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Global implications of Somalia 2011 for famine prevention, mitigation and response ☆

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ABSTRACT

The famine in Somalia 2011–2012 is a call for critical reflection and improvement. This article reviews lessons emerging from the series of articles in this special edition of Global Food Security, and identifies global implications for famine prevention, mitigation, and response in five key areas: the delay in response, the criteria for declaring a famine, the response, humanitarian space, and accountability. Three areas are identified for further research, including implications of Somalia 2011 for practice and policy; linkages to the resilience agenda and the imperative to prevent—not just respond to—famine; and implications for famine theory. Whether or not famines continue to be part of human existence or are finally relegated to history depends on how well we learn from the experience of Somalia 2011–2012, and how well this learning is incorporated into future policy and practice.

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1. Introduction

The famine in Somalia 2011–2012 is a call for critical reflection and improvement. To summarize the main conclusions, while the emergence of a food security crisis in the Greater Horn of Africa in 2011 was well predicted, inadequate measures were taken to prevent, mitigate and respond to this crisis. In the hardest hit areas of Somalia, this failure resulted in famine. There were multiple proximate causes of the crisis, but the three salient ones were drought, conflict, and a rapid increase in food prices both locally and globally. Somalia 2011 underscored the dire effects of ongoing and worsening underlying causes to the crisis, including civil insecurity, lack of governance, environmental degradation, and increasing climate variability. Control over the affected area by an insurgent group broadly opposed to both food aid and to foreign intervention, in combination with counter-terrorism laws and related policies in donor countries, confounded efforts to prevent or respond to the crisis. In addition, the long-standing willingness of the international community to tolerate higher levels of humanitarian suffering in Somalia than in other parts of the world made putting off response easier.

2011 was the first time that a famine was declared in real-time, using a broadly accepted set of criteria—a declaration that finally mobilized a vigorous (but tragically late) response. Part of the response was the innovative use of cash transfers to reach populations who were unreachable by food aid operations. Because of insecurity and restrictions on access, much of the crisis was managed remotely. Innovative means of monitoring—in addition to the unique function of the Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit (FSNAU) and the Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWS NET)—made for a steady stream of data before and during the crisis, though it was difficult to verify some data. There has rarely – if ever – been a crisis and a response that was so apparently rich in data, while so lacking in any human sense of what was happening on the ground among the affected population groups due to lack of humanitarian access.

While reflection on the famine and the response could touch on these and many more issues, this concluding paper focuses on five key points highlighted by the contributions to this special issue. First is the obvious question of why the response was so delayed when the warnings were so clear. Second is a related—but much less discussed—issue about the declaration itself: given that it was the Declaration of Famine, rather than the early warning, that finally prompted a proportionate response, is the threshold for declaring famine "correct?" The third is the response. Given that the most likely option for response to a food security crisis (food aid) was not possible, other responses had to be organized but there was no clear mechanism for determining or prioritizing responses. Fourth is the question of "humanitarian

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space'' and whether or not belligerents in a conflict recognize that preventing and responding to acute humanitarian crises is a priority that overrides military or strategic objectives. Fifth is the question of accountability. Since at least the mid-1990s, scholars studying famine have identified accountability as the single most important component of the system to prevent, mitigate and respond to famines. Yet by 2011, these mechanisms were not in place, and indeed are not in place as we write.

All these have implications for what can be learned from the famine of 2011–2012—and for what must be improved to prevent the recurrence of similar events. In conclusion, this article considers three further questions: the implications of the 2011–2012 Somalia famine for practice and policy; links to the ''resilience'' agenda and the imperative to prevent—not just respond to—famine; and implications for what we understand about famines and famine theory.

2. Early warning and the failure of response

The challenge to link early warning to early response is an old and ongoing problem (Buchanan-Smith and Davies, 1995). Papers in this issue and elsewhere have concluded that early warning was adequate in principle (Bailey, 2012; Hillbruner and Moloney, this issue), but did not lead to an adequate response. Professionals in the early warning community should take no comfort in these conclusions. Key questions emerge on the technical nature of classifying food insecurity that apply not just to famine analysis in Somalia, but to any situation of food insecurity globally.

One unique aspect of Somalia 2011 was the use of a widely accepted system for classifying famine (Darcy et al., 2012). The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) divides food insecurity severity levels into five Phases: *None/Minimal, Stressed, Crisis, Emergency, and Famine*. Originally developed by the FAO-managed Food Security Analysis Unit for Somalia in 2004, the IPC has since been adopted as a common standard by a number of UN, NGO, and governmental agencies (FAO, 2012) and is used in more than twenty countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Somalia in 2011 was the first time it was used to declare a famine. But Somalia 2011 also highlighted the importance of the IPC beyond just a classification system. Authors in this issue have noted that while the famine declaration was successful in eliciting a marked response by the international community, it is a failure of the system as a whole to wait for a famine declaration before launching an adequate and proportional response (Hillbruner and Moloney, this issue; Lautze et al., this issue; Menkhaus, this issue). Responses should have been progressively scaled up as the crisis progressed from Phase 2 (Stressed) through Phase 4 (Emergency). A global lesson learned from Somalia 2011 is that there is a need for educating decision makers on the implications of various phases of severity on the IPC scale. The question of the delayed response has been adequately emphasized elsewhere in this special edition, and need not be repeated in detail here.

3. Thresholds for declaring a famine

Another question with global implications concerns the indicators and thresholds that are used to determine levels of severity of food insecurity. The IPC is able to provide a comparable analysis by using a reference table of outcome indicators that in theory should have the same meaning regardless of the causes or context of the food insecurity. The thresholds for these indicators are drawn from global standards and previous efforts of devising classification scales (SCN, 2004, Howe and Devereux, 2004a). However, in the absence of definitive standards for determining severity levels, the IPC has drawn together the 'best fit' for these indicators. In the case of famine (as noted by Salama et al. in this issue) specific thresholds for each of three outcomes must be present in order to make the declaration: food consumption, nutrition, and mortality. However, in reality there is a complex relationship between these outcomes as they do not all increase and decrease in unison (Young and Jaspars, 2009). The Somalia Famine declaration provided real-time insight into how these indicators interact and provided the opportunity for in-situ analysis of their appropriateness for decision support (Salama et al., this issue). Given the tremendous humanitarian, political, and financial implications of a famine declaration, a legitimate debate on the appropriateness of these indicator thresholds arose from the Somalia 2011 experience. Essentially, the question is whether the thresholds are too high, too low, or does the experience of 2011–2012 suggest that they are about right?

The indicator of mortality poses the biggest controversy. There can be many degrees of famine—some more severe than others. While comparing various historic famines can be important, the question from a decision-making perspective (which is the primary purpose of the IPC) is the point at which a food security situation is so severe that it has crossed a threshold into what can be described as famine—with all the rhetorical and emotive implications of that term. At what point does the international community set aside any (tragically) lingering financial or political hindrances to ratchet up its response in scale, comprehensiveness, and urgency? The real-time nutrition and mortality data collection of the Somalia famine by FSNAU (2012) shed light on how these thresholds increase with other indicators and also with total number of estimated deaths. For reasons related to doubts about the accuracy of population estimates, no figures for total mortality were released at the time of the declaration. But using the thresholds described above and accepting that population estimates were at best inaccurate, by the time Famine was declared, human mortality from the crisis could have already been in the tens of thousands. With this number already so high, raising the threshold for mortality beyond the current 2 deaths per 10,000 per day would have the effect of requiring even more people to perish before a famine would be officially declared. On the other hand, anything lower than the current threshold would leave little distinction from what are commonly accepted as Emergency levels, which are specified by WHO as more than 1 death per 10,000 people per day. Some observers argue that mortality of 1–2 persons per 10,000 per day should be labeled a ''minor famine.'' The Somalia 2011 experience suggests that the current thresholds in IPC analysis for the declaration of famine are about correct—in any case, they have not been revised. It should be reiterated, however, that the IPC is not a tool intended for the classifications of different degrees of famine—other classifications systems are recommended for that, such as the Howe–Devereux famine intensity and magnitude scales (Howe and Devereux, 2004a). Somalia 2011 underscores the need for global discussion and agreement on common standards for classifying food insecurity.

Nonetheless, contributors to this issue and other observers have argued emphatically that the system is broken if desperate populations must wait for famine declarations to evoke an appropriate response, which of course ties the question of thresholds back to the question of early response (Bailey, 2012; Darcy et al., 2012). To some degree, this raises a question not only about the famine thresholds, but also about how response is managed at less severe phases in the IPC—particularly Phase 4 or ''Emergency.'' With regard to Somalia in particular, there is a sense that ''Phase 4 happens every year'' and hence the urgency intended by such a severe classification is lost—another manifestation of the ''normalization of crisis'' discussed throughout this special edition. Version 2.0 of the IPC addresses this issue in a different way

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