

The Politics of Information and Analysis in Famines and Extreme Emergencies: Findings from Six Case Studies

A FEINSTEIN INTERNATIONAL CENTER BRIEF 

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Introduction

Major progress has been made in the past decade and a half in building evidence-based responses to famine and extreme humanitarian emergencies. Through improved methods of data collection and analysis, the level of rigor, reliability, and validity of humanitarian information is much greater today. Nevertheless, numerous parties have an interest in influencing—and sometimes blocking or suppressing—information about these emergencies. In many crises, good quality data are not always readily available, and both data collection and analysis processes have been undermined, distorted, and in some cases shut down for political reasons. These are long-standing issues, but they make difficult analyses even more complex in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Parties prone to influencing data certainly include national governments and armed non-state actors, but also include donors, humanitarian agencies, or in some cases even the leaders of affected communities: each have different rationales, and each must be better understood.

Influence on humanitarian analysis takes many forms but can be broken down into

- attempts to influence or limit data collection;
- attempts to control, limit, or shape the analysis;
- attempts to block or delay reports; and
- attempts to “spin” the communication of the results of analysis in ways that distort the findings.

The analysis of famine is fraught with politics. No party wants to hear the word “famine” invoked: To national officials, it implies a failure of governance, or perhaps even a violation of International Humanitarian Law, and it offers opposition politicians or armed groups major fodder with which to attack the current government. To donors and humanitarian agencies, it implies a failure of humanitarian response and, very likely, a failure to heed early warning information. To local communities, it can be a failure to adequately look out for vulnerable members of the community. The observation in this study is that the closer to famine an analysis comes, the more fraught the politics become.

Famine analyses such as Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) or Cadre Harmonisé (CH)¹

¹ Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) has become the global standard for assessing the severity of food security crises, including famine (See IPC Partners. 2019. The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification Technical Manual. Version 3. Rome: FAO). A nearly identical analytical protocol with a somewhat different governance structure, Cadre Harmonisé (CH), is used in West Africa. Information on the severity of food insecurity in 35 countries is available from IPC/CH analyses. Because of its prominence in famine analysis, IPC/CH was the dominant information analysis system reviewed by this study, but it was not the only one. This research focused specifically on the politicization of information and analysis—it was not an evaluation of IPC/CH.

assess need and classify the current and projected severity of crises. Donors may expect them to serve as “report cards” on the previous year’s humanitarian response plan (HRP); governments may expect them to be statements on the overall status of a crisis or even about a conflict driving the crisis—this places additional political strain on an already fraught analysis process.

It is unrealistic to think that the analysis of such crises can take place in an environment completely independent and free of political influences, so the point of this study is to document the influences and recommend good practice for managing the politics, rather than trying to erase them altogether. Further it is not reasonable to expect that staff who are expert analysts in food security and nutrition are necessarily able, on their own, to also manage political tensions. Higher-level leadership within the humanitarian

community must provide the space for technical experts to do their jobs. In other words, addressing and defusing political tensions with government should be the task of UN or agency leadership—but tensions may also exist between or within agencies, or with donors, local communities, and other stakeholders. Leaving the management of all these tensions to technical staff undermines their ability to conduct good technical analysis. Tensions between agencies should be worked out at the leadership level—not at the level of technical staff.

This policy brief summarizes the political influences, noting separate influences on data collection, analysis processes and governance of information systems. The full report² synthesizes the findings and recommendations from six country case studies: Somalia, South Sudan, northeastern Nigeria, Yemen, Ethiopia, and Kenya.³

Influences on data collection, analysis, and governance of information systems

Many of the issues highlighted by this study are technical problems, and some have technical solutions. However, addressing the technical solutions is frequently subject to political constraints, and case study respondents repeatedly stressed that political influences are the greatest precisely when the data or the analytical capacity are the weakest.

Data collection challenges

Certain categories of data are frequently missing, and data may be uneven in quality and reliability. Given that different types of data are collected by different mechanisms, challenges arise in the timing and frequency of data collection and in mismatched units of analysis. Information on food consumption and livelihoods is usually available, but information on nutrition may be limited, and information on mortality is frequently limited or missing. Information on other key related sectors (health or water, sanitation,

and hygiene) is often missing altogether. Given the primary focus on classifying current severity status, many information systems have focused less on a deep analysis of the causes of crisis, and thus many have a limited ability to identify developing “hotspots.” Rigid methodologies or overly bureaucratic adherence to rigid criteria can also result in information gaps.

Humanitarian information systems are dominated by quantitative data and quantitative analysis processes. However, in many extreme cases, such data may not be available in sufficient sample sizes or may be collected in such non-random ways that quantitative analysis is severely limited. However, to date very

² The full report is available here: <https://fic.tufts.edu/publication-item/politics-of-information-and-analysis-in-famines-and-extreme-emergencies-synthesis/>.

³ The country case studies are analyzed in individual reports as well. See: <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/the-constraints-and-complexities-of-information-and-analysis/>.

little capacity exists for the collection and analysis of qualitative information in such circumstances, few guidelines exist for assessing the quality of qualitative information, and the current utilization of qualitative information and analysis is highly vulnerable to political manipulation.

The final key issue is the lack of a common practice around data sharing—which is less a technical problem and more an issue of system governance. Nutrition information systems usually have a standard protocol for data sharing; to date, food security systems mostly do not.

Data analysis challenges

Problems identified in the analysis of information include limits of the technical capacity of systems or technical teams, further exacerbated by high staff turnover. There are also limits on participation and transparency. While the analysis is intended to be a “technical consensus” of all parties engaged in the analysis and the response, in practice it may be dominated by a few large actors, including national governments and some of the larger agencies. Consensus-based analysis can be undermined by powerful actors who insist on their perspective, dubbed the “loudest voice in the room” phenomenon. Given limited clarity on the differentiation between severity categories and the politically fraught implications of “famine,” instances of analytical compromise are not uncommon. This is especially the case with the category of “famine” (technically, IPC Phase 5). These compromises keep “famine” out of the conclusions by increasing numbers in need in the less severe but nevertheless still serious category of “emergency” (IPC Phase 4)—dubbed the “Goldilocks” or “just right” solution.⁴

Humanitarian information systems are intended to produce both current-status information (“hard” data about events that have already happened and people already in need) and early warning information (probabilistic information about risks and hazards and people likely to be in need). Many systems

⁴ Based on the 19th century English folktale about a little girl who inadvertently enters the home of three bears while they are away and finds the porridge, bed, and chair of the parent bears too extreme (too hot, too cold; too hard, too soft) but finds baby bear’s amenities to be “just right.”

confuse these two types of information. IPC/CH analysis focuses not only on current status assessment (frequently twice per year but in some countries only once) but also *projections*, or predictions of populations by phase classification. Other information systems are responsible for early warning, or more frequent monitoring. Differences in objectives and outputs between systems often leave decision-makers confused about current conditions and future risks. Each of these are legitimate components of humanitarian information and analysis systems, but each plays a separate—and complementary—role. Clarifying these roles and the agencies who lead them, as well as how the generated information fits into a general analysis, is a high priority. While efforts towards combining or better coordinating information systems are on-going, strong institutional imperatives to protect existing systems or mandates sometimes make their rationalization a challenge. All of these issues often raise questions about the validity of the reported number of people in need.

A final analytical concern regarding famine analysis in particular is the risk of inaccurate classification. Systems have been built with strong protections against a “false positive” determination (the risk of an analysis determining that a famine is occurring when actually it isn’t). However, there are many fewer corresponding protections against a “false negative” determination (the risk of failing to determine that a famine is actually occurring). While a balance must be struck between these two, the repercussions of a false negative is much worse in humanitarian terms.

Other more flagrant forms of political interference have been documented. These include limitations on access—which of course result in missing or very limited data. Sometimes limitations on access are due to real security concerns; other times access may be invoked specifically to limit information. For example, the strong protections against false positive determinations mean that little can be said about famine if mortality data cannot be gathered. So preventing the collection of reliable mortality data is one certain means of preventing the determination of famine. In the case studies, while the most frequent source of interference came from national governments, it also came from humanitarian agencies or donors. Overt government interference included reports being quashed, analyses being stopped, and individuals being threatened with deportation (if international) or removed from their jobs (if national government employees). Less severe forms of in-

terference included demands for changes in reports that eventually led to versions of the “Goldilocks solution,” or alterations to the number of people in need.

More subtly, these pressures also lead to self-censorship by analysts or analytical teams, such that agencies and governments are satisfied with results of analyses, thereby avoiding overt arguments or threats. Sometimes, however, individuals or groups may challenge the dominant narrative or “consensus” analysis, but they do so at some risk. All of this compromises the independence and impartiality of the process. These influences can be mitigated by good leadership and governance structures, but even good leadership at the technical level can be undermined by political actors.

Famine and extreme emergencies have multiple causes, but conflict is the common thread among causes of contemporary famine. Conflict was a significant cause of food security crises in all but one of the countries studied (the country least at risk of famine or extreme emergency). In at least three cases, conflict was *the* main cause of famine or crisis. Analysis of conflict is frequently either missing completely or relegated to a brief mention as a “contributing factor.” However, considering that conflict information or analysis is also the most highly politicized, it is the most problematic to include. This is particularly the case where a government is party to a conflict causing the crisis (but even where conflict is not the major driver, parties in an analysis may be reluctant to try to include it).

Challenges with the governance of information and analysis

IPC/CH analysis (in particular) is intended to be driven by technical consensus. Controversy arises when that technical consensus proves illusive or

when some participants deem the consensus to have been driven by the interests of one or more parties to the analysis rather than by the data or analytical protocols. This raises the issue of holding “consensus” processes accountable, and “speaking outside the consensus” which is always controversial (but sometimes necessary). “Consensus” does not mean “unanimity”; nor does it mean a conclusion forced by the most powerful party to the analysis. The system needs to incorporate a means of dissent—and a process to resolve disputes.

The role of national governments in assessing humanitarian needs must be clarified. The normative view tends to be that governments should lead these processes, and indeed in some countries, government-led processes have remained largely independent of political influences. But these systems work much better at the lower end of the spectrum of severity than when famine is a serious risk.

Building systems that guarantee the broadest participation in data collection and analysis is a key safeguard against political influences. But the greater the participation, the more difficult the coordination. The broader the inclusion of disparate sources of data and information, the greater the constraints on ensuring data quality and reliability. Trade-offs are inevitable, and the nature of these trade-offs may also determine the extent to which information and analysis can be influenced. As a result, data collection, analysis, and reporting are becoming concentrated in the hands of a relatively small group of analysts who, for the most part, work for a relatively limited number of agencies.

System learning is evident in these analytical processes—particularly where it is specifically fostered. This is constrained by high turnover in the staff who collect data in the field and/or conduct the analyses—but in many ways high turnover and other constraints only emphasize the need for system learning and documentation.

Recommendations: Managing the politics of information and analysis

While doing away with politics around the question of famine is probably impossible, recommendations emerged from this study that could improve analysis by *reducing the influence* of political and other nonevidence-based influences on data collection, analysis, and interpretation. These recommendations are about famine and famine risk, but may also apply to crises of lesser severity. They are grounded in the conviction that the purpose of humanitarian assessment and analysis is to give all actors the most accurate, independent, and up-to-date information about humanitarian conditions possible; *no secondary purpose can be allowed to supersede this primary purpose*.

1. Ensure that the humanitarian imperative prevails in humanitarian analysis.

IPC/CH analysis embraces the twin objectives of building sustainable capacity for a local, government-led analysis and providing an independent, rigorous analysis of humanitarian conditions. Under most circumstances this is appropriate and unproblematic. However, in famine conditions, these two objectives may not be compatible, and if not, *means must be established to ensure the independence of the analysis takes precedence*. Assuring the independence of analysis is imperative, particularly when government is party to a conflict that drives famine or extreme food insecurity. Unquestionably this is a fraught process: over-riding government preferences can result in whole operations being stopped, but independent analysis is directly linked to the “responsibility to protect” commitments of the international community and to UN Security Council Resolution 2417. Ultimately, the process must be accountable to affected populations.

2. Promote honest reporting—regardless.

This may be uncomfortable for some data collection and analysis teams who do not want their outputs to be perceived as less than perfect. It may also be uncomfortable for some elements within host governments. But without exception, the decision-makers interviewed who rely on humanitarian information want honest reporting, including an honest assessment of the weaknesses or gaps in the data and the analysis. Much clearer documentation and reporting of data gaps, quality issues, and decisions made to deal with these gaps are needed. The limitations of the data and the analysis should be reported in an honest and transparent way so that those using the analysis can understand the implications. This will require humanitarian leaders to promote and protect a culture of honesty from the top to the bottom of the process. It will also require monitoring by an independent body and possibly links to funding.

3. Treat humanitarian data as a public good.

At present, much of the data on which humanitarian analysis depends are kept private by the agency collecting them and are only made public after their effective shelf life has expired. To facilitate the most transparent and trustworthy analysis, *data must be made available in real time for independent inspection and analysis*. The Global Nutrition Cluster already does this (except in Yemen). Other examples of sharing the data cleaning and analysis task among stakeholders can serve as models. Donors can help make this a standard practice.

4. Beware the “Goldilocks” solution.

Strong circumstantial evidence shows that certain outcomes in the analysis of extreme emergencies are more acceptable than others. Pressure is strong not to put populations in famine but to keep funding flowing. *In short, this means that IPC Phase 4 is often an accepted compromise in the analysis.* This does not mean that every time a Phase 4 outcome is reached, it is wrong. But it does mean that analysis teams need to be critically self-aware of the symptoms of “Goldilocks” outcomes to analyses. Developing analytical tools—such as examining population distributions across phases—is part of this solution.⁵ However, analytical teams might need to allocate time to examining the various political pressures to negotiate an outcome and to documenting how the analysis has mitigated these pressures.

5. Build in protections to prevent erroneous analytical outcomes.

To date, most protections built into the analytical processes help to prevent false positives (that is, protecting against falsely identifying famine when none exists). From a humanitarian perspective, false negatives (failing to identify famine when one is actually happening) may be a greater danger, but protections against false negatives are far fewer. Several attempts have been made to find a solution to this problem—all involving wording analytical outcomes to explain a situation where data is inadequate to classify a famine, but where the strong probability of famine exists, and where the situation should be treated accordingly. The IPC in close collaboration with donors should identify and codify an approach to solving this dilemma.

⁵ This is described in detail in the full report, pages 30–32.

6. Engage senior agency leadership to counteract influences.

Implementing all of the above recommendations requires strong leadership. This includes UN and non-governmental agency leadership, humanitarian country teams, donors, and governments. The engagement of data collection and analysis teams in countering influence is important, but higher-level leadership is critical in protecting against political interference. In famine-risk countries the UN Humanitarian Country Team should make a briefing from technical leaders a standard component of meetings to address ongoing issues such as access, undue pressure in the analytical process, and disagreements within the consensus-based processes. Draft analytical reports should be made available to a select number of senior decision-makers prior to release to allow a joint approach to dealing with political pressures on the findings of the reports.

7. Strengthen existing technical capacities.

Invest in better data quality and analysis.

Where data quality is lowest and analytical capacity is weakest, external (political) influences are likely to be most pervasive. Continuous strengthening of the technical *capacities for data collection and analysis*, and institutionalizing this capacity, is a high priority. Strengthening technical capacity is necessary to improve the system, but it will not reduce political influences on its own.

Build better data quality checks.

The Global Nutrition Cluster has standard protocols for enumerator and supervisor training, field checking, data quality checks, plausibility checks, and other means to cross check the reliability and validity of nutrition data. There is no reason why the rest of the analytical community cannot do the same. However, information working groups, clusters, and IPC/CH technical working groups must first arrive at a consensus on methods and indicators. Quality checks should include an assessment of the representativeness of the data. Progress has been made in recent analyses, but this process needs to be documented and incorporated into every analysis.

Broaden the analysis.

An unintended consequence of the adoption of the Integrated Phase Classification has been to focus the analysis of crises mainly on the *severity of the crisis* (How “bad” are the current-status indicators like food insecurity, acute malnutrition, and mortality?). This leaves out other important dimensions, including the *magnitude of the crisis* (How many people are affected? What is total mortality, rather than just the mortality rate?); *the longevity of the crisis*; and *the geographic specificity of the crisis*. Analysis should focus on these four dimensions.

Strengthen analytical leadership.

Managing these analyses is not just a matter of technical expertise. Substantial facilitation, leadership, and management skills are needed to lead a “technical consensus” approach. *Investment in good soft skills for leading analysis processes may be as important as investing in the analytical skills.* Some interference in data collection and analysis is subtle and difficult to detect, and the required facilitation and leadership skillset includes the ability to nimbly detect and navigate both implicit and explicit influences.

8. Distinguish more carefully between outcomes and causal factors.

Analysis guidelines and practice must differentiate clearly between current-status information and early warning information, and greater capacity still needs to be built for the latter. While everyone likes “hard numbers,” programs and especially early action interventions have to be based on probabilistic forecasts. Current status and projections are related but different kinds of information, and they result from very different kinds of analysis.

9. Broaden (meaningful) participation in the analysis and build in processes to counter “forced” consensus.

One way to counteract political pressures and to ensure that the “loudest voices in the room” don’t control the analysis process is to *guarantee the genuine participation of all*. Some smaller agencies, and especially local agencies, feel a lot of pressure to conform to the “loudest voices.” Consensus-based analysis processes need a built-in governance mechanism for resolving serious disagreements—a multi-layered escalation process by which serious disagreements can be resolved. The process also needs an agreed mechanism for “minority reports,” or “speaking outside the consensus,” if the disagreement cannot be resolved or if a party is certain that political influences are still overriding evidence-based conclusions. To some degree, the IPC Famine Review Committee is intended to play this role, but is not always able to.

10. Broaden the range of outcome data analyzed.

At the moment, analytical outcomes emphasize food security, malnutrition, and mortality. A full analysis needs a broader range of data, including health, WASH, displacement, and protection—as well as more in-depth examination of causal factors.

11. Clarify the use of qualitative methods and data.

The misuse of “qualitative” information is often one means of undermining an analysis for political

purposes. Clear guidelines should be developed that include criteria for collecting and screening qualitative information, incorporating qualitative analysis methods, and developing mixed-methods approaches to analysis.

Humanitarian food security and nutrition analysis in general has improved markedly over the past decade. Nevertheless, this study highlights ways in which the analysis of famine continues to be influenced by political and other nonevidence-based factors. Humanitarian actors who lead these analyses, those who fund them, and those who rely on them to make decisions must work together to ensure that continuous improvement includes these recommendations to better manage and minimize the influences underlying independent and rigorous analysis.

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