

# Do Famine Declarations Really Lead to Increased Funding?

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## A FEINSTEIN INTERNATIONAL CENTER BRIEF

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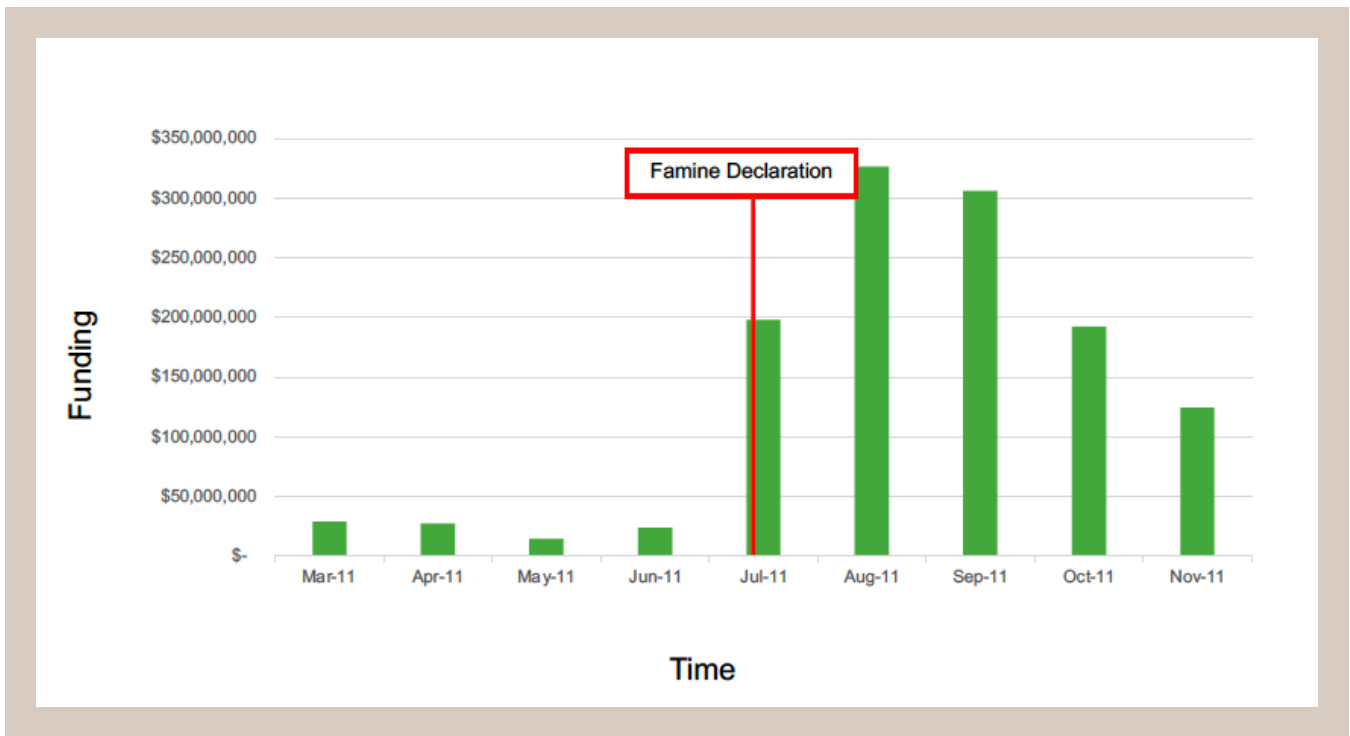
Recently claims have been made suggesting that only an official declaration of famine brings much needed increases in financial resources to address humanitarian catastrophes of food insecurity, ill-health, and malnutrition that ultimately lead to large-scale loss of life. To contribute to the prevention or mitigation of famine, the narrative suggests, we need to declare famine much earlier in order to save lives and protect populations. This claim has recently turned up in multiple fora regarding the crisis in Somalia. *The New York Times* reported on November 6, 2022, that many aid agencies working in Somalia were calling for a famine declaration that “would allow more aid to flow.” *The New York Times* subsequently noted on [December 13, 2022](#), that “an official declaration of famine would unleash aid and attention. Some experts say Somalia shows that the international system for making the judgment is broken.” On December 6, 2022, *The Guardian* noted that a famine declaration “serves to focus global attention on the problem,” and noted that Somalia needs that attention, “in the hope of driving up funding for the drought response for the region, which is only 50% funded.” The *New Zurich Times* on January 17, 2023, asserted that a “retrospective look shows that the declaration of a condition of famine usually has a significant mobilization effect. Suddenly the world is watching, suddenly additional funds are found.” And the claim was given headline attention in a *Devex* post on February 22, 2023, which notes that as Somalia faces “the brink of yet another famine, many in the humanitarian sphere are calling for an *official declaration*, which they say will unlock the donor dollars needed to avert many thousands of deaths.”

It is not just journalists—humanitarians are saying this as well. The country director for Oxfam in Somalia was quoted on [Reuters](#) on November 21, 2022, saying that a “declaration of famine will certainly bring in more support.” Senior humanitarian officials, including the chief economist of the World Food Programme and the former UN under-secretary general for humanitarian affairs, have called for faster, earlier declarations, in effect arguing that “[slow declarations cost lives](#).” The UN coordinator for famine prevention and response recently commented on [Al Jazeera](#) that action “will only be undertaken after the attention that comes with an official declaration of that dreaded f-word: famine.” Again, all of this strongly implies that only *declarations of famine* will speed up funding.

This claim is problematic in two ways: First, it implies that donors respond mainly (or only) to official declarations, which can only be issued when famine thresholds have already been breached—rather than to early warning or famine projections. This would imply that, by definition, funding for famine response and prevention is late, and the only resolution to the problem is lowering the bar for declarations to speed up the process. But second and more to the point, with one major exception, there is little evidence that declarations of famine actually do lead to significant increases in funding from external donors.

There is no doubt that in Somalia in 2011, funding increased substantially following the declaration of famine (see Figure 1). Contributions to the Somalia Consolidated Appeal nearly doubled overnight and eventually almost tripled although other factors besides simply the

Figure 1. Famine Declaration and Funding Levels: Somalia 2011



Source: OCHA-FTS, Maxwell and Majid 2016

declaration were at work.<sup>1</sup> A similar funding pattern was observed in 2017, except that it was *not* a *declaration* of famine but rather a *famine projection*—a high-likelihood warning—that triggered the response. There was no declaration in 2017, and indeed famine thresholds were not surpassed. Somalia 2017 is generally upheld as a good example of prompt action in response to a projection or warning rather than a declaration—and at least partially as a result of lessons learnt in 2011. Indeed, funding should be allocated in response to projections and warnings, not declarations.

However, on the whole, there doesn't appear to be much of an obvious relationship between either declarations or warnings and actual funding flows. Ideally, "famine projections" and "risk of famine" warnings—not declarations—should trigger the scale-up of resources for prevention and response. But the perception persists that an official declaration, not warnings or projections, is the

factor that triggers more funding. The experience of Somalia in 2011 seems to be the mental model that many humanitarians (and journalists) carry regarding the relationship between famine declarations and funding. But the evidence since 2011 does not confirm any such relationship. Figure 2 depicts a number of warnings, declarations, and projections of famine in South Sudan from 2015–18, including one actual declaration in February 2017.

The main mechanisms for declaring or warning about famine are the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) and the Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWS NET), which follow the same protocols. These can be broken out into several categories:

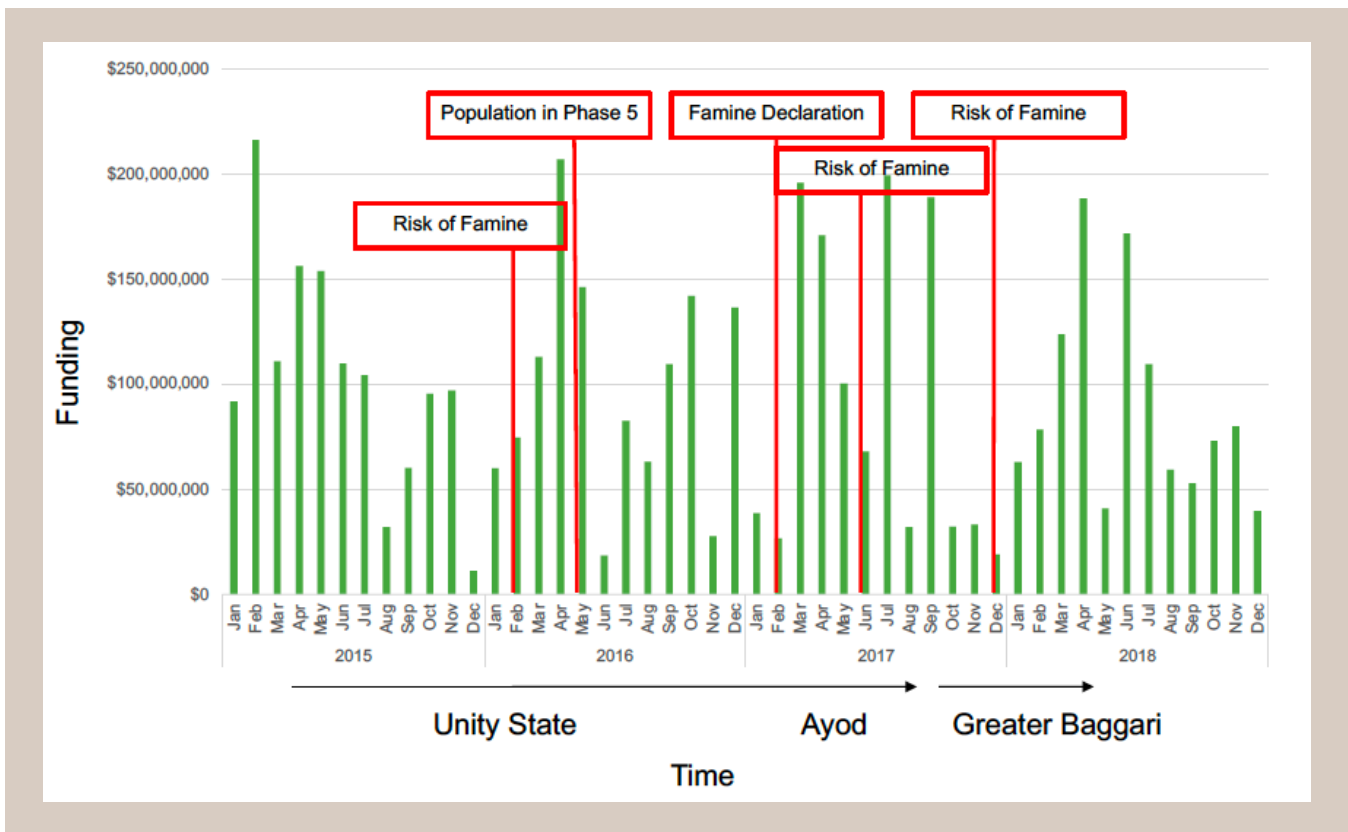
- **Famine declarations.** These are issued when there is verifiable evidence that all three famine thresholds<sup>2</sup> have been breached. This has

<sup>1</sup> One of the major constraints to external funding for Somalia in 2011 was counter-terrorism restrictions on aid. It took months of negotiation to formulate a humanitarian work-around (in the form of the OFAC license in the US case—other Western donors had similar restrictions). Somewhat coincidentally the solution to the counter-terrorism

restrictions was worked out about the same time that famine was declared.

<sup>2</sup> These have been stated so often recently it is hardly required to reiterate them but include that at least 20% of the population has effectively no access to food and coping capacity is exhausted; at least

Figure 2. Famine Declaration, Warnings, and Funding Levels: South Sudan 2015–18



Source: OCHA FTS and IPC Famine Review Committee

happened only once since 2011 (in South Sudan in 2017). Declarations must be reviewed by the Famine Review Committee (FRC), a group of independent experts.

- **“Famine likely” declarations.** These are issued when at least two of the three thresholds have been breached, but evidence on the third isn’t available. This is equally rare, occurring only once—also in South Sudan—in 2020. (A similar declaration was made retrospectively in northeastern Nigeria in 2016, before the “famine likely” designation was in use.) These are also reviewed by the FRC.
- **“Famine projections.”** These are issued when the most likely scenario for three-to-four months in the future is famine. These have been issued several times in recent years. These are also reviewed by the FRC.

- **“Risk of Famine” statements.** These are issued when there is a plausible risk of famine in the foreseeable future, but is not the most likely scenario. These are mostly determined by in-country technical working groups.
- **“Populations in Phase 5.”** This means that a proportion of the population is suffering extreme food insecurity (equivalent to that suggested for famine), but not in sufficient numbers to breach famine thresholds. These statements say nothing about nutritional status or mortality thresholds. These estimates are also determined by in-country technical working groups.

30% of children under five years of age are acutely malnourished; and the crude death rate is at least two per ten thousand people per day.

Table 1. Comparison of Funding Four Months Prior to and Four Months After Analysis

#	Famine/Crisis	Designation	4 Months Prior <sup>4</sup>	4 Months After <sup>4</sup>	Timing
1	SOM 2011 (Jul)	Famine (South-Central)	\$93,529,000	\$1,028,456,000	Real-Time
2	NGA 2016 (Nov)	Famine Likely (Borno)	\$213,788,000	\$310,878,000	Retrospective <sup>6</sup>
3	SSD 2017 (Feb)	Famine (Unity)	\$342,639,000	\$495,492,000	Real-Time
4	SSD 2020 (Dec)	Famine Likely (Pibor)	\$248,774,000	\$197,261,000	Real-Time
5	SSD 2016 (Feb)	ROF <sup>2</sup> (Unity)	\$263,529,000	\$540,958,000	Warning <sup>6</sup>
6	SSD 2017 (May)	ROF (Ayod)	\$432,120,000	\$400,000,000	Warning
7	MAD 2021 (Jul)	ROF (Grand Sud)	\$70,254,000	\$46,746,000	Warning
8	ETH 2021 (Jul)	ROF (Tigray)	\$736,988,000	\$588,393,000	Warning
19	SOM 2022 (Apr)	ROF (South Central)	\$366,341,000	\$1,106,748,000	Warning
10	SOM 2017 (Jan)	Projection <sup>3</sup> (Central)	\$202,275,000	\$569,504,000	Warning
11	SSD 2017 (Dec)	Projection (Baggari)	\$286,420,000	\$284,006,000	Warning
12	SOM 2022 (Aug) <sup>1</sup>	Projection (Bay)	\$1,106,748,000	\$431,367,000	Warning
13	SSD 2016 (May)	Pop in P5 (BEG/Unity)	\$454,617,000	\$310,608,000	Real-Time
14	YEM 2017 (Nov)	Pop in P5 (Multiple)	\$967,570,000	\$691,298,000	Real-Time
15	ETH 2017 (Dec)	Pop in P5 (Somali Region)	\$487,223,000	\$295,711,000	Real-Time
16	YEM 2022 (Mar)	Pop in P5 (Hajjah/Hodeida)	\$342,230,000	\$949,523,000	Real-Time

Source: OCHA-FTS; IPC Famine Review Committee

SOM Somalia      NGA Nigeria      ETH Ethiopia  
 SSD South Sudan      MAD Madagascar      YEM Yemen

**Notes**

1. Another analysis for Somalia in November 2022 also projected famine. It is not included here due to the overlap in timing.
2. Low likelihood (but plausible) scenario—typically 3–4 months hence. A form of early warning.
3. Most likely scenario—typically 3–4 months hence. A stronger form of early warning.
4. Column 3: Funds “committed” or “paid” during the four months prior to declaration or statement.
5. Column 4: Funds “committed” or “paid” during the month of declaration and three months after declaration or statement.
6. “Famine Likely” and “Risk of Famine” are similar to earlier “Step 2” designations” and “ELOF” (Elevated Likelihood of Famine) but not precisely the same thing. The “Famine Likely” and “ROF” designations were formally adopted in 2021 but used in 2020.

In brief, the data in Table 1 suggest that what happened in the four months following the declaration in Somalia in 2011 (a ten-fold increase in funding compared to the four months prior) was a one-off phenomenon, which has not even remotely been repeated since—even though this seems to be the mental model everyone has about the impact of declarations. In South Sudan in 2017, funding

increased modestly in the four months following the declaration—and a lot of resource re-prioritization occurred internally. But the funding for South Sudan as a whole hardly changed at all between 2016, 2017 and 2018—approximately \$1.2 billion per year each of those years. Funding levels actually declined in the four months following the “famine likely” determination for Pibor

County in South Sudan in 2020. Again, there was some internal reallocation or re-prioritization of resources for Pibor, but overall levels of international support fell in the short term and remained unchanged over the longer term.

In [Nigeria](#), funding for the emergency in the northeast had increased from only \$158 million in 2015 to over \$900 million in 2017, so some of this followed the declaration in late 2016, but the declaration was retrospective—the identified famine had occurred four months prior to the analysis that determined it. While it was possible that famine was still occurring in other areas, funding for 2017 had, for the most part, already been allocated by the time of the declaration. International support to northeastern Nigeria was ramping up, but it was in response to the larger crisis, not a retrospective declaration.

The responses to a “Risk of Famine” (ROF) determination are also mixed. In most cases, funding increased or decreased modestly. The sharp exception is [Somalia](#) in 2022<sup>3</sup> where funding increased threefold over the ensuing three months. The “Projection” of famine (as a stand-alone analysis—many of these were included with a declaration or a “Risk of Famine” analysis) also show mixed results. In 2017, a projection of famine in Somalia resulted in almost a threefold increase in funding over the ensuing four months—much of this coming from DFID. In 2022, the projection did not result in an increase—largely because the big increase in funding had taken place earlier (after the ROF analysis). The projection of famine did instigate another supplement from USAID, which had been responsible for the large increase in funding following the “Risk of Famine” analysis. The “Risk of Famine” analysis for [Madagascar](#) did not result in a short-term increase in funding, but overall levels of funding increased substantially for the following year.

And finally, the “Population in Phase 5” (for acute food insecurity) analyses also show very mixed results—mostly declines in funding. Yemen in 2022 is the one exception, but again, no significant change in overall levels of funding for Yemen occurred between 2021 and 2022. There was a large increase in funding for [Yemen](#) in 2018. The “Population in Phase 5” finding for [Ethiopia](#) in 2017 did not make a major difference in year-to-year funding, and short-term support actually declined.

Overall, the relationship between declarations or warnings and funding is unclear. Warnings appear to have a bigger impact on funding than declarations, but even warnings appear to have mixed impacts. This data suggests however, that both warnings *and* declarations regarding Somalia elicit a bigger response from donors than those from other countries.

None of this is to imply that funding for any of these crises was *adequate*. The data only suggest that, with the one major exception of Somalia in 2011, there is little evidence that declarations result in an increased flow of international funding—either in the short term or even on a year-by-year basis. Overall funding for humanitarian action—not just famine prevention and response—has increased substantially over recent years but is not keeping up with rapidly expanding *need*. Of course, what these figures do not show is what proportion of any increase in resources went to the specifically affected populations, or to what extent resources were re-prioritized internally towards a specifically identified population. And finally, the humanitarian response should not focus entirely on the international flow of resources—there are also internal resources and capacities to be mobilized.

For the most part, donors note that funding for humanitarian response is largely locked in long before it actually arrives on the ground (or on the OCHA Financial Tracking Service reporting site). Exceptions do exist, and supplemental funding is sometimes added to humanitarian budgets in the middle of a budget year. Much of the funding decision-making process has already been completed before either declarations or projections are made. However, these analyses are still critical: most donors hold at least some amount of funding in reserve precisely because crises are so difficult to predict (additional funding was made available globally in both 2017 and 2022). These additional funds are at least part of the reason why Somalia did not fall into famine in 2017 and 2022, but they are not the only reason.

The answer to the problem of resources for famine prevention and response is not to lower the bar to speed up the process for an “official” declaration of famine. That would simply turn every “emergency” into a “famine-

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<sup>3</sup> The 2022 figures for Somalia are a bit confusing. The big supplemental funding was from USAID, and it shows up on the OCHA Financial Tracking Service records in May, but it actually wasn't announced until

Samantha Power's visit to Mogadishu in July. But the figure for May was confirmed by USAID—and was based in internal messaging from FEWS NET as far back as late 2021.

prevention emergency,” and in a severely resource-constrained era, would do little to promote good analysis or the impartial prioritization of the most critical problems. In the case of Somalia in 2011, the declaration of famine did trigger an enormous flow of resources. But this meant that the big influx of resources arrived very late, and a lot of people lost their lives. Since 2011, there is little evidence that *other* declarations have resulted in major resource inflows. The preferred means of prioritizing more resources—both of a preventive and

responsive nature—would be credible warnings of a problem that is *likely* to occur, but which are issued *before* the crisis has spiraled out of control. Paying much closer attention to early warning is far better than simply lowering the bar for a declaration. This analysis offers some evidence that projections and warning statements do trigger greater prioritization, but not in all cases. Linking good analysis and warning to timely action continues to challenge the humanitarian system.

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