

Reflecting on livestock-related interventions in the 2020–2023 drought in Ethiopia and identifying areas for improvement: A qualitative study of expert opinions

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Abstract

Between 2020 and 2023 Ethiopia faced its worst drought for four decades, losing over four million livestock and placing over twelve million people into food insecurity. The overall aim of this study was to gain detailed, real reflections on the livestock-related humanitarian interventions used during the 2020–2023 drought to improve future efforts. More specifically this study aimed to evaluate the livestock-related drought interventions in Ethiopia; identify key areas requiring improvement for future responses; and explore potential solutions which could improve relevant interventions for future droughts in Ethiopia, given the trends of climate change. A qualitative thematic analysis was conducted of in-depth key informant interviews of experts in Addis Ababa and the Borana district, using open/inductive and axial coding techniques ($n = 7$). This yielded four major themes and thirteen sub-themes. The main findings of this study include that during the 2020–2023 drought in Ethiopia, the interviewed experts felt that timing of funding release/response was too late; responses such as vaccination, de-stocking and index-based livestock insurance (IBLI) were not used optimally; and that rangeland and water management need prioritisation to improve sustainability and resilience. This study argues that further research is needed to understand why resources were not mobilised in a timely manner and what resources and partnerships are needed to improve existing efforts. It recommends a focus shift towards core, natural resource inputs and that a streamlined resource mobilisation procedure be designed and implemented.

Keywords: climate, humanitarian, development, rangeland, veterinary policy

1 Introduction

“Our livestock are our bank; if we lose them, we are nothing.” - Tume Jirma, Ethiopian farmer (Helvetas, 2022).

The WHO (2023) states that globally, 40 % of the world’s population are impacted by drought and that by 2030 over 700 million people may be at risk of displacement as a result. The FAO defines drought as “an extended period – a season, a year, or several years – of deficient precipitation compared to the statistical multi-year average for a region that results in water shortage for some activity, group, or environmental sector” (FAO, 2003). However, the tendency of the humanitarian sector to label a crisis as only “drought” risks failing to address the complex failure of the food system perpetuating

responses that do not address the root cause. An overview of interventions in the Horn of Africa found that many of the humanitarian evaluations failed to recognise drivers such as changes to migration, conflict, market failures and food price shocks (Sandstrom & Juhola, 2016).

Ethiopia is said to be one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change, in part because approximately 80 % of their population live in rural, agriculture-dependent areas (Wambugu, 2022). Climate change in Ethiopia has caused temperature increases and rainfall decreases, resulting in increased drought frequency and severity (Dejene, 2023). Most recently, the 2020–2023 drought was the worst the country had faced in over forty years. It spanned five failed rainy seasons between 2020–2023, during which it is estimated that over 4.5 million livestock died from a lack of

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feed and water (FAO, 2023). This, combined with food costs rising by 67% and continued conflict in the Oromia, Afar, and Benishangul-Gumuz regions, led to an estimated 20 million people becoming food insecure (UNHCR, 2023; UNOCHA, 2022). Fig. 1 shows the projected acute food insecurity phase classification (IPC) of Ethiopian woreda's, as of September 2023 after the drought ended (Famine Early Warning Systems Network, 2023). The IPC scale is a food insecurity and acute malnutrition measurement tool used in over 30 countries around the world. There are 5 phases of acute food insecurity in this system: none/minimal (phase 1), stressed (phase 2), crisis (phase 3), emergency (phase 4) and catastrophe/famine (phase 5). From phase 3 upwards, urgent action is required (Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, n.d.). This demonstrates that the predominantly pastoralist regions of Oromia, Somali and Afar were disproportionately affected.

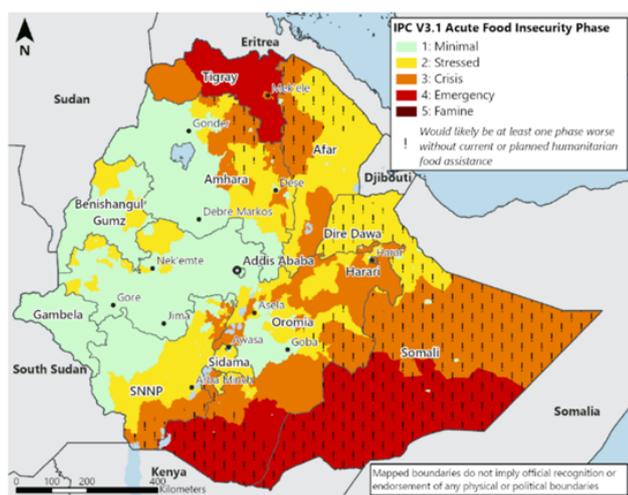


Fig. 1: Map showing projected acute food insecurity phase level-of Ethiopian woreda's as of September 2023 (Famine Early Warning Systems Network, 2023).

Ethiopia has approximately 11 million pastoralists, and the most livestock of any African country. Pastoralist livestock contributes 80% of the country's milk supply, and as such Ethiopia relies on these populations for its food security (Abdulkadr, 2019). However, drought has become more frequent and intense, exhausting pastoralist communities coping mechanisms (Dejene, 2023).

Drought responses are typically described as having five phases: normal, alert, alarm, emergency and recovery. Relevant to this study, the Ethiopian Disaster Risk Management – Agriculture Task Force has also adopted this system. Each phase has a set of livestock-related responses associated with it, as detailed in the LEGS guidelines (LEGS, 2018). Guidelines such as LEGS (2018) and “Livestock-Related In-

terventions During Emergencies: The how-to-do-it-manual” published by the FAO in 2016 contain further detail on the implementation of such responses. During the “normal” and “alert” phases, insurance-based livestock insurance (IBLI) and early warning systems (EWS) are also used. IBLI has been available since 2009 and was designed to support traditional risk-sharing arrangements which are becoming increasingly ineffective in today's climate of catastrophic covariate disasters (Awel & Azomahou, 2014; Dercon *et al.*, 2014). In practicality, the benefits of IBLI are not clearcut and the long-term impact is not fully investigated as covered in existing reviews (Bageant & Barrett, 2017; Gebrekidan *et al.*, 2019; Matsuda *et al.*, 2019; Taye *et al.*, 2019; John *et al.*, 2019; Timu & Kramer, 2021; Timu *et al.*, 2023). EWS have been present for decades from an institutional perspective since USAID began its Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) in 1985, and for centuries longer when you consider traditional indigenous systems. There are many types of EWS being implemented in the Horn of Africa, of which many are detailed by Funk *et al.* (2019). In theory, EWS has the potential to enable more cost-effective and efficient responses, preventing suffering and support economic development. However, the effectiveness of EWS is undermined by many challenges, such as the need for accurate input information, the capacity to collect localised data, and robust decision-making processes (Malicha, 2002; Hillier & Dempsey, 2012).

In Ethiopia, climate models suggest a further increase in temperature by between 1.4 and 2.9 degrees Celsius by the 2050s. In addition, it is forecasted that drought frequency will continue to increase (Simane *et al.*, 2017). This means that in the future we will see disasters like the one we just witnessed, and therefore the sector needs to act to reflect on its response and better itself for next time. The pastoralist areas of Ethiopia saw many NGO, international organisation and government-organised responses. However, it is well acknowledged that throughout the sector truly independent evaluations without donor or organisation influence are rare. This study seeks to reflect on the response through independent, empirical research which identifies areas for improvement by examining local, field-experienced expert opinions.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Data collection

To gain a variety of reflections from local experts with field experience, interviewees were sought from various sectors and levels of response. A purposive snowball sampling method was used (Parker *et al.*, 2019). This ensured that

experts identified locally were selected from NGOs, international organisations, and research institutes.

The semi-structured interviews allowed exploration of the same topics across interviews, while also enabling participants to speak freely about their opinions. A prompt sheet containing a set of open-ended questions (see supplement) was used, and probing questions were asked based on the respondents' answers. Interviews took place at the participants' chosen location, except for one which took place via Google Meet (Google LLC, 2025c). The interviewer acted only as a facilitator, prompting the participant to share their views. Interviews were recorded using the author's Google Pixel 5 Android device, and written notes were taken at the time to capture important themes and quotes.

2.2 Data analysis

Recordings were transcribed using the android "Recorder" application into Google Docs (Google LLC, 2025a; Google LLC, 2025b). Transcriptions were prepared in an "intelligent verbatim" manner to allow for repetitions and sentence structure differences with second-language English speakers (Weloty, 2015). Transcriptions then had any identifying information removed from them and participants were assigned a unique identification number.

Interview data were analysed using a thematic analysis (Silverman, 2004; Braun & Clark, 2006). The software used was QDA Miner Lite v3.0 (Peladau, 2023). Codes were manually assigned to each transcription using a line-by-line, open/inductive coding methodology followed by axial coding after analysis of frequency and relationships. A quote could have more than one code attributed to it. The full codebook and their frequency are available in Appendix 2. This produced four major themes and thirteen sub-themes which were sent to a second reviewer (RK) who reviewed the approach and after discussion agreed on the final coding structure. As the aim of this study was to gather reflections rather than quantify opinions and as such only a small number were sampled, further quantitative analysis of code word count was not performed similar to studies by McCormick (2015), Villarreal & Meyer (2019), and Namrita *et al.* (2022). However, the number of respondents discussing each theme and sub-theme was captured to demonstrate which were widely discussed or those that were discussed by only one participant.

2.3 Ethical considerations

This study was reviewed for research ethics approval by the University of York and was deemed exempt under institutional guidelines. Exemption applied because the study involved only professional participants, collected anonymised

data, did not address sensitive topics, did not include vulnerable or dependent groups or recipients of aid, and focused solely on issues within the professional competencies of respondents. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the start of each interview. Anonymity was ensured by removing all identifiable information from the dataset. Participants were informed that a summary of the findings would be shared with them. The interview framework remained flexible and did not intentionally seek negative feedback. Participants were advised that they were free to decline any question and could withdraw from the interview at any time.

3 Results and discussion

3.1 Interviewee demographics

All experts interviewed either currently or previously worked in the field in Ethiopia. The experts were from a variety of backgrounds as detailed in Table 1. To avoid identification, the experts' background has been simplified to only their current broad expertise.

Table 1: Interview participant backgrounds.

<i>Participant number</i>	<i>Background</i>
1	NGO field project manager
2	NGO field project co-ordinator
3	NGO country director
4	International organisation team co-ordinator
5	Research officer
6	Policy expert
7	Livestock expert

3.2 Interview results

A thematic analysis was conducted during which four major themes emerged, with between three and four sub-themes within each as summarised in Table 2. The key results within each theme and a discussion of these will be presented.

Changing times

Discussion on the social, political and ecological contexts which underpinned the resultant loss of livelihoods and famine elicited insights into the multitude of inter-linked factors contributing to the crisis. These were considered under the sub-themes changing context, climate and pastoralist livelihoods.

Table 2: Summary of themes and sub-themes.

Theme	Sub-themes
Changing times	Changing context
	Changing climate
	Changing pastoralist livelihoods
Rangeland and the environment	Rangeland health
	Rangeland management & rehabilitation
	Water
Livestock-related responses	Animal health
	Destocking and restocking
	Markets
Response management	Insurance
	Timing
	Policy
	Collaborative approach

Four respondents discussed contextual changes, which, when combined with increasing climate shocks, influenced the recent crisis, including both local and global conflicts. For example, local fighting affected communities through restricting grazing, killing animals, and preventing livestock keepers from collecting and distributing feed. It also resulted in human casualties.

Participant 1: “... conflict at the global arena will have an effect down to the [local] area.”

Participants also felt that degradation of rangeland as a result of climate shocks was inter-linked to resource depletion and thus resource-based conflict and loss of lives.

Participant 1: “When they’re competing over this limited resource... it also takes a lot of human lives as well as livestock.”

Participant 3: “In a nutshell you know, this drought can create land degradation, people displacement, conflict... all are interlinked.”

Linked to this, all seven respondents referenced an increase in the frequency of climatic events. It was acknowledged that drought was not a new phenomenon for the affected communities but that it has increased in severity, and the recent drought was felt to be of an unprecedented length and magnitude.

Participant 1: “Drought has been with this community for centuries, but it didn’t take this huge amount of livestock life like before.”

Partly because of these changes to climatic events, it was discussed that while some richer pastoralists maintained the ability to mobilise their core animals to more plentiful areas,

many were unable to do so. This was also felt to be due to several other factors, including the encroachment of private enclosures on mobility corridors; the widespread nature of the drought affecting usual destinations; and an increase in cropping in mobility corridors. In response, the concept of a “transitional context” whereby large numbers of people were abandoning pastoralism as their sole livelihood strategy, was discussed.

Participant 2: “... now as all the areas are similar, we have no place to go. So, the coping mechanism that they used was migration but now it’s not functioning.”

As a result of this changing context, differing opinions were present on the future of pastoralism ranging from feeling that pastoralism is no longer sustainable; that pastoralism needs to be supported with minimal transformation; and that a more modern type of pastoralism should be supported. The term modern included increasing commercialisation, reducing overall number of pastoralist households and increasing diversification.

Participant 3: “If we sing a song always saying pastoralism is a sustainable life, that is really against all these odds which I mentioned: climate change, conflict and so on.”

Participant 5: “So we need to promote their way of life and also acknowledge that that is a viable production system which can support the livelihood of the pastoralists, as well as the economy of the nation.”

Finally, under this theme, it was acknowledged that livestock are of utmost importance to communities and continue to be the key asset.

Participant 1: “Livestock is their everything; it is their values; it is their identities; it is their income; their food. Livestock is their everything.”

Fig. 2 represents an analysis of the inter-play between the factors discussed under this theme. Changes to the landscape and to pastoralist livelihoods in turn affect rangeland and community resilience strategies. Consequently, production decreases and local conflict over resources increases, both of which contribute to compounding crises, as was evident during the 2020-2023 drought. For the purposes of this study, a crisis is defined as an event or series of events that poses a critical threat to the health, safety, security or well-being of a community (Humanitarian Coalition, 2013).

Rangeland and the environment

The importance of the rangeland and environment was discussed by all experts despite no specific prompting question on this topic. The sub-themes that emerged were: rangeland health, rangeland management and rehabilitation, and

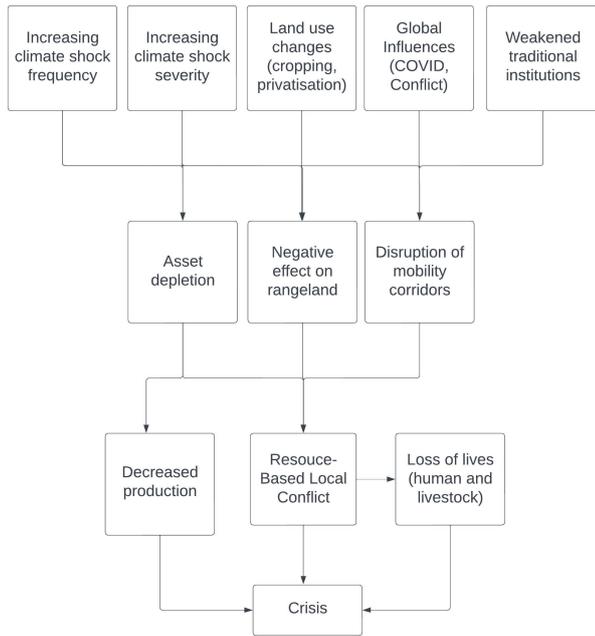


Fig. 2: The relationship of contributing factors to the recent Ethiopian drought (Authors own)

water. Firstly, many respondents cited the importance of rangeland health in terms of quality pasture for pastoralist livelihoods and their resilience.

Participant 2: “This rangeland is actually the key input for the livestock... and so they cannot be resilient in short dry periods, let alone the drought.”

Discussions yielded three major mechanisms which were leading to poor rangeland health: degradation via overgrazing and desertification; emergence of invasive species; and bush encroachment.

Participant 2: “They are using the free grazing system, this will have a huge burden on the rangeland – the soil is degrading.”

Participant 2: “In previous years, I mean like, 20 or 30 years ago as we hear from the elders, the rangeland is not like this. It was more productive, even though there is drought.”

In relation to bush encroachment, one respondent noted that although not a new phenomenon, the reduced capacity of communities in recent years of drought has meant that the labour-intensive task of removing the bush was beyond the capabilities of local populations. This bush was deemed unpalatable and unnutritious for livestock, reducing the land area available for nutritious feed. This agrees with older literature, such as those by Solomon *et al.* (2006), who identified that the 1974/1975 ban on traditional bush burning practices, recurrent droughts and increased crop cultivation were

contributing factors, and with Homann *et al.* (2007), who identified government-imposed administration and population growth as contributing factors.

Participant 1: “The fact is there is bush encroachment. It is totally encroaching all the grazing areas, replaced by invasive bush.”

Two respondents discussed that this bush encroachment was occurring simultaneously with the increasing presence of invasive species, namely *Parthenium* spp. which spread from the American continent and is drought-tolerant, allelopathic, toxic and pervasive to control.

Participant 1: “All green plants or even most of them now becoming poisonous.”

Participant 5: “This *Parthenium*, newly emerged weeds and other toxic plants are emerging in the rangeland... so that is very unhealthy now.”

When asked about what response they would design in the future, even as livestock experts, over half of the respondents emphasised the need for rangeland rehabilitation. Two respondents highlighted that rangeland management presents an opportunity to not only improve feed resources for animals, but also for business opportunities in terms of forage and bush products.

Participant 4: “[Forage gives] economy to the communities, they can feed their animals, they can also sell, you know, forage products to other areas.”

Participant 5: “We need to change this bush to a business by just considering, for example, if you convert that one to a timber tree product, that’s going to be a resource for them.”

All respondents discussed access to water, in relation to both forage activities and hydration. However, it was acknowledged that improving water infrastructure would require significant resources and funding.

Participant 5: “So invest in water because in some areas this is very scarce.”

Participant 4: “If you have the water, you can do the forage activities. The animals need only the feed and the water, so they can survive whether there is drought or not.”

Despite the above findings, rangeland management was not found to be a focus of existing literature on livestock responses, despite this study highlighting its critical importance. Existing literature such as that by Gina (2015), details how elements of rangeland management such as water infrastructure and bush control, have posed challenges for many years. This may be due to the complex nature of rangeland management, which encompasses mobility, cropping/agricultural expansion, social intricacies, water availability, land ownership, and labour-intensive, long-term re-

quirements. This could lead livestock-related organisations to delegate related activities to environmental organisations. However, research such as that by Catley *et al.* (2014) confirms the importance of feed and water for livestock survival, both of which can be sustainably provided through rangeland management.

This study acts to raise awareness of the importance of rangeland and water as core requirements for livestock and highlights the recent increase in bush and invasive species encroachment as a result of the 2020–2023 drought. It is a recommendation that livestock-related organisations consider natural resources as key targets to have sustainable and long-lasting impacts which empower communities to support themselves and will not perpetuate aid dependence. This may include partnering with organisations to find sustainable ways to manage the extensive clearance needed and the continued labour requirement which might not appeal to donors. In addition, to improve water infrastructure which although requiring expensive infrastructure, resources and upkeep is crucial to pastoralist livelihoods and could impact on agropastoral-pastoralist conflict. Guidelines on the types of activities needed in a participatory manner are detailed by Flintan & Cullis (2010).

Livestock-related responses

Four sub-themes emerged in relation specifically to livestock: animal health, destocking and restocking, markets and insurance. Respondents discussed the lack of access to veterinary care for the most vulnerable populations, including due to conflict. This included drug provision and curative services but also herd health and disease surveillance systems.

Participant 4: *“You can imagine most of the veterinary clinics there are now empty, they are damaged by the war, so it needs a lot of resources to bring them back to service... this is everywhere in Ethiopia.”*

In particular, vaccination programmes during the middle of the crisis were felt to be ineffective.

Participant 6: *“In the middle of the crisis, while animals are struggling to die, vaccinations are being given.”*

Participant 7: *“We did not support vaccination because vaccinating when animals are too immunocompromised, because of their nutrition status, is just a waste of funding.”*

This agrees with existing literature that vaccination may not always be the most effective use of limited drought-response resources, since up to 100% of excess livestock deaths in drought are caused by dehydration or starvation rather than disease (Catley *et al.*, 2009; Catley *et al.*, 2014). However, the same four respondents felt that prior to and after the

crisis, preventive healthcare such as vaccination was appropriate.

Participant 6: *“Once you’ve detected, you have to give proper vaccinations before the crisis approaches.”*

Animal nutrition was also discussed, covering both emergency nutrition such as multi-nutrient blocks or concentrated feed; and nutrition through improved feeds and feed storage depending on the phase of the emergency. The latter was felt to represent an opportunity whereby communities could be empowered to retain sufficient nutrition for their core livestock without relying on aid.

Participant 4: *“Feed development, for me, should be the very serious issue from the long-term aspect... whether there is a drought or not, so the community can provide feed for the animals.”*

Destocking was discussed as a crucial intervention in the lead up to crises due to its ability to generate cash for families to purchase supplementary nutrition during the droughts, as well as optimising the use of available resources for the core breeding stock. During the most recent crisis, however, it was reported that current systems were not functional, meaning that animals were not destocked at the appropriate time.

Participant 7: *“In fact, the most important livestock humanitarian intervention related to drought in pastoral areas is destocking, right? Saving the core breeding stock, getting all the other stock out of the system.”*

Participant 2: *“People are waiting for the rain of the last season. Then when the season comes, if there is no rain, the livestock are already emaciated. It doesn’t have good market value so that they cannot sell at a good price.”*

In the literature this delay in de-stocking is described as being due to the need for complex inputs such as markets capable of supporting the destocking programme, trustworthy brokers, functional national markets and infrastructure (Abebe *et al.*, 2009). No existing literature was found describing short-comings of de-stocking programmes in Ethiopia in particular.

Participant 7: *“Destocking as a humanitarian intervention has always been quite difficult, and there are often not-true beliefs that pastoralists don’t want to destock, that they want to save all their animals... the reality is it takes effort, and so it’s often hard for partners to want to do destocking programs.”*

Opinions varied greatly when discussing re-stocking after the crisis. Some experts felt strongly that restocking to a level high enough to sustain a pastoral livelihood was not the correct use of resources, and instead emphasis should be placed on providing small ruminants for milk production.

Participant 3: *“If you think of restocking as to restock huge livestock [numbers], you know, you can’t do that in reality because of the resource scarcity.”*

Participant 6: *“Instead of restocking, there is no need to restock. That’s my intention; if already they lose, they’re not going to be able to come and continue as a way of life. So, in the future, pastoralism will be the richest people’s way of life.”*

However, one expert felt that pastoralism should be supported by full restocking. When discussing these differing opinions, one expert mentioned that these options represent a “false dichotomy” whereby the choice is more complex than it appears.

In relation to insuring livestock, all experts agreed that there were significant delivery issues with index-based livestock insurance, which have prevented its effective use despite its availability since 2009. Firstly, two experts were concerned that the premiums were unaffordable for the most vulnerable.

Participant 3: *“I don’t think it has worked very well because, the first thing, this kind of insurance is usually for at least very rich people; those are the ones who are able to buy the premium.”*

The insurance scheme in Borana was said to sometimes not cover policyholders if they moved to a different area to the one in which they took out the insurance. In addition, since many insurance programmes use satellite-measured greenery as the index, it was claimed that the recent expansion of invasive species and bushland created a false impression of abundant palatable nutrition.

Participant 6: *“Sometimes in the pastoral area, a shower may create a very green colour of the Acacia. Okay, the top is green, but if you go to the ground level, there’s no grass. It was not enough just to grow grass.”*

However, there was still some promise in the livestock insurance schemes that were discussed, due to their positive impact.

Participant 1: *“The livestock insurance is the best and perfect intervention that all pastoralist households should have... because it guarantees them that the resource they have is a sustainable resource.”*

Participant 3: *“If you see its broader perspective, that’s really useful, and in a high-risk environment, where, as I mentioned, climate shocks are common, generally if someone like myself thinks of insurance, it’s very important.”*

Lastly, within this theme, the importance of markets was stated, while also acknowledging that markets are complex

systems with multiple inputs and outcomes, thus requiring multiple interventions.

Participant 2: *“When you talk about markets, the livestock market is not something that you do at a single place; rather, it is the entire system involved. This needs different advocacy at different government levels because there are different policy issues in it; there are different marketing infrastructure issues in it; there are different marketing linkages that should be [present]. You will see that big improvement after [fixing such issues].”*

Respondents discussed opening up trade agreements, given that cross-border trade was not formally permitted at the time. Two participants spoke of a wider global market and requested that policymakers facilitate this. It was acknowledged that transboundary disease must be controlled to achieve this. Issues discussed in terms of the national market, included a lack of published pricing, unfair broker pricing, and long distances.

Participant 6: *“People have to move freely... so that is the solution for pastoral development. Could be in Somalia, could be in Kenya, these people have to move with trading.”*

Participant 6: *“With a well-functioning market and more information about the global market as well, then you don’t need to carry food aid to the people; that is my ultimate activity.”*

Relating to the future of livestock marketing in Ethiopia, some respondents supported increasing commercialisation. It was suggested that by educating communities to adapt their systems in a market-oriented manner, this would increase their productivity and thus resilience.

Participant 2: *“We need to help the community to focus on market-orientated livestock production. You see, the livestock themselves should be fit for the market and what is demanded rather than what is available. So, the orientation, the attitude of the community, should also be changing. So, this market system is very important.”*

Response management: timing, policy and a collaborative approach

Response management was discussed during all key informant interviews and formed the sub-themes timing, policy and collaborative approaches. All experts believed the timing of responses in the recent crisis was too late. This was described as leading to a narrow suite of responses being available and, in some cases, responses being used inappropriately. Although early warning systems were present, it was felt that they could be improved by integrating with traditional early warning systems.

Participant 6: “Pastoralists, they have their own way of early warning. The problem of the government is to adapt the original early warning system. . . there must be a hybrid way of doing that. . . they may inform you, but the problem is the next level.”

Some respondents felt strongly that early warnings were not followed by early action. This was largely blamed on the government’s slow response and the consequential knock-on delay in the funding process, which is analysed further below. The numerous relevant quotes are organised in Table 3.

Table 3: Quotes from participants relating to lack of early action.

Topic	Quote
Government	Participant 6: “The problem is the next level, that the government institution may feel that there is weakness, but it’s not weakness of the administration, it’s drought. They have to report it but they don’t report, or they will start reporting after the crisis happens.”
Donor	Participant 6: “Early warning in this country is complicated and very delayed and I have never seen an early response for the happening of tasks. It’s not only the government, even the donors. They knew the situation and they didn’t act because they were waiting for the government to declare. . . donors have their own interests.” Participant 7: “Donors are more driven by IPC (Integrated Food Security Phase Classification) levels and unfortunately in pastoral systems by the time you get to IPC 3+ it’s too late and so that’s the conundrum in pastoral areas. It’s an appropriate decision-making process in other places. It’s too late in pastoral.”
Phase	Participant 7: “The reality is that most of the humanitarian assistance for the drought came well into the emergency phase and unfortunately, the reality in particular in pastoral systems is that, by the time you’re well into the emergency phase, it’s basically too late. There’s not much that you can do in terms of livestock-related interventions.”

These findings agree with literature available on the slow response during the 2015-2016 (Drechsler & Soer, 2016) and the 1997-1998 droughts in the region (Maxwell, 2002). In relation to the Horn of Africa, a report by Hillier & Dempsey (2012) condemned the sector’s late response, especially given that the EWS was performing well. This was attributed to waiting for certainty, fear of making the wrong decision, and fear of being too interventionist. Chris Hilbruner, an early warning specialist, summarised this by stating ‘In order to use early warning information most effectively, decision-makers have to be comfortable with. . . uncertainty – and it’s difficult to be comfortable with it’ (in: Hillier & Dempsey, 2012, pp. 15). Fig. 3 illustrates the knock-on effects of this delayed funding, whereby only lifesaving, rather than livelihood-saving, options remain. Both Hillier & Dempsey

(2012) and Drechsler & Soer’s (2016) call for an approach to be developed to trigger early action, termed a “no-regrets trigger”. This is also a recommendation of this research as well as further study to gain more detailed information on the causes to delay in fund mobilisation and response so that a streamlined process can be collectively created and implemented as soon as practical. Interviews elicited a lack of effective policy supporting pastoral development.

Participant 2: “Now if you look at the policy, there is no appropriate policy for pastoral development. So, everything is taken from the agrarian community that doesn’t fit well in this context. This will also have an impact on the vulnerability of the people.”

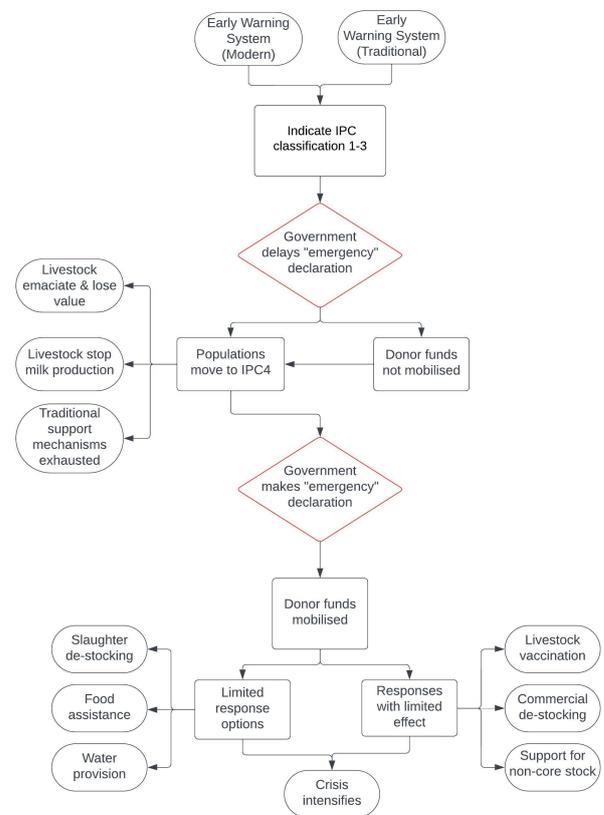


Fig. 3: Analysis of relationships between early warning systems (EWS), emergency declaration timing and associated outcomes. (Authors own)

Similarly, it was felt that there was a disconnect between emergency and development policy, especially in pastoral areas.

Participant 7: “Unfortunately, there are some basic disconnects in the whole system, in terms of humanitarian interventions really being the only assistance that’s often provided to the most vulnerable areas, and particularly in pastoral areas.”

In response to this, two of the experts discussed the idea of including a crisis modifier in development funding, relating to the “Humanitarian-Development-Peace” (HDP) nexus, as part of the UN’s “New Way of Working” (NWOW) approach. Also relevant to the HDP, two respondents discussed the importance of peace.

Participant 3: *“Unless peace is there, your children will not go to the market, the market will collapse, education fails, technologies would not be functioning. So yeah, peace is the centre of this.”*

Experts discussed the need to reduce aid dependence, with development activities being highlighted as an important means of achieving this. A way forward suggested was the involvement of the private sector. It was hoped that this would improve the efficiency and timing of response, as well as reduce reliance on foreign aid.

Participant 6: *“But nowadays, the local people are waiting for the famine. They are already dependent.”*

Participant 6: *“I hope no animal will die if we engage the private sector. That’s my very sole recommendation.”*

Education was also discussed as a means of supporting pastoralists in lifting themselves out of crisis and transitioning to alternative livelihoods in a sustainable way.

Participant 3: *“For me one of the ways out is education. . . people’s quality of life is dependent on education.”*

Participant 7: *“They’re the least educated, they have the highest rates of illiteracy, they have the least skills, so they will always be outcompeted when it comes to scarce opportunities. So, basics, you know, primary education, literacy, all those kinds of things. These are really the important kinds of development interventions that are being missed in pastoral areas and not being designed to be in tune with how people are transitioning in the system.”*

Lastly, One Health integrates the health of people, animals, and their ecosystems. Two experts discussed this as being especially fundamental in pastoralist contexts where people rely on their animals and in turn rely on the land.

Participant 1: *“So if the pastoralists are working on human and environmental health and again on animal health, they can have sustainable pastoralism and sustainable, resilient livelihoods. . . if we only focus on human health and we ignore environmental health, we ignore livestock health, and then these communities are supposed to rely on livestock. The combination of these three has contributed to sustainable healthy lives and healthy livelihoods.”*

4 Limitations

This study gathered the opinions of professionals only, in order to understand their expert perceptions of the drought response. Although the limited resources meant that the number of interviews that could be conducted was restricted, this study provides unique insights that can be used by a wide audience and as a basis for future research.

5 Conclusion

There are few publicly available qualitative and independent analyses of drought responses, and even fewer relating to the response of the livestock sector incorporating multiple sectors. The main findings of this study are that the timing of the release of funding and the response were too late, that responses such as vaccination, de-stocking and insurance based livestock insurance (IBLI) were not used optimally, and that rangeland and water management need to be prioritised in order to improve sustainability and resilience. These findings can be used to draw parallels with drought relief efforts in other countries, so that the sector can avoid repeating short-comings and act pro-actively. This study argues that further research is needed to understand why resources were not mobilised promptly and what resources and partnerships are necessary to improve existing efforts. It recommends implementing a streamlined resource mobilisation procedure and shifting the focus towards core natural resource inputs to support self-reliance and minimise aid dependence. This study also highlights the perceived recent increase in bush and invasive species encroachment which require finding sustainable, collaborative approaches to manage the extensive clearance needed and continued labour requirements. In light of climate change trends and the inevitable increase in drought events, it is crucial to reflect on and act upon these findings to improve future responses and minimise death and suffering.

Supplement

Supplementary information is accessible via the article’s DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17170/kobra-2026011411805>.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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