Synthesis Report on the Famine Forum

Annette C. Sheckler, Timothy Shortley, Anne Swindale and Sue Lautze

May 2004

In response to the 2002 National Security Strategy, USAID issued its White Paper, *Foreign Aid: Meeting the Challenges of the Twenty-first Century*. The White Paper outlines USAID's proposed reforms and guiding principles to increase development aid effectiveness and policy coherence. In it, the developing world is divided into two groups of countries: relatively stable developing countries and fragile states.

USAID's strategy for fragile states has significant implications for how USAID responds to the challenges of famine in a constantly shifting global context. According to the White Paper:

> Fragile states include those on a downward spiral towards crisis and chaos, some that are recovering from conflict and crisis, and others that are essentially failed states. The challenge for these countries is to strengthen institutions, basic governance and stability, and thereby join the group of countries where more conventional development cooperation and progress are possible. [1]

The White Paper highlights the competing principles of investing more resources in relatively stable developing countries positioned for "transformational development" and the need to strengthen fragile states. According to the White Paper, "[f]rom the perspective of long-term U.S. interests, transformational development remains the best investment."[2] Yet, without sufficient investment in fragile states—especially famine-prone countries—the United States, other donors and recipient countries are stuck on a treadmill of massive humanitarian aid. The immediate focus on saving lives fails to address the root causes of weak livelihoods systems that provide little or no protection against shock (e.g. famine or conflict).

Famine prone countries are a unique sub-set of fragile states that require special focus. These countries currently include Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Malawi, the People's Democratic Republic of Korea, Somalia, Sudan, and Zimbabwe. In all cases, weak and failing economic,

governance, health and livelihood systems, and in particular food systems at the national level, increase famine vulnerability. The combination of shocks, failing systems and poor policies in these countries often results in famine outcomes including destitution, morbidity, malnutrition and mortality.

USAID has responded to recent threats of famine primarily with large amounts of food aid. Yet, the root causes of famine extend far beyond climatic anomalies and are inextricably bound to households' and societies' capacities for managing both shocks and longer term processes, e.g. globalization, marginalization, disease epidemics, etc. To date, USAID has focused its resources on response and not prevention and mitigation. In order to better deploy resources to meet the challenge of famine in fragile states, the Office of Food for Peace (FFP) and the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) organized a Famine Forum March 24-25, 2004 in Washington, D.C.

The objectives of the forum were to:

- Recognize that a sub-set of fragile states represents the most 'famine-prone countries' and requires that USAID "does business differently" to address the underlying causes through a developmental relief approach;

- Redefine USAID's definition of famine and policy toward the application of resources to prevent and respond to the threat of famine;

- Use the newly identified "famine scales" to lower the present threshold of famine;

- Identify alternative responses necessary for success beyond the "nuts and bolts" of food and non-food programming, including livelihood and market interventions, responses to health system inadequacies, as well as short- and longer-term policy and governance constraints; and

- Enhance coordination with other donors to develop pro-active approaches to famine prevention and famine response.

[1] United States Agency for International Development, *U.S. Foreign Aid: Meeting the Challenges of the Twenty-first Century* (January 2004), referred to here as the White Paper.

[2] *Ibid.*

Participation in the forum included a broad representation of USAID practitioners, senior-level USAID management and representatives from FEWSNET, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and the Academy for Educational Development's Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance Project (FANTA). International famine experts Sue Lautze, (Feinstein International Famine Center at Tufts University), Stephen Devereux and Paul Howe, (Institute of Development Studies), as well as others, made significant contributions to the discussion with some of the state-of-the-art thinking on the challenges of addressing famine in the 21st century.

This report is a synthesis of the discussions that took place during the forum and concludes with recommendations for priority actions that will assist USAID to move from famine response to famine prevention in a strategic manner. Table 1 is a detailed summary of the key themes and focus areas that were discussed.

The first section summarizes the presentation made by Stephen Devereux and Paul Howe on the famine scale, a new approach to defining famine based on measuring intensity, based on malnutrition and mortality indicators, and magnitude. Lowering the 'catastrophic' threshold and moving from a food-first approach to a broader, more complex definition, emphasizing people's livelihood's as well as a multi-sector approach will drive an earlier and more appropriate response.

Section Two summarizes the discussion on changes required in USAID's institutional structure and culture. This includes: expanding responsibility and accountability for prevention throughout USAID; strengthening human resource capacity; promoting a climate of risk-taking; and improving information systems.

Following the discussion of institutional changes is a section on resources. Resources drive famine response. Forum participants expressed broad agreement on the need to clarify concomitant funding and programming flexibilities that will ensure success in supporting a famine prevention agenda. Section Three discusses the need to increase the availability of resources and have greater flexibility in deployment to support aggressive famine-prevention interventions.

The U.S. is the lead donor in humanitarian response worldwide. Section Four looks at ways to leverage this role within the broader humanitarian community, focusing on the pros and cons of consensus; the need to reform U.N. disaster management agencies; and diversifying non-governmental organization (NGO) implementing partners.

Last, new tools, approaches and programmatic changes are required to address famine as a failure of systems and strategies in famine-prone countries. Section Five is a discussion on using the livelihoods context to broaden famine definitions, improve surveillance, monitoring information and assessments, and improve famine prevention and response efforts.

This synthesis report concludes with a list of priority action areas.

List of Acronyms

CMR	Crude Mortality Rate
DA	Development Assistance
DCHA	USAID's Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance
FANTA	Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance Project
FEWSNET	Famine Early Warning Systems Network
FFP	USAID's Office of Food for Peace
GDA	Global Development Alliance
HA	Humanitarian Assistance
IDFA	International Disaster and Famine Assistance
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute
ILO	International Labor Organization
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
OFDA	USAID's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance
P.L. 480	U.S. Public Law 480, Title II commodity program administered by USAID (see Title II)
TITLE II	USAID administered program to provide agricultural commodities to foreign countries to address famine or other urgent relief requirements
UN	United Nations
USG	United States Government
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Table 1. Key Themes and Focus Areas of Discussion for Consideration

1. Policy	• Update Famine Background Paper
	  − *operational definition, lower thresholds for response, use famine scales*
	• Review White Paper for implications for required resource integration (Development Assistance (DA), International Disaster and Famine Assistance (IDFA), Title II)
	• Integrate famine-prone countries into Fragile States Strategy
	• Identify famine-prone countries as priorities
	  − *devise country-specific strategies such as the new Ethiopia famine prevention framework*

2. Institutional	• Build mechanisms for assigning accountability and responsibility within the Agency for famine prediction, response and prevention
	  − *better integration across the agency in preventing and mitigating famine*
	• Strengthen human capacity
	  − *empowered Humanitarian Entrepreneurs / Humanitarian Diplomatic Corps*
	  − *knowledgeable mission staff (including Mission Director) on famine and famine processes as well as prevention and response tools available*
	  − *encourage risk-taking and innovative thinking*
	• Improve knowledge management of historical approaches and innovations

3. Resources — More and Better	• Increase availability of resources of DA, Title II, IDFA • Provide more flexibility to tailor response to causes • Rationalize food and/or non-food resource prioritization • Use food aid resources to support market development and policy reform • Better integrate Development Assistance (DA) and Humanitarian Assistance (HA) resources − *appropriate mix of available development assistance, disaster funds, and food assistance* • Support multi-year and predictable resource flows

4. Recipient Governments/ Donors/ Implementing Partners	• Leverage USAID resources to a greater extent (reducing barriers and creating enabling environment)
	• Better understand when consensus among donors is required for USAID to respond
	  − *understand strengths and weaknesses of consensus-building*
	• Press for United Nation reform of disaster management agencies
	  − *bring in parts of U.N. system that are not in crisis (e.g., ILO)*
	• Increase requirement for match of private resources
	• Diversify PVO/NGO implementing partners

5. Programmatic	• Information - more and better
	  − *baseline understanding of current situation and contextual factors (e.g., food security, health systems, governance)*
	  − *baseline for early warning indicators; more holistic, predictive indicators (e.g., livelihoods)*
	  − *on-going monitoring*
	• Make better use of the local mass media channels to inform the people about the response, and to hold the government accountable
	• More emphasis on:
	  − *prevention and early response*
	  − *building local capacity to respond in short-term*
	  − *health status, systems and health responses*
	  − *good governance*
	  − *reducing vulnerability (medium-term)*
	  − *poverty reduction (longer-term)*
	• Better market development interventions; engage the private sector in famine response
	• Transform project approach to systems response as famine is a failure of systems (e.g., economic, governance, health, and livelihoods)

1. Defining Famine Using Intensity and Magnitude: The Famine Scale

It is important that USAID update the present famine background paper to include an operational definition of famine that broadens the parameters from simply a catastrophic event to reflect the complexity and inter-relationship of causal factors. This includes lowering the 'catastrophic threshold' and moving from a food-first approach to a more nuanced definition, emphasizing the multi-causal nature of famine vulnerability.

Operationally defining famine is a key step towards refining the policy framework. Recent USAID experience in Southern Africa and Ethiopia highlights the reluctance within USAID and the broader international humanitarian community in declaring a famine. A declaration of famine has significant implications for the timing of the response, resource allocation, type of response and, ultimately, accountability. Without consensus on the definition of famine, stakeholders may delay responding to the crisis until, in effect, it is too late. This is one of the many factors that delays response.

The absence of a universally accepted definition of famine within the international humanitarian community has operational and political consequences.[3] Operationally, disagreements over terminology make it difficult to interpret and respond quickly on the early warning data that precede the crisis. During the crisis, lack of consensus about what constitutes a famine creates uncertainty about the gravity and magnitude of the crisis, which can result in delays and inappropriate responses—such as an over-emphasis on food aid. Politically, stakeholders may contest the declaration of a famine to evade responsibilities to affected populations. Following the crisis, the lack of international consensus on what constitutes a famine undermines stakeholder accountability for actions (or inaction) during the famine emergency.

On June 11, 2002, USAID issued a background paper on famine. In this background paper, famine is defined as "…a catastrophic food crisis that results in widespread acute malnutrition and mass mortality…with a beginning, a middle and an end." This definition was critiqued for overemphasizing the role of food and falling short of capturing:

1) the accelerated deterioration of conditions that precede the famine event—a critical component of effective early warning; 2) the broader crisis that includes health and physical security; and, 3) the range of livelihoods crises that underpin famine vulnerability.

Capturing the trajectory of famine conditions and the broader crisis beyond food availability is especially critical within the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. A high prevalence of HIV/AIDS creates famine conditions and famine conditions facilitate the spread of HIV/AIDS. This 'new variant famine' where HIV/AIDS is a central feature, a concept proposed by Alex de Waal and Alan Whitehead,[4] has three features that makes a food crisis wider, deeper and more intractable. First, vulnerability is widely spread. Second, household impoverishment is more rapid. Third, a high level of vulnerability continues well beyond the breaking of the famine.[5]

Paul Howe and Stephen Devereux propose using a famine scale that:

- disaggregates intensity (the severity of a crisis in a given area at a specific point in time) and magnitude (the aggregate impact of the entire crisis);
- moves from a binary conception of famine/no-famine to a graduated understanding based on scales; and
- assigns harmonized objective criteria in place of individual subjective judgments.[6]

The intensity level in a given population area is determined by using a combination of anthropometric and mortality indicators along with food security descriptors. Using an intensity scale found in Table 2, population areas within a country are assigned a level from 0 (food secure conditions) to 5 (extreme famine conditions). The intensity level provides a clear-cut way of capturing localized conditions at a certain point in time that can: 1) drive the appropriate intervention; 2) provide a means for monitoring situations; and, 3) allow stakeholders to prioritize resource allocations based on need. Magnitude is determined ex-post by measuring excess human mortality based on a scale from minor famine to catastrophic famine (see Table 3). The scales are not intended to replace early warning systems—they complement early warning systems by registering intensity and magnitude. Early warning systems predict potential movements up or down the scales.

[3] This section is based on a presentation made by Stephen Devereux and Paul Howe at the Famine Forum. See also, Paul Howe and Stephen Devereux, *Intensity and Magnitude Scales for Famine,* Working Draft. (Institute of Development Studies, January 2004).

[4] Alex de Waal, "New variant famine: hypothesis, evidence and implications," in the Humanitarian Practice Network's Humanitarian Exchange Series 23 (March 2003): 20-22.

[5] Alex de Waal and Alan Whitehead, "New Variant Famine: AIDS and Food Crisis in Southern Africa," The Lancet 362 (2003): 1234-37.

[6] Howe and Devereux, *op.cit.*

Table 2. Intensity Scale

Level	Phase designation	Malnutrition and mortality indicators	Food security descriptors
0	Food security conditions	CMR<0.2 AND Wasting<2.3%	Social system is cohesive; prices are stable; negligible use of coping strategies
1	Food insecurity conditions	CMR>=0.2 but < 0.5/10,000/day AND/OR Wasting>=2.3% but <10%	Social system remains cohesive; price instability and seasonal shortage of key items; 'reversible' coping strategies start to fall (e.g., mild food rationing) are employed
2	Food crisis conditions	CMR>=.5 but <1/10,000/day AND/OR Wasting>=10% but <20%	Social system is significantly stressed but remains largely cohesive; dramatic rise in price of food; 'reversible' coping strategies start to fail; increased adoption of 'irreversible' coping strategies
3	Famine conditions	CMR>=1 but <5/10,000/day AND/OR Wasting.=20% but < 40%	Clear signs of social breakdown appear; markets begin to close or collapse; coping strategies exhausted, 'survival strategies are more common; affected populations identify food as the dominant problem at the onset of the crisis
4	Severe famine conditions	CMR>=5 but < 15/10,000/day AND/OR Wasting >=40%	Widespread social breakdown; markets are closed or inaccessible to affected populations; 'survival strategies' are widespread
5	Extreme famine conditions	CMR>15/10,000/day	Complete social breakdown; widespread mortality

These scales, used together, provide more precision in using (or not using) the term famine and lower the threshold of famine definitions currently used by donors and U.N. agencies. The famine scales also provide a framework for focusing more on prevention and less on famine response through broader consensus among stakeholders while ensuring accountability. Use of the famine scales by USAID should be considered to assist in linking early warning to response and recognizing a process of famine prior to the actual famine event.

Table 3. Magnitude Scale

Category	Phase Designation	Mortality range
A	Minor famine	0-999
B	Moderate famine	1,000-9,999
C	Major famine	10,000-99,999
D	Great famine	100,000-999,999
E	Catastrophic famine	1,000,000 and over

2. Improving Institutional Capacity

Changes needed to increase USAID's institutional capacity in famine response are based on three assumptions: 1) famines result from failures in livelihood systems; 2) famine prevention is more cost effective than famine mitigation; and 3) USAID has a wealth of human resource capacity and institutional experience in famine response on which to draw. What is required is a broader, more coherent mandate for preventing famine at the Agency level (beyond DCHA) that includes: expanding responsibility and accountability for prevention throughout USAID;

strengthening human resource capacity; promoting a climate of risk-taking; expanding response strategies to target vulnerable institutions, policies and processes; supporting recovery strategies in the post-famine period; greater resources targeting fragile states and famine prone countries; and, improving information systems.

The absence of effective institutions to mitigate the impacts of shocks such as climatic anomalies, violent conflict, and global economic shocks creates both the conditions that lead to famine and impede recovery from famine. Fragile states are, by definition, poorly governed and share characteristics including: inappropriate political control of macro-economic policies; lack of investment in health and education systems; absence of democratic institutions

to manage conflict; and, lack of investment (or deliberate neglect) in market infrastructure and other measures needed to build the resilience of livelihood systems.

These systemic problems thus far have been met by humanitarian response programs that emphasize project-based approaches, largely managed by NGOs operating in delimited geographic areas. The resulting gap between the systemic nature of vulnerability and the discrete project response has limited the effectiveness of U.S. famine prevention and response strategies. To improve the impartial nature of response (i.e., assistance provided according to the exact nature of vulnerability), USAID will need to improve its pro-active, anti-famine engagement with the flawed policies, institutions and processes underpinning famine vulnerability. This will require a form of engagement to promote anti-famine measures within technical line ministries (e.g. health, agriculture, water) in fragile states, as well as a level of "humanitarian diplomacy" to advocate for short-term favorable trade arrangements, for the promotion of "humanitarian space" in famine-prone conflict areas, and for anti-famine political contracts by host governments in famine-prone nations, for example.

In addition, famine prevention and mitigation requires a USAID-wide commitment of financial resources—including development assistance (DA), international disaster and famine assistance (IDFA) and P.L. 480 Title II—and human resources. There are critical gaps in USAID's human resource capacity for dealing with large-scale crises, both at headquarters and at the Mission level. Forum participants expressed concurrence with the Administrator's vision for a Humanitarian Backstop Officer. In addition, there was wide agreement that training should be developed and implemented for Mission Directors who have little or no experience in dealing with humanitarian crises. Mission Directors, along with their staff, play a key role and need to be held accountable in this process.

Essential to strengthening human resource capacity is promoting an institutional culture of risk-taking within USAID. The forum participants envisioned a corps of humanitarian entrepreneurs who are empowered to develop innovative approaches to famine prevention and mitigation.

3. Leveraging Resources

There exists an underlying assumption that when we talk about famine, we are talking about food. Indeed, P.L. 480 Title II food aid is the primary resource of the United States for responding to the critical food needs of affected populations during a food crisis. Food aid will remain a key resource for USAID's response to famine. Yet, a greater emphasis on famine prevention and approaching famine as systems failures requires more resources and better ways to use both food and non-food aid. Forum participants made three recommendations for leveraging USAID food and non-food aid for famine prevention and response.

First, concerning food aid, forum participants suggested that a portion of Title II emergency food aid be used for market and private sector development in support of the re-establishment of national food systems including commercial importation, markets and commodity marketing, and regional trade strategies. Monetization of emergency food can also provide cash resources to respond to the effects of collapsed market infrastructure, health systems, and agriculture. Leveraging emergency food aid beyond traditional consumption meets both the short-term relief needs of affected populations and begins to address the systems failures that led to the crisis.

Second, USAID requires an increase in funding and additional flexibility to ensure success in supporting a famine prevention agenda. This includes the increased availability, integration and flexibility of DA, Title II and IDFA resources with multi-year and predictable levels of funding. Moreover, fully sourcing the Famine Fund to US$ 200 million is critical as is increasing the overall level of Title II and DA resources targeting famine-prone countries.

And third, USAID needs to leverage matching funds from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), private voluntary organizations (PVOs) and support assistance from various U.S. food industries through the Global Development Alliance (GDA) as well as solicit "buy-in" from recipient countries to press for greater political will in making systems changes (economic policy reform to reduce vulnerability, governance, health and livelihoods). The use of GDA to support and enhance the linkage between trade, aid and agriculture is another critical requirement.

4. Managing Relationships with Stakeholders

Humanitarian crises such as famine involve a broad array of international actors including: the host country government and its agencies; bilateral donors; multilateral donors; and implementing PVOs. There are four key areas for USAID to address: 1) the role of consensus within the international humanitarian community; 2) the U.S. government's policy on food aid vis-à-vis multilateral organizations; 3) the U.N.'s capacity to respond; and 4) NGO and PVO implementing partners.

Once a famine is declared, there are norms that govern responsibility and accountability across the international community. In the absence of a universally-accepted definition of famine, however, humanitarian actors seek to build a consensus to coordinate response among the various stakeholders. Recent experiences in Southern Africa and Ethiopia, however, highlighted some of the weaknesses of consensus-building. In Southern Africa and Ethiopia, donors questioned the validity of host country governments' declarations of famine, causing major delays in humanitarian response. U.S. government leadership needs to leverage its position as the lead donor to press for accountability and uphold standards for emergency response and famine prevention policies throughout the international humanitarian community—including host country governments.

There was agreement among the participants that U.N. agencies have fallen short of fulfilling their mandate in responding to famine situations—for example, citing UNICEF retreating from core commitments such as water and basic health. U.N. disaster management agencies need to undertake serious reforms including upholding standards of response and broadening the mandate of some of its agencies, such as the International Labor Organization (ILO) for emergency public works to prevent and ameliorate famines.

Further, forum participants recommended that the U.S. government expand the use of the G8 Famine Initiative beyond the present focus to include a broader United Nations, donor and partner NGO/PVO famine prevention effort focused on addressing failed strategies and systems (economic, governance, healthcare and livelihoods) in famine-prone states to reduce vulnerability.

Last, although participants acknowledged the fact that they are not a replacement for governments and institutions, NGOs and PVOs play a critical role in disaster response. There is a need to diversify NGO and PVO implementing partners to improve effectiveness, leverage funding and heighten creativity for durable solutions.

5. Shifting to a Livelihoods Approach

There is a critical need to shift USAID's project-driven approach to a systems approach that addresses the root causes of development failure. There was broad agreement across the forum that a livelihoods approach might best help USAID use resources during an emergency to move away from a food-first approach toward a broad, more complex definition of famine, emphasizing a multi-sectoral approach to drive an earlier and more appropriate response. A livelihoods approach can improve surveillance, monitoring information and assessments, and famine prevention and response efforts.

Six principles central to a livelihoods strategy in crisis response include: 1) rigorous assessment; 2) appropriate market support; 3) protecting essential assets; 4) easing vulnerable peoples' burdens; 5) timely interventions; and, 6) increasing protection for populations at risk of displacement.[7]

These principles can guide USAID's shift from a project-driven approach to a systems response that addresses the underlying causes of famine.

6. Conclusion: Priority Actions

These priority actions reflect the consensus that emerged from the two-day famine forum:

1. Integrate the new Agency position on famine prevention into the Fragile States Strategy and update the DCHA famine background paper dated June 11, 2002. This will include: lowering the 'catastrophic' threshold and moving from a

[7] Sue Lautze, *Saving Lives and Livelihoods: The Fundamentals of a Livelihoods Strategy* (Feinstein International Famine Center, 1997).

food-first approach to a broader, more complex definition, emphasizing people's livelihood's as well as a multi-sector approach to elicit an earlier and more appropriate response; and supporting the development and roll-out of a "livelihoods toolkit" that links strengthening livelihoods as part of a conflict reduction strategy.

2. Review the implications of the "transformational development" and "fragile states" divisions set forth in the White Paper to ensure necessary program integration among development assistance (DA), international disaster and famine assistance (IDFA) and P.L. 480 Title II.

3. Informed by the processes described in point 2, clarify concomitant funding and programming flexibilities that will ensure success in supporting a famine prevention agenda. Because of the short-term view of disaster assistance and increasing emergency needs globally, USAID requires legislation to provide flexibility and longer-term commitment to support aggressive famine-prevention interventions.

4. Develop integrated famine prevention strategies for famine-prone countries based on the Ethiopia Famine Prevention Framework model. Similarly, make famine response more efficient and more effective with multi-year predictable resource allocations.

5. Strengthen human capacity for famine prevention program design and implementation, at USAID/ Washington and field level. This can be addressed through the implementation of the Administrator's vision for the Humanitarian Backstop Officer and additional training for Mission Directors with little or no humanitarian experience. Build a corps of humanitarian entrepreneurs within USAID who are empowered to develop innovative approaches to famine prevention and mitigation.

6. Leverage matching funds from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), private voluntary organizations (PVOs) and support assistance from various U.S. industries (e.g., food multi-nationals) through the Global Development Alliance (GDA) as well as solicit "buy-in" from recipient countries to press for greater political will in making systems changes (governance, market, health, economic policy reform and reducing vulnerability). The use of GDA to support and enhance the linkage between trade, aid and agriculture is another critical requirement.

7. Develop an education campaign aimed at the inter-agency level to increase and leverage U.S. government resources to better address famine-prevention in target countries linking the three-pronged approach of Defense, Diplomacy and Development from the National Security Strategy.

8. Expand the use of the G8 Famine Initiative beyond the present focus to include a broader U.N., donor and partner NGO/PVO famine prevention effort focused on addressing failed strategies and systems (economic, governance, health and livelihoods) in famine-prone states to reduce vulnerability.

9. Famine prevention requires accountability and reform among the myriad of stakeholders including the United Nations, donor countries and famine-prone states. U.S. government leadership in pressing for accountability and upholding standards for emergency response and famine prevention policies is essential to achieving reform.

10. Finally, consensus was achieved on using the livelihoods context to broaden famine definitions, improve surveillance, monitoring information and assessments, and improve famine prevention and response efforts.