



Policy brief

Rapid assessment of the hunger–climate–conflict nexus

Food and nutrition security in Somalia

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Key messages

Fragility and conflict create vulnerabilities to climate and non-climate shocks, and impact livelihoods and food and nutrition security. Decades of fragility and conflict, particularly by armed groups, have led to low investment in socioeconomic development.

In Somalia, prolonged drought has destroyed crops and killed livestock, devastating agricultural and agropastoral livelihoods. While cases of diagnosed malnutrition are low, households have little to eat beyond purchased spaghetti.

Households are dependent on what they earn for the day in order to purchase food. A day without work is a day without eating.

Women face the highest livelihood, food and nutrition insecurity, as well as gender-based violence.

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Introduction: fragility, conflict and vulnerability to climate shocks

There is nothing ‘natural’ about disasters. When a climate hazard, such as a drought or a flood, triggers impacts that are disastrous to people, their livelihoods, and their food and nutrition security, it is because the systems upon which people depend are fragile. Elements of fragility – such as socio-political marginalisation, lack of economic development or land tenure insecurity – can create the systemic conditions that contribute to conflicts at local to national levels. And conflict, particularly violent conflict, further erodes people’s livelihoods and food security, destabilises markets and increases vulnerability to climate shocks (even if these hazards are not yet influenced by climate change). Even when conflicts are not currently occurring, the impacts of their legacy on development can continue to perpetuate fragility. Fragility, with or without conflicts, creates vulnerabilities and exposures to climate shocks and non-climate stressors at individual, household and community levels, such that when a hazard like drought occurs, its impacts can become disasters. where Action Against Hunger has active and needed cash assistance, food aid and medical care programmes. Clan-based violence, political disagreements between the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and Federal Member States (FMS), and ongoing violent attacks by non-state armed groups have held Somalia back socioeconomically, leaving it unprepared for managing climate-related disasters, and are contributing to ongoing widespread displacement.

These complex and ongoing fragility and conflict dynamics have culminated to make Somalis – the majority of whom rely on a mix of farming or pastoralism – highly vulnerable to climate shocks. Somalis have had to contend with floods, droughts and locust plagues in the past few decades (Opitz-Stapleton et al., 2022) – and non-climate stressors such as food price inflation related to COVID-19 (Mayhew et al., 2023; World Bank, 2023). Not all recent climate shocks have been influenced by climate change; the drought of 2016–2017 was within natural variability (Van Oldenborgh et al., 2017). However, the most recent drought, of late 2020–2023, has been strongly influenced by higher evaporation caused by warmer temperatures associated with climate change (Kimutai et al., 2023).

Climate change projections indicate that temperatures will continue to increase; the country’s aquifers and the Jubba and Shabelle rivers are and will be at risk to both warming and the expected increase of both floods and droughts (Gulati et al., forthcoming). Water insecurity and its subsequent impacts on food security in Somalia are likely to increase in the future without climate-resilient water infrastructure, livelihood diversification and risk-informed development that supports peacebuilding efforts.

Figure 1 Fragile systems create vulnerabilities for people and communities, such that when shocks and stresses occur, they can have disastrous impacts on livelihoods, access to food and nutrition.



Source: The authors.

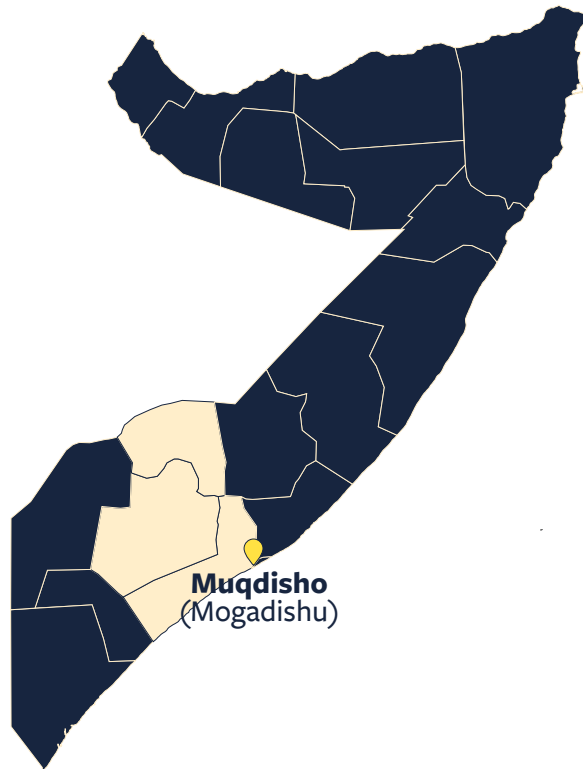
Study focus

Action Against Hunger is implementing a regional project funded by the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO): Multisectoral humanitarian response to the deteriorating nutrition situation focusing on severely affected crisis contexts in sub-Saharan Africa. The project aims to improve the nutritional status of crisis-affected populations in seven countries, including South Sudan, Mali and Somalia. It also aims to generate evidence to better shape and scale up approaches that aim to tackle the impacts of layered crises, including those influenced by climate change and the cascading socioeconomic consequences of COVID-19.

As part of this regional project, Action Against Hunger has commissioned two assessments to inform and bolster its humanitarian and resilience programming and interventions. The first assessment aimed to understand, from the perspectives of those experiencing fragility, conflict and climate shock layering, how these complex crises are impacting food security and what coping mechanisms households and communities are employing. This brief presents a snapshot of the findings of the main report ‘Rapid assessments of the hunger-climate-conflict nexus: first assessment’ (Opitz-Stapleton et al., 2023).

Through 51 interviews and 14 focus group discussions, we examined the layered impacts of fragility, conflict and climate shocks and stresses on food security and nutrition in IDP camps and host communities at three sites in Southwest State: Baidoa, Barawe and Elbarde. We also asked how people were coping with impacts and what assistance they would like. The perspectives of women and men were sought (separately), as well as those from people living with disability or illness, or caring for a disabled or ill person.

Figure 2 Regions where the three study communities are located.



Note: The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the authors, Action Against Hunger, ODI or the GFFO concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

Source: United Nations Maps & Geospatial services

Layered crises and impacts on livelihoods and food security

Climate shocks are not the sole cause of food insecurity and malnutrition. The current drought (since late 2020) is the proximate cause of displacement, according to many of the internally displaced person[s] (IDPs) interviewed or participating in focus groups. Women and men indicated that they have had to give up their farming and livestock activities as the drought has decimated crops and killed livestock. However, they indicated that it is the cumulative impacts of multiple previous shocks and stressors that have broken their coping capacities and led to them moving to camps or towns. Some spoke of non-state armed groups' continuing practice of collecting forced 'tithes' from their remaining meagre food supplies as driving hunger.

Others spoke of other forms of conflict disrupting livelihoods, and stated that a prior drought and locust plague had depleted their assets to the point that when this current drought started, they had little coping capacity left.

Ongoing food and nutrition insecurity for both IDPs and host communities is linked with the ability to find casual daily labour. A day without work translates to reduced or no food for a household on that day. Various forms of violent conflict are impacting abilities to work, food prices and household food security. Whether referring to conflict between various government and opposition forces in Southwest State (due to a political dispute) or violence by non-state armed groups, people reported that conflict prevented them from leaving their homes or the IDP camps to find work or purchase food. Non-state armed group activities, ranging from planting landmines on roads to demanding taxes for transporting food, were blamed as contributing to higher food prices since they added to the cost and difficulty of bringing imported food from Mogadishu to other markets.

Women and men are impacted differently by conflicts at the places to which they have been displaced; host communities are also impacted. Men and youths are at risk of forced conscription into training camps organised by the Somalia Federal Government in Eritrea. They also face the risk of being shot on suspicion of belonging either to non-state armed groups or opposing sides in the political conflict. Women's income at all three sites is impacted by a ban on collecting firewood imposed by non-state armed groups. This was a major income-earning activity for women; the ban has reduced their ability to purchase food for their households.

As a result, hunger is acute (one meal a day, sometimes none at all) among 14 households (6 in Baidoa, 6 in Barawe, 2 in Elbarde) out of 51 households interviewed. Most of the remaining interviewed households are eating only two small meals a day (8 in Baidoa, 9 in Barawe, 16 in Elbarde). Most interviewees indicated that the number of meals and quantity of food consumed in a day is dependent on what they can earn through casual labour on that day; a day with no or little earnings reduces consumption, with some households forgoing food altogether.

Transitioning to more resilient food security: key learning points

Key learning point 1: Fragility and conflict create vulnerabilities to climate and non-climate shocks, and impact livelihoods and food and nutrition security

Among both IDP and host community households, undiagnosed malnourishment is likely. Due to the ongoing drought, no one can grow crops. All food must be purchased from the markets. However, because of high food prices, most households are reduced to purchasing cheap rice and some spaghetti from local markets. No one can afford protein (meat, milk or eggs), beans or vegetables; protein, vitamin and mineral deficiencies are likely among both adults and children. People are aware that their diets are poor and that they and their dependants are likely undernourished, but cannot afford better or enough food. More than half of the interviewees are spending 70% or more of their daily earnings on food purchases.

Malnourishment has knock-on impacts for household incomes. Men and women, including those working, complained of feeling weak and dizzy and having health problems. This is troubling as most of the available casual labour is physically intensive. Malnourished workers are at greater risk of injury and have reduced working capacities, which in turn could lead to reduced income for the day and higher food insecurity for households.

Key learning point 2: The reporting of malnutrition is inconsistent across interview sites

The high dependency on daily labour acts as a barrier to seeking medical care, including malnutrition screenings for children. Any time taken off work in order to bring children to Action Against Hunger or local partner medical centres means no income and reduced or no meals for that day. Children are also impacted by conflict. Fear of non-state armed group attacks was informally mentioned by local humanitarian partners as a factor preventing them from going to camps to actively screen for malnutrition; instead, they were waiting for parents to bring their children to the medical centres. As a result of both conflict and inability to take time off work, the number of malnourished children under the age of 5 years is likely to be higher than that captured in health screenings.

Key learning point 3: Gender-specific vulnerabilities are driving differentiated risks

Women bear even higher malnourishment burdens than men. It was mentioned both by interviewees and in the focus groups that adults reduce their food portions or forgo eating to

ensure that children, the elderly and disabled are fed first. However, in the women's focus groups, it further emerged that women are the last to eat and will wait until the men have eaten. Pregnant and lactating women, and women of childbearing age, are at particular risk given labour demands (both paid and unpaid in the home), the demands of caring for dependants, and reduced food.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is high in the IDP camps and women have little recourse to justice. Women-headed households are often targets of theft and rape; the flimsy tents or shelters constructed from brush afford women little protection from attackers. Women who are victims of sexual assault are often shunned within the camps. Women also spoke of being beaten more often by husbands, who, being without jobs and falling into despair, are taking their frustration out on their wives. Women also reported that if their children witness GBV against their mothers, they are traumatised. Access to psychosocial support is available only in Baidoa, where Action Against Hunger has opened a room in the hospital for women.

Key learning point 4: People are thinking about what adaptive capacity measures they need to take to meet immediate needs and prepare for the future

People spoke of the urgent need for food assistance to reduce hunger for everyone in their households. This request was followed by one for cash assistance: they indicated that with cash they would be able to purchase more food, as well as cover other needs such as hygiene products for women, school fees and medical care.

About half of the IDPs spoken to indicated that they are not planning to return to their farms or go back to keeping livestock herds when drought conditions ease. They intend on permanently relocating to the town to which they have fled.

On the longer term, and as a more resilience-building measure, both IDPs and hosts at the three towns spoke of their desire for job skilling so that they can diversify their livelihoods beyond day labouring in construction or cleaning. Most indicated that there is a need to expand and diversify the local economy, so that more can participate in labour markets.

While many households wished for cash assistance over the short term, this was not something they wanted long-term. They wanted to be self-sufficient and able to provide decently for their families, including being able to send their children to school so that the children can have different, well-paying jobs when they grow up.

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