Managing Famine Risk

Linking Early Warning to Early Action

A Chatham House Report

Rob Bailey

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April 2013

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Charity Registration No. 208223

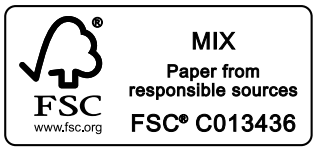
ISBN 978 1 86203 284 2

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Designed and typeset by Soapbox, www.soapbox.co.uk

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Latimer Trend and Co Ltd

The material selected for the printing of this report is Elemental Chlorine Free and has been sourced from well-managed forests. It has been manufactured by an ISO 14001 certified mill under EMAS.



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About the Authors

Lead author

Rob Bailey is a Senior Research Fellow of the Energy, Environment and Resources Department at Chatham House, focusing on food security. He previously held a number of posts at Oxfam GB, including Head of Economic Justice. In 2011, he was named as one of the DEVEX 40-under-40 leading thinkers on international development.

Contributing authors

The report draws heavily on the field research of Chatham House Africa Programme Associate Fellows Paul Melly and Jason Mosley in West Africa and East Africa respectively, and on the significant contributions to Chapter 6 of Robin Willoughby, Research Consultant (Food and Environmental Security) with the Energy, Environment and Resources Department at Chatham House.

Preface and Acknowledgments

This report is the final output of the Chatham House research project *Translating Famine Early Warning into Early Action*, led by the Energy, Environment and Resources Department. The project explored the barriers that hinder appropriate response to early warning of slow-onset food crises. The report builds on the author's earlier report *Famine Early Warning and Early Action: the Cost of Delay*, and on the findings of field research in West Africa and East Africa conducted by the Chatham House Africa Programme.

The challenges of preventing and responding to humanitarian crises, with scarce resources and in often near-impossible conditions, are immense. Although there is always the potential for improvement, this should not detract from the fact that the humanitarian system performs admirably. The purpose of this report is to identify problems and consider opportunities to address them. Inevitably this leads to a focus on things that are not working well, but the tone should be interpreted as constructive rather than critical.

Chatham House would like to thank the Rockefeller Foundation and the Disasters Emergency Committee for their generous support for this project. Special thanks to Claudia Juech and Annie Devonport for their critical engagement, support and advice.

The author would like to thank Laura Hammond, Bernice Lee, Paul Melly, Jason Mosley and Rachel Scott for their significant and considered feedback on earlier drafts. The author is also grateful to Margie Buchanan-Smith, Erin Coughlin, James Darcy, Ben Dempsey, James de Waal, Gary Eilerts, Nick Haan, Chris Hillbruner, Debbie Hillier, Sue Lautze, Michel Le Pechoux, Simon Levine, Jeremy Loveless, Dan Maxwell, Andy Seal, Maarten van Aalst and Tim Waites, who all provided valuable ideas, insights and comments along the way.

Estelle Rouhaud, Suzannah Robinson, Meera Shah and Natasha White provided valuable research and administrative support over the course of the project. Many thanks to Jon Wainwright for copy-editing the report and Margaret May for overseeing the production process at Chatham House.

Chatham House would like to thank all those who participated in confidential interviews as part of the research process, and the participants at the following two workshops which helped generate, test and clarify many of the ideas explored in this report:

- *Translating Early Warning into Early Action: Response by Donors and Implementing Agencies*, Chatham House , 11–12 April 2012.
- *Translating Early Warning into Early Action: Response within Affected Countries*, Chatham House, 2 July 2012.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

3N	Nigeriens Nourish Nigeriens
ACTED	Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development
AGIR	Alliance Globale pour l'Initiative Résilience (Global Alliance for Resilience Initiative)
ALRMP	Arid Lands Resource Management Project
ARC	African Risk Capacity
BMZ	Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development)
CAP	Consolidated appeals process
CAT	Catastrophe
CBA	Cost–benefit analysis
CBHA	Consortium of British Humanitarian Agencies
CCAA	Climate Change Adaptation in Africa
CCRIF	Caribbean Catastrophe Risk Insurance Facility
CERF	Central Emergency Response Fund
CEWS	Community early warning system
CHAP	Common Humanitarian Action Plan
CHF	Common Humanitarian Fund
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CIDCM	Center for International Development and Conflict Management
CILSS	Comité permanent Inter-Etats de Lutte contre la Sécheresse
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DCM	Drought cycle management
DEC	Disasters Emergency Committee
DFID	Department for International Development
DMB	Disaster Management Bureau
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
ECHO	European Community Humanitarian Office
ECOWAS	Economic Community Of West African States
ERF	Emergency Response Fund
EWI	Early warning information
EWRD	Early Warning and Response Directorate
EWS	Early warning system
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FEWSNET	Famine Early Warning System Network
FSNAU	Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit
FSNWG	Food Security and Nutrition Working Group
GDP	Gross domestic product
GFDRR	Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery
GHD	Good Humanitarian Donorship
GIEWS	Global Information and Early Warning System (Food and Agriculture Organization)
HDI	Human Development Index
HERR	Humanitarian Emergency Response Review
HEWS	Humanitarian Early Warning Service
HRD	Humanitarian Requirements Document
HRO	High reliability organization
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
IGAD	Inter-Governmental Authority for Development
ILRI	International Livestock Research Institute
IPC	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
K4K	Kenyans for Kenya
KRCS	Kenyan Red Cross Society
LIC	Low-income country
Mt	Megatonne (million tonnes)
NASA	National Aeronautics and Space Administration

NDMA	National Drought Management Authority
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NOAA	National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (United Nations)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OIC	Organization of Islamic Cooperation
OTP	Outpatient Therapeutic Programme
PSNP	Productive Safety Net Programme
RRF	Rapid Response Facility
SAP	Système d'Alerte Précoce
SATCA	Sistema de Alerta Temprana para Centro America
SHARE	Supporting the Horn of Africa Resilience
SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SME	Small and medium enterprise
SNNPR	Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region
TFG	Transitional Federal Government
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	US Agency for International Development
VAM	Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping (World Food Programme)
W&I	Warnings and indicators
WFP	World Food Programme (United Nations)

Executive Summary

Recurrent food crises are one of the principal impediments to development in the Horn and Sahel regions of Africa. In 2011, a drought-related emergency affected over 12 million people in the Horn – the fourth such event since the turn of the millennium. Precise numbers are unavailable, but estimates indicate that hundreds of thousands of people were displaced and tens of thousands more died. A year later, 18 million people were affected by a major crisis in the Sahel – the third to hit the region in eight years.

Food crises are slow-onset disasters. They emerge over a period of months and are routinely tracked and anticipated by famine early warning systems – specialist units that monitor and forecast risk factors such as food prices, health indicators, rainfall and crop production. These systems provide governments and humanitarian actors with the chance to take early action and prevent the situation from escalating into an emergency. Cost-benefit analyses indicate that, compared with emergency response, early action offers significant cost savings in the long run.

Yet all too often the link between early warning and early action fails and the opportunity to mitigate a gathering crisis is lost. This disconnect was starkly apparent in Somalia during 2010/11, when increasingly urgent early warnings accumulated for 11 months before famine was finally declared in July. Only after that did the humanitarian system mobilize.

Beginning with the failures that allowed the Somalia famine to take place and drawing on the recent history of other early warnings, this report considers in detail the various political, institutional and organizational barriers to translating early warning of famine into early action to avert it, and makes recommendations for how these can be overcome.

Key findings

1. Famine risk is well understood and badly managed

The spectre of famine has returned. Rapid population growth, low levels of political inclusion, low agricultural yields and rapid environmental change mean the risk of food crises in the Horn and Sahel is increasing. Conflict and geopolitics act as risk multipliers, meaning that full-blown famine remains a serious threat. The number of people affected by drought-related crises each year in the Horn and Sahel is on an upward trend. Humanitarian needs are increasingly going unmet despite increasing donor spend.

Food crises are not 'black swan' events. They occur regularly and their slow-onset pathology is well understood. They can be anticipated several months in advance, so are never unexpected. They are, however, devastating. It is reasonable to assume that between one and two million people have died in drought-related emergencies since 1970, the vast majority of these in the Horn and Sahel. As well as claiming lives, successive food crises erode assets and destroy livelihoods, trapping populations in a downward spiral of compounding shocks and increasing vulnerability.

Risk reduction efforts are not commensurate with the scale of risk. A threat of high likelihood and high severity, that is furthermore predictable and preventable, should be a constant focus for risk reduction measures. Yet responses to food crises are reactive, slow and fragmented.

2. Famine early warning does not lead to early action

Famine early warning systems have a good track record of predicting food crises but a poor track record of triggering early action. The long lead times offered by famine early warning systems provide the opportunity for decisive early action, but also the opportunity for prevarication, delay and buck-passing. This disconnect persists despite major improvements in the sophistication and capabilities of modern systems. Continuing technological and methodological advances mean the gap between early warning and early action is set to widen.

These 'delay dynamics' are magnified by a disparate collection of responders and deep accountability deficit. The users of early warnings are numerous and fragmented. They include at-risk populations, local authorities, national governments, national and international NGOs, UN agencies and donor governments. These have differing interests and priorities and weak lines of communication. Those with the greatest capacity to avert crisis are, at best, only weakly accountable to those at risk.

3. In the absence of strong accountability to vulnerable populations, governments do not give priority to humanitarian needs

Political risk trumps humanitarian risk. Aid policies and institutions are shaped by the risk preferences of donor governments, resulting in bureaucratic risk aversion and over-centralized and ponderous decision-making. In at-risk countries, governments may give lower priority to politically marginalized communities in spending and policy-making, thereby institutionalizing their vulnerability.

For donors and national governments delay is often a politically rational strategy. Donor governments may choose to delay action for a variety of reasons: if the affected country is unsupportive of their geopolitical agendas, if there is a risk they may be criticized for wasting taxpayers' money or that aid may be diverted to hostile groups, or simply because they expect that another donor will find the funds. National governments may suppress famine early warning if they are concerned it will challenge their record on hunger reduction, and may disregard early warnings of crisis among communities of low political value.

4. Changing the status quo requires that governments anticipate political reward from acting to reduce famine risk and expect to be penalized for failing to do so

Closer alignment of humanitarian and political risks would make governments more likely to respond to famine early warning and more likely to reform institutions and policies to enable early action.

Civil, political and media freedoms can help align humanitarian and political risks in affected countries. In addition, supporting the participation of vulnerable populations in decision-making and political processes, decentralized government, and national legislation to establish famine prevention measures and responsibilities in law may help increase government accountability to vulnerable populations.

For donor governments, closer alignment of humanitarian and political risk is likely to be piecemeal and incremental, but possible. NGO advocacy and campaigns can help tip the political calculus in favour of early action by rewarding those governments that provide early funding and criticizing those that delay. Reforms among donors to agree burden-sharing rules for early funding could increase mutual accountability. Donor governments can seek to manage the downside risks of early action by developing clear aid strategies that explain why early action is justified and seeking buy-in for these through their parliaments – similar approaches have been successful in helping donors manage the political risks associated with aid in fragile state for example.

Recommendations

Improve official early warning capacity and effectiveness

- Donors and national governments should invest in national famine early warning capacity, based on a comprehensive review of existing capabilities and needs in at-risk areas.
- They should also develop sustainable, multi-stakeholder models to strengthen and support famine early warning systems in poor countries, based on financial support from national government and donors, and technical support and capacity-building from early warnings providers and humanitarian agencies.
- Early warnings providers should explore opportunities to develop and deepen linkages between early warning systems – both vertically (community level to national level) and horizontally (across countries). For

example, a key strength of the Ethiopian national early warning system is its ability to draw on local-level data and cascade early warnings from national to regional and community levels.

- Early warnings providers should develop approaches to incorporate qualitative, informal early warnings from communities and networks into official analyses and decision-making. For example, the Climate Change Adaptation in Africa project has successfully integrated both traditional and scientific approaches to weather forecasting, resulting in more accurate forecasts and greater community acceptance.
- Donors, agencies and early warnings providers should develop a formal, independent process to reconcile differences swiftly between official early warning systems.

Enable vulnerable communities to take early action themselves

- Donors, agencies and national government should invest in community-based early warning systems and capacity-building, particularly in national contexts of low government capacity or where communities are politically marginalized.
- National and local governments should create an enabling environment for community-based early action by ensuring that policies and regulations support the response strategies of vulnerable groups.
- National governments, early warnings providers and agencies should develop innovative approaches to increase community access to official early warning information and tailor it to their specific needs.

Operational reform

- Agencies can reduce lead times and maximize their readiness for early action through a number of avenues. Lead times have been reduced from months to days by:
  - Undertaking regular preparedness audits to maintain optimal preparedness.
  - Developing response plans based on crisis calendars, which identify when during the timeline of a crisis particular interventions are appropriate and whether they can be delivered in time.
  - Reforming contingency planning into a more dynamic, fluid process in which plans are live documents that are continually revised as risk factors change.
- Agencies can optimize preparedness by maintaining a certain level of operational redundancy or spare capacity. This includes pre-positioning of emergency supplies in response to early warnings. For example, the World Food Programme's Forward Purchase Facility allowed it to establish a supply line to the Sahel six months before the peak of the 2012 crisis. Appropriate redundancy measures also include ongoing operational presence and greater staff continuity in at-risk areas.
- Agencies should develop 'early action platforms', building short-term emergency capacities into long-term development and social protection programmes which can adapt and scale up in response to early warning signals. Specialist humanitarian and development agencies should begin experimenting with joint programmes. Agencies with separate development and humanitarian divisions should develop organizational change plans to more closely integrate the two.
- As the primary providers of funds, donors can create the incentives for operational change. For example, they could:
  - Insist that agency response plans demonstrate interventions can be delivered in time.
  - Underwrite operational redundancy by funding advanced purchasing of emergency supplies (as donors such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Spain are doing) and long-term staff contracts in at-risk areas.
  - Encourage closer integration of humanitarian and development work by bringing humanitarian and development funding decision-making closer together (as Spain, and the United States are attempting to do), experimenting with joint humanitarian/development strategies with common goals and objectives, and earmarking funding for integrated projects or programmes.

- Foster cooperation between agencies by favouring joint programmes and proposals, funding inter-agency response analysis and agreeing transparent and objective funding criteria that clarify when particular interventions are warranted.

Funding reform

- Donors should expand and deepen the use of instruments to increase flexibility and speed up access to funding, such as rapid response funding mechanisms – used by donors such as Sweden, Spain and the United Kingdom – with fast-track decision-making and disbursal processes, contingency funds, increasing use of untied aid, and greater use of multi-year humanitarian funding and long-term humanitarian partnership agreements such as those being explored by Denmark, Australia, Spain and Sweden.
- Pooled funds should clarify guidance for early funding; where necessary new criteria should be introduced to encourage agencies to seek early funding from these sources.
- Donors, governments and agencies should explore innovative risk-financing arrangements that can provide rapid, early financing in isolation from political considerations. A major opportunity is the African Risk Capacity initiative, which would allow governments to access early funding based on rainfall indices, and reduce costs by pooling drought risk across the entire continent.

Institutional reform

- Donors and agencies should adopt risk management strategies that identify risks, explain the rationale for assuming risk and show how early warning and early action are central to risk management.
- They should also ensure the creation of incentives for appropriate risk-taking and, equally importantly, the removal of disincentives, for example by providing institutional cover to decision-makers.
- Clear processes for triggering, escalating, recording and justifying decisions, whether they are to respond or not, should be formalized within organizations.
- Where the capacity exists to do so, decision-making should be decentralized.

Test new approaches in 'resilience labs'

Resilience labs should be developed in partnership between national governments, donors, agencies and early warnings providers to test new approaches and demonstrate success. Root-and-branch reforms of the kind called for in this report will be easier to justify if they have been tested and shown to work. These partnerships would develop joint long-term, flexible programmes in vulnerable regions designed to respond to early warnings.