
Executive Summary

Managing Famine Risk

Linking Early Warning to Early Action

A Chatham House Report

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Executive Summary

Recurrent food crises are one of the principal impediments to development in the Horn and Sahel regions of Africa. In 2011, a drought-related emergency affected over 12 million people in the Horn – the fourth such event since the turn of the millennium. Precise numbers are unavailable, but estimates indicate that hundreds of thousands of people were displaced and tens of thousands more died. A year later, 18 million people were affected by a major crisis in the Sahel – the third to hit the region in eight years.

Food crises are slow-onset disasters. They emerge over a period of months and are routinely tracked and anticipated

by famine early warning systems – specialist units that monitor and forecast risk factors such as food prices, health indicators, rainfall and crop production. These systems provide governments and humanitarian actors with the chance to take early action and prevent the situation from escalating into an emergency. Cost-benefit analyses indicate that, compared with emergency response, early action offers significant cost savings in the long run.

Yet all too often the link between early warning and early action fails and the opportunity to mitigate a gathering crisis is lost. This disconnect was starkly apparent in Somalia during 2010/11, when increasingly urgent early warnings accumulated for 11 months before famine was finally declared in July. Only after that did the humanitarian system mobilize.

Beginning with the failures that allowed the Somalia famine to take place and drawing on the recent history of other early warnings, this report considers in detail the various political, institutional and organizational barriers to translating early warning of famine into early action to avert it, and makes recommendations for how these can be overcome.

Figure 1: 2011 Somalia consolidated appeal and selected early warnings



Source: OCHA Financial Tracking Service (FTS), FEWSNET, Chatham House analysis.

Key findings

1. Famine risk is well understood and badly managed

The spectre of famine has returned. Rapid population growth, low levels of political inclusion, low agricultural yields and rapid environmental change mean the risk of food crises in the Horn and Sahel is increasing. Conflict and geopolitics act as risk multipliers, meaning that full-blown famine remains a serious threat. The number of people affected by drought-related crises each year in the Horn and Sahel is on an upward trend. Humanitarian needs are increasingly going unmet despite increasing donor spend.

Food crises are not ‘black swan’ events. They occur regularly and their slow-onset pathology is well understood. They can be anticipated several months in advance, so are never unexpected. They are, however, devastating. It is reasonable to assume that between one and two million people have died in drought-related emergencies since 1970, the vast majority of these in the Horn and Sahel. As well as claiming lives, successive food crises erode assets and destroy livelihoods, trapping populations in a downward spiral of compounding shocks and increasing vulnerability.

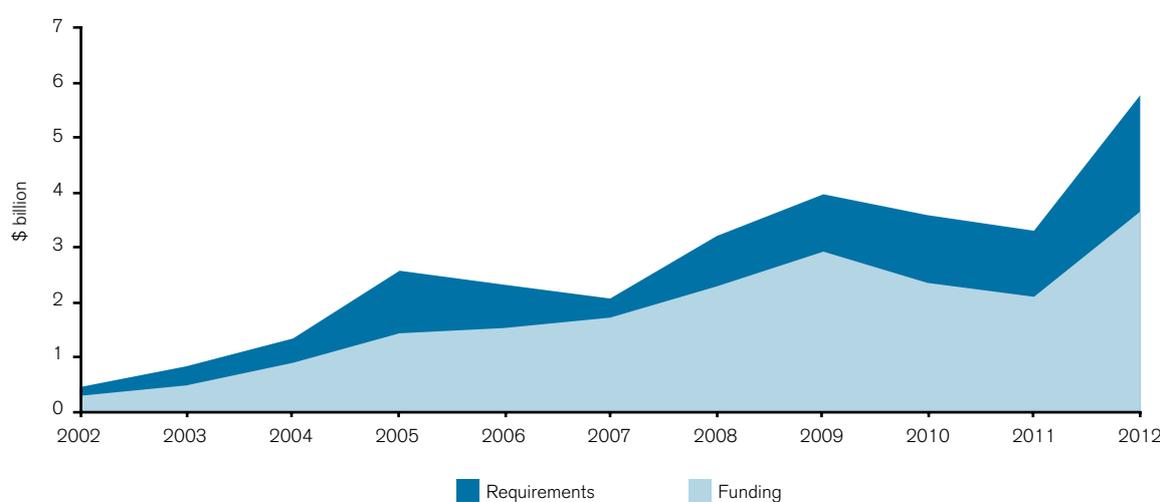
Risk reduction efforts are not commensurate with the scale of risk. A threat of high likelihood and high severity, that is furthermore predictable and preventable, should be a constant focus for risk reduction measures. Yet responses to food crises are reactive, slow and fragmented.

2. Famine early warning does not lead to early action

Famine early warning systems have a good track record of predicting food crises but a poor track record of triggering early action. The long lead times offered by famine early warning systems provide the opportunity for decisive early action, but also the opportunity for prevarication, delay and buck-passing. This disconnect persists despite major improvements in the sophistication and capabilities of modern systems. Continuing technological and methodological advances mean the gap between early warning and early action is set to widen.

These ‘delay dynamics’ are magnified by a disparate collection of responders and deep accountability deficit. The users of early warnings are numerous and fragmented. They include at-risk populations, local authorities, national governments, national and international NGOs, UN agencies and donor governments. These have differing interests and priorities and weak lines of

Figure 2: Funding of UN consolidated and flash appeals in the Horn and Sahel



Source: OCHA Financial Tracking Service (FTS). Available at <http://fts.unocha.org/pageloader.aspx?page=emerg-globalOverview&Year=2012>.

communication. Those with the greatest capacity to avert crisis are, at best, only weakly accountable to those at risk.

3. In the absence of strong accountability to vulnerable populations, governments do not give priority to humanitarian needs

Political risk trumps humanitarian risk. Aid policies and institutions are shaped by the risk preferences of donor governments, resulting in bureaucratic risk aversion and over-centralized and ponderous decision-making. In at-risk countries, governments may give lower priority to politically marginalized communities in spending and policy-making, thereby institutionalizing their vulnerability.

For donors and national governments delay is often a politically rational strategy. Donor governments may choose to delay action for a variety of reasons: if the

affected country is unsupportive of their geopolitical agendas, if there is a risk they may be criticized for wasting taxpayers' money or that aid may be diverted to hostile groups, or simply because they expect that another donor will find the funds. National governments may suppress famine early warning if they are concerned it will challenge their record on hunger reduction, and may disregard early warnings of crisis among communities of low political value.

4. Changing the status quo requires that governments anticipate political reward from acting to reduce famine risk and expect to be penalized for failing to do so

Closer alignment of humanitarian and political risks would make governments more likely to respond to famine early warning and more likely to reform institutions and policies to enable early action.

Box 1: Political risk trumps humanitarian risk

- **Donor governments are reluctant to devolve decision-making to those on the ground.** The United States and EU institutions refuse to fund country-level pooled funds. The UK government withdrew support for the innovative NGO-managed Consortium of British Humanitarian Agencies Emergency Response Fund, which had a successful track record in providing early funding for food crises, and replaced it with a new centralized funding mechanism with decisions signed off by the Secretary of State.
- **The 2011 Somalia famine was made more, not less, likely by donor attempts to manage political risks** associated with humanitarian aid being captured by the armed Jihadist group al Shabaab. Donors cut aid by half in the three years before famine hit. Donor actions further constrained the ability of humanitarians to operate in the worst-affected areas, by imposing onerous reporting requirements on agencies and by placing staff at risk of prosecution and imprisonment in the event that aid was diverted to al Shabaab.
- **Governments in at-risk countries may attach low priority to the needs of poor or marginal communities when deciding how to allocate public funds or whether to respond to early warnings.** Rates of public spending in the politically marginalized and sparsely populated northern drylands of Kenya are among the lowest in the country despite extreme levels of poverty and vulnerability to drought. When crisis struck these regions in 2011, the Kenyan government was slow to respond and mobilize assistance.
- **Governments in at-risk countries may downplay or suppress early warnings** where they are concerned these may undermine their record on hunger reduction. The government of Ethiopia routinely revises down annual estimations of food aid requirements, resulting in avoidable delay when these are subsequently revised up and plans adjusted accordingly. The former president of Niger, Mamadou Tandja, refused to acknowledge the 2005 crisis within his own country, commenting at the time that 'the people of Niger look well fed'.

Civil, political and media freedoms can help align humanitarian and political risks in affected countries.

In addition, supporting the participation of vulnerable populations in decision-making and political processes, decentralized government, and national legislation to establish famine prevention measures and responsibilities in law may help increase government accountability to vulnerable populations.

For donor governments, closer alignment of humanitarian and political risk is likely to be piecemeal and incremental, but possible.

NGO advocacy and campaigns can help tip the political calculus in favour of early action by rewarding those governments that provide early funding and criticizing those that delay. Reforms among donors to agree burden-sharing rules for early funding could increase mutual accountability. Donor governments can seek to manage the downside risks of early action by developing clear aid strategies that explain why early action is justified and seeking buy-in for these through their parliaments – similar approaches have been successful in helping donors manage the political risks associated with aid in fragile state for example.

Recommendations

Improve official early warning capacity and effectiveness

- Donors and national governments should invest in national famine early warning capacity, based on a comprehensive review of existing capabilities and needs in at-risk areas.
- They should also develop sustainable, multi-stakeholder models to strengthen and support famine early warning systems in poor countries, based on financial support from national government and donors, and technical support and capacity-building from early warnings providers and humanitarian agencies.
- Early warnings providers should explore opportunities to develop and deepen linkages between early warning systems – both vertically (community level to national level) and horizontally (across countries). For

example, a key strength of the Ethiopian national early warning system is its ability to draw on local-level data and cascade early warnings from national to regional and community levels.

- Early warnings providers should develop approaches to incorporate qualitative, informal early warnings from communities and networks into official analyses and decision-making. For example, the Climate Change Adaptation in Africa project has successfully integrated both traditional and scientific approaches to weather forecasting, resulting in more accurate forecasts and greater community acceptance.
- Donors, agencies and early warnings providers should develop a formal, independent process to reconcile differences swiftly between official early warning systems.

Enable vulnerable communities to take early action themselves

- Donors, agencies and national government should invest in community-based early warning systems and capacity-building, particularly in national contexts of low government capacity or where communities are politically marginalized.
- National and local governments should create an enabling environment for community-based early action by ensuring that policies and regulations support the response strategies of vulnerable groups.
- National governments, early warnings providers and agencies should develop innovative approaches to increase community access to official early warning information and tailor it to their specific needs.

Operational reform

- Agencies can reduce lead times and maximize their readiness for early action through a number of avenues. Lead times have been reduced from months to days by:
 - Undertaking regular preparedness audits to maintain optimal preparedness.
 - Developing response plans based on crisis calendars, which identify when during the timeline of a crisis particular interventions are appropriate and whether they can be delivered in time.

- Reforming contingency planning into a more dynamic, fluid process in which plans are live documents that are continually revised as risk factors change.
- Agencies can optimize preparedness by maintaining a certain level of operational redundancy or spare capacity. This includes pre-positioning of emergency supplies in response to early warnings. For example, the World Food Programme's Forward Purchase Facility allowed it to establish a supply line to the Sahel six months before the peak of the 2012 crisis. Appropriate redundancy measures also include ongoing operational presence and greater staff continuity in at-risk areas.
- Agencies should develop 'early action platforms', building short-term emergency capacities into long-term development and social protection programmes which can adapt and scale up in response to early warning signals. Specialist humanitarian and development agencies should begin experimenting with joint programmes. Agencies with separate development and humanitarian divisions should develop organizational change plans to more closely integrate the two.
- As the primary providers of funds, donors can create the incentives for operational change. For example, they could:
 - Insist that agency response plans demonstrate interventions can be delivered in time.
 - Underwrite operational redundancy by funding advanced purchasing of emergency supplies (as donors such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Spain are doing) and long-term staff contracts in at-risk areas.
 - Encourage closer integration of humanitarian and development work by bringing humanitarian and development funding decision-making closer together (as Spain, and the United States are attempting to do), experimenting with joint humanitarian/development strategies with common goals and objectives, and earmarking funding for integrated projects or programmes.
- Foster cooperation between agencies by favouring joint programmes and proposals, funding inter-agency response analysis and agreeing transparent and objective funding criteria that clarify when particular interventions are warranted.

Funding reform

- Donors should expand and deepen the use of instruments to increase flexibility and speed up access to funding, such as rapid response funding mechanisms – used by donors such as Sweden, Spain and the United Kingdom – with fast-track decision-making and disbursement processes, contingency funds, increasing use of untied aid, and greater use of multi-year humanitarian funding and long-term humanitarian partnership agreements such as those being explored by Denmark, Australia, Spain and Sweden.
- Pooled funds should clarify guidance for early funding; where necessary new criteria should be introduced to encourage agencies to seek early funding from these sources.
- Donors, governments and agencies should explore innovative risk-financing arrangements that can provide rapid, early financing in isolation from political considerations. A major opportunity is the African Risk Capacity initiative, which would allow governments to access early funding based on rainfall indices, and reduce costs by pooling drought risk across the entire continent.

Institutional reform

- Donors and agencies should adopt risk management strategies that identify risks, explain the rationale for assuming risk and show how early warning and early action are central to risk management.
- They should also ensure the creation of incentives for appropriate risk-taking and, equally importantly, the removal of disincentives, for example by providing institutional cover to decision-makers.
- Clear processes for triggering, escalating, recording and justifying decisions, whether they are to respond or not, should be formalized within organizations.
- Where the capacity exists to do so, decision-making should be decentralized.

Test new approaches in 'resilience labs'

Resilience labs should be developed in partnership between national governments, donors, agencies and early warnings providers to test new approaches and demonstrate success. Root-and-branch reforms of the

kind called for in this report will be easier to justify if they have been tested and shown to work. These partnerships would develop joint long-term, flexible programmes in vulnerable regions designed to respond to early warnings.

Box 2: Opportunities to learn from others

In pursuing the types of reforms called for in this report, there are significant opportunities for the humanitarian system to learn from others. In particular:

- **Learn from the military and security sectors** in terms of dynamic contingency planning, building the adaptive capacity of decision-makers, engendering a culture of readiness and, most importantly, building effective cross-agency working relationships and trust.
- **Adopt the qualities of high reliability organizations** such as nuclear aircraft carriers and air traffic control systems, which achieve near error-free performance. These include a degree of operational redundancy; an open culture of risk management in which staff are encouraged to report risks, errors and concerns and not 'wait for certainty' before responding; the rejection of a silo mentality; and a deference to expertise where decision-making migrates to those with the best situation knowledge, irrespective of their seniority.
- **Examine funding models of new and emerging donors** – properly referred to as non-DAC (Development Assistance Committee) donors. These donors are playing an increasingly important role in humanitarian funding, but have different risk preferences and a more flexible *modus operandi*, meaning that they may find it easier to fund early action in situations where 'traditional' DAC donors are reluctant to do so. As they increasingly consider how to engage with existing aid structures and norms, there will be important opportunities to learn from their approaches.
- **Experiment with innovative risk-financing approaches from the private sector** which offer examples of how to pool and transfer risks and may provide opportunities to strengthen the links between early warning and early funding. These approaches may have some distinct advantages for donors including reduced dependency on emergency assistance, greater returns on investment, smoothed costs and the wider promotion of risk management practices in vulnerable countries. However, realizing these opportunities requires donors to be more supportive of innovation and experimentation, and more tolerant of failure.



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