



Reenergizing the High-Level Task Force on Preventing Famine

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The international community's response to famine prevention is in urgent need of reform as nearly one million people face famine conditions.

In 2017, the threat of four famines captured global attention and drove early action, averting many of the worst outcomes. Since then, acute food insecurity has more than doubled, driven up in large part by COVID-19 and the global effects from the conflict in Ukraine. While the international community is rightfully seized with growing food insecurity across dozens of countries, this broad focus has diverted focus and resources from the smaller group of countries at most imminent risk of famine.

There has been a proliferation of international initiatives to address global food insecurity, including the G7 Famine Prevention Compact; the G7/World Bank Global Alliance for Food Security; the Roadmap for Global Food Security; the International Financial Institutions' Action Plan to Address Food Insecurity; the Global Crisis Response Group on Food, Energy and Finance; and the Global Network Against Food Crises. Many of them are focused on longer-term issues related to food systems, supply chains, and economic development.

What is missing is a robust safety net that kicks in when these efforts falter and a country is headed towards famine. Commendable efforts on wider food insecurity will come too late for people at risk of starvation now.

The Cost of the Status Quo: A Risk of Multiple Famines

Six countries are at highest risk of famine: Somalia, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Yemen, northeast Nigeria, and South Sudan.

They host nearly 100 million people facing food insecurity – close to one-third of the global caseload. This represents a tripling in food insecurity compared to the 'four famines' risk in 2017. By late 2022, these states already hosted nearly one million people who were projected to slip into famine conditions and millions more on the brink, putting them at risk of starvation.

Getting the global response right in these states could tip the scale away from catastrophe.

The System is Broken, not just Broke

Famine responses are not just underfunded; the system for anticipating, preventing and responding to famine is failing. In the 2011 famine in Somalia, half of all deaths occurred before a famine was declared. Yet famine declarations, rather than early warning, remain the key trigger for a response. Several challenges have prevented effective responses:

- 1) Responsibility is diffused.** The proliferation of initiatives to address food insecurity is diluting focus and diffusing responsibility for any given group to spring into action on famine. The lack of an effective, coordinated approach to famine prevention, beyond the humanitarian system, further enables political inertia and reduces accountability.
- 2) The donor base is limited.** Countries at risk of famine tend to receive humanitarian funding from a small number of traditional donors. Despite months of famine warnings for Somalia in 2021-2022, funding came months too late and remains insufficient to address rising needs.
- 3) Early warning fails to spark early action.** Early warning mechanisms and famine risk forecasting have become highly sophisticated and accurate, yet this data is not driving action early enough. A [USAID-commissioned study](#) on Somalia estimates that early responses can reduce costs by 30%. Despite this, a study of nine crises found only [2.3%](#) of funding was pre-arranged. The organizations that produce technical early warning data, like the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) and the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Global Platform, lack the convening power and influence to catalyze global action at the highest levels.
- 4) Humanitarian and development actors operate in silos.** Many countries at risk of famine have large-scale aid programs and an array of humanitarian, development, climate, peace, and private sector actors. Yet too often the response to famine is constrained to humanitarian action that scales up once deaths begin. This dynamic incentivizes national governments to delay famine declarations out of concern that all resources will be redirected to emergency aid. Famines require more than just food, and more than humanitarian aid. The current approach fails to leverage all the tools available for a collective response.

The IRC's Proposal

The UN Secretary-General's [High-Level Task Force \(HLTF\) on Preventing Famine](#) was established in 2021 with a singular measure of success: preventing famine. With a unique mandate provided by the Secretary General, the HLTF should be elevated as the primary international body charged with famine prevention and response.

The revised HLTF would not seek to replace the IASC-led humanitarian coordination architecture or formal famine declaration process, but rather it would provide forum to raise attention and resources early on before it is too late and promote a comprehensive and coordinated response across a more diverse set of actors.

Structural changes

1) Formally align the HLTF's mandate with the outcomes of WFP and FAO's *Hunger Hotspots* analysis.

The HLTF should have a standing mandate to focus narrowly on only the countries identified by WFP and FAO as "highest concern" in their regular *Hunger Hotspots* analysis. Once a country is on this list, it should trigger a standardized course of action from the HLTF (see below). That tier currently consists of six countries: Afghanistan, Yemen, northeast Nigeria, Somalia, Ethiopia and South Sudan.

2) Expand the HLTF's membership.

The HLTF remains siloed within the UN system, reinforcing a humanitarian-development divide. Moreover, famines are often rooted in complex crises that require diplomatic and political engagement. The HLTF should be a forum to facilitate greater coordination and a common approach by including the below members. The affected states should also be regularly engaged to advise on needs in their countries and align national and international responses.

- **Donors:** Participants (at Ministers for Development level) should include those who have traditionally provided significant political and financial contributions to address food insecurity as well as emerging donors.
- **Regional bodies:** The location of famine risk countries should guide participation, including: the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the African Union, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).
- **NGOs:** Participation should include NGOs, who are on the frontlines of famine responses. National and international NGOs can provide unique insights into the community needs, access barriers and response gaps.
- **International Financial Institutions (IFIs):** Participants (at Director level) should include those leading responses to famine prevention and regional/country representatives. This should include representatives from the World Bank, the IMF, and representatives from regional development banks as relevant to affected countries.
- **UN agencies:** Participation in the reformed HLTF should be agreed at Principal level and representation (at the executive director level) should be expanded beyond OCHA, WFP, and FAO to include UNICEF given its leadership on nutrition and UNDP given its work related to climate change and resilience.

Ways of Working

The HLTF should operate with senior level membership and a robust accountability structure. This should include:

- **Annual convening:** HLTF members should meet at Principals level to launch the HLTF and its focus for the year, and thereafter, to agree the Action Plan developed by the HLTF Steering Committee each year.
- **Quarterly check ins:** A Steering Committee, consisting of senior representatives (e.g. UN Executive Directors, Famine Envoys, heads of donor agencies, NGOs' operational response leaders, etc.), should meet to develop an HLTF Action Plan that outlines agreement and responsibilities. The group should allocate responsibility for each action to a lead member who holds responsibility for coordination, delivery, and reporting.
- **Published annual Action Plans:** The Action Plan should be public, and at the annual meetings of the HLTF, the Steering Committee should submit a progress report to the HLTF leadership, including the Secretary-General.
- **Resourcing:** Each participating body should establish a dedicated staffing structure to support their engagement in the development and delivery of the Action Plan.

What the HLTF should do

The HLTF should convene on a regular basis and establish a collective **Action Plan for Famine Prevention** which addresses the following objectives and actions in prioritized countries.

1) Leverage evidence to drive coordinated decision making.

- **Facilitate a common understanding of the drivers of food insecurity in each context** to inform policy decisions and trigger the release of funding. It can draw on and elevate the findings of the technical analysis from early warning systems such as the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET), the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), the Systematic Observations Financing Facility as well as other indicators of famine risks including analysis from the WASH and health sectors, the Global Network Against Food Crises, and the work of HLTF members. This should include analysis from relevant regional organizations.
- **Create shared analysis of the barriers to an effective famine response.** The HLTF's mandate and standardized approach to each famine risk country may help it address thornier issues without being perceived as politically motivated. This should include identifying gaps in data, barriers to regular food insecurity assessments, and constraints on humanitarian access. Assessments could be informed by visits to prioritized countries and consultations with IASC, national governments, local actors, and affected populations.

2) Galvanize collective action for resource mobilization and advocacy.

- **Support fundraising, with a focus on new funding streams and anticipatory financing.** The HLTF should support a pledging conference on famine prevention with OCHA to mobilize funding and other pledges for at-risk countries, ensuring lower profile crises are not forgotten. The HLTF should establish a private sector engagement plan to encourage participation from the private sector and philanthropies and could include a fundraising target for the private sector to help expand flexible funding. These contexts should be priorities for anticipatory financing, like OCHA's pilots with the Central Emergency Relief Fund, given their history of famine risks.
- **Coordinate investments in resilience and anticipatory actions.** The HLTF can help strengthen the high-level activation and coordination of efforts to scale up resilience and anticipatory action. This should include greater social safety nets, service delivery programs (e.g., health, water and sanitation) and cash programming early on to halt deteriorations into famine. In some at risk states, governments are unable or unwilling to respond in all areas and there are significant populations outside of government control. As such, donors should adapt by supporting UN agencies and NGOs as delivery partners for these programs.
- **Identify opportunities for IFIs to scale up and deploy their crisis funds and other tools.** For instance, the World Bank's Crisis Response Fund and IMF's Food Shock Window should be key pillars of famine prevention efforts across the highest risk states, combined with faster and more flexible disbursements and rapid deployment of technical support missions to these countries.
- **Engage in collective advocacy to address barriers to famine response.** These efforts may include addressing bureaucratic access impediments, legal issues, counterterrorism restrictions, gaps in capacity of governments, or developing policies that target the most vulnerable and marginalized populations. The HLTF could help guide targeted efforts with other operational groups and initiatives on food insecurity, such as the Group of Friends on Conflict and Hunger or IASC and its Emergency Directors Group, to support coordinated engagement.
- **Identify synergies between climate efforts and famine prevention needs.** Too often, climate and humanitarian responses are siloed. Climate financing is risk-averse, failing to go towards the fragile and conflict-affected states where climate change is hitting hardest and driving severe hunger crises, while insufficiently investing in the types of programs they require to prevent cycles of famine, particularly adaptation and longer-term investments. The HLTF has a role to play in driving political will to prioritize these highest risk settings. HLTF members, particularly NGOs with experience in conflict settings, can also support climate actors to better understand and mitigate risks.

3) Publicly issue after-action reports on prioritized countries. Famines have been prevented, including three of the four risks in 2017. But lessons learned are often not systematically documented. This reporting should occur regardless of whether a famine occurs, identifying the roles that HLTF members and others played in trying to prevent famine.

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