Lessons from the 2011 famine in Somalia: key issues & challenges in humanitarian response

Presentation by Helen Altshul, Regional Program Director, Adeso
OCHA REGIONAL WORKSHOP ON HUMANITARIAN PARTNERSHIP
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OVERVIEW OF THE 2011 FAMINE IN SOMALIA

- Most dire humanitarian situation in the world
- Mass exodus of people
- High level of malnutrition
- Approx 750,000 people at risk of starvation
- 6 regions affected by the famine, later downgraded to 3
- Famine amidst insecurity from militia groups
- Lack of access & monitoring challenges
- Confusing counter-terrorism legislation
EARLY WARNING SIGNS

- Immense potential for cash transfers to provide humanitarian relief at scale

- Many early warning signs of a looming food crisis – by February 2011 clear that major food crisis was looming

- **BUT** took months for humanitarian community to employ cash transfers as alternative to food aid
• Large-scale food aid was not feasible
• Advocacy efforts for adoption of cash at scale were initiated in March 2011 & yet the large-scale use of cash only from August 2011 onwards (took famine declaration)
• Famine declared on 20th July – HCT endorsed principles of cash programming on July 25th
• Vast majority of cash responses implemented from September 2011 onwards
POTENTIAL RISKS WITH CASH

- **Market elasticity & potential inflationary effects** – no evidence of previous inflationary effects, FSNAU & FEWSNET reports supported use of cash in South central Somalia
- **Risk of aid diversion** – but existing cash transfer system through Hawalas
- **Risks in ability to monitor** – previous experience showed M&E possible
- **Risks in targeting** (overcoming power structures) – proven methodology existed
FLAWS IN THE SYSTEM

- **Fear of mistakes**: despite evidence, major reluctance of humanitarian community to use cash at scale early on.

- **Risk aversion**: Defending the decision to use cash overshadowed well-established track record in meeting relief needs effectively.

- **Remote management**: almost no international staff in Somalia – desensitization

- **Trust deficit**: barriers between local & international organizations
2011–2012 Globally, Somalia had the largest cash transfer program implemented by NGOs.

As per Inter Cluster Cash Coordination, $88 million transferred in different forms of cash (Aug 11 – May 12).

Cash Consortium transferred $25 million in unconditional grants (Sep 2011 to April 2012).

Cash Consortium is planning to implement phase II (May – Oct 2012).

Preliminary analysis shows positive impacts.
M&E System

- Traditional M&E possible in the region
- Cash Consortium – common M&E framework adopted by 5 other INGOs (9 agencies total)
- 3 levels: process, market, impact
- Tools: monthly & quarterly PDMs, weekly market price monitoring, complaints mechanism
- ODI independently analyzes & reports on M&E data & cross references with FSNAU & FEWS-NET
- Independent field monitors
- Triangulation
LESSONS LEARNED

- Partnerships between INGOs was key to success
- Coordination with other players helped spread the intervention
• Somalia experience illustrates that many of the barriers to use cash at scale & to respond early & effectively to crisis are not based on lack of evidence, but on lack of leadership in the face of risk aversion.
LESSONS LEARNED
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• Proper training for all field staff in beneficiary selection/targeting & the logistics of distribution is essential to the success of the intervention.

• A consortium approach is highly encouraged because it breeds combined learning, a common M&E system, compliance to donors & promotes technical quality all of which were key to the success of the intervention.
CONCLUSION

- When lives are endangered, the humanitarian community needs to act quickly & effectively.

- The current system breeds a sense of conformity: everyone is nervous, & those who are innovative tend to get frustrated – so they either leave or assimilate or are the lone voice in a big room.

- Humanitarian reform needs to look at how we ensure that few personalities do not drive change, action & innovation, but that instead the system as a whole is open & receptive & willing to act in that manner.
THANK YOU
Contact information

Adeso Headquarters – Kenya
P.O. Box 70331-00400
Nairobi, Kenya
M: +(254) 710 607 378
T: +(254) 20 800 0881
info@adesoafrica.org

Website: www.adesoafrica.org
Twitter: @adesoafrica.org
Facebook: facebook/adesoafrica