



Food insecurity: what actions should follow early warning?

Food shortage, starvation and famine are often the most devastating consequences of a disaster. Food stocks, food production and other sources of income are vulnerable to drought, floods or other calamities. As income and assets diminish, households resort to increasingly desperate coping strategies. When such strategies are exhausted, the result is starvation and death. This chain of events was tragically illustrated by the catastrophic famines triggered by drought in the Sahel and Bangladesh in the 1970s and in the Greater Horn of Africa in the mid-1980s.

These famines resulted in various international calls for action to eliminate chronic and transitory hunger, including the 1996 World Food Summit, the Millennium Development Goals (one of which is to halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger) and the right to adequate food and the fundamental right to be free from hunger embedded in international law (the term 'right to adequate food' is derived from the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which to date has been ratified by 160 states). The Hyogo Framework for Action (2005–2015) also commits signatories to the progressive reduction of risk, including the risk of malnutrition.

Although there has clearly been progress in preventing the recurrence of the scale of mass starvation last witnessed in the 1980s, a similar pattern of food crises – albeit not as catastrophic – has continued more or less unabated since then. For example, the same sequence of events is yet again being played out in the Greater Horn of Africa with 20 million people facing hunger (International Federation, 2008). In its 2008 appeal, ActionAid gives voice to the suffering caused by the failure of the previous two years of rain in northern Kenya.

“I had thirty head of cattle a year ago. I am now left with only one which is so emaciated that it can barely stand,” says 82-year-old Apollo Kibet... Women in the village go about gathering poisonous wild berries that they boil for hours on end to remove the toxins from them. These fruit, known as Sorich, are what people in the region have come to regard as food... “I have to set out by 7 am for me to get these wild fruits and prepare them in time for tonight’s meal,” says Mary Ngoleyang, 32, and a mother of three... The inhabitants have

In the picture opposite, hungry children collect maize fallen from trucks at the side of a road in south-west Zimbabwe. Despite early warning, people throughout the country are facing chronic food shortages in 2009, following years of drought and chronic socio-economic insecurity.

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started eating carcasses of their dead animals portending a serious health risk. If humanitarian assistance is not forthcoming soon, humans will also succumb to the drought.”

As well as such moving personal accounts of the unfolding tragedy in the Horn of Africa, more measured analysis and reporting from the region reveal widespread hunger and malnutrition:

“The nutrition situation in Kenya has been described as ‘critical’, particularly in the north-west drought-prone region of Turkana. Nutritional survey results indicate that levels of global acute and severe malnutrition have almost doubled since 2007.

“Therapeutic and Supplementary Feeding Centres are overstretched, with many people unable to access the treatment they require. Most people in this region still rely on food relief; any reduction in aid provision would inevitably result in increased mortality and morbidity.”
(*The Lancet*, 2008)

Furthermore, the current crisis in the Horn is far from unique. Transitory hunger and malnutrition, as a consequence of natural hazards or man-made crises, remain a major global challenge. The organization CARE International, for example, estimates that the number of people confronting a food emergency has risen to 220 million – almost twice as many as in 2006 (CARE, 2008).

Ever since the events of the 1980s, there has been a growing conviction that severe hunger as a consequence of natural disasters is neither necessary nor acceptable. A recent press headline sums up this feeling: “Ethiopia – another famine, another avoidable disaster” (*The Times*, 2008).

All types of disasters may impact on food consumption and nutrition. However, food requirements arising from natural hazards are predominantly associated with slow-onset droughts and concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa. While significant levels of malnutrition and hunger remain global problems, in other regions these problems are typically chronic in nature or predominantly related to conflict.

These slow-onset disasters are largely predictable. Furthermore, resources are available to ensure that no one, anywhere in the world, at any time, should go hungry.

This chapter asks why this state of affairs persists. Is it inevitable that natural disasters should be associated with extreme hunger and suffering? Specifically, what is the contribution of early warning and early action? Within this area of work, what emerging approaches demonstrate promise and need to be scaled up? What obstacles

impede finding more effective responses and where is the creative energy necessary to identify innovative solutions?

The history: early warning and famine prevention

Over the last three decades, increasingly sophisticated approaches have been adopted to prevent, mitigate and prepare for food crises. Arguably the greatest effort and expense has gone into improving early warning systems (EWS) as a mainstay of emergency preparedness and famine prevention.

A simple definition of an early warning system in a food security context is a “system of data collection to monitor people’s access to food, in order to provide timely notice when a food crisis threatens and thus to elicit appropriate response” (Buchanan-Smith and Davies, 1995). In theory, such a system should provide decision-makers with timely information so as to act to prevent shocks – natural, political and economic – from turning into disasters.

Considerable progress has been made in establishing food security-related EWS at global, regional, national and community levels. These systems are developed and maintained by multiple stakeholders including donors, national governments of highly food-insecure countries, United Nations (UN) agencies and civil society. Given the prevalence of food insecurity in sub-Saharan Africa, specific attention has been paid to establishing food-related early warning systems in this region. Regional intergovernmental organizations have played a central role in supporting regional and sub-regional systems, including the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, the Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS) and the Southern African Development Community.

These systems were established with the primary aim of preventing mass starvation. An underlying assumption was that the principal risk to adequate nutrition arises from variations in domestic agricultural production. Production may determine both food availability and incomes in rural areas (for example, through the sale of cash crops). Consequently early warning systems were designed to closely monitor climatic factors that impact directly on agricultural production, as well as other hazards such as pests, which may cause diseases or destroy entire crops. Innovative remote sensing technologies have been used to great effect in order to monitor climatic variations and to model crop yields. To varying degrees, in some systems crop indicators have been complemented by other socio-economic and welfare indicators, including live-stock production, market prices and malnutrition rates.

This type of early warning system has been widely adopted and institutionalized by national governments. However, the functioning of many systems remains sub-opti-

mal. Significant constraints to their operations are regularly encountered. These include technical factors (tools to integrate systematically food security indicators into a clear statement about the severity of a crisis and the implications for response options), institutional issues (managerial independence and analytical autonomy and the ability to recruit and train a diverse group of food security analysts) and financial limitations (principally continual reliance on donor funding).

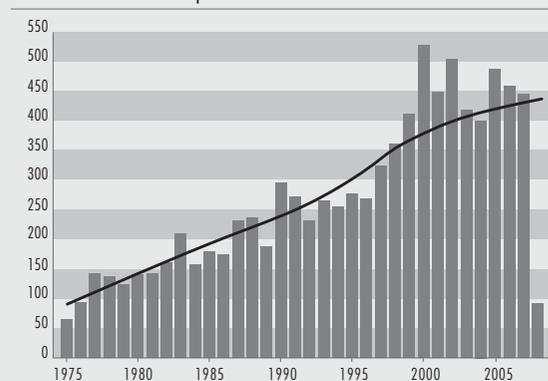
In general, though, the evidence suggests that established early warning systems have performed relatively well and, overall, have been effective in alerting countries and donors to imminent food crises due to production failures (FAO, October 2006). Today, such systems generally monitor the most vulnerable areas and populations. It is rare for decision-makers not to be warned in advance of slow-onset events such as drought and crop failure.

This combination of analytical and response capacity has largely prevented a recurrence of outright mass starvation, as seen in 1984, in food crises attributable to natural hazards. Data on recent disasters indicate a declining number of mortalities, despite the rising number of disaster events (see Figure 5.1).

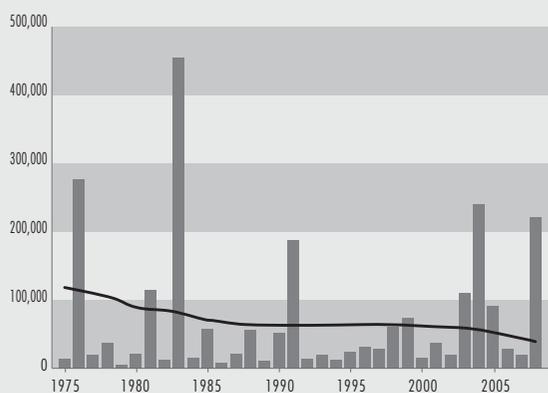
Figure 5.1

Number of disaster events rise, while fatalities decline

Natural disasters reported 1975–2008



Number of people reported killed in natural disasters 1975–2008



Source: EM-DAT The International Disaster Database

Expanding the scope of early warning beyond natural disasters

While the ‘traditional’ early warning systems have been designed to monitor, analyse and report on the impacts of natural disasters, there is growing evidence that the complexity of food crises is increasing. A rigorous analysis of several recent food crises (that were at first assumed to be largely driven by harvest failure) has revealed multiple and overlapping causes (Trench et al., 2007). The impact of meteorological, hydrological and climate change-related hazards needs to be assessed and analysed in the context of concurrent changes in poverty levels, conflict, pandemic diseases and economic developments. The combination of these causal factors influences both the overall level of needs and the most appropriate responses.

For example, an analysis of the 2001–03 and 2005 food crises in southern Africa identified no fewer than four overlapping crises in the region. While harvest failures in 2001 and 2002 provided the immediate trigger, these hit a region already suffering weaknesses in governance, with a population ravaged by the HIV and AIDS epidemic and where extreme poverty was growing. These shared characteristics were, in turn, overlaid by specific national level trends and triggers (Maunder and Wiggins, 2007).

The conclusion drawn from this analysis was that many of these factors interact with, and compound, vulnerability to natural disasters. The various causal factors need to be understood and monitored to appreciate properly the scale of the needs and to plan a tailored response. This, in turn, implies that EWS need to include a broader, context-specific range of environmental, social and political indicators.

In particular, interpreting the impact of natural disasters within the context of changes to levels of structural poverty remains a major challenge for many early warning systems. Such contextual factors have been at the heart of explaining where early warning is deemed to have ‘failed’ in recent crises. Niger’s 2005 food crisis illustrates how natural hazards and economic shocks, added to existing chronic food insecurity, quickly led to famine conditions (see Box 5.1) – despite accurate agro-climatic monitoring and timely early warning.

An analysis of current emergency operations highlights the fact that the major ongoing humanitarian crises are predominantly those caused by conflict or complex emer-

Box 5.1 The Niger crisis of 2004–05: lessons on early warning and early action?

The Niger food crisis in 2004 and 2005 was a severe but localized food security crisis in the regions of northern Maradi, Tahoua, Tillabéri and Zinder in south-eastern Niger. It was caused by an early end to the 2004 rains, desert locust damage to some pasture lands, high food prices and chronic poverty.

This crisis is often cited as a failure to react early enough to prevent a humanitarian crisis. It provides an important case study to guide the development and use of early warning and response systems, so it is therefore useful to consider what happened and what lessons have been learnt for preventing a recurrence of similar events in the future. The crisis evolved slowly over the course of 2004 and 2005. However,

a significant response only materialized after the scale of the humanitarian crisis was highlighted by international media.

In late July 2005, for example, Jan Egeland, then UN emergency relief coordinator, reported at a UN news briefing in Geneva that “over the last few days, the world has finally woken up, but it took graphic images of dying children for this to happen. More money had been received over the last 10 days than over the last 10 months” (UN, 2005).

Eventually a large-scale humanitarian response did ensue: “Between January and October 2005 some 230,000 children under the age of five, including 60,000 who were severely malnourished, were treated by NGOs –

surpassing past records of relief intervention. Despite this large-scale effort, thousands of children died of hunger-related causes" (Mousseau and Mittal, 2006).

But another report noted: "If the test of good humanitarian action is that it should be timely, proportionate, appropriate and effective, the response to the crisis in Niger has to date arguably failed on all counts" (HPG, 2005).

Many reasons contributed to the failure to act early enough and prevent such a tragic outcome, and several analyses have been made in the wake of the immediate crises to analyse these factors and the interplay between them. Among the plethora of issues discussed, the performance of the early warning systems has come under particular scrutiny.

The Sahel region, including country-level coverage for Niger, is well covered by EWS. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has the Global Information and Early Warning System, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) finances the Famine Early Warning System Network and the European Union has invested in the AGRHYMET, a specialized institution of CILSS. Between October 2004 and July 2005, these systems produced no fewer than eight major assessments that highlighted the growing problems in Niger. In early November 2004, CILSS and FAO took the unusual step of organizing two simultaneous press conferences, in Dakar (Senegal) and Banjul (Gambia), to report on the situation in the region.

But these EWS were largely focused on drought and the weather-related threats to food production resulting from variations in the timing and intensity of rains, as well as pest and disease outbreaks. However, it became clear that the crisis had far more complex roots than drought and the locust invasion. Niger did not face an exceptional drop in aggregate production in the 2004–05 agricultural year; produc-

tion at the end of 2004 was only 7.5 per cent below the national food requirement (Mousseau and Midal, 2006); but most of the shortfall in production took place in the lowest productivity (relatively northern) areas of the country.

Another important factor is that food markets within the region, especially between Niger and northern Nigeria, have long been closely integrated. In 2004, Nigeria took drastic steps to increase domestic grain production, by reducing rice imports from the world market. The intended effect was to push up grain prices sharply in Nigeria and provide strong incentives to increase production, but this price increase 'spilled over' into lower-income Niger, where staple food prices nearly doubled in 2005. As one report explained: "Part of the problem seems to be that 'food availability' approaches – as distinct from approaches focused on food access – continue to drive policy... Weather conditions in 2004–05, and the locusts, have had a relatively modest impact on national grain production. But, as Amartya Sen pointed out more than 20 years ago, famines can still occur when aggregate food availability is sufficient, if prices are too high for poor people to access enough food" (HPG, 2005).

Better monitoring and analysis of markets is clearly one part of the solution.

Whereas the grain price rises were (with some difficulty) manageable in Nigeria, in Niger they affected a large percentage of the population living in absolute poverty. Acute malnutrition is rampant there even in years of good agricultural production. Indeed, some analysts still disagree about whether there was a real *crisis* or whether it was a 'chronic emergency' that received international media attention for a short time (McNabb, 2008). Others hold that 2004–05 was more a price and income crisis than simply one of food supply.

There is certainly an argument for further strengthening early warning systems. But as

Clay (2005) points out: "It is genuinely difficult to anticipate [such] a crisis. EWS are being asked to determine when and where problems of chronic poverty and malnutrition that have a strong seasonal dimension are becoming so acute that exceptional emergency measures are required."

This in turn links to the question of what are the most appropriate mechanisms to deliver a timely, appropriate response to highly vulnerable populations that can easily be tipped over the edge to hunger.

The variety of causes translated into problems in defining appropriate responses and whether the response belonged within the remit of long-term development policies or a short-term relief response: "There was uncertainty as to whether it was a 'production-crisis', a 'market crisis', 'a crisis caused by long-term poverty' or even a 'crisis of malnutrition caused by cultural practices', and if so whether the solutions were to be found with the government and development agencies or with a relief intervention" (Harrigan, 2006).

According to the Humanitarian Policy Group (2005): "The problem seems to have been less the quality of the information about the food security situation, and more the way that information was interpreted, and the analysis developed on which subsequent decisions about response were based."

Although this discussion highlights the challenges for early warning, the Niger case also demonstrates the highly complex interaction of factors that can lead to unmitigated acute food insecurity. The relatively bountiful years, with record harvests in 2000, 2002 and again in 2003, may have introduced a certain complacency regarding food security. Donors were slow to react to initial appeals by the government in November 2004, and pledges only picked up after intensive media campaigning by international relief organizations. Having received little international support in 2004, the government then focused on political priorities (with elections in February 2005), managed the situation to the best of its own limited resources and downplayed the scale of the crisis until well into 2005.

In conclusion, the Niger example reinforces the analytical challenge for EWS. It reminds us that food crises are highly correlated to underlying poverty and the state of essential public services – with natural hazards as the tipping factor. As Eilerts (2006) wrote: "The most immediate challenge lies in accepting that we can no longer limit our monitoring and analysis to the strict confines of 'food security' and food-related crises. Livelihood emergencies of many different types, in many different places, will produce many of the next food security or famine crises. Indeed, identifying what not to monitor will be among our most difficult tasks." ■

agencies. The emergency appeals for the complex emergencies in Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Somalia dominate the requests for donor resources (ReliefWeb, 2008).

The problem of forecasting, monitoring and responding to conflicts is not the only concern here. There are significant overlaps between the incidence of natural disasters and complex emergencies. Between 1998 and 2003, at least 140 natural disasters occurred in countries where complex political emergencies were also present (Buchanan-Smith and Christopolos, 2004). Climatic variations or extremes can also increase competition for scarce natural resources and exacerbate

tensions. Therefore, better methods to forecast, assess and respond to food needs under conditions of restricted access must be a priority. Technically, establishing and integrating conflict monitoring and response within EWS remains an intractable problem.

The core role of EWS in preventing mass mortality through the monitoring of agro-climatic indicators remains highly relevant, given the continued susceptibility of African agriculture to the increasing frequency and intensity of extreme climate events (droughts, floods, tropical cyclones and hailstorms) associated with climate change. However, EWS have not proved sufficiently flexible to identify and monitor emerging sources of risk in all cases. This problem is illustrated by the laboured attempts of many EWS to incorporate the implications of the recent global food price rises, the global financial crisis and, before this, the HIV and AIDS pandemic. This is partly due to the complexity of the issue and to the fact that most EWS, being country- or region-specific, are poorly prepared to tackle complex global phenomena.

Linking early warning to decision-makers

Linking early warning to early action has long been recognized as a critical bottleneck (Buchanan-Smith and Davies, 1995). There is a well-identified requirement to ensure that analysis and reporting are geared to meeting the needs of decision-makers. A technically sound food security analysis will be of little use if it fails to address the real questions that decision-makers want answered. Thus, increasing attention has been given to how best deliver analyses and recommendations that directly support decision-making on timely, appropriate, proportionate and effective responses to food crises (Darcy et al., 2007). Particular effort has been focused on developing standards for comparing the severity of needs in different contexts, standards that are necessary to support impartial decision-making.

The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) is an innovative attempt to systematize the situational analysis and relate it more clearly to the actual needs of decision-makers. The transparency and comparability of the analysis are related to trigger points for action. Furthermore, the IPC provides a framework explicitly to link the analysis of the determinants and extent of food insecurity to recommendations on appropriate response options (see Box 5.2).

The IPC has been piloted in several countries in East and Central Africa with varying degrees of success. While recognizing that the IPC has a limited influence on many upstream issues (including data availability) and downstream issues (of the uptake of recommendations), it provides a constructive approach to improving the consistency, comparability and degree of consensus in the analysis, and it deserves further support to promote its wider application.

Box 5.2 The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification – linking analysis to action

While individual early warning systems have been generally effective in alerting emergency response agencies to impending crises, the objective ability to compare the relative severity of these crises remains extremely limited.

As long as major humanitarian organizations, UN agencies and national governments use different scales for classifying food-related crises, there will be confusion about which situations are most severe. This lack of comparability has contributed to a situation where the global humanitarian response often fails to assign priorities for delivering assistance on an impartial basis, solely determined by real need (Darcy and Hofmann, 2003).

Faced by multiple, simultaneous food crises, decision-makers need to understand which ones are most critical and where to intervene first within each crisis, with limited resources.

The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification was developed to address this need. The IPC offers a 'common currency' for classifying levels of food insecurity. It provides a scale comparable across countries and different seasons, in order to make it easier for donors, agencies and governments to identify priorities for intervention.

The classification system is defined by using threshold levels of a number of key reference indicators, including those relating to mortality, nutritional status and food consumption. The use of quantified thresholds introduces a rigour and transparency into the analysis that are often lacking in this area of work. The IPC identifies five main phases or categories of food insecurity:

- Generally food secure
- Chronically food insecure
- Acute food and livelihood crisis

- Humanitarian emergency
- Famine/humanitarian catastrophe

The IPC is not an assessment method *per se* nor does it replace existing information or classification systems. Rather, it builds on whatever information is already available and uses a 'convergence of evidence' approach. It brings together data and information from many different sources. Classifications are based on well-documented evidence and the whole process is transparent.

The IPC can, therefore, be adapted to a broad range of information systems with regard to data availability, methodological approach and human capacity. This both minimizes costs and makes it easier for governments and agencies to assimilate it into established systems.

It is also vital to communicate findings in a visually compelling way that can be easily understood by a wide audience. The IPC uses maps to give a very clear, intuitively understandable picture of the overall situation. The analysis and maps describe the current or imminent situation for a given area, along with a prediction of future trends and whether the phase may worsen or improve (see map).

The IPC goes further than just categorizing the severity of the crisis as it explicitly links the situation analysis to potential responses. The IPC advocates for responses that meet three broad objectives: mitigating immediate outcomes, supporting livelihoods and addressing underlying and structural causes.

However, while the IPC provides a basis for indicating the appropriate types of responses, it stops short of a full evaluation of response option analysis and recommendation. Further detailed appraisal is still needed to determine what responses are most appropriate and fea-

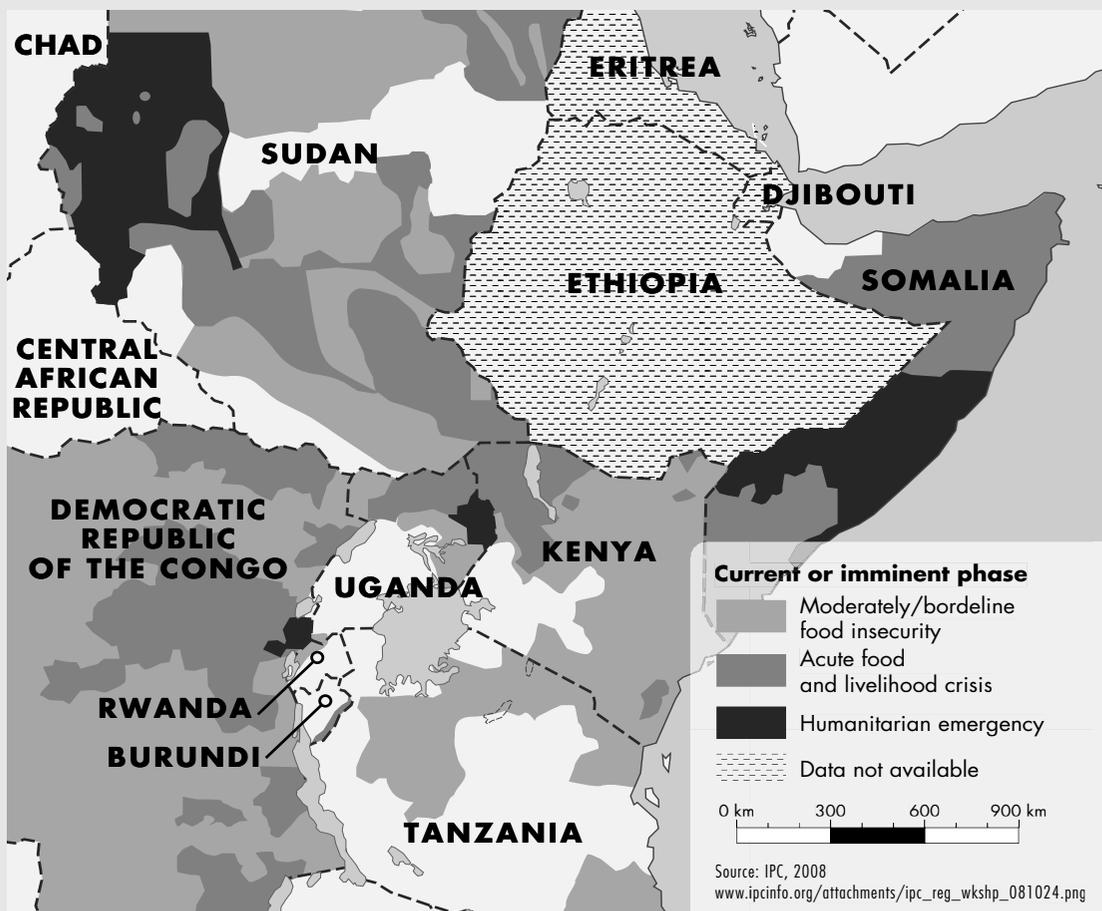
sible in different scenarios in the light of, for example, local capacity and ongoing interventions.

The IPC may also contribute to more coordinated interventions. The development of the IPC statement depends on developing a consensus among representatives of all the main food security-related organizations, including the national government. This can foster better collaboration and coordination of response efforts.

The potential of the IPC is balanced by a number of well-documented constraints. Not least of these are the often poor availability and quality of the data relied on for the analysis. Where data are scarce, there is little choice but to determine the phase almost exclusively based

on expert judgement. While the IPC can help to advocate for improving data collection, monitoring, information systems, methodologies, capacity-building of analysts and other important prerequisites for food security analysis, it helps make the best use of limited data by encouraging a participatory and convergence approach to analysis.

On the response side, there is a real danger that the IPC might overly focus attention on the most extreme situations of food insecurity and divert attention from developing livelihoods crises and important opportunities for risk reduction. However, this problem may be related to the overall decision-making processes, rather than a specific criticism of the IPC itself.



Originally developed in Somalia by the Food Security Analysis Unit, IPC maps are now being produced in Somalia and Kenya – where the IPC has been officially adopted by the government. IPC-related activities have also been substantial in southern Sudan and Burundi, while start-up activities are taking place in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Tanzania and Uganda.

IPC-related training, awareness-raising activities and pilot tests have also taken place in southern Africa and Asia. Lessons learned from

using the IPC in different countries will help further refine the system.

IPC global partners include FAO, the World Food Programme (WFP), Care International, the European Commission's Joint Research Centre, the Famine Early Warning System Network, Oxfam Great Britain and Save the Children UK and US. ■

For more information, see the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification web site: www.ipcinfo.org

Does early warning stimulate early action?

Ultimately early warnings, however accurate and complete, are only as useful as the responses that they elicit. However, in situations of food insecurity and famine, the evidence reveals a damaging tendency by the appropriate authorities to wait until the situation reaches a critical phase, and only then to react with a lifesaving response.

Emergency aid continues to be made available too late and on too short term a basis, and is targeted too heavily at saving lives rather than protecting vulnerable livelihoods as well. As one commentator described:

“By the time the response finally comes, they [the victims] may have liquidated productive assets, withdrawn children from school or engaged in environmentally or socially destructive activities. Although they did not starve, they are poorer and more vulnerable to the next disaster. This downward cycle is seen in the increasing numbers of destitute and chronically vulnerable populations throughout Africa.”
(McNabb, 2008)

A detailed retrospective analysis of the 2006 crisis in Kenya provides a good case study of the failure of early warnings to lead to early action (see Figure 5.2). The quality and credibility of the early warning signals were not called into question in this case; indeed, Kenya has been at the forefront of developing and institutionalizing innovative EWS. However, a meaningful response only occurred when the situation was acute – that is, at a stage when 11 million people required food, malnutrition rates were exceeding emergency thresholds and estimates showed that over 70 per cent of livestock had died in some locations (HPG, 2006).

“Many humanitarian actors have expressed frustration that the drought has had such a disastrous impact. They point to widely available research which shows that, if urgent action is taken early in a crisis to protect livelihoods, the effects of drought on pastoralists can be mitigated and the need for a massive emergency response to save lives can be reduced. Yet agencies, donors and national governments proved unable to address the crisis effectively in its early stages. Livelihoods interventions have been limited, and the response has focused overwhelmingly on food aid.” (HPG, 2006)



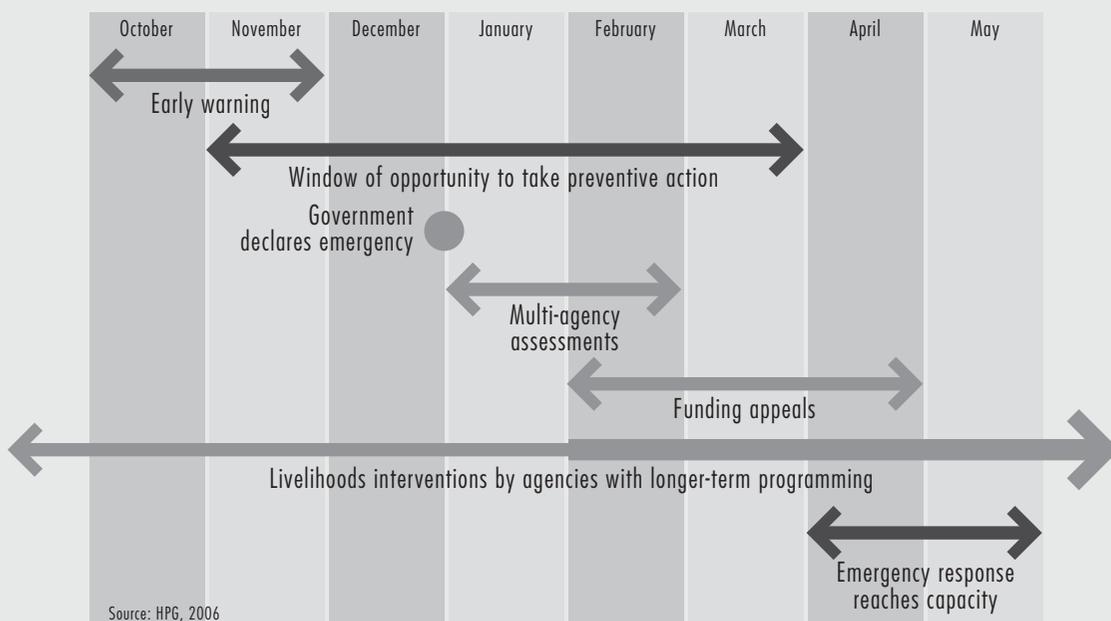
It has been argued that the failure of early warning to stimulate appropriate early action is a reflection of the fact that EWS are designed to meet the needs of the responders (principally the international humanitarian system) rather than the real needs of those vulnerable to natural disasters (Maxwell et al., 2008 citing Glenzer, 2007). The priority is to raise an alarm that mobilizes resources to prevent mass mortality. However, this only occurs after some livelihoods have been destroyed and some lives have been lost. The implication is that the bottom-line concern is to contain the damage, not to prevent it. However, from the perspective of affected households, a more appropriate trigger point is the preservation of livelihoods, rather than ‘just’ the saving of lives. See Box 5.3 for examples of attempts to provide early warning that will stimulate early action – in this case, an appeal for financial assistance to prevent the loss of lives and livelihoods in Zimbabwe.

After the failure of yet another rainy season, farmers in Kenya watch their cattle, their only source of food and income, die of thirst and hunger.

© Kenya Red Cross Society

Figure 5.2

Timeline of key events in Kenya, October 2005–May 2006



Box 5.3 Early warning in Zimbabwe

In March 2008, the Zimbabwean government, along with FAO and WFP, issued an urgent warning of the rapidly deteriorating food security situation in the country.

The warning was largely expected by the humanitarian community given the underperforming 2007 harvest. An exceptional accumulation of factors created an unprecedented situation. Adverse and chronic weather patterns, deterioration of infrastructure, shortage of agricultural inputs and drastic socio-economic decline conspired to leave millions of people without access to sufficient food.

A joint FAO and WFP crop and food supply assessment mission in June 2008 painted a clearer and grimmer picture of the crisis. The report estimated that almost half of the country's

population (5.1 million people) would be food insecure by the beginning of 2009 unless significant steps were taken.

At the beginning of August, the Zimbabwe Red Cross Society (ZRCS), supported by the International Federation, launched an urgent international appeal for almost 28 million Swiss francs.

The immediate priority was to provide monthly food assistance to more than 260,000 people who were either infected or affected by HIV and AIDS and therefore acutely vulnerable to food insecurity and its related ills (for people taking anti-retroviral treatment, sufficient food is essential).

The second component was the provision of agricultural support to about 100,000 people

in an effort to mitigate another poor harvest, an initiative linked with ongoing and long-term water and sanitation programmes.

Thousands of ZRCS volunteers across the country began to distribute food in October. Working in partnership with WFP, the volunteers provided families with packages of maize, beans and cooking oil.

However, though the warning of impending food insecurity was timely and clear, the response from the humanitarian sector as a whole was hampered by a range of factors. Operations were complicated by the unresolved political situation, with the movements of non-governmental organizations restricted following the two rounds of national elections in March and June 2008.

Throughout the country, especially in rural areas, the little food available was typically

overpriced and being sold in foreign currency due to the continued and rapid devaluation of the Zimbabwe dollar. This made it difficult for the average person with no access to foreign currency to purchase these commodities. Supplies of agricultural inputs, equipment and fuel were erratic, while prohibitive costs also made farmers unable to cope.

The country faced yet another year of chronic food shortages, a fact that sits uncomfortably alongside the recent deadly outbreak of cholera. At the end of 2008, many people were resorting to eating wild fruits and many households were selling personal assets in order to alleviate the dire food shortages. At the beginning of 2009, an estimated 5.9 million Zimbabweans were food insecure – a number beyond the worst case scenario issued some seven months earlier. ■

Table 1 Projected national requirements for Zimbabwe 2008–2009

2008–2009 needs 2008	Expected harvest requirement	Government import	Deficit
2,080,000 tonnes	848,000 tonnes	850,000 tonnes	382,000 tonnes

Table 2 Estimates of food insecure individuals in rural and urban areas 2008–2009

Province	July–September 2008	October–December 2008	January–March 2009
Manicaland	285,400	535,100	713,400
Mashonaland Central	154,600	289,800	386,400
Mashonaland East	187,000	350,600	467,500
Mashonaland West	126,300	236,800	315,700
Masvingo	252,200	472,800	630,400
Matabeleland North	127,500	239,100	318,900
Matabeleland South	148,500	278,400	371,200
Midlands	243,800	457,200	609,500
Urban and peri-urban localities	515,000	966,600	1,288,800
Total	2,040,800	3,826,400	5,101,800

Source: FAO/WFP crop and food supply assessment mission to Zimbabwe, 18 June 2008

Diversifying responses from food aid

A powerful illustration of donor-driven decision-making is the provision of food aid as the first line of defence and response to most food crises. Food aid continues to dominate the response, in terms of both what is appealed for and the resources supplied by donors. A comparative analysis of the 2001–2003 and 2005–2006 crises in southern Africa (Maunder and Wiggins, 2007) found that the emergency responses remained largely unchanged – that is, dominated by large-scale food aid. In effect, many EWS have been designed to answer an operational question of “when, where and how much food aid to deliver?”

In-kind food aid undoubtedly continues to be a key tool in famine prevention. However, the scale of its use clearly owes much to the ready availability of this resource for emergency response, largely because of the agricultural surpluses resulting from domestic agricultural policies in the donor nations. The emphasis given to food aid as the main response runs counter to the growing consensus on the limitations of in-kind food aid. The time lags are significant; these may average in excess of six months for the delivery of internationally sourced food, thus compromising the timeliness of the response (Barrett and Maxwell, 2005).

Furthermore, there are significant doubts about the appropriateness of food aid in addressing the real causes of malnutrition – which may be far more varied than a shortfall in food consumption. As Gro Harlem Brundtland, former director general of the World Health Organization and prime minister of Norway, has said:

“The dual scourge of hunger and malnutrition will be truly vanquished not only when granaries are full, but also when people’s basic health needs are met and women are given their rightful role in societies.”
(FAO, 2002)

Critically, food aid may protect lives, but it is a highly inefficient and ineffective means of protecting livelihoods. Effective early action in support of livelihoods requires the more balanced use of a range of instruments that deal with the genuine causes of vulnerability, as opposed to merely what donors are willing to give.

A greater role for cash transfers?

Over the last decade there has been a rapid growth in experimentation with the use of cash transfers and vouchers in meeting food needs in emergencies. Critical potential benefits of cash transfers include greater timeliness, greater flexibility and individual choice for beneficiaries in the use of the resource, cost savings and positive secondary impacts on the local markets and economy. Examples of large-scale *emergency* cash transfer programmes remain limited, although a growing number of pilot

programmes are yielding important quantitative evidence of their beneficial impact. For example, the evaluation of Save the Children-UK's emergency drought response in Swaziland in 2007–2008 revealed that not only were cash transfers used to ensure access to food for drought-affected families, but that they also enabled the purchase of other essential non-food items and were in part invested in assets and livelihoods (Devereux and Jere, 2008). The World Food Programme has recently made a positive policy commitment to consider cash and voucher schemes as an alternative to food aid.

Clearly, the use of cash is not a panacea. The appropriateness of cash or voucher transfers varies enormously depending on the context. Cash will only be appropriate if the necessary goods or services are available on local markets. Depending on the situation, cash, vouchers or the in-kind provision of commodities or services may be the preferred or the only feasible option. A range of resources, commodities and services is needed to save lives and livelihoods and to prevent and mitigate acute food insecurity.

Early action to protect livelihoods

There is a broad consensus on the need to react to early indications of a pending crisis and implement relief action designed to strengthen livelihoods. When a slow-onset event begins to emerge, there are various possible interventions which can be used to support traditional coping mechanisms. These options can help avoid, or at least mitigate, the impending crisis. But why has it been so problematic to translate these ideas into action, and can more early action be taken?

At the most basic level, there is often a lack of understanding over what interventions are appropriate and cost-effective in a given employment context. Relief workers often lack the detailed knowledge of people's livelihoods necessary to facilitate the planning of more sophisticated emergency responses. Such detailed knowledge is typically held by development workers, acquired through their sustained work with communities at risk.

Poor coordination between organizations and their staff in the field, as well as between emergency and development agencies, is an important issue. All sides bring key skills and capacities to the response task. Development specialists have strengths in grass-roots participation, detailed analysis of the socio-cultural context and capacity-building, which are vital to understanding and implementing early livelihood actions.

Conversely, emergency specialists bring skills in vulnerability analysis and logistics as well as the ability rapidly to implement interventions at scale. These diverse skills need to be brought together, through the establishment of appropriate coordination and consultation mechanisms.

Another aspect of an improved strategy to protect livelihoods must be the dissemination of knowledge on emergency response options. The Livestock Emergency Guidelines (LEGS) is a useful and valuable model for what might be achieved (see Box 5.4) and it is now being replicated in the fisheries sector.

Box 5.4 Livelihoods-based interventions, pastoralism and drought

Two underlying principles of livelihoods-based programming in disasters are to protect people's key assets and to support the local markets and services which are needed for recovery after a disaster.

In pastoralist areas of Africa, these principles can be applied to drought as a slow-onset hazard which is, to a large extent, an expected, although not precisely predictable, event.

Approaches to dealing with drought are not new and include drought cycle management as a means to identify appropriate livelihoods-based responses relative to the progression of drought. In these areas, livestock are the key livelihoods asset; the responses, therefore, centre on converting these assets into cash, protecting a 'core herd' needed for recovery after the drought and, as a last resort, rebuilding herds through restocking.

Following the drought cycle management model above, early warning requires timely detection of the alert/alarm phase of a drought and early response requires timely action. Furthermore, experience from the Horn of Africa shows that it makes strong economic sense to intervene early. As a general rule, well-designed interventions implemented during the alert/alarm phase of a drought carry a far higher benefit-cost ratio than interventions used later on.

The benefits of early response: commercial destocking in Ethiopia

In 2006, the USAID-funded Pastoralist Livelihoods Initiative programme in Ethiopia responded to drought by linking livestock traders to

hitherto unaccessed pastoralist communities. Facilitated by Save the Children US, the Ethiopian government and Tufts University, the process led to traders using their own resources to buy approximately 20,000 cattle, valued at US\$ 1.01 million. Pastoralists did not opt to sell all of their cattle, but selected specific types of animals for sale while retaining a core herd for breeding (Abebe et al., 2008). On average, destocked pastoral households in the programme received US\$ 186 from the sale of cattle. Approximately 5,405 households were involved. In terms of aid investment, the approximate benefit-cost ratio was 41:1 for the intervention.

During the drought, income from destocking accounted for 54.2 per cent of household income (n=114 households), and this income was used to buy food, care for livestock, meet various domestic expenses, support relatives, and either pay off debts or add to savings. In terms of supporting local markets and services, 79 per cent of the income derived from destocking was used to buy local commodities or services. Expenditure on livestock care amounted to 36.5 per cent of the local expenditure, and included the private trucking of livestock to better grazing areas (Abebe et al., 2008).

Constraints to early response

Despite the obvious benefits of livelihoods-based interventions such as commercial destocking, this kind of early response has yet to be institutionalized in Horn of Africa countries. For humanitarian actors and systems, key remaining challenges include:

- Early warning systems do not present information against a drought cycle management framework or use specific indicators for each stage of the cycle.
- Humanitarian actors wait for an official declaration of a disaster which, for drought, means waiting until substantial livestock assets have already been lost.
- Even when an alert/alarm phase is accurately identified, the decision-making processes and administrative rules in UN agencies and large non-governmental organizations (NGOs) prevent appropriate and timely response.
- In some emergencies, donors have limited capacity to assess proposals using livelihoods-based approaches.

It follows that strong livelihoods-based interventions during drought in pastoralist areas tend not to be implemented by typical emergency actors, but more by agencies with a long-term presence on the ground through development programmes.

Some of these players have built-in contingency funds and triggers which enable them to react quickly during the alert/alarm phase of a drought, and to respond on the basis of a relatively in-depth understanding of local livelihoods and of the capacities of government and private sector.

The livelihoods and programming logic of this kind of predictive flexibility indicates that all 'pastoral development' programmes should view drought as normal and include drought contingency funds supported by pre-agreed triggers, rapid decision-making and streamlined procurement and contracting arrangements. None of these ideas are new, but tend to contradict the trend within the UN and larger NGOs towards greater financial accountability and risk-averse management. Yet it makes little

sense to account for every cent if the response was late and had no impact.

Livestock Emergency Guidelines and Standards

The Livestock Emergency Guidelines and Standards (LEGS) are being developed as a set of international guidelines and standards for the design, implementation and assessment of livestock interventions to assist people affected by humanitarian crises.

The LEGS process:

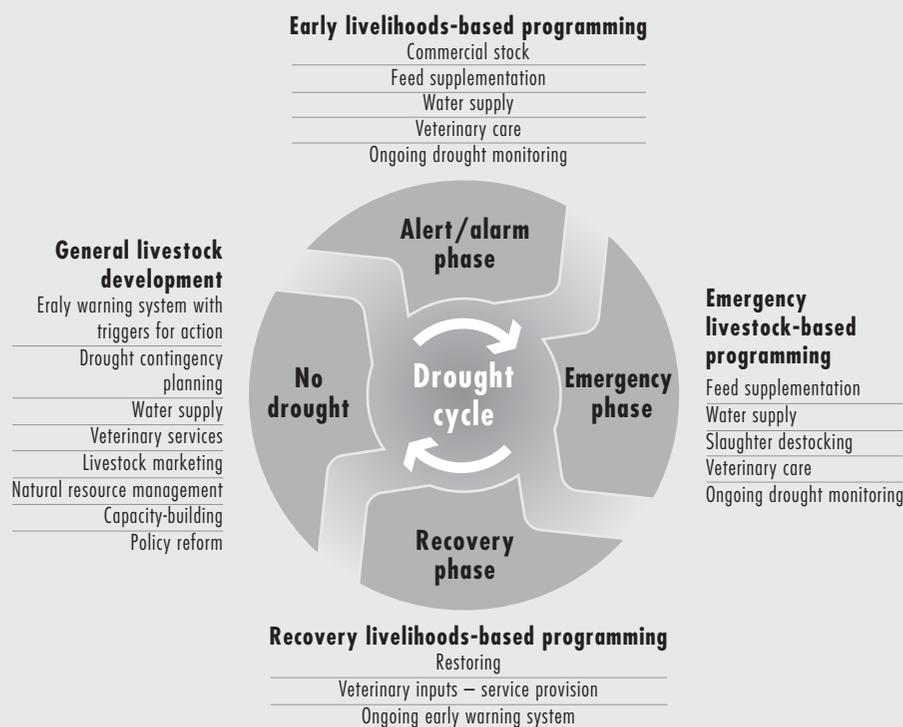
- grew out of a recognition that livestock are a crucial livelihoods asset for people throughout the world and that livestock interventions are often a feature of relief responses. Yet to date, there are no widely available guidelines to assist donors, programme managers or technical experts in the design or implementation of livestock interventions in disasters
- mirrors the process for developing the *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response* – the Sphere Project. The process is based on multi-agency contributions and broad reviews and collation of practitioner experience. LEGS liaises closely with the Sphere Project and intends to become one of the first Sphere 'companion modules'
- recognizes the value of livelihoods thinking and the need to harmonize 'relief' and 'development' approaches. This means promoting more long-term thinking and response in emergencies. This approach is particularly important as climatic trends are causing more frequent and varied humanitarian crises, particularly affecting communities such as pastoralists who rely heavily on livestock
- is led by a steering group comprising the Feinstein International Center (Tufts University), the International Committee of the Red Cross, the FAO, the African Union and Vétérinaires sans frontières, Belgium

- will result in an independent publication available as hard copy and CD-ROM in early 2009. Soft copies will also be available on the LEGS web site (www.livestock-emergency.net). LEGS will also run a series of awareness-raising and training events to promote the use and future revision of the standards and guidelines

In terms of timely responses to drought in pastoralist areas, LEGS advocates early, livelihoods-based interventions. As a set of international guidelines, LEGS should act as a point of reference for donors, NGOs and government agencies involved in drought response. LEGS also covers rapid-onset hazards, such as floods and earthquakes, and complex emergencies. ■

Figure 1

Livelihoods-based livestock interventions in the drought cycle



Source: Adapted from Aklilu et al., 2006

A critical observation is that a relatively narrow window of opportunity exists for implementing specific livelihood interventions. Many are subject to a tight timeline, in many cases only a month or two, beyond which they are ineffective.

For example, working in the Horn of Africa, a region of serious food insecurity, the Pastoral Areas Coordination Analysis and Policy Support (PACAPS) project (part of the USAID-funded Regional Enhanced Livelihoods in Pastoral Areas programme) is

advocating the phased use of a range of early actions to support pastoral livelihoods. In this region, given that a crisis normally spans two rainy seasons (see Figure 5.3), the timeline for some possible interventions would include:

- appropriate livestock feeding from around August, when pasture is scarce and animal condition is deteriorating, until the following March, when the rains may bring new pasture
- support to livestock marketing from around August, when poor body condition pushes prices down, until December once the condition of the animals is so poor that they have little market value
- mass destocking by early October, since it can be anticipated that animals will be dying in large numbers by January; destocking would be supported by selective livestock deworming and feeding to keep them in a marketable condition and to maintain a core breeding herd until the next rains (PACAPS, October 2008)

To support decision-making about when to implement livelihood interventions, a range of sensitive trigger points, or thresholds, should be defined. To reduce response delays, each of these thresholds should automatically trigger associated action. Achieving this aim demands redesigning early warning systems so that there is no longer a primary and single-purpose trigger of deterioration in welfare.

Furthermore, many of these triggers may only be visible in local-level systems, rather than at regional and national levels. The point is, therefore, not just to give an early warning of an impending crisis, but also to provide the information about the detailed scenario likely to unfold over the crisis period.

Figure 5.3

The evolution of a pastoral food crisis in the Horn of Africa

	March April	May June	July August	September October	November December	January February
	poor rains	no rain		poor rains	poor rains	
<i>pasture</i>		declining	very scarce	none		none
<i>livestock condition</i>		declining		very poor – old and weak starting to die	mortality increasing	high mortality
<i>livestock market</i>	high		low demand and price	very low demand and price	no demand, exploitation price	

Source: PACAPS, October 2008

Action-oriented contingency planning

Many of these alternative livelihood interventions require more time to design and plan than do general food distribution schemes. The problem is that given current start-up times, it may be necessary to decide upon and initiate action *before* the trigger points have been reached. Therefore, it may be vital to compress the timeline for implementing the response.

Response-oriented contingency planning has been advocated to increase the effectiveness of such time-critical livelihood interventions. Contingency planning should focus on the most probable scenarios and a limited number of feasible, tested response options. In these situations the goal is to reduce the associated timelines for implementation. Activities can be analysed to see which could be carried out well before a crisis matures, as the following quotation explains:

“For example, preparing draft job descriptions and having these approved ‘in principle’ could save two or three days. Pre-qualifying suppliers could save another two or three days by checking up on trading licences. A short list of pre-qualified suppliers would also shorten the time for advertising a tender by over a week. Having draft project proposals written and discussed both within the organisation and with potential donors could save much more time. Ensuring that customs staff recognise and can accept the goods which will need to be imported could save long delays. Working as a team, staff will quickly see that individual ‘savings’ of one or two days quickly add up to improving response times by weeks or months. None of the steps should involve much expenditure of resources, so there should be little waste if crises don’t occur.”

(PACAPS, September 2008)

Overall, early livelihood interventions have the potential of providing more timely, appropriate and cost-effective interventions. Nevertheless, it is difficult to find examples where humanitarian aid has prevented a large-scale crisis specifically by protecting household assets.

Even the advocates of these new strategies are pragmatic about the extent to which they constitute a comprehensive solution. The conservatism of response agencies and donors still needs to be overcome. Even then, the sophistication of the strategies – in contrast to the uniformity of traditional food-aid approaches – calls for strong technical and organizational capacities at the local level. In consequence, they must be thought of as offering a partial, albeit important, element of the overall effort to improve early action and prevent serious food crises in the wake of an emergency.

The role of risk reduction and safety nets

The practical constraints on our ability to react to the first signs of an acute crisis and mount a timely response are daunting. Hence, there is increased awareness of the need to concentrate on preventing and mitigating disasters *before* the shock occurs. In the broadest sense, the above can be thought of as part of an early warning *system*. Early warning starts with a process of risk assessment. This involves identifying hazards, high-risk areas, vulnerabilities, capacities and the probabilities of disasters occurring. Logically, the next stage consists of prevention and mitigation activities to protect against the identified risks.

There is growing attention to disaster risk reduction (DRR), which identifies opportunities for the prevention and mitigation of risks. DRR aims to decrease the likelihood that shocks will occur or, if they do occur, that they will cause damage. DRR can, in theory, reduce the need for emergency response to food crises. Examples of actions that reduce risk range from establishing early warning systems, to improving agricultural resilience (through distributing drought-tolerant seeds) and protecting the environment (such as implementing water conservation measures).

So far there is little quantitative evidence that investments in risk reduction are effective in maintaining food security in the face of shocks. The absence of this evidence does not imply that risk reduction investment is ineffective; rather it points to the need for improved impact evaluations.

Scaling up established safety nets to mitigate the impact of an unfolding disaster is an important area, but so far one which is under-explored. Capitalizing on the existence of an ongoing and well-funded poverty alleviation programme would greatly reduce the response lag-time.

Tangible, albeit modest, progress has been made in rolling out social protection and safety nets in a number of low-income countries. Several donors and international NGOs have taken a keen interest in safety nets and social protection. National governments are more ambivalent, concerned as they are about the fiscal implications of investing in safety nets and the difficulties of targeting the needy. Despite this, the number of social protection programmes is increasing. These programmes encompass a wide range of instruments, from poverty alleviation transfers targeted at the chronically poor, to transfers which support desirable agricultural, health or educational outcomes.

One of the most ambitious programmes has been the establishment of a safety net programme in Ethiopia (see Box 5.5). In 2006 the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) was used, on a pilot basis, to distribute additional resources to farmers affected by drought. The outcome of this pilot project could have significant ramifications for transforming the future delivery of humanitarian aid.

Box 5.5 Ethiopia Productive Safety Net Programme: improving the efficiency and effectiveness of emergency response

The Ethiopia PSNP is an innovative attempt to meet predictable food needs in more appropriate ways and thus limit the extent of household impoverishment in the event of a natural hazard.

Over the last two decades, emergency appeals for Ethiopia have become an annual event. Between 1994 and 2004, the number of food aid beneficiaries in Ethiopia fluctuated between 5 and 14 million. It has become increasingly clear that a large proportion of the households targeted for emergency food aid were, in fact, vulnerable not as a result of exceptional circumstances – such as drought – but rather due to predictable seasonal food shortages caused largely by structural agricultural production constraints and poverty.

People living with chronic food insecurity are, clearly, also vulnerable to other shocks to their livelihoods. In an emergency, families may be forced to take children out of school or sell productive assets and household goods in order to survive. The consequences are inevitably long term and with each shock, families and communities become less able to cope and fall further into food insecurity.

Decades of large-scale food aid did little to prevent this deterioration of livelihoods. As Food for the Hungry's country director in Ethiopia reported: "Food aid appeals were made based on annual crop assessments. The timing of these assessments and appeals made it difficult to receive the food aid on time and many people had to sell assets to survive until the food arrived. The food-for-work activities associated with these annual appeals were hastily planned and the quality of the activities was in many cases less than desired. Truly, a new approach to programming food aid was needed for the

lives of these food insecure households and communities to improve" (Alliance for Food Aid, 2008).

To better address long-term vulnerability to food insecurity in response to this situation, the government of Ethiopia, jointly with WFP and the World Bank, initiated a PSNP. This programme provides for a multi-year response to those affected by chronic hunger instead of the relatively unreliable annual emergency appeals. The PSNP has received widespread donor support, including the Canadian International Development Agency, Development Cooperation Ireland, European Commission, the United Kingdom's Department for International Development, USAID and the World Bank.

Under the PSNP, resource transfers (a mix of cash and food-for-work) are planned in advance and made available during the annual hunger period. The PSNP offers food-for-work and cash-for-work opportunities to households with productive members, while households without labour qualify for unconditional food or cash transfers. The programme is designed to provide timely resources that help households to bridge periods of hunger without having to sell scarce assets to survive.

The ultimate goal of the PSNP is to produce long-term improvements in livelihoods so that households can 'graduate' from the need for external food assistance. The logic is that not only are household assets protected, but household and community assets will be built up over time, since most of the food-for-work activities reinforce the communities' protective environment (e.g., erosion control, drainage and reservoirs) and leave households more food secure.

The PSNP is designed to meet structural food deficits in the absence of an emergency.

In a typical year, no emergency appeal is needed beyond the programmed PSNP resources.

Over the first four years of the programme's operations, good rains prevailed. Unfortunately in 2008, weather conditions led to an exceptional food crisis, and needs were well in excess of the planned capacity of the PSNP. However, the framework of the PSNP was used to expand deliveries efficiently, without the long start-up time and delays of stand-alone emergency programmes. Whereas in a normal year the chronically food insecure households may need food support for five or six months, in 2008 they required an additional three months of rations. By the same token, the PSNP has some flexibility to provide support to population groups not normally affected by structural food insecurity (i.e., only in times of crisis).

A pilot scheme is developing a model for financing unforeseen additional distributions under the PSNP as a result of drought shocks. The project, whereby farmers would receive cash payments in the event of a severe drought, was piloted by the WFP and its reinsurance partner Axa Re in 2006. Weather-indexed payments are triggered early in the season, mostly by comparing levels of rainfall with historical levels and crop requirements. The goal is to provide a national-level programme, where the insurance cover generates a contingency fund for up to 6.7 million people in the case of a severe drought.

"This is the first ever attempt of the humanitarian community to approach risk in a social protection fashion, determining in advance of a

crisis which segments of a population are at risk from what sources, and intervening with mechanisms that are able to avert or mitigate a crisis before it occurs" (Maxwell et al., 2008).

The early studies of the impact of the PSNP are generally positive. The main operational concern is that distributions have not proved to be as predictable as intended – in either timing or quantity. This has obviously limited the food security impacts (Gilligan et al., 2008). It is also argued that a safety net programme alone is unlikely to enable graduation on any scale: "A combination of a safety net programme and other programmes will enable some (but not all) households to also build assets, but whether they thereby graduate into food security will depend to a large extent on whether critical enabling elements in the wider environment are in place" (RHVP, August 2007).

However, there is little doubt that this model offers a considerable improvement over sole reliance on annual emergency appeals. Most significantly, emergency needs may be met in a more timely way that helps to preserve basic household assets and livelihoods. In addition, redirecting the responsibility for responding to chronic needs has important repercussions for reducing operational pressures on scarce humanitarian capacities and budgets. This strategy deserves further consideration in other regions or countries (western and southern Africa and Bangladesh have been mentioned) where chronic hunger persists alongside the capacity and political will to establish and manage such schemes. ■

Political and financial support for early action

Even when the technical elements of an effective early warning and response system are in place, the effectiveness of the response is highly dependent on the overall governance context. Amartya Sen's provocative observation (Sen, 1999) that "famines don't occur in democracies" raised the all-important question of governance and accountability.



The primary responsibility in any country for ensuring the right to food rests with the leaders and administrators of that country. Despite the widely endorsed political commitments to the reduction and eventual elimination of hunger, many of the most serious food crises are clearly associated with a failure of states to protect, respect and fulfil the right to food. Indeed, it can be argued that poor governance may be viewed as the major underlying cause of food crises.

Failures of governance that contribute to the escalation of food crises occur at many levels. Long-term efforts to reduce vulnerability depend on the success of governments in tackling poverty and delivering the range of basic services in health, sanitation, education – which are strongly correlated with food security. At a basic level, emergency response cannot compensate for failures of development.

At a cruder level, there may be political interference in the monitoring process and the distribution of humanitarian aid. While a common concern is the artificial inflation of needs, in fact the reverse may be the case, even more insidious in its consequences. Recently it has been claimed that, for diverse reasons, several governments have been unwilling to acknowledge and respond to the food crises; examples cited include Senegal (McNabb, 2008) and Ethiopia (Righter, 2008).

A farmer works in a field of maize near Siara village in Ethiopia.

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International Federation

That good governance is necessary to prevent acute food insecurity goes without saying. More generally, though, responsibility for preventing hunger and malnutrition must be shared by nations globally. The donor nations persistently fall far short of delivering on existing aid commitments.

It is unclear whether, even if these commitments were met, this would suffice to meet established needs and prevent a continuing downward spiral of destitution in the most vulnerable regions. Uncomfortable comparisons deserve to be drawn between the willingness to mobilize huge sums to respond to the global financial crisis of 2008, with the parsimonious response to appeals to meet the survival needs of the world's poorest and most destitute.

Clearly, it is not just the quantity of funding that is important, but also the quality. Flexible emergency funding needs to be made available to support early action, ideally well in advance through the establishment of national safety net programmes. Although progress has been made in improving the availability and flexibility of funding, this is still the exception rather than the norm. As CARE reports:

“Donors are still failing to fund preventative action adequately. In April 2008, three donors either refused or ignored CARE’s requests for funds to protect the health and assets of vulnerable populations faced with crop failure and rising prices in the Horn of Africa. But later some of these same donors funded expensive emergency responses instead. Heartening exceptions have been the US Agency for International Development’s new flexible multi-year development funding in southern Ethiopia, and the European Community Humanitarian Office’s regional drought funding in the Horn of Africa.”

(CARE, 2008)

The establishment of various ‘pooled’ donor funds for emergency response funds has been part of wider UN reform programme. These have included the establishment of the Common Emergency Response Fund (CERF) and other country-specific pooled donor funds. The recent CERF evaluation found some evidence that its fund had contributed to the timeliness of response, but had mainly been used by UN agencies to respond in traditional ways – for example, via food aid (Barber et al., 2008).

A specific criticism of the CERF has been that it is not directly accessible to NGOs, the very agencies best placed to implement livelihood interventions. Therefore, further adapted, or additional, funding instruments are still needed to support the flexible funding of livelihood interventions that can respond dynamically to changing circumstances (see, for example, Simpkin, 2005).

An agenda for action

It is hard to justify or accept a continuance of the status quo, where natural hazards trigger a descent into nutritional emergencies. The knowledge and resources exist to prevent this cycle of suffering. Improving early warning and early action presents one important opportunity to address this problem. While significant progress in this area is evident, what has been achieved still falls far short of what is needed, given the paramount importance of protecting lives and livelihoods from natural hazards, wherever possible.

Given the complexity of livelihoods, and the numerous and evolving sources of risk and variable governance capacities, there is no simple or uniform solution for improving the early warning and early action systems. The challenges and opportunities are highly context-specific and action on multiple fronts is needed. Overall, a number of general conclusions and common themes for action emerge.

First, considerable progress has been made in monitoring, analysing and disseminating early warning of risks to food security. The operation of early warning is still far from perfect and deserves continued development and support. Placing greater emphasis on early livelihood action demands new thinking on what to monitor, how to analyse it and how to report it. But only infrequently is an absence of early warning cited as a critical constraint on action. At the same time, a major remaining challenge occurs when conflict precludes humanitarian access. Second, there is a growing consensus around, and knowledge of, what early actions are necessary and appropriate to prevent hunger and destitution. The capacity to deliver a diversified menu of tailored response recommendations is increasing, but more needs to be done to put in place the ability to react in a timely and appropriate way to early warnings.

There are a number of promising avenues of action, which can be scaled up and built upon. Much needs to be done to strengthen implementation capacity for early livelihood actions. Capitalizing on the roll-out of social safety nets as a means of mitigating risk is an emerging and promising opportunity that deserves greater support.

Nevertheless, what emerges as the single most critical constraint on more effective action is the uneven level of demonstrated political commitment for early action. Rarely are national governments or donors held accountable in this respect. As noted, the primary responsibility for ensuring the right to food in any country rests with the national government.

Creative solutions to strengthening the responsibility and accountability of governments to their own citizens must be a priority. At a donor level, financial aid commitments must be better met, both with respect to humanitarian response and to address the underlying structural causes through increased development funding.

CHAPTER 5

Chapter 5 and three boxes were written by Nick Maunder who works in the field of food security, social protection and vulnerability analysis. He is currently the European Commission Directorate General for Humanitarian Aid (DG-ECHO) sector expert for food assistance and disaster risk reduction. The opinions expressed are solely those of the author. Box 5.3 was written by Jean-Luc Martinage and Matthew Cochrane of the International Federation's secretariat. Andy Catley, research director at the Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and a member of the LEGS steering group, contributed Box 5.4.

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