Global implications of Somalia 2011 for famine prevention, mitigation and response ☆

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ABSTRACT

The famine in Somalia 2011–2012 is a call for critical reflection and improvement. This article reviews lessons emerging from the series of articles in this special edition of Global Food Security, and identifies global implications for famine prevention, mitigation, and response in five key areas: the delay in response, the criteria for declaring a famine, the response, humanitarian space, and accountability. Three areas are identified for further research, including implications of Somalia 2011 for practice and policy; linkages to the resilience agenda and the imperative to prevent—not just respond to—famine; and implications for famine theory. Whether or not famines continue to be part of human existence or are finally relegated to history depends on how well we learn from the experience of Somalia 2011–2012, and how well this learning is incorporated into future policy and practice.
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1. Introduction

The famine in Somalia 2011–2012 is a call for critical reflection and improvement. To summarize the main conclusions, while the emergence of a food security crisis in the Greater Horn of Africa in 2011 was well predicted, inadequate measures were taken to prevent, mitigate and respond to this crisis. In the hardest hit areas of Somalia, this failure resulted in famine. There were multiple proximate causes of the crisis, but the three salient ones were drought, conflict, and a rapid increase in food prices both locally and globally. Somalia 2011 underscored the dire effects of ongoing and worsening underlying causes to the crisis, including civil insecurity, lack of governance, environmental degradation, and increasing climate variability. Control over the affected area by an insurgent group broadly opposed to both food aid and to foreign intervention, in combination with counter-terrorism laws and related policies in donor countries, confounded efforts to prevent or respond to the crisis. In addition, the long-standing willingness of the international community to tolerate higher levels of humanitarian suffering in Somalia than in other parts of the world made putting off response easier.

2011 was the first time that a famine was declared in real-time, using a broadly accepted set of criteria—a declaration that finally mobilized a vigorous (but tragically late) response. Part of the response was the innovative use of cash transfers to reach populations who were unreachable by food aid operations. Because of insecurity and restrictions on access, much of the crisis was managed remotely. Innovative means of monitoring—in addition to the unique function of the Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit (FSNAU) and the Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWS NET)—made for a steady stream of data before and during the crisis, though it was difficult to verify some data. There has rarely – if ever – been a crisis and a response that was so apparently rich in data, while so lacking in any human sense of what was happening on the ground among the affected population groups due to lack of humanitarian access.

While reflection on the famine and the response could touch on these and many more issues, this concluding paper focuses on five key points highlighted by the contributions to this special issue. First is the obvious question of why the response was so delayed when the warnings were so clear. Second is a related—but much less discussed—issue about the declaration itself: given that it was the Declaration of Famine, rather than the early warning, that finally prompted a proportionate response, is the threshold for declaring famine "correct?" The third is the response. Given that the most likely option for response to a food security crisis (food aid) was not possible, other responses had to be organized but there was no clear mechanism for determining or prioritizing responses. Fourth is the question of "humanitarian

space" and whether or not belligerents in a conflict recognize that preventing and responding to acute humanitarian crises is a priority that overrides military or strategic objectives. Fifth is the question of accountability. Since at least the mid-1990s, scholars studying famine have identified accountability as the single most important component of the system to prevent, mitigate and respond to famines. Yet by 2011, these mechanisms were not in place, and indeed are not in place as we write.

All these have implications for what can be learned from the famine of 2011–2012—and for what must be improved to prevent the recurrence of similar events. In conclusion, this article considers three further questions: the implications of the 2011–2012 Somalia famine for practice and policy; links to the "resilience" agenda and the imperative to prevent—not just respond to—famine; and implications for what we understand about famines and famine theory.

2. Early warning and the failure of response

The challenge to link early warning to early response is an old and ongoing problem (Buchanan-Smith and Davies, 1995). Papers in this issue and elsewhere have concluded that early warning was adequate in principle (Bailey, 2012; Hillbruner and Moloney, this issue), but did not lead to an adequate response. Professionals in the early warning community should take no comfort in these conclusions. Key questions emerge on the technical nature of classifying food insecurity that apply not just to famine analysis in Somalia, but to any situation of food insecurity globally.

One unique aspect of Somalia 2011 was the use of a widely accepted system for classifying famine (Darcy et al., 2012). The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) divides food insecurity severity levels into five Phases: *None/Minimal, Stressed, Crisis, Emergency, and Famine*. Originally developed by the FAO-managed Food Security Analysis Unit for Somalia in 2004, the IPC has since been adopted as a common standard by a number of UN, NGO, and governmental agencies (FAO, 2012) and is used in more than twenty countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Somalia in 2011 was the first time it was used to declare a famine. But Somalia 2011 also highlighted the importance of the IPC beyond just a classification system. Authors in this issue have noted that while the famine declaration was successful in eliciting a marked response by the international community, it is a failure of the system as a whole to wait for a famine declaration before launching an adequate and proportional response (Hillbruner and Moloney, this issue; Lautze et al., this issue; Menkhaus, this issue). Responses should have been progressively scaled up as the crisis progressed from Phase 2 (Stressed) through Phase 4 (Emergency). A global lesson learned from Somalia 2011 is that there is a need for educating decision makers on the implications of various phases of severity on the IPC scale. The question of the delayed response has been adequately emphasized elsewhere in this special edition, and need not be repeated in detail here.

3. Thresholds for declaring a famine

Another question with global implications concerns the indicators and thresholds that are used to determine levels of severity of food insecurity. The IPC is able to provide a comparable analysis by using a reference table of outcome indicators that in theory should have the same meaning regardless of the causes or context of the food insecurity. The thresholds for these indicators are drawn from global standards and previous efforts of devising classification scales (SCN, 2004, Howe and Devereux, 2004a). However, in the absence of definitive standards for determining

severity levels, the IPC has drawn together the 'best fit' for these indicators. In the case of famine (as noted by Salama et al. in this issue) specific thresholds for each of three outcomes must be present in order to make the declaration: food consumption, nutrition, and mortality. However, in reality there is a complex relationship between these outcomes as they do not all increase and decrease in unison (Young and Jaspars, 2009). The Somalia Famine declaration provided real-time insight into how these indicators interact and provided the opportunity for in-situ analysis of their appropriateness for decision support (Salama et al., this issue). Given the tremendous humanitarian, political, and financial implications of a famine declaration, a legitimate debate on the appropriateness of these indicator thresholds arose from the Somalia 2011 experience. Essentially, the question is whether the thresholds are too high, too low, or does the experience of 2011–2012 suggest that they are about right?

The indicator of mortality poses the biggest controversy. There can be many degrees of famine—some more severe than others. While comparing various historic famines can be important, the question from a decision-making perspective (which is the primary purpose of the IPC) is the point at which a food security situation is so severe that it has crossed a threshold into what can be described as famine—with all the rhetorical and emotive implications of that term. At what point does the international community set aside any (tragically) lingering financial or political hindrances to ratchet up its response in scale, comprehensiveness, and urgency? The real-time nutrition and mortality data collection of the Somalia famine by FSNAU (2012) shed light on how these thresholds increase with other indicators and also with total number of estimated deaths. For reasons related to doubts about the accuracy of population estimates, no figures for total mortality were released at the time of the declaration. But using the thresholds described above and accepting that population estimates were at best inaccurate, by the time Famine was declared, human mortality from the crisis could have already been in the tens of thousands. With this number already so high, raising the threshold for mortality beyond the current 2 deaths per 10,000 per day would have the effect of requiring even more people to perish before a famine would be officially declared. On the other hand, anything lower than the current threshold would leave little distinction from what are commonly accepted as Emergency levels, which are specified by WHO as more than 1 death per 10,000 people per day. Some observers argue that mortality of 1–2 persons per 10,000 per day should be labeled a "minor famine." The Somalia 2011 experience suggests that the current thresholds in IPC analysis for the declaration of famine are about correct—in any case, they have not been revised. It should be reiterated, however, that the IPC is not a tool intended for the classifications of different degrees of famine—other classifications systems are recommended for that, such as the Howe–Devereux famine intensity and magnitude scales (Howe and Devereux, 2004a). Somalia 2011 underscores the need for global discussion and agreement on common standards for classifying food insecurity.

Nonetheless, contributors to this issue and other observers have argued emphatically that the system is broken if desperate populations must wait for famine declarations to evoke an appropriate response, which of course ties the question of thresholds back to the question of early response (Bailey, 2012; Darcy et al., 2012). To some degree, this raises a question not only about the famine thresholds, but also about how response is managed at less severe phases in the IPC—particularly Phase 4 or "Emergency." With regard to Somalia in particular, there is a sense that "Phase 4 happens every year" and hence the urgency intended by such a severe classification is lost—another manifestation of the "normalization of crisis" discussed throughout this special edition. Version 2.0 of the IPC addresses this issue in a different way

by aligning with long standing practice of FEWS NET to have two clear time periods for analysis—a current situation classification and a future projection. For the IPC, the future projection is based on the most likely scenario, and is communicated clearly with maps and tables. It is incumbent on analysts to make the best use of available data and, with acceptable levels of evidence, *make the call* of what they determine will be the future outlook. Authors in this issue have identified two key opportunities for improving early action: incentive-based systems to encourage risk taking on the part of donors and humanitarian agencies (Hillbruner and Moloney, this issue) and accountability at all stages of the humanitarian cycle (see below).

4. The response

The actual response to the famine was shaped by the context—and the controversy over the best way to respond goes at least some way towards explaining the delay in acting on early warning information. The declaration of Famine in Somalia in July 2011 found the international community without its primary food assistance response vehicle—the World Food Programme and other food aid agencies. But more seriously, there was no clear contingency plan for how a major disaster would be handled, given that the WFP option was unavailable (Darcy et al., 2012).

Combined with the other reasons for the delayed response outlined above, this left the humanitarian community with few options other than scaling up non-traditional approaches—particularly cash transfers but also blanket supplementary feeding (Ali and Gelsdorf, this issue; McCloskey-Rebelo et al., this issue). While it may seem in retrospect that there was little alternative to these responses, they were highly controversial at the time—especially cash transfers—which raised four main concerns. The first was about humanitarian access of aid agencies (although in many ways, access presented fewer concerns for a cash response than other response modalities). The second was about the threat of diversion or taxation of transfers—by Al-Shabaab or others—which in the absence of good access was potentially a serious problem and exacerbated the legal risks. The third was whether or not a demand-side intervention like cash would stimulate a market response in terms of food supplies. Finally, a related concern was whether cash would exacerbate food price inflation, which was already high at the time the famine was declared. There was also no clear mechanism for determining what the response should be or who should lead it. One evaluation lists some 15 different coordination forums, in which the possibility of a cash response was debated (Humanitarian Outcomes, forthcoming).

In the event, both global and local food prices actually began to decline about the time of the declaration and dropped continuously throughout the autumn of 2011, so the fears about the market response and food price inflation did not materialize. And though Menkhaus (this issue) notes the fears that agencies had about possible legal liability, to date no humanitarian organization has been charged with violations of counter-terrorism laws. But none of this was so clear at the time.

Two major factors emerge as requiring improvement: coordination and response analysis (the process of determining what response options are most feasible and appropriate under the circumstances). The Food Assistance Cluster[3] was not in position to lead on either response analysis or strategic planning until after the famine was declared. The Agriculture and Livelihood Cluster, on the other hand, championed the idea of conditional transfers (cash-for-work). Given the lack of any other party to conduct

response analysis, FEWS NET and FSNAU undertook a market analysis immediately after the declaration, and concluded that cash would stimulate a market response and would not cause undue inflation. WFP did a similar analysis in September 2011, and came to largely the same conclusion, but were more cautious about the supply response—suggesting that demand-side interventions be accompanied by supply-side interventions. Separately from these analyses, USAID proposed to monetize food in Mogadishu—the kind of supply-side intervention that, at least in theory, WFP was proposing. In the event, however, none of that food reached the market until early 2012, after the famine was over.

To some degree, the coordination issue is already being dealt with—the Food Assistance Cluster and the Agriculture and Livelihoods Cluster have merged to become a Food Security Cluster, and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee on Emergency Response has issued recommendations for a "transformative agenda"—dealing in part with the question of improved coordination. But the question of coordination goes beyond just the clusters, and the question of clusters in this case went well beyond just the food and agriculture clusters—coordination arose as a significant constraint in the nutrition response as well. Major new humanitarian actors were clearly present in Somalia in 2011–2012, many of them Islamic in origin and coordinated not by traditional UN or even host government structures but by the Organization of Islamic Conference. An analysis of this response is a serious omission from this Special Edition—and evidence of the gulf between the traditional humanitarian community and many emergent actors.

The issue of response analysis—and who or what institution is responsible for it—remains unanswered. Recent research suggests that despite the imperative for more analysis and evidence-based program decisions, the choice about how to respond to food security crises tends to be shaped at the agency level by perceptions of donor resources and by a powerful organizational ethos about preferred responses that determine both capacity and analysis (Maxwell et al., forthcoming).

Though a formal evaluation has yet to be completed, the cash response seems to have enabled improved access to food and other basic necessities, and protected nutrition programs so that severe child malnutrition could be dealt with. There are, however, several factors that may make this apparent success somewhat Somalia-specific. First, despite its long history of conflict, Somalia has working markets, a functioning road network, and traders whose activities are largely unimpeded by conflict. Second, and perhaps more critically, Somalia has relatively state-of-the-art telephone networks, and a vibrant informal banking sector (the *hawala* system) through which cash transfers could be distributed.

Both the cash and the nutrition programs were *responses* to the famine. The area of prevention received much less attention. Famine prevention, resilience building and risk reduction are back on the programmatic agenda now, but as McDowell and Majid (this issue) note, this has to take into consideration not only the usual categories of livelihood and institutional strengthening, they also have to consider reducing political and social vulnerability. Ensuring adequate attention to development interventions that build resilience and reduce risks is an urgent priority. Programs with longer-term objectives need to include a "crisis modifier" with the flexibility to switch to humanitarian objectives in the short term in the event of an emerging crisis.

5. Changes in "humanitarian space"

Responding to the Somalia famine was challenging because it was difficult for outside agencies to access affected populations. While access had become increasingly difficult—and the security of humanitarian workers had been deteriorating—for years prior

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[3] The cluster system is a coordination structure—organized around thematic areas—for United Nations and NGOs that is meant to ensure efficient and effective humanitarian response.

to 2011, access constraints reached a peak in 2011–2012 (Sulieman et al., this issue). This is because of both restrictions put in place by the local authority, *Al-Shabaab*, in most of the famine-affected areas and because of counter-terrorism laws in donor countries that criminalized any form of assistance that fell into *Al-Shabaab*'s control. The positions of both the local authority and the donors effectively politicized humanitarian aid, making neutral and impartial assistance impossible (Menkhaus, this issue). Security threats led to further "bunkerization" of the aid response, and heavy reliance on remote management strategies to implement the response (Sulieman et al., this issue). The issue of contested principles and shrinking humanitarian space or humanitarian access is not new—indeed some observers contend that comparing access to affected populations in current crises to past crises is not comparing similar phenomena, since humanitarians tend to operate inside war zones today whereas in the past they operated only in adjacent territories (Collinson and Elhawary, 2012). Nevertheless, Hammond and Vaughan-Lee (2012) argue that the political economy of aid in the conflict context of south Somalia, "has become so entrenched that it has eroded trust between stakeholders and increased insecurity for humanitarian personnel and civilians living in conflict zones, severely constraining humanitarian space" (Hammond and Vaughan-Lee, 2012, p. 2). The famine—and the attention it drew to Somalia—only made this worse: of the handful of agencies still engaged in south Somalia in mid 2011, many were expelled or had their operations suspended by *Al-Shabaab*, partly because they were drawing attention to the problem, as their mandate required them to do. Hammond and Vaughn-Lee join many other humanitarian observers (Donini, 2012; Barnett, 2011) in noting that the only way to restore the notion of "humanitarian space" is to cease using humanitarian assistance for political ends. Collinson and Elhawary (2012) dispute this point, but contemporary trends suggest that in any case this will not happen any time soon, the results of the Somalia famine notwithstanding.

6. The imperative for system-wide accountability

The famine that was declared in south Somalia in July 2011 had profound implications for accountability. For those who argue that famines are not natural disasters but avoidable products of human action or inaction, the declaration of a famine immediately raises the question: why was it not prevented? Who is responsible for causing or allowing this famine to happen?

Failures of accountability have been identified as one reason why famines persist in Africa, especially in low-income countries with weak governance structures and imperfect or absent democratic institutions (Devereux, 2009; Rubin, 2009). Assigning accountability for famines is not just a "blame game;" it has two important instrumental functions. First, it is imperative to send a signal that famine, like genocide, is morally unacceptable and will not be tolerated. Edkins (2007) has argued for the "criminalisation of mass starvation," since involuntary starvation violates the fundamental human right to food, but criminalizing famine requires assigning and enforcing accountability. Second, understanding who is responsible generates lessons for improved prevention or response when the next famine threat occurs (Howe and Devereux, 2004a).

Individuals and institutions could be responsible for a famine either by deliberately causing it to happen (acts of commission), or by failing to prevent it despite having the capacity and mandate to do so (acts of omission). Howe and Devereux (2004b) propose an 'accountability matrix' as a tool for famine analysis and prevention. An accountability matrix is a means of identifying the various functions involved in famine prevention and assigning responsibility

for each function to named institutions. Devising and applying an accountability matrix has four steps.

1. Recognize the roles and functions played by various stakeholders (the government, donors, operational agencies, early warning systems, etc.) for ensuring that famine does not occur in a given country (in this case, Somalia);
2. Assign responsibility for each specific function to designated duty-bearers;
3. After a famine (or near-famine) occurs, examine which of these duty-bearers failed to meet their designated responsibilities (e.g. inappropriate government policies, inaccurate information, or late delivery of food assistance or other aid);
4. Hold the responsible duty-bearers to account, by imposing appropriate sanctions on the basis of "proportionate accountability."

We focus here on three proximate causes of famine: inappropriate policies; inaccurate early warning information; late delivery of food aid. An "accountability matrix" analysis investigates failures to prevent famine at these three stages: policies; information; and response. Several articles in this collection address the issue of accountability for the Somalia famine, either directly or indirectly, which allows us to answer these questions.

6.1. Were appropriate policies implemented before the famine to minimize the risks and consequences?

The Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Somalia exerts little control or authority outside Mogadishu, so its policies have little impact on the population that was affected by famine in 2011. This might appear to absolve the TFG of responsibility, at least in this respect. Lautze et al. (this issue) point out that Somalia has neither democracy nor a free press, which are two critical institutions for establishing a social contract for famine prevention between citizens and the state. This means that Somalia is "lacking an institutional context within which accountability should exist, both from the people to the national government and from the national government to the international community" (Lautze et al., this issue). On the other hand, Menkhaus (2009) argues that the policies of Western governments and UN agencies in 2007 and 2008 exacerbated the conflict and insecurity that raised famine vulnerability in Somalia, so perhaps accountability in this dimension lies beyond the borders of Somalia and the policies of the national government.

In areas under its control, *Al-Shabaab* introduced policies that ostensibly aimed to benefit local populations but often succeeded only in making people more vulnerable. Inappropriate policies included levying taxes on poor families, conscripting young men as fighters, and restricting mobility by preventing famine-affected people from fleeing to Kenya and forcing them to return to their farms to prepare their fields for planting. "The restrictions on population movement imposed by *Al-Shabaab* in 2011… undoubtedly contributed to increased mortality levels" (McDowell and Majid, this issue). This direct link between a specific policy action and attributable mortality points to *Al-Shabaab's* accountability for at least some of the famine deaths.

6.2. Was early warning information timely and accurate?

When humanitarian actors fail to respond to signs of impending crisis they often blame failures of information—early warning that is absent, late, incorrect or imprecise. The consensus in the case of Somalia 2011 is that early warning information was adequate, timely, credible and pointed to clear, actionable interventions. Although information could not be easily validated through field

visits because of access constraints, assessments provided by FSNAU and FEWS NET warned about the evolving crisis for almost a year before the famine was declared. A contribution to this issue, tellingly titled 'How much early warning does it take?' (Hillbruner and Moloney, this issue), documents the series of early warning bulletins and briefings that drew attention to the deteriorating situation, starting in August 2010. In fact, this famine was unusual for the amount, quality and timeliness of the early warnings that were provided, which were also (for the first time ever) based on a widely accepted operational definition of famine. Unfortunately, the trigger for the full mobilization of humanitarian relief was not the early warning information, but the declaration of famine itself.

We conclude, therefore, that there was no failure on the part of the early warning system. In terms of the "accountability matrix," this crucial set of actors performed its function adequately. The real question is why the early warning information failed to trigger a timely humanitarian response. This question was asked by Buchanan-Smith and Davies (1995) in their book 'Famine Early Warning and Response: The Missing Link'; 16 years later, Hillbruner and Moloney (this issue) reach the same conclusion: "in the absence of incentives for early action, preventable food security emergencies are likely to persist, regardless of the quality of the early warnings that is provided" (page 1).

6.3. Was the humanitarian response timely, adequate and appropriate?

Before the Famine Declaration in July 2011, no effective humanitarian response to the predicted crisis was mobilized, either by national authorities or by the international community. The dominant narrative (at least in the Western media) explaining the Somalia famine attributes all blame to Al-Shabaab, which obstructed relief efforts in several ways and denied drought-affected people access to food. Al-Shabaab blocked famine relief to south Somalia, first by barring the largest disburser of food aid—the World Food Programme—from re-engaging in areas under its control; and later by expelling a number of additional aid agencies from south Somalia, and by conscripting relief supplies. When NGOs tried to distribute food vouchers, Al-Shabaab banned these vouchers. In some areas, "hardline Al-Shabaab groups either expelled, threatened, or attacked relief workers" (Menkhaus, this issue). Aid workers are more likely to be killed in Somalia than in any other country; their courage deserves to be more widely recognized and applauded.

The donor community joined the media "blame game," arguing that insecurity in the drought-affected areas, stoked by Al-Shabaab, undermined their ability to intervene effectively. However, this does not fully explain the failure of the humanitarian response. After the agencies withdrew they made no attempt to develop a contingency plan, they did not advocate strongly for financial or political commitments from the international community, and they remained under-funded and under-prepared even as the indicators deteriorated. As Hillbruner and Moloney (this issue) point out, the famine declaration galvanized a rapidly scaled up relief operation—not only in Somalia, despite continuing problems of insecurity and restricted access, but also in Ethiopia and Kenya, where no such challenges existed to explain the delayed response. This suggests that the famine could have been prevented. This fact alone means that some blame must be attached to the donor community and implementing agencies.

The United States' inflexible pursuit of its foreign policy objectives, with inadequate consideration of the humanitarian consequences, also partly explains the failure to prevent the famine. In late 2009 US food aid was suspended to southern Somalia for legal reasons—"counter-terrorism laws applied to Somalia essentially criminalized almost all flows of remittances and aid into areas controlled by Al-Shabaab" (Menkhaus, this issue). Fear of violating this legislation discouraged many US agencies and US-funded agencies from operating in southern Somalia. In a sense, the actions of the United States and Al-Shabaab collectively ensured that humanitarian interventions to famine-affected areas were blocked until it was too late to prevent large-scale loss of life.

Finally, the TFG interfered with the relief program once it got underway, by diverting or taxing assistance in several ways: payments had to be made to port authorities; "taxes" were levied on food convoys at militia checkpoints; food aid was appropriated from IDP camps. TFG officials also appropriated food aid on the pretext that they believed humanitarian agencies were channeling supplies to Al-Shabaab. The corrupt TFG officials who saw the famine as an opportunity for personal gain should also be held accountable for denying food aid to starving people.

Summing up. The "accountability matrix" analysis presented here is preliminary and cursory; more detailed and in-depth analysis would be needed to assign specific and proportionate responsibilities for the various failures that allowed a drought in the Horn of Africa to develop into an avoidable mass mortality famine in south Somalia. With this caveat in mind, the following tentative conclusions can be drawn.

The **policy** context was not conducive towards preventing famine: the punitive actions of Al-Shabaab towards people under its control, the weakness of the Transitional Federal Government, and the indifference or hostility of Western governments and agencies towards Somalia, all left the local population extremely vulnerable and unprotected against livelihood shocks. On the positive side, the early warning **information** was unusually good in terms of its timeliness and credibility. A range of actors contributed to the humanitarian **response** failure—led by Al-Shabaab, certainly, but including the TFG, the United States government, the United Nations and the broader donor community, which abrogated its responsibility to protect the fundamental human right to food, for reasons that are partially explicable but are certainly inexcusable. If famines were criminalized as gross violations of the right to food, all the actors named here would arguably face prosecution under international law.

A conclusion reached by several contributions to this collection is that accountability failures were an underlying cause of the Somalia famine, and that this deficit must be urgently addressed if future famines are to be prevented. Salama et al. (this issue) argue that "the next important step for the international community may be to ensure a clearer and more robust link between data and accountability for action in humanitarian response". Hillbruner and Moloney (this issue) agree that stronger incentives for early action are needed, noting that "Practical mechanisms which hold governments, donors, and implementing agencies more accountable during humanitarian crises must be developed." Maxwell and Fitzpatrick (this issue) identify the need for a social contract against famine as a means of constructing accountability.

Finally, Lautze et al. (this issue) draw a distinction between 'providers of first resort' (led by national governments) and 'providers of last resort' (the international humanitarian community). Where national actors have failed to meet their obligations, Lautze et al. ask: "Where is the accountability in the providers of last resort?" They propose a 'Ulysses pact' (a decision that is made freely but is intended to be binding) between UN agencies that serve as providers of last resort "and the member states to which they are accountable in a relationship with populations dealing with risk and vulnerability based on a compact of rights, resources, responsibilities and recourse." Such a pact would go some way towards building accountability for famine prevention. Making the responsibilities embodied in this pact legally binding

would take this one step further, by making accountability for future famines justifiable.

7. Conclusions: learning for the future

Three further questions deserve attention in reflecting on the lessons of 2011–2012: the implications of the Somalia famine for practice and policy; links to the "resilience" agenda and the imperative to prevent—not just respond to—famine; and implications for what we understand about famines and famine theory.

With regard to policy and practice, though there is much that went well with early warning, there is a clear need to strengthen prevention and response, to improve the evidence base on which prevention and response are based, and to improve accountability mechanisms to ensure that prevention and response happen on a timely basis. But much also remains to be learned about communities' own responses to the famine, and particularly the role of remittances from the diaspora. This clearly played a critical role in the response to the 2011 famine, but one that falls outside the formal humanitarian arena. As Menkhaus (this issue) notes, access to this source of income is not equitable, and has major implications for the targeting of limited external humanitarian assistance. But understanding how humanitarian assistance can bolster local or diaspora responses more generally is a major challenge.

Much remains to be learned about improving remote management, and it is bound to remain a difficult task. Working through partnerships, as discussed by McCloskey-Rebelo et al. (this issue), will no doubt be an important element of this. Yet the evidence over the past few years suggests that more crises will have to be remotely managed. And though it sounds almost trite to suggest at this point, better contingency planning and more flexible donor funding are urgently needed—not only in Somalia but in all chronically risk-prone areas of the globe.

We are now in a set of circumstances under which the threat of famine is more pronounced than at any time in the past several decades: with increasing frequency of climate-related production shocks; greater price volatility than ever (as this issue goes to press the U.S. and other major exporting nations are meeting to discuss how to deal with the drought of 2012 in the US and the subsequent impact on global food stocks and prices); and a highly polarized political situation, in which the prevention of humanitarian disasters is unfortunately not very high among the competing priorities.

On the brighter side, the issue of "resilience"—improving the ability of affected communities to withstand shocks—is back on the international agenda. So far, this is mostly about technical issues, and more focused on resilience to drought and natural hazards than to either political or price shocks. Such conversations have happened before on the back of major crises in the Greater Horn of Africa, and for the most part these efforts fizzled out before major reforms resulted (the one major exception to this observation being the development of the Productive Safety Net Programme in Ethiopia, after the 2002–2003 crisis there). The international humanitarian and development communities need to learn from previous efforts: what happened that such discussions eventually ran out of steam before major institutional reforms were achieved? Ultimately, these efforts to address resilience have to come to terms not only with natural hazards but also with political vulnerability.

While this Special Issue focuses particularly on humanitarian practice, there is also much to learn from Somalia 2011–2012 about our understanding of famines and its implications for famine theory. This concluding article has outlined many of the themes to be addressed in the further refinement of famine theory: multiple causation; socio-political vulnerability—as well as economic or asset-based vulnerability; limited accountability; limited access and strategies of remote management; and the need for greater integration, not only of information and response, but also of prevention and response. Ultimately, whether or not famines continue to be part of human existence or are finally relegated to history depends on how well we learn from the experience of Somalia 2011–2012, and how well this learning is incorporated into future policy and practice.

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