

Unaffordability means people resort to stealing for survival

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Sitting in the narrow strip of shade provided from a tin roof, Mary sells her chapatis for 10 shillings each. She needs to sell 30 a day, but business isn't good. While her prices haven't gone up, the size of the chapati has grown smaller. Just in front of her makeshift stall in Nairobi's Kibera – Africa's largest slum. Before she set up at 6 earlier that morning, thieves with pangas attacked a man delivering bread and stole his two crates. Mary and her neighbour, standing nearby – both said they had not heard of people here stealing food before.

From December 2007 to last month, food prices in Kenya doubled. Before, the urban poor spent 60-80% of their meagre income on food, now they are often forced to spend 100% of their wages, and it can be a choice between eating and paying rent. Even paltry savings, used for emergencies, are being eaten up simply to stay alive.

When people talk about the food crisis in Kenya, the problem is not that there is no food: there is plenty in the stores. The problem is that people can't afford to buy it. People like Mary are now buying cooking oil in spoonfuls as they can't afford to buy the whole bottle. The spiralling cost of petrol has tripled the cost of fertiliser. It has made getting food to market more expensive, and

these expenses have been passed on to the consumer. The rioting and looting that occurred earlier in the year made some impact, but 75% of the land in Kenya's breadbasket had already been planted. A further complication is the drought that has affected the Horn of Africa. Even middle-class Kenyans have started to grow their own vegetables. To give it a certain perspective: in the UK, inflation went up by less than 4% and the government is in turmoil. In Kenya last month, inflation for basic commodities was 29.5%.

The food crisis hits many people, but it is girls and women who suffer most. When the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) began its school feeding scheme in 2005 in the Kibera slums, enrolment jumped, especially for girls.

In 2004 there were more boys than girls at the school. Today not only are there more girls but they do better academically than the boys, and the two top pupils were girls. With even four years of primary education for girls, the impact on the community is profound. As a result of girls' education there is improvement in hygiene, variety of diet and in the standard of living. And families are better able to make more informed decisions about, for example, contraception. Girls' education was never taken seriously, but the fact that their daughters were fed at school encouraged parents to send them.

For some of those children, it's the only meal they will get all day. Usually, it consists of rice, peas and porridge. It offers a

healthy, nutritious meal, even though 14-year-old Eric Adika, one of the pupils at Kicoshep School, says: "Kids want different kinds of food." Community volunteers make the food. Often pupils will save some of their meal to take home to other siblings. Nothing goes to waste in the making, and there are no leftovers.

Kibera, which means "jungle", is a forest of grim shacks. Not too long ago, children would collapse from hunger; now, according to Nashono Nyango, the head teacher at Kicoshep: "You can't tell the difference between rich and poor."

That might be about to change as the WFP contemplates scaling back its school feeding programme if the financial situation doesn't improve, which would gradually affect 750 000 children.

The food crisis is the biggest challenge that the WFP has faced in its 45-year history. At the beginning of this year, 74-million people in 78 countries needed to be fed, and that number is rising. Due to spiralling food prices, WFP launched a special appeal asking for an extra \$755-million. Further compounding the problem is the weak dollar and strong euro.

"There will be no ration cuts in 2008, thanks to the extra donations from our emergency appeal," says Gabrielle Menezes, the WFP's public information officer, in Nairobi. As we walk along the abandoned railway track that straddles Kibera, and down its impoverished mud paths, she continues: "The Saudis have

donated an extra \$500-million. The worry is that donors will not fund the higher level of 1.2-million children. However, we are seeing if the government of Kenya or private donors could contribute."

As a rule, the WFP sources its food locally. While it is not the first time, it is unusual for the WFP to import food from South Africa to East Africa, which has a surplus of about 2-million tons. The WFP has bought 110 000 tons of maize for East Africa, although not all of it has been delivered, with transport infrastructure from inland ports inadequate and the ports themselves overloaded.

The WFP anticipates that it will continue to buy more maize from South Africa.

The food crisis will have other consequences. In other parts of Kenya, children have stopped going to school to help their families look for food.

Meanwhile, there are still virtually no pavements in Nairobi, and, recently, in an act almost more comic than tragic, MPs banned local transport from entering Nairobi's city centre to enable their Hummers and the cars of the rich to have easier access to the badly jammed roads. A stunning reversal of universal trends, where most cities are trying to limit the number of cars and increase availability of public transport, making people who hardly have enough to eat walk even further.