

FAMINE WARNINGS

20 million on brink of famine: saving lives and building futures

MARCH 2017

A famine in parts of South Sudan and looming threats of famines in Nigeria, Somalia and Yemen have put an estimated 20 million people – more than double the population of London – are at risk of starvation. Approximately 1.4 million children are at imminent risk of death without immediate action by the international community.¹

These massive multi-country humanitarian crises will have far-reaching impacts on security and stability in already volatile regions of Africa and the Middle East. Besides the tragic human costs, they could increase migration flows and set back poverty reduction efforts by decades. The crises are stretching the already overwhelmed humanitarian system almost to breaking point.

Although severe drought is playing its part, these are not ‘natural disasters’ but man-made crises, driven by a deadly mix of conflict, marginalisation, violent extremism, climate change, and insufficient investment in conflict prevention and management, resilience and sustainable development activities.²

While the immediate priority must be saving lives, building resilience and addressing conflict and violence cannot wait. **As the international community, national governments and local responders mobilise to respond, we should simultaneously:**

- **Provide urgent assistance and remove obstacles to humanitarians accessing**

populations in need – especially diplomatic obstacles;

- Invest in building the resilience of vulnerable communities to prepare for, withstand and recover from shocks and stresses; and
- Address the root causes of conflict and violence.



AN ESTIMATED 20 MILLION PEOPLE ARE AT RISK OF FAMINE IN 2017

Famine was declared in Unity State in South Sudan early in 2017. Lack of information and access makes it difficult to confirm whether famine has occurred or continues to occur beyond South Sudan (i.e. Boko Haram-occupied areas in Northern Nigeria).³

Photo: Domin Nahr for Mercy Corps

¹ UNICEF Press Release (21 February 2017). See also: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/22/world/africa/why-20-million-people-are-on-brink-of-famine-in-a-world-of-plenty.html?_r=0
² NYT on 18 March 2017 ('That Food Saved My Life,' and Trump Wants to Cut It Off).

³ <http://www.fews.net/west-africa/nigeria/alert/december-13-2016>

Four Man-Made Disasters Unfurling

South Sudan

South Sudan is a prime example of how, when left unaddressed, long-term conflict can produce devastating consequences. After decades of conflict with Sudan, South Sudan experienced a brief moment of stability post-independence before conflict broke out once again in December 2013. Since then, tens of thousands of South Sudanese civilians have been killed and the ongoing civil war has forced more than 3 million people to flee their homes.⁴ Over 1.5 million people have fled to neighbouring countries, including to Uganda (which is now hosting the largest refugee population on the continent), Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Central African Republic.⁵ After more than three years of war and repeated warnings about the deepening of the crisis in South Sudan, we now have one final chance to prevent a famine from spreading and engulfing more than one million people.

Of the many humanitarian needs within the country, the magnitude of food insecurity and malnutrition experienced by South Sudanese is unprecedented. Despite fertile land, conflict has made it impossible for farmers to tend their fields. To make matters worse, militias have been accused of intentionally destroying crops, looting cattle, burning homes and villages, and damaging vital water sources.⁶ Currently, almost 5 million people are without enough food (IPC Phases 3-5), and of that some 100,000 people are on the brink of starvation.⁷ If nothing is done, by July 2017, it is

projected that the number of people without adequate access to food may reach 5.5 million.⁸

Horrifyingly, one in four South Sudanese children under the age of five is already stunted due to malnutrition and is especially vulnerable to the effects of constrained food consumption.⁹

Nigeria

Ongoing conflict and instability in North East Nigeria, including the presence of violent extremist group Boko Haram, has destroyed markets and agriculture, and kept millions of people trapped in poverty and insecurity. Some 1.3 million people are still in displacement after fleeing their homes, and approximately 8.5 million are in need of life-saving assistance.¹⁰ Many of them live in dangerous and hard-to-reach places, and a disproportionate number are children. Almost a quarter of a million children are suffering from severe acute malnutrition and some 49,000 may die if they are not reached soon.¹¹ FEWSNET reports that famine is already underway in Boko Haram-occupied areas in Northern Nigeria.¹²

Somalia

Somalia has been ravaged by decades of conflict and insecurity, making access to many parts of the country difficult. When overlaid by multiple years of failed rains, the effect is catastrophic – as we saw in the 2011 famine that killed nearly 260,000 people.¹³ This year, rains have failed again – and we have seen water prices triple, crops wiped out and the death of livestock. Three million two hundred thousand people are in need of water, sanitation and hygiene services (WASH)

⁴ <http://www.unocha.org/south-sudan>

⁵ <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/latest/2017/3/58cbfa304/refugee-crisis-south-sudan-worlds-fastest-growing.html>

⁶ <https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2017/03/20/south-sudan-needs-peace-much-food>

⁷ <http://www.ipcinfo.org/ipcinfo-detail-forms/ipcinfo-new-s-detail/en/c/471308/>

⁸ <http://data.unhcr.org/SouthSudan/regional.php>; <http://www.ipcinfo.org/ipcinfo-detail-forms/ipcinfo-map-detail/en/c/471270/>

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/famine-in-south-sudan>
¹⁰ http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ocha_nga_hr_2017_19122016.pdf

¹¹ Decreasing child mortality and improving maternal health depend heavily on reducing malnutrition, which is responsible, directly or indirectly, for 35% of deaths among children under five." See: <http://www.who.int/nutrition/topics/malnutrition/en/>

¹² <http://www.fews.net/west-africa/nigeria/alert/december-13-2016>

¹³ <http://www1.wfp.org/countries/somalia>

and nearly half of the population needs food security assistance.¹⁴ Hundreds of thousands of children face acute malnutrition and potentially starvation. The new President declared the drought a natural disaster at the start of March after 110 people died within 48 hours in the Bay region. Unless a massive and urgent scale-up of humanitarian assistance takes place, famine could soon be a reality in some of the worst drought-affected areas of Somalia.¹⁵

Over the last two years, Somalia has seen increased refugee returns (both UNHCR supported and spontaneous returns) from neighbouring countries, primarily from Kenya (Dadaab refugee camp). As of March 15, 57,329 Somali refugees had returned home since December 8, 2014, when UNHCR first started supporting voluntary return of Somali refugees. UNHCR supported 17,359 in 2017 alone.¹⁶ The conditions in many parts of Somalia are not conducive to mass refugee returns due to ongoing conflict, insecurity, and humanitarian conditions that have now been exacerbated by the worsening drought and possible famine, leading to further internal and external displacement of the local communities and returnees.

Yemen

Again due to ongoing conflict, approximately 65 percent of households in Yemen do not have access to enough food and some 7.3 million need emergency food assistance.¹⁷ UNICEF reports that 462,000 children are suffering from severe acute malnutrition.¹⁸ **The situation in Yemen is now so dire that a child under five dies every ten minutes.**¹⁹ Parents are forced to make horrific decisions, including whether to pursue medical attention for one sick child over buying food to

feed their other children; they are forced to choose which children live and die.²⁰

Bureaucratic hurdles impede humanitarian operations while Hodeida Port, through which 80 percent of Yemen's food supply enters the country, is at serious risk of full closure. If this happens, the humanitarian crisis will significantly escalate.²¹ In this context, with the economy also on the verge of collapse, humanitarian assistance alone cannot stave off famine in Yemen for long.²²

A Smart Response to Increase Food and Livelihood Security

Saving Lives Now

Governments, donors, humanitarian organisations and local responders have already begun to mobilise. Some donors have committed or reprioritised large tranches of funding in order to facilitate immediate life-saving response, but more assistance is needed.

We must quickly deliver food, water, health care and sanitation supplies. Where appropriate, we should provide support in the form of cash assistance, which allows families to buy the items they need most and can support and stimulate local markets and businesses.

Further funding for these efforts is urgently needed. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is appealing for \$5.6 billion in 2017 to avert famines in Yemen, South Sudan, Nigeria and Somalia, \$4.4 billion of which is required urgently.²³

¹⁴ <http://reliefweb.int/report/somalia/humanitarian-action-children-2017-somalia>

¹⁵ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/03/05/somalia-prime-minister-110-dead-hunger-past-48-hours-drought/>

¹⁶ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/54715>

¹⁷ <http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/ena/wfp247833.pdf>

¹⁸ https://www.unicef.org/media/media_94893.html

¹⁹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38767874>

²⁰ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/in-yemens-w-ar-trapped-families-ask-which-child-should-we-save/2016/11/30/c2240cf4-7d60-4132-989f-2128b077efbb_story.html?utm_term=.386a383ff036

²¹ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-hunger-idUSKBN1670Z2>

²² <http://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFKBN15P2D0>

²³ <https://www.unocha.org/top-stories/all-stories/our-world-plenty-there-no-excuse-inaction-or-indifference-un-secretary-gener>

Humanitarian Access

Humanitarian access in these conflict zones is also a concern as aid workers continue to be killed, injured and harassed. Without safe access to deliver food, water and vital supplies, especially in areas which are on the brink of starvation, we will not be able to save lives.

According to the UN, nearly 80 aid workers have been killed by warring parties in South Sudan since the conflict erupted in 2013.²⁴ For example, in Unity State in South Sudan, famine has already been declared but humanitarians are currently unable to enter the areas in direst need and serve the worst-affected communities due to security concerns. In fact, after the famine declaration, about 28 humanitarians were evacuated from Mayendit County in Unity state, which is a famine-affected county. Unless the guns fall silent and conflict stops, the humanitarian situation will continue to deteriorate.

The security threat also impacts the communities the humanitarians are trying to serve. In South Sudan the land is still fertile and could be supporting families and communities if they could plant and harvest. The Nile provides enough water, and there are still bees. Our country director Deepmala Mahla recently reminded NPR listeners that "Honey from the South Sudan could be in a supermarket in the United States! All we need is peace."²⁵

The difference unimpeded humanitarian access makes on mitigating famine risks can be seen starkly in East Africa. The constraints on access in Somalia to the most vulnerable is what is elevating the risk of famine, compared to the proactive responses of the governments of Kenya and Ethiopia who are responding to the same regional drought. The levels of food insecurity and malnutrition in Ethiopia and Kenya are sobering,

²⁴ <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article62009>

²⁵ <http://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2017/03/24/520547986/nobody-wants-to-drop-food-from-a-plane-but-its-happening&sa=D&ust=1490624178401000&usg=AFQjCNGaARAii6NleANs77qI-OLrst0dA>

but would be even worse (as they are in Somalia) if they were not allowing the most vulnerable to be reached and contributing their own resources to the response.

Building Resilience in the Future

Even as we respond urgently, we have an opportunity to build communities' ability to cope with shocks and stresses in the future. Mercy Corps research has shown it is possible to build resilience even in fragile and conflict affected contexts like the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lebanon, and Syria. We have found that investing in strengthening resilience in Ethiopia reduced human suffering, asset losses, and humanitarian need during the severe El Niño drought in 2016.

More effective responses that build resilience requires longer-term, flexible investments that strengthen the systems, such as markets, local governance, and livelihoods, that people and communities rely on to cope with and overcome shocks and stresses. By building local capacity in communities' abilities to deal with risk, we can save lives from future famines and reduce the need for costly humanitarian interventions over the long-term.

Fighting Violence and Conflict

Violent conflict is the leading cause of suffering and extreme poverty today. In 2016, the World Bank revisited the 2011 World Development Report on Conflict and revised its statement saying that **conflict is not one of the drivers of suffering and poverty, but is the primary driver.**

Violent conflict erupts for a host of reasons – many intersecting.²⁶ For example:

- Degradation of natural resources impedes livelihoods among farmers and

²⁶ <https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/PeaceAndConflictSectorApproach.pdf>

pastoralists, inciting cattle raids and land grabs;

- Poor governance, where certain populations are underrepresented or served, provides openings for leaders to utilise grievances to mobilise supporters;
- Erosion of formal and informal institutions creates power vacuums that groups vie to fill.

During a conflict, there are activities that NGOs and others can take to help mitigate the conflict and bring it to a peaceful conclusion. These actions include:

- Improving local governance capacities to respond to community needs;
- Strengthening social cohesion;
- Being explicit about peacebuilding goals; and,
- Negotiating local ceasefires and humanitarian access.

For example, in one of Mercy Corps' humanitarian programmes in Yemen, where tribal conflicts – particularly over land – have existed for centuries, villagers in the Haymah Dakhliyah district of Sana'a Governorate decided to use aid distribution as a way to bring the village together. They agreed to hold distributions and education sessions across lines of division. Even more surprisingly, they agreed to leave their guns at home. The hope is that by rebuilding trust between villagers, local-level outbreaks of violence that prolong suffering and limit the area's development can be prevented when the larger conflict ends between the Houthis and the Saudi-led coalition backing the government.²⁷

Even as we respond to these crises we must enhance the capacity of people and institutions to prevent and manage conflict, and tackle the root causes that drive people to participate in violence. As the news cameras move away from these crises and hopefully, we stave off the worst of

²⁷ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/yemen-hopeless-international-community_us_581ad480e4b08f9841ad63d4

these potential famines, such efforts must continue in the long term, over many years.

Policy Recommendations

Multiple Approaches

Now, more than ever, civilians in all of these countries need a strong commitment from the international community to meet their basic needs. But as each of these contexts proves, short-term approaches will not result in strong and secure communities in the long term.

While providing urgent assistance, our response to these man-made crises must start to address the root causes of conflict and work to strengthen resilience to future shocks and stresses. We therefore urge the UK and EU to commit to multi-level and multi-faceted interventions. To prevent future famines we recommend the UK and EU:

- Immediately respond to humanitarian needs to avert mass starvation and death, providing support in the form of cash assistance where appropriate;
- Support development programmes to build resilience to future shocks and stresses, improve food security and mitigate the impact of disasters, both within the emergency response and by continuing to support community-led development wherever possible;
- Invest in programmes now and in the long-term that address the root causes of conflict and violence at all levels; and
- Prioritise protection and psychosocial support for adolescents and children who have been exposed to constant violence.

When making funding decisions, the UK and EU should continue to utilise the following tools that support this type of work:

- Mechanisms that enable timely emergency response;
- Multi-year funding; and,
- Flexible, adaptive and iterative programme design to enable interventions

to respond and stay relevant to rapidly changing conditions and needs.

Bottom Up and Top Down Diplomacy

We know that both community-led and high-level diplomatic efforts are needed for a stable peace in these countries. In addition to local conflict prevention and management efforts, diplomacy and negotiation is needed at the highest levels.

The UK, EU and key allies should provide ministerial leadership in diplomatic efforts that:

- Guarantee humanitarian access and ensure the safety and security of aid workers;
- Ensure quick and peaceful resolution to the conflicts;
- Address governance, inequality and development issues that drive conflict and violence and support longer-term peacebuilding.

About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organisation powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.

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