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Living on the Edge of Emergency

An agenda for change

CARE Policy Update



CARE 2006/Sarah Bones

Every day 25,000 people die from hunger and poverty. More than 120 million people in sub-Saharan Africa are permanently living on the edge of emergency. Climate change, the HIV pandemic and population growth are all contributing to more frequent and severe emergencies. But so is the international community by responding inappropriately. This suffering is preventable - the international aid system must be overhauled to correct its record of funding expensive and short-term emergency responses that has allowed so many to remain on the edge for so long.*

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1. SOS Africa – permanent crisis in Africa?

By 2020 the world will have spent more than £165 billion this century fighting emergencies in Africa¹. Yet it has been estimated that just £132 billion, if spent differently, could instead halve hunger by 2015². Rather than simply saving lives, this money could be spent improving lives and ending the cycle of emergencies.

In 1984, famine in Ethiopia prompted the unprecedented mass action of LiveAid to raise funds for the eight million people facing starvation. But since then there have been five more major emergencies in Ethiopia³ alone, and sixty emergencies across the continent⁴. In the Horn of Africa, countries including Somalia and Kenya have been hit by emergencies in four of the last six years. And in the last year alone emergencies in the Horn of Africa, southern Africa and west Africa have left 35 million people facing starvation, at a conservative estimate. That is equivalent to more than half the population of the UK.

These emergencies are not isolated events. They are the peaks of long-term crises that continue long after the pictures of starving children have left the news. The people affected struggle to find enough food even in 'good' years, and live with high incidence of disease, low or little income and gradually depleting essential possessions. These are the people 'living on the edge'.

And yet, these emergencies and this human suffering are rarely inevitable. A fundamental overhaul of the world's approach to emergencies can end this devastation.

Although natural disasters – in particular drought, but also flood or locust plagues - are often the trigger for emergencies, these are not new for people living in these parts of Africa. What is new is their inability to cope with the increasing frequency and severity of drought. This is compounded by the effects of new phenomena such as HIV and AIDS and increasing pressures on diminishing and fragile environments. These changes mean that people who live in the shadow of emergency are less able to find effective means of coping, such as migrating with their herds to new pastures to stay alive.

Definitions

Emergency: The acute and immediate emergency, typified by widespread malnutrition and threat of starvation

Crisis: The long-term underlying crisis or 'permanent emergency' of chronic malnutrition and poverty

Based on the average rate of increase in humanitarian spend from 1995 to 2004. Data from OECD

² NEPAD 2002 –original figure \$251 billion

³ 1985-1986, 1988, 1990-1992, 2000-2001, 2003, 2006 - 'Risk and vulnerability in Ethiopia' 2003, inter-university initiatives on humanitarian studies and field practice.

⁴ FAO 2004

This trend is set to continue as global warming increases the frequency, severity and geographical spread of such disasters. It is anticipated that across 25 per cent of Africa, surface water access will be significantly affected by the end of the century⁵ which will shrink available pastures and hinder agricultural production further.

The international community's response too often centres around providing food aid – a quick fix aimed at ending people's extreme hunger. This is vital, but does not address the causes of the crisis or help people to recover from the emergency. Generally speaking, the response to emergencies is too late, too brief, inappropriate and inadequate.

The consequence is that more and more inherently vulnerable people are having their resources squeezed to an unprecedented degree and are being pushed over the edge into destitution, dependency and all too often to their premature deaths. This perpetuates a downward spiral and increases their vulnerability to future emergencies.

CARE International is challenging governments, donors, aid agencies, media and the public to change the way they respond to emergencies. Just saving lives, emergency after emergency, is not enough. We need a radical shake-up: money must be used to tackle the underlying crisis and end the cycle of emergencies.

2. Who lives on the edge?

In Africa, the 120 million people living on the edge of emergency are the hardest hit, the first to fall and the least able to get back onto their feet when hunger strikes. Nomadic animal-herders and subsistence farmers make up the largest, most vulnerable and most marginalised groups. Within these groups the old, the young and women are often most affected. All of these people are dependent on the land for their income and are hugely susceptible to drought which can rapidly wipe out their crops, pastures and water sources and kill their livestock.

In Kenya this year, severe drought killed between 60 and 80 per cent of animals in the most affected districts. Imagine waking up to find your pension fund has collapsed, wiping out your life's investments. On top of that you, and everyone in your community, have lost your job. The effects are devastating and reverberate through the whole community for years as people try to re-establish their herds and productive crops. But, in the meantime, they are left more vulnerable to another emergency.

⁵ University of Cape Town, March 2006

The result is a downward spiral of emergencies and poverty. Each emergency hits people harder and leaves them worse off than the previous one. People adopt both traditional and new ways of coping, but none of these alone allow them to fully or permanently recover.

3. How the world responds to crisis in Africa

Emergency aid to Africa has steadily and significantly increased from £500 million in 1997 to £1.58 billion in 2003⁶ and is still growing. This is a laudable response to growing needs, but money alone is not the answer.

In fact, this money is often made available too late, is too short-term and is targeted at the wrong things. The result is that the needs of people living on the edge are largely ignored until they have fallen into starvation. The same money must be spent differently to end the cycle of emergency.

3.1 A narrow response – fighting the symptoms with food

Typically, the first response to an emergency is to provide food aid, which makes up a huge and increasing proportion of humanitarian assistance. In 2005/2006, 39 per cent of the UK's Department for International Development's humanitarian aid in Africa was spent on food aid – that's more than twice what was spent on the next largest sector, health.

Given that people are by that stage desperately in need of food to survive, food aid seems a natural solution. However, while food aid is often necessary, it only addresses the symptom of the emergency – hunger – and fails to address the real reasons for the crisis. In fact with long-term crises, the cause of the immediate emergency is often not a food shortage, but rather a lack of money to buy food. Introducing food aid can add to the problem by distorting local markets: driving food prices up, out of reach of the poorest; or driving prices down, leaving farmers with poor prices for their harvest.

A more appropriate response would be to tackle the problem before it progressed to the point of malnutrition and starvation – eliminating the need for food aid. In Niger, as in many cases, other types of assistance, such as helping people to earn an income to buy food, are at least of equal importance as emergency food.

However food aid responses continue to be popular, partly because food aid is used by several international governments to offload their own domestic food surpluses, but also because the results are immediate and visible. Despite this, food aid often leaves people no better off than before the emergency.

⁶ Global Humanitarian Assistance Update 2004-05, original figures \$946 million and \$3 billion

In contrast, the impact of long-term investment that could eradicate food emergencies can take years to emerge and have measurable effects.

This narrow approach, focused solely on food aid, is dangerous. During the 2006 Horn of Africa drought response, crucial food distributions to help the 11 million at risk were being funded. Meanwhile, 83 per cent of the funding applications for non-food aid responses in Kenya – responses that could have helped to protect the livestock that form people’s major source of both food and income - were turned down. This figure was 82 per cent in Somalia, and 65per cent in Ethiopia⁷. Subsequently, livestock died in their tens of thousands pushing thousands of people over the edge into dependency and destitution. The animals’ carcasses contaminated water supplies, further exacerbating the problem.

In southern Africa, the fourth consecutive year of severe food shortages affected 12 million people in 2005/2006. This crisis was partially caused by low rainfall, but lack of access to seeds and land itself keeps yields low regardless of the rainfall and year on year food insecurity continues to grow. In this case HIV is perhaps the single largest factor keeping people on the edge, because HIV and hunger work in tandem. Malnutrition accelerates HIV's progression. HIV worsens malnutrition⁸. And it is estimated that by 2020, HIV will kill 20 percent of southern Africa's farm workers⁹, further decreasing food production.

Here again the major response to the emergency was to distribute food with little emphasis on tackling the effects of HIV and boosting agriculture, both of which are crucial to address the real permanent crisis.

3.2 A late response – the failure to avert predictable disasters

Emergencies are increasingly easy to predict. Ordinary people plan for and anticipate these events, and sophisticated early-warning systems and satellite imaging warn us in ever more detail of impending threats.

However, despite warnings from aid agencies including CARE, assistance arrived too late to respond to the widespread failure of rains and a locust invasion in Niger in 2005 effectively. The international community was slow to mount appeals, and the donors were slow to respond. This delay pushed 3.6 million people over the edge into starvation. Only then, after the BBC aired a report on Niger, did the world respond in any significant capacity.

This story is not unusual. Time and again, appeals from aid agencies, the UN and governments go largely ignored by donors until there is the political pressure to act. Even the media are slow off the mark –

⁷ Saving lives through livelihoods: critical gaps in the response to the drought in the Greater Horn of Africa: HPG Briefing Note, Overseas Development Institute, May 2006

⁸ General Brief 1 and 2 Stats and TP on HIV/AIDS, 17 November 2003

⁹ Bread for the World Institute, Agriculture in the Global Economy 2003, p126-127

typically not showing interest until the devastation of an emergency has peaked and then quick to move the spotlight elsewhere, long before the emergency is over. This fuels a widespread lack of public awareness and understanding of the preventable, predictable and long-term nature of these emergencies. Media attention often leads to public appeals and donations that are crucial for saving lives. But earlier funding is needed to prevent people getting to this point.

In addition to the moral arguments, responding early to emergencies is highly cost-effective. In the midst of the Niger emergency, Jan Egeland, the UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs said it would have cost \$1 a day to prevent malnutrition among children if the world had responded immediately. By July 2006, it was costing \$80 to save a malnourished child's life¹⁰.

The failure of the international community to respond early has been likened by Hilary Benn to a fire station having to arrange to lease a fire engine, or plead for funds for fuel every time there is a major fire. This causes unnecessary suffering and death and results in a further increase in the number of people left living on the edge.

3.3 What's the answer?

Typically, at the peak of an emergency there is an influx of aid agencies, UN agencies, TV crews, and both human and financial assistance. It's beyond doubt that this saves lives, but once the immediate danger to life has been averted, attention and media coverage move on to the next crisis, with funding hugely scaling back after a year.

For example, the UK's Department for International Development has provided a welcome £3.9 million to emergency responses in the Sahel region including Niger in 2005 and 2006, but just 12 per cent of that or £1.5 million over three years for long-term development responses. From 1986 to 2004, Ethiopia reported itself to be in food crisis 93 per cent of the time, yet US spending on long-term aid in Ethiopia is less than 1 per cent of that spent on emergencies.

A long-term fix for a long-term problem

Thirty-year-old Halima was hit hard by the 2005 food crisis in Niger. She had to sell almost everything she had, including two goats, to buy food for her children.

It was selling the goats that hit her hardest. She said: "It worried me as I knew I wasn't getting a good price for them and I knew that they were supposed to provide us with an income in the future.

Her village of Satchi was given emergency food aid to help see them through, but more importantly, CARE set up a project in the village that gave them hope for the next time hunger struck.

The project is known as *habbanaye*. It allows women to buy two goats, one male one female, at a fraction of their normal price. The women look after the goats until they produce kids. Once the kids reach four months, the breeding pair is then sold on to another woman who will repeat the process.

It allows women to have a say in their own lives and gives them a living that is sustainable, helping them to recover from the emergency.

As Halima says: "If by this time next year my daughter and I have a handful of goats between us, our family will be far better off than we were last year. I will sell one or two to stock up on food and to buy clothes for my children to replace the things I had to sell last year."

¹⁰ TIMELINE: How Niger's food crisis unfolded, Reuters Alertnet, 25 July 2005

This sort of disparity leaves millions of people to battle towards recovery with little outside help, often to fall back into crisis again, despite this being the most efficient time to use funds to avert future emergencies.

The failure to provide sustained levels of funding for recovery has brought about increased levels of poverty and destitution for many communities in sub-Saharan Africa. This year around 1.8 million people in Niger are facing food shortages again, despite relatively good harvests, because last year's emergency has left them too poor to buy food. Inadequate attention to the wider needs of people living with HIV and AIDS in Southern Africa continues to leave many hundreds of thousands of families in countries across the region close to the edge, regardless of good rains and good harvests.

Post-emergency funding is essential to help people to move back from the edge and re-establish their livelihoods. In the short-term this can be supported by providing seeds, fertilisers and agricultural tools, or by replacing lost animals and providing vaccination schemes to protect weak livestock.

However to enable people to recover enough to protect themselves from the next emergency a range of complementary, sustained and long-term forms of support are needed. For example, in Africa CARE is investing in rural infrastructure, such as water sources and roads and promoting improved agricultural production, such as encouraging use of more drought-resistant crops. We are also building systems to protect seed and fodder reserves, and creating savings and loans schemes to provide access to credit in times of hardship and for starting new businesses.

Long-term funding must also be used to restore people's ability to earn money and build reserves to fall back on. Providing access to credit and new markets by setting up micro-finance groups gives people a buffer of income to complement, or if necessary substitute, their agricultural earnings. At the same time, these groups create new social support mechanisms for times of crisis, particularly in the case of groups of women. In Kenya, CARE is successfully linking animal-herders and livestock buyers to create new markets for animals and increased and more stable incomes for the animal-herders.

Alongside explicit work to help recovery from emergency, it is also essential that efforts are focussed on increasing and improving healthcare and education for the poorest people. This may not have immediate impact, but is necessary to help people escape poverty for good and break the cycle of emergencies.

4. How do people cope with emergency?

To respond properly to the needs of people living on the edge, it is essential to understand why they are there and how they try to cope with 'shocks', such as drought. As long-term crises deepen and because of new pressures such as climate change, these methods are becoming increasingly less effective at keeping people from falling into emergency.

Cutting investments

People will protect seeds and animals at all costs, because these are the key to survival. Farmers must have seeds to plant if they are to harvest the next year. Animal-herders rely on their animals for up to 80 per cent of their food, both milk and meat. Crops and livestock are valuable. They are a form of savings that can be sold for food, money or other assets that can increase income.

Over the edge: *Mohammed Ismail, Somalia*

"They started to die around June last year. There was nothing I could do, I could not find enough water or food for them. The animals that I have left now are very weak, but I am doing everything I can to keep them alive for they are all I have left. The only way I can survive is to stay here, where at least there is water, and hope that people will contribute some of their food to my family. That is my only hope."

So as emergency takes hold, all other outgoings and investments, such as spending on school fees and medicine if they are affordable in the first place, are shed first. Next, cooking equipment, jewellery or farming tools are sold to buy food. Once everything that can be is sold, people are finally forced to sell their animals and eat their seeds in a desperate attempt to survive.

Migrating for work

Once seeds and animals are gone, men will often migrate to neighbouring towns or even countries to find agricultural labour: families are separated; women left alone become vulnerable; and extended families become less able to share limited food or income.

This also poses a new threat of HIV. Migrant workers are affected by HIV at disproportionate rates as they often unknowingly engage in high-risk sexual behaviour. In Tahoua, Niger, two-thirds of men migrate to Cote d'Ivoire or Nigeria for work. As a result the HIV rate is double the national average. This ultimately leads to an increase in vulnerable groups such as widows and orphans – often left to face a life of destitution.

Borrowing money

With nothing left to sell for money and a breakdown of extended families, people are forced to take on huge debt just to meet their basic needs. Unable to regain assets from which to earn money to pay back their debts, this leads them further into the cycle of debt and destitution.

Over the edge: *Issoufou Harouna, Niger*

“We have sold over half of this year’s crop to pay back our debts from buying food to cover our needs. What is left will feed my family for five months if we don’t buy clothes or need health care. After that? Hopefully, we will be able to sell a goat, if she reproduces. Perhaps my son will leave for migrant work in Nigeria. In the end, we will go into debt again. We have no choice.”

5. What makes people so vulnerable?

A number of wider social, economic, environmental and political factors keep people in a state of chronic poverty. They differ in influence from case to case, but the common result is that they prevent people from making enough money to accumulate essential goods, savings or livestock to fall back on in times of crisis.

Inequality and lack of economic opportunities

People are forced to sell their produce at poor prices, particularly when disaster strikes, or to work for very low wages often far from their homes. This makes it very difficult for them to work their way out of poverty. Furthermore, poor access to markets means that people find it hard to sell what they can produce.

Over the edge: *Florence Augustin, Malawi*

“When I left home today the house was completely empty and there was nothing in it for me or my children to eat. The situation here is very bad for me because my husband passed away. He was HIV+. Now I’m alone and depending on piecework. When I was tested HIV+ I was still strong and could work well, but now I’m weak. I was told what type of food to eat but it is difficult to find the right food during this time of hunger.”

HIV pandemic

The rampant spread of HIV among already poor populations has led to a decline in production and work force numbers, and a huge strain on limited health services, coupled with an increase in the number of vulnerable groups – such as the 11 million AIDS orphans in Africa, most of whom never learnt how to grow and prepare food from their parents.¹¹

Access to basic public services

Many governments don’t have the capacity, funding or political will to provide services such as schools, hospitals or roads. This leaves people physically isolated and a lack of education makes it difficult for people to build on their traditional livelihood systems or to take advantage of alternative ways of making a living.

¹¹ UNICEF’s Africa’s Orphaned Generations (November 2003)

Marginalisation

People living on the edge typically have little say in government decision-making that affects them. As a result, governments often neglect the needs of the rural poor and are left unable to respond in times of emergency.

Environment and climate change

Millions of people who rely on agriculture or livestock find it hard to make a viable living due to drought and poor access to water and grazing land; a decline in the price of agricultural goods; a historical lack of investment in agriculture; and a failure to address the increasing extremes of many of these factors because of global warming.

Previous emergency responses

A history of ill-timed, inappropriate funding has left people worse off, as well as unprepared for and vulnerable to another emergency. We are now facing food emergencies that may in part be blamed on poor responses to previous emergencies.

6. Dangers of Failure

The failure to protect people from falling over the edge has a wide and long-term impact. The fall-out affects not just individuals, families and communities, but whole towns, countries and regions.

Malnutrition

This is a common short- and long-term effect of emergency. However, millions of people live with almost constant malnutrition. It is a sad norm that families across Africa must endure regular 'hungry seasons', often going months eating minimal food. In Niger this is the case each year, and after a drought malnutrition becomes a part of daily life as families work to rebuild their herds. Malnutrition weakens people, making them prone to disease and often without the energy they need to work or to learn.

Starvation

For people so close to the edge that hunger is a daily reality any small pressure on their fragile existence can tip them into starvation and at its extreme, death. Every day 25,000 people die from hunger and poverty. And hunger and malnutrition are the number one risks to global health, killing more than AIDS, malaria and TB combined¹².

¹² Source: WHO-World Health Report 2002 – WHO 2003

Poverty

Each time people fall over the edge, they become at once further entrapped in poverty, less able to escape it and more likely to be hit again by emergency. And so the downward cycle continues. In the Horn of Africa, it is estimated it will take seven years to recover from this year's emergency. But recent trends suggest that the next drought is expected in five years, and some say it will be as little as two. If this happens, the people affected will be in an even worse position to defend themselves than they were this year.

Conflict

Emergencies increase potential for conflict - before, during and afterwards. In particular, during a drought, increased competition for grazing land and water can cause conflict between animal-herders and farmers to escalate. In fragile areas with a history of conflict, such as on the Kenya-Somali border, this can easily spark wider conflict. In Kenya in 2006, women became the victims of increased attacks as they were forced to cross tribal boundaries in a desperate search for water.

Destitution

As people fall over the edge, the build-up of destitute people in urban areas also creates conflict and tensions. In Eastern Sudan, the city of Port Sudan has grown exponentially since the 1970s on the back of cyclical drought which has forced the rural population to the city. Integration of these new arrivals has proved impossible and has been a major factor in bringing this region to the edge of major conflict. In early 2005 demonstrations against the authorities over the level of urban development became a flashpoint with dozens of people being gunned down during a demonstration. This year, Garissa town in Kenya has become the fifth fastest growing city in Kenya as destitute animal-herders come in search of jobs and help.

7. Pulling back from the edge

Emergency aid as we know it will never end hunger and starvation. Worse, by permitting emergency responses that are too late, too narrowly-focused and too brief, donors, aid agencies, governments, media and the public all conspire to keep people trapped on the edge.

Given its predictability, the potential scale of resources available, the increasingly robust early warning systems and the knowledge of effective responses, there is no defence for allowing this to continue. Africa need not be seen as a bottomless pit of emergency money and millions need not live on the edge.

Impediments such as major conflict, as in Darfur, huge logistical constraints, as in Democratic Republic of Congo, and a lack of functioning government, as in Somalia, make certain regions especially challenging. However, in places like northern Kenya, southern Ethiopia or much of southern Africa where there is a reasonable infrastructure, relative political stability and significant presence of aid agencies, the excuses are running out fast.

7.1 An agenda for change

CARE International is proposing a radical overhaul of the international aid system's approach to emergencies. By evening out the pattern of emergency aid - better using available funds before, during and after the emergency's peak - this could reverse and eventually end the cycle of increasing emergencies and deepening poverty.

In every response, the immediate emergency and the long-term crisis must be treated as equally important. They are inextricably linked and it should not be assumed that addressing one will resolve the other. Ultimately, this will leave people in a position to manage potential emergencies without outside help.

There are three key steps in CARE's agenda for change:

- i) **Preventative action:** Funding must be made available early enough to counteract the first signs of impending emergency. Early action is crucial to prevent hungry people falling over the edge to become starving people, and to prevent the mounting debts and sale of belongings that prevent recovery.
- ii) **Doing more than saving lives:** When unavoidable emergencies do occur, emergency aid must do more than just save lives, important though that is. It must sow the seeds of recovery - returning starving people from the brink and then moving them away from the edge.
- iii) **Sustained support:** Funding must be sustained beyond the peak of the emergency. Predictable funding for long-term work is essential to help people get back on their feet, rebuild their incomes and tackle the root causes of the long-term crisis, such as HIV and AIDS or lack of opportunity to earn an income.

7.2 Making it happen

In order for this essential transition to take place, we are calling on all players to change their approach to emergencies, specifically:

7.2.1 A different approach to funding

International donors: governments and institutions

- Donors must respond to the warning signs and listen to calls from governments and aid agencies to release funds early.
- Donors must establish funding mechanisms for broader emergency responses, ensuring that each response improves lives and decreases vulnerability, as well as saving lives.
- Governments of UN member states should contribute to a reformed CERF (Central Emergency Revolving Fund) that would enable the UN and NGOs to respond immediately to emergencies in a timely, substantial and equitable manner, intervening before they escalate to crisis levels.
- Donor funding must be sustained and predictable, focusing on helping people recover.
- Donors should explicitly focus on countries where cyclical food emergencies occur.

Southern governments

- Southern governments should establish their own reserves that will enable them to mount rapid and appropriate responses in times of emergency.
- Governments need to prioritise long-term investment in people and areas that are vulnerable to the impact of natural disaster.
- Southern governments and their donor partners need to ensure that their Poverty Reduction Strategies have a genuine focus on vulnerable groups such as animal-herders and subsistence farmers, and deliver appropriate types and levels of support.

Aid agencies

- Aid agencies must demand changes to donor funding policies to ensure that their responses tackle the needs of people living on the edge and deliver sustainable, long-term change.

7.2.2 Changing action on the ground

Development

- There must be significant investment in development – by donor governments and institutions, southern governments and aid agencies - based on a good understanding of the social, environmental and economic dynamics facing people living on the edge.

Agriculture

- Seeds and fertiliser will help ensure successful harvests, which in turn will refill grain stores and provide excess food to sell. But to protect critical resources in the long-term further mechanisms must also be put in place, for example, improving seed and water storage and supply.

Animal husbandry and animal-herders

- Animal-herders need support to rebuild their herds and to regenerate and improve the management of vital pastures. Veterinary systems must also be built up to protect animals in times of drought.
- Governments and donors must recognise and support animal-herding as a livelihood and work to strengthen its viability.
- Education and training to help animal-herders find other ways of earning a living must be made available.

Links to markets

- People must be helped to secure fairer terms of trade for their produce and to access new markets in which to trade. Market systems need investment to be made robust enough to withstand crises.

Targeting emergency aid

- Emergency aid must be used to prevent destitute people from starving. But it must also be targeted at people on the verge of destitution to prevent them from selling their crops and animals and becoming tomorrow's destitute people.

7.2.3 Shifting public perception

Media

- While news agendas are largely focused around dramatic images and events, public interest does extend beyond the peak of an emergency. The mainstream media must do more to satisfy this public interest in what happens in the aftermath of an emergency.

Aid agencies and the media

- Aid agencies and the media must explain the long-term nature of crises and the need for long-term work to draw people out of poverty alongside emergency appeals.

8. Conclusion

Based on humanitarian aid trends over the last ten years, emergency spending in Africa is increasing by an average 20 per cent each year. This is strong evidence of the need for radical change. Unless money is spent differently and better, by 2020 £165 billion will be wasted on emergencies this century, some of which could be prevented. Countless lives will be lost and the numbers of people condemned to a life on the edge will continue to rise. The international community must act now to halt this and put CARE's agenda for change into action.