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Resilient livelihoods: re-examining mobility social solidarity for climate change adaptation in east Africa's drylands.

Tahira Shariff, M¹

¹International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI), Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Protracted Crisis (SPARC), Jameel Observatory for Food Security Early Action.

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Abstract

The Horn of Africa has recently faced one of the worst droughts in over forty years, resulting in the death of nearly 11 million livestock, displacement, and loss of livelihoods. The drought condition is exacerbated by the compounding structural conditions arising from protracted conflict, marginalization, malnutrition, disease, and food insecurity. Notwithstanding these challenges, pastoral livelihood has persisted and often thrived due to adaptive practices, such as strategic mobility, livestock diversification, intensifying income portfolios, and investing in solidarity relationships and external support. Owing to the proliferation of transport, communication, and mobile money transactions, including in the remote pastoral villages in Northern Kenya's drylands, the adaptive capacities of the pastoralists to share information, transport produce, and engage with a growing market have improved.

The customary social solidarity and redistributive practices through moral economy have rekindled, thanks to the connectivity to urban and diaspora communities. Drawing on ethnographic data collected between 2018 and 2024, this research re-examines social solidarities in enhancing pastoralists' capacity to withstand and transform their livelihoods in response to climate shocks. In a context characterized by a lack of financial services, restricted mobility, and limited government support, local solidarity and redistribution provide continuous access to resources, including labour and cash, to support livelihoods. The reliance on a social solidarity network allows for a more agile and timely response, not only to co-variate shocks but also to idiosyncratic pressures arising from everyday calamities. However, such practices remain unrecognized and sometimes undermined by the mainstream social provisioning, cash transfers and relief aid that provide inflexible finance with sedentary bias without considering the changing pastoral context and adaptive practices. The findings will contribute to the recent approaches to link humanitarian and development action with local resilience-enhancing practices.

Introduction

Pastoralism has been persisting in the Horn of Africa despite multiple indications that pastoralism is under pressure and needs to be replaced by alternative livelihoods. Pastoralists have often been blamed for causing desertification and keeping livestock beyond the land's carrying capacity (Hardin, 1968). These

assumptions led to agricultural and environmental policies and investments that promoted forced sedentarization, large-scale irrigation and land grabbing for nature conservation, undermining pastoralists' mobility (Behnke and Kerven, 2013; Eriksen *et al.*, 2021). Although pastoral drylands are predisposed to multiple shocks, including climatic-induced drought, floods, animal diseases and other social instability, the livelihoods are sustainable. Pastoralism is a viable livelihood suited to variable and non-equilibrium environments (Krätli *et al.*, 2013). Still, pastoral development has often remained in classic thinking that sees pastoralism as backward and vulnerable in constant needs. This paper examines how external interventions such as social protection and livestock insurance intersect with local social solidarity in pastoral drylands. Can social protection from above (external interventions) be connected to pastoralists' solidarity networks to improve livelihoods in the face of multiple shocks and stresses?

The recurrent disasters in the Horn of Africa, including drought, compounded by protracted conflict, political instability, and food insecurity, have attracted manifold interventions, including humanitarian and development support. Humanitarian assistance includes emergency food aid, water and sanitation and cash assistance. In contrast, development response includes rangeland rehabilitation through re-seeding, market infrastructure development, and projects that support diversification out of pastoralism (see Mohamed *et al.*, 2025). Following the 2011 famine in Somalia and subsequent severe drought in the greater Horn, countries in this region adopted resilient strategies through IGAD Drought Disaster Resilience and Sustainability Initiatives (IDDIRSI) (see IGAD, 2013). Countries domesticated IDDIRSI through country-specific programming, and robust drought management institutions emerged, including Kenya's National Drought Management Authority (NDMA). Resilience building later topped the national agenda for drought response (Hargreaves *et al.*, 2012). The focus of resilience-building initiatives included market infrastructure development, rehabilitation of water systems and investment in social protection, specifically cash transfers and livestock insurance, as a route to de-risking pastoral settings (Lind *et al.*, 2022; Johnson *et al.*, 2023).

In Kenya, the Hunger Safety Net Programme (HSNP) provides unconditional cash transfers of US\$27 to vulnerable households across eight pastoral counties every two months. In Ethiopia, the Productive Safety Net Program provides cash or food to vulnerable populations against public works or unconditional cash to more vulnerable households. Later, linked to protecting livestock assets, Index-based Livestock Insurance (IBLI), grounded on statistical analysis and modelling of vegetation index, emerged as a form of state-private sector-led intervention (Bageant and Barrett 2017). All three forms of social assistance (HSNP, PSNP, and IBLI) have predictive and targeting mechanisms that identify households based on geographical region, vulnerability status and individualized contributions to premium, often ignoring the predominant characteristics of pastoral societies and knowledge (Derbyshire *et al.*, 2024). Although these social assistances have contributed to household-level food security, the coverage is limited to a few households. It does not provide adequate long-term resources for herd reconstruction post-disaster.

On the other hand, pastoralists have relied on different forms of informal social solidarities, some founded on cultural norms and values, while others rooted in religious obligations (Mohamed, 2023). Among the pastoralists in Northern Kenya, these practices are sometimes called 'moral economies'-a redistributive practice that helps pastoralists respond to a crisis. Such practices can be institutionalized redistribution, labour sharing, and the moral economy of diversification (see Mohamed 2022) for a broader overview of the concept. Examining the changes and continuities of the moral economy through time (between 1975 and 2020), space (rural-urban) setting and within generations (young, wealthy and old), Mohamed highlighted that such informal social solidarity remains essential and has been modified by the dynamic social, technological and market transformation in the drylands. Mohamed noted that the moral economies

in near urban areas and remote areas differed. In remote areas with limited infrastructure and weak government support, pastoralists invest primarily in comradeship, reciprocal labour exchange and redistribution. In contrast, pastoralists near urban centres invest more in diverse economic relationships and saving groups.

In the ensuing section, I present the methods used for data collection, examine both formal and informal social protection and highlight its role in helping pastoralists respond to different crises.

Methods

This study is based on qualitative ethnographic research conducted between 2018 and 2024 among the pastoralists in Northern Kenya's Marsabit and Isiolo Counties. It combines data collected for different but related research on pastoralists' livelihoods, resilience, and the evolving social safety nets in responding to various shocks and crises. Among these projects are the politics of social protection in Kenya undertaken through the Effective States and Inclusive Development (ESID) project at Manchester University. It also largely emerged from the author's PhD research within the Pastoralism, Resilience and Uncertainty (PASTREs) programme in Northern Kenya, which explored social safety net and the moral economies among the diverse pastoralist's social groups. It also drew on an ongoing qualitative postdoctoral research that examines the nexus between humanitarian aid and resilience programmes in the Horn of Africa in managing crisis, using institutional-based interviews and stakeholder workshops.

The data is also drawn from various policy convening and discussions examining the disconnect between pastoralism and social protection. Secondary data from academic, conferences and policy papers were used to guide the discussion. The data is analyzed thematically, comparing the pastoralist's social security with the conventional social assistance in the Drylands of Eastern Africa.

Contrasting social protection and the pastoralist's social solidarities

a. Pastoralists social solidarity

Pastoralists have traditionally managed different forms of crisis within the variable and erratic drylands and mountainous regions of the world. Among the most notable practices are movement to relatively better-resourced areas for adaptive utilization of water, pasture and security. This movement sometimes entails splitting livestock into different categories, the milk animal, weak, dry and young (Dahl, 1979; Mohamed, 2022). Labour organization is essential to enable spatial utilization of the resources and manage different animal needs. Owing to the various seasons of plenty and scarcity, sharing resources among families, neighbours, clans, and religious ties is a central survival strategy (Mohamed, 2023). This redistribution strengthens social relations among the groups but also ensures resources are accessed at differing times, primarily due to the uncertain nature of production. Such sharing is reinforced by religious and cultural norms embedded in daily practices and shown through sayings, such as a Borana proverb, '*Ollomaf duudaan ejjaani*' (we could only stand because of our neighbours and our backbone) (See Mohamed, 2022).

In a study that examined 'resilience from below', we mapped critical networks and forms of solidarity that people turn to in a time of crisis (Mohamed et al., 2023). We found herders at the centre of these networks, but they must also link with other motorcycle riders to transport goods, deliver medicines and scout for safe grazing. They also rely on mobile money agents that provide cash for urgent needs, to purchase medicine and animal feeds. The agroveterinarians offer advice on animal disease and loan medicines. At the same time, a livestock market broker links the herders to the market and provides the herd owners with upfront cash to manage different needs. At the heart of these is also redistribution and sharing of resources, especially herders pulling labour to reduce the high cost of livestock management and exchanging animals for milk

access. All these essential services are accessed through mutual relationships and trust. It is often based on flexible, reliable and attuned to different needs, but is not equally distributed among the pastoralists.

b. Livestock Insurance system

The index-based livestock insurance (IBLI) has recently emerged as a ‘de-risking’ tool for individual protection against drought peril. IBLI has been scaled in Kenya’s ASAL counties through the Kenya Livestock Insurance Programme (KLIP) in the early 2000s as a form of private-public partnership and involved international research institutions, the World Bank and the government (see Fava *et al.*, 2021). The insurance systems are designed based on the correlation between rainfall distribution and pasture availability through a forecasted Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI). The assumption is that a payout is given to the affected premium holders whenever pasture levels reach certain thresholds (Johnson *et al.*, 2023). The new De-risking and Value Enhancement (DRIVE), a regional livestock insurance programme, has been scaled in the Horn of Africa to enhance pastoralists' access to innovative climate risk financing and boost disaster resilience. But who does insurance benefit, and for how long?

A study by Taye (2022) challenged key assumptions in insurance and revealed that drought is not a singular peril that affects a singular area but a process involving constant livestock mobility. Its risks are experienced and perceived differently, depending on wealth and gender. The study noted that livestock insurance is mainly utilised by wealthier male herd owners, with others excluded. Bageant and Barrett 2017 have also cautioned against the potential gendered exclusion of IBLI owing to the paternalistic culture in most pastoral areas. Insurance tools are based on continuous data collection, which, if well-coordinated with the existing early warning institutions, might prove effective but remain costly. IBLI has recently adopted a bundled approach, and the policy is tied to other services like veterinary and feed support (Banerjee *et al.*, 2024) to increase policy uptake among pastoralists. There is a potential for livestock insurance to prevent distress sales and improve food security. The challenge remains on how to sustain such a costly investment for the long-term, protect families from falling back into poverty and whether insurance has the potential to survive outside government subsidy.

c. Social protection for humanitarian assistance

Uganda’s social assistance is primarily implemented by the humanitarian agencies through disaster risk financing following government withdrawal linked to the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s. Cash transfers are tied to workforce and feeding programmes to protect vulnerable households during emergencies. Third Northern Uganda Social Action Fund (NUSAF), a disaster risk finance safety net programme supported World Bank, provides labour-intensive public works after a disaster. NUSAF has contributed to short-term household food security during disasters but promoted sedentarization and dependency among the beneficiaries, undermining productive mobility (Caravani, 2024). In Libya, the Government created the Zakat Fund, which was co-financed by the national government and local religious leaders and distributed by young volunteers. Caravani *et al.*, 2021 highlighted that the Zakat fund, through its robust delivery mode, has delivered effective aid in line with social and moral obligations and revealed a high level of accountability in a politically unstable state.

Both Libya and Uganda’s social assistance are forms of disaster risk financing, but the mode of delivery has shown a significant degree of effectiveness. Trust and accountability are improved when delivered through local systems and capitalizing on existing infrastructure such as Zakat. On the contrary, conventional humanitarian and social assistance is often forward with fixed plans that guide humanitarian response and is less adaptable to pastoralists' planning and response to shocks.

Conclusion

Social protection and insurance in pastoral areas potentially improve short-term food crises; they are not enhancing sustainable food security nor improving long-term livelihoods due to their short-termism and crisis-driven intervention. These programmes sometimes disrupt pastoral systems by creating perverse incentives, mainly in sedentary camps near urban centres and operate in parallel to pastoralists' social solidarities. The disconnect between these forms of assistance can be summed into four: first, properties and assets are not individualized but collectively owned through large family alliances and networks, and individual policy holding is parallel to pastoral systems. Secondly, crisis response requires collective efforts for safety and strengthening labour relations for livestock management and future security. Thirdly, formal assistance is often tied to quotas, fixed amounts and predictive targeting, with high chances of excluding eligible households. Such fixed targeting does not consider dynamic commodity prices that undermine people's purchasing power. Moreso, it needs to attune to pastoralists' mobile context and access to infrastructure as the experiences of pastoralists in remote and urban connected areas are much different (See Mohamed 2022).

Finally, overlapping social provisioning, especially around severe drought, creates confusion for pastoralists but also for government entities as well. For instance, some insurance is subsidized, and others are not, while some cash transfers are upscaled in crisis time and reduced in lean seasons.

As the Horn of Africa grapples with poly-crisis, climate change, conflict and structural problems, bringing external and local assistance together is essential; otherwise, the longstanding disaster and emergency response will continue, and the most anticipated resilience will not be built. Both insurance and social protection must go beyond pro-poor emergency assistance limited to the availability of funding to supporting existing relational and networked solidarities that strengthen continued food security and long-term resilience. For social protection to be adequate, it must capitalize on linking public-private partnerships, while centring community practices. Future studies should explore how formal social protection crowd out informal social assistance and ways to align the two systems better.

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