

## FAMINE EARLY WARNING AND RESPONSE



# Famine Early Warning and Response

## *The Missing Link*

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## Acronyms

ACC/SCN	Administrative Committee on Co-ordination /Sub-committee on Nutrition
AEDES	Association Européenne pour le Développement et la Santé
AGRHYMET	Agrometeorology and Remote Sensing Unit (CILSS)
APU	Agricultural Planning Unit, Darfur Regional Government (Sudan)
ASAL	Arid and Semi-arid Lands (Kenya)
BET	Borkou-Ennedi-Tibesti (Chad)
BSA	Bureau de la Statistique Agricole (Chad)
CASAAU	Comité d'Action pour la Sécurité Alimentaire et l'Aide d'Urgence (Chad)
CCE	Commission des Communautés Européennes
CFA	Committee on Food Aid Policies and Programmes (WFP)
CFAfr	Communauté Financière Africaine franc
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CILSS	Comité Permanent Inter-Etats de Lutte Contre la Sécheresse dans le Sahel
CNAUR	Comité National d'Actions d'Urgence et de Réhabilitation (Mali)
CNNTA	Centre National de Nutrition et de Technologie Alimentaire (Chad)
COC	Comité d'Orientation et de Coordination (Mali)
CRA	Comité Regional d'Action (Chad)
CRDA	Christian Relief and Development Association (Ethiopia)
CSA	Central Statistical Authority (Ethiopia)
DHA	Department of Humanitarian Affairs (UN)
DIAPER	Projet Diagnostique Permanent (CILSS)
DMC	(District) Drought Management Committee (Kenya)
DMP	Drought Monitoring Programme of SRC, North Darfur (Sudan)
DNA	Direction Nationale de l'Agriculture (Mali)
DNSI	Direction Nationale de la Statistique et de l'Informatique (Mali)
DPASA	Direction de la Promotion des Productions Agricoles et de la Sécurité Alimentaire (Chad)
ELP	Emergency Livestock Purchase Scheme (Kenya)

EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EPPG	Emergency Prevention and Preparedness Group (UN Ethiopia)
ERA	Eritrean Relief Association
EU	European Union
EW	early-warning
EWPS	Early Warning and Planning Services (within RRC of Ethiopia)
EWS	early-warning system(s)
EWSU	Early Warning System Unit (within RRC of Sudan)
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation (UN)
FEWS	Famine Early Warning System (USAID)
FFW	food-for-work
FIAA	Front Islamique Arab de l'Azawad (Mali)
GIEWS	Global Information and Early Warning System (FAO)
GTZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit
IDS	Institute of Development Studies, Sussex
IEFR	International Emergency Food Reserve (WFP)
IER	Institut d'Economie Rurale, Bamako (Mali)
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington, DC
IFRC	International Federation for Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
ILO	International Labour Organization (UN)
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INRA-ESR	Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique, Montpellier
IRA	Immediate Response Account (WFP)
IUCN	International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources
KANU	Kenya African National Union
MATDB	Ministère de l'Administration Territoriale et du Développement à la Base (Mali)
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MPA	Mouvement Populaire pour l'Azawad (Mali)
MSAPS	Ministère de la Sécurité Alimentaire et des Populations Sinistrées (Chad)
MSF	Médécins sans Frontières, Belgium
MUAC	middle upper-arm circumference
NCPB	National Cereals and Produce Board (Kenya)
NDPPS	National Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Strategy (Ethiopia)
NDVI	Normalised Difference Vegetation Index
NMSA	National Meteorological Services Agency (Ethiopia)
NORAD	Norwegian Agency for Development

NSP	Nutritional Surveillance Programme (SCF (UK), in Ethiopia)
ODA	Overseas Development Administration of the UK Government
ODI	Overseas Development Institute, London
ODNRI	Overseas Development Natural Resources Institute, Chatham (now Natural Resources Institute)
OFDA	Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance, State Department of the US Government
OLS	Operation Lifeline Sudan
ONC	Office National des Céréales (Chad)
ONDR	Organisation Nationale de Développement Rural (Chad)
OPAM	Office des Produits Agricoles du Mali
PADEM	Projet de la Mise en Place de Dispositifs Permanents d'Enquêtes auprès des Ménages (UNDP) (Mali)
PNSA	Programme National de Sécurité Alimentaire (Chad)
PRMC	Programme de Restructuration du Marché Céréalier (Mali)
RDI	Relief and Development Institute (formerly International Disaster Institute, now amalgamated with Overseas Development Institute), London
REST	Relief Society of Tigray
RRC	Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (Ethiopia and Sudan)
SADS	Suivi Alimentaire Delta Seno (SCF (UK) project in Mali)
SAP	Système d'Alerte Précoce (Chad and Mali)
SCF (UK)	Save the Children Fund of the United Kingdom
SEPHA	Special Emergency Programme for the Horn of Africa (UN)
SIM	Système d'Information sur le Marché des Céréales (Mali)
SNS	Stock National de Sécurité (Mali)
SRC	Sudanese Red Crescent Society
TCC	Technical Co-ordination Committee (Sudan)
TDCPU	Turkana Drought Contingency Planning Unit (Kenya)
TLU	Tropical Livestock Unit
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
TRDP	Turkana Rural Development Programme (Kenya)
TRP	Turkana Rehabilitation Project (Kenya)
UDPM	Union Démocratique du Peuple Malien (Mali)
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNDRO	United Nations Disaster Relief Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WFP/PAM	World Food Programme/Programme Alimentaire Mondiale (UN)
WHO	World Health Organisation (UN)



## CHAPTER 1

# The Missing Link

### Introduction

By the early 1990s, most drought-triggered famines and food crises in Africa were not hard to predict. This is testimony to the success of famine early-warning systems (EWS), many of which were set up during the 1980s. In 1984–5, failure to prevent famine in the Sahel and Horn of Africa was widely attributed to a lack of early warning (EW). Since then, better prediction has been a major policy concern, for both donor agencies and national governments. Greatest attention has been paid to the establishment of purpose-built EWS. In the Sahel and Horn of Africa alone, more than eight new EWS were set up between 1985 and 1990. Considerable progress has been made, in improving data-collection methods, developing indicators, and making use of sophisticated information technology. By 1990 more information on the likelihood of famine was available to donors and governments than ever before.

Famine prevention, however, has remained an elusive goal. Better prediction has not led to corresponding improvements on the response side. There is clearly a missing link between the provision of EW information and the use of that information to trigger a timely preventive response. Anecdotal evidence abounds as to why EW information has not been influential. The EWS was not sufficiently vociferous; the information was inappropriate, late or untrustworthy; donors were ill-disposed to help a particular government; adequate resources were not available; institutional and logistical obstacles overwhelmed good intentions; the domestic political will to react was lacking, and so on. Intuitively such explanations make sense, but they do not amount to a systematic analysis of what happens to EW information once it enters the decision-making process and how it is used by policy-makers. How and when do they receive the information, and what kind of data are most influential and why? Most important, what are the missing links between prediction and prevention?

That is the subject of this book. It is based on an analysis of early warning and relief responses in 1990 and 1991 in five African countries: Ethiopia, Sudan, Chad, Mali and Kenya focusing on Turkana District in the north; and in a number of donor agencies. Our approach is to begin with the decision-making processes which determine the response to a threatened crisis. From there, it is possible to ascertain the relative importance of information and of other factors in triggering or inhibiting the response.

The agricultural year 1990–91 was a year of drought across much of the Sahel and Horn of Africa, with early indications that food crises would be

widespread. In some regions, it was the combination of drought and conflict that threatened to cause the most severe cases of famine and suffering. Elsewhere, the drought was not necessarily as bad as in the mid-1980s. Nevertheless, conditions deteriorated to the point where relief aid was necessary, to protect livelihoods and often lives as well. A number of EWS in the region were being put to the test for the first time. Could they fulfil their ultimate objective of triggering an adequate and timely response to prevent acute food insecurity and/or famine developing? The results have been mixed. In some countries the EWS were remarkably ineffective. In others, they had much greater influence.

The reasons why EW information is, or is not, used fall into four broad categories: first, reasons to do with the EWS itself, and the information provided; second, reasons to do with the institutional context within which the EWS sits, and the institutional links to decision-makers; third, reasons to do with the broader political environment; and fourth, logistical obstacles to launching a timely and adequate response. Much has been written about the technical aspects of EW and numerous evaluations of different systems have been carried out.<sup>1</sup> Most have focused on the internal workings of the EWS: the scope of indicators, accuracy of the data and timeliness of the warnings. These relate to the first category of reasons, concerned with the performance of the EWS itself. But few have looked at how EWS fit into the wider context.<sup>2</sup> From the analysis presented in this book, the second and third categories of reasons emerge as the most important explanations of whether EW information is used, and of variations in performance between the different case-studies.

Most countries in the Sahel and Horn of Africa rely on the international relief system to provide resources to run relief operations in times of food crisis. National governments rarely have adequate resources or capacity to respond. Donor agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the key actors within the international relief system, have been particularly influential in developing famine prediction for the Sahel and Horn of Africa, both in funding and operational roles. But much less attention has been paid to developing the response side of the equation. There are two key reasons for the persistent failure to translate EW into timely response, illustrated in the case-studies in this book. First, the international relief system responds to famine once it is under way but is ill-equipped to respond to genuinely *early* warning, to intervene in time to prevent it. Second, it is not the severity of the crisis, but relations between international donors and national governments which tends to be the single most important determinant of the timing and scale of the international response. Thus, in the case of the southern African drought in 1992–3, as well

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<sup>1</sup> See Lambert *et al.*, 1991, for an annotated bibliography of the literature on famine EWS.

<sup>2</sup> Although after each episode of severe drought and famine in Africa there has been a prolific literature which looks at what went wrong, and what needs to be done to ensure that the same mistakes are not repeated (for example, Gill, 1986; Glantz, 1987; Curtis *et al.*, 1988; Downing *et al.*, 1989), rarely has this investigated in any detail how the decision-making processes work, which trigger or inhibit the launching of a timely relief response.



as national capacity to respond, the desire of the donors to keep structural adjustment programmes on track and a determination to avoid further political unrest in the region combined to initiate a timely response by the international relief system (SADC, 1993). The same factors did not conspire to trigger a timely response to food crisis in the Sahel and Horn of Africa in 1991.

## Understanding famine

A common theme running through this book is that a gap exists between theory and practice in famine prevention. Our understanding of famine as 'outsiders' has improved in leaps and bounds during the last 10 to 20 years. This should improve our ability to prevent it with appropriate policies and interventions. Instead, conventional and often inappropriate relief responses persist. Explanations of the causality of famine have shifted from a preoccupation with supply-side factors in the 1970s, towards a recognition of the pre-eminence of access or entitlement to food in the 1980s. Famine is no longer solely — or indeed even primarily — attributed to food availability decline (FAD), but increasingly to food entitlement decline (FED). Thus 'starvation is the characteristic of some people not *having* enough food to eat. It is not the characteristic of there not *being* enough food to eat' (Sen, 1981:1). This key distinction has fuelled much of the subsequent development of famine theory. The notion of entitlements has been refined in the light of recent famines in Africa. The health-crisis model of famine, for example, challenges Sen's assumption and the popular Western notion that famine mortality is caused primarily by starvation. Instead, the major killer is epidemic disease, either during or after periods of food shortage (de Waal, 1990; Dyson, 1993). The outbreak of mass communicable disease is often caused by economic and social collapse leading to large-scale migration and social disorder, itself a function of declining entitlements. A further refinement has been to move away from a narrow focus on exchange relations towards a wider bundle of entitlements incorporating different types of assets, including investments, stores and claims (Swift, 1989). In addition to buffering vulnerable people when famine threatens, however, this broader range of entitlements can also undermine food security, for example, via demands from kin for food, or various claims exacted by the state or by more powerful neighbours (Davies, 1995 (forthcoming)).

Linked to this is improved understanding of the strategies famine-prone people pursue to cope with famine. Interest in coping strategies arose in the mid-1980s as a means of trying to understand why it was that some people survived periods of dearth while others did not. Studies have revealed different stages of coping, from insurance, through to disposal of productive assets, to destitution as the crisis deepens and coping capacity runs out (Corbett, 1988). At the centre is a constant trade-off between short-term consumption and the preservation of longer-term capacity to produce: it is now widely recognized that households threatened by famine often choose to go without food rather than sell productive assets (de Waal, 1989; Devereux, 1993). Emphasizing indigenous strategies marks a

shift towards a more people-focused understanding of famine, paying attention to the perceptions and priorities of famine victims.

Famines caused by conflict are increasingly common on the African continent, but are as yet poorly understood. There are at least three major ways in which war causes famine: first, the direct destruction of battle, and consumption of resources by armies; second, when famine is used as a weapon of war, for instance through restrictions on population movement, especially during sieges and for counter-insurgency purposes; and third, when state structures and warlords sustain themselves as predators of the poor, thereby creating famine (de Waal, 1993). Conflict, especially when it is prolonged, also serves to divert attention away from the pursuit of preventive policies. Furthermore, it tends to weaken those institutional structures not directly geared to sustaining and/or winning the war; and also creates a climate of suspicion and mistrust between governments and donors.

## Early warning

There are many systems for predicting famine, from informal indigenous information systems through to formal EWS. This book is principally concerned with the functioning of formal EWS. An EWS can be defined as 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 (Davies *et al.*, 1991).

To some extent improved understanding of famine processes has fed into and informed the design of, and approach to, EWS. Inevitably there is a time-lag before theory is applied in practice, although the lag for EW has not been that long. The first major impetus to establish EWS in Africa came after the famines of the early 1970s in the Sahel, which the international community failed to recognize in time. EWS were set up to service donor and UN food aid institutions, and this remains their *raison d'être*. The earliest modern (and still one of the most influential) EWS, the FAO's Global Information and Early Warning System (GIEWS) is unequivocally supply-side oriented.

With the influence of entitlement theory of famine in the 1980s, most EWS began to incorporate indicators of effective demand for food, including price data and other socio-economic indicators, and a number responded to the work on coping strategies by trying to incorporate behavioural indicators of famine vulnerability. Measurement difficulties and scaling-up of local experiences make this one of the more challenging episodes in EWS development. Much of the most successful work has happened within small-scale, local-level information systems. Although most formal EWS operate at national and international level, after the mid-1980s a number of pioneering local-level systems were set up, often by NGOs.

Food-production and food-supply forecasts are in many ways still the best-developed EW capability. A number of EWS continue to be food-supply driven. However, many have now developed multi-indicator models, incorporating a wider range of socio-economic indicators, which

enable them to be sensitive to less-dramatic changes in food situations than famine. The complexity of famine processes implies that multi-indicator local-level EWS are most likely to be able to: detect deterioration in food security sufficiently early to launch a timely response; monitor and be sensitive to complex famine processes within different groups in a population; and identify appropriate public action in line with local people's priorities. Nevertheless, the original rationale for setting up EWS, to service food-aid donor agencies, has changed very little during the last 20 years. Their reference point, particularly for the recommendations they make, continues to be large-scale famine catastrophes.

Least progress has occurred in conflict situations, despite growing demands for EWS to enter this arena. The problems here are overwhelming, not least because of political sensitivities which can undermine the 'technical neutrality' most EWS strive to preserve.

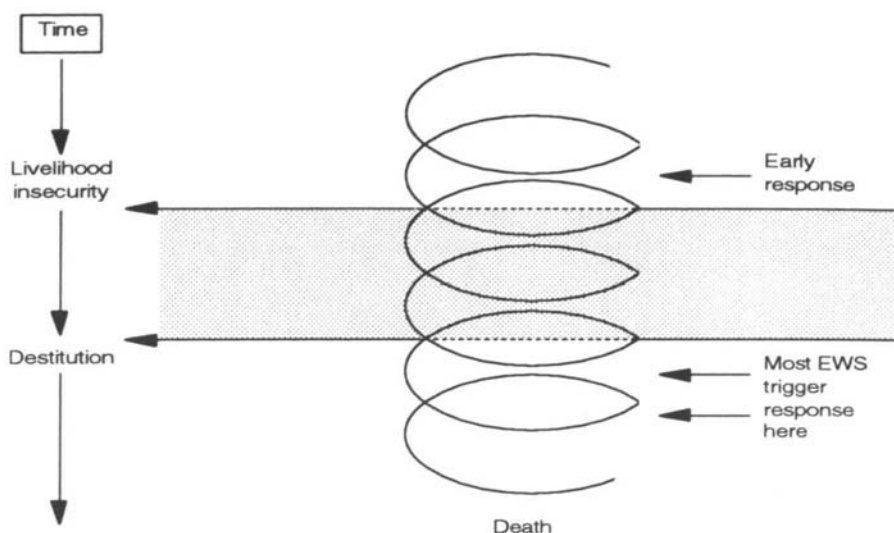
### **Famine prevention: the relief response**

Response can be defined as additional resources channelled to famine-prone people in order to assist them in withstanding the effects of declining access to food. For the international relief system, this means resources over and above normal development aid. In practice, response usually means saving lives or providing food to prevent starvation. Much less often, it means saving livelihoods, or providing food and other resources to protect future capacity to subsist, as well as to ensure current consumption.

The conceptual advances in our understanding of famine processes have major implications for preventive public action. First, they imply that famine policy cannot be limited to preventing large-scale excess mortality due to starvation, but instead must be viewed as halting the progress of a downward spiral of increasing vulnerability, leading to economic and social disintegration, destitution and eventually death from one of a number of causes, of which the outbreak and transmission of communicable disease is particularly serious. This spiral is illustrated in Figure 1.1. For famines to be prevented, intervention on the spiral must occur well before the point of death has been reached, as indicated.

Second, intervention must be early enough to protect livelihoods before lives are threatened, in accordance with people's own priorities (cutting back on consumption to preserve productive assets). This requires a more developmental approach to relief early enough in the spiral to prevent destitution and to reinforce existing capacity to cope.

Third, the preventive process is institutionally and politically more complex than a narrowly defined humanitarian relief operation which aims to prevent death by starvation. It implies that a range of interventions is required, including improved health care and the protection of water sources. This suggests a heavy institutional load, both for donor agencies and national governments, and a restructuring of bureaucratic procedures which tend to separate famine and related emergencies from more general development activities.



**Figure 1.1** *The timing of response in the downward spiral of famine*

The current international relief system falls far short of this ideal. Its approach is founded on a simplistic and reductionist model of famine — of death by starvation, to which the most logical response is to provide food aid. Of course there are other factors feeding these assumptions: at least until recently, readily available food surpluses in the North, whereas money and other relief resources have been more difficult to obtain. The principal characteristics of the international relief system are that it is geared to saving lives, not livelihoods; that it mainly provides food aid, on the premise that starvation is the main cause of famine mortality; and that it delivers inadequate quantities of relief too late — after the start of the hungry season.

Figure 1.1 shows how far down the famine spiral people must sink before they usually receive international relief assistance. This is supported by evidence from the case-studies in this book. What is conspicuously clear is that our improved knowledge has not percolated through to famine-prevention practice. And this cannot be blamed on lack of information; famine EW is where greatest progress has been made. Instead, the problems are to do with inherent institutional and political weaknesses in how the international relief system functions. These themes are explored in Chapter 3.

### **The Sahel and Horn of Africa: conditions ripe for famine**

Coupled with this poorly functioning international relief system is a constellation of forces in Africa which conspire to create conditions ripe for famine. What makes the Horn of Africa, in particular, and to a lesser but significant extent the Sahel, so vulnerable to famine when other countries,

such as India, are succeeding in preventing it?<sup>3</sup> First is the fact that the underlying scale and intensity of food insecurity on the African continent are increasing. More people are vulnerable to famine now than 20 years ago, due both to deteriorating trends and rising incidence and severity of short-term shocks. Nearly half the population of sub-Saharan Africa — an estimated 235 million people — face conditions of chronic food insecurity. A third of all children under five are chronically undernourished. Population growth has resulted in the absolute number of hungry children rising from 18 million in 1975 to 30 million in 1990 (ACC/SCN, 1992).

Second, economic performance in sub-Saharan Africa contrasts sharply with the rest of the world. While global per capita food production has increased by approximately 10 per cent during the last 20 years, in Africa it has declined by 15 per cent. From being more or less self-sufficient, Africa now produces less than 90 per cent of its food needs. GNP per capita has decreased since 1981 to about US\$300 a year, approximately equivalent to the level in the 1970s. The International Food Policy Research Institute has highlighted economic policy failure as one of the most important root causes of famine in Africa today (von Braun *et al.*, 1993). Recent structural adjustment programmes have had mixed effects on economic performance, often making the poor in sub-Saharan Africa potentially more vulnerable to internal and external shocks (Elbadawi *et al.*, 1992).

Third, the shock of drought exacerbates this underlying impoverishment. The Sahelian belt has experienced an unusually dry period over the last 30 years, during which time the frequency of drought has increased. Despite the estimated effects of global warming and reduced rain-forest cover, the reasons for this desiccation are not known with any certainty. Historically, such episodes are not abnormal: the region has experienced similar dry periods in the past. What has changed is people's vulnerability. A vicious circle is set in motion. Macro-economic decline, frequently accompanied by a marginalization of the traditional farming and pastoral sectors, has increased inequalities, cut the real incomes of many rural people, and reduced their assets. The increased frequency of drought makes it even less likely that in the interim wetter years they will be able to reconstitute assets, whether of livestock or some other store of wealth, to build the buffer needed for survival in the dry years.

Fourth, the shock of armed conflict has intensified in Africa. In addition to the long-running civil war in south Sudan, war has broken out in Somalia and Rwanda, and many other countries have intermittent internal conflicts (e.g. Chad). Initially attributable to war by proxy under Cold War conditions, in the post-Cold War era internal conflict is increasingly prevalent, fuelled by the availability of sophisticated weaponry and the struggle for resources and economic survival (Duffield, 1991). In some cases, rapid political transition has further increased the likelihood of conflict, for example, in Kenya. Internal wars are easier for the international community to ignore than the proxy wars of the Cold War era; and it is harder for it to

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<sup>3</sup> For example, India successfully averted famine in 1987, despite the worst drought in a hundred years.

assist in peace brokering, as the case of Rwanda illustrates. Against this unstable background the international community's attention is increasingly diverted away from Africa, where the geopolitical stakes are low, towards the Gulf, eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

The effect of both these short-term shocks — drought and conflict — has been a growing number of people displaced from rural areas, swelling the ranks of the urban poor who are dependent on unreliable food and labour markets, or in the case of war, precipitating large movements of people and influxes of refugees across borders.

Fifth, the last ten years or so have witnessed the withdrawal of individual African states from many spheres of economic activity, due to macro-economic decline, mounting debt, deteriorating terms of trade and enforced reduction of the public sector via structural adjustment programmes. This has prompted a drive towards liberalization of the economy, market-driven efficiency, reduced public-sector deficits and a smaller civil service. Liberalization of cereal markets may theoretically offer some opportunities for private sector contribution to famine mitigation, but in most instances the contribution is small. Thus, despite recent donor emphasis on good government, the capacity of the state to provide basic safety nets to protect people from famine has been eroded from an already low starting-point. The climate of political liberalization has not always facilitated the state's role in this respect. Democratically elected governments are usually more sensitive to the threat of famine. For example, a free press can publicize famine, as it did in Kenya in 1992 (see Chapter 8), and it has been argued that in India this has been a principal reason for ensuring famine prevention (Drèze and Sen, 1989). But this presupposes that the government has adequate resources to respond. Instead, in most African countries, the government is dependent on the goodwill of the international donor community, and as new zones of crisis emerge outside Africa, in more geopolitically strategic places, African countries may no longer be accorded priority.

This is the context within which more information about the threat of famine in the Sahel and Horn of Africa has been generated than ever before. The inability to use this information to prevent famine is rooted in the constraints which national governments face in responding and the consequential dependence on the international relief system, which cannot be guaranteed to mobilize an adequate or timely response.

## **The actors**

People who live in famine-prone areas have little — if any — direct input into the decision-making process about public action to prevent famine. There are isolated examples of EWS which rely on local people's own perceptions and responses as a source of information. But these are rarely influential at the decision-making stage, despite the fact that, of all the actors concerned, it is famine-prone people who can least afford to make mistakes and who have shown themselves best able to anticipate and plan for shocks in their livelihood strategies, especially in their ability to plan for drought in those agro-ecological zones where it is endemic.

Recognition of this capacity is reflected in policy-makers' interest in indigenous coping strategies. But there is a danger of overestimating the capacity of people to cope, as vulnerability intensifies. Coping strategies can be thwarted by conflict (migration routes disrupted); exhausted by over-use (wood-fuel reserves depleted); rendered useless by market forces (the terms of trade between goats and cereals may collapse if too many people sell livestock), and so on. Macro-economic decline in many African countries during the last decade has adversely affected local people's ability to cope, leaving them more vulnerable as a result. In Sudan, for example, finding employment in urban areas to supplement rural incomes is no longer as feasible nor as lucrative an option as it was in the early 1980s. Community safety nets, reciprocal ties between households in different agro-ecological zones and between richer and poorer neighbours are all under stress. Increasingly, studies show that people's coping strategies run out earlier than they used to; and that they offer piecemeal, poorly remunerated and uncertain means of filling food gaps (Davies, 1995 (forthcoming); Holt and Lawrence, 1993). Reinforcing indigenous coping capacity is currently a much-advocated but rarely implemented policy option. Before this can happen, far more needs to be known about the potential for reinforcing these strategies — the starting-point for developing more flexible response options than are currently offered by the international relief system.

International donor agencies, recipient governments and NGOs are the principal players in the implementation of exogenous famine-prevention exercises. It is they who determine whether, when and how resources are allocated once an EWS has signalled the threat of famine. Relations between them are of central importance in understanding how decisions are made. For example, donors and recipient governments can be sceptical of each other's motives. Foreign NGOs, which often have a high profile in implementing relief programmes, may play an ambivalent role in this climate of mistrust: at times independent, at other times beholden to one or other side.

### *International donor agencies*

These include Western bilateral donors and multilateral institutions such as the UN agencies. Donors have assumed a responsibility to respond to food shocks in Africa, whether caused by drought, war or a combination of both. This role has become especially prominent since the perceived failure to respond in time to prevent the Ethiopian famine of 1984. Demands from Western electorates for their governments to intervene on humanitarian grounds, irrespective of wider political interests, have given famine relief a high political profile in recent years.

The amount of money now being spent by the main donors on famine relief has increased substantially, from less than two per cent of overseas development assistance in 1988 to more than six per cent in 1991 (Borton, 1993). Relief expenditure in Africa accounts for a large part of the increase. This is against a backdrop of stagnating or declining aid budgets. But it is politically more sensitive to cut emergency aid which enjoys greater media coverage than development expenditure, and this to some extent protects the emergency portion of aid.

### *Recipient governments*

In stark contrast to Asian examples of famine mitigation, where domestic public action has been the corner-stone of success, government capacity to respond to the threat of famine in the Sahel and Horn of Africa has never been strong. Where it did exist, it has been eroded by a decade or more of public expenditure cuts and economic stagnation. As well as being crippled by a lack of economic and institutional resources, governments do not necessarily have the political will to prevent famine, especially if they are under threat from rival interest groups. Elsewhere, political upheaval and change have diverted government attention away from food crises.

Local government capacity to respond has tended to be even weaker. In exceptional cases where local capacity is strong, this is invariably due to localized investment by a foreign donor or NGO. Democratization, and the accompanying trend towards decentralization of government service provision, offers real opportunities for more appropriate and flexible famine-prevention policies; but, again, these will inevitably be contingent on the availability of external resources. Building up local government capacity is a lengthy and costly process.

### *Non-governmental organizations*

Over the last 10 to 15 years, the role played by Northern but also by some Southern NGOs in providing relief assistance has increased dramatically (Borton, 1993). In sub-Saharan Africa, 40 per cent of emergency food aid is now channelled through NGOs. Western donors have actively encouraged Northern NGOs to play a bigger role, tending to become the favoured distributors of relief. There are a number of reasons for this sub-contractual relationship. First is mounting frustration with inadequate government capacity to run relief operations. Second, NGOs are seen to be more flexible, able to deliver relief more rapidly and be more accountable to donors for the resources they handle. Third, as a growing proportion of relief is destined for conflict areas, NGOs are chosen by donors as the most trustworthy and neutral distributors, less constrained by issues of sovereignty where cross-border operations are to be launched (Borton, 1993; see also Chapter 3). But there are also drawbacks to the use of NGOs. Their geographical coverage is usually limited. Relying on NGOs is often at the expense of government structures which become marginalized and weakened even further.<sup>4</sup> And national governments do not necessarily agree with donors' perceptions of the suitability of foreign NGOs.

## **Conclusions**

There is growing concern about the poor record of famine prevention in the Sahel and Horn of Africa, despite the quantity of resources allocated to it. The time has come to shift the debate forward from a preoccupation with information and EW towards tackling constraints on the response

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<sup>4</sup> See Buchanan-Smith, 1990, for the case of Sudan in the mid-1980s.



side. There is little point in further improving the ability of EWS to provide decision-makers with the certainty they crave, until there are changes in the institutional framework within which they operate, to reflect better what actually happens during a famine. Prediction will always be more akin to art than science; decision-makers must learn to live with this, but adapt their response systems accordingly rather than waiting for the definitive forecast. If the policy failure of famine prevention is to be reversed, the institutional and political constraints to realizing the benefits of early, albeit imprecise, warning must be tackled.

The starting-point is that EWS must not only be capable of warning of large-scale famine (quite a rare event), but also be sensitive to changes in food-security status long before famine threatens and be able to detect localized pockets of acute food stress. As many EWS evolve into multi-indicator systems, this wider remit is now within their reach. On the response side, interventions should be geared to protecting livelihoods, not only to saving lives. This means *early* response, and is consistent with local people's priorities. It is also a more rational response than waiting for destitution as the trigger, especially if post-famine rehabilitation is part of the overall policy objective. The analysis presented in this book about how the international relief system works, and the five country case-studies of EW and response in 1990–91, are judged against these benchmarks of what an EWS and a relief response *ought* to be able to do.

In Chapter 2, the complexity of EWS for famine prevention is situated in the wider context of the debate about the use of information in decision-making. Empirical evidence on the generation and exploitation of famine early-warning information within the international relief system is analysed in Chapter 3. Chapters 4 to 8 present five country case-studies plotting the story of famine early warning and response in 1990–91 in each country. Barriers to, and opportunities for, timely response are identified in each case. The five countries reflect the diversity of early-warning and response systems in Africa. Some of the countries face endemic food crisis (e.g. Ethiopia), whereas others face only periodic episodes of food shortage (e.g. Mali). In some cases, relations between national government and international donors were good in 1991, as in Mali; elsewhere they were fraught with difficulty and tension as in Sudan and Ethiopia. Some systems operated in the context of decentralized government (e.g. Kenya), whereas others were highly centralized (e.g. Chad and Ethiopia). Such differences permit useful comparisons to be made and conclusions drawn about the particular set of circumstances which are most likely to ensure that a strong link between early-warning information and preventive action can be forged. Finally, Chapter 9 concludes with a set of practical policy recommendations about how to tackle the institutional, political and logistical constraints to realizing the benefits of early — if imprecise — warning, to inform the reversal of the current policy failure of famine prevention.