When Emergencies Last for Decades
How to improve food security in protracted crises

33 countries currently face a food security crisis, 14 of which have been in this situation for more than a decade (see Figure 1). When emergencies continue for such extended periods of time, traditional humanitarian and development paradigms are not suitable for guiding effective responses. Rather than engaging in ad hoc relief programmes, interventions should follow longer term strategies and build on local institutions.

Building on local institutions

The lack of a longer-term development focus results in many interventions neglecting local institutions and power structures. In Somalia, for example, inadequate knowledge of clan politics led some development agencies to inadvertently support groups that represented militia factions rather than households affected by food insecurity. A thorough analysis of the realities on the ground is thus a precondition for improving the effectiveness of interventions. Given the weakness of state institutions in crisis countries, building on informal mechanisms is often the most promising—and sometimes the only feasible—approach.

This strategy has already produced some promising results. In the DRC, the so-called “chambres de paix” helped farmers settle disputes over land rights. Composed of community elders, these local councils resolved cases more effectively than the official justice system that had lost trust among the population. Similarly, by relying on community structures the Nuba Mountains project in Southern Sudan achieved more sustainable solutions.

Relief vs. long-term structural change

Responses to protracted crises generally consist of a series of emergency interventions, with little attention given to their long-term sustainability. Such operations frequently lack a proper needs assessment and risk further aggravating the situation. In Somalia, the free distribution of seeds as a response to the country’s food crisis undermined already functioning market structures. Similarly, the provision of fishing equipment in the DRC offered short-term relief but exacerbated the severely depleted fish stocks of Lake Edward.

Very few donors commit to development goals beyond the acute phase of an emergency. This generally leaves the underlying structural deficiencies unresolved. Indeed most interventions treat food insecurity in protracted crises as if it were caused by external factors, for example natural hazards or crop failures. Such approaches thus fail to adequately address the social and political causes of an emergency.

In order to deal with protracted crises, short-term relief programmes need to be coupled with measures to address the underlying causes of food insecurity. Interventions must build on local institutions and livelihood adaptation strategies to achieve more sustainable solutions. The current aid architecture needs to be more flexible and support longer term interventions and development approaches, even during acute crisis situations.

Figure 1: Location and duration of food emergencies

Source: based on GIEWS (2010).
Sudan was the only initiative that could bring together opposing groups in the ongoing conflict. This helped improve peoples’ livelihoods and provided a basis to gradually build peace. While it is undoubtedly difficult to identify suitable partners when institutions are in tatters, the success of interventions crucially depends on this initial step.

Building on informal institutions can also strengthen the sustainability of an intervention. In fact the people affected by a severe crisis are often the ones best able to recognize future opportunities and adjust their lives accordingly. Despite being encouraged to continue their traditional vocation, fisherfolk around Lake Edward started shifting to farming activities in view of decreasing catch volumes. In Somalia, pastoralists gradually moved towards agriculture in response to disease outbreaks and other livestock-related shocks.

Such coping mechanisms are often insufficiently acknowledged by policy makers who fail to integrate them into their overall development strategy. Intervening agencies should thus promote livelihood adaptation strategies and avoid weakening existing patterns of resilience.

Towards more effective interventions

Many factors contribute to the poor track record in dealing with protracted crises. Above all, donors lack the right instruments to achieve better results. Most development interventions currently fall into one of three categories: (i) humanitarian aid, which neglects long-term considerations; (ii) development assistance, which relies on functioning state institutions; and (iii) nation-building activities, which focus more on re-establishing the public sector than addressing the source of the problem.

None of these instruments alone can effectively combat persistent food insecurity. Instead, protracted crises call for an integrated approach to development and humanitarian interventions. Emergency relief programmes should be coupled with efforts to prevent and mitigate risks for future crises. Such initiatives need to strengthen a country’s institutional framework and simultaneously address the short- and the long-term dimensions of an emergency (Box 1).

Box 1: Operation Lifeline Sudan

Short- and long-term interventions were successfully linked in the animal health programme of Operation Lifeline Sudan during the civil war in the 1990s. Short-term interventions addressed the immediate needs of pastoralists whose food security had been seriously compromised by livestock losses due to rinderpest. Meanwhile, community-based animal health programmes were set up to work towards long-term eradication of the disease. Donor flexibility and close collaboration with local institutions were key to the programme’s success.

Policy makers thus need to intervene on two fronts: improve access to food through immediate support measures and address the root causes of the crisis through longer-term structural interventions. In this regard better coordination of all stakeholders is of crucial importance. Strengthening the participation of local partners and institutions will be one of the key ingredients to break the vicious cycle of continuing and self-perpetuating emergencies. Most importantly, the current aid architecture needs to be revised in order to effectively link long- and short-term interventions.