UN announces famine in Somalia, 20 July 2011

Oxfam public position on Somalia famine

1. Famine is the “triple failure” of (a) food production, (b) people’s ability to access food and, finally and most crucially (c) in the political response by governments and international donors. Crop failure and poverty leave people vulnerable to starvation – but famine only occurs with political failure. In Somalia years of internal violence and conflict has been highly significant in creating the conditions for famine.

2. Decision-makers have collectively failed to act properly to avert a famine in Somalia and help all those who need food both in Somalia and in neighbouring regions. It is inconceivable that there has been such a catastrophic breakdown of collective responsibility to act, given what was known to be happening over nearly two years.

3. This UN announcement of famine in Somalia – the fourth large-scale African food crisis of the 21st century, at a time when famine has been eradicated everywhere else – is both a wake-up call to the scale of this disaster, and a wake-up call to the short- and long-term solutions we need to limit death-from-hunger now and stop it for good in Africa in the future.

What is famine?

- The 21st Century is the first time in human history that we have the capacity to eradicate famine. Europe hasn’t had a famine since the 1940s; East Asia since the 1960s; South Asia since the 1970s. (The 1990s food crisis in North Korea was the result of a unique political environment). But Somalia is the fifth mass-scale food crisis in Africa since 2000 (Ethiopia 2000; Malawi 2002; Niger 2005; South Sudan 2008) – with the 2000 Ethiopia crisis having been the last officially-declared and widely-accepted famine.

- The UN uses a five-step scale, developed with NGOs including Oxfam, to assess a country’s food security. Stage 5 – “famine/humanitarian catastrophe” – requires that malnutrition rates are greater than 30%; mortality rates greater than two per day per 10,000 people; and food is limited to less than 2,100 kilocalories and water to four litres a day per person.

- In October 2009 Oxfam published a paper on Ethiopia and neighbouring regions asking “what can be done to prevent the next drought from becoming a disaster?” We acknowledged that food aid saved lives but that it was not cost-effective and did not alone help people to withstand the next shock. We said:
  - Just 0.14% of total overseas aid went to disaster risk management in 2007.
  - Ethiopia’s biggest humanitarian donor USAID spent 92% ($561m) of its relief on in-kind food aid despite saying it had “shifted toward more sustainable solutions” to helping hungry people. This concentration toward food aid crowded out other good USAID initiatives to prevent the next drought becoming a disaster, such as one that helped 10% more livestock to survive drought.
  - In 2006, the European Community Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO) began work on drought early-warning systems and in helping communities protect assets such as their livestock and land – but that this “never grew from being a €40m pilot initiative spread across six countries and will likely have ended by 2011”. ECHO also tried to integrate disaster risk management into all its emergency work but, because it was bound to the one-year limit of its programs, it was not long enough to help communities build their own resilience.

- By the time the UN calls a famine it is already a signal of large-scale loss of life. We can only ensure now that aid comes quickly and appropriately to prevent an even worse-case scenario. We must also resolve not why this famine happened but why again? And how to prevent the next one?
The causes of famine

- Famines result from a combination “triple failure” in food production (i.e. lack of food not meeting people’s needs from e.g. harvest failure due to drought etc); food access (i.e. people too poor; prices rising; assets falling; markets not delivering; no social safety nets) and response (i.e. lack of political will; donors acting too late; poor information).

- PRODUCTION FAILURE: In Somalia, a two-year drought – which is phenomenal in now being the driest year in the last 60 – has caused record food inflation, particularly in the expectation of the next harvest being 50% of normal. Somalia already had levels of malnutrition and premature mortality so high as to be in a “normalized” state of permanent emergency. This is true too in pockets across the entire region.

- ACCESS FAILURE: The drought has killed off the pastoralists’ prime livestock assets (up to 90% animal mortality in some areas), slashing further their purchasing power. In addition Somalia has been hit by severe internal conflict which has made development almost impossible to achieve and data difficult to access both accurately and credibly.

- RESPONSE FAILURE: Underlying it all has been the inability of Somalia’s government and donors to tackle the country’s chronic poverty, which has marginalized vulnerable people and fundamentally weakened their ability to cope. There’s been a lack of investment in social services and basic infrastructure and lack of good governance. Meanwhile donors have reacted too late and too cautiously. The overall international donor response to this humanitarian crisis has been slow and inadequate. According to UN figures, $1bn is required to meet immediate needs. So far donors have committed less than $200m, leaving an $800m black hole.

What needs to be done

- Humanitarian relief is desperately needed now to save lives. But the fact that we need to appeal again for aid, for a major food crisis for the fourth time in Africa since 2000, reflects the fundamental failure of policy to address the underlying problems in African livelihood systems.

- We need money. We need food made accessible to people in the markets Otherwise there will be mass deaths again from hunger in Africa. But we also need to tackle the specific risks that certain African countries consistently face in production, access and response.

- PRODUCTION SOLUTIONS: We must accelerate investment in African food production. There are regions in Africa we know have always faced chronic food shortages, where even small blips in harvests can have terrible consequences. We need more support for small-holder farmers and pastoralists (e.g. hardier crops, cheaper inputs, disaster risk management).

- ACCESS SOLUTIONS: We must alleviate rural African poverty. More aid and budgetary investment into physical infrastructure (roads, communications etc) and allowing public intervention to correct market failures until markets are stronger (e.g. grain reserves to stop price volatility).

- RESPONSE SOLUTIONS: We need to move away from discretionary assistance to guaranteed social protection e.g. such as social assistance to the poor households to access food throughout the year and insurances, so that support can be triggered automatically in times of crisis. In some contexts cash transfers can be more appropriate than food aid, where availability of food is not a problem.

- Ultimately, famine prevention is Africa rests with African governments – but they need help to rid their countries of conflict and build up democratically responsive, accountable and transparent institutions, and to tackle the fundamental problems of food production, access and response that have been resolved everywhere else in the world bar Africa.

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