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We Slept Like That

By Peter Kimeu

Droughts are cyclical in Kenya. Before, they came every ten years, but now they seem to be hitting us more often and for longer periods of time. My community remembers events and birthdays by times of hunger. We give the droughts names: “*longoza*” was the drought when many animals died; there was the drought of the “planes” because food was dropped from the air by planes, and one particularly bad drought was called “man who dies with money in his fist,” because, even if there was money, there was simply no food to purchase.

I happen to have been born in 1951 in Machakos and, from what my mother tells me, that year there was a serious drought. My sister was born in 1961, and I clearly remember the terrible weather and the prevailing hunger throughout the region. I can’t tell you how many times I went to bed without eating. “I slept like that,” is how we described it, which means we went to bed with nothing to eat. I can’t count the number of days when “I slept like that,” or describe the feeling of going to sleep hungry knowing I’d wake up and there would still be no food for breakfast.

Hunger is an unforgivable disease because it is one that is the easiest to cure. It is annoying to wake up in the morning and look east, west, south, and north and see that there is nothing green that you can chew. During a drought everything goes yellow and dry. I would walk the roads and search the ground to see if someone had spat out a bit of chewed up sugar cane. I am not ashamed to say that I would re-chew what I would find.

Hunger is dehumanizing. It gets to a level where you do not know how you will survive and you will do anything for a simple kernel of corn.

The thing about drought is that it does not just affect farmers and their crops—it affects everyone. If you think about it, during harvest time farmers hire local farmhands to help with their crops. But, when there are no crops to harvest, not only does the farmer lose his or her income, so do the laborers the farmer would have hired. There is a ripple effect that impacts the whole community. Few have food and even fewer have money to buy food.

My parents did everything they could to feed us. My father would leave early in the morning carrying a little basket to beg for food or ask for food on credit. Each night he would arrive around 10 PM. My mother, after a fruitless day attempting to find food, would try to encourage us by telling me to keep the water in our pot boiling so that when my father arrived we could quickly cook the food he brought in the already prepared water. I would keep the fire burning and the water boiling. As the hours passed I would watch the water level slowly go down all with the hopes that we would eat that night. More often than not, however, my father would arrive frustrated and empty-handed. And I would sleep like that, knowing that I would have to go to school without eating, and that there would be no food for lunch and, if we were lucky, we might come home and perhaps my father or mother would have found food.

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It is a traumatizing situation as a young child to be without food. Your stomach is so empty that even when you are thirsty and you take water it makes you dizzy. You get so nauseated you want to vomit and you're vomiting what you didn't eat.

I think about this now as East Africa faces another drought. I think about all the children who are suffering as I did. We see terrible images of hunger, but I fear that we have not yet seen the worst of what is to come. What we are having is really serious stress. At the moment, the magnitude of the hunger facing Kenya is not well known.

It is incumbent on all of us to ban together and fight this very curable disease. No child on earth should ever have to sleep like that.

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