



Women in search of water in Hadigala district, Siti Zone, Somali Region, Ethiopia. July 2015. Poon Wai Nang / Oxfam

EL NIÑO: THE CASE FOR URGENT ACTION

El Niño 2015/16 briefing

Millions of poor and vulnerable people face hunger and poverty this year and next because of record global temperatures, droughts and erratic rains in 2014 and 2015, compounded by the development of possibly the most powerful El Niño on record. Strong leadership at every level of government and a coordinated international effort are required to avoid the failures of the 2011 Horn of Africa drought, when the international system was slow to respond and widespread suffering ensued. Urgent humanitarian response is required in places already in crisis such as parts of Ethiopia. This paper focuses particularly on other places, where the crisis is currently unfolding, and where there is still the opportunity for rapid action to mitigate the worst impacts of El Niño.

1 INTRODUCTION

Millions of poor and vulnerable people face hunger and poverty this year and next because of record global temperatures, droughts and erratic rains in 2014 and 2015, compounded by the development of possibly the most powerful El Niño on record. Harvests and livelihoods have faltered as drought has taken hold across equatorial regions – in Ethiopia, much of Southern Africa and parts of Central America, the Caribbean, South America, Asia and the Pacific. In some countries, the impacts are exacerbated by conflict, a lack of necessary investment in sustainable agriculture and growing inequality inside societies that leaves some people especially vulnerable.

In some places – notably parts of Ethiopia –there is a need for a strong multi-sectoral humanitarian intervention to save lives and reduce suffering. Elsewhere, the humanitarian crisis is still unfolding and there remains an opportunity to mitigate the worst impacts of El Niño through early response.

The human costs of late response to food insecurity are unacceptable. As well as short-term suffering, hardship and loss, there are long-term consequences for children’s development, and particularly harmful impacts on girls and women. Food crises reduce economic growth and push people further into poverty, reversing sustainable development gains. It takes many years to recover from livelihood and property loss. Further, inequality may be deepened as distress sales at low prices transfer assets from the poor to the wealthy.

This briefing builds on Oxfam’s report ‘Entering Uncharted Waters: El Niño and the threat to food security,’¹ and our briefing ‘Urgent action now can prevent major suffering and loss.’² It makes the case that governments, donors and humanitarian actors must respond through urgent humanitarian action where the situation is already at breaking point and elsewhere support early action interventions including: water resource management; support for resilient and diversified livelihoods; strengthening of social protection mechanisms; development of grain reserves; working with communities to strengthen systems to prevent, mitigate and respond to crises; and developing the capacity to interact with resource management mechanisms.

Box 1: Never again: lessons from the 2011 Horn of Africa drought

The 2011 drought in the Horn of Africa was the worst to affect the region in over 60 years. The drought claimed around 258,000 lives in Somalia and shattered livelihoods across Ethiopia and Kenya. Although early warning systems flagged severe food security stress, the response was too slow. The international humanitarian community failed to significantly scale up their response until the situation was an emergency and famine was declared in Somalia.³ This was a predicted and broadly preventable crisis – it should not have become a humanitarian catastrophe.

Delayed response has been the defining characteristic of food emergencies over the last three decades in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel.⁴ The humanitarian community has vowed to learn from its mistakes, but has yet to prove its ability and will to react swiftly and at scale to warning signs. There is a window of opportunity for early response to this El Niño, to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, but this closing fast.

2 SUPPORTING NATIONAL LEADERSHIP

National governments have the primary responsibility to meet food security needs and provide humanitarian assistance, and they must show leadership at the highest political level to prioritize early action.

In many countries governments have taken early action, such as in the case of Kenya, where response plans to rains have been developed, additional funding has been released and coordination at national and local level has been improved. Malawi, which has engaged in a transparent review of the problematic response to the floods earlier this year, has taken clear steps to be more prepared. It has developed a contingency plan for El Niño, allocated resources towards early action, strengthened its rescue capabilities and is moving towards expansion of social protection programmes to build resilience of vulnerable and poor communities.

These initiatives are critical, but for many countries, more is needed and at a larger scale. The cost of not acting is too great: crisis response is by far more expensive than early action and building resilience, and the impacts of El Niño present a grave risk to countries' long-term development and to people's lives.

The impact of food insecurity also exposes the failure of some governments to prioritize investments necessary to enable smallholder farmers to become more resilient, productive and profitable. In Africa, for example, governments have pledged to allocate 10 percent of national budgets to the agriculture sector, but a recent review found that average public expenditure is just four percent across all regions of the continent. National governments have the primary responsibility to develop strategies and take action so that farmers can manage risk and access market opportunities. Increasing inequality is another factor that exacerbates the impact of the crisis on societies.

But even committed governments might not have the resources to tackle all of the pressing problems smallholder farmers face, let alone respond to a growing number of disasters that wipe out harvests and decimate livestock. Donor assistance is necessary to address food insecurity and help smallholder farmers adapt to current and future extreme weather events such as the ones caused by El Niño, which are likely to become more frequent as a result of climate change.

While national governments have to lead on the response to food insecurity and design suitable approaches, regional bodies have an important role to play in coordinating response strategies, providing political, and where possible, financial support. Regional development banks, such as the African Development Bank – which already runs a Drought Resilience and Sustainable Livelihoods Program in the Horn of Africa – or the IGAD Drought Disaster Resilience Initiative (IDDRSI), should consider how they can support the response, by, for example, building the technical capacity of member states regarding interventions that support resilience. The UN also has a role to play in supporting early action, for instance through the role of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in better coordinating and sharing information regarding the global impacts of El Niño and planned response.

Since 2011, there has been investment in early warning and contingency planning processes such as the Situation and Response Analysis Framework,

which has been developed and trialled by Save the Children, Concern Worldwide and Oxfam. The Framework analyses impending 'crisis' situations and their impacts and designs outcomes of responses once forecasts become available. However, these efforts remain sporadic and at times disconnected from other types of investments in areas where risks of drought are high. In addition, some of the analysis and information is not publically available, which further complicates a much-needed consolidation and coordination of information to provide input to early warning mechanisms and in turn, early action and emergency responses.

Apart from the availability of early warning information, the crucial question is to what extent the information received is acted upon by governments and humanitarian and development actors. Some progress has been made, such as the introduction of 'crisis modifiers' in development assistance, which allow pre-agreed access to humanitarian finance. Initiatives to fast-track development funding, such as the EU's recent decision to release funds from the European Development Fund's reserves to finance El Niño emergency actions, are laudable but seem to still be the exception rather than the rule.

3 FOOD INSECURITY UNDERMINES DEVELOPMENT GAINS

Climate change, unsustainable agricultural systems, conflict, unequal access to markets and El Niño are exacerbating food insecurity across the world, with clear human costs of hunger, hardship and loss in the short term. What are often less well understood, however, are the lasting consequences of food insecurity.⁵

As food security worsens, poor people are often forced to sacrifice their long-term interests in order to meet immediate needs. Harmful and dangerous coping strategies often have particular impacts on vulnerable groups, with women and girls often bearing the brunt: early and forced marriage, transactional sex and withdrawing children from school. In the long run these coping mechanisms make households poorer and even more vulnerable, with adverse effects transferred to future generations through their impact on education and health.⁶

Food insecurity exponentially increases the probability of long-term adverse consequences and mortality for children.⁷ Malnutrition can lead to stunting, cognitive underdevelopment and high rates of preventable sickness in children⁸ that can impact on their entire lives: it is estimated that the 1982–84 Zimbabwe drought reduced achievements at school that lead to a drop in lifetime earnings in low-skilled sectors by 14 percent.⁹ A similar study in Ethiopia suggested an income loss of three percent per capita per year over people's lifetimes.¹⁰

It can take years to recover from asset loss – crops wither, livestock die, houses and property are damaged or lost. The Kenyan drought of 2008 resulted in crop losses that year, but also for many years after as farmers were less able to purchase seeds and fertilizer for production due to increased debt, reduced savings, and consumption of seed stocks that would have been kept for planting.¹¹

Food insecurity has clear impacts on economic growth and poverty. For example, a study in Malawi found that droughts, on average, cause GDP losses of almost one percent every year, but this rises to 10.4 percent in an extreme drought. In Malawi, such extreme droughts were found to increase poverty by 17 percent – the equivalent of an additional 2.1 million people falling below the poverty line.¹² And in the Philippines, poverty levels in Rizal (one of the worst affected areas) almost doubled after Tropical Storm Ondoy and Typhoon Pepeng in 2009 and were still elevated three years later.¹³

Inequality is also likely to deepen. While droughts and floods have impacts on all sections of a society, the poorest suffer disproportionately. They are often forced to sell off their productive assets, such as livestock and land, at low prices – effectively transferring assets from the poor to the wealthy.¹⁴ In this context it is worth noting that Oxfam research in Malawi has found that in just seven years, the gap between the richest 10 percent of Malawians and the poorest 40 percent has increased by almost a third.¹⁵

4 THE UNEQUIVOCAL FINANCIAL CASE FOR EARLY ACTION

Lack of funding remains a key obstacle to early and effective food security interventions. Yet a multitude of studies have shown unequivocally that early response and building resilience interventions, however varied, are significantly more cost-effective than emergency interventions for seriously malnourished people.

A five-country study commissioned by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) in Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Niger and Bangladesh found that **early response** reduces cost per capita by 40 percent on average, though the estimates are wide-ranging, between seven percent and 71 percent.¹⁶ Another six-country study (Ethiopia, Kenya, Senegal, Niger, Mozambique and Malawi) estimated that response at four months after a failed harvest costs \$49 per household, whereas response at six months after harvest costs \$1,294 per household.¹⁷

There are some particularly striking examples of the cost-effectiveness of early action:

- **Early commercial destocking¹⁸ and investment in market based mechanisms:** A study on Ethiopia found that early commercial destocking was 137 times cheaper than waiting until herds are depleted before responding with imported food aid and restocking.¹⁹ Supporting livestock owners' access to veterinary medicine through market-based mechanisms, which at the same time strengthens the veterinary pharmacy sector in rural areas, has led to a significant reduction in livestock disease and increased productivity of cattle.²⁰
- **Water provision:** In Kenya, the drilling of a contingency borehole²¹ is estimated to cost only 10 percent of water trucking.²² Oxfam's experience is

similar: we found that trucking water to 80,000 people in Harshin, Ethiopia for five months cost more than \$3m, compared with \$0.9m to rehabilitate all the non-operational local water schemes.²³

- **Severe acute malnutrition:** In Bangladesh, early treatment of malnutrition through community case management has been shown to be eight times cheaper than traditional treatment using inpatient care.²⁴

Early action can contribute to longer-term **resilience-building**. DFID's studies found that the benefits of investing in interventions and programmes which contribute towards building the resilience of households and communities consistently outweigh the costs, yielding gains ranging from \$2.3 to \$13.2 for every dollar invested.²⁵ Specific examples of the cost-benefits of resilience building are below:

- **Soil and water conservation:** In Mozambique, for every \$1 spent on soil and water conservation, \$12.4 of benefits are gained. If the avoided losses are included, the benefit to cost ratio rises to 56:1.²⁶
- **Long-term water provision:** Providing underground water cisterns in Ethiopia yields \$27 for every dollar spent and a full package of water investments from the Ministry of Water yields \$5.5 for every dollar spent.²⁷
- **Safety net programmes:** In Bangladesh, cost-benefit ratios are 5:1 for the Enhancing Resilience programme (which provides cash/food for work and training in areas that are most vulnerable to climatic shocks) and 12:1 for the Vulnerable Group Development programme (which provides food for training to develop the marketable skills of women and build social awareness on disaster management and nutrition).²⁸

Evidently, appropriate early response storylines are highly context-specific and cost-benefit ratios will vary.²⁹ But overall, the economic arguments for early action are twofold. First, a shift to early response does not incur any additional cost compared with late response. Second, smart implementation of early response strengthens structural development through resilience-building, which is particularly important in the context of vulnerability in a changing climate.

A perceived risk in responding early is that humanitarian funds will be released incorrectly to situations that turn out not to be a disaster. National governments and donors are afraid of 'crying wolf' by reacting pre-emptively to forecasts that are subsequently proven to be incorrect, which presumably leads to funding being misallocated. However, DFID's five-country study concludes as follows:

*'Economic concerns over false early response are unwarranted. Country studies found that, for every early response to a correctly forecast crisis, early responses could be made 2–6 times to crises that do not materialise, before the cost of a single late response is met.'*³⁰

At-risk countries, donors and humanitarian actors must acknowledge that waiting to see if a situation becomes a large-scale crisis before committing funding and resources is a false economy. The humanitarian imperative requires governments and donors to eventually respond in the face of humanitarian crisis; responding quickly and smartly now is therefore a clear economic win.

5 URGENT RESPONSE REQUIRED NOW

In reality this is not one crisis but many. The current international focus is understandably on hardest-hit countries but the international response needs to go much further to ensure other countries do not follow suit.

Urgent humanitarian response is required in some places – such as areas of Ethiopia – where El Niño conditions this year have followed a very poor agricultural season for smallholder farmers in 2014/15, creating a dire situation. Those who are chronically vulnerable are being tipped further into hunger and poverty. Across the world there are millions of people who are classified as being in 'Crisis' at IPC (Integrated Phase Classification) Phase 3,³¹ and some in 'Emergency' (IPC 4). Some people have lost everything. In these places there is a need for urgent humanitarian response now. This is likely to include life-saving interventions to support:

- **Food security:** this may include the delivery of food aid, or financial support through cash or vouchers;
- **Nutrition:** identifying and supporting people who are malnourished, through the provision of dietary supplements, and supplementary and therapeutic feeding;
- **Water, sanitation and hygiene:** ensuring people have access to clean water and effective sanitation to preserve health.

As well as this life-saving support, further interventions to support livelihoods are also required to help to ensure a quicker recovery and prevent further asset loss. Interventions would be highly context specific but in Ethiopia, for example, this may include slaughter destocking.

In countries where the situation is deteriorating but not yet a fully-fledged emergency, government and donors must support **early actions** which will mitigate the impact of the current El Niño and build resilience. Early action goes beyond preparedness such as prepositioning stocks, conducting surveys of markets and water sources and contingency planning for public health and veterinary services. This work is crucial, but it is neither a substitute nor the same as an early resilience-building response.

Clearly, early action interventions will be context-specific and an essential component must be consulting and involving communities at the beginning of the process, putting them at the heart of planning and decision-making, and wherever possible, building on services and measures already in place. The outcomes of this participatory approach will dictate the precise measures governments use in a toolkit of early response options. These could include:

- **Water resource management**, including rehabilitation of water points, development of new water sources, and their ongoing maintenance and management.
- **Support for resilient and diversified livelihoods**, such as improving weather information data collection and dissemination to inform production decisions; developing risk management mechanisms; development of new

livelihoods opportunities; supporting improved and fairer access to (labour and product) markets; linking women, men and youth with services that help develop livelihood options; provision of appropriate seeds; information and agricultural support such as tools, training, fertilisers etc.; support to markets and delivery networks; and the strengthening of agricultural and livestock extension services and increased support for pastoralists, including veterinary services, livestock water-point rehabilitation and maintenance, and destocking.

- **Strengthening of social protection mechanisms** (both formal/state run and informal mechanisms) that address the needs of vulnerable populations (children, pregnant and breastfeeding women and the elderly), and which can be scaled up if the crisis deepens.
- **Development of grain reserves**, regionally, nationally or locally.
- **Working with communities and authorities** to strengthen systems to prevent, mitigate and respond to crises and develop capacities of people to interact with resource management and response mechanisms.

Of course, early action is only one part of the response, and the current challenge to mobilize actors to react swiftly demonstrates that more needs to be done to adapt longer-term programmes to support interventions that build the resilience of communities (through e.g. investment in social protection and sustainable livelihoods), react swiftly (through, for example, usage of crisis modifiers), and invest in innovative approaches that support communities in managing the risks they face from increasingly erratic weather.³²

Box 2: Country snapshot: early response in Papua New Guinea

Up to three million people Papua New Guinea have been affected by severe drought and frost, destroying crops and livestock and causing severe food shortages. Creeks and streams have dried up, forcing villagers to use alternative sources of water, which has compromised hygiene practices and led to cases of water-borne disease.

Prime Minister Peter O'Neill has warned that an intensifying El Niño could bring the worst drought in at least 20 years to PNG, calling for agencies and communities to work together in the coming months to reduce the impact of extreme weather conditions.³³

Some funding has been released from national, provincial and district budgets, and PNG's National Disaster Committee³⁴ and the PNG Defence Force have been appointed to lead response efforts, in coordination with humanitarian organisations including Oxfam. They have distributed emergency food supplies, as well as drought- and frost-resistant seeds. Despite significant logistical challenges, including the remoteness of many of the worst-affected communities, the government continue in their efforts to respond to emerging needs.

However, there is still a need for further scale-up of a timely, effective early response to help contain more severe damage as a result of drought.

Oxfam will continue to support the government at the national, provincial and district levels as it seeks to do so. Priorities for early response should include:

Livelihoods/food security

- Expanding **awareness-raising** for communities, through training and distribution of information materials on gardening and farming practices to adapt to drought, their rights to improved seed varieties and building their capacity to claim their rights.
- Expanding support to farmers beyond subsistence farming and maintaining gardens and increasing their buying power, **potentially initiating cash and food-for-work programmes**. These programmes should ensure they benefit men and women equally and are inclusive of vulnerable groups, including people with disabilities.
- **Enhanced monitoring** of food security, markets and market access, both now and ongoing throughout the response.
- **Increasing levels of relief to remote communities** who have received limited assistance to date and have poor access to markets.
- Ensuring that **farmers have seed stocks available** for when the rains do arrive.

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH)

- National and provincial health authorities and humanitarian agencies strengthening joint awareness campaigns and **dissemination of public health messaging** and hygiene promotion.
- Increasing **distribution of WASH-related non-food items** including jerry-cans, soap and water treatment tablets to reduce transmission of water-borne disease.
- Expanding rehabilitation of existing **water distribution and irrigation systems** and construction of new disability-friendly water systems where needed.

Gender and Protection

- Helping to counter the increased risk of violence, especially gender-based violence, as a result of the crisis by **supporting awareness-raising campaigns for communities** on gender roles and responsibilities, women's rights and children's rights.
- Providing clear instruction and support to district **and ward-level government staff to prioritize the security of women and children.**

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Stronger leadership:** National governments, who have the primary responsibility to meet food security needs, should show leadership at the highest political levels to manage the drought response. This is already the case in many affected countries. A range of investments are necessary to build resilience and help farmers adapt to climate change. But these will only be successful if they are developed through inclusive consultation processes with local communities.

To support nationally led responses, regional bodies should play an important role in strategic leadership and coordination and international actors should provide financial and technical inputs. The UN system has a role to play in supporting urgent action through, for example, OCHA's role in consolidating information about the impact of El Niño and planned responses.

With the parties to the 2015 Paris climate deal committing to limit temperature increases to 1.5°C, all countries should now reach for the maximum possible in cutting greenhouse gas emissions. Failure to do so will lead to more and worse extreme weather events than what we are witnessing today. Developed countries, as historic polluters, need to cut faster first, but all countries will need to commit to make their clean energy transition even faster, with support if needed. To meet growing needs, more and new financing will need to be made available to support preparedness and climate adaptation, not just from existing aid commitments but also from new sources of public finance.

2. **Rapid scale-up of the response:** Many governments and donors have focused well on preparedness, which is valuable, but this needs to switch to urgent action and significant scale-up relevant to the specific context. In places that are in IPC 3, urgent humanitarian response is required to save lives and reduce suffering. In contexts in IPC 2, early interventions at scale, which build community resilience and support livelihoods, must be supported. Not only will this be cheaper than crisis response, but it will also have long-term benefits.
3. **Level and flexibility of funding:** Lack of funding remains a key obstacle to scale up action. There are still huge gaps in terms of urgent humanitarian response. For example, in Ethiopia, from January 2016 onwards, the food distribution pipeline is only funded to three percent.³⁵ In terms of early response, most donors still do not have appropriate funding streams which can support early action. Creative ways to overcome this must be urgently found from both development and humanitarian funding streams, such as fast-tracking of development assistance. Regional development banks should

consider their role in supporting the response, given the way in which El Niño may undermine development in many contexts. Longer term, structural changes must be made to funding criteria to support resilience building and to enable scale-up in the event of an impending crisis. For development grants, the use of 'crisis modifiers' – which allow pre-agreed access to humanitarian finance – should be scaled up by donors to promote greater flexibility and timely action in response to emerging and slow-onset crises.

NOTES

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