**Workshop Summary**

# Translating Early Warning into Early Action: Response by Donors and Implementing Agencies

11-12 April 2012

## INTRODUCTION

On 11-12 April, Chatham House convened an expert workshop as part of the Energy, Environment and Development Programme project *Translating Early Warning into Early Action*.

The project seeks to identify the particular barriers to responding in a timely and appropriate fashion to early warnings of slow onset food crises, and develop recommendations for how these can be addressed. In general, significant improvements in the quality and timeliness of early warning information have not been matched by comparable improvements in the responsiveness of governments and the international community. As a result, insufficient preventive interventions are undertaken and the opportunity to protect more lives and livelihoods is lost. The most recent example of this was the 2011 Horn of Africa crisis, and in particular the famine in Somalia, where early warnings increased in frequency and severity over the course of a year until famine was eventually declared in July, only at which point did donors and agencies fully mobilise.

The purpose of this workshop was to bring together experts to discuss the particular problems and constraints faced by donors and implementing agencies, for the purposes of this workshop termed 'the supply side' – indicating the role of these actors in the provision of early action and humanitarian response[1]. Wherever possible, the discussion was directed towards solutions, with participants encouraged to be as propositional as possible.

### The Chatham House Rule

The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule. The Chatham House Rule reads as follows: 'When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity not the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.'

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[1] Note that meeting participants were uncomfortable with this categorisation, preferring instead to differentiate between actors on the basis of whether they were providers of first resort (e.g. communities, local NGOs, local governments, national governments) or last resort (e.g. UN agencies, international NGOs, donors). Somewhat confusingly, this definition of 'provider of last resort' is more general that the more commonly used definition, which is applied only to cluster lead agencies.

## SUMMARY

The discussion was wide-ranging and constructive. What follows is a summary according to a number of themes that emerged over the course of the two days. In general, there was good consensus. Where there were differences of opinion, this is reflected.

## Defining early action

There appears to be no single, accepted definition for what constitutes early action in the context of a food crisis, and as a result, it can mean different things to different actors. Some participants felt that the term early action was unhelpful, as simply doing something earlier than normal (for example food distributions) may be harmful. They instead proposed 'timely action' as a better term.

Whatever the case, it was agreed that any action should be *appropriate*. A food crisis may develop over a period of many months or years due to a cumulative series of compounding events. Early warning systems can track this through the evolution of weather and climate forecasts and observations, harvest data, market data and livelihoods data. However the emergency itself may crystallise relatively suddenly, with very rapid deteriorations in malnutrition and mortality indicators. What constitutes appropriate early action (or timely action) is highly context specific, depending upon the particular livelihood and coping strategies of the affected population, where they are in their livelihood calendars, and the stage the crisis has reached.

At the earliest stages of onset, appropriate early action is likely to constitute resilience-based and Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) interventions, whilst at the point of emergency, the appropriate intervention will be some kind of humanitarian response. However in the last few months and weeks before an emergency takes hold and early warnings become increasingly confident, another set of mitigating interventions is possible.

Recognising that these 'early action' interventions are context specific, participants nevertheless agreed that agencies must better articulate what they actually consist of. For example, do they consist of preparing for a humanitarian response, or undertaking a humanitarian response early? Ideally, agencies would be able to articulate a 'menu of options' – a list of potential interventions to be applied dependent on context and lead time. Discussion indicated that donors expect agencies to be able to articulate something more than undertaking response interventions early, which they

would view as being asked to fund a humanitarian response before an emergency has been declared.

It was also noted that there is no common understanding among donors of when particular interventions are warranted either. For example, it was pointed out that the European Union (EU) and World Food Program (WFP) have different policies on when emergency food assistance is appropriate, whilst USAID has no public position.

## Information and decision-making

*Decision-making within agencies*

Linking national, regional and global structures for effective information transfers and decision-making within large international organisations is challenging. A general picture emerged that responsibility for decision-making in response to early warning information is dispersed and often unclear. Particular issues included:

- Some of the most valuable knowledge regarding the particular situation within a country, and how it is likely to evolve, is obtained through local staff and their networks, however this is not effectively collated and interpreted by senior country staff or passed up the chain to regional or global level decision-makers. In particular, country staff may not see it as part of their jobs to pass this informal early warning information on.

- Relatedly, decision-making in response to early warning is typically at the global level, removed from country teams. Different agencies adopt different approaches: in some, country directors are responsible for raising an early warning flag which must then pass through regional or global structures for resources to be mobilised. In others, there may not be explicit requirements upon country directors to be accountable for early warning.

- There may be no paper trail relating to decision-making.

- Food crises are often regional, albeit with particular national dimensions, however agencies and coordination structures are primarily organised at the country (not regional) level. This can result in poor coordination between country teams on issues such

as logistics, a failure to account for cross-border issues, and in worst cases result in country teams competing for resources.

Though the value of informal early warning information gained from local knowledge and networks can be very important, it was pointed out that this kind of information may be discounted by decision-makers at global level, because its evidence-base or sourcing may not be clear or trusted. In general, it was felt that decision-makers at global level, in donors and agencies, have a strong preference for hard, quantitative data from particular sources.

Information systems may pose a challenge. Email can dilute accountability for decision-making because early warning information may be passed on and on throughout a large organisation, with responsibility being transferred through the forwarding of an email. When actors are faced with large numbers of emails a day, this can result in decisions not being taken.

It was noted that there is a tension between ensuring accountability for decision-making whilst at the same time ensuring dispersion of information and avoiding over-centralisation. This requires a system wide approach, with incentives for different actors at national, regional and global levels designed to achieve shared outcomes. In general, there was a preference for a more decentralised approach within agencies, with more accountability and responsibility given to country directors for raising early warnings and undertaking preventive actions. One suggestion was for country directors to be able to authorise early action interventions up to a certain threshold – for example a percentage deviation from planned budget, or up to a certain absolute amount. These decisions could be based upon pre-defined triggers that would not require absolute certainty for action to follow. Irrespective of decentralisation, it was agreed that organizations must improve clarity around *who* is responsible for taking *what* decisions in response to early warning information, up to what (resource) *level* and how decision-making should *escalate*.

*Decision-making between agencies*

In general, a picture emerged of decision-making tending to take place within agencies rather than between them. At inter-agency level, the emphasis is more upon coordination, which occurs at different points and to different extents, rather than inclusive analysis, joint strategic planning and decision-making.

Inter-agency coordination at country-level takes place primarily through the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC), Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and the cluster system, and essentially takes the form of information sharing (i.e. agencies telling each other what they are doing) rather than developing and implementing joint strategies and activities. This tends not to deliver jointly-agreed response plans and erodes shared ownership and cohesion of overall activities (see following section on response planning). It also tends to result in the largest agencies pursuing their own agendas through, or in spite of, the cluster system. Many participants noted an apparent over-emphasis on food assistance for example. It was also noted that despite the considerable reliance on clusters, these do require operational direction, decision-making and guidance from the HCT.

Inter-agency coordination was seen to be weakest at the regional level, where despite various fora there is no clear, effective mechanism for developing a coherent regional perspective or collective decision-making on early warning information.

At the global level, relevant discussions occur in fora such as the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), though there are no formal joint decision-making mechanisms and senior decision-makers face the challenge of being far-removed from the situation on the ground. As a result, decision-makers at the most senior levels may not receive consistent or targeted messages.

The IASC Sub-Working Group on Preparedness is currently seeking to address this with a new inter-agency Early Warning and Early Action report, which will aim to provide specific recommendations for early action, though without a formal global level decision-making process for this to feed into, there is still more to do. This report will not be shared widely, which raised some concerns among participants, in particular that it will not be subject to broad scrutiny and that it will not serve a wide audience of stakeholders.

It was suggested that the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) should be more proactive in facilitating high-level decision-making among donors and agencies.

In general, it was felt that the humanitarian system is very complicated and heavy, with multiple coordination structures and processes that need constant servicing and act as a drain on resources, especially if overlapping. This, coupled to a lack of clear responsibility for raising flags and forcing or taking decisions ahead of disasters, results in significant inertia.

*Response planning*

There was considerable discussion around the complexities of response planning, and in particular why agencies often fail to develop timely response plans based upon a context analysis. It was argued that agencies consider a variety of factors when developing plans including:

- An expectation of donor funding preferences, such that plans are tailored according to what agencies think donors want to fund, rather than what needs dictate;

- The capacity of the organisation to use the new range of tools and interventions available, which often impose new requirements in terms of IT, finance, logistics etc.;

- Costs of donor compliance, such that agencies may prefer interventions that minimise their reporting and auditing costs – for example food distributions have lower costs than cash;

- Risk management considerations, including risk to staff, risk to recipients and organisational reputation.

As a result, it is rare that response plans are based solely on an analysis of needs.

It was also recognised that response planning tends to happen first within agencies, at which point plans are shared within clusters but not necessarily harmonised. This can result in the duplication of efforts, or gaps not being filled, or conflict between agencies with differing approaches. Another consequence is a project-based rather than strategic response. In general, it was felt that agencies are getting better at coordinating within clusters, but that coordination across clusters is still very poor.

Within the UN system, though HCs and HCTs are in theory responsible for ensuring a joint response plan is developed and owned across agencies and clusters, this responsibility is fuzzy – specifically the precise nature of what is required, how it should be produced and how they are accountable for it is unclear. More fundamentally, agencies and NGOs are not incentivised to develop joint plans. Designing incentives for the country directors of different agencies to develop joint strategies, whilst ensuring that they remain individually accountable within their own organisations, was recognised as a challenge. These problems were particularly stark in Somalia in 2011, where agencies argued over the appropriate response approach and no inter-agency consensus on early action emerged at the national level.

One suggestion was for the UK Disasters Emergency Committee to be examined as an example of effective collective decision-making.

Developing a needs-based, context specific, jointly-owned response plan will be time consuming. Given that the realistic window for early action in response to early warnings is only a few months, this is not a task that can be undertaken from scratch. A continuous process of joint contingency planning is needed instead, where agencies jointly-own a response strategy which is regularly revised in light of early warning information and local contexts and livelihood analyses. This process should represent a break from existing models of contingency planning, which see agencies separately develop generic plans each year that are then discarded until the next planning cycle begins. It should inform a continual process of programme modification as early warning and livelihoods information is incorporated into activities. This would be different to current contingency planning in two ways: 1) it is more inclusive; and 2) it is more dynamic, organising contingency planning as a live process that continuously evolves and phases-in particular decisions and actions as more information and certainty emerges.

There was also discussion of the role of early warning providers in response planning. It was noted that often there may requests from donors for early warnings providers to include response recommendations within their bulletins, however this is typically beyond their mandates and capacity. It was also noted that where early warnings begin to include such recommendations, agencies may use this as a substitute for undertaking their own needs assessments and response analyses.

*Informational challenges*

Decision-makers need early warning information on which to base their decisions. In this specific context, early warning information is understood quite differently to more general conceptions of early warning information (such as horizon scanning) which are not necessarily linked directly to specific early actions or imminent decisions. In particular, where early warning should inform early action, a greater level of understanding and trust is required.

Consensus among early warning providers was seen as important in enabling early response, particularly from donors. Differences between early warnings providers increase uncertainty and provide a rationale for delaying action.

Although there was strong consensus on Somalia in 2011, this is not always the case. The example of the Sahel in 2012 was discussed, where early warning providers are not in agreement about the severity of the situation. Participants felt that more could be done to unpack differences in early warning information where needed, and work towards consensus.

Countries or regions with chronic malnutrition rates also face a particular problem of 'normalisation of crisis', whereby decision-makers become used to maps covered in red and malnutrition rates at emergency thresholds. This can make it hard to trigger a response when indicators deteriorate even further. This was seen as having been a problem most recently with Somalia in 2011, where several years' of early warning bulletins with red maps and critical malnutrition rates may have reduced the impact of early warnings in the run-up to famine.

It was pointed out that decision-makers are naturally averse to probabilistic information, often requiring certainty instead, and may struggle to correctly interpret it in any case. Decision-makers may even struggle to differentiate between current status and forecast information where both are presented in the same way: the specific example of people interpreting current status maps as forecast maps was given. As noted elsewhere, decision-makers may demand response analysis as part of early warning information, to provide recommendations for decision-making, but this may often be outside the mandate and capacity of early warning providers.

Generally speaking, participants agreed that early warning systems have improved significantly in recent decades and are not the limiting factor in triggering action, as illustrated by the case of Somalia, which has one of the best resourced and most sophisticated early warning systems in the form of the Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit (FSNAU). Nevertheless, some participants felt there were still opportunities for improvement, including investment to increase the capacity and penetration of early warning systems in vulnerable countries, to develop processes to resolve discrepancies between different early warning providers, to continue to improve and standardise forecasting of outcome indicators such as mortality and malnutrition, and to better integrate refugee nutritional data.

*Triggers*

Discussion frequently returned to the potential for triggers at the international level, such that once a particular threshold is reached, a certain set of pre-agreed actions among donors and agencies would follow. The principal

attraction of a trigger mechanism is the automation of decision-making, potentially hastening the process and insulating it from political or institutional issues.

The Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) was discussed as a possible standard for providing trigger points. Its obvious strength is that it is an accepted framework for classifying the severity of crisis and therefore achieving consensus. Different actions (or degrees of action) could be triggered by different points on the IPC scale.

A weakness is that the IPC classifies the *current* situation – it is not forward looking and is therefore not suited to triggering early action. Though the IPC now includes a scenario-planning component, this provides a standard framework for *presenting* future scenarios but does not provide a standard methodology for *generating* them. Despite its strength in other areas, in the absence of a standard methodology for forecasting, and an independent body for undertaking or auditing forecasts, the IPC was not felt to offer an appropriate trigger mechanism at this stage in its development.

It may be difficult for a particular trigger to deal with the complexity of an emergency. For example, a trigger based on the incidence of drought would fail to account for other factors that determine the ultimate severity of livelihood impacts – e.g. functioning of markets, coping strategies, conflict, politics, level of humanitarian access etc. For this reason, it was felt that any parametric trigger (i.e. based on an underlying parameter such as rainfall) should be situated within a broader situation analysis.

Discussion also focused on what action or activities a trigger should bring about. There was some concern about triggering the release of funds at scale if this was to occur in the absence of a response plan. Participants generally felt that the trigger should activate an inclusive response planning process (and potentially funds for this activity) in order to guard against a repeat of some of the problems seen most recently in the 2011 Somalia response, where implementing agencies were slow to collectively formulate and agree response plans.[2] At the very least, a trigger should force a decision to be made.

There was also interest in the use of triggers at the programmatic level, for example in relation to risk-financing mechanisms or contingency funds that

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[2] Note that the discussion agreed that Somalia 2011 is an example of multiple failures of which this was only one. On the basis of the discussion the most important issues were primarily political.

increase the flexibility of long-term programmes to respond to anticipated crises.

## Accountability and ensuring decisions are taken

*Incentives for decision-makers*

Decision-makers in donor agencies see considerable downside risk in releasing funds in response to uncertain early warnings, particularly in the event that no crisis materialises and they are seen to have wasted public resources. They do not see comparable downside risk in waiting for certainty, and responding only when a crisis has taken hold, by which point early action is by definition impossible.

There were different suggestions as to how to address this. Some proposed that decision-making should move onto a risk management basis, where decisions are justified upon an assessment of the risks of action versus inaction. In this approach, decision-makers would be insulated from the risk of a crisis not happening if their decision to act (or not) was made on a sound analysis of the risks at that point in time. Another suggestion was for Donor Risk Reduction, whereby improved decision-support can help identify donor perceptions of risk and identify interventions that are most appropriate for their risk appetites.

Some focused on the accountability deficit – recognising these skewed risk preferences follow from the fact that decision-makers are not accountable to vulnerable populations. Increasing accountability is difficult to achieve in practice. One suggestion was to take a sanction-based approach. Under this scheme, agencies and donors would need to keep a record of decisions taken in response to early warning information. Agencies would record their decisions to revise programmes (or not), release contingency funds (or not), develop response plans (or not), and raise funds (or not). Donors would record their funding decisions. They would then rely on these records to justify the actions taken (or not taken) and would face sanctions in the event that their actions, or lack of actions, could not be reasonably justified on the basis of the information and resources available, and a responsibility to protect the vulnerable communities in question. One concern raised in response to this approach was that it may create the perverse incentive to over-respond as decision-makers seek to cover their backs by mobilising significant resources in all cases.

The preference of decision-makers to continually delay or pass on decision-making, rather than decide a course of action, was widely recognised, and it was felt that, even without specific sanctions, the general approach outlined above could still offer important opportunities. In particular, there was agreement among participants that once presented with early warning information, decision-makers should *have* to take a decision, recognising that this might include the decision not to act, and that this decision should be recorded and justified. Including this information in strong evaluations would still be highly valuable and increase accountability against the current baseline.

Softer approaches to improving accountability were also proposed. One was an explicit role for the UN Secretary General's Special Representative on Food and Nutrition Security, or another senior figure, in ensuring that appropriate decision-making and response planning are taking place within the UN system. Another was the possibility for greater scrutiny (NGO, OECD?) of donors with respect to their appetite for funding preparedness and early action, and responding to early warnings in general.

There may also be opportunities to better reward decision-makers for taking appropriate early action. For example the discussion noted that decision-makers in donor organisations tend to focus on outcome indicators such as mortality rates and malnutrition prevalence in deciding whether to release funds. This can mean that funds are not forthcoming until these indicators deteriorate, by which point preventive action is too late. If early warning providers could forecast mortality and malnutrition impacts then this could help unlock early action. It could also provide a reward for donor governments, by providing a baseline against which to estimate how many lives were saved through early action. This is technically very difficult to do, and although the IPC is moving towards a forecasting approach, a standardised methodology for doing so has not yet been developed.

*Building the case for early action*

Following on from this, it was recognised that a better case for early action needs to be presented to donors, one that clearly demonstrates the economic, livelihood and mortality impacts of earlier intervention. A systematic approach was suggested, in which implementing agencies record and collate the costs and impacts of early interventions as part of their programming and build a 'menu of options' from which specific actions can be identified depending on context and lead time.

## Funding and the humanitarian / development divide

*Building flexibility into development programming*

Participants agreed that current delivery frameworks, split between humanitarian and development programming, represent a significant barrier to early action. The system was caricatured as binary, with humanitarian response switching on and off as emergencies come and go, and development programming continuing in the background regardless. There was a clear consensus around the need to shift towards long-term development programmes that build resilience among vulnerable communities and that can be rapidly scaled-up or revised in order to respond to situations as they unfold. Social protection and safety net programmes were seen as important within this, and the Ethiopian Productive Safety Net Programme pointed to as an example of success. Cash transfers were pointed to as an intervention that can be rapidly scaled-up and delivered as a resilience and response measure.

The Consolidated Appeal Process (CAP) was seen as problematic, as it follows a particular funding and planning timeline which has nothing to do with the timeline of a particular crisis. For instance in the case of drought-related crises, the CAP timeline is not synchronized with the timing of rainy seasons. The somewhat rigid nature of the CAP limits the flexibility of agencies to respond as the situation evolves, and a number of participants pointed at the need for the CAP to become more flexible and closely related to the crisis calendar. The specific example of Somalia in 2011 was discussed as an illustration of how the CAP may be insufficiently responsive. The CAP level remained flat over the first half of 2011 in spite of the deteriorating situation. One reason discussed was a political judgment on the part of agencies that it was not realistic to increase the CAP given already low donor funding for Somalia. It was also pointed out that there are significant delays between conducting needs assessments, publishing them and feeding them into the CAP, so that they are out of date and do not reflect the latest information or take into appropriate consideration forecasts and their possible humanitarian implications. Finally, it was proposed that the HCT was reluctant to revise the CAP on the basis of new early warning information, having just completed the last iteration, preferring instead to hope that the situation would improve with good rains or at least would not deteriorate drastically.

Among providers of last resort, it was felt that the burden for early action and risk reduction falls on humanitarians, but actually it is the responsibility of development actors: initial responses to the first early warnings of a possible

food crisis should come from development programmes, which have the requisite knowledge skills and tools to respond to what is at this point a development problem. However DRR currently receives too little emphasis within development agencies. There were subtle differences of opinion about how best to address this gap. The most radical proposals called for the breaking-down of silos between humanitarian and development actors leading to a one programme approach. Others felt the onus should be on development actors to bridge the gap by delivering more DRR and resilience based-programming, allowing humanitarians to focus on emergency response. One specific proposal was that, at a minimum, donors should require all development funding proposals in vulnerable regions to include specific details about how they will respond and adapt to early warnings and crisis situations. The use of crisis modifiers was seen as a step in the right direction, but ultimately not transformative enough – entire programmes should be responsive rather than just a part.

It was noted that moving towards a model of integrated, flexible programming would require staff in development and humanitarian programmes to develop new ways of working, move outside of comfort zones, take on new challenges and develop new skills and capabilities. More broadly, it was recognised that developing staff in this way, and retaining experienced and capable staff in general would require financial resources. It was questioned whether donors would be prepared to fund this investment in staff capacity, particularly with the increasing focus on results based aid. One proposal was that donors promoting a resilience agenda should be prepared to fund necessary investments in human resources.

In general, it was agreed that much more needs to be done to work with the development community to bridge this divide.


*Bifurcation of aid*

A similar discussion extended to the provision of donor funding, which is bifurcated between short-term humanitarian and long-term development budget lines, perpetuating divisions at the delivery level. For some donors, funding early action in the run-up to an emergency may be impossible as these interventions do not conform to existing budget lines. Abolishing the distinction between humanitarian and development lines was suggested, however some participants cautioned against this, citing the need to retain funding linked to humanitarian principles. It was however agreed that funding

structures need to be far more flexible if development programmes are to become fully responsive.

The bifurcation of aid is compounded by the fact that relatively little resources are spent on DRR, and that donor DRR spending tends to marginalise the most vulnerable countries.

Again, the lack of clarity about what constitutes early action in response to early warning creates challenges for accessing funding, as early action seems to sit somewhere between (or as part of) DRR on the one hand and humanitarian response on the other. At the moment, agencies and donors are being creative within existing architectural constraints. For example, the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) *has* provided some limited funding ($11 million) for life-saving early action in the Sahel at the end of 2011 (though a one-year implementation period limits longer-term resilience-building interventions), and agencies have found ways of using the CAP for early action and preparedness projects in the absence of clear prohibitions. One suggestion was for a new CERF window for early action and preparedness, although the political feasibility of this was questioned. In the meantime, participants agreed that agencies needed to be more creative in pushing the boundaries of existing funding rules and being proactive in presenting well-articulated and evidenced plans for life-saving early action.

*The need for a paradigm shift*

It was recognised that the bifurcation of aid debate is an old one, but despite this it has remained at the conceptual rather than the operational level. At the operational level within agencies, staff remain in silos and hold very different views about the relative roles and responsibilities of humanitarian and development actors, the aims of their organisations and the ways in which they should function. As a result, agencies are bad at articulating effective demand for more flexible funding. Similar patterns play out at the coordination level, where the particular expertise of cluster leaders and Resident Coordinators/Humanitarian Coordinators may introduce bias towards *either* development *or* humanitarian focus.

The discussions frequently returned to the need for a paradigm shift within and between donors and agencies. Achieving this will be very hard to do and will take time, as it will require cultural and organisational change. Strong and visionary leadership will be crucial. Most crucially this leadership must be sustained.

## Donor politics

The focus of the workshop was on donors and implementing agencies, so the discussion of politics dealt primarily with how donor politics may constrain or enable early action. There will be a subsequent workshop to discuss the specifics of national politics in affected countries.

*Media*

The CNN effect, whereby donor governments respond only once domestic news channels broadcast images of crisis, was widely recognised; footage from the refugee camps in Dadaab helping mobilise donors in response to the 2011 Somalia famine was cited as a recent example.

The role of the media in triggering donor action is closely entwined with the role of NGOs. For example, in the case of the Dadaab camps, it was argued that Save the Children brought the situation to the media's attention. Participants felt that NGOs have an important role to play in this regard, and in challenging the consensus that may exist between donors and early warnings providers at the global level as to how serious a particular situation is. However a tension was also noted: the NGOs themselves are to a large extent dependent on media coverage in order to launch appeals, creating incentives for them to over-state needs.

Some participants also pointed towards media fatigue with reporting on food crises. This is clearly a major challenge, however it could be turned into an opportunity if a new narrative or framing can be provided which captures journalist imaginations. Responding earlier and preventing crisis could be such a framing, and some participants argued that this is the narrative that has been adopted by the media in its coverage of the current situation in the Sahel. Some felt that certain NGOs, agencies and politicians were over-stating the severity of the situation in the Sahel relative to the Horn, and that the media has seized upon a narrative of responding to early warning and not repeating the mistakes of 2011, when actually there remains considerable unreported disagreement among early warnings providers about the severity of the situation.

Whilst participants welcomed the traction that the need for earlier action in the Sahel has received within the media and among high-level decision-makers, concern was expressed that the coverage is too simplistic, whilst insufficient emphasis is being placed upon the Horn, where vulnerability remains extreme following the 2011 crisis, and early warnings of significantly below average seasonal rains have been released by the Intergovernmental Authority on

Development (IGAD) and the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWSNET) with apparently little response from donors or agencies.

It was felt that agencies chase the CNN effect, so perpetuating it, rather than seeking to change the dynamic. Participants agreed that the challenge agencies face is how to engage the media in stories of longer-term development and resilience-building which is increasingly difficult to do as newspapers and news channels cut budgets and reduce the numbers of correspondents actually based overseas. The rise of new media and social media, which may democratise access to information and increase the interaction of populations in donor and affected countries could be a significant opportunity.

*Geopolitics*

Whilst media reporting and the declaration of famine can trigger a step change in donor response, there is a broader set of geopolitical factors that help explain donor behaviour more fully. For example, particular historical or cultural ties, e.g. due to a colonial legacy, may mean that a donor is likely to respond more generously to a crisis in one particular country than another.

Strategic considerations also influence donor decisions on *when* to respond, and with *how much*. Donor governments are likely to consider the consequences of a particular crisis for their own strategic interests when deciding how to react. For example it was argued that a poor donor response to FEWSNET warnings of the 1999/2000 Ethiopian crisis was due to donor frustration with the Ethiopian government for fighting a border war with Eritrea and ignoring the humanitarian problems within its own borders. In contrast, the 2002 Ethiopian crisis saw a massive food aid response. At the time it was argued that the international community had learned the lessons of 1999/2000, however another interpretation is that Ethiopia had become a key ally in the Global War on Terror: in 1999/2000, Western donors were indifferent to whether the Ethiopian government fell, by 2002 this was no longer the case.

Donors may also prioritise other strategic imperatives over a humanitarian response. It was proposed that for many Western donors in 2011, counter-terrorism, or more specifically preventing assistance from falling into the hands of al Shabaab, was a greater priority in Somalia than preventing a disaster. In this view, the declaration of famine in July shifted the political calculus for donors, making this prioritisation less tenable, though by which point it was too late to prevent disaster. One question raised was whether

anything other than a declaration of famine could have shifted the political calculus. Another example discussed was the 1990/91 crisis in Sudan, which received little attention from donors following the Sudanese government's support for Iraq during the first Gulf War.

In particular circumstances, crisis may even provide donors with a strategic opportunity. It was pointed out that there is evidence of discussions within the US administration regarding the strategic pros and cons of *not* responding to the North Korean famine in the mid-1990s. It was suggested that it would be naïve to suppose that similar discussions had not taken place with regards to Somalia in 2011, with a potential strategic opportunity being presented should a deepening crisis weaken al Shabaab's position in South Central Somalia, providing a better chance of a successful military intervention from AMISOM forces.

Participants noted that the Global War on Terror is one of several geopolitical factors that may influence how donor governments decide to respond to early warning information, others being the emergence of new donors, the emergence of new economic and political powers in vulnerable regions – in particular China, and an increasing emphasis on resource security.

Some participants felt that the politicisation of donor response is increasing, as donor aid agendas become increasingly securitised in general.

The challenge of addressing these political factors was acknowledged. One suggestion was that multilateralisation of donor funding may help depoliticise the process, as if donor funding decisions are taken collectively, then it may be harder for the geopolitical preferences of individual donors to dominate.

*National politics*

As providers of first resort, national governments and local/regional authorities have significant influence over the timeliness and extent of any response to early warnings. Ultimately, it is their responsibility to monitor early warnings, mobilise early to protect vulnerable populations, request assistance, declare an emergency, and to coordinate the response. Over recent decades, it was noted significant improvements have been made in Ethiopian and Kenyan government capacity to generate early warning information and respond, however politics may often get in the way. The discussion focused particularly on Ethiopia, where early warning and nutrition surveys are heavily controlled by the state which, it was argued, may be reluctant to acknowledge the extent of any problems for fear of tarnishing an

image of a 'New Ethiopia'. It was argued that this dynamic is facilitated by donor politics, as donors do not wish to see a regime change in Ethiopia, and so provide emergency assistance as required to contain a crisis and prevent it becoming destabilising. This presents a challenge for NGOs which need access to affected areas, so must maintain good relations with national governments. In particular it is hard for NGOs to be fully open with the media about the failings of national government, resulting in NGO narratives that simply focus on number of people at risk and the need for more money.

It was also noted that al Shabaab, as the de facto regional authority in South Central Somalia, should assume a deal of the responsibility for the 2011 famine, and that without doubt the politics of al Shabaab vis-à-vis Western donors was crucial in determining the outcomes of the crisis.

*Information and advocacy in the political context*

There was some agreement that these political factors are likely to trump most other issues, in particular, improving information and data will only get us so far in improving the timeliness of response. For example, though much can be achieved by improving the quality of early warning information, tailoring it to donor needs, building the economic and humanitarian cases for early action etc., this is only likely to generate significant improvements in donor response in the absence of political constraints such as those discussed above.

Unlocking early donor action will therefore often necessitate the removal of political obstacles to action. This points towards the need for agencies to better incorporate political analysis into their advocacy, in particular identifying and targeting key individuals within governments that can influence these debates.

## CONCLUSIONS

The following represent some of the key themes and recommendations over the two days:

### Evidence and analysis

- The system as a whole needs to get better at measuring and recording interventions and impacts, in order to better define what early action is, what works and what doesn't, identify no and least regret options, and ultimately build the economic, humanitarian and development case for donors.

- This should inform a common understanding of what early action interventions are, when they are appropriate (even in the absence of absolute certainty), and how they should be incorporated into DRR and development programming more broadly.

### Response planning is deficient

- Current early warnings do not lead to coherent joint response planning processes. There are multiple reasons for this, including the numerous competing agendas agencies consider when developing plans, weak coordination and joint decision-making processes, a lack of incentives for agencies to plan collectively, and dysfunctional contingency planning processes.

- In the immediate term, a process must be agreed between agencies, national governments, local and regional authorities, donors and early warning providers for how response analysis and planning should take place, how it should be initiated, who is responsible for ensuring that it happens, what it should produce, etc. that can be rolled-out across the system.

### Information is secondary to politics

- Early warning systems have improved significantly in recent years, though there is still room for improvement – for example in increasing penetration in certain countries, in forecasting the kinds of outcomes that donors are most responsive to, in developing processes to achieve better consensus among providers etc.

- However focusing on improving early warning systems will only get so far, as donor and national politics can place serious constraints on the translation of early warning information to early action, no matter how good the early warning information.

- Agencies need to better understand the politics of early action and develop advocacy strategies as part of their plans – who gains and loses from action or delay, how can they be challenged, swayed or supported, what are the channels of influence available and who are the key actors?

- Approaches to insulating response decisions from broader political agendas should also be considered, though these may be resisted by governments.

## Accountability and incentives

- Accountability for taking decisions is too dispersed. Individuals must be made more accountable for passing information on, forcing decisions and taking decisions. In particular, country directors should be made clearly responsible for raising flags and forcing decisions as necessary. Those taking decisions on the basis of this or other early warning information should record their decisions and justify them.

- Incentives matter, and are rarely aligned with a system wide objective of preventing crisis. As providers of resources, donors have the power to change many incentives, for example, by demanding that agencies include early action plans in development programmes, or that response plans are jointly developed and owned. Shifting the incentives for donors is more challenging, as these relate to politics.

## A role for triggers?

- There is a role for triggers – but generally they should trigger processes (such as joint response planning) or decisions, as opposed to large scale fund releases.

- There will never be a perfect trigger as the complexity of most emergencies makes them irreducible; therefore triggers should not be used in isolation from broader political and contextual analyses.

## Changing the paradigm

- A new paradigm is needed that moves us away from debates about humanitarian versus development and focuses on building resilience and reducing risk. Ultimately, this will require significant changes in organisational structures, funding structures and ways of working, but to begin with it will require strong and concerted leadership from politicians in donor and national governments, and leaders within the UN system and NGOs.

- Such a process will take time. But there are signs that the political will is emerging, with the resilience agenda slowly gaining more traction at governmental level. Important upcoming opportunities to advance the agenda include the 10th anniversary of the Good Humanitarian Donorship in 2013, where new commitments are likely, and the expiry of the Hyogo Framework for DRR in 2015.

## A new model of continuous programming and engagement

- Ultimately the objective should be to move towards long-term programmes that respond continually to early warning information, moving between development, DRR and preparedness, early action and humanitarian response according to needs. Social protection, cash transfer and safety net programmes will be important tools within this.

- These programmes should be based upon improved understanding (and evidence) of the nature of chronic food insecurity, vulnerability, livelihoods and coping strategies in the local contexts.

- Contingency plans should be jointly owned across agencies and be live documents – continually revised and updated based on early warning information and scenario forecasting, so that they can rapidly inform any joint response planning process.

- Within this, decision-making must be dynamic. As new early warning information comes in, programming should be re-evaluated and revised accordingly. As lead times shorten and confidence increases, new interventions may become feasible. Decision-points should be identified in advance.

- A process of continuous dialogue between early warning providers, donors, agencies and national governments should underpin this, build trust, reduce donor risk perceptions, and provide the platform for joint-

decision making to agree what needs to be done and who should do it, and reach funding decision-points earlier.

## Align funding structures with needs

- The current funding architecture is not consistent with delivering this. It is not set-up to flex and switch between development, DRR, early action and response interventions. Donors need to create more flexibility within their budget lines, the CAP process needs to be more responsive to national contexts and opportunities to reform the CERF explored.

- In order to build scope for flexible development programming, donors will need to support capacity building and recruitment within agencies.