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Another Humanitarian Crisis in Somalia?
Learning from the 2011 Famine

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Somali pastoralists watering livestock at a borehole. Credit: Dan Maxwell

Contents

Another crisis in 2014?

After two reasonably good years of recovery, 2014 appears to be shaping up as a difficult year for Somalia. Donors and agencies are ringing alarm bells about deteriorating conditions. Oxfam issued a special report in May, highlighting nearly a million people in a humanitarian emergency and double that number under stressed conditions.[1] There is some discussion in humanitarian circles in Nairobi of "another 2011"—only this time competing for attention and funding with higher-profile crises in the Central African Republic, South Sudan, and Syria.

The Early Warning Community, led by the Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWSNET) and the Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit (FSNAU), has been cautious in its categorization of the current situation. A recent FSNAU Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) map shows most of Somalia in Phase 2 (stressed). The current FEWSNET map shows pockets of Phase 3 in some coastal areas and in parts of Middle Juba, Gedo, southern Bakool, Hiraan and Middle Shabelle regions—expected to last through the end of 2014. This represents a deterioration in status from earlier IPC maps. The number of people in crisis (IPC Phase 3 or higher) is likely to reach 1 million before the end of the year.[2] Trade restrictions due to conflict and localized blockades have resulted in local food price spikes particularly in towns, where purchasing power has dropped by as much as 75 percent over recent months, hitting poorest groups—laborers and IDPs—the hardest. Access to the affected towns is described as "nearly non-existent." Areas currently classified in Phase 3 could soon be in Phase 4 (humanitarian emergency).[3] The collapse in terms of trade for these groups was a major factor in the 2011 famine.

The war between *Al-Shabaab* and the internationally backed government of Somalia continues to dominate security worries—both in Somalia itself and in the broader region, with *Al-Shabaab* taking credit for numerous attacks both within and outside Somalia, particularly Kenya. In late June 2014, the International Crisis Group (ICG) issued a report on Somalia suggesting that in spite of recent military offensives against it, *Al-Shabaab* is far from defeated, and the fight against it will likely be "a long war." The ICG suggested the most likely scenario "is that [*Al-Shabaab*'s] armed units will retreat to smaller, remote and rural enclaves, exploiting entrenched and ever-changing clan-based competition; at the same time, other groups of radicalized and well-trained individuals will continue to carry out assassinations and terrorist attacks in urban areas, including increasingly in neighboring countries, especially Kenya."[4]

The political and humanitarian situation in Somalia is deteriorating, although early warning bulletins suggest that food security or nutrition comparisons with 2011 are overstated.[5] Nevertheless, a worsening food security and nutrition situation, the underlying levels of vulnerability, the on-going war with *Al-Shabaab*, the over-riding policy priority of counter-terrorism and state-building, limited humanitarian access to affected areas, and a generally limited enthusiasm for risk-taking, do suggest certain parallels with previous crises and immediate pre-crisis periods. Compounded by deep divisions among humanitarian actors and a currently underfunded response, the current time is one of concern. Now is perhaps the time for an honest re-assessment of both the 2010–11 period and the present.

Learning from the Somalia Famine and Regional Crisis of 2011–12

Since 2012, a group at Tufts University and the Rift Valley Institute has been conducting a retrospective analysis of the famine of 2011–12—in Somalia itself and in the region more broadly—with the primary objective of providing empirical evidence for prevention or early mitigation of such crises in the future. The research focuses on the causes of the crisis, the responses of different groups, and what was learned from them (with regard to famine prevention, preparedness, and humanitarian response), and the resilience agenda that has dominated the discourse since the famine of 2011.[6]

This brief interim paper highlights several findings of the on-going study that are relevant to the cur-

rent humanitarian situation in Somalia. It focuses on four critical areas: understanding the multiple causes of vulnerability in Somalia; early warning and response; strengthening the humanitarian community in Somalia; and the role of *Al-Shabaab*. The paper concludes with several policy considerations for the emerging situation in Somalia.

Crisis, Vulnerability, and Multiple Causal Factors of Famine in Somalia

The 2011 famine was caused by multiple factors—a point that is often overlooked in retrospect, with many observers now simply referring to it as "the drought." There was of course a drought that affected the whole Greater Horn of Africa region—in fact, two successive rain failures within Somalia, the *deyr* in late 2010 and the *gu* in March-June 2011. The drought led to higher food prices locally and lower demand for labor and livestock—the two commodities that Somalis can most easily sell. This combined with global food price increases to cause a catastrophic collapse in terms of trade for food, affecting low-income households the most. Added to that was the culmination of a long offensive against *Al-Shabaab* with concomitant population displacement, combined with the repressive rule of *Al-Shabaab* itself in many of the most hard-hit areas. Finally, counter-terrorism laws, a widespread aversion to risk, the lack of humanitarian access, and the absence of the World Food Programme all contributed to the crisis.[7]

A critical underlying aspect of vulnerability—relevant to both the 1992 and 2011 famines—is that the majority of victims were from the Digil and Mirifle/Rahanweyn clans and Bantu populations in the inter-riverine and riverine areas.[8] Some of the groups most affected in 2011, as in 1992, were the more sedentary, agro-pastoralist populations of the sorghum belt in Bay region, as well as some cattle pastoralist groups in Lower Shabelle.

As a result of long-term processes of marginalization, many of the Digil and Mirifle/Rahanweyn and Bantu populations have seen less urbanization, migration, education, and diasporic dispersal over time compared to the major clans in Somalia. This in turn has limited the size of their business communities (and therefore wealth at the clan/sub-clan or social group level), the level of remittances received, and their visibility within both Somali society and the humanitarian community. In terms of the latter, for example, there are few strong Somali NGOs from these population groups and relatively few employees within the humanitarian community from these same groups. These dimensions represent medium- to long-term processes of risk diversification, or adaptation and transformation in resilience terminology, which the major clans have benefitted from to a much greater extent than these more-marginalized clans.[9]

This socio-political vulnerability is evident in the current IDP camps in and around Mogadishu, as well as in the refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya, where these social groups represent the majority of these populations. In Mogadishu in particular they are systematically preyed upon by so-called "black cats," and in the Shabelle Valley by some rogue NGOs associated with majority clan members.[10] *Al-Shabaab* exploits these historical and ongoing inequalities to appeal to more-marginalized populations. By the same token, the Mogadishu government is unable to limit their exploitation by powerful interest groups in the city, or develop locally based governance processes that address associated grievances.[11] The upshot of this is that there is no guarantee—even where access is possible—that aid resources actually benefit the most-vulnerable populations.

The drought caused a **production failure**; high food price inflation added an element of **market failure**; and the conflict, the impact of *Al-Shabaab*'s rule, the counter-terror legislation, and restricted humanitarian access amounted to **response failure**. The three combined to cause a famine in 2011, whose epicenter hit these more-marginalized populations the hardest. In 2014, production and markets—while showing worrying trends—have not (yet) failed, but now is the time to act on preventing response failure.

Early Warning and Early Response

In 2011, the consensus was that early warning had been timely and accurate. By 2014, some parties

have expressed a different view about information in general and early warning in particular. Some agencies now insist that information was not sufficient in 2011, that information was contradictory; some even make the complaint that the early warning information was "probabilistic" (which is odd, because any forecast is by definition probabilistic).[12] Some senior humanitarian leaders interviewed about 2011 noted that they didn't feel they had the credibility or clout to push more urgently for early response, even with the early warning information. Certainly the restrictions of counter-terrorism laws and the legal risks they implied inhibited the response. Exemptions to these restrictions were eventually granted, but only after famine was declared. In retrospect, clearly both the donors and the implementing agencies were slow to respond in 2011, but a review of the early warning information as well as the reports of independent investigators suggests that although there were some issues with information, it is hard to blame the late response in 2011 on the availability or quality of early warning information.[13] In 2014, donors and implementing agencies seem to be out ahead of the early warning agencies in terms of raising the alarm. Whether this will translate into programs—and what kind of programs—remains to be seen.

Lessons on early response from 2011 suggest several actions: First, to ensure that rigorous early warning information is acted on, clear "triggers" (and trigger indicators) that link specific kinds of predictions to specific responses could be developed. Three main categories of early response options can be identified from the experience of 2011:

- "No regrets" programming—interventions designed to mitigate a worsening crisis, that will have beneficial impacts even if the crisis does not turn out to be as bad as anticipated. Cash transfers targeted to the most vulnerable groups to protect both consumption and livelihood assets would be one example. Some groups championed this notion in 2011, but the cash transfer response was not scaled up until after the famine was declared.

- "Crisis modifiers"—or budget lines in longer-term programming that can quickly shift programming objectives towards mitigation without going through the lengthy process of fund-raising and proposal writing. A clear example would be implementation of the Livestock Emergency Guidelines Standards in livelihoods programs in pastoral areas—including commercial livestock off-take, increased animal health interventions, and provision of water and fodder to protect a core breeding herd. A few examples of this were noted in 2011, but only a few.

- "Scalable safety nets"—or the rapid scaling up of existing social services and social safety nets to meet an anticipated increased need based on early warning information. Little of this was done in 2011, but some evidence of this exists now in places where social safety net programs have been built in Somalia. However, coverage is far from complete.

Second, the issue of access, and the political constraints to early response remain largely unchanged since 2011. Counter-terrorism laws are now matched by rigorous risk-management requirements of donors. The combined effect has led to resurgent risk aversion in 2014. This aversion to risk has meant a limited effort in mitigation, but the time for bold mitigation action is before the crisis worsens, not after.

Third, regional sharing of early warning information remains somewhat *ad hoc*. In retrospect, refugee authorities in neighboring Ethiopia clearly did not have adequate information about the worsening situation in Somalia in 2010–11 and continued to be surprised not only by the numbers of refugees arriving, but also the severity of their condition upon arrival. Improved regional information sharing is an important component of early warning.[14]

Regarding the response, the vast majority of the documentation on the 2011 response is about the international response. Relatively little was documented regarding community-based coping and social support mechanisms, even though these are renowned in Somalia—and were among the few responses to the worsening crisis in the first half of 2011. These can be summarized in terms of diversification, flexibility, and especially social

connectedness—often referred to by Somalis as "someone to cry to." Having someone to cry to is an important option in difficult times, and depends largely on the relative diversification and wealth within the household and the social networks to which a household belongs. The wealthier and more-diversified clans, with their bigger business communities and diaspora populations, had more options in a crisis. In 2011, the private sector and diaspora responded to immediate relatives and clan members first, and later, when the famine was declared and the global media covered it, the response became less clan- or local-community-based, and more one of wider solidarity. Mosques largely followed the same pattern, initially supporting people in their local areas, before some of the large Nairobi mosques participated in the wider Somali fundraising and response processes. The Somali predicament however is such that these laudable social support processes within Somali society take place alongside highly exploitative ones, where much aid is diverted away from its intended recipients.

Serious implementing agencies will review the current early warning data in more depth than the cursory treatment above, but the general observation over the past twenty years has been that late response is only rarely caused by poor early warning.[15] Many of the above mitigation responses could and should be implemented now—before the crisis grows worse. Indeed, this situation would make an excellent trial for the notion of "no regrets" programming, and trials should be rigorously evaluated. Likewise, understanding local, private sector, and diaspora-led responses is important. The fear, however, is that the political and risk-aversion constraints are as great as they were in 2011—or even greater.

The State of the "Humanitarian Community" in Somalia

Throughout the research, a deep sense of malaise has been palpable within the Nairobi-based humanitarian assistance system for Somalia. Much of the written documentation in the public domain is optimistic that while mistakes were made in 2011, lessons have been learned, and new systems have been put in place. Privately, however, many people have expressed a much more negative view: the aid system in Somalia corrupts both benefactors and beneficiaries; it is beholden to political agendas that have little to do with protecting human lives or livelihood; and under current circumstances, little is being done—or can be done—to fundamentally change things. The humanitarian community in Somalia is fragmented; most donors and agencies will not divulge the results of internal reviews or audits on programs in Somalia, even under strictly confidential terms, for fear that anything that admits mistakes will lead to blame and stigmatization. The competitive structure of funding makes genuine information sharing difficult. The realities in the field simply cannot be made to match with the rhetoric from headquarters offices of either donors or agencies. Agency staff turnover is high and new people have to relearn the same lessons—often the hard way.

The diversion of aid has long been a problem in South Central Somalia,[16] and the more "remote" that management has become, the more difficult the problem has become. Given the lack of access to places of operation, monitoring local partners and activities is very difficult. This has led to a rise in third party- or even covert monitoring. While this may help increase accountability to donors in the short term, it does little to build genuine trust among partners in the longer term—and may, in fact, be undermining it. Accounts of the diversion and the "elite capture" of aid abound in Nairobi, but no one can speak openly about either. Risks are rarely jointly shared: if a donor funds an agency, the agency shoulders the risks. Agencies have little choice but to accept these conditions, but while incentives are strong to prevent diversion, the disincentives to reporting it when it happens are equally strong. This makes an honest discussion about operating in Somalia very difficult. All this underlines the sense of a "damned-if-you-do-and-damned-if-you-don't" malaise in the system.

Some progress has been made. Agencies' risk-management practices have improved significantly.[17] In general, if diversion hasn't been completely stopped, it has at least been made more difficult. A UN Risk Management Unit is now in place, and

information sources are better crosschecked. On the other hand, risk management procedures are often opaque to those they affect, and overall, the emphasis seems to be more on simply *cutting* the risk of diversion rather than systematically *managing* that risk—in other words, developing robust means of weighing the risk of diversion against other risks—in particular, humanitarian risks. When the emphasis is on stopping "leakage," almost by definition "under-coverage" increases. This affects both the overall amount of assistance and the geographic targeting of that assistance—and indeed there are large areas in Somalia today where little aid can reach because of these fears, undermining the core humanitarian principle of impartiality. A version of this phenomenon was, of course, part of the reason for the late response to the 2011 crisis. This lack of impartiality is yet another symptom of the system-wide malaise. These issues urgently need to be addressed—and to do so requires an honest discussion about the nature of these risks: these concerns are not going away any time soon.

The response to the 2011 famine was also marked by a major engagement of "new" or "emerging" actors, particularly Turkish and Gulf States donors and agencies. These are now major players on the global humanitarian scene. Though far from a homogenous group, with significant differences in ethos and operations among them, these agencies share a number of common characteristics. These actors can in part be defined by an Islamic identity and principles of charity and by a spirit of volunteerism, which in turn suggests a closer solidarity with people on the ground, and a greater presence in Somalia in 2011 compared to western agencies. This is in contrast to the current politicized and securitized Western aid system in Somalia, which has long been perceived by many in Somalia as neither neutral nor impartial. (This observation is not to imply, however, that no political or economic interests are behind the engagement of some of the emerging actors). Given limited documentation of these agencies' impact, assessing what these characteristics mean is difficult. Much of the aid from these actors remained in and around Mogadishu in 2011-12, though some agencies were able to reach rural areas and the epicenter of the crisis. In Mogadishu, these actors faced the same challenges

of gatekeepers, diversion and limited impartiality that affected western organizations, although arguably at least some of the emerging actors have been relatively successful in managing these constraints.

Despite some attempts to coordinate actions, a degree of mistrust still exists between these actors and the more traditional OECD/DAC country agencies. The latter view the former as inexperienced. Many of the Gulf State agencies in particular, fear they are perceived by western agencies solely as a source of money. As noted, this is a diverse group—some emerging agencies do not have the same experience and internal systems (administrative, monitoring and evaluation) as many Western agencies, and note that they are learning—but some agencies in this group are very experienced. In summary, these organizations work in a less formal way, through personalized and trusted networks, rather than the more formalized, contract-based relationships of Western agencies. There are ample possibilities for greater partnership.

The Ongoing Role of *Al-Shabaab*

The role of *Al-Shabaab* in Somalia is complex, it has changed over time, and its presence has revealed many problematic features of humanitarian actors, the government, and Somali society itself. For example, *Al-Shabaab* challenged the dominant clan-based power structures that have long determined how aid resources are distributed, from the provision of contracts to the targeting of beneficiaries. These arrangements have long benefitted dominant groups in Somali society, in which, effectively, many aid actors have been complicit and have failed to address over time. In some cases, *Al-Shabaab* provided better security than government forces for the distribution of aid. However, like the government and external actors, *Al-Shabaab* failed to anticipate the 2011 crisis, and moreover its actions escalated the crisis and were an obstacle to the response, seriously complicating a famine that eventually cost an estimated 260,000 lives.

One of the major complaints of households interviewed by this study was the multiple forms of taxation imposed by *Al-Shabaab*, which took both a systematic and an *ad hoc* form. The redirection of

zakat, from an internal redistribution process to an extractive one benefiting *Al-Shabaab*, is one notable example. High levels of taxation in general led to the flight of a wealthier segment of the population in many areas. Both of these factors weakened social networks and social redistribution processes in Somalia.

Al-Shabaab also played other detrimental roles in 2011, including forbidding access by agencies and expelling agencies that had access; restricting the movement of people as the crisis deepened; limiting the outward flow of information on the severity of the crisis in areas under its control; and imposing military blockades, contributing to further food-price increases at a time of extreme stress. The extent to which all of these conditions are still in place, as well as an uncertain level of recovery in these areas, raise concerns about underlying vulnerability and resilience to further shocks in the near future. The ICG suggests *Al-Shabaab* has learned from some of its mistakes. If this is indeed true, what remains to be seen is whether it would apply these lessons to the management of a renewed large-scale crisis.[18]

Four Policy Considerations for 2014

Although not yet a crisis approaching the magnitude of 2011, the current situation calls for more decisive action. The structural issues noted above—both in Somali society and in the humanitarian aid system—cannot be addressed simply with a few quick recommendations for the present. Nevertheless, this brief review of the 2011 crisis suggests several critical points for action to address the current situation.

First, now is the time to scale up mitigation efforts aimed at protecting the progress made during several years of fragile recovery. These will vary from place to place, depending on local livelihood systems. Where these are already linked to triggers, they could represent a chance to test out important innovations. Mitigation efforts by the external humanitarian community should include the "no regrets" or "crisis modifier" programs and scalable safety nets mentioned above. They should also recognize and support local, community, or private

sector-led efforts—or at a minimum, should not undermine them (for example, in supporting on-the-ground mitigation efforts on the one hand, while attempting to close down the accounts of Somali money transfer companies with western banks on the other).

Second, analysis of the current situation needs not only to include the usual early warning indicators but also to build in a socio-political analysis across the humanitarian sector. This would focus on marginalized and minority population groups (combining livelihoods analysis with a socio-political analysis), while also examining agency staff identity, partners, and organizational credibility and relationships in the local field context. Such analyses are inevitably sensitive and dependent on who is facilitating and informing them.

Third, to effectively manage risk in the present and the future, means must be found for having an honest discussion about risk and risk-sharing mechanisms. This will require a much bolder effort and must be framed in terms of valuing the humanitarian imperative as highly as counter-terrorism or other objectives; must aim to build trust alongside accountability; and must be more concerned with learning and an honest accounting of aid than with maintaining the appearance of "zero-tolerance." The discussion will have to involve donors and agencies, but will also have to engage powerful actors within Somalia as well. In this regard, OECD/DAC donors and agencies, and Turkish/Gulf state actors have something to learn from each other, with their different networks and systems, and approaches to risk mitigation; and there is much broader scope for collaboration.

Finally, while negotiations with *Al-Shabaab* around humanitarian access may appear naïve or unlikely, repeated military attacks and a famine "on their watch," in areas they controlled, appear to have had limited impact on *Al-Shabaab*'s reach. Preparedness measures, such as means of negotiating access, should at least be in place for addressing this constraint should conditions deteriorate further.[19]

While progress on these issues is important to the current context, deeper issues remain: a humanitarian aid system deeply divided, whose aims are

contested and manipulated, whose impacts may be helpful but can also be very harmful, and whose "distance"—both geographic and psychological—from intended beneficiaries is growing. Many observers within the aid system in Somalia doubt that the system is "fit for purpose," a doubt echoed by external experts and indeed many Somalis themselves. Yet little evidence exists that the humanitarian aid system in Somalia is going away, or that the forces driving these contradictions are likely to diminish.

An honest discussion aimed at addressing these issues—and at the underlying causes of recurrent crisis in Somalia—is both critical and urgent. The full report of this study will be released later in 2014, when the findings will also be presented publicly in East Africa, Europe and the U.S.

Endnotes

1 Oxfam. 2014. "Somalia Update." Issue #29, May 31. Oxford: Oxfam. See also, "Risk of Relapse: Somalia Crisis Update," signed by 22 local and international NGOs and published on May 7.

2 FEWSNET. 2014. "Food Security Outlook: The population in Crisis (IPC Phase 3) and higher will continue to increase through December. July 2014. http://www.fews.net/east-africa/somalia.

3 FEWSNET. 2014. "Food Security Alert: Restricted trade is preventing food from reaching some southern Somalia towns." July 17, 2014. http://www.fews.net/east-africa/somalia.

4 International Crisis Group. 2014. "Somalia: *Al-Shabaab*–It Will Be a Long War." Africa Briefing No. 99, p.1. Nairobi/Brussels: ICG.

5 The most recent update from the Famine Early Warning Network (FEWSNET) states, "Food security is likely to deteriorate in southern Somalia, particularly in Lower and Middle Shabelle Regions, due to intensified conflict, erratic rainfall from April to June, and their impacts on agricultural labor demand and staple food prices" (FEWSNET, March 26, 2014). However, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification map shows little change from classifications in 2012 and 2013.

6 Three main groups were interviewed: the mainstream humanitarian community including donor agencies, the UN, and NGOs; Somali communities themselves, including affected households, local businesses, mosques, and other local responders; the diaspora; and a group of "emerging" humanitarian donors and agencies, specifically from Turkey and Middle Eastern countries, who played a significant role in the response in 2011. A desk review included some 600 documents, summarizing in detail over 180 of these.

7 Daniel Maxwell and Merry Fitzpatrick. 2012. "The 2011 Somalia Famine: Context, Causes, and Complications." *Global Food Security*. Volume 1(1), pp. 5–12. This was a Special Issue on "The 2011–2012 Famine in Somalia." In response to popular request, the publisher, Elsevier, has made this Special Edition available free of charge for three months at http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/22119124/1/1.

8 We use these generic identifying terms with caution as no agreed classifying system exists for these groups and, in addition, there are significant differences within and between them, based on lineage, livelihood, and geography.

9 Within the major and marginalised clans, there are different levels of diversification and wealth at the sub-clan level. See Nisar Majid and Stephen Mc-Dowell. 2012. "Hidden Dimensions of the Somalia Famine." *Global Food Security*. Volume 1(1), pp. 38–44. Special Issue on "The 2011–2012 Famine in Somalia."

10 "Black cats" are individuals from a powerful majority clan who provide protection for a particular group—typically a minority family or families. These are highly unequal, exploitative arrangements, with the black cat benefitting in different ways, including financially.

11 ICG (op. cit.).

12 Key informant interviews in 2013 and 2014.

13 Rob Bailey. 2013. "Managing Famine Risk: Linking Early Warning to Early Action." A Chatham House Report. London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs. Early warning information from 2011 has been thoroughly reviewed by the study team as well.

14 See also Abhijit Bhattacharjee. 2012. "IASC Real Time Evaluation (IASC RTE) of the Humanitarian Response to the Horn of Africa Drought Crisis 2011: Regional Mechanisms and Support during the Response." New York: IASC.

15 Besides the Chatham House report (ibid.), see Buchanan-Smith and Davies, 1995, *Early Warning and Response: The Missing Link*. London: ITDG; Humanitarian Policy Group, 2006, "Saving Lives through Livelihoods: Critical Gaps in the Response to the Drought in the Greater Horn of Africa." *HPG Briefing Paper*. London: ODI; and numerous others.

16 For the most flagrant cases, see the 2010 report of the UN Monitoring Group for Somalia and Eritrea (Nairobi: UN). It reported as much as half of the food aid in Somalia at the time being diverted to uses other than humanitarian.

17 Many agencies have new risk management approaches; the NGO Consortium for Somalia has recently come out with a joint risk management framework.

18 ICG (op. cit.).

19 There is evidence of at least some evidence for the possibility for negotiated access. See, Ashley Jackson and Abdi Aynte. 2013. "Talking to the other side: Humanitarian negotiations with Al Shabaab in Somalia." Humanitarian Policy Group. London: ODI.