

# The Causes and Consequences of Famine

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## Famine in the Horn of Africa

Last summer, East Africa was hit with the worst drought in over 50 years.

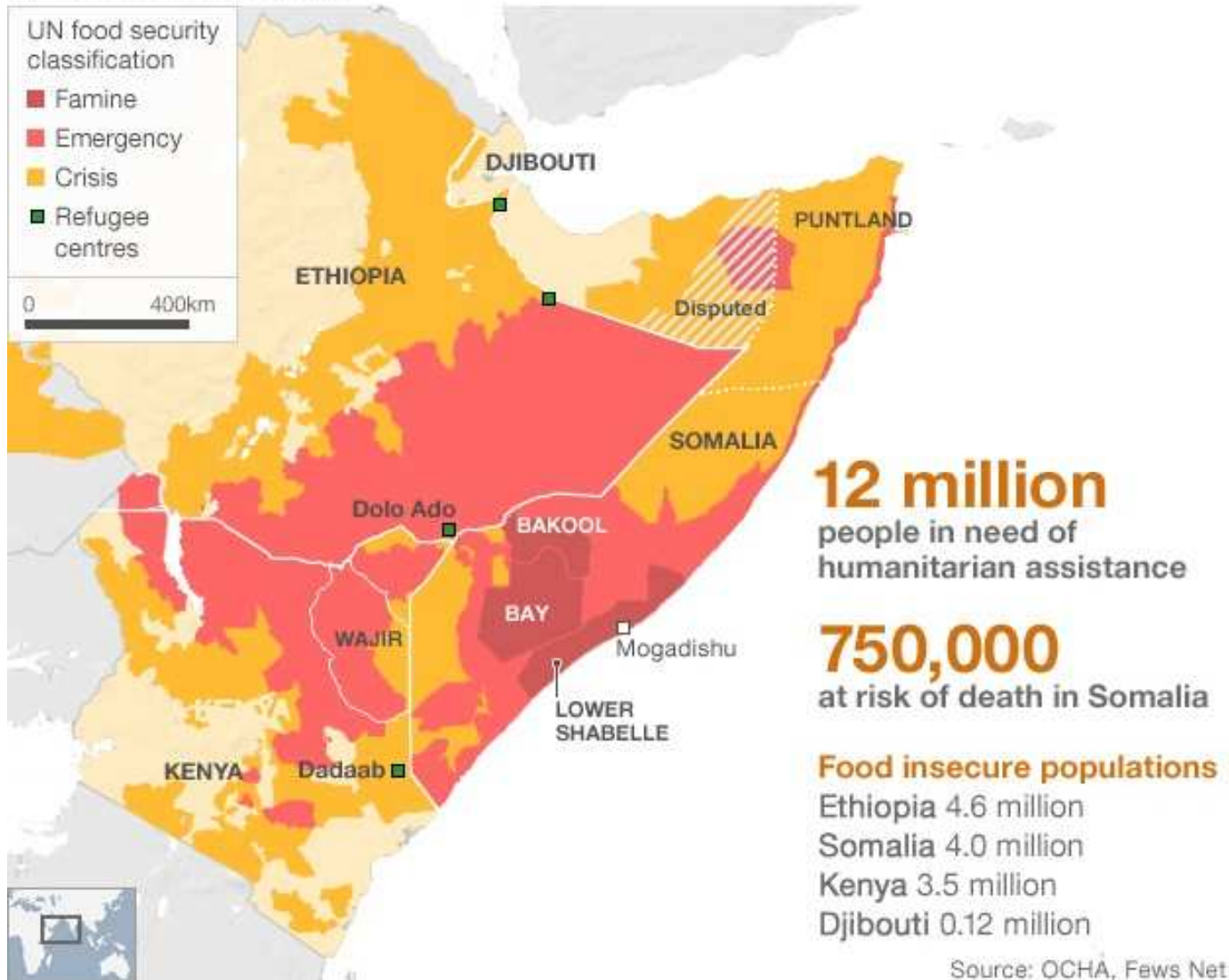
On July 20, for the first time in almost 30 years, the United Nations (UN) declared famine in Southern Somalia.

## Famine in the Horn of Africa

Three conditions must hold for the UN to declare famine:

1. 20 percent of the population or more must have less than 2100 calories a day;
2. 30 percent of the children or more must be acutely malnourished; and
3. There must be two (four) deaths or more daily per 10,000 adults (children).

### Areas of food shortages



(Source: [BBC News](#), October 19, 2011.)

## Famine in the Horn of Africa

This really begs the question:

“Did the drought that hit East Africa last summer cause the current famine in Somalia?”

The answer is “Not quite.”

## Causes of Famine

Most famines begin with a natural disaster: a severe shock to the supply of food.

But as 1998 Nobel laureate for Economics Amartya Sen wrote in *Development as Freedom* (2000):

“No famine has taken place in the history of the world in a functioning democracy.”

## Causes of Famine

In other words, famine is man-made.

In Ireland, the Great Famine of 1845-1849 was caused by blight... and by Sir Charles Trevelyan limiting government relief to Ireland because he God had sent blight to “teach the Irish a lesson” (Keneally, 2011).

## Causes of Famine

In China, the famine of 1958-1961 was caused by natural disasters... and by Mao's Great Leap Forward (Dikötter, 2010).

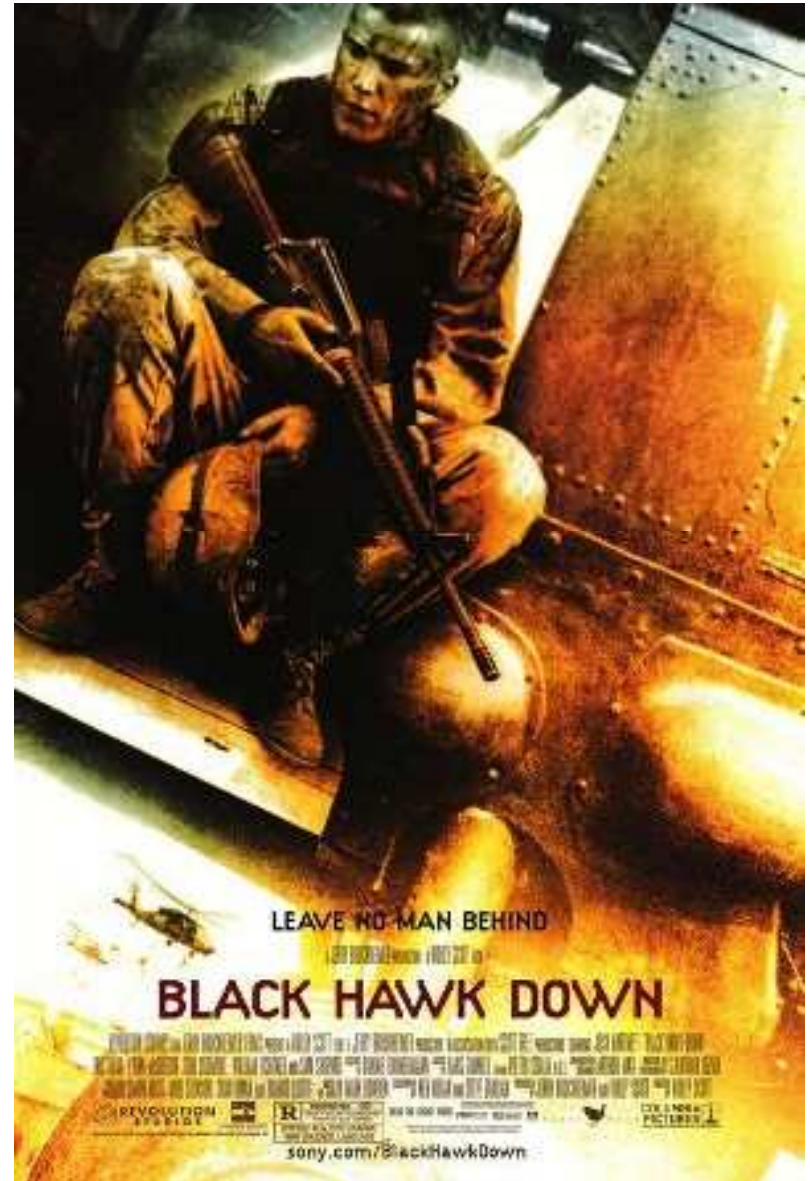
In Ethiopia, the famines of 1974 and 1984-1985 were caused respectively by the misguided policies of Haile Selassie and of Mengistu (Keneally, 2011).



## Causes of Famine

In Southern Somalia, the current famine is the result of al-Shabaab preventing aid deliveries (Polman, 2010).

Recall the opening scenes of Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down*.



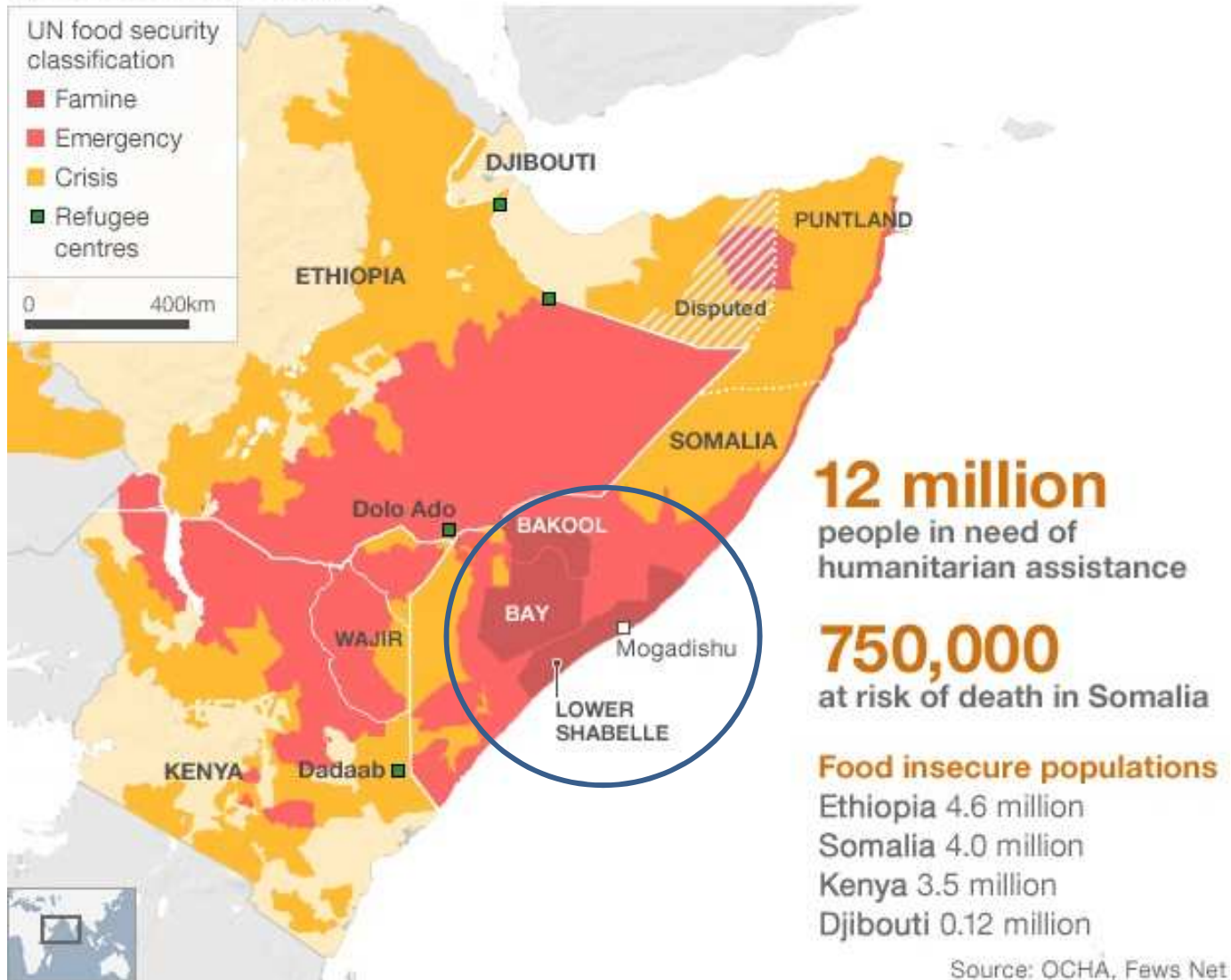
## Causes of Famine

In the Horn of Africa, we (almost) have a natural experiment.

Wikipedia: “A study in which the assignment of treatments to subjects has been haphazard: i.e., the assignment of treatments has been made ‘by nature.’”

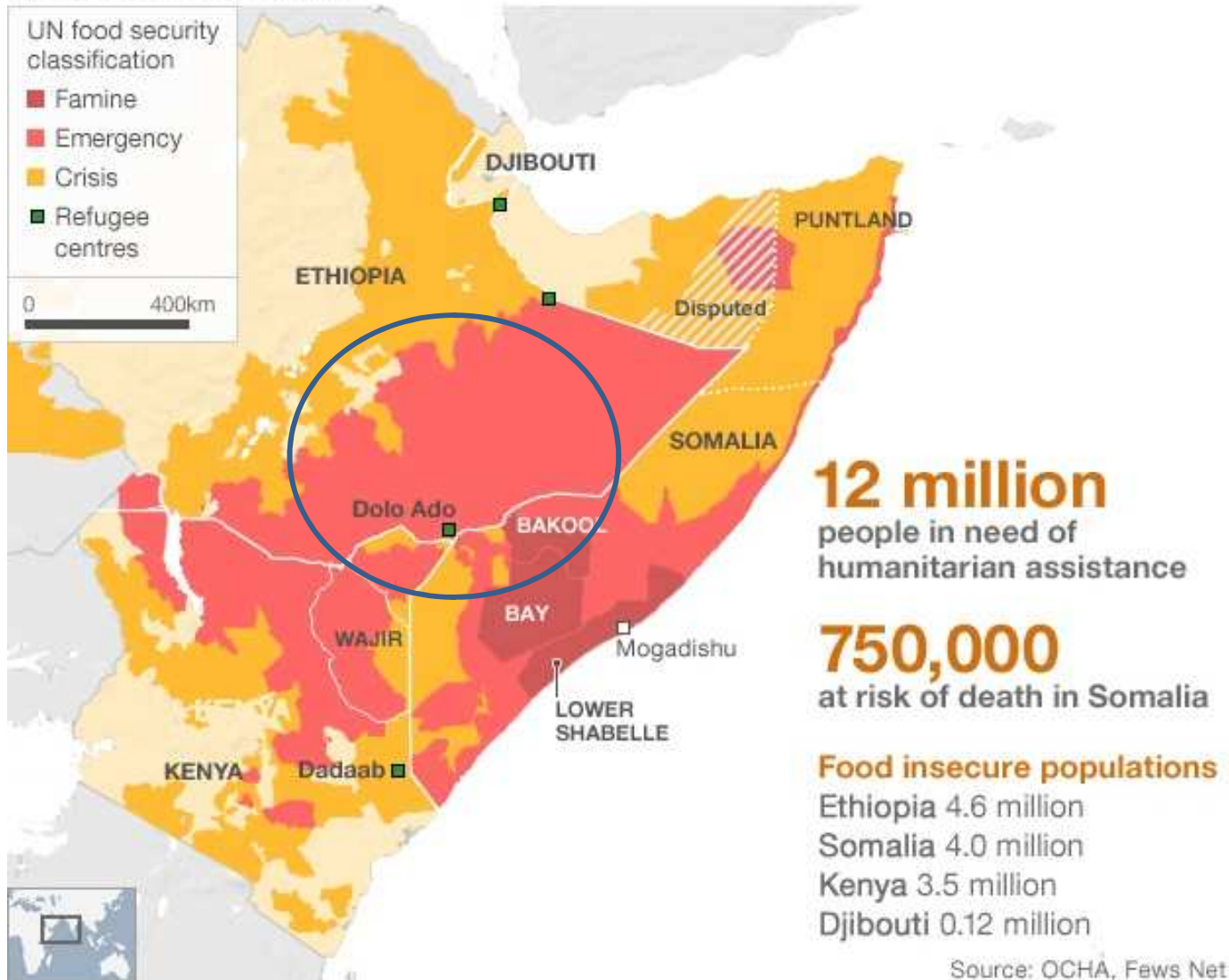
The same drought (treatment) has had different impacts on countries with different institutions (subjects).

### Areas of food shortages



(Source: [BBC News](#), October 19, 2011.)

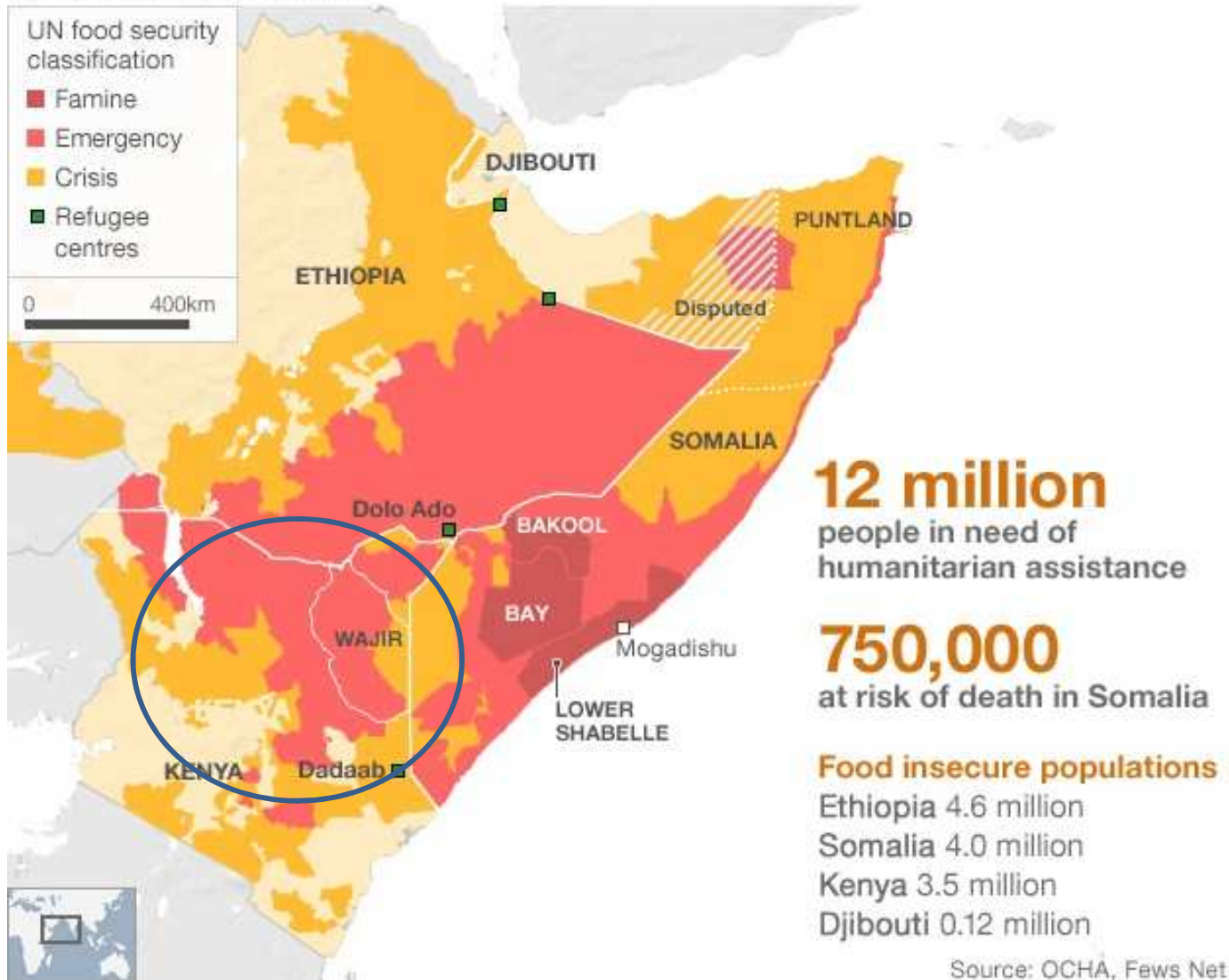
### Areas of food shortages



(Source: [BBC News](#), October 19, 2011.)



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## Consequences of Famine

By the time famine emerges, it's too late for food riots.

How do people cope with famine? Keneally (2011) lists many coping mechanisms:

Praying or begging. Reducing their food intake, especially the food intake women and girls within their households.

## Consequences of Famine

Selling family assets.

Eating foods they would not normally eat, such as pork or other animals one would not think of as food.

Emigrating to areas where famine has not stricken.

## Consequences of Famine

Stealing from others. Giving up children, the sick, or the elderly.

Going into prostitution, or selling children into prostitution.

And ultimately, cannibalism.





(Source: MSN.com.)

## References

- Dikötter, Frank (2010), *Mao's Great Famine*, New York: Walker & Company.
- Keneally, Thomas (2011), *Three Famines*, New York: PublicAffairs.
- Polman, Linda (2010), *The Crisis Caravan*, New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Sen, Amartya K. (2000), *Development as Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.