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OUTSMARTING LA NIÑA

Lessons and recommendations for strengthening resilience through the drought response in the Horn of Africa

MARCH 2022





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Executive Summary

La Niña is rearing its ugly head again. The effects of this weather phenomenon are driving one of the worst droughts in the Horn of Africa in a generation. For the communities affected, the drought is a grave manifestation of the climate impacts predicted in the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report.¹ The drought has destroyed crops and decimated livestock, threatening the livelihoods of millions of farmers and pastoralists. These impacts are exacerbated by, and in some cases further fueling, increases in conflict in the region. As a result, more than 13 million people in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia are already experiencing extreme hunger.

The worst is likely yet to come, with seasonal rains expected to be below average again this year—for an unprecedented fourth rainy season in a row.² The number of people experiencing severe food insecurity is predicted to double, with the bulk in conflict-affected areas of Somalia and Ethiopia.³ In Somalia, a Famine Risk Assessment has been commissioned, signaling the potential for the drought to lead to widespread malnutrition and possible starvation there. Among those most affected in the region are women and girls, who in times of drought often bear the brunt of both the impacts on water and food availability, and the harmful mechanisms used to cope with the crisis.⁴

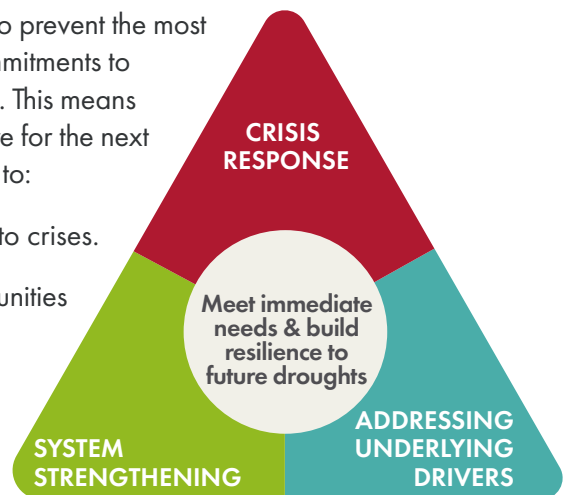
This severe drought is one of the many shocks that have pummeled the Horn in recent years, including COVID-19, locust outbreaks, and devastating floods. Ongoing violent conflict and poor natural resource management have only compounded the effects of these shocks on people’s lives and livelihoods.

In many ways, those living in the drylands of the Horn are more prepared than in previous droughts. Governments, donors, aid agencies, and local communities have made major investments over the last decade to build resilience and end drought emergencies. These investments are helping to mitigate the worst effects of the current drought.⁵ It is critical that the current response protects and builds on these hard-won gains.

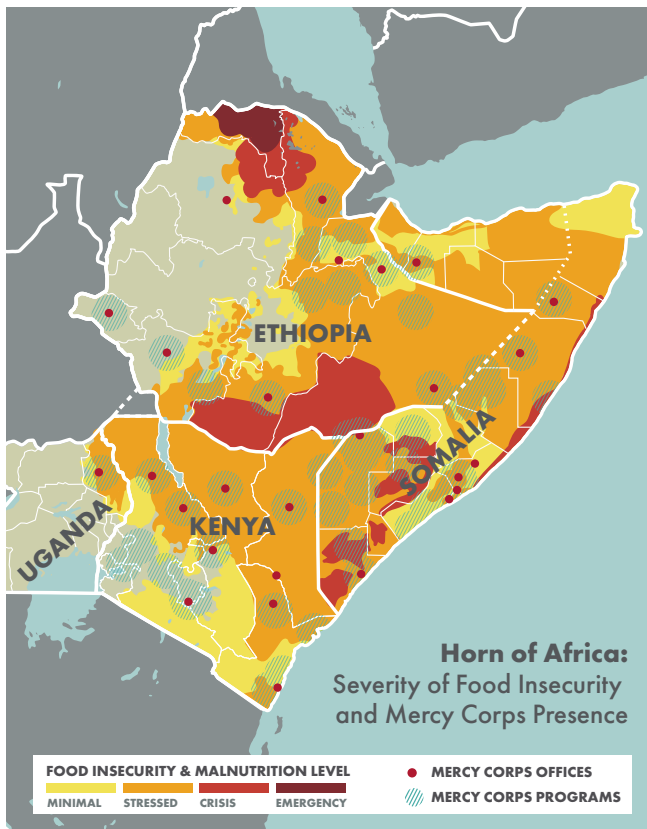
This is not the first drought to strike the Horn, and it will certainly not be the last. As the climate emergency escalates, the future will bring more frequent and severe droughts. We have the knowledge and ability to prevent them from escalating into humanitarian emergencies. This requires that the international response not only urgently address immediate needs, but also deepen investments in interventions that build communities’ resilience to future droughts.

Donors, governments, and aid agencies should take urgent action to prevent the most devastating impacts of the drought at scale while strengthening commitments to resilience-building through a drought cycle management approach. This means responding not only faster to the current crisis, but smarter to prepare for the next one. Specifically, we call on humanitarian and development actors to:

- › Harness proven tools that allow rapid, flexible responses to crises.
- › Strengthen the formal and informal systems that help communities prepare for, cope with, and recover from severe droughts.
- › Address the underlying drivers of crises, including climate change, conflict, and natural resource degradation.



1 IPCC. (2022). *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*. Cambridge University Press.
2 FEWS NET. (2022). *East Africa Key Message Update: Scale of food assistance needs in East Africa continues to outpace the humanitarian response, February 2022*. FEWS NET.
3 FAO. (2022). *Rapid response and mitigation plan to avert a humanitarian catastrophe*, 10. FAO.
4 A Mercy Corps study of adolescents in Turkana County, Kenya, found that during the 2011 drought, “To cope with the loss of livestock during drought and replenish their herds, families will hasten the marriage of girls, some as early as 10 years of age.” Chetail, S. et al. (2015). *Wealth & Warriors: Adolescents in the Face of Drought in Turkana, Kenya*, 37. Relief Web.
5 Adrian Cullis. (2021). *Living with certainty: pastoralists grapple with drought in Horn of Africa*. SPARC.



Mercy Corps is responding to the drought by protecting lives, assets, and livelihoods in the immediate term while laying the groundwork for long-term resilience by working with communities, government, and the private sector to improve local capacities and systems. We are **supporting basic needs through cash assistance** to nearly 10,000 drought-affected households. We are **increasing access to water** for over 12,000 households, rehabilitating boreholes, desilting water pans, and, in the most extreme circumstances, water trucking for both household-level use as well as pastoral livelihoods. We are **safeguarding pastoral and agro-pastoral livelihoods** for 10,000 pastoral households through improving access to animal health inputs and services, fodder, and feed. We are also enhancing market linkages and financial support to protect core animal breeding stock and accelerate destocking of non-productive animals. We are **embedding a conflict-sensitive approach** throughout all of our programming, supporting peaceful migration and resource sharing.

In preparing this brief, Mercy Corps drew on multiple sources: examples from nearly 20 years of experience providing humanitarian and development assistance across drought cycles in the Horn of Africa; insights and recommendations surfaced during a roundtable Mercy Corps convened in January 2022 with policy and technical experts; and local knowledge about drought conditions and responses collected from Mercy Corps teams in the region. We also took stock of reviews of previous drought responses, including recommendations related to early warning, response targeting, governance, food aid, water interventions and nutrition—nearly all of which remain wholly relevant today.⁶ This research brief summarizes key lessons and their implications for donors, governments, and aid agencies.

Background

Drought severity

The Horn of Africa is deep in the grip of drought after three consecutive seasons of failed rains. Parts of the region are facing their driest conditions and hottest temperatures since satellite record-keeping began 40 years ago.⁷ Forecasts suggest that the situation is likely to escalate further, as a fourth consecutive season of below-average rains (March-May 2022) is now considered highly likely. This would be the first occurrence of four consecutive below-average rains in the region since 1981, resulting in one of the worst climate-related emergencies on record.

More than 13 million people in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia are already in need of urgent food assistance.⁸ A fourth season of failed rains would leave a staggering 45-55 million people facing acute food insecurity by mid-2022.⁹ In Somalia, a Famine Risk Assessment has been commissioned, signaling the potential for the drought

6 Including: Hedlund, K. & Knox Clarke, P. (2011). [ALNAP Lessons Paper: Humanitarian action in drought-related emergencies](#). ALNAP.

7 World Food Programme Research Analysis and Monitoring Unit. (2022). [An Analysis of the Impacts of Ongoing Drought across the Eastern Horn of Africa 2020–2022 Period](#), 5-6. World Food Programme.

8 Khorsandi, P., & Snowdon, G. (2022). [Millions face hunger as drought grips Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia, warns World Food Programme](#). World Food Programme.

9 FEWS NET. (2022). [East Africa Key Message Update: Scale of food assistance needs in East Africa continues to outpace the humanitarian response, February 2022](#). FEWS NET.

to lead to widespread malnutrition and possible starvation there. On top of the urgent threat to human lives, the protracted drought crisis also threatens livelihoods for millions. Severe water shortages have caused farmers' crops to fail. Without access to enough pasture, water, and fodder, livestock health is rapidly deteriorating. This is greatly reducing people's ability to sell off animals—a key coping strategy for agro-pastoralists. At the same time, staple food prices are surging across the region—a function of poor harvests, inflation, and rising prices on international markets—reducing the purchasing power of poor households and further compounding the crisis.¹⁰ The conflict in Ukraine threatens to further drive up prices of wheat, corn, and other staples across Africa.¹¹

Women and girls will bear the heavier brunt of the impacts of the drought, due to prevailing gender inequality in the region. For instance, in times of crises, populations adopt negative coping strategies such as skipping meals or removing children from school. Cultural norms dictate that women and girls will be the last to eat or not eat at all, and girls will be the first to miss out on their education. The displacement that results from drought can also lead to greater gender-based violence against women and girls.¹²

While droughts are a regular occurrence in the Horn of Africa, this drought comes on top of a series of shocks that leave many communities deeply vulnerable. These include COVID-19, conflict, and climate-related stresses such as widespread flooding in 2019 and subsequent desert-locust outbreaks. The impact of such compounding and recurring crises has eroded communities' coping strategies. And while regional governments and development actors' investments in local systems and capacities have been crucial in helping lessen these impacts, the scale of the current drought occurrence, in combination with the array of other shocks, is overwhelming communities.

Drought responses to date

Droughts are becoming more frequent in the Horn, roughly doubling in frequency over the last two decades. Before 1999, poor or failed rains affected the region once every five to six years. But in the years since, poor rains have occurred every two to three years.¹³ This pattern will undoubtedly continue, demanding better responses that are more efficient and effective.

Early preventative action is vital to avoiding mass loss of life during these events. The Horn of Africa's catastrophic drought in 2011 is a sobering example of what happens when help arrives too late. The Famine Early Warning Systems Network and Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit in Somalia released early warning alerts anticipating the crisis as early as August 2010, but a large-scale response was mostly delayed until July 2011. As a result, 260,000 people died in Somalia—half of them children under five.¹⁴ In contrast, a swifter and smarter response in Ethiopia and Kenya in 2011, and across all three countries in the 2015-2016 drought, as well as a more fully funded response in Somalia in 2017, prevented the worst outcomes.¹⁵

In addition to being more timely, the responses between 2015-17 were more effective because of years of investments to improve cash and market-based programming, animal health services, natural resource management, and other systems that underpin drought resilience.¹⁶ Getting to this point required a marked shift within donors and governments. Many are now treating cyclical droughts as a development problem requiring long-term investments, rather than as isolated humanitarian emergencies.¹⁷ This paradigm is exemplified in the drought cycle management approach,¹⁸ which “ensures that appropriate interventions are implemented before,

10 FEWS NET. (2022). [Very high humanitarian assistance needs are likely to persist in East Africa in 2022](#). FEWS NET.

11 IFAD. (2022). [The impact of conflict in Ukraine on global food security](#). Relief Web.

12 UN OCHA. (2017). Horn of Africa: Impact of conflict and drought crises on women and girls. UN OCHA.

13 Funk, C. (2021). [Scientists sound the alarm over drought in East Africa: what must happen next](#). The Conversation.

14 Hillbruner, C., & Moloney, G. (2012). [When early warning is not enough—Lessons learned from the 2011 Somalia Famine](#). Global Food Security.

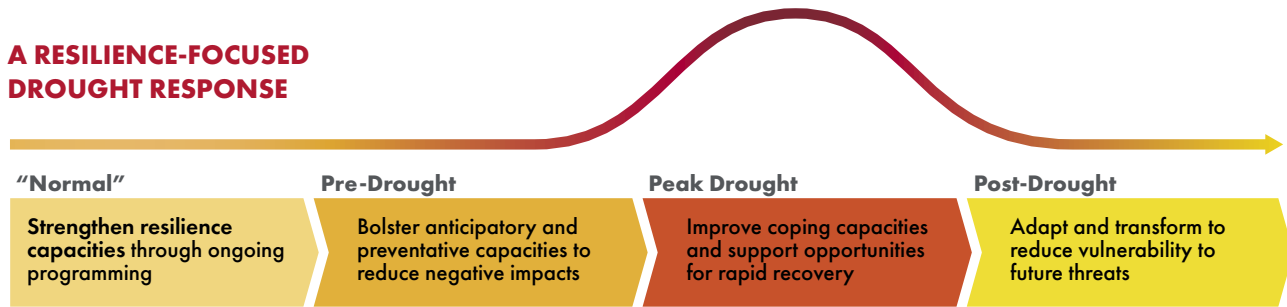
15 Clayton, M. et al. (2017). [The 2017 pre-famine response in Somalia: Progress on reform?](#) Humanitarian Policy Group.

16 USAID. (2017). [Quick Facts on Resilience in the Horn of Africa](#). USAID; Peachey, K. (2017). [Looking back to look forward: Building on learning from 2011 to strengthen the 2017 drought response in Somalia](#). The CaLP Network.

17 Greg Collins, personal communication, January 2022.

18 USAID Ethiopia Agriculture Knowledge, Learning, Documentation and Policy (AKLDP). (2014). [Resilience in Africa's Drylands: Revisiting the Drought Cycle Management Model](#). Feinstein International Center, Tufts University.

during and after droughts. This ultimately reduces the risks and consequences of drought.”¹⁹ Drought-affected communities are also recognizing the value of investment in resilience approaches. For instance, numerous local governments in Kenya are advocating that humanitarian assistance for the drought response equally invest in resilience building to mitigate the impact of future shocks.²⁰



International, regional, national, and local communities are mobilizing in response to the current drought. Following Kenya and Somalia’s declarations of the drought as a national disaster in December 2021, governments of East Africa joined with U.N. agencies and the European Union to issue a call for urgent humanitarian assistance—such as food, water, and cash—alongside development support that would build resilience to future climate shocks.²¹ Some donors have scaled up humanitarian assistance in response, with the United Kingdom committing £17 million for countries in East Africa facing drought and flooding, plus an additional £5.5 million for Somalia;²² the European Union committing €294.2 million in humanitarian funding to assist vulnerable populations in East and Southern Africa;²³ and the United States committing \$39 million USD in humanitarian assistance to respond to the drought in southern Ethiopia.²⁴

Overall, however, humanitarian resources are stretched given the number and scale of other competing global crises. As a result, humanitarian funding is falling far short of the magnitude of needs in the Horn. The 2022 humanitarian appeal for Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia is for \$4.4 billion USD to provide life-saving assistance and protection to 29 million people. For Somalia, so far less than 4% (\$54.8 million USD) of that is funded (as of March 18, 2022).²⁵

Some development actors have used flexible funding mechanisms to shift resources quickly to the emergency. In Kenya, for example, USAID approved a \$684,000 USD crisis modifier for a major food security program implemented by Mercy Corps and its consortium partners in Turkana and Samburu counties. This modification enabled four months of unconditional cash assistance to 2,700 drought-affected families, complemented by emergency nutrition services, and other critical support.

The case for resilience investments

Since the Horn of Africa’s devastating drought in 2011, governments, donors, aid agencies, and local communities have made major investments to build resilience and end drought emergencies. These investments are working. In 2017, USAID reported on the impact of investments in resilience in the Horn since the 2011 drought. It concluded, “As a result of these joint efforts, significant progress has been made in reducing hunger and poverty,

19 Oxfam. (2010). *Disaster Risk Reduction in Drought Cycle Management: A Learning Companion*, 3. Oxfam.
 20 USAID et al. (2021). *Livestock Market Systems Activity: Strengthening Community Capacities for Resilience and Growth: Annual Progress Report October 2020-September 2021*. Mercy Corps.
 21 FEWS NET. (2021). *The Eastern Horn of Africa faces an exceptional prolonged and persistent agro-pastoral drought sequence*. FEWS NET.
 22 Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. (2022). *Press release: New UK support to tackle impact of droughts and flooding in East Africa*. GOV.UK.
 23 European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations. (2021). *Horn of Africa drought: EU allocates €21.5 million in additional humanitarian funding*. European Commission.
 24 This funding is in addition to USAID support for humanitarian relief in Tigray, northern Ethiopia. It also comes on top of USAID’s contributions to the multi-donor famine prevention initiative Productive Safety Net Program, described below.
 25 Financial Tracking Service. (2022). *Somalia Humanitarian Response Plan 2022*. UNOCHA.

strengthening resilience, and improving disaster risk management and early response when droughts inevitably do occur.”²⁶ Better early warning systems, more shock-responsive social protection programs, and stronger market systems are arguably mitigating some of the worst effects of the current drought—at a fraction of the cost of emergency assistance.

Recent analysis drawn from drought data in the Horn between 2000 and 2015 indicates that investment in resilience and safety nets “reduces the net cost of humanitarian response by an estimated \$1.6 billion [USD] over a 15-year period over the cost of a late response.”²⁷ When taking into account the costs of meeting immediate needs and the benefits to incomes and livestock, investments in resilience building are estimated to save \$4.3 billion USD over a 15-year period, which averages to \$287 million USD per year.²⁸

It is critical that the current drought response protects the hard-won gains from these investments in resilience. However, there is a risk that in the rush to deliver critical life-saving assistance, we will bypass or potentially undermine the systems people rely on to cope with and recover from major shocks. This would leave affected communities more vulnerable—and make it more expensive for donors and governments to respond to the humanitarian needs caused by future droughts, which are only becoming more frequent and more severe.

Recommendations for a smarter response

This is the time to double down on investments in resilience by: Harnessing proven tools that allow aid agencies to respond quickly and flexibly to emergencies, strengthening the formal and informal systems that help communities prepare, cope, and recover, and addressing the underlying drivers of crises.

Harness proven tools that allow rapid, flexible responses to crises

In crisis-prone contexts like the Horn, aid agencies must be able to adapt programming in response to early warnings of shocks—and to sudden onset disasters—without delay. Yet the bureaucratic systems of the aid world are often too rigid to allow responders to quickly pivot to address complex problems efficiently, and program incentives frequently undermine adaptive management instead of supporting it. There have also been reports of a reluctance, particularly within the donor community, to allocate funds towards the drought response when it is not yet certain that conditions will escalate into a crisis. This aligns with previous analysis, which found that the “risk of ‘acting in vain’ is a major perceived barrier” to early, forecast-based action within the aid community.²⁹ Removing constraints to adaptive programming is an important priority as part of the current drought response, and in anticipation of future ones. Equally important is adopting a “no-regrets” approach to forecast based action, on the understanding that even if an anticipated crisis does not materialize, assistance is nonetheless likely to enhance resilience to future shocks.

One proven tool for allowing program flexibility in the face of emergencies is the crisis modifier. Crisis modifiers are finance mechanisms integrated into longer-term funding. They trigger the release of emergency or humanitarian funds during a crisis, thus positioning development programs to leverage their work and partnerships towards a rapid response. Crisis modifiers have been shown to allow development programs to respond to shocks, protect development gains made to date, and help prevent poverty backsliding.³⁰ In recent years, donors, including USAID, have used crisis modifiers “in shock prone environments to inject emergency funds through existing development programs,” particularly in drought-prone pastoral areas including the Horn of Africa.³¹ Other donors, including the

26 USAID. (2017). [Quick Facts on Resilience in the Horn of Africa](#). USAID.

27 Cabot Venton, C. (2018). [Economics of Resilience to Drought in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia](#), 11. USAID Center for Resilience.

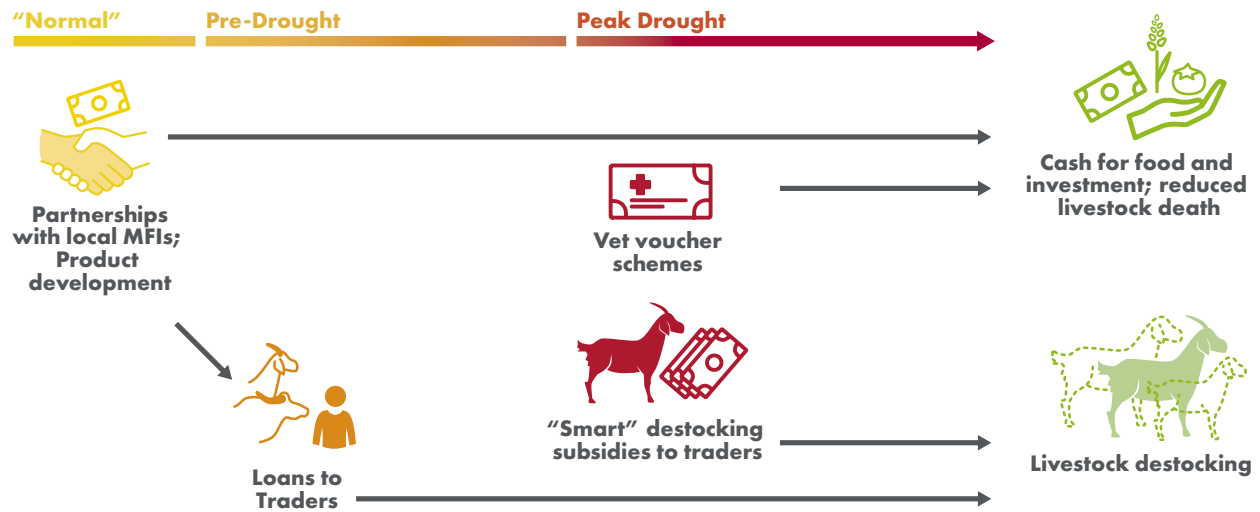
28 Ibid.

29 Tanner, T. et al. (2019). [Scaling up early action Lessons, challenges and future potential in Bangladesh](#). ODI.

30 Peters, K. and Pichon, F. (2017). [Crisis Modifiers: A Solution for a More Flexible Development-Humanitarian System?](#) BRACED/UKAID.

31 USAID. (2017). [Shock Responsive Programming and Adaptive Mechanisms](#). USAID Learning Lab.

EXAMPLE: PRIME'S 2016 DROUGHT RESPONSE



Mercy Corps has seen significant successes leveraging crisis modifiers in response to past drought emergencies in the Horn of Africa. Consider the Pastoralist Areas Resilience Improvement and Market Expansion (PRIME), a six-year development program in the drylands of Ethiopia funded by USAID. The 2016 drought that struck Ethiopia triggered several innovative crisis modifiers in PRIME. These included provision of unconditional cash transfers to households and emergency access to fodder and veterinary services, both of which worked through existing institutions and market actors to avoid unnecessary disruptions of local economies.

Another PRIME crisis modifier intervention was commercial destocking via “smart” subsidies, where Mercy Corps and partners provided carefully designed incentives to local livestock traders who purchased from livestock markets in drought affected areas. The subsidies helped drive demand and increase prices to provide much-needed income for pastoral households, while building new market linkages for livestock traders. Crisis modifiers helped ensure that in the face of drought, households reached by PRIME were more food secure, were better able to maintain household and livestock assets and avoid impoverishment, and had healthier livestock herds.³⁵

United Kingdom³² and Sweden³³ have also recently employed crisis modifiers, and in 2021, ECHO issued a disaster preparedness guidance which stated that “[t]he inclusion of a crisis modifier is... recommended to all partners, unless... Early/Rapid Response Mechanisms are [already] in place.”³⁴

Given the evidence of their effectiveness, crisis modifiers should be prioritized as part of current and future drought responses. However, their integration in large development programs in the Horn of Africa remains limited, and their implementation rigid and often mired in bureaucracy. There is scope to significantly scale up and simplify their use across the region, and there is still time to do so in response to the current drought crisis in the Horn.³⁶ Specifically, donors and their implementing partners should agree on the specific, objective criteria for activating crisis modifiers or similar mechanisms, pre-approve budget flexibility, and conduct contingency planning to define the menu of activities to be funded in advance of an emergency to avoid delays when triggering a response.

32 BRCIS. (2022). [Early Action Early Warning Technical Brief](#).

33 UNDP. (2018). [Press Release: Sweden allocates additional SEK45M to resilience building](#).

34 DG ECHO. (2021). [DG ECHO Guidance Note - Disaster Preparedness](#).

35 Jacobs, M. and Sagara, B. (2017). [Enhancing Resilience to Severe Drought: What Works?](#) Mercy Corps.

36 Maxwell, D. et al. (2021). [Early Warning and Early Action for Increased Resilience of Livelihoods in the IGAD Region: Executive Summary](#). Feinstein International Center, Tufts University.

The crisis modifier is just one example of a flexible financing mechanism that donors can integrate into development programming in preparation for shocks.³⁷ It is critical that aid agencies are able to trigger these mechanisms early enough in a crisis and that donors sufficiently fund these mechanisms so they have a sufficient scale of impact.

Alongside donors providing flexible funding, aid agencies also need to be ready to make effective use of it to pivot efficiently to respond to humanitarian emergencies. In short, this means embracing adaptive management. Creating adaptive teams and programs requires dedicated efforts on multiple fronts, including: establishing an organizational culture that incentivizes experimentation and learning, cultivating the right people and skills including critical thinking and contextual awareness, and investing in tools and systems, such as for regular analysis of changing conditions and for nimble procurement of goods and services. Investments in these and other building blocks of adaptive management have paid off for Mercy Corps and peer agencies, and have been critical to effective responses to droughts and other major crises in the Horn and beyond.³⁸ Investments in these and other building blocks of adaptive management have paid off for Mercy Corps and peer agencies, and have been critical to effective responses to droughts and other major crises in the Horn and beyond.³⁹

Recommendations

To harness proven tools that allow rapid, flexible responses to crises, donors, governments, and aid agencies should:

- › Adopt a posture of early warning and early response. This means monitoring conditions and initiating action early enough that it will truly buffer against drought leading to humanitarian crisis. This requires constant dialogue with implementing partners and affected communities to recognize early warning signs. It also requires being comfortable in triggering a flexible response at scale on a no-regrets basis before conditions spill over into a full blown emergency.
- › Universally integrate the use of crisis modifiers or other flexible financing mechanisms into all existing and new development programming in the Horn of Africa. Streamline the activation and use of crisis modifiers to enable agencies to better pivot quickly to emergency response while protecting development gains.
- › Demand and create the conditions for adaptive management. This requires sufficiently funding key functions like monitoring and learning, and decentralizing planning and emergency response decision making to leaders closest to program activities.⁴⁰

Strengthen systems through drought response

When responding to past droughts, humanitarian and development actors have focused primarily on the provision of direct support like cash, food, water, and nutritional assistance. Funding appeals for the current drought call for much of the same. This type of direct support to individuals saves lives, and it remains a critical part of the drought response. It is equally important, however, that the response supports the systems that help communities cope with, and recover from, crises. These include social systems—such as social protection systems, community networks, and informal institutions—and local market systems, which provide essential goods and services to affected populations.

Social and market systems can be leveraged to respond quickly and cost-effectively to shocks.⁴¹ Strengthening systems is also critical for reaching more people in need.⁴² When aid actors focus only on individuals and households with relief assistance, they inevitably fail to reach more than a subset of the affected population. To

37 Other flexible financing approaches include contingency funding mechanisms, “no regrets” responses, and forecast-based financing. For a complete discussion, see: Rohwerder, B. (2017). [Flexibility in funding mechanisms to respond to shocks](#). GSDRC.

38 Mercy Corps. (2015). [Managing Complexity: Adaptive Management at Mercy Corps](#). Mercy Corps.

39 Mercy Corps, IRC, & ADAPT. (2016). [Adapting Aid: Lessons from Six Case Studies](#). Mercy Corps.

40 Wild, L. (2015). [PRIME Time for Mercy Corps Ethiopia’s Concept Note and Reporting System](#). USAID Learning Lab.

41 Petryniak, O., Proctor, K., & Kurtz, J. (2020). [Towards Resilience: Advancing Collective Impact in Protracted Crises](#). Mercy Corps.

42 Levine, S., & Becton, G. (2019). [Facing Up to the Challenges: Blending Market and Humanitarian Support for Refugees in Uganda](#). Mercy Corps.

achieve scale and greater coverage, aid actors need to reinforce the systems people rely on to access food, water, and other basic needs. Crises also offer opportunities to make local systems more inclusive and gender-responsive. For example, aid interventions can support systems to promote women’s leadership in governance and decision-making structures, and to better reach those who are most in need, including groups whose intersecting identities lead to their systemic marginalization.

Work through formal social protection systems

Formal social protection systems—those run through government agencies—aim to help reduce hunger and poverty, and to enable vulnerable groups and individuals to cope with crises. They have been shown to protect development gains in the context of shocks in low-income countries.⁴³ Examples of strong social protection systems in the drylands of the Horn include the Ethiopian Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) and Kenya’s Hunger Safety Net Programme (HSNP). As part of the current drought response, the PSNP has expanded to reach an additional 2.9 million people across the most drought-affected regions of southern Ethiopia. Similarly, Kenya’s National Drought Management Authority (NDMA) has scaled up the HSNP to reach up to an additional 272,000 households with cash transfers across four counties in Northern Kenya.⁴⁴

The PSNP and HSNP were both developed to protect against severe droughts and other major shocks. Yet a number of constraints remain that limit how “shock-responsive” these systems are—meaning, how useful they are in responding to large-scale shocks and disasters like drought. Non-governmental responses often set up parallel systems to provide similar forms of social assistance during emergencies. Instead, aid actors should work in ways that strengthen—or at a minimum, are harmonized with—formal social protection systems.

Ample guidance and lessons exist on how to do this.⁴⁶ Such collaborations typically take one of two primary forms: 1) Humanitarian actors can expand the coverage of social assistance, either “horizontally” to reach additional eligible households, or “vertically” to increase the level of benefits (e.g. an additional cash transfer amount) to meet people’s emergency needs. The PSNP in Ethiopia has a strong track record of such shock-response expansion, including during the 2015-16 drought. 2) Aid actors can complement formal social assistance



Photo Credit: E. Millstein/Mercy Corps 2022

The Kenya Hunger Safety Net Programme (HSNP) is an example of how aid actors can collaborate with governments to strengthen social protection systems. Supported by an international consortium of donors, the HSNP aims to build food security by building resilience to crises, including through cash-based social assistance. During the 2015-16 drought, Mercy Corps, WFP, and other implementing organizations linked their crisis responses to the HSNP.⁴⁷ These collaborations were aided by Kenya’s integrated beneficiary registry—a common platform for data on households eligible for and receiving social assistance. Mercy Corps and other humanitarian actors used this single registry to identify and reach households with top-up payments and provide nutrition support. This approach is an important departure from the ‘project-centric’ approach often taken by humanitarian actors. The result was more coherent and complete coverage of social assistance to vulnerable families across government and non-governmental responses.

43 Oxford Policy Management. (2017). [Shock-Responsive Social Protection Systems Research: Literature review \(2nd Edition\)](#), 18. Oxford Policy Management.

44 Hunger Safety Net Programme. (2022). [WATCH: How HSNP cash helped me cope with drought emergency](#). HSNP.

45 The CaLP Network, UNICEF, & OCHA. (2020). [Supporting the Linkages Between Humanitarian Cash and Voucher Assistance and National Social Protection Systems](#). The CaLP Network.

46 Duguma, Mesay Kebede. (2019). [Can social protection schemes contribute toward drought resilience? Evidence from rural Ethiopia](#). Science Direct.

with additional activities or support to achieve the desired outcomes, for example by providing nutrition assistance alongside cash transfers to help reduce acute malnutrition in women and children. Such complementary support is seen as essential in light of research that has shown safety net programs on their own are not often sufficient to build resilience in the face of frequent, severe droughts.⁴⁷

Strengthening shock responsive social protection requires proactive coordination and communication between aid actors and relevant government agencies. These relationships and mechanisms should be built, fostered, and strengthened through sustained collaboration over time so they can be efficiently leveraged when a shock happens. Establishing pre-agreed mechanisms and agreements can enable government and civil society-led aid actors to deliver quick, comprehensive, and equitable emergency assistance to vulnerable households at scale. Experiences from Ethiopia have shown the importance of having well-functioning, well-coordinated social safety nets in place prior to a major shock. This was exemplified during the COVID-19 response, where support through Ethiopia's PSNP "offset virtually all adverse pandemic-related impacts for participating households".⁴⁸ Donors can foster such linkages by funding key coordination functions that bring together government, civil society and other social protection actors⁴⁹

Identify and support informal social support systems

Alongside supporting formal, often government-run social safety nets, the aid community also needs to support *informal* social protection systems. During humanitarian crises, affected communities are their own first responders. Informal social protection—that is, support shared within people's own social networks—is a critical source of coping and recovery for crisis-affected communities.⁵⁰ This support often includes cash and loans; food, water, and other in-kind assistance; and psychosocial support, all of which are vital to cope with major shocks like droughts. People also rely on trusted social networks for information and advice. Social connections play a vital role in influencing their decisions about a wide range of survival and livelihood issues during crises. For example, Mercy Corps' experience with Village Savings and Loans Associations and other women-led self-help groups has shown the essential role that these structures play in building resilience by providing a combination of peer-based psychosocial and economic support.⁵¹

For too long, humanitarian responses have ignored, and sometimes even inadvertently undermined, these key local sources of resilience. For example, disputed or opaque targeting criteria can sow social tensions and disrupt local solidarity and informal support practices.⁵² Aid actors should instead support and strengthen informal and traditional social protection systems alongside the formal, government-led ones. They can do so, first, by measuring and monitoring changes to informal social networks over the course of the drought emergency. This can be a simple process: for example, agencies can integrate questions into periodic monitoring during droughts around whether recipients feel their households are able to lean on others for support.⁵³ Such monitoring allows agencies to better account for, and proactively respond to, signals of stress on these social relationships that may indicate worsening conditions.

Aid agencies should also seek out and invest in opportunities to leverage informal systems as part of emergency response. One opportunity is to engage informal social networks in the dissemination of pertinent and up-to-date information about evolving humanitarian conditions. Research and guidance on best practices for community-

47 Gentilini, U. et al. (2018). [Humanitarian Capital? Lessons on Better Connecting Humanitarian Assistance and Social Protection](#). International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank, and the World Food Programme.

48 Abay, K. A., et al. (2021). [Ethiopia's social safety net effective in limiting COVID-19 impacts on rural food insecurity](#). International Food Policy Research Institute Blog.

49 Smith, G. (2020). [Five practical insights on linking humanitarian assistance and social protection](#). CALP Network.

50 In a retrospective study of the drought and famine in 2010-11, one of the most important factors which determined how well households coped and survived was the extent and diversity of their social networks and households' ability to mobilize resources through such linkages. Majid, N., et al. (2016). [Narratives of Famine: Somalia 2011](#). Feinstein International Center, Tufts University.

51 FinEquity. (2021). [FinEquity Webinar: Building Resilience Through Women's Groups: A Discussion of Why Psychosocial Factors are Critical for Their Success](#). FinDevGateway.

52 Humphrey, A., et al. (2019). [The Currency of Connections: Why local support systems are integral to helping people recover in South Sudan](#). Mercy Corps.

53 Kim, J., et al. (2020). [Social Capital and Social Cohesion Measurement Toolkit for Community-Driven Development Operations](#). World Bank.

based early warning highlights that for slow-onset emergencies, including droughts, communities are most likely to heed early warning information after hearing it multiple times, through multiple channels.⁵⁴ “The natural inclination is to crosscheck or triangulate information with neighbors, friends, colleagues and available media,” concludes the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.⁵⁵

Finally, the aid community can invest in crisis-affected communities’ own initiatives. Such support efforts networks are also a critical but overlooked topic in the push to localize humanitarian and development assistance. These are especially important in insecure regions in the Horn where a range of barriers restrict donors and international organizations’ ability to partner with formal local organizations. Aid agencies can follow practices such as the survivor-and community-led crisis response to more effectively support informal initiatives.⁵⁶ This can take the forms of community mobilization and facilitation, group microgrants, demand-led skill training, and locally relevant mechanisms for coordination that seek to empower and support autonomous and collective self-help.

Market systems

During crises, communities depend heavily on markets, both to cope in the short term and to recover. Local businesses and traders are among the quickest to adapt to meet vulnerable populations’ needs in difficult contexts. Reflecting the global inflation trend following COVID-19 impacts on labor force and supply chains, markets across the Horn have broadly seen increased food and fuel prices. The drought has caused both domestic and imported cereal prices to skyrocket due to consecutive failed crops—with implications both for human and livestock consumption. In Somalia, for example, in southern markets maize and sorghum prices have increased 30-60 percent above the five-year average.⁵⁷ These increases are particularly challenging for vulnerable drought-affected households to absorb due to reduced purchasing power from pastoral and agro-pastoral livelihoods. To cope with these increases, vulnerable households commonly rely on relationships with market actors—for example small-scale vendors may enable regular clients to buy on credit, with the understanding that debts are repaid as the household has access to additional income.

Despite the importance of local market systems, the aid community has historically focused on direct provision of commodities and services to meet the needs of crisis-affected people.⁵⁸ A recent review of support to livelihoods and markets in protracted crises found that food assistance (in-kind or via cash or vouchers) remained the predominant response.⁵⁹ This approach has often undermined the functioning of local markets and communities’ ability to cope without aid, and hampered longer-term transitions out of crisis. Instead, aid agencies should be providing support to and through market actors and businesses during emergencies, wherever conditions allow.

In the drylands of the Horn of Africa, where the current drought is most severe, livestock markets, in particular, are critical lifelines for agro-pastoralists. Livestock production and marketing form 75-90 percent of local economies in arid and semi-arid land regions.⁶⁰ Yet droughts are especially disruptive to the functioning of livestock market systems. For example, traders’ demand for livestock tends to decline sharply as animal body conditions deteriorate, leaving pastoralists with unmanageably large herds and loss of income. Meanwhile, food prices often increase at the same time, as household demand for gains increase to supplement decreased milk production. This general trend is playing out across the Horn. In Ethiopia’s Somali Region, small-scale traders have reported they may not be able to continue operating given the poor quality of animals and skyrocketing prices for water and supplementary feed. Feed is currently over 200 percent above normal market rates and unavailable in the commercial market. Supporting these livestock markets is a critical means of delivering assistance during the

54 McDaniel, N. (2014). [Extending Best Practices in Early Warning Systems for Building Community Resilience: Report](#). Prevention Web.

55 International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. (2012). [Community Early Warning Systems: Guiding Principles](#). International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

56 See Corbett, J. et al. (2021). [Survivor- and community-led crisis response Practical experience and learning](#). ODI HPN.

57 FEWS NET. (2021). [Somalia Food Security Outlook \(Oct 2021 - May 2022\)](#). FEWS Net.

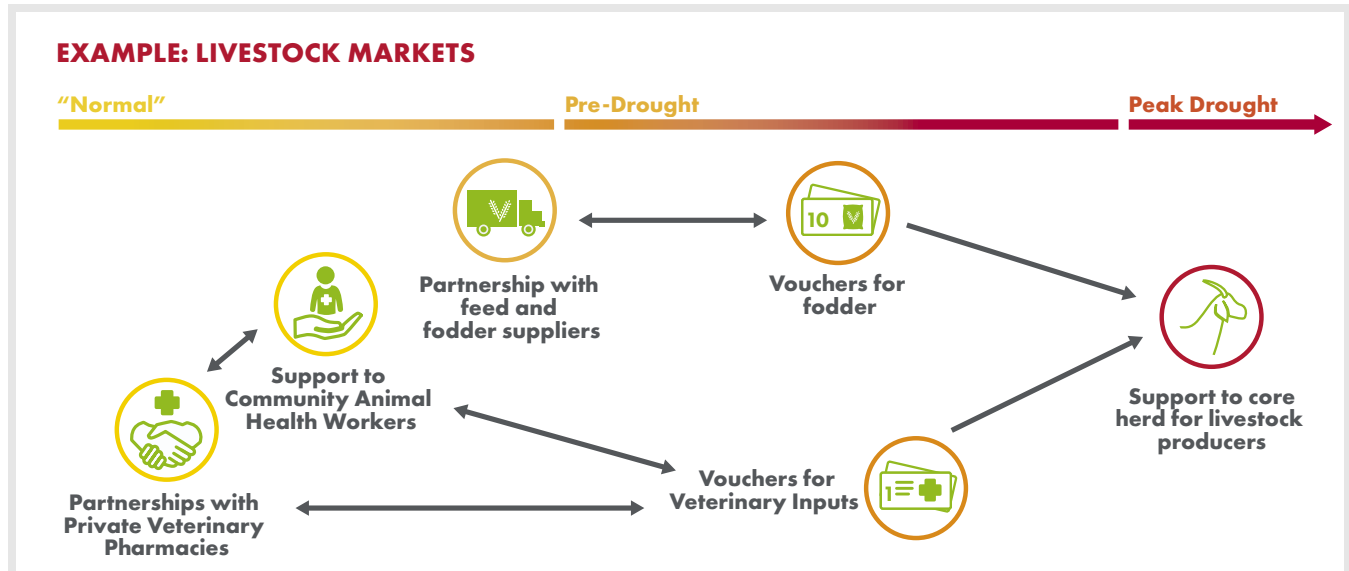
58 Ibid.

59 Wiggins, S. et al (2021). [Livelihoods and markets in protracted conflict: a review of evidence and practice](#). SPARC.

60 Aklilu, Y., et al. (2013). [Market access and trade issues affecting the drylands in the Horn of Africa](#). International Livestock Research Institute.

peak drought phase. Doing so is also a critical step towards preparing for recovery, and strengthening systems ahead of the next drought.^{61,62,63}

One such market-based intervention is destocking. This offtake of animals from pastoralists to markets strengthens livestock market functionality during crises and helps livestock-dependent households convert weak, unproductive, and costly animals into cash. Households can then use this cash to meet basic needs during the emergency.⁶⁴



Livestock market support can build resilience before, during, and after drought emergencies. For example, the PRIME program in Ethiopia combined ongoing development work in an area often affected by extreme drought with a crisis-response approach that included economic recovery. Pre-disaster, PRIME pursued several market-systems activities to support household resilience, including improving the functioning of veterinary supply markets, expanding access to financial services, and providing timely and accurate weather and market information. The team worked closely with both large and small enterprises to understand and mitigate risks and prove the business value of investing in risk mitigation.

When drought hit in 2016, the preparation and established relationships demonstrated their worth. With normal livestock trade and household incomes under threat, the program team supported traders to purchase larger numbers of sheep and goats than normal. This stabilized the price

of livestock and stimulated destocking by pastoralists.⁶² By selling over 12,000 sheep and goats at a time when they were still healthy enough to be sold commercially, the pastoralists gained vital income. Furthermore, traders who participated in the program built new relationships with pastoralists, which continued after the drought. The project also introduced new techniques for stock verification and identification, such as ear notching, and overcame initial skepticism from traders who experienced the benefits during the destocking process.⁶³

This set of market support interventions worked. An independent impact evaluation concluded that exposure to the PRIME program strengthened households' resilience to drought and related shocks. Those who participated directly in PRIME's comprehensive resilience programming "experienced a full 40 percent lower decline [in their food security] than those that did not, evidence that they were much more resilient" in the face of the 2015-16 drought.⁶⁴

61 An assessment of a commercial destocking intervention during the 2006 drought in Ethiopia's Moyale district, for example, found that "income from destocking accounted for 54 per cent of household income and was used to buy food, care for livestock, meet various domestic expenses, support relatives, and either pay off debts or add to savings. Cullis, A. for the LEGS Project. (2018). [LEGS Drought Tool: A LEGS-based preparedness, planning and response tool for improved resilience in the drylands of the Horn of Africa](#), 26. The LEGS Project.

62 Mercy Corps. (2021). [Protecting Development Gains: Leveraging the Crisis Modifier in Mercy Corps' Ethiopia Programs](#). Mercy Corps.

63 Ward, S., et al. (2017). [Driving Resilience: Market approaches to disaster recovery](#). Mercy Corps.

64 TANGO International. (2019). [Ethiopia Pastoralist Areas Resilience Improvement and Market Expansion \(PRIME\) Project Impact Evaluation Endline Survey Report](#), xiii. FSN Network.

There are a variety of destocking interventions available to aid actors, from directly purchasing livestock from drought-affected herders and transporting animals for redistribution, to providing vouchers or cash transfers upon proof of purchase to local traders to stimulate demand in local markets. The most appropriate destocking strategy will depend on how acute the drought emergency is in a specific location, the drought's effects on local market conditions and animal body conditions, and how these differ across sub-geographies. Existing tools, such as the Livestock Emergency Guidelines and Standards (LEGS), offer aid actors specific guidance on when and how to intervene to incentivise destocking at different stages of the drought cycle, by stimulating market actors to continue trade in unfavorable conditions.

Recommendations

To strengthen systems through the drought response, donors, governments, and aid agencies should:

- › Harmonize formal social protection systems with humanitarian cash and voucher assistance, and invest in making social protection systems more responsive to shocks. These linkages should aim to increase the breadth of coverage and depth of assistance needed to protect households' assets and livelihoods in the face of frequent, severe droughts.
- › Ensure that interventions complement, and at the very least do not undermine, informal community safety net systems and related local initiatives that drought-affected communities rely on during crises. Directly supporting initiatives communities are taking on their own terms is an untapped opportunity for aid actors to both maximize impact and localize power and decision-making.
- › Robustly fund market-based interventions as part of drought response and recovery. Use existing, evidence-based guidance, such as LEGS, on when and how to employ specific market-based interventions during the drought cycle. Additionally, aid actors should leverage context-specific and frequently updated technical guidance, such as the Kenya NDMA's county-specific early warning bulletins.⁶⁵

Address the underlying drivers of crises

Efforts to strengthen resilience must go beyond helping people prepare for and cope with increasing risks and shocks. Simply making crises less bad, while leaving the causes or drivers unattended, cannot be the goalpost. This is especially true of violent conflict, which is often rooted in structural, social, and institutional inequities. Such factors can be addressed to reduce the likelihood that people experience conflict and insecurity in the first place.

While droughts are natural phenomena, they escalate into emergency situations due to underlying factors including poor management of natural resources, limited options for alternative livelihoods, and insecurity. Some of the worst impacts of recent droughts have been in contexts of weak governance around land security, such as the Afar, Oromia, and Somali regions of Ethiopia.⁶⁶ These challenges around poor governance, conflict, and insecurity are within our ability to influence, and from a resilience perspective are imperative to change.

Address the intersections of climate change and conflict

Climate change and conflict are major, intertwined challenges in the Horn of Africa. Climate change is driving extreme weather events across the region, intensifying both dry and wet seasons—and causing both catastrophic droughts and floods.⁶⁷ Ongoing conflicts in Somalia, Ethiopia, and parts of Northern Kenya are exacerbating the impact of these climate events by displacing vulnerable communities, destroying livelihoods and limiting

⁶⁵ National Drought Management Authority.

⁶⁶ Mercy Corps. (2021). *Addressing the Climate-Conflict Nexus: Evidence, Insights, and Future Directions*, 7. Mercy Corps.

⁶⁷ Johnson, K. (2021). *La Niña and Climate Change Cause Exceptional Drought in East Africa*. AGRILINKS.

humanitarian access.⁶⁸ The effects of insecurity are especially dire for pastoralists who depend on mobility to manage droughts. For instance, in Northern Kenya, the impacts of the drought are reported to be worse in parts of Turkana County, which has somewhat relatively better rains than neighboring areas but where grazing land is often inaccessible because of ongoing conflict.⁶⁹

At the same time, climate change itself is a conflict risk multiplier. There is increasing evidence that climate change compounds existing sources of economic, political, and social risks that drive violence.⁷⁰ Drought is already increasing the risk of intercommunal conflict in the Horn. As pastoralists trek long distances to find water and pasture, tension is mounting between communities competing over scarce resources.⁷¹

Mercy Corps' research and programming have demonstrated effective models for addressing key drivers of climate risk and conflict (see box for details). However, funding in these areas remains extremely limited in the contexts that most need it, and very often too short-term and limited to the community level to address systemic drivers of conflict.⁷⁴ Investment in climate change adaptation is lagging in the most climate vulnerable countries generally,⁷⁵ but especially in countries that are also fragile or conflict affected.⁷⁶ The same is true of funding for conflict and violence prevention, which accounts for less than 2% of gross Overseas Development Assistance in 2019.⁷⁷ Research by Mercy Corps and the Overseas Development Institute found that despite evidence of a relationship between climate change and conflict, climate adaptation programs are rarely financed in fragile states and those which are, are not delivered in a conflict-sensitive manner.⁷⁸

Protect and improve the natural resource base

The vast majority of people in the Horn rely on natural resource-based livelihoods and are highly vulnerable to drought and other extreme weather events resulting from climate change.⁷⁹ The arid regions, where food security and livelihoods depend largely on pastoralism, are among the most severely affected by the current drought.⁸⁰ Poor natural resource management is amplifying these impacts.



Photo Credit: E. Millstein/Mercy Corps 2022

Research on Mercy Corps' programming in agro-pastoral areas of Ethiopia and Uganda illustrates how the twin goals of conflict reduction and resilience to climate shocks can be achieved.⁷² These programs were able to mitigate the effects of severe drought by strengthening local conflict management systems, developing resource sharing agreements, and promoting collaboration between government representatives and traditional leaders on dispute resolution. Ultimately, the communities reached by such interventions were able to maintain greater food and livelihood security during the 2011 drought in Ethiopia, mainly owing to improved security and mobility to access water and pasture for their livestock.⁷³

68 FAO. (2022). [Rapid response and mitigation plan to avert a humanitarian catastrophe](#), 8. FAO.

69 Smith, G. (2021). 'Heading into the worst': How drought drives conflict in Kenya. Al Jazeera.

70 Mercy Corps. (2021). [Addressing the Climate-Conflict Nexus: Evidence, Insights, and Future Directions](#), 2. Mercy Corps.

71 OCHA. (2022). [Horn of Africa Drought: Humanitarian Key Messages](#). Relief Web.

72 Mercy Corps. (2015). [Pathways from Peace to Resilience](#). Mercy Corps.

73 Kurtz, J., & Scarborough, G. (2012). [From Conflict to Coping: Evidence from Southern Ethiopia on the contributions of peacebuilding to drought resilience among pastoralist groups](#). Mercy Corps.

74 Mercy Corps. (2020). [New Research: Climate Finance Fails to Reach Most Vulnerable Nations Facing Climate Chaos](#). Mercy Corps.

75 Between 2010 and 2019, only 8% (\$5.9 billion USD) of global adaptation finance (\$77.8 billion USD) was committed to countries in the Sahel and Horn of Africa. See Alcayna, T. (2020). [At What Cost: How chronic gaps in adaptation finance expose the world's poorest people to climate chaos](#). Zurich Flood Resilience Alliance.

76 Cao, Y., et al. (2021). [Exploring the conflict blind spots in climate adaptation finance](#). SPARC.

77 Analysis of ODA commitments by DAC countries based on OECD, Query Wizard for International Development data, accessed 16/03/2022

78 Cao, Y., et al. (2021). [Exploring the conflict blind spots in climate adaptation finance](#). SPARC.

79 Richardson, K., et al. (2022) [Climate risk report for the East Africa region](#), 1. Met Office, ODI, FCDO.

80 World Food Programme. (2022). [Regional Drought Response Plan for the Horn of Africa](#), 1. Relief Web.

Land degradation, mismanagement, urbanization, neglect, and overuse have destroyed the landscape's hydrological recharge capacity—meaning, the ability of rain to penetrate the soil, nourish vegetation, and refill underground water sources. This creates a cruel paradox for the drylands. Even when rains do come, much of it simply runs off the landscape, leaving people, plants, and livestock without the water they need to survive. Perversely, rain may very well cause more damage than benefit. In 2019, for example, unusually heavy rains in the Horn caused severe flooding. The devastation left 220,000 people homeless in Ethiopia alone.⁸¹

Drought response efforts need to lay the foundation for long-term improvements to the natural resource base on which livelihoods in the region are so dependent. An essential part of this is improving rangeland ecosystems and rebuilding the hydrological recharge capacity of the drylands so that the landscape can absorb water again.⁸² For example, rainwater harvesting technologies such as 'demi-lunes' (small, half-moon shaped structures that catch and retain water) have been shown to be effective in the Sahel and in semi-arid zones of the Horn of Africa.⁸³ These types of traditional and indigenous natural resource management practices must be preserved, supported, and scaled, especially as these often hold women at the center as stewards and caretakers of their environments.

Limiting risks and sustaining improvements to the management of water, pasture, and other natural resources requires inclusive and community-based governance mechanisms.⁸⁴ Evidence from responses in the Horn and beyond suggests that environmental and social outcomes improve in the places where the poor effectively engage in natural resource management.⁸⁵

Recommendations

To address the underlying drivers of crises, donors, governments, and aid agencies should:

- › Increase funding to climate-vulnerable communities in fragile and conflict affected states (FCAS), specifically developing and testing approaches to climate adaptation and interventions at the intersection of climate and conflict.



Photo Credit: E. Millstein/Mercy Corps 2022

A promising example of local natural resource governance is being pioneered by Mercy Corps' USAID-funded Livestock Market System (LMS) program across four counties in Northern Kenya. The program, in partnership with County Governments and the National Drought Management Authority, has facilitated the development of Ward Development Committees (WDCs), which identify and advocate for communities' priorities in the county planning and budgeting processes. Since 2017, LMS has worked with 15 WDCs to strengthen the management of water and rangeland resources to prepare for and manage drought risks. Critically, the WDCs have leveraged \$7.58 million USD as part of Counties' Area Development Plans that have gone towards interventions in early warning, water infrastructure, rangeland management and other sectors prioritized by communities.⁸⁶

81 Schlein, L. (2019). [Heavy Flooding Devastates Lives and Economies in Horn of Africa](#). VOA News.

82 Mercy Corps. (2020). [Water Security and Productivity: Mercy Corps' Approach](#). Mercy Corps.

83 Aker, J. C. (2015). [Rain Water Harvesting in the Sahel](#). Center for International Environment and Resource Policy.

84 USAID. (2021). [The Horn of Africa Resilience Network \(HoRN\) Regional Resilience Framework 3.0](#). USAID.

85 Mercy Corps. (2018). [Environment, Energy, and Climate Change: Technical Unit Sector Approach](#). Mercy Corps.

86 USAID et al. (2021). [Livestock Market Systems Activity: Strengthening Community Capacities for Resilience and Growth: Annual Progress Report October 2020-September 2021](#). Mercy Corps.

- › Increase funding for, investments in, and integration of peacebuilding, good governance, and social inclusion efforts into drought response. Mercy Corps' Advancing Peace in Complex Crisis framework provides guidance on how this can be achieved across a range of conflict types and security conditions.⁸⁷
- › Strengthen the technical capacities of national and local governments in natural resource management in fragile drylands contexts, with a focus on ecosystem restoration, rangeland regeneration, and improved water resource management. Champion policies that foster greater community-led and traditional natural resource management approaches.

Summary

The drought emergency in the Horn of Africa requires urgent action to prevent the most devastating potential impacts on lives and livelihoods. Such assistance should be programmed in ways that are looking ahead to the next drought. Smarter investments in resilience will help communities protect hard-won gains, cope with the current drought, and prepare for inevitable future crises. Donors, governments, and aid agencies thus need to anticipate a future of worsening droughts and multiple shocks, including climate-driven conflict. As shocks increase in frequency and magnitude, we can no longer wait for one emergency to end before we start preparing for the next one. By scaling up smart investments in resilience now, we can help people in the Horn of Africa protect gains and prepare for the future.



Photo Credit: E. Millstein/Mercy Corps 2022

87 Mercy Corps. (2021). [Advancing Peace in Complex Crises](#). Mercy Corps.

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About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



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