SPARC
Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises

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POLICY BRIEF

HOW TO MANAGE CRISES DIFFERENTLY IN ASALs WITHOUT TALKING ABOUT A NEXUS

What can we learn from the water sector?

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Key messages

- **Predictable crises must be factored into longer-term planning.** Actors focusing on drought response and those focused on natural resource development have to agree in advance: who will finance what, in which eventualities. All actors have to respect the agreed strategy, so they should only agree to something they can live with.
- **If you're putting in, or repairing, water supplies, think about how the supply will be maintained** and about a system for financing a surge capacity during droughts. If there isn't a plan for that, then stop.
- **Don't assume that someone else will be responsible for maintaining** the water supply or that this capacity already exists. Assume that it doesn't.
- **Demand accountability** from those who are responsible for maintaining the water sources. You can't devolve authority to collect fees without imposing accountability.
- **Water is just one illustration of how long-term and short-term thinking need to be integrated.** 'Nexus' doesn't mean coordinating how everyone does their own thing, nor that everyone covers both short- and long-term priorities. It means having a shared strategy for reliable services and resources that incorporates potential crises; it means respecting that strategy if and when crisis strikes.

Collecting saline water at Bubisa, Marsabit County, Kenya, April 2024. © Jackson Wachira,

A fresh look at the old problem of the development–emergency divide

We have known for decades that the international aid model for responding to emergencies does not work well where crises are frequent. Long-term development planning struggles to deal with crises, often leaving the responsibility to separate emergency interventions – but these short-term measures often undermine longer-term strategies. Various theoretical approaches have been proposed for addressing this fragmented situation, but with little success. SPARC's recent research on the provision of water in the arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs) of eastern Africa (Balfour et al., 2025) offers a different way of addressing the issue. By identifying the specific problems caused by the lack of integration between emergency water interventions and water development, sensible solutions can be found without getting bogged down in jargon around the development–water–peace 'nexus' or in resilience frameworks. This same approach offers more practical ways forward than the struggles that arise when the starting point is the architecture of emergency assistance rather than a shared responsibility for providing a reliable water supply.

What 'silos' mean for strategy in the water sector

The long-term strategy on water development has a logic. Local government often has the responsibility for providing and maintaining water points, but they do not have enough resources. The donors who fund new water sources do not want to take on the responsibility for their maintenance and repair, because they believe this is not a sustainable solution. Instead, maintenance is often devolved to 'communities', who pay user fees to water committees who (in theory) use the funds to maintain and repair pumps.

The emergency strategy also makes sense. When deeper boreholes are not functioning, communities may face a potential emergency because other water sources can quickly dry up during the droughts which are common across this region. Humanitarian donors want to prevent extreme suffering and populations being forced to move to where water is available. They also want to avoid bringing in water in tankers, which is expensive and only brings a short-term benefit. They find that fixing broken pumps is by far the cheapest response and the one that minimises suffering.

What's the problem of water points in ASALs?

Both development and humanitarian systems work to their own underlying and common-sense logic, but what tends to happen when the two systems operate in the same place independently?

The development strategy is supposed to contribute to resilience to drought, but this requires that resilience is thought about in the design phase. Boreholes need to be sited where the surrounding grazing land can withstand extended droughts, and water storage capacity needs to be designed with drought periods in mind. As currently practised, the logic of water development and that of emergency response do not meet.

But planning for shocks is not only about the technical side. As a result, a set of incentives has been created that actually discourages water committees from doing their best to keep water supplies flowing. They know from long experience that if a pump breaks down, they can wait until a drought strikes, when humanitarian agencies are likely to step in to make repairs. The regularity with which this has happened has been recorded by the multiple agency signboards surrounding many boreholes.

The result is predictable: many local committees ignore their responsibilities. If they keep the user fees for themselves (or if the system was set up with insufficient user fees) the communities suffer without a functioning water source for several months, but sooner or later emergency repairs will be made, and the pressure will be taken off the committee. Local authorities and water managers, struggling with insufficient resources for their devolved responsibilities, can gratefully leave the repairs to the same donors who would regard it as 'unsustainable' to finance local authorities to fulfil their responsibilities.

Meanwhile, there are still demands for the most expensive measure of all: water trucking in droughts. Although absurd, this too is encouraged by the incentive system. Communities get their water, water committees can keep the user fees, powerful private interests have lucrative contracts for transporting water and the donors have an easy deliverable with a clear figure to put next to the box for 'number of beneficiaries' or 'total lives saved'.

Does everyone really win, though? Communities may regularly go several months without a functioning borehole, until the donor steps in. External resources also have an opportunity cost, because donor funds could have been used to improve people's lives instead of subsidising standing still. But most importantly, the long-term corrosive power of corruption is being ignored. This creates relationships of mistrust and resentment within communities and erodes the social contract between communities and local government. This can have a huge cost, particularly in areas where conflict is an ever-present threat. Everyone recognises how important are strong and trusted local institutions for resilience.

Conclusions

What needs to change in the water sector?
The deep and pervasive problems are caused by the existence of two different sets of value criteria for allocating money in the same place. The long-term vision insists on sustainable (self-funding) institutions, whereas emergency response prioritises the immediate relief of extreme suffering, when the argument that 'it's not sustainable for external actors to fund maintenance' goes out the window.

The solution is obvious: a single set of value criteria that can work in both the short and the longer term must be agreed in advance.

In ASAL, droughts are a predictable and inevitable part of the longer term. However sensible a long-term strategy may appear, if it does not consider and answer the question 'what should happen in a drought?', then it's neither logical nor common-sense. Plans for ensuring the functioning of boreholes in droughts can and should be drawn up well in advance – but they can only be called 'plans' if local and national governments, development partners and humanitarian donors all agree to follow them, if local service providers are included and if there is a realistic resource plan. This may involve changing the incentives for maintaining separate emergency response plans, specifically the boom in business for water truck owners and NGOs.

This does not imply that the same procedures must be continued regardless of circumstances. On the contrary, changing circumstances must be planned for. The system for maintaining water points must consider financial, technical and institutional arrangements, recognising that additional support may be needed in droughts, when demand on boreholes may be higher just when the ability to pay user fees can disappear and when institutional capacity may be lower. Because it is predictable that priorities will also change in droughts – from strengthening water systems to a narrower focus on supplying water, today and here – this, too, must be considered in planning. The change in priorities is not wrong: the mistake is not planning in advance to provide the surge capacity needed.

The solution does not lie with changing one or other strategy; both must change to become part of the solution. Long-term plans are not paying enough attention to short-term needs, and short-term plans are not considering the long term. All stakeholders need to come together to agree on how to put this right.

Nexus beyond water?
Huge investments have been made in discussions and talking about frameworks for breaking out of siloed working (or fixing what has been called 'the humanitarian–development divide'). Despite many well-intentioned efforts, the problem has continued. Our analysis of the water sector in ASALs illustrates a different way to address the challenge. Rather than starting from a discussion about funding architectures or creating coordination committees, we took the ground-level situation as our starting point. By identifying the specific problems that people faced – and felt – in their communities as a result of the disconnect between two systems, and by uncovering the causal processes that create those problems, we were able to identify what needed to change.

This could all be done in terms that are familiar to the water sector. Local authorities, development partners and humanitarian actors don't need to agree in the abstract about new ways of working; they just need to sit down and work out a long-term strategy for water supply that is relevant to drought-prone areas.

This approach can work in other sectors, too. Look for the concrete problems in different places that people face because of incompatible approaches by different actors, and work together to avoid them. Time spent on planning for reliable services in an unreliable climate may be far more fruitful than more workshops discussing a humanitarian–development or triple nexus.

References

Balfour, N., Wachira, J., Taye, M. and Levine, S. (2025) *Do new permanent water supplies in the drylands help build resilience? The impacts of new boreholes on coping with drought in Ethiopia and Kenya*. Technical Report. London: SPARC Knowledge (www.sparc-knowledge.org/publications-resources/do-new-permanent-water-supplies-build-resilience) (https://doi.org/10.61755/UQJM3428).

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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.

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