

STRUCTURED SUMMARY

AID AT A CROSSROADS

Adapting to drylands realities

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Motivation

More than half a billion people live in the drylands of East and West Africa and the Middle East. Yet the economies and societies of the drylands (and, to some extent their physical systems) remain misunderstood and under-prioritised by aid actors, who often perceive investing in dryland development as both risky and yielding, at best, marginal returns. This has led to chronic underinvestment, exclusion from climate finance, and aid approaches that fail to engage with the economic and social systems that local people rely on to navigate the natural systems of the drylands that have long been subject to uncertain hazards, such as drought.

Since the mid-2010s, many of the drylands have seen increased conflict and more climatic shocks consequent on climate change. These pressures have compounded vulnerability, fuelled displacement and undermined local economies. Amidst shrinking international assistance (above all since early 2025) and widening gaps between humanitarian needs and funding, aid actors have come under pressure to economise. The challenge for committed aid actors is to 'do differently with less'. The drylands are at the frontline of this challenge, where traditional aid models are too often falling short. The moment calls for rethinking how aid might operate in environments where uncertainty over conditions in the next season is the norm, to better align with the aspirations, needs and capacities of local societies.

Purpose

This report aims to change not only what aid actors do, but also how they work – towards approaches that are more flexible, context-responsive and locally embedded. Four central questions are posed:

- How must prevailing mindsets and assumptions about the drylands evolve to support more effective aid?
- How can the challenges of development in the drylands be more realistically framed for better aid programming?
- What operational changes should aid actors make to support greater flexibility and responsiveness in volatile contexts?
- How can aid actors better engage with the informal social systems that communities rely on during crises?

Approach and methods

This report synthesises six years of research by the Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) programme to offer practical recommendations for improving aid delivery in the drylands. While grounded in SPARC's extensive body of work, the report also draws on external research to complement,

contrast and contextualise SPARC's findings. External evidence highlights tried and tested programmes and policies that align with or extend insights generated through SPARC, and helps ground recommendations in practical experience.

Findings

How can the challenges of development in the drylands be more realistically framed for better aid programming?

- Drylands complexity is often oversimplified. Linear development models fail to account for the relational, mobile and risk-sharing strategies that local people deploy to be resilient in these lands.
- Better learning can reframe the issues. Working with local people in participatory planning, co-produced research and experiential learning can help policy-makers and implementers reframe drylands resilience on local terms.
- Pastoralism is already highly adapted to its environment. Aid that seeks to formalise or 'modernise' livelihoods can unintentionally undermine social capital and coping strategies, especially mobility.

What operational changes should aid actors make to support greater flexibility and responsiveness in volatile contexts?

- Rigid aid systems misalign with dynamic realities. In contrast to adaptive pastoralism, aid often relies on fixed plans and risk-averse procedures that struggle to keep up with rapidly shifting contexts.
- Flexible, adaptive programming yields better results than blueprint planning and implementation. SPARC case studies show that programmes able to revise plans, shift funding and empower field teams are more responsive and impactful in contexts often subject to rapid changes.
- Building from existing practices is key to scaling. Incremental improvements that align with local behaviours and existing practices are more likely to lead to sustainable change compared with attempts at wholesale transformation using 'best buy' approaches transferred from other contexts.

How can aid actors better engage with the informal social systems that communities rely on?

- Informal social systems are dryland communities' first line of response to uncertainty and change. Social networks, mutual aid, local markets and diaspora ties play a critical role in adapting to changing circumstances, often more so than formal aid, but remain under-supported by external actors.
- Bypassing these local systems can weaken resilience. Top-down aid can disrupt informal sharing norms, fuel mistrust, and reduce long-term coping capacity, especially when targeting of beneficiaries is opaque or misaligned with local norms.
- Promising entry points exist to work through local systems. SPARC highlights emerging practices like group cash transfers to local responders, flexible support for informal traders, and engagement with diaspora networks as scalable, community-aligned approaches.

Policy implications and recommendations

The report calls for a fundamental reorientation of aid in the drylands. Key recommendations include:

- **Recognise and engage with complexity.** Aid actors must challenge linear assumptions about change and development in the drylands, investing in deeper contextual understanding, and adopting iterative approaches to programming and scaling.
- **Reframe how success is measured.** Metrics should capture long-term, relational change, like social capital and trust, as much as, or more than, short-term, easily quantifiable outputs.
- **Operate flexibly.** Donors and implementers must enable adaptive management, simplify reporting requirements, and empower frontline staff to respond to changing circumstances in real time.

- **Invest in informal social systems.** Aid should resource and reinforce the networks and institutions communities already use, such as mutual aid groups, local traders, and diaspora networks.

In sum, we urge a shift away from rigid blueprints towards approaches grounded in local systems, adaptive learning and humility. In the face of shrinking aid budgets and increasing crises since the mid-2010s, this will not only be more effective, but also essential for relevance and sustainability in changeable drylands.

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