



Research and
Studies

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

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



A. Context of the study

Climate change and environmental stressors—such as droughts, floods, conflicts, and epidemics disproportionately impact vulnerable populations, especially persons with disabilities, by undermining livelihoods and deepening socio-economic vulnerabilities. Traditional top-down aid approaches have often neglected local knowledge, resulting in limited community ownership and unsustainable outcomes. Current development and humanitarian frameworks increasingly emphasize localization and the value of indigenous knowledge in building resilience, as reflected in initiatives like the *Grand Bargain* and *Early Warnings for All (EW4All)*. Humanity & Inclusion, formerly Handicap International (HI) embraces this shift, supporting vulnerable communities in strengthening their resilience through locally driven, context-specific strategies.

Evidence from countries like Nepal and Ethiopia highlights the urgency and effectiveness of bottom-up approaches in addressing climate risks and promoting sustainable development. However, rigid donor frameworks remain a challenge to fully operationalizing these community-led models. Advancing sustainable resilience requires deeper recognition, systematization, and promotion of local adaptation practices as essential assets for equitable, scalable, and lasting impact.

B- General and specific objectives

This study aims to document local climate mitigation and adaptation practices in Ethiopia and Nepal, aiming at contributing to economic resilience. By capturing these community-driven strategies, HI seeks to strengthen its livelihoods programming to ensure that interventions are inclusive, sustainable, and responsive to the needs of marginalized groups. 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.

Both Ethiopia and Nepal, despite their distinct contexts, face significant climate risks compounded by limited adaptive capacities, underscoring the importance of localized solutions. The selection of these two diverse yet similarly vulnerable countries was intended to reveal a broad range of practices that can inform and enrich future programming and recommendations.

C- Methods

The research utilized mixed-methods approaches (combining qualitative and quantitative), including interviews with 215 participants across both countries, focusing particularly on persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups. It relies on in-depth fieldwork, with particular emphasis on amplifying the voices of the most vulnerable populations to understand the coping mechanisms they develop in response to climate-related shocks. Community-level discussions and interviews provided rich, context-specific insights, which were subsequently complemented and deepened through a rigorous literature review.



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This dual approach allowed for the collection of real, grounded data from within the communities, while also enabling a level of analysis that assesses the potential transferability of the identified practices and the specific conditions required for their successful adaptation in other contexts.

The research focused on Nepal's Bajura district, in Badimalika municipality & Ethiopia's Somali region in Degehabur district (Dumot kebele) and Bombas district (Hoden kebele).

D- Findings

Climate vulnerabilities manifested differently in each country: Nepal faces landslides, floods, erratic rainfall, and human-wildlife conflict, while Ethiopia experiences severe droughts as the primary hazard, followed by human and livestock diseases. Both countries demonstrate that vulnerable communities possess valuable local knowledge and coping mechanisms, though these are increasingly overstretched as climate shocks intensify.

Key findings reveal that livelihood diversification serves as a cornerstone for resilience, with communities combining agriculture, small-scale trade, and skilled labour to create multiple income streams. Water management emerges as fundamental to community resilience, essential for human consumption, livestock survival, and agricultural productivity. The study identified that inclusive programming starting with the most vulnerable groups creates stronger community-wide resilience outcomes.

Critical gaps persist in supporting persons with disabilities, who often receive limited institutional support and remain dependent on family networks, particularly during crises. Traditional community-based practices prove most effective when they adopt holistic, multi-sectoral approaches that build on existing local knowledge and capacities rather than imposing external solutions.

“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)

E- Recommendations

1- Integrated approach for community development

Treating communities as ecosystems through holistic, bottom-up approaches that prioritize local needs and knowledge over sectoral budget allocations.

This requires implementing area-based and collective approaches that aggregate community feedback and align interventions to local priorities, while promoting coordination across sectors and engaging local partners in joint planning and implementation. The approach must address the entrenched sectoral structure of humanitarian funding through integrated analysis, shared decision-making platforms, and flexible funding mechanisms that support collective action.

2- Sustainable livelihood diversification

- Promoting diversification into value-adding sectors like agro-processing and small businesses while ensuring inclusion through vocational training for women, youth, and persons with disabilities.
- Creating inclusive financial mechanisms using trusted community guarantors is crucial for supporting the most vulnerable groups.
- Building on existing community needs and capacities through participatory frameworks ensures interventions align with local practices while avoiding externally driven solutions that undermine local ownership.

3- Inclusion-centered programming

Programming should place persons with disabilities at the center of design, recognizing that focusing on their needs first sets higher standards for community resilience and benefits the broader ecosystem.

This approach addresses systematic barriers including lack of education access, limited knowledge on how to assist persons with disabilities, and community attitudes that underestimate their potential contributions. Strengthening institutional support systems is essential to reduce dependency on family networks during crises.

4- Water management & infrastructure development

Scaling up low-cost, community-owned water management solutions such as rainwater harvesting systems, communal wells, and small reservoirs is fundamental to community resilience.

These initiatives must include practical training for system maintenance and establish inclusive water management committees to ensure effective governance, sustainability, and equitable access for all community members.

F. Conclusion

True resilience is about enabling communities to adapt and thrive independently. Evidence from Nepal and Ethiopia shows that even the most vulnerable groups hold valuable local knowledge to cope with crises. Yet, as climate shocks intensify, these traditional mechanisms are increasingly overstretched, sometimes leading to harmful coping strategies that further weaken communities.

To foster lasting resilience, development efforts must aim for transformational, multi-sectoral change that addresses interconnected risks and is firmly grounded in local priorities, knowledge, and governance. Investing in solid preparatory work—designed with and for communities, especially the most vulnerable—is essential to ensure that interventions are inclusive, relevant, and community-owned.

This requires a shift in humanitarian and development practice: communities must drive the agenda, rather than external actors. HI is well-positioned to champion this approach, promoting localized, community-led solutions that start with the most vulnerable and benefit the broader ecosystem.

In a context of shrinking aid and growing global instability, prioritizing financial autonomy, local leadership, and community-driven resilience is more critical than ever to achieving sustainable, equitable, and climate-adaptive futures.



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Access to the complete study on [Hi.Org](https://hi.org)

Access to the brief on Ethiopia on [Hi.Org](https://hi.org)

Access to the brief on Nepal on [Hi.Org](https://hi.org)

About HI

Handicap International - Humanity & Inclusion (HI) is an independent and impartial NGO that intervenes in situations of poverty and exclusion, conflict, and disaster. HI works alongside people with disabilities and vulnerable populations. 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.

About this study

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