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The 2011–12 Famine in Somalia: Introduction to the Special Edition

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ABSTRACT

On July 20, 2011, the Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWS NET) and the Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit for Somalia (FSNAU) operated by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, declared a Famine in several areas of the southern part of the country. There had been warnings of the deteriorating situation for some period of time prior to the declaration, but a variety of factors delayed the response. Then humanitarian actors scrambled to scale up a response. The Somalia famine of 2011–2012 thus touched on many familiar themes, and also raised many new ones. This special issue of *Global Food Security* analyzes the famine—mostly from the perspective of humanitarian actors themselves: analysts, practitioners, and managers of the response. This article introduces the special issue and notes the main questions that the special issue tries to address.

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1. Introduction

On July 20, 2011, the Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWS NET) and the Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit for Somalia (FSNAU) operated by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, declared a Famine in several areas of the southern part of the country. This was the first time that a Famine had been declared, in real time, using empirical data and a commonly agreed set of thresholds for making such a declaration. The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) tool was developed and piloted by FSNAU, and it continues to be the meta-analytical tool used by FSNAU (and in many other countries now), but this was the first and only time that it has been used to declare a Famine. The famine lasted through the latter half of 2011 and into early 2012 when a subsequent assessment found that indicators of mortality and malnutrition, while still at unacceptably high levels, had fallen below famine thresholds.

Despite years of chronic food insecurity that waxes and wanes depending on the season and the year, this was the first time that Somalia had experienced outright famine in nearly 20 years. A crisis of serious proportions had been forecast for Somalia and other parts of the Horn of Africa in 2011 because of the well-recognized cycle of el Niño and la Niña effects on rainfall. But a number of other factors converged to make the crisis of 2011 reach the proportions of a famine. Early warning alarm bells had been ringing throughout the first half of 2011, and had even

begun in the second half of 2010. But the response to the early warning was little different from the response in Somalia in “normal” years—until the declaration of Famine. Then funding from donors nearly doubled over night and a major humanitarian effort quickly ramped up. But for many affected groups—already displaced, malnourished and tragically, in many cases, already suffering high levels of human mortality—the response was too late. Indeed, a high level of mortality is one of the thresholds by which the Famine was declared (Salama et al., in this issue).

There are many ways that famine can be analyzed: the analysis that follows is mostly from the perspective of humanitarian actors who led the early warning, who debated the best way to overcome the constraints of access and insecurity, and who ultimately responded to the crisis. This analysis is not from the perspective of the people who actually suffered the impact of the famine, nor is it from the perspective of the various local authorities who should have been responsible for its prevention. There have already been a number of analyses of the famine; this Special Edition of *Global Food Security* is an attempt by a group of academic and humanitarian analysts to pull together various perspectives on the famine, its causes, and the humanitarian response—and put them into a peer-reviewed journal where they will not simply get lost in the “fog of humanitarianism” that such crises tend to engender (Weiss and Hoffman, 2007).

It has been nearly two decades since the original research that looked into the puzzling question of why it is that, despite having invested heavily in famine early warning systems, and despite such systems being able to generate reasonably accurate predictions of looming food security crises, the responses to those warnings are all too often a matter of “too little and too late” to prevent

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widespread malnutrition and death (Buchanan-Smith and Davies, 1995). While the specifics vary in each crisis, much of the original analysis developed by Buchanan-Smith and Davies nearly 20 years ago still provides many insights into why this issue persists. Reviewing the experience of Niger in 2005, Glenzer (2007) suggests that contemporary early warning systems and their requisite response mechanisms will only ever be partly successful at best: informing and scaling up a humanitarian response will only take place after significant loss of life and assets. This “institutionalization of partial success” is primarily because the system exists to meet the needs of the responders (the “international humanitarian community”), not the groups affected by the famine. This suggests a need for the accountability of the system to be reoriented.

There were new and novel elements of this emergency as well. First, under other circumstances, a crisis like this one would have been addressed with a massive food aid intervention. But the main instrument of food aid delivery—the World Food Programme (WFP)—had been forced to pull out of south Somalia a year and a half earlier. And the local authority, *Al-Shabaab*, the Islamist insurgent movement that controlled much of south Somalia (and virtually all of the famine-affected areas) would not permit them to return, and generally opposed foreign food aid in any case. Hence, while a variety of other international and Somali organizations continued to have a presence with programs that were designed to protect livelihoods, prevent malnutrition, ensure access to basic needs etc., there was no way to scale up a rapid response to a food crisis using the traditional instrument of food aid. So alternatives had to be quickly scaled up, including the use of cash as an alternative to food aid, but also a number of other responses. But—as several of the following articles narrate—cash was a controversial response to a crisis that was at least partly triggered by a major production shock.

Second, because of insecurity, and *Al-Shabaab* prohibitions on international staff entering famine areas, the response was mostly managed remotely from Nairobi. To be sure, there were Somali staff of some international organizations, as well as the staff of a number of Somali organizations, who valiantly carried out the immediate management of relief assistance—indeed as they have done for many years. But the fund-raising, the decision-making and most of the program design was conducted hundreds of miles away from the location of the crisis—and in many cases by individuals who had never been to the scene of the crisis, or at least not for some time. Unlike most previous crises in Africa, few senior humanitarian managers had any contact with the actual affected population unless the latter had fled to Kenya, Ethiopia, or areas of Somalia controlled by the Transitional Federal Government (TFG)—mainly Mogadishu. This raises numerous questions about the impact of remote management on the quality of humanitarian response.

The security situation for agency staff had been deteriorating steadily for years, and indeed was a major consideration behind WFP's withdrawal, and had been the main reason for the withdrawal of CARE International from the same area earlier. It had worsened to the point that Somalia was the most dangerous place in the world to be a humanitarian aid worker by 2008 (Fast, 2010).

Third, and again in part because of the role of *Al-Shabaab* and its self-professed links to *Al-Qaeda*, there were strict prohibitions of what aid agencies could and could not do in south Somalia. Some of these restrictions were relaxed somewhat after the declaration, but the role of counter terrorism laws in donor countries affected both the level of funding and the degree of freedom that humanitarian agencies had—particularly in the period just prior to the famine, but to some degree even after the Famine was declared (Menkhaus, in this issue).

There were other, more positive factors as well. Somalia has long relied on large-scale remittances from the Somali diaspora worldwide—a factor that helped to dampen the impact of the

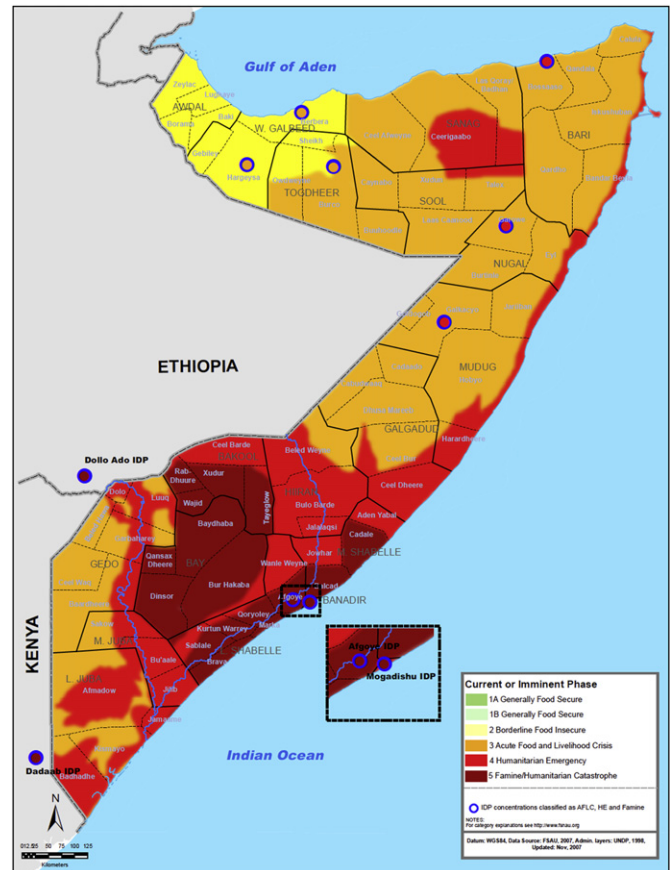


Fig. 1. IPC Map of Somalia showing famine-affected areas Aug–Sept 2011. Source: FSNAU.

crisis, at least for some. There were many non-traditional humanitarian actors engaged in the response, including from Middle Eastern and Islamic countries. And the existence of an informal banking network, the *hawala* system, greatly facilitated the flow of cash once a cash response ramped up.

This Special Edition of *Global Food Security* attempts to put in perspective the famine of 2011–2012 in south Somalia; the attempts to warn of it and prevent it; to analyze the causes and complications of the situation that led to the emergence of such a humanitarian catastrophe; and to assess the ways in which the humanitarian community responded to it. It is also an attempt to note all the unique factors, the successes and failures, and above all, to consolidate the lessons of the experience of 2010–2012 for future policy and practice.

While the crisis of 2011 engulfed much of the Greater Horn of Africa, this Special Edition is limited to the Somalia famine, and the area that was affected by it—which we refer to here as “south Somalia” or “south central Somalia:” roughly the area constituted by the regions of Gedo, Middle and Lower Jubba, Middle and Lower Shebelle, Bay, Bakool, Hiran and the city of Mogadishu. Not all these areas were affected by the famine, but the indicators at the time of the declaration were such that all were included in the attempt to respond. A map of Somalia is presented in Fig. 1, showing the famine affected areas according to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2008). Please note that the article by Salama et al. (in this issue) omits some data on the declaration of Famine for Bakool Region that turned out upon subsequent analysis to be flawed. However, FSNAU and FEWS NET stand by their declaration of Famine in Bakool, based on information available at the time—hence the map shows four of five districts in Bakool to be in famine.

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