by

resource-based conflicts and other natural catastrophes such as flash floods, heat waves and dust storms.

Nicodemus Okangu, the Branch Co-ordinator of the Kenya Red Cross in Turkana County, believes that with the right technology, food security, can be achieved in the county.

"We did a needs assessment and a lot of planning to ensure that the food security project we start will be sustained. We identified four sites in Kaikor Division then started this project in 2012. We sank four boreholes and installed solar panels. We then adopted drip irrigation and installed shadenets and also started open grounds. The community here now grows, maize, sorghum, tomatoes, butternuts, and watermelons," he says.

With Sh125 million, they bought 1,365 households a quarter acre of land each fitted with drip systems. Each household is now preparing for its second maize and sorghum harvests.

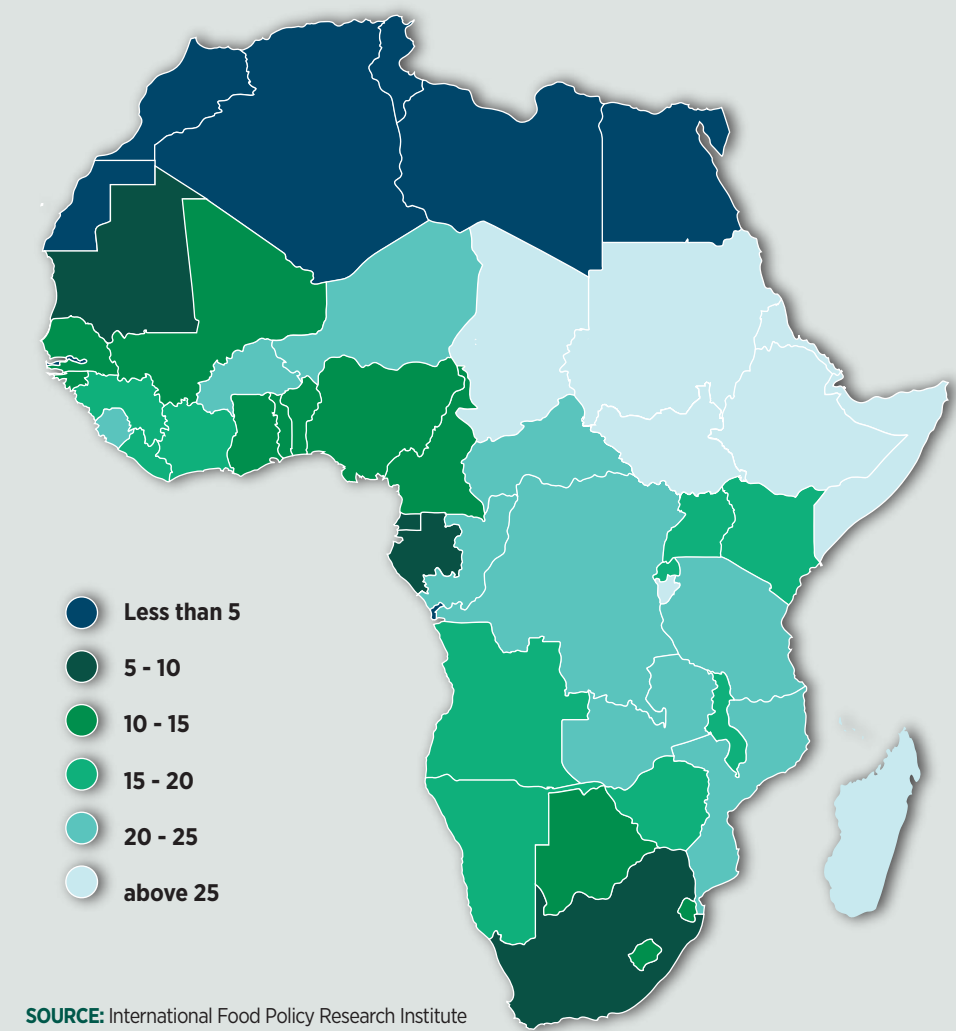
"The needs of Turkana County are enormous. This just shows that food security is possible in Turkana County. We should stop giving these people food aid only and focus on long-term projects that will sustain them. Food distribution is very expensive, and is not sustainable," Okangu observes.

Ruth Amankori Chori, a beneficiary of the project, nearly lost her children one point.

"Two years ago, we were like corpses but today can put food on the table, and not from aid, but from our own land," she says.

Yet the government still has no concrete plans. The National Drought Management Authority

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in Turkana is still talking of reviving the irrigation schemes, but there is no indication of when.

Meanwhile, the wailing in Lodeiya's manyatta has become unbearable. The frail

man stands, ties a leso tightly around his waist and heads for the forest. He needs to get his children something to eat.

"The only thing I can give them now is the mkoma. Every time they eat it, they

pass diarrhoea and get very thirsty, but I have no option," he says.

We eventually leave, haunted by the faces of hungry people who do not know where their next meal will come from.

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