POLICY BRIEF

FIVE LESSONS FOR SUPPORTING RESILIENCE IN CONFLICTS AND RECURRING CRISES

Evidence from SPARC's retrospective studies of livelihood support

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Key messages

- **Support for resilience should focus on evolutionary change**, rather than on seeking transformational leaps. It is more important that changes are easy for people to adopt than that they lead to more ideal outcomes.

- **Approval of any intervention should depend on evidence that it is based on an understanding of the informal ways in which people currently live.** The impacts of the intervention on informal institutions – and vice versa – must be planned for. Projects should first look to improve what already exists.

- **No single package of ideas can match the varied needs and priorities of everyone, even in a single community.** It is better to provide a range of ideas that people can adopt and adapt.

- **The social processes by which change is likely to happen must be set out explicitly,** including, for example, how attempts at elite capture of the benefits of any intervention will be mitigated. Theories of change need to be taken seriously. They should not be reduced to diagrams. Setting out the assumptions necessary for interventions to work makes it possible for those assumptions to be monitored – and for management to be adaptive.

- **There are no excuses for continuing to rely on the same mistaken assumptions in project and intervention design,** simply because they are never checked. It should be standard practice to revisit a sample of interventions a few years after they have closed, to learn what really happened.

Members of a VLSA in Turkana, West County, Kenya, March 2023 © Dorice Agol

Introduction

SPARC researchers have spent the last two years investigating what is usually taken for granted: how far efforts to support resilience are actually helpful. Efforts to find out and document whether the assumptions underlying these efforts hold true are worryingly rare.

SPARC's series of case studies going back several years after the end of projects designed to support resilience in the arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs) in Africa was initiated when ODI researchers discovered how rarely this happened (Levine et al., 2024). Because resilience is revealed only over time and in response to challenges, this effectively means that very little is known about how far efforts to support people's resilience are actually helping. Reports of success made at the time inevitably rely on untested assumptions. They also have to assume that what was seen during implementation of any intervention will continue exactly as had been intended. This is not a strong foundation for future planning.

Following a study of the lasting impacts of public works in Kenya and Ethiopia (Levine et al., 2024), SPARC has investigated the development of new permanent water sources, climate-smart agriculture and market-based approaches to development in Ethiopia, Chad and Kenya. The recently published series of studies all found some strikingly similar themes in otherwise diverse experiences, suggesting that their implications are of wide relevance (Balfour et al., 2025; Agol, 2025; Benoudji et al., 2025; and Bedelian and Levine, 2025).

SPARC believes that the lessons from the series of studies deserve the urgent attention of: (1) those involved in funding decisions and in the design of development interventions; and (2) implementers and (3) those working in monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning.

The five studies are briefly described here. Then, some common learning is summarised, together with recommendations for improving the effectiveness of efforts to support people's resilience.

Findings from the five studies

#1 PUBLIC WORKS, ETHIOPIA AND KENYA

Public works programmes (PWPs) are much more expensive than cash transfers. This cost, and the demand for people to work, were justified by the assumed benefits of the assets built as public works. This was entirely assumed. The assets had never been assessed.

The assets built had no significant impact on livelihoods. The reason was clear: the projects prioritised people working to be paid a wage. What they were building was not prioritised at any stage in the project cycle.

It is widely true that assets are not taken seriously enough at any stage in PWPs and no attempts are made to check the assumptions used to justify them.

In place of learning, we often see self-promotion – the generation of implausible or atypical 'success stories'.

Levine et al., 2024

#2 CLIMATE-SMART AGRICULTURE, CHAD

Some of the wide variety of innovations introduced were successful, varying from village to village. Others did not work out.

'Simple' changes were more widely adopted and had significant impact. Some were institutional innovations (e.g. grain banks for village-level emergency funds); others were technical (e.g. fruit-tree propagation).

Change that was driven by donated equipment rarely worked well; nor did changes for purposes that had never existed (e.g. collective learning in centres).

People didn't just adopt – they adapted ideas to suit their own preferences.

Benoudji et al. (2025)

#3 MARKET-BASED DEVELOPMENT, ETHIOPIA

This was a complex, layered programme aiming to transform pastoralist production through market transformation, creating incentives to invest in producing higher-quality animals.

Assumptions in the theory of change had not proved to be true, though this had not been recognised.

Support to larger traders had not brought benefits for pastoralists or change in their production.

Market-orientated production did not match pastoralists' objectives, livelihood strategies or their current market engagement.

A credit association was working well but mainly supported peri-urban petty trade rather than primary production and pastoralism.

Introduction of mobile money was widely successful: it allowed people to do more easily what they were already doing or wanting to do.

Bedelian and Levine (2025)

#4 MULTI-SECTORAL PASTORALIST RESILIENCE PROGRAMME, KENYA

Water development was functioning well because of a strong governance regime, though with different opinions on whether increased settlement leads to resilience or vulnerability.

Loans were appreciated but the survival of village savings and loans associations (VSLAs) depended on further donor grants. They had not unlocked savings and transformed them into investment capital, as had been assumed.

The impact of a physical marketplace development remained a mystery. Traders claimed it was a success though there were no obvious changes, and most herders continued to trade outside the market using pre-existing connections.

Agol (2025)

#5 NEW PERMANENT WATER SOURCES, KENYA AND ETHIOPIA

Permanent water has brought a mixture of benefits and problems – its benefits also catalyse settlements, disturb migration patterns, can create conflicts and are subject to elite capture.

Most water sources were too salty to use or not functioning. Siting was driven by politics or technology, with little understanding of local dynamics.

Traditional governance of water is linked to grazing resources; formal water governance is not. Regular emergency repairs of unmaintained pumps in droughts have incentivised corruption.

Balfour et al. (2025)

Focus on evolutionary change, not transformational leaps

The language of transformation is entrenched in the discourse of resilience-building. The ambition of transforming people's lives is laudable but the case studies all suggested that such ambition could be counterproductive.

Smaller steps had far more likelihood than larger leaps of being sustainable. Taking small steps does not mean working on a small scale. The size of the step describes the degree to which people (and institutions) are required to change how they think, work and interact with each other. People could more easily adopt changes when they fitted more closely into how they were currently living. For example, it was easier for people to adopt new practices where they demanded change in how they farmed or in how they worked together – but not in both at the same time.

A mobile money-transfer service was a new institution for pastoralists in Ethiopia but it did not require anyone to change how they wanted to use money. Achieving their existing objectives simply became easier. Once the service was established, people found their access to markets and financial services was hugely improved. In Chad, communal grain banks were introduced, which dovetailed with existing community practices of mutual assistance. Elders had always been trusted to organise village contributions for those in need, and people were happy to contribute a share of their harvests to stores that they managed. Having material assistance already in place meant that in the event of a family emergency, for example, villagers were not limited in the assistance they could offer by what they happened to have at hand at that time.

There was no lasting benefit when agencies tried to achieve transformational economic progress by expecting people to make several simultaneous changes that made the practices feel strange. For example, village-level agricultural training centres in Chad collapsed because they required managing expensive resources for a completely new purpose: organised collective learning. Building a new livestock marketing hub in Kenya did not transform pastoralists' access to livestock services because both they and traders did not abandon their preference for informal relationships for selling animals.

By contrast, successes came when changes were built on people's existing practices. As each change took root, more possibilities opened up for future change. The desire for transformational leaps responded to the short-term demands of aid agencies to be able to report on dramatic successes. It did not match how people live. It was profoundly unhelpful.

IMPROVING THE SITUATION

Making changes easier is more important than making them technically or economically superior. Interventions should be deliberately designed so that changes are easily acceptable and easy to adopt. Project design needs to consider how difficult it will be for (different) people to make each proposed change. This is not a technical assessment: it must look at the psychological, social or political barriers to change.

Intervention design should maximise the extent to which changes fit with people's existing objectives, their culture and value systems, their economic realities, local institutional norms, and so on. It is more important to design changes that are easy to adopt than changes that would lead to more ideal outcomes.

Some steps inevitably require greater risk, courage or trust. If these barriers are understood, ways can be identified of reducing the risks involved. This may involve helping people to find mutual support to give them courage or ways of building trust.

Monitoring should be tasked with providing information on the constraints that different population groups face in making the different changes expected of them. Adaptive management can then ensure that these constraints are addressed.

Embrace informality

Governments and aid agencies alike almost always relied on formal institutions to introduce change. Market development was sought through formal marketplaces; village efforts were channelled through the creation of new committees and formal groups. This applied whether the aim was that women grew vegetables together, providing access to credit, that new water sources were well managed or villagers learned new agricultural techniques. Such institutions rarely matched how most people lived their lives.

It can be argued that some functions require formality, for example to provide legal accountability for funds received. But, although formality was always demanded for this purpose, we found no cases where accountability had then been enforced, such as through legal action against members of formal committees who had misused funds or other resources. Most functions have no need for formality. People have farmed together and learned from each other for thousands of years without feeling a need to formalise arrangements. Everywhere, people grow up in their societies learning the norms about where mutual obligations lie and how accountability or sanction can be applied. Formal institutions often lie outside these norms, and they therefore tended to break down more easily and be more prone to elite capture or corruption. Women in Chad did not need to be in a formal group to grow vegetables. When group leaders of women's horticulture groups in Chad stole the equipment, the groups collapsed. Some women, though, continued to practice what they had learned. Requiring them to work collectively had never been necessary.

Where it was necessary to establish a formal system, it was still essential to understand what informal norms were already in place. For example, in Kenya, formal water committees were established to collect user fees and manage new water points. These were set up without considering what informal institutions and norms were already working to manage natural resources. The indigenous way was to manage water and grazing together. The new formal system covered only water and it weakened rangeland management. The committee members did not feel bound by the same cultural norms of responsibility as did the traditional managers of natural resources, and so corruption and mismanagement were rife.

IMPROVING THE SITUATION

It is not difficult to learn about informal institutions and norms. It requires only willingness to learn (curiosity) and time spent asking people in open-ended and non-judgemental ways about how they live their lives – how they manage rangelands, where they get new farming ideas or how they sell their animals.

No intervention should ever be approved until it shows that it has understood well what already exists and what the impact will be of that on the intervention. Projects should first look to improve what already exists, including by working with the (informal) ways that people usually work. Not everything that projects can offer will be better than what is already there.

Failing to think about the informal ways in which people are already working is a pervasive problem. This suggests that it has common underlying causes. Governments and other agencies need to reflect on why they find it so difficult to engage with people where they are. Among the answers may be the fact that agencies are always looking for 'solutions' that have worked elsewhere.

Provide options, not recipes

Although our case studies identified common weaknesses in all the projects studied, some of the investments were bringing about positive change. These successes were often when people had taken introduced ideas and resources and used them in their own, different ways, or when they had been able to keep the ideas that suited them and abandon the rest. It seems obvious that this would be the case, but the implications are far-reaching.

No single package of ideas or resources can match the varied needs and priorities of everyone, even within a single community. Interventions did best when they offered a number of ideas that people could take up independently and in different ways. When people were given a single option, or had to accept several changes as a single package, innovations were less likely to be taken up.

Structural rigidity in government planning and in the aid sector reinforces the tendency to transplant ready-made solutions into different societies. Because accountability is ('upwardly') focused on outputs or 'deliverables', it is difficult to change plans or contracted outputs (thus preventing adaptive management). Standardisation is imposed about how changes are introduced. This is instead of allowing for local discretion and working in ways that maximise impact – which would be more likely from 'downward accountability'.

People began to select and adapt the innovations as they wished only after projects had closed. Had that process been encouraged and supported during the projects, the interventions might have been much more successful. Also, future interventions would surely have been better designed had they built on the understanding of which ideas people took up and how – and why – they adapted them.

IMPROVING THE SITUATION

This requires a mindset that respects where people are and what they currently do, and that sees the imperative as being to support people's agency – to give people choices – rather than to ensure that they conduct their economic activities correctly. Offering choices would follow naturally if interventions follow the first two lessons: (1) seeking incremental changes that match people's lives; and (2) looking always to understand and integrate with the informal ways in which people manage their affairs.

This mindset may sometimes require a cultural change in governments or other agencies. Success should not be measured simply by how many people follow the recommendations as instructed. Rather it should be interpreted by the wider impacts the options offered have on people's lives and by how far these have then spread. When ideas are adapted rather than simply followed, it should be recognised that this is a sign that success is likely to be more sustainable because change has been integrated into people's lives.

Sometimes, a bureaucratic change will be needed. Proposals or staff management frameworks that measure success by how many people follow certain practices are not compatible with an approach that encourages choice and independent decision-making.

Monitoring should be encouraged to report on such adaptations and selectivity of uptake. This allows interventions to be managed adaptively and helps generate learning for everyone else.

Take seriously the need to understand how change will happen

The language of 'theories of change' is mainly used in aid circles but governments, service providers, businesses – and families – all need to understand how their plans are supposed to achieve change. The case studies revealed how rarely this was adequately done.

Project designs often ignored evidence that undermined their theories of change. Existing agricultural research from the area showed soil conservation measures in case study #1 were unlikely to lead to higher crop yields. Knowledge about the pastoral economy made it clear that year-round demand from new export markets was unlikely to stimulate widespread intensive production in high value animals (as assumed in case study #3): herders had access to 'informal' export markets (ignored because they were not legal), and the pastoral production system is primarily geared to managing risk, not to increasing risky investments. It is difficult to understand how investments can so regularly be funded without a plausible theory of change, but Levine and Pain (2024) discuss structural causes in the aid system.

Complicated 'layered' projects resulted from designing sets of activities to address each of a series of identified problems. There was a theoretical logic to each project component, but insufficient thought had been given to what real people would have to do to make all the changes, let alone to the likelihood of so many complicated behaviour changes all occurring together. The chain included assumptions about how prices were transmitted down from export markets to producers, pastoralists' willingness to borrow to invest in herds, and savings groups making investment capital available in remote areas.

The behaviour of people and institutions is rarely totally unpredictable, making it less excusable for so many interventions to rely on models with implausible assumptions about how people, societies and economies would behave. All interventions, whether policy changes or investment programmes, require some reliance on assumption. Close examination is therefore needed of the plausibility of expected change processes, i.e. the behaviour changes expected from people and institutions. For example, if a grant is given to a VSLA, is it likely that members can ensure that money will be made available fairly to all, or will more powerful people capture the benefits for themselves? There is no universal answer to this question. Communal governance was very different in Chad and in Kenya, but in neither country were the outcomes surprising. Existing evidence and knowledge provided a good guide.

Nothing ever works out totally as planned. Monitoring should be designed for testing assumptions and theories so that interventions can be adapted as some assumptions are shown not to work. None of the studied interventions, even where they were successful, had done this. Projects were assumed to be working. Monitoring indicators were not designed to test underlying assumptions: indicators had relied on those very assumptions. So, functioning water points were taken to indicate more resilient communities, because new water sources were assumed to make people more resilient, even where they led only to resource capture or water that was too salty to use.

IMPROVING THE SITUATION

All interventions, including both new policies and projects, need to set out the social processes by which change is likely to happen and the assumptions that have to hold true for the intervention to work as planned. Instead of seeking to minimise assumptions listed, as if they were an admission of project weakness, it is a strength to identify as many as possible. This makes effective monitoring and adaptive management possible. Both those proposing any actions and those financing them have a responsibility to take social processes and assumptions seriously.

Staff involved in monitoring should be made responsible for testing the assumptions on which interventions are based. Quantitative analysis inevitably relies on some assumptions, so it is never enough. Monitoring must understand and not merely count. However, such monitoring will be helpful only where its function is to generate learning to serve management, rather than being managed separately, serving donors for reasons of accountability.

Adaptive management requires periodic reporting on how well theories of change are standing up to reality. Every progress report should detail the adjustments required in thinking and planning. (It is almost inconceivable that none will be required.) Those reporting and those receiving the reports should both be responsible for ensuring this. This requires collaboration between all parties, such as between central and local government or between donor and implementing agency/department.

Processes for allowing – or better, ensuring – adaptive management need to be built into the design of the intervention.

Profit from experience: go back to learn

The agencies involved in the case studies had not known the outcomes after they had left, because they were not given external resources to revisit the interventions to find out. (In case study #5, where the agency was still in the area, its information gathering was based on all the project assumptions, as above.) All the projects had been assumed to be successful. In fact, in no case had everything turned out as planned or as assumed, even where the interventions were successful. Every study could have provided useful, practical lessons for the future but these opportunities to learn from experience were being wasted.

Learning was not being prevented primarily by technical or methodological challenges in attributing the causes of change. The unpleasant truth is that learning is held back by bureaucracy and by the lack of political will.

The bureaucratic barrier is probably the easiest to rectify. Ways have to be found to fund retrospective learning because, currently, when budgets are closed at the end of implementation, no resources are available for retrospective evaluation or continued learning. This would not be hard to change, if there was a genuine appetite for such learning.

The lack of political will is the main barrier, generated by the incentive structure surrounding funding. There are stronger incentives to claim success than there are to learn about a need to change approach. Reports of success serve the interests of both donors and implementers.[1] It is easier to keep repeating the same interventions (and claiming successes) than to rethink new approaches each time. The only people who are not served by this game are those who are supposed to be made more resilient by the interventions. 'Upward' accountability is designed to ensure that money is spent 'properly', but somehow this does not include the need to use resources in ways that contribute to the lives of people without the power to hold anyone to account when projects are based on false assumptions.

Needlessly relying on unexamined, misguided assumptions is costing governments and donors billions of dollars. More importantly, it is at the expense of people who need and deserve better.

IMPROVING THE SITUATION

There are no excuses for continuing to rely on the same mistaken assumptions because they are never checked. This failing is easily remedied.

It should be standard practice to conduct retrospective evaluations and impact assessments, revisiting a sample of interventions a few years after they have closed. This small investment in learning could offer enormous value for money by improving how money is spent in the future. Such studies could easily be complemented with informal visits from agencies who remain in the area. This recommendation applies equally to government- and aid-funded programmes. This, though, assumes a willingness to learn and an ability to adapt.

A wide range of methodologies and approaches exists for drawing lessons, provided that the evaluators or researchers accept that their responsibility is to test assumptions, and not to design studies by using only data whose relevance relies on those assumptions being true. (This is a trap that ensnares both quantitative and qualitative studies.)

Agencies need to share their learning openly, including about what is not working. They also need to work more collaboratively to help each other ensure that everyone's lessons are widely embedded in practice.

Putting this right should not be difficult but it relies on government departments, implementing agencies and donors being open to challenges to their favoured programmatic models. Such open-mindedness does not exist everywhere, as this study, too, experienced. A refusal to listen to evidence must be called out repeatedly and strongly until the situation changes.

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1 Many working in the aid sector know that the more powerful the agencies involved, the more likely that they will push back against any question that their interventions are not working as planned. This is seen as criticism and thus a threat, not as an opportunity to learn. This was also experienced during the series of case studies being discussed here.

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Acknowledgements

About SPARC

Climate change, armed conflict, environmental fragility and weak governance, and the impact these have on natural resource-based livelihoods, are among the key drivers of both crisis and poverty for communities in some of the world's most vulnerable and conflict-affected countries.

SPARC aims to generate evidence and address knowledge gaps to build the resilience of millions of pastoralists, agro-pastoralists and farmers in these communities in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.

We strive to create impact by using research and evidence to develop knowledge that improves how the FCDO, donors, non-governmental organisations, local and national governments, and civil society can empower these communities in the context of climate change.

Funded by

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