



Improving Food Security Analysis and Response: Some Brief Reflections[†]

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It is both an honor and a challenge to address a global gathering such as this. I want to share a couple of reflections on where we are as a “community of practice” in the food security enterprise—a group of people who have a common interest or problem, collaborate to share ideas, find solutions, and build innovations.

Since our deliberation these two days is around analysis and response I will briefly reflect on a couple of points on those topics—and try to relate them to the Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) tool. These include a couple of technical points, and one point of a more political nature.

Technical Issues

The imperative for analysis to enable an appropriate, impartial, and proportional response was brought back to our community three years ago by the landmark ODI study, *According to Need* by James Darcy and Charles-Antoine Hoffman.¹ That report had three important points:

1. International humanitarian financing is not equitably allocated across crisis and amounts allocated do not reflect comparative levels of need;
2. There is no system-wide framework for judging the relative severity of crises and for aligning response accordingly;
3. Donors are skeptical about agency’s assessments and agencies doubt that objective assessment is the basis on which they make allocations anyway.

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¹ James Darcy and Charles-Antoine Hofmann. 2003. *According to Need? Needs Assessment and Decision-Making in the Humanitarian Sector*. Humanitarian Policy Group Report #15. London: Overseas Development Institute.



This was not the first time these criticisms had been made regarding humanitarian response. The following year Simon Levine and Claire Chastre² reviewed emergency food security interventions in Central Africa and pointed out that many emergency food security programs:

- Actually failed to address needs;
- Were not based on analysis and therefore were not even designed to address needs;
- Were not well thought through but were based on a relatively narrow range of pre-existing packages—largely food aid and agricultural inputs;
- In many cases, ignored existing information.

To summarize briefly, the programs operated by our community of practice were often not having not having the intended impact; they were based on little or no analysis, or when analysis was done, it had been un-transparent, irreproducible, and generally just not very good. Serious questions arose about our ability to compare across contexts. And there was clearly a question of trust between ourselves and our donors. So a couple of questions arise:

1. Can we really get to a comparative analysis that truly enables impartial response?
2. Can we link this analysis in a practical way to interventions?

Both the Strengthening Emergency Needs Assessment Capacity (SENAC) project and the IPC tool are major attempts to come to grips with the analysis problem. SENAC is now being externally reviewed, and one of the first questions is that of believability and transparency. A second question is about impact at the field level—about whether better analysis is leading to better programs. The web-based discussion we've been having the past several weeks about the IPC is another approach, as are the humanitarian benchmarking initiative, the SMART initiative and other initiatives to standardize analysis.

We rely to a large degree on in-depth contextual knowledge to detect crises. The IPC is trying to pull us towards a comparative analysis by suggesting how specific indicators can work towards a summary synthesis—creating a “common currency” as Nick Haan, the primary author of the IPC, describes it. But even with the most universally comparative of our indicators—would any of us here really be ready to say that 15% global acute malnutrition *means* the same thing in Zimbabwe as it does in Somalia? I ask this not in the bio-physical sense—that much we're agreed upon. Rather I ask it in an analytical, humanitarian, and programmatic sense—i.e. that resources ought to be allocated accordingly? Or to put it in the context of the IPC, does ranking a situation a “humanitarian emergency” with all the analysis made clear, *mean* the same thing as a across those two contexts?

In theory, if we've done our analytical homework, then these should *mean* the same thing. But, if I were in the hot seat, I can imagine myself squirming a little bit, clearing my throat and explaining that perhaps it's a little more complicated than that. One has to take into consideration all kinds of contextual factors. Depth of contextual knowledge is nothing to be ashamed of, but it probably does mitigate our attempts at impartial comparison. But I'd be reluctant to admit this too loudly for fear that admitting some uncertainty would be seized on by less scrupulous parties who contend that since impartiality is a fiction anyway, we should dispense with any notion of it. I'm left with the slightly uneasy feeling of an irresolvable problem. Except that, I would ask, is comparing across contexts really what our analysis is really our first priority? Or is that a donor demand on our skills? I can't these questions, but we need to talk about them.

² Simon Levine and Claire Chastre (et al.) 2004. *Missing the point: an analysis of food security interventions in the Great Lakes*. Network Paper 47, Humanitarian Practice Network. London: Overseas Development Institute.

Perhaps going forward, the emphasis should perhaps be to ensure that minimum standards in analysis are met—which they clearly are not at the moment—and to ensure that “good enough” analysis underpins everything that we do. We haven’t resolved all analytical problems but let’s ensure that the “perfect” doesn’t become the enemy of the “good enough” in our analysis.

That brings me to my second point: the link between situational analysis and response, or *response analysis*.

For far too long, we simply equated a food security problem with a food gap; and a food gap with a food aid response. Our knowledge about cash programming has expanded dramatically, and at least some donors are moving in the direction of greater flexibility. John Hoddinott³ recently caricatured the debate over the appropriate response as one between food and cash. But the real point is that while we now have several tools in our response toolbox, we have had no agreed procedure for deciding which response is best one to use. And to be honest the “foodies” among us were no less prone to knee-jerk programmatic responses than the “aggies” were. The IPC doesn’t provide detailed instructions on this kind of analysis, but at least it clearly draws our attention to it. While I don’t have time here to describe it, there is a lot of work being done in this area.

So we haven’t sat still on this issue either, but I wonder: if Claire Chastre and Simon Levine were to return to the Great Lakes today, would they find emergency response in food security crises very different? I fear that our response is still—often, not always—conditioned by donor and local authority preference rather than good *response analysis*. But if our programs continue to call for inappropriate or second-best resources because we assume that’s the best we can do, or because we can’t say what the first-best resources are, we can hardly absolve ourselves of responsibility for less than optimal response.

Broader political issues

Several recent studies on humanitarian assistance from outside our community make it clear that the best analysis and the best of intentions fall prey to forces beyond our control. Olsen⁴ and colleagues analyzed three main factors that they determined were the key determinants of the scope and magnitude of humanitarian response.

- Security and geo-political concerns outweigh all other factors in determining a donor response to a humanitarian crisis.
- The media (or the “CNN effect”) actually only occasionally plays a decisive role in convincing donors to allocate resources.
- Humanitarian capacity on the ground, including analytical and response capacity, does have some impact of the decisions of donors

Drury⁵ and his colleagues were looking at US humanitarian assistance only, and concluded that:

³ John Hoddinott. 2006. “A conceptual framework for appropriate emergency response options” Washington: IFPRI.

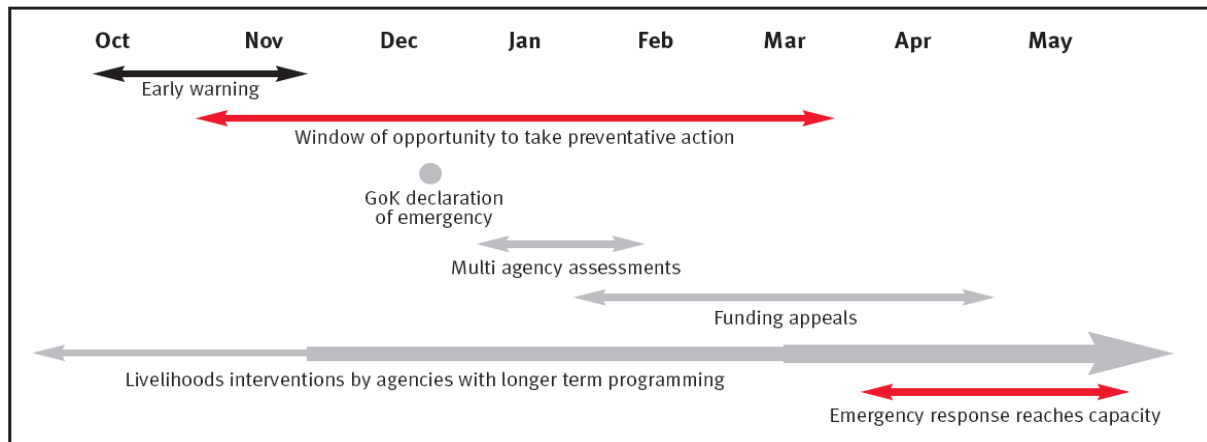
⁴ Gormley Olsen, Nils Carstensen, and Khristian Hoyen. 2003. “Humanitarian Crises: What Determines the Level of Emergency Assistance? Media Coverage, Donor Interests and the Aid Business.” *Disasters*. 27(2): 109–126.

⁵ A. Cooper Drury, Richard Olson, and Douglas Van Belle. 2005. “The Politics of Humanitarian Aid: US Foreign Disaster Assistance, 1964-1995.” *Journal of Politics*. 67(2): 454–473.

- US response is strongly tied to geo-political interests, particularly at the level of whether or not there is a response, but also at the “level of response” question.
- The media is important in the US: one New York Times article is more predictive of a US response than is the *documented evidence* of 1,500 deaths from a disaster. (Think about that for a second!)

There is a critique—also from completely outside our little community of practice—which basically argues that the Early Warning and Response system as it now exists, is condemned forever to “partial success.”⁶ That is, it will produce an analysis, it will raise an alarm, and it will mobilize some resources that will save some people’s lives. But as it is constituted, it cannot protect everyone’s life and livelihood—because it does not spring into action until after some people have died and some livelihoods destroyed. This is fundamentally because the system as it now exists is there to meet the needs of the responders and not the needs of the people the systems ostensibly exists to protect, and because we can’t decide whether we’re more concerned about leakage or under-coverage. The implication is that the bottom line concern is to contain the damage, not to prevent it. I’m not completely sure I agree with the analysis, but it is pretty hard to disagree with the evidence: I wish I had the time to walk us through an analysis of the drought crisis in the Greater Horn last year. Figure 1 below outlines the main stages in response to that crisis.

Figure 1: Timeline of key events, October 2005–May 2006



Early Warning clearly worked well during the rainy season. That was a clear success for the IPC and its related early warning tools. Needs assessments were conducted beginning in December and the government in Kenya declared an emergency in December. But appeals weren’t launched until February and although some response started by February, the real flow of funds from international donors began only in March after a visit from the newly appointed UN Special Humanitarian Envoy. So once again, our community knew well enough in advance, but once again, we were unable to mount a credible response for a long time after knowing.

So what do we do? Obviously we still have work to do. I would suggest we prioritize three things.

First, let’s certainly continue to push for analysis that enables an impartial response, but let’s not downplay contextual knowledge. And let’s also focus on getting all programs to be based on “good enough” analysis.

⁶ Kent Glenzer. 2007. “We Aren’t the World: Discourses on the Sahel, Partnership, and the Institutional Production of Early Warning Systems That Are Predictably Partially Successful.” Unpublished.

Second, let's prioritize good response analysis and the tools it requires by insisting that proposals include it and justify the *type* of resources requested, not just the *amount*. Let's include an evaluation of the actual resources used in response in after-action reviews, and build up a stronger base of evidence about on this topic.

Third, if the two studies I cited are right, then at least one part of the complex set of factors that put people at risk today is the political economy of response, as much as natural or economic hazards—or even conflict. Can our analysis actually begin to factor these risks in? I think it can, but to have any impact, we would have to put much more emphasis on working with policy makers to ensure long-term change. Better analysis will mean a better evidence base to influence policy making. I'm told that in the field of public health, for decades, diagnostic and prescriptive capacity ran far ahead of the political will to provide broad access to health care, but in the long-term those advances were an important input to the process of changing public policy.

A window of opportunity to effect real change in US aid policy may open in a couple of years with a change of administration—regardless of who wins the elections—but only if we begin now to amass the evidence. We should all work together in that effort and identify other windows of opportunity to change policy as well.