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OBSTACLES TO AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ANTICIPATORY ACTION IN SOMALIA

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Key findings

- The national emergency reached at the end of 2021 developed slowly as several shocks combined – locusts, the economic impacts of COVID-19 and three successive poor rainy seasons. Other more local shocks, such as riverine floods, exacerbated difficulties further.
- Community networks are critical conduits of early warning information, particularly about floods and locusts. They also supported individual and joint actions to anticipate and respond to shocks.
- People with different livelihood strategies (including pastoralists, agro-pastoralists and farmers) took different measures in an attempt to counter these threats. The timing of such actions varied in different parts of the country. This makes it harder to design and deliver support for people's anticipatory actions.
- Aid actors engaging in anticipatory action should support communities' own anticipatory initiatives and be guided by them in their timing. They need to establish communication with communities about this before crises threaten, to ensure assistance can be relevant and timely.

Women and men using clay to build levees for flood protection along the Juba River, Somalia.
Photo credit: Jeremy Barnicle/Mercy Corps

About this paper

This brief is the second in a series highlighting learnings from a longitudinal study on anticipatory action in Somalia. This brief follows a previous evidence brief on the role of anticipatory action in Somalia, and a paper on the impact of Covid-19 on livelihoods, which were based on conversations with the same panel of respondents. While this document is based on an analysis of interviews conducted in 2021 only, a forthcoming report from SPARC will include an analysis of more recent conditions. For more information, or to explore opportunities for collaboration, contact Simon Levine, Lena Weingärtner or Alex Humphrey.

I. Introduction

Somalia is experiencing one of the worst drought emergencies in recent generations. The current crisis, which follows three consecutive failed rainy seasons in the Horn of Africa, has left at least 6 million people in Somalia facing high levels of acute food insecurity. Around 4.2 million people are experiencing water shortages, and 1.4 million children are acutely malnourished. Drought conditions are currently affecting 90% of Somalia's districts (UN OCHA, 2022). Rains are now delayed once again in much of the Horn of Africa,[1] with a fourth below-average season appearing increasingly inevitable (VOA, 2022). This would be without precedent since satellite record-keeping began in the 1980s (FEWS NET, 2021b). As of April 2022, long-range forecasts even point to a potential fifth below-average season later in 2022, though their accuracy at this time of year is limited, meaning outlooks should be treated with caution (Met Office, 2022).

The Government of Somalia declared a drought in April 2021 (UN OCHA, 2021) and a state of emergency in November 2021 (Hiiraan Online, 2021), with government and international aid agencies announcing a scale-up of their assistance. In April 2022, donors pledged close to $1.4 billion to support a humanitarian response across the Horn of Africa (UN OCHA, 2022).

The last serious droughts in Somalia in 2010/11 and 2016/17 gave impetus to attention within the humanitarian sector to the possibility of assisting people ahead of an expected crisis, rather than in response to already widespread severe needs. This approach has been pushed through initiatives labelled anticipatory action, early warning, early action, forecast-based action/finance or livelihood protection. Here, we use the term 'anticipatory action' to encompass activities taken in the expectation of a crisis, whether by aid actors, central or local government, service providers or affected populations themselves.

In Somalia, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) anticipatory action pilot funded through its Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) was triggered in June 2020 due to Covid-19, locusts and flooding (Gettliffe, 2021), and in April 2021 related to drought (CERF, 2021a). Other organisations – e.g. the Somali Red Crescent Society – are exploring the feasibility of implementing anticipatory action in the future. Longer-term programmes that engage with communities on a more continuous basis, such as Building Resilient Communities in Somalia (BRCiS) and the Somalia Resilience Programme (SomRep) have supported anticipatory action at the community level.

With such increasing interest in anticipatory action, it is becoming more important to understand what can be done, and when, to reduce or mitigate expected crisis impacts. The longitudinal learning undertaken by Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC)[2] aims to inform that analysis by understanding better what information people have about what may be coming their way, when they use various strategies to prepare for possible difficulties, and what constraints they face at different times.[3]

1.1 SPARC's investigation of anticipatory action

This SPARC brief shares learning from regular interviews with a panel of households, including pastoralists, farmers and small-business owners in Somaliland, Puntland and South-Central Somalia. Initially, interviewing and analysis focused on the impacts of Covid-19 on Somali pastoralists and farmers in early 2020. Following warnings in late 2020 of a likely drought, the focus of interviewing shifted to how people were seeing the threat of drought and what they were doing as a result, to better understand the implications for anticipatory action.

This paper is based on two rounds of interviews conducted in July to August 2021 with 26 men and 12 women, and in

[1] In late 2021, FEWS NET (2021a) was reporting below-average rains for the 2022 Gu season. Around the same time, however, other forecasts and seasonal climate outlooks were reporting that above-average rains for parts of Somalia would be likely. ICPAC, for instance, suggested that southern and northern Somalia would have a relatively high chance of receiving more rain than usual, though it also pointed to longer-term rainfall deficits, particularly in the south of Somalia, and highlighted that the season would not lead to immediate recovery from the existing drought impacts even if rainfall were above average (WMO, 2022). There was significant disagreement across meteorological agencies about the outlook until the start of the season in March 2022. Generally, the accuracy of global climate model forecasts is relatively low for the Gu season in Somalia (ibid.).

[2] Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) is a five-year research project funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).

[3] For a more detailed discussion on the importance of timeliness in anticipatory action, see also Levine et al. (2021) and Levine et al. (2019).

October to November 2021 with 29 men and 15 women. Respondents included pastoralists, agro-pastoralists, and farmers residing in rural and urban areas in **Burao** (Togdheer region, Somaliland), **Galkayo** (Mudug region, Puntland) and **Jowhar** (Middle Shebelle region, Hirshabelle State).

1.2 Livelihoods in the three study sites

Jowhar serves as the administrative and state capital for both the Middle Shebelle region and Hirshabelle state. It is 90 kilometres north of Mogadishu. The Shebelle River shapes the district's landscape, and much of the agriculture depends on irrigation from the river, as does water supply in towns. Year-round agriculture is practised in much of Jowhar, with common crops including maize, beans, rice, sesame, onions, sorghum and a variety of fruits. Cattle, goats, camels, sheep and poultry are all productive livestock in the area, and Jowhar is home to a livestock market. Some cattle are also exported from the region via Mogadishu's port. A smaller number are exported through Puntland's Bossaso port, although the route is less active, since Al-Shabab has been controlling sections of the supply route and is imposing levies on the animals being shipped.

Burao is the capital of the Toghdeer region, one of Somaliland's most productive rain-fed agro-pastoralist regions. Burao district has a population of over 516,797 people. It is home to Somaliland's largest livestock market, and the livestock sector is the region's principal source of economic activity. Camels, sheep and goats are reared for subsistence and as a source of income. Burao is located within the Hawd Pastoral ('forest land') livelihood zone, Somalia's largest livelihood zone. Burao is a trade route that is linked to the Berbera corridor, and it operates as a market for animals from surrounding areas. It also serves as a hub and a trade route for livestock originating in the Somali region of Ethiopia.

Galkayo is the capital of the Mudug region and is divided into two federal Member States, with Puntland administering the northern section and Galmudug administering the south. Galkayo serves as a crucial commercial and logistical hub due to its strategic location in the heart of three of Somalia's most important seaport cities: Bossaso, Berbera and Mogadishu. Galkayo North has a population of approximately 450,000 people, the majority of whom subsist off pastoralism, with sheep, goats and camels being the prevalent animals. The town is located on the main road that connects northern and southern Somalia, and acts as a transit point for animal exports, especially sheep and goats, via the Bossaso and Berbera ports. The principal commercial routes to the Galkayo livestock markets are through Mudug, Hiran and the Somali region of Ethiopia. Many pastoralists in Galkayo reside in towns and cities, where their children can attend school and they can earn additional income by operating a shop or restaurant in addition to caring for their livestock in rural areas. Locally, these types of pastoralists are referred as *laba gardaaq*.

2. Livelihood difficulties between June and November 2021

Compared to the situation in February 2021, respondents more often experienced major livelihood disruptions as a result of delayed rains (Burao and Galkayo) and floods (Jowhar) over the 2021 Gu (March to May) and Deyr (October to December) rainy seasons in 2021.

2.1 The Covid-19 pandemic

Covid-19 remained a stress on livelihoods throughout the year, as the second cancellation in a row of the Hajj[4] (in June 2021) reduced livestock export market opportunities, with a particular impact on pastoralists and their local economies. In Burao, some respondents reported livestock prices for sheep and goats, which usually reach $70–90 during the Hajj season, to be as low as $50–60 in the Hajj period in 2021, representing a 30% loss in income.[5] There were wider knock-on effects in the local economy – for example, on businesses selling fodder to export traders in Berbera port, or *khat* businesses whose customers were unable to pay their previous debts.

The construction sector in towns relies heavily on the diaspora commissioning building work, so the reduction in remittances as a result of Covid-19 meant far fewer jobs in construction. In Burao, this was exacerbated by a shortage of construction materials, blamed on movement restrictions because of Covid-19 and their impact on trade.

2.2 Locusts

Locusts continued to attack crops and grazing land in parts of Burao and Galkayo throughout June, July and August. Efforts by the Ministry of Agriculture to spray affected areas were not perceived as effective in Burao. People resorted to beating on empty tins or drums and burning dry vegetation for smoke to scare away the locusts. By October, locusts were less prevalent in the previously affected areas, but people had already observed some early signs of their return in some villages.

2.3 Weather

In Jowhar, the Gu 2021 rains were unfavourable to farming activities. At the same time, many areas along the Shebelle River were hit by floods from heavy rains upstream in

4 For a rapid assessment of the impact of the restricted Hajj 2020 on livestock exports from Somalia, see SPARC (2020).
5 It should be noted, however, that livestock price monitors (including FEWS NET and FSNAU) saw goat prices closer to the five-year average for the same period in Burao (FEWS NET, 2021c).

Ethiopia, inundating fields and destroying crops. Floods and drought combined to leave many with very poor harvests. Properties, roads and other infrastructure were also damaged. Such flooding has been regular in recent years, destroying riverbanks and displacing people from some villages.

In August, parts of Jowhar were flooded again,[6] with water levels subsiding slowly. Some roads remained inaccessible, leaving people to rely on boats to move people and goods for months. Flooding increased the cost of living, including through rising food prices. In early July, one respondent described a 100% rise in the prices of rice and cooking oil, and a 50% increase in the price of sugar – a significant component of the diet in Somalia. Several respondents mentioned mosquito infestations and resulting malaria outbreaks due to the continued flooding.

By October 2021, as farmers struggled to recover from the previous floods, parts of the farmland close to the river were submerged again by new waves of flooding. In parallel, some people started looking ahead to the upcoming Deyr season, in expectation of further flooding in the coming months.

In Burao and Galkayo, the 2021 Gu rains started late – in Burao, not until May. The rains were lower than usual and lasted for a much shorter period of time, in some places only for two weeks instead of the usual three months.

Crop and fodder growth were poor, and the livelihood relief brought by the rains was short-lived, because pasture dried up before the animals' body condition could substantively improve. Some people were unable to recover their investments made at the start of the season (e.g. in tractor hire), and had to use up any financial reserves or rely on credit for food. The poor season had wider effects on local markets, related to a reduction in seasonal labour and in the income of farmers and pastoralists, with less money in circulation to spend in local businesses.

> "I am currently only farming one of my two fields. The other didn't get enough water. I usually take on five or six people to work, but I only have one because the rain was so poor."
> (Male agro-pastoralist in Galkayo, June 2021)

In parts of Burao and Galkayo, people were highly concerned about the shortage of water, as the Gu rains were insufficient to fill up the reservoirs in some villages, and groundwater levels were getting lower.

> "Our main challenge now is lack of water. I have tried to dig 14 shallow wells in areas where we used to get water … I have dug 6 metres deep, but there are still no signs of water. People with knowledge of hydrology are saying the water levels have gone to 70–80 metres deep. We just don't have the capacity to drill water that deep."
> (Male agro-pastoralist in Galkayo, June 2021)

At the end of October to mid-November, Deyr rains, which would usually be expected in early September, had not yet begun in parts of Burao and Galkayo. As a result, many people – particularly in Burao – saw the drought situation getting worse over time. Grazing areas were further depleted, and farm production affected, which led to pastoralists moving longer distances in search of fodder. Water storage was also further depleted compared to a couple of months earlier. In Jowhar, Shebelle River levels were well below the long-term mean by late 2021 (FAO SWALIM, 2022).

3. Variations in responses to livelihood threats by time and location

The actions that respondents described taking to address livelihood threats during our second and third rounds of interviewing varied dramatically between livelihood types, as well as both geographically between research sites and temporally, based on when disruptions were anticipated to fall on the typical livelihood calendar.

During both rounds of interviewing in Jowhar, interviewees engaged in farming on the Shebelle River flood plain were prioritising actions to address the danger of anticipated flooding – for instance, by repairing and de-silting canals or reinforcing dams. These actions take time to organise and implement and are, therefore, generally prioritised in the early part of the rainy seasons, and particularly when seasonal rains are predicted to be heavier than usual. These predictions were often based on observation and inference based on comparisons to prevailing weather patterns.

[6] According to Somalia Water and Land Information Management (SWALIM) reports, observed water levels of the Shebelle River were rising in early August due to moderate rains in the Ethiopian highlands. This contributed to riverine flooding in Middle Shebelle. In addition, two river breakages south of Jowhar led to major flooding in the area (FAO SWALIM, 2021).

For example, one male pastoralist in Galkayo explained:

> "We assess the weather and compare the current situation to the situation of the past 10 years or so. We base our livelihood decisions on weather changes and comparisons to the situations in past years."

To a lesser, but still important extent, interviewees also described relying on formal forecasts conveyed over radio and online media.

When riverine floods are anticipated later in the growing season – usually based on warnings conveyed by phone from friends and relatives living upstream – a different set of actions was generally prioritised. These actions tend to be more rapid and urgent in nature. For example, some interviewees described harvesting crops before they had reached maturity, to avoid a total loss, or purchasing and stockpiling food and other essentials in anticipation of floods cutting off access to nearby markets.

> "We get information about flooding from villages far away, close to the Shebelle River. We have relatives there that we are in touch with. When there are signs of river overflow on the northern side … they immediately [call us to] alert us. We then mobilise the local population using horns and tell them we need to reinforce the riverbanks with sandbags."
> (Male farmer in Jowhar, June 2021)

In Burao and Galkayo, communities were far more concerned with drought-related hazards than flooding. The actions taken by interviewees tended to entail anticipatory livestock management strategies. Early in the dry season, interviewees were more likely to invest time and resources in time- and labour-intensive actions, such as borehole maintenance or the construction of water catchment and storage systems designed to capture any occasional rainfall.

Other interviewees described increasing grazing time to build up animal body conditions and increase animals' resilience to anticipated drought conditions.

Another interviewee described proactively selling livestock to raise the funds to migrate with his herd and family to less drought-prone areas:

> "I was expecting drought, so I sold 9 goats for $65–70 each and got a total of $610. I saved all the money for use during the drought. I used the money to hire the truck that I used to move my animals and family to my current location."
> (Male pastoralist in Galkayo, October 2021)

However, as the drought cycle progressed in Burao and Galkayo and interviewees experienced and anticipated ever worsening conditions, actions became increasingly urgent. For example, interviewees described intensifying efforts to stockpile fodder (which in many cases they were required to purchase), limiting fodder consumption to lactating livestock, and trucking and storing water in underground reservoirs (Berkads).

Once grazing lands started to run low on fodder in the early Deyr season, pastoralists in Burao and Galkayo decided to move to other areas in search of pasture and water. In some cases, this meant trucking animals to distant locations, especially to other parts of Somalia and to Ethiopia. The timing of when people decided to move differed, however, in some cases within the same – or nearby – locations. This seemed to depend on a combination of grazing land conditions, the state of animals (e.g. whether they were still strong enough or already too weak to move), and the information and money pastoralists had at their disposal.

4. Obstacles to anticipatory action

In all three sites, interviewees described a variety of obstacles that prevented them from taking action at the ideal time. In many cases, these barriers related to a lack of resources. For example, numerous interviewees in Jowhar described financial constraints to hiring heavy construction equipment to reinforce riverbanks and construct floodwater canals ahead of river levels rising. Similarly, in Burao, interviewees were unable to afford construction materials to build silos for fodder storage ahead of droughts.

In other cases, interviewees identified gaps in knowledge and skills as the most important barriers to taking

anticipatory action. For example, in Galkayo and Burao, some interviewees recognised the increased importance of vaccinating livestock ahead of forecast droughts, but as one male pastoralist in Galkayo explained,

> "the shops that sell the veterinary drugs do not have much information about the quality of the drugs or how to use them, unfortunately."

Similarly, interviewees in Jowhar recalled times in the past when they had wished to plant drought-tolerant crops ahead of forecast poor rains, but had lacked sufficient knowledge to do so:

> "If only we get the skills and support on how best to plant [drought-tolerant crops], we would have made good money out of it. We just need more understanding of the best practices like the kind of seed to use, when to water, spacing and weeding among others." (Male agro-pastoralist in Jowhar, April 2021)

Structural and policy-related barriers were a third category of obstacles to action that interviewees described. These were particularly common among pastoralists in Burao and Galkayo, who often considered rangeland management policies and norms to be preventing them from proactively growing and stockpiling sufficient amounts of fodder.

One constraint to their own anticipatory actions which interviewees did not explicitly identify is a seeming lack of awareness that rains were predicted to fail. Interviewees reported listening regularly to the radio, and they have good networks of information, and yet in each interview round they were expecting the rains to be good, even when interviews were taking place at a time when rains ought already to have started. Forecasts of likely poor rains were available globally. It is not clear, though, what actions would have been taken had they had more urgency about an impending drought. This will be a focus of interviewing in 2022.

5. Community networks and collective action

Formal and informal community networks play a major role in enabling respondents to act in anticipation of shocks. Community networks were often described as a way to mobilise resources to prepare for and respond to shocks – for example, people borrowing money from local businesses, making food purchases from shops on credit or pooling funds to hire machinery.

In Burao and Galkayo, several respondents described informal support systems which helped people in need – for instance, to start a livelihood, or when they face difficulties such as health issues in the family, or losing livestock to disease or drought. However, respondents also pointed to the limitations of such groups when difficulties affect entire communities:

> "The women's association has formed saving groups ... but because the economy is so generally poor, they do not have much savings." (Female agro-pastoralist in Burao, June 2021)

People coming together to manage livelihood threats collectively was a particularly prominent strategy in the case of anticipated flooding. For example, male community members in Jowhar joined forces to share in the labour of de-silting and repairing canals in the hope of mitigating expected flooding. In some cases, women led efforts to pool funds from within the community which are used to hire bulldozers and other heavy equipment to reinforce riverbanks.

> "There are events that affect the whole community, such as when the water level in the river increases. As a result, the community works together to prevent the river from breaking its banks by blocking areas we think can release water to the farms with sandbags… Since the flood is a common community problem, the entire community comes together to prevent it ..." (Female farmer in Jowhar, October 2021)

In Jowhar, communities mobilised around pre-existing groups – for instance, farmers' associations, local self-support groups or water management committees – to pool money and labour to prepare for flooding.

In many cases, this was part of a broader package of collective action and pooling of resources that also includes activities such as irrigation canal management and access to water pumping, procurement of seeds,

provision of livestock health services, or lobbying the regional administration for farmer interests.

> "We have two farmers' associations that mobilise farmers when there is need to reinforce the river embankment with sandbags against flooding of the farms. (…) These farmers' groups also help in mobilising farmers in de-silting the canals, especially the Kongo canal in our village, and every farmer pays some fee. Per acre it is $25 annually. This money contributes to the salary paid to the manager of the canal, while it also caters for the labourers during the de-silting work." (Male agro-pastoralist in Jowhar, July 2021)

A critical role that mostly informal community networks seemed to play across all locations was related to the sharing of information about expected flooding or drought, and to inform response strategies. This included warnings from contacts upstream about heightened river levels that indicate likely downstream flooding, reports of locust sightings in nearby villages, as well as people surveying possible areas with available pasture and water to take animals to during droughts.

6. Our learning so far

6.1 Engaging community structures in planning for and implementing anticipatory action

One challenge that aid actors face is balancing the need for anticipatory action to be nimble, fast and reliable while also contextualised and specific. In some of the study areas, there are operational community platforms that support people in preparing for and responding to shocks already, on which aid efforts to implement anticipatory action can build. This is the case, for example, with water management committees in Jowhar, or informal savings groups in Burao. Local structures can be integral to coordinating and facilitating anticipatory action at the community level. Aid actors may be able to directly engage these existing structures as a means of contextualising the design of anticipatory action programmes, ensuring the appropriate timing of actions and facilitating their implementation.

However, these opportunities do not necessarily exist everywhere. In one of our locations, the absence of community platforms or forums that are seen to have a role in managing risks affecting the entire community was mentioned as a barrier to joint action. Overall, collective action was prominent among farming communities along the river who were trying to address flood risk. Pastoralists used their social networks – for instance, to inform and support seasonal migration – but reported less collective action. The different ways of collaboration may be a reflection of the nature of these livelihoods being inherently different in terms of how collaborative, competitive or commercialised they are (e.g. vet, fodder and water services for pastoralists can be paid by and delivered to individuals, whereas river bank and canal management are subject to the tragedy of the commons), and mirror underlying types of social networks and levels of cohesion in different geo-cultural locations.

In any case, the examples highlight that aid actors wanting to engage in anticipatory action should support initiatives identified and led by communities, building on a strong understanding of the context, existing community structures and social capital. This includes considering power relationships and the implications of working with existing formal and informal networks for who may be included, and who may be left out or further marginalised in the process.[7] Longer-term resilience and development programmes that have engaged with communities over longer periods of time already can be critical partners in this regard.

6.2 Timing of anticipatory action

The study on the impacts of Covid-19 in 2020 and the first round of interviews that focused on anticipatory action to drought in February 2021 already indicated that people's needs for support were changing. While there was not yet a fully developed crisis situation at the time of the first round of interviews in February 2021, there were already clear signs of heightened anxiety among respondents, due to the various shocks and stresses they were experiencing at the time.

This situation changed for the worse in the months that followed, and by November 2021 it had developed into a national emergency. The CERF anticipatory action mechanism was triggered in April 2021, releasing $20 million.[8] Money was used to implement a range of livelihood, health, food security, nutrition and water, sanitation and hygiene activities. Given the time required to plan and implement, these activities were delivered

[7] For more about the role of informal social networks and local support systems during crises in relation to the 2011 famine in Somalia, see Maxwell et al. (2016).

[8] This was coupled with CERF rapid response allocations of $7 million in March 2021, and another $25 million in November to December 2021 (UN OCHA, 2021b).

throughout the following months. This was still before the national emergency was declared, and before the Somalia drought response plan 2022 was published in December 2021. Nevertheless, there may have been other opportunities earlier in the year for the provision of support to protect livelihoods at different points in time as the situation evolved.

While SPARC followed what pastoralists, agro-pastoralists and farmers were doing at different points in time, others have implemented anticipatory action and reviewed the aid response. What could be learned if all this information was pooled and the agencies and individuals involved analysed it together, to see what recommendations for policy and practice we can identify collectively? To further unpack questions around timing and how to use assistance to support anticipatory action in Somalia, SPARC aims to co-convene in the coming months a conversation and joint analysis with key actors that have collected information and experience about anticipatory action in Somalia.

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