

Drought in the Horn of Africa Roundtable

BY AMINA ABDULKADIR



Very low water level in catchment, Madhawey, Hudur, Bakool region. December 2016.

Key points

- There is a short window of opportunity to prevent another famine in Somalia.
- Humanitarian donors and aid organizations need to scale up their response rapidly and appropriately.
- Experiences and lessons from the 2011 famine mean that the international response in 2017 should be better prepared and informed on how to prevent a famine.
- The triggers of famine are multiple and distinct populations have different levels of social, economic and political resilience and vulnerability which need to be factored into any response.
- To prevent a famine, the response needs to be diverse and involve timely and effective collaborations amongst humanitarian actors, Somali organizations, regional governments and non-traditional donors.

Introduction

In early 2011, the scale of famine affecting the Horn of Africa was only just beginning to receive international attention, despite early warnings in the previous year. It was not until July that famine was formally declared. The famine killed 250,000 people in southern Somalia alone, and displaced and destroyed the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of others. Many sought refuge in Kenya, which was also coping with a nation-wide drought and food shortages. Six years after the 2011 famine, the region is facing a disaster of a similar scale.

On 8 February 2017, the Rift Valley Institute and the Centre for Humanitarian Change, convened a roundtable meeting of UN agencies and international and Somali NGOs to discuss the drought crisis in the Horn of Africa and to identify ways to prevent another famine. This report summarizes the discussions that took place.

From drought response to famine prevention

For the past year rain has been poor across the Horn of Africa, with populations facing severe

food and income shortages. Early warning systems indicate there is a likelihood of famine in Somalia unless there is an immediate and appropriate response.

There are a number of differences in early 2017 to the situation in 2011. The drought is more widespread, affecting Somaliland and Puntland, and pastoral areas in Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya, and the numbers of people at immediate risk are greater than in early 2011.

Pastoral, livestock-dependent livelihoods are particularly affected by increasing food prices and simultaneously decreasing livestock prices. Markets are functioning, but peoples' purchasing power is weak. In Somaliland and Puntland, where pastoral livelihoods dominate, the severe drought has been exacerbated by a Saudi Arabian import ban on livestock from Somalia.

With crises in Syria, South Sudan, Yemen and Nigeria, there are more demands on the humanitarian system compared to 2011. On the other hand, access for humanitarian agencies in Somalia is better than in 2011. There are more organizations operational in Somalia; government institutions are better established, making joint assessments feasible; working aid consortia should allow donors to channel resources more quickly, enabling the response to scale up quicker; and humanitarian agencies are heeding early warnings.

The experience of the 2011 crisis and lessons learned from the Real Time Evaluation and other analyses of the international response to the famine¹ mean that the international response should be better informed and prepared than in 2011. Some key lessons arising from 2011 include:

- The causes of the famine were multiple and distinct populations had different levels of resilience and vulnerability linked to their food economies, conflict, market access and social networks of support. A lesson from 2011 is that increases in excess mortality does not happen gradually but suddenly as livelihoods collapse. The established early warning systems— FAO's FSNAU (Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit) and FEWSNET (Famine Early Warning Systems Network)—may not capture a sudden change and need to be supplemented by more regular real-time analysis. Somalis have been

aware of and responding to the current crisis for months.

- In 2011, despite multiple early warnings, famine in Somalia was not prevented. In early 2017 Somalia is already in a crisis. Donors and humanitarian agencies are more aware than they were in 2011. There is a window or opportunity to prevent mass mortality if donors and aid agencies assume the worst-case scenario and scale up responses immediately. There needs to be a programmatic shift from drought response to famine prevention.
- While better than in 2011, access to some of the populations who were worst affected in previous famines remains problematic due to on-going conflict between the Somali government and AMISOM forces, and al-Shabaab.
- A risk-averse culture hampered the response in 2011. In 2017, bureaucratic, risk-averse procedures can be streamlined, to enable quick and effective responses.
- Cash transfers were successfully used in Somalia in 2011, and in 2017 cash and vouchers should form a key part of a mixed response to shore up livelihoods. A cash response in 2017 can be better targeted now that mobile money transfer systems are more fully developed.
- An appropriate response needs to be both multi-sectoral, including water and health in addition to food and cash, with a balance between rural and urban areas.
- A diversity of actors responded to the famine in 2011 of which the established international humanitarian system was only part. A large part of the response in 2011 came from Somalis and their own social networks. A diverse response should be encouraged in 2017, including non-traditional donors and the private sector.
- A lack of engagement with local agencies was a shortcoming of the international response to the 2011 crisis. Donors and international agencies should invest in the capacities of government bodies and Somali NGOs to assess and respond to the crisis. This is in line with the global commitment made in the Grand Bargain at the 2016 World Humanitarian

Summit, that 25 per cent of humanitarian funding be directed to local and national agencies. Partnerships need to be established in advance.

- In 2011 there was little regional coordination and no common response strategy. Regional governments have subsequently made commitments to ending drought emergencies. Certain problems, such as historically low water levels in the River Shabeelle, require regional dialogue. The international and donor communities need to engage, support and strengthen regional government capacity in their drought and famine responses.

Timely and effective collaborations amongst humanitarian actors provide an opportunity to

protect livelihoods through social protection and resilience programmes.

The needs of large internally displaced populations and returning refugees need special attention. In 2011, most people died en-route to aid delivery points or in displaced people and refugee camps. Where possible, people should be assisted in situ.

Strategic coordination is vital if early warnings are to elicit timely and effective responses, drawing on each actor's comparative advantage, expertise and ability.

Regular meetings, updates and coordination between humanitarian actors are also important, especially to implement lessons from the 2011 crisis.

Notes

¹ Dan Maxwell & Nisar Majid, *Famine in Somalia: Competing Imperatives Collective Failures, 2011-2012*, Hurst: London, 2016.



Credits

This report was written under the auspices of the Rift Valley Forum. It was edited by Cedric Barnes and Mark Bradbury. It is available for free download from www.riftvalley.net. Cover photo © FSNAU 2016.

The Rift Valley Institute works in eastern and central Africa to bring local knowledge to bear on social, political and economic development.

Copyright © Rift Valley Institute 2017. This work is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).