



Regional Learning &
Advocacy Programme
for Vulnerable Dryland
Communities

POLICY BRIEF: Addressing chronic food insecurity in the Horn of Africa: Good practice identified, but commitment needed

By John Morton and Frédéric Mousseau, independent consultants, December 2010¹

Summary

The Horn of Africa is again suffering a crisis of hunger, as it did in 1999-2000, 2002-03, 2005-06 and 2008. These ever frequent crises are triggered by drought and conflict, but they strike populations already suffering from underlying vulnerability, particularly those in the drylands. This vulnerability stems from multiple factors including long term lack of investment, lack of organisation and political voice, degradation of natural resources, inadequate land tenure institutions and population increase. Many of the people affected can be considered chronically or seasonally food insecure.

The global spike in food prices in 2008, caused by a combination of drought in key producers like Australia, conversion of grain to bio-fuels, and speculation, may have exacerbated the crises. The linkage with national crises in the Horn is much better demonstrated for Somalia, Eritrea and Djibouti than for Kenya or Ethiopia. The latter also suffered sharp price rises, but possibly for reasons more specific to the national economies. In any case the global food crises have made managing national and local crises more difficult.

The chronic nature of the food insecurity, the recurrence of crises, and the multiple sources of vulnerability, make food insecurity a development problem, not just a relief problem.

Significant steps have now been taken towards better practice in managing food insecurity – reforms, new initiatives and pilots. In many cases the solutions have been either: flawed, too small-scale, or lacking commitment from key donors. It is important that the approaches exist – but donors must increase their commitment to making them work, intensifying, scaling-up, and managing better. Some of these experiences, and their implications, are highlighted below.

Improved government leadership

New structures and initiatives for national governments to co-ordinate emergency efforts are appearing, especially in Kenya but also elsewhere in the region. Governments now visibly have more “convening authority” in times of food crisis. For example, the Kenyan Ministry of Development of Northern Kenya and Other Arid Lands has a strong focus on drought management, and is establishing a National Drought Management Authority. This permanent institution with a sound legal basis is replacing what was in the final analysis a time-bound donor-funded project.

¹ This paper was based on a study carried out by Frédéric Mousseau in 2009 and then updated by John Morton in 2010.



Elsewhere, governments have been involved in drafting national Disaster Risk Reduction policies. At the level of regional inter-governmental organisations, COMESA has drafted and disseminated important policy guidelines, such as those on livestock mobility. IGAD sponsors training on Disaster Risk Reduction, and has established its own Climate Predictions and Applications Centre, ICPAC. The AU has formally discussed Disaster Risk Reduction at ministerial level.

All this should be very welcome to donors and international NGOs, who have long pushed for this sort of leadership. But the question now is how donors should react. The answer lies in an increased emphasis on a capacity-building role for international agencies, but are they equipped for this role, and are they willing to step back in this way?

Safety Nets

Large numbers of those who have received food relief during recent crises are in fact chronically food insecure. Drought forces such people to dispose of key productive assets such as land and livestock, further increasing their vulnerability. Safety nets are large-scale programmes to give these populations multi-annual and predictable support, independent of the annual emergency appeals. Such support should give them space to plan the use of their assets and eventually “graduate” out of poverty. To these ends safety nets have received considerable funding from development donors such as the World Bank, the European Commission and DFID.

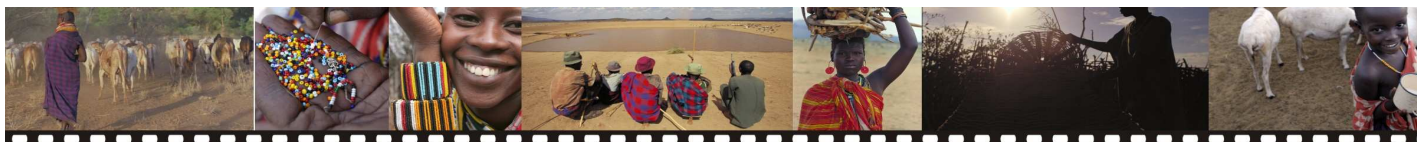
The most advanced example is the Ethiopian Productive Safety Nets Programme. It is based on provision of employment opportunities on public works that are themselves productive assets for communities - roads, dams etc. - with other forms of provision for those that cannot work. The Programme covers the basic food needs of 8 million people, or 10% of the population, for six months of every year.

The PSNP has used both food and cash payment for labour, with cash being considered preferable by donors, as it gave beneficiaries more options. However as food prices in Ethiopia increased dramatically in 2008 and the cash wage could buy progressively less, beneficiaries came to prefer food to cash.

The principle of safety nets is now widely accepted, and independent evaluation of the Ethiopian PSNP has shown significant impact. However, there are major questions on the implementation of the PSNP. It has been described as “off-track” in terms of coverage of population and transfer of resources, and as not succeeding in reducing the need for emergency appeals. In early 2009, nearly 5 million people in need were not being reached by the PSNP. Only 18,000 people “graduated” from poverty in the first four years of PSNP, despite a design assumption that all beneficiaries would graduate after 2-3 years. There is now limited confidence that most beneficiaries will ever graduate. There are also concerns about the heavy administrative burden of needs assessment and of identifying, designing, implementing and monitoring projects, which largely falls on local government and national NGOs.

Disaster Risk Reduction

Disaster Risk Reduction or DRR is a terminology used by many donors for a systematic approach to identifying, assessing and reducing the risks associated with disaster. Ideally, DRR should identify all potential threats to lives and livelihoods and people’s vulnerabilities to these threats; and it should build their resilience – their ability to withstand shocks without jeopardising their livelihoods. DRR has strong overlaps with other approaches and terms, such as timely response to drought, and “protracted relief and recovery” – the continued and more tailored involvement of humanitarian donors as beneficiaries rebuild their livelihoods. DRR has its roots in emergency



response, and is promoted most energetically by relief donors such as ECHO and OFDA, but also needs to be seen as an approach within development.

There are now many significant programmes operating under DRR or similar approaches, funded by USAID, the European Commission, the World Bank and the World Food Programme. In addition, DRR has been adopted as a policy framework by governments, and by regional organisations such as IGAD and the AU.

As it is more widely adopted, there is a danger that DRR will be understood in a narrow technical sense, or as something only to be applied at community-level. The real roots of vulnerability lie in policies, institutions and unequal access to knowledge, and effective DRR needs to address these issues at the level of policy as well as projects. True DRR needs: policies to recognise and strengthen community management of natural resources (including land); better access for smallholders and pastoralists to markets for their produce; investment in infrastructure such as rural roads; effective dissemination of new agricultural technologies, and effective management of existing knowledge, including indigenous knowledge; and commitment to reducing power imbalances, gender inequality and marginalisation. It is now also apparent that it requires policies to cushion the poor from the impacts of global price rises.

Better management of the humanitarian system

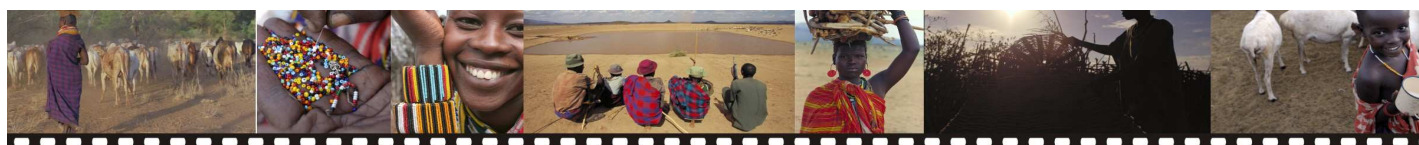
There are now various initiatives underway to reform the international humanitarian system – some of which have been actively lobbied for by NGOs. Recent years have seen the establishment of Humanitarian Response Funds to improve the timeliness of emergency response and pool bilateral contributions. The funds created for Ethiopia and Somalia have channelled \$170 million of assistance since their establishment in 2006. These are also more flexible frameworks for long-term, large-scale funding of NGOs; consortia of NGOs are now receiving millions of dollars over multi-year periods for livelihood interventions in Kenya and Ethiopia.

The cluster approach instituted in 2005 assigns lead agencies to sectoral clusters working globally and nationally. The approach has been undeniably useful in fast-onset emergencies and displacement situations, but there are serious concerns about its implementation, highlighted in a general evaluation of the approach and a case-study in Uganda under the Inter-Agency Standing committee. They include: exclusion of national and local actors, particularly NGOs; failure to support existing national co-ordination measures; poor or top-down cluster management; lack of definition of lead agency roles; possibility of entrenching the divide between management of food aid and ensuring food security.

The Integrated Phase Classification is an analytical framework and common language for assessing and communicating levels of food insecurity, and is being rolled out across the Horn and East Africa. There have also been innovations in disseminating early warning, including by SMS – this has been used in Kenya for spreading information about floods and fungal contamination of grain. Such information tools demand a willingness to use them as a means for real integration, and specifically to link work on chronic and transient food insecurity.

Alternatives to international food aid

There have for many years been criticisms of international food aid, not least by NGOs, on how it is driven by vested interests such as farm lobbies within donor countries, and can distort markets in recipient countries. Significant alternatives are now available. Several major donors now respond to appeals with cash rather than food, cash which can be used for purchase of food in-country, support services and support to livelihoods. 50% of donor contributions to World Food Programme are now in cash. The World Food Programme's Purchase for Peace (P4P) is a specific programme that accompanies local procurement with capacity-building for farmers and small traders,



currently operating in 17 countries, including all countries of the Horn. In addition, direct cash transfers to beneficiaries increasingly replace food transfers, especially within safety net programmes.

Scaling up of these initiatives has been slow and the barriers to further progress are formidable. Cash transfers, seen as a progressive alternative to food aid, have also become problematic with food price volatility – cash wages suddenly lose effective value when food prices rise, made worse because beneficiaries of safety nets almost by definition spend very high proportion of wages on food.

Of all forms of emergency assistance, food aid remains the most demanded and the most funded. In the Somalia Appeal of 2008, food aid represented 51% of the appeal and was funded at 98% of what was requested; by comparison agriculture represented 10% of appeal and was funded at 25%. Most importantly the policy of the US government shows an overwhelming bias toward procurement from US farmers – out of \$560 million of US food assistance to Ethiopia in 2008, only \$4m million was for local purchase. The Food Aid Convention, the international treaty that governs food aid, discourages innovation such as “twinning” (donors paying transport and distribution costs for local procurement by national governments). P4P, while promising, shows limited achievements to date in terms of actual purchase. The problem of aflatoxin contamination in purchased grain in Kenya has highlighted some of the potential quality issues in procurement from smallholders. P4P still assumes procurement at market prices, without “positive discrimination” on price for smallholders. Domestic procurement for social programmes in Brazil allows preferential local procurement even at higher prices – we must ask if this should now apply in international food aid.

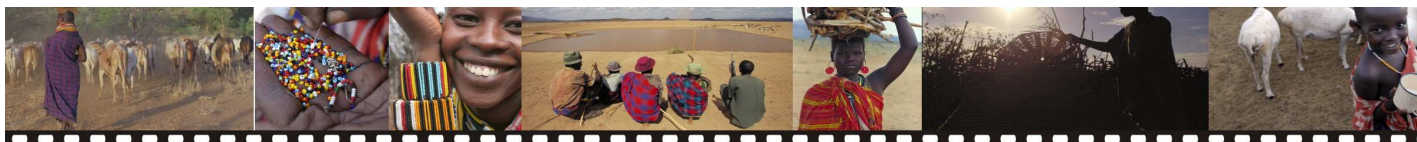
Emergency responses specific to agriculture

Various initiatives are now being tried to give direct support to agriculture during crises and post-crisis recovery. In Ethiopia in 2008, \$240 million from the World Bank and \$70 million from the African Development Bank was redirected to emergency purchase of fertilizer. But the impact of fertilizer is reduced if there has not been matching investment in seed and seed systems. There has been considerable experience in and discussion about interventions for pastoralists during drought onset, to preserve their purchasing power in buying grain, and their breeding stock. These interventions include: emergency livestock vaccination; “destocking”; provision of water and feed; and negotiation of access to private pasture. But at present such interventions represent about 1% of total international assistance. Can they be scaled-up, and how? More fundamentally, they cannot compensate for lack of broader and more sustainable development in pastoral regions. Emergency destocking is a one-off intervention using explicit or implicit subsidies: building sustainable cattle marketing systems requires investment and difficult international trade negotiations.

What needs to be done?

Steps have been taken towards a principled, coherent response to food crises and chronic food insecurity – but many challenges remain, for governments, donors, and international agencies. In addition to long term investment to promote sustainable development in the drylands:

1. ***National governments need to critically reassess their food security strategies and the place of the safety net programmes within them***, to maximise graduation of the poor into long-term food security.
2. ***Better co-ordination is needed between emergency response and long term efforts to address chronic food insecurity.***



3. ***Disaster Risk Reduction needs to be understood and practised***, not simply as short term or technical interventions at village level, but in its fullest sense of building overall resilience through good policy and implementation.
4. ***Information on promising new approaches to emergency interventions and their management must be exchanged and disseminated.***
5. ***International food aid has often saved lives but should be: one instrument among several and untied from domestic interests of donors.***
6. ***The Food Aid Convention needs to be reformed to favour aid in cash, local procurement and support to livelihood interventions.***
7. ***US food aid operations must be reformed to allow local procurement in beneficiary countries.***
8. ***Governments and WFP must invest more in capacity-building for smallholders as potential suppliers of food.***
9. ***The Integrated Phase Classification and other information systems on food insecurity need to be used in ways that link short-term and long-term responses to food insecurity.***
10. ***Donors should deepen and re-orient their support for the new national institutions that are emerging to co-ordinate and lead emergency response*** – building national capacity for leadership.



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Copies of this brief and the full report can be accessed at:
<http://www.disasterriskreduction.net/east-central-africa/reglap>

