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Translating Famine Early Warning into Early Action: An East Africa Case Study

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INTRODUCTION

More than a quarter-century after the 1984 famine in Ethiopia, and following decades of investment in famine early warning (EW) systems, a slow-motion disaster unfolded in Somalia during 2011, as a food security crisis mushroomed into a full blown famine in some central and southern districts. Warnings were sounded as early as August 2010, and only grew in intensity. However, intervention – and funding – commensurate with the scale of the disaster only increased from mid-2011, when a famine had been declared in parts of southern and central Somalia.¹

This is precisely the scenario that EW systems were developed to avoid. A series of technical evaluations have been and are being carried out by the humanitarian and donor communities, seeking to understand the response in Somalia and how it fell short. There are doubtless technical lessons to be learned, in terms of improving the efficacy of response and shortening lead times.

However, it is significant to note that the same climatic conditions that contributed to famine in parts of Somalia also affect neighbouring Ethiopia and Kenya – neither of which experienced conditions anywhere near as dire. Nor, in fact, did the climatic factors affect other parts of Somalia in the same way. The 2011 Horn of Africa emergency was described as in essence a Somali emergency, spilling over the borders into south-eastern Ethiopia and northern Kenya (in the form of refugees). In terms of the acute emergency, this seems accurate. Both Kenya and Ethiopia face perennial food security challenges, which were exacerbated by drought in 2011, but certainly the epicentre of their emergencies played out in their borderlands with Somalia.

How can this variation be accounted for? Technical factors related to humanitarian operations and logistics do vary between the three countries, although there are serious efforts to coordinate between agencies within countries and between. Nevertheless, these factors are better left to the ‘real-time evaluation’ processes carried out by the UN Interagency Standing Committee (IASC), Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) and others.

This paper is based in part on a number of interviews conducted with humanitarian community, donor and government sources in Nairobi and Addis Ababa between 22 March and 5 April 2012, as well as on desk research and further interviews with academic and policy specialists in the United Kingdom. Informants have been kept anonymous, to allow for a more frank discussion.

The paper explores how the political context has affected and – in effect – constrains or enables the humanitarian community in its response to emergencies, examining the operating environments in Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia. Although the Horn of Africa is often seen as a security-challenged region, for good reason, the level of insecurity varies significantly between and within countries. Moreover, the political systems – in terms of governance (and its impact on social and economic mobility and human rights) and of government capacity – in place in the three countries bear little resemblance to each other.

What the countries do share, however, is a common climatic zone – a semi-arid rangeland that stretches across northern Kenya, into Somalia and southern Ethiopia. The first section of this paper deals with some important implications of this region’s perennial climatic challenges for approaches to improving food security. The following sections deal with the political contexts in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia, how these affected the response to the 2011 crisis, and the implications for future response. The final section offers recommendations.

¹ See UNISDR (2012), pp. 18–19.

HORN OF AFRICA: SHARED VULNERABILITY

To the east and south of the Ethiopian highlands is a wide stretch of territory that has long been integrated economically and climatically.² In general, weather conditions in the Horn of Africa vary significantly, although the arid and semi-arid lands of northern Kenya, eastern and southern Ethiopia and much of Somalia are particularly prone to drought. Drought is estimated to be the underlying factor in some 90 per cent of the region's natural disasters.³ Understanding of these dynamics was already well established more than two decades ago.⁴

Pastoral livelihoods

The population size of communities historically associated with pastoralism in these areas has long since grown beyond a level at which all members can participate in traditional, transhumant livelihoods. The effects of this demographic pattern have been exacerbated by climatic factors. Over decades of intervention, as individuals 'fall out' of pastoralism and into support interventions, the question becomes not so much what can be done to get them 'back in', but what alternatives they have for new livelihoods. Although there have been changes to the pastoral economy – which is becoming more commercialized and seeing the rise of larger herds controlled by fewer individuals – the more important trend is the emergence of a growing population of displaced or otherwise vulnerable 'former' pastoralists whose livelihoods are regularly threatened, and for whom humanitarian intervention is a repeated – but not guaranteed – element of support.⁵

Political impact

Moreover, regional politics – Ethiopia's in particular – are sensitive to the attendant strains on food security. Famine in the 1960s and early 1970s fuelled popular protests against the imperial regime in Addis Ababa, paving the way for a military coup in 1974. Continued food security problems, and particularly the famine of 1984 in northern Ethiopia, undermined the military regime and helped drive the northern-based insurgency that toppled the government in 1991.

In southern and central Somalia, the Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen (al-Shabaab) militia, which has controlled much of the region since 2008, gambled unsuccessfully on bolstering its legitimacy by placing restrictions on foreign aid groups from mid-2009.⁶ Al-Shabaab accused international agencies of failing to remain politically neutral (see fuller discussion below), and also attempted to promote sourcing of food assistance from within Somalia. However, by late 2010, as the region entered a third year of poor rains, this strategy had backfired, leaving the group open to criticism and forcing it to lift restrictions on population movement as well as to loosen some of its blocks on foreign assistance.

These political implications provide a powerful incentive for regional politicians to pay attention to the issue of food security.

Development agenda?

Significantly, the populations of north-eastern and northern Kenya and southern and eastern Ethiopia have historically been politically and developmentally marginalized within their countries. This has played an important role in entrenching the vulnerability of populations in these areas. In Kenya in particular, data on public spending (while incomplete) suggest that northern and north-

² See Mahmoud (2010) and Majid (2010).

³ See UNISDR (2012), pp. 10–11.

⁴ See Buchanan-Smith and Davies (1995), Chapter 1.

⁵ See Levine et al. (2011), p. 1.

⁶ See Zimmerman (2011).

eastern counties receive some of the lowest levels of government transfers in the country. This is reflected in development indicators in these areas that are well below national averages.⁷

Humanitarian interventions have in some senses filled a gap left by the state, although repeated short-term interventions over many years are no substitute for a development strategy. The Kenyan and Ethiopian governments are now pursuing longer-term development strategies, including in these arid areas. There are clearly implications for practitioners of traditional livelihoods, such as pastoralists, in terms of how these strategies will affect their ability to carry on with such livelihoods. In Kenya, and especially in Ethiopia, maintaining traditional livelihoods is probably not the main goal of government strategies. Rather, 'modernizing' and extending services to poorly connected regions is at the root of efforts. This may have negative consequences for those still actively practising traditional livelihoods; for example, they may not be able to access education services offered through fixed locations. New infrastructure – including transport networks or water supplies – could constrain mobility or limit access to essential resources (such as pasture or water sources). On the other hand, many of those who have 'fallen out' of traditional livelihoods but lack viable alternatives may benefit significantly from such interventions; in Ethiopia, it appears that these are in fact the target populations of government strategies.

In Somalia, the collapse of the state in 1991 – compounded by the preceding and subsequent periods of conflict and instability – has meant that there is no effective state development strategy of any note for much of southern and central Somalia. Local or regional administrations, even when politically legitimate, have been disrupted or replaced frequently enough to prevent the emergence of a long-term policy agenda. The international community provides support but is mostly active in relief operations. The presence of more stable political administrations – especially in the last decade – in the north-west (Somaliland) and north-east (Puntland) is reflected in better food security and better responses in times of crisis.

Additionally, the strength of civil society is an important potential counter-factor to government shortcomings. For example, although the Kenyan government's response was extremely slow in 2011 (see below), the Kenyan Red Cross Society spearheaded a 'Kenyans for Kenya' SMS-based fundraising campaign that mobilized more than 500 million shillings in about two weeks, largely in small individual donations. Ethiopia's tightly restricted civil society environment, as well as telecommunications network, would probably struggle to achieve a similar outcome.

Regional initiative

At the regional level, the Horn of Africa's regional body – the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) – is pursuing initiatives to tackle chronic vulnerability through long-term frameworks. IGAD hosted two summits in the wake of the 2011 disaster, in September 2011 and April 2012. It seeks to play a mainly coordinating role, providing a platform for the lead institutions in each country on disaster risk reduction (DRR) to discuss their national level interventions and boost cooperation. It is also promoting development of national drought management strategies in member countries.⁸ Capacity constraints at IGAD, and a preference among member states to retain national-level control over their initiatives, limit the extent to which the regional body could play a more robust leadership role. There is clearly a lost opportunity in a less coherent regional approach, since drought and its effects on food security represent a regional problem.

So far, only Uganda has fully operationalized its strategy, but Kenya and Ethiopia both have draft strategies.

Kenya's 10-year strategy, 'Ending Drought Emergencies in Kenya', was presented at the September 2011 IGAD summit. It has already seen the establishment – awaiting full legislative endorsement – of a National Drought Management Authority (NDMA), which will be the focal point

⁷ See Rupert Simons, 'Is East Africa in 2011 like Ireland in 1847?', <http://rupertsimons.org/2011/07/31/is-east-africa-in-2011-like-ireland-in-1847/>.

⁸ See UNISDR (2012), pp. 12–13.

for long-term planning, risk reduction and response.⁹ Although not the first such initiative in Kenya, the new framework is well along the path towards implementation and funding.

In Ethiopia, the government launched a National Food Security Programme in 2004 and a Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) in 2005. The PSNP is a multi-year support mechanism – in effect a food-for-work scheme that is meant to prevent the erosion of the livelihoods bases of vulnerable populations. With World Bank and World Food Programme (WFP) assistance, the Livelihoods, Early Assessment and Protection (LEAP) project has added early-warning and contingency-planning functions for triggering a scaling up of PSNP interventions in response to emergencies.¹⁰ A base of about 7.6 million people receive assistance annually under the PSNP, with need spiking above that in times of more acute crisis. A further drought management strategy is reportedly in draft form.

⁹ See Government of Kenya (2011), and UNISDR (2012), pp. 14–15.

¹⁰ See UNISDR (2012), pp. 54–5; Buchanan-Smith and Davies (1995) note in Chapter 4 of their study that Ethiopia has some of the longest-established EW systems globally, so LEAP does not represent new but rather additional EW capacity.

COUNTRY VARIATIONS

Within the regional context, states and humanitarian agencies are well versed in the climatic and political factors that perennially threaten food security. There is already some shift in terms of planning, away from cyclical response and towards a longer-term livelihoods support and development agenda. The next three sections examine the ways in which the national political context can affect delivery of assistance, and in particular how it undermines early action (EA).

Ethiopia

Ethiopia presents donors with something of a conundrum in that it has some of the most developed EW systems in the world. Its mechanisms emerged in the 1970s, and have continued to be refined and enhanced since then. Yet Ethiopia repeatedly appears to require ‘unanticipated’ interventions or interventions on a scale significantly larger than initial assessments suggested. There are multiple, complex factors in play that help to explain why EW is not better channelled into EA in Ethiopia.

The ‘growth story’

The country is led by the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a multi-party coalition at the core of which is the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) – which overthrew (alongside the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front, still in power in Asmara) the military government in 1991. The TPLF’s roots are as a peasant revolutionary movement, although its senior leaders – including late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi – were student radicals in the dying days of the empire.¹¹ During more than ten years of guerrilla warfare, the movement developed a deep understanding of the agricultural base of the peasant economy, reflected in its development strategy since the mid-1990s – so-called Agricultural Development Led Industrialization (ADLI). This programme has involved agricultural extension services to boost yields – largely in highland areas outside the highly vulnerable semi-arid and arid southern and eastern portions of the country (which furthermore have remained politically marginalized for most of Ethiopia’s modern history). It claims to have made huge improvements in yields, which underlie the country’s high headline GDP growth rates for most of the last decade¹² – averaging 8.1 per cent for the 2000–11 period, according to the IMF.

Such high growth rates have fed through into a drop in the headline poverty rate, reportedly from almost 50 per cent in 1990 to under 30 per cent in 2011. The Ethiopian government prides itself on this achievement, which is no mean feat given that estimated rates of population growth have not slowed significantly (averaging about three per cent over that period); the population rose from about 48 million in 1990 to nearly 87 million in 2011.

Increasingly, and especially in the five-year economic policy plan for 2010–14, the government’s policy rhetoric has shifted towards achievement of middle-income status, in an effort to move away from a narrative of Ethiopia centred on ‘poverty reduction’ and ‘famine’ to one portraying it as a prosperous economy and foreign investment destination. To a significant extent, the strategy is paying off. Foreign investor interest is rising, especially in ventures to supply goods and services to a growing (mainly urban) consumer base.

Measuring need

Nevertheless, poverty and food security remain difficult challenges for Ethiopia. Moreover, the challenge is made more complex by the significant variations in livelihoods across the country – broadly speaking, climatic conditions affect higher-altitude populations in terms of the impact on

¹¹ See Young (1997).

¹² See Mosley (2012a), pp. 11–12.

agriculture, whereas at lower altitudes, populations are affected through negative impacts on pastoralism.

However, there is a clear sense among members of the humanitarian community that the government is reluctant for accurate figures on food needs to be released, as they might contradict its preferred growth narrative. This in turn means that the twice-yearly assessments that feed into the annual Humanitarian Requirements Document (HRD) (a consolidated appeal framework compiled late each year and released early the next) perennially understate need, and subsequently require upward revisions – resulting in delayed deployment of assistance. The understatement significantly undermines the ability to turn EW into early action, since needs are downplayed until they manifest around April/May or later – by which time early intervention is no longer possible.

The numbers indicate that something is amiss with assessment of need. However, and interestingly, it is not only in pastoralist areas – the politically marginalized semi-arid and arid lands that are at the core of perennial vulnerability across the region – that this phenomenon is most entrenched. Rather, it also includes the densely populated and agriculturalist areas of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNPR). In February 2011, the HRD underestimated the eventual scale of need by more than 187 per cent in SNNPR, and more than 200 per cent in neighbouring Oromia Region (compared with an upward revision of only 11 per cent for the arid Somali Region, although this could well be due to political factors; the government does not negotiate over these figures). In early 2012, concern was growing over yet another underestimation of need in SNNPR, which was feared might be worse even than 2011, whereas the figures approved by the government for inclusion in the 2012 HRD had barely risen from the 2011 document.

Others have said that this narrative was overstated, and that significant problems with data-gathering in SNNPR could partially explain the discrepancies. Additionally, the point is made that donors are not without their own leverage, and given that independent estimates of vulnerability exist, there is scope for pressure to be exerted on the government if a particular donor feels that the government is potentially ignoring a developing emergency situation. Nevertheless, the 'negotiated' process of establishing a baseline vulnerability assessment is generally agreed to be inefficient at best.

One observer has pointed out that the credibility of the figures as an accurate gauge of vulnerability is undermined by their being subjected to negotiation between humanitarian agencies and the government.

Government-NGO relations

A compounding factor for many of the agencies involved in humanitarian assistance in Ethiopia is the operating context for non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Since coming to power, the EPRDF has taken a fairly robust stance towards the international community and has tried to maintain strong oversight of the NGO sector. That tendency has only strengthened over more than two decades of EPRDF rule.

The 2005 general elections were the most heavily contested in the country's history. They saw opposition parties massively increase their representation in parliament, and also spawned a protest movement that was subsequently forcefully repressed. Since then the government has steadily restricted political space in the country. In the 2010 elections it achieved near total domination of parliament, which now has just one opposition member. In the intervening years, a number of laws were passed to limit the space for criticism of the government. The 2009 anti-terrorism law has been applied to prosecute journalists.

The 2009 charities and societies law dramatically reduced the NGOs' space for operation. It defines as a 'foreign' NGO any that receives more than 10 per cent of its funding from abroad, effectively 'eliminating' the local NGO sector. It further places restrictions on the operations of foreign NGOs, which are prohibited from working on democracy and human rights, among other areas.

Since many of the humanitarian agencies that provide emergency relief are simultaneously active in Ethiopia as development agencies, they have been directly affected by this framework. In addition, concerns were expressed about a new requirement being imposed on aid agencies, which stipulates that 70 per cent of funds must be spent on programme activities, and no more than 30 per cent on overheads.

Implications for EW to EA

Although the government's stance towards NGOs and the aid community in general is wary, there remains a significant humanitarian imperative in Ethiopia, with the vulnerable population fluctuating between about 7 million and 13 million each year. Many agencies would prefer to remain in the country, if uncomfortably, rather than withdraw. Moreover, key donors may calculate that continued access – and the potential to pressure the government quietly should they perceive an emergency to be developing unaddressed – outweigh any benefits that overt pressure on the government might produce (in addition to the negative consequences such criticism could trigger).

Many agencies are involved in assessment of vulnerability and in EW, but it appears likely that there will be continued lost opportunities for early intervention. The larger donors may have the influence to be able to nudge the government from actively allowing a food emergency to develop. Moreover, it is in the government's own interest to prevent famine – given the previous role played by food security in regime change in the country.

The EPRDF is aware of these precedents, and since 2005 it has taken a proactive approach to reducing vulnerability through the PSNP. Although the potential for EA may continue to be negatively affected, it is clear that the government has a long-term vision for development.¹³

Kenya

Although the available EW systems did alert the authorities to the impending drought emergency, as early as August 2010, the reaction was slow – with significant, scaled-up response not under way until mid-2011. In part, the Kenyan authorities indicated that they lacked resources to respond adequately, following the closure of the World Bank-funded Arid Lands Resource Management Project (ALRMP) at the end of 2010. Government and aid groups also hoped that spring rains would improve the situation.¹⁴

Kenya's arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs) account for some 80 per cent of the country's territory – stretching from the northern areas along the Ethiopian and Somali borders towards higher, more fertile land to the south and west. The government estimated in September 2011 that some 3.8 million people (almost 10 per cent of the country's population) were affected by drought in the ASALs.¹⁵

Regional politics

This is not a new phenomenon. These regions have remained underdeveloped and their populations vulnerable for decades.¹⁶ The real centre of gravity in Kenyan politics rests in the tussles between ethnic groups from Central and Rift Valley provinces for dominance in Nairobi. Coastal and northern areas were poorly connected to the political economy of Nairobi at independence. The subsequent conflict in Somali-speaking north-eastern Kenya (the 'Shifty Wars'), fuelled by irredentist ambitions in Mogadishu, entrenched the region's isolation from power. Moreover, pre- and post-colonial development policy has tended to focus on areas considered to

¹³ See Markakis (2011), Parts IV and V.

¹⁴ See Paul, Duncalf et al. (2011), pp. 20–24.

¹⁵ See Government of Kenya (2011), Introduction.

¹⁶ See Branch (2011), especially Chapters 1 and 8.

have 'high potential', which do not include most arid or semi-arid lands. Northern Kenya now lags far behind the rest of the country in development indicators.¹⁷ For example, primary school enrolment stands at only 36 per cent, compared with a national average of 93 per cent. Child immunization rates stand at 48 per cent, compared with 78 per cent nationally. Similar observations could be made about physical and economic infrastructure, relative to the other regions.

However, an important shift appears to be under way in the state's considerations of the region's significance.

Demographic shifts have increased the political significance of Somali population in national calculations and ethnic coalition-building ahead of elections. North-eastern voters played something of a swing role in the closely contested 2007 elections. The current defence minister is an ethnic Somali.

Policy-makers in Nairobi are aggressively pursuing the development of an infrastructure corridor running from a new deepwater port in Lamu (on which work has begun) through northern Kenya to the borders of Ethiopia, Uganda and South Sudan. The plans include pipeline infrastructure, and road and rail links. Kenya is looking to retain its dominance as the region's transport gateway, and to tap into growing markets in Ethiopia and South Sudan, as well as into Ugandan and South Sudanese oil.

In 2012, oil was discovered in Kenya itself, in the north-western Turkana region, reinforcing this trend and potentially providing sufficient justification for investment in the transport linkages without relying on neighbouring countries from the start.

Combined with the devolutionary agenda under the constitutional reform – which will create a system of county administrations likely to have fiscal resources worth fighting for – these trends have pushed North-East, Eastern and parts of Coast provinces further up the priority list, with implications for local populations. Indeed, Kenya's October 2011 military intervention in Somalia – justified on the grounds of protecting the tourism sector – is more understandable as an assertion of Kenya's presence in its border areas with Somalia, and an effort to boost security there in the light of these economic interests.

As described above, increased investment and engagement from Nairobi in this region will not necessarily benefit the most vulnerable populations directly, and some of the new infrastructure seems almost certain to have a negative impact on traditional livelihoods (where they are still practised). On the other hand, better transportation links, electrification and delivery of education and health services in the region could in the medium to long term open up new livelihoods strategies for populations in these regions.

NDMA and contingency funding

In the light of the above considerations, the launch of Kenya's ten-year drought management strategy takes on additional significance and credibility. Significantly, the strategy is more than a DRR approach, and includes goals related to development more generally. Taking a long-term view is essential for this, given the long feed-through times for investments in education, for example.

In addition, the strategy saw the establishment in late 2011 of the NDMA, which is intended to be an independent agency, rather than subordinated to a line ministry. Since the establishment of the unity government in 2008 (and even before this, in different ways), the mandate for drought management has fallen between the Agriculture Ministry and the Ministry of State for the Development of Northern Kenya and Other Arid Lands (MSDNKOAL).

Observers in the country describe *de facto* divisions between the two bodies, with the Agriculture Ministry's agenda dominated by the interests of farmers in highland areas, whereas MSDNKOAL's agenda is said to be centred on livestock and pastoralism. Concern has been expressed that,

¹⁷ See UNISDR (2012), pp. 63–4.

following the end of the unity government after the 2013 election, MSDNKOAL might be subsumed into the Agriculture Ministry's portfolio, diminishing its effectiveness at focusing policy attention and resources on the region.

However, the NDMA should provide a centre of gravity for the agenda currently championed by MDNKOAL after 2013. As designed, its budget is not meant to be tied into the same annual 'use or lose' framework as line ministries, which means it can take a long-term view. Moreover, the National Drought and Disaster Contingency Fund, which has been established and received seed funding from the Kenyan government and the EU, will have a similarly independent mandate and funding structure. This means that there is taking shape both the means for a long-term vision of development in drought-prone areas as well as the capacity to intervene when cyclical conditions necessitate it.

Corruption

The perennial problem of corruption in Kenya has not spared the humanitarian or development sectors. Two recent scandals carry implications for the NDMA and future policy.

In 2009, senior figures within the state-owned National Cereals and Produce Board sanctioned the export of maize to Southern Sudan, contravening a ban on exports of the crop due to a drought-induced food security crisis. William Ruto, a political heavyweight and presidential contender in 2013, was minister for agriculture at the time, with oversight of the board. An independent audit subsequently found that more than \$26 million were lost as a result of the sales, which involved ghost companies.

The ALRMP was a \$120-million project, and was in its second phase when it was closed. A World Bank audit for 2007 and 2008, covering about half of total project expenditure, revealed about \$4.5 million of transactions suspected of being fraudulent expenditures (some 29 per cent of the expenditures reviewed).¹⁸

The closure of the ALRMP project in particular was cited as a factor undermining the 2011 response, as its resources were important to the county-level EW architecture.

Implications for EW to EA

Despite perennial food security challenges in northern Kenya and in other parts of the country, there are indications that a framework is emerging – under the NDMA – in which a more effective response to EW could be seen. Kenya's civil society and open media environment have contributed to the response – though not to EA. Performance will undoubtedly vary from district to district, along with local political priorities and differences in resourcing. Moreover, political factors – most significantly the constitutional reform processes and the 2013 elections – will continue to affect the implementation of the ten-year drought management strategy. But the marginalized region looks set to receive more policy attention and resources. This will not have uniformly positive consequences for all vulnerable groups, but it provides the longer-term framework within which more effective EA mechanisms could be designed.

Somalia

As noted, southern and central Somalia was the epicentre of the regional crisis in 2011, and in most senses has been and remains the most vulnerable part of the region in terms of food security. It was here that the failures of early response were most visible. EW reports in August 2010 clearly identified vulnerability here, and by March 2011 warned of famine. Yet the international response was not scaled up significantly until the declaration of famine in July.

¹⁸ See World Bank (2011), p. 5.

Humanitarian agencies especially draw attention to small aspects of the EW process that could be improved in order to facilitate EA. However, most acknowledge that the EW systems functioned adequately, and that other factors lay at the root of the sluggish response. Some warn that there is a tendency to focus on EW because it is a part of the puzzle over which the international community has some influence. This is not unimportant: although there is significant EW capacity, assessing vulnerability is different from needs assessment. In other words, knowing who is vulnerable does not mean that it is always clear what the necessary intervention should be.

Conflict and access

The point about humanitarian influence goes directly to the issue at the heart of the crisis: access. Increasingly over the last five years, conflict in southern and central Somalia – or its after-effects – has been a major factor limiting humanitarian access. While the humanitarian community remains a significant presence in Somalia, perhaps precisely because of the scale of its presence, providing aid has not been a politically neutral activity. This is not a new phenomenon. But with conflict intensifying since Ethiopia's invasion at the end of 2006 and its 2007–09 occupation – which saw the rise of al-Shabaab's insurgency and its political dominance across many parts of southern and central Somalia – the question of humanitarian access has become even more fraught.¹⁹

However, problems of access do not stem only from the direct impact of insecurity on the ability to operate. Rather, a combination of factors has resulted in structural and political restrictions on agencies.

Increasing risk to physical safety and the targeting of expatriate staff in attacks resulted in many agencies relocating their Somalia operational headquarters to Nairobi. Somali staff or sub-contracted local agencies became the local face of many of these operations. Some degree of resentment in Somalia was generated at the disparity between working conditions there and those in Nairobi.

In the run-up to the 2011 famine, the international community recognized the transitional federal government (TFG) as the legitimate authority for the whole country, including the areas under al-Shabaab control. Particularly under the incumbent special representative of the UN secretary-general (Augustine Mahiga), there has been a push to increase coordination between humanitarian and development agencies and the UN Political Office in Somalia (UNPOS) behind the goal of bolstering TFG capacity, and delivering a 'peace-dividend' to increase popular support for it. This stance towards state-building fed perceptions that Western aid was being deployed politically, rather than based on need – with potentially serious negative consequences for the reputations of international NGOs, which risked losing their neutrality. (Moreover, the TFG has benefited little in terms of its perceived legitimacy.²⁰)

In its own battle for 'hearts and minds', al-Shabaab sought to counter the influence of Western aid by explicitly restricting access to agencies, starting with the UN Development Programme, UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) and UNPOS in 2009. By early 2010, the WFP had also been shut down in many areas, following an order that it should source its food supplies from local Somali farmers. The WFP's distribution network had been a major component of food supplies in these regions. After it was forced to shut down, essential services that it had provided to the wider UN and international aid community – including personnel security activities previously handled by UNDSS – were no longer available. Many agencies were then forced by their security policies to restrict their activities to TFG-controlled areas. By late 2010, this had generated significant local resentment in areas under al-Shabaab control, and the group was forced to allow populations to move to other regions to access aid, but the propaganda war did not end. The International Committee of the Red Cross was added to the list of banned agencies in early 2011. Restrictions on Western agencies were not lifted during 2011, although Turkish and other non-Western and diaspora organizations were able to operate in areas controlled by al-Shabaab.

¹⁹ This section draws heavily on Hammond and Vaughan-Lee (2012), especially Chapters 3–5.

²⁰ See Mosley (2012b).

Counter-terrorism and aid

Another limiting factor was the effect of (mainly US) counter-terrorism policies in Somalia. Al-Shabaab is on the US list of foreign terrorist organizations, and in the run-up to the 2011 crisis Washington had tightened its monitoring of sanctions related to this designation. It is a crime under US law to provide financial support to al-Shabaab. This has led to wire transfer services from the United States being curtailed in order to prevent funds from being diverted to al-Shabaab.

More significantly, because of al-Shabaab's practice of imposing 'tax' on businesses and aid agencies operating in areas under its control, Western agencies became increasingly concerned about falling foul of these restrictions – especially agencies receiving US funding. Adding to the chilling effect, in its March 2010 report, the UN Monitoring Group on sanctions related to Somalia reported on alleged diversions of WFP consignments to the benefit of al-Shabaab. Other organizations were extremely concerned not to be similarly exposed.

Although the US Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) indicated that it would relax enforcement of its regulations owing to the famine, it later added that it was still illegal to provide financial support to al-Shabaab. This appears to have limited the ability of agencies to provide relief in the form of cash transfers – one of the few options available to them for accessing populations in al-Shabaab-controlled areas. Rather than clarify the situation, OFAC's statement seemed to enforce the chilling effect.

Red maps and 'normal'

More broadly, there appears to be a general sense of donor fatigue in Somalia. Although EW systems were providing indications of possible famine, donors had become inured to seeing 'red swathes' on EW forecast maps of Somalia. Agencies did not push a compelling narrative for early response to overcome the sense that such vulnerability was 'normal' for Somalia.

Implications for EW to EA

In contrast to Kenya and Ethiopia, where the role of the state features prominently in an understanding of how the political context affects the humanitarian environment, in southern and central Somalia there is no functioning state with which to interact or to provide a strategic framework for access. Rather, the political context is dominated by the security environment.

As such, there is little prospect of comprehensively improving response times, although the benchmark provided by 2011 is probably a low point. The key question is the extent to which al-Shabaab remains in control of significant territory, having recently lost Afgooye and Afmadow districts to African Union peacekeeping forces, as well as Kismayo. Nevertheless, the group appears set to remain a significant presence in rural areas, which means that interventions by Western countries will continue to be hampered unless they can find a way to engage with al-Shabaab. Lifting counter-terrorism-related restrictions on humanitarian operations across southern-central Somalia would be a start in improving access, and thereby potentially improving EA.

CONCLUSION

Although there is a clearly identifiable region of vulnerability and food insecurity stretching across the region discussed above (southern and eastern Ethiopia, northern and eastern Kenya and southern and central Somalia), the major variation in the three countries' political environments significantly undermines the prospects for comprehensively addressing the problem with a coherent regional strategy. It is clear that the political context is a major determining factor in the efficacy of intervention.

Moreover, there is a need to reconcile two seemingly contradictory constraining factors.

First, in the longer term, cyclical vulnerability – as is the case in this region – cannot be adequately addressed and remedied via repeated humanitarian interventions. Instead, a long-term development strategy is needed.

Second, given the long period under which such a developmental approach would be taken (i.e. several decades), effective mechanisms need to be in place for responding to the expected, short-term variations in conditions. While it is certain that the region will experience further drought, and periods of acute vulnerability, such short-term responses should comprise part of a longer-term strategy.

To bridge this apparent gap requires the intervention of stakeholders in a position to take a long-term view, and with the mandate to deliver on developmental goals over that period: i.e. the states of the region. In this regard, political stability and government capacity become even more important. Humanitarian response will continue to be essential, but within a framework targeted at bolstering the livelihoods – and moreover opening alternative livelihood strategies – of vulnerable populations in these regions.

This sets the question of early response in a slightly different context. Slow-onset emergencies such as droughts may be exacerbated by other factors – such as a conflict – but this has rarely emerged without warning. Moreover, after decades of intervention, a 'toolkit' of effective responses should be available, and could be incorporated into contingency planning built into long-term frameworks.²¹ This means that response mechanisms for a range of likely challenges can be thought out in advance and deployed when conditions demand them.

Of course, for such a system to function would require significant resources and institutions at the local and district level for monitoring vulnerability, assessing needs, and initiating and overseeing responses. The capacity of the state to deliver these varies significantly between the three countries, as we have seen. Moreover, the willingness of the state to be held accountable for delivery is an important factor. Whereas Ethiopia and Kenya have the capacity, and both states are to some degree accountable for delivery – perhaps Kenya more so – needs are most acute in southern and central Somalia, where capacity is lowest, and accountability is almost non-existent.

NDMA as model?

Kenya's NDMA may be an experiment worth watching closely, although its success is not guaranteed. Unlike Ethiopia's plan for drought-management, Kenya's ten-year strategy is fairly transparent as far as its goals and policies are concerned.

Nevertheless, two key potential limiting factors in Kenya spring to the fore. First, potential problems and delays loom in the setting up of new county and district administrations as part of the constitutional reform process. Parliament is significantly behind schedule with a range of legislation related to constitutional implementation. The NDMA will depend for success on effective local (especially district-level) administration, where the best EW and contingency planning could take place.

²¹ See PACAPS (2008).

Second, the NDMA could become a casualty of post-election manoeuvring in 2013. The MSDNKOAL, where it currently sits, will probably be folded as a department into another ministry (a likely candidate being the Agriculture Ministry) when the government of national unity ends and the size of the cabinet is shrunk back. It would be preferable if the NDMA (along with the ASAL secretariat) were to move somewhere 'above the fray', such as to the Office of the Presidency, rather than being subordinated within a ministry.

Access and engagement

The populations affected most acutely by the 2011 crisis, in southern and central Somalia, remain highly vulnerable. It is apparent that political factors will continue to affect the ability of the international community – especially Western agencies and NGOs – to reach these populations. In order to improve access, engagement with all political actors relevant to the operating environment is essential – including al-Shabaab where it continues to hold sway. The Western, especially US, policy of isolating al-Shabaab needs to be seriously reconsidered where it interferes with humanitarian access.

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