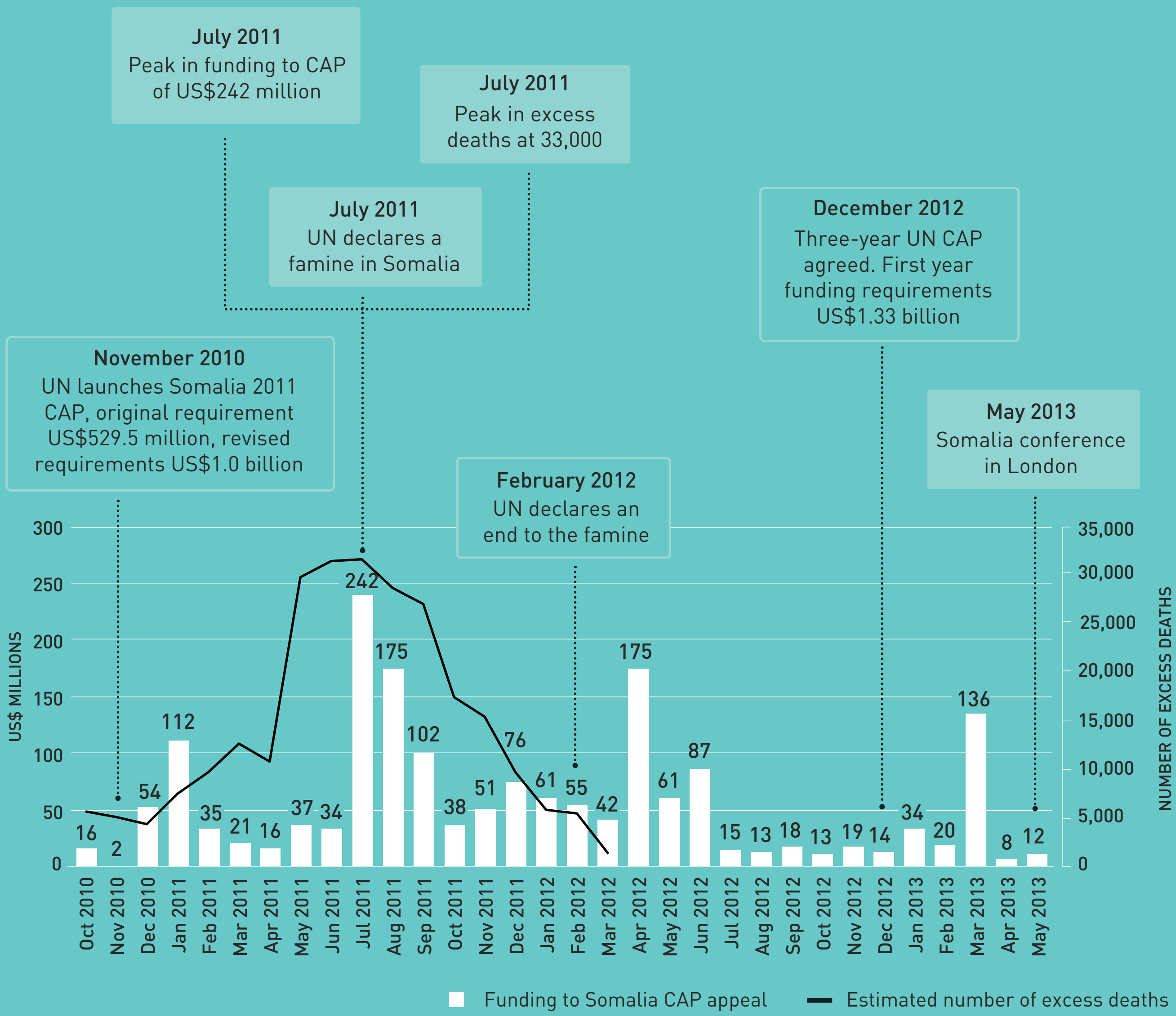
In focus: Horn of Africa famine and timely response

The dire effects of the international community's delayed response to the 2011 food crisis in the Horn of Africa – despite advanced warnings – has led to a number of recent changes in humanitarian policy and practice when responding to forewarned emergencies.

Somalia

The severe food insecurity and famine is estimated to have claimed 257,500 lives in Somalia between October 2010 and March 2012, half of which were children under the age of five (FSNAU). The following graph shows contributions through the UN Somalia CAP, with a peak in funding, US$241.6 million, in July 2011. This coincides with the date that the famine was officially declared by the UN, and the month with the highest number of excess deaths recorded at 33,000. While the original requirements for the Somalia CAP 2011 were just over US$500 million, requirements were later revised to over US$1 billion.

FIGURE 6.13: FUNDING TO SOMALIA CAP APPEALS AND NUMBER OF EXCESS DEATHS IN SOMALIA, OCTOBER 2010 TO MAY 2013



Source: Development Initiatives based on UN OCHA FTS, FEWS NET and FSNAU data

While the famine was declared over by the UN in February 2012, it is estimated that 3.8 million people are still in need of life-saving assistance. In late 2012 the UN announced a three-year CAP for Somalia, the first of its kind. The donor response to the new three-year consolidated appeal for Somalia will be a fundamentally important test-case of donor commitment to putting their money behind their policy commitments to support longer-term flexible financing in chronic crises and build resilience to shocks (see chapter 7 'Strengthening the response to people in crises' for more information on the Somalia three-year CAP).

Why was response delayed in the Horn?

Figure 6.14 overleaf shows the international funding response to four different emergencies – two rapid-onset "triggered" crises (the 2005 Indian Ocean tsunami and the 2010 Haiti Humanitarian Appeal in response to the earthquake), and two slow-onset protracted crises (the Somalia 2011 famine appeal and the 2011 Kenya Emergency Humanitarian Response Plan) – and the differences in speed of the international funding response. The graph clearly demonstrates a more delayed response to slower-onset crises and shows that higher profile emergencies, such as Haiti and the Indian Ocean tsunami, received a greater proportion of funds early on in the crisis, compared with Kenya and Somalia where contributions trickled in over the same period.

One of the explanations for the slow response to complex crises is a culture of risk aversion. There is huge pressure on those allocating resources to avoid waste and investments that put taxpayers' money at risk. Consequently donors often demand hard evidence – that cannot be given – of a crisis before authorising a response and are reluctant to commit funding to something that remains a possibility. This is not unique to institutional donors – the same response pattern was also seen domestically in Kenya during the 2011 food crisis. The Kenyan Red Cross launched an appeal early in the year in response to warnings but struggled to raise significant amounts as the government had not yet raised the official alarm. Significant funds were only raised via the public after the 'Kenya for Kenyans' campaign was launched some months later, in July. By this point, malnutrition rates had already reached emergency levels in some areas and hundreds of thousands of people were at risk of dying. Within four weeks of launching the appeal, more than KES1 billion was raised in donations from the Kenyan public.

After the introduction of strict US counter-terrorism legislation in 2009 there was an 88% reduction in US funding for Somalia, with aid agencies apparently reluctant to apply due to concerns of not being able to comply with its requirements. US funding for Somalia had previously made up 40% of all aid financing in the country, so this reduction had a huge impact on resources available until the restrictions were eased in July 2011.

The delay was further exacerbated by political problems, with the conflict in Somalia seriously hampering the humanitarian community's ability to respond, and in Kenya, an early reluctance by the Kenyan government to officially act further delayed the response there. Political negotiations over the number of people affected in Ethiopia also had an effect.

As long as the funding community continues to respond to acute humanitarian situations with a clear 'trigger' plunging people into crisis over protracted situations of chronic need in which people are consistently living close to or in humanitarian crisis, avoidable disasters like the 2011 Horn of Africa crisis will continue to take place.

Lessons learnt

- More preventative action needs to be taken.
- Greater flexibility and collaboration between development and humanitarian funding and programming would help define the responsibility for addressing underlying vulnerability to crises more clearly, and would better enable programmes to act to prevent crises from escalating into situations of acute need.
- A framework is needed to enable improved response to early warnings of a complex crisis.
- Better use of cash transfers and safety net programmes is needed.
  - The crisis in Somalia was not solely caused by a shortage of food as a result of the drought, but rather by a food shortage combined with market failure caused by the conflict. This pushed food prices up, so people could no longer afford to buy it.
  - In Ethiopia, an early response to warnings and early scaling-up of the Productive Safety Net Programme helped significantly reduce the overall impact of the crisis. The cost per beneficiary in areas where the scaled-up programme was employed was estimated in the 2012 GHA report at US$53, compared with US$169 where a traditional humanitarian food aid response was used.
- Multi-year humanitarian funding cycles are needed in areas of persistent need.
- Improved willingness by the humanitarian response community is needed to employ new programming ideas such as cash transfers at scale in a crisis, where evidence exists to show they are more effective.

Action already taken

The Nairobi Strategy, developed by African leaders and international partners at the Summit on the Horn of Africa in September 2011, outlined a number of commitments to address many of the issues brought to light by the 2011 crisis. It was agreed that the crisis reflected "long-term under investment in drought-prone areas" and a new approach was required in which policies and programmes would have a "primary objective of building resilience to future climatic and economic shocks."

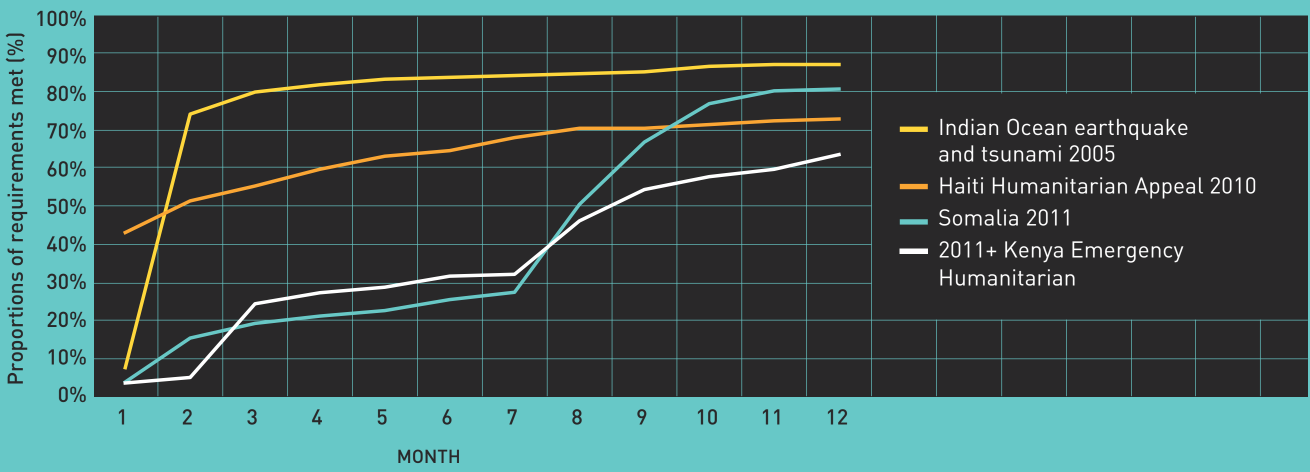
> "The new approach and focus should be preventive rather than reactive, and should be holistic, rather than emergency oriented. It should recognise existing frameworks and mechanisms for disaster risk reduction, namely the Hyogo Framework for Action and the Africa Strategy and Programme for Action 2006–2015. It should encompass the continuum of relief, recovery, reconstruction, innovation and long-term development towards sustainable development to ensure drought resilience and ensuring food security." **The Nairobi Strategy**

Aid agencies such as **Oxfam** are advocating for long-term development programmes to take greater responsibility for responding to forecasts of crisis in order to reduce the impact before it hits, and to build this into their own programming.

In its 2012 humanitarian appeals for the Horn of Africa region, **UN OCHA** included a greater number of early recovery and resilience-building projects, including cash transfer programming.

The **European Union** launched its 'Supporting the Horn of Africa's Resilience' (SHARE) initiative in response to the effects of the delayed response to the 2011 crisis. SHARE is a €270 million joint humanitarian-development programme aiming to boost resilience in Horn of Africa countries by addressing recovery from drought, and ultimately to improve people's and communities' ability to respond to persistent and acute emergencies.

FIGURE 6.14: FUNDING RESPONSE TO RAPID ONSET AND COMPLEX DISASTERS



Source: Development Initiatives based on UN OHCA FTS data

Continuing challenges

Funding for recovery and resilience-building programmes remains challenging: in 2011, these types of projects were only 27% funded. Most humanitarian funding continues to go towards immediate life-saving support and fails to prevent the loss of assets experienced by vulnerable households in humanitarian crisis, effectively trapping them in chronic poverty.

Though it is still too early to measure the impact of the three-year CAP on Somalia's ability to respond to persistent crises, it is clear that longer-term investment would allow agencies to invest more in longer-term planning and preventative measures, over time leading to better outcomes.

In this time of increased pressure on international aid budgets, however, governments can more easily justify funding immediate life-saving interventions over long-term development and preventative programming. While our understanding of the importance of long-term crisis prevention is improving, greater incentives are needed for donors to invest in early action. This will require an improved understanding of the effectiveness of different early intervention measures, a willingness to invest more money up-front to long-term programming, and for more responsibility to be taken by the development community for DRR and resilience-building work.