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Governance and Social
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Helpdesk Research Report: 'Triggers' to scale up assistance in advance of shocks

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Query: Please identify the approaches that have been used to try to define the 'triggers' that should be used to scale up humanitarian and other forms of assistance in advance of new shocks in contexts of chronic crisis or vulnerability. Where possible, identify the theoretical underpinnings of the trigger approaches, the indicators proposed to serve as triggers, and the operational experience of such an approach.

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1. Overview

There is no specific body of literature that looks at trigger approaches. Instead, there is a growing literature, specifically NGO and donor reports, that advocates triggers for action as part of an early warning and response system for humanitarian assistance.

A 'trigger' approach

Despite sufficient warning, international actors failed to respond quickly enough to the Horn of Africa crisis following the 2011 drought. Hillier and Dempsey (2012) argue that response can be improved through a common approach to triggers for early action as there are a range of disincentives for national and international actors to act. Triggers can help address the particular technical and political impediments that arise and enable a wide range of stakeholders to declare a crisis is underway and begin to respond appropriately before the crisis becomes severe (Macauslan and Phelps 2012).

There has been no overall evaluation of such a trigger approach in comparison to non-trigger approaches. USAID has incorporated triggers into their multi-year assistance programmes and they have identified a number of lessons when evaluating specific programmes (Mathys

2007). In particular they note that when creating a community-based trigger system there can be tensions between ensuring technical rigour and having the system owned and managed by the community.

Types of triggers

Triggers for response would generally be based on humanitarian need, with differing triggers for different levels of crisis. Both 'entry' and 'exit' triggers are important to ensure the programme starts and finishes according to need, and not funding or political considerations (Macauslan and Phelps 2012). These indicators should be context-specific and based on field research (ibid). They can be 'soft' triggers that start a consideration process for response, or 'hard' triggers that cause an automatic intervention (Dempsey expert comments).

Beyond triggers based on humanitarian need, there can be other types of triggers. These can be internal triggers (a programme push or internal NGO advocate) or external triggers (politics and the media) (Houghton and Emmens 2007). Empirical evidence suggests that it is in fact politics, particularly the security interest of Western donors, and the actions of humanitarian stakeholders that impact the level of humanitarian assistance, whereas the role of the media is comparatively minor (Olsen et al. 2003).

Examples of Trigger Frameworks and Indicators

- In relation to food security, the **Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC)** sets out a number of phases and also indicators and their threshold or cut-off points (see figures 1 and 2).

- **Save the Children** are currently developing their own organisational framework (Save the Children 2012). Their draft framework outlines the different phases of a crisis, the trigger indicators for those phases and the suggested responses in terms of programmes, advocacy, communication and fundraising. The framework is to be used as guidance for in-country teams but is not obligatory (Dempsey expert comments).

- **USAID** have used trigger indicators in their early warning and response systems to determine a point when activities should be shifted or additional resources provided. These are not standardised and it is left to the local implementers to design and report back on their trigger indicators (Mathys 2007).

- The UN **Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs Global Focus Model** can help identify which populations are most exposed to hazards that could trigger a humanitarian emergency. However, as the model is usually updated only once a year with data that is usually 1 to 2 years old already, it would not be useful for providing short-term triggers (Marinos expert comments).

Key characteristics for trigger indicators

Key recommendations for trigger indicators (Mathys 2007; Dempsey expert comments; Hillier and Dempsey 2012) are:

- identify the shocks of **greatest local concern**

- choose trigger indicators that provide **sufficient advance notice**
- set **conservative thresholds** for triggers that **reflect the exponential** (rather than gradual) **worsening of crisis**
- **partner the trigger system** with national and community processes rather than undermine them
- ensure that indicators are **workable**
- ensure that trigger indicators are **agreed among different actors.**

2. Key Documents

Hillier, D. and Dempsey, B. (2012) 'A Dangerous Delay: The cost of late response to early warnings in the 2011 drought in the Horn of Africa', Joint Agency Briefing Paper: Oxfam International and Save the Children
http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/a-dangerous-delay-the-cost-of-late-response-to-early-warnings-in-the-2011-droug-203389

This report examines the crisis following the 2011 drought in the Horn of Africa. The report examines the factors that allowed the drought to develop into a full-scale crisis, despite clear early warning signs many months in advance. One of the recommendations from the report is that all actors and early warning specialists need to develop a common approach to triggers for early action, to be used by both humanitarian and development actors. If an early warning system had triggered an earlier, more substantial response the scale of death and suffering, and the financial cost, could have been greatly reduced.

The report finds that early warning systems have performed well overall, but decision makers chose not to respond. The report suggests three possible reasons for the reluctance for decision makers to respond:

- **Fear of getting it 'wrong'** – with both financial and reputational risk at stake;
- **Fear of being too interventionist** – undermining communities' own capacities to cope;
- **Fatigue** – 'there are droughts every year' – encouraging an attitude of resignation to the high levels of chronic malnutrition, and an inability to react to the crisis triggers.

The authors note that these factors can be compounded by political and security issues and that there is a greater need to incentivise early response. National governments can see an emergency declaration as a sign of weakness, and this can make it difficult for humanitarian agencies to declare an emergency themselves. National governments do not always have incentives to provide support. This can be especially the case where there is no multi-party democracy, weak civil society, a lack of free press, or the victims are politically marginalised.

For the donors, their relationship with national governments is a key determinant of early response and political differences can seriously delay the response. There are consequences for donors of either responding early and committing resources on the basis of forecasts, thus taking a modest financial risk; or waiting for certainty, thus risking the loss of lives and livelihoods and ultimately spending more money on response.

In the case of the Horn of Africa, the report notes that many people on the ground, particularly communities themselves, were aware of the impending crisis in January/February 2011, but were not able to get traction further up the chain to the people with the power to make

decisions about funding and other resources. The report argues that there needs to be a common approach to using triggers, so that decision makers know exactly what they ought to be doing as the situation deteriorates and the consequences if they fail to act on those triggers.

This system of triggers for food crises should:
- Recognise the **national government** (where possible) **as primary duty-bearer** for meeting citizens' food needs;
- Reflect the **high levels of chronic malnutrition** in some areas;
- Reflects the **exponential development of malnutrition** (i.e. once a threshold has been reached there is a rapid increase in malnutrition rather than a steady rise);
- **Not** lead to interventions that **undermine communities' capacity to cope**;
- Be **context-specific** for different livelihoods zones;
- Be **agreed between different actors**, just as the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) has developed a standardised approach (see Macauslan and Phelps 2012).

The authors note that agreeing triggers for response is not likely to create an automatic warning-response system but can be an important tool to press for early response. There can be a different response for a different trigger: at an early stage the trigger might be for advocacy, but as the situation deteriorates, it might be for a livelihood response, and subsequently for a food or nutrition response.

Houghton, R. and Emmens, B. (2007) 'Surge capacity in the humanitarian relief and development sector: A review of surge capacity and surge capacity mechanisms within international NGOs', People in Aid
http://www.ecbproject.org/downloads/resources/surge-final.pdf

This paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of surge capacity mechanisms within humanitarian organisations. A surge is effectively where humanitarian organisations rapidly scale up their activities relating to a particular issue. The paper identifies a number of 'triggers' which lead to such surges.

Triggers may be internal or external. Internal triggers could typically include a strong push for an intervention by a particular programme, or an internal advocate. For example, a food security unit might push for a response in the early stages of famine. The report concludes that generally, an emergency response is almost always triggered by something external, and both politics and the media play a significant role in shaping the nature of any agency's response. Despite the fundamental principles of humanitarianism that aid should be allocated according to need, humanitarian aid is subject to both political influence and media response which, when combined, play a dominant role in shaping public sympathies.

Macauslan, I. and Phelps, L. (2012) 'Oxfam GB Emergency Food Security and Livelihoods Urban Programme Evaluation: Final Report', Oxfam
http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/OGB%20EFSL%20Urban%20Evaluation.pdf

In an evaluation report on Oxfam's emergency food security and livelihoods programmes in urban areas, Macauslan and Phelps (2012) emphasise the importance of exit as well as entry triggers and note that such triggers are vital for social protection but are not currently well-developed.

The report notes that one of the principal challenges in humanitarian work and social protection is when to exit. It is important to have an agreed system for triggering exit, because development actors are concerned about involvement in slow-changing situations with no prospect of exiting or handing over to another responsible institution, which in most cases would be the government. This challenge is particularly significant in urban areas as these environments are rapidly changing, with new vulnerabilities and opportunities constantly emerging and evolving.

As an example of the absence of appropriate triggers, the report highlights the case of Oxfam's work in Mukuru, Kenya. Here the programme's start and end was driven by funding, rather than analysis of changes in vulnerability, the end of the crisis, or a change in the political value of the programme. The authors argue that exit triggers would have been more logically justified.

The development of trigger indicators for entry and exit require more field-based research and design to produce "agreed indicators and thresholds that would enable stakeholders to declare different levels of crisis in urban areas and therefore trigger an appropriate response" (Macauslan and Phelps 2012: 4). The report also argues that Oxfam should provide resources for work on developing these indicators and apply the political capital that they have gained in ensuring that they are relevant globally.

While the report notes a lack of appropriate indicators for urban situations, as an illustration it includes a framework taken from the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) User Guide[1]. This is to illustrate how a framework may look with different phases which imply different levels of interventions. The phases are set out in Figure 1 and the indicators and thresholds/cut-offs are set out in Figure 2.

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[1] FAO (2008) 'Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) User Guide' UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) http://www.fsnau.org/downloads/Integrated-Food-Security-Phase-Classification-User-Guide-Version-1.pdf

Figure 1: Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Phases

	Phase	General Description
1A	Generally Food Secure	Usually adequate and stable food access with moderate to low risk of sliding into Phase 3, 4, or 5
1B	Generally Food Secure	
2	Moderately/Borderline Food Insecure	Borderline adequate food access with recurrent high risk (due to probable hazard events and high vulnerability) of sliding into Phase 3,4, or 5.
3	Acute Food and Livelihood Crisis	Highly stressed and critical lack of food access with high and above usual malnutrition and accelerated depletion of livelihood assets that, if continued, will slide the population into Phase 4 or 5 and/ or likely result in chronic poverty
4	Humanitarian Emergency	Severe lack of food access with excess mortality, vey high and increasing malnutrition, and irreversible livelihood asset stripping
5	Famine/Humanitarian Catastrophe	Extreme social upheaval with complete lack of food access and/or other basic needs where mass starvation, death, and displacement are evident

Figure 2a: Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Indicators and Cut-offs

Indicator	Description	IPC cut-offs				
		1	2	3	4	5
CMR	# deaths per 1000 people per day	0.5	0.5	0.5-1	1-2	>2
U5MR		1	1	1-2	>2	
GAM	weight for height<2 z scores	3	3-10	10-15	15+	30+
Stunting	height for age<2 Z scores	20	20-40	Not defining (NDC)	NDC	NDC
Disease		NDC	NDC	epidemic outbreak; increasing	pandemic outbreak	pandemic outbreak
Food access/ availability	HEA; HHS;HFIAS	Usually adequate (2100)	Borderline adequate	Lack of entitlement, meeting needs through asset stripping	Severe gap; unable to meet needs	Extreme gap
Dietary diversity		Consistent quality and quantity	Chronic deficit	Acute deficit	Regularly 3 or fewer groups consumed	NDC

Figure 2b: Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Indicators and Cut-offs (continued)

Water access/ availability	Litres per person per day; need to consider purchasing power	>15	>15	7.5-15	<7.5	<4
Displacement						
Civil security		Prevailing peace	Unstable; disruptive tension	Limited spread; low intensity	Widespread, high intensity conflict	Widespread, high intensity conflict
Coping strategies	3 types: Insurance are reversible, crisis are irreversible (threatening future livelihoods), distress	NDC	Insurance	Crisis (CSI> reference increasing)	Distress; CSI significantly > reference	NDC
Hazards	Life-threatening, including market, socio-economic	Moderate to low probability	Recurrent, with high vulnerability	NDC	NDC	NDC
Structural	Changes that require long-term strategy	NDC	Pronounced underlying hindrances	NDC	NDC	NDC
Livelihood assets	Sustainable livelihoods framework analysis to assess rate of depletion	Sustained	Stressed unsustainable	Accelerated and critical depletion	Near complete and irreversible depletion	Effectively complete collapse

Mathys, E. (2007) 'Trigger Indicators and Early Warning and Response Systems in Multi-Year Title II Assistance Programs', Washington, DC: Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance Project, Academy for Educational Development
http://www.fantaproject.org/downloads/pdfs/ffpOP5.pdf

This report provides recommendations for USAID to better operationalise trigger indicators (TIs) in relation to their Multi-Year Assistance Programmes (MYAP) providing food. A TI is "used to determine the threshold at which MYAPs need to shift activities and/or require additional resources for new activities in response to a slow-onset shock. Such an indicator helps direct program priorities in dynamic and often unpredictable operating environments." (Mathys 2007:3). The threshold of a trigger is the level of a trigger indicator that, when reached, signals the need for certain actions to be taken.

The report suggests that in general:

- TIs should be selected to **provide advance notice** (typically one to six months) of a potentially serious deterioration in conditions. To identify TIs, it is necessary to **first identify the shocks of greatest local concern** – including slow-onset sub-national/local shocks. A brief justification for the TIs in a proposal should draw on a **national vulnerability analysis**.
- Given the function of TIs, the **thresholds of TIs should be set conservatively**.
- TI monitoring plans can encompass data collection from primary and secondary sources, and should **identify data triangulation/validation strategies** when data

indicate that TI thresholds have been reached. TI levels at the start of the programme should be documented, and triangulation/validation strategies for TI data identified.

- TIs should be **linked to a series of actions**, with an emphasis on **partnering with national and community processes**, early warning and/or disaster preparedness institutions wherever possible.
- TI **monitoring and analysis should be integrated into ongoing M&E** rather than carried out as a discrete and parallel activity.

USAID has some limited experience in using TIs for community-based Early Warning and Response (EWR) systems, which the report examines. The report notes that within USAID TIs are not mandatory, and that they aim to enhance programme flexibility rather than monitor or evaluate programme impact. TIs are defined by local implementers and not standardised by the central USAID Office of Food for Peace though TI information is to be reported to them.

From USAID's limited experience in using TIs, the report notes that there is often a tension between maintaining sufficient control over food security information to ensure a technical rigour to the system and working with (and through) partners to promote local ownership and sustainability. As a result 'community based' EWR systems are frequently not truly 'community based' in the sense of communities (and their local leaders or representatives) playing a leadership role in the development and management of the system. Community-level EWR systems therefore range from being largely extraction of data to being genuinely 'community-managed'.

OCHA (2012) 'Global Focus Model', UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)
www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/downloaddoc.aspx?docId=6000

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) developed the Global Focus Model (GFM) in 2007 to analyse hazards, vulnerabilities and response capacity at the country-level of 147 countries, using a range of quantitative indicators. The GFM is designed to identify which populations are most exposed to hazards that could trigger a humanitarian emergency; what factors influence a hazard's impact on a population; what factors influence the ability of a community and society to cope with the impact of a hazard; and to what extent OCHA is likely to have a role in a country, given the organisation's mandate, tools and services. The GFM helps OCHA prioritise its activities around the world.

Olsen, G., Carstensen, N. and Høyen, K. (2003) 'Humanitarian Crises: What Determines the Level of Emergency Assistance? Media Coverage, Donor Interests and the Aid Business' Disasters, Vol. 27, Iss. 2, pp109-126
http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-7717.00223/pdf

Using empirical analysis this paper looks at the relationship between volume of emergency assistance any humanitarian crisis attracts and three main factors working either in conjunction or individually. These factors are: i) intensity of media coverage; ii) the degree of political interest, particularly related to security, that donor governments have in a particular

region; and iii) the strength of humanitarian NGOs and international organisations present in the country experiencing the humanitarian emergency. The paper concludes that only occasionally do the media play a decisive role in influencing donors. Instead, the security interests of Western donors are important, together with the presence and strength of humanitarian stakeholders, such as NGOs and international organisations lobbying donor governments.

Save the Children (2012) 'DRAFT: Slow Onset Food Crises: Save the Children Response Framework' Save the Children

This framework, still under development, sets out roles and responsibilities for decision-making amongst Save the Children teams during the process of slow-onset food crises. The response framework is being drafted as a response to the Hillier and Dempsey (2012) report recommendation to "Manage the risks, not the crisis" (Hillier and Dempsey 2012: 5). The purpose of the 'Slow Onset Food Crises Response Framework' is to set out the triggers and associated response actions for the different stages or levels of food insecurity. There are four phases of food crisis: stable, stressed, acute food insecurity, emergency and famine. For each of these phases there are a number of specified indicators and appropriate responses in terms of: programmes, advocacy, communications and media, and institutional and voluntary fundraising.

The aim is that by triggering early interventions Save the Children will mitigate or prevent more acute food crises. The triggers are based upon the internationally recognised Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) system (see Macauslan and Phelps 2012), whilst the response framework sets out recommended actions, roles and responsibilities for the different Save the Children teams. It is designed to provide coherence and collaboration in the work of multiple teams.

To operationalise this framework, country-specific indicators and thresholds for emergency should be identified and systematically monitored. Once thresholds for triggers have been identified in a certain phase there is no need to wait until all triggers have been reached before implementing the activities associated with that phase - deterioration of one indicator should indicate a broader deterioration of the situation.

Additional information

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About Helpdesk research reports: Helpdesk reports are based on 3 days of desk-based research. They are designed to provide a brief overview of the key issues; and a summary of some of the best literature available. Experts are contacted during the course of the research, and those able to provide input within the short time-frame are acknowledged.