

Maria Belding  
Pella High School  
Pella, IA  
Somalia, Factor 17

### **Failures and Famines: Improving Humanitarian Relief in Somalia**

According to the United Nations, the 2011-2012 famine that killed as many as 100,000 people in the Horn of Africa is over. Now downgraded to a crisis, this humanitarian disaster was temporarily relieved by surprisingly heavy rainfall and aid trickling in from around the globe. However, most of these countries are still desperately in need and have no way to prevent such a large-scale tragedy in the future. Somalia in particular is a study in worst-case scenarios, an example of what happens when everything that can go wrong truly does. Located along the Indian Ocean and sharing borders with Kenya and Ethiopia, the country's climate boasts little fertile land, and the few areas that can support commercial agriculture are racked by political instability and damaged by poor farming practices. A heavy presence by the militia group al-Shabab has led to more chaos, with the powerful and widely feared al-Qaeda collaborator blocking refugees from fleeing the country, ordering them at gunpoint to turn around and return to the hopelessness of mass hunger in al-Shabab "camps". The group has also forced out "Western" aid organizations like the Red Cross and UN, and refuses to allow in vaccines from any source, claiming these lifesaving basic medications are a Western plot to murder Somali children. This lack of immunization combined with the poor sanitation in refugee camps means the measles, cholera and other diseases spread like wildfire among a population already weakened by starvation. Corruption runs rampant in the few aid organizations that are on the ground in this difficult-to-access country, and there is a massive black market for food stolen from humanitarian groups, whom themselves are reluctant to admit to the large scale of fraud and theft for fear of losing donors. Although the situation in the country is no longer considered to be at famine levels, there are still 2.34 million Somalis who are food insecure, the vast majority of whom live in the incredibly impoverished southern half of the state. Even the country itself is a nation only in name—there has been no functioning government in the region for almost two decades.

The people who live in Somalia face no better odds on their own than they do in refugee camps. Many families live with three generations under one roof, as aging grandparents step in to care for children with ill or deceased mothers and fathers, or when the grandparents have nowhere else to go. As is typical in Africa, even nuclear families are quite large and struggle to support their average size of six to seven children, and the added burden of an extended family does little to help. Even if a mother wishes to stop bearing children, access to medical care and birth control are limited—for every physician on the ground, there are almost 29,000 Somalis. This is especially concerning when one examines the infant mortality and childbirth death rates. 10.6% of infants die before reaching their first birthday, while one out of every hundred women dies during or soon after delivery. Also bleak are the statistics concerning educational opportunities—the "school life expectancy", or average number of years a child can be anticipated to attend organized classes taught by a teacher, is three years. The literacy rate, defined as persons over the age of 15 who can read and write fluently, lies below fifty percent for both sexes, but the rate for women is half of that of their male peers.

The typical Somali farm family and the typical Somali family are often one and the same—almost three-fourths of the population is employed in some type of agriculture. Most of these units either practice nomadic pastoralism, traveling from location to location to hunt and herd animals, or are involved in traditional farming. Crop growing is more common in the south of the country, where land is more plentiful. Unfortunately, the southern half of Somalia is also the area most deeply clenched inside the al-Shabab's iron fist, and most of those who are food insecure in Somalia reside here. For those who have managed to avoid the Shabab, the main crop grown is bananas, which account for a significant percentage

of Somalia's exports along with charcoal, fish, livestock, and hides. Most farms are quite small and rely on very basic agricultural technology, using plow animals and human labor. Without machines to lighten the load, impoverished farmers often have no choice but to use their children in the fields, further adding to the cycle of poverty by keeping these potential students out of school.

Although many Somalis practice pastoralism, this farming method is falling out of favor due to the all-too-common environmental disasters that plague the country. "When there is drought, your animals die and you are left with nothing," said a farmwoman in Turkana to BBC News. "I appreciate pastoralism but animals are not sustainable anymore." This is one of many obstacles facing farmers who are trying to improve their yields, which are often so low they do not feed the entire family, let alone provide a surplus and therefore a profit. Another major barrier is the land itself. Ecologically speaking, Somalia is almost exclusively desert, and less than two percent of its land is considered arable. Prone to everything from recurring droughts to floods to dust storms, this country would not be ideal for farming even with the world's newest agricultural technologies. Of course, Somali farmers do not have access to these techniques, and agriculture has never left the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in this country. As the United States learned in the Dust Bowl, these farming practices can be incredibly degrading towards the environment, and Somalia is beginning to see similar effects as the American Southwest did in the 1930s. Soil erosion, desertification and overgrazing are damaging the few acres of quality land, and the yearly monsoons do not help the situation. Because of this damage and the overall lack of land, Somalia is forced to import much of its food, leaving it vulnerable to fluctuations in global crop prices.

Both the presence of the Shabab and the poor land quality would not on their own create the massive suffering taking place in Somalia. But when the two coincided, a perfect storm of human misery was created, and Somalia is now just on the tail end of its second major famine in twenty years. The fight to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian relief and food aid has been going on for even longer, and so far the results have been far from successful. Dozens of international aid organizations have tried and are trying in vain to enter the country to offer their support, but the al-Shabab have kept their iron fist firmly intact. This al-Qaeda supporter has either completely blocked entry to "Western" charities or allowed them in, only to loot the supplies and remove them from the country on grounds that the donated items are "unfit for human consumption." Among these humanitarian organizations no longer allowed inside the borders are Unicef, the International Red Cross, and the World Health Organization, while other charities were never let in to begin with. Even those groups who have managed to set up operations in the country aren't faring well. The World Food Program, which uses local Somalis as staff to ease cultural tensions, has discovered massive corruption and fraud in their food distribution program. The organization is still losing almost half of their emergency rations to theft and misappropriation of supplies. An AP investigation, done in conjunction with the World Food Program, revealed that Somali aid groups prepared almost thirty percent more food when they were anticipating press coverage or the arrival of WFP authorities. When the officials behind the inquiry showed up unannounced, they were dismayed to find only 3,000 people receiving aid, when they were told the center was serving more than 7,000 daily. Although there is obvious and ample evidence to prove theft is a major issue for The World Food Program and others like it, the organization and its peers have yet to significantly acknowledge this. Linda Poleman, an expert and author on aid and conflict, says she knows why. "Aid organizations have a problem. It is difficult for them to be honest (about theft) because they will be punished. Donations will go down and donor governments will be angry. So it stays a well-kept secret," she says. This puts more strain on humanitarian groups, who are already dealing with safety concerns (the country is considered so dangerous aid groups create their headquarters across the border in Nairobi, Kenya) as well as threats to their staff (The World Food Program has had 17 workers murdered or killed in Somalia since 2008).

Due to an unexpected rainy season, the situation for Somali citizens is improving, although the statistics are still so dismal there is little reason to celebrate. The number of people dying daily of starvation is now

low enough to downgrade from the declaration of famine to one of crisis, although the UN has stated the next several months are critical for preventing a relapse. Somalia is still one drought, one angry action by the Shabab, or one swing in global food prices away from falling back into the mass starvation it has managed to escape only by sheer meteorology. Experts are expecting a spike in mortality rates once the winter months come, when the floods carry waterborne diseases like schistosomiasis into the homes of generally unvaccinated children and adults, many of whom are already immunosuppressed by hunger. The situation may statistically be improving, but Somalia is still very, very vulnerable, and no action taken thus far has done anything to change that fact.

If a real solution were found, however, the rewards would be incredible. This is especially true for a country that has not even had a functioning ruling body for two decades, longer than half of the population has been alive. The fact that there are so many children in the nation gives global problem solvers even more motivation to find a way to get aid into Somalia and start fixing what has been broken for so long. If agencies were somehow able to successfully get enough food and other supplies on the ground in an organized fashion, the mortality rate would flatten and the immediate crisis would be relieved. This would involve feeding everyone, Shabab or otherwise. If the people were fed and could at least temporarily provide for themselves, there would be far less turmoil and fewer uprisings. Fewer uprisings would mean more stability, which would mean uninterrupted farming and better yields. Better yields mean feeding each family member and maybe even making a profit, which may allow for the purchase of technology that would take the place of child labor on the farm. Children who do not have to work in the fields can go to school, where they can get an education and leave the poverty cycle for good. Like dominoes, this process could spread across the country and create real change.

Of course, actually fixing the country is much easier said than done. Other challenges such as climate change and massive population growth have not and will not make finding a solution any easier. Family planning and birth control access are almost nonexistent, and so women become pregnant even if their bodies nor families can bare the strain of another child. The population growth rate for Somalia is 1.596%, a very high percentage that reflects the six to seven children each woman can be expected to have in her lifetime. Climate change is also a concern, especially with the poor farming practices that have marred what little land is plentiful to begin with. Access to water and the quality of that water may also become an issue, especially if farmers begin to use pesticides or other chemicals that cause runoff in a widespread fashion. This would especially become a concern during the winter months, when monsoons drench the country and flood much of it. If pesticides and other chemicals were in the water that leaks and sometimes pours into Somali homes during this time of year, the spike in deaths that already occurs from cholera and other waterborne illnesses would be ever higher. This would be compounded by the rising of international sea levels, predicted to worsen the severity of these winter monsoons over time.

This is not to say that nothing can be done to help improve the situation in this country. It may just be a matter of finding a new approach. For decades the world has been trying to fix Somalia from the outside in, giving billions of dollars in humanitarian relief that has never reached its target. Much of this relief has gone missing or become unaccounted for, lost in a donation so large that it seems to have slipped away. Based on my research, I recommend a completely different strategy –small donations, but on a large scale. This process, as mastered by the charity Kiva, involves citizens from wealthy countries loaning a small sum of money to a farmer or business owner in a poor nation such as Somalia. Once the amount needed by the business owner or farmer is raised by the loaners, the money is sent via wire transfer and the business owner or farmer can begin launching his or her own success. Boasting a return rate of well over 90%, those who do the loaning are usually paid back, and many of these lenders choose to reinvest this return into another Kiva project. This would help Somalis not only get back on their feet but get them into a prime position to stay there. Many attempts at helping Somalia have been, up till now, so-called “band-aid solutions” –they provide relief, but don’t solve the problem. Microloans do both. They provide individuals or families with enough money to pay for food and other necessities in the short-term and help

set up a permanent solution through the purchase of better farm equipment or a storefront for a business. Using small loans through electronic wiring not only gets around the Shabab, but also looters, strangling government regulations and corrupt officials. Organizations such as the Red Cross have already begun experimenting with this idea. All “Western” aid groups would need to do would be to shift their focus from providing large donations to small, one-family loans. Local Muslim-run charities, which have the acceptance of the Shabab but not necessarily the knowledge of how to run a large-scale hunger relief program, could be trained by those from the UN and other groups on how to do just that and take over this aspect of relief, with UN officials familiar with Somali culture staying on the ground to keep corruption at bay. The unique insight into the culture from Muslim-run charities allows workers to access areas of the country run by the Shabab, getting food to those who need it most. Meanwhile, Unicef and other charities barred from the country along with the governments of Western nations whose traditional aid would be rejected could still be giving direct relief through these money transfers, allowing Somalis to purchase their own food and begin to get back on their feet. This would mean most Somali families would be well on their way to building their own success by 2015. This may be the best part of this potential solution. Somalis may be getting the loan from a charity, but they themselves are doing the work, instilling pride and a sense of community into a nation that lost both feelings far before the national government toppled around 1990.

In the past twenty years, Somalia has been home to two different devastating famines and countless clan wars, shootouts and government overhauls. The people of Somalia have been failed by fifteen different national regimes, the Shabab, and perhaps even the world at large. But with a significant population under the age of 16 and with new technology changing the way aid can be provided, we finally have a chance to stop failing Somalia and start giving the people the security, stability and future they deserve. It’s not going to be an easy task, and unraveling decades of clan tensions and political instability will take time and effort. But Somalia is once again dangerously close to famine, one slip away from another humanitarian crisis. One strong monsoon, one aggressive move by the Shabab or one drought could wipe all of the precious progress made by humanitarian groups in the past weeks and months. It will only take one of the several dozen factors currently causing problems in the country (ethnic disputes, drought, and a large population growth to name a few) getting even further out of hand to cause another collapse. The country is still in a state of crisis, and although the terminology occasionally changes – disaster, famine, emergency –the point is really moot. Somalia has never left its grave situation, although some years have been better than others. The country has been stuck in a brutal cycle of poverty, violence and no options for growth almost since its birth, and the world has yet to come with a solution that will lift them out. Small steps have been made –polio has been wiped out, and cases of malaria are also decreasing, but there is still a large gap between the standard of living in Somalia verses the rest of the world, and the more time that passes, the more the country falls behind. While the wealthiest countries in the world begin developing ultra-sleek computers and cloud data storage, Somalia has barely caught on to the ideas of the industrial revolution. In fact, Somalia seems to almost be moving backward. When conflict breaks out, factories are looted and transnational corporations move out, taking jobs and technology with them. As the world becomes more globalized, Somalia is being left in the dust in every aspect, from human rights to education to technology. With the fast-paced development of new technology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it will not be long before Somalia will be incapable of catching up, leaving it in a permanent state of vulnerability. We as the world cannot accept this. We’ve failed Somalia for far too long.

#### Works Cited

- Bowden, Mark. "Aid Efforts Need Help Getting To Somalia's Famine: NPR." Interview by Rachel Martin. NPR. 15 Jan. 2012. Radio. Transcript.
- "Climate Change and Public Health." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 29 Nov. 2010. Web. 25 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.cdc.gov/climatechange/effects/waterborne.htm>>.
- Chonghaile, Clar Ni. "Al-Shabaab Bans Aid Agencies in Somalia and Raids Offices." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, 28 Nov. 2011. Web. 9 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/nov/28/al-shabaab-bans-aid-agencies-somalia>>.
- Chonghaile, Clar Ni. "Somali Islamists Ban Red Cross." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, 31 Jan. 2012. Web. 9 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jan/31/somali-islamists-ban-red-cross?newsfeed=true>>.
- Chonghaile, Clar Ni. "Somalia Famine over but There Is Still a Crisis, Says UN." The Irish Times. 4 Feb. 2012. Web. 4 Feb. 2012. <<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/world/2012/0204/1224311250437.html>>.
- "Famine in Somalia." BBC News. BBC. Web. 12 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/in-pictures-16582481>>.
- Gettleman, Jeffery. "Somalia's Agony Tests Limits of Aid." NYTimes.com. The New York Times, 1 Nov. 2011. Web. 12 Feb. 2012. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/02/giving/some-aid-trickles-into-somalia-surrounded-by-death-and-disease.html?\\_r=2&pagewanted=3&ref=famine](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/02/giving/some-aid-trickles-into-somalia-surrounded-by-death-and-disease.html?_r=2&pagewanted=3&ref=famine)>.
- Gettleman, Jeffery. "Somalis Starve as Shabab Militants Block Escape From Famine." NYTimes.com. The New York Times, 1 Aug. 2011. Web. 8 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/02/world/africa/02somalia.html>>.
- Hourel, Katharine. "Somalia Famine Aid: How Aid Went Astray." The Huffington Post. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 17 Mar. 2012. Web. 12 Aug. 2012. <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/17/somalia-famine-aid\\_n\\_1355348.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/17/somalia-famine-aid_n_1355348.html)>
- Perlez, Jane. "Somalia 1992: Picking Up Pieces as Famine Subsides." The New York Times. The New York Times, 31 Dec. 1992. Web. 8 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1992/12/31/world/somalia-1992-picking-up-pieces-as-famine-subsides.html?pagewanted=all>>.
- "Somalia." CultureGrams Online Edition. ProQuest, 2012. Web. 13 Mar 2012.
- "Somalia's Al-Shabab Militants Ban Red Cross Aid Work." BBC News. BBC, 30 Jan. 2012. Web. 11 Feb. 2012. <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-16798893>>.
- "World Food Programme Fighting Hunger Worldwide." Somalia. World Food Programme. Web. 8 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.wfp.org/countries/somalia>>.

