



No access: Critical bottlenecks in the 2011 Somali famine

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ABSTRACT

The principal obstacle to effective humanitarian response in the 2011 Somali famine was lack of access to famine victims. Poor access can be traced to five distinct bottlenecks: (1) *Al-Shabaab's* obstructionist policies, which prevented most international aid agencies from operating in the famine zones; (2) US suspension of food aid into areas of Somalia controlled by *Al-Shabaab*, and other constraints on aid agencies related to counter-terrorism legislation; (3) chronic insecurity pre-dating *Al-Shabaab* and US policies, which led most aid agencies to suspend or close operations in south Somalia by 2009; (4) diversion of food aid by armed groups and corrupt officials in the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) which controlled the capital Mogadishu; and (5) a “privilege gap” in Somali society, in which low status groups lacked the social capital to access relief aid, remittances, and lateral transfers from fellow Somalis. All five of these impediments must be addressed if humanitarian access is to be improved in the future.

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1. Introduction

Somalia has been the site of intermittent humanitarian crises since the 1970s. In previous decades, humanitarian agencies were generally able to negotiate *access* to communities at risk; the main obstacles they faced were related to their inability to fully control *distribution*, due to systematic diversion of aid by the Somali state (in the 1980s) and predatory armed groups (in the 1990s). In 2010–2011, relief agencies confronted a far more daunting array of impediments, including basic problems of access and new types of externally imposed political and legal constraints. As a result, humanitarian actors were very limited in their ability to respond effectively to one of the world's worst famines in 20 years. An “alarming void in international humanitarian aid” emerged at precisely the moment when relief aid was needed most (UN Monitoring Group, 2011).

Most Western media accounts of the 2011 Somali famine focused on the obstructionist policies of the *jihadi* group *Al-Shabaab* which controlled most of the territory where the famine occurred. But *Al-Shabaab's* policies were only part of the problem. In reality, external aid efforts in Somalia faced five distinct impediments. These included (1) *Al-Shabaab's* refusal to permit most international relief agencies to operate in the famine zone, and its sharp restrictions on the few that were granted access; (2) US suspension of food aid into areas of Somalia controlled by *Al-Shabaab*, and other constraints on aid agencies related to counter-terrorism legislation; (3) chronic

insecurity pre-dating *Al-Shabaab* and US policies, which led most aid agencies to suspend or close operations in south Somalia by 2009; (4) diversion of food aid by armed groups and corrupt officials in the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) which controlled the capital Mogadishu; and (5) a “privilege gap” in Somali society, in which low status groups lacked the social capital to access relief aid, remittances, and lateral transfers from fellow Somalis.

Any one of these obstacles alone would have posed a serious problem for humanitarian response, but the combination of all five created an operating environment that proved impossible for humanitarian agencies to navigate successfully. This article assesses each bottleneck and how it constrained effective humanitarian response.

2. Background to the crisis

The underlying and precipitating causes of the 2011 Somali famine have been analyzed in an opening article in this special issue and need not be repeated here in full (Maxwell and Fitzpatrick, in this issue). For our purposes, a few critical points must be underscored. First, food insecurity and high levels of malnutrition have been a chronic problem in Somalia since the 1970s, and as a consequence international food relief and other humanitarian aid have been a pillar of the Somali political economy for decades. Problems related to diversion of humanitarian aid, conflicts over contracts and rents linked to aid agencies, use of food as a weapon, and efforts to harness humanitarian aid to advance political and stabilization objectives are unfortunately not new (Menkhaus, 2010).

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Second, the 2011 Somali famine occurred in a unique political and security context. One aspect of this context is the complete collapse of the Somali state since 1991. The collapse of the state has not meant that Somali populations have lived in a state of Hobbesian anarchy. Instead, local communities have forged a variety of informal governance and security arrangements to provide for themselves some degree of law and order (Menkhaus, 2007). Commercial enterprises have adapted well to state collapse, evolving into a vibrant — though sometimes destructive — private sector involved in cell phone service, global remittance (or *hawala*) companies, cross-border trade, importation of foodstuffs and basic consumer goods, utilities, health and education services, livestock exports, and many other businesses (Little, 2003). The existence of a robust private sector in Somalia allowed for the possibility of a market-based response to mounting food insecurity in 2010–11. But merchants involved in food importation were also capable of intentionally manipulating food supplies to drive up prices, and were not necessarily interested in importing low value foodstuffs like sorghum and millet, which was all that destitute Somalis could afford.

The political and security context in south central Somalia grew more complex beginning in 2006. In that year, a loose umbrella group of Islamist militias (the Islamic Courts Union, or ICU) defeated an equally loose coalition of clan warlords in the capital Mogadishu. For six months, most of south Somalia fell under the control of the ICU; it was a brief period of stability and calm in the country. But in December 2006 neighboring Ethiopia went to war with the increasingly radical ICU, and within days the ICU was routed. Ethiopian forces occupied the Somali capital for two years, and were later joined and replaced by African Union peacekeeping forces (AMISOM), the mandate of which was to protect the fledgling Transitional Federal Government (TFG) as it sought to extend its authority. One radical, *al Qaeda*-affiliated wing of the ICU, known as *Al-Shabaab* (or *Harakat Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen*), emerged as the main insurgency fighting to drive Ethiopian and AMISOM forces out of the country and defeat the TFG. Much of Mogadishu and parts of south Somalia became a battlefield for the next several years, with the insurgency and counter-insurgency violence producing 700,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs). The US government, which had designated *Al-Shabaab* a terrorist organization in 2008, also engaged in direct counter-terrorism operations against the group.

For a time, *Al-Shabaab* enjoyed widespread support from Somalis, and by 2008 succeeded in recapturing most of the countryside of south Somalia and much of Mogadishu. The group also attracted non-Somali *jihadis*, some of whom assumed top positions in the movement. Though *Al-Shabaab* subsequently suffered from internal divisions, declining public support, and loss of territory to AMISOM (it abandoned most of its positions in Mogadishu in June 2011), the *jihadi* group continued to maintain control over almost all of the rest of south Somalia. The leadership of *Al-Shabaab* was internally divided over the presence of international aid agencies, but over time its hardliners prevailed, expelling a growing number of international NGOs and UN specialized agencies from south Somalia. Those which remained operated under tight restrictions.

As it happened, the 2011 famine broke out in areas under *Al-Shabaab*'s control. Because the UN and many Western countries had designated *Al-Shabaab* a terrorist organization, humanitarian agencies still operating in south Somalia were caught in a quandary. Their mandate to provide essential humanitarian aid to famine victims, their right under both the Geneva Conventions and customary international humanitarian law to negotiate with non-state parties to an armed conflict in order to access famine victims, and their need to maintain neutrality collided both with *Al-Shabaab*'s intransigence and with international counter-terrorism legislation that criminalized “material support” to terrorist

groups (Margon 2011; Harvard University, 2011). Meanwhile, portions of the famine zone were also sites of active military and counter-insurgency operations. This was the very difficult setting humanitarian agencies faced as famine conditions emerged in 2011.

3. Bottlenecks to humanitarian aid

3.1. *Al-Shabaab* policies

When the humanitarian crisis worsened in 2011, *Al-Shabaab* initially appeared to embrace a responsive and constructive approach. It collected money from local businesspeople and others as a form of *zakat* to redistribute to the needy, and in July 2011 it announced that it welcomed Western famine relief “with no strings attached.” But it then quickly rescinded that statement — arguing that it had been “mistranslated” — and affirmed that only a small number of aid agencies would be allowed to operate in its area of control (Pflanz, 2011). With the largest purveyors of food aid — World Food Programme (WFP) and CARE — already banned from *Al-Shabaab* areas (CARE in 2009, WFP in late 2010), only the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) had the capacity to move large quantities of food. This placed an enormous burden on ICRC, which had to shoulder the task of moving food aid into south Somalia for a targeted population of one million people, all the while negotiating continuously with a very nervous and increasingly unpredictable and internally divided *Al-Shabaab* leadership.

As the crisis worsened, *Al-Shabaab*'s policies became more puzzling, inconsistent, and self-defeating. Its spokesman denied that a famine existed, and blamed the UN for trying to fabricate a crisis to embarrass *Al-Shabaab*. It tried, with limited success, to block famine victims from fleeing to Kenya or Mogadishu. Refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) reported that *Al-Shabaab* was hurriedly burying the dead to hide the scale of fatalities occurring on its watch. At one point *Al-Shabaab* tried to collect drought victims in its own relief camps, mainly in the lower Shabelle region, to prevent them from leaving to areas beyond its control. But the group adamantly opposed vaccinations in those camps, until a devastating measles outbreak in several of their camps led them to reconsider. In late September, it suddenly announced that drought victims had to return to their fields to prepare the ground for the next rainy season—a forced relocation by truck that, given the weakness of the population, turned into a death sentence for some, and made it much more difficult for populations to access what little medical and nutritional aid was available in south Somalia. Somali refugees interviewed for this research reported that *Al-Shabaab* also forced rural households to either pay a tax or offer up one of their sons as a fighter. Given the destitution in the community, this was a thinly veiled form of forced conscription, and one which was deeply resented. Some of these boys deserted and fled to Dabaab, a cluster of refugee camps in northern Kenya that by late 2011 swelled to over 500,000 people, making it the largest refugee camp in the world.

Over the course of the crisis, *Al-Shabaab*'s leadership appeared more and more intent on hiding the extent of its own responsibility for the failed famine response, blaming the disaster on others, and claiming credit for successful aid delivery, whether or not it was true. Ironically, on this score *Al-Shabaab* had much in common with the international donors and aid agencies it despised. NGOs still on the ground quietly expressed frustration that *Al-Shabaab* was seeking to manipulate efforts to provide famine victims with direct purchasing power in the form of vouchers. *Al-Shabaab* first sought to stamp all vouchers with the word “*Al-Shabaab*” to give the impression it was responsible for the vouchers. Then, in late September, it forbade the vouchers altogether.

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