

# Trigger happy? Why we need to rethink the signals which determine humanitarian intervention for more timely response.

## *Why is humanitarian intervention for pastoralists so often late?*

Despite huge investment that has been made to improve early warning, too often humanitarian assistance continues to arrive late in pastoral areas. Aid has been able to prevent humanitarian crises, but it is difficult to find examples where a large scale use of humanitarian aid has prevented a livelihood crisis, i.e. it has left pastoralists with their assets intact. This is rarely because the early warning actors failed to warn of an on-coming crisis in time. The reasons why response is often late are many and complex. This paper looks at just one component of the problem: the link between early warning and decision making for response. Sometimes, warnings have been ignored. But is untimely response also caused because agencies are paying attention to the wrong set of signals? Although it seems obvious that the trigger for humanitarian response should be indicators relating to the severity of a humanitarian crisis, this paper argues that this will not always lead to the right response at the right time.

Let us look at the basic livelihood elements that cause the humanitarian problem. A pastoral household facing a deepening drought has to cope with several mutually reinforcing problems. Pasture and water become scarce, animals may need to be moved outside normal grazing areas, which can create conflicts. As animal condition declines, milk production reduces, and the value of the animals to be sold declines. The price of staple food often rises at the same time, meaning that several times more animals need to be sold to buy the same quantity of grain. Birth rates go down, and mortality rates go up, so fewer animals can be sold without depleting the herd unduly. The household has to meet basic needs as well as maintain a core breeding herd which can multiply as fast as possible after the drought. As the next rains approach, should animals be sold before they die? Or should they try to 'hang on'?

External support can help pastoralists meet various livelihood objectives. If the value of animals is maintained, they won't need to sell so many animals to meet needs. This can be done by keeping animals in

better condition (through making feed available, or by clearing animals of parasites) and by improving markets. (It has already been shown how much cheaper it is to use support to the market to help people to buy food compared to feeding them<sup>i</sup>.) Core breeding herds can also be targeted for life-sustaining support, such as feeding. (It has also been shown how much cheaper it is to keep animals alive throughout a drought rather than replacing them<sup>ii</sup>.) When pasture or water fail, pastoralists can be supported to move their animals (with transport, or with interventions to reduce potential conflicts) or can be provided directly with water. The costs of purchasing necessary food for the family can be reduced by subsidised sale of grain or by direct food aid; and families can be helped to sell fewer animals by being supported with alternative income, e.g. through large scale cash for work programmes.

## *Using triggers based on understanding livelihoods*

Which ever intervention is the most appropriate in given circumstances, it is the logic of the intervention itself which determines when it is appropriate – and when it simply can't help. For example, once animals are already dying, it is obviously too late to think about supporting marketing; and it is clearly too late to distribute feed after the rains have already regenerated pasture. The interventions which target livestock all have appropriate windows of opportunity which are determined purely by the 'crisis calendar' – that is, by the succession of different stages in the evolution of a drought. In the drought scenario sketched in figure 1, for example, livestock feeding could be appropriate from around August, when pasture is scarce and animal condition is suffering, until the following March, when the rains finally bring new pasture.

Support to livestock marketing in this example makes sense from around August, when low demand pushes down prices – because of poor body condition and because many traders hope for a continued drought and a collapse in livestock prices in December. There is unlikely to be any benefit from support to livestock marketing once the condition of the animals is so poor that they have little market value (from around December, in this example). It is important to stress that the timing of these interventions has a logic which

	Mar-Apr	May-Jun	Jul-Aug	Sep-Oct	Nov-Dec	Jan-Feb
	poor rains	no rain		poor rain	poor rain	
<b>pasture</b>		declining	very scarce	none		none
<b>l'stock condition</b>		declining		very poor old & weak starting to die	mortality increasing	high mortality
<b>l'stock market</b>	high		low demand & price	v. low demand & price	no demand, exploitation price	

derives from the activity itself, and not from the humanitarian situation. (Livestock need feeding when there is no pasture – not in the month when child malnutrition passes a certain threshold.)

By early October, we could know for sure that animals will be dying in huge numbers in January, that people will not be able to earn enough to buy food for their families. We will already know, for example, to what extent child malnutrition is likely to be a problem and that many pastoralists will be left almost without assets, unable to recover for the next drought cycle. So, in October we already have the choice: wait for a humanitarian disaster and mount major (and expensive) food aid and feeding programmes: or, mount a major (and much cheaper) humanitarian programme targeted at livestock - people's livelihoods. This could de-worm and feed animals to keep them in a market condition, and support mass commercial de-stocking, so pastoralists could buy their own food; and could keep enough animals alive until the next rains to maintain the core assets needed for recovery. (These are only examples: the specific interventions needed will vary. Food aid may of course remain a part of the necessary response.)

#### *Using triggers that factor in the start-up time-line*

In fact, even this reaction will be too late. If we make a decision in October to support livestock feeding, that is not the same as starting to feed livestock in October. It can take an agency three or four months to go through all the steps of staff recruitment, tendering, purchasing, transport, (etc., etc.) before the animals finally receive food. We can understand, then, why fodder was distributed in some cases after the rains in 2006 – if we wait until livestock mortality increases (November) to support this programme, and then it takes 3-4 months for start-up, practical assistance only starts in March. In order to start by October, we would have to make a decision by late July. This is before the second rains in our hypothetical drought have yet failed: is it ever going to

be possible to fund and mount a humanitarian response based only on a prediction that rains may fail?

This is a challenge. The situation is perhaps not so hopeless. The start-up time-line of four months is the

current level of preparedness. If agencies were prepared – with minimal use of resources – this could easily be shortened to around one month for most interventions. That would mean a decision could be taken as soon as the rains started to fail. Support to livestock marketing however should start around August and this needs a commitment from July – clearly before the second rains have failed.

#### *Will timely humanitarian response ever be possible?*

Part of the problem should be easy to solve. Mounting a humanitarian operation before we reach crisis should not be difficult as long as it is clear that such a crisis is inevitable – i.e. in our example, as soon as the second rains have failed. Support is possible if agencies are prepared. (See our companion paper # 1: *Preparedness auditing*). However how do we start interventions before the second rains fail in July? A decision has to be made by Governments, donors and implementing agencies, that we either want to support livelihood protection in pastoral areas, or we are simply giving up. If we are committed, then we need some creative solutions. This paper aims to show how we need to change the triggers that we often use for humanitarian intervention. Some ideas which may work for some agencies could include:

- making *preparedness* a mandatory part of any longer term programme;
- longer term programmes with much greater degrees of flexibility (with or without consultation/approval);
- greater investment in longer term programmes which build in many humanitarian elements – e.g. support to marketing, animal health;
- operation contracts which allow a project to start some spending (e.g. in July), but where money must be redirected/returned if rains occur.

Solutions cannot be found by one person and will not occur in one day. Unless we direct our attention to finding ways in which our humanitarian structures can work together to respond to triggers based on understanding livelihoods and the livelihood logic of practical interventions, then we will never be able to make full use of timely, appropriate and cost-effective interventions which can save lives and livelihoods.

This paper was prepared by PACAPS, part of USAID's RELPA programme. The views contained in this paper do not necessarily reflect those of USAID or any of the other agencies participating in the RELPA programme. This paper may be freely copied and distributed. PACAPS would welcome any feedback on this draft. Please send any comments to [Simon\\_Levine@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:Simon_Levine@yahoo.co.uk)

October 2008

<sup>i</sup> See Policy Brief 1, Pastoralist Livelihoods Initiative, October 2007

<sup>ii</sup> Policy Brief 2, PLI, November 2007