

# Famine, the Coronavirus, and the Politics of Information and Analysis

A FEINSTEIN INTERNATIONAL CENTER BRIEF 

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“In war, truth is the first casualty”

Aeschylus

Greek tragic dramatist

(525 BC - 456 BC)

Leaders around the world have declared that we are “at war” with a virus. Such declarations are often used to legitimize actions that leaders use to take control of information and the story that it tells. We saw this behavior regularly in our recent study “The Constraints and Complexities of Information and Analysis.”<sup>1</sup> That study noted several troubling trends regarding the way information is collected and analyzed and also regarding the way that analysis is interpreted, misrepresented, and “spun.”

If the pandemic is something akin to a “war,” then the international community should heed the words of Aeschylus and work to keep evidence as the basis of action. As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds, we are watching some world leaders misrepresent and manipulate information in the pandemic in ways similar to our observations of information and analysis in famine. In this brief, we lay out some of the lessons from our study of famine information systems

<sup>1</sup> Research page of the Feinstein International Center (Tufts University) website: <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/the-constraints-and-complexities-of-information-and-analysis/>.

and consider how these lessons may be applicable to humanitarian decision makers responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the debate rages over containing the spread of the virus versus containing the economic damage of the pandemic, now is the time to be hyper aware of these issues and act deliberately to prevent misinformation or distortion.

# The politics of information and analysis in famine

“The Constraints and Complexities of Information and Analysis” study analyzed the influences of politics and political interference on information collection for and analysis of famines and famine-risk countries, using data collected in six countries—five of which remain at risk of famine. The main objective of this study was to understand these influences and determine how they can be minimized or better managed to present as accurate a picture as possible of the current status and future path of these crises. All six case study reports are available on the Feinstein International Center website.<sup>2</sup>

The word “famine” retains the power to shock—for good and bad. On the one hand, it awakens authorities and humanitarian actors to a serious crisis: the risk of famine in four countries in 2017 prompted the US Congress to allocate an additional \$990 million (Washington Post 2017), despite pressure to reduce—not increase—foreign assistance budgets.

However, states and governments do not want to admit that, under their administrations, crises have deteriorated to the point of widespread malnutrition and death—neither do armed groups controlling famine-affected territories (Howe and Devereux 2007, de Waal 1997, Lautze and Maxwell 2006). For humanitarian actors, famine is the dramatic manifestation of a response failure (Maxwell and Majid 2016), which can damage their reputations. Donors also risk their reputations at home if they must explain how humanitarian conditions are deteriorating to the point of famine in areas where they have funded major humanitarian efforts.

Given the connotations of the word, there is significant pressure to *not* use it, to cover it up, or to cast

it as something else. In these cases, political forces often determine how famine or near-famine crises are presented to governments, donors, humanitarian agencies, affected communities, the media, and the general public.

Parallels with the coronavirus pandemic are being played out before our eyes around the world, with near daily tussles between scientists and politicians in some countries. In many countries, the lack of testing capacity and incomplete data on all aspects of the pandemic open up opportunities for spinning data and mistrusting official messaging about the progress of the pandemic and the response. Conspiracy theories abound about the origins of the virus and how it is transmitted.

Famines and food emergencies are classified in severity according to a scale; in contrast, pandemics either exist or they don't. With food emergencies, much of the effort to manipulate the data is to keep numbers below the most severe classification (famine). With the pandemic already an established fact, much of the attempt to manipulate or obfuscate information is comparative—twisting data to demonstrate that one country is “flattening the curve” better than another, or that one place is better at balancing the need to contain the virus with the need to manage the economic knock-on effects. Some manipulation aims to stigmatize some groups for the spread of the virus. A scholar in India notes in an April 3 *Time* magazine story that “Islamophobia has been transposed onto the coronavirus issue” (Perrigo 2020). As the debate rages over containing the spread of the virus versus containing the economic damage of the pandemic, now is the time to be hyper aware of these issues and act deliberately to prevent misinformation or distortion.

<sup>2</sup> Individual country case study reports cover Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, and Yemen. They can be found at <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/the-constraints-and-complexities-of-information-and-analysis/>. A synthesis report of the full study is forthcoming in May 2020.

# Ways information can be distorted

Information and analysis can be undermined or influenced for political ends in many ways. In our study about famine information, we found that political influences are more pervasive when data collection processes are poor and data quality or analytical capacity is weak. With the COVID-19 pandemic, we are in a global situation of poor data collection processes, weak data, and uncertainty about numerous important parameters of the progression of the epidemic. Below are some lessons for decision makers as the pandemic and its response plays out in fragile contexts.

## Access to data and missing information

A major constraint on data collection in famines—and the reason that data are frequently missing altogether—is the difficulty humanitarian teams have accessing field sites where the worst affected populations are. Access is frequently a physical constraint in famine—particularly conflict-related famines. Typically, it is governments or governing authorities that restrict or prevent access. Missing data results in an incomplete analysis, which usually means that definitive statements about famine cannot be made. Therefore, ensuring that some data are missing is one way to manipulate the outcome of the analysis. For example, nothing can be definitively said about famine without mortality data. So, if the political pressures are to not say anything concrete about famine, one certain way of ensuring nothing is said is to ensure that mortality data are missing, or are insufficiently rigorous. Other information that is frequently missing—such as about populations or displacement—also make analysis more difficult. Given the novel status of COVID-19, there is a dearth of data in many areas. Information on the incidence of COVID-19 itself is frequently missing, and the fact of the pandemic makes standard (food security and nutrition) data collection even more difficult. Perhaps the most important reason information is missing is the lack of adequate testing and therefore the inability to gauge the fatality rate, identify hot spots, and adapt interventions.

## Influences on the “number in need”

The other major source of interference from government is over the numbers of people in need. In some contexts this figure is so highly politicized that it is politically negotiated, not evidence-derived. Without detailed knowledge of the behind-the-scenes politics, it is difficult to determine if the numbers are being pushed upwards (usually in search of greater resource allocations) or downwards (usually to minimize the extent of a crisis and improve appearances to domestic and international political stakeholders).

Donors may expect to see some impact from *last year's* investment in response reflected in the numbers of a current analysis. In Somalia in early 2018, the donor community wanted to see that the \$1 billion put into the 2017 Humanitarian Response Plan had a positive impact. Analysts are aware of all these pressures. Even while they do their best to produce independent analysis, these pressures influence how important numbers emerge from the analysis. Disputes over numbers have been rampant in the COVID-19 pandemic. The US has cut funding to the World Health Organization over accusations that the WHO helped China cover up the “real” numbers about the initial outbreak. These types of disputes are likely to happen at national and local levels and involve all powerful players in the response.

## Loudest voice in the room

Humanitarian analysis is frequently conducted as a technical consensus among different actors. Frequently, however more powerful actors try to control the process and influence the results of the analysis. This is frequently facilitated by gaps in the data, poor-quality data, uncertainty over causality, or simply by intimidating analysts. All of this leads to a tendency towards less politically risky outcomes to the analysis. In the case of famine, the attempt is usually to influence the analysis towards a less severe outcome—despite the evidence. It is highly likely that the same pressures will emerge during the COVID-19 response.

In the coronavirus pandemic, the loudest voices may well be on social media, which handily transmits conspiracy theories and misinformation about who is to blame, how the disease is transmitted, and who has done a better job of managing the crisis. This miasma of information of unknown validity creates fear and also a laissez-faire attitude, both of which are dangerous during a pandemic.

## Blatant political interference

In some cases involving famine, political interference may be direct and flagrant. The most frequent source of blatant interference is from national governments in a variety of ways, including quashing reports, stopping analyses, threatening individuals with deportation (if international) or removal from their jobs (if national government employees), or demanding changes to analysis reports they do not like. Sometimes agencies or donors may interfere if results of analyses do not support their objectives, budgets, or reputations. In the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen stories such as the April 3 article in *The New York Times* about a Russian medical doctor who was detained for challenging the official virus figures (Higgins 2020). The doctor who initially reported the outbreak of the virus in China was among a group of “whistleblowers” silenced by the authorities. That doctor later died from COVID-19 (BBC, February 7, 2020).

## Self-censorship

Perhaps the most insidious way these pressures manifest themselves is when analysis teams censor

themselves. During famine, analysis teams sometimes change the results to deflect criticism or push-back from political authorities and powerful players. Some are intimidated by people with “the loudest voice in the room,” but some are simply aiming for self-preservation: analysts not only have to think about the data in front of them, but also of future access to the field for assessment, future streams of funding, their own security, and their own sanity. Analysis teams often self-censor to protect themselves from the blatant political interference described above.

In some cases, self-censorship leads to delaying data collection, revising schedules or protocols, or not pushing back very hard on denials of access. It may also mean that analysts simply avoid sensitive areas or topics of conversation or do not push back with evidence to the contrary when it comes to numbers—particularly if dealing with armed groups. Ultimately, self-censorship can lead to negotiated—rather than evidence-based—outcomes to an analysis.

The same is true for the COVID-19 pandemic. Since blatant interference in the evidence for short-term political advantage or to bolster police powers has been the order of the day in several countries, self-censorship will happen. But it will be difficult to detect. Already, the silencing of whistle-blowers and attempts to shame or attack scientists and doctors is likely having a dampening effect on the contributions of other scientists about both the best way to collect and analyze data about the COVID-19 pandemic and the most appropriate responses.

# Recommendations

The purpose of humanitarian information and analysis is to give all actors the most accurate, independent, and up-to-date evidence about humanitarian conditions. No secondary purpose can be allowed to supersede this primary purpose. Threats to independent and impartial humanitarian data analysis comes from nearly all quarters—governments and armed opposition groups, donors and aid agencies, and local government or representatives of affected

communities. To the extent that the independence and reliability of such analyses are undermined, all parties are potentially worse off in the medium term (though some may avoid reputation problems or embarrassment in the short term).

A handful of recommendations grew out of this study that are equally true in famines and in pandemics.

## High-level leadership should engage to counteract politicized influences

All of these recommendations require strong leadership. This includes national governments as well as international agencies, humanitarian country teams, donors, and sometimes local authorities. The leadership and engagement of data-collection and analysis teams is important, but higher-level leadership is critical. Analysts and scientists should have the space to do their jobs and do them well. Higher-level leaders must ensure that they have that space. This key point has become very evident in famine analysis and will be crucial in the collection of data and the analysis of trends during the pandemic. Denial of access, lack of data transparency, political pressures on analysts, etcetera, are all issues that humanitarian leaders should take a lead on to ensure that there is trust in the findings of analyses. In areas of violent conflict, early negotiation of access for data collection is going to be important both to make decisions about the response, but also to mitigate the use of the pandemic for political and conflict objectives by states and non-state armed actors.

## Share data (in real time)

Without exception, famine analysis is seriously crippled when data are not quickly shared among the various actors in an emergency. While nearly all parties have policies of “data transparency,” those guidelines often don’t specify a time frame. In famine analysis, in some cases, interim arrangements are reached that allow, for example, staff from different organizations to work together on real time analysis. In other cases, donors have brought pressure on agencies to share data. Better data transparency and sharing of raw data among various partners in the analysis means that the analysis can be cross-checked. In terms of COVID-19, data on this previously unknown virus are needed quickly to understand the course of the pandemic and the infection and fatality rates. Sharing that data as quickly and accurately as possible is in everyone’s collective interest, but perhaps not in the individual interests of specific parties. Stronger cooperation and coordination are necessary to bring famines to an end.

The same will be even more necessary to bring the pandemic to as swift an end as possible.

## Analysts must be able to “speak outside the consensus” when needed

In our study, in some cases a party to the analysis either issued a separate analysis or registered a minority opinion within a consensus-based process. This “speaking outside the consensus” may be the only means of escaping self-censorship, if the team or individual has the courage to do it.

## A clear multi-level governance system for information collection, analysis, and use is essential

That system needs to have channels for whistleblowing and to manage disagreements between actors. The governance of analysis systems needs to be (and be seen as) independent because in emergencies, especially those that involve the entire population, trust is the key commodity that convinces entire populations to take action and to accept the impacts their actions will have on their lives and livelihoods. At the same time, avenues for managing disagreements must be strengthened, and there must be independent means to fact-check the whistleblowers.

## Beware negotiated outcomes

Strong circumstantial evidence shows that certain outcomes to extreme analysis are more “acceptable” than others. Governments may apply strong pressures to not label populations as “in famine” while at the same time agencies may press for continued funding for humanitarian response. Likewise, all kinds of pressures are being put on individuals and agencies in the pandemic. Analysts and policy makers alike should be on the lookout for analytical results that smack of “horse trading” rather than evidence. Several actions are essential to allow analysts and humanitarian leaders to assess the degree of negotiated outcome present in the analysis. These actions include data transparency, clear and transparent documentation of decisions made during data cleaning and analysis, and a record of where data are

cleaned or changed. Negotiating and “horse trading” may be necessary in policy formulation; it is deadly in analysis.

## Clarify the roles of governments and international agencies

Humanitarian actors generally agree that national information and analysis systems should be led by governments, but the role of government remains to be clarified. Is the government the convener and then one party among equals? Or does a government always have the final say? These are not technical questions or an issue of capacity, but they ultimately must be addressed to have the buy-in and support of all parties. These questions are complicated by the fact that governments are often one party in the conflict that is the main cause of the food security crisis (as was the situation in five of the six cases we studied). Clearly, in such circumstances, a different understanding of the role of government in the analysis is necessary. Lurking behind these questions is the age-old humanitarian dilemma of sovereignty: Is it the sole right of sovereign states to declare crises (and famines) within their own boundaries? What is the role and obligation of the international community? In conflict-affected countries, the risk is that the COVID-19 pandemic will become part of the political conflict and, as a result, the response will not be effective. Preparedness to mitigate this risk would involve a high-level humanitarian agreement on thresholds—when the humanitarian and international community should step in with a responsibility to protect.

## Be prepared to act on imperfect data

Famines cannot be hidden forever. If a famine is occurring, it will eventually become obvious. And so it is with the coronavirus: the pandemic is now an

accepted fact. However, once a famine—or a pandemic—becomes obvious, it may be too late to implement some of the necessary steps to contain the factors driving it. Thus, in a famine or in a pandemic, the early decision making, facilitated by the best evidence-based analysis of drivers and likely outcomes, is critical to prevention, containment, and mitigation. Hence an early and evidence-based analysis that can build a broad consensus for effective action is essential in large-scale crises. To ensure trust in the analytical process, decisions must be clearly and transparently documented. Unfortunately for effective action, political interests often take precedence over evidence.

## Strengthen existing technical capacities

In the longer term it is important to invest in better data quality and analysis, to build better data quality checks, to broaden the analysis, and to strengthen analytical leadership. This can't be done overnight in famine situations or in pandemics—but the current situation calls for rapidly ramping up capacity for analysis *during* this crisis.

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Well before the outbreak of the coronavirus, Colombo and Checchi stated the problem of information and analysis bluntly: “Public health information available in humanitarian crises is, in general, inadequate and ... its application is [often] secondary to *reasoning and incentives of a political nature*, thus contributing to the recurrent failings of humanitarian action” (2018, p. 214, emphasis added). Now that we are in the middle of a pandemic, these words ring even more true. Coming to grips with the political manipulation of information and analysis is key to overcoming this pandemic—and any future pandemic or famine.

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