



Research and Studies RS Brief I 23-3



Community-based solutions for economic resilience: Building on local knowledge and know-how to respond to climate change challenges (Ethiopia)

Innovation, Impact & Information Division & Resilience and Inclusion Division
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About HI

Handicap International – Humanity & Inclusion (HI) has a strong presence in Ethiopia, supporting vulnerable communities through inclusive resilience initiatives. HI prioritizes the economic resilience of highly vulnerable communities, with a particular focus on persons with disabilities. HI's work is shaped by the recognition that traditional top-down aid approaches have often failed to deliver sustainable results, and that community-driven solutions are essential for lasting impact. consultants.

About this study

This study has been conducted with the assistance of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Luxembourg.



A. Context of the study

Ethiopia, with over 112 million people, faces severe droughts and floods that threaten agriculture and food security. These climate risks are worsened by gender inequality, as few women own land or have access to resources. HI's approach in Ethiopia is to work alongside communities to co-create solutions, rather than imposing standardized external models. This not only enhances the effectiveness of interventions but also strengthens the long-term self-reliance and cohesion of communities facing recurrent and increased shocks and stresses.

B. General and specific objectives

The primary aim of the study was to strengthen HI's economic resilience programming by understanding and building on local adaptation strategies in Ethiopia. Specifically, the study sought to:

- Identify and document local practices, knowledge, and coping mechanisms for climate change adaptation and mitigation.
- Highlight the unique challenges and capacities of persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups.
- Co-create recommendations for evidence-based, inclusive, and sustainable programming and advocacy.

C. Methods

The study used a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection. Fieldwork included in-depth community-level discussions, interviews, and focus group discussions, with 112 participants, ensuring voices of the most vulnerable were amplified. The research was complemented by a literature review to contextualize findings and assess transferability of promising practices. The research focused on Ethiopia's Somali region in Degehabur district (Dumot kebele) and Bombas district (Hoden kebele), where livelihoods rely almost exclusively on agriculture and pastoralism.

D. Findings

Drought is the most severe and frequent hazard, now occurring almost annually and severely impacting livelihoods, food security, and health. Water scarcity and livestock disease are major challenges, with over 60% of communicable diseases linked to poor environmental conditions.

Persons with disabilities are particularly vulnerable, often skipping meals during droughts and lacking institutional support. Communities rely on traditional knowledge for drought preparedness and have begun diversifying livelihoods through small businesses and water storage systems.

“When the drought comes, we share what little water we have, but those with disabilities are often the last to receive help. We need more support to prepare, not just react.” (Community member, Ethiopia)

Social bonds and community cooperation remain crucial for the resilience of the most vulnerable but they are insufficient to overcome structural barriers and bring lasting change in the perceived role of persons with disabilities within a community.

E. Recommendations

1. Adopt holistic, community-led approaches anchored in local knowledge and needs.

Needs, knowledge and opportunities may differ from one community to another. Programmes should be defined with the community members, including the most vulnerable groups, be based on the existing knowledge and know-how, and consider gender inequalities to be as transformational as possible. Tools such as inclusive needs assessments and studies like this one provide a systemic lens on socioeconomic resilience, enabling the design of targeted, community-tailored interventions.

2. Ensure that persons with disabilities are at the center of program design and implementation.

Persons with disabilities in the studied areas face exclusion from education and social protection, often relying on family or community support. In Degehabur, an OPD-led initiative enabled persons with disabilities to access business loans through a partnership with financial institutions and Kebele administrators with local authorities serving as guarantors. This model reduces financial risk for banks, enabling favourable loan conditions while empowering persons with disabilities and shifting community perceptions.

3. Scale economic diversification using traditional knowledge and accessible technologies.

To build sustainable livelihoods, highly vulnerable communities require accessible economic opportunities that can be maintained with little support from external actors. Government-led initiatives in poultry farming and beekeeping offer interesting alternatives to current unsustainable practices used by vulnerable groups which are often risky or implemented away from the community;

4. Expand community-owned water management solutions and capacity building.

Efficient water management is foundational for developing sustainable socioeconomic opportunities and fostering community well-being in arid areas. Investing in inclusive water management solutions owned by the communities - such as covered birkas with fences and shared ponds – and awareness on safe and good practices for maintenance (e.g. chlorine use for potable water) and governance seems to be the first step to undertake before expanding or improving existing livelihoods. It will not only support agriculture and livestock but also lay the groundwork for broader livelihood initiatives and economic diversification within the community

5. Promote drought-resilient agriculture and livestock practices.

Agropastoral communities already employ adaptive strategies, which should be reinforced by: a) further developing early warning systems using local knowledge and low-cost technologies, b) promoting agricultural transformation to preserve food for longer periods (and especially during the drought season), c) improving methods and technologies for storage, d) supporting initiatives promoting natural fertilizers and value chain development. For livestock, community-based decision-making around destocking/restocking, strategic animal movement, and veterinary support (in collaboration with FAO and relevant ministries) should be integrated into resilience programming.

6. Align economic resilience with social bonds and community solidarity systems

Cultural and religious values in Ethiopia - particularly within pastoralist and Islamic traditions - form the backbone of social cohesion and build resilience of the most vulnerable groups (especially persons with disabilities and the elderly). At community level, practices such as zakah (charitable giving), communal farming, and livestock sharing are vital safety nets for persons with disabilities and the elderly. Economic initiatives—such as small-scale cooperatives or community-based cash-for-work programmes—should strengthen and not disrupt these support systems. Additionally, the potential role of the diaspora in funding and co-creating inclusive local initiatives warrants further exploration.

F. Conclusion

True resilience in Ethiopia depends on empowering communities to lead their own adaptation strategies, with a focus on the most vulnerable. By investing in inclusive, locally-driven solutions and building on traditional knowledge, HI and its partners can help communities shift from reactive crisis management to proactive, sustainable resilience.



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