

Constraints and Complexities of Information and Analysis in Humanitarian Emergencies

Evidence from Somalia

A FEINSTEIN INTERNATIONAL CENTER BRIEF 

Peter Hailey, Jeeyon Janet Kim, Erin McCloskey, Maria Wrabel, and Daniel Maxwell

1. Introduction

With a long history of political instability and conflict, Somalia has made slow but steady progress in state building and stabilization since the 2011–2012 famine. In August 2012, Somalia formed its first formal parliament since 1991, ending the rule of the Transitional Federal Government and installing the Federal Government of Somalia. The Federal Government of Somalia is also reclaiming its place in providing humanitarian assistance, a role that largely fell to the international community in the past few decades.

Decades of insecurity and instability translate into limited state capacity to provide health, nutrition, water, sanitation, and hygiene, and education services, as well as humanitarian assistance to the population. Systemic corruption and state weakness continue to challenge peacebuilding and long-term security. Al-Shabaab, among other actors, continues to cause insecurity and drive conflict. The group's activities continue to destabilize the country. Humanitarian access to many parts of the country remains limited due to Al-Shabaab operations and blockades (ACAPS 2018). In the context of continued insecurity, weak governance, and population movement, several consecutive droughts, poor harvests, rising staple cereal prices, and a severe cholera outbreak set the stage for the potential recurrence of famine in 2017.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' 2018 Humanitarian Needs

Overview estimated that more than 6.2 million people, over half of the population, were in need of humanitarian assistance at the beginning of 2018 (UNOCHA 2018). Approximately 2.1 million people, or almost 20 percent of the population, were internally displaced. At 17.4 percent, the global acute malnutrition rates continued to be above emergency thresholds, with 22 percent of malnourished children suffering from severe acute malnutrition. According to the February 2018 Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit (FSNAU) Food Security Outlook, the October–December 2017 rainy season was better than anticipated; nevertheless, predicted poor rains in 2018 mean that poor households, particularly pastoralists, could face severe food insecurity between March and June (FSNAU 2018). However that did not come to pass, as better than average rains ensued.

1.1 Integrated Phase Classification analysis in Somalia

In the 2000s, FSNAU developed the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) in Somalia to facilitate a standardized scale for decision-making using several types of data, thus providing the foundation for technical consensus and a common language to classify food insecurity crises. IPC analysis classifies food insecurity as minimal, stressed, crisis, emergency, or famine based on thresholds of four indicators: the prevalence of food insecurity, the prevalence of malnutrition, livelihoods assets and

coping strategies, and crude mortality (IPC Partners 2012).

2. Challenges and constraints of food security analysis in Somalia

Since its inception in Somalia, IPC analysis has made significant gains in its focus, its rigor, and its ability to accurately portray the severity of crisis. While such progress has been made, several key constraints and challenges emerged from this study.

2.1 Somalia-specific issues

1. One dominant actor: FSNAU and its partners

Somalia is unique in that a single actor dominates food security and nutrition analysis—the Somalia Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit. FSNAU leads the collection of information and acts as the principal analyst of that information. Concerns about data quality, coverage, completeness, and timeliness have ultimately led—in Somalia and elsewhere—to consolidated data collection processes that rely less on multiple sources of information and partnership and have become more centralized, with hierarchical control of the process. The bulk of the information and much of the core analysis is done by FSNAU, not the other technical stakeholders in the IPC process. NGOs and other actors that produce additional information note that their information is not incorporated into the process, and indeed many protest that their voices and experience—although on paper are represented in the process—are actually little heard in the analysis. This centralization of all steps of the IPC process is increasingly challenged by donors, agencies, and particularly the government of Somalia, as no longer being valid.

The combined challenge going forward for FSNAU is to develop stronger partnerships with the government and address the demands for transparency, while ensuring the quality and independence of the analysis. Fulfilling all three demands completely will be very difficult. Ironically the present situation, where independence and quality of the analysis ap-

pear to dominate over transparency and partnership, seems to be resulting in stakeholders expressing more doubts about the independence and quality of the analysis.

2. A more representative and capable government of Somalia

The Federal Government of Somalia and the six Federal Member States today have functioning technical ministries in many areas that deal with questions of food security analysis and early warning, as well as with prevention, preparedness, and response. Donors and many other stakeholders are heavily invested in the success of the current government and tend to insist that the government must, at a minimum, play a greater role in information and analysis. Yet, working out exactly how this will happen remains very much a work in progress.

Despite the various criticisms raised about FSNAU above, many stakeholders still trust FSNAU analysis and express fears about the independence of the analysis if FSNAU (or the processes it has managed) is taken over by government. Some in the international community fear that if strong protections are not put in place, FSNAU would be “gobbled up” by government, undermining the independence and integrity of the analysis. On the other hand, government respondents are very clear that food security analysis is a both a sovereign right and a responsibility, and they are increasingly impatient with external control over the process.

2.2 Technical and coordination challenges

1. Uses and purpose of IPC analysis in Somalia

The IPC is meant to offer an overview of the situation. It is not mandated to present operational recommendations. Donor respondents state that while they want agencies to use the IPC to justify where to intervene, it is insufficient as the only means of providing information to present in a proposal. However, the population numbers “in need” generated by the IPC are often used for planning purposes for national level targets for food distributions and expected

nutrition caseloads. IPC classifications are also used to prioritize geographic areas for programming.

Respondents also expressed concerns that the timing of the major analytical products is not fully in sync with the humanitarian response planning process. There are opportunities for the IPC processes to be better linked with that of the Humanitarian Response Plan process to ensure analyses that are more coherent and to avoid confusion about assessed needs and targeting.

2. Capacity constraints among partners

Limited technical and operational capacity and the high turnover of staff continue to impede national, international, and governmental partners' ability to fully engage in the IPC process. Moreover, partners' engagement with all steps of the FSNAU process requires resources that are often not budgeted, and time commitments to FSNAU are judged against the opportunity costs of the partner's other interventions. Also, partners have few technically trained personnel, resulting in partners' limited understanding of the process and lack of technical capacity. This in turn limits their ability to genuinely engage in the discussion to influence the technical consensus and final phase classification. Some partners (with the exception of UN agencies) feel ambiguous about the IPC process and therefore limit the time and resources that they are willing to invest in data planning, collection, and analysis.

3. Data planning and collection

Each year, there are limited changes to the data plan, informed largely by physical accessibility or funding constraints. After FSNAU creates the data plan, government, national, and international partners request and receive contributions of resources to support the planned surveys. While national, UN, and international NGOs plan and carry out their own assessments for localized situational analyses and operational purposes, such data are rarely incorporated into the IPC analysis. With the exception of few cases, FSNAU plans, collects, and analyzes the majority of the data used for the IPC analysis.

Partners voiced that ample opportunities exist to make the data planning process more participatory and collaborative. FSNAU has voiced concerns over sample sizes used by NGOs and the overall quality of the data collected in such assessments. Coordination with the Food Security and Nutrition Cluster can be improved to identify and employ local and national partners fill in data gaps, especially in areas deemed inaccessible for FSNAU.

4. Analytical processes

Data for the IPC process are first analyzed in decentralized regional workshops in Somaliland and Mogadishu. All stakeholders are invited to participate in the regional workshops where they hold back-and-forth discussions about indicators and data and come to an agreement about the IPC designations. These regional workshops are perceived to be fairly inclusive, but questions remain about their membership and the capacity of the many partners to fully understand and, in turn, genuinely participate in the complex analytical process. A national-level workshop is subsequently held in Nairobi where FSNAU and Famine Early Warning Systems Network-Somalia (FEWS NET-Somalia) are responsible for the final IPC phase determination. Respondents perceived this phase classification as a closed room "secret" process, with decisions made sometimes only 24 or 48 hours before the final announcement. Stakeholders are not clear about what data are included in the analysis and how the final classifications are determined by FSNAU and FEWS NET.

Some efforts have been made to ensure greater transparency in the data collection and analytical process. The online dashboard maintained by FSNAU allows partners to access the data. Nutrition assessment protocols and data generated by FSNAU are externally validated by the Nutrition Cluster's Assessment and Information Management Technical Working Group and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Despite these efforts, the overwhelming perception continues to be that the IPC analysis process lacks "data transparency." Respondents noted that data are often not shared in a timely manner. Analysts do not have sufficient time to assess the information and in turn, partners cannot effectively question the outputs prior to

the analysis workshop and the pre-briefing session before the “Oscars moment” of the technical release. This seeming lack of transparency at the end leads to suspicion and doubt of the final classification, with some respondents going so far as to say that they are beginning to have doubts about outputs. While respondents acknowledge that recent efforts have been made to increase transparency and time for consultation on each step, dissatisfaction with the processes remains.

5. Data messaging and linkage to response

Respondents noted the critical importance of getting the post-analysis IPC communication strategy right, and striking the right balance between “dry facts” and “messaging.” Many noted after the most recent analysis that the audience had a difficult time fully understanding the technically dense nature of the IPC presentations. In particular, the differences between phase classifications and the different indicators and the cut-offs required for each phase were poorly understood by the non-technical audience.

A “common” message is critical to ensure timely action. Sometimes, different messages coming from the technical analysts and operational agencies create confusion. Without the common message, especially in cases of Phase 4 and Phase 5 classifications, donors do not have the appetite for funding and there is no forward momentum for humanitarian funding. The sense is that FSNAU is not keen to synchronize communication messages prior to the press release; some believe that this reluctance comes from FSNAU being inflexible to the feedback of other stakeholders.

6. Data challenges

Several challenges relate specifically to data and data collection. These include the timing of data collection, missing data, and data quality.

Timing. Due to the large volume of information that is required and the centralized role FSNAU plays in the process, IPC data are collected in waves that span seasons. The data incorporated into the analysis actually may represent significantly different seasons and not be representative of the current situation.

Moreover, between seasons, there is no comprehensive situation assessment. The highly changeable situation in Somalia means that some are frustrated about not having more frequent analyses of the situation.

Missing information. Information is often missing from the analysis. Security remains a key constraint to data completeness and representativeness. Access issues can lead to extrapolation of data, which has many weaknesses, especially with changing security and displacement in Somalia. This issue is not unique to Somalia. A lack of access leads to an overconcentration of surveys in accessible areas and areas covered by international partners. Several areas have not been surveyed for five or six years due to accessibility issues. A lack of accessibility is particularly problematic for collection of nutrition and mortality data, which is logistically demanding and requires direct access to beneficiaries for the anthropometric measurements required for nutrition’s strict case definitions.

A number of respondents are unclear about how the IPC analysis framework considers data that are not strictly related to food security, prevalence of acute under-nutrition, and mortality. Respondents also noted that several key factors affecting the humanitarian situation are missing from the IPC analysis process. The inclusion of underlying issues—in particular, conflict, clan issues/marginalization, and gender—is weak in the analysis as there is no guidance or protocol within IPC for how best to collect, analyze, or include them.

Furthermore, the acquisition, use, and interpretation of humanitarian assistance information in the IPC analysis remain a concern. Respondents noted limited (timely) data sharing by agencies, lack of clarity and guidance on how to assess humanitarian assistance as a contributing factor in the analysis, and potential reliability issues. Finally, there are ongoing concerns about the population and displacement numbers used by FSNAU.

Data quality. Given the cost and operational constraints, follow-up independent verification surveys are often not performed during the IPC process. Moreover, in inaccessible areas, FSNAU has estab-

lished a methodology of making telephone calls to conduct key-informant interviews. While there is heavy reliance on such *qualitative* information collected from inaccessible areas, and at times such information is turned into quantitative IPC outputs, challenges remain with the rigorous analysis and inclusion of such qualitative information in the IPC framework.

7. Hotspots and early warning

Many respondents complain that Somalia does not have a true early warning system. There are certainly many early warning mechanisms: FEWS NET has long operated in Somalia, in close collaboration with FSNAU. FSNAU itself developed the “dashboard” as an attempt to corral forward-looking indicators into a single data “signal” that would indicate a worsening situation. However, many stakeholders feel that IPC’s standard practice—a current-status assessment and a projection that gives estimated conditions three to six months out—is not adequate for planning or early intervention purposes. Lessons learned from the 2011 famine suggest that a tool is needed to provide a more regular snapshot of the situation and that would be connected to triggers for decision making and easier to understand by decision-making bodies such as the UN Humanitarian Country Team.

8. Access, independence of the analysis, and managing the influences

At this moment, famine is not a “forbidden” word with the government of Somalia. First, famine is not an unusual experience in Somalia, and second, in the words of one respondent, drought and other “natural” hazards play a large role, and the man-made role in the threat of famine is largely attributed to Al-Shabaab and other non-state actors, making the government less fearful of the term.

Nevertheless, there are threats to the independence of the analysis. Main concerns regarding influences on the outcomes of the analysis therefore can be summarized as limitations on access, the heavy reliance on a few key informants to determine current status in areas of limited access, agency agendas, and the hidden influence of clans. The main concerns regarding trust in the outcomes of the analysis have

to do with the perceived lack of transparency in the process and the fact that the “consensus” outcome is largely determined by one party in the process with few cross checks. But overall, there are fewer concerns expressed about influences on the analysis in Somalia than in other case study countries. However, many respondents express concern about the independence of the process if controlled by the government, even while recognizing that the government must play an increasing role.

3. Conclusions and lessons learned

Several conclusions can be drawn from this case. These fall largely into the categories of the transparency of the process and trust in the results, the changing role of the government (both Federal Government of Somalia and Federal Member States), and the changing nature of the partnership among all the actors engaged in food security analysis in Somalia. These are, to some degree, overlapping concerns.

3.1 Positioning FSNAU

The difficulties of conducting regular, high-quality, and nearly country-wide assessments cannot be underestimated and, much to its credit, FSNAU has consistently produced a high-quality and independent product. Producing good quality analysis over a long time in a complicated environment leaves little time to reflect on assumptions about the optimum way to collect and analyze food security, nutrition, and mortality data. The proliferation of actors in food security and nutrition analysis as well as the many innovations in the collection and analysis of data is an opportunity to be seized by FSNAU if it wishes to take the lead in convening, coordinating, and testing the next generation of food security analysis.

3.2 Trust and transparency of the results

Technically, most respondents trust the process, but many complain that it is not transparent and inclusive. Technical, transparency, and inclusion improvements could be made, but improvements to date are

seen as far too much under the control of one actor. This is slowly eroding the high level of trust that FSNAU enjoys. The discussions on greater transparency and inclusivity in the process are balanced by a shared desire to maintain trust in the quality and independence of the process: If the balance is not perceived to be right, trust in the system is eroded. This dilemma applies to the relationship between FSNAU and other stakeholders, but is a particular focus in the conversation about how the Somali government increasingly takes responsibility for food security and nutrition analysis.

3.3 Towards a partnership for analysis and action

The food security and nutrition analysis/early warning space in Somalia includes many actors, and the number is growing. While FSNAU has been the premier institution for food security analysis for over two decades, this is increasingly less the case. The new phase of the FSNAU project offers many opportunities to strengthen its convening and coordination role, based on stakeholders' trust in its independence. Among government and development stakeholders, FSNAU remains a trusted interlocutor. Therefore, FSNAU is in a unique position to learn and guide this process in such a way that all its objectives of quality, independence, transparency, and inclusivity are balanced and maintained as part of a process towards increasing the leadership and accountability of the Somali government.

4. Recommendations

Resulting recommendations can be broken down into those that relate to the governance of the process and those that relate to the technical quality of the data and the analysis.

4.1 Governance recommendations

1. Inclusivity and partnership

There may be fears about the independence and quality of the analysis if FSNAU were to become a government project, but perhaps the best way to protect against that is to build an analysis system

that ensures that all voices—FSNAU, government departments, UN agencies, as well as international and local NGOs—are heard in all stages of planning, data collection, analysis, and messaging.

2. Transparency

Humanitarian data—irrespective of who collects and analyzes it and irrespective of who is paying for it—should be treated as a “public good.” Data should be made available for analyses and used for planning purposes. This approach may complicate managing a central “message” coming out of the analysis but it also ensures the inclusion of multiple perspectives during analyses.

3. Capacity building

Investments in government capacity building and resources to support the necessary administrative, coordination, leadership, and accountability structures are necessary to enable full participation in the IPC process.

4.2 Technical recommendations

1. Participatory review of timing of FSNAU analysis

Greater flexibility in the timing of data collection is needed to conduct analyses between bi-annual seasonal assessments. This approach has resource implications but potentially makes the analysis more relevant in influencing the Humanitarian Needs Overview, in the timing of early action, and in the focus on contextual analysis in Somalia.

2. Strategic approach to increase participation and ownership

If all stakeholders agree that increasing participation in, transparency of, and ownership in food security and nutrition analysis are important, then a joint budgeted plan—facilitated by FSNAU, government, and clusters—is required. Moreover, if data are to be treated as public goods, the protocol for sharing data among partners needs to be clarified prior to the technical release of an analysis. The process should also aim to facilitate an agreement on a common message that does not modify the technical outcome

while at the same time communicates a message that will influence operational decision-making, including funding decisions. Finally, more time should be given between pre-briefing and release to ensure that all stakeholders are adequately briefed and brought up to speed on the latest release and its limitations and qualifiers.

3. Greater accuracy in reporting

Access constraints and/or reliability of the data should be made clearer on the IPC maps generated, for both acute food insecurity and nutrition. Surveys that do not have representative clusters in all parts of the administrative or livelihood zone should make this clear on the map for which the data is representative. Representing minority views in final messaging would make reporting more transparent.

4. Linking to broader trends

Greater effort should be made to investigate emerging evidence on unexpected patterns of under-nutrition, mortality, and food security. This will require more emphasis on causal and aggravating factors for nutrition. While a focus on food security and drought remain critical in Somalia, other issues—health, water, security, marginalization, and gender—play a big role as well.

5. Synthesis

Somalia and the FSNAU are the birthplace of IPC analysis, and other notable innovations food security information have been instituted in Somalia as well. There is little doubt, for instance, that the pre-famine warning in early 2017 mobilized adequate resources early enough to prevent the recurrence of the famine of 2011. Somalia is unique in that one institution has dominated in leading the process and because that institution was, for many years, outside of government control or leadership. But now, both Somalia

and the agencies engaged in data collection and analysis face new challenges: challenges of leadership and partnership, as well as technical capacity and adaptation. This case study has found fewer instances of overt influence over the analysis process than other cases, but many worries about the future independence of the analysis and ownership of the process. While strengthening technical capacity is one means of ensuring independence, building trust and collaboration among various partners—government, UN, and civil society, both international and local—is likely to be the challenge for the future.

6. Methodological note

The study was comprised of a background desk review, key informant interviews, and a series of private meetings with key stakeholders to test initial findings. The team conducted 46 interviews with 62 informants. This brief summarizes the findings for IPC analysis in Somalia and lays out a condensed version of the main report, which can be found at fic.tufts.edu and whatworks.co.ke.

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