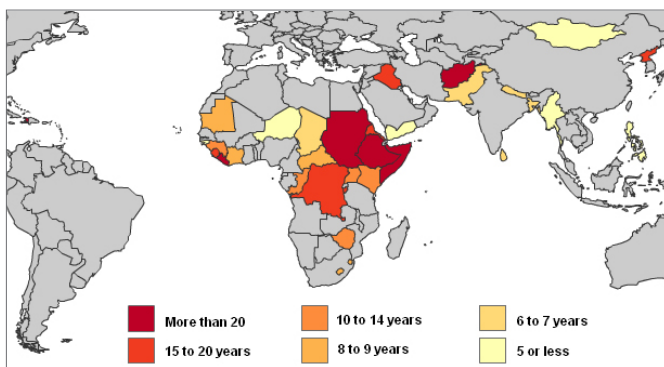


# When Emergencies Last for Decades

## 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.

Figure 1: Location and duration of food emergencies



Source: based on GIEWS (2010).

Unlike emergencies following natural catastrophes, protracted crises are often the result of failed institutions and conflicts over resources. They are characterized by poor or non-existent public services, high susceptibility to violence, and the absence of regulation in the productive and trade sectors. As countries become less able to protect their citizens, widespread hunger is a common consequence.

The Democratic Republic of Congo is a case in point. Years of violence have disrupted livelihoods, distressed relations between different communities and eroded the country's social fabric. The DRC's political and economic crisis has also had a heavy toll on food security. The prevalence of hunger increased from 29% in 1990-92 to 75% in 2004-06.

### 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

- 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

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.

### 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 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.

### Further information

- Alinovi, L., Hemrich, G., & Russo, L. (eds). 2008. Beyond Relief: Food Security in Protracted Crisis. FAO and Practical Action Publishing. Rugby, U.K.

FAO's *State of Food Insecurity in the World 2010* will focus on lessons learned on promoting food security in protracted crises.

For questions or inquiries, please contact Luca Alinovi of the Agricultural Development Economics Division of FAO: [ES-Policy-Briefs@fao.org](mailto:ES-Policy-Briefs@fao.org).