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## Food Security and Its Implications for Political Stability: A Humanitarian Perspective

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Note from the author:

I would like to acknowledge feedback on earlier drafts of this paper from Peter Walker and Antonio Donini. Since some of the following is rather speculative, I prefer to explain, at the outset, the perspective that I bring to this discussion. I tend to subscribe to the *Dunantist* notion of the separation of humanitarian action from partisan politics in warfare and conflict, to ensure the overriding priority of the humanitarian imperative, and so that humanitarian actors can, in the words of the International Committee of the Red Cross, “enjoy the confidence of all sides” (or at least try to). On the other hand, particularly where food security is concerned, it is very difficult—and frequently counter-productive—to firewall humanitarian action from longer-term risk reduction, safety net, and recovery types of programming. And in many contemporary conflict situations, it is not clear that humanitarians any longer enjoy the confidence of *any* side, in part because they have been manipulated by just about everybody (including themselves). In a sense, then, I tend to reflect something of a situational ethic with regard to the primacy of humanitarian independence and neutrality—depending largely on the degree to which conflict is the cause of the crisis. Second, I am currently an academic, based at a research institute that works on humanitarian disasters, but I have spent most of my career as a practitioner, not an academic. I tend to look at humanitarianism not just as a phenomenon to be understood or explained in its own right, but also as a field of practice in urgent need of improvement and reform. This no doubt affects my ability to step back and analyze the humanitarian system as a whole. Lastly, most of my working career and virtually all my research have focused on Eastern and Central Africa. I try to draw examples in this paper from elsewhere, but most of my perspective is informed by that particular geographic and political context.

## Introduction

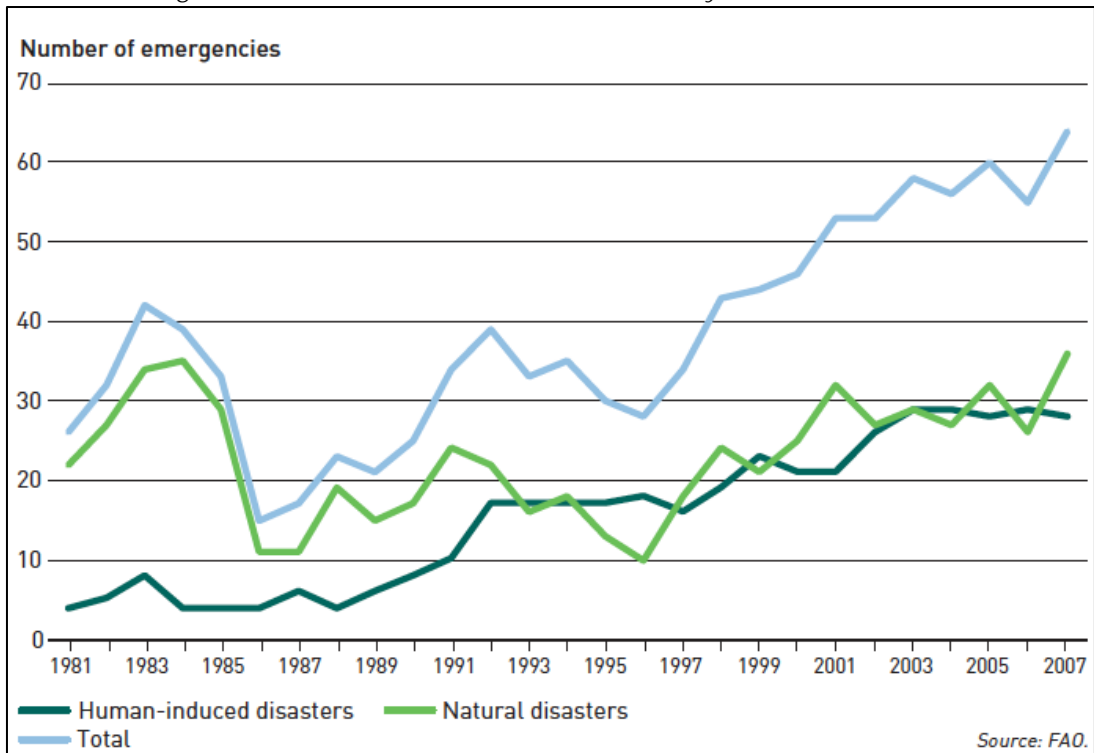
The 2011 famine in Somalia put humanitarian food security crises starkly back on the agenda of the international community. With its causes linked not only to environmental, climatic, and food price factors, but also to internal conflict, competition among regional powers and the global war on terror, the Somalia famine raised anew, many long-standing concerns about the link between extreme food security crises and stability, security and other political imperatives. The Somalia famine may have been an outlier in terms of the severity of the crisis and the extent of human suffering it engendered, but the famine was in many ways characteristic of the kinds of crises likely to be experienced in the medium-term future—at least in terms of kinds of drivers involved, if (hopefully) not in terms of the magnitude of the human consequences. The causes and consequences of these crises—as they relate to political stability—are important to understand.

This paper explores the linkages between food security and political stability from a humanitarian perspective. Humanitarian agencies and actors have traditionally been called upon to respond to crises of various kinds, to protect human life and dignity, and to contain human costs of crises. Food insecurity has been both a cause and a consequence of those crises, but for much of recent history, the humanitarian establishment has been focused primarily on the latter (i.e., the consequences). In this paper, I will trace the recent evolution of food security crises and the humanitarian response to those crises, to draw some conclusions about the nature of the relationship between food security and political stability, and to suggest the major challenges facing policy makers trying to address these two concerns. The paper is structured as follows: First, I examine the types of humanitarian emergencies experienced in recent years, their historical causes and newly emerging drivers of crisis, and the consequences of these crises. Second, I explore different kinds of humanitarian actors, consider the way humanitarian action has grown in importance, and raise some issues about whose responsibility it is to respond to crises—as well as emergent trends in responding to these crises. After that, I explore a number of contemporary trends and constraints on humanitarian action to prevent, mitigate, or respond to emergencies in the future, the implications of these constraints for the relationship of food security and political stability, and what could or should be done to address these constraints. I use a brief synopsis of the Somalia famine of 2011–12 to explore the implications of a number of these themes.

## Types of crises, drivers of crises

Acute food insecurity is frequently the result of humanitarian disasters of different types. Classically, disasters were divided by their nominal causal factors (“nominal” in this case because crises are rarely, if ever, “caused” by a single factor—“predominant triggering factor” is probably a better way of categorizing crises).

Figure 1. Number and causes of food security crises, 1981–2007

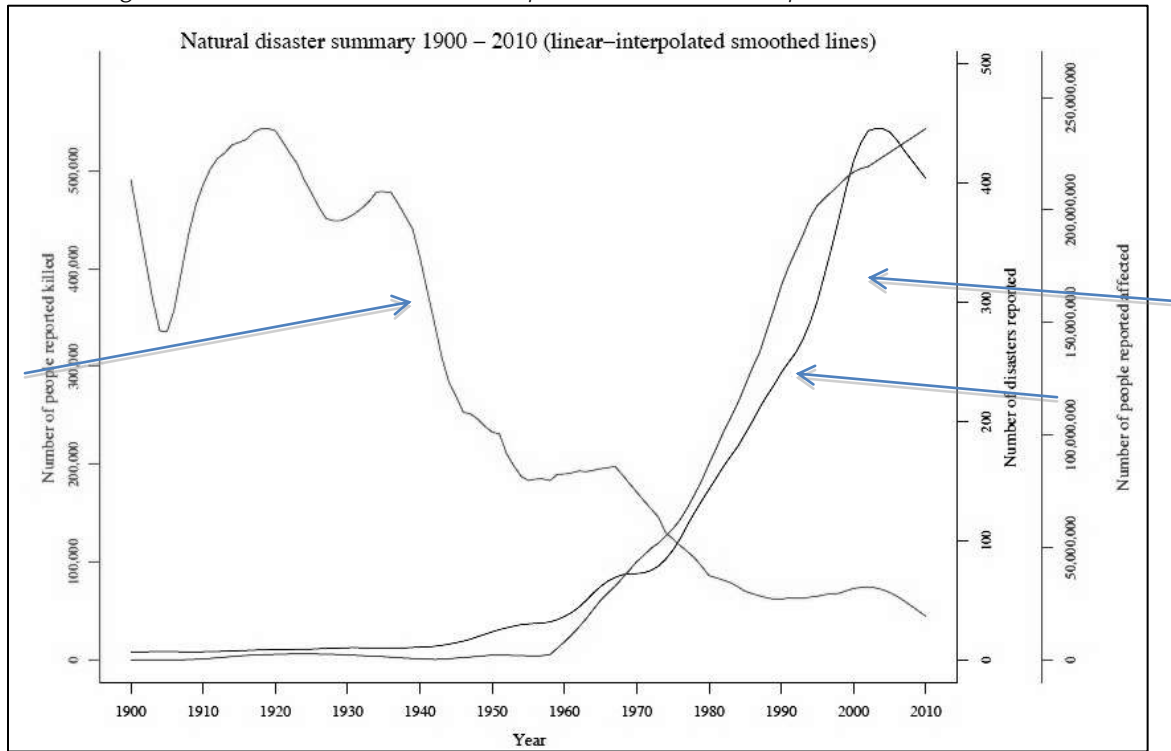


These include “rapid-onset” natural disasters—those that generate little if any specific warning at all such as earthquakes and tsunamis or those that might be generally predictable but not the specifics about precisely where and when (storms, floods, etc.); “slow-onset” natural disasters—mainly droughts that take several months or even years to develop, thus enabling (at least in theory) some amount of mitigation and preparation for response; and “human-made” disasters—often involving conflict, but sometimes being driven by political factors or government policy without overt or militarized conflict. For example, the prolonged crisis in Zimbabwe and the famine in North Korea in the mid-1990s, were both cases in which there was a major food security crisis that was caused almost entirely by political factors, but which were not overtly militarized conflicts.

Several observations about humanitarian crises should be underlined here. First, *the number of disasters has grown*. Figure 1 depicts the number of food security crises, breaking them down only by the (relatively artificial) categories of “natural” and “human made.”

Figure 2 depicts the number of natural disasters since the turn of the nineteenth century, the numbers of people affected, and numbers killed. While some of the data in Figure 2 no doubt result from more comprehensive reporting systems, there is little doubt that both the number of disasters and number of people affected have grown. Better response and mitigation have reduced the number of fatalities.

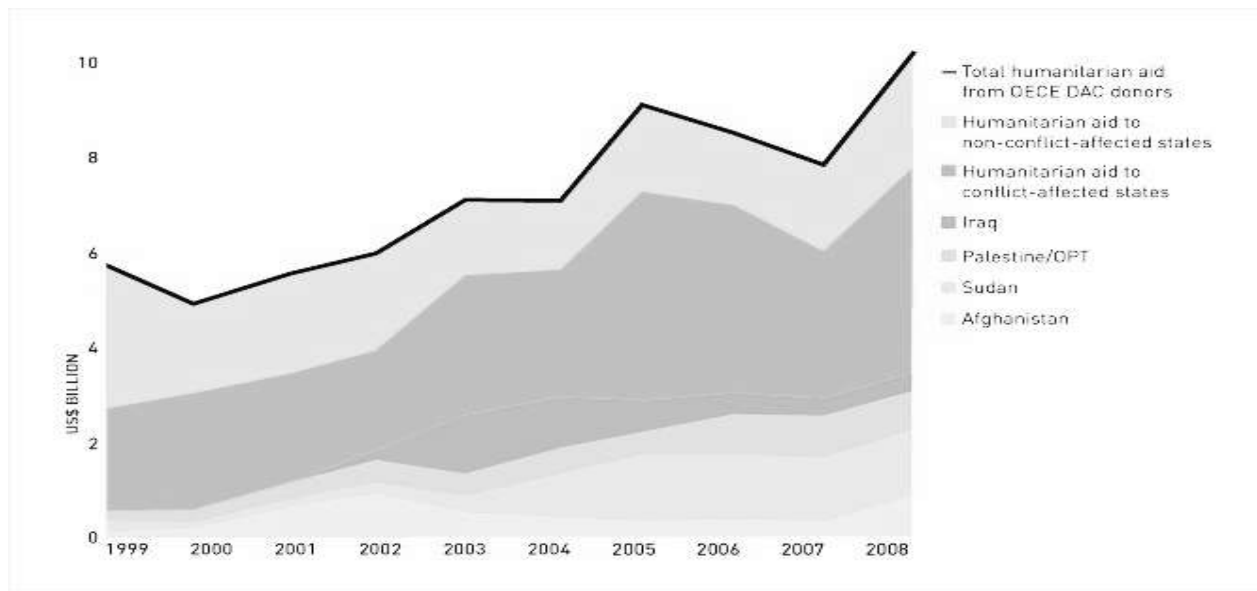
Figure 2. Number of Disasters, People Affected and People Killed, 1900–2010



Source: (EMDAT-CRED, 2012)

Second, while the causes of crises are both “natural” and “human-made,” *the consequences of crises that are more “human-made” (particularly conflict-driven) are more difficult for the humanitarian community to manage.* Figure 3 depicts the relative budgets of contemporary humanitarian response to different kinds of disasters, and makes clear the extent to which international response is heavily focused on conflict emergencies. Many—if indeed not most—humanitarian disasters today are triggered by some combination of factors, both “natural” and “human-made” (FAO/WFP, 2010). Political instability can be the consequence of either kind of disaster. Sometimes, natural disasters can be a source of significant political instability—such as the 2010 Haiti earthquake. Past famines in Ethiopia (1972–73 and 1984–85) are widely believed to have been associated with regime change, but were triggered mainly by droughts that were poorly managed (Lautze & Maxwell, 2006). On the other hand, conflicts—to which Figure 3 refers—are self-evidently about political instability, and often the drivers of food security crises. Both types of emergencies (which are, in fact, rarely easily distinguished in practice) are taken here to be potential sources—and manifestations—of political instability. The difference is that in primarily natural disasters, the state may be in a better position to mitigate and respond to the crisis (or at least in a better position to be assisted). In internal conflicts, the state may well be a party to the conflict—hence one of the causes of the crisis and therefore not interested in external assistance to address the crisis. Of the twenty countries receiving the most humanitarian aid (food assistance and otherwise) since 2000, 18 of them have been involved in some kind of internal conflict (Development Initiatives, 2011).

Figure 3. Growth in humanitarian funding to conflict-affected states, 1999–2008



Source: Development Initiatives (2012)

The third major point to be noted is that *causal factors have evolved*. It is no longer particularly helpful to break down crises between “natural” and “human made” even if donors use those categories to break down resource allocation. Virtually every contemporary crisis is caused by a combination of factors. And even if the primary shock may be completely “natural” (such as an earthquake), the nature of the humanitarian emergency engendered by the shock is shaped almost entirely by political factors.

A 2009 report by the Feinstein International Center summarized several additional emergent causal factors or drivers of crises of the future. *Demographic changes are probably the most predictable of these drivers*. Virtually all the projected net global population growth between 2020 and 2050 will take place in the developing world, and almost all of this will be in urban and peri-urban areas. Governments will have little chance to adapt to this growth; infrastructure and services will not be able to keep pace in many countries. This portends an increasing urbanization of poverty, vulnerability, hunger—and disasters. Though food security crises remain predominantly rural, there is increasing evidence that the locus of crisis is slowly shifting towards urban areas (Pantuliano, Buchanan-Smith, Metcalfe, Pavanello, & Martin, 2011). Population sizes are expected to double in much of sub-Saharan Africa. Less is certain about HIV-AIDS, but ever-higher populations of AIDS orphans are generally expected (Feinstein International Center, 2010).

The impact of *climate change will also have a major impact on humanitarian disasters* and the response. The Feinstein Center paper foresees both so called “first order” impacts—changes in agricultural production systems, global disease vectors and epidemiological factors, and

the resulting disruptions of livelihood systems that have been well documented by many studies. It also speaks of “second order” impacts—the tendency for political systems to become more repressive as the rate of change outpaces the ability of systems to adapt (Feinstein International Center, 2010). The implication is that climate change—irrespective of the argument about its human causation—will likely increase the intensity and frequency of “natural” disasters (floods, droughts, etc.), and lead to more political crises as well.

The other factor mentioned by the Feinstein Center paper is the *impact of globalization on disasters*. Globalization portends more rapid economic growth but also greater inequality; the growth of unsustainable economic activity in pursuit of short-term gains in unregulated markets; and higher levels of human migration—both voluntary and forced. More marginalized groups mean more people at risk of disaster. The impact of globalization on the state appears unclear and perhaps contradictory—perhaps a more curtailed role, or perhaps a greater assertion of sovereignty. With regard to humanitarian action, both trends are visible, and predicting which will be the dominant trend is context-specific. Already evident is the greater penetration of global markets into local economies. In some cases, this can result in greater vulnerability of localized (and previously much more isolated) markets to global price volatility and in more rapid transfer of economic shocks—in particular the impact of the food price spikes in 2008 and 2011 (FEWSNET, 2011). On the other hand, greater integration of markets likely serves to reduce the impact of localized production shocks. And more integrated markets have opened up the possibilities of cash and voucher-based programming—a more rapid and in many cases, more efficient response to localized food access crises, as well as one frequently more preferred by recipient communities (Lentz et al., 2012; Violette et al., 2012). Overall, the impact of globalization on food security crises is variable.

Fourth, *the nature of conflicts driving food security crises has also changed*. In the immediate post-cold war era, much of the increase in internal conflict was driven primarily by local grievances that had been masked by the bipolar nature of international relations between East and West between 1948 and 1989. Some of these post-cold-war conflicts were political, but many were resource-based, and many took the form of conflict between ethnic or other identity groups. In recent years, while resource-based conflict remains prevalent, some conflicts have become again more ideological and polarized—and in many cases “asymmetric,” particularly in the context of the global war on terror (GWOT). While this no doubt shapes foreign policy and security considerations, it also profoundly affects humanitarian policy: nine of the top ten recipient countries of humanitarian assistance in 2011 have conflicts that involve at least one group labeled as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the US government (Development Initiatives, 2011).

Fifth, the very term “crisis” or “emergency” once implied a short, acute episode with an identifiable cause, a beginning, and an end. In the twenty-first century, there are very few crises that fit such a description. *Long-lasting crises, which may have many causes but no clear ending and limited potential for recovery, are much more the norm today—so called “protracted crises.”*



Table 1. Countries in Protracted Crisis

Country	Natural disaster only	Human-induced disaster only	Combined natural and human-induced disaster	Total disasters (1996–2010)	Humanitarian aid/total ODA (2000–2008)
	(Number of years)			(Percentage)	
Afghanistan		5	10	15	20
Angola	1	11		12	30
Burundi		14	1	15	32
Central African Republic		8		8	13
Chad	2	4	3	9	23
Congo		13		13	22
Côte d'Ivoire		9		9	15
Democratic People's Republic of Korea	6	3	6	15	47
Democratic Republic of the Congo		15		15	27
Eritrea	2	3	10	15	30
Ethiopia	2	2	11	15	21
Guinea		10		10	16
Haiti	11	1	3	15	11
Iraq		4	11	15	14
Kenya	9		3	12	14
Liberia		14	1	15	33
Sierra Leone		15		15	19
Somalia			15	15	64
Sudan		5	10	15	62
Tajikistan	3		8	11	13
Uganda		4	10	14	10
Zimbabwe	2	3	5	10	31

Source: FAO/WFP (2010)

A special report by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Food Programme (WFP) outlined the nature of protracted crises and their implications for food security in 2010 (FAO/WFP, 2010). Protracted crises are defined first and foremost by longevity or duration. The FAO Global Information Early Warning System (GIEWS) tracks information provided by most governments, and shows states of humanitarian emergencies (so defined because they require external assistance) lasting for up to 30 years in some countries. Conflict, weak governance, and the breakdown of services and institutions are also common characteristics, although not all countries in protracted crisis have necessarily experienced overt conflict. Countries in protracted crisis—and the kinds of crises they report, the proportion of assistance they receive that is purely humanitarian and the number of years in crisis during the fifteen years between 1996 and 2010—are depicted in Table 1 (many have been in crisis much longer than that).

The consequences for livelihood systems and food security are stark. Assistance that could have gone for developmental purposes is increasingly limited to life-protecting humanitarian aid. And the prevalence of food insecurity—as measured by the FAO undernourishment indicator and the International Food Policy Research Institute Global Hunger Index (GHI)—is significantly higher in protracted crises (FAO/WFP 2010). Countries in protracted crisis on average have a prevalence of food insecurity that is nearly three times higher (37percent) than all other developing countries (13 percent) with the exception of China and India (whose



large populations skew the average, and where 15 percent of the population is undernourished). FAO/WFP reported a statistically significant relationship between number of years in crisis and worsening national prevalence of food insecurity (FAO/WFP, 2010).

More alarmingly, in 2010, twenty-four countries in Africa alone reported crises to GIEWS, and nineteen of these had been in crisis for at least eight of the previous ten years (the FAO/WFP criterion for longevity to define a protracted crisis). By contrast, two decades earlier in 1990, only twelve countries in Africa reported crises, and only five of those fit the criterion for protracted crises. This strongly suggests that protracted crises—not the acute short-lived emergencies that we tend to think of, and for which the international humanitarian apparatus is designed—are the “new norm.” This is certainly the case in Africa, but also in many parts of South Asia and a handful of countries elsewhere in the world. To be sure, in some cases, the crises reported did not affect entire countries (Northern Uganda, for example, but not the rest of the country), and in some cases not always the same location within countries (Southern Sudan from the mid-1980s until the mid-2000s, primarily Darfur thereafter for a number of years).

Nevertheless, the implications are profound. Not only is food insecurity significantly worse in these countries, the very nature of these crises means that the government of the affected country is often not in position to address either the causes or consequences of these crises through concerted public policy action, and in fact may be party to conflicts that drive these crises (Sudan being the classic example). Donor funding going to these crises now consumes the vast majority of humanitarian budgets. In 2010, roughly 70 percent of humanitarian assistance was going to countries that had been in crisis 8 years or more; 20 percent went to countries reporting crises lasting 4–7 years, and only 10 percent went to crises of three years or less duration. Yet much of the rhetoric and most of the response mechanism is still built on the presumption of defined, acute “emergencies” (Development Initiatives, 2011).

Perhaps the most troubling finding of the FAO/WFP report is that, of the five African countries that were in protracted crisis in 1990 (Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Angola, and Mozambique), only Mozambique was no longer in protracted crisis by 2010! So the difficulties of emerging from this kind of crisis are very different from the notions of “recovery” that are often bandied about—even by the very organizations and national governments that have to deal with these crises (FAO/WFP, 2010). **All this points to the need for greater emphasis on the “gray area” between humanitarian approaches and the standard development approaches of the recent past to improving food security. This “gray area” emphasizes risk reduction, recovery, asset protection, and livelihoods diversification in chronically vulnerable areas (Maxwell, Webb, Coates, & Wirth, 2010).**

To summarize this picture, several key points should be noted about the changing nature of crises. First, the number of disasters has grown over time and causal factors have evolved. It is no longer particularly helpful to try to distinguish between “natural” and “human made” although the terms remain in widespread usage. Virtually every contemporary crisis is caused by a combination of factors. The consequences of conflict-driven crisis are more difficult to

manage. Nearly all of them have negative short-term effects on food security, requiring humanitarian assistance; most have long-term effects as well.

Second, many factors are expected to shape the crises of the future, including demographic changes and an increasing urbanization of poverty, vulnerability and hunger. Climate change is expected to have a major impact on future disasters including not only well-known “first order” impacts but also likely “second order” impacts and in particular the tendency for political systems to become more repressive as the rate of change outpaces the ability of systems to adapt. And the impact of globalization will change the nature of disasters—particularly the ability of globalized markets to quickly transfer food price volatility into previously relatively isolated markets—which makes already at-risk populations much more vulnerable to the kinds of food price spikes seen in 2008 and again in 2011.

Third, the nature of conflicts driving crises has also changed from primarily local resource-based, ethnic conflict to more ideological and polarized and asymmetric conflicts particularly in the context of GWOT.

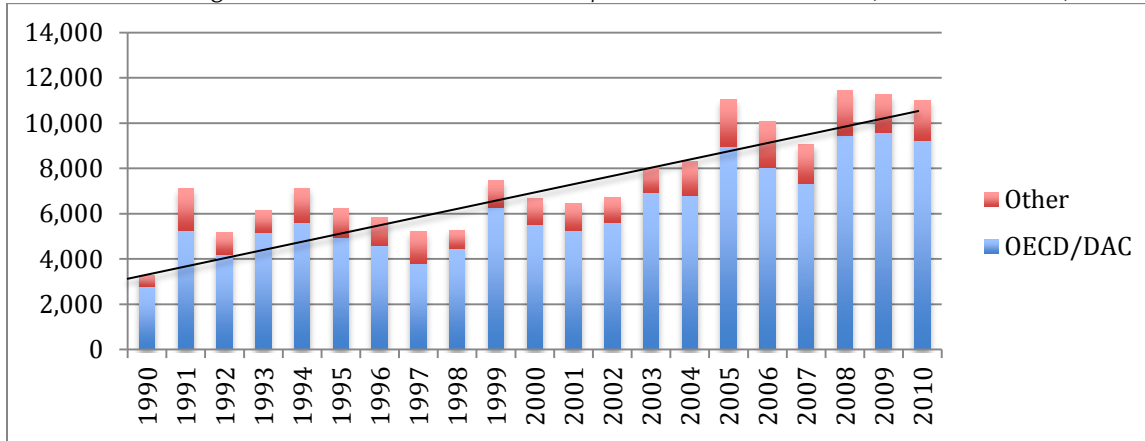
And fourth, protracted crises—which have multiple causes but no clear ending and limited potential for recovery—appear to be the norm today. Food insecurity is demonstrably worse in these crises, and the nature of the crisis undermines the ability of the affected governments to manage or respond to such crises. These crises now consume the vast majority of international resources for humanitarian action—even though the problems are arguably not what the international humanitarian system was designed to address. And the evidence suggests that once in a protracted crisis, it is exceedingly difficult for a country to overcome it.

Political instability is both a cause and a consequence of disasters, both human-made and natural disasters. Indeed, containing the political consequences of crises—rather than acting to prevent or reduce human suffering—has become the major rationale for humanitarian action in the contemporary era—a point to which I return below. So we now turn our attention to humanitarian actors and action.

## Contemporary humanitarian actors and actions

Contemporary humanitarian action has many antecedents, but most histories trace their origins to the work of Henri Dunant and the founding of the International Committee of the Red Cross (Walker & Maxwell, 2008). But most contemporary humanitarian actors now pursue somewhat different objectives from the ICRC, or at least are only partially related to the genre of humanitarian action that grows out of the experience of the Red Cross movement. But contemporary humanitarianism is in considerable turmoil—some even use the term “malaise” (Donini et al., 2008) to describe the contemporary humanitarianism. Again, several trends can be observed that explain much of this.

Figure 4. Total Humanitarian Expenditure 1990–2010 (US\$ in millions)



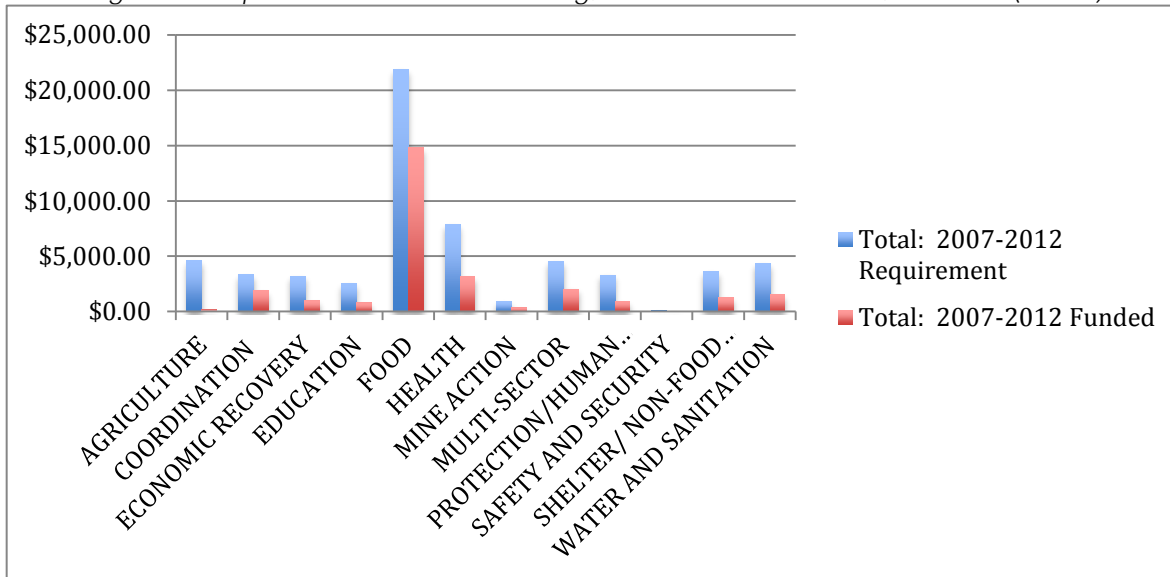
Data source: Development Initiatives (2011)

First, *humanitarian action has metamorphosed from relative obscurity during most of the Cold War to being an important—and highly contested—arena in the contemporary era.* Figure 4 depicts the growth in official budget allocations for humanitarian action over the past two decades, from around US\$3B in 1990 to over US\$11B in 2010. There is little to suggest that this trend will be reversed any time soon, particularly in light of earlier trends regarding the number of disasters each year, and the greater vulnerability of higher numbers of people.

Throughout this period, food assistance (traditionally food aid) has been the biggest single category of humanitarian response. Figure 5 depicts the funding requested and that actually granted in UN Consolidated Appeals from several recent years.<sup>1</sup> Not only is the food response to humanitarian emergencies by far the biggest single category of humanitarian expenditure, the proportion of requirements that actually attract donor funding for food varies from 79–90 percent of the requested amount—whereas for most other sectors, the average was only about 50 percent. With a few exceptions, most humanitarian appeals remain underfunded, and the longer-term recovery from crises woefully neglected (Maxwell, et al., 2010). While acute emergencies receive the lion’s share of funding, and food assistance the biggest share of that, *there is little evidence that significant progress is being made to address the underlying causes of food insecurity in these emergencies, or that recovery from crises—much less, crisis prevention and risk reduction—is taken as seriously as crisis response.* This is not just a humanitarian question, but one that affects the entire range of development interventions: economic growth, human rights, peace building etc.

<sup>1</sup> UN Consolidated Appeals (CAPs) do not include all funding allocated to humanitarian response, but are the best single indicator of relative amounts of response.

Figure 5. Requested and Actual Funding, Humanitarian Sectors, 2007–12 (US\$M)



Note: 2012 funding figures are partial.

Data source: Development Initiatives (2012)

A related point is that, until very recently, the major attempts by the international community to address the global food insecurity problem have tended to prioritize improving production in relatively high-potential areas—not to address the problem of recurrent crises in lower-potential or chronically at-risk areas. These areas are left to the domain of humanitarian action, even though they fundamentally are not (or not primarily) a “humanitarian” problem. In the wake of major crises in 2011 and 2012 in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel, this may finally be changing.

Second, *there are very different perspectives on the role or basis of humanitarian action*. These have been characterized as “Dunantist”—after Henri Dunant, the founder of the Red Cross movement—at the most “apolitical” on non-partisan end of the spectrum; to “Wilsonian”—after President Woodrow Wilson, who saw international action both government-led and non-governmental, as a key element of US policy—as the “pragmatic” or more situational approach humanitarian engagement; to “new humanitarian,” a movement that began in the late 1990s that deliberately sought a much more politically engaged form of humanitarianism(see for example (De Torrente, 2004; O'Brien, 2004). With regard to the issue at hand, a “Dunantist” approach to food security emergencies would imply basically only providing immediate food and nutrition assistance to people affected by a disaster, for as long as the effects of the disaster lasts; a “Wilsonian” approach would probably recognize the linkages between acute food insecurity in a crisis and a more chronic form of vulnerability to disasters, and emphasize economic growth, livelihoods diversification, and disaster risk reduction—in times of disaster and in more “normal” times—as the appropriate response. A “new humanitarian” approach would emphasize the right to food, the political blockages to the fulfillment of that right, and political contracts between rulers and populations that

prevent the outbreak of famines or food crises. But there is no simple, linear continuum of types of humanitarian organizations.

The more general role of humanitarian action has varied over time. During the Cold War, humanitarians were viewed, with a few exceptions such as during the Biafra war or the Ethiopian famine of 1984–85, as “angels of mercy”—well-intentioned and good-hearted, but fundamentally political lightweights on the international scene. With the outbreak of numerous localized conflicts that affected large numbers of people, but which commanded no particular geo-political rationale for international engagement, humanitarian action increasingly became a substitute for foreign policy engagement to end conflicts in the 1990s—hence the rapidly growing budgets in Figure 4. But in practice, this has meant that containing the humanitarian damage, rather than addressing the problem causing the conflict, was the *modus operandi* of the day—nowhere more obviously or tragically so than in the Bosnian war. Since 9/11, humanitarian action has become part and parcel of foreign policy of donor countries and domestic policy of many affected countries—with profound implications for the ability of humanitarian action of whatever political stripe to access affected populations (Walker & Maxwell, 2008). The point is that there are clear historical trends, but also clearly identified schools of thought within humanitarian circles.

So it is a bit pretentious to suggest one “humanitarian perspective” on the problem of food insecurity and political instability—there are *several* humanitarian perspectives on the question. The number and type of humanitarian actors have expanded considerably. Not only are more agencies engaged, there are many new actors. Once largely the domain of governments and a handful of large UN agencies or international NGOs, now many entirely local (often partisan) organizations and solidarity-based diaspora-linked organizations operate as NGOs. But there are also increasingly new donors and new organizations from non-traditional sources such as the Middle East and South East Asia. And increasingly, military and private commercial interests are taking on humanitarian roles.

Third, the capacity to respond to food security crises has improved substantially. Not that long ago Levine and Chastre (2004), found responses to food security crises in Central Africa were not based on assessment or analysis, tended to rely on a limited handful of interventions, and were not having very much impact. Since then, *the ability to analyze trends and causes of food insecurity has improved, and the options for mitigating and responding to food security crises have expanded considerably*. Whereas in-kind food aid—typically tied to source markets in the donor country—was the dominant response a decade ago, there are now a multiplicity of forms of response, including cash and vouchers, different modalities of in-kind food; various forms of support to livelihood so to both improve food production and bolster the purchasing power of crisis-affected populations; and a wide range of much more effective nutritional responses, particular ready-to-use foods and community-managed forms of outpatient care (Maxwell & Sadler, 2011). As a result—at least until the Somalia famine—mortality rates in acute food security crises had been declining. But this only underscores the point made above: overall mortality in acute emergencies appears to be declining, but there

is little doubt that the number of people pushed closer to the edge of survival has grown—particularly in the most food-insecure areas of the globe.

Fourth, the level of funding noted above and the discussion about humanitarian principles notwithstanding, *funding for humanitarian response is generally not allocated on the basis of needs or impartiality* (Darcy & Hofmann, 2003). This trend has only gotten worse over time, leading to some crisis situations being referred to as “hidden” (Checchi & Roberts, 2008) or even “normal” (Bradbury, 1998). The basis for allocation of funding has more to do with geopolitical or strategic interests than with an impartial assessment of need, or even with the so-called “CNN effect” (Olsen, Carstensen, & Høyen, 2003). This is related to the so-called “securitization of aid” (see next section).

Fifth, while much of the emphasis in humanitarian action is on the international response, international law is quite clear that *national governments have primary responsibility for the protection and well-being of their citizenry* (ICISS, 2001). In spite of this, humanitarian action and state sovereignty have a somewhat fraught relationship. For much of their existence, international humanitarian actors have had a “state-avoiding” tendency, reinforced perhaps by the frequent absence (or in some cases, the predatory nature) of state actors in the arenas where humanitarian assistance was needed most. As noted above, humanitarian agencies were often used as a substitute for serious policy engagement with thorny problems in the immediate post-cold war era—it was international donors that funded the humanitarian agencies, but national governments that were either ignoring the problems humanitarians agencies were called on to address, or were actively causing them.

Lastly (and related to the issue of national management of food security crises), in the aftermath of numerous crises in chronically at-risk countries, a different kind of programmatic response has arisen that addresses these crises as predictable—and long-term—manifestations of poverty and vulnerability, not as a humanitarian emergency *per se*. *Safety nets or social protection programs, led and at least partially funded by national governments—not just international humanitarian agencies—are now a major feature of the response to chronically high levels of food insecurity throughout much of Eastern and Southern Africa*, with the Ethiopian Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) as the archetypal example. The intent of these programs is to provide adequate access to food in the short term while building household and community assets in the medium term, and hopefully eventually reducing the need for such a comprehensive programs in the long term. To date, programs have been more successful at the first objective (providing a safety net) than the second two (graduation and self-reliance). For the most part, donors and national governments view these as development programs, not humanitarian programs—although many of them have flexible funding and allocation mechanisms that can be ramped up in bad years. Many of the countries that appear in Table 1 don’t have the capacity to manage this kind of intervention, or are viewed by donors as being too predatory to be entrusted with external resources to address the needs of the population.



To summarize, humanitarian action has grown rapidly from a relatively obscure form of international response during the Cold War to a major—and highly contested—arena today. Throughout this period, the primary form of response has been related to food security—mostly in-kind food aid. The ability to analyze and respond to food security crises has improved dramatically in the past 5–10 years, and there is a much-expanded range of response options now that address not only the immediate issue of access to adequate food, but also to forms of livelihood support that may bolster both access and production, and a new range of nutritional interventions that have been much more successful at controlling malnutrition problems (Maxwell & Sadler, 2011; Barrett, Binder and Steets, 2011). Safety nets and social protection programs have emerged to take the place of humanitarian response in the case of predictable, chronic food insecurity, but which may nevertheless require short-term (and often longer-term) assistance. Mortality in crises (at least until the Somalia famine) had been dropping, but the longer-term effects of crises are less positive.

There are many different perspectives on the role that humanitarian agencies do (or should) fulfill in food security crises; and while the obligations of the state are clearly specified in international law, the actual role of the state in a given crisis is highly variable—ranging from absent to predatory, to facilitative to protective, and with the question of state sovereignty and international obligations not always clear (see below). That said, humanitarian aid is clearly not allocated impartially on the basis of need. This discussion leads directly to some observations about the constraints on responding to acute and chronic food insecurity. Emergent constraints to humanitarian response in food security crises

There is thus some evidence of both improved capacity to respond to crises, and decreased mortality in crises. However, since the end of the Cold War, and particularly since 9/11, there have been more ominous trends as well. A brief “label” can summarize each of these.

### Securitization of aid

First, *humanitarian assistance is increasingly linked to security or political objectives*, undermining its traditional (though somewhat mythical) neutral and independent status—summarized by the label of “*the securitization of aid*” (or even, in some circles, “*humanity as a weapon of war*” (Brigety, 2008; Howell & Lind, 2009).

This trend has had several important implications. First, countries that have insurgent movements that are anti-Western in orientation and linked to terrorist organizations, or movements that are widely believed to have such links, have seen comparatively greater levels of assistance—both in terms of military assistance, and development/humanitarian assistance (Table 2). Second, significant amounts of humanitarian assistance have been funneled through the military rather than through traditional aid agencies. Third, there has been an increasing “securitization” of the *objectives* of assistance, regardless of the type of agency or actor through which the funding is channeled. And fourth, this assistance has been guided by a widely held belief that poverty and under-development are key drivers of insurgency and terrorist movements, and hence the notion of “winning hearts and minds” has become central to both counter insurgency strategies and the aid allocation strategies of some donors, particularly in certain countries.



*Table 2. Aid Flows, Selected Countries, 2000–2008*

Country	Average Humanitarian Assistance (US\$M, 2007 prices)	Average Total Development (non-military) Assistance (US\$M, 2007 prices)
Iraq	465	3,251
Afghanistan	463	2,368
Sudan	764	1,225
Somalia	203	317
Average: all other countries in protracted crisis	104	506
Average: all other developing countries	13	265

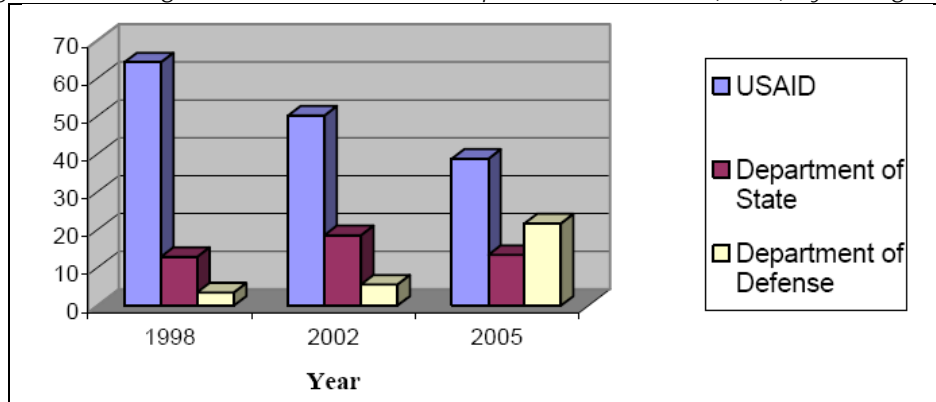
Data source: Development Initiatives (2009)

This trend is broader than just US foreign assistance, but has strongly influenced US assistance. Figure 6 depicts the levels of US Official Development Assistance funding made through the traditional mechanism of USAID, and that channeled through the Department of State (which houses the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration—BPRM) and the Department of Defense (DoD). Since 2005, these trends have reversed somewhat, with declining percentages of ODA passing through the DoD. However, the overall trend towards more securitized aid seems to be continuing as USAID objectives—particularly in certain countries such as those featured in Table 1—are increasingly tied very explicitly to promoting security objectives (for example, see (Frej & Hatch, 2010).

This has resulted in the obvious “blurring of the lines” between humanitarian, developmental, and security assistance, and has forced agencies to accept explicit security or counter-insurgency objectives. This in turn has led to increased worries about the security of humanitarian workers, who—despite the evidence—still regard themselves as neutral and impartial. Indeed kidnappings and killings of aid workers have increased over time, particularly in a few countries, but it is uncertain whether this deterioration in the safety of aid workers is explicitly linked to the securitization of aid (Fast, 2010). However, the trend highlights questions about whether humanitarian principles and International Humanitarian Law (IHL) still govern humanitarian responses in situations of conflict, the extent to which these principles and laws are recognized by all actors, and the shrinking of “humanitarian space” (see below).

Another recent strand of analysis has focused less on principles and more on the question of the effectiveness of aid provided in promoting security and stabilization objectives. Put in its most simple form, the “winning hearts and minds” hypothesis posits that poverty, under-development and unmet human needs are important drivers of insecurity – and that meeting humanitarian need, providing economic opportunity, and promoting recovery will therefore be a major contributing factor to stabilization, conflict reduction and counter-insurgency.

Figure 6. Management of Official Development Assistance (ODA) by US Agencies



Source: Center for Global Development (2007)  
Data source: OECD DAC Peer Review of US (2006)

While this view is widely held, there is little evidence to support it. Recent research has shown that providing aid according to security objectives in Afghanistan has shown “very little evidence of aid projects winning hearts and minds or promoting stability.” Instead, “one of the main reasons given by the Afghans ... interviewed for the growing insurgency was their corrupt and unjust government.”<sup>2</sup> The study found that allocating large amounts of money through military funding mechanisms for local development such as the Commanders Emergency Response Program in highly insecure regions often ended up exacerbating problems like corruption.

That research concluded, “not only is aid *not* contributing to improved security, but in some cases it may actually be *fueling* the conflict.”<sup>3</sup> The Commander’s Emergency Response Program budget has grown rapidly – from about \$400 million in 2007 to \$1.2 billion in 2010 in Afghanistan, for example. In the meantime, targeting assistance by security criteria—rather than by poverty or humanitarian criteria—allocates the most resources to the most conflict-affected countries or areas of countries, at the expense of other places with equally pressing needs and potentially higher probability of developmental or humanitarian impact from assistance. This tends to reinforce the view of humanitarian assistance as politically biased and not based on need—which many observers believe is a major reason for the contraction of operating “space” for humanitarian action (see below).

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Wilder and Stuart Gordon, “Money Can’t Buy America Love,” *Foreign Policy* (December 1, 2009). The same study included research in East Africa, but results weren’t as conclusive there.

Ibid.

Table 3. Actors, actions and outcomes: The instrumentalization of food assistance

Actors	Country	Action	Outcome
Donor Agencies	Somalia	Aid withdrawal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Significant factor in causation of 2011 famine</li> <li>• Little political or security improvement</li> </ul>
	Afghanistan	<b>“Securitization”</b> of aid objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not clear – similar securitization of aid efforts have been counter-productive in security terms</li> </ul>
	North Korea	Aid as a carrot – <b>“food for talks”</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Famine was not prevented.</li> <li>• No major change in regime policy or behavior</li> </ul>
Recipient Country Governments	North Korea	<b>“Triaging”</b> access to food for large groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perhaps a million people starved.</li> <li>• Regime controlled access to food and survived.</li> <li>• Underground private markets emerged—contrary to government policy</li> </ul>
	Sudan	Manipulating registration of IDPs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• IDPs threatened with aid cut-off, but agencies—not government—blamed.</li> <li>• Agencies reversed cut-off policy</li> </ul>
Rebel Movements Non-State Actors	Ethiopia	Diverting funds to buy arms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not clear – evidence is so limited that the accusation was formally withdrawn.</li> </ul>
	Biafra	Landing/currency exchange fees financed the war	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Biafra was ultimately defeated.</li> <li>• 180,000 people starved.</li> <li>• Aid manipulation likely prolonged the war—and hence the suffering and loss of life.</li> </ul>
Humanitarian Agencies	Darfur	<b>“Food for access,”</b> <b>“Food for protection”</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food diverted (undermined impartiality and neutrality)</li> <li>• Probably contributed to general deterioration of security</li> </ul>
Recipient Communities	Southern Sudan	Food taxation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food diverted to army</li> <li>• Humanitarian impact not clear</li> </ul>
	Somalia	Food redistribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Likely mitigated local conflict</li> <li>• Likely reduced food security impact of food aid</li> </ul>

Source: Maxwell (2012, forthcoming)

### The instrumentalization (manipulation) of aid

The securitization of aid is a subset of the more general question of aid manipulation. *Humanitarian aid has often been a resource that parties in conflict situations have sought to control, divert, or capture in some way in order to support their own (non-humanitarian) objectives.* Though not new, the evidence of this is as strong now as ever—summarized by the label of “instrumental manipulation of aid” (Donini, 2012). Food aid in crises has been particularly subject to manipulation, in part because it is viewed as a powerful tool, and in part because it is available and difficult to conceal in what is often an otherwise resource-scarce environment. This of course sometimes simply has to do with diverting food aid for sheer economic gain, but is often an attempt to influence the behavior of states, non-state actors, and affected populations towards some particular end. Referring the attempts to use both food aid and commercial exports to achieve foreign policy objectives, Robert Paarlberg noted twenty-five years ago that the manipulation of food power rarely actually achieved those objectives. Nevertheless, a recent review of this topic noted numerous attempts to utilize food assistance in humanitarian emergencies to achieve a variety of outcomes (Maxwell, 2012).

Actions included attempting to use aid to favor one group over another; to address insecurity; to induce belligerents into peace talks; to influence the movement and registration of internally displaced persons (IDPs); to sell and use for the purchase of weapons; to protect aid convoys or to buy protection for recipient communities. Table 3 summarizes the instrumentalization of food assistance. Nearly all parties involved in conflicts or response to humanitarian emergencies have attempted to manipulate food aid towards these ends at some point or another, including donors, national governments of recipient countries, non-state actors and insurgent movements, humanitarian agencies themselves, and even recipient communities.

In almost all of the cases reported, *the policy objective of the manipulation of aid was not achieved, but the attempt came at significant humanitarian cost.* Nevertheless, unless and until there is a stronger consensus that humanitarian assistance is only for humanitarian purposes and stronger sanctions against its misuse are implemented, the manipulation of aid will almost certainly continue—it is simply too tempting to *all* parties.

### Early warning/late response

Research conducted in the early 1990s attempted to come to grips with an increasingly obvious dilemma in slow-onset (often drought-triggered) food security crises: the so called “missing link” between early warning and response (Buchanan-Smith & Davies, 1995). *Nearly twenty years later, this dilemma remains: why is it that the international community can see a crisis coming, yet fail to take actions to prevent or mitigate it, or respond to it until it is a full-blown crisis?* After the famine in the Sahel in the early-to-mid-1970s, the US government and several international organizations invested heavily in famine early warning systems, including the US-funded Famine Early Warning Network (FEWSNET) and several UN-led systems. Most chronically risk-prone countries now also have national systems as well. In brief, the ability to monitor and predict food security crises has never been better. And yet, time and again, governments, donors and humanitarian agencies continue to fail to prevent or mitigate crises (Humanitarian Policy Group, 2006). Several reasons posited by Buchanan-Smith and Davies remain relevant, predominantly institutional explanations around lack of trust between donors and recipient governments or donors and agencies about the actual dimensions of the problem; or political explanations (similar to those discussed above under the manipulation of aid). The latter has been compounded in recent crises by counter-terrorism legislation in many donor countries (Pantuliano, Mackintosh, Elhawary, & Metcalfe, 2011). Risk aversion on the part of both donors and agencies appears to have increased under these circumstances (Bailey, 2012). There is little doubt in policy circles that early, protective responses are both less expensive financially, and protect affected populations more effectively, yet a variety of factors continue to prevent this obviously more optimal means of addressing food security crises.

### The responsibility to protect

After a brief interlude in which there seemed to be an emerging global consensus about the responsibility of the international community to intervene to protect the rights and dignity of people caught in crises—the “responsibility to protect”—*recent trends have seen the reassertion of nationalistic sentiments or sovereignty, with substantial constraints on the*

*independence and ability of humanitarian actors to respond to crises.* While this mainly impinges on crises of human rights violations, the overlap with humanitarian food security crises is substantial. The doctrine of responsibility to protect (R2P) essentially posits that when a country is unwilling or unable to protect the rights of its citizens, the international community has an obligation to intervene. Growing out of the report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) in 2001, R2P fairly rapidly gained popularity in the early to mid-2000s. Overwhelmingly affirmed by the UN as its principle in 2005, it was, from the start, on a collision course with other powerful interests and positions. In more recent years, after the failure of attempts to intervene to protect citizens in recent crises at the end of the civil war in Sri Lanka, in Myanmar after Cyclone Nargis, and especially in Darfur, R2P has fallen on hard times and many observers now speak of an era of “R2P pessimism.” The expulsion of humanitarian agencies from Sudan in 2009—allegedly for providing information on war crimes to the International Criminal Court—or new legislation in many countries treating humanitarian agencies, particularly International NGOs, as particularly suspect organizations, are examples of this reassertion of sovereignty at the expense of the ability of humanitarian actors to intervene in crises. Even non-state actors are asserting much more “sovereign” control over activities conducted in areas they control—witness for example the virtual shutdown of humanitarian activity in South Central Somalia by *al-Shabaab*, in the middle of the worst food security crisis in a decade. How far the pendulum will swing back towards sovereignty and away from international accountability and responsibility remains to be seen, but the trend is very clear.

#### The collapse of “humanitarian space”

*The combination of these factors has resulted in a substantially more constrained and difficult operating environment for humanitarian actors, both national and international—generally labeled the “collapse of humanitarian space”* (Hammond & Vaughn-Lee, 2012). This is partly about the factors just mentioned: the identification of humanitarian assistance with the security objectives of belligerents in a conflict rather than with the traditional principles of impartiality and independence; the manipulation of aid by other parties; and the relative withdrawal of the international community with regard to the “responsibility to protect.” But there are other, new factors involved here as well. First, security conditions for humanitarian agencies and staff have deteriorated badly (Stoddard, Harmer, & Haver, 2006), leading to increasing reliance on either remote management (Egeland, Harmer, & Stoddard, 2011) or the increased “bunkerization” of aid agencies *in situ* (WFP, 2010). Second, in the context of GWOT, legislation has been introduced that severely limits humanitarian response, so as to ensure that assistance does not end up benefitting terrorists or other proscribed groups. Most famously represented by so-called OFAC (Office of Foreign Asset Control) laws in the US, such legislation is now common in many Western countries (Pantuliano, Mackintosh, et al., 2011). These laws criminalize the transfer of resources to proscribed groups, whether accidental or intentional—and irrespective of the motive or objective of the agency providing the assistance. The actions and independence of humanitarian actors has also been severely curtailed by terrorist groups as well. Although it is not popular to talk about, deteriorating security, the attempts of local authorities to manipulate aid, and counter-terrorism laws each played a major role in ensuring the absence of major humanitarian actors from areas of

Somalia affected by famine in 2011 and in significantly slowing the response even after the famine was declared (Maxwell, Haan, Gelsdorf, & Dawe, 2012).

### Bright spots?

There have been bright spots in this scenario. Improved technologies have improved the ability to detect crises sooner—and to respond more quickly where the political will to do so exists. As noted, the range of response options has widened significantly enabling more tailored responses. The use of cell phone technology, for example (together with other factors such as the *Hawala* system of banking) allowed for a cash response to the famine in Somalia to quickly ramp up in 2011, after the famine was declared, and it became clear that food aid was simply not an option.

New, non-Western/Northern actors have emerged, and the role of local organizations in responding to humanitarian crises has expanded significantly, putting the focus for the more traditional humanitarian agencies as much on partnership as on implementation. The existence of experienced and locally embedded organizations in Somalia in 2011 was the *only* means of addressing the famine after virtually all international agencies were denied access. And there were a number of non-traditional donors engaged in the Somalia crisis—many from Islamic countries, with their own implementing partners and their own coordination mechanisms. Accountability measures have been improved, although there is still room for much more progress on this front. While long-standing concerns about building resilience in risk-prone areas may finally be getting some attention, much remains to be done to decrease the specter of food security crises and famines.

As noted briefly above, there is increased integration of local markets in marginal areas into national, regional and global marketing systems, which has opened up new options—particularly cash or voucher-based transfers—for providing assistance in emergencies. This has particularly been applied in food security crises, but in fact can be used to provide for most any kind of commodity as long as markets can supply them. This is cheaper and faster than managing a logistical humanitarian supply chain.

To summarize, while there are some bright spots, the constraints to effective humanitarian action to prevent, mitigate and respond to food security crises have probably never been greater since at least World War II. Humanitarian assistance—particularly from major Western donors—is increasingly linked to political or security objectives. Counter-insurgency or counter-terrorism measures put substantial constraint on operational activities, even in circumstances where the same concerns may make funding more available. But this trend certainly makes it difficult to argue that humanitarian aid is independent or impartial—regardless of its source. The lack of independence or impartiality is not lost on other belligerents in conflict situations.

Though aid has long been manipulated in conflict, there is no sign that this will decrease any time soon, even though the objectives of manipulation are rarely achieved. The security of both aid workers and civilians caught in conflict—both of which are provided for in IHL—has



declined markedly, particularly in a handful of countries, leading to increased remote management of aid or the “bunkerization” of aid agencies in context. Many of these factors have come together to substantially reduce the “space” for humanitarian action in crises—limiting the ability of the international community to intervene in crises, even when they deem it important.

Despite early acceptance, and even some attempts to aggressively enforce it, the doctrine of the “responsibility to protect” now seems to be in decline. And the conundrum of early warning but delayed response remains as much an obstacle today as it was twenty years ago. One need look no farther for evidence of this than Somalia in 2011.

## The Somalia famine of 2011–12

The United Nations declared a famine in South Central Somalia on July 20, 2011—the first time that actual famine conditions had been reported anywhere for nearly a decade, and the first time in history that a famine was declared in real time using empirical data and an agreed-upon set of thresholds for the determination of famine. Since not only was this the most serious food security crisis in recent history, but the Somalia famine exemplifies nearly every trend summarized in this paper, it is perhaps worth examining it in greater detail.<sup>4</sup>

There were early warnings of a crisis—as early as mid-to-late 2010—but a number of factors came together to cause the famine and to seriously compromise efforts to respond to it. The drought was certainly a cause—but the drought was only one factor. It led to a steep drop in crop production and increased livestock mortality that substantially cut people’s direct access to food and means of income at a time when the cost of food was increasing steeply. Somalia is dependent on imported food even in good years, and the combined impact of a production shock, falling incomes, and steeply rising prices for food from both domestic *and* international sources combined to turn the impact of a long running crisis into a catastrophe. The conflict between the fledgling Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and its allies on one side, and the Islamist insurgent movement, *al-Shabaab* on the other, had been ongoing since 2006 when the TFG was reinserted into Mogadishu by the Ethiopian army. And much of the affected area of the country had been in a series of low-grade, localized conflicts ever since the civil war that overthrew the Siad Barre government in 1991. (This same area was hit by famine in the aftermath of that war in 1992.) Since the early 2000s, however, the conflict had taken on elements of regional power competition—with Ethiopia backing the TFG and Eritrea backing various insurgent movements, including *al-Shabaab*—and the global war on terror as links between *al-Shabaab* and *al-Qaeda* became more evident and more pronounced. US drone strikes against *al-Shabaab* leaders and other insurgents became more frequent—

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<sup>4</sup> The materials for this section are mostly drawn from an upcoming special edition of the journal *Global Food Security* (Maxwell et al., 2012, forthcoming).



leading to some US-based humanitarian organizations being forced out because of suspicion of complicity in the strikes, and direct threats against the security of their staff.<sup>5</sup>

There was no new spike in the fighting immediately prior to the famine, but the conflict, the external engagement (Ethiopia, Eritrea, the African Union, and the US) and the collapse of humanitarian space as a result of the war were all implicated in the famine. The impact of counter-terrorism laws in the US and other donor countries complicated efforts to prevent, mitigate, and respond to the famine. The war and the lack of a central state apparatus, the drought and the food price spike, added to a long-standing crisis of livelihoods in Somalia, and underlying environmental crisis. The Somalia famine was a textbook case of an acute emergency superimposed on a protracted crisis.

And as noted, despite ample early warning, there was scarcely any response beyond the usual level (being a protracted crisis, there is always some level of humanitarian response) until the middle of July 2011 when the famine was declared. This was to some degree influenced by a long-observed tendency to simply tolerate higher indications of humanitarian crisis in Somalia than elsewhere—a phenomenon first noted by Mark Bradbury (1998) but reconfirmed since by many others. Normally, a crisis involving a major production shock (the drought) and a price shock would have elicited a major response in the form of a massive food aid program. However, the World Food Programme had withdrawn from areas controlled by *al-Shabaab* in 2010 and was not allowed back into the area during the run-up to or during the famine. WFP had been accused—both by the UN Monitoring Group and the BBC—of lax oversight arrangements with its transporters such that as much as half the food aid being sent into South Central Somalia was going missing (UN Monitoring Group, 2010). Given that much of this was feared to have ended up in the hands of *al-Shabaab*, the US cut off its funding. At the time, this was explained simply and purely as compliance with OFAC regulations, but some observers suspected it was also part of an attempt to undermine *al-Shabaab* and bolster the credibility of the TFG, by making humanitarian assistance available only in TFG-controlled areas (Gettleman, 2010).

By 2011, the only organization still able to negotiate a food response with *al-Shabaab* was the International Committee of the Red Cross. *Al-Shabaab* opposed the importation of food aid and not only refused WFP's return, it eventually forced the ICRC to shut down its food pipeline as well. The humanitarian community did not have an adequate contingency plan for this situation, despite early warning (IASC, 2012; WFP, 2012) and was forced to quickly ramp up a major cash response, amidst some uncertainty about whether it would work or whether it would simply lead to more food price inflation (FEWSNET, 2011; WFP, 2011).

As humanitarian conditions worsened in the first half of 2011, large-scale population movement began, both internally within Somalia and across borders to Kenya and Ethiopia. *Al-Shabaab* restricted some of this movement and in some cases, forced displaced people to

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<sup>5</sup> The agencies denied any involvement in military strikes, and no evidence has ever emerged to suggest that they were. But the suspicions about US-based agencies were so high that continued presence was impossible.

return to their places of origin prior to the short rains in November, in order to increase farming activity and agricultural recovery.

Due to the restrictions of *al-Shabaab*, almost all of the response was managed remotely from Nairobi, with only a limited number of Somali staff of international organizations, and the staff of a number of Somali NGOs implementing actual interventions on the ground. The limited access that some international agencies did have declined steadily throughout late 2011 and early 2012, as *al-Shabaab* closed down their operations. But other factors, specifically the *Hawala* banking system and a well-functioning cell phone network, enabled the cash transfer program to function, and indeed to scale up to assist over a million households. In the event, global prices (which, in addition to the drought, had been causing food prices to rise in the run-up to the famine) declined after mid-2011, and the cash transfer program did not appear to cause further food price inflation (Cash/Voucher Monitoring Group, 2012).

OFAC and other counter-terrorism laws were at least partially behind the withdrawal of WFP in 2010, and made it increasingly difficult to engage in *al-Shabaab* controlled areas throughout 2011–12. The withdrawal of WFP in 2010 did not have an immediate impact on food security, because of *el Niño* rains that year resulted in one of the most bounteous harvests in South Central Somalia in recent times. But the predictable *la Niña* effect followed, which usually indicates drought for the Horn of Africa. Late 2010 and early 2011 were no exception. After the famine was declared, USAID obtained a license from OFAC for some humanitarian activities, but the activities covered by the license remained vaguely defined, and in any case, did not cover prevention and mitigation activities, nor did the license apply to the period prior to the declaration. This explained part of the delayed response, but other factors were important as well—most notably a reluctance to commit major additional resources until there was incontrovertible evidence of the humanitarian crisis; in other words, until there had been a spike in mortality. That evidence was graphically provided by the declaration, but obviously waiting until the declaration was, once again, waiting until it was too late.

Once the famine was declared, a major response ramped up—and indeed ramped up quite quickly given the constraints. But for the Somali population caught in the famine, it was not quickly enough. Although a retrospective assessment of total mortality in the famine won't be available until late 2012, the loss of life from the famine is certainly going to be in the multiple tens of thousands—perhaps as many as one hundred thousand. The Somalia famine touched on all four “pillars” of food security: a major production shock resulting from the drought; a food access shock from deteriorating income possibilities and steep food price inflation; a malnutrition crisis manifesting itself from access and utilization constraints; and overall stability of food sources undermined by the conflict, the underlying livelihoods crisis, the collapse of the state, the extreme restrictions on humanitarian access, and by political actors—both internal and external—who had priorities other than preventing humanitarian catastrophes.

## Tentative conclusions: food security crises and political stability

Several potential conclusions emerge from this discussion. First, *the causal relationship between food security and political stability in humanitarian emergencies is complex and difficult to generalize*—that is to say that food insecurity can be caused by conflict/political instability, and political instability can be caused by food insecurity. Militarized conflict—an extreme form of political instability—has clearly been a major driver of humanitarian emergencies, particularly since the end of the cold war, with high levels of food insecurity a common consequence of these emergencies. However, at the same time, many of the local drivers of conflict have been related to control over land and other natural resources, which are ultimately linked to people’s livelihoods—and therefore to their food security (Alinovi, Hemrich, & Russo, 2008). In most of these emergencies, it isn’t really possible to specify the “independent” and “dependent” variables in the relationship. The relationship can be understood in any given context, but it is circular and iterative, not linear. And, it should also be noted, that there isn’t always *any* particularly demonstrable relationship between the two. Substantial levels of food insecurity can exist without there being any driver related to political instability, and without necessarily causing major political instability. Hence, a certain amount of caution is justified regarding any general theory of the link between the two.

Second, *there are some common drivers of both political instability and food insecurity*. Climate change is at least partly implicated for both in the Darfur conflict, for example: as rainfall patterns changed, nomadic camel herders had to migrate farther and farther southwards to find dry season grazing and water, which brought them increasingly into conflict with other ethnic and livelihoods groups—and made the lack of a designated homeland or “Dar” for the nomadic groups more evident (Young et al., 2005). Needless to say, the Darfur conflict was quickly politicized by other actors—predominantly the ruling party in Khartoum—for their own purposes, so it would be wrong to blame the Darfur crisis predominantly on climate change. Nevertheless, it likely played a crucial underlying role. Increasing frequency of drought and climate variability is equally implicated in food security crises elsewhere.

It seems unlikely that there will be any change in the foreseeable future in a number of drivers of food insecurity: the volatility of short-term weather impacts and medium-term climate change impacts, the volatility of global and local food prices, or the number of localized conflicts (ripe for manipulation the way Darfur or Somalia were). In other words, the number of localized food security crises is unlikely to decrease. This has major implications for both humanitarian preparedness and response—and for policy makers worried more broadly about the implications for political stability, notwithstanding the caution raised above about generalizing the relationship between food insecurity and political stability. The social protection responses rolled out on a national scale in Ethiopia, and piloted in a number of other countries have certainly made progress in providing a safety net—but the jury is still out on whether such programs actually offer a broadly accessible “ladder” out of poverty and chronic food insecurity. It is likely that substantially more resources will be required to achieve the latter objective at scale, and the infrastructure and capacity needed for implementation are likely inadequate in the most affected countries.

And third, as implied throughout this paper, *the relationship between humanitarian actors and policy-makers or actors more primarily focused on political stability questions is problematic*. The question from a policy-making perspective is not just which is the cause and which is the effect, but also *which is the means and which is the end?* I have argued that that causation can run both ways—so presumably the policy-making logic can too: that is, achieving food security can be a means to the end of political stability, but the evidence suggests that political stability is also important for achieving food security. I have also argued that nearly all parties in conflicts, protracted crises and food security emergencies are all too happy to manipulate humanitarian assistance to achieve other goals—be they economic, political, territorial, security or other goals—and that this has severely undermined humanitarian goals and humanitarian access. This has long been rationale for separating humanitarian response from partisan political objectives, as suggested by numerous international agreements, both formal (IHL) and informal (humanitarian principles).<sup>6</sup>

The far more serious question about “means” and “ends” is not whether improved food security is generally good for political stability (most any reasonable person, humanitarian or otherwise, could agree to such a proposition), but rather whether, under certain circumstances, ignoring some amount of short-term *food insecurity* is a useful tool with which to promote longer-term “stability” or other political or security objectives? There is no doubt that humanitarian assistance has been restricted, channeled and in other ways manipulated so as to favor one side in conflicts. Indeed doing so now clearly seems to be part and parcel of US policy, at least in certain countries. There was little doubt that the response to the Pakistan displacement crisis in 2009 for example (which had major elements of food security in the response) was deliberately channeled in such a way as to strengthen the Pakistani government and weaken the Taliban, without evidence of any specific concern for the humanitarian consequences of doing so (Péchéayre, 2012). Similar suggestions have been made in other contexts as well—notably the North Korean famine in the mid-1990s (Haggard & Noland, 2007).

There were earlier indications that US policy in Somalia was devoted to using humanitarian assistance at least in part in an attempt to bolster the political credibility of the TFG, without particular regard to the fact that needs were demonstrably higher outside of the tiny areas controlled by TFG. Given the tragic delay in responding to the 2011 crisis in Somalia as it worsened in the spring and early summer of 2011, one cannot help but wonder whether, at some level, policy makers thought that some amount of a humanitarian crisis in *al-Shabaab* controlled areas *might actually be a good strategy* to undermine *al-Shabaab*—and hence a good strategy towards longer-term political stability in the Horn of Africa (i.e., a “humanitarian” or “food insecurity” means justified by “political stability” end). Though the evidence on this is circumstantial, it is consistent with earlier policy, and would be one of the few coherent explanations for the poor response until a full-blown famine was declared.

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<sup>6</sup> Actually, humanitarian principles are enshrined in the Good Humanitarian Donor Initiative, to which the US and other OECD donor countries are committed. So these are not just “informal” international norms. But the GDHI doesn’t have the force of a treaty or international law.

In the context of the kinds of crisis likely to be continuously experienced over the coming decade, some kind of policy decision has to be made that allows for policies and interventions to promote stability (and food security) while not victimizing the people most vulnerable to these crises. This will not be an easy task.

*Table 4. Principles for protracted crises?*

Humanitarian principles	Developmental principles	OECD principles for “Engagement in Fragile States”
Humanity	Empowerment	Context-specificity
Impartiality	Participation	Do no harm
Neutrality	Sustainability	State building as central objective
Independence	Self reliance	Prioritize prevention/risk reduction
Universality	Equity	Recognize political, security and development links
	Capacity building	Promote non-discrimination
	Transparency/accountability	

Source: FAO/WFP (2010).

Table 4 summarizes the principles of humanitarian action, principles of development and growth (which tend to presume stability) and principles for international engagement with “fragile states” (which presumes a degree of instability). It is clear that these core principles are not necessarily or frequently easily aligned. Were one to add a column to Table 4 for explicitly dealing with security threats, the dissonance with humanitarian approaches would be even greater.

This suggests several issues for consideration. The first is the need to ensure some amount of “space” for needs-based humanitarian action—certainly response and presumably prevention—in situations of extreme political instability that are distinct from political interventions. The second is the question of ensuring the accountability of all parties in a crisis situation for the consequences of their actions (including slow or inadequate responses). And third, there must be a greater consensus to prevent the instrumental manipulation of humanitarian assistance for non-humanitarian purposes. The hard evidence is that the purpose of the instrumentalizers is rarely met in such circumstances, but the consequences for people caught in crisis are dramatically worsened, and the dampening of humanitarian objectives only legitimizes the theft, diversion and other abuses. These observations alone should convince US policy makers to prioritize the reduction of risk and the protection of human life and dignity in crises over fleeting and often delusionary short-term advantages in crises of both food insecurity and political instability.

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