



## When early warning is not enough—Lessons learned from the 2011 Somalia Famine

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### ABSTRACT

Starting in July 2011, the United Nations made a series of public famine declarations for southern Somalia, based on joint technical analysis by the USAID-funded Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) and the FAO-managed Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit for Somalia (FSNAU). During the 11 months prior to the Famine declaration, early warning was provided by FEWS NET and FSNAU, including a specific Famine warning in March 2011. While early warning has been provided in advance of many past food crises, these early warnings were notable in terms of the timeliness, quantity and quality of the warning provided, and the use of a formalized Famine definition. However, in the absence of incentives for early action, preventable food security emergencies are likely to persist, regardless of the quality of the early warnings that is provided.

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### 1. Introduction

On July 20, 2011, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Somalia declared that a Famine was ongoing in two regions of southern Somalia. This followed 11 months of increasingly dire warnings, and a technical determination of Famine by the FAO-managed Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit for Somalia (FSNAU/Somalia) and the USAID-funded Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET). Famine was declared in another four areas in the subsequent the 2 months (see map in Salama et al., this issue). At the Famine's peak between June and September, four million people were unable to access the basic food and non-food items needed for survival (FEWS NET and FSNAU, 2011d), nearly four in 10 children in southern Somalia were acutely malnourished (FEWS NET and FSNAU, 2011e), and refugee flows to camps in Kenya and Ethiopia reached nearly 2000 people per day (UNHCR, 2011a, 2011b).

The Famine had four key drivers. First, the failure of the 2010 Deyr (October–December) and 2011 Gu (March/April–June) rainy seasons resulted in substantial livestock mortality and the lowest annual cereal crop production since the 1991–1994 civil war. Second, as of January 2010, the World Food Programme suspended operations in southern Somalia, citing insecurity (WFP, 2010). This withdrawal severely damaged the operational

capacity of the international community to deliver food assistance and deprived the country of a major source of cereals (roughly 15% of national demand according to FEWS NET estimates). The decline in cereal production, in combination with the decline in food assistance, severely constrained market supply and resulted in an explosion in local staple food prices. In Baidoa (Bay region) for example, red sorghum prices rose 240% between June 2010 and June 2011 (FEWS NET and FSNAU, 2011b). Third, despite increasing needs during 2010 and 2011, *Al-Shabaab*, a militant Islamic group which controlled large areas of southern Somalia, placed significant limitations on humanitarian access and population movement. *Al-Shabaab's* presence, in combination with US anti-terrorism legislation, also constrained humanitarian funding. Finally, even considering WFP's withdrawal and the various impacts of *Al-Shabaab*, emergency response from the international community was very limited until after the July Famine declaration.

Following a substantial increase in emergency assistance in September/October 2011, a sharp decline in local cereal prices, and an excellent October–December 2011 rainy season, Famine abated in early 2012 (FEWS NET and FSNAU, 2012). Although a formal estimate of the Famine death toll has not yet been completed, a preliminary review of existing mortality surveys suggests that, at a minimum, tens of thousands of excess deaths occurred during the 2011 Famine, most of them children (unpublished).

During the 11 months prior to the Famine declaration, a series of early warnings were provided by FEWS NET and FSNAU. This early warning predicted the poor performance of the 2010 Deyr

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and 2011 *Gu* seasons and its impact on crop and livestock production; highlighted early on the dramatic increase in cereal prices; and publicly warned that Famine was possible in March 2011, 4 months before the official famine declaration. Early warning has been provided in advance of many past food crises; however, the early warning of the 2011 Somalia Famine was notable in terms of the timeliness, quantity, and quality of the warning provided, and the use of a formalized Famine definition.

This article has four aims: to describe this early warning—its providers, the processes, and the products; to discuss which aspects of the early warning process worked well and worked poorly; to comment on the effectiveness of early warning information in catalyzing early response; and to highlight lessons learned for both policy and future programming.

## 2. Food security information and early warning systems in Somalia

Food security analysis and early warning in Somalia is provided primarily by two groups: FSNAU and FEWS NET. The Food Security Assessment Unit (FSAU) was established in Somalia in 1995, following the 1991/1992 Famine. Multi-donor funded, and initially managed by WFP, the unit moved under FAO management in 2000. At the same time, a sister project was established to monitor the nutrition situation. In 2009, the two projects merged to create the Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit (FSNAU). The purpose of FSNAU is to provide a broad range of stakeholders with appropriate information on food, nutrition, and livelihood security for improved emergency response and development planning. This multi-donor funded project has a staff of 70, half of whom reside full-time in Somalia. These analysts conduct monthly monitoring of key indicators of nutrition and food security, implement regular national assessments, and generate nutrition, food security, and livelihood situation analyses. This includes an estimation of the size and location of the population in crisis, as well as a determination of its main drivers. This information is then disseminated through a variety of media to inform response decision-making. In addition to this early warning, FSNAU conducts research into the underlying causes of chronic food and nutrition insecurity, and provides capacity development to Somalia authorities and local NGOs. FSNAU coordinates closely with partners such as FEWS NET, WFP, UNICEF and many INGOs.

The Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) is a USAID-funded activity created in response to the 1983–1985 famines in East and West Africa. It aims to inform emergency response decision-making through the provision of timely and rigorous early warning and analysis of potential, emerging, and evolving food insecurity. FEWS NET staff use monitoring data (e.g., remote sensing imagery, price and trade data, nutrition information—much of it from secondary sources), an understanding of local livelihoods, and scenario building to develop projections of future food security outcomes. FEWS NET then uses a suite of decision support products including web content, written reports, and briefings to communicate this analysis to US government, UN, national government, donor, and NGO decision makers. As of early 2011, FEWS NET covered 31 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America/Caribbean, and Central Asia. This included Somalia, where FEWS NET began working in 1995, as well as the surrounding countries of Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti.

During 2010 and 2011, a number of other groups made a variety of contributions to the food security and early warning analysis developed by FSNAU and FEWS NET. These inputs included primary data collection, the provision of secondary data for verification and triangulation purposes, sectoral analysis, and

participation in multi-agency analysis workshops. Contributing agencies included UN partners (WFP, UNICEF, OCHA, UNHCR, and WHO) as well as a range of other international agencies such as African Development Solutions (ADESO), Danish Refugee Council, Action Contre la Faim, Save the Children, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, amongst others. In addition, the Regional Food Security and Nutrition Working Group hosted by FAO played an important role in hosting briefings and disseminating early warning analysis to a wide group of decision-makers in the East Africa Region.

## 3. Early warning process and products

In a typical year, FSNAU and FEWS NET produce a series of 14 food security analysis and early warning reports. These include seasonal assessment technical series following the *Gu* (April–June) and *Deyr* (October–December) seasons and four quarterly briefs whose production is led by FSNAU, and four Outlook reports and four Outlook updates whose production is led by FEWS NET. Both projects also publish various sectoral products including Climate, Market, and Nutrition Updates (FSNAU), and Rain Watches and Price Bulletins (FEWS NET). FEWS NET also produces monthly early warning reporting for Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti, and the larger East Africa region. Between August 2010 and the July 2011 Famine declaration, FEWS NET and FSNAU produced an additional 16 special products focused on the developing crisis (Fig. 1). These products came in four broad phases: August–September 2010 (the earliest warnings), October 2010–January 2011 (implications of *Deyr* season failure), February–March 2011 (*Gu* season warnings), and May–July 2011 (lead-up to the Famine declaration). These written products were complemented by more than 50 FEWS NET and FSNAU briefings, primarily in Nairobi and Washington DC, to USAID and other donors, the Somalia Humanitarian Country Team, UN agencies, INGOs, and other partners. Both projects also provided additional technical analysis related to nutrition, climate, and market functioning. Once the Famine had been declared, FSNAU and FEWS NET provided ongoing Famine monitoring and continued to provide forward-looking analysis.

The brief “La Niña and Food Security in East Africa”, released by FEWS NET on August 17, 2010, was the earliest public warning of a potential food security crisis in Somalia, and in the eastern Horn more broadly. It described the declaration of a La Niña by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s Climate Prediction Center (CPC/NCEP/NWS, 2010). The brief also presented October–December rainfall forecasts from the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts (ECMWF) and Columbia University’s International Research Institute for Climate and Society (IRI). Based on the La Niña declaration and these forecasts, the brief concluded that below-average rainfall totals, delayed onset, and erratic performance were likely during the October–December 2010 period in “Somalia, the northeast pastoral and southeastern marginal agricultural areas of Kenya, the Somali region of Ethiopia, and northeastern Tanzania” (1, FEWS NET, 2010a). The brief also raised concerns regarding the sub-region’s 2011 main season (Mar/April–May) given that “four of the last six October–November–December La Niña events in East Africa resulted in poor March to May rains the following year” (2, FEWS NET, 2010a). In addition to describing the likelihood of poor rainfall, the brief highlighted the likely negative impacts of the forecast on key food and income sources, concluding that a failed October–December season would reverse recent improvements in food security and that a failure of both the October–December and the March–May seasons would have “more far-

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