A predictable crisis

Focus on Somalia

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SOMALIA

THE CRISIS AND THE RESPONSE

Somalia has had one of the longest humanitarian crises in the world, with over two decades of conflict and insecurity. It is a highly politicised, complex crisis that brings together extreme vulnerability, a weak and fragile state, complex internal and regional power struggles and the dynamics of the War on Terror.

There are nearly 1.5 million Somali IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons) and almost 800,000 refugees, mainly in camps in Kenya and Ethiopia.

At the time of the HRI mission in February, many parts of the country were suffering from a long-term drought, with over 2 million people requiring assistance.

By June, despite months of warning signs, the situation deteriorated into a full-scale famine, with an estimated 4 million Somalis in need of urgent assistance.

The radical Islamist group Al-Shabaab has killed, threatened and expelled many humanitarian workers, denying vulnerable populations access to assistance in areas they control.

Conflict and insecurity in many parts of the country force humanitarian agencies to manage operations remotely from Nairobi, making it difficult to accurately assess needs and monitor and follow-up on actions.

The UN appealed in June for a record US$1.5 billion to support famine relief efforts, of which 81% has been covered to date. Since then, good rains in October have eased the situation slightly, but needs persist, and a long-term commitment by donors to build resilience, prevent future famines and resolve the political instability in the country is urgently required.

Cover photo: Refugees huddle underneath a blanket against the rain on the outskirts of Ifo camp while waiting for relocation to Ifo Extension. / UNHCR / B. Bannon
Prior to the declaration of a famine, only 67% of the appeal had been covered. In 2010, the US made major cuts in funding to Somalia, only partially compensated by increases by Spain and other donors.

Despite the magnitude of the crisis, few donors had dedicated humanitarian advisors in the region, and most decisions were perceived to be unduly influenced by domestic political issues and concerns, not driven by humanitarian needs.

Anti-terrorism legislation from several donor governments was seen by many as undermining the principle of providing aid without discrimination and based on needs alone. This led to a general climate where other donors were reluctant to take risks.

The situation is also complicated by several donor governments’ unconditional support for the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), a party to the conflict and perceived by many as weak and corrupt.

Donors were also criticised for not responding early enough to the warning signs of the famine, and for not providing longer-term funding and support for activities that focus on building resilience, prevention and preparedness.
On July 20th 2011, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon declared that parts of Somalia and neighbouring countries in the Horn of Africa were officially in a state of famine, with over half of the population, some 4 million people, facing starvation unless the international community could mobilise over US$1.5 billion in aid (OCHA 2011a). The response to the famine revealed once again the chronic inability of the humanitarian sector to adequately prepare for, prevent and mitigate what was essentially a completely predictable disaster.

So why did it take so long for the world to react? The constraints and challenges expressed by humanitarian actors at the field level in the months leading up to the famine can help shed light on some of the factors behind the slow and inadequate reaction. In the context of Somalia, politicisation of the crisis, severe constraints on access and protection, and structural limitations of a system geared towards emergency relief, not prevention, all conspired against taking more proactive steps to address the famine early on. What’s more, the famine and the subsequent response has overshadowed and perhaps even reversed many of the small but positive steps made over the past two years by humanitarian actors to improve the quality and effectiveness of humanitarian action in one of the world’s most complicated and long-standing crises.

As previous reports and a recent IASC evaluation highlight, Somalia is a highly politicised, complex crisis that brings together extreme vulnerability, a weak and fragile state, complex internal and regional power struggles and the dynamics of the War on Terror (Hansch 2009, Polastro, et al 2011). The competing interests of many of the different actors—Al-Shabaab, Somalia’s Transitional Federal Government (TFG), governments in neighbouring Kenya and Ethiopia and donor governments— has too often meant that political objectives take precedence over meeting humanitarian needs. In this context, the warning signs of the impending famine may have been disregarded in favour of meeting other priorities.

In addition to instability and conflict, Somalia had been facing the effects of a long-term drought in the region for several years. At the time of the HRI mission in February, for months, all indicators pointed towards a dramatic worsening of the situation. The United States Agency for International Development’s (USAID) Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) and the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation’s (FAO) Somalia Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit (FSNAU) –tools designed precisely to avoid the reoccurrence of famines of the past– were generating warnings that the situation was critical. According to the FSNAU, over 2.4 million Somalis were in need of humanitarian assistance at the time, with one in four children in Southern Somalia acutely malnourished (OCHA 2011a).

During the mission, on a daily basis, the number of Somalis fleeing to camps in Mogadishu or in neighbouring Kenya and Ethiopia were increasing dramatically, an indicator of the growing scale of the crisis. In a two-month period, the number of drought-
related displaced persons increased by 20,000 (OCHA 2011a). All of the representatives of the United Nations (UN), other aid agencies and donor governments interviewed during the HRI field mission unanimously agreed that a major catastrophe was in the making. Following a visit in early February, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) called for urgent action, but to little effect. Clearly, it was not a lack of information that impeded the international community to take early action.

Prior to the famine, there was steady progress towards improving and scaling up the quality and effectiveness of the response to existing needs, showing that despite the difficulties, humanitarian actors were finding ways around the particular challenges posed by Somalia. However, many of these efforts were undermined by the lack of respect and understanding of the critical need to maintain the neutrality, impartiality and independence of aid in Somalia.

Continued problems of protection, access and security were major factors that hampered the ability of aid organisations to reach people in need of aid. Al-Shabaab, a militant Islamist group linked to Al-Qaeda, has the main share of the blame for creating and accentuating the scale of the crisis. Access by humanitarian organisations to many Al-Shabaab controlled areas of South and Central Somalia is extremely limited, with many agencies expelled, humanitarian workers killed or threatened, and others facing unacceptable conditions on access, including payment of obligatory “taxes” on humanitarian goods. Even worse, Al-Shabaab has targeted civilians in the conflict, and restricted movement of populations desperately seeking relief from the drought, effectively holding them hostage to the crisis.

The situation is only somewhat better in Mogadishu and areas nominally controlled by the TFG and African Union peacekeeping forces, ANISOM. Despite significant Western backing, the TFG has failed to deliver on the promise of providing stability and security for the civilian population, has faced widespread charges of corruption and nepotism, and according to many, made minimal efforts at facilitating aid organisations’ access to people in need. Likewise, the ANISOM peace-keeping mission in Somalia has not done enough to provide much needed protection and security for civilians.

In contrast, the security situation is relatively stable in Puntland and Somaliland, allowing many humanitarian organisations opportunities to expand relief programmes to include more emphasis on agricultural and livelihood activities and to work with local organisations and authorities to integrate capacity building in their programming. In this context, most agencies continued to rely on remote control management arrangements, with operations directed from Nairobi but delivered through local Somali organisations.

THE RESPONSE

Despite these operational challenges, at the time of the HRI mission, humanitarian actors were working in a more coordinated and rigorous manner to assess and prioritise needs. In fact, the decrease in funding requested in the 2009 Consolidated Appeal (CAP), from over US$850 million to just under US$600 million in 2010, is partially explained by more accurate and reliable information about the extent of needs. Nevertheless, funding was still only 67% of the stated needs, and substantial cuts in the US’ level of aid to Somalia, mainly due to concerns about aid diversion to Al-Shabaab, was only partially compensated by a large carry-over from 2009 and a major increase in funding from Spain and other donors (OCHA 2010a).

With over US$61 million mobilised, the Common Humanitarian Fund (CHF) and Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) pooled funds became important sources of funding to agencies, and were used to help scale up activities in the areas of water, sanitation, nutrition and health, and to a lesser extent, agriculture and livelihoods programmes (OCHA 2010b). The CHF was well-supported by donors, and generally worked well in offering a rapid, locally managed response.
to covering gaps in needs, according to most interviewees. There were, however, complaints from some non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that the funds were too focused on emergency relief, rather than prevention, transition and recovery activities. Some organisations interviewed felt donors were using the pooled funds as a way to circumvent the complicated aid politics of Somalia and transfer risks to the UN: “Pooled funding is now becoming an easier option for donors to shed their responsibilities to engage with more demanding partners like international NGOs, or confront the issues” according to one respondent. “Donors are risk adverse, and are therefore using pooled funds, but it doesn’t necessarily mean better accountability,” said another.

Many NGOs and some UN agencies seemed to be making progress in engaging local Somali actors in the design, management and implementation of programmes, especially in Puntland and Somaliland. As an example, many OCHA reports and other documentation on the response are available in Somali, a sign of increasing transparency and engagement with local actors (OCHA 2011).

HUMANITARIAN ACTORS WORK IN A MORE COORDINATED AND RIGOROUS MANNER TO ASSESS AND PRIORITISE NEEDS

This was combined with a growing recognition that Al-Shabaab was not a monolithic organisation, but was often fragmented, allowing for some tentative, cautious steps towards engagement with local chiefs to negotiate access based on humanitarian principles. At the same time, many actors interviewed expressed serious reservations about the TFG’s legitimacy and its ability to engage positively with the international community on humanitarian issues, and were looking at alternative means to engage with local authorities on programming issues.

DONOR PERFORMANCE

Despite these positive efforts, nearly every organisation interviewed stressed that donor politics were compromising the ability of humanitarian agencies to respond to the crisis. Many respondents felt donors mixed security and political agendas were compromising a needs-based approach. Respondents distinguished
between donor regional representatives, who were generally viewed positively, versus representatives at the capital level. “In the case of Somalia, it is a case of different levels of awfulness from donors,” exclaimed one respondent. “The dual or triple track approach, where donors are trying to support the TFG, combat terrorism, achieve stability and meet needs, is not working at all.” Another respondent stated that “donors are not very principled. They have focused excessively on Al-Shabaab and they are not driven by responding to needs.”

Donor capacity was a concern for many respondents. Despite the magnitude of the crisis, few donors had dedicated humanitarian advisors. Most donor government representatives, such as Sweden, also covered development portfolios, and many had additional responsibilities for covering several countries in the region. The UK had a regional humanitarian advisor but the post was vacant for a year, leading to delays in programme decisions, according to some respondents.

Italy had a project office to specifically support humanitarian action, but the office was shutdown a few months following the HRI mission. Spain, one the largest donors to Somalia in 2010, had no dedicated humanitarian resources in the field. Nevertheless, an informal humanitarian donor support group provided an important forum to discuss issues and share information, and regular briefings were held between donors and the Humanitarian Coordinator. Additionally, donors were also engaged in the CHF in an advisory role and with other coordination mechanisms.

For many respondents, the real issue was that critical decisions were too often taken at the capital level without an understanding of the complexities of Somalia. There was a strong sense of frustration that government donors’ domestic political priorities were getting in the way of humanitarian issues, leading to “mixed signals and little clarity.” One respondent summed up the widespread sentiment: “Donors pay lip service to humanitarian principles, but are beholden to the decisions of their capitals and driven by domestic political agendas.”

Despite a good dialogue at the field level, the US government’s stance was a major concern for many actors. “The US is the worst example of politicisation of aid and has a schizophrenic approach to Somalia,” stated one NGO respondent. US anti-terrorism legislation, in particular, the regulations from the US government’s Office for Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), imposed severe restrictions on aid agencies trying to work in areas controlled by Al-Shabaab, undermining the principle that aid is provided impartially and without discrimination. While US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and USAID officials subsequently attempted to reassure aid organisations that there would be special exemptions from the OFAC regulations, there was widespread fear that aid agencies and staff could be legally liable for any aid diverted to Al-Shabaab: “You could go to jail! How is it possible to know and control every exact detail about every operation?” exclaimed one respondent.

The US position appeared to be having perverse spin-off effects with other donors. Canada was mentioned by some interviewees as a negative example of following the US’ lead: “Canada has not been neutral, and humanitarian aid funding is heavily conditioned by imposing strict no-engagement rules regarding Al-Shabaab,” remarked one respondent. Other donors were accused of being overly cautious and risk averse, in part for fear that they too might be liable for legal actions, according to some respondents. As one agency representative put it, “at least the US is very clear and explicit in its policy. The rest of donors are ambiguous with regards to Al-Shabaab; everything is fuzzy.” The restrictions, whether explicit or not, have meant humanitarian organisations have lost
placed staff and beneficiaries at risk of reprisals. “The burden of proof is on NGOs that we have the capacity, access, controls in place, etc.,” said one respondent, “but there is little recognition or support from donors for what this implies.” For some, this was a clear example of misplaced accountability: “Donors are very constraining and demand that all aid be accounted for. If not, NGOs have to bear the costs. The quality of work is affected, as this requires many audits and extensive staff capacity and resources in order to meet the different requirements.” Donor governments were also criticised by some for their position regarding neighbouring Kenya: “They are doing nothing to address widespread government corruption and delays in opening access to refugee camps.”

Politicisation was plainly a major factor limiting the ability of humanitarian organisations to adequately meet existing needs, much less precious time and energy that could have been spent to build trust and understanding from all actors and to negotiate unrestricted access to people suffering from the crisis.

The unconditional political and financial support for the TFG by many donors, was also seen as affecting the ability of humanitarian organisations to distinguish themselves as independent from their country of origin or government funders. Some organisations interviewed claimed donor governments had turned a “blind eye” to the corruption and complicity of the TFG. “All donors support the TFG, so donor neutrality is definitely questionable for all of them,” stated one respondent. Several donor field representatives interviewed recognised that supporting the TFG had backfired and not generated stability. “In retrospect, we backed the wrong horse,” said one, “but at this stage, we have very few alternatives.” Many donors interviewed had by then reached the conclusion that working through local authorities and Somali NGOs was a much more conducive approach to building stability and resilience, but this analysis did not appear to lead to a shift in tactics in donors’ capitals.

According to many interviewed, donors had an exaggerated preoccupation about the potential diversion of aid to Al-Shabaab, especially after reports of massive diversion of food aid from the World Food Programme (WFP). For some donors, their concerns reflected anti-terrorism legislation, while other donors like the UK were accused of “an almost obsessive focus on showing value for money” despite the complexities of doing this in a crisis like Somalia. Whatever the arguments from donors, the vast majority of organisations interviewed felt that this had led to delays in programme approvals, restrictive conditions, and time-consuming and costly reporting procedures. There were also serious concerns that some donors’ procedures, such as vetting of all locally-employed staff or sub-contractors and beneficiary lists, were dangerous measures that potentially
prepare for and respond to the risk of outright famine. Nevertheless, the famine response was also hampered by an overall lack of commitment to prevention, preparedness and risk reduction efforts. Many organisations complained about an inability of some donors to see beyond the labels of a “fragile state” and look for opportunities to build resilience and capacities of communities to cope with the drought, famine and conflict.

Most donors were criticised for short-term funding cycles and an excessively rigid categorisation of aid into humanitarian only activities, versus other activities that had a component of resilience, capacity-building and transitional funding. This meant, according to many interviewees, that potential support for programmes in Somaliland and Puntland, was not provided as it was not classified as a humanitarian emergency. “After twenty years of crisis, it’s impossible to convince donors to fund longer-term programmes. There are many opportunities for us to work with more prevention and preparedness and livelihoods activities even in South and Central Somalia, but these are not supported,” claimed one respondent.

Another respondent complained of the acrobatics required to “disguise programmes as humanitarian” in order to get funding: “We call this an ‘emergency operation in a protracted crisis’ so technically we can’t use funds for prevention or recovery in the programme. But in practice, on the ground we integrate whenever possible. We have to. If not, what’s the alternative? We might not have access later, when the drought gets worse.”

Many organisations felt donors were unwilling to recognise and support the use of Somali NGOs, private companies, etc. much less building their capacity – even though the reality is that any aid effort depends on them. “Donors don’t understand and don’t care about Somali capacity and especially fail to engage with the very capable and strong Somali diaspora,” said one respondent. “Building community resilience against famines and other stresses is also a key way to prevent conflict,” argued one respondent.

Gender was another area where donors often failed to make the connection between effectiveness of programmes and beneficiary accountability.
Donors should strongly support more specific measures, especially against sexual and gender-based violence,” said one respondent. Indeed, one donor representative interviewed admitted gender was not their main concern, despite policy declarations to the contrary. “In truth, this is not a priority; it’s more of a ‘tick the box’ approach,” arguing that the extent of the humanitarian crisis and the complicated politics of the response was more important. But donors are not the only ones to blame – representatives of several humanitarian organisations expressed similar sentiments, claiming gender was “important, but we have so many other issues and concerns, and in an emergency, this is the last thing on our minds.” The announcement of the famine initially triggered a flurry of international media and donor attention. Funding has, in fact, risen dramatically – from US$492 million in 2010 to US$820 million by December 2011, or 81% of needs– but even so, there are still gaps in important areas like protection and shelter (OCHA 2011). Good seasonal rains in October have also helped to mitigate the worst effects of the drought. The famine has also triggered new collaboration between the UN and other actors with non-traditional donors, such as Turkey and the Gulf States. Meanwhile, the US has restored much of the funding it cut to Somalia in past years, making it one of the top donors to the crisis today. It also recently relaxed some of the restrictions on aid organisations working in Al-Shabaab areas, but so far there have been few concrete assurances that this will be followed through with legal guarantees to protect humanitarians.

However, Al-Shabaab appears to have taken a harder line against international actors, announcing that an additional sixteen aid agencies have been expelled from Al-Shabaab controlled areas. Furthermore, the effects of recent military encroachments by Kenya and Ethiopia and offensives by the TFG and ANISOM remain to be
seen in terms of protection of civilians. By any measure, the crisis in Somalia is likely to drag on for some time, and millions of Somalis will be in dire need of assistance for months if not years, reinforcing the need for a long-term approach and long-term commitment from the international community.

So, what is the way forward? Recent evaluations such as the Inter-Agency Steering Committee’s review of the impact of the humanitarian response in South and Central Somalia over the past five years have highlighted important areas where the humanitarian sector can make improvements in programming, and efforts are underway to implement recommendations (Polastro et al, 2011). The evaluation report underlines the need for all actors, especially donor governments, to respect and promote neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian action. This is critical to ensure safe access and protection to affected populations, but donors’ positions regarding Al-Shabaab and the TFG have likely exacerbated the situation for humanitarian actors.

Another clear message to donor governments is to recognise and reinforce the efforts of humanitarian actors at the local level to address the challenges posed in Somalia in delivering aid effectively, instead of imposing conditions and demands that undermine those efforts. In particular, donors could have paid attention to the warnings coming from humanitarian actors that a major crisis was in the making. Donors could have also invested in building resilience, and adopted a more flexible and nuanced stance at supporting prevention, preparedness, transition and recovery when the situation allows, as in Puntland and Somaliland. Access to long-term funding and support for these types of activities would have helped aid organisations and vulnerable communities alike to be better prepared to anticipate and confront the drought, and potentially minimise the scale of the subsequent famine.

The fact that several donors funded the IASC evaluation and are supporting implementation shows a commitment to learning and improving the response to the crisis. The question is whether governments are ready to take steps to implement the recommendations and ensure humanitarian assistance is independent from other aims, and support long term prevention, recovery, and resilience strategies. Or will we yet again need the images of starvation and distress to prompt us into action?
REFERENCES


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