

Somalia's Drought Induced Crises: Immediate Action and Change of Strategy Needed



April 2017

Published in 2017 by the Heritage Institute for Policy Studies, Mogadishu, Somalia

The Heritage Institute for Policy Studies (HIPS)

HIPS is an independent, nonpartisan, non-profit policy research and analysis institute based in Mogadishu, Somalia.

Cover: dead animals in Mudug region

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Key messages

- The ongoing drought in Somalia – referred to in the Somali language as Sima, which means the leveler, ubiquitous or pervasive – has enveloped the entire country. If rain does not arrive by mid April, and if a massive humanitarian campaign is not mounted swiftly, the drought could morph into an insidious famine that could devastate the country. Hundreds of thousands of vulnerable men, women and children could starve to death.
- Though awareness of the ongoing suffering and the potential famine has been high, the response of the international community and the mitigation strategy by Somalia has been wholly inadequate. Across the country, the majority of the population is not receiving basic necessities despite UN agencies raising over US\$300 million. Many pastoral communities have also lost 80 percent of their livestock, escalating their vulnerability to an alarming and perilous level.
- Successive years without rain triggered the prolonged drought and its unfolding humanitarian crisis. That is, however, only a partial explanation for the problem. Unmitigated conflict intertwined with incessant political malfeasances have rendered the country a famine-prone, failed state. For a quarter of a century, the absence or acute fragility of Somalia's state organs have stifled developing institutions, systems and policies that could help the country reach its potential to be the breadbasket of the Horn of Africa instead of the current 'basket case' reality.
- The formation of the National Drought Response Committee and its regional counterparts and mobilization efforts by diaspora Somalis, including social media activism, has made a significant difference and helped to set off early warning bells about the possibility of famine. The creation of a ministry responsible for humanitarian affairs is also a timely and prudent step in the right direction. The challenge will be, however, making the new ministry effective in light of Somalia's reputation as the most corrupt country in the world and in a context where a vast, entrenched foreign aid industry dominates the scene.
- The absence of organized business community efforts to address the unfolding crisis is worrisome and begs a proper understanding and explanation. Generous donations from the main telecom firms in Mogadishu and Hargeisa and their swift distribution of over US\$1 million in assistance is indeed commendable and merits emulation.

Introduction

Somalia is currently experiencing severe drought affecting the entire country from the largely pastoral arid lands of the north through the central and southern breadbaskets. The drought was caused by the poor Gu' rainy season from April-June 2016 and a failed Deyr rainy season from October-December 2016. The most affected communities are in southern agricultural and agro-pastoral areas and in the northern pastoral areas like Sool, Sanaag, Togdheer, Awdal, Mudug, Galgaduud, Nugaal and Bari where scarcity of food and water, together with spiralling food prices and the deaths of livestock, have forced many families into unbearable destitution and displacement. Many drought-affected IDPs are currently living on the side of the road without any proper shelter.

In early January 2017, many pastoral communities in the Sool, Sanaag and Mudug regions came together at the village of Humbeys, about 90 kilometers east of Qardho in the Bari region, where a brief rainfall yielded animal pastures. With the small pasture exhausted due to overgrazing, the local population and the new arrivals are all faced with scarcity of food and water, and there is concern that conflict could break out over the few resources available.

The drought also seriously affected communities straddled along Somalia's border with Ethiopia such as Buuhoodle, Wajaale, Matabaan, Gedo, Galdogob and Derusalem. Although these communities face almost same challenges, they have attracted less attention from the humanitarian communities.¹

¹ An interview with United Nations, humanitarian officer, 21 March 2017.

Sool is among the worst hit regions in Somaliland. The impoverished pastoral communities who have lost most of their livestock have gathered in the Oog neighborhood and set up a makeshift camp beside the main road leading to Laas-Caanood. Some of the residents in the camp pointed out that despite being there for four months they had not received any assistance except occasional visits from the United Nations and other international aid agencies on assessment missions.²

Likewise, the humanitarian situation in the southwest state of Somalia continues to worsen. The drought has become more severe because of the dwindling economic capacity of the local communities, leading to increased food scarcity, augmented morbidity and high levels of acute malnutrition. Infrastructure is damaged or destroyed, diseases spread quickly and people can no longer grow crops or keep livestock, contributing to the deteriorating food insecurity.³ This promotes extreme levels of malnutrition.

As Al-Shabaab is away from the road and deep in the forest, the situation for pastoral and agro-pastorals looking for humanitarian assistance and water for their livestock in places like Hudur in the Bakool region is improving. However, the price of water has increased exponentially in the southwest region including Hudur where road blockages by Al- Shabaab and lack of access to health care and safe drinking water are the most pressing challenges for relief workers.⁴

² Interview with a community organizer, Oog camp, Sool region, 21 March 2017.

³ HIPS researchers travelled to Bay and Bakool regions and observed the situation on the ground.

⁴ An interview with local administration official, Hudur, Bakool, 10 March 2017.

The prices of maize in Qoryooley is now 51 percent above the five-year average,⁵ and the price of sorghum in Baydhabo is 88 percent above average. The level of the Shabeelle River is nearly 60 percent below average for this time of the year, limiting access to water for livestock and crop production. The January Deyr harvests are likely to be 60-70 percent below the five-year average and among the lowest on record.⁶

Compared to earlier droughts, this one is devastating in terms of magnitude and severity and the speed at which it claims lives and destroys livelihoods. The affected communities have described it as Sima, a Somali word referring to its encompassing nature and wide-ranging impact.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR), as of 21 February 2017, more than 135,000 people have been displaced inside Somalia due to the drought. People are abandoning their settlements and heading to villages, towns or roads leading to the cities because of acute livelihood insecurity. Currently, over 6.2 million people, including close to one million children, are stressed or in need of urgent life-saving support.⁷

These recurring droughts that have repeatedly hit Somalia since 1964 have caused profound

social, economic and environmental impacts. The drought-affected areas become more vulnerable, and the short intervals between droughts leave the affected communities with little time to recover. These cyclical droughts have also caused extreme food insecurity, poor health care, and lack of access to safe drinking water and sanitation facilities. This has resulted in the deaths of humans and of livestock and the destruction of farm and grazing lands, leading to displacements, endemic diseases, rural migration, urban poor and increased child mortality rates throughout Somalia.

HIPS researchers traveled to drought affected areas in Somaliland, Puntland and the southwest and observed the impact of droughts on the livelihoods of the affected communities. This paper aims to contextualize the recurrent drought in Somalia, describe its severity and magnitude and explain the root causes and other contributing factors. It also examines current humanitarian interventions, draw conclusions and finally suggest some policy considerations.

Causes and contributors

Two successive seasons of poor rainfall have caused a scarcity of water and pasture leading to the widespread death of livestock, which is the lifeline for pastoral communities. There is also an insufficient amount of water in the Shabeelle River to support crop production. The production of the agro-pastoral communities has been seriously affected as the water levels have been too low to irrigate agricultural land.⁸

⁵ UN OCHA, "Improve food access to reduce acute humanitarian needs among the most vulnerable urban and IDPs integrated into host communities in food crisis in Qorioley district of Lower Shabelle Region", January 2017.

⁶ Famine Early Warning Systems Network, "SOMALIA Food Security Outlook Update", October 2016 - January 2017,

http://www.fews.net/sites/default/files/documents/reports/Somalia_FSOU_11_2016_0.pdf

⁷ UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Inside Somalia, drought displacement growing", 21 February 2017, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/58ac33a84.html>

⁸ Somalia Drought Conditions Jan 2017, 1 Feb 2017, <http://reliefweb.int/map/somalia/somalia-drought-conditions-jan-2017>

Another major contributor to the widening of the drought-related problems is the lack of functioning institutions both nationally and sub-nationally. The ministries of forestry, livestock, housing and public works, health and social services and water and mineral resources are not working properly. They were supposed to address the current problems of food insecurity, health epidemics, water shortages and lack of infrastructure. It has therefore become impossible to put in place practical contingency plans to deal with the country's chronic vulnerabilities to floods, droughts and food insecurity.

In terms of long-term disaster mitigation strategies, the international donor community did not implement enough sustainability programs for community resilience such as assisting in the creation of diversified means of livelihoods, launching environmental consciousness and disaster risk awareness campaigns and equipping local communities with the necessary coping skills for recurring weather-induced disasters. This has also contributed to the recurring droughts in Somalia.

The most challenging factor resonating across the drought affected regions is the absence of a systematic humanitarian response plan synchronizing the local, sub-national, national and international efforts in the face of such cyclical humanitarian crises. There are no practical national or sub-national drought response strategies to guide the international relief operations.⁹ Consequently, donors have reacted too late and too cautiously. This made the humanitarian response very slow and inadequate.

⁹ An interview with Somali national drought committee member, 2 March, 2017.

Somalia has been in election mode for the past eight months. The recently selected and elected leadership have not yet presented their strategy and vision to address the raging drought. Neither the national government nor regional authorities have the capacity to mitigate and cope with the current national disaster over the long or short term.

Due to the delayed responses, Somalis across the country have been exposed to serious food and water shortages, lack of emergency healthcare services, displacement and other safety challenges. Many have exhausted their disaster coping capacities. In some parts, of the country, communities have also been severely challenged by recurring natural disasters such as the floods in 2015 caused by torrential rains in central and southern regions, the subsequent 2016 Shabeelle River overflows and now the drought.

Other contributing factors to the humanitarian disaster include deforestation, mainly caused by charcoal burning and desertification in the form of overgrazing and continuous inter-clan conflicts. One of the prime examples is the huge reduction of food aid in Al-Shabaab strongholds, which has further worsened the plight of the drought-stricken communities since the insurgents still control many parts of south-central Somalia. Al-Shabaab's potent threat to peace and security is a clear reminder of the national government's inability to discharge one of its core state functions – providing security and law and order.¹⁰

¹⁰ Senior Somali federal government official, 15 March 2017.

Interventions

In terms of tangible mitigating strategies where they are most needed – in the stressed and vulnerable livestock and agriculture sectors – the international donor community has responded slowly to the drought. Yes, there were monthly warning bulletins as early as the beginning of 2016 about the looming problems. However, adequate funds were not raised to help farmers and rural communities cope with and mitigate the impending food insecurity. This came at a time when the United Nations was still reeling from the failure to avert the devastating famine in 2011.

UNICEF and the World Food Programme (WFP) started to provide some assistance to communities in northern Somalia already suffering from the severe drought and the harsh El Niño conditions in early 2016.¹¹ The WFP says it is planning to tackle the ongoing food and nutrition shortages through the provision of “immediate relief assistance and in-kind and cash based transfers to the most vulnerable people in drought affected areas of northern and south-central Somalia for about six months”. Additionally, as the WFP manages the United Nations Humanitarian Air support, it aims to facilitate the speedy delivery of life-saving assistance and assist in the mobility of aid workers in Somalia.¹²

The Arab and Muslim world has also helped the drought-affected communities. The King Salman Center for Relief and Humanitarian Aid with the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has

¹¹ World Food Programme, “UNICEF And WFP Respond To Needs Of Drought-Affected People In Somaliland And Puntland”, 11 April 2016.

¹² WFP Somalia Country Brief, January 2017, <http://reliefweb.int/report/somalia/wfp-somalia-country-brief-january-2017>

distributed 30,000 food baskets to 18,000 drought-affected people. Turkey has donated 700,000 tons of humanitarian aid.¹³ In early January 2017 the UAE completed the construction of 20 boreholes aimed at relieving the general water shortages in Somaliland regions such as Sool and Sanaag.¹⁴

Others in the international community have promised assistance. The United Kingdom has already donated some US\$12.5 million for drought relief through the WFP, UNICEF and the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). On 22 February 2017, the UK’s Department for International Development (DfID) announced a further US\$125 million in emergency aid to Somalia.¹⁵ The Qatar Fund for Development has committed to undertake multiple health projects to support local hospitals as well as distribute food packages and drill and/or rehabilitate artesian wells.¹⁶ The

¹³ Daily Sabah, “Turkish Red Crescent mobilizes for unprecedented famine threat in Somalia”, 26 March 2017, <https://www.dailysabah.com/turkey/2017/03/27/turkish-red-crescent-mobilizes-for-unprecedented-famine-threat-in-somalia>

¹⁴ Somaliland Sun, “Somaliland: UAE Responds to Drought Relief Appeal”, 22 January 2017, <http://www.somalilandsun.com/development-aid/9999-somaliland-uae-responds-to-drought-relief-appeal>

¹⁵ UK Government, “UK outlines new humanitarian support and urges international community to save lives before it's too late”, 22 February 2017, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-outlines-new-humanitarian-support-and-urges-international-community-to-save-lives-before-its-too-late>

¹⁶ “QRCS to Commence Relief Intervention in Somalia [EN/AR]”, 22 Jan 2017, <http://reliefweb.int/report/somalia/qrcs-commence-relief-intervention-somalia-enar>

government of Canada has earmarked C\$21 million dollars for Somalia.¹⁷

National efforts

At the national level, the Federal Government set up a National Drought Response Committee and urged the international community and Somalis in and out of the country to respond to the unfolding crisis. The committee's mandate was to undertake awareness campaigns, to collect emergency aid and to coordinate with regional drought committees. It engaged with the main stakeholders such as the business community, relevant ministries, the diaspora and the international community in an effort to mobilize resources and raise funds to respond to the ever-growing needs of the drought victims. The committee has raised only about US\$2 million, showing the limited capacity of the government and the main organ tasked with tackling this unprecedented national disaster.¹⁸ The overall weakness in the government response has its roots in the weak state apparatus and the drawn out election process, which diverted focus and resources from the drought.

Different segments of Somali society have also organized themselves to respond. Informal community-level drought committees have been formed under the leadership of religious leaders who have used both social and mainstream media outlets to raise funds, including from ordinary citizens who have generously donated money.

¹⁷ Canada pledges \$120M after the UN warns of 'largest humanitarian crisis since WWII', <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2017/03/17/canada-pledges-120m-after-un-warns-of-largest-humanitarian-crisis-since-wwii.html>

¹⁸ Interview with a member of Somali National Drought Committee, 16 March 2017.

Although it is hard to determine the exact amount donated, the informal drought committees may have raised decent amounts from both local and diaspora communities. Traditionally, and for religious purposes, many Somali philanthropists prefer to donate anonymously. However, two of the biggest donations were made by main telecoms companies – Hormuud and Telesom. Hormuud donated US\$800,000 and Telesom paid out US\$500,000 for drought relief.¹⁹ Another company provided US\$10,000 to the committee, but other businesses, particularly those in Mogadishu, have not been as generous as during past humanitarian crises.²⁰ This absence of the business community from the relief effort, a leadership role that they had played in the past, needs further study and a speedy reversal.

Civil society, social media activists and the Somali diaspora have also played a major role and mobilized Somalis and non-Somalis around the world to help avert a repeat of the 2011 famine. Most notable social media campaigns by Somalis include CaawiWalaal, led by local Somali youth activists, who had raised about US\$59,000 as of March 2017.²¹ Daryeel Bulsho also collected funds and distributed food and water in multiple regions.²² The Somali Canadian Relief Task Force has sent to the national drought committee close to \$US100,000 and aims to raise \$US1 million.²³ The Task

¹⁹ See <http://somaliamediamonitoring.org/january-27-2017-morning-headlines/>

²⁰ Interview with member of the drought committee, 23 March 2017.

²¹ Interview with CaawiWalaal volunteer, 26 March 2017.

²² Interview with DaryeelBulsho Volunteer, Hargeisa, March, 2017.

²³ Multiple interviews with members of the Task Force, April 2017.

Force also lobbied the Canadian government to contribute.²⁴

Other international initiatives, such as Love Army for Somalia set up by global celebrities, made headlines as they collected in just a few days over US\$2 million. They also convinced Turkish Airlines to provide them with planes to fly in emergency relief.²⁵ Countless other individual efforts through Facebook and Twitter and informal social networks in WhatsApp and Viber have also raised a significant amount of money for the drought-affected communities in all regions.

The support that individuals and communities provide to their relatives is largely undocumented and often under-reported. It is, however, clear that diaspora communities, ordinary citizens in urban centers, religious leaders using mosque pulpits, community organizers, internet savvy diaspora returnees, media outlets and some businesses are active, visible and making an impact. Their aid delivery system is faster and more targeted, based on the priority needs of the affected communities.

For example, the Hormuud Foundation (set up by the largest telecom/banking/mobile money/remittance conglomerate) provides aid through its branches across the regions with

minimal bureaucracy, administration costs and logistical challenges.²⁶

The different diaspora groups have also set up aid committees based on regions of origin and transfer funds through reliable local intermediaries who provide aid directly to the intended recipients. But given the scale and the scope of the current emergency, the ongoing responses remain “a drop in the ocean”.²⁷

Challenges

The biggest challenge is not only how to save human lives and livestock but also how to revive the destroyed livelihoods of the affected communities so they are not uprooted. There are growing concerns regarding the speed and scale of the implementation of relief operations as well as the coverage of affected regions. It is worrisome that many in the areas that were hit hardest in 2011/2012 have yet to recover, especially those citizens with limited mobility. Other pressing problems include displacement and patterns of refugee flow, political constraints to access, counterterrorism complications and legal as well as reputational risks that make the delivery of humanitarian aid complicated and cumbersome. In addition, reports on the ground suggest that there are poor cooperation and coordination mechanisms among aid actors in terms of prioritization and diversification of relief work for the affected communities.

A robust government-led national campaign is not there yet, notwithstanding the efforts of the National Drought Response Committee. This volunteer committee consisting of members from

²⁴ Hiiraan Online, Open Letter to the Canadian PM: Urgent Appeal for Famine Prevention in Somalia, 27 February 2017, https://www.hiiraan.com/news4/2017/Feb/140749/urgent_appeal_for_famine_prevention_in_somalia.aspx

²⁵ Kalhan Rosenblatt, “Ben Stiller, Colin Kaepernick, and Others Raise Millions to Help Famine-Hit Somalia”, 22 March 2017, <http://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/pop-culture-news/ben-stiller-colin-kaepernick-others-raise-millions-help-famine-hit-n736996>

²⁶ Interview with staff member of Hormuud Foundation, Mogadishu, 17 March 2017.

²⁷ Interview with member of Somali-American Diaspora, Hubeys, Bari, 6 March 2017.

the regions and the federal government and civil society including the Ulema (elders) has created awareness but has so far raised only US\$2 million. The United Nations has appealed for US\$88.5 million and has raised around US\$300 million, though most of that has yet to be disbursed.²⁸ As the drought coincided with a prolonged election period, this has delayed vital government leadership, direction and advocacy, not to mention the mobilization of government resources.

The problem of corruption, mismanagement and aid diversion, which plagued the 2011 famine response, could rear its ugly head again in 2017. Incidents of stolen aid or attempts to embezzle aid have been reported in a number of drought-ravaged areas.²⁹ Extra steps should be taken to ensure aid reaches its intended recipients, particularly if the severity of the drought increases and the many aid agencies in the field scale up their distribution while failing to improve their coordination with each other and properly prioritize what is needed.

The new American administration has indicated it will be cutting nearly 30 percent of its humanitarian assistance globally.³⁰ As Somalia has been the largest beneficiary of US humanitarian assistance to World Food Program's support to the country, this will obviously have serious consequences for the UN humanitarian response plans for drought-prone countries like Somalia. Likewise, Al-Shabaab's

control over significant swathes of territory is a major challenge to delivering relief supplies to the communities requiring most help. Reportedly, a significant number of people, many women and children, are dying from cholera and malnutrition as aid agencies are unable to deliver emergency medical supplies to the drought victims in Al-Shabaab strongholds.

Conclusion

Although failing rainfalls are largely to blame for the current debilitating drought, the problem in Somalia is a symptom of much wider complex challenges requiring a long-term strategic solution. Moreover, Somalia's recurrent droughts are further aggravated by the absence of effective state institutions making it difficult to deliver basic services to the pastoral and agro-pastoral communities across the country. Other pertinent challenges include a delay in international relief efforts as well as the shortage of actual resources on the ground – from both Somalis (be it the government or citizens) and from international humanitarian actors. Protracted wars between Al-Shabaab and the Somali Federal Government, and inter-communal conflicts in many parts of the country, restrict the needed rapid response.

Environmental degradation, such as deforestation and desertification, is also a serious contributor to the scope of the devastation. The absence of coping and mitigation strategies as well as the inability of communities, government(s) and the international community to put in place effective and speedy response strategies make the specter of another deadly famine a looming possibility.

Over 6.2 million people are in an emergency situation requiring urgent assistance. Efforts by

²⁸ FTS Tracking Humanitarian Aid Flows, <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/528/summary>

²⁹ Interview with senior official in Sool regional administration, 2 March 2017; interview with member of the National Drought Response Committee, 22 March 2017.

³⁰ VOA, Africa Aid Officials Concerned a Proposed US Aid Cuts, <http://www.voanews.com/a/africa-aid-officials-concerned-at-proposed-us-aid-cuts/3773854.html>

the National Drought Response Committee, as well as citizen initiatives, are positive, in terms of awareness campaigns and mobilization purposes, but are insufficient. As of this writing, the UN has received about 41 percent of its Somalia appeal fund,³¹ and the situation is as dire as months ago. The failure of the rainy season to arrive could mean that a repeat of the 2011 famine is a strong possibility. If this happens, only a massive humanitarian relief operation could avert a catastrophe. Neither Somalis – the government or citizens – nor international humanitarian actors are currently ready or equipped to discharge this responsibility to protect.

Policy considerations

- The overwhelming majority of the millions of Somalis who urgently need life-sustaining assistance have not received aid, and this requires immediate remedial action. Delayed response was the main reason why a quarter of a million people died in the 2011 famine. The international humanitarian actors, particularly the UN agencies and programs that dominate the ‘appealing for’ and ‘obtaining of’ international aid to Somalia, must disburse, without delay and throughout the country, the funds they have received so far. Particular attention should be given to places that are difficult to access deep in the interior. Areas along the long Ethiopia-Somalia border, which are far from the focus of media and national authorities, should also not be forgotten. Here is where coordinating and collaborating with the

National Drought Response Committee and its regional counterparts could be of help.

- The primary reason why environmental challenges in Somalia repeatedly turn into humanitarian crises is simply the lack of resilience capacities in communities and governments’ inability to put mitigation mechanisms in place. In the short-term, restoration of livelihoods of the affected pastoral communities should be pursued urgently. For the long-term, sustainable projects on local infrastructure and a knowledge base of resilience should be implemented for the pastoral and agro-pastoral communities.
- Droughts can only be managed and famine averted when Somalia is peaceful and has functioning and accountable government institutions. Al-Shabaab’s 10-year insurgency and the instability it produces has further amplified the recurring livelihood scarcities. As the continuation of the conflict is likely to result in the perpetuation of the suffering of the most vulnerable members of society, Al-Shabaab and the government should come to the negotiating table. Failure to make efficient and credible institutions – at the national and regional levels – also impedes local coping and mitigation efforts as well as the needed international cooperation and capacity injection.
- The formation of a ministry of humanitarian affairs and disaster management is a sensible and timely decision. However it must be made a

³¹ As of writing, this number increases continuously, <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/528/summary>

functioning ministry. Creating dysfunctional and resource-deprived institutions are what made Somalia a failed state. The private sector and international aid agencies now shoulder, however inadequately, the responsibility to protect. They may assume responsibility has been transferred to a new institution when in fact it is not servicing citizens. Creating this particular ministry and failing to operationalize it could thus contravene the do no harm principle.

- The business community's conspicuous absence in the relief effort is uncharacteristically visible. They should step up to the plate. Diaspora citizens, social media activists and civil society actors are admirably leading the awareness campaign. They are also engaged in modest relief work and should

redouble their efforts.

- Developing a national food security policy is a must. Also vital is the nurturing of local coping mechanisms including saving food for future consumption as well as the diversification of community livelihoods. There must be a sustained campaign of environmental consciousness and disaster risk awareness for pastoral and agro-pastoral communities to avert these man-made disasters.
- The national government and regional authorities should also coordinate their long-term response strategies. Areas that need immediate attention include investment in strategically located water storage facilities, building roads and improving other infrastructure.

