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Food Security in Complex Emergencies:
A Case Study of Sanaag, Somalia

Horn of Africa Relief and Development Organization
(HORN RELIEF)



*“Working for sustainable peace and development in Somalia through grassroots capacity
building, empowerment of women, and protection of the environment”*

Abstract

Somalia in general is an excellent example of complex emergency, and is specifically because of disputed territories and problematic relationships between humanitarian agencies and local authorities and organizations. The regions of Sool and Sanaag provide a tragic and real example of the failure of humanitarian response both in the long and short term in Somalia. This paper intends to offer insights into the constraints of policy and response to short and long term food security in Somalia through a critical analysis and case study of the Sanaag Region.

A history of isolation and neglect

Horn Relief's programmes serve pastoral communities in Sanaag, Somalia. Sanaag is in north-eastern Somalia, and is the second largest region in the nation. Horn Relief estimates the population of eastern Sanaag to be approximately 117 000 people. More than 70 percent of this population are nomadic pastoralists.

Sanaag lies between the borders of the semi-autonomous State of Puntland in the northeast, and the self-declared State of Somaliland in the northwest. Both governments claim territorial authority over the land. Although both governments invest heavily in their political and territorial interests, neither administration has contributed to meaningful development or emergency relief in the region.

Despite the territorial dispute, there has been very little violence in Sanaag since the war broke out in 1991. In fact, because of its peace and stability the region became a refuge for thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) seeking safety. However, the international community has responded to the political conflict and complex situation by instituting a 'non-

engagement' policy, leaving the people in the region without access to assistance and support in their efforts to secure sustainable livelihoods.

Sanaag is now one of the most impoverished and underdeveloped regions in Somalia, in particular in northern Somalia - which overall has more stability and should thus have received more assistance and development. The international community's policy of non-engagement has been devastating to both short- and long-term food security in the region.

Deteriorating livelihoods

Horn Relief has been working with the isolated communities of Sanaag for over ten years. In an effort to promote sustainable livelihoods in Sanaag, Horn Relief has closely monitored long-term factors leading to food security including the state of the environment (i.e. rangelands), water supply, animal health, access to markets and levels of purchasing power.

In Sanaag, pastoral survival is inseparable from the condition of the environment. The population depends on fertile pasturelands to raise their camels, sheep, and goats. Sanaag is experiencing enormous environmental problems, while at the same time it lacks both the human and financial resources to address these critical issues. As a result of the clear-cutting of trees for charcoal production and exportation, the land is rapidly becoming a useless desert. Vital rangelands have now turned into wastelands that do not support animal or human life.

The Sanaag region is classified as an arid and semi-arid environment, experiencing less than 250 mm of rainfall per year which is very erratically distributed. Connected with these dry conditions is the frequent scarcity of water. The main sources of water for the region are boreholes, *berkeds* (ponds), and shallow wells. Without local capacity to invest in necessary maintenance, less than 20 percent of water infrastructure is functional in Sanaag. The majority of both the nomadic and village populations are now dependant on unreliable surface water sources.

In recent years the population in the Sanaag region has nearly doubled. There has been a gradual migration of IDPs seeking a peaceful place to settle. The increase in numbers has intensified pressure on the fragile rangeland resources as well as the limited resources of local households.

Traditionally the Sanaag region maintained a diverse economy, producing and exporting livestock, frankincense, and leather. However, following the outbreak of civil war the region's economy collapsed from loss of markets, dilapidated infrastructure, and lack of investment. Now the region only supports one main economy, livestock rearing. The livestock ban imposed by Gulf countries (Sanaag's largest market) has virtually destroyed the economy in the region, reducing purchasing power and forcing pastoralists in the region to survive on subsistence activities. The increase in IDPs coupled with the ban on livestock exports has caused overstocking in the region. The numbers of livestock have exceeded the capacity of the available rangelands leading to their overuse and destruction.

Humanitarian appeal to the international community

In response to the clear signs of eroding livelihoods and increased risk of chronic and acute food insecurity Horn Relief, for over eight years, has been lobbying the international community to intervene and assist the people in the Sanaag region. Horn Relief has offered information to the SACB, NGO Consortium, EU, UN, and USAID about the critical situation. Faced with a complex political situation between Puntland and Somaliland and the fact that Sanaag is a disputed territory, the international community has chosen to be "neutral" and has adopted a policy of non-engagement. This policy has allowed the international community to stay politically neutral, however, at the cost of the opportunity to develop

sustainable livelihoods in the Sanaag region. Although the UN and the international community claims “neutrality”, since UNISOM days they have been engaging with the Somaliland Administration when it comes to negotiating activities in Sool and Sanaag.

Horn Relief, with the support of various foreign NGOs and foundations, in particular NOVIB, has been able to work in Sanaag implementing projects aimed at addressing the long-term sustainability of livelihoods and food security. However, the resources available to Sanaag are limited and not sufficient to meet the growing deterioration of long-term food security.

From deteriorating livelihoods to a crisis of acute food insecurity

For the third consecutive year Sanaag is experiencing drought. The majority of the region did not receive any rain the last season. Recurrent drought, limited water sources, lack of water infrastructure, and environmental degradation has led to a water and food security crisis in the Sanaag Region.

Droughts have been a normal cycle of pastoral life in Sanaag, however with the rapid destruction of the environment caused by overgrazing and charcoal burning pastoralists have lost traditional coping mechanisms. The current drought has become a humanitarian crisis because distances between healthy pasture and water have greatly increased as a result of desertification. Poor and middle wealth-group pastoralists are unable to walk the distance from water points to good pasture resulting in mass loss of livestock.

The pastoral communities are not able to cover their basic food, medicine or water needs. As a result of the drought the number of saleable animals has decreased and pastoralists do not have the resources to buy the food they need from the market. Poor households and some middle wealth-group households are facing an energy need deficit of 25-35 percent (FSAU, 2003). By August 2003, food insecurity reached emergency levels.

Currently the drought is posing a threat to more than 69 000 individuals, or 10 000 households. The vulnerable population has increased by 125 percent since the FAO Food Security Assessment Unit (FSAU) and Horn Relief carried out a drought assessment in 2002. Global Acute Malnutrition has increased from 6 to 13 percent over the last year and is expected to increase due to the failure of rains (FSAU, 2003). These numbers indicate an alarming increase in the level of food insecurity in the region.

Without an alternative income generating activities or coping mechanisms, pastoralists have turned to charcoal production as a source of hard currency income. With the loss of all other industries, charcoal is the only means for communities to meet their basic needs. However, charcoal production causes rapid desertification and compromises opportunities for long-term recovery.

The overall food security situation of pastoral communities in Eastern Sanaag calls for immediate attention.

International (non-)response

After ten years of isolation and neglect, despite Horn Relief's efforts to promote sustainable livelihoods with limited resources, 69 000 now face food insecurity in Sanaag and are in need of immediate relief in the form of food and water distribution. The FSAU has repeatedly provided early warning reports about this situation over the last three years. In addition, Horn Relief has carried out food security assessments in the region and reported the findings to the Somalia Aid Coordination Body (SACB) and other international actors in Somalia.

Despite the obvious risk of food insecurity predicted six months ago by Horn Relief and the FSAU because of the failure of seasonal rains, the international community has been slow to act as a result of a lack of preparation for food insecurity, the political complexity of Sanaag, and the lack of interagency coordination and cooperation.

The FSAU was established in order to improve early warning for food security in Somalia. However, unless there are clear policies and systems of response to warnings of weakening food security situations, or especially when acute food insecurity is reported, early warnings and reports are ineffective at mitigating a humanitarian crisis. In the instance of Sanaag, FSAU and Horn Relief have been assessing and reporting the progress of a deteriorating food security situation becoming an acute crisis. However, the information has not been successful in mobilizing a response.

When the FSAU, the agency mandated to report on food security, and the only agency in the region, in this case Horn Relief, reports acute food insecurity the next step would naturally be an interagency response to ensure the mitigation of immediate threats. However that is not the case in Sanaag. After almost a month of meetings among the international community on the food security situation in Sanaag, the only action that has been taken in addressing the humanitarian crisis was a fact finding mission by the UNDP/Humanitarian Coordinator, which concluded in the recommendation for a further interagency assessment to be conducted. While the international community spends time and resources double-checking Horn Relief and FSAU's reporting, pastoralists in Sanaag face an increasing risk.

The lack of response to the crisis in Sanaag is not only a result of the lack of policy and response systems, but reflects the complex political situation. The current drought affected areas and subsequent food crisis is in the eastern region of Sanaag, which is dominated by a clan affiliated with the Puntland administration. Neither Puntland nor Somaliland Administration has declared an emergency in Sanaag. The response of the UN has led to the heightened politicization of the food security situation. Rather than approaching the communities in need directly, the UN has chosen to involve political leaders in the region, who are part of the Somaliland Administration. This again illustrates the manner in which "neutrality" is implemented in the field – clearly not neutral. The result has been a delay in response as the UN struggles to negotiate and navigate the political complexity of the region.

Response has also been delayed as a consequence of lack of cooperation and coordination between food security actors. While FSAU clearly reports the need for humanitarian intervention in the region in terms of food and water distribution, the World Food Programme argued that there is not a crisis in Sanaag and was opposed to emergency intervention. In order to resolve the opposing views of both agencies it was decided that there would be an interagency assessment. While it is critical that there is a mutual understanding of the situation and the options for the best and most sustainable response, calling for another interagency assessment will take a month and a half to organize and two weeks to report and interpret findings, and the suffering in Sanaag will not receive assistance for a minimum of two months. By that time rains may come, but those most at risk may already be lost. The international community again needs to review its policy related to which agency is mandated to declare a food security crisis.

Recommendations

- Building and promoting sustainable livelihoods over the long term will reduce risk of acute food insecurity and should be the priority in addressing food security in Somalia.
- Grassroots organizations should be consulted and supported in their efforts to promote sustainable livelihoods.
- Civil society organizations based in both Sanaag and Sool that are supporting either Puntland or Somaliland administrations must be supported to discuss the food security

situation in the region, and political/clan conflicts and their impact on the livelihood of the communities.

- FSAU findings should be considered sufficient to warrant response to food insecurity by the international community.
- Neutral rules of engagement must be established and applied by the international community, led by OCHA and UNDP, when addressing needs in disputed territories.
- A lack of objective information on the security of these territories results in unsubstantiated and biased allegations of “insecurity”. This means that the regions become labelled as insecure, despite the reality on the ground. This must be addressed with regular security assessments taking place in these regions.

References

FSAU (2003). *Monthly Food Security Report*, July. Food Security Assessment Unit, FAO