



## When business is not as usual: Decision-making and the humanitarian response to the famine in South Central Somalia

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### ABSTRACT

In July 2011, following years of protracted crisis, famine was declared in South Central Somalia. Humanitarian agencies and donors overcame significant obstacles to drastically increase life-saving food assistance and respond to the crisis. This did not occur until famine was declared; however, this article provides insight into how and when actors made strategic response decisions to the unfolding crisis. It explores the dynamic and complex nature of, both, the operational context and food security situation in South Central Somalia, while also highlighting the challenges the humanitarian community faced in developing a consolidated understanding of the crisis in the period leading up to the Famine Declaration. The article concludes by discussing key implications for supporting better response decisions in Somalia and other complex emergencies.

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### 1. Introduction

*“Somalia is like a broken dam, water is constantly lost but it's only when the river is full that the situation is noticed and action is taken. At that point, it is impossible to fix and requires every resource you have to sand bag.”*—Member of the Food Security Cluster.

Somalia is the setting of the world's most complex and protracted humanitarian emergency. From late 2010 onwards, as humanitarian actors responded to deteriorating food security conditions across the country, they were confronted with an evolving food access crisis exacerbated by two successive droughts, embedded within an increasingly complex operational context of conflict, insecurity, geopolitical uncertainty, humanitarian access constraints, and compliance concerns, including donor antiterrorism legislation. In South Central Somalia, decision-making is complicated not only by the complexity of the broader context, but also by the protracted state of the humanitarian emergency. According to the Somalia Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWS NET) and the Somalia Food Security Nutrition and Analysis Unit (FSNAU), between two and three million people have typically required urgent life-saving assistance on an annual basis in recent years. As a result, attempts by the international community to distinguish between routine

crisis conditions and those requiring a significant increase in the scale and extent of the humanitarian response were confounded by the increasing normalization of crisis in Somalia.

Following CARE's forced exclusion from *Al-Shabaab* controlled areas in 2008 and the World Food Programme's (WFP) forced exclusion in January 2010, and with the entrance of no new humanitarian actor providing large-scale emergency transfers, the capacity of the humanitarian community to respond to the on-going food access crisis in South Central Somalia was significantly reduced by early 2010.

The level of assistance provided to South Central Somalia was not adequate for preventing famine conditions from arising in July 2011. However, recent evaluations of the response, in particular the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's Real-Time Evaluation (RTE) (Darcy, 2012), have highlighted that once large-scale assistance was provided, it helped alleviate the crisis from late 2011 onwards. While there is substantial documentation on the outcomes of the response, there is less known about how various actors chose their responses and how the decision-making process evolved over time. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to provide an enhanced understanding of how food security actors made strategic and programmatic decisions to provide life-saving access to food<sup>3</sup> given the broad array of operational challenges they faced in South Central Somalia.

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<sup>3</sup> While some actors were engaged in a broad range of food security interventions, the focus of the article is decision-making as it pertained to the support of direct access to food, including modalities, such as direct food transfers, wet feeding, cash transfers, food vouchers, cash-for-work programs, and food-based nutritional support.

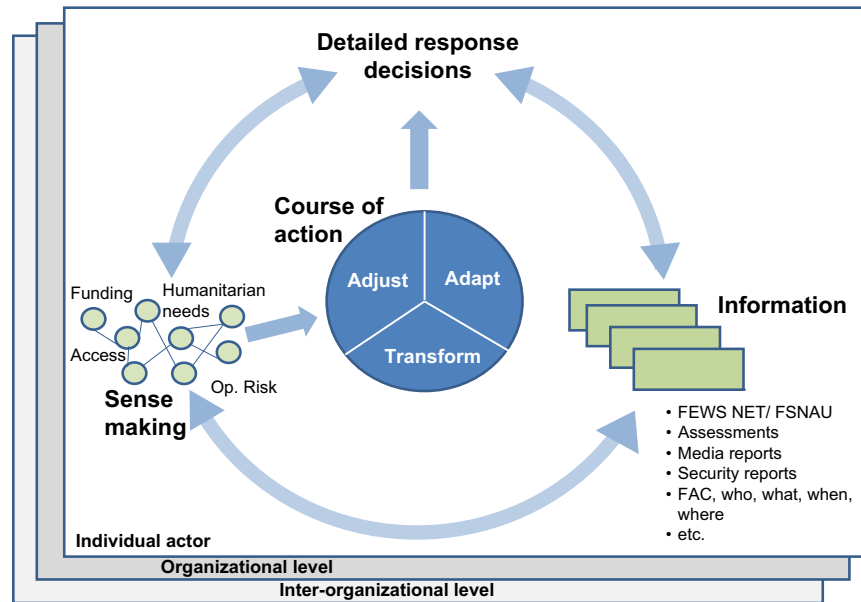


Fig. 1. Complex crisis decision-making framework.

The article outlines a framework for analyzing the decision-making process. It then covers two distinct phases in the response during which actors made the majority of their strategic response decisions. The first phase of the response occurred prior to the Famine Declaration, from early to mid-2011, while the second phase occurred after the declaration, between late July and October 2011. A third phase of the response, from November 2011 through early 2012, is not covered in detail in this article as efforts at that point in time were largely focused on implementation rather than decision-making. The article is based on interviews with 16 officials representing member, observer and donor organizations of the Somalia Food Assistance Cluster, the Agriculture and Livelihoods Cluster and the Nutrition Cluster, including local NGOs, INGOs and UN agencies. Key insights from the decision-making processes undertaken by various actors, both individually and at a collective level are then presented in the final section of the article. Analysis of the response to the famine in South Central Somalia sheds light on how decision-making can be better supported in the on-going crisis in Somalia and in other complex emergencies.

## 2. A framework for analyzing decision-making in complex emergencies

This article analyses decision-making for the South Central Somalia crisis response through the lens of a Complex Crisis Decision-Making Framework adapted from Choo's (2002) 'Organizational Knowing' strategic decision-making model, which focuses on how organizations make sense of changes in their operating environment and how this leads to strategic changes to existing activities. Based on the model, analysis of decision-making in South Central Somalia includes consideration of: (i) the information that decision-makers possessed and how it was utilized for decision-making; (ii) how decision-makers made sense of the information they had available, including the weighting of variables, such as the scale and severity of humanitarian need, access, operational risk, security dynamics, and legal considerations; (iii) the course of action chosen by actors; and (iv) the specific decisions involved in designing the response. The model provides a useful framework for decision-making in complex

circumstances, where actors must not only decide how to respond, but whether an adjustment to an on-going response is required at all. Distinctive courses of action are highlighted in the model: decisions to make short-term *adjustments* to how existing activities are implemented within current programming parameters, more substantive action to *adapt* existing programs to significant changes requiring a thorough recalibration of programming approaches, and fundamental actions that change the overall nature of the response approach and *transform* operational posture. This article focuses on exploring how food security actors *adapted* and *transformed* responses to the crisis in South Central Somalia, rather than the more limited changes implied in routine *adjustments* that take place under normal circumstances (Fig. 1).

## 3. Phase one: adapting in anticipation of crisis (February to Mid-July 2011)

### 3.1. Making sense of a deepening crisis

Throughout 2011, humanitarian food security actors supporting South Central Somalia faced severe access constraints to information and data collection, in particular the collection of household-level information. Due to the level of security concerns and limited infrastructure in Somalia, the country-level management of almost all of the food security actors interviewed are based in Kenya, reliant on national staff and cooperating partners in the region to provide local-level information for decision-making. FEWS NET and FSNAU were the only sources of food security information at a nationwide level during 2011 and food security actors relied extensively on these sources to assess the overall situation in the region.

In January 2011, FEWS NET estimated that more than two million people across Somalia were in need of emergency assistance (FSNAU Somalia, 2011) and a March warning highlighted the potential for famine conditions if the *Gu* rains failed (FEWS NET Somalia, 2011). All actors interviewed were concerned by the deteriorating conditions over the course of late 2010 and early 2011. However, the food security situation had been critical — and even on the edge of famine — in recent years (FEWS NET

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