Climate change is a human problem

Finding the missing voices of climate resilience



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Resilient livelihoods: Social protection and collective solidarity for climate change adaptation in East Africa's drylands



By Tahira Mohamed

Resilience building initiatives have lately emerged as a tool for improving vulnerability to climate crises and food insecurity in rural communities. Social assistance through cash transfers and livestock insurance has become a favored resilience intervention. Evidence has shown that social assistance improves household well-being, reduces stress, improves access to food, affords some income to offset difficulties and reduces poverty.

However, there is a disconnect between the capacity of social protection to enhance resilience and its delivery, which is static, has limited potential to scale, and does not always address everyday crises.

Social assistance remains protective but fails to incorporate an adaptive capacity central to rural livelihoods amid uncertainties. Using qualitative research data collected between (2018-2024), we examined social protection in pastoral areas by comparing Kenya's Hunger Safety Net Programmes (HSNP) and Livestock Insurance Programme (KLIP) with customary redistributive practices (moral economies). These systems operate in parallel and fail to achieve disaster-resilient communities.

Social solidarity networks, like friends, neighbors, and religious groups enable agile responses to covariate shocks and everyday calamities that take the shape of food shortages, livestock raids, and the loss of loved ones. Mainstream social provisioning often undermines these practices through inflexible financing with a sedentary bias.

This article explores how social protection and livestock insurance intersect with local solidarity in pastoral drylands, questioning whether external interventions can align with pastoralists' networks to enhance community resilience.

Following the 2011 Somalia famine, countries in the Horn of Africa, specifically Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia adopted resilience strategies through IGAD Drought Disaster Resilience Initiatives (IDDIRSI), establishing drought management institutions such as Kenya's National Drought Management Authority (NDMA).

In Kenya, the Hunger Safety Net Programme (HSNP) provides bimonthly unconditional cash transfers of US$ 27 to vulnerable households across eight pastoral counties. Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Program provides cash or food against public works, or unconditional cash to vulnerable households.

Index-based Livestock Insurance (IBLI), which insures livestock against drought using satellite-derived vegetation indices, has emerged as a major state–private sector intervention in Kenya and Ethiopia, its design links payouts to declines in vegetation cover, providing households with support when drought conditions intensify. These social assistance programs have predictive mechanisms that identify households based on region, vulnerability status, and premium contributions, often ignoring the characteristics of pastoral societies (Derbyshire et al., 2024). While contributing to household food security, coverage remains limited and inadequate for post-disaster herd reconstructions. It remains inadequate because most cash transfers from these social assistance programs are minimal, for instance, HSNP only provides KSH 2700 per month, which simply does not cover the needs of household members, especially some households that have 8 members.

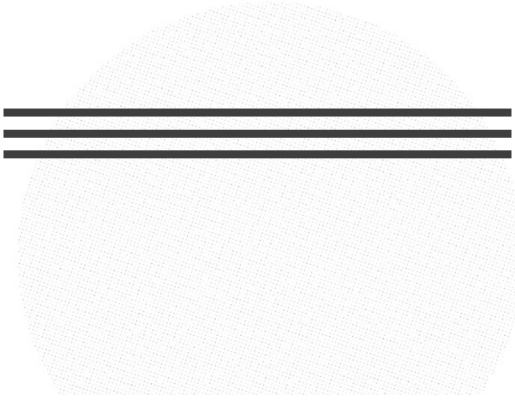
In contrast, pastoralists rely on informal social solidarity based on cultural norms and religious obligations, which for a lot of people is an essential avenue to survive uneven resource access and uncertainties (Mohamed, 2023). In Northern Kenya, these 'moral economies' include redistributive practices, labor sharing, and livelihood diversification (Mohamed, 2022). Examining moral economic changes between 1975-2020 across rural-urban settings and generations, Mohamed found that informal solidarity remains essential but is modified by social and market transformation. Remote areas emphasize comradeship and redistribution, whereas urban-adjacent pastoralists focus on diverse economic relationships and saving groups.

Comparing social protection and the pastoralist's social solidarities

a.) Pastoralists' collective solidarities

Pastoralists have managed crises within drylands and mountainous regions through their movement to better-resourced areas for water, pasture, and security. This movement involves splitting livestock into categories and organizing labor to utilize resources effectively (Dahl, 1979; Mohamed, 2022). Sharing resources among families, neighbors, clans, and religious ties is crucial for survival during seasons of abundance and scarcity.

This redistribution strengthens social relations and ensures resource access and are reinforced by cultural norms. In examining 'resilience from below', a study by Mohamed and colleagues found that herders were central to critical networks, connecting with motorcycle riders for transport and scouting, mobile money agents for urgent cash-needs, and agrovet dealers for medical advice. On the other hand, livestock market brokers link herders to markets and provide cash to meet various needs (Mohamed at al., 2023). Resource sharing remains vital, with herders combining labor to reduce management costs, exchanging animals for milk, and banding together to exploit potentially insecure rangelands due to the threats of livestock raiding and ethnic conflict. These services operate through mutual trust and relationships, although access to them varies among pastoralists (Mkutu, 2008; Mohamed, 2023).



b.) Livestock insurance system

Index-based livestock insurance (IBLI) has emerged as a 'de-risking' tool for drought. The IBLI scaled in Kenya through the Kenya Livestock Insurance Programme as a public-private partnership involving research institutions, the World Bank, and the government (see Fava et al., 2021). Insurance systems correlate rainfall distribution with pasture availability through the normalized difference vegetation index, providing payouts when pasture levels reach certain thresholds that warrant the declaration of a dry spell (Johnson et al., 2023). For instance, the De-risking and Value Enhancement (DRIVE) program has expanded in the Horn of Africa to enhance pastoralists' access to climate risk financing. Taye (2022) challenged insurance assumptions that sometimes don't accurately depict vegetation covers, showing that drought affects areas differently through livestock mobility, with risks varying by wealth and gender. Insurance mainly benefits wealthy male herd owners, while others are excluded. Among pastoralists, buyers are largely affluent men; very few women-led households can afford coverage unless fully subsidized, and the current public–private model prioritizes profit, limiting broader access. Bageant and Barrett 2017 warned of gendered exclusion due to pastoral paternalistic culture. The IBLI now bundles insurance services with veterinary and feed support (Banerjee et al., 2024) to increase uptake. Although insurance can prevent distress sales and improve food security, challenges persist in sustaining this investment and surviving without government subsidies as the intervention is costly.



Image credit: Anthony Mogaka, Midjourney V 7.0

c.) Social protection for humanitarian assistance

Uganda's social assistance is primarily implemented by humanitarian agencies through disaster risk financing, following government withdrawal from structural adjustment programs. Cash transfers are tied to workforce and feeding programs to protect vulnerable households during emergencies. The Third Northern Uganda Social Action Fund (NUSAF), a World Bank-supported safety-net program, provides public work after disasters. The NUSAF has contributed to household food security but promotes dependency and undermines productive mobility (Caravani, 2024). On the other hand, in Libya, the Government created the Zakat Fund, which was co-financed by the government and religious leaders and distributed by volunteers (Caravani et al., 2021). Caravani and colleagues showed that the Zakat fund delivered effective aid with high accountability in an unstable state. Social assistance in both countries is a form of disaster risk financing with varying effectiveness. Trust improves when delivered through local systems, such as Zakat, whereas conventional humanitarian assistance follows fixed plans that are less adaptable to pastoralists' responses to shocks.

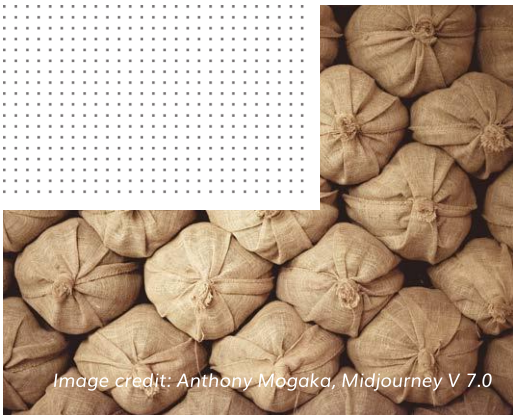


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Conclusion

Social protection and insurance in pastoral areas address short-term food crises but fail to enhance sustainable food security due to crisis-driven interventions. These programs can disrupt pastoral systems by creating perverse incentives near urban centers and operate separately from pastoralists' social solidarity. The disconnect between these forms of assistance has four aspects: first, properties are collectively owned through family networks, making individual policies ineffective. The crisis response requires collective efforts for safety and strengthening labor relations. Secondly, formal assistance uses fixed quotas and targeting, often excluding eligible households and ignoring dynamic commodities prices. It fails to consider pastoralists' mobility and infrastructure access between remote and urban areas (Mohamed 2022). Fourthly, overlapping social provisions during severe droughts create confusion for pastoralists and government entities, with inconsistent insurance subsidies and cash transfers.

As the Horn of Africa faces climate change, conflict, and structural problems, effectively aligning external and local assistance is crucial to building resilience rather than continuing competing emergency responses. Insurance and social protection must extend beyond emergency assistance to support existing networked solidarity and relationships for long-term food security. Social protection should leverage public-private partnerships while centering the role of everyday community practices. Future research needs to examine how formal protection affects informal assistance and how both systems can effectively enhance their resilience strengthening capacities.

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Image credit: Anthony Mogaka
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