

STRUCTURED SUMMARY

THE DRYLANDS OF TOMORROW

Pathways to prosperity, peace and resilience

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Motivation

For decades, farming and pastoralism in the drylands have been perceived as unchanging: forever marginal and unproductive. Even as research has transformed understandings of these livelihoods, characterising them as dynamic, adaptive systems capable of making the most of unpredictable contexts, old perceptions remain influential in policy and practice. Narratives of persistent crisis reinforce these outdated assumptions, narrowing imaginations and limiting the investments and interventions considered viable. The structural and political causes of vulnerability are overlooked in favour of short-term, standardised solutions that simplify complex problems.

Policy-makers and development actors who fail to see existing livelihoods as a basis for investment and support risk generating pathways for change that poorly align with local priorities, values and long-term aspirations. In many drylands, priority is given to large-scale commercial projects and schemes – ranging from irrigation to energy – that implicitly assume change must be delivered from outside, rather than built on the existing capacities and knowledge of pastoralists and farmers. Years of research and practice demonstrate that alternative pathways exist, rooted in existing social and economic systems and offering prospects for sustainable peace, prosperity and resilience.

Purpose

Taking a long-term view, we assess drivers of change in the drylands, how development and humanitarian aid have engaged with key challenges, and what can be learned from the strategies and priorities of farmers and pastoralists to inform more effective investment and support.

Approach and methods

We synthesise six years of [Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises](#) (SPARC) programme research to examine how livelihoods in the drylands have evolved in the face of opportunities and challenges. Summarising key messages and insights from SPARC research, we draw connections to wider bodies of research into peace, prosperity and resilience, setting out implications for future investment and support.

Findings

Look for incremental progress. Smaller-scale, context-sensitive investments in pastoralism and smallholder farming usually drive long-term prosperity far more effectively than large, top-down projects, which are costly, often misaligned with local priorities and frequently do not work as expected. Gradual, incremental progress should be prioritised over large-scale transformation in most cases.

Build peace from the ground up. Peace is best achieved by working with local realities, addressing specific grievances and respecting community knowledge and values, rather than pursuing uniform, idealised solutions.

Measure what matters. Indicators of progress should reflect the concrete and specific priorities of affected populations, rather than the goals set by outside agencies.

Think local while acting across multiple scales. Effective interventions are not limited to the local level alone. They may be tailored to local context yet still address regional and national concerns.

Work with social networks. Social networks shape livelihoods, trade and crisis response in the drylands. It is by leveraging these networks that investment and support can improve market access, social assistance and collaboration.

Support collective practices and institutions. Collective resource management and sharing support successful adaptation to variable and unpredictable conditions. Interventions and investments can achieve greater impact by working with this collective reality rather than focusing on individuals or isolated risks.

Respect flexibility in livelihoods and knowledge. Both livelihoods and the knowledge that make them possible constantly evolve, as practice and knowledge is reinterpreted and remade to suit shifting circumstances. Dryland economies depend on local people being flexible in response to seasonal and annual variations and longer-term changes. Innovation and growth are best supported through approaches that support this flexibility and the collaboration it already underpins across different livelihoods and skills.

Change the narrative. Longstanding negative narratives that the drylands are unproductive obscure their potential. By seeing the drylands as places underserved by central governments and donor agencies rather than places that are inherently vulnerable, it is possible to identify and invest in local solutions.

Conclusions

The drylands and their development need to be rethought; challenging common assumptions about conflict, climate vulnerability and poverty to highlight pathways to a positive future — pathways that emerge from the locally-led approaches already sustaining dryland communities. At a time of far-reaching environmental, economic and political transformation — climate change, digital telecommunications, political devolution, reductions in aid, etc. — challenges to old narratives and the limits they place on contemporary planning and practice are more important than ever. Above all, development agencies should learn to recognise opportunities in the drylands and should work with local people to realise them.

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