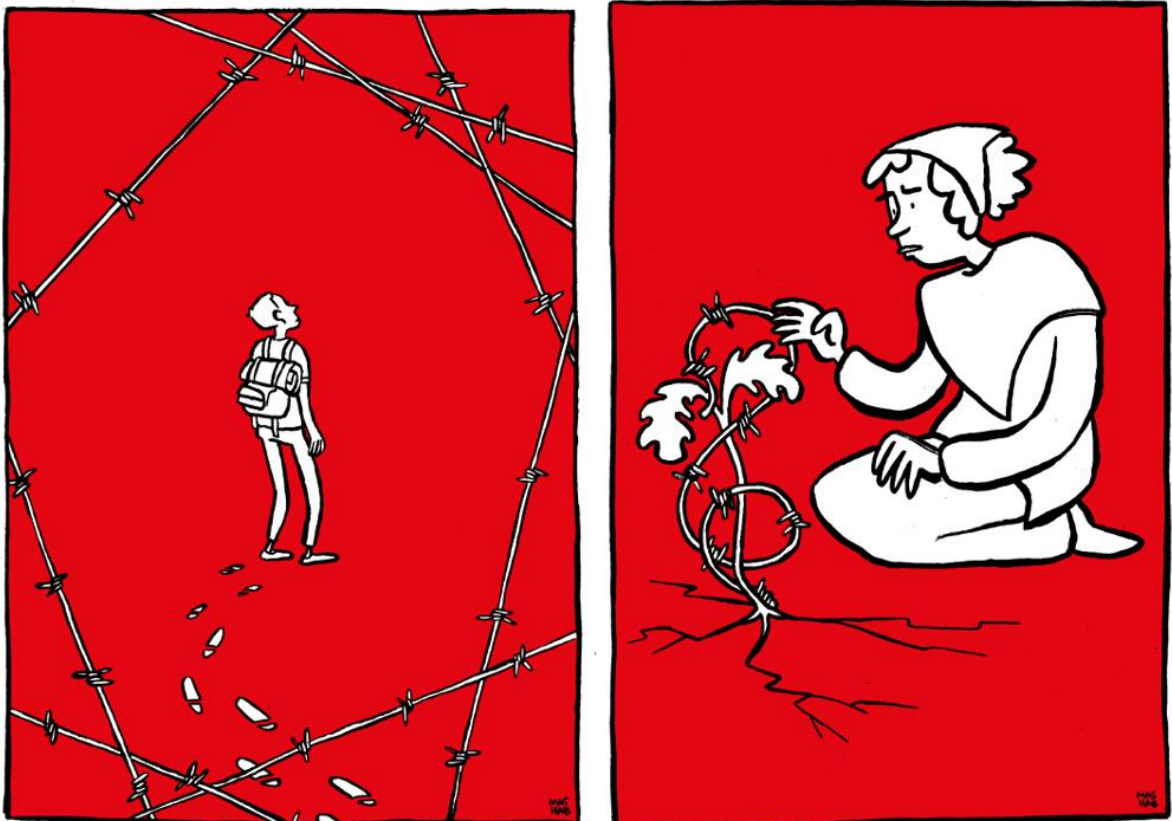


Knowing Food Crises

Data & disasters: a challenging combination

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All crises, certainly food crises, have to deal with numerous uncertainties. Knowing a food crisis is not easy, sometimes even impossible. How do humanitarian professionals cope with uncertainties? And how do they construct messages for their communication with journalists, media organizations and citizens? An expert meeting organized by KUNO and Wageningen University (March 2018).



KUNO is an initiative of ten NGOs and five knowledge institutes from the Dutch humanitarian sector. KUNO's goal is to strengthen the humanitarian sector in the Netherlands. KUNO is a platform for joint learning, reflection and debate. We organize expert meetings, working sessions for professionals, webinars, training and public debates. All of our events are cross-sectoral and organized in cooperation with our partners.

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Cover: cartoons made for KUNO by the Dutch artist MasHab.

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Introduction

On March 20 of 2017, KUNO and Wageningen University organized a debate on the assessment, framing and media coverage of food crises. The most recent Giro 555 action in the Netherlands (Hunger in Africa, 2017) was a success in terms of fundraising and reaching a broader audience, but it was also a showcase of the sometimes uneasy relationship between getting the facts right and bringing an appealing message on time to a broad audience. In the Dutch media the issue was whether the food crisis in South Sudan in 2017 was as severe as was claimed by Giro555 was raised.

This was not a once-only affair. Biafra (1976-1979), Cambodia (1979), Ethiopia (1984, Live Aid), Rwanda (1994), Niger (2005). All examples of major humanitarian campaigns that raised questions about assessing the severity and nature of crises, and/or raising questions about the messages and framing that were used in the media and during the campaigns.

The panel members of the debate were:

- **Marinus Verweij**, CEO of ICCO/Kerk in Actie and currently the lead of the SHO (Samenwerkende Hulporganisaties/Giro 555);
- **Saskia van der Kam**, nutrition specialist at Artsen Zonder Grenzen (MSF Holland);
- **Arjan Hehenkamp**, former director of Artsen Zonder Grenzen (MSF Holland);
- **Bram Jansen**, lecturer at Wageningen University and Research Centre.

Furthermore: a column by **Bram Posthumus**, freelance journalist in West-Africa.

The debate was facilitated by **Peter Heintze**, coordinator of KUNO, the Platform for Humanitarian Knowledge Exchange in the Netherlands.

Declaration of famine: assessment

In the introduction to the theme, **Bram Jansen** explained that a crisis is a construction, a narrative, a story: 'The declaration of a crisis depends on an authority that argues that an intervention is necessary. This narrative is not carved in stone, and the image supporting the narrative does not only depend on scientific research and measurements: communication objectives and the media also play a big role. The crisis narrative can, because it is a construction, turn out to be not entirely true. The Norwegian Broadcasting Company TV2 showed a good example in the documentary film *The Famine Scam*, broadcast in 2008. *The Famine Scam* showed that a most urgent food crisis in Niger in 2005 and 2006, which was reported by the BBC and was proclaimed by the United Nations, did not occur. After the first reports of hunger in Niger, the humanitarian apparatus for building up an effective humanitarian response and public fundraising, was set in motion. By that time this apparatus has been set into motion, it cannot be reversed easily.'

"A crisis is a construction, a narrative, a story."

Bram Jansen: '*Famine* is a fraught word. It is a label that calls for action: people have to act on it. A crisis is often seen as an outside event, where support from others (outsiders) is necessary.' Bram Jansen quoted Alex de Waal, an expert in food crises and famine, who wrote in 1989 about biases in the assessment of a crisis. De Waal points at several types of bias: spatial bias, dry season bias, project bias, personal bias, diplomatic bias and professional bias. These biases show that in the assessment of a crisis, it matters where you are and where you get access to, who you talk to, what your background is, and which institutions or authorities you depend on.

After introducing these biases, Bram Jansen asked Saskia van der Kam, nutrition advisor with MSF, about the food security assessment nowadays, wondering if these biases still exist.

Saskia van der Kam explained how the IPC system (Integrated Food Security Phase Classification) works, and also how MSF assesses the food security phases. The IPC approach started in 2004 and is now used by prominent international humanitarian organizations, such as Save the Children, Oxfam, and United Nation organizations (FAO, WFP, Unicef). MSF choose not to switch to a new system, but to stick to their own assessments for food security.

Saskia van der Kam started by explaining the history of food crisis assessment; 'It used to be really complicated, because there was no categorization. In the 1970s and 1980s the data used to assess crises became more categorized. Three levels were distinguished: individual, community and society. The interventions were carried out on all three levels. However, this system did not assess the severity of the crisis. MSF started to distinguish several indicators (food access, food diversity, food availability, but also vulnerability, displacement etc.). MSF really looks at the behaviour of people: this indicates the severity of the food insecurity.' Saskia van der Kam also elaborated on the availability of food: the problem is most often the lack of high-quality food, not staple foods. High-quality food is the type of food that children need.

"The IPC-system is very enhanced. (...) MSF tries to keep it simple. And looks at a local level."

Saskia van der Kam: 'The IPC indicators are quite similar to MSF ones, but the IPC system also includes information about crops, rainfall and food prices. The IPC system is very advanced: many methods are included and triangulation is used to improve the assessments. Manuals and trainings are also developed for this reason.' Saskia van der Kam also addressed some of the weaknesses of the IPC system: 'Biases cause gaps in the data, and the validity of the data is not always guaranteed. Sometimes the source of the data is unknown, and generalization happens quite often.'

'MSF tries to keep it simple and looks at a local level. Therefore, the MSF assessment is often about the 'here and now', and the IPC system is more an early warning/prediction system. The phases of food insecurity are the same: phase one is minimal, phase two is stressed, phase three is crisis, phase four is emergency, and phase five is famine.' Arjan Hehenkamp added that the IPC system is more sensitive, and that the MSF system is more specific. In other words: the IPC system

might pick up a crisis sooner, and the MSF system might be more often right about the situation in a certain area. Arjan Hehenkamp also made it clear that this assessment is very difficult, and that it more often goes wrong than right.

Decision making, fundraising and the media

On the one hand, food crises are about the assessment of the crisis, as described above. On the other hand, there is the issue of decision-making about interventions, fundraising for the crisis, and media coverage and framing. **Marinus Verweij**, CEO of ICCO/Kerk in Actie, is currently the lead in the SHO, a cooperation of eleven organizations, and it focuses on fundraising in the Netherlands.

Marinus Verweij explained that SHO uses strict criteria for launching a Giro 555 action, a large fundraising action to support the humanitarian actions of their member organizations. The first one is: the crisis or disaster is too large to handle by the country itself. Secondly, humanitarian organizations must be able to deliver aid on the ground very quickly. Thirdly, there must be media coverage. And lastly, there must be the expectation that the Dutch are willing to help. In the SHO, these four criteria are discussed all the time, and often it is decided not to launch a Giro 555 action. Marinus Verweij: 'The SHO makes use of UN data and FEWS NET* to assess a food crisis, together with the information of the eleven affiliated organizations. Sometimes they get criticized for starting a Giro 555 action too early, or too late. It remains a difficult decision. The areas that are monitored by the SHO right now are Yemen, the Horn of Africa, and the Rohingya situation in Bangladesh.'

* FEWS NET (Famine Early Warning Systems Network): an evidence-based analysis for 34 countries, created by US AID in 1984 to support humanitarian decision-makers. FEWS NET is related to the IPC system.

“A Giro 555 campaign for a natural disaster always raises more money than it does for other crises.”

‘When the SHO launches a Giro 555 campaign for a natural disaster, such as the earthquake in Haiti (2010) or in Nepal (2015), the total amount of money raised is higher than with other crises,’ says Marinus Verweij. ‘The possibility of framing it as “natural”, as opposed to man-made, yields more money.’ However, with food crises, there is always a man-made construction in the crisis, argued Arjan Hehenkamp: ‘Food crises relate to policies, militia, and often also to conflict. Besides the man-made dimension to food crises, there is the notion of protracted food insecurity or the degree of novelty or acuteness.’ Arjan Hehenkamp said that it is less common that a crisis is new: a crisis is often constructed to create awareness. Bram Jansen confirmed the statement of Arjan Hehenkamp on ‘the normalization of crises’: the food insecurity in countries such as Somalia is very structural; therefore it is difficult to indicate a ‘tipping point’ towards a crisis or famine.

The discussion about the severity of the crisis and how the crisis should be communicated in the media, starts within the organizations themselves, argues Marinus Verweij. Verweij: “In all eleven organizations, there are humanitarian experts and communication experts. They do not always agree, and the discussion starts with questions such as: do we use the word ‘famine’? There is a tension: communication to a greater audience is often about one-liners and clear messages, while the complexity of a crisis asks for nuance and prudence, according to the humanitarian experts.”

“In a media campaign, the nuance can vanish swiftly.”

The panellists did agree: all these complexities in assessment and decision-making are difficult to translate into a clear story that is ready to be communicated

through the media. In a media campaign, the nuance can vanish swiftly. A clear message can convey the urgency of a situation better, but how much room is there for nuance and prudence? What if there was no famine, although there was one declared? Or the other way around, what if there was a famine, although it was not declared? When is it 'safe' to declare a crisis? We need to acknowledge that this is a difficult process. We also need to acknowledge that there are often no easy solutions. Marinus Verweij argued that the Dutch citizens are smart enough to know that these situations are complex, especially when there is also conflict in the area. It also depends on the medium: there is more room for nuance in a documentary than in a newspaper advertisement.

The discussion revolves around the one-liner, the terminology, and of course the imagery used. Which photo do you want to be the image of the Giro 555 campaign? Communication experts look at what works and what doesn't work. Humanitarian experts bring in some nuance. Then it goes to the media: are they willing to campaign? And we should also acknowledge: the media can have a different interest than the organizations. Marinus Verweij referred to a media team he witnessed, which said that a 'regular' refugee camp was 'too normal' for taking pictures.

Media: celebrities and local knowledge

The media can also be a catalyst for action, argued Bram Jansen. The free press can write their stories and policies can be adjusted according to the journalist's findings. However, there is also the risk that the nuance is lost when, for instance, famous people commit to spreading the message, known as 'the CNN effect'. In 1984 and 1985, celebrities raised awareness for the famine in Ethiopia – neglecting the political problems in the country. Bram Jansen raised the question: are celebrities the right people to spread the message of crisis? Marinus Verweij argued that celebrities can make people more enthusiastic to participate and donate. There is also a difference between the 1984/1985 situation and the Dutch celebrities who commit to an organization, get informed, and help spreading a message by making a commercial. Also, the media are necessary to boost the fundraising. The willingness to give of the citizens is influenced by media coverage. And involvement of Dutch citizens with other people and other countries is not wrong, says Marinus Verweij.

[The media can also be a catalyst for action.]

Bram Posthumus' column discussed local knowledge and networks. In Africa there are excellent journalists, writers, scientists and bloggers. They can provide context and know about the history; they can give good interpretations and explanations. For NGOs, they can help organizations get a realistic estimation of the local context and their position in that local context. This estimation could prevent blunders and help make the decision to intervene (or to stay away). Local knowledge, according to Bram Posthumus, is essential when you take the fundamental principle of humanitarian aid, 'Do No Harm' seriously. NGOs that arrive in the local context become part of the local context, and by doing so they might do more harm than good. (LINK NAAR COLUMN BRAM POSTHUMUS)

Further reading

- 'Mass Starvation' by Alex de Waal
- 'How to declare a famine?' by IRIN news
(<https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2018/03/05/how-declare-famine-primer-south-sudan>)
- 'Living level 3: South Sudan', a comic by the World Food Program
(<https://insight.wfp.org/living-level-3-south-sudan-148111eb0f34>)