System error: Issues in humanitarian responses to early warning information for famine

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NOHA Master’s in International Humanitarian Action Thesis

May 2019

This thesis is submitted for obtaining the Master’s Degree in International Humanitarian Action. By submitting the thesis, the author certifies that the text is from his/her hand, does not include the work of someone else unless clearly indicated, and that the thesis has been produced in accordance with proper academic practices.
“It is important to state at the outset that however noble the humanitarian enterprise is, and however extraordinary it is… humanitarianism is by definition an emblem of failure, not success. The disaster has already happened; the famine has started; the cholera is raging; or the refugees are already on the move”.

- David Rieff
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ALNAP</td>
<td>Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance</td>
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<td>CAP</td>
<td>Consolidated Appeals Process</td>
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<td>EW</td>
<td>Early Warning</td>
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<td>EWI</td>
<td>Early Warning Information</td>
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<td>EWS</td>
<td>Early Warning Systems</td>
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<td>FAO</td>
<td>Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations</td>
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<td>FEWSNET</td>
<td>Famine Early Warning Systems Network</td>
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<td>FSNAU</td>
<td>Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit</td>
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<td>FRC</td>
<td>Famine Review Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>HC</td>
<td>Humanitarian Coordinator</td>
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<tr>
<td>HCT</td>
<td>Humanitarian Country Team</td>
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<td>HQ</td>
<td>Headquarter</td>
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<tr>
<td>HRP</td>
<td>Humanitarian Response Plan</td>
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<tr>
<td>IGO</td>
<td>Inter-governmental organization</td>
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<td>INGO</td>
<td>International non-governmental organization</td>
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<td>IPC</td>
<td>Integrated Food Security Phase Classification</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-governmental organization</td>
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<td>SOHS</td>
<td>State of the Humanitarian System</td>
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<td>TWG</td>
<td>Technical Working Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations Children’s Fund</td>
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<td>WFP</td>
<td>World Food Programme</td>
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Abstract

Humanitarian responses to famine early warning information are persistently delayed, despite immense improvements in understandings of famine and the quality of early warning systems. Famines are complex, slow-onset disasters that result in a high volume of needs, which are too large to be addressed by any one actor. Famine response entails a multi-faceted approach by a large number of actors. Therefore, to identify issues in famine response, the humanitarian system as a whole should be examined.

Systems theory, borrowed from organizational studies, allows for such an analysis. Using Seybolt’s application of systems theory to the humanitarian system, this paper uses the unique approach of applying the theory to humanitarian responses to famine early warning information specifically. By applying systems theory in this original way, the thesis offers new perspectives on a previously studied topic.

Issues pertaining to humanitarian responses to famine early warnings were found through a literature review and are sorted according to three variables: exogenous/environmental, structural, and procedural. Once the problems in response are understood, Seybolt’s hypothesis of needed improvements to the system, and their feasibility, are examined. These are: more differentiation among units, increased connectivity, use of collaborative processes, and a shift in decision-making power. In addition to Seybolt’s suggestions, accountability and incentives deficits and the politicization of aid are examined. While most of the examined changes are at least somewhat feasible and would help to improve response times, some are beyond the power of humanitarian actors to change. The work contributes to academic knowledge by offering novel perspectives on systemic issues pertaining to famine response by taking general theory and applying it to the specific topic of famine response.
1. Introduction

1.1 Research problem
Famine is certainly not a new phenomenon, however it is a persistent one. In 2017 alone, the United Nations (UN) issued warnings of four impending famines in Yemen, Somalia, South Sudan, and Nigeria.¹ This is not the first time in recent history the famine alarm has been raised. The African famines of the 1980s and 1990s saw a greater investment in early warning systems (EWSs) for food insecurity, in the hopes that such problems could be addressed before they devolved into famine. In spite of this, famine continues to be a modern reality, as in Somalia in 2011. Notwithstanding constant early warnings (EWs) up to a year in advance, an adequate humanitarian response in Somalia was only triggered after an official declaration of famine. Unfortunately, as is seen in the ignored 2017 warnings and the persistence of severe food insecurity and famine-like conditions in contexts such as Yemen today, the humanitarian community has yet to bridge the gap between early warning and early response. Famine is not a sudden-onset disaster; it is a process caused by a multitude of factors that build up over time. With familiar cries of ‘never again’ in the wake of each new famine and the better quality of early warning information (EWI) available, why do humanitarian responses tend to only come when the situation has devolved into famine and many have already died?

1.2 Research questions, aims and objectives
Humanitarian responses to famine EWI are persistently delayed. These ongoing delays indicate that there may be a system-wide issue regarding response to EWI. The general question and objective of this thesis is therefore to examine the humanitarian system to discern which systemic issues are inhibiting humanitarian responses to early warning information for famine. This will be done by asking:

i. Can systems theory provide a framework to help better understand the persistent delays in humanitarian responses to early warning information for famine?

ii. Can systems theory and systems thinking provide solutions that would improve response time?

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To save lives, a response should come before a situation has devolved into famine, earlier on in the “spiral of famine” (see Figure 1). However, adequate intervention rarely comes before a catastrophic point has been reached, further down in the spiral. The aim of this research is to use systems theory as a tool to better understand the causes of delayed responses to EWI. Systems theory is a useful tool for the analysis of issues on several levels, and allows us to distinguish between exogenous/environmental, structural, and procedural shortcomings that conspire to produce performance gaps in the humanitarian response to EWs for famine. This research asserts that the humanitarian system as it is today is unable to implement timely responses to EWI because of systemic inefficiencies. While certain aspects of the system are stuck in using hierarchical or market-like methods, a move towards a systemic network model could promote response earlier in the spiral.

**Figure 1: The timing of response in the downward spiral of famine**

Source: Buchanan-Smith and Davies, *The Missing Link*, 6

1.3 Relevance to the humanitarian field
The research question posed is of high relevance to the humanitarian field, as famine warnings have become rampant in recent years. The continual warnings of famine indicate that the humanitarian system continually struggles with reacting to EWI. It is important to reflect on the causes of late responses if the humanitarian system is to change for the better.
This research is also highly relevant as many of the issues are not exclusive to responses to EWI from EWSs. The findings of issues in early response to food insecurity should not, therefore, be taken in isolation. In fact, many of the issues covered over the course of this research are applicable to other areas of humanitarian action. Recommendations for improvement are therefore not necessarily targeted solely towards actors responsible for early response to food security crises, but rather, could be applied to the humanitarian system at large.

The literature review highlighted multiple cross-cutting issues affecting a variety of actors. For instance, political considerations inform donor funding decisions (how much funding to contribute to a given crisis and when). Since humanitarian organizations are highly resource-dependent on a small number of donors to implement humanitarian responses, donor policies are able to place operational and regulatory constraints on humanitarian organizations. Such constraints impact the timing and nature of responses. The interconnected and causal nature of impediments to famine response make the theoretical framework (systems theory) used highly relevant. Systems theory has been used in analysis of the humanitarian sector in previous works; however this has largely been in the context of logistics and supply chain management. This research will seek to use a unique approach in applying systems theory to issues in famine early warning and early response specifically, which can perhaps clarify how the humanitarian system can improve. This approach is best in this context because, to find a solution, systems thinking and systems solutions must be identified and employed. That is, the humanitarian system is large and change must occur at all levels across all organizations. It would be futile to discuss only one organization or one general actor in isolation, as they are all linked to one another. This is particularly true for famine response, which requires the concerted action of multiple international

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non-governmental organizations (INGOs), UN agencies, and donors. Therefore, systemic thinking is the preferred approach.

1.4 Methodology

In order to gather initial information, a literature review was conducted to gather qualitative data. A qualitative approach was employed because much of the reasoning for late response is unquantifiable and dealt predominantly with ideas, perceptions, and opinions.

The literature review consisted of a variety of materials. Academic books, journal articles, case studies, humanitarian program evaluations, and workshop summaries were consulted. This range of materials was used to gain a well-rounded understanding, ranging from academic analysis to practitioner opinions. Initial readings made it clear that the sheer number of actors involved in responses to famine would be too great for the purposes of this dissertation. Therefore, the decision was made to refine the focus to Western donors, UN agencies, and INGOs – the providers of last resort.

Initial academic readings were supplemented by case studies, most prominently the humanitarian response to the 2011 Somalian famine, in order to corroborate theoretical findings with real-world examples. Finally, evaluations, workshop and discussion summaries were used in order to gain insight into the thoughts of practitioners.

From each source, a list of reasons cited for delayed responses was created, which was then consolidated into a single list in which readings were grouped according to the reasons for delayed response cited. It was clear from the literature review and grouping exercise that many issues were related and had a causal nature to them. The question was then which theoretical framework to approach them with.

A phrase that appeared consistently throughout the literature was the “humanitarian system”, so further research was conducted into what this phrase meant. The result was the discovery of systems theory from the discipline of organizational studies. A literature review was done to obtain a general understanding of systems theory. Once there was foundational knowledge of the underlying theory, research was conducted into systems theory as applied to the humanitarian sector. There is no common consensus on how to analyze the humanitarian sector, for instance Sarah Collinson’s *Constructive deconstruction: making sense of the international*
humanitarian system provided different approaches to analysis. While not categorically accepted as the only unit of analysis, systems theory was chosen due to the interconnected nature of the issues found in the literature review, and therefore was found to be the best framework for analysis. Systems theory was predominantly applied in the realm of humanitarian logistics and supply chain management. It also had several applications as a tool of analysis for the sector at large. Taylor Seybolt’s systems theory as applied to the humanitarian sector was chosen for its focus on systemic elements and hypothesis on potential improvements.

After understanding the different elements of a system, the theory was adapted and streamlined in order to promote relevance with findings from the literature review. Reasons for delayed response were then sorted according Seybolt’s variables: exogenous factors/environment, structure, and processes. An analysis was then conducted to examine whether Seybolt’s suggestions for an improved system would help response times, given the information found during the literature review stage. This included limitations of the theory that were found in conducting this analysis.

1.5 Limitations of research
A multitude of actors are involved in response, ranging from local communities to national governments to the UN. For the sake of this research, only EWSs, donor organizations, UN agencies, and INGOs will be examined. Donors will also be limited to Western and/or traditional donors who tend to pay into humanitarian response plans (HRPs) and engage in mainstream humanitarian funding practices. An increasing number of donors are providing funding for humanitarian projects, but newer donors tend to engage in different funding practices, for instance providing more aid bilaterally and not necessarily through the framework of HRPs.

Given these limitations, this means that national governments, de facto authorities, the Red Cross and Red Crescent movements, local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), crisis-affected communities, and any other additional actors will not be included in the analysis. The decision to not include these admittedly essential pieces of the puzzle is in no way meant to diminish their importance— they too heavily influence response. Particularly, national governments should be the first line of response. However, in countries where such events occur, the national government or de facto authorities tend not to have the resources or capacity to implement a

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5 For example, Bessiou et. al, “System dynamics for humanitarian operations.”
response on the scale required to prevent or stall famines. An effective response in these cases therefore begins with funding from donors and the planning, logistical, and implementing capacities of the UN agencies and INGOs. Thus, this thesis will only examine the responders of last resort- the “formal” humanitarian system.

Regarding the examination of different contexts, this research will only look at situations in which violent conflict is present. Modern famines should be understood as complex, slow-onset emergencies, exacerbated by armed conflict and are rarely caused solely by weather shocks, such as drought. This is not a new revelation; one only needs to look at the four countries (Yemen, Somalia, South Sudan, and Nigeria) which raised famine alarms in 2017 to recognize that the commonality of these contexts is protracted violence.

Finally, the following research will not seek to examine the effectiveness of an intervention after a response has been launched. Such issues are no doubt important, but would require a more in-depth analysis on its own that is beyond the scope of this paper.

1.6 Thesis outline
The thesis will consist of four major chapters:

Chapter 2 will provide background information on terms and the field of study relating to famine and EWSs.

Chapter 3 will offer a background on system typologies and introduce the theoretical framework. The theoretical framework employed will be an adapted version of Taylor Seybolt’s systems theory, which will serve as an organizational tool and provide an understanding of elements of a system. Three main elements will be focused on: exogenous/environmental, structural, and procedural. Seybolt’s suggested improvements to the humanitarian system at large will also be introduced.

Chapter 4 will apply Seybolt’s framework to problems in humanitarian responses identified in the literature review. According to the framework, these will be addressed according to three variables: exogenous factors/environment, structure, and processes.

Chapter 5 contains a discussion of the results found and the applicability of these findings to Seybolt’s hypothesis on potential improvements for the humanitarian system and if these would
help responses to EWI specifically. The feasibility of Seybolt’s hypothesis will be discussed, as well as additional considerations not explored by the framework and further areas of research.

Chapter 6 will conclude the thesis by offering a summary of the constraints to humanitarian responses to EWI identified in the literature. A final overview of potential improvements, both those suggested by Seybolt and those missing from his work, and the feasibility of such changes given the constraints identified, will be reviewed.
2. Famine and early warning systems

2.1 What is famine?
To understand issues in humanitarian responses to EWs for famine, it is important to understand what famine is. It should be stressed that famine is not an event; it is a process. Famine does not occur suddenly, but rather is the amalgamation of a variety of factors compounded over time that lead to a crisis situation and is not caused simply by a lack of available food. Famines should therefore be understood as complex, slow-onset disasters.⁶

Understandings of famine and its causes have immensely improved over time, moving from the antiquated, overly simplistic, and debunked Malthusian theory that famine is the product of overpopulation, whereby there is simply not enough food available to meet the needs of such a large population. With this understanding, famine is therefore a corrective process to bring a population back to equilibrium.⁷ The next great famine theorization came from Amartya Sen in the 1980s, which popularized the idea of the exchange entitlement approach to understanding famine.⁸ According to Sen, famine is not caused by a lack of food availability, but by the inability of people to translate their endowments (assets and resources e.g. land, wages, labor) into an adequate “entitlement set- the full range of goods and services that he or she can acquire by converting his or her “endowments””.⁹ With regards to famine, this means not being able to convert endowments into sufficient food, either quantity or nutrition-wise. While there is by no means a unanimous consensus behind Sen’s theory, it has been influential in the field and offered a more complex and nuanced understanding of famine. Of note is that, despite significant research on the topic, there is no standard, universally agreed-upon definition of famine. The UN defines a famine as a situation in which “at least 20 per cent of households in an area face extreme food shortages with a limited ability to cope; acute malnutrition rates exceed 30 per cent; and the death rate exceeds two persons per day per 10,000

⁶ Bailey, Managing Famine Risk, ix.


persons”.\textsuperscript{10} While this technical threshold is useful for data purposes, it does not provide an explanation and a deeper understanding of what famine is, and seems to reduce it to a hunger and malnutrition issue.

Famine needs to be distinguished from chronic malnutrition and hunger, as it is a special, particular condition that needs to meet certain thresholds to be declared.\textsuperscript{11} While the presence of famine is indicative of starvation, the reverse is not always true. Rather, “famine is a social, economic, and political phenomenon as well as a nutritional one”.\textsuperscript{12} To declare famine and monitor it, a large variety of variables need to be quantified and measured. It follows that variables relating to food are not the only ones that should be monitored in such situations.

Two models of famine are of note. The most common understanding is the “starvation model”, which posits that populations starve in times of famine due to a shortage of food. However, a second model must also be taken into account. The “health crisis model” of famine posits that the majority of deaths during periods of famine are due to disease. Famines should therefore be treated not exclusively as food crises, but also as health and water and sanitation crises.\textsuperscript{13}

However, even this dichotomy may be too narrow a description as many other factors feed famine conditions. For example, while a famine alarm was being raised in Yemen in 2017, a massive cholera outbreak was raging due to a collapse in the water and sanitation sector.\textsuperscript{14} The collapse in the water and sanitation systems was a result of a lack of public services due to unpaid wages of government employees spurred by a severe economic crises. Unpaid wages, coupled with crippling inflation, destroyed the purchasing power of families to buy food and other basic necessities such as clean water, providing fertile ground for famine to emerge. Malnutrition and

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{11} De Waal, \textit{Mass Starvation}, 17.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Stephen Devereux, Lewis Sida, and Tina Nelis, \textit{Famine: Lessons Learned} (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2017), 15, https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/123456789/13173/Lessons%20Learned%20FINAL%20online.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 18.
\end{enumerate}
the inability to purchase clean water made the population more susceptible to cholera. All of these drivers, coupled with armed conflict and the blockages of ports and borders, are a case against the traditional “food first bias in famine response”\textsuperscript{15}.

To view famine as a food issue, or even a health issue, is far too narrow and such thinking needs to be altered. Famine is multi-faceted in nature, and to truly eradicate it root causes such as conflict and economic factors need to be addressed. Humanitarian responses therefore aim to treat the symptoms (e.g. malnutrition, disease outbreaks) rather than the causes of famine.

Equipped with the knowledge of causes and prevention we enjoy today, “the very existence of famine reveals some error of either commission or omission that enable[s] famine to occur”\textsuperscript{16}. Since the root causes of famine tend to be political or economic in nature, eradicating famine is not within the purview of the humanitarian system- the best it can do is treat symptoms as soon as possible and before they reach catastrophic levels. Acknowledging this fact, it follows that the sooner the humanitarian system has information on the devolution of a situation, the sooner it can act. Famine EWSs are meant to provide such information. If humanitarian responses are persistently delayed, the functioning of EWSs should be explored to discern if informational challenges play a role in hindering action.

2.2 What are early warning systems?
Modern famine EWSs began emerging following the African famines of the 1980s\textsuperscript{17}, and today there are a multitude of them in operation. These famine EWSs differ in their monitoring indicators, thresholds, and areas of monitoring, ranging from international, regional, country-specific, or even district-specific. For example, international EWSs include the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWSNET), the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations’ (FAO) Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit (FSNAU), and the Integrated Food

\textsuperscript{15} Devereux et al, \textit{Famine: Lessons Learned}, 4.


Security Phase Classification (IPC). The IPC has become the “gold-standard” in EWSs for famine, and was used to declare famine for the first time in Somalia in 2011.\(^{18}\)

The purpose of the IPC is four-fold: to build technical consensus; to classify severity and causes; to provide communication for action; and to ensure quality.\(^ {19}\) It is not run by any one organization, and is funded by multiple donors and comprised of a committee of experts and steering committee from multiple IGOs and INGOs (e.g. CARE International, FEWSNET, World Food Programme (WFP), among others).\(^ {20}\)

The IPC was created to meet the needs of decision-makers by producing easily-digestible information, and to make the best of available data in difficult contexts. Findings are presented for both the current situation, and provide a projection of the future situation. Forecasts include projections for both the likely future situation with humanitarian assistance, and without. The variables used by the IPC can be found in Appendix 1.

As the IPC is the most commonly accepted classification tool, in the following sections the IPC scale will be used when referring to examples and for recommendations. IPC comes in five phases, ranging from least severe to most severe: phase 1 (none/minimal); phase 2 (stressed); phase 3 (crisis); phase 4 (emergency); and phase 5 (humanitarian catastrophe/famine).\(^ {21}\) The IPC conducts classifications that are area-based (“overall population in a given area”) and household group-based (“relatively homogenous groups of households with regard to food security outcomes”).\(^ {22}\) The criteria for each can be found in Appendices 2 and 3 respectively. The household classifications provide information at a more granular level and inform the area classifications.

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\(^ {21}\) Ibid., 27.

\(^ {22}\) Ibid.
It should be noted that saying a country is at risk of famine does not indicate the whole country is in phase 4 or phase 5. Famine warnings are normally given for pockets of phase 4/phase 5 within a country, as a country is not uniformly in the same phase in all areas and districts.

While the IPC is an immensely useful tool, many organizations and governments continue to use their own assessments based on different criteria and are not always in agreement with IPC classifications. Methodologies across organizations are not always comparable or compatible. In practice, the IPC therefore does not create the universal consensus it was meant to achieve. Other warning systems (like FEWSNET) may be “IPC compatible”, meaning the analysis “uses the same phase names, reference tables, and evidence-based criteria”,23 which allows for easier comparison. But IPC compatible approaches still result in competing information that can delay response due to a lack of consensus. Conflicting information from a variety of sources understandably creates a degree of confusion.

Furthermore, the IPC’s sophisticated system and its aim of consensus-building does not mean the IPC itself is not without its issues. Recommendations for classifications are first given by a Technical Working Group (TWG), and then reviewed by a Famine Review Committee (FRC). The two groups are not always in agreement on classifications. For example, in the FRC’s November 2018 review of the TWG’s classifications for Yemen, there was disagreement on the “projected period analysis”, or the expected future situation.24 The fact that there are disagreements, even within the same classification tool, highlights an issue with EWI. If IPC committees cannot agree among themselves on classifications, decision-makers would be understandably hesitant to base their actions on such inconclusive products.

In addition to technical issues, the link between humanitarian response and EWSs is inherently flawed (and somewhat ironic) in that EWSs are meant to save lives, but indicators and

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markers need to be calamitous before they are taken seriously and action is taken.\textsuperscript{25} Deaths do not only occur in phase 5 of the IPC scale; unacceptable numbers of people die before this catastrophic point is reached. Data for EW therefore has a “deaths before data” modus operandi; whereby people need to die before a more severe phase is reached and is given notice by the humanitarian community.\textsuperscript{26} Action needs to be taken at an earlier stage in the spiral in order to be effective.

Despite its issues, it should be acknowledged that modern EWSs for famine and food security are highly sophisticated. Of all the pieces of the early response puzzle, EWSs for famine have made the largest strides in recent decades and are not yet finished evolving. New initiatives, such as the Famine Action Mechanism (FAM) spearheaded by, among others, the World Bank, the UN and technology corporations such as Amazon and Microsoft\textsuperscript{27} offer promising, innovative potential for the improvement of EWI. While of course useful, such initiatives will not help famine prevention. EWSs are not without their problems, but the main issue does not lie with early warning. No matter how perfect this information becomes, it will be futile as long as the early response part of the equation does not have the ability to translate the information into early action to save lives.

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3. Theoretical framework: Seybolt’s humanitarian systems theory

3.1 Understanding systems theory

If EWI is not the impediment preventing early action, one must look elsewhere in the humanitarian system to discern impediments to responsiveness. This will be done through the use of systems theory, which allows for examination of the humanitarian system as a dynamic organism, made up of a variety of units that work together and are highly interconnected.

Systems theory, originating in biology, has become widely used in the discipline of organizational studies. Systems theory was chosen as a framework for this research due to its ability to analyze the interaction of components within a larger structure and how different factors have an impact on a system’s ability to produce outputs. There has been debate on whether the systemic approach is really the best way to analyze the humanitarian sector. For instance, some literature uses a political-economic approach by labelling the humanitarian sector as a market or industry, arguing that humanitarian aid is akin to a profit-making business in its functioning.28 Using the concepts of supply and demand, the argument is that humanitarian organizations are essentially self-interested and primarily concerned with their own survival in an increasingly competitive environment, particularly with regards to funding.29 Such assumptions are used to guide the analysis of the aid sector’s functioning. However, such a theoretical framework is overly pessimistic and unfair. While it is true that competition is present in the humanitarian sector and that it exhibits market-like qualities, the mandates in the system make it different in character and self-interest is not the only (or even arguably the greatest) consideration. This is evidenced by the growing use of lessons learned exercises and attempts to improve collaboration and progress in the system. If humanitarian organizations were only focused on their best interests, it is doubtful such efforts would be made towards improvements, especially when it can sometimes be objectively unbeneﬁcial for individual organizations.

Systems theory, like the industry approach, examines the behavior and interaction of different actors within the humanitarian sector, but places emphasis on their interconnected nature and mutual dependence and does not make the assumption that actors are above all self-interested.


While there are some objections to labelling the humanitarian sector as a “system”, much literature uses this approach and there is a generally accepted consensus in this matter. For example, ALNAP’s (Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance) 2018 *State of the Humanitarian System* (SOHS) report concurs with this view, labelling the humanitarian sector as a complex, open system.\(^{30}\)

While there is no agreed-upon method and structure in which to analyze the humanitarian system, certain theories offer interesting frameworks for analysis. Systems theory has been applied to the humanitarian sector in several instances.

For one, Fawcett and Fawcett use systems design theory to examine issues in supply chains in the context of humanitarian aid and disaster relief. They argue that systems thinking is essential for improving logistics and supply chains. Decision-makers tend to focus on “local issues and outcomes” and less on the big picture. Systems thinking would allow decision-makers to contemplate not only these local problems, but also “longer-term, system-wide ramifications of decisions and provide a process for aligning the efforts” of various actors.\(^{31}\) Fawcett and Fawcett highlight that issues in supply chains and logistics are not with individual organizations, but the absence of a system-wide “collaborative infrastructure”, thereby highlighting the importance of systemic thinking.\(^{32}\)

The theory used for the purposes of this dissertation is Taylor Seybolt’s theory of the humanitarian sector as a complex, open, adaptive system. Seybolt was chosen due to his application of systems theory to the humanitarian system at large, rather than its more common application in industrial relations or in humanitarian logistics/supply chains. Systems theory as applied to the humanitarian system at large is a useful starting point for analyzing systemic issues in humanitarian responses. This thesis aims to take a unique direction in applying Seybolt’s general theory to humanitarian responses to famine EWI specifically.

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32 Ibid., 687
Seybolt defines a system as “a set of units that interact to produce a range of outcomes”. In this context, the humanitarian system is

…a complex, open system, consisting of…units that are loosely coupled, socially connected, and highly dependent on external resources. The system is “open” because the environment in which the units operate is determined by exogenous factors…as well as by endogenously generated stimuli... The goal-directed behavior of the organizational units within the system is strongly influenced by the environment, and is characterized by division of labor that depends on continuous communication.

While the humanitarian system is vast and composed of a high volume of actors, the “system” for the purposes of this research will be Western donors, UN agencies, and INGOs. The idea of using a systems approach is appropriate in the context of early response, as failure is not the fault of one organizational unit, but rather a system-wide failure that can only be fixed by comprehensive change.

3.2 Types of systems (hierarchies, markets, networks)

Not all systems function in the same manner- systems can take a variety of forms. Open systems can be categorized according to three different typologies: a hierarchy, a market, or a network.

Hierarchies

Hierarchies, are highly centralized and exhibit top-down structures. Decision-making processes in hierarchies are concentrated at the top. Hierarchies are conflict-avoidant and try to ensure harmony among units by making them differentiated enough so that there is minimal “domain overlap”. Such a structure is conducive to coordination in times of stability, but the rigidity of the design and top-down structure means decreased responsiveness to dynamic environments.

Markets

Unlike hierarchies, markets are decentralized, giving more decision-making power to units and follow a more horizontal approach to communication. Markets encourage conflict and competition

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34 Seybolt, “Harmonizing the Humanitarian Aid Network,” 1029.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.
among units in order to increase efficiencies, utilizing a “survival of the fittest” mentality. Due to their decentralized nature, the structure of markets is more conducive to responsiveness in unstable, dynamic environments.\(^{37}\)

*Networks*

Networks sit somewhere between hierarchies and markets, borrowing characteristics from each. Like markets, horizontal communication is used and decision-making is decentralized among units. However, like hierarchies, they seek to eliminate conflicts among units by minimizing domain overlap. In networks, this is achieved “by working collaboratively to create, plan, implement and evaluate…activities”.\(^{38}\) By working collaboratively, the goal is to optimize the quality of the output. Collaboration is key in network structures, allowing units to “jointly develop a shared understanding of the tasks to be completed, the means to achieve them, and (sometimes) an overall strategic vision”.\(^{39}\) Systemic networks are those which “produce a common output by means of operational processes of coordination and task integration, through differential structural characteristics and by developing specialized participation via function and role”.\(^{40}\) Systemic networks also rely on informational feedback in order to regulate themselves and improve. This is ideal in highly uncertain environments, where it is difficult to have strict task allocation upfront due to the high diversity and uncertainty of needs. The system needs room to adjust itself based on past experiences and lessons learned in order to meet the demands of the uncertain operational environment.\(^{41}\)

Seybolt’s description of a systemic network is akin to Sacchetti and Sugden’s “network of mutual dependence”, wherein “power is distributed amongst participants on the basis of the pattern


\(^{38}\) Ibid.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 1030.


\(^{41}\) Ibid., 93.
of interdependencies amongst actors’ resources and activities”. The humanitarian system does not have a centralized, all-encompassing decision-making authoritative power, and therefore an analytical model that acknowledges this fact is important. While power among units of the system may not be consistently equal, it is diffuse.

**Figure 2: System typologies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Governance</th>
<th>Structure and processes</th>
<th>Competition</th>
<th>Differentiation</th>
<th>Responsiveness to instability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hierarchy</strong></td>
<td>Centralized; top-down</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Market</strong></td>
<td>Decentralized; horizontal</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Network</strong></td>
<td>Decentralized; horizontal</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In red is how Seybolt believes aspects of the humanitarian system currently operate (with some exceptions; some areas are moving towards a network approach). In green is where the humanitarian system should be to reduce performance gaps.

According to Seybolt, the humanitarian system exhibits some signs of moving to a network approach, but also uses some of the worst elements of hierarchies and markets. For example, the highly top-down approach of giant bureaucracies such as the UN and the market-like high competition for funds among INGOs and UN agencies.

Not all the literature, however, is in agreement that a network is feasible, or even desirable. Weiss, for instance, advocates for a more differentiated system with a system-wide top-down approach of power, essentially advocating that the system is not hierarchical enough. But this would not likely increase responsiveness to EWI. Top-down approaches to decision-making would have the effect of being removed from the situation on the ground, and also make decision-making more likely to be susceptible to political considerations.

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3.3 Elements of the system
A system is the product of four variables: exogenous factors/ environment, structure, processes, and outputs.45

3.3a Exogenous influences and environment
Exogenous factors are those outside a system which affect the environment in which a system operates.46 Systems do not operate in isolation; external interests and decisions impact a system’s environment. In the humanitarian system, and early response in particular, the main exogenous factor shaping the environment are political interests.

The environment of a system “imposes task requirements and dependency restrictions on organizations within the system”.47 Task requirements are actions which organizations in the system must undertake to serve their clients. In conflict contexts, task requirements are difficult due to security and access constraints, and the high volume of needs.

Dependency restrictions are determined “by organizations’ access to resources, regulatory constraints, and political influences”.48 Most humanitarian organizations are highly dependent on a few donors for resources, and therefore subject to regulatory constraints and political influences. Vertical resource dependency, as is exhibited in the humanitarian system, facilitates a necessarily increased acceptance of stringent restrictions.49

3.3b Structure
A system’s structure is based on five variables: size, complexity, differentiation, stability, and connectivity.50 The two variables which will be focused on in examining humanitarian responses

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45 Note: In Seybolt’s work, exogenous factors and environment are treated separately.


47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid., 1032.

50 Alter and Hage, Organizations Working Together, 77.
to EWI are stability and connectivity. However, a brief overview of size, complexity, and differentiation is also needed, as they impact the functioning of the system:

Size refers to the number of organizations in the system. The humanitarian system, consisting of a great amount of actors, is very large in size.

Complexity examines the number of different services and/or products delivered by organizations in the system. The humanitarian system is highly complex, offering a wide range of services and products to an ever-changing client base. This is referred to as “complex task requirements”, and necessitates “a complex structure to produce effective outputs”.

Differentiation refers to the overlap in functionality/specialization among organizations within a system. The humanitarian system is somewhat differentiated. While most UN agencies are sectorally differentiated to some degree, over time there has been an increasing isomorphic tendency among INGOs. This is a double edged sword. While high differentiation is good in terms of specialization and expertise, it is more difficult in an unstable environment where needs are constantly evolving and therefore a quick multi-sectoral response is needed.

Stability is “the frequency of turnover of participating organizations, geographic locations, and the client populations”. High instability translates into low familiarity, and therefore lower levels of trust. The humanitarian system is highly unstable, with the exception that a few INGOs and UN agencies tend to be involved in most responses globally, and therefore some level of familiarity/stability is present.

Connectivity is defined as the “number of communication linkages within the system”. According to Seybolt, connectivity is needed (but not adequate) for better coordination. He posits

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51 Seybolt, “Harmonizing the Humanitarian Aid Network,” 1033.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
that in the humanitarian system, such linkages are stronger at field-level, and weaker at administrative headquarter (HQ) level. Therefore, it can be said the humanitarian system exhibits “moderate” connectivity.\(^5\) The size of a system impacts its connectivity- the larger the system, the more costly bilateral connections between each unit of the system is. It follows that larger systems “must be willing to concede some connectivity and rely disproportionately on a few central organizations for direction and information exchange”.\(^5\)

3.3c Processes

Processes refer to how a system functions. In open systems, processes are particularly important to examine because they are influenced by exogenous factors and the environment, and therefore processes must adapt to these variables.\(^5\)

Processes within the humanitarian system should be examined at both the HQ level and field level, as well as between the two. It is important to have this multi-level approach since “communication, decision making, and action within and between the two levels weigh heavily in determining the quality of a system’s outputs”.\(^6\) In general, horizontal communication is the approach amongst actors at both levels, and vertical communication between the two levels.

There are three “process models” for units to provide outputs: sequential, reciprocal, and collaborative.\(^6\) Sequential processes are akin to manufacturing assembly. Reciprocal processes see organizations working at the same time, but there is no joint planning involved. Collaborative processes see units working together simultaneously at the implementation phase and, importantly, at the planning stage, ensuring a coherent strategic plan rather than the fragmented project-centric approach of reciprocal processes. Seybolt argues that the humanitarian system utilizes reciprocal processes, whereby organizations are serving different needs of the same populations but rarely plan their actions together. As will be discussed later in this paper, this is problematic when

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\(^6\) Ibid., 1034.

\(^5\) Fawcett and Fawcett, “Benchmarking the state of humanitarian aid,” 663.

\(^6\) Seybolt, “Harmonizing the Humanitarian Aid Network,” 1035.

\(^6\) Ibid.
planning responses to famine. To Seybolt, this reciprocal tendency is due to a multitude of reasons. For one, high resource dependency on a few sources, coupled with low differentiation, means INGOs have a “double domain overlap (inputs and outputs)”\textsuperscript{62} which encourages competition rather than cooperation. This competition could lead to hesitancy to share information. This is exacerbated when actors are constantly changing and connectivity is low, thereby creating an unstable system.

3.3d Outputs
Output refers to “intended and unintended events that are consequences of activities within a system. All systems have a performance gap when it comes to output”.\textsuperscript{63} The performance gap in the responses to EWI is glaringly obvious, in that there tends not to be a reaction until it is too late and a crisis point has been reached. The focus of this paper will be to identify the causes of this output gap, and explore changes that could help reduce it.

Seybolt uses the following figure to encapsulate where the humanitarian system is today.

\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{humanitarian_system.png}
\end{center}

\textbf{Figure 3: The Humanitarian System}
Source: Seybolt, “Harmonizing the Humanitarian Aid Network,” 1030.

\textsuperscript{62} Seybolt, “Harmonizing the Humanitarian Aid Network,” 1036.

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 1037.
3.4 Can the performance gap be minimized? Moving towards a systemic network
In an ideal world, the humanitarian system would move towards a systemic network structure, where “clusters or organizations that make decisions jointly and integrate their efforts to produce a product or service—adjust more rapidly…develop new products and services in a shorter time period, and provide more creative solutions”. 64

Seybolt asserts that performance gaps will continue to be large in situations where several conditions are met:

Firstly, performance gaps will be persistently large where “environmental dependency is high and task requirements are complex, voluminous, and uncertain”. 65 This is certainly the case where famine or near famine-like conditions are present. Famines tend to occur in contexts of protracted violence and complex operational environments, with large roadblocks such as access and ever-changing and ever-emerging needs. However, and as Seybolt concedes, this impediment is beyond the control of the humanitarian system.

Second, performance gaps will be large where “central elements of the system’s structure are bureaucratic, as is the case in UN agencies”. 66 Again, this is true with regards to responses to famine not only among UN agencies, but donors who are also highly bureaucratic in their work, making the first line of decision-making slow. While a shift away from such bureaucracies is theoretically possible, Seybolt casts doubt on whether it is realistic for organizations as large as the UN to shift away from such structures. The same is true of donors, who are linked to political institutions and national governments, making them accountable to tax payers and therefore in need of the bureaucracies that this entails.

Finally, Seybolt points to reciprocal processes as keeping the performance gap in place, and argues that collaborative processes would aid in shrinking the gap. This impediment is seen as the most feasible to overcome, as the process model used is in the purview of the organizations that comprise the system. Seybolt goes on to hypothesize that changes in processes could affect

64 Alter and Hage, Organizations Working Together, 2.
65 Seybolt, “Harmonizing the Humanitarian Aid Network,” 1037.
66 Ibid.
structural changes in the system. Collaborative processes are a hallmark of networks, and Seybolt believes that shifting to a systemic network would reduce performance gaps.

In order to stimulate a change in processes, we must first look at motivation. Why, with all the competition and domain overlap endemic in the system, would the units choose to move to a collaborative process rather than a reciprocal one? Seybolt believes this would be spurred by “the social character of the system” and the acknowledgement that the task requirements of the humanitarian system are too large and complex to address alone. Therefore, they should “learn to specialize, support each other, and increase their information sharing with the goal of reducing their system’s performance gap”.

Seybolt hypothesizes that, if the system is moving into a network, then several changes should be observed. For one, the units in the system should be more differentiated. This would mean that, similar to UN agencies, INGOs should have expertise in specific sectors, thereby decreasing the domain overlap and increasing interdependence, as they would rely more on one another to deliver on complex task requirements rather than trying to offer everything on their own (e.g. INGOs who are involved in multiple sectors at once).

Second, more connectivity in the structure of a system would be indicative of a shift to a network approach. In practice, this would mean increased information-sharing and more communication linkages among constituent units.

Third, process models at both the administrative and operational level should be more collaborative than reciprocal, meaning more joint planning, increased responsiveness to changing conditions, and more information-sharing.

Fourth, the decision-making power should not be as hierarchical, and should therefore shift from the administrative level to the operational level.

68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
Yet there are many obstacles to overcome before the humanitarian system can get to this point. The most poignant of these for donors is the politicization of funding decisions. For agencies and INGOs it is the high vertical resource dependency on very few donors for said funds, which Seybolt believes makes collaboration impossible. Further, the nature of humanitarian work means that it will always operate in an environment where task requirements are immense and uncertain, which will translate into the structure being “unstable, highly complex, and large, with a low level of differentiation”. Moreover, there is the issue of trust, which is difficult to accomplish in such an unstable and highly competitive environment. Lack of trust inhibits information-sharing and collaboration.

There are undoubtedly many improvements that could be implemented in the humanitarian system to increase responsiveness to EWI. But before determining whether such changes are feasible, it is important to examine which issues exist in the system today and how these impact its functioning.

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71 Seybolt, “Harmonizing the Humanitarian Aid Network,” 1046.

72 Ibid.
4. Literature review: Issues in early warning and early response

This chapter seeks to sort and analyze issues in the humanitarian system that impede response to EWI. These were drawn from the literature reviewed, and sorted according to Seybolt’s elements of a system: exogenous influences and environment, structure, and processes.

4.1 Exogenous influences and environment

As stated in Seybolt’s theory, exogenous factors are those outside a system which affect the environment in which a system operates. Meanwhile, the environment of a system “imposes task requirements and dependency restrictions on organizations within the system”.73

4.1a Politicization of aid

According to much of the literature, the largest roadblock and most important exogenous influence shaping the environment of potential early action is politics. Political considerations are taken into account when funding decisions are made and, for a timely response, political will is needed.74 De Waal goes so far as to say that the real clients of the humanitarian system are not beneficiaries, but donors. Aid is not allocated according to need, but is rather “driven by the political demands of its donors”.75 The disparity in response from one context to another regarding famine can be understood by the presence of “priority regimes”, where the prevention of famine is, in some instances, of lesser importance than political agendas and considerations.76

According to Bailey, there are several political considerations taken into account when donor funding decisions are made. Donors are more prone to support countries they are tied to colonially, linguistically, or culturally; that are closer geographically; that are oil exporters; and that are “less politically aligned- which suggests that emergency relief is used as a diplomatic tool

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73 Seybolt, “Harmonizing the Humanitarian Aid Network,” 1031.


to help build geopolitical bridges”.\textsuperscript{77} Furthermore, the relationship shared between a donor government and a recipient government experiencing the crisis can be a determining factor.\textsuperscript{78}

In addition to these considerations, donors will use strategic thinking in their funding decisions. Strategic considerations can inform not only if donors respond, but also when and with how much funding. This means that governments will “likely consider the consequences of a particular crisis for their own strategic priorities when deciding how to react”.\textsuperscript{79} Humanitarian workers at both headquarters and field levels were found to be in agreement that funding tended to be allocated to crises that were more strategically significant to donors or had more media attention.\textsuperscript{80} Some respondents to the SOHS 2018 report felt that an “alternative system was being established, based around funding streams devoted to securitization and the prevention of migration, separate from and possibly competing with the existing system”.\textsuperscript{81}

There are a variety of choices facing decision-makers at donor level regarding famine response. The consequences of these choices will vary depending on the resources, power, and incentives of the decision-maker:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interests/Incentives</th>
<th>Oppose/avoid</th>
<th>Neutral/inattentive</th>
<th>Benefit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Power/resources</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Effective famine protection</td>
<td>Indifference or inaction in the face of famine</td>
<td>Famine as a weapon of war and social exclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Failure to prevent famine</td>
<td>Indifference or inaction in the face of famine</td>
<td>Famine exacerbated to serve political purposes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textbf{Figure 4:} Famine outcomes according to power and interests
Source: Rubin, \textit{Contemporary Famine Analysis}, 88


\textsuperscript{78} Buchanan-Smith and Davies, \textit{Famine Early Warning}, 2.

\textsuperscript{79} Chatham House, \textit{Translating Early Warning}, 17.

\textsuperscript{80} ALNAP, \textit{The State of the Humanitarian System}, 114.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 223.
Donor political considerations can generally be separated into two categories: geopolitical risk and domestic political considerations.\textsuperscript{82} Donors’ geopolitical risk considerations are driven by their foreign policy agendas, such as regime preferences.

For example, in the context of Somalia in 2010/2011, much of the famine risk was in South Central Somalia, then largely controlled by Al Shabaab, a designated terrorist organization by many Western governments. Counterterrorism goals played a factor in the reluctance of donors to provide humanitarian funding, despite the imminent threat of famine and the persistent humanitarian needs. Many donors had counterterrorism legislation in place at the time. The fear of donors of aid diversion, whereby food aid could be used to support belligerents, made them reluctant or unwilling to provide funding.\textsuperscript{83}

While aid diversion is of course undesirable and certain checks and balances must be in place to mitigate this risk, it is clear that Western donors did not just have a moral problem with unintentionally providing material support to organizations they had labelled as terrorists. Rather, after famine was declared, the “political calculus shifted”, thereby increasing the costs of inaction for decision-makers, as the public was calling for help.\textsuperscript{84} Here, donors had to consider their domestic political risks. This shift was caused by the higher visibility of the crisis in the media, and also the use of the word “famine”, which has powerful and emotive connotations. A large-scale response was suddenly possible after a declaration of famine\textsuperscript{85} and donor funding came flooding in.

Buchanan-Smith and Davies call these “escape hatches”, whereby donor governments justify their inaction on something (or someone) seemingly out of their control (e.g. the national government has not declared an emergency; fact-finding reports must be done before action; respecting sovereignty).\textsuperscript{86} While respecting sovereignty is a wholly valid point, these escape

\textsuperscript{82} Bailey, \textit{Managing Famine Risk}, 47.

\textsuperscript{83} Maxwell and Majid, \textit{Famine in Somalia}, 2.

\textsuperscript{84} Bailey, \textit{Famine Early Warning and Early Action}, 10.


\textsuperscript{86} Buchanan-Smith and Davies, \textit{Famine Early Warning}, 46.
hatches tend to magically disappear with a declaration of famine or with high media attention. The escape hatch effect is clear in the figure below, where funding levels for Somalia in 2011 boomed immediately after a declaration of famine, despite previous reservations of donors.

![Figure 5: Somalia appeals and early warnings](source: Bailey, *Famine Early Warning and Early Action*, 1.)

In today’s world, famine should be seen as a political choice. It can be used as a weapon of war, orchestrated by “intentional policies to marginalize and control a portion of the population”. For example, in the case of Somalia, there has even been some (unproven) speculation that aid was purposely withheld to weaken Al Shabaab’s position and hold on South Central Somalia. In conflict situations, it can be employed as a conscious tactic. The purpose of famine can have “a political, economic, or military rationale” behind it in many cases. Such conflict-induced and intentional famines are known as “siege famines”, whereby famine conditions are intentionally generated by parties to a conflict, “using starvation as a weapon”.

Regarding domestic political considerations on funding decisions for donors, the media through the so-called “CNN-effect” and humanitarian agencies through advocacy work play a

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90 Ibid., 9.
significant role. By educating or alerting the public to an imminent famine, it increases the public demand for action, which pressures donor governments to provide funding. Without this visibility, there are no or low costs of inaction to those in charge, as there will be no outrage or pressure if the population to which they are accountable are unaware of a crisis. For this reason, Dreze and Sen posit that democracies with an open and free press provide some of the best defence against famine. However, the media, while able to stimulate a reaction from governments, is not necessarily the key to early response because such crises are only deemed newsworthy when they are already in severe stages (IPC phase 4 or even 5). By this time, the coverage of the crisis that could prompt a response is “usually late, selective, and often sensationalist”.

4.1b Vertical resource dependency
The humanitarian system has a very high vertical resource dependency for funds, which affects the environment by imposing dependency restrictions on humanitarian organizations. Simply put, if donors are not willing to fund a humanitarian response for whatever reason (for example, political considerations), there is little humanitarian organizations can do to respond.

Vertical resource dependency in the humanitarian system is exacerbated by the large bulk of funding coming from a handful of donors. For example, in 2017, 15 donors (including the United States, the European Union, Germany, and the United Kingdom) provided 86 percent of humanitarian funding, while 59 percent of all government contributions in 2017 came from 3 donors.

Extreme vertical resource dependency leaves humanitarian organizations vulnerable to tailoring their actions to crises where donors have a vested political interest and are willing to fund.

91 Chatham House, Translating Early Warning into Early Action, 16.
92 Bailey, Famine Early Warning and Early Action, 8.
94 Buchanan-Smith and Davies, Famine Early Warning, 43.
This can result in agency and organization proposals being geared towards what they think donors want and are more likely to fund, rather than needs.\textsuperscript{97} It also has the effect of establishing regulatory and political constraints, as predicted in Seybolt’s theory.

Such constraints impact famine response. In Somalia in 2011, the counterterrorism considerations discussed above placed regulatory and political restraints on humanitarian organizations. For one, the required funding to respond early enough was simply not there. Second, the fear of agencies was that they could, in theory, be legally culpable in cases of aid diversion (for example, under the US Material Support Statute)\textsuperscript{98}, which drove a hesitancy to operate in Al Shabaab-controlled areas and is cited as a reason for the late response in 2011.\textsuperscript{99} Humanitarian organizations had difficulties not only getting funding, but when it was granted it was tightly controlled and subject to strict measures to curtail aid diversion risks.\textsuperscript{100} This increased operating expenditures and led to slower response, thereby exacerbating the situation. Further, by imposing such restrictions on operational areas, donors were seen as politicizing aid and violating the principle of impartiality, as efforts to operate in the areas most in need were made significantly more difficult if not impossible,\textsuperscript{101} and there was an apparent obsession with “reducing leakage [which] inevitably increases under-coverage”.\textsuperscript{102} Vertical resource dependency therefore has the ability to place regulatory and political restrictions on humanitarian aid, and very much impacts responses to famine EWI.

4.1c Risk preferences

Another factor shaping the humanitarian environment are risk preferences. Donors are particularly risk averse. Low risk preferences are problematic because donors are hesitant to release funds, especially in famine cases where information is rarely certain. In general, low risk preferences

\textsuperscript{97} Bailey, \textit{Managing Famine Risk}, 39.

\textsuperscript{98} Bailey, \textit{Famine Early Warning and Early Action}, 10.


\textsuperscript{100} Bailey, \textit{Famine Early Warning and Early Action}, 10.

\textsuperscript{101} Maxwell and Majid, \textit{Famine in Somalia}, 46.

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 23.
have the effect of increasing task requirements on the system, as EWSs, UN agencies, and INGOs must go to greater lengths to prompt funding to launch a response to EWI.

EWSs are, by their very nature, probabilistic and uncertain\textsuperscript{103} due to the high number of constantly-changing variables they measure and the imperfect information they operate with. They require some level of judgement\textsuperscript{104} on the part of the experts compiling them, and there is often disagreement on classifications. But decision-makers at HQ level in both donor and humanitarian organizations prefer “hard, quantitative data from particular sources”\textsuperscript{105} but this is problematic because such conclusive information is rarely if ever available. For example, in 2011 Somalia, when FEWSNET and FSNAU updated donors, UN agencies and INGOs on their analysis, decision-makers appeared “uncomfortable with the uncertainty inherent in early warning analysis and the absence of definitive statements about future outcomes, particularly mortality levels”\textsuperscript{106}.

In situations of protracted violence, information is even more imperfect due to access constraints. The resulting incomplete information increases uncertainty about the situation on the ground,\textsuperscript{107} making donors even more reluctant to release funding. Coupled with a high volume of competing needs in multiple contexts that may be more politically relevant, it is easy for donors to have their attention and funds invested in another crisis and therefore willfully overlook early warnings.

Additionally, risk aversion is a product of incentives. Donors tend to favor delay rather than early action because it is hard to determine, if action is taken based on EWI, that a crisis has been prevented and hence rewards for this are minimal. On the other hand, funds could be seen as wasted if the crisis predicted by EWI does not actually occur. While employees of donor organizations (e.g. USAID) are not politicians themselves, they rely on politicians to agree to release funds for disbursements. Donors are therefore accountable to politicians, who are in turn

\textsuperscript{103} Bailey, \textit{Famine Early Warning and Early Action}, 5.

\textsuperscript{104} Buchanan-Smith, \textit{Role of Early Warning}, 9.

\textsuperscript{105} Chatham House, \textit{Translating Early Warning}, 5.

\textsuperscript{106} Hillbruner and Moloney, “When early warning is not enough,” 26.

\textsuperscript{107} Buchanan-Smith and Davies, \textit{Famine Early Warning}, 25.
accountable to the taxpayers who provide the funds, and do not want to be seen as wasting money as such an image could stunt their career. There are few incentives for early action, as action needs to be justified but inaction does not. Such a bureaucratic culture among donors therefore results in a “wait-and-see attitude”.

In humanitarian agencies and INGOs, risk aversion is incentivized due to a “compliance culture”, most prominently in the UN agencies. Compliance culture is exemplified by staff being rewarded and promoted if they “never rock the boat” and do not exhibit strong leadership qualities. Such a culture constrains early action, where decisive and bold decision-making is not rewarded and discourages staff from calling for action on EWI that is uncertain.

Risk averse attitudes may be further exacerbated by political considerations, such as the counter-terrorism legislation in 2011 in Somalia. Inaction, therefore, is a risk management strategy. This risk management strategy is, oddly, enabled by EWI to some degree. The paradox of EWSs is that, while they are to provide information for early action, the longer lead times they provide actually allow for more “prevarication, delay, and buck-passing” because there is no sense of pressure to act as there is when a crisis is more severe. Inaction as a risk management strategy on the part of donors does not, in fact, contain the risk of the crisis. The risk of the crisis is acknowledged “but as a risk to others, not the decision-maker”.

A potential solution raised to the issue of risk aversion is for humanitarian agencies to present donors with “no-regret options”, which could help stimulate action to famine EWI. Humanitarian agencies would appeal to donors’ risk preferences by creating response options in the context of early action that would be a worthy investment, irrespective of a crisis actually

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111 Ibid., ix.

112 Ibid., 39.

developing at a later date. Approaches like these are deemed “donor risk reduction”, whereby agencies and organizations factor donor risk preferences into their proposals. Such proposals should be accompanied by cost-benefit analyses for early response, and approach donors with a “menu of options” for action.\footnote{Ibid., 12.}

Another suggestion for lessening risk is the use of pooled funds, which would not only let donors pool their funds and resources, but also their risks. Agencies make the decisions regarding the spending of pooled funds, which would remove some of the pressure from donors to do so, and also take out a degree of politicization from the allocation process. It could also have the effect of lessening agencies’ and organizations’ catering to donor risk preference in their project design and reduce competition.\footnote{Bailey, \textit{Managing Famine Risk}, 69.} However, UN agencies tend to manage these pooled funds and complaints have been made by NGOs regarding their access to said funds. In addition, donors’ willingness to contribute to certain pooled funds does have a political aspect, and many donors still do not pay into pooled funds as it takes away a degree of their decision-making power.\footnote{Ibid.}

\section*{4.2 Structure}
\subsection*{4.2a Stability}

The humanitarian system by its very nature is highly unstable, constantly responding to a new crisis, different needs, and a difficult operational environment. While much of the instability comes from exogenous factors over which the system has no control, there are factors within the system that contribute to instability on a structural level. This instability in turn affects the system’s ability to respond to EWI for famine.

\footnote{Chatham House, \textit{Translating Early Warning}, 11.}
\footnote{Ibid., 12.}
\footnote{Bailey, \textit{Managing Famine Risk}, 69.}
First, there is the issue of low institutional memory due to high staff turnover\textsuperscript{118} and the lack of documentation of past experiences.\textsuperscript{119} High staff turnover indicates that more experienced practitioners who have been a part of famine response teams in the past are not able to share their lessons learned and make suggestions for best practices. Team composition is also constantly altered, creating a more challenging and unfamiliar operational and planning environment. Further, organizations tend to be hesitant to make public lessons learned from past failures or disclose evaluations of their past performances that may be less than positive. Therefore, there is suboptimal reflection on past failures that could potentially inform decisions in a similar future situation. Such practices lead to a “sense of starting afresh each time”,\textsuperscript{120} increasing the probability of a delayed response as informational resources and skills are not leveraged to the degree they should be in future responses.

Due to the low institutional memory and high turnover, there is an inadequate level of trust among actors. This manifests itself in various ways. For one, agencies tend to be unwilling to publically share reviews of their internal performance. In the case of Somalia, said reviews and audits were not often shared due to “fear that admitting mistakes would lead to blame and stigmatization”.\textsuperscript{121} Such fears encourage a culture of saving face and impedes the ability of organizations to learn from one another, and inhibits the informational feedback that has the potential to propel the system toward a systemic network structure.

Second, the myriad of EW actors and different methodologies, and therefore varying opinions regarding the situation on the ground, can lead to a mistrust in EWI provided. Lack of trust in any one EWS due to the plethora of information provided can lead to hesitancy to act, and therefore response delays.\textsuperscript{122}


\textsuperscript{119} Buchanan-Smith and Davies, \textit{Famine Early Warning}, 23.

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 24.

\textsuperscript{121} Maxwell and Majid, \textit{Famine in Somalia}, 181.

\textsuperscript{122} Chatham House, \textit{Translating Early Warning}, 8.
As was discussed earlier in the section on EWSs, there are a myriad of actors that provide such information and they do not necessarily agree on classifications. Different EWSs and even individual agencies and/or INGOs will disagree on the severity of a situation in a given context. Disagreements on such fundamental prerequisites to launch a response can lead to delay due to the high degree of uncertainty surrounding a situation, which is then linked to the issue of risk preferences. While the IPC was meant to address this issue, it continues to persist.

In contexts of protracted violence, information can be downplayed in the minds of decision-makers and responders due to a normalization of crisis- it may be questioned if there is in fact a crisis if decision-makers are accustomed to seeing “maps covered in red” and high malnutrition rates in a country or area. This was cited as contributing to the delayed response in Somalia in 2011, where there was a feeling that “phase 4 happens every year” and therefore the impact and remedial actions for such a serious classification were inhibited. Even among the humanitarian agencies and INGOs this is problematic. In Somalia in 2011, in Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) meetings, there was disagreement whether the crisis was actually getting worse or if Somalia was simply just going through another bad year. Further, even though field staff and locals conveyed the alarming erosion of the situation on the ground, they were “essentially ignored by agency decision-makers, who were unable to cross check them”.

Lack of consensus is reinforced by the lack of agreement on assessment standards, and every agency feeling the need to conduct their own assessments rather than trusting information already available. Despite being discussed as part of the Grand Bargain, the SOHS 2018 report

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123 Bailey, *Famine Early Warning and Early Action*, 12.


found that, while methodologies had improved, there was still a gap in convergence, with agencies using differing approaches to data collection that made comparisons difficult.¹²⁹

Finally, the want of agencies and EWSs to elicit funding from donors and the high competition among agencies and INGOs for limited funds leads to what donors feel can be an over-exaggeration of the situation or needs. Resultantly, there is a “deficit of trust” between donors and agencies, which affects funding levels. Donors believe that agencies may exaggerate the needs and “apply a discount accordingly”.¹³⁰ Agencies are aware that donors will apply a discount to appeals, and therefore are incentivized to inflate appeals, thereby supporting the dynamic. Donors tend to only respond to crisis points, and while such exaggeration may help to induce a response once, in the long run it will have detrimental effects on donors’ willingness to release adequate and timely funding and may inhibit the trust necessary among actors.¹³¹ The issue of overstating needs is not confined to agencies, but also an issue among EWSs, and in the long term can “undermine the credibility of EWSs”.¹³² Trust deficits induce hesitancy to act, and thereby impede timely responses to famine EWI.

4.2b Connectivity
Connectivity refers to the communication channels and linkages among actors in a system. In the context of response to EWI, connectivity among EW providers, organizations and donors, and between field and HQ teams, tends to be fragmented. Connectivity is particularly important in famine responses, where collective action by a large number of actors is required in order to be effective. The absence of proper and adequate connectivity within the system and the lack of consensus and information-sharing ultimately leads to a collective action problem.

An absence of information and communication are not per se lacking in the humanitarian system. It is the sheer volume of information humanitarian workers and decision-makers are bombarded with from multiple sources that is problematic to response. Actors in this situation


¹³¹ Buchanan-Smith and Davies, *Famine Early Warning*, 206.

¹³² Buchanan-Smith, *Role of Early Warning*, 10.
suffer from information overload, combined with being over-worked and over-stretched. This puts them into the mode of dealing “with what they are forced to”.\(^{133}\) It is easy for information to get lost in the shuffle and if an EW alert is not made a top priority by superiors, employees have little incentive to bring up the information and act upon it. This is linked to the concept of risk preferences shaping the environment - non-response to a situation that is not made a priority is low risk and it is unlikely to result in negative repercussions.

An element exacerbating the lack of connectivity, as one study found, was that “no one felt that it was their job to manage the communication, because each team felt its responsibility ended with its own work”.\(^{134}\) A rampant lack of meaningful communication at both an inter and intra-organizational level was acknowledged by practitioners as being a central issue, and that if communication linkages within the system were improved, technical issues could be resolved more expeditiously.\(^{135}\)

The humanitarian system has attempted to increase connectivity and information-sharing through the creation of the cluster system. An early response to famine would necessitate several clusters to work in unison to deliver a holistic response. However logical in theory, the implementation of the cluster system has had mixed success. Though clusters were meant to improve connectivity, they “have become silos justifying themselves rather than facilitating further strategic engagement”.\(^{136}\) This results in chaotic connectivity at best, where clusters are not meaningfully engaging with one another in order to create a concerted response.\(^{137}\) At a Chatham House workshop of practitioners, it was acknowledged that agencies have improved coordination within their clusters, but inter-cluster coordination remains fragmented and subpar,\(^{138}\) and

\(^{133}\) Buchanan-Smith and Davies, *Famine Early Warning*, 22.

\(^{134}\) Levine et al, *System failure?*, 18.

\(^{135}\) Ibid.


\(^{137}\) Ibid., 70.

therefore inhibits the connectivity of the system. Due to the complex and multi-faceted nature of famines, responses to EWI necessitate inter-cluster cooperation. The clusters-as-silos issue has implications for the processes of the system, which also stall response by encouraging reciprocal processes. This will be discussed in more detail below.

Connectivity between field and HQ teams presents an additional issue in response. As expected, field teams and local staff on the ground will tend to have the best, most up-to-date information and situational analysis. This includes a better understanding of how the situation will develop over time. Unfortunately, such valuable information is not properly assembled and synthesized by senior-level country staff or “passed up the chain to regional or global-level decision-makers”.139 This could be caused by country directors not being aware or simply not thinking that this is a part of their job. While in some organizations it is known that the onus is on country directors to raise the flag for early warning, in others it is not explicitly stated. This communication issue therefore leads to an accountability deficit. If it is not explicitly clear that one is responsible for raising a famine alarm or triggering a response, there are negative impacts on decision-making processes which contribute to delayed responses to EWI (discussed below).

4.3 Processes
In Seybolt’s theory, processes refer to the way in which a system functions. This section aims to focus on how the processes of the humanitarian system inhibit reactivity to EWI according to the literature reviewed.

4.3a Rigid funding processes
The funding process in the humanitarian system tends to be quite rigid, with funding calls such as the consolidated appeals process (CAP) and HRP being released at roughly the same time each year. With predictable deadlines, such appeals are tied to UN planning timelines instead of the timeline of a crisis.140 One evaluation report found that the yearly HRP hinders “flexibility to respond to additional needs reported by the communities during the year”.141 An issue was also raised that, by the time needs assessments are conducted and collated and used to inform appeals,

139 Chatham House, Translating Early Warning, 4.

140 Bailey, Famine Early Warning and Early Action, 14.

141 MDF Training and Consultancy, Real-time Evaluation, 41.
the information may already be outdated, and will therefore not adequately reflect real-time needs. Practitioners noted that, after the arduous process of compiling the CAP, humanitarian coordinators (HCs) were disinclined to adjust appeal figures according to the latest EWI. This lack of responsiveness can be detrimental to a reaction to EWI, if such information calls for action in a timeframe at odds with the funding calendar.

Further, multi-year projects in humanitarian action are still quite rare, with most funding going to projects that are around one year in length, thereby inhibiting organizations to invest in preparedness and resilience-building. Preparedness and contingency planning are keys to timely action regarding famine EWI. If organizations do not have the long-term funds to invest in such activities, responsiveness will suffer.

Even with the increased use of finance mechanisms such as pooled funds, humanitarian workers have regularly pointed to an absence of suitable funding mechanisms and inflexibility in funding processes as hindrances to action. For example, little allocated funding or mechanisms for preparedness activities, restrictive criteria for emergency assistance funding, lack of quick access or contingency funds, and lack of funding or mechanisms for nexus activities.

4.3b Lack of triggers
In order to take much of the guess-work out of when to launch a response, a recurring point made in the literature is that a lack of triggers for action causes delays. Majid and Maxwell write that triggers need to be developed and linked to early warning indicators and decision-making processes in order to expedite the process and remove some of the guess-work involved in triggering action. If triggers are to be used, two variables must be pre-determined: “the trigger point in terms of EWI and the action to be triggered”.

One suggestion was to use the IPC phases as triggers for certain responses. However, it was acknowledged that having such definite triggers would be challenging because, if standardized in such a way, it would preclude it from taking into account the context of a situation. Therefore, the triggers would need to be rooted in a context-specific situation analysis. But even this may not be enough. Lack of triggers is related to the problems of consensus and proper contingency planning. If proper contingency planning is not undertaken and triggers are not clearly identified, response is stalled because actors are unsure about how to proceed. Even if triggers are established, it is confusing if there is no consensus on the situation on the ground (e.g. phase 3, 4, or 5) and there will be disagreement on whether the trigger point has been reached. These structural and procedural issues conspire together to promote delayed response.

4.3c Lack of preparedness and contingency planning

In the literature, a common theme that practitioners found to be missing in the early response formula was adequate contingency planning and preparedness. A key defect found was that responses are delayed simply because they were never planned in the first place. Lack of contingency planning and preparedness has the effect of delaying response to EWI, as organizations scramble to decide how they will respond, and determine if they even have the capacity to do so in a timely manner.

Levine et al found that, like EWSs, an increasing amount of human and monetary capital was being injected into contingency planning processes, but such planning was detached from action. Also akin to early warning, no triggers were incorporated into contingency plans in relation to action, nor were any operational definitions given for when a situation was present. For example, in the Horn of Africa, “plans would specify that a particular project would be run ‘in alarm’…or ‘emergency’ phase, but gave no clear or objective criteria to…determine whether one was in such a phase”.

Further, the contingency plans that were created were found to be very generic in nature and geared towards “abstract ‘shocks’” and were not context-specific, rendering them effectively useless. The non-operationalization of the contingency plans was reinforced by an

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149 Ibid., 9.
absence of assigning accountability or responsibility to action plans. In the case of the 2011 Somalia response, delays in response analysis and contingency planning were cited as contributing to late responses, and additionally “lacked an effective process and leadership”.  

Preparedness is also an issue in humanitarian processes, and organizations cannot be truly prepared if they have not done effective contingency planning. Preparedness refers to “the start-up months…when resources are sourced, staff recruited and trained, purchases made and items transported”. It is important to remember that, when a decision is taken to respond to EWI, the implementation will not happen overnight, as these factors affecting lead times need to be taken into account. Lead times are contingent on preparedness, and can range from days to months. Long lead times may make the planned intervention inappropriate-by the time an agency is in a position to begin implementation, the situation on the ground may have already changed. To help with preparedness, Levine et al suggest the use of “preparedness auditing”, which entails the use of a Gantt chart “to quantify an agency’s state of preparedness”. All tasks that need to be completed before the commencement of a project would be listed, and would be further broken down into specific sub-tasks. An analysis of whether or not these sub-tasks could be done ahead of time, how long they would take, and who would be responsible for each task would also be listed. This implements a sense of responsibility and accountability. Lead times were found to be, on average, 3 to 5 months. With the use of preparedness auditing, it was found that this could be minimized to a few days or 2 to 3 weeks at the longest. An example of a preparedness auditing table can be found in Appendix 4. Such practices could greatly help improve response times, particularly in famine situations that are slow-onset.

Levine et al also suggest that evaluators of humanitarian projects could help strengthen preparedness by examining an agency’s level of preparedness to a given response and offer suggestions for improvement. EWSs could include decision dates or deadlines for action. Donors could induce preparedness by making funding contingent on proof of preparedness for timely

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152 Ibid.
153 Ibid., 13.
response from agencies. Finally, humanitarian coordination platforms could spend more time discussing preparedness issues.154

4.3d Reciprocal processes as a result of competition

Reciprocal processes are a consequence of the high vertical resource dependency of agencies that shapes the humanitarian environment. High resource dependency on a handful of donors and relatively low differentiation leads to high competition among humanitarian organizations. Shortfalls in funding cause friction among INGOs and the UN agencies, incentivizing them to compete over funds and engage in reciprocal processes, rather than to work together on joint strategic planning.155 These practices hinder responses to famine EWI, which requires a large-scale, multi-actor and multi-sectoral response.

Reciprocal processes cause silos to emerge in the humanitarian system. Decision-making usually takes place within organizations, rather than among them. When it comes to collaboration among agencies, there is a stress on coordination “rather than inclusive analysis, joint strategic planning, and decision-making”.156 The humanitarian system has tried to address this issue through the use of HCTs, HCs, and the cluster system. However, these groups and mechanisms tend to be more information-sharing rather than collaborative platforms.157 The power of these mechanisms to enforce collaboration is diminished by the fact that participation is on a voluntary rather than mandatory basis. This means that organizations and agencies are still free to pursue their own agendas according to their best interests. What emerges from this is a “project-based rather than strategic response”.158 In addition, while the idea behind HCs and HCTs are that they would lead a jointly-planned response, this duty is vague and it is unclear what is necessary to fulfill this duty, how it is to be done and who is exactly accountable.159

155 Bailey, Famine Early Warning and Early Action, i.
156 Chatham House, Translating Early Warning, 5.
157 Ibid., 6.
158 Ibid., 7.
159 Ibid.
EWI requires a swift response, and taking into account the issues of contingency planning discussed above, lead times need to be considered. Early action in the form of a jointly-owned plan will not be feasible if agencies are starting from nothing. In order to have a truly collaborative, timely, and jointly-owned response, a suggestion from a practitioner workshop was to have an ongoing process of contingency planning among agencies, rather than just within them. These plans would undergo continuous review and revision to reflect the latest EWI and situation analyses.  

Another suggestion in the literature was for donors to provide “seed funding” for collaborative, inter-agency planning for responses to EWI, make a concerted effort to favor joint or consortium proposals, or to make such collaboration a criteria for funding.

4.3e Lack of decision-making processes and accountability

Linked to risk preferences that shape the environment, a pervasive lack of accountability or appointment of clear decision-makers and decision-making processes was cited by much of the literature as being the largest impediment to early action after political considerations. This may seem counter-intuitive, as large bureaucracies such as the UN and donors are hierarchical in nature, and should therefore have clear chains of command for decision-making. However, such decision-makers for triggering a response to famine EWI are not explicitly designated, making accountability difficult to substantiate. With lack of accountability, “decisions are passed around or lost within complex bureaucracies.”

Maxwell and Majid suggest that accountability in the context of famine should not only be limited to humanitarian responses, but should also be about addressing the drivers that make famine possible, and “especially about arresting the downward spiral of livelihoods and


163 Bailey, *Famine Early Warning and Early Action*, i.
vulnerability that make famine a real possibility” and accountability regarding learning and taking seriously lessons learned from previous failures. In the humanitarian system, accountability tends to be focused on money: donors feel accountable to taxpayers, and humanitarian agencies have accountability and reporting standards imposed on them by donors to monitor how their funds are being spent. What is persistently and glaringly absent is accountability to people in need, and such “downward accountability” is still fairly uncommon in the humanitarian system. Local populations living in phase 4 or 5 pockets have no recourse if EWI is not acted upon.

Additionally, decision-making in both humanitarian and donor organizations is downstream rather than upstream. For responses to EWI, decision-making is generally centralized at HQ level, with the onus on field staff to prompt such a decision through information flow regarding the situation on the ground. While this should in theory make decision-making easier, the lack of officially appointed decision-makers to trigger a response at HQ level or formal processes for making said decisions facilitates non-responsiveness, intensified by an absence of a “process for recording decisions”, which all contribute to a lack of accountability.

The “heavy” (or large size) and complex structure of the humanitarian system further dilutes accountability and confuses decision-making because there are “multiple coordination structures and processes” that are sometimes overlapping, making it unclear who is responsible for what at which time.

Despite EWI, there are no repercussions for not responding in a timely fashion. This lack of repercussions and absence of accountability for inaction is heightened by both physical distance and, particularly for donors, a sense of not being accountable to populations in need, but to Western

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165 Ibid., 193.
166 Ibid., 189.
167 Bailey, Famine Early Warning and Early Action, 4.
168 Ibid., 4.
169 Chatham House, Translating Early Warning, 6.
public opinion. Culpability is further diminished if there is low visibility of a disaster in the media and there is a sense that there is nothing to lose by not acting on EWI. The issue comes down to a lack of clarity regarding who is responsible for triggering responses and at which time, which allows for decisions to be passed around. Considering the high workloads in the humanitarian sector, employees may feel that this is not their role and be preoccupied with other issues and tasks that they are clearly and explicitly responsible for.

4.3f Centralization of resources and decision-making

Resources and decision-making in the humanitarian system still largely take place at HQ-level and are top-down processes. The lack of connectivity between field and HQ staff and among HQs at different organizations make the centralization of resources and decision-making in the response process problematic. As noted before in the section on connectivity, field staff are the most cognizant and well-informed about the situation on the ground. However, decision-making tends to take place at HQ level, detached from country teams. A Chatham House workshop saw calls for decision-making to become more decentralized, such as a devolution of responsibility from HQ to country directors for triggering responses. Suggestions were made for country directors to have the power to approve certain interventions up to a pre-determined threshold, and for such approvals to be based on pre-determined triggers, which could improve response times.

4.3g Lack of nexus with developmental actors at early response stages

Because initial EWI may not seem to be under the humanitarian mandate (for instance, IPC phase 3), cooperation with the development sector is needed to clearly delineate responsibilities. Even though there is an emerging and increasingly loud discourse calling for a humanitarian-development nexus approach to aid, in practice the two remain quite distinct, especially regarding funding. The lack of progress in nexus processes has an impact on responses to EWI, because when EWSs are not yet at a crisis point, humanitarian actors may feel as though it is not their responsibility; that, for example, IPC phase 3 is a developmental issue. Intervening at such a point

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170 Buchanan-Smith and Davies, *Famine Early Warning*, 207.
172 Ibid., 4.
is generally not considered part of the terms of reference of emergency relief. Meanwhile, development actors may not feel this is their responsibility either. With both the humanitarian and development systems waiting for the other to act, paralysis sets in.

The additional difficulty facing the development and humanitarian systems from collaborating is the bifurcation of funding. For most donors, development and humanitarian funding come from separate budget lines, and humanitarian and development funding principles are different. Time horizons for humanitarian funding tends to be largely short-term, which imposes challenges on the system to respond to slow-onset disasters such as food crises that can devolve into famine. Early action thus tends to “fall between the cracks of time-bound humanitarian funding on the one hand and unresponsive development funding on the other”.

It was expressed in the literature that long-term development and resilience-building is needed to ensure proper cover from extreme food insecurity as a first line of defense. The humanitarian system would be embedded in these longer-term programmes through the use of crisis modifiers tied to development projects. These modifiers would act as triggers, with the hopes that these would increase responsiveness.

4.4 Conclusion
Based on the literature reviewed, the reasons for delayed responses to EWI are varied. They involve all actors, and can be found in every element of the system (exogenous factors/environment, structure, and processes).

The primary exogenous factor impacting response are political considerations, while the main environmental factors are vertical resource dependency and risk preferences. Structural hindrances were found regarding stability (low institutional memory, lack of trust, and lack of consensus) and connectivity (informational overload, siloed clusters, and disconnect in field-HQ relations). Finally, a multitude of procedural obstacles were identified. These were rigid funding practices, lack of embedded triggers, lack of contingency planning/preparedness, reciprocal

174 Buchanan-Smith and Davies, *Famine Early Warning*, 53.
processes, deficits in decision-making processes and accountability, centralization of resources and decision-making, and the underdevelopment of nexus practices. Many of these issues were found to be intertwined to some degree, and the literature review has indicated that issues in one element of the system impact others. For instance, structural issues such as lack of common methodologies and trust in EWI information hinders consensus-building regarding the severity of a situation. This, in turn, shapes the system’s environment by fuelling donor risk aversion, leading to limited funding which constrains humanitarian organizations’ ability to launch a response based on EWI. Limited funding then affects processes by hindering preparedness and contingency planning activities and encourages reciprocal processes.

It should be noted that the organizations comprising the humanitarian system do not have the power to change some of the constraints identified, such as the politicization of funding decisions. However, this does not mean the system can do nothing to improve. The following chapter will explore potential changes and their feasibility.
5. Moving to a network approach: Discussion of findings and potential system improvements

5.1 Discussion of findings
As the literature review revealed, there are a multitude of reasons for delayed responses to famine EWI. Impediments to responsiveness were found across all actors (EWSs, donors, UN agencies, and INGOs), as well as across all elements of the system (exogenous factors/environment, structure, and processes). The use of the elements of a system as given by Seybolt proved a useful tool in categorizing issues, though the classification of an issue as an exogenous/environmental, structural, or procedural one was difficult in some instances due to the interconnected and/or causal nature of various issues. Rather than diminishing the usefulness of systems theory in this context, this difficulty indicates that systems thinking is an appropriate approach to analyzing the causes of delayed responses, as a system should be viewed as the sum of its parts, and each part has its own role to play in shaping how the system functions. An issue in one element or actor cannot be taken in isolation, as it will impact another element or actor in the system. It is therefore understandable that the lines between issues become blurred. The chaotic and interconnected nature of system problems can be visualized through the following original graphic on the issues identified through the literature review.

Figure 6: Issues affecting humanitarian responses to EWI, sorted by elements
This original figure was constructed to reflect the findings from the literature review, sorted according to Seybolt’s variables of exogenous factors/environment, structure, and processes. While overly complex to be taken alone, the image illustrates that many issues are connected in some way. For example, the exogenous factor of politicization of aid takes into account domestic political considerations. If media attention for a crisis is low or non-existent, there is little incentive for donors to act and fund a crisis. The absence of an incentive to act leads to a risk-averse environment, where inaction is used as a risk management tool. The risk-averse environment leads to hesitancy from donors to trust and act on uncertain information, particularly where there is not a complete consensus on a situational classification. Lack of trust and consensus on a potential famine situation is exacerbated by a lack of triggers and reciprocal processes. If there is no agreement on the situation and if actors are not trusting of the EWI given, and would rather collect their own data and act accordingly, actors will design their own strategies, resulting in the delayed and fragmented responses seen in reality. In addition, even if there were triggers, the lack of consensus would make it unclear if a trigger for response had been activated. This is simply one example of the many such interconnected reasons found in the literature review.

However, one aspect is missing in Seybolt’s framework that is highly applicable to the examination of humanitarian responses to famine EWI. While the theory goes into great detail about intra-system relations, what is absent is inter-system relations. This is to a degree incorporated with the elements of exogenous factors and environment, which acknowledges that forces outside the system shape the system’s functioning. But a key issue that needs to be resolved in order to improve responsiveness to famine EW is the humanitarian-development nexus. Improvement would entail a synergistic inter-system relationship between the humanitarian and development systems, so that EW action does not continue to fall between the cracks of humanitarian and development mandates.

Besides this conclusion that systems theory is the best framework through which to analyze problems in famine EW response, it remains to be seen if the system can move to the systemic network that Seybolt advocates for, and if this would improve response times. Seybolt labelled the humanitarian system as an adaptive system.\(^{178}\) In theory, an adaptive system should take into

\(^{178}\) Seybolt, “Harmonizing the Humanitarian Aid Network,” 1028.
account feedback in order to improve, and there has been a slew of “lessons learned” language in the humanitarian system. The use of feedback to inform change is an attribute of a systemic network. But such feedback does not seem to be translating into practice, as the system continues to be riddled with identified issues from decades past. For instance, Margaret Buchanan-Smith and Susanna Davies’ *Famine Early Warning and Response- The Missing Link* was used in the literature review section and is a seminal work on this issue. While the work was written in 1995, an unsettling amount of the identified problems still held true today. This indicates that the fundamental underlying issues in the system have never really been addressed, despite the increased sophistication of tools and the system at large. While Seybolt’s theory provides a useful framework for identifying problems in the system, particularly to distinguish between variables, it does not sufficiently explain the causes of these problems which shape the system.

5.2 Hierarchies, markets, and networks

As noted earlier, Seybolt writes that there are three types of open systems: hierarchies, markets, and networks. He notes that, while there are some areas of the humanitarian system moving towards a network approach, the system still largely employs the worst components of hierarchies and markets. After reviewing the literature, is this in fact the case in the context of responses to EWI for famine?

According to Seybolt, the structure and processes of the humanitarian system are hierarchical in that they are highly centralized and use a top-down approach. The literature review found this to be true. Decision-making was regularly cited as being made at HQ level, and disconnected from the field in many instances. This centralized, top-down approach is also problematic in that decision-makers are far removed geographically from the context about which they are making decisions, and there is a lack of downward accountability to people in need.

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179 Seybolt, “Harmonizing the Humanitarian Aid Network,” 1029.

180 Ibid.


182 Buchanan-Smith and Davies, *Famine Early Warning*, 207.

Seybolt’s assertion that the humanitarian system operates as a market in the sense that units are highly competitive and that there tends to be low differentiation was also found to be true. Many organizations vie for limited funding, especially in a pre-famine declaration and where there is lack of consensus surrounding a situation. In addition, the lack of differentiation among INGOs contributes to reciprocal processes in the system.

Seybolt then goes on to assert that the functioning of the system would improve if there was a shift towards a systemic network approach. The following section will examine this claim, and if Seybolt’s proposed changes would improve response times.

5.3 Moving to a systemic network
Seybolt argues that four changes would need to be made for the system to move to a network model.

1. Increasing differentiation among units
2. More connectivity
3. Collaborative rather than reciprocal processes
4. Shift in decision-making from the administrative level to the operational level

Are these changes suggested by Seybolt feasible in the humanitarian context? Will they improve response times to EWI, and thereby decrease the performance gap? Each suggested change will be examined in the following section.

5.3a Increasing differentiation among units
The first suggestion is increased differentiation among units in the system. This would mean more specialization among units, and thereby a decrease in domain overlaps. This idea is not a novel one, and indeed is the same as the economic concept of comparative advantage. Production according to comparative advantage increases efficiencies and output in the system. In terms of

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184 Seybolt, “Harmonizing the Humanitarian Aid Network,” 1029.
185 Bailey, Managing Famine Risk, 46.
186 Seybolt, “Harmonizing the Humanitarian Aid Network,” 1038.
187 Ibid.
impacts on the system, differentiation could impact the components of trust, consensus, and reciprocal processes.

In the context of the humanitarian responses to famine EWI, this would first of all entail INGOs (who are the least differentiated of the groups discussed) to become more specialized in certain sectors, rather than trying to unilaterally provide multi-sectoral interventions. INGOs tend to have their “hallmark” sector, in which they have a proven track record and reputation for delivering on results. In order to increase differentiation among units, INGOs and UN agencies should keep to their strong suits, rather than attempt to enter into new sectors for which they may not have the technical or organizational capacity. If units were more specialized, it would have the effect of stimulating more collaborative rather than reciprocal processes (discussed below), as they would rely on one another to provide multi-sectoral interventions. Due to the multi-faceted nature of famine, this would likely have the effect of improving response quality. Increased collaboration would also build trust within the system, as actors are interacting at higher frequencies and on deeper levels.

Several issues and impediments arise when discussing sectoral differentiation among units. For one, INGOs with a unilateral multi-sectoral implementing capacity are not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, for sudden-onset emergencies it may in fact be the best model for increased responsiveness. The issue lies with the quality of these interventions. As discussed earlier, famines are not sudden-onset disasters. There are warning signs and information well in advance, so if the humanitarian system is launching an early response then there should be no need for a haphazard, multi-sectoral intervention implemented by an INGO who will not be able to deliver quality results in all sectors. This is irresponsible practice and has the potential to violate the humanitarian code of “do no harm”. However, it is difficult to put a stop to this practice because donors encourage it through their preferences and policies.

Through the use of sectoral earmarking, donors encourage more domain overlap as INGOs compete for funds, venturing into new sectors for which they may not have the technical know-how. This is a dangerous practice that can lead to undeserving projects being funded, simply because of low competition in a certain sector for funding. Sectoral earmarking is also problematic in that the context is not being taken into account, thereby encouraging INGOs to create proposals that not only cater to donor preferences and increase domain overlap, but may also not be most
beneficial to the populations they are meant to serve. For example, sectoral earmarking for education in emergencies for a near-famine context is perhaps tone-deaf and is not addressing the most pressing and life-saving needs of the populations. Such earmarking is based on the political or personal preferences of decision-makers, and is not a reflection of needs. But due to high vertical resource dependency, INGOs may alter their programs to fit donor preferences and to get these earmarked funds, rather than advocating to donors that this money would be better spent elsewhere.

Donors have the power to change this practice by simply not funding multi-sectoral interventions where the applicant does not have a proven track record in all sectors involved in their implementation plan. Rather, donors could agree to fund the portion of the intervention which concerns a sector in which the INGO is skilled, and make funding the other sectors of the proposal contingent on the INGO finding a partner to implement with who is skilled in these other sectors. As a result, consortium plans and collaborative processes would be encouraged (discussed below in more detail). This would have the effect of facilitating more high-quality response, and through continued interaction trust would increase among INGOs and UN agencies, thereby also improving the stability of the system in areas that were found to be lacking in the literature review. Through such repeated interactions, planning interventions among differentiated units would become faster and more responsive. These results would therefore help to shrink the performance gap in the system’s responses to EWI. It is also a very feasible change - if donors are willing to implement and encourage it. These practices would also benefit donors, who would see their funds being used in a more efficient manner.

If INGOs still want to branch out into new sectors for their organization, such a transition would at the very least be a more responsible way for them to do so. By encouraging these consortium plans, INGOs will be forced to work with other organizations who have expertise in a sector they do not, and therefore will be able to learn by observation and supporting before attempting to enter into the sector themselves.

Lack of differentiation leads to competition for funds, which encourages reciprocal processes. It is important to note that increasing differentiation among INGOs will only be beneficial to quality and timely response if it is coupled with the condition of increasing use of collaborative processes. Without collaborative processes, increased differentiation could
potentially be more harmful to early response, creating fragmented and spotty implementation. It is clear here to see the systemic approach of Seybolt’s recommendations—changes in processes could have the effect of changing the structure of the system and vice versa. If more collaborative processes were employed, differentiation would be most logical. If differentiation increases, collaborative processes would be needed to deliver on the complex task requirements of the system. The two changes are very much interconnected and dependent on one another.

Sectoral differentiation would also potentially reduce lead times by making preparedness and contingency planning activities easier for organizations. While differentiation would not make the task requirements of the system as a whole any less complex, it would decrease the complexity of task requirements for any one organization. Preparedness and contingency planning would seem more manageable if this needed to be done for one or two sectors versus four or five. Greater preparedness would have the effect of minimizing lead times, allowing a response to implemented in a more expedient manner.

Differentiation of units as it pertains to humanitarian responses to EWI does not concern only INGO overlap. There is also the large issue of domain overlap regarding EWSs and EWI, which causes confusion about the reality on the ground, thereby inhibiting response. The literature review highlighted how a lack of consensus regarding the situation on the ground can have a debilitating impact on response. For instance, disagreement within the HCT on whether the situation in Somalia was in fact worse than usual or just another bad year was found to cause delays in response.188

An issue not very much discussed in the literature was access to data or the quality of the data. Access issues for collecting data greatly inhibit response, whether due to security or political constraints, as they create more confusion about the situation. Orchestrating confusion can be beneficial in cases where famine is an intentional tactic in conflict situations. Confusion about the real situation on the ground can be driven by lack of access from authorities for necessary data collection, or by suspicion of manipulation of data by authorities, which would thereby render data unusable. Deaths could also simply be unreported because of a lack of formal infrastructure to track such information. This situation is further exacerbated where there is domain overlap

188 Hobbs et al, “When business is not as usual,” 52.
regarding EWI and EWSs, where methodologies differ and what may be considered as usable data varies. For example, while the UN and most INGOs were warning of an impending famine in Yemen, MSF stated that this was not their experience on the ground, and that it was impossible to discern what was actually happening in Yemen due to data quality and access constraints. Such conflicting messages most certainly drive confusion, and therefore contribute to delayed responses, as decision-makers may be more comfortable waiting until there is total consensus. This adds to the performance gap as it paralyzes the system, and the need for less domain overlap in EWI would definitely aid in facilitating more expedient responses.

Yet this domain overlap is arguably more difficult to overcome than differentiation among INGOs. The power to declare famine should not be underestimated, as famine is an emotive term with political consequences and can be used as a political strategy. Data can often be manipulated or interpreted in such a way as to help a strategy or position. It is doubtful that all actors would be willing to cede such an enormous power to one organization for the collection and analysis of data. While it would in theory help with consensus-building, it is not realistic. At the very least, then, organizations should agree on common methodologies and frameworks in order to make data more cohesive and compatible across organizations. This was raised as a Grand Bargain commitment but improvements still have a long way to go.

5.3b More connectivity

Seybolt’s second suggestion is that the system would benefit from more connectivity. In practice, this would mean increased information-sharing and more communication linkages among constituent units. Is greater connectivity possible, and would it help?

The main issues of connectivity found in the context of responses to EWI were lack of inter-cluster communication, and connectivity issues among field and HQ staff. These will each be explored in turn.


191 Seybolt, “Harmonizing the Humanitarian Aid Network,” 1038.
The fact that clusters engage in reciprocal processes has the effect of decreasing connectivity among sectors, which in turn encourages reciprocal processes, and so on. The issue is not that groups or committees to encourage inter-cluster relations do not exist. On the contrary, inter-cluster coordination groups are meant to do just that. Therefore, the infrastructure is in place, but is simply not being used efficiently. When a problem is raised, the default suggested solution of the humanitarian system is to create yet another working group or committee to fix the issue. Such solutions have the effect of further complicating structures, increasing domain overlap, and making the system on the whole heavier. Adding additional structures or mechanisms to the existing system would not work in the case of improving connectivity, and would actually make the situation worse. With humanitarian workers already citing work and information overload as issues, adding yet another layer of work and reports would be beneficial to no one. Perhaps Seybolt’s suggestion of greater connectivity to improve functioning should be refined. Rather than more connectivity, it seems that to improve response times to EWI the system needs better quality connectivity.

In a way, increased differentiation and a reduction in domain overlap would help improve connectivity. With humanitarian organizations being involved in a variety of sectors, the sheer amount of coordination, cluster, and sub-cluster meetings can be impossible to attend and keep up with due to a lack of staff and time. Poor attendance decreases connectivity, and also encourages reciprocal processes. If organizations were more differentiated, they would have fewer meetings to attend, and thereby make attendance more likely, including to inter-cluster meetings. Repeated interactions at meetings could foster a sense of trust among members, who would grow familiar with one another. This would make the likelihood of collaborative processes greater. Collaborative processes, in turn, would encourage greater connectivity and information-sharing, as organizations are working more closely together. Inter-cluster connectivity would additionally benefit the collection of EWI for famine. As explored earlier, famine is a multi-faceted crisis that spans a variety of sectors. Inter-cluster connectivity would help to create a more comprehensive picture of the situation on the ground.

The second major connectivity issue found was communication between field and HQ offices. The literature review suggested that, while field staff have the best and most up-to-date

192 Buchanan-Smith and Davies, *Famine Early Warning*, 22.
information regarding the situation on the ground and the context, connectivity between the field and the decision-making HQ is lacking.\textsuperscript{193} Increased connectivity between the operational and administrative levels would surely improve response times, as the field could report on the real-time evolution of the situation, which could also inform contingency planning and preparedness. Field-HQ relations are largely driven by the organizational culture on the one hand, but also largely varies from team to team. At HQ level, one team could have regular contact with their field office, while another team within the same organization could be completely disconnected from theirs.

The difficulty in standardizing approaches to field-HQ teams is that these relationships largely depend on the personalities and relationships of the individuals comprising these teams. In theory, this should make field-HQ connectivity the easiest issue to fix of all the problems found. However, it would likely not be so easy in practice. In order to facilitate better connectivity, organizations could implement, at a minimum, mandatory weekly meetings between field and HQ teams to ensure that a certain level of information exchange occurs. This would give field teams a regular space in which to provide situational updates to those closest to decision-makers, and in which they could corroborate the information being provided by EWSs. In-house corroboration could have the effect of making organizations take EWI more seriously, and induce action or at least greater preparedness activities.

5.3c Collaborative rather than reciprocal processes

According to Seybolt, reciprocal processes are the largest roadblocks to minimizing performance gaps in a system’s outputs, and the most significant change which needs to be made for the system to move towards a network.\textsuperscript{194} Collaborative processes would be more likely in situations where the previous two changes have also occurred: increased differentiation and greater connectivity. Due to the multi-faceted nature of famines, reciprocal processes could be devastating to effective response. Collaborative processes would improve responses to famine EWI, as it would promote response cohesiveness and could be used as a consensus-building platform. However, several impediments stand in the way of collaborative processes.

First, high vertical resource dependency on a few donors causes high competition, which encourages reciprocal rather than collaborative processes. The shortfall in funding causes friction

\textsuperscript{193} Chatham House, \textit{Translating Early Warning}, 4.

\textsuperscript{194} Seybolt, “Harmonizing the Humanitarian Aid Network,” 1038.
among NGOs and the UN agencies, incentivizing them to compete over funds rather than to work together on joint strategic planning. In a sense, this is a self-inflicted pain to the humanitarian system due to the fact that more complex, modern financial instruments such as insurance or forecast-based financing are not widely utilized or understood. This leaves the highly competitive system at the mercy of a few large donors to do its job. In the context of early response to EWI, this resource dependency is the greatest instance of politicization in the process of action. Vertical resource dependency on the level seen in the humanitarian system is therefore greatly at odds with the principles of impartiality and independence.

Second, collaborative processes would necessitate organizations working in unison to create jointly owned strategic plans, which would entail organizations giving up a degree of their independence—something that INGOs are particularly resistant to. A great challenge with the humanitarian system moving towards the collaborative processes of a systemic network is one of independence. Being one of the key humanitarian principles, organizations struggle to retain as much independence as possible. Most work on systemic networks has dealt with the private or public sector, with the organizations having differing mandates that encourage collaboration when it is in their best self-interest to do so. The humanitarian sector is unique in that the mandates of most organizations are the same: to save lives and alleviate human suffering. Altruistic and moral considerations for engaging in collaborative processes in the humanitarian system are therefore arguably stronger than in other systems. While the humanitarian mandate and the goals that come along with it offer a strong incentive for collaboration, this will mean that in some sense individual organizations will have to be willing to give up some degree of independence in planning and implementation. This is true for early response mechanisms to early warnings for food insecurity—this will require a multi-sectoral intervention that is jointly planned. While the humanitarian sector has made strides in coordination and information sharing, the shift to the collaborative processes that is characteristic of a systemic network has yet to be established on a wide scale.

The shift to collaborative processes would need to be led by donors. According to Seybolt, vertical resource dependency makes collaboration impossible.195 His assertion is somewhat an exaggeration. While resource dependency in its present form does make collaboration more difficult by promoting more competition, it does not mean this aspect is impossible to change. As

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the gatekeepers of funding, donors more than any other actor have the power to influence the procedural status quo in the system. For one, donors could explicitly have funding requirements, or at least favor, consortium or partnership plans to induce collaborative processes. These requirements could also include the need for these partnerships to hand in detailed contingency planning and preparedness proof, which would also help in the early response project. Such funding policies could incentivize organizations to work together. Similar joint analysis and response plans would need to be evidenced for country-wide consolidated appeals and humanitarian response plans as well. The literature found that country appeals tend to be a compilation of projects rather than a well thought-out joint strategic document. Donors could incentivize joint strategizing by perhaps agreeing to pay more into the HRP or CAP if it is shown such a process was done. For those donors that do not pay into country pooled funds, they could agree to pay even a small, nominal amount into such a fund as an incentive for such procedural changes. Vertical resource dependency is seen as a large problem by Seybolt, but he does not acknowledge the fact that it could also be the solution, whereby donors have the power to incentivize collaborative processes through new policies.

Financing instruments such as pooled funds would logically help create more collaborative processes. Rather than being funded directly by a donor organization for their own project, UN agencies and INGOs could decide together in a collaborative way how to use the discretionary funds at their disposal. But this would mean convincing donors to pay more into such funds, which many are reluctant to do. By paying into a pooled fund over which they do not have control, donors are giving up a large degree of their decision-making power, which they are wont to do. This is perhaps the largest obstacle in increasing the use of more innovative instruments that could increase responsiveness to EWI.

Additionally, as noted in the literature review, there have been complaints from INGOs that the UN agencies hijack the allocation processes for these special types of funds. As INGOs tend to be the ones actually doing most of the implementation on the ground, it is essential that they have more buy-in and say in the disbursements of such funds if the process is to be truly collaborative. At the very least, if the UN agencies want to monopolize the allocation and planning

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processes at a country level, mechanisms should be put in place to hold them accountable if such interventions are a failure.

Collaboration, however, should not only involve planning. Collaborative processes should also be employed in learning, particularly for past mistakes. Collaborative processes would have the effect of fostering trust over time, which may in turn make organizations more comfortable in discussing past mistakes for learning and improvement purposes. The literature review found that such a culture does not really exist in the humanitarian sector.\footnote{Maxwell and Majid, \textit{Famine in Somalia}, 181.} If the system is to be adaptive, it needs to take into account the feedback of past lessons in order to evolve. The humanitarian system seems to put great emphasis on lessons learned, but such practices will be totally ineffective if these lessons do not go beyond the person writing them or the organization. Perhaps decreased competition among organizations, coupled with increased connectivity, would foster a collaborative environment in which organizations feel comfortable sharing their mistakes. Stock-taking activities like these should not only take place after a famine has occurred, as with the 2011 Somalia famine. These should take place any time a situation has devolved into a phase 4, as it needs to be remembered that an unacceptable amount of people die at this phase as well. Conducting joint lessons learned activities for phase 4 situations would also help to promote an early response mindset among practitioners, who would become more familiar with warning signs and appropriate responses.

In addition to intra-system collaborative processes, improving response times to EWI would necessitate the establishment of collaborative processes with the development sector. While humanitarian actors may be best positioned to respond in contexts of protracted violence, development actors have in most instances been on the ground longer and have longer-running projects, making them beneficial and necessary partners in terms of not only contacts but long-term context and understanding. Humanitarian and development actors need to engage in a more meaningful manner. For example, the literature review suggested that a difficulty in early response is the lack of triggers, making the timing of launching a response unclear.\footnote{Ibid., 172.} Development projects should have humanitarian triggers built in, making it clearer when a response will revert back to the providers of last resort- the humanitarian community. This would also have the effect of
decreasing lead times if humanitarian organizations were able to leverage developmental infrastructure when needed. Collaboration on this scale would require joint planning and agreements ahead of time, and could employ the preparedness auditing suggested by Levine et al (see Appendix 4).

However, some may disagree with the nexus approach due to the potential violation of humanitarian principles: independence, neutrality, impartiality, and humanity. There is a fear that humanitarianism would be tainted by the political nature of development. But as we have seen, humanitarian aid, particularly in the context of responses to famine, is already highly political. While humanitarian organizations may individually try to uphold the principles on a project or programmatic level, to say these principles are held up on a system-wide level would be an overstatement.

5.3d Shift in decision-making power

Finally, Seybolt writes that a shift in decision-making power from administrative to operational levels is needed.200 In practice, this would entail a change from decision-making at HQ level to field level, making the governance of the humanitarian system less hierarchical.

The literature review revealed that most of the decision-making is taken at HQ level, far removed from the situation.201 This is problematic especially when coupled with the issue of suboptimal connectivity among HQ and field teams. Decision-makers are therefore those that probably have the least idea of the actual situation on the ground, and are also most exposed to the political aspects and pressures of decision-making. Being stationed at HQ makes one more cognizant of the political pressures and nuances that influence decision-making and can cloud judgement. This, coupled with the compliance culture indicated in the literature review,202 can make responses to famine EW impossible if there is a perception at HQ that it is unimportant. Faced with the situation on the ground daily and with an intimate knowledge of the context, a network approach would see the removal of top-down decision-making and give more power to

201 Buchanan-Smith and Davies, Famine Early Warning, 207.
202 Bailey, Managing Famine Risk, 49.
the field to make decisions. A change like this would be highly beneficial to timely response to EWI; however, the feasibility of such practice is questionable.

In the literature review, it was found that some practitioners had suggested giving country directors or senior field staff the power to approve certain actions or amount of funding on their own,203 in the hopes that being able to do so and not wait for HQ approval would expedite the process. While sound in theory, it is difficult to imagine this working in practice. Due to political considerations and a desire to control decisions, it is unlikely that HQ would be willing to give such a carte blanche to country directors. Even though they may give them a nominal amount of financial and decision-making power, it is doubtful that it would ever be on a large enough scale to allow a country director to launch a sufficient and impactful response. To do so would require field teams to convince HQ teams and would take time. This would be particularly difficult in the context of early response, where a crisis point would not yet have been reached and therefore removed HQ teams may be disinclined to act.

Decentralization of decision-making could also have implications for the relationship between UN agencies and INGOs. There is a sense that the UN agencies tend to take the lead in planning and funding decisions (especially pooled or non-earmarked funds), as indicated earlier. Information and resources are therefore sometimes highly centralized within the UN agencies. This in turn can lead to a feeling that the UN has co-opted the whole process and thereby diminishes the inputs of INGOs. Such practices are quite nonsensical, as INGOs are typically more involved on the ground in project implementation and therefore better positioned to give input. In order to move forward towards a systemic network, the UN needs to be willing to relinquish a degree of its tight control over processes and allow more space for INGOs to be involved, which would also have the effect of encouraging collaborative processes. This could be done by ensuring buy-in from INGOs in all phases of strategic planning, and involve them more in cluster or sub-cluster leadership roles.

5.3e Missing pieces: Incentives and accountability

While Seybolt’s four suggested improvements to drive change would likely help response times, they do not address the root causes of late response. The process of categorizing problems faced

in humanitarian responses to EWI according to Seybolt’s variables helped to highlight commonalities in root causes. Most of the issues found in the literature review are, at their core, either an incentives issue and/or an accountability issue. It could also be that issues from decades past persist today because incentives and accountability issues have not been adequately addressed, and therefore are the two changes the system would need to make in order to tackle the issue of responsiveness to EWI.

The two are very much interrelated, in that unclear accountability diminishes incentives for action. In the broadest sense, early action to EWI for famine does not happen because there are no personal incentives, positive or negative, for people to act because no one is clearly accountable. Further, institutional incentives for more collaborative and prudent processes are absent from the system. A lack of accountability, and the feeling of individuals across the system that they will not be held responsible, contributes to the incentive for inaction. If these are the common roots of the majority of the issues found, it follows that these are the two issues that need to be addressed to influence a real change.

While helping those in need should be incentive enough for the system to act, as Maxwell and Majid noted there is little downward accountability towards populations that the system is meant to serve. This downward accountability is more evident on a project level, with feedback mechanisms being increasingly put in place for beneficiary feedback, which gives beneficiaries more formal channels for lodging complaints and holding humanitarian organizations accountable. At a project level, while improving, such systems are still weak, but on a systemic level are virtually non-existent. Populations who are affected by famine situations essentially have no way to hold the system to account for not listening to local information given at early stages and failure to act. There is an abstract, vague feeling of fiduciary responsibility in the system, but not an enforceable one that promotes accountability and incentives for action. Accountability and incentives will need to come from both informal, bottom-up sources, but also formalized, explicit delegation of responsibility.

Informal sources of accountability could come from the media and humanitarian advocacy, as will be discussed below in further detail. But in order to increase the likelihood of better responsiveness, the system cannot and should not depend on the media to force a response. Formal accountability measures need to be implemented throughout the system.
Formal accountability could be enforced by making explicit reference to early warning action in terms of reference in employment agreements and making it clear who is responsible for triggering a response, and the steps to be taken. In addition, organigrams could be created and circulated so it is clear not only to the responsible individuals, but also to others involved in a response. Accountability matrices as suggested by Howe and Devereux should also be produced within organizations, which make clear who is responsible and the consequences for not carrying out responsibilities properly. Formal accountability on an organizational level may be easier to achieve, with clear chains of command outlined. It would be vastly more difficult to replicate this on a systemic level.

Formal accountability and a clear chain of decision-making processes on a systemic level would be problematic if not impossible because the humanitarian system does not have an overarching decision-maker that encompasses all actors. There is no one voice that speaks for all constituent units and there is no ultimate decision-maker. Therefore decision-making is destined to always be fragmented to a degree on a systemic level. In order to have clear systemic accountability and decision-making process, the system would need buy-in from all actors, as it is evident that famine response is not only reliant on one organization. Then again, it is difficult to envision all actors, particularly donors, agreeing to such explicit incentives and accountability mechanisms, as it would diminish their ability to justify inaction when such inaction is a product of political considerations.

5.3f Insurmountable obstacle? The politics of famine

While not a suggestion from Seybolt and cited as an exogenous factor outside the control of the humanitarian system, a discussion on improving response times to EWI for famine would be incomplete without discussing its biggest impediment: politics. It is important to discuss politics, as Seybolt believes that “the politicization of humanitarian aid will prevent the system from ever becoming a fully-functioning network”.

As evidenced by the literature and the discussion on potential changes to transform the system to closer resemble a systemic network, it seems that all

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204 Haan et al, “Global Implications of Somalia,” 77.

205 Seybolt, “Harmonizing the Humanitarian Aid Network,” 1046.
roads eventually lead back to politics. Will politics impede early responses to famine, and is there anything that can be done to mitigate its influence?

As the literature review suggested, media coverage and advocacy work has the ability to force action. This can be seen as an informal, bottom-up source of incentive for action. Evidence for this is plentiful, even in recent events. For instance, the US has backed the Saudi-led coalition in the brutal war in Yemen since 2015, which has included strict blockades of ports and borders, and what could be characterized as a siege famine. Such tactics and a multitude of other factors led Yemen to the brink of famine, where it sits today, and it is widely acknowledged that the situation is entirely man-made—there are no droughts or environmental shocks on such a magnitude that they could be blamed.

Despite the severity of the situation, the conflict was largely ignored by the media. However, the murder of Jamal Khashoggi changed the conversation on Yemen. His murder in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018 is largely believed to have been carried out on the orders to the Saudi royal family. This in turn brought a tidal wave of media coverage and scrutiny on Saudi Arabia, including their war in Yemen, which was finally given its due attention, albeit as a result of a tragic event. Outrage ensued, and there was a highly critical examination of the close US-Saudi relationship, and particularly the US support for the war in Yemen.

Wide media coverage was coupled with strong advocacy on the part of the humanitarian community. For example, a joint statement was issued by Oxfam, International Rescue Committee, CARE, Save the Children, and Norwegian Refugee Council, calling on the US to end its support to the Saudi-led coalition. The statement used highly emotive language, for example writing that if the US “does not cease its military support for the Saudi/UAE coalition, the United States, too, will bear responsibility for what may be the largest famine in decades.”

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206 Chatham House, *Translating Early Warning into Early Action*, 16.

207 Saudi-born journalist, residing in the US at the time of his death due to his critical reporting on the Saudi royal family.

As a result of high media visibility that came as a consequence of Khashoggi’s murder and the complementary advocacy efforts, the political calculus of decision-makers in the US shifted, and in March 2019 the Senate voted to end US support to the war in Yemen.209 While it remains to be seen if this decision passes in other decision-making bodies and Yemen is already on the brink of famine, indicating the window for a timely response has already passed, it is an important testament to the power of public opinion and media coverage. It reinforces Sen’s idea that a democracy with an open and free press has the power, in theory, to force response.

However, this will not be enough to ensure timely responses in the future. As the literature review suggested, a situation is only deemed newsworthy when it has reached catastrophic levels.210 In the case of Yemen, it was not even the catastrophic situation itself that caused the draw of attention, but rather was the by-product of a seemingly unrelated scandal. Humanitarian organizations had been trying to draw attention to the Yemen crisis and calling for respect of the humanitarian principles for years before the Khashoggi case. These efforts were to no avail as conflicts more geopolitically important to the West, such as Syria, grabbed headlines instead. Media outlets tend to provide content on topics that seem to matter or be of interest to populations. Grassroots social media campaigns could therefore induce wider media coverage of less-publicized conflicts sooner, thereby pressuring decision-makers to act. Nevertheless, the multitude of conflicts, and even famine-risk conflicts, means that each crisis will never get the full coverage it deserves. The system should not be reliant on the media to force decisions, but rather there needs to be institutionalized mechanisms and responsibilities in place as indicated earlier.

The tragedy surrounding famine and famine response is that it will forever be secondary to the geopolitical interests of the states who provide the greatest amount of humanitarian funding and have the political capital to prevent it. While media and advocacy can to a degree change the domestic political considerations that could induce action, it is still often not enough to manipulate the priority regimes of decision-makers. It is challenging to see any solution to this, especially in the increasingly polarized political climate that has been evolving in recent years. While the system


210 Buchanan-Smith and Davies, *Famine Early Warning*, 43.
should strive to fix what it can regardless, this is the largest impediment to early response and the issue that is seemingly insurmountable.

5.4 Recommendations for further research
Several areas of research should be explored further in order to continue the conversation of improving response times to famine early warning:

- How can domain overlap among EWSs and EWI be minimized to promote consensus, given the political constraints?
- Since donors have the greatest ability to affect procedural change, which concrete policy changes need to be made to encourage collaborative processes and differentiation?
- Can a system-wide accountability structure be designed for the humanitarian system, specifically regarding famine responses? What would such a structure look like, and what would be required to get buy-in from all or most actors?
6. Conclusion

Causes of famine are multi-faceted, as are the issues in responses to EWI for it. Seybolt’s systems theory allows us to examine these issues in response on a systemic level, which acknowledges their interconnected and causal nature. This thesis used an original approach by applying Seybolt’s general humanitarian systems theory to responses to famine EWI specifically. There are a variety of problems that contribute to late response, ranging from exogenous/environmental factors, to structural and procedural issues. Taken together, these result in a large performance gap in the system. The two most influential reasons found for inhibiting response were political considerations and a lack of clear accountability and decision-making processes. Examination of the reasons for late response uncovered in the literature review found that the root causes of most of the issues involved a pervasive lack of accountability and incentives.

The literature review revealed that certain elements of the system are still characteristic of hierarchies or market systems, and according to Seybolt the system should evolve to a systemic network in order to shrink its performance gap. According to Seybolt, four changes should occur if the system is to move to a systemic network: increasing differentiation among units; more connectivity; collaborative rather than reciprocal processes; and a shift in decision-making from the administrative level to the operational level. In addition to Seybolt’s suggestions, important issues surrounding the implementation of an accountability mechanism were discussed, as was the issue of politics in famine response.

**Figure 7: Summary of findings for improving the system**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suggestion</th>
<th>Issue impacted</th>
<th>Feasible?</th>
<th>Time horizon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased differentiation</td>
<td>INGOs</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EWS</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>More connectivity</td>
<td>Clusters</td>
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<td>Field-HQ</td>
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<td>Nexus</td>
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<td>Shift in decision-making</td>
<td>HQ to field</td>
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<td>Medium/long-term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability and incentives</td>
<td>Informal accountability</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>Short-term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Formal accountability</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>Medium/long-term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political considerations</td>
<td>Domestic</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>Short-term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Geopolitical</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The analysis of Seybolt’s suggestions as they pertained to responses to EWI were found to be mixed, and most would require medium or long-term solutions. This implies that there are no quick fixes to the deep issues causing the large performance gap in the system.

The first suggestion of increased differentiation is thought to be feasible for INGOs in the medium-term. Such a change could be induced by donors through modified funding policies that would incentivize differentiation rather than unilateral multi-sectoral approaches. For EWSs, a decrease in domain overlap would not be feasible in practice due to the large amount of power and influence that comes with being able to officially declare famine.

The second suggestion, more connectivity, was found to be feasible given the issues found in the literature review. More inter-cluster connectivity is possible in the medium-term if there is increased differentiation and more efficient use of current structures. More connectivity between field and HQ teams is seemingly the easiest fix of all as it is reliant on individuals rather than the system, and could therefore be implemented in the short term.

The third suggestion, collaborative processes, was found to be mostly feasible. Collaborative processes in planning could improve in the medium term with the increase in differentiation and connectivity. Collaborative learning would also occur in the medium-term with these two initial changes, as trust through interaction would be promoted. A solid improvement in nexus activities through collaboration with the development system would be more challenging due to rigid funding processes and attempts to safeguard the humanitarian principles. This would therefore require a long-term process of negotiation to work out these issues and negotiate roles.

The fourth suggestion, shifting decision-making from HQ to field staff, is seen as being somewhat feasible. While field teams hold some degree of decision-making power, it is doubtful HQs would be willing to relinquish enough control to allow field teams to make impactful decisions unilaterally. The devolution of power would require medium and long-term changes, as small increments of power could be given to field teams and terms renegotiated over time.

In addition to Seybolt’s four suggested changes, two further areas for necessary change were identified: incentives and accountability deficits, and political considerations. Improvements to the underlying issues of incentives and accountability are seen as somewhat feasible. Informal accountability through media and advocacy efforts could somewhat induce action in the short-
term, but as pointed out these often come too late and do not necessarily work. Formal accountability on an organizational level is feasible if explicit terms of reference and chains of command are implemented for triggering action. But formal accountability on a systemic level is not feasible, due to the lack of a central, all-encompassing authority in the humanitarian system at large.

The insurmountable obstacle to famine response was found to be political considerations. While domestic political considerations can be somewhat manipulated in the short-term by media and advocacy efforts which can pressure decision-makers to act, the influence of this is limited. Further, priority regimes and geopolitical considerations are not feasible for the humanitarian system to change.

Much of the change that needs to be made to the system to move towards a systemic network where collaborative processes rule and information feedback informs change is within the power of the humanitarian system. Donors in particular have the power to inform change as the holders of funding, which the system depends on. But, as Seybolt suggests, the irreconcilable issue of political motivations will prevent the system from implementing all the changes it needs to move to a systemic network. No matter how many improvements the humanitarian system makes, it will always be beholden to these interests and considerations. Politics is the leading cause of famine, and the largest obstacle to responding to it. As long as geopolitical interests continue to rule, famine will continue to plague populations, and prevent action until it is too late and many have already lost their lives.
Appendices
Appendix 1

Appendix 2

### Diagram 4: IPC Acute Food Insecurity Reference Table for Area Classification

**Purpose:** To guide short-term strategic objectives linked to medium and long-term objectives that address underlying causes and chronic food insecurity.

**Usage:** Classification is based on convergence of evidence of current or projected most likely conditions, including effects of humanitarian assistance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phases</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Action Required</th>
<th>Urgent Action Required</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1 Minimal</td>
<td>More than four in five households (HHs) are able to meet essential food and non-food needs without engaging in atypical, unsustainable strategies to access food and income, including any reliance on humanitarian assistance</td>
<td>Action required to build resilience and for disaster risk reduction</td>
<td>Prevent widespread mortality and total collapse of livelihoods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 2 Stressed</td>
<td>Even with any humanitarian assistance at least one in five HHs in the area have the following or worse: Minimally adequate food consumption but are unable to afford some essential non-food expenditures without engaging in irreversible coping strategies</td>
<td>Action required for disaster risk reduction and to protect livelihoods</td>
<td>Save lives and livelihoods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 3 Crisis</td>
<td>Even with any humanitarian assistance at least one in five HHs in the area have the following or worse: Food consumption gaps with high or above usual acute malnutrition OR are marginally able to meet minimum food needs only with accelerated depletion of livelihood assets that will lead to food consumption gaps</td>
<td>Protect livelihoods, reduce food consumption gaps, and reduce acute malnutrition</td>
<td>Prevent widespread mortality and total collapse of livelihoods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 4 Emergency</td>
<td>Even with any humanitarian assistance at least one in five HHs in the area have the following or worse: Large food consumption gaps resulting in very high acute malnutrition and excess mortality OR Extreme loss of livelihood assets that will lead to food consumption gaps in the short term</td>
<td>Based on the IPC Household Group Reference Table, at least 20% of the households in the area are in Phase 4 or worse</td>
<td>Based on the IPC Household Group Reference Table, at least 20% of the households in the area are in Phase 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 5 Famine</td>
<td>Even with any humanitarian assistance at least one in five HHs in the area have an extreme lack of food and other basic needs where starvation, death, and destitution are evident (Evidence for all three criteria of food consumption, wasting, and CDR is required to classify Famine.)</td>
<td>Based on the IPC Household Group Reference Table, at least 20% of the households in the area are in Phase 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Priority Response Objectives

- More than 80% of households in the area are able to meet basic food needs without engaging in atypical strategies to access food and income, and livelihoods are sustainable
- Based on the IPC Household Group Reference Table, at least 20% of the households in the area are in Phase 2 or worse
- Based on the IPC Household Group Reference Table, at least 20% of the households in the area are in Phase 3 or worse
- Based on the IPC Household Group Reference Table, at least 20% of the households in the area are in Phase 4 or worse
- Based on the IPC Household Group Reference Table, at least 20% of the households in the area are in Phase 5

#### Food Consumption, Livelihood Change, Food Security

- **Acute Malnutrition:** Prevalence of underweight (10-20%) or severe underweight (less than 10%)
- **Acute Malnutrition:** Prevalence of severe acute undernutrition (BMI < 15)
- **Acute Malnutrition:** Prevalence of moderate acute undernutrition (15-29.9%)

#### Nutritional Status

- **CDR:** Current death rate
- **USDR:** Under-5 death rate

#### Mortality

- **CDR:** Current death rate
- **USDR:** Under-5 death rate

*For both nutritional and mortality area outcomes, household food consumption deficits must be an explanatory factor in order for that evidence to be used in support of a Phase classification. For example, elevated malnutrition due to disease outbreak or lack of health access—if it is determined to not be related to food consumption deficits—should not be used as evidence for an IPC classification. Similarly, excess mortality rates due to murder or conflict—if they are not related to food consumption deficits—should not be used as evidence for a Phase classification. For Acute Malnutrition, the IPC thresholds are based on % of children under 5 years that are below 2 standard deviations of weight for height or presence of oedema. BMI is an acronym for Body Mass Index. CDR is Crude Death Rate. USDR is Under 5 Death Rate.*

Appendix 3

Diagram 5: Acute Food Insecurity Reference Table for Household Group Classification

**Purpose:** To guide short-term strategic objectives tailored to the needs of household groups with relatively similar Phase classifications, which should complement medium- and long-term objectives that address underlying causes and chronic food insecurity.

**Usage:** Classification is based on convergence of evidence of current or projected most likely conditions, including effects of humanitarian assistance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase Description</th>
<th>Phase Name and Description</th>
<th>Action required to Build Resilience and for Disaster Risk Reduction</th>
<th>Action required for Disaster Risk Reduction and to Protect Livelihoods</th>
<th>Urgent Action Required to:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1 None</td>
<td>HH group is able to meet essential food and non-food needs without engaging in any illegal, unsustainable strategies to access food and income, including any reliance on humanitarian assistance.</td>
<td>Even with any humanitarian assistance: HH group has minimally adequate food consumption but is unable to meet some essential non-food expenditures without engaging in irreversible coping strategies.</td>
<td>Even with any humanitarian assistance: HH group has high consumption gaps with high or above average acute malnutrition. OR HH group is marginally able to meet minimum food needs only with accelerated depletion of livelihood assets that will lead to food consumption gaps.</td>
<td>Even with any humanitarian assistance: HH group has severe consumption gaps consisting of very high acute malnutrition and excess mortality. HH group has extreme loss of livelihood assets that will lead to large food consumption gaps in the short term.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 2 Stressed</td>
<td>HH group is able to meet essential food and non-food needs without engaging in any illegal, unsustainable strategies to access food and income, including any reliance on humanitarian assistance.</td>
<td>Even with any humanitarian assistance: HH group has minimally adequate food consumption but is unable to meet some essential non-food expenditures without engaging in irreversible coping strategies.</td>
<td>Even with any humanitarian assistance: HH group has high consumption gaps with high or above average acute malnutrition. OR HH group is marginally able to meet minimum food needs only with accelerated depletion of livelihood assets that will lead to food consumption gaps.</td>
<td>Even with any humanitarian assistance: HH group has severe consumption gaps consisting of very high acute malnutrition and excess mortality. HH group has extreme loss of livelihood assets that will lead to large food consumption gaps in the short term.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 3 Crisis</td>
<td>HH group is able to meet essential food and non-food needs without engaging in any illegal, unsustainable strategies to access food and income, including any reliance on humanitarian assistance.</td>
<td>Even with any humanitarian assistance: HH group has minimally adequate food consumption but is unable to meet some essential non-food expenditures without engaging in irreversible coping strategies.</td>
<td>Even with any humanitarian assistance: HH group has high consumption gaps with high or above average acute malnutrition. OR HH group is marginally able to meet minimum food needs only with accelerated depletion of livelihood assets that will lead to food consumption gaps.</td>
<td>Even with any humanitarian assistance: HH group has severe consumption gaps consisting of very high acute malnutrition and excess mortality. HH group has extreme loss of livelihood assets that will lead to large food consumption gaps in the short term.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 4 Emergency</td>
<td>HH group is able to meet essential food and non-food needs without engaging in any illegal, unsustainable strategies to access food and income, including any reliance on humanitarian assistance.</td>
<td>Even with any humanitarian assistance: HH group has minimally adequate food consumption but is unable to meet some essential non-food expenditures without engaging in irreversible coping strategies.</td>
<td>Even with any humanitarian assistance: HH group has high consumption gaps with high or above average acute malnutrition. OR HH group is marginally able to meet minimum food needs only with accelerated depletion of livelihood assets that will lead to food consumption gaps.</td>
<td>Even with any humanitarian assistance: HH group has severe consumption gaps consisting of very high acute malnutrition and excess mortality. HH group has extreme loss of livelihood assets that will lead to large food consumption gaps in the short term.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 5 Catastrophe</td>
<td>HH group is able to meet essential food and non-food needs without engaging in any illegal, unsustainable strategies to access food and income, including any reliance on humanitarian assistance.</td>
<td>Even with any humanitarian assistance: HH group has minimally adequate food consumption but is unable to meet some essential non-food expenditures without engaging in irreversible coping strategies.</td>
<td>Even with any humanitarian assistance: HH group has high consumption gaps with high or above average acute malnutrition. OR HH group is marginally able to meet minimum food needs only with accelerated depletion of livelihood assets that will lead to food consumption gaps.</td>
<td>Even with any humanitarian assistance: HH group has severe consumption gaps consisting of very high acute malnutrition and excess mortality. HH group has extreme loss of livelihood assets that will lead to large food consumption gaps in the short term.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority Response Objectives</th>
<th>Household Outcomes (quantity and nutritional quality)</th>
<th>Livelihood and Coping Strategies (strategies and assets that will lead to high food consumption gaps)</th>
<th>Contributing Factors</th>
<th>Source: IPC Global Partners, Integrated Food Security, 33</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quantity: adequate (1,000 calories/person/day)</td>
<td>HHDS: no recent deterioration of average food intake; Safe Water ≥15 litres/person/day</td>
<td>Water: adequate (1,000 calories/person/day)</td>
<td>Hazard: Food and water availability; Safety: Access to markets and distribution systems; Coping: Insurance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantity: minimally adequate (700-1,000 calories/person/day)</td>
<td>HHDS: recent deterioration of average food intake; Safe Water ≥15 litres/person/day</td>
<td>Water: minimally adequate (700-1,000 calories/person/day)</td>
<td>Hazard: Food and water availability; Safety: Access to markets and distribution systems; Coping: Insurance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantity: food gap below 10%</td>
<td>HHDS: severe recent deterioration of average food intake; Safe Water ≥15 litres/person/day</td>
<td>Water: extremely low (below 500 calories/person/day)</td>
<td>Hazard: Food and water availability; Safety: Access to markets and distribution systems; Coping: Insurance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The acronyms for the commonly used methodologies included in the reference table include: HHDS (Household Dietary Diversity Score), FCS (Food Consumption Score), HH (Household Hunger Score), CSI (Coping Strategies Index), and HEA (Household Economy Approach).*
### Table 1: Taking preparedness seriously: what can be done to shorten a start-up timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Obtaining funding from donors</th>
<th>Purchasing equipment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-task</strong></td>
<td><strong>Can it be done in advance?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding which donors are interested in agencies’ ideas for response</td>
<td>Yes – ongoing sharing of strategies with donors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparing concept note</td>
<td>Yes – inc. ongoing contingency discussions with communities, local gov’t, cluster members, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing in format of different donors</td>
<td>Yes – discussing in principle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussing with donor(s)</td>
<td>Yes – discussing in principle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing formal proposal</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting approval from senior management</td>
<td>Partly – getting approval in principle, may shorten total approval time by several days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rewriting in formats of different donors</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submitting to donors</td>
<td>Partly: draft proposals can be shared and discussed in-country, should shorten discussions on formal submission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waiting for donor response</td>
<td>No – but quicker if donor is already familiar with agency strategy and proposal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-up meetings with donor</td>
<td>As above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amending proposal</td>
<td>As above – should be unnecessary if shared in advance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resubmitting</td>
<td>As above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waiting for response</td>
<td>As above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contracts arranged</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contracts signed</td>
<td>No</td>
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Bibliography


