FAMINE WARNINGS

20 Million on Brink of Famine- Urgent Need for Saving Lives and Building Better Futures

JULY 2017

Looming threats of famines in Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen has put an estimated 20 million people – more than the entire population of Florida – at risk for starvation. Approximately 2.5 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, it 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, marginalization, 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 mobilize 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.

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)
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, 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 nearly 4 million people to flee their homes. Nearly 2 million people have fled to neighboring countries (63 percent of whom are children), including to Uganda (which is now hosting the largest refugee population on the continent), Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, the DRC, and CAR, with the latter two countries managing displacements from internal conflict as well. 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. Currently, 6 million people are without enough food (IPC Phases 3-5), and of that some 45,000 people are experiencing famine. This is 500,000 more people in need of emergency assistance in the country than had been originally projected at the start of the year.

In just four short months, the number of people on the brink of starvation has risen from 700,000 to 1.7 million. Despite the levels of need in two areas of South Sudan in Unity State being reduced from outright famine, the overall situation in the country is rapidly worsening, with 50 percent of the population now being recognized as food insecure, the greatest number ever recorded in South Sudan.

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 1.8 million people are still in displacement after feeling their homes – including 1.3 million in Borno State – and approximately 8.5 million are in need of life-saving assistance. 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. FEWSNET reports that famine is already underway in Boko Haram–occupied areas in Northern Nigeria. Inaccessible areas of Borno State are seeing an elevated risk of famine with the onset of the rainy season in June/July likely to further limit humanitarian access exacerbate food insecurity.

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3 http://www.unocha.org/south-sudan
6 http://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/famine-south-sudan-understanding-food-insecurity-unity-state
7 http://www.irenn.org/analysis/2017/03/20/south-sudan-needs-peace-much-food
8 http:// ipc.globalalert-issue8.squarespace.com/
9 http:// ipc-globalalert-issue8.squarespace.com/
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/
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. This year, rains have failed again—and we have seen the tripling of water prices, the wiping out of crops and the death of livestock.

The Government of Somalia declared the drought a natural disaster at the start of March after 110 people died within 48 hours within the Bay region. In addition to the food needs, 4.5 million people are in need of water, sanitation and hygiene services (WASH) and nearly half of the populations are in need of food security assistance. A severe cholera outbreak is ongoing in East Africa and over 50,000 cases have been reported in Somalia alone since January 2017.

Since the beginning of this year, risk of acute malnourishment for Somali children has increased 50 percent. In 2017, an estimated 1.4 million children have or will face acute malnourishment, including hundreds of thousands whose condition is life threatening. Any significant interruptions in ongoing food assistance activities risk triggering a famine, and additional assistance is needed especially to address disease outbreaks.

Over the last two years, Somalia has seen increased refugee returns (both UNHCR supported and spontaneous returns) from the neighboring countries, primarily from Kenya (Dadaab). As of May 31, 66,647 Somali refugees had returned home from Kenya since December 8, 2014, when UNHCR first started supporting voluntary return of Somali refugees from Kenya. 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

Due to ongoing conflict, approximately 75 percent of households in Yemen need humanitarian assistance. Of the 20.7 million people living in Yemen, 17.1 million are food insecure and 7.3 million need immediate emergency food assistance. UNICEF reports that nearly 2.2 million children are malnourished including half a million suffering from severe acute malnutrition. The situation in Yemen is now so dire that a child dies every ten minutes of a preventable disease. 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.

Cholera has killed more than 1,300 people. By July 2017, there have been more than 96,000 suspected cases of cholera, and the startling rapidity of the spreading outbreak is reflected by the fact that the number of deaths is three times

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14 http://www1.wfp.org/countries/somalia
15 http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/03/05/somalia
17 http://www.fews.net/east-africa/alert/july-6-2017
18 https://www.unicef.org/media/media_95918.html
19 http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/57557.pdf
21 https://www.unicef.org/info/bycountry/media_95886.html
higher since April 27 than was reported from October 2016 to March 2017.\textsuperscript{24}

Lack of political will and bureaucratic hurdles impede humanitarian operations. Port Hodeida, through which 80 percent of Yemen's food supply enters the country, is at serious risk of full closure. In this context, with the economy also on the verge of full collapse, humanitarian assistance alone will not stave off famine in Yemen for long.\textsuperscript{25}

\section*{A Smart Response to Increase Food and Livelihood Security}

\subsection*{Saving Lives Now}
Governments, donors, humanitarian organizations and local responders have already begun to mobilize. Some donors have committed or reprioritized large tranches of funding in order to facilitate immediate life-saving response, but more assistance is needed.

We must quickly deliver food, water, hygiene 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.\textsuperscript{26}

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

According to the UN, more than 80 aid workers have been killed by warring parties in South Sudan since the conflict erupted in 2013.\textsuperscript{27} In June, OCHA recorded the highest number of incidents (100) in the first half of 2017. NGO compounds have been forcibly entered and looted, staff members physically assaulted and robbed, and vehicles ambushed on the roads.\textsuperscript{28}

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."\textsuperscript{29}

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, 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.

\textsuperscript{24} http://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-complex-emergency-fact-sheet-12-fiscal-year-fy-2017
\textsuperscript{25} http://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFKBN15P2D0; http://www.fews.net/east-africa/yemen
\textsuperscript{26} https://www.unocha.org/top-stories/all-stories/our-world-plenty-there-no-excuse-inaction-or-indifference-un-secretary-general
\textsuperscript{27} http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article62009
\textsuperscript{28} OCHA South Sudan: Humanitarian Access Snapshot (June 2017)
\textsuperscript{29} 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=AFQjCNGapaRAi6NieAn577qgi-OLrst0dA
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 strengthens 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. For example:

- Degradation of natural resources impedes livelihoods among farmers and pastoralists, inciting cattle raids and land grabs;
- Poor governance, where certain populations are underrepresented or served, provide openings for leaders to utilize grievances to mobilize supporters;
- Erosion of informal and informal institutions creates power vacuums that groups vie to fill.

During a conflict, there are activities that NGOs and others can be taken 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 programs 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.31

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 these potential famines, such efforts must continue in the long term. As each of these contexts proves, addressing conflict cannot be achieved by short-term approaches, but requires complex, multi-level, multi-faceted interventions over many years.

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

31 https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/PeaceAndConflictSectorApproach.pdf
Policy Recommendations

Funding
The U.S. Congress must act to stop this humanitarian crisis. In FY2018, Congress should fully fund the International Assistance budget (“150” account) at $60 billion. Also, funding of the following accounts at the following level is critical: International Disaster Assistance ($3.41 billion), Migration and Refugee Assistance ($3.604 billion), and Food for Peace Title II ($1.874 billion, including $350 million for resilience-building non-emergency programs) and development programs funded through the Economic Support Fund and Development Assistance accounts that can mitigate these man-made crises.

Now, more than ever, civilians in all of these countries need a strong commitment from the international community to meet their basic needs. U.S. foreign assistance funds will:

- Provide immediate resources to respond to humanitarian needs and avert mass starvation and death;
- Support development programs to build resilience, improve food security and mitigate the impact of disasters, both within the emergency response and by continuing to support community-led development wherever possible;
- Prioritize protection and psychosocial support for adolescents and children who have been exposed to constant conflict; and,
- Invest in programs now and in the long-term that address the root causes of conflict and violence at all levels.

When making funding decisions, the U.S. government should continue to utilize the following tools that support this type of work:

- Crisis modifiers and other mechanisms that enable timely emergency response;
- Multi-year funding; and,
- Flexible, iterative program 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 U.S. and key allies should provide high-level support and attention to diplomatic efforts that:

- Guarantee humanitarian access and ensure the safety and security of aid workers;
- Ensure quick and peaceful resolution to the conflicts; and
- 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 organization 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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