

A Dangerous Delay

The cost of late response to early warnings
in the 2011 drought in the Horn of Africa



The pastoralist communities of Turkana, Kenya are experiencing one of the worst periods of drought in living memory and are now increasingly reliant on food aid. Here, people come to collect water, Lokitaung district, March 2011. Photo: Andy Hall

More than 13 million people are still affected by the crisis in the Horn of Africa. There were clear early warning signs many months in advance, yet there was insufficient response until it was far too late.

Governments, donors, the UN and NGOs need to change their approach to chronic drought situations by managing the risks, not the crisis.

This means acting on information from early warning systems and not waiting for certainty before responding, as well as tackling the root causes of vulnerability and actively seeking to reduce risk in all activities. To achieve this, we must overcome the humanitarian–development divide.

Foreword by Jan Egeland

We live in a world where we know how to prevent extreme hunger, yet people still die from a lack of food. 2011 saw the worst hunger crisis this century in the Horn of Africa. More than 13 million people, most of them women and children, have been affected. Lives and livelihoods have been devastated, pushing people into poverty that will cause them suffering for years to come. The crisis continues into 2012.

The greatest tragedy is that the world saw this disaster coming but did not prevent it. Across Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti and Somalia this crisis has played out very differently, but common to all of them was a slow response to early warnings. Early signs of an oncoming food crisis were clear many months before the emergency reached its peak. Yet it was not until the situation had reached crisis point that the international system started to respond at scale.

As the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator I saw how vulnerable communities and humanitarian field workers were denied the tools and resources necessary to save lives before it was too late. It was incomprehensible. How come, more than a generation after man walked on the moon, we would let fellow human beings die needlessly because we would not give priority to meeting their most basic human needs in time? That the needless haemorrhage of human lives took place again in the Horn of Africa in 2011, in spite of all our knowledge and all our experience, is an outrage.

We know that if we take the right steps we can prevent the suffering of millions and the deaths of thousands of people from hunger and the crushing and sustained poverty that these crises bring. In the long term, the answers lie within developing countries themselves, including supporting local food production, protecting the poorest and most vulnerable, making food affordable and ensuring a strong national response to impending crises.

We also need to improve how the humanitarian system responds when warnings of a crisis are given and communities need help. This report makes valuable recommendations for how to achieve that.

Ultimately, we know the steps we must take to tackle these crises – they are outlined in the Charter to End Extreme Hunger. We have the power to prevent thousands of deaths. What we need is the will.

Jan Egeland
UN Emergency Relief Coordinator 2003–2006

Summary

The 2011 crisis in the Horn of Africa has been the most severe emergency of its kind this century. More than 13 million people are still affected, with hundreds of thousands placed at risk of starvation.¹ One estimate suggests that 50,000–100,000 people have died.² This crisis unfolded despite having been predicted. Although brought on by drought, it was human factors which turned the crisis into a deadly emergency.

Tragically, the 2011 crisis is not an isolated case. The response to drought is invariably too little too late, representing a systemic failure of the international system – both ‘humanitarian’ and ‘development’. The result of this failure is that the people affected – this time in the Horn of Africa: Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia* – lose their livelihoods and potentially their lives. Women are often worst affected, as they generally eat last and least. And hunger threatens children’s health and development, and thus the well-being of future generations.

This briefing examines the factors that allowed a drought in the Horn of Africa to develop into a full-scale crisis of hunger and livelihoods. While recognising the ultimate importance of enhancing the resilience of communities themselves, the primary focus of this briefing is the response of the international system.

We argue that all members of the international system must improve their ability to prevent the worst effects of hunger crises before they happen. In particular, national governments must fulfil their responsibilities to people caught up in crises and demonstrate leadership.

This should include endorsing the Charter to End Extreme Hunger – a new initiative generating increasing state support that outlines key ways to reduce the impact of these crises.³ If they are acted on, extreme hunger events can be averted in the future. It is a major challenge, but the knowledge exists to address it. One of the key recommendations of the Charter is earlier response to early warnings.

This briefing outlines how, in the Horn of Africa, there were indications that a crisis was coming from as early as August 2010. In November 2010, these warnings were repeated and they became more strident in early 2011. Some actors did respond, but full scale-up only really happened after the rains had failed for a second successive time. By this time, in some places people were already dying. Many had lost their livelihoods, and many more – particularly women and children – were suffering extreme hardship. The scale of death and suffering, and the financial cost, could have been reduced if early warning systems had triggered an earlier, more substantial response.

Why was the international system so slow in responding to accurate

* Djibouti was also severely affected; however, this briefing focuses on Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia.

early warnings? One reason is that raising large sums for humanitarian response currently depends on getting significant media and public attention – which did not happen until the crisis point was reached. But this misses the point. Waiting for a situation to reach crisis point before responding is the wrong way to address chronic vulnerability and recurrent drought in places like the Horn of Africa. Instead, the international community must change how it operates to meet the challenge of responding to recurrent crises in regions such as this.

Decision makers are often not comfortable with uncertainty and forecasts, requiring hard data before initiating a response. So, while many people 'on the ground' in the region – representatives of many agencies and institutions, and communities themselves – were aware of the impending crisis and trying to set alarm bells ringing in January and February 2011, they were not always able to get traction 'further up the chain' from those who needed to act to avert another crisis.

This needs to change. All actors need to adopt standard risk management approaches – so if there is a high probability of a high-impact event occurring, interventions must begin immediately. Of course, forecasts can be wrong, but managing risk to reduce the impact of a crisis is better than hoping one will never happen. Risk management and disaster risk reduction (DRR) must be an integral part of both emergency response and longer-term development programmes. These principles of risk reduction and management are well accepted in other fields, such as insurance, where paying money upfront is regarded as a responsible approach to prevent high losses in the event of a crisis.

There also has to be a fundamental shift to integrated, long-term, flexible programming that aims to reduce the risks faced by people whose livelihoods are extremely vulnerable. Long-term development work is best placed to respond to drought – with established programmes, experienced staff, an understanding of vulnerabilities – and should adapt interventions quickly as drought conditions worsen.

All actors – governments, donors, NGOs, the UN – need to change the way they do things to make a bigger difference to people who will be affected by the next drought.

There are already commitments to address these ongoing problems. Governments of the Horn of Africa region committed to prepare and deliver on national strategies at the Nairobi summit in September 2011.⁴ The crisis has reinvigorated the Horn of Africa Plan of Action,⁵ and many are considering the lessons from the UK's Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) evaluations and others.

Together, the international community and national governments must seize the momentum and commit to change now, so that next time more is done, more quickly, to protect vulnerable people and to fulfil the objectives of the Charter to End Extreme Hunger. Another food crisis is already looming in the Sahel, with millions of people across at least five countries at risk of serious food insecurity, so there is an urgent need to put what has been learned in the Horn of Africa crisis into practice.

Recommendations

The lessons from the drought in the Horn of Africa in 2010/11 show that national governments and the international community must improve their response in a number of areas, in line with the Charter to End Extreme Hunger.

1 Manage the risks, not the crisis

- *All actors* need to review their approach to drought risk reduction and **not wait for certainty** before responding.
- *All actors* and early warning specialists need to develop a common approach to **triggers for early action**, to be used by both humanitarian and development actors.

2 Earlier drought response

National governments should

- recognise their primary responsibility to meet food security needs, providing **political leadership** for a drought response;
- endorse the Charter to End Extreme Hunger and act on its principles.

The international aid community should

- embed a risk reduction approach in all its work, thus allowing **long-term development interventions to adapt** to the changing context;
- undertake **preventative humanitarian work** on the basis of forecasts: including livelihood protection and 'no-regrets options'; and assisting communities to prevent, mitigate, prepare and respond to crises;
- ensure that systems are in place to integrate risk management into work throughout the development and humanitarian cycle – through **investing significantly in people** and partner organizations and **reviewing organizational structures** and systems.

Donors should

- provide **more agile and flexible funding** – by including crisis modifiers in multi-year development grants to build recurring-crisis response into development programming; and by ensuring that humanitarian funding can support pre-emptive or early response. Funding needs to be able to respond to uncertainty.
- endorse the Charter to End Extreme Hunger and act on its principles.

Notes

¹ OCHA, Horn of Africa Snapshot, 16 December 2011.

² <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Documents/publications1/press-releases/9000%20tonnes%20of%20UK%20aid%20for%20Horn%20of%20Africa.pdf>

³ See <http://hungercharter.org/>

⁴ 'The Nairobi strategy: Enhanced partnership to eradicate drought emergencies', adopted at the Summit on the Horn of Africa Crisis, 9 September 2011, Nairobi, Kenya.

⁵ Developed by Oxfam, FAO and WFP at the request of the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator.

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