Notes For CFS presentation

Dan Maxwell
September 5 2024

There are all kinds of food crises many of which pass with little notice. So here I'd like to restrict myself to more extreme cases of food security crises, which I will define as famine or very high IPC Phase 4 emergencies.

Given time constraints, I'd like to draw on two specific examples from this kind of crisis—one which resulted in famine, one which did not—to talk about coordination and collaborative governance in crises: Somalia in 2011 and Yemen in 2018

At face value, Somalia 2011 looked like a drought, and there were back-to-back failed rainy seasons. But those the coincided with a global spike in food prices and, the drought caused the rural labor market to dry up at exactly the time that food prices increased, resulting in a dramatic drop in purchasing power for people dependent on markets for food—which is the majority of the Somali population.

But what really tipped it over into a famine was: first, the absence of WFP from the affected area; second, the restriction on access to and movement of affected populations by al Shabaab; and third, severe sanctions from donors on humanitarian actors whose assistance was diverted and ended up in the hands of al Shabaab or other groups labeled as “terrorist.”

So, addressing this crisis required not just the standard response to a drought or price shock, but also thinking of alternatives to the logistics of food aid delivery (and believe me there was a ferocious argument over whether cash was an appropriate response). It involved working

with commercial traders to ensure that there were food stocks on hand for people to buy if cash could be gotten to them.

And critically, it involved developing a workaround that would allow assistance to flow without putting humanitarian agencies in legal and reputational risk when, as invariably happens in complex emergency, some of it goes astray. And of course, a very under-recognized response, that fell completely outside the realm of collaborative governance was the response by local communities, mosques, and especially the international diaspora, through the hawala banking system in Somalia.

All of these played a role, but for several of them response was so delayed that famine was not prevented. And it was partly the return of the rains in the autumn of 2011 as well as the reduction in global grain prices that brought the crisis under control.

In Yemen in 2018, the crisis had been building for several years, and was driven mostly by the war, but with some unique twists. Although the country was divided between north and south, there continued to be a single central bank, and technical collaboration between line ministries whether based in Aden or in Sanaa.

While the symptoms of the crisis were the high levels of acute food insecurity and malnutrition, the drivers were related to restrictions in the ports and long logistical delays; the high cost of fuel for transportation; an acute liquidity crisis--which meant that importers couldn't get letters of credit from banks to import food; a health system collapsing under air attacks; and rapidly declining incomes. There was also, of course, conflict-related displacement, and at least in some cases access constraints.

The UN “road map” for addressing the crisis included standard responses such as ramping up humanitarian assistance and improving targeting mechanisms, as well as developing a special integrated famine risk reduction mechanism to identify rapidly deteriorating “hotspots,” bringing together the sectors of food security and nutrition, but also health and WASH to provide for a most holistic prevention and response mechanism.

But it also called for a full engagement in peace talks to halt the violence; the re-establishment of commercial imports; facilitating delivery of assistance; addressing the macroeconomic crisis such including the currency depreciation and the liquidity crisis in the Yemeni economy; and the reactivation of payments of pensioners and civil servants. Clearly, the war didn’t stop (!) but some elements of the “road map” were implemented and at least famine was averted.

So: what to take away from these two examples?

- First, while extreme food and nutrition crises are usually driven by some combination of climate, conflict, and market drivers—and sometimes other factors—no two crises are alike: there is no universal formula for collaborative governance to address these crises. Every crisis requires good analysis of context and causes, as well as of prevention and response options.
- Second, in all these crises, information was available, but not acted on in a timely manner. Better links of information and analysis to decision making and action are a prerequisite across all crises.
- Third, though we call these “food security crises,” and while production and trade are important underlying factors, preventing and mitigating these crises goes far beyond simply addressing food availability constraints they involve a much wider range of factors—and call for a much wider range of prevention and response

measures—and include health systems, macroeconomic policy, and security constraints.

Some of these may seem at first glance to have little to do with food insecurity or malnutrition, and the governance actors involved may have little accountability for preventing or mitigating famine or food crises (perfect example here was convincing the US Department of Treasury that its counter terrorism policies were helping to cause a famine in Somalia in 2011!).

- Fourth, local, informal, and diaspora actors are frequently the best placed—and sadly often the most overlooked—groups to address extreme crises. The international community has better engage, support and not undermine these efforts.
- Fifth, violent conflict is the common denominator across ALL famines and near-famine crises in this century, and conflict actors seem increasingly willing to use starvation as a weapon of war. This necessitates an approach to addressing conflict, negotiating access, and reaffirming global commitments to International Humanitarian Law and holding conflict actors accountable for their actions.
- If I may, I'd like to highlight a separate initiative we're engaged with under the Global Network Against Food Crises working on famine prevention and a system wide understanding of what famine prevention entails—addressing the ongoing misconception that 'averting' famine is somehow the same thing as 'preventing' famine. and how this gap in policy is affecting and resulting in a less than adequate response, and moreover a lack of responsibility and accountability.
- Our Tufts team is working with the Global to build and support this topic across 2024/5 with a particular focus on conflict and hunger.

Thank you