



Early warning, late response (again): The 2011 famine in Somalia[☆]

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ABSTRACT

One of the main questions that emerge from a review of the 2011 Somalia Famine is why early warning information did not lead to early action in Somalia in 2010 and 2011. Despite the timely alerts and stark predictions released over a period of 11 months, insufficient measures were taken to prevent malnutrition, morbidity, mortality and livelihood stress. To help answer this question, this article takes a common framework for analyzing early warning failures and tests it against the actual experience of early warning and response in Somalia, including the content and communication of the early warning information, the institutional context of the early warning system, the broader political environment and the logistical obstacles to launching a timely and adequate response. This article concludes with a review of the implications of the systematic problems of late response to early warning, including the need to refocus early warning and support to communities and in-country institutions and systems (“providers of first resort”) and to clarify rights, resources, responsibilities and recourse within the international system of assistance providers (“providers of last resort”).

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1. Introduction

The situation across the Horn of Africa deteriorated significantly in 2010 and 2011. Parts of the region experienced their driest years since 1950/51. Conditions were dire in Somalia, where cumulative harvest failures were compounded by conflict and population displacement. In the absence of adequate remedial measures, the situation deteriorated into famine (initially declared in two areas of south central Somalia on 20 July 2011) that ultimately affected five areas of south central Somalia. The Famine declaration was not unexpected. Timely and accurate early warnings with alarming predictions had been issued by food security analysts since the summer of 2010. However, this information did not induce a scale of early action necessary to

prevent the threats from overwhelming the already stressed capacities of individuals, households and communities.

This article examines the reasons why early warning information did not lead to adequate crisis risk management initiatives in Somalia in 2010 and 2011, drawing on the widely recognized four-part framework by Buchanan-Smith and Davies to explain the “missing link” between early warning and response.

- (1) The early warning system and information provided.
- (2) The institutional context within which the early warning system sits and the institutional links to decision makers.
- (3) The broader political environment.
- (4) Logistical obstacles to launch a timely and adequate response.

Based on the analysis, we offer directions for the communities of stakeholders concerned with the well-being of the Somali population as well as global measures to limit the impact of geopolitical dynamics on systems for early action to prevent — or at least mitigate — human catastrophes.

This article begins by providing background to the declaration of Famine (Section 2.1) and describes the Famine declarations (Section 2.2). Then the delayed crisis response in Somalia is examined in light of the literature on early warning (Section 3.1), specifically: the content and communication of the early warning information (Section 3.2), the institutional context of the early warning system (Section 3.3), the broader political environment (Section 3.4) and the logistical obstacles to launching a timely and adequate response (Section 3.5). The livelihood response and programming needs in

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Somalia are then covered (Section 3.6). Section 4 explores the implications for both Somalia and the global humanitarian system of yet another delayed response to reasonable indicators of impending crisis, reviewing the implications of a global community that has become inured to the baseline level of suffering in Somalia (Section 4.1). The article concludes by noting that a system of last resort cannot simultaneously serve as a system of first resort. Given the apparent limitations of the international community in timely response for Somalia, the article calls for a refocusing of early warning and support to communities and in-country institutions and systems (“providers of first resort”) and a clarification of rights, resources, responsibilities and recourse within the international system of assistance providers (“providers of last resort”) (Section 4.2).

2. Background of the crisis in Somalia

2.1. The 2011 famine in Somalia in context

The last famine in Somalia (1991/92) resulted from the violent conflict that followed the overthrow of long-term dictator Siad Barre. Coinciding with the end of the Cold War, Somalia became a zone of experimentation for a new form of assertive international humanitarianism, one prompted by then UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros Ghali’s *Agenda for Peace*. The legacy of 1991/92 famine resulted in the long-term evolution — in the absence of recognizable state authority — of a highly sophisticated and internationally-managed system of food security and nutrition analysis.

Following the collapse of the national government, the USAID-funded Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWS NET) for Somalia, based in Nairobi, Kenya, started operations in 1994, the same year as the then WFP-funded Food Security Assessment Unit (FSAU) for Somalia was established. FEWS NET and FSAU closely collaborated from the outset, thanks in part due to the personal commitment of the staffs as well as physical proximity, with the FSAU adjacent to FEWS NET. (The FSAU is now the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit.)

FSNAU and FEWS NET continue to work in close collaboration and share activities, as well as enjoy recognition as *the* food security early warning unit for Somalia. In addition, there is a long history of collaboration between FSNAU and INGOs for technical support for food and nutrition security. The influence of the FSNAU in development of tools and methodologies in food security and nutrition early warning analysis is international. For example, the integrated food security phase classification tool (IPC), first developed in Somalia in 2004, is now a global tool for classifying various stages of food insecurity. The IPC integrates comprehensive data sources to classify food security and livelihood conditions thus providing focus to different analytical systems, enabling comparability of the severity of crisis areas not only within countries but across them, and explicitly linking analysis to action.

2.2. The Famine declaration: July 2011

The highly advanced early warning information systems repeatedly sounded warnings of increasingly acute vulnerability wrought by successive seasons of failed rains and associated poor harvests, violent insecurity, food, fuel and input price inflation, and a decline in humanitarian assistance as a result of bans imposed by *Al-Shabaab* in areas under their control. The bans began in early 2009 (with CARE), with other NGOs banned during the course of the year. This was followed by the withdrawal (and subsequent ban) of WFP in January 2010 from *Al-Shabaab*-controlled areas.

From August 2010 to June 2011, the FSNAU (and partners) released 78 communications highlighting the deteriorating nutrition and food security situation (see Hillbruner and Moloney, in this issue). The analysis was based on monthly monitoring of food security outcomes, over 100 nutrition and mortality surveys, and three nationwide food security assessments. In this period, the FSNAU conducted more than 50 briefings to the donor, UN, NGO and media communities to report on the deepening crisis, especially in south central Somalia. In response to the increased demand for information, the FSNAU increased its reporting of market analysis from monthly to bi monthly, reported the cost of the minimum expenditure basket by region each month and developed a series of special products to support decision making and response analysis. This included a series of studies on the potential role of cash transfers to increase food access, its impact on markets and the costs of such interventions, amongst others (see Ali and Gelsdorf, in this issue).

On 20 July 2011, Famine was declared in south central Somalia, as predicted. Despite stark early warnings released over a period of 11 months, insufficient measures were taken to prevent the malnutrition, morbidity, mortality and livelihood stress represented by the IPC Famine thresholds. The declaration of the Famine in Somalia, as the nutritionist Joan Rivers (1976) (writing generally on famine) observed in 1976, was the difference between freezing water and ice. To many working on Somalia, the sudden, global impact of the IPC Famine declaration was astonishing. An immediate “CNN effect” appeared to galvanize an exponential increase in donor (traditional and emerging, alike) and humanitarian agency mobilization and drew the generosity of donating publics.

Prior to July 2011, neither Somali authorities nor the international community had responded with proportional increases in assistance for identified at risk communities, despite strong analysis of the deepening crisis. A focus on state-building and stabilization over the previous 10 years resulted in initiatives such as the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), but there was limited development assistance to livelihoods and food security. In 2010 and 2011, even as individual, household and communal resilience eroded dangerously, programming focused principally on short-term humanitarian interventions.

3. Why the early warnings did not catalyze a timely response

3.1. Early warning systems in context

An early warning system is defined as a system of data collection to monitor people’s access to food in order to provide timely notice when a food crisis threatens and thus to elicit appropriate response (Buchanan-Smith and Davies, 1995). Globally, early warning system development over the past 40 years has focused on refining indicators, the accuracy of data and the timeliness of warnings. Comparatively limited attention has been paid to the institutional context within which early warning systems are embedded, capacities for meta-analysis of a range of data or across multiple early warning systems, the importance of traditional early warning systems, the relevance of the broader economic and political environment, or linkages with decision-making (Stacy et al., 2009).

It is held that early warning systems must be linked to wider decision-making political processes that predictably, appropriately and accountably trigger timely responses. Therefore, the effectiveness of early warning systems is dependent on factors beyond the technical and analytical scope of the systems. Buchanan-Smith and Davies (1995) seminal book, *Famine Early*

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