

Getting it right Understanding livelihoods to reduce the vulnerability of pastoral communities

Livestock ownership remains the backbone of the pastoral economy. Yet livestock are more than just a 'unit of production'. They determine social status and provide access to insurance in times of stress. In addition to livestock-keeping, livelihood diversification has been essential to spread the risk of food insecurity and cope with the changing nature of hazards in pastoral areas. Understanding the diversity of pastoral livelihoods is central to designing responses that are proportionate and well-targeted, and obviate the use of negative coping strategies that undermine the long-term sustainability of livelihoods.

The study on which this Synthesis Paper is based argues that the increasing vulnerability to food insecurity that pastoralists face stems from the failure to put the protection of pastoral livelihoods at the centre of emergency preparedness, planning and response mechanisms.

Emergency responses are failing on three counts. They fail to prevent the recurrence of crisis. They fail to support the capacity of the pastoral community to withstand the effects of shocks. And they fail to adapt to the changing nature of shocks. There is an urgent need to develop responses that address the underlying causes of the increasing vulnerability facing agro-based livelihoods (livestock and farming). Equally important are developmental responses to enable poor households to pursue productive economic alternatives.

The study also argues that, in order to be effective, emergency preparedness and planning must continue to improve both the timeliness and appropriateness of interventions, through the effective use of early warning systems and contingency planning. These should not be seen as emergency instruments, but rather as a means of managing predictable risks in pastoral areas and ensuring the protection of livelihoods – a long-term investment for a public good. In

addition, a livelihoods approach must be the critical base for designing an integrated approach that addresses vulnerability, as it improves the sensitivity of monitoring systems to hunger and impoverishment.

Perceptions of pastoral livelihoods and vulnerability

It is not drought as such that makes pastoralists vulnerable, but the growing inability of pastoralists to cope with it. Factors that constrain pastoral drought response mechanisms, especially the mobility of people and animals, are the main reason for this. These factors include restrictions on trade and movement, poverty and poor investment in social services and infrastructure.

Insufficient and poorly designed state-led investment in development initiatives, increasing climatic variability and public policy constraints combine to impoverish pastoralists. These factors have fed the misconception that pastoralists are in a perpetual state of humanitarian crisis, and that their extreme vulnerability requires and justifies short-term interventions. This is perhaps why governments continue with low levels of investment and restrictive policies that preclude approaches to lessen pastoralist vulnerability.

Pastoralists' vulnerabilities and coping strategies

Pastoralists across the Horn of Africa have developed strategies to minimise risks to their livelihoods and cope with predictable shocks in the drylands. Central to these coping strategies is mobility and herd management.

Table 1 outlines the main strategies that pastoralists have adopted over time to cope with vulnerabilities and shocks. It also attempts to show that pastoral communities are more



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Table 1: Main pastoralist strategies to cope with vulnerabilities and shocks

Coping strategies	Main risk-minimising strategies	Increasing and emerging threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase livestock and livestock product sales • Old/weak livestock slaughtered for consumption • Labour migration to towns • Household splitting (e.g. sending children to relatives) • Seeking agricultural labour/employment • Diversify income sources – agro-pastoralists have better opportunity to do so – e.g. selling bush products, labour • Increase bush product collection and sale • Livestock migration/herd splitting • Minimise consumption, reduce meals and expenses • Reduce gifts (by better-off to poor) • Wild food consumption – option declines in drought situations • Community-funded water-trucking to areas of good pasture • Seeking relief assistance • Storage of <i>ghee</i> until dry season when prices are higher 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pasture survey and migration • Old/weak animals slaughtered or sold before drought • Slaughter of new-born cattle/sheep • Controlling breeding to time birth to coincide with rainy seasons (mainly for sheep) • Mixed cropping and varieties (drought-tolerant; early-maturing) • Species diversification and splitting in dry season • Water harvesting and conservation – e.g. <i>berkads</i>, ponds • Grain/fodder storage (wealthier households) • Social support systems (<i>kaalmo</i> and <i>zakat</i>) • Make <i>ghee</i> for the dry season (mainly cattle) • Increase pack animals • Increase fodder production and conservation to replace lost access to dry-season grazing areas • Develop and sustain breeding herds and market other stock to increase resilience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing constraints to traditional coping • Rural to urban population shifts, concentration and growth • Declining access to rangelands • Insecurity • Shifting wealth status impacting on kin support and traditional social support (insurance) • New vulnerable groups emerging • Speed of change: low capacity to adapt • Delayed regional support for appropriate policy and practice • Inadequate marketing support • Poor transport and communication infrastructure • Rangeland degradation • Restricted mobility impacting on seasonal access to water and pasture and access to labour and trade • More extreme climatic variations • Human, livestock and crop health risks

vulnerable in the face of increasing hazards partly associated with drought, but increasingly a result of the delayed implementation of pro-pastoralist policy and practice.

Using livelihoods analysis to understand pastoral livelihoods and risk

Livelihoods analysis is a framework to understand how people with different assets obtain a living. This approach recognises the importance of access to elements of livelihood such as food security, and the systematic inequalities that keep some people from obtaining this access.

Profiles of pastoral livelihoods

A sound understanding of pastoral livelihoods is essential to prepare for emergencies in pastoral areas and to develop appropriate mitigation responses. Four dominant livelihood systems have been identified for pastoral areas across the Horn of Africa:

- 1) *Livestock-based livelihoods* – the most common livelihood in the drylands, based on rearing camels, cattle, sheep and goats. Mobility and the ability to access pasture and water are fundamental to the continuation of this livelihood.
- 2) *Agro-pastoral livelihoods* – these combine extensive livestock rearing and rain-fed cereal production (typically sorghum, wheat and barley) for household consumption. Mobility remains important for these households.
- 3) *Sedentary farmers* – practice mixed farming, cultivating food crops (sorghum, wheat or other cereals) along with modest sheep and goat herds.
- 4) *Ex-pastoralists* – these are households who have lost their livestock and now depend largely on human labour. They are usually settled on the peripheries of major urban centres.

Most remain on the margins of the economy, performing low-skilled labour-intensive activities including the collection and sale of bush products.

Poorer households in the first three livelihood systems have a smaller productive asset base. They also tend to have to diversify their livelihood strategies to survive. However, diversification for poorer households usually entails combining meagre agro-based activities with petty trade and low-value labour-based activities such as collecting and selling firewood. Given the high dependence on the unsustainable harvesting of natural bush products, environmental degradation ensues, threatening the viability of natural resource-based livelihoods.

Livelihood strategies among poorer households in livestock-based, agro-pastoral and sedentary farming areas closely resemble each other. The similarity of the options available to these groups reflects the poor economic environment of the pastoral areas, the options available to them and the absence of alternative non-livestock livelihoods. The critical question with diversification as an effective strategy to spread risk of food insecurity is ‘diversification to what?’.

The range of livelihood systems and the variations within these groups illustrate the need to develop responses that address the underlying causes of the increasing vulnerability of agro-based livelihoods. It also demonstrates the urgent need to enable the growing proportion of poor households to pursue productive economic alternatives.

Early warning systems and preventing crisis

The humanitarian system in the Greater Horn of Africa relies on cycles of assessment and response that mirror the main

production system associated with rainfall seasons. Assessments are made and disseminated through early warning systems (EWS) and seasonal assessments. Responses are developed through appeals for funding and the delivery of assistance.

The failure to anticipate and prevent recurring emergencies in the Greater Horn of Africa has led to increased investment in, and the proliferation of, early warning and emergency assessment methodologies. These are implemented by a variety of governments, donors and UN and NGO agencies. Yet despite wider use of early warning and emergency assessment, humanitarian efforts to prevent widespread food crisis fail. The scale of humanitarian operations has been increasing as poverty levels increase. However, with few exceptions, bureaucratic administrative procedures and political considerations typically lead to delays in the timing of assessments and the implementation of response beyond the actual phases of the drought cycle.

Why the failure to prevent food crisis?

Failure to incorporate vulnerability into food security analysis

A key reason why food crises are not being prevented is a failure to incorporate vulnerability into food security analysis – vulnerability being the degree to which households depend on food and income sources that are affected by shocks, and the available options to mitigate the effects through existing or new livelihood strategies. Assessments focus solely on assessing food deficits, without considering the relationship between a shock and the severity of impact on livelihoods.

Understanding vulnerability in food security assessments is important to effectively tackle the negative coping strategies that undermine the long-term sustainability of livelihoods. By focusing on food deficits, assessments often miss the shift in wealth group status that arises from eroding assets and failure to cope. Tracking the proportions of better-off, middle and poorer wealth groups is essential if a dysfunctional economy is to be avoided. For example, in the event of a shock, a decreasing proportion of better-off households deprive an increasing proportion of poor households of access to kin support or labour exchange opportunities. This seriously undermines the resilience of social support systems, which serve as an important coping mechanism. Planners focusing only on production deficits may see little change in projected deficits, and may provide food aid in response. But this does not halt or reverse the deteriorating livelihood situation.

Possible use of inappropriate indicators to determine the onset of food crisis

Integrated analysis of livelihoods and nutrition can help overcome the sometimes erroneous attribution of child malnutrition to the single cause of inadequate food consumption, which overlooks poor health, hygiene and care practice. Where food insecurity is the main cause of malnutrition, livelihoods analysis establishes links between seasonality and nutrition and permits prediction (early warning) of periods when malnutrition is likely to increase. This emphasises longer-term investment of resources over late and inappropriate short-term emergency interventions.

Inconsistent assessment and analysis compromises the quality and reliability of information

Poor-quality and uncoordinated information systems undermine the reliability of assessment findings. In Ethiopia, for example, 33 different early warning and food security surveillance systems are in use, each employing different methodologies and often producing different results. This delays responses because the reliability of analysis comes into question, and assessment findings have to be verified.

Assessment practice and institutional response frameworks

The type of resources available restricts the range and objectives of interventions that can be implemented. Funds are usually not available before a crisis, when mitigation interventions are required. Available funds still emphasise the primacy of immediate life-saving interventions, to the detriment of livelihood protection responses. In addition, institutional response frameworks tend to be resource-driven. With limited donor resources available, humanitarian agencies competing for funds are less inclined to challenge the funding policy of donors.

The role of political factors

The causes and scale of humanitarian crises arouse competing political interests from governments, donors and humanitarian agencies. Donors often attribute the occurrence of a humanitarian crisis that could have been prevented to poor or failed government development policy. Governments may, on occasions, be inclined to understate the severity of a crisis in order to deflect criticism of existing policy.

A focus on food aid militates against preventing food crisis

Food aid has been provided without regard for its appropriateness or whether its beneficiaries wanted it. Increasing poverty and the accompanying increase in food aid beneficiaries across the Horn of Africa also illustrates that food-based emergency responses have not been effective at addressing the underlying causes of food insecurity. In addition, excessive food aid distributions potentially undercut the interdependent economic relationship between livestock and crop producers, where crop producers sell staple foods to livestock-based households in order to earn income for the purchase of livestock products. If urgent action is taken early in a crisis to protect livelihoods, the effects of drought on pastoralists can be mitigated and the need for a massive emergency response to save lives can be reduced.

Using livelihoods analysis to strengthen emergency preparedness and response

Standardising livelihoods based EWS

Livelihoods-based early warning improves the sensitivity of monitoring systems to hunger, but more importantly to impoverishment. To provide effective early warning, monitoring systems must be able to discern differences between and within a population, and also to predict whether a particular shock might result in a food security problem. A clear understanding of pastoral livelihoods, and a framework that identifies the importance of different indicators for households with different livelihoods and wealth, is essential. Any

analysis not using a livelihoods approach would not be able to detect with sufficient reliability the variety and nuance of impact on these households. Livelihoods-based early warning systems employing Household Economy Analysis (HEA) are being used in Somalia by the Food Security Analysis Unit (FSAU), and in Ethiopia and other parts of the Horn. Principles of the methodology are being considered for incorporation into the Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) work being developed by a group of UN agencies and NGOs, which is seeking to reach consensus around a common analytical framework. A growing community of practitioners is familiar with the need for an approach offering predictive analytical features. For further progress in preparedness planning, an approach that incorporates these attributes must be broadly adopted to allow analysts and decision-makers to engage more effectively and avoid agencies making decisions in isolation.

Livelihoods-based contingency and response planning

To enable timely and appropriate responses, early warning systems must be able to predict the effect of shocks and trigger contingency planning. The first step in contingency planning is to identify contingencies and then, through scenario analysis, to predict the likely economic consequences of the threat to livelihoods. The projected outcome is then used to prepare response plans to alert decision-makers to the scale and duration of the anticipated problem and the amount and type of resources required for effective response.

The Productive Safety Nets Programme (PSNP) in Ethiopia, for example, has provision for 20% of the *woreda* budget to be held as a contingency fund. The effectiveness of the fund depends on an effective early warning system and setting the triggers for the release of the funds at sufficiently low administrative levels to enable timely responses that protect livelihoods. Institutionalising contingency planning among practitioners and communities is critical for regular and effective emergency preparedness and planning.

Implications

Using livelihoods analysis for preparedness and response planning means that household coping strategies are more readily supported when a shock becomes evident. Analysing livelihoods also ensures that the underlying causes of food insecurity are addressed before and even during a crisis, and that targeting is effective and interventions are appropriate.

Conclusion and recommendations

Rather than introducing food aid to mask structural problems with food security, planners and policy-makers should review the growing constraints to traditional coping options. Pastoral development policy and practice must enable access to sustainable options to improve food security. In light of this, policy-makers and donors need to:

1. Ensure that emergency preparedness focuses on protecting and promoting livelihoods

Vulnerability to drought and poverty are increasing across pastoral areas – despite continuous emergency food aid, or perhaps because of it. Placing livelihoods at the centre of emergency preparedness and planning is a critical base for the design of timely and appropriate programmes and policy responses that mitigate hazards. The primacy of protecting and promoting livelihoods must be incorporated into institutional emergency preparedness and planning frameworks.

2. Promote the development and utilisation of livelihoods-based information systems

Early warning systems should not be seen as an ‘emergency’ instrument, but rather as a means of managing predictable risks in pastoral areas and ensuring the protection of livelihoods. Capacity-building on the development and utilisation of livelihoods-based information systems must be provided to senior decision-makers in the humanitarian community.

3. Develop longer-term intervention strategies

The idea that a continuum exists between emergency response, rehabilitation and development has taken root. While the need to predict requirements for food and non-food relief remains pressing, governments and development agencies increasingly recognise the need for longer-term approaches to reducing poor people’s vulnerability to shocks beyond the short-term emergency funding cycle. To identify realistic interventions requires an appreciation of the constraints faced by pastoralists and the opportunities open to them to lock into the wider economy.

A shift from ‘emergency–relief’ paradigms of interventions to a strategy that acknowledges the drought cycle as the normal pattern in pastoral areas is necessary. Support for interventions that manage the drought cycle, including longer-term interventions to secure greater investment in development in pastoral areas, is of critical importance.

4. Improve the link between analysis and response

The information available is only as good as the programme and policy planners who use it. With increased use of livelihoods-based information systems, the challenge is to ensure that the analysis provided informs responses. Despite variations in the rigour of assessments, most recommendations and interventions have focused on short-term/immediate responses. Clear connections must be made between food insecurity problems and clear actionable recommendations based on in-depth livelihoods analysis of different livelihood groups.

5. Institutionalise contingency planning and funding mechanisms for countries across the Greater Horn of Africa

Contingency planning would substantially assist in ensuring timely responses triggered by the early warning system. The cost-effectiveness of protecting livelihoods rather than resorting to having to save lives at a later stage has been well-documented.