

The Ethiopian Crisis of 1999–2000: Lessons Learned, Questions Unanswered

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During 1999–2000, Ethiopia was brought to the edge of a major disaster, with some 10 million people estimated to be in need of food assistance at the height of the crisis. A repeat of the catastrophic famine of 1984–5 was avoided, but the numbers of people affected, the loss of life and the destruction of livelihoods made this one of the most serious crises in the Horn of Africa in the past 15 years. The humanitarian community has been slow to recognise the lessons of 1999–2000, and there have been surprisingly few attempts to conduct a serious, post-event evaluation of the overall crisis and response. The label ‘famine averted’ seems to summarise the crisis to the satisfaction of most parties involved.

This paper reviews the crisis, the events that led up to it and the response effort. It examines the factors that contributed to making this crisis so serious, in order to draw conclusions and note issues that are relevant to current thinking about disaster preparedness and response — in Ethiopia and elsewhere. Some of the lessons learned from the 1999–2000 crisis are not new. However, the very fact that mistakes have been repeated should be a lesson to the humanitarian community.

Keywords: Ethiopia, slow-onset crisis 1999–2000, food assistance, disaster preparedness.

Famine averted?

During 1999–2000, Ethiopia was brought to the edge of a major disaster. At the peak of the crisis in mid-2000, over 10 million people in Ethiopia were estimated to be in acute need of food assistance, out of a population of 55 million. This was a classic slow-onset crisis, triggered by a variety of shocks that began in some areas of the Eastern agricultural highlands and the pastoral lowlands as early as 1997. The situation worsened steadily through 1999 before peaking in early 2000. Only then did a long-delayed response from donors effectively begin to ameliorate the impacts of the crisis, and the international media began to devote widespread coverage to it.

Since the major famine of 1984–5, both the government of Ethiopia and external aid agencies have invested heavily in improvements for famine prevention in Ethiopia, including strengthened early warning and assessment capacity, establishment of a food security reserve and other institutional measures intended to expedite response. Efforts by the government and the international community eventually brought the situation under control by late 2000. Although timely interventions helped prevent the spread of famine throughout the country, the numbers of people affected, the loss of life and the destruction of livelihoods made this one of the most serious

crises in the Horn of Africa of the past 15 years. Most of the parties involved in the relief operation of 1999–2000 seem to believe that famine was averted. However, in some areas, famine was not averted, and there is little reason for complacency about the state of famine preparedness in Ethiopia: some famine prevention mechanisms did not function as planned, some elements were still missing and some unforeseen complications arose. The lessons to be learned from the 1999–2000 crisis in Ethiopia have far-ranging implications for famine prevention elsewhere as well.

This paper is an attempt to review the crisis by examining the events that triggered it; the underlying factors that contributed to its severity; the information that was available to the humanitarian community as the crisis was unfolding; and the response effort. It outlines major issues relevant to current thinking about disaster preparedness and response that have yet to be adequately understood and addressed.

This crisis a long time in the making: 1997–2000

The roots of the emergency can be traced as far back as mid-1997 when the first widespread failures of the short (*belg*) rains were reported. *Belg* rains, which typically fall during the first half of the year, are important not only for minor crops such as pulses and potatoes but also for preparing the ground for the longer cycle crops (particularly maize and sorghum) that are planted in June and July. In 1997 the main rains were unevenly distributed as well, resulting in localised failures of the main agricultural crops. In pastoral areas of Somali Region (east/south-east) and Borena Zone (south), the failure of the rains during the first quarter of the year came on top of poor rains in late 1996. Whereas in the government's Appeal for Emergency Assistance issued in December 1996 only 35,000 people in Somali Region were estimated to be in need of food relief, by February the number had risen to 600,000 people (Borton, 1997). The situation was exacerbated by the migration of several thousand pastoralists into Ethiopia from south-western Somalia and northern Kenya, where the drought was more advanced. The UN-Emergencies Unit for Ethiopia (UN-EUE) reported that the regional and zonal administrations and local NGOs in pastoral areas achieved modest success in obtaining support for water tankering to alleviate the immediate water shortage. In February 1997, the government of Ethiopia issued a special appeal for additional assistance for nearly one million affected pastoralists. By March, additional areas in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR) had been added to the appeal, as reports were received of declining human nutritional status and weakening livestock. The government of Ethiopia's Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission (DPPC) deployed trucks to transport water, fodder and food to remote locations in affected areas (UN-EUE 1997a).

By August 1997, the government of Ethiopia estimated that 3.4 million pastoralists and agropastoralists (including *belg* farmers) were in need of 300,000MT of emergency food assistance (UN-EUE, 1997b, 1997c). In an update for donors, the DPPC stated, 'In spite of the apparent relief needs in the country, and the acute levels of malnutrition, and at times displacement of people, observed in a number of areas, this year's Donor response has unusually been very low' (DPPC, Aug. 1997). The report went on to say that donors had only pledged 49 per cent of total relief requirements and that food that had been pledged was slow in arriving.

Only half of the food required for distribution in 1997 was received and distributed during that year. Approximately 108,000MT of the total 267,647MT

assistance delivered was locally purchased grain (bought in surplus-producing areas and transported to food-deficit areas for distribution). The European Union (EU), together with the World Food Programme (WFP), led this initiative. In addition to the limited food response, the Ethiopian government's request for cash and non-food items (especially water supply, emergency health-care and agricultural support) went largely ignored. In many areas, ration sizes were reduced from the standard level of 15kg/person/month to 12.5kg or even less to accommodate the high numbers of people in need of food assistance. Although the exact impact of ration dilution has not been assessed, it was widely believed that the inadequate support received resulted in the continued downward spiral of poor farmers and pastoralists into further destitution (Thomson et al., 1998).

Early indications of the food production picture in 1998 seemed to suggest dramatic improvement. A pre-harvest joint assessment carried out by WFP/FAO and the Ethiopian government predicted that there would be a national grain production figure of over 11 million metric tons — close to the record harvest of 1996, with a marketable surplus of 300–400,000MT. As of January 1999, the donors were under the impression that food supply in Ethiopia was generally good. The international community and the government quickly forgot about the localised shortages experienced in 1997. Little attention was given to the pastoral areas that had not benefited from the improved situation in the agricultural areas and were still struggling to recover from the livestock and income losses of 1997.

In early 1999, several things happened to cause the food security situation to deteriorate rapidly. First, and most significantly, the border dispute with Eritrea, which had been simmering since mid-1998 — but which had seen little actual military action during the second half of the year — flared up again into open fighting in February 1999. Second, the actual results of the 1998 harvest did not live up to the optimistic picture that the pre-harvest assessment had painted. Heavy rains and hail just before the harvest led to production losses. By the time the losses were recorded, however, donor pledges had already been announced based on the pre-harvest assessment. Willingness to consider changing pledges was tempered by unwillingness to provide any but the most essential assistance to a nation at war with its neighbour.

Matters were made worse by the near total failure of the 1999 *belg* rains. The already vulnerable areas of North and South Wollo, and East and West Hararghe in Oromiya Region were the most severely affected. In South Wollo, there was a massive loss of livestock (particularly equines, which are used for ploughing there) because of depleted grazing areas (UN-EUE, 1999; Hammond and Eggenberger, 1999). All of these shocks had been appropriately noted by various components of Ethiopia's early warning network (operated mostly by the DPPC and donors, but augmented in some locations by localised early warning systems operated by NGOs). However, low response from donors during 1999 resulted in continued decrease of rations (by reducing the size of the ration as well as skipping distributions altogether). Farmers reacted by liquidating the few assets they had and shifting to short-cycle, low-yielding crops (Hammond, 1999; Guinand, 1999; Ugas and Eggenberger, 1999).

In affected areas, many people did not have enough cash to buy grain from local markets. Areas that do not produce *belg* crops of their own but depend upon waged labour on *belg* farms, such as Wag Hamra Zone in Amhara Region, also suffered a severe drop in purchasing power (Hammond, 1999c). People sold what assets they had — oxen and other livestock, seeds, tools and household items — to be able to purchase grain.

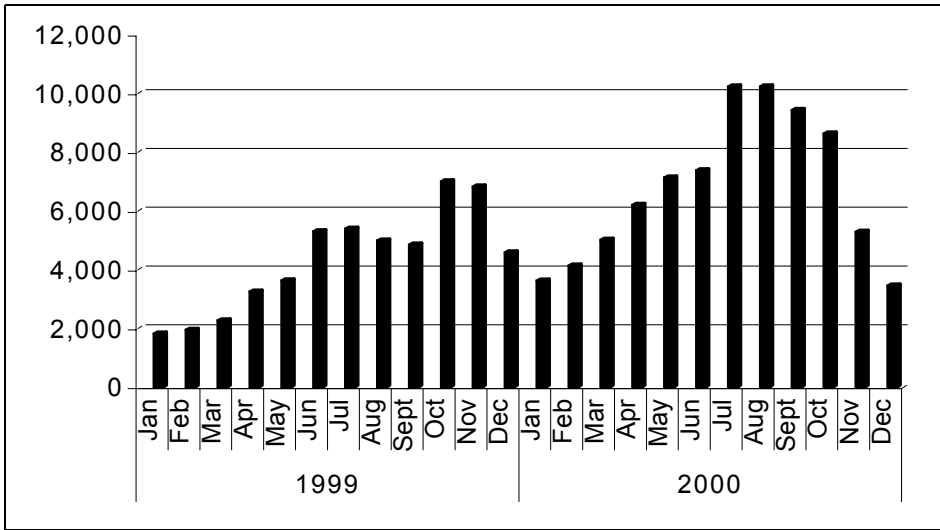


Figure 1 People in need by month (000s), 1999–2000

Source: DPPC estimates in Fortnightly Bulletins

At the beginning of 1999, an estimated 2.2 million people were in need of emergency food assistance (GFRDE/DPPC, Jan. 2000).² This number rose steadily throughout the year. As the drought worsened, its characteristics and geographic focus shifted. When the *belg* rains failed in the northern highlands in March–May 1999, the focus of humanitarian attention quickly shifted from Somali Region to the densely populated Amhara Region, where chronic food insecurity had already rendered people destitute. Then the focus of the relief operation returned to the eastern lowlands as anecdotal evidence and limited nutritional surveys reported high rates of malnutrition. The features of the vulnerability included the following points:

- Continued drought conditions in *belg*-producing agricultural and pastoral areas prevented significant recovery of productive potential. Although fodder availability improved, milk production remained insufficient throughout the year.
- Additional vulnerable areas throughout the country emerged as a result of asset erosion in chronically vulnerable areas that were either previously identified as being in need of close monitoring or had not been expected to require assistance.
- Efforts to provide food to all affected areas strained available food resources as well as the government's and relief infrastructure's capacity. The situation in the southern area of Welayita, for instance, was distinct from that in Somali Region and in the northern highlands. It was thus difficult to bring the situation in all areas under control.
- The scale of livestock losses in pastoral and agropastoral areas rendered many households without any assets to speak of and caused them to migrate to settled areas in search of relief food (see Table 2). Migrants were unable to regenerate their herds or regain access to animals. In August 1998, severe food insecurity was reported in the eastern highlands (East and West Hararghe) and high levels of out-migration were reported through April and May of 1999 (Ahrens, 1999; CEFIS, 1999; Guinand, 1999).

Table 1 Prevalence of malnutrition and excess mortality, various places, 1999–2000

<i>Region</i>	<i>Place</i>	<i>Time period</i>	<i>Organisation</i>	<i>Prevalence of malnutrition* (%)</i>	
Somali	Gode	Dec. 1999	SCF-US	54.8	
	Gode	Feb. 2000	MSF-B	43.0	
	Gode	March 2000	MSF-B	32.4	
	Gode	May 2000	World Vision	39.4	
	Denan	May 2000	MSF-B	52.9	
	Gode	July 2000	UNICEF, CDC	29.1**	
	Jijiga		May 2000	CARE	32.0 (resident)
					50.0 (IDP)
	Afder		March 2000	NCA/ECCMY/DIA	11.5 (Dolobay)
					18.2 (Bare)
	Shinille		July 2000	Oxfam-UK	74.0 (resident)
					84.0 (IDP)
	Shinille		June 2000	UNICEF	70.0
32.8					
Kebre Dahar		June–July 2000	ACF-F	32.8	
				22.3	
Sesi Tsaedaemba		Feb. 2000	WVI	22.3	
				20.1	
Tigre	Sesi Tsaedaemba	May 2000	WVI	20.1	
				26.0	
Amhara	Lay Gayint	Nov. 1999	CARE	26.0	
	Wag Hamra	May 2000	MSF-CH	26.8	
	Wello	May 2000	Concern	11.2	
	Borena	March 2000	CARE	24.2	
Oromyia					
SSNPR	Konso	August 1999	MSF-H	20.2	
	Konso	Feb. 2000	MSF-H	12.9	
	North Omo	April 2000	Concern	25.6	
	North Omo	July 2000	Oxfam	45.1	
	South Omo	July 2000	Concern	53.3	

Sources: Nutrition Surveys Summary, Field news: November 2000 PFEDA, University of Lille; UNICEF/WHO; CARE; Salama et al., 2001

* Global malnutrition expressed in % with weight for height (W/H) Z score < -2 + oedema; or % weight for height (W/H) < 80% of the median + oedema.

(*Note:* lack of standardised procedures for measuring and reporting malnutrition made it difficult to compare results).

** Included estimate of crude mortality rate (3.2/10,000 population/day) and under-five mortality rate (6.8/10000/day).

(*Note:* Normal CMR for developing countries is <0.5/10,000/day; over 2/10,000/day is considered a situation out of control. For <5 MR is of <1/10,000/day is considered normal for developing countries; over 4/10,000/day indicates a catastrophic situation).

The prevalence of acute malnutrition in the affected areas reached critical levels in 1999, and was rapidly worsening in early 2000. The DPPC issued a total of six appeal revisions during 1999; with each update, the numbers of people affected and the amount of food requested increased. By January 2000 the number of people

estimated to be affected by natural disaster and thus in need of emergency food aid had risen to 7.7 million. By mid-2000, over 10 million people were reported to be acutely food insecure in Ethiopia. The overall numbers of people affected over the entire two-year period are shown in Figure 1.

Delivery of relief food during the second half of 2000, and an improved main rainy season, prevented large-scale stress migration in the agricultural highlands; migration to most settlements in the pastoral areas had greatly subsided by August.

More malnutrition, mortality and assets eroded

Despite widespread evidence of food-related stress in 1999, major efforts to assess malnutrition in the worst-affected areas were not widely reported until the first quarter of 2000. Table 1 reports the results of a number of nutrition and mortality assessments carried out from mid-1999 to mid-2000. Sampling techniques and measurement methods vary, making these results difficult to interpret and compare. But these data paint a picture of a serious and widespread crisis that was well under way even before nutritional assessments were carried out.

In a major epidemiological study done by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) of the impact of the crisis in Gode zone in Somali Region, Salama et al. (2001) conducted a retrospective mortality survey combined with a current nutritional assessment. Their findings regarding current nutritional status were similar to many other assessments — Global Acute Malnutrition (prevalence of wasting) was found to be 29.1 per cent. However, the shocking figure to come out of the study was the extent of excess mortality. Over the eight months prior to August 2000, they found a total of 293 deaths in a sample of 595 households, extrapolated to an estimate of over six thousand ‘excess’ deaths in Gode Woreda³ alone. This equates with a mortality rate six times higher than a typical baseline figure, and three times higher than the defined cut-off for an acute emergency.

If extrapolated to all of Gode Zone (which was widely though perhaps incorrectly perceived to be the epicentre of the crisis), this would be equivalent to about 20,000 deaths resulting from the crisis. If similar conditions prevailed throughout, the authors estimated something in the range of 100,000 famine-related deaths in all of Somali Region — although of course their data came from only one part of the region. Nevertheless, substantially higher levels of malnutrition than the CDC group found in Gode were reported by reputable agencies elsewhere — particularly by Oxfam and UNICEF in Shinille Zone, and by Oxfam and Concern in North and South Omo (see Table 1). Further, the rates of mortality were highest early in the recall period of the CDC study, implying that the mortality rate had risen before the recall period, which strongly suggests that overall mortality in Gode may have been even higher than the CDC figures indicate. The major cause of death noted by the CDC study was reportedly measles or other communicable diseases — only about 15 per cent of deaths were reported to be the result of outright starvation. However, children with measles or other serious illnesses were much more likely to die if they also suffer from malnutrition. The extent to which the data of Salama et al. can be generalised to other parts of Somali Region has been challenged, most notably by the World Food Programme, which continued to insist that a nationwide famine had been averted (Tanner, 2001). Some observers argued that mortality rates in towns such as Gode and Denan were higher because they were magnet centres to which people

Table 2 Estimated drought-induced herd-size decreases (May 1999 to May 2000)

<i>Region</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Cattle</i> %	<i>Sheep</i> %	<i>Goats</i> %	<i>Equines</i> %	<i>Camels</i> %
Afar	Better	15	5	5	-	0
	Worse	45	15	15	-	25
Oromiya	Borena/better	30	20	20	10	10
	Borena/worse	80	50	30	20	20
	Bale lowlands	50	35	20	20	15
Somali	Better	40	40	40	-	15
	Worse	80	60	40	-	35
SNNPR	South Omo	50	20	20	-	15

Source: Sandford and Habtu, 2000: 8

migrated and therefore the same rate found in these towns should not be extrapolated to outlying areas of the zone. Whether or not the extrapolation is warranted, the data still leave little doubt that in some areas, true famine conditions existed. Surprisingly few comprehensive mortality studies were carried out elsewhere in Ethiopia during the crisis.

While the extent of acute human suffering received the most media attention, the loss of livelihood assets was also devastating. The loss of cattle in particular was very high, and virtually ensured that recovery from the 1999–2000 drought would be long and difficult. Table 2 reports estimated losses of livestock in the main pastoral areas of Ethiopia between May 1999 and May 2000 — a period that does not span the entire crisis.

In retrospect, whether an ‘emergency’ is broadly perceived by the international community to be a ‘famine’ depends not on the damage to livelihoods, the level of migration, or even the prevalence of malnutrition. It depends on the level of what is politely termed ‘excess mortality’. This crisis was labelled a ‘famine averted’ in part because there is little evidence on which to make the determination of ‘excess mortality’. Arguing after the fact about the extent to which the CDC study can be extrapolated is not the point. The point is, a better working definition of famines is needed — if a sceptical international community still needs to be convinced of the seriousness of a crisis by its death toll, mortality recalls should be incorporated into routine nutritional assessments. However, this approach seems to be backward; mortality data, while important, should not define a crisis to the humanitarian community itself — it should signify a failure of response.

Information systems and early warning lacking in pastoral areas

Since the mid-1980s, the humanitarian community, under the leadership of the Ethiopian government’s DPPC, has invested heavily in improved early warning and assessment capacity, and in information-gathering and management systems generally. While this system appears well adapted to the densely populated and chronically vulnerable agricultural areas of the northern highlands, the 1999–2000 crisis was worst

in pastoral areas, where information problems were at least partially to blame for the slow response.

Even in early 1999, there were rapidly developing problems that were not adequately noted — particularly in the southern and eastern pastoral areas. In addition to inadequate current information regarding the contingent factors that early warning (EW) systems generally track (rainfall, markets, etc.), there was also a lack of baseline information about pastoral livelihoods, the ways that pastoralists cope with extreme drought and the usual (and unusual) livestock and population migration routes. There was also (as noted above) a near total absence of baseline nutritional and mortality information from the affected areas, which made it difficult to interpret the results of nutritional assessments carried out during the crisis (Molla, 2001; Salama et al., 2001). Not only did this paucity of baseline information hobble the analysis of EW information, it also complicated efforts to distinguish chronic and acute vulnerability. In many cases this meant that short-term means (food aid) were used to address long-term, chronic problems (destitution) because a more far-sighted policy approach had not been developed.

The lack of information was particularly acute for Somali Region. By early 2000, many agencies were busily engaged in conducting rapid assessments all over Somali Region to get a better picture of the extent of the crisis, but by this time much of the damage had already been done. The majority of the deaths reported by the CDC took place prior to March 2000 (Salama et al., 2001). Humanitarian actors were unable to prevent these deaths because they had begun to pledge too late, and deliveries had not yet arrived in the country. Moreover, the Ethiopian Food Security Reserve, which was designed for use in cases like this, did not have adequate stocks or confirmed pledges to be able to lend out food.

The general problem with the early warning system in agricultural areas was not that adequate data were unavailable, but that there was not a system in place to ensure appropriate response (Buchanan-Smith, 2000). In the northern agricultural highlands, pledges were forthcoming only after a high-level DPPC/WFP/donor helicopter mission in March 1999. Mission members observed hundreds of destitute people who had migrated into Lalibella town in search of food; the widespread use of famine food; and hundreds of animal carcasses in areas where pasture had dried up. The migrants reported that there had already been many adult and child deaths in the area. This response came too late, and was not a reaction to normal early warning information reporting procedures.

In the pastoral areas, not only was there no early warning system, there was no system to stimulate timely response. There needs to be established a system of ‘red flags’ to trigger such response. Such indicators should be based on thorough knowledge of pastoralist livelihoods and coping strategies. At the minimum, they must also incorporate international standards for malnutrition (>15 per cent global acute malnutrition), mortality (1/10,000/day) and water supply (3.0 litres/day/person for personal use).⁴ Additional standards and response triggers must be agreed upon after the collection of baseline livelihoods information. The lack of a pastoral early warning system in Somali Region has been recognised, and the problem is being belatedly addressed in the period since the crisis, with a system being developed and pilot tested by Save the Children-UK and the DPPC (IRIN, 2002).

Given other factors (not least of which were the prevailing climate of insecurity in many parts of Somali Region and a relative paucity of operational capacity) it is not clear in retrospect whether better early warning in Somali Region would have reduced the impact of the 1999–2000 crisis or not. It is hardly a ‘lesson

learned' to say that famine prevention requires accurate and timely information, yet to some extent, even in places where food insecurity crises are common and where considerable effort has been invested in information systems, problems remain. The issue is twofold: first, better pastoral early warning is an imperative; second, institutionalised mechanisms need to link early warning with response in a systematic rather than an ad hoc way.

While contingent factors (such as drought) were being monitored, underlying factors (such as household asset levels and destitution) were not. It was not well known how close to the edge many of the affected households and communities were living (Devereux and Sharp, 2000; Hammond, 2001). There is still something of a policy vacuum regarding the destitution question, although several innovative pilot approaches have been suggested (Raisin, 2001; Middlebrook, 2000) and the topic is being researched (Devereux and Sharp, 2000). Unless substantial investments are made that improve income and productivity as well as reduce vulnerability to structural and contingent factors, it is only a matter of time until a repeat crisis occurs in Ethiopia.

Media were not used effectively

In mid-1999, the World Food Programme attempted to draw the attention of the international media to the steadily worsening situation in Ethiopia by bringing a team of visiting journalists to the affected areas in Gode and North and South Wollo. However, because the starvation was not yet visible and stress migration had not started on a large scale, the story was not considered a priority, particularly for television journalists who could not convey the seriousness of the crisis in film footage. The crisis was only picked up and broadcast globally by the media — particularly BBC television — in late March 2000. By then there were thousands of starving women and children streaming into the towns in Somali region. Despite their late arrival on the scene, the media coverage evoked memories of the role it had played in the 'discovery' of the 1984–5 crisis. This time, the crisis was already well known in the humanitarian community, and indeed response mechanisms were already being put in place when the media arrived. However, because the bulk of the response came on the heels of the media coverage, it looked on the television screen as though the media had 'discovered' the crisis this time around as well. Given the powerful influence of the media, the humanitarian community must become better at getting the story out earlier and more effectively.

Disaster preparedness better but problems persist

In the past 10 years, the Ethiopian government has worked hard to enhance its preparedness capacity, seeing this as a necessary key to improving response. It has taken a variety of steps, including development of the National Policy for Disaster Prevention, Preparedness and Management (1994); institution of a system of Employment Generation Schemes (EGS) which seek to promote food-for-work projects which are directed towards reduction of vulnerability; establishment of the Ethiopian Food Security Reserve to serve as a strategic food reserve; improvement of government early warning systems; and development of National Guidelines for Food Aid Targeting (2000). Since the 1999–2000 crisis, additional steps taken include the

creation of a high-level task force to revise the National Food Security Strategy (2001) and the formation of a Ministry of Rural Development, which coordinates the work of the Ministry of Agriculture and DPPC towards poverty alleviation, development and relief (2001).

One effect of the pre-crisis emphasis on preparedness was to orient donors and NGOs away from emergency interventions and towards development work. This had the unforeseen result of limiting the capacity of some actors to respond to the emergency when it arose.

The Ethiopian Food Security Reserve was established in 1992, and by the time of the crisis in 1999–2000, had a maximum capacity of approximately 300,000MT in six different storage hubs strategically located near vulnerable areas of the country. The reserve helps to bridge breaks in the food availability pipeline, although it is constrained when pledges are not forthcoming or when repayments are delayed. Low stock levels, resulting first from low pledges and later from slow repayments, impeded the effectiveness of the reserve in 1999 and early 2000. During 1999–2000, the reserve did not have adequate stocks to lend for pre-positioning, and it was unable to make up the deficit in food aid arrivals.

International partnerships against famine

Insofar as famine prevention is a partnership between national governments, donors and international agencies, steps must be taken to reduce problems of institutional mistrust. The perception persists that local government, national government and operational agencies tend to put the worst ‘spin’ on events in order to increase the resources at their disposal, while donors (and to some extent, the media) are routinely accused of a ‘show-me-the-dead-bodies’ scepticism. Reviewing the data on assessed needs and donor response to acute food insecurity throughout the mid- to late 1990s affirms this perception (Figure 4). But it also underlines the point about monitoring long-term trends. Throughout the 1990s, donors (including the Ethiopian government) did not provide assistance at levels anything like assessed needs, and apparently no drastic increase in malnutrition or mortality occurred (at least not until 1999). But this ‘under-response’ doubtless contributed to and magnified the underlying process of destitution, as people were forced to sell assets in order to survive. This, in turn, almost certainly contributed to the fact that relatively modest shocks — such as the failure of the *belg* rains — pushed an enormous number of people over the edge in early 1999. Moreover, year after year of ‘under response’ likely contributes to over-estimation by officials who feel that they must request much more than they can expect to receive. The practice of conducting joint vulnerability assessments, involving all major stakeholders, was instituted in the late 1990s in Ethiopia; this has improved interagency collaboration and trust somewhat, but more needs to be done. However, the list of stakeholders involved still omits the crucial role of affected communities — strengthening the role of community-based preparedness, response and development must be more fully integrated into any plans to reduce vulnerability to famine.

The UN placed high priority on coordination during the emergency. The Secretary-General appointed Catherine Bertini, executive director of WFP, as Special Envoy to the Horn of Africa Drought Emergency, and also appointed a regional humanitarian coordinator. In addition, high-level visits from officials from the US

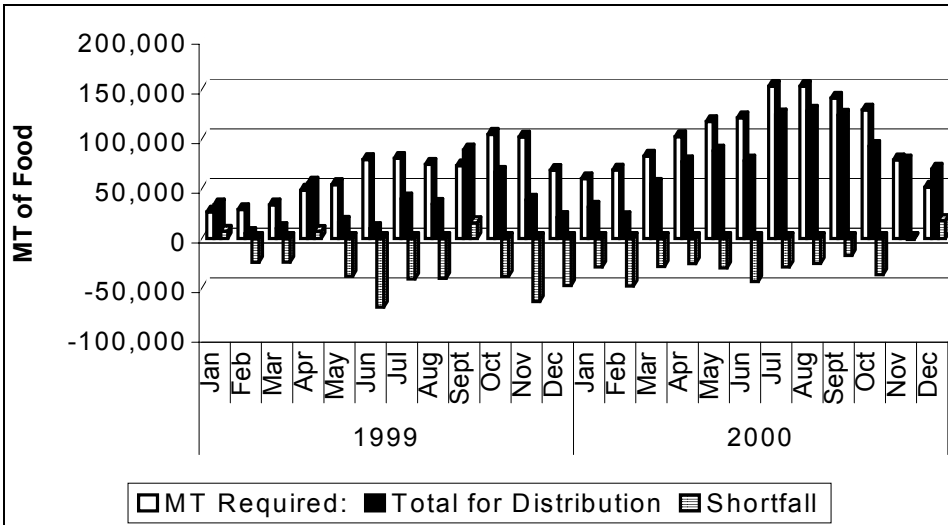


Figure 2 Shortfall in food distributions (MT) in Ethiopia in 1999/2000

Source: DPPC Fortnightly Bulletins, WFP; FEWSNet/CARE, 2000

Note: Figures are combined from several sources; for any given month they might not be precisely correct due to differences in the way monthly totals were calculated by different sources. Overall, they do present an accurate picture.

government and EU stimulated public interest in donor countries. These measures increased public awareness and, in turn, resulted in increased pledging and expedited deliveries. At the field or distribution level, interagency coordination was arguably more effective than in previous disasters: NGOs pooled resources, the UN provided common security services to areas operational around Gode and coordination committees enhanced programme delivery while minimising duplication of efforts. However, there were disagreements, affecting more than just donor-government relations. In April 2000 a joint NGO statement was issued in Addis Ababa that noted:

We affirm that there is a critical situation in the South and East that could have been averted. The EFSR was depleted last year. Some donors borrowed from the reserve, and have not all yet repaid their debt. The tragedy is that if this debt had been repaid as promised, the food would have been in place to bridge the [current] crisis (Joint NGO Statement, 2000).

The letter came much too late to have any effect on the rate of replenishment, and was perceived by some donors as an attempt by the NGOs to shift the blame for the crisis away from themselves. At the same time, many donor agency staff in Addis Ababa were doing their best at the time to convince their headquarters offices of the gravity of the situation prevailing in Ethiopia. In retrospect, multi-agency collaboration would probably have been a better strategy to convince donor headquarters of the need to speed up deliveries and repayments to the EFSR.

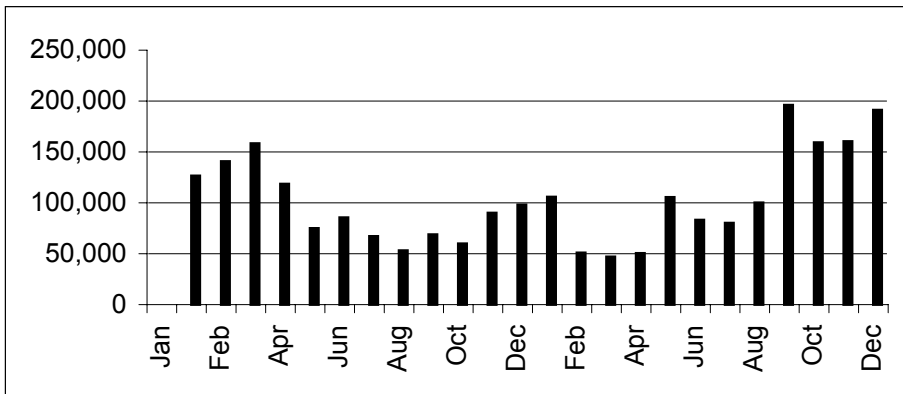


Figure 3 Stock in EFSR (MT) at end of month, 1999–2000

Source: DPPC Fortnightly Bulletins

Food aid pipeline disruption

During the run-up to the peak of the crisis in early 2000, a serious gap developed in the food assistance pipeline, which complicated and delayed the response. Figure 2 presents the available data on assessed needs, food deliveries, and the shortfalls in delivery each month during 1999 and 2000. There were substantial shortfalls in food aid deliveries for several months in 1999 and early 2000. After mid-2000, the ratio of food available compared to requirements increased. Nevertheless, throughout much of the two-year period there were substantial deficits in food aid available for distribution. The overall shortfall for the entire country in 1999 was over 50 per cent of assessed requirement; close to 80 per cent of the assessed requirement for food assistance was distributed in 2000 (Figure 4).

The exact effect of these shortfalls is difficult to assess without more detailed data on locally assessed need; the times and amounts of local deliveries; and information about local food security, malnutrition and out-migration. This information simply does not exist. Molla (2001), citing DPPC data, notes that during 1999, the Somali Region received food aid equivalent to only 20 per cent of the assessed requirement and it was likely, given the lack of information on the region, that the assessed requirement was lower than the actual need. Such shortfalls in deliveries in 1999 certainly contributed to the impact of the crisis there in 2000.

As it became clear in mid-1999 that the food crisis was worsening, it also quickly emerged that stock levels in the EFSR were inadequate to respond to needs in advance of deliveries (Hammond, 1999b). Despite several extraordinary appeals in 1999, pledge levels remained low — and repayment of debts continued to lag — until well into 2000, by which time the EFSR was quite depleted (Figure 3). The cumulative deficit in food available for distribution over a five-month period in late 1999 and early 2000 — the critical period of the emergency — was nearly 200,000MT (Figure 4), and although the EFSR was designed to help bridge such a gap, in the event it was unable to do so.

At a certain point, of course, repaying debt to the reserve became a moot point — any incoming food was needed for immediate distribution, and was directed to bypass EFSR warehouses to expedite delivery. Nevertheless, throughout the worst of

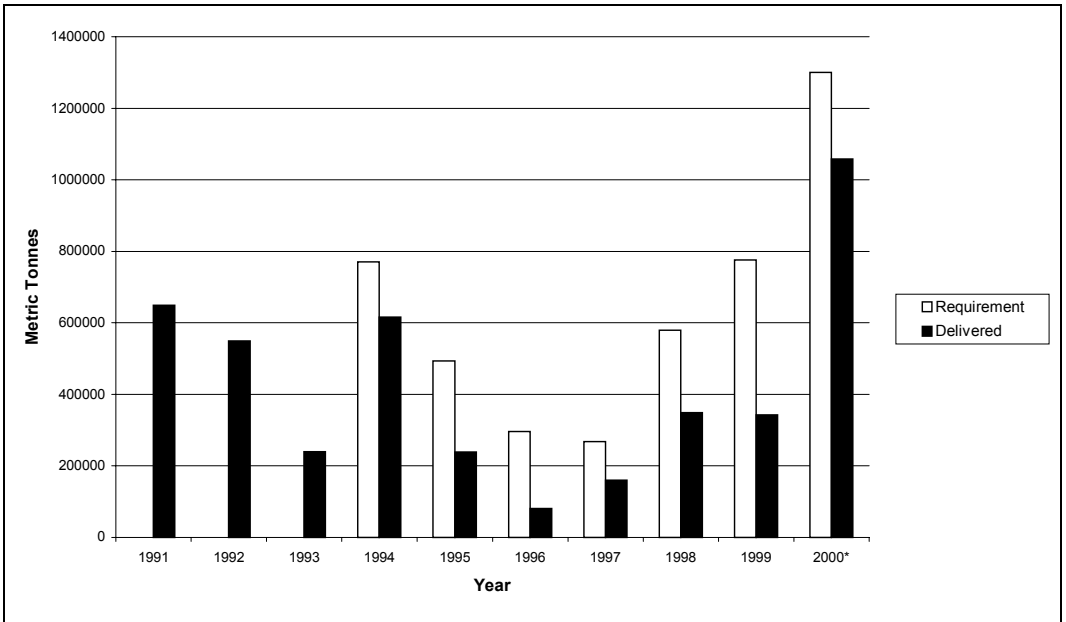


Figure 4 Emergency food requirements vs deliveries, 1991–2000
Sources: Delivery information is from WFP Addis Food Aid Information Unit. Requirement figures are taken from DPC appeals and UN-EUE Situation Reports. Delivery figures do not include beginning of the year carryover stock

the crisis, the EFSR was owed a total of nearly 300,000MT of food — over 80 per cent of its total reserve capacity — which was the main factor crippling its capacity to bridge the gap in the pipeline. During the period of late 1999 and early 2000, the EFSR had an average of less than 50,000MT of food in reserve (Figure 4). Thus, at best, agencies involved in food distribution were able to borrow only partial amounts of the confirmed pledges they had received, and in some cases, no food at all could be allocated. The amount of the debt was such that the capacity of the EFSR was seriously impaired during the period it was most needed to avert disaster. By the time any substantial amount of food had been paid back to the reserve in May 2000, it had been over nine months since the UN-EUE report first raised the alarm about stock levels.

This state of affairs did not arise suddenly. It was a long-term condition that persisted despite the dramatically stepped-up requirements for emergency response. Even at the very outset of the crisis in early 1999, the EFSR held stock equivalent to only about one-third of its capacity, and as already noted, the rate of repayment during the crisis was very slow. Most of the debt to EFSR was more than six months old — in some cases over a year old.

The precise impact of both the pipeline problems and the delays in repayment to the EFSR were hotly debated at the time. Some of the donors maintained that the impact had been minimal. NGOs and some external observers argued otherwise, as indicated in the 15 April 2000 Joint NGO Statement. The Pastoral Assessment Team made the same point in rather more strident language in a report issued later in 2000 (Sandford and Habtu, 2000). Had the EFSR been fully stocked at the outset of the crisis, and had the rate of payment been faster, it is clear that the overall situation

would have been better. Whether this would have ameliorated the specific conditions in Somali Region — given the various constraints faced there — is not known.

Assistance arrives and the situation improves

As humanitarian conditions worsened (and in spite of the continuing war in the north), the government made efforts to contribute to the relief effort, including 100,000MT of locally purchased grain for distribution to drought victims. After mid-2000, food aid was more forthcoming from donor sources as well. Beginning in April–May, many deliveries were received through the ports of Djibouti and (to a lesser extent) the Somaliland port of Berbera. The US, EU and WFP worked effectively together to coordinate deliveries so as to avoid congestion in the ports. The WFP Food Aid Transport System was very successful at getting food from port to distribution site quickly — and it should be noted, lest policymakers forget the good job this system did and decide to dismantle it.

Deliveries to the worst-affected areas were accelerated with the increased availability of food. This helped to minimise out-migration of people in the *meher*-producing highlands in search of work. It also helped to bring down the intake rates at supplementary and therapeutic feeding centres and to reduce mortality rates (although the extent to which these rates were affected is not known). In the lowland and pastoral areas, provision of relief food combined with modest resumption of rains helped pastoralists begin the long process of herd recovery and income diversification. This process has continued gradually since, assisted by improved rains, though malnutrition levels remained stubbornly high well into 2001 (MSF-Belgium, 2001).

Although food pledges and deliveries during 2000 were high enough to maintain a reasonable level of response, non-food contributions remained low. Response to UN appeals in the non-food sectors was much lower than response to the food requirements. NGOs proved to be able to respond more quickly and effectively with non-food emergency response than UN agencies. However, significant needs in agricultural and livestock support, health-care and water supply were not adequately resourced. Given the expectation that a significant proportion of affected pastoralists and many of the poor agriculturalists would continue to require assistance for a matter of years to rebuild their asset base and thus climb out of chronic poverty, there is ample justification for making multi-year commitments of pledges.⁵ Donors need not wait until confirmation of figures by the Ethiopian government to begin to make preparations for providing a percentage of the expected food requirements. Such forward planning will help prevent breaks in the food availability pipeline and will promote faster recovery. This will require that donors (particularly the US, EU and WFP) coordinate closely their early-year requests from headquarters so that pledges are timed in such a way as to prevent stoppages in the food availability pipeline or congestion in the ports and warehouses.

Diplomatic objectives vs humanitarian imperative?

The war between Ethiopia and Eritrea was a major factor complicating the response to what should have been a relatively straightforward drought crisis. Donors' reluctance to pledge assistance to Ethiopia and the slow speed of the international response, was in

many cases related to their opposition to the conflict with Eritrea. There is also little doubt that donor concerns about the war played a role in slowing down both new pledges of food aid and debt repayment to the EFSR. This was not a complex emergency in the classic sense of the term, in which people were at risk of famine because they had been attacked, displaced or otherwise prevented from pursuing their livelihoods as a direct result of a conflict. It was 'complex' in the sense of diplomatic objectives being at odds with humanitarian imperatives.

The war, which began in May 1998 and effectively ended in June 2000, was characterised by relatively short but extremely intense bouts of heavy fighting. It was viewed by most of the rest of the world — especially donors — as a pointless battle over a sparsely populated, unpromising strip of land of dubious strategic value to either country. At issue for this analysis is not the merit of the war itself, but rather the impact of the war on the humanitarian response. Donors were reluctant to be seen as subsidising the war. Likewise, the governments of both Ethiopia and Eritrea refused to have their foreign policy dictated by external forces. But there is little doubt that such an expensive war was using up government resources — financial, physical and human — on both sides (Jeffery, 2000). In addition, all assistance had to be funnelled through Djibouti, rather than the often more convenient Eritrean ports of Assab and Massawa.

Various external policymakers, including notably UK Secretary for International Development, Clare Short and EC Commissioner Poul Nielsen, vocalised the view that the war was wasting valuable resources that should have been going to prevent humanitarian suffering. The Ethiopian government adamantly insisted that the drought and the war were two separate issues that should not be linked. The Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi declared in April 2000, 'In Ethiopia, we do not wait to have a full tummy to protect our sovereignty' (IRIN, 2000).

Off the record, many field staff of donor agencies were willing to suggest that political and diplomatic considerations had a lot to do with slow response to the worsening situation in 1999. But once the situation had deteriorated drastically in early 2000, and especially after the media reported the possibility of a link between the war and a slow humanitarian response, most donor staff said little more about the war. In fact, it appears that whatever links between diplomacy and humanitarian response had existed previously, the two issues were separated by donor governments after about March/April 2000, when responses speeded up significantly, but as noted, the emergency was already peaking by that point. In any case, the actual fighting came to a rapid end in mid-2000 following a major Ethiopian offensive, and the end of the fighting facilitated a greater response to the drought emergency.

The front has been quiet for two years, and efforts to consolidate the peace process are proceeding relatively smoothly. Government-donor relations have been normalised, and nobody wants to revisit the uncomfortable relations that existed during the war and much of the humanitarian crisis. But the situation is bound to arise again, somewhere, somehow. So the familiar question remains — albeit in perhaps a somewhat novel form — of how to ensure the separation of humanitarian response from political or diplomatic objectives, when most of the humanitarian community now recognises that the prevention of famine is itself an inherently political question.

Conclusions

Perhaps it is not remarkable to note that the capacity of the international community to deal with famine prevention still has gaps in both technical and political terms. The crisis of 1999–2000 in Ethiopia should have been a straightforward case of mobilising domestic and international support to protect livelihoods and save human lives. The effort was largely successful in the chronically vulnerable highland areas — at least in the second objective of preventing large-scale mortality. But the effort came up short in the hard-hit pastoral areas. Many of the technical issues mentioned above, particularly the pastoral early warning issue, are now being addressed. However, technical capacity is of limited utility without political will.

In these kinds of circumstances, which are bound to arise again, the humanitarian community — the humanitarian agency of the host government, donors, the UN and both local and international NGOs — is caught in a dilemma: on the one hand having to raise the alarm about an impending crisis to obtain resources without being caught ‘crying wolf’; while on the other, needing to reassure both the international community and the host country government that the problem is under control. If all parties do their part, this is a manageable dilemma. Ethiopia in 1999–2000 was more complicated: triggered by a drought, the crisis was underpinned by increasing destitution, environmental degradation and other ‘developmental’ problems, while the response was complicated by the war with Eritrea and competing international objectives. In an era of convergence or ‘coherence’ between political and humanitarian objectives (Macrae and Leader, 2000), the international community must come to grips with managing divergent responses to humanitarian and political imperatives. Ethiopia is only one of many contemporary food security crises in which this issue arises.

If ‘famine averted’ is forever the label stuck on Ethiopia 1999–2000, then everybody is let off the hook in terms of examining their own actions and identifying how the operation could have been improved upon. Our interest is not in debating whether this was a ‘famine’ or not, nor do we wish to point fingers. The issue is not just about holding other parties accountable; it is also about holding ourselves accountable. The ultimate objective of reviewing ‘lessons learned’ should be to create the space in which all parties can look at their own actions and reflect on how things might have gone differently.

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Notes

1. *Belg* crops are planted during the short rains that usually fall in March and April. *Belg* crops may be harvested between June and September depending on the variety and rain conditions. Although estimates vary, it is generally believed that *belg* crops amount to less than 15 per

- cent of overall national food production. *Belg* failure, however, can be disastrous in areas where farmers do not receive a *meher* harvest.
2. This figure does not include requirements for IDPs displaced by the conflict with Eritrea.
 3. A *woreda* is approximately similar to a British or American county.
 4. While the Sphere guidelines (Sphere Project, 2000) do not specify cut-off points at which a situation is officially classified a disaster, these figures are generally accepted international norms.
 5. In 2002, both USAID and the EU are involved in negotiations with Ethiopia to develop a pilot project involving multi-year pledging for assistance to chronically food-insecure areas.

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