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A Tale of Two Droughts:

The 1973/1974 and 1984 Droughts in Ethiopia

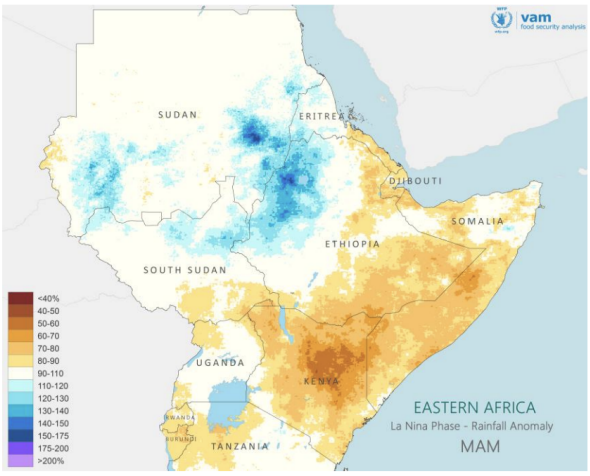
In Ethiopia, drought is a complex, recurrent phenomena driven by natural processes and human action. Webb and Von Braun (1990) assert that there are only two uncontestable aspects of droughts in Ethiopia: (1) drought is not a new phenomenon, and (2) the onset and impact of a drought involves a lot of complex, interrelated variables. While most drought assessments of Ethiopia take a meteorological point of view - defining drought as a deficit of water compared with some "normal" condition - some address the role of physical environmental processes *and* human action in triggering drought conditions and increasing human exposure and vulnerability to droughts (Alem Mera 2018). In the context of Ethiopia, an integrated analysis that incorporates climate, geography, topography, politics, and economics is necessary to piecing-together why droughts occur and which populations are vulnerable to them and their impacts. The 1973/1974 and 1984 droughts in Ethiopia are prime cases in which the causes, impacts, and responses to drought are as linked to human action as they are to natural processes.

Causes of the 1973-1974 and 1984-1985 Droughts

There are certain aspects of Ethiopia's climate that make it susceptible to drought. One is the variability in experienced rainfall patterns. The ITCZ (Intertropical Convergence Zone)

moves across Ethiopia two times

throughout the year, bringing along with it periods of rainfall that break up the region's climate. The first period, occurring during the spring from March-May, brings the long rain season while the second, occurring during the fall from October-November, brings the short rain season. The long rain season is the primary rainy season throughout all of East Africa, however, a decline has been recorded throughout the recent few decades (Haile 2019). This is thought to be a major cause for Ethiopia's increasing drought risk and one of the primary reasons for both the 1973/1974 and 1984 droughts (Mekonen 2020).



March-May rainfall during La Niña seasons as a percent of the average in neutral seasons.

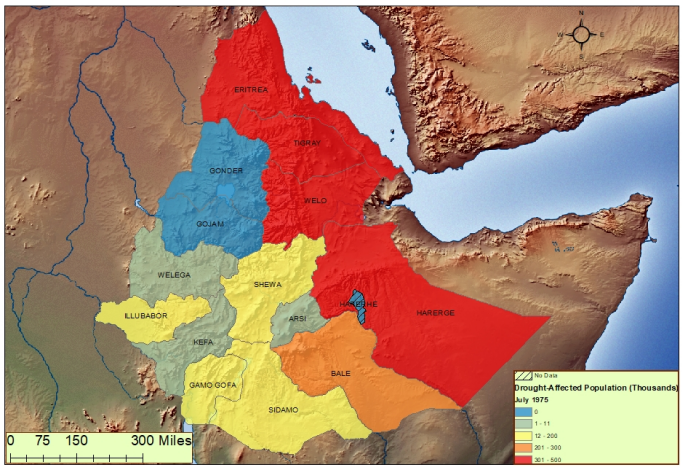
The ENSO (El Niño Southern Oscillation) is another major factor in the onset of these two droughts, specifically the occurrence of La Niña. This event refers to cooler than usual ocean temperatures in the east Pacific, occurring every 3-7 years, and affecting temperature, precipitation, and storm patterns in many parts of the world (Mekonen 2020). Based on historical data, La Niña affects Ethiopia by causing drier than average conditions specifically during the long rain season (reliefweb). It has been recorded to have occurred right at the onset of both the 1973/1974 and 1984 droughts, contributing greatly to their causes (OCHA 2016).

The climate variabilities caused by the bimodal rain patterns and La Nina are further exacerbated by Ethiopia's experienced environmental stress caused by human activity. The region's natural resources base has been reported to be continuously and cumulatively degrading

(Teklu2014). This is in part due to the increase in population that has been occurring at a fast pace since the 1950'S (open.edu) This population growth relates to the increase in Ethiopia's drought risk because of the rise in water demand that occurs along with the rising standard of living, economic growth, and industrial development (open.edu). A drought can be defined through a socio-economic lens by looking at a region's water supply and demand, and in the case of both the 1973/1974 and 1984 droughts the demand far outweighed the supply available. A higher deforestation rate was also observed alongside this population growth as more wood was needed for expansion of housing, fuel, and other uses (open.edu) This loss of vegetation is harmful to the region as it prevents transportation of water into underground aquifers where it can be stored and prevents it's return back into the atmosphere through evapotranspiration (Nairobi2016) Additionally increasing Ethiopia's environmental degradation and drought risk is the effects of climate change (Teklu 2014). The increase in global temperature through human activity has a direct correlation to the increase of droughts, as it increases rates of evaporation and causes further variability in the region's climate, making the area more at risk to this disaster. Climate change has been increasing the frequency of droughts experienced in Ethiopia, and it is thought to have contributed to the causes of both the 70's and the 80's droughts (open.edu).

Risk and Vulnerability

July 1975: Drought-Affected Population (Thousands)



Viewing precipitation trends at the province level for 1973, 1974, and 1984 a picture of a cumulative drought emerges for parts of Tigray, Eritrea, modern-day Afar, Harrargue (modern-day Somali), Shewa, Wollo (Welo), Bale, Sidama, Kefa, Gemu Gofa (modern-day SNNP), Illubabor (modern-day Gambela), and Wellega (modern-day Benishangul Gumz). Like many droughts, cumulative droughts creep along undetected until their impacts are catastrophically unmistakable. However, cumulative droughts are particularly insidious as they are successive incidents of rain shortfalls followed by a complete failure of rain. They are hard to pin-point from the outset, and will gradually erode the capacity of people to endure them over time.

In Ethiopia, as the trend in precipitation went down over time, crop production was meager and then failed all together (Kloos 1982). Furthermore, the strategies to cope with crop failures and reduction in viable grazing land became less and less viable. When the rains failed completely in 1974, the price of grain went up and what slender food-stocks people had were reduced, throwing those who were already on the precipice of hunger into starvation. While most of the small-scale farmers and pastoralists in the region can survive one or two bad seasons, the cumulative effects of low or delayed seasonal rainfall over a large area sparked-off famine conditions (Cutler 1991). Compounding these issues with farming and grazing brought on by years-long rainfall fluctuations were the Imperial Ethiopian Government's agricultural policies; they added to the precarity of small scale farmers in Tigray and Eritrea.

The introduction of commercial farming into the agricultural sector left small-scale farmers and pastoralists vulnerable to drought and famine (Kloos 1982). Commercial farming - promoted by the Imperial Ethiopian Government, landed-elite, and multinational corporations for their own benefit - resulted in a precarious tenancy system that displaced people due to high rents (Koehn 1979). Moreover, in the name of "progress", Ethiopia's agricultural sector created a legal order that enclosed communal pastures and usurped small farms for "modernization" (Webb and Von Braun 1990, Kloos 1982, Koehn 1979). Anyone who could not afford the steep tenancy rents on the corporate farms had to move and scrape out a living on the eastern escarpments of the highlands. When the worst year of the drought hit, those pushed to farming at the margins would stay and starve, immigrate to the lowlands to find wage labor jobs on corporate farms, or seek assistance at famine relief stations.

Displacement and starvation was particularly high in Wollo (Welo), whose famine relief stations became the center of media coverage during the last and worst year of the drought. In Wollo, 85% of the population were "subsisting on less than 1,500 calories per day", with 10% critically malnourished (RRC 1975, 16). An assessment in seven districts of Wollo found that 20% of the province's population died by 1975 (RRC 1975). Despite the Imperial Government stating that it knew little of the crisis, official documents report that by 1972 at least nine regional governors and administrators requested 46000 tons of grain and 121,000 cartons of supplementary food from the central government. The government neglected pleas for help, allowing the famine to rage. Such callous treatment was extended to the lowlands of Wollo.

The hardest hit groups during this 1973/1974 were the lowland agro-pastoralists and pastoralists in the Awash Valley (Webb and Von Braun 1990). The Awash Valley is in current-day Afar (Wollo or Welo on the 1975 maps) and accounts for 70,000 square kilometers of

northern Ethiopia's Rift Valley. Until the agricultural development projects of the mid-1960s, only the Jile Oromo, Arsi, Kereyu, and the Afar pastoralists and agro-pastoralists tribes occupied the Awash Valley. On the whole, these tribes lost 25-30% of their populations and a significant portion of their livestock to the drought and subsequent famine. As livestocks were the foundation of their diet, economy, and social relationships, such loss was a huge blow. By the end of the drought in 1975, those that stayed in the Awash Valley abandoned century-old practices of pastoralism, shifting towards more sedentary farming practices or engaging in waged-labor. Similar to the highlands, the loss of cattle, land, life, and livelihoods was not due to drought-induced crop failure alone – it was a function of development schemes aimed at enfolding Ethiopia into the global capitalist order.

In the Late 1960's, the Imperial Ethiopian Government implemented the Third-Five Year Plan to "modernize" Ethiopia's agricultural sector and "develop" its natural resources through the commercialization of agriculture (Kloos 1982). Thought of as a veritable wasteland by government officials, the Awash River basin was slated as the primary demonstration site for development. Similar to the highlands, Halie Selassie's government enclosed communal grazing lands and displaced small-scale farmers to build dams and establish commercial farms that produced cash crops for export. The displacement of pastoralists led to adverse environmental conditions that compounded the impact of increasingly dry conditions on the Awash floodplains and higher-ground pasture areas. Furthermore, in the drought stricken areas of the Awash basin, land became increasingly unavailable for seasonal grazing, forcing over 20,000 pastoralists onto what little communal pastures were available and not denuded of grasses. The competition for grazing land increased overstocking, conflicts, and migration out of the Awash Valley.

The 1984 drought was considerably worse than the one 10 years prior. In many ways, the

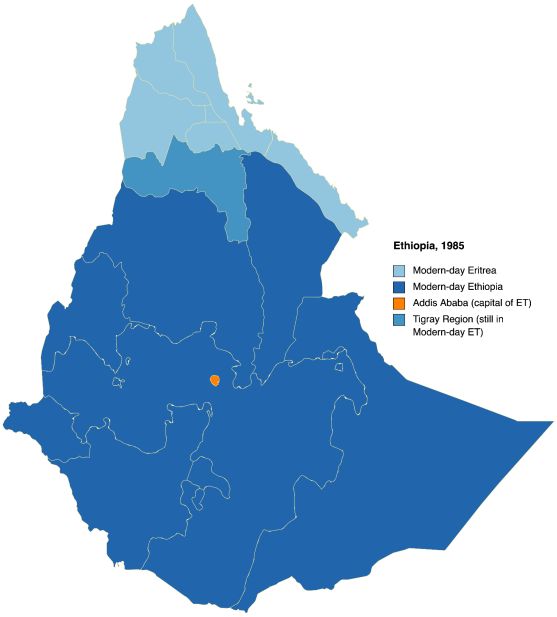
drought of 1984 was a repeat of the 1973/1974 drought, but on a much larger scale. First, the 1984 was also a cumulative drought - consisting of seasonal rain shortfalls followed by a year of rain failure in 1984. Second, the drought disrupted peasant and pastoral economies, causing dramatic declines in crop production and in rangeland vegetation, both for grazing and browsing (Cutler 1991). Third, with the exception of the central highlands, much of the same drought-prone areas were feeling the impact of the deficit in rainfall - the north and north-eastern highlands and the lowlands. However, while the political economy worked in-tandem with increasingly arid conditions to create conditions of famine in the 1973/1974 drought, civil war played a large role in the famine of 1984.

The Derg - a Marxist regime that staged a coup to overthrow the Imperial Ethiopian Government in 1974 - used drought and famine as a tool of war. While the drought affected the entire country intensely, communities of dissent, like Tigray and Eritrea, were particularly vulnerable to famine. For example, the Derg confiscated food-stuffs and sent them to urban centers. They also with-held famine relief funds and food aid from communities in the North to root out insurgents. Finally, they masked their efforts to expand control over rebel territories by implementing resettlement and villagization schemes. Between 1984 and 1986, the Derg coerced famine-struck populations in the North into existing or planned villages in the Oromo region. They withheld food from populations in the north until many agreed to move, which exacerbated the famine and led to mass migration to neighboring countries.

Civil War and Agriculture

It is important to emphasize that by the 1970s, the region of Ethiopia and present-day

Eritrea had been experiencing heightened tension between the monarchy and several ethnic groups for almost a decade. The insufficient response under Selassie's rule following the first drought would ultimately lead to the public's distrust and contribute to the successful overthrow of the monarchy by the Dergs, a Marxist-Leninist group in 1974. This coup, however, did not mark the end of the civil war, as the new government still faced opposition from Eritrean separationists, Ethiopian Democratic Union, the Trigray's People Liberation Front, Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party, and later the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement. The conflict between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray's People Liberation Front persisted in the Tigray region and Eritrea well into the 1980s, when the second drought occurred.



Although the country experiences droughts regularly, the scale of this particular drought was unprecedented. As the drought began, the Ethiopian government prioritized financial assistance to coffee farmers over

grain farmers, as coffee made up 60-70% of the country's export earnings. At the time, grain farmers were the majority, contributing to 90% of the workforce.(Smith).

Grain farmers primarily grew teff, barley, sorghum, and wheat for their respective kin on their kin group's land. The land was determined through an ancestral system, called rist. Typically, the larger the group of kin was, the less land each individual would be assigned. Once the Derg regime gained control, the ancestral and sharecropping systems were dismantled. All rural lands and state and commercial farms were claimed as state property in 1975, and used for collectivization. (Tefferra). The reduced assistance coupled with the overall corruption and mismanagement of land in relation to population would lead to a famine of mass proportions.

Political Motivation and International Assistance

The Ethiopian government relied on European, American, and Canadian assistance for food in an effort to aid the famine for their citizens. However, as the government was still at odds in guerilla warfare with the Tigray region, food and aid was deliberately halted from reaching that area, despite it accounting for nearly 50% of the population. (Smith). Instead, the majority of food and aid was delivered to citizens who lived in the government-occupied areas, being distributed nearly ten times as much.

Despite knowing about the issue in May of 1984, the National Security Council of the United States did not approve the delivery of aid and resources until the following November. It was at this point that funds began being sent to the region through programs and charities through 1986. A main reason as to why the American government did not act earlier stems from the political alignment of the Ethiopian government with the Soviet Union. The connection started in 1959, when the Soviet Union loaned $102 million to the Selassie (imperial) regime,

and continued when the US stopped a military supply delivery of $100 million to the Derg regime in April of 1977. It was at this point that Ethiopia turned to the USSR for military support against Somalia by aid through the delivery of Soviet arms until October of 1977. The Soviet Union also provided tank and artillery training for the Derg regime against both the Eritrean Liberation Front and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front. (Lyons).

The United States was in the middle of the Cold War with the Soviet Union when Ethiopia was going through its civil war and the after-effects of the Sahel drought on the region. Once the event began to attract international media coverage as a humanitarian crisis, the Reagan administration "interven[ed] more directly in Ethiopia's internal affairs. Although the administration repeatedly assured the media that 'a starving child knows no politics'." (Smith).

Later in 1984, negotiation to ratify the Food for the North Initiative took place, which proposed setting up six feeding centers in the Tigray region and Eritrea was passed. Even so, these measures were not effective enough to prevent droves of people from migrating to Sudan and other neighboring countries. In fact, the Ethiopian government forced those who were in the guerilla territories into neighboring countries, or alternatively, back into the government zones. By the end of 1985, the United States was responsible for providing the Ethiopian government $282,000,000 (taking inflation into consideration, this would be approximately $724,889,386.62 in 2021). (Smith).

Final Words

The Ethiopian droughts of 1973/1974 and 1984 illustrate two things about droughts: (1) they are an insidious hazard, creeping along undetected until they are catastrophically unmistakable, and (2) although they occur naturally in several climates, droughts are increasingly linked to human activity. Anthropogenic climate change is seen as a major driver in the

increased frequency of droughts, particularly in Ethiopia (Ghebrezgahber et al. 2016). Furthermore, while the causal linkage between deforestation, soil degradation, and droughts is tenuous, environmental degradation is cited as a major factor in either driving droughts or making people increasingly vulnerable to them. As a weather extreme and a hazard, droughts are influenced by physical-environmental processes and human activities.

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