Planning From the Future

Component 2. The Contemporary Humanitarian Landscape:
Malaise, Blockages and Game Changers

Case Study:
The Somalia Famine of 2011–12

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<td>FSNAU</td>
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<td>IDP</td>
<td>Internally Displaced Populations</td>
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<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development</td>
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<td>OIC</td>
<td>Organization for Islamic Cooperation</td>
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<td>SNA</td>
<td>Somali National Army</td>
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<td>SRCS</td>
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<td>TFG</td>
<td>Transitional Federal Government</td>
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Planning from the Future—the Project

Kings College (London), The Humanitarian Policy Group at the Overseas Development Institute (HPG/ODI) in London and the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University (FIC) are partnering on a 15-month research project on “Planning From the Future: Crisis, Challenge, Change in Humanitarian Action.” The research looks at the past, present and future of humanitarian action:

- HPG leads the analysis of the blockages in the past and how these have led to changes in the humanitarian architecture (Component 1).
- FIC identifies the key blockages and game changers in the humanitarian landscape today (Component 2)—and at urgent measures to reform it that could immediately be taken (Component 3).
- Kings College looks at the future and asks whether improvements contemplated today will be adequate to meet the growing vulnerabilities, dimensions and dynamics of humanitarian crises in the longer-term (Component 4).
- The three partners will then come together to provide a synthesis of their findings and recommendations in a final report to be issued in early 2016 (Component 5).

Component 2—The Humanitarian Landscape Today

Despite impressive growth, institutionalization and professionalization, the humanitarian system is facing an existential crisis. While time-tested tools, funds and capacities are readily available, the system has succumbed to a widespread malaise and is not delivering. Recent crises from Afghanistan to Somalia, Haiti, Sri Lanka and Pakistan as well as current emergencies—Syria, South Sudan, Central African Republic, among other less visible crises, question the very foundations of humanitarianism and of the galaxy of institutions that pursue humanitarian goals. The intractable nature of many crises and the instrumental use of humanitarian action to cover up for political failures of the so-called international community are leading to a growing realization that the humanitarian system as presently constituted is not fit for purpose—and growing dissonance about what the purpose should be.

As part of component 2, FIC is producing a series of papers that capitalize on recent or ongoing research. These include Case Studies that will analyze blockages and game changers affecting humanitarian action in recent crises—and what these crises tell us about the state of the humanitarian enterprise. FIC will also be preparing Background Papers on emerging or under-researched policy, operational or systemic issues that need to be better understood because of how they affect the changing humanitarian landscape.
Introduction to Case Study: The Somalia Famine of 2011

The Somalia famine of 2011 was the first instance of actual famine in nearly a decade, and by far the worst famine of the 21st Century. In retrospect the disaster, while it might not have been entirely preventable, should never have reached the proportions of scale of a famine. It was underpinned by a drought and production failure in the Greater Horn of Africa (GHA)—neither of which was new or particularly difficult to foresee. It was also underpinned by a market failure—and a global spike in the price of food. Somalia is an import dependent country even in good agricultural years; 2010-11 was a particularly bad year that unfortunately coincided with a bad year in global markets. This drastically reduced people's purchasing power at a time when the production failure forced more people to depend on markets for access to adequate food. But fundamentally, the famine developed as the result not only of these factors, but also from the lack of an adequate preventive response from either Somali authorities or the international humanitarian community. The factors that led to this response failure revolved primarily around the fact that a “terrorist” or proscribed group controlled much of the affected area, and counter-terrorism legal constraints outweighed humanitarian concerns in policy considerations—meaning that both access and funding were extremely constrained up to the point that an outright famine was declared.

In the glare of media attention that followed the declaration, ways were quickly found to provide humanitarian exemptions to counter-terrorism restrictions, and a large-scale response was quickly mounted. Given that a number of contemporary humanitarian emergencies occur in contexts where armed non-state actors (whether officially labeled “terrorist” or not) control both geography and human populations, the Somalia famine of 2011 offers valuable lessons about humanitarian operations in the context of the “war on terror” and balancing the imperatives of security concerns with the humanitarian imperative; about the link between early warning and prevention/response; about the failure of response and collective responsibilities for that failure; about how conflict- and crisis-affected people cope in the absence of external humanitarian assistance; and about the rapid emergence of humanitarian organizations that arise not from the Western, Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) funded, UN-led humanitarian system, but from Middle Eastern and Islamic donors and agencies. A number of other key game changers and blockages to humanitarian action in the 21st Century emerge as well.

This case study report is based on data and findings from an earlier Feinstein International Center study, “Lessons Learned from the Somalia Famine,” funded by The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance.¹

The case study is structured as follows. The first section is a brief introduction to Somalia and an overview of the famine of 2011. The second section is a brief stakeholder analysis,
noting the major actors in the crisis. This includes the main belligerents in the conflict in Somalia at the time of the famine; the main governmental and non-state actors; the humanitarian actors—both Western and non-Western; and the roles played by communities caught in the crisis, including the business community and the diaspora. The third section is the analysis of the main game changers and blockages that grows out of the famine and the response. These include the “war on terror” and counter-terror measures; the “remote management” practices that arose in Somalia; new analytical and programmatic approaches; the role of the diaspora and other “first-responders in the absence of an international humanitarian response; the rapid emergence of non-Western humanitarian actors in the response; the rise of the “resilience” discourse and resilience programming in the aftermath of the crisis; the internal causes of the crisis—many of which were not readily apparent to external analysts; the repeated failure to act on early warning information; and the malaise that characterized much of the Western humanitarian response both during and after the famine. The final section presents the main lessons learned and the implications for future humanitarian action.

Background

In 2011-2012, an estimated 13 million people were affected by the food security crisis in the Horn of Africa. Somalia was the hardest hit country, with agro-pastoralist, riverine, and displaced populations in the South and South Central parts of the country the most affected. Back-to-back failure of rains gave rise to a widespread shortage of water, and in turn, parts of Somalia suffered from the worst annual crop production seen in seventeen years, along with loss of grazing for livestock. In combination with high global food prices, record levels of cereal prices were reached, and livestock and wage prices plummeted. As a result, by July of 2011, more than half of the country’s population was affected by the crisis. Nearly three quarter of a million people were famine-affected, over three million people were in immediate need of assistance, and four million were in crisis. The United Nations (UN) declared the famine on July 20, 2011—the first actual incidence of famine in nearly a decade, and the first time in history that a famine had been declared in real time using a widely accepted set of technical criteria and based on real-time evidence.\(^2\) The famine in Somalia is estimated to have led to 258,000 deaths between October 2010 and April 2012, a figure which includes 133,000 children under the age of five.\(^3\) Causes of these deaths were not recorded but likely culprits were opportunistic diseases (measles or respiratory infections) in children rendered vulnerable by malnutrition.

It is important to note the multiple causes of the Somalia famine. It was not simply the result of \textit{La Niña}-related drought in the Horn of Africa. The high price of food in Somalia in the run-up to the famine, and the fighting between the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) /African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) and Al-Shabaab all contributed to
deteriorating conditions. These triggering factors were underpinned by long-standing environmental degradation, an underlying livelihoods crisis, and the absence of a functioning central state since the collapse of the Siad Barre regime in 1991. Moreover, the absence of the World Food Programme (WFP) and other major food aid actors from the affected area, the actions of Al-Shabaab, and the counter-terrorism restrictions further complicated the situation.

While the crisis was foreseen, little additional action was taken to prevent or mitigate the crisis. Indeed it was not until the famine was declared that any kind of large-scale international response began to ramp up. Early warning (EW) information was generally considered “accurate and timely.” Between September 2010 and July 2011, FEWSNET and FSNAU issued 16 special bulletins or other early warning flashes. They noted the severity of the short season (deyr) rain failure, becoming more specific and more alarming over time. The critical issue was not the quality of the information and the available analysis but rather the poor response that ensued.

While there have been various reasons put forward for this “early warning/late response” phenomenon over the years, the overriding consideration in Somalia in 2011 was the fact that Al-Shabaab, an Islamist insurgent group that had been labeled a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the US and other Western donor countries, controlled most of the affected areas. There were strong counter-terrorism policies in limited humanitarian action—both through restricted access and restricted funding. Al Shabaab and counter-terrorism restrictions were not the only constraints, however, as these factors were not present in Ethiopia and Kenya, where response was also late. Donors were leery of inadvertently supporting Al-Shabaab, and not comfortable planning on the basis of probabilistic forecasts (although this was neither new nor different from previous crises in the GHA). Given this, there was also limited advocacy by the UN and NGOs. Moreover, the lack of contingency planning and response analysis given the absence of major food aid agencies were major hurdles, which were in turn associated with poor leadership within the humanitarian system.

Limited capacity for needs assessment, the lack of effective contingency planning, institutional constraints, and the influence of counter-terrorism measures were major constraints to rapid response in the crisis of 2011-2012 in the horn of Africa. All contributed to a high degree of risk aversion by both donors and agencies.

**Stakeholder Analysis**

There were a number of stakeholders of key actors in the run-up to and the reasons behind the famine. These included the belligerents in the conflict (including internal, external and regional actors), the major humanitarian actors (Western and non-Western), and other Somali actors (including the business community, clans and diaspora groups)
Conflict actors

Armed actors in the conflict included the fledgling TFG and its army, the Somali National Army (SNA). In fact, during much of its erstwhile rule, the TFG controlled little territory and exerted little political control. It was made up of the combination of some of the militia leaders and “warlords” from an earlier era, some of the leaders of the previous Islamic Courts Union (UIC) and some professionals and technocrats. But the army was weak and not well organized, and the TFG relied more heavily on allied but independent militias and on AMISOM.

There were several Islamist insurgent groups in Somalia, some of which emerged out of the UIC government (such as Al-Shabaab) and some of whom had existed prior to that era. Al-Shabaab was the most radical faction to emerge out of the collapse of the UIC regime, and rapidly grew from a relatively tiny group in 2006-07 to control most of South Central Somalia by 2010. They were declared to be a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the US in 2008, with other Western countries following suit in 2009 and 2010. Al-Shabaab officially swore its allegiance to Al Qaeda in 2011. There were a number of other regional or clan-based militias that still existed in Somalia by 2010-2011, which were sometimes aligned with the TFG/AMISOM, sometimes with Al-Shabaab, and sometimes operated independently of the two main belligerents. Numerous other militias existed, with links to clans, warlords, private businessmen and other interests. Sometimes these were aligned with the TFG, sometimes with Al Shabaab, and sometimes with external actors like Kenya or Ethiopia.

AMISOM grew out of the worries that Islamist terrorist groups (principally Al-Shabaab) in Somalia presented a threat to stability in the Horn of Africa. It was set up in 2007 in the aftermath of the Ethiopian invasion and the collapse of the UIC regime, and included “peace keeping” troops from a number of other countries in the region, principally Uganda, Djibouti and Burundi. Ethiopia and Kenya subsequently joined AMISOM but both had their own interests in Somalia, and their own alliances with Somali militias. Ethiopia has invaded in 2006, and maintained links with local militias in the border area. Kenya invaded in 2011, and eventually became part of AMISOM. The US and other Western countries provided support for AMISOM, and also maintained their own capabilities in Somalia—including significant drone warfare capacity based in Djibouti. Given Eritrea’s enmity with Ethiopia, Eritrea provided significant military support to Al-Shabaab, even though the regime in Asmara was not Islamist and did not particularly have Islamic sympathies.

Thus the conflict in Somalia included numerous local groups with local agendas, it included a weak central government battling against a surprisingly strong Islamic insurgency that had both homegrown and foreign elements. It included a distinctly non-neutral peacekeeping force and it embodied several different regional rivals competing for dominance in the Horn of Africa. While Somalia had been in various states of conflict since
the civil war that led to the overthrow of the Siad Barre regime and the collapse of the central state in 1991, the period of 2007-2011 marked a relatively high water mark in the intensity and scale of the conflict. The UN did not have peacekeeping troops on the ground, but the UN and major Western donors were all aligned with and supportive of the TFG.

**Humanitarian Actors**

For years—at least since the Ogaden refugee crisis in the late 1970s, and especially since the civil war that overthrew the Siad Barre regime in 1991, there has been a large-scale, Western humanitarian presence in Somalia. This has been led by the UN, mostly funded by OECD/DAC affiliated donors, and includes UN operational agencies, International and national NGOs, and the Red Cross—ICRC, IFRC affiliates and the Somali Red Crescent Society (SRCS). Numerous Somali national NGOs emerged during and after the UN Missions to Somalia (UNISOM) in the 1990s—some of which went on to become firmly established as a component of the humanitarian community, others that focused more on development or other issues. And there was a long tradition of Islamic and Middle Eastern agencies working in Somalia as well, but mostly working in other endeavors—mosque building, education and health—that quickly rose to the demand of responding to the worsening crisis in 2011. These agencies are analyzed in greater detail below.

**Other Key Somali Stakeholders**

There were clearly many Somali constituencies in the 2011 famine. The epicenter of the famine included the riverine and inter-riverine areas of South Central Somalia—primarily Bay, Bakool, and Lower and Middle Shabelle regions—with surrounding areas affected by the crisis but not the same extent. These four regions included not only the biggest internally displaced people (IDP) populations, but also some of the more marginalized clans in Somalia, including the Rahanweyn clans that inhabit much of Bay and Bakool regions, and Somali Bantu groups in the riverine areas of Lower and Middle Shabelle. These groups were also the hardest hit by the 1991-92 famine. Nearly all of Somali society is organized into clans, and the differing strength of these clans—politically, economically, educationally, and in terms of their links to the diaspora—played a major role in the way in which they were affected by the famine. Historically, the Rahanweyn and particularly the Somali Bantu have been among the more marginalized groups—although there is a good deal of internal differences within these groups as well—so in many ways, it was predictable that they would again be among the most hard hit groups. Research on the famine has shown that clans with stronger links to urban business communities and the diaspora were less severely harmed by the famine.

In much of South Central Somalia, international humanitarian agencies were unable to operate in the run-up to the famine in 2010 and early 2011, meaning that affected communities had to rely on their own resources and their own social networks to deal with
the rapidly worsening situation. In this context, many groups arose from the local business community to help, as did diaspora groups.\textsuperscript{12}

**Major Themes Emerging from the Famine**

Component 2 of “Planning from the Future” is organized around the notion of “game changers” and “blockages.” “Game changers” here refers to major factors that emerged from the crisis or were relatively new—factors to which the international humanitarian community is either unaccustomed or ill-prepared to deal with, or both—that underpin or trigger a crisis, or emerge in the response to the crisis. “Blockages” is a slightly subtler concept—it can refer to things that are blocking humanitarian action in a given context, but it can refer to longer-standing problems that have yet to be dealt with—and which in some manner significantly shape either the crisis or the response. The following are the main factors that fall into those categories, but as will be noted, some of the factors that emerge from an analysis of the Somalia famine contain elements of both game changers and blockages.

**“War on Terror” and Counter-Terrorism Constraints**

In 2008, Al-Shabaab was labeled as a “specially designated global terrorist” group by the US State Department. Many other governments quickly followed suit, as did the UN Security Council.\textsuperscript{13} Noting the sanctions that followed this, and the historical role of the UN in the conflict, Al-Shabaab viewed the humanitarian arm of the UN and other humanitarian actors as being “political”—i.e., not impartial.\textsuperscript{14}

With a long-standing antipathy towards food aid, Al-Shabaab believed that food aid was being “dumped” in Somalia, wrecking Somali markets and undermining self-reliance. Al-Shabaab held particular disdain towards WFP, blaming it for using food that was spoiled or expired.\textsuperscript{15} Al-Shabaab also disagreed with many agencies’ approaches, namely efforts to empower women, which they regarded as anti-Islam. Aid agencies were also suspected of being a part of Western intelligence networks.\textsuperscript{16}

In January 2010, WFP suspended its operations in South Central Somalia because of both security threats and on-going problems with food aid diversion and the legal threat this was causing. WFP was subsequently expelled by Al-Shabaab. It accused WFP of undermining local production and having “covert” political motives.\textsuperscript{17} Ironically, Western counter-terrorism policy converged with Al-Shabaab’s interests in removing food aid from areas controlled by Al-Shabaab. Nearly all food assistance support to South Central Somalia ceased. Much of 2010 saw good rainfall and good local production, so the impact of WFP’s absence was somewhat blunted for a time. In mid-2011, as the extent of the food security crisis became clear, Al-Shabaab announced that any group, whether “Muslims or non-Muslims” could provide assistance to the civilians as long as such groups had “no hidden
However, when WFP tried to re-enter South Central Somalia, Al-Shabaab reasserted their ban.

Al-Shabaab acknowledged that the drought was a problem and created a “drought committee” in 2010. It was established to demonstrate its awareness of the risk of drought and to foster support for its decision to expel Western agencies. However, Al-Shabaab dismissed the UN famine declaration as “utter nonsense, 100% baseless and sheer propaganda.”

At the same time, its efforts to limit humanitarian access were touted as part of its “propaganda campaign against the West” and reflected Al-Shabaab’s deeply held suspicion of aid agencies as spies or as the enemies’ conspirators. Finally, on November 28, 2011, Al-Shabaab’s Office for Supervising the Affairs of Foreign Agencies expelled most UN agencies and other major international organizations citing “misconduct” and “illicit activities”.

While some permits were granted to agencies to work in areas under Al-Shabaab’s control, access was granted only through direct negotiation. Agencies were required to complete registration forms and, allegedly, to pay fees and sign off on other documentation that laid out general conditions for access, including pledges not to proselytize. There were various missed opportunities for improved negotiation of humanitarian access during the crisis; leaders within the humanitarian community could have engaged with Al-Shabaab about access without undermining counter-terrorism objectives, and agencies could have collaborated and shared information to stand united in their negotiations for access. It is important to note, however, that many within the humanitarian community strongly contest these points.

The Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) was the entity responsible for enforcing US sanctions. In 2010 and 2011, it was pushing a very hard line on Somalia, which had a chilling effect on the willingness of US agencies (and to some degree, other agencies and US citizens working in other agencies) to engage in Somalia. Several agencies noted that they had the contacts and the capacity to work in South Central Somalia in early 2011, but were very worried about the possible legal consequences.

Such legal ambiguity had an astonishing impact on the response in Somalia. US contribution to humanitarian response in Somalia plummeted from $237 million in fiscal year 2008 to less than $100 million in 2009, to less than $30 million in 2010. Until famine was declared, almost no US funding was renewed for South Central Somalia after contracts expired in October 2010. Other donors continued their support but they were relatively low and were fraught with their own set of constraints.

Throughout this time, US officials argued that the constraints to humanitarian access were Al-Shabaab’s policies and actions, not counter-terrorism law in the US or other donor
countries. They also gave verbal assurances that they would not punish agencies for small amounts that went astray and could not be accounted for.\(^27\) Both USAID and the State Department issued verbal assurances that the intent was not to prosecute humanitarian agencies and indeed no aid worker has ever been charged in the US with a crime for aid being diverted in Somalia. However, neither the Departments of Treasury nor Justice would confirm USAID’s assurances and no government agencies were willing to provide clear, written assurances. Humanitarian Agency lawyers believed that the laws were clear and the consequences for breaking them severe; verbal assurances offered little protection to agency staff that might be accused of abetting terrorists. There were also reputational risks. An agency’s reputation could be tarnished with accusations of “helping terrorists” with global ramifications. The interpretation of such “constructive ambiguous” policies played out while the crisis worsened. The opportunity to mitigate the crisis was missed.\(^28\) In this context, many agencies simply closed down operations or maintained only a minimal presence despite having some capacity and at least some degree of access.

The constraints imposed by counter-terror measures were further exacerbated by the presence on a non-neutral external peace keeping force in Somalia. Although the AMISOM force was specifically mandated by the African Union, it had UN support and the financial backing of a number of Western governments, and its mandate was not about keeping peace \textit{per se}. The first item on its mandate states its objective is to “Take all necessary measures, as appropriate, and in coordination with the Somalia National Defense and Public Safety Institutions, to reduce the threat posed by Al-Shabaab and other armed opposition groups.”\(^29\) While the mixing of security, political and humanitarian mandates in UN or regional interventions in humanitarian crises is not new, it reached new heights in the Somalia conflict and famine, and the harmful impacts on the humanitarian effort were unprecedented.

**Remote Management**

Remote management is “the practice of withdrawing international (or other at-risk staff) while transferring increased programming responsibilities to local staff or local partner organizations.”\(^30\) Decision-making authority is transferred \textit{outside} the area of operation in an effort to adapt to insecurity and lack of access. It was the approach of choice during the crisis and a critical factor in the delayed nature of the response. The fear that remote management increases risks of diversion or misuse of aid and makes monitoring more difficult, ultimately led to doubts on the part of donors about accountability.\(^31\)

Remote management began as a way to maintain programming presence in highly insecure areas.\(^32\) Humanitarian staff—particularly senior management—have been withdrawing from Somalia since the 1990s. The practice had reached extreme levels in Somalia by the time of the famine, with almost no international staff anywhere in South Central Somalia, and with virtually all the on-the-ground implementation done by local organizations—
many of whom had head offices in Nairobi as well. But the practice was by no means new, nor particularly restricted to Somalia. By the time of the famine, Somalia was one of the most dangerous places in the world for humanitarian aid workers. Fewer and fewer senior managers of humanitarian operations were based in Somalia since the withdrawal of UNOSOM II. Responsibility for on-the-ground operations was delegated to junior staff and increasingly outsourced to local partner organizations. There was not only increasing physical distance between humanitarian decision-makers and the affected communities, but also a growing remoteness in psychological and emotional terms—distinctly reducing the sense of solidarity that had captured the humanitarian spirit in an earlier age.

Remote management increased the risk of diversion. And it also made adherence to some humanitarian principles more difficult, given the clan-linkages (or even control) of the local organizations that were outsourced to carry out activities. Considering who was most vulnerable in 2011, this turned out to be a major issue in some areas. So while remote management facilitated the provision of aid, it also posed serious threats to the principle of impartiality.

The practice has inevitably led to an increased focus on partner vetting and on risk management. Risks include the diversion of aid, lower program quality, and the disjuncture between on-the-ground realities and strategic decision-making and accountability. But it is the issue of diversion of aid has received the greatest attention during and since the famine. “Risk management” has become synonymous with reducing the risk of aid diversion, especially in Al-Shabaab-controlled areas. In reality, however, the actual diversion was taking in large place in Mogadishu or other TFG-controlled areas. This situation emphasized the trade-offs between remote management (for security) and risk management (to reduce diversion).

Remote management in Somalia was not only characterized by sub-contract arrangements with local partners, but also greater emphasis on remote or third-party monitoring, including covert monitoring, the increased use of “distance technologies” like call-centers or the use of cellphones for post-distribution monitoring, remote sensing, and even suggestions of the use of drones. Cash and Voucher Monitoring Group (CVMG) and the UN Risk Management Unit were two innovative approaches. The former monitored the cash transfer program and the latter helped UN agencies assess risk, review partners, and improve monitoring and evaluation of their programs. Such approaches were deemed necessary to demonstrate accountability to donors, especially around issues of aid diversion, but certainly did not foster trust among partners. Indeed, many Somalia analysts have emphasized the importance of relationships built on trust between outside agencies and local actors, trust which takes time to build up, and which can be relied upon in crises. Most of the distance technologies built up before and during the famine did not engender this kind of trust, in fact they seemed to be built on the presumption of the lack of
trust. This factor is equally important to the lack of security and the lack of funding in the late response to the famine in 2011.  

**New Analytical Approaches**

The Real Time Evaluation noted the lack of contingency planning—as did an internal review of WFP’s programs. Ideally, mitigation programs would have been implemented, destocking programs would have been ramped up, and household resilience would have been bolstered through cash or food transfers to prevent a slide into malnutrition, destitution, and mass migration. As it happened, almost none of these programs were actually implemented on a scale large enough to effectively address the rapidly worsening situation.

*Response Analysis.* A food aid response was, for the most part, not possible. The major food aid actors were not present, and Al-Shabaab clearly would not welcome another agency attempting to implement a food aid program. In the absence of a food aid response, the remaining options were for cash transfers or some kind of food voucher program that worked directly with traders. Given the difficulty—impossibility in many cases—of accessing areas to work with traders, and given the presence of a reliable cash distribution network through the *hawala* system, the main option available to rapidly scale up a response was to distribute cash. Cash distributions had been tried in Somalia previously on a small scale and shown to be an effective means of supporting at-risk populations. But, nothing had been tried at the scale required. There were several risks. The first was the risk of diversion—no greater for cash than for in-kind food aid—in fact many argued that the risk was substantially lower. The other risk was of even greater food price inflation. If this were to happen, standard analysis showed that it could make populations more vulnerable, not less. But, there were no options on the table in 2011 that presented humanitarian decision-makers with no risks.

New modalities required a new form of analysis-comparison of response options to determine the optimum response. This has come to be known as response analysis. This should have been part of humanitarian response for a long time—but in fact was relatively new in 2011—several experimental methodologies were already in existence, but the GHA crisis was the laboratory for the development of this kind of analysis.

In the Somalia case, two rapid market analyses were conducted at the time of the famine declaration that attempted to rely on existing information to project what might happen if substantial amounts of cash were injected into South Central Somalia in response to the famine. These analyses suggested that markets would function, but supply might be constrained at first. As a result, the lead agencies worked with traders to ensure a supply response, and the sale of food aid in urban markets to help control prices was also explored. Ultimately, the cash response was the most innovative response to the famine
of 2011 (see below) but like other responses, it was late to start. That said, it was scaled up very quickly.

**Risk assessment and risk management.** A number of points emerged from the research with regard to managing the risks of operating in Somalia. These include due diligence in partner selection in terms of background checks and uncovering links to other security/political actors. Partner accountability implies establishing systems to ensure that partners act according to agreed plans and standards. Measures to assess and counter fraud or diversion are clearly needed. Measures to assess and ensure the safety and security of both national and expatriate staff seem quite obvious; perhaps less obvious are measures to minimize threats to the security of recipient communities. Given the risks of working in Somalia, clear needs are for risk-sharing mechanisms between donors, international agencies, and local partners, and agreed “red lines” about situations which will cause agencies to suspend operations or cease operations altogether.\(^49\) Conflict sensitivity or “Do No Harm” approaches that mitigate potential harms or increased conflicts caused by humanitarian assistance help practitioners to understand the relationships/links between local partners, contractors, and beneficiaries. Equally important is understanding the relationship between local communities and the government or controlling authorities. And lastly, given that most humanitarian aid is managed from Nairobi, Kenya the need is clear for ongoing analysis of risks of “remote management.”

Several other kinds of analysis were also mentioned in field interviews as having grown out of the Somalia famine. **Hazard analysis** examines past shocks or crises and potential hazards, trends relating to these, and how they affect people and their livelihoods. **Landscape analysis** looks at climate, livelihood strategies, cultures, and longer-term trends. **Political/conflict analysis** studies political, social, and security factors, how they interact, and how they affect the target population, the humanitarian community and humanitarian response.\(^50\)

**New Programmatic Approaches**

Although none were entirely new, several of the most innovative of the responses are worth a brief mention. These include the cash and market-based programming, the rise of “no regrets” programming or crisis modifiers (similar but distinct forms of mitigative interventions) and scalable safety nets.

**Cash and market-based programming.** Food aid played a limited but critical role in the response to the famine, but in the absence of WFP and the antipathy of Al-Shabaab towards food aid, alternatives were clearly needed. In the end, seventeen agencies collaborated to implement an unconditional cash transfer response in South Central Somalia coordinated by UNICEF and funded by a variety of donors. From July 2011 to December 2012, about
$110 million were devoted to unconditional cash and voucher programs. Starting slightly later, The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) implemented a cash-for-work (CFW) program with an additional budget of $45 million. That program required people to work in order to receive cash assistance. These two programs combined reached approximately 1.5 million famine-affected people in South Central Somalia, and constitute one of the biggest cash transfer programs in a single country in history. Nevertheless, these programs only directly reached about half the affected population.

Although cash transfers and market-based programs were not new, the famine was probably the largest market-based response to a crisis of this magnitude in a single country up to that time. Several features of Somalia facilitated this. First, there is a nation-wide network of money-transfer companies, known as hawala, which did the actual transfers. Second, there is a good functioning cell phone network, without which the hawala system would not have functioned as well. Third, Somali traders have long been able to negotiate their way across battle lines so the markets were able to respond to increased demand. A unique feature of both the unconditional cash transfer program and the cash for work program was that they built in a third-party monitoring and evaluation component from the beginning, so reasonably good data was available on which to draw conclusions about the unconditional response.

Several points from this program are key here. First, cash proved to be a rapidly scalable intervention in the context of Somalia, and it quickly reached many vulnerable people. Second, Somali traders were able to reach practically everywhere in the country to supply markets, including Al-Shabaab–controlled territory. Al-Shabaab—and other local authorities through whose jurisdictions they had to travel—likely taxed these transfers, but diversion and “taxation” were less a problem with cash transfers than had been the case earlier with in-kind food aid transfers. A concerted effort was made to work with traders to ensure a rapid market response. Third, despite fears that cash might be used for other things, the results clearly show that the biggest single use of cash was to purchase food and the second biggest use was to pay off debts—many of which had been incurred to purchase food before the program was established. Cash was successfully targeted within the household and given the coverage of hawala agencies, could be distributed almost everywhere. Fourth, food price inflation did not emerge as a problem. This was at least partially because global food prices began to decline at about the same time the famine was declared and continued into 2012. Fifth, cash and vouchers were much more cost effective than food aid. Of the budget of $110 million dollars for the unconditional cash and vouchers response, some $92 million ended up in the hands of the final recipients—an average of 85 percent of the total budget. This compares with something like 35–40 percent of the total budget for in-kind food aid delivered under similar circumstances—given the high cost of transportation, storage, spoilage, and distribution.
Nevertheless, cash and vouchers did have some issues. First, it wasn’t so much a question of the modality of the transfer, as the fact that an inadequate amount of all types of assistance was reaching the most-affected areas. So aid of all kinds, cash included, was implicated in the widespread migration to Mogadishu and surrounding areas—or to Kenya and Ethiopia. Second, there was a huge debate about the best way to target cash to recipients. The evaluation of the unconditional cash transfer program concluded that in the midst of an actual famine, household targeting was an expensive waste of valuable time—and that the emphasis should be on targeting geographic areas and then providing “blanket coverage”—meaning that all households in the areas selected receive a transfer, an idea that donors were unwilling to consider. Agencies gained experience targeting at scale throughout the program, and new recommendations on targeting cash programs was one of the key areas of learning.

Third, it wasn’t clear who was responsible for the coordination function. The UN Cluster System is intended to coordinate responses in humanitarian emergencies. The Food Assistance Cluster had been relatively moribund and devoted almost entirely to the issue of in-kind food aid. Eventually as many as fifteen separate bodies engaged in coordinating cash interventions in one way or another. Part of the issue was that cash or vouchers are modalities, not sectors. Fourth, instances of diversion and fraud related to the cash-transfer program occurred, and many reports surfaced of recipients being taxed on the transfers. Much of the diversion had to do not just with armed groups, but also the staff of agencies. While the amounts reported were small, they presented a problem to donors, who subsequently had their own forensic audits conducted.

Fifth, the issue of conditionality was questioned. Some observers thought that requiring a labor contribution from recipient households in the middle of a famine was a harsh condition to impose, pointing out that one of the factors that made some households vulnerable in the first place was a shortage of labor. A two-week “unconditional wage” was initiated to enable recipients to regain some strength and nutritional status before work requirements began. In some cases, work requirements were reduced to account for the poor nutritional status of recipients. But, these program elements were often not implemented. However, the CfW program added the element of public works—hence investment in community owned infrastructure, such as the de-silting of irrigation canals or the construction of roads or markets. In short, the point was not only to improve people's short-term ability to access adequate food by providing a cash wage for the work; it was also to rebuild some of the livelihood assets that had been lost or damaged by the conflict and the neglect of previous years. The CfW program was more complex to manage, because it involved both the transfer of money and the public works component. There was a limit to how much public work any one local organization could manage and thus necessitated lots of partners.
“No regrets” programming, crisis-modifiers and scalable safety nets. Scalable safety nets—long-term services that function during non-crisis times but which can be rapidly scaled up to meet increasing needs in times of crisis—were clearly shown in the responses in Ethiopia and Kenya to have effectively mitigated the crisis in those countries. A number of agencies tried to adapt this approach to Somalia—the big difference between the countries being that the government is the implementer in Ethiopia, where it is a national program, while in Somalia, the government did not have the capacity to manage a national program. Another approach to early response is the use of “crisis modifiers”—programs that build in flexibility to respond to or mitigate a developing crisis through having a built-in budget for such a purpose that can be drawn upon without having to write new proposals and launch new appeals. Finally, “no regrets” programming introduces interventions that address a looming crisis, but which are beneficial even if the crisis turns out not to be as serious as feared—and presumably thus reduce the fear of engaging too quickly a developing crisis as witnessed in repeated instances of “early warning/late response” including Somalia in 2010-2011. All of these ideally incorporate community-based mitigation and local information about social connectedness. This latter category of program all link into the notion of “resilience” (see below).

The Role of Diaspora and Local Responders

Within the Somali context, social networks are critical to consider. For the most part these reflect kin or clan-based relationships although they can also include friends and neighbors. They are both local and distant, where family members may be in far-away towns and areas within Somalia or much further away in neighboring or distant countries. It is also possible to distinguish between those who had such connections to town or to the diaspora as being much better off than those who do not. Social networks are always important but having networks beyond the immediate (drought- or conflict-vulnerable) context provided an opportunity for support from friends or relatives who may not have been facing the same problems.

The nature of these social networks also reflects the history of diversification that can be identified at the level of the clan. Some clans and sub-clans have had more opportunity to diversify, in terms of urbanization, education, and the formation of diaspora and business communities, relative to others. In general, the Rahanweyn and Somali Bantu of the riverine and inter-riverine areas of southern Somalia are marginalized and minority populations who have not seen the same degree of diversification as many other groups. These were also the most severely affected populations in 2011.

The roles of the Somali business community, diaspora, and mosque networks are also critical to note. These actors support members of their own clans as members of their own clans and social groups. These supportive relationships exist at multiple levels: individual-to-individual, household-to-household levels, and wider community level where
individuals send money to a central pot, usually managed by elders or other organizing groups (a prominent businessperson or religious leader). These phenomena were reported during 2011, and would have encompassed a very significant proportion of the Somali response.

However, these three actors also acted outside of clan-defined boundaries. The largest businesses in Somalia funded food and water (and other commodities) humanitarian responses in many parts of southern Somalia, particularly in the IDP camps in the major towns and cities but also in rural areas. They also reported that Al-Shabaab was a complicating factor, not allowing them to deliver assistance in some instances, particularly prior to the mass displacement of people.

The Somali diaspora was also mobilized beyond clan-defined boundaries, particularly after the media images of the famine were broadcast around the world. Groups formed to organize fund-raising and channel responses during this time, and others sent money through organizations or people they knew. The mosques in Nairobi that were frequented by Somalis became important hubs for fundraising from Kenyan Somalis, more-distant members of the diaspora, and the Somali business community in Kenya. Within days of the famine declaration, the mosques organized food deliveries to Dadaab and sent cash to their mosque-based networks throughout southern Somalia.

“New” Actors? Non-Western Humanitarian Response

Initially labeled as “emerging” or “new,” the 2011-2012 famine saw an increased role of non-Western humanitarian actors. Despite these labels, many of these actors were neither “emerging” nor “non-traditional” as some have been around since the beginning of organized humanitarian action (for example the Turkish Red Crescent Society, Kizilay) and many were working in Somalia before the famine, albeit not necessarily in a humanitarian role. These “new” actors include Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States. It also includes their various charitable and humanitarian organizations such as the Red Crescent Societies, many of which are major actors in their home countries as well as Islamic charities and NGOs. Together, these actors pledged one-third of the money for the humanitarian response in 2011. Collectively, many of these agencies sought to operate under the coordinating mechanism of the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

Their response was dominated by food aid but medical aid, shelter, and other commodities and services were also provided. Much of the non-Western actor response was focused on recovery (especially resettlement of IDPs) programs and other medium-term activities. The Turkish government, for example, has been particularly active in rebuilding infrastructure in Mogadishu and managing port and airport facilities.

The sources of funds and areas of activity for these actors are largely guided by the Islamic identity and solidarity. The declaration of famine and the media images that were
transmitted around the world took place during Ramadan; the charitable giving during the Islamic holy month carries even more religious significance than in other times. Respondents in Turkey suggested the timing did increase contributions compared with what they might otherwise have been, and this is also thought to be the case for donations from the Gulf and the global Muslim population. Funds for the humanitarian response came both from the governments and from individuals.

Much of the activities of these actors, like their Western counterparts, remained in Mogadishu. In turn, they contributed to the city’s position as a magnet for displaced people and “profiteers.” In Mogadishu, in government-held areas, non-Western actors faced the same pressures of insecurity, corruption, and gatekeepers faced by all other agencies. Resources were most likely also captured through these channels, particularly resources of those with no experience of Mogadishu and in the early weeks of their response. Even experienced Gulf and Somali charities had to accommodate the demands of various “gatekeepers,” especially those controlling the IDP camps in the city. These charities indicated they were fully aware of the gatekeepers and demonstrated different means to bypass them, but also admitted that they did use a small proportion of their resources to gain access to affected populations (by paying off such gatekeepers).

It remains unclear the extent to which these non-Western actors were able to use their Islamic identity to navigate the complex context or reach beyond Mogadishu in a more effective way than Western agencies. The symbolic and psychological impact of these actors does appear to be significant, particularly in the perception of Somalia by outsiders and at the elite levels of Somali society. It is difficult to assess how affected groups see this value beyond the increased availability of relief items.

Moreover, it is important to note the tensions and lack of coordination between the OIC and Western agencies. And while improved communication and coordination were attempted, at this time, barriers remain in terms of language, culture, and perceptions.

One of the critical shortcomings of non-Western actors, whether Turkish, Gulf, or their Somali partners, was their lack of documentation. In general, it is difficult to attain documents to even confirm the activities of this set of actors, let alone their impact. Any available documentation provided only the most basic information. Many agencies do not conduct monitoring, evaluation, or impact assessments, making verification of these activities and assessing their impact difficult. These actors recognize however, that this is a major shortcoming, and appear to be taking steps to better assess their own activities.

**The Resilience Agenda**

Cycles of crisis and recovery have been the norm in the Greater Horn of Africa for as long as humans have inhabited the region, but governments, donors, and affected communities have all noted that recovery time between crises takes longer, but the time between crises
is growing shorter and in some cases, whole regions of a country seem to be in almost perpetual crisis. Combined with the repeated problems of slow response to early warning and limited investment in prevention and risk reduction, it was clear by the time of the famine that a different approach was needed.\textsuperscript{69}

In the aftermath of the famine, various stakeholders called for building the resilience of communities regularly affected by crisis. Similar to earlier efforts to reduce vulnerability, resilience purports to hold the key for overcoming the cycle of recurrent crises and humanitarian response.\textsuperscript{70} The discourse on resilience has dominated much of the post-famine not only in Somalia but most of the Greater Horn of Africa and the Sahel. All the major donor agencies have resilience strategies now under implementation.\textsuperscript{71} In Somalia, the UN took the early lead on resilience programs—even while the famine was ongoing—emphasizing livelihoods improvements, access to services, and social safety nets. Other elements of resilience programming include things mentioned above—the improved use of “trigger” indicators in early warning, greater emphasis on risk reduction and prevention, crisis modifiers and “no regrets” programs, in addition to the main elements of the UN strategy. Besides the UN, there are several NGO consortia working on resilience programs in Somalia in the post-famine era. The resilience agenda clearly dominated the post-famine policy discourse, but for the most part, it is too soon to judge the impact of resilience policies or program on the ground.

The other, often overlooked element of resilience is a clear analysis of what strategies communities rely on to remain resilient in the face of repeated crises. In Somalia, the strategies of famine-affected people include diversification, flexibility, and social connectedness. Diversification of livelihood strategies and assets is a critical part of this, but so is diversification of risk. Flexibility may mean be physical mobility (for pastoralists) or the capacity to move between livelihood strategies. In more extreme cases, families split their households. But the Somalia crisis emphasized the critical importance of social connectedness. During a major catastrophe, social networks determined the line between survival or not. It is difficult, however, for programs to directly support social connectedness. Alongside other notions of resilience, it is critical for programs to understand and avoid undermining people’s own strategies (such as the attempt to shut down the remittance networks into Somalia, a major source of support for many Somalis during both good and bad times).

**Failure to Act on Early Warning**

It is critical to assess the institutional and political context when assessing the success or failure of early warning and early response.\textsuperscript{72} Political considerations determine the willingness to respond early, for example whether the populations concerned are marginal, or if declaring a “famine” or other crisis has political risks. Ethiopia and Kenya have received both considerable international support and investment in needs assessments.
over many years, within and in partnership with government structures, but in Somalia, the function of early warning and needs assessment remains in multiple international institutions. The Somalia Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit (FSNAU) is responsible for early warning and major seasonal assessments; needs assessments remain the responsibility of individual agencies. A major humanitarian sector evaluation for Somalia in 2010 noted that needs assessments have been problematic in Somalia for years.73

Behind all the institutional constraints is the question of counter-terrorism. There was very little support from major donors to mitigate or prevent a crisis in the run-up to the famine. Political risk preferences and donors’ geopolitical and domestic political concerns in Somalia outweighed humanitarian concerns until the declaration of famine forced a response. The difficulty of operating in South Central Somalia and the likelihood of aid “leakage,” the risk of aid inadvertently falling into the hands of Al-Shabaab were weighed against the potential humanitarian costs of the unfolding disaster. However, the response was also late in Ethiopia and Kenya where the counter-terrorism objective was less important, so these constraints cannot be held entirely responsible for the delayed response in Somalia.74

Moreover, there was no built-in incentive to respond. There are several donors who are working to develop triggers and trigger indicators, which become more difficult with political or security issues in play. Early response in 2011 would have meant negotiating with Al-Shabaab; most donors were opposed to this and Al-Shabaab was blocking humanitarian access.

Moreover, the funds requested by the humanitarian community, as seen in the Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP), were not very different than amounts requested for the previous three years, despite a rapidly worsening situation. And donors were funding the CAP appeal to the same degree—about 50 percent of the request—as in earlier years (Table 1). Surely, the CAP process itself can be seen as a constraint to the early response to the crisis with the 2011 CAP having been written before the 2010 deyr (short) rains failed at a time when things seemed to be going well in Somalia.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Amount (in millions)</th>
<th>Percent funded by mid-year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>$641</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>$849</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>$689</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>$529</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011*</td>
<td>$1,002</td>
<td>78%**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* After famine declaration  
** November 2011
Risk aversion played out in different ways. The general security concerns, the risk of diversion and fear of the legal consequences, and danger to organizational reputation if diverted aid ended up in the wrong hands all contributed to the failure to act on the early warnings.

And finally, as mentioned above, there were no coordinated effort at negotiating access. Each humanitarian agency had to individually negotiate their access to famine-affected or at-risk populations during the crisis. Menkhaus notes that “none of the most powerful actors in the Somali drama—Al-Shabaab, the TFG, the UN, the US, and Ethiopia—facilitated this effort. All, in varying degrees, were impediments to humanitarian access. The result was very limited space for aid agencies to operate…”

**The “Normalization of Crisis”**

Somalia has suffered from the combined impact of repeated shocks, oft-delayed responses, and seemingly shorter periods of recovery between shocks, for much of the past three decades. Combined with other factors such as the collapse of state institutions, a long-standing crisis of livelihoods and a growing environmental crisis, this has led to a general lowering of overall standards of living and an ever-growing requirement for external. High levels of malnutrition and food insecurity had been noted in Somalia since the late 1980s, and had already led external analysis to coin the term “normalization of crisis” to describe this chronic state in Somalia. Bradbury notes that beliefs about “aid dependency” in Somalia, and more general arguments about “local solutions to local problems” has led over time to a significantly lower level of concern about humanitarian problems and has put the responsibility for development back onto local communities. This provided the pretext for international withdrawal from places like Somalia and denial of responsibility for humanitarian emergencies there. Indeed, a similar argument is made about the resilience agenda in the current context. This has meant however, that external humanitarian and development agencies, donors, and indeed what has remained of the state in Somalia—have all been willing to tolerate much higher levels of human deprivation than would be acceptable in other places.

**Internal Factors that Aggravated the Crisis**

Beyond the well-publicized major causes of the famine (drought, conflict, rapid food price inflation) and the external factors that aggravated it, several less well-explored internal factors played a role as well. These included the political economy of aid in a country that has seen rising (if inadequate) levels of humanitarian assistance for the past three decades; the rule of Al-Shabaab (quite apart from counter-terrorism restrictions); the impact of the
structure of the Somali clan system; and the phenomenon of “gate-keepers” or the deliberate exploitation of famine victims to ensure the capture of aid.

The political economy of aid. Somalia has experienced an “avalanche of aid” since the Somalia-Ethiopia War of 1977–78 that led to a large-scale refugee crisis in Somalia. Capturing this aid is a major source of self-enrichment. Over the years, this aid has provided opportunities for illicit income for government officials, aid agencies staff and other profiteers and opportunists—and in some cases, the refugees and IDPs. These resources have become part of the economy of Somalia, and it has become common practice to inflate needs assessments to make the diversion of aid less obvious. The UNDP notes that by the late 1980s, aid to Somalia (both development and humanitarian) amounted to some 70 percent of the state’s resources. Lee Cassanelli observed that this aid has always been a resource to be captured by Somali government agents and self-appointed opportunists. As such, and given the limits on law and order in Somalia since the collapse of the state, some amount of aid diversion has been tolerated and simply considered to be the cost of “doing business.” The UN Monitoring Group for Somalia and Eritrea published a report that made clear the extent of this problem in 2010—noting that as much as half the food aid intended for crisis affected Somali groups was being diverted. Needles to say, in the context of counter-terrorist restrictions, the revelation caused great consternation among aid agencies and donors—even though all knew it to be the reality.

Al-Shabaab. The Harakat al-Shabaab al Mujahideen (Movement of Warrior Youth, Al-Shabaab) rose to prominence in period from 2007 to 2009, in the aftermath of the Islamic Courts Union government. Al-Shabaab's rise challenged the political order in Somalia, and challenged the engagement of international actors and especially humanitarian agencies. But their repressive rule, their use of terror tactics inside Somalia, and brutal enforcement of their particular notions of Islamic law—in turn challenged Al-Shabaab’s legitimacy. However, the role of Al-Shabaab in the famine of 2011 is more complicated than the unidimensional accounts in the media. Al-Shabaab was not the only armed non-state actor in Somalia at the time, or the only Islamist group, but it was the biggest, the most influential, and the focus of most of the international counter-terrorist restrictions.

Al-Shabaab rule was more peaceful in some areas—and provided for improved local security—than had been the case under the TFG or the warlord era: “peace and security, for a price” as a 2010 Human Rights Watch report described it. However, Al-Shabaab achieved this through public executions, the regulation of people’s personal lives, and a variety of other coercive means. They have been especially restrictive of the freedom of women. Several other factors related to Al-Shabaab’s rule determined the way in which the famine played out. First, they heavily restricted information flow—meaning that even many in Somali society who could have helped didn’t know how bad the situation inside Al-Shabaab controlled territory was. Second, Al-Shabaab controlled the movement of people—in some cases restricting people’s mobility when they were trying to move; in
other cases forcing them to move. Mobility has long been a significant component of coping with adversity in Somalia, and these restrictions limited people’s ability to cope. And third, Al-Shabaab imposed several forms of economic controls. This was partly about restricting trade in some cases. But it was mainly about taxation. And there is little doubt that taxation policies worsened the impact of the famine. They taxed market transactions and exports—which perhaps any controlling authority would do, but they also taxed crop production, harvest, livestock, movement, and even weddings. They also claimed Zakat giving—sometimes these were redistributed to the poor as intended; sometimes it wasn’t known where these funds went. There was a “household tax” and failure to pay often meant a son would be taken as an Al-Shabaab fighter, “a thinly veiled form of forced conscription.”

These measures both worsened the impact of the famine by altering redistribution mechanisms, and also meant that some of the better off members of rural communities (upon whom less well-off could depend for labor opportunities or other support in a crisis) had already left the area before the famine hit. And of course, Al-Shabaab was strongly opposed to external humanitarian assistance and food aid in particular, so endeavored to keep agencies out, made conditions very difficult for them, and attempted to tax them as well.

Gatekeepers. One of the most difficult problems in the response to the famine—and indeed with humanitarian response over the previous twenty years, is the issue of so-called “gatekeepers.” Simply put, gatekeepers control access to internally displaced people and other vulnerable groups, and control their access to assistance, and often control access to and the flow of information. Most infamously, they are known as the “managers” of IDP camps, but they can be found within government and even humanitarian agencies. Many of them are displaced themselves, but have leveraged their power and connections to enable them to control the flow of aid. And many of them profit hugely from it. The circumstances prevailing in Somalia are ripe for this kind of internal exploitation—which is often so serious that gatekeepers and known internally as “black cats.” One observer described it like this: “What started as an attempt by gatekeepers to assist fellow human beings who had fallen on difficult times, has evolved into a lucrative economic opportunity for individuals with equally limited avenues for making a living.”

Some of these gatekeepers are prominent businessmen with strong linkages into the humanitarian effort. The 2010 UN Monitoring Group report identified three local businessmen who controlled food aid transportation and delivery in Somalia on behalf of WFP—and who regularly diverted a large proportion for their own ends. Nearly all gatekeepers had some link to militias—some had links to Al-Shabaab. And they frequently had links to local administration and District Commissioners and even the TFG. Menkhaus pointed out that in 2011, “A political quarrel within the TFG over whether or not to concentrate the IDPs in a few large camps had nothing to do with efficiency and everything to do with a struggle to control the food aid flowing in, and then back out of, the camps.”
Nowhere was this problem more serious than in Mogadishu, where many of the internally displace fled in search of assistance. But in Mogadishu, the vast majority of IDPs were from the Rahanweyn clan or are Somali Bantu, but “camp managers” (gatekeepers) are reportedly mostly from Hawiye sub-clans.

Thus, while not causing the famine per se, a number of internal factors certainly worsened the impact of it. The predatory actions of armed non-state actors and gatekeepers had significant implications for protection, and humanitarian actors were relatively helpless to deal with problems. Humanitarians belatedly took action to try to deal with the gatekeeper issue but the issue of protection inside Al Shabaab areas remained a stubborn problem.

**A “Malaise” of Humanitarian Action**

During and after the famine, there was a widespread perception of a deep malaise in the whole system of humanitarian response to Somalia—phrased more than once as a view that the “system is rotten.” This included several elements: First, there is a strong sense that the aid system corrupts both benefactors and beneficiaries and is beholden to political agendas that have little to do with protecting life or livelihood. Second, there is a high degree of fragmentation and mistrust, both within the “Western” (OECD/Development Assistance Committee (DAC); Office of Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)-led) aid community, and between the “Western” and “non-Western” actors described above. Third, the competitive structure of funding ensures that information sharing was minimized for fear of losing one’s competitive edge. Fourth, staff turnover was high and new people had to relearn the same lessons, often the hard way. The problem of diversion and corruption were pervasive, and the realization that some of this was internal to humanitarian agencies was very demoralizing. And the more “remote” that management became, the worse the problem became. This gave rise to third party monitoring and other forms of remotely tracking local partners, which further undermined trust. All this fed the perception of the system being “rotten.”

Fifth, much emphasis was placed during the famine and its aftermath on “risk management”—both the risks to the physical safety of aid workers, but also the risk of aid going astray, the risks to the reputation of agencies, and the legal risk—given the counter-terrorism regulations. But there was also a sense that this risk was outsourced from donors to agencies, and from international agencies to their local partners. The reputational risks led the fear of speaking out when aid was diverted.

All this made for a situation in which an honest discussion about operating in Somalia was very difficult, and further contributed to the assessment that “the system is rotten.” And yet most in the humanitarian community agreed that only way to address the problem was through an honest discussion, and getting all the actors on board for collective action to halt the problem. Some attempts were made to deal with these problems. A UN Risk
Management Unit was set up to vet local organizations, which helped UN agencies better manage risk. Third party monitoring and other innovations such as call centers arose to try to give famine-affected communities some avenues for feedback. But savvy actors figured out how to exploit these systems as well. And attempts to improve risk management also inevitably had the effect of reducing the amount of overall assistance, and the targeting of that assistance to areas where the risks were lower—which inevitably meant areas where Al-Shabaab was not in charge. A version of this phenomenon was at least partly responsible for the late response to the 2011 crisis—hence the general impression of a widespread malaise of humanitarian action.97

**Lessons Learned and the Implications for Humanitarian Action**

There is much to be learned from the Somalia famine of 2011, from the failure to prevent or mitigate it, and from its aftermath. The following are 14 key points and their implications for humanitarian action in the future.

1. *Multiple causes of the famine.* The Somalia famine of 2011 was widely believed to have been caused by drought, and there was a very serious drought, brought about by *La Niña* conditions in the second half of 2010 and the first half of 2011. But the drought alone didn’t “cause” the famine—multiple factors account for that, including the conflict between AMISOM/TFG and Al-Shabaab (among others) and the displacement caused by that; the global price spike in the cost of food, which pushed food out of the range of economic accessibility right at the moment that most Somalis had to rely on the market for food because the drought had badly affected their own production and livestock. And there were multiple complications, including the restrictions of Al-Shabaab and the counter-terror laws of Western donors (see below).

   **Implications.** The implications include recognizing the important of contextual knowledge and analysis, and paying attention to such analysis and shaping mitigation and response efforts accordingly (see below under early warning and late response).

2. *Multiple actors in prevention, response and recovery.* There were multiple actors engaged in the crisis—ranging from engaging in causes, to mitigation and response, to increasing the complications to the response. These operated at various different levels (local, national, regional and international) and variably included political, military and security, economic, and criminal actors—in addition to humanitarian actors or “ordinary” citizens who took on a humanitarian role, given the nature of the crisis.
Implications. Once again, the implications include recognizing the importance of contextual knowledge and analysis, and of detailed stakeholder analysis in crisis prevention, mitigation and response (see below under “non-Western” actors and “first responders and the diaspora). But while part of the implication is for a much “bigger tent” of humanitarian actors, it also calls for a much more politically savvy approach to non-humanitarian actors (again, see below).

3. “Terrorist groups” and counter-terror restrictions. Somalia was neither the first nor the last time that an armed non-state actor, labeled and sanctioned as a terrorist group, has controlled territory and affected populations in a major humanitarian emergency (see Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, Darfur, and Nigeria for a handful of contemporary examples). While the “terrorist” label makes engagement much more fraught, armed non-state actors that aren't officially labeled “terrorist” are increasingly a feature of humanitarian emergencies. There is little doubt that the severe limits placed on humanitarian action by Al Shabaab, and the counter-terror restrictions of donors were major reasons for the delayed response to the worsening crisis in 2011.

Implications. Given the extreme cost in human lives (more lives were lost in one year in Somalia than are estimated to have been lost in four years of a brutal civil war in Syria), some recalibration of the balance of priority objectives (security/counter-terror and humanitarian) is imperative. Once the famine was declared and donors found ways (such as the US OFAC license) to permit humanitarian assistance into Al-Shabaab controlled areas of Somalia, there is little material evidence to suggest that Al-Shabaab benefitted significantly—even though there is little doubt that they taxed or diverted some of the aid. Greater efforts in monitoring the impact of aid—as well as better efforts to prevent its diversion—are important. But so too are efforts to negotiate access. Strong evidence exists, in the Somalia case, to support the argument that negotiated access was a possibility throughout, and that negotiated access included efforts to minimize diversion. Much of what made the response so late in 2011 was not only donor policy but also “self-censorship” by agencies in fear of reputational and legal damage, and the fear of media accusations of “helping terrorists.”

Given the increasing incidence of large-scale humanitarian emergencies in fragile states or areas of contested governance, better practice must be developed for engaging with armed non-state actors—whether labeled “terrorists” or not. One of the implications remains the issue of humanitarian independence in the face of dealing with proscribed groups. Although the level of mistrust between the UN and Al Shabaab varied by agency, overall the UN and most Western donors and agencies were closely identified as pro-TFG and anti-Al Shabaab. The UN was heavily criticized for not playing a larger role in negotiating access in the run-up to the
famine, but for the most part, the UN’s hands were tied by donor (member state’s) interests. Only a handful of Western agencies successfully negotiated the difficult terrain, and even one of them (MSF) felt obliged to withdraw from Somalia in the aftermath of an Al Shabaab-related kidnapping.

4. Early warning and late response...again! While counter-terror restrictions played a major role in the delayed response, there is little question but that a major emergency was well forecast and that earlier action could have mitigated it—perhaps preventing the slide into actual famine (2011 still would have been a very bad year). This is not the first time this has happened—in fact there is a long and shameful history of this problem, particularly in so-called “slow-onset” crises in Sub-Saharan Africa. It relates to the “normalization of crisis” (see below) but it also reflects internal risk aversion of humanitarian donors and agencies.

**Implications.** Several ideas have been floated since the famine. Some of these are about different programming approaches (see below); some of them are about “trigger” indicators and building these into early warning systems such that when conditions reach a certain degree of severity, responses are “automatically” triggered. While some such have been put in place, they mostly have not yet been tested, and there is no guarantee that if there were political reasons for ignoring early warning in the past, there might be political reasons for overriding “triggers” as well. More to the point, stronger accountability mechanisms are needed to ensure crisis mitigation and response—including accountability to affected populations. But the imperative of accountability pales in comparison to other political or security imperatives. This problem remains largely unresolved and to some degree unaddressed.

5. Remote management. Remote management arose as a means of maintaining presence in the face of increasing security or access challenges—and indeed it didn’t arise suddenly in 2011. The gradual withdrawal of humanitarian decision makers and managers from Somalia began in the 1990s, and increased sharply in the Al-Shabaab era. Humanitarian staff—particularly international staff—did face unprecedented security challenges: Somalia was at one point considered the most dangerous place in the world for humanitarian aid workers. But remote management brought with it its own risks: risk of diversion and corruption; the risk of badly misunderstanding or misinterpreting local conditions on the ground; and in 2011 perhaps the absence of urgency about response by outside humanitarian witnessing the death and destruction firsthand. The withdrawal of humanitarian staff also reduces the extent to which any protection can be afforded to at-risk groups. As one observer put it: if previous crises in the Horn of Africa had been characterized by thousands of humanitarians driving around the bush talking to affected populations and struggling to put together the “big picture,” this crisis was
characterized by thousands of humanitarian sitting at computer screens in Nairobi crunching data, but having no idea of conditions on the ground.

**Implications.** Three big implications follow from this analysis. First, given the high risks, donors have insisted that remote management be scaled back in the post-famine era. But this has simply meant that little assistance (humanitarian or otherwise) is reaching certain areas, which cripples the principle of impartiality—assistance is being targeted based on risk criteria, not needs criteria. Second, Hugo Slim, one of the foremost of humanitarian ethicists of our times, has recently noted that classic (admittedly Western) humanitarianism had long practiced an ethic of “intimacy”—that operating in close proximity to affected people was a critical component of what humanitarianism is and how it operates. The age of remote management, big data, and “humanitarian drones” seriously challenges this ethic, and seriously challenges humanitarian understanding of events and processes on the ground in emergencies. Non-Western actors were somewhat better at negotiating these challenges in Somalia, but faced their own version of remote management as well. Ultimately, if this human connection is lost, humanitarianism will be dramatically reshaped—and Slim implies it would be for the worse. This also has implications for protection. Third, the out-sourcing of risk associated with remote management has undermined partnership approaches, and required new kinds of trust building among partnerships where risks may not be equally shared.

6. **New analytical and programmatic approaches.** New analytical approaches included such things as response analysis and improved context analysis. Major challenges remain in understanding—and taking into consideration—context in humanitarian policy and programming. The major “new” programmatic approach in the famine was the use, at scale, of market-based approaches to deal with a severe and widespread food security crisis. This wasn’t new in the sense that it had never been tried before, but new in the sense of the scale of the response and the speed of scale-up. Other new approaches include experimenting with “crisis modifiers” and “no regrets” programming. Elsewhere (Ethiopia and Kenya, which were affected by the same drought and food price crisis), existing safety net programs were successfully scaled up to meet additional demand in the face of a large-scale emergency, and for the most part prevented loss of human life (livestock losses and other livelihood damage were extensive).

**Implications.** Since the famine, there has been a lot of work in this area, and it probably represents one of the few genuine success stories to emerge from the Somalia famine. Though work on market-based programming had been on-going for some time, the crisis of 2011 significantly increased interest and expertise in this kind of programming, and likewise for other kinds of programming (see below on resilience). This highlights that much of the learning from the famine—and the
implementation of the practical results of that learning—has been in technical program areas, whereas the major constraints were political.

7. Local “first responders” and the diaspora. The dearth of international response in the most affected areas in Somalia during late 2010 and the first half of 2011 meant that affected communities had to rely on their own resources, and their own diasporas, to deal with the worsening crisis. There was little understanding of these dynamics in the external response to the crisis, and little attempt to recognize, bolster or in any other way work with these responses. And in many cases, these responses were equally late and inadequate to deal with the severity of the crisis. Those groups least connected to the urban economy in Somalia or to the diaspora were clearly the hardest-hit by the famine. Those groups that did have good connections—while still affected—certainly suffered lower mortality and loss of livelihoods.

Implications. Again, the first implication here is a call for greater understanding of these dynamics, who is included and who is excluded, and what kinds of mechanisms exist. Critical information can and should be incorporated into more formal early warning systems. The role of some coping mechanisms is well understood, but the important of social connectedness in particular, is often highlighted and then ignored in Somalia. At a minimum, steps should be taken to ensure that these mechanisms are not undermined (such as, to take the most worrisome example, cutting off remittance mechanisms in the name of counter-terror intervention—which several Western donor countries that support the resilience agenda have tried to do!).

8. Non-Western humanitarian agencies and response. During the famine, there was much talk about “new” or “emerging” humanitarian actors in Somalia—many of which originated in Turkey and the Middle East, or through broader Islamic networks. In fact, these groups were for the most part neither “new” nor “emerging” but were not part of the traditional, largely Western humanitarian community that had been involved in Somalia. In the end, this group of actors provided as much as one third of the total external assistance that went into the famine. They faced many of the same problems as Western agencies, but found their own ways of dealing with them. The response in Somalia was no doubt made larger by the fact that the famine was declared during the holy month of Ramadan, but there is no doubt that this group of actors—and other non-Western humanitarian donors and agencies—are going to be a permanent part of global humanitarian action in the years ahead.

Implications. Somalia offers several valuable implications. First, while there is advantages in maintaining somewhat separate identities (some Islamic agencies faced significantly fewer constraints in Al-Shabaab areas, at least at first) there are distinct advantages to all groups to collaborate more closely. But this inevitably
involves compromise and dialogue. There were attempts at this in Somalia, but for the most part, non-Western actors reported feeling pretty much marginalized by formal, UN-led systems and processes. A longer process of intentional engagement, mutual understanding and joint work—while maintaining the distinctiveness of different identities—is a challenge for the future.

9. **Resilience and the “resilience agenda” in prevention and recovery.** A greater emphasis on building the resilience of at-risk communities was already a strong recommendation prior to the famine, but the 2011 crisis in the Greater Horn of Africa and the 2012 crisis in the Sahel definitely put “resilience” on the agenda of both humanitarian and development actors, and both national governments and external donors. But resilience means different things in different places, it is by definition a very long-term agenda that is ill fitting with the (still mostly) short-term vision of humanitarian actors, and it still falls into a “gray area” in between development and humanitarian windows of funding agencies. And a growing chorus of critics seems to equate the emphasis on resilience with a “blame the victim” approach to humanitarian action—implying that the underlying motivation for the whole resilience agenda is to put the onus back onto affected communities. While this is in large part a misinterpretation, it arises as a substantial challenge from within the humanitarian community.

*Implications.* Both development and humanitarian actors—and national governments and international donors—should devote greater emphasis to reducing risk, improving livelihoods and access to services, and rapid mitigation measures aimed at improving overall resilience. In many ways, national governments in the GHA are leading on this, and indeed there are intergovernmental efforts such as the African Risk Capacity initiative that to some degree grew out of these two crises, that characterize this lead. However, there is also a narrative that improved resilience means that there will not be any need for humanitarian response capacity. While that might be the long-term goal, it is far too early to start dismantling this capacity any time in the foreseeable future. Indeed much of the infrastructure and institutions put in place have yet to be tested by a major crisis—certainly nothing of the magnitude of the 2011 crisis in the GHA.

10. **The “normalization of crisis.”** This term was coined over fifteen years ago to describe a condition that had existed a lot longer than that. Yet it continues to accurately describe attitudes towards Somalia and some other places.

*Implications.* Although critics have long pointed out problems associated with the acceptance of higher levels of human suffering in some contexts as simply being a fact that has to be accepted, little has been done to change this kind of thinking. Progress has been made on the front of being able to accurately compare the
severity of crisis across different contexts—and indeed much of this progress was made in Somalia: the development of the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification system, now being applied in some 35-40 at-risk countries in many parts of the world, was developed by the FSNAU. But the analysis capacity has so far outpaced the appetite of donors and policy makers to fully utilize information and analysis to ensure prompt and impartial humanitarian action.

11. Internal (and sometimes invisible) elements of the crisis. This analysis has shown a number of internal factors in the Somali context that didn’t necessarily cause the famine, but which greatly aggravated its impact.

Implications. The first implication is simply for greater analysis and understanding of these factors. Ultimately they will have to be challenged if future crises are to be prevented or mitigated, but it will almost certainly have to be Somali groups and individuals who challenge them, not international actors or humanitarian actors. But the latter would be well served by keeping in close contact with groups who might bring about change.

12. The “humanitarian malaise.” Many of the symptoms described regarding the humanitarian malaise operate not only in Somalia, but in many contexts, and indeed some observers think the whole humanitarian system is also in a state of malaise.

Implications. The analysis here suggests that a big part of the implication at the country level is for a much more honest discussion about the problems that humanitarian action faces. Given that some of these stem from the competitive nature of funding, donors could do a lot to enhance the atmosphere for honest discussion—something that was distinctly absent during the famine. At the more global level, more significant reforms might be required, but the reforms required to address this problem are in many ways context specific, and much can be done to address these constraints at a country level—which might not be possible with system only reforms.

Conclusion
This case study has briefly analyzed the causes, effects, and implications of the Somalia famine of 2011 for humanitarian action—both in Somalia and beyond. It has necessarily highlighted some elements of that complex emergency, but has not analyzed all of it. Major lessons learned and implications from the Somalia famine have broader implications for humanitarian action globally, and much can be learned by in-depth analysis.
References


Notes

6 Ibid.
12 For more on this theme, see ibid.
15 Hansen, Al-Shabaab in Somalia. The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group 2005-2012. Whether or not food aid was “dumped” in Somalia depends on one’s perspective, but certain examples exist of food aid undermining Somali markets, just as there are examples that food aid definitely helped to protect human life. Much of this discussion about the merits of food aid relate to the way in which it is managed. See, Christopher B. Barrett and Daniel G. Maxwell, Food Aid after Fifty Years: Recasting Its Role (London: Routledge, 2005).
20 Seal and Bailey op. cit. p. 3.
21 Including UNHCR, WHO, and UNICEF. UN agencies that had, up to that point, managed to maintain a somewhat separate identity from the more-political arms of the UN in Somalia and from WFP.
22 Jackson and Aynte (2013). The issue of paying fees was highly controversial, because of course, it would have been considered a criminal offense under the counter terrorism laws of the US and other Western donor countries. Nevertheless, Jackson and Aynte recount fairly specific requirements.
25 OCHA. Financial Tracking Service.


Ken Menkhaus, "No Access: Critical Bottlenecks in the 2011 Somali Famine," *Global Food Security* 1, no. 1 (2012). Menkhaus went on to note that US officials thought they were being "scapegoated" by the humanitarian sector because of increased linkages of US humanitarian assistance to security objectives more generally.


Egeland, Harmer, and Stoddard, "To Stay and Deliver: Good Practice for Humanitarians in Complex Security Environments."


Fortunately, the latter did not happen. The use of drones has been associated with external (particularly American) military intervention, and the introduction of drones for humanitarian purposes simply runs too many risks of being misperceived.


Donini and Maxwell, op. cit.

Field interviews 2012–14.

Menkhaus, "No Access: Critical Bottlenecks in the 2011 Somali Famine."


The reasons for Al-Shabaab’s opposition to food aid were several fold: First, for the most part, they just didn’t trust the humanitarian agencies. Second, they wanted people in the area they controlled to be self-sufficient, and believed that food aid undermined self-sufficiency. Third, they saw food aid as something foreign and that promoted foreign control and manipulation. Fourth, it was something they did not fully control, and it gave people a sort of independence from Al-Shabaab’s control.


See, for example, Christopher B. Barrett et al., "Market Information and Food Insecurity Response Analysis;" *Food Security* 1, no. 2 (2009).


For the purposes of this review, we did not expect that these would be spelled out, so only looked for any statement of situations in which humanitarian operations would be ethically impossible.

Field Interviews. 20120–2104.


There is some evidence that cash transfers were shared among recipients, meaning that indirectly the program probably reached a greater number of people, but there are no numbers on this. Field Interviews. 2012–14.


Hedlund et al., "Final Evaluation of the Unconditional Cash and Voucher Response to the 2011–12 Crisis in Southern and Central Somalia."


FSNAU, "Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Post Deyr 2011/2012," in Technical Series (Nairobi: FSNAU, 2012). It is a bit dangerous to play "what if?" games retrospectively, but if food prices had remained high, at a minimum, larger cash transfers would have been required to achieve the same food security outcomes, but even had this been the case, evidence was clear that the intended supply response was induced by the cash transfers.

The size of individual amounts varied from $40 to $110 per month. Hedlund et al.

Field interviews. 2012.


Hedlund et al., "Final Evaluation of the Unconditional Cash and Voucher Response to the 2011–12 Crisis in Southern and Central Somalia."

Ibid.

Field interviews. 2012–13. None of our respondents had been able to see the results of these audits.


Hillbruner and Moloney, "When Early Warning Is Not Enough - Lessons Learned from the 2011 Somalia Famine."


No analysis of the 2011 famine would be complete without analyzing the role of Al-Shabaab in both the causes of the crisis and the complications arising in responding to it. But this section is not intended as a compete history of the role of Al-Shabaab more broadly in recent Somali history. For that, the reader is referred to Hansen (2013), Marchal (2012), Menkhaus (2010 and 2012), or Pham (2013) among other more authoritative accounts than this one.

Hansen, Al-Shabaab in Somalia. The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group 2005-2012. Hansen also notes that over time, Al-Shabaab developed relations with different groups of maritime pirates, although had initially been quite independent of pirate groups.


Field interviews 2014.


Menkhaus, "No Access: Critical Bottlenecks in the 2011 Somali Famine."


Again, much more could be said about this phenomenon. See Famine in Somalia: Competing Imperatives, Collective Failures, 2012-2012.