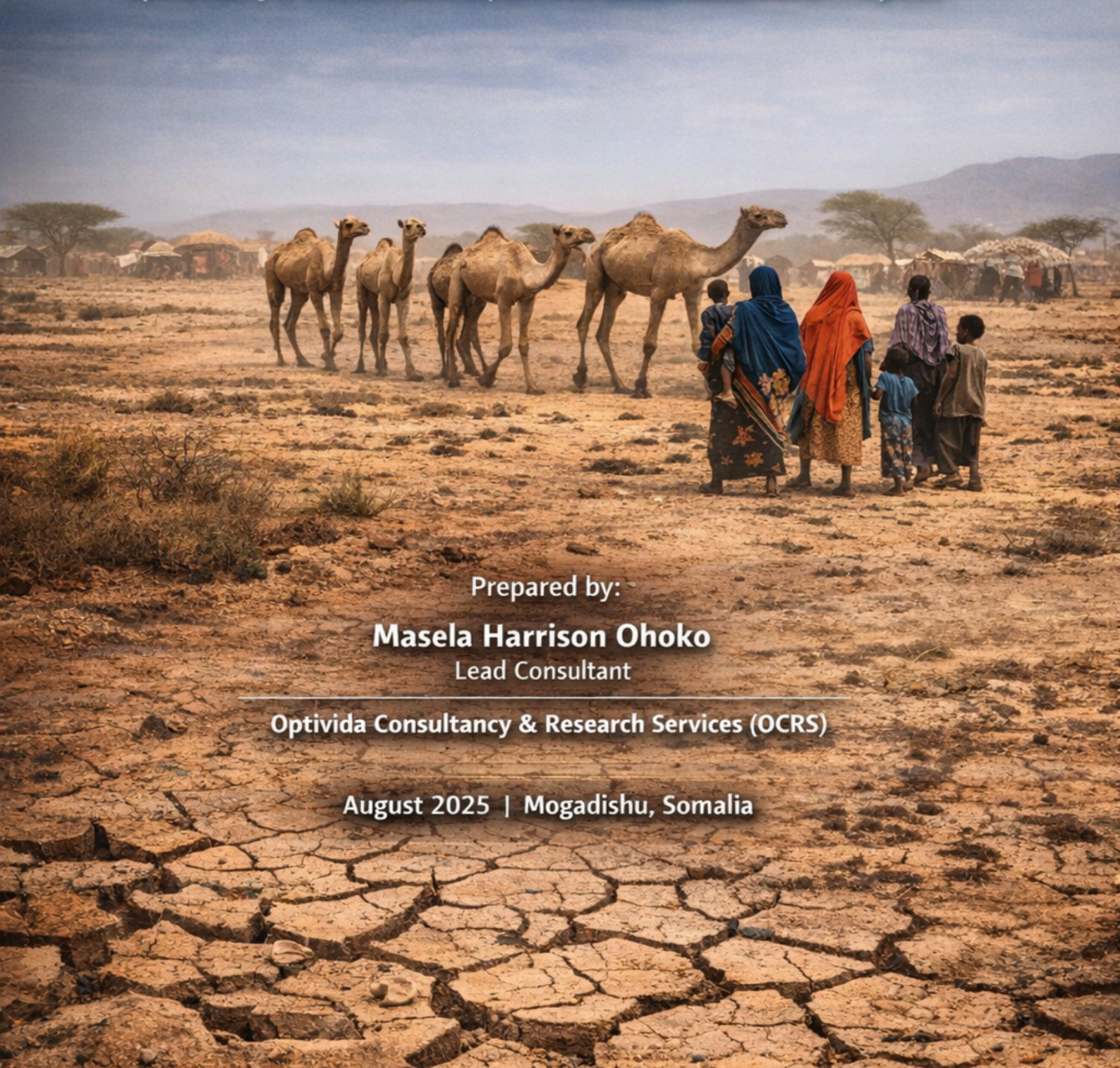


CLIMATE AND CONFLICT: A DOUBLE BURDEN FOR RURAL SOMALIA

Implications for Livelihoods, Displacement, and Humanitarian Response



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August 2025 | Mogadishu, Somalia

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1.0 Executive Summary

Rural Somalia faces a compounding crisis where climate change and conflict interact to create a “double burden” on already vulnerable communities. Recurrent droughts, environmental degradation, and erratic rainfall patterns have significantly disrupted pastoral and agro-pastoral livelihoods, increasing food insecurity, water scarcity, and economic instability. At the same time, persistent insecurity, weak governance structures, and resource-based conflicts further constrain access to essential services and limit community resilience.

This paper examines the intersection of climate stressors and conflict dynamics in rural Somalia, highlighting how these factors reinforce each other and deepen vulnerability. Climate-induced resource scarcity, particularly water and pasture, intensifies competition among communities, often escalating into localized conflicts. These dynamics are further exacerbated by displacement, loss of livelihoods, and reduced access to markets and basic services, placing additional pressure on humanitarian systems.

The analysis draws on existing literature, field-based insights, and case examples to explore how the climate–conflict nexus affects livelihoods, displacement patterns, and humanitarian response. It emphasizes that climate change is not only an environmental issue but also a key driver of instability and fragility in rural Somalia.

Despite ongoing humanitarian and development interventions, gaps remain in addressing the interconnected nature of climate and conflict risks. Current responses are often fragmented, with limited integration between climate adaptation, peacebuilding, and livelihood to support initiatives. This limits their effectiveness and sustainability.

The paper identifies opportunities for more integrated and locally driven approaches that strengthen resilience while addressing conflict sensitivity. It underscores the importance of supporting community-based coping mechanisms, enhancing early warning systems, and promoting inclusive governance and resource management structures.

Key recommendations include scaling up climate-resilient livelihood programmes, strengthening conflict-sensitive programming, improving coordination between humanitarian and

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development actors, and increasing investment in locally led solutions. Addressing the climate–conflict nexus in a holistic manner is critical to reducing vulnerability and building sustainable, peaceful, and resilient rural communities in Somalia.

2. Introduction

Rural Somalia is facing a growing and complex crisis driven by the combined effects of climate change and protracted conflict. These overlapping challenges have created a “double burden” that continues to undermine livelihoods, deepen vulnerability, and strain humanitarian response systems. For communities that depend largely on pastoral and agro-pastoral livelihoods, the impacts of recurrent drought, environmental degradation, and resource scarcity are not only environmental concerns but also key drivers of socio-economic instability.

At the same time, Somalia’s fragile context, characterized by weak governance, limited state presence, and localized conflict dynamics, further exacerbates the impact of climate stressors. In many rural areas, competition over scarce resources such as water and grazing land has intensified, often leading to tensions and conflict between communities. These dynamics are compounded by displacement, loss of livelihoods, and limited access to essential services.

This paper explores the intersection of climate and conflict in rural Somalia, examining how these factors interact to create compounding risks for vulnerable populations. It aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the climate–conflict nexus, with a focus on its implications for livelihoods, displacement, and humanitarian response.

The paper is guided by the recognition that climate change and conflict cannot be addressed in isolation. Instead, it adopts an integrated perspective that considers the interlinkages between environmental stress, governance, and social dynamics. Drawing on existing literature, contextual insights, and practical examples, the paper seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions on resilience, conflict sensitivity, and the humanitarian-development nexus.

Ultimately, the objective of this paper is to inform more effective, coordinated, and locally grounded responses that address both immediate humanitarian needs and longer-term drivers of vulnerability. It provides actionable recommendations for policymakers, humanitarian actors, and development partners seeking to strengthen resilience and promote sustainable peace in rural Somalia.

3. Context Overview: Climate and Conflict in Somalia

Somalia is one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world, characterized by recurrent droughts, erratic rainfall patterns, and increasing environmental degradation. The country's largely arid and semi-arid land (ASAL) ecosystems support predominantly pastoral and agro-pastoral livelihoods, which are highly sensitive to climate variability. Over the past decade, the frequency and severity of drought cycles have intensified, leading to widespread livestock losses, reduced agricultural productivity, and heightened food insecurity across rural areas.

At the same time, Somalia continues to face protracted conflict and fragility driven by a combination of political instability, weak governance structures, and localized resource-based tensions. In many rural areas, limited state presence and institutional capacity constrain the effective management of natural resources such as water and pasture. As a result, communities often rely on traditional governance systems, which, while important, are increasingly strained under the pressures of climate change and population movements.

The intersection of climate stress and conflict has created a complex operating environment where environmental shocks amplify existing vulnerabilities and tensions. Competition over scarce resources, particularly water and grazing land, has become a key driver of localized conflicts, especially during prolonged drought periods. These dynamics are further complicated by displacement, as communities move in search of water, pasture, and humanitarian assistance, often settling in already overstretched areas.

In addition, rural communities face limited access to basic services, markets, and infrastructure, which further weakens their ability to cope with shocks. Humanitarian needs remain high, with millions requiring food assistance, water, and protection services. While humanitarian actors continue to respond to immediate needs, structural challenges persist in addressing the root causes of vulnerability.

Understanding the broader context of climate and conflict in Somalia is essential for designing effective and sustainable interventions. It requires recognizing the interconnected nature of environmental stress, livelihood systems, governance, and conflict dynamics, and adopting integrated approaches that bridge humanitarian response, development programming, and peacebuilding efforts.

4. Climate Stressors in Rural Somalia

Rural Somalia is increasingly affected by a range of interconnected climate stressors that are intensifying vulnerability and undermining traditional livelihood systems. These stressors—primarily drought, water scarcity, and environmental degradation, are not only environmental challenges but also key drivers of socio-economic instability and conflict.

4.1 Drought and Environmental Degradation

Somalia experiences recurrent and prolonged drought cycles, which have become more frequent and severe over the past decade. Failed rainy seasons, declining vegetation cover, and rising temperatures have led to widespread degradation of rangelands. For pastoral and agro-pastoral communities, this has resulted in significant livestock losses, reduced milk production, and diminished household income.

Environmental degradation, including soil erosion and deforestation, further exacerbates the situation by reducing the regenerative capacity of land. As natural resources become increasingly scarce, communities are forced to travel longer distances in search of pasture and water, increasing their exposure to risks and heightening competition over limited resources.

4.2 Water Scarcity and Resource Competition

Water scarcity is one of the most critical climate-related challenges in rural Somalia. Seasonal rivers and traditional water points frequently dry up during drought periods, leaving communities dependent on limited and often unreliable water sources.

This scarcity intensifies competition between communities, particularly among pastoral groups whose livelihoods depend on access to water and grazing land. In many cases, disputes over water points and migration routes escalate into localized conflicts, especially in areas where governance and conflict resolution mechanisms are weak or overstretched.

4.3 Livelihood Disruptions (Pastoral and Agro-Pastoral Systems)

Climate stressors have significantly disrupted traditional livelihood systems in rural Somalia. Pastoralism, which relies on mobility and access to natural resources, is increasingly constrained by environmental degradation and insecurity. Agro-pastoral communities face additional challenges due to reduced rainfall, declining crop yields, and limited access to agricultural inputs.

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As livelihoods become less viable, households adopt negative coping strategies, including asset depletion, reduced food consumption, and migration. These disruptions not only deepen poverty but also increase dependency on humanitarian assistance, placing additional strain on already limited resources.

5. Conflict Dynamics and Fragility

Somalia's conflict landscape is complex and multi-layered, shaped by historical grievances, political instability, weak governance, and competition over scarce resources. In rural areas, conflict is often localized but deeply interconnected with broader structural challenges, including limited state presence and inadequate institutional capacity. These dynamics create a fragile environment in which climate stressors can easily exacerbate tensions and trigger conflict.

5.1 Local Conflict Drivers and Insecurity

In many rural regions, conflict is driven by a combination of socio-political and economic factors. These include clan-based tensions, disputes over land ownership, and competition for access to essential resources such as water and grazing land. The absence or weakness of formal governance structures often limits the effective management of these disputes, leaving communities reliant on traditional mechanisms that may be strained or insufficient under increasing pressure.

Insecurity also affects mobility, market access, and the delivery of humanitarian assistance. In some areas, the presence of armed groups and ongoing instability restricts access for both communities and humanitarian actors, further isolating vulnerable populations.

5.2 Resource-Based Conflicts

Resource scarcity, particularly during drought periods, has become a major trigger of localized conflicts in rural Somalia. As water points dry up and pasture becomes limited, pastoral communities are forced to migrate in search of resources, often entering territories traditionally used by other groups.

For example, during prolonged droughts, pastoralists from one region may move into neighboring areas, leading to disputes over grazing land and water access. These tensions can escalate quickly, particularly in the absence of effective conflict resolution mechanisms or coordinated resource management systems.

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Climate change intensifies these dynamics by increasing the frequency and severity of resource shortages, thereby amplifying competition and the likelihood of conflict.

5.3 Governance and Institutional Gaps

Weak governance remains a central factor in Somalia's conflict dynamics. In many rural areas, state institutions have limited reach, and formal systems for resource management, conflict resolution, and service delivery are either absent or underdeveloped.

While traditional governance systems, such as clan elders and community leaders, play an important role in mediating disputes, they are increasingly challenged by the scale and complexity of current crises. In addition, these systems may not always ensure inclusive participation, particularly for women and marginalized groups.

The lack of coordinated governance and institutional support limits the ability to address both the immediate and underlying causes of conflict. This creates a cycle where unresolved tensions persist and are repeatedly triggered by environmental and socio-economic shocks.

6. The Climate–Conflict Nexus: A Double Burden

The intersection of climate stress and conflict in rural Somalia creates a reinforcing cycle of vulnerability that significantly undermines resilience and recovery. Rather than operating as separate challenges, climate change and conflict interact in ways that intensify their combined impact, creating what can be described as a “double burden” for affected communities.

Figure 1: Climate–Conflict Nexus



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Figure 1: Climate–Conflict Nexus illustrating the interaction between environmental stress, resource scarcity, and conflict dynamics in rural Somalia

6.1 Interlinkages and Feedback Loops

Climate stressors such as drought, water scarcity, and environmental degradation directly influence conflict dynamics by increasing competition over limited natural resources. As access to water and pasture becomes more constrained, communities are forced to migrate or adjust to traditional livelihood patterns, often leading to disputes with neighboring groups.

At the same time, conflict further exacerbates the impact of climate shocks. Insecure environments restrict mobility, limit access to markets, and disrupt livelihood activities, reducing communities' ability to cope with environmental stress. Conflict can also hinder humanitarian access and delay response efforts, leaving communities more exposed to climate-related risks.

These dynamics create a feedback loop where climate stress increases the likelihood of conflict, and conflict, in turn, deepens vulnerability to climate shocks.

6.2 Impact on Vulnerable Populations

The combined effects of climate and conflict disproportionately affect vulnerable groups, including pastoralists, agro-pastoralists, women, children, and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Loss of livestock reduced agricultural output, and displacement significantly weakens household resilience and increases dependency on humanitarian assistance.

Women and children often face additional risks, including reduced access to food, water, and protection services. In displacement settings, overcrowding and limited resources further exacerbate vulnerabilities, creating conditions that strain both host communities and humanitarian systems.

6.3 Displacement and Humanitarian Needs

The climate–conflict nexus is a major driver of displacement in rural Somalia. Communities affected by drought and insecurity are often forced to leave their homes in search of water, pasture, and assistance. This movement not only disrupts livelihoods but also increases pressure on already vulnerable areas.

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Displacement sites frequently face challenges such as inadequate shelter, limited access to clean water, and insufficient basic services. At the same time, host communities experience increased competition over resources, which can further fuel tensions.

The resulting humanitarian needs are complex and multi-dimensional, requiring responses that address both immediate survival needs and the underlying drivers of vulnerability.

7. Implications for Humanitarian and Development Response

The intersection of climate stress and conflict in rural Somalia presents significant challenges for humanitarian and development actors. Addressing these overlapping risks requires a shift from fragmented, sector-specific interventions toward more integrated, conflict-sensitive, and locally grounded approaches.

7.1 Challenges in Coordination and Access

Humanitarian response in rural Somalia is often constrained by insecurity, limited infrastructure, and restricted access to affected populations. In areas affected by both drought and conflict, access for humanitarian actors can be unpredictable, delaying the delivery of critical assistance. In addition, coordination among actors is frequently fragmented, with limited integration between humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding initiatives. Sectoral approaches may fail to capture the interconnected nature of climate and conflict risks, resulting in gaps and duplication in response efforts.

7.2 Gaps in Current Programming

Many existing programmes address either climate resilience or conflict mitigation, but few effectively integrate both dimensions. For example, livelihood interventions may focus on drought resilience without considering conflict dynamics, while peacebuilding initiatives may overlook the environmental drivers of tension.

There is also a tendency toward short-term, project-based interventions that prioritize immediate humanitarian needs over longer-term resilience and system strengthening. This limits sustainability and reduces the ability of communities to withstand future shocks.

7.3 Opportunities for Integrated Approaches

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Despite these challenges, there are significant opportunities to improve response effectiveness through integrated programming. Approaches that combine climate adaptation, livelihood support, and conflict-sensitive interventions can help address both the symptoms and root causes of vulnerability.

For instance, supporting climate-resilient livelihoods alongside community-based resource management and conflict resolution mechanisms can reduce competition over scarce resources and strengthen social cohesion. Similarly, strengthening early warning systems and linking them to coordinated response mechanisms can improve preparedness and reduce the impact of shocks.

Local actors and community structures play a critical role in these approaches, as they bring contextual knowledge, legitimacy, and the ability to sustain interventions over time.

8. Case Study: Rural Communities in South-Central Somalia

8.1 Context and Overview

This case study focuses on rural communities in South-Central Somalia, particularly in districts such as Baidoa and Lower Shabelle, where the combined impacts of recurrent drought and localized conflict are most evident. These areas are characterized by agro-pastoral livelihoods, high levels of food insecurity, and significant displacement. Communities in these regions are highly dependent on rainfall for crop production and livestock survival, making them particularly vulnerable to climate variability.

Over recent years, consecutive failed rainy seasons have led to severe drought conditions, resulting in crop failure, livestock losses, and reduced access to water. At the same time, insecurity and localized conflicts have limited mobility, disrupted market access, and constrained humanitarian operations.

8.2 Community Experiences and Coping Mechanisms

Households in these areas have adopted a range of coping strategies in response to climate and conflict pressures. These include:

- Migration in search of water, pasture, and livelihood opportunities
- Reduction in food consumption and reliance on less nutritious alternatives

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- Sale of productive assets such as livestock
- Increased dependence on humanitarian assistance

While these strategies may provide short-term relief, they often undermine long-term resilience by depleting household assets and increasing vulnerability to future shocks.

Community-based support systems, including informal sharing networks and traditional leadership structures, play an important role in helping households cope. However, these systems are increasingly strained due to the scale and frequency of crises.

8.3 Local Coordination and Response Systems

Local coordination mechanisms, including community committees and traditional leadership structures, play a critical role in organizing response efforts. These structures are often responsible for:

- Identifying vulnerable households
- Supporting targeting for humanitarian assistance
- Facilitating communication between communities and humanitarian actors
- Managing local disputes over resources

For example, in drought-affected areas of Baidoa, community committees work with NGOs to identify households most in need of cash assistance and coordinate water trucking interventions. They also play a role in sharing early warning information and mobilizing community participation in response activities.

However, these mechanisms often operate with limited resources and support, which constrains their effectiveness and sustainability.

8.4 Key Lessons from the Case Study

- Climate and conflict pressures are deeply interconnected and cannot be addressed separately
- Local coordination structures are essential for effective and contextually relevant response
- Community coping mechanisms are increasingly under strain and require external support
- Integrated, locally driven approaches are critical for strengthening resilience

9. Recommendations

Addressing the combined impacts of climate change and conflict in rural Somalia requires integrated, context-specific, and locally driven approaches. The following recommendations are designed to be practical, achievable, and aligned with humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding priorities.

9.1 Strengthen Climate-Resilient Livelihoods

- Scale up support for diversified and climate-resilient livelihood options, including drought-resistant crops, livestock health services, and alternative income-generating activities
- Invest in sustainable natural resource management, such as rangeland rehabilitation and water infrastructure (e.g., boreholes and water harvesting systems)
- Support pastoral mobility through coordinated resource mapping and negotiated access agreements

Example: In drought-prone areas, combining livestock vaccination campaigns with water point rehabilitation can reduce losses and improve resilience.

9.2 Promote Conflict-Sensitive Programming

- Integrate conflict analysis into all climate and livelihood interventions
- Support community-based conflict resolution mechanisms, including peace committees and traditional leadership structures
- Facilitate dialogue between communities over shared resource use, particularly during migration periods

Example: Establishing joint water management committees across neighboring communities can reduce disputes over water access.

9.3 Strengthen Local Coordination Mechanisms

- Provide financial and technical support to community-led coordination structures
- Formalize linkages between local committees and district or regional coordination systems
- Build capacity in areas such as data collection, planning, and reporting

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Example: Training community committees in early warning data collection can improve timely response and coordination.

9.4 Enhance Integrated Programming (Humanitarian–Development–Peace Nexus)

- Design programmes that simultaneously address immediate humanitarian needs, long-term resilience, and conflict drivers
- Strengthen collaboration between humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding actors
- Align interventions with national and local development plans

Example: Combining cash assistance with livelihood recovery and conflict mediation can support both recovery and stability.

9.5 Invest in Early Warning and Preparedness Systems

- Strengthen community-based early warning systems linked to national frameworks
- Improve data sharing between local actors, government, and humanitarian agencies
- Ensure early action is triggered based on warning signals

Example: Using community data on rainfall and livestock conditions to trigger pre-emptive support before drought peaks.

9.6 Increase Support for Locally Led Solutions

- Provide direct and flexible funding to local organizations and community structures
- Promote equitable partnerships between international and local actors
- Recognize local actors as key decision-makers, not just implementers

9.7 Improve Access and Service Delivery in Rural Areas

- Expand access to basic services, including water, health, and education
- Invest in infrastructure to improve market access and mobility
- Strengthen outreach to remote and hard-to-reach communities

10. Conclusion

Rural Somalia is facing an increasingly complex crisis driven by the intersection of climate change and protracted conflict. This “double burden” continues to erode livelihoods, deepen vulnerability, and strain already limited humanitarian and development systems. Recurrent droughts, environmental degradation, and resource scarcity are not only undermining traditional

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pastoral and agro-pastoral systems but are also intensifying competition over scarce resources, contributing to localized conflict and instability.

This paper has demonstrated that climate and conflict are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Climate stress increases the likelihood of conflict by exacerbating resource scarcity and displacement, while conflict limits communities' ability to cope with and recover from environmental shocks. These dynamics create a cycle of vulnerability that cannot be effectively addressed through isolated or sector-specific interventions.

The analysis highlights the critical role of local actors and community-based systems in navigating these challenges. However, it also underscores the need for stronger support, integration, and recognition of these mechanisms within broader coordination and policy frameworks.

Addressing the climate–conflict nexus in rural Somalia requires a shift toward integrated, conflict-sensitive, and locally led approaches that bridge humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts. Investments in climate-resilient livelihoods, inclusive governance, and community-based coordination systems are essential to building long-term resilience.

Ultimately, breaking the cycle of climate vulnerability and conflict will depend on sustained commitment, coordinated action, and meaningful engagement with local communities. By adopting holistic and context-driven approaches, stakeholders can contribute to more resilient, stable, and sustainable futures for rural populations in Somalia.