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Living on the Edge of Emergency



Paying the Price of Inaction

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“Not in recent memory has the global economy been under such stress. More than ever, this is the moment to prove that we can cooperate globally to deliver results: in meeting the needs of the hungry and the poor, in promoting sustainable energy technologies for all, in saving the world from climate change – and in keeping the global economy growing.”

Ban Ki-Moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations, 23 July 2008

In 2006, CARE International demanded a radical overhaul of the international aid system's failing approach to food emergencies. We argued that money must be spent differently and better to end the cycle of deepening poverty which traps 120 million of Africa's poorest people permanently on the edge of emergency. The alternative, we warned, is that by 2020, £165 billion will be wasted responding to emergencies this century, some of which could be prevented.

Our agenda for change has not been adequately heeded. Today in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel alone, despite some progress, the aid system has allowed millions to fall over the edge into emergency once again. What's more, the recent rapid descent into global food crisis has raised crucial new challenges in the fight against hunger.

1. Paying the price of inaction

In signing up to the Millennium Development Goals, world leaders have committed to halving extreme poverty and hunger by 2015. By then, nearly £100 billion will have already been spent this century fighting emergencies¹. Despite this investment, in the two years since CARE demanded an overhaul of responses to food emergencies, another 100 million people have been pushed into hunger, no longer able to afford enough food².

In Niger, three years after the country's worst food emergency for decades, almost 20 per cent of the population is again severely food insecure, struggling to recover from the last emergency and facing dwindling food stocks, drought and flooding. In the Horn of Africa another 14 million people need urgent emergency aid.

Furthermore, the pain of hunger is being felt across the globe - from Afghanistan to Bolivia - as high food prices strip the world's poorest of enough to eat. An average 83 per cent price rise in three years³ has left families cutting back on meals, children being pulled from school to go to work, and the number of beggars on city streets climbing daily. Protests and riots over food prices have been seen on every continent.

The world's poorest people are paying a high price for the international aid system's failure to address the factors keeping them in chronic poverty, and to end predictable food emergencies in Africa. As a result we face a problem more entrenched than ever and spreading globally. Rising food prices are now further hampering the world's already faltering progress towards halving hunger.

This report sets out recent failures, and some successes, of the international aid system's response to hunger in Africa, the new global challenges, and three crucial steps to combating those challenges.

2. Too little progress

The international community has failed to learn the lessons of countless emergencies⁴. Emergency aid to Africa continues to be made available too late, is too short-term and targeted too heavily on saving lives rather than protecting vulnerable livelihoods.

There has been progress, but not enough. Over the last two years, inaction by governments, donors, the UN and aid agencies has been at the cost of millions of people driven further into poverty. And many of those, for example in Niger, Ethiopia and Somalia, have been driven to the brink of emergency again.

In 2006, CARE prescribed three steps to ending predictable emergencies in Africa. What progress has been made?

2.1 Preventative action: funding must be made available early enough to counteract the first signs of impending emergency. Early action is crucial to prevent hungry people falling over the edge to become starving people, and to prevent the mounting debts and sale of belongings that prevent recovery.

Social protection and disaster risk reduction approaches that can provide a safety net in times of stress and reduce people's vulnerability to predictable hazards such as drought, are being successfully piloted across Africa. For example, in Niger the UK Department for International Development (DFID) has invested in disaster risk reduction, and in Ethiopia the Productive Safety Net Programme has successfully delayed the impact of this year's emergency, shielding its eight million participants from the worst effects. A similar programme is currently being launched in Kenya, also supported by DFID.

Abdusalam, Kebele Chairman, Ethiopia

"The safety net has many advantages; they are able to maintain their household assets, and at least they are getting fed. At the same time it is creating infrastructure and social structures, for example we built additional school buildings and roads. But it doesn't address all of the most needy - there are many not targeted. You can tell which people are in the safety net, they at least have food. You can read it on the faces of people who are not in the safety net."

But the need is far outstripping the reach of these programmes, and for the millions of vulnerable people who are not among the lucky few to be reached, very little has changed.

Donors are still failing to fund preventative action adequately. In April 2008, three donors either refused or ignored CARE's requests for funds to protect the health and assets of vulnerable populations faced with crop failure and rising prices in the Horn of Africa. But later, some funded expensive emergency responses instead. This investment would have been better spent over the last three years, and bolstered at the first warning signs in April to prevent the worst of today's emergency. Heartening exceptions have been the US Agency for International Development's (USAID) new flexible multi-year development funding in southern Ethiopia, and the European Community Humanitarian Office's (ECHO) regional drought funding in the Horn of Africa.

Too often national governments are slow to declare an emergency and call for necessary funds and intervention. This often limits how NGOs and other actors can respond, and restricts the scope of mitigation efforts.

However, reforms to the UN's Central Emergency Revolving Fund (CERF) are now helping to speed up the release of emergency funds from donors. And in Ethiopia this year, funds from the Humanitarian Response Fund (HRF) were available to NGOs at the first sign of crisis. But in many countries, it is still taking too long to get these funds to NGOs on the ground. In other cases it is unclear how funds are to be released, making it difficult for agencies to plan activities. These delays are still costing lives.

2.2 Doing more than saving lives: when unavoidable emergencies do occur, emergency aid must do more than just save lives, important though that is. It must sow the seeds of recovery - returning starving people from the brink and then moving them away from the edge.

Some progress has been made in broadening emergency responses beyond only food aid. The World Food Programme, for example, has recently made a welcome commitment to consider cash and voucher schemes that give vulnerable people the autonomy to meet their own food needs while supporting local markets.

However donors, governments and institutions are still failing to invest adequately in protecting livelihoods and helping people to recover. In Kenya, 94 per cent of the £115 million donated to the 2006/07 humanitarian response was allocated to food aid⁵. But food aid only addresses the symptoms of the emergency – hunger – and fails to address the real reasons for the crisis, which include a range of social, political and economic factors such as access to land and basic services, social marginalisation, climate change and poor governance. In addition to the moral arguments, responding early to emergencies is highly cost-effective. In Niger, in 2005, it would have cost \$1 a day to prevent malnutrition among children if the world had responded immediately. By July 2005, it was costing \$80 to save a malnourished child's life⁶.

Aid must focus more on supporting pastoral and agricultural livelihoods, for example by providing access to fodder, veterinary services, fertiliser and markets, as well as building local and national grain reserves. Early-warning systems and ongoing nutritional support to high-risk groups are also vital gaps in investment.

Supporting people's livelihoods alone is not a panacea. But it must be central to long-term efforts to address the national and global, social, economic and policy issues that make and keep people poor, marginalised and vulnerable.

2.3 Sustained support: funding must be sustained beyond the peak of the emergency. Predictable funding for long-term work is essential to help people get back on their feet, rebuild their incomes and tackle the root causes of the long-term crisis, such as HIV and AIDS or lack of opportunity to earn an income.

Millions of people continue to be pushed into destitution and starvation largely as a result of the failure of donors to address vulnerability as a crisis itself. Emergency responses are often too short-term and development initiatives have failed to understand or plan for drought cycles or increase people's resilience to drought. According to the Sahel Working Group, *"current planning methods do not deal with drought as a necessary element of the situation... but as an unfortunate event that causes a setback in normal progress"*. As climate change makes rainfall patterns more extreme and variable, humanitarian and development communities must integrate this understanding into the core of their work.

Insufficient progress has been made against all millennium development targets. Inadequate emergency responses have undermined gains made on development programmes, but initial investment in development has also remained inadequate. Unless significant progress is made on the first Millennium Development Goal - halving hunger - it will be impossible to achieve the other goals, such as gender equality and education. People's basic food needs must be met to enable them to address other social and economic needs.

3. New challenges in fighting hunger

The failure to protect people from falling over the edge has left the international aid system in crisis. Across the world the poor are getting poorer, paying ever higher shares of their limited income for food - leaving even less money for education, health care, shelter, and other basic needs. Malnutrition rates are rising as poor people shift to cheaper, less nutritious foods, or as they simply eat less. And we are seeing increasing migration of people from rural to urban areas, further disrupting communities, agricultural production, education of children, and local markets.

Compounding the failure of the international community to address these issues are a number of new economic, social, environmental and political factors that are pushing yet more people to the edge of emergency. A major shift in the global food production system means that people who once had enough food are now going hungry. The international aid system will need to change rapidly to meet these new challenges.

3.1 Challenge 1: global food price rises

The World Bank estimates that the crisis of surging food prices – which have risen by 83 per cent over the past three years⁸ - could set back the fight against poverty by seven years.

People or countries who are not able to meet all of their own food needs are feeling the impact of reduced purchasing power far more than those who can grow most of their food. In Africa this means that it is largely the poor who already spend more of their income on food than on anything else, who are affected most by rising prices.

Some of the communities CARE works with, for example in Kenya, are spending an average of 80 per cent⁹ of their household expenditure on food, compared to an average of 10 per cent¹⁰ in the UK. Faced with this, a family on a limited income is left with little choice other than to cut back on the quality and quantity of food being consumed, as well as investment in education, health and their livelihood, undermining previous progress.

Fatuma, Haramaya, Ethiopia

“Our last harvest was in November – all that food was used up by March. I now rely on labour to make more money. My husband works earning 10 birr (58p) a day. But today 1 kg flour costs 7 birr (40p). It is too much, how can we survive on 10 birr when flour is this much?”

The complex causes of rocketing prices boil down to supply and demand. Despite record global harvests, food crop production is decreasing, the land now growing biofuels and animal feed instead. Industrialised countries are moving away from agricultural production of food and climate change is reducing the productivity of much rain-fed land. At the same time as this decrease in the supply of food, steady population growth is producing more mouths to feed and consumption patterns are expanding and changing. Between 2005/06 the world population grew by 1.17 per cent and in Africa 2.25 per cent¹¹. And demand growth for food will be as high as 2.6 per cent per year within a decade¹² – with worrying implications for global food security.

3.2 Challenge 2: climate change

Industrialised countries are the largest contributors to climate change, but it is developing countries, where large proportions of the population are dependant on agriculture, that are most affected by changing weather patterns.

In Africa by 2020, between 75 and 250 million people are projected to be under increased water stress due to climate change¹³ and by the 2080s, the amount of arid and semi-arid land in Africa is likely to increase by five to eight per cent¹⁴. We have seen the direct impact of this trend over the last decade on the production of food. Droughts and floods are occurring with increasing frequency and intensity. Each time taking their toll on existing crop yields, but also affecting future productive potential as water reserves are depleted, soil loses its fertility, and farmers and herders become poorer and less able to invest in these productive livelihoods.

Evidence suggests that climate change also impacts food prices, by making land less productive and therefore reducing crop yields. It is predicted that temperature increases of more than three degrees Celsius will cause prices to increase by up to 40 per cent¹⁵.

Climate change and rising food prices are putting increasing pressure on natural resources which are essential to people's livelihoods, such as water and pasture for livestock, and fertile land and irrigation for agriculture. Reduced availability of these resources can lead to conflict between clans, ethnic groups or pastoralists and farmers which can escalate, as was seen in Darfur. The cost of conflict is felt in human lives, land and livestock being destroyed and the diversion of national budgets to military responses, all of which incur subsequent losses of productivity.

Food: A security issue

Food has been recognised as a serious security issue, and recent years have seen protests over food prices on all continents. In many countries these protests have turned into riots. Notably, in 2008, protests in Côte d'Ivoire, Haiti and Cameroon left dozens of people dead. In poor countries, particularly those with a history of conflict, social divisions and inequalities, there is a high likelihood that suffering from food shortages and price rises will translate into violent responses. Soaring food prices are fuelling political instability and threatening fragile peace in many countries emerging from conflict or experiencing long-term social tensions.

3.3 Challenge 3: biofuels

Many governments are backing investments in biofuels as a response to climate change. But there are clear drawbacks which have often been ignored to date.

Biofuels compete for land that could otherwise be used for food production. Ethanol production already consumes 20 per cent of America's corn crop¹⁶. This trade-off plays a large role in the global decrease in grain supplies and therefore, arguably, increases in prices. Current planned biofuel expansion is predicted to increase international maize prices by 26 per cent¹⁷, resulting in a decrease in the availability of and access to food for the poorest people. And, as land is increasingly being bought up for large-scale biofuel production, smallholder farmers have found themselves pushed off their land and without a livelihood.

The professed reduced environmental impact of biofuels masks the real issue of increasingly excessive consumption patterns in developed economies. And, while the use of biofuels could help reduce carbon emissions, it has been suggested that their production could actually increase them. Deforestation to make space for biofuel production reduces oxygen levels in the atmosphere as well as posing a threat to biodiversity. And increased use of fertilisers, production of which is energy-intensive, could also undo the benefits of biofuels.

Land Grab¹⁸

A local woman responds to a company pulling down trees to make way for a biofuel plantation in Ghana: "Look at all the sheanut trees you have cut down already... the nuts that I collect in a year give me cloth for the year and also a little capital. Now you have destroyed the trees and you are promising me something [a job and improved livelihood] you do not want to commit yourself to. Where then do you want me to go? What do you want me to do?"

3.4 Challenge 4: urban food insecurity

Food insecurity has typically been associated with rural populations. But rising food prices have exposed newly vulnerable urban communities. Often relying increasingly on imported foods, such as maize and rice, urban populations have been hit hard by price increases. Of all foods, the price of rice has increased the most sharply, by 40 per cent in the last year.

In the city food is readily available, but with few employment opportunities or access to basic services, the poor simply can't afford it. When food stocks run low people flood the city in search of work, adding to the strain. This impacts rural populations, who can no longer depend on urban relatives or finding work in urban areas in difficult times.

Food security responses are generally not set up to deal with the urban hungry. After post-election violence in Kenya, the government addressed the looming food crisis with a combination of subsidised agricultural inputs for farmers and food aid. This protected future food security of some of the vulnerable rural populations, but did not address the immediate or long-term risk facing the growing numbers of extremely vulnerable urban poor.

Mohammed, aged 9, Addis Ababa

"Me and my brothers and sisters don't have enough for us all to eat. There are families that I know that eat in shifts. The eldest eats on Monday, the second on Tuesday and the third on Wednesday. If he's lucky there is something for the eldest to eat on Wednesday morning or evening again."

The international community, particularly NGOs on the ground, must address this emerging face of hunger, by developing its limited expertise on urban food security, and quickly planning preparedness and response strategies to address urban vulnerability.

4. What is needed: aid system overhaul

The need for a radical overhaul of the international aid system's approach to emergencies is more urgent now than ever. The current system has failed to even out the pattern of emergency aid, better use available funds, or reverse the cycle of increasing emergencies and deepening poverty.

Instead, the failure to act has allowed the crisis of hunger to spread. And now food price rises double the challenge. The international aid system must deal with the consequences of its failure, and step up to make the fundamental changes required to counter the global food crisis.

CARE is prescribing **three new steps** to tackle the new challenges and reverse the trend of increasing hunger and emergency:

4.1 Step 1. More aid: donors must meet existing aid commitments, and expand them to meet significant new needs.

4.1.1 Meeting and increasing aid commitments

The United Nations Millennium Declaration - an action plan including commitments to halve extreme poverty, halt the spread of HIV and AIDS and provide universal primary education - has helped galvanise unprecedented efforts to meet the needs of the world's poorest. But the world's richest nations are still £20 billion short of meeting a pledge to double aid to Africa by 2010¹⁹ and we are falling well short of meeting the Millennium Development Goals in 2015. Donors need to meet these existing aid commitments and expand their assistance to respond to specific needs of those who have already fallen into destitution. They must invest in long-term programmes to reduce vulnerability, aid recovery and empower poor people to meet their own food needs.

4.1.2 A global fund to fight hunger

Additional funding must be channelled into a new global fund that supports long-term and emergency needs in fighting hunger. It should complement existing aid commitments and mechanisms, and be based on country and context-specific needs and priorities, as well as strong coordination between local government, multilateral organisations, NGOs, local civil society, private sector and beneficiaries.

4.1.3 Ending monetised food aid

Other NGOs should join CARE in turning down US Government monetised food aid - food sold to raise cash for poverty-fighting programmes. It is inefficient, with an estimated half of every pound wasted on packing, shipping and selling the food. Furthermore, imported donated food can compete with poor farmers' crops and undermine their livelihoods.

The US Government should provide cash instead, which can be spent on faster and more appropriate responses, avoiding the wasteful and potentially harmful impacts of monetised food aid. International and institutional donors should support aid agencies to make this shift by putting up cash to fill the funding gap in their programmes.

4.2 Step 2. Better aid: the divide between emergency and development programmes must be bridged to ensure coherent and complementary approaches to hunger.

4.2.1 Expanding social protection

National social protection systems exist in only a few countries and are often at a scale that falls far short of the need. Government capacity and commitment remains a critical challenge, and implementation continues to face obstacles. Donors are often poorly coordinated - pulling governments in different directions with different requirements. The establishment and expansion of co-ordinated, institutionalised and large-scale social protection programmes for the poorest people, including emerging vulnerable urban populations, must be prioritised.

4.2.2 Bridging the aid divide

The international community must shift from separate emergency and development responses towards disaster risk reduction approaches that address vulnerability and build communities' and countries' resilience to shocks.

DFID has led the way by committing 10 per cent of all its emergency spend to disaster risk reduction activities – cost-effective spending as it costs less to protect livelihoods than to rebuild them. This needs to be reflected in development activities too, ensuring that making people less vulnerable to future hazards is a shared and long-term commitment.

4.2.3 Investing in agriculture

The lack of investment in agriculture over the past decade has exacerbated the current global food crisis. Today, it is no longer only a case of poor people unable to afford food, we also have a global availability problem. Small-scale farms - which account for more than 90 per cent of Africa's agricultural production - must be supported to increase food production and to become more resilient to shocks such as drought which can threaten livelihoods. Once they are producing a surplus, farmers can benefit from rising food prices. This will provide a springboard to a viable livelihood.

A number of African governments have come together to collectively boost African agriculture – the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme. Donor governments must support them in this crucial process.

4.2.4 Investing in pastoralism

Livestock rearing has proved a viable livelihood for generations, providing milk, meat and income for hundreds of millions of poor Africans, as well as manure that is essential for agricultural production. However in many parts of Africa, particularly the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, climate change has reduced rain and pasture – often sparking conflict. This, combined with unchecked political and social marginalisation, has put increasing strain on pastoralists, forcing many to drop out and migrate to urban centres to look for low-paid, unskilled work.

Fatimatou, Abalak, Niger

“Before, milk was our main food. But with all the droughts and the loss of our animals we’ve had to change and have started eating cereals. We used to be nomadic but now we stay put in the same place for long periods, and have even built buildings. We can’t buy the food that we want to eat and each meal is smaller than it used to be. For us to go back to our former way of life, the climate would have to change significantly and water and pasture be replenished. But things have been getting worse for the last twenty years and this isn’t likely.”

To stop the resulting net decrease in food production, pastoralists need access to credit and markets, and opportunities to gain the skills needed to strengthen and diversify their livelihoods. Communities who have been forced to settle must be supported to realise their rights, manage their land and to claim basic services. Increased funding and expertise to better manage scarce natural resources and prevent conflict is needed to ensure pastoralist livelihoods can remain productive. Where land is no longer able to support this way of life, pastoralists must be given support to find alternative livelihoods.

4.2.5 Making aid accountable to the poor

The Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) initiative provides a framework for official humanitarian aid and encourages greater donor accountability. However, the translation of principles into donor policy and funding has been inconsistent and they are not ensuring effective responses.

Local civil society is still being sidelined in the process of defining and implementing responses that impact on their lives. The UN and donors must support national governments in making the humanitarian system responsive and accountable to those affected, and invest in strengthening the voice of vulnerable and marginalised groups. National governments must ensure that domestic policies encourage a diverse and vibrant civil society, and include and support farmers and pastoralists.

4.3 Step 3. Delivering aid: a radical and fundamental overhaul of the international aid system to enable timely and adequate funding, and end gaps and duplications, is the only hope for ending hunger and food emergency.

4.3.1 Reforming UN systems

The international aid system has proved inadequate for tackling chronic vulnerability and hunger, and faced with new challenges it is ever less able to meet the needs of the hungry. The UN must fundamentally change to ensure more effective coordination on hunger across UN agencies, better linking humanitarian and development staff and programmes. The focus of a reformed system should be on decreasing vulnerability with each response, as well as saving lives.

The UN and NGOs have jointly identified the need for a new global food security coordination mechanism that bridges emergency and development to ensure early, appropriate responses. It is time to make this a reality, bringing together donors, UN agencies, private sector, NGOs, national governments and civil society, and ensuring comprehensive national and regional response strategies.

4.3.2 Linking climate change and hunger

Debates around energy and climate change must acknowledge and be linked to discussions on trade, agriculture and food prices. The European Community, for example, needs to work towards coherence between these issues, instead of fragmenting them as its current policies do. Sustainable approaches to climate change, such as energy policies that prioritise the reduction of energy consumption, should be adopted by Northern governments to prevent further degradation of vulnerable livelihoods. Substantial analysis is required to fully understand the global impact of current biofuel commitments, particularly on food prices. Until then, a moratorium must be called on further commitments.

4.3.3 Shifting public perception

Media coverage is key to determining the magnitude and timing of responses to emergencies, attracting the attention of the public and government decision-makers. Yet typically, media coverage remains sparse until the emergency is at its peak. However, CARE research has revealed that three-quarters of the British public want the media to highlight food crises earlier, with two-thirds wanting to donate while there is still time to prevent the worst²⁰.

Evidence from CARE's work shows that the public's desire to know about and give money to emergencies earlier is good news for the poor. Media decision-makers should recognise their power and accept the responsibility that goes with it. They must listen to what the public want to hear about and look for new ways of reporting food crises, before they reach their peak and after.

5. Time for action

The world's inaction on food emergencies has proved costly and is no longer an option. Global food price rises have raised the stakes too high.

Governments, institutions, donors and aid agencies must take this opportunity to deliver long-term, structural reforms to the international aid system. The new system must work for and with the most vulnerable, to help them to protect themselves from emergency and build their ability to feed their families. They must prioritise disaster risk reduction – bridging emergency and development work – to build resilience to shocks such as food prices and drought.

It is more urgent than ever that long-overdue aid pledges are honoured, but donors must dig deep and come up with the estimated £8.2 billion required to meet the immediate needs of people affected by the current food price crisis²¹. New investment must be channelled to support small-scale agriculture and pastoralism, and new energy focussed on addressing the climate change and biofuel production that compete with and hamper food production.

The aid system has an opportunity and a responsibility to rise to this challenge. If it does not, the cost will be measured not only in the billions of wasted emergency funds, but in the suffering of the millions of people pushed to and beyond the edge of yet more needless emergencies.

Notes

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