



The 2011 Somalia famine: Context, causes, and complications

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ABSTRACT

On July 20, 2011, the UN declared a famine in southern Somalia, affecting some 3.1 million people. Although largely described by the media as being caused by drought, the Somalia famine of 2011 was caused by multiple factors—including drought, but also conflict, rapidly-rising global food prices, and other long-standing, structural factors. The response to the famine was substantially complicated by several more factors, which combined to make the crisis worse. These include constrained humanitarian access, and the absence of the World Food Programme. This article analyzes these factors, and poses a set of questions, many of which are addressed by other articles in this issue.

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1. Introduction

On July 20, 2011, the UN declared a Famine in southern Somalia, affecting some 3.1 million people, and an estimated half million children were malnourished. The famine itself is described elsewhere in this special edition (Salama et al., in this issue). There had been early warning of a crisis in the Horn—and specific warnings about Somalia—for nearly 11 months prior to the declaration (Hillbruner et al., in this issue). However, a complex set of factors came together to both cause the famine and seriously compromise efforts to mitigate or respond to it. This article puts the 2011 famine in context and reviews causal factors as well as the complications in the response.

The well-publicized drought was a major causal factor—with the lowest recorded levels of rainfall in 50 years in some of the affected areas—but the drought only accounts for part of the causes of the famine (New York Times, 2011; Zarocostas, 2011; Zutt, 2011). Other causes included the rapidly rising price of food—both domestically in Somalia and globally. Even in good-rainfall years, Somalia relies heavily on imported food—both commercial imports and, for many years, food aid. Any increase in the international price of food exacerbates the existing food access crisis in Somalia. The fighting between the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) on one side, and the Islamist insurgent group, *Al-Shabaab* on the other, was also a major cause of the famine. These proximate causes were overlain on long-standing crises of livelihoods, governance and the environment in southern

Somalia—an area that has not had an effective central government since the overthrow of the Siad Barre regime in 1991, and which has been mostly under the control of *Al-Shabaab* since 2007. In many ways, even before the famine, southern Somalia was experiencing a classic case of “protracted crisis” (WFP/WFP, 2010).

Several complicating factors made the humanitarian response more difficult. Access to affected populations was very restricted by the governing authority *Al-Shabaab*. The absence of major food aid agencies meant the humanitarian community was left scrambling to come up with alternative means of addressing food needs in the famine-affected areas, and it did not have an adequate contingency plan for this situation, despite early warning (WFP, 2012; Darcy et al., 2012).

This article puts the 2011–2012 Somalia famine into perspective by adopting a systems approach to understand famine (Howe, 2010). The article provides a brief review of the recent history of conflict in Somalia and sketches out the major proximate causes of the famine itself, then outlines several major factors underlying the famine and the factors that made the mitigation of and response to the famine extremely difficult. Finally, it raises several questions about the nature of the famine and the response to it, which are addressed in subsequent articles in this volume. Along the way, the article outlines the way in which the Somalia famine confirms or contests existing knowledge about famine (Devereux, 2009).

2. Recent history of southern Somalia

Somalia has not had a central government since 1991 when the Siad Barre regime was toppled, and was in a state of civil war for several years prior to that. Most of southern Somalia was under the authority of local warlords or militias throughout the

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1990s. Fighting among these militias was one of the causes of the devastating 1992–93 famine (de Waal, 1997), which affected roughly the same area as the 2011 famine. Since 1993, the international community has made various attempts to facilitate the resurrection of the Somali state, the most recent of which is the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). Since 2004, the TFG has been attempting to bring some control over southern Somalia, but has been unable to extend its authority very far outside Mogadishu (ICG, 2011).

The Union of Islamic Courts (ICU), formed in the early 2000s, consolidated various groups into its control in early 2005, wrested control of Mogadishu from a coalition of warlords and soon extended its control over most of southern Somalia. There followed a brief respite and relative calm, as various business leaders in Mogadishu threw their support behind the ICU government. But Ethiopia—wary of an Islamic regime in the Greater Horn of Africa and aware that its regional rival, Eritrea, backed the ICU—invaded Somalia in December 2006 with the backing of the TFG. The Ethiopian army advanced rapidly to Mogadishu, toppling the ICU government and scattering the factions that comprised it. Even as the ICU regime collapsed under the Ethiopian invasion, its most radical member, *Al-Shabaab*, increased its popularity and influence by putting up the strongest resistance. Thus began a long counter-insurgency war between *Al-Shabaab* and the TFG—first with the backing of Ethiopia and later with support from African Union (AMISOM) troops.

By 2009, more than three million people were affected by the combination of drought, conflict, and high food prices, and required immediate food assistance. More than half of these were internally displaced. The global food-price crisis of 2008 and its aftermath had hit Somalia particularly hard. In 2008 and 2009, the highest volume of food aid was brought into Somalia since the 1992–93 famine. In 2008, *Al-Shabaab* was also formally added to a list of foreign terrorist organizations maintained by the Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) in the US Department of Treasury. In late 2009, all US food assistance to southern Somalia (i.e., territory then controlled by *Al-Shabaab*) was stopped. This set in motion a series of events that were to have major consequences in 2011 (Maxwell, forthcoming).

Throughout its recent history, Somalia—especially southern Somalia—has had indicators of humanitarian wellbeing that have been substantially worse than would be tolerated in other countries. These include the prevalence of food insecurity and malnutrition; incidence of disease or prevalence of disease symptoms; and lack of access to water and other basic services. The term “normalization of crisis” was actually coined to describe the situation in Somalia in the late 1990s (Bradbury, 1998). Suffice it to say, the degree to which the international community was willing to accept extremely poor levels of humanitarian wellbeing in Somalia was, if anything, greater by 2011 than it had been in the late 1990s. All these factors contributed to the course of events that took place in 2011.

3. Proximate causes of the famine

Several factors triggered the 2011 famine in Somalia. These include the drought, the rapid increase in the price of food, and the conflict.

3.1. Drought

There is no question that the drought that affected the entire region was a major trigger of the famine. Rainfall during the *deyr* season in late 2010 in many areas of the Greater Horn was at the lowest recorded level in 50 years (FEWSNET, 2011). Fig. 1 depicts

the *Normalized Difference Vegetation Index* (NDVI)—an index reflecting vegetative growth from remote sensing data—in December 2010, after the failure of the *deyr* rains.

The NDVI is used as a proxy indicator for rainfall—and thus provides a rough indication of the impact of the drought on both crop production and grazing and water resources for livestock. Note that the more solid red (most drought-affected) areas roughly correspond to areas declared famine. The failure of the *gu* rains in April–June 2011 was not as dramatic, but compounded the harm. Fig. 2 shows the maize and sorghum harvest (from both the *deyr* and *gu* seasons) in southern Somalia in 2011 compared to the five-year and post-1993 averages.

The dramatically reduced crop production and increased livestock mortality decreased both local food availability and livestock sales, one of the most common sources of income. The decline in agricultural production also meant the loss of significant wage-labor opportunities in rural areas.

3.2. Rapid increase in food prices

Though less publicized than the drought, of equal importance in triggering the famine was the simultaneous steep climb in the price of food globally. Somalia, as already noted, is heavily dependent on food imports. Fig. 3 depicts the price of basic food grains in different locations in Somalia. Food prices peaked in June and July, just about the time famine was declared. This was not just a local phenomenon brought about by the failure of the *deyr* harvest (although that contributed)—the trends in Fig. 3 are broadly indicative of global prices.

The combination of the loss of animals and declining rural labor opportunities contributed to a rapid decline in rural incomes precisely at the time that the price of food was escalating. The terms of trade between livestock sale prices and labor wages vis-à-vis food declined rapidly in late 2010 and stayed at historically low levels throughout the first half of 2011. This led almost instantly to a drastic drop in entitlements for several identifiable groups in southern Somalia—particularly agriculturalists, agro-pastoralists, laborers, and IDPs—resulting in a devastating—and sustained—decline in people’s ability to access adequate food (Sen, 1981). Fig. 4 depicts this rapid decline in terms of trade. In terms of causation, it is difficult to separate out the impact of the drought from the impact of the price rise. The former partially caused the latter; the latter dramatically exacerbated the effects of the former; and both contributed substantially to the collapse of entitlements.

3.3. Conflict

A protracted conflict had existed in southern Somalia for years. The conflict took on not only regional dimensions (with Ethiopia backing the TFG and Eritrea backing the ICU and later, reportedly, *Al-Shabaab*) but also global dimensions (the global war on terror). In the run-up to and during the famine, the fighting did not particularly intensify, but there were restrictions on movement and access and, in some cases, forced movement. The impact of conflict on famine has long been noted (Macrae and Zwi, 1992), but Somalia 2011–2012 offers new insights into several factors, including the role of the global war on terror (GWOT) and counter-insurgency legislation (Pantuliano et al., 2011). It was not a coincidence that the area affected by the famine was the area controlled by the *Al-Shabaab* insurgency. Civilian displacement was a major problem—in fact it was probably at the highest level since the 1990–92 war that helped trigger the previous famine. The regional and global dimensions of the conflict not only complicated the conflict—it vastly complicated the prospect for mitigating or responding to the famine (UNHCR, 2012).

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