

Why do Famines Persist?

A Brief Review of Ethiopia 1999–2000

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1 Introduction

During 1999–2000, Ethiopia suffered its worst food security crisis in a decade and a half. High levels of acute malnutrition prevailed throughout many areas of the country, and high levels of excess mortality were observed in areas of the Somali Region in early to mid-2000. Overall, 10 million people were estimated to be in need of assistance at the peak of the crisis. Over the course of the two years, nearly 1.5 million metric tons of food aid, and a smaller amount of complementary non-food assistance was made available by the Government of Ethiopia and the international community, before the crisis was brought under control.

Famines or major food security crises are not new to Ethiopia, and the 1999–2000 situation was a classic slow-onset crisis, triggered by drought, which began in some areas of the country as early as 1997–8 and worsened steadily during 1999. Since the catastrophic famines of the mid-1980s, the humanitarian community (including the Government of Ethiopia as well as donors, the UN and NGOs) has invested heavily in institutional improvements for famine prevention in Ethiopia. These have included improved capacity in early warning and assessment by the Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission (DPPC); a major expansion in the strategic food grains reserve held by the Ethiopian Emergency Food Security Reserve (EFSR); a DPPC-led system of using food aid to promote public works-based safety nets; and a variety of improvements in the administration of famine assistance. Thus the risk was well known; the institutions needed to prevent famine were in place; and this particular crisis was reasonably well predicted. In brief, Ethiopia 1999–2000 should have been a relatively straightforward case study of the way in which famine prevention mechanisms work, and there need not have been a humanitarian crisis.

Yet this was one of the worst food security crises in the Greater Horn of Africa since 1985. It was not until extraordinary responses were invoked – personal visits by a number of senior aid officials and the appointment of a United Nations Special Envoy to oversee the response – that the response became substantial enough to bring the crisis under control. And by that time, the evidence suggests that the humanitarian crisis had already peaked. The obvious question is: why did all this happen?

This article is a brief review of some of the major factors that contributed to the extent of the crisis in Ethiopia in 1999–2000. It is based on a longer article that presents a more detailed analysis (Hammond and Maxwell 2002). Both articles are intended to suggest lessons for the humanitarian and development communities in Ethiopia and elsewhere; neither is an attempt to apportion blame or point fingers. Analytically, the ‘why did this happen?’ question is important to address; practically, the ‘what should be done differently?’ question is equally important. This article focuses on the first question, and makes some suggestions towards the second.

2 A brief overview of the crisis

Other articles have reviewed the crisis thoroughly (Hammond and Maxwell 2002; Hammond 2001; Salama *et al.* 2001; Sandford and Habtu 2000) and this article is not another attempt to do so. However, a few key points are necessary to briefly review for the analysis. First, the ‘crisis’ was actually several events that joined together. These were triggered by a series of relatively moderate shocks. Despite the number of people affected, this crisis was not ‘the big one,’ in terms of causal factors – which, in terms of drought, for Ethiopia would be a failure of the main *meher* rains, or back-to-back failures (Hammond 2001). Second, while the early warning system functioned reasonably well in the densely populated agricultural highlands, it did not do so well in pastoral areas, where in many cases early warning hardly existed, and where it did exist, it was poorly adapted to the local conditions (Hammond 2001; Sandford and Habtu 2000).

Third, human malnutrition was widespread – not only in the agricultural highlands where the crisis struck first in 1999, but particularly in the pastoral areas throughout 1999 and 2000. These areas also suffered a major loss of livestock assets, and the long-term effects of the crisis are still being felt. Though surveys of mortality were few, where they were carried out, loss of human life was substantial (Salama *et al.* 2001).

Fourth, there was a substantial gap in the availability of food assistance. The Emergency Food Security Reserve was at a relatively low level of stock in 1999 at the outset of the crisis, and for the

most part was not significantly replenished during the entirety of the crisis. The rate of repayment of old debts to the EFSR by donors was slow, and as a result, the Reserve was not able to play the crucial role for which it had been designed – that of filling a gap between requirements for food and the arrival of food aid from international sources (Hammond and Maxwell 2002; CARE and FEWSNET 2000). The level of food aid available for distribution was substantially below assessed requirements for eight out of nine months in late 1999 and early 2000, as the crisis grew to its peak. The shortfall between assessed requirements and food available for distribution over the course of these months was close to half a million tons (Hammond and Maxwell 2002, citing WFP and DPPC data). This situation began to change in the wake of high profile visits to Ethiopia by aid agency officials in early 2000, which finally triggered a substantial response. No one knows for sure what effect the gap in food assistance had on the course of the crisis in any given location, but it can only be presumed to have had an adverse effect. Molla (2001) notes in particular the shortfall of food assistance compared with assessed needs in the Somali Region in the run-up to the peak of the crisis, but in general, specific information on the localised impact of shortfalls in food distributions is not available.

Fifth, of course, was that the entire period of the crisis was framed by the Ethiopian/Eritrean war, which began in 1998, and broke out into major fighting in early 1999. The fighting effectively ended in May 2000 in the wake of an Ethiopian offensive. While the war displaced civilian populations on both sides of the border, it was not a major cause of the humanitarian crisis (at least not until the offensive that ended the war, and the humanitarian crisis caused by the offensive was on the Eritrean side of the border).

3 Stakeholder views of explanatory factors

The historical context of this case, and extensive interviews with a variety of actors within the humanitarian community, suggest at least five major categories of explanation for the crisis of 1999–2000. None of them fully explains what happened, but all contribute to an understanding, and each has implications for future humanitarian

practice. Most of these perspectives revolve around the gap in the response, and the effect that this had on exacerbating the crisis:

- logistical and bureaucratic problems caused the gap
- information problems and poor informational linkages caused the gap
- informational problems aside, institutional mistrust delayed the response
- the war with Eritrea led to a major rift with donors
- famine prevention institutions focused on the 'event' rather than the 'process' of famine – underlying causes were not adequately addressed.

Each of these is explored below.

3.1 Logistical and bureaucratic problems

The first explanation that hinges primarily on the gap in the food aid pipeline, notes that a combination of unrelated, one-off coincidences happened in the same period of time, and unfortunately they all happened at the worst possible time. While not all were due purely to logistical bottlenecks, neither were they the result of negligence or malfeasance. There was indeed one large shipment of food that was significantly delayed because of a variety of problems related to administrative oversight of donor budgets. There is no doubt also, that logistical and security problems, as well as limited operational capacity, hampered emergency operations in the Somali Region, where roads are poor and populations are typically dispersed over vast and remote areas (Salama *et al.* 2001). Similarly, the vast majority of food assistance – in addition to all of Ethiopia's other imports – had to pass through the port of Djibouti. But in fact, there were surprisingly few logistical bottlenecks in the port, due to good logistical coordination.

However, it was these kinds of delays and logistical problems that the EFSR was set up in order to circumvent. In addition, the amount of the shortfall was substantially greater than the amount of the delayed shipment. Thus, while contributing to the magnitude of the shortfall in food assistance, such problems can hardly be said to be the *cause* of

the shortfall in food assistance. For several years, analysts have been aware of the problem that the rate of replenishment of the EFSR was significantly slower than it was designed to be. The estimated stock requirements were calculated in relation to the extent of vulnerability, but in fact over time, it has become clear that stock levels also need to be set according to 'lead time' – or the amount of time it takes to repay after grain has been loaned out against a pledge. Proposals to change the levels of grain in the reserve were on the table at the time the crisis began (NRI 1999).

3.2 Information problems and links between information and response

A second explanation for how the situation got out of hand is that the information forecasting the extent of the problem was too slow in coming to the attention of the international community. There is *some* validity to this point of view, but again it is only a very partial explanation. There was admittedly a problem with the initial 1998 pre-harvest assessment, which overestimated the projected grain availability for 1999. This estimate was revised downward in early 1999 (and emergency assistance requirements revised upwards), but by that point, donors had focused their attention elsewhere. The extent to which the failure of the 1999 *belg* rains pushed people to the brink of disaster also took the humanitarian community by surprise, because it set off much wider than expected effects. Lastly, there is little doubt that the early warning in the pastoral areas failed to give adequate forewarning of the problems there. Several initiatives are urgently addressing this issue at present.

Nevertheless, it cannot be logically argued that an information problem was responsible for the delay in response. First, the extent to which the *belg* failure in 1999 produced a near disaster rang alarm bells with the international community about the extent to which coping mechanisms had already been exhausted, and therefore how much closer a major disaster could be in the event of another shock – even a minor one. Second, widely available early warning information clearly documented the food security situation in Ethiopia throughout 1999, with increasing urgency. By late 1999, all available early warning bulletins were forecasting imminent disaster. Third, there were early warning

indications of a problem in Somali Region in the second half of 1999 – though given a relative dearth of baseline information, this information was more difficult to interpret than was information from the highlands. Fourth, the DPPC itself issued several extraordinary appeals in October and November 1999, one of which explicitly highlighted the problem in pastoral areas, and another highlighted the gap in the pipeline that was developing. Yet little mobilisation of food aid was achieved until months after these appeals were issued.

3.3 Institutional mistrust among international partners

Analysing the ‘missing links’ between early warning and response – including, but not limited to, Ethiopia – Buchanan-Smith and Davies (1995) note that the problem of slow response is often to be found in the institutional realm. In the Ethiopian context, such an argument would hold that the early warning system adequately picked up the problem, but failed to mobilise the kind of response needed to avert a disaster, in short, because donor agencies were sceptical about the needs figures. The early warning system in Ethiopia was decentralised in the early 1990s including, critically, the judgement about the number of vulnerable people and the allocation of food aid. This system is believed to put pressure on local authorities to produce exaggerated numbers of population in need. While there was little that external actors could do to verify that this is the case, this perception meant that donors were sceptical of needs estimates and in fact delivered only a portion of the total estimated requirements between 1994 and 1999. So long as this ‘under-response’ had little visible negative impact on human welfare outcome indicators such as prevalence of malnutrition, for example, it was seen as appropriate – at least informally (Hammond and Maxwell 2002). One institutional improvement in famine prevention and response capacity in Ethiopia has been the introduction of joint assessment teams (including Government of Ethiopia, UN, donor agency and NGO staff), to make the needs assessment process more transparent to all parties. In theory, this should have prevented a problem of institutional mistrust, but even after this system was adopted, the problem continued to persist (Sandford and Habtu 2000).

The other side of this issue was the reluctance of the Government to completely use up the reserves in the EFSR, in the face of a large-scale disaster. Despite its low stocks, the EFSR was never drawn down completely, meaning that people were going hungry even though there was some grain in the warehouses – albeit less than 40,000 metric tons at some points, or only about a week’s worth of distributable stocks. Some observers argued that the emergency was of a great enough magnitude that the *entire* reserve should have been drawn down. But the Government was sceptical about the reliability of an external food aid pipeline that was managed by a number of different agencies and clearly did not want to put itself in the situation of having *no* reserve stocks (a similar disagreement between the Government and the humanitarian community occurred during 2000 in Eritrea). Again, the point here is not so much the merits of the argument about when and how much the Reserve should be drawn down as it is to simply underline the evidence of a fairly high level of mistrust among major partners at the height of the crisis.

3.4 Political and diplomatic sticking points: the war with Eritrea

The war between Eritrea and Ethiopia was a major thorn in the flesh of relations between the Government of Ethiopia and donors. There was little doubt in the minds of many Ethiopian policy-makers at the time that the slow response to the humanitarian crisis was one form of pressure from the international community on Ethiopia to peacefully and rapidly conclude the conflict with Eritrea – a conflict that was largely viewed by the donors as a pointless exercise that was diverting much-needed resources in both countries. Again, the issue here is not the merits of the war itself, but rather how the war influenced relations between the Government and donors, and the impact this had on the humanitarian response. Donors did not want humanitarian assistance to be seen in any way as ‘subsidising’ the war, and governments on both sides refused to have their foreign policy dictated by external forces. Though donor objections with regard to Ethiopia had more to do with general national priorities than with specific evidence of the direct diversion of humanitarian resources, there was little doubt that such a war was using up resources – financial and physical as well as human

(IRIN 2000; Jeffery 2000). It also meant that assistance had to be funnelled through Djibouti or Berbera, rather than the Eritrean ports of Assab and Massawa.

In theory, while some donors froze development assistance to Ethiopia during the war, humanitarian assistance was not supposed to be affected. But the speed and magnitude of the international response as the crisis built to its peak made many observers think otherwise. Informally, donor agency staff were willing to talk about the impact of the war on the response in 1999. But once the story got into the international media in early 2000, donor staff said little more about the war – and indeed, this is the point at which the international response was speeded up significantly, implying that to whatever extent the war had been an issue slowing the response in 1999, the two issues had to be separated once the crisis was peaking in 2000 and it was picked up by the media. In any case, the war effectively came to an end shortly thereafter. Regardless of the merits of the war or how it ended, there is little doubt that the end of the fighting facilitated the speeding up of the humanitarian response. But the evidence tends to suggest that the international community (governments, donors, and agencies) could not agree on how to separate the humanitarian imperative and humanitarian response from political and diplomatic objectives in 1999 and early 2000. As noted elsewhere,

this was not a complex political emergency in the classic sense of the term, in which people were at risk of famine because they had been attacked, displaced, or were otherwise prevented from pursuing their livelihoods as a direct result of a conflict. It was ‘complex’ in the sense of diplomatic objectives being at odds with humanitarian imperatives (Hammond and Maxwell 2002: 63).

3.5 Underlying famine processes were inadequately addressed by prevention mechanisms

Much of famine preparedness in Ethiopia and elsewhere focuses on famines as events – specific episodes that put people at risk of starvation – rather than as processes that over time lead to either an improvement or a deterioration of

people’s livelihoods. Despite the improvements made in famine preparedness mentioned in the introduction, in many parts of the country, including those most hard hit by the crisis, people were steadily losing assets – and thus their ability to cope with the shocks that led to the crisis – all through the 1990s (Devereux and Sharp 2000; Hammond 2001; Raisin 2001). In fact, the ‘under-response’ to food insecurity in more ‘normal’ times referred to above probably contributed to the speed of the onset of the crisis in 1999, because although there was no major increase in malnutrition during 1995–8, the effect of years of food insecurity was a slow but steady process of destitution or depletion of assets which significantly decreased coping capacity.

Ironically, it appears in retrospect as though an emphasis on putting more resources into ‘development’ in the mid-1990s may have actually increased the likelihood of famine in Ethiopia, in part because it separated emergency preparedness and long-term poverty reduction efforts, rather than integrating them. Many agencies that had been involved in both activities earlier had focused nearly exclusively on ‘development’ in the mid-late 1990s, as though emergencies were no longer part of the equation. This meant that they were no longer deliberately linking emergency preparedness to development activities, and it also meant that when the crisis struck, they were inadequately prepared themselves to deal with it. Despite the ‘development’ effort, recent UN evidence shows that rural Ethiopians are as poor now as they were two decades ago (IRIN 2002). Ideas for re-integrating emergency preparedness and poverty reduction have been suggested since the crisis (Raisin 2001).

4 Conclusions: lessons learned for future humanitarian preparedness and response

Several major lessons can be noted that run the gamut from ‘technical’ to ‘political’ in nature. While lack of information is probably not to blame for the crisis of 1999–2000, several lessons about information systems can be drawn. One is that, in addition to the standard early warning information collected, the humanitarian community ought to pay much closer attention to assets and the coping

capacity of vulnerable populations. The underlying process of destitution in rural Ethiopia was known, but was not widely incorporated into early warning analysis before the crisis. Second, early warning systems developed for agricultural areas probably require greater adaptation before being used in pastoral areas. These points have been widely acknowledged, and are currently being incorporated into famine preparedness in Ethiopia.

The 'lead time' in loan repayment to the EFSR needs to be substantially shortened. The alternative is to increase the size of the EFSR, so that an adequate amount of stock is held in country. This is essentially what had been planned prior to the crisis, but had not been implemented (NRI 1999). Efforts are now underway to put this plan into action.

Operational agencies almost certainly need to be better advocates, both in terms of lobbying donors and mobilising the media. An NGO statement of April 2000 attempted to do this, but probably did not do so in the most effective manner. A concerted, long-term advocacy effort is needed that pulls together the major partners to effectively raise the resources to deal with both the recurrence of emergencies in Ethiopia and their underlying causes.

But the international humanitarian community also needs to address several difficult questions that focus on the political dimensions of famine prevention:

- How can the international community (governments, donors, UN agencies, NGOs) be

Notes

* This article is based on research on the Ethiopia crisis of 1999–2000 conducted in the course of professional work, but views expressed here are personal and do not represent the official position of CARE International. There is still a major controversy over whether the Ethiopia crisis of 1999–2000 should be labelled a 'famine' or not, in light of the emotive and political connotations of the word. In the author's view – given the number of people affected, the damage to livelihoods and human development,

held accountable for their obligations to protect and respect the right to food and other basic rights at a time when humanitarian priorities and diplomatic/political priorities clash? While individual agencies have committed themselves to standards of accountability in emergencies (Sphere Project 2000), these measures do not hold other actors accountable. In an era of convergence or 'coherence' between political and humanitarian objectives (Macrae and Leader 2000), are divergent responses to humanitarian and political imperatives possible?

- Could the international community have taken a much more proactive role early on in advocating for a different stance *viz à viz* both the humanitarian emergency and the war? Could the institutional problems have been dealt with in isolation from the political differences? Is something like an 'anti-famine' coalition a possibility at the international level?
- Given that humanitarian response during an emergency is largely about redressing short-term acute needs, how can long-term underlying causal factors be successfully addressed in such a way that foreseeing and mitigating acute emergencies becomes an integral part of on-going efforts to promote rural development and reduce poverty?

These questions are going to be much more difficult to answer than are specific initiatives to fix technical problems. Yet now is the time when these more difficult issues should be addressed.

and the loss of human life – there is no question about whether Ethiopia 1999–2000 was a famine. But the continued controversy over this issue points to the need for a broadly accepted operational definition of famine and perhaps to differences over the extent to which limited information can be extrapolated over a broad area. This article does not explicitly address those issues – rather it attempts to identify major factors that caused (or allowed) the crisis to become so serious.

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