

ENHANCING RESILIENCE TO SEVERE DROUGHT: WHAT WORKS?

Evidence from Mercy Corps' PRIME Program in the Somali region of Ethiopia

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Can investing in resilience mitigate the worst impacts of recurrent humanitarian crises, preserving development gains? Mercy Corps, USAID, and other major humanitarian and development actors are betting on this. Yet, to date, there has been little empirical evidence on the efficacy of a resilience approach in achieving these aims.

At the onset of the recent El Niño drought in Eastern Ethiopia in 2016, Mercy Corps initiated a unique study to rigorously measure communities' capacities to cope and recover – key forms of resilience. We compared households where resilience interventions had taken place with comparable households where they had not. The results are encouraging: they show that resilience programming enhanced households' wellbeing during the worst drought in decades.¹ The new evidence has significant implications for future donor and national government investments in resilience programming in the Horn of Africa and similar contexts frequently beset by drought and other climate-related shocks.

» SUMMARY RESULTS

In the face of the severe El Niño-related drought, households that had benefitted from PRIME fared better than other households in their:

- » *Ability to maintain sufficient food consumption*
- » *Likelihood of avoiding impoverishment*
- » *Levels of productive household assets (including mobile phones, stoves, radios)*
- » *Animal health, including experiencing fewer deaths of livestock*

El Niño: Pernicious Problem and Unique Opportunity

In 2015, one of the strongest El Niño cycles on record exposed parts of Ethiopia to the worst drought in decades. At its height, over 10 million people were in need of food aid with a value over one billion dollars.² Even as the response mounted, this humanitarian crisis enabled Mercy Corps to test the impact of its resilience programming under the Pastoralist Areas Resilience Improvement through Market Expansion (PRIME) project.³

¹ Full report forthcoming

² According to the Government of Ethiopia and humanitarian partners

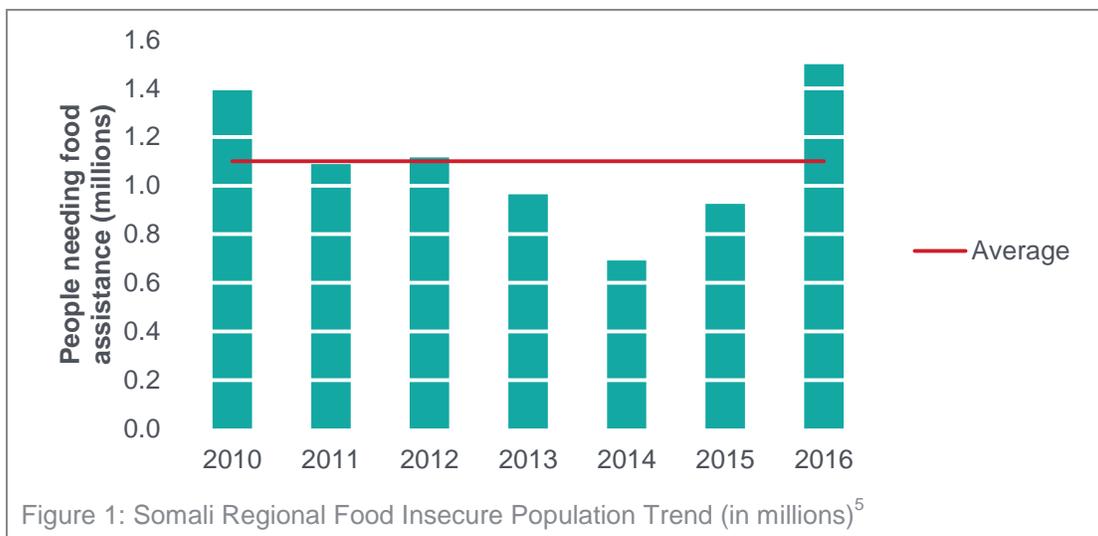
³ For more details on the PRIME program, see: <https://www.prime-ethiopia.org/>

PRIME: An Innovative Solution

The PRIME project is a five-year USAID investment financed through the Feed the Future and Global Climate Change facilities. The program is implemented by Mercy Corps in partnership with the Aged and Children Pastoralists Association (ACPA), Action for Integrated Sustainable Development (AISDA), CARE, Ethiopian Center for Disability and Development (ECDD), Haramaya University, Horn of Africa Voluntary Youth Committee (Havoyoco), Kimetrica, and SOS Sahel. PRIME is designed to improve the lives and enhance resilience of pastoralist communities in Ethiopia’s dry lands in Afar, Oromiya and Somali regional states, which are among the most drought-prone areas of the country. Begun in 2012, the project works to strengthen market systems to benefit poor and vulnerable households, and reduce their risks to the effects of climate change. This type of intervention – aimed at strengthening the broader systems that poor families rely on – is a major departure from traditional programming in the drylands of the Horn of Africa, which has mainly taken the form of handouts and direct service delivery.⁴

Research Methodology

In May 2016, Mercy Corps conducted a study focused on parts of Somali regional state that were heavily affected by the El Niño drought. Approximately 1.4 million people were estimated to be food insecure in 2016 according to the Government of Ethiopia and Humanitarian Country Team, well above the five-year average and even greater than the drought experienced in 2010/2011 (see Figure 1 for details).



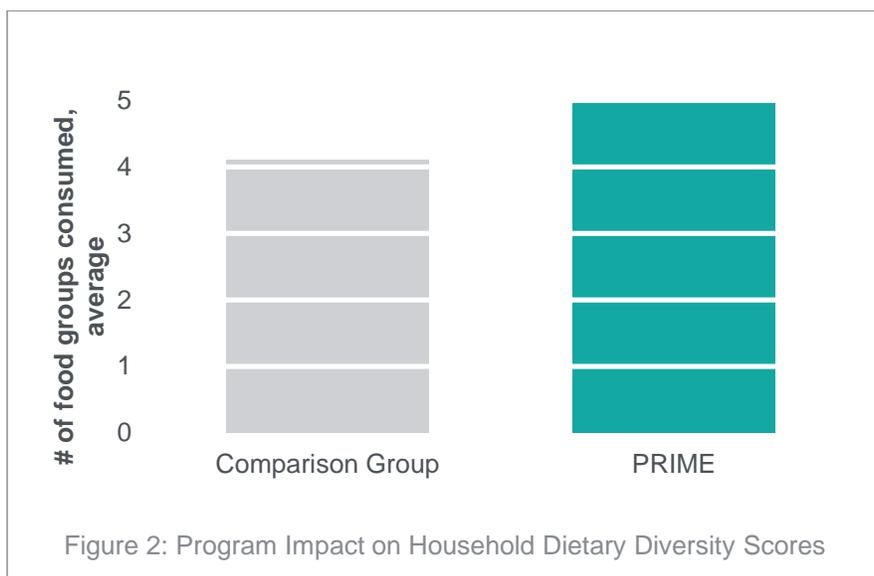
To understand the impact of PRIME’s resilience-related interventions, we collected data from four *woredas* (Districts) that were both significantly affected by drought and had also been targeted by the PRIME project. Across these *woredas*, 500 households were sampled from communities that had received support through PRIME for multiple years, and over 1,000 households were sampled from similar communities not targeted by the program. The comparison group was matched to PRIME participants such that they were statistically similar, with the exception being whether they had benefited from PRIME activities. Using data from the African Flood and Drought Monitor, our research was able to control for levels of drought exposure, so that any differences observed between the two groups could be attributed to the program.

⁴ See: Kleiman, S. (2013). Lessons for Effective Resilience Programs: A case study of the RAIN program in Ethiopia. Mercy Corps: Washington, DC. <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/lessons-effective-resilience-programs>

⁵ Adapted from: Government of Ethiopia, Ethiopia Humanitarian Country Team (2015) Ethiopia Humanitarian Requirements Document 2016. Obtained online: http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ethiopia_hrd_2016.pdf

Key Findings

- » **Enhanced food security:** Households reached by PRIME were better able to maintain sufficient food consumption vis-à-vis comparison households that were similarly affected by the drought. On average, households in PRIME target communities had a more diverse diet, **consuming nearly one additional food group per day**. This is a key indication that the program improved people’s income and/or access to markets to enable them to purchase and consume more nutritious foods even during an acute crisis.



- » **Greater assets and lower vulnerability to poverty:** PRIME interventions had a positive impact on households’ ability to maintain important household and livestock assets and avoid impoverishment in the face of the drought. The asset values (a proxy for wealth) of households in the program were 1.4 times higher than those of the comparison group. Households supported through PRIME were also four percentage points less likely to be at risk of being under the poverty line at the time of the study.⁶
- » **Better animal health and fewer livestock deaths:** Compared to the non-targeted households, PRIME beneficiaries were able to maintain healthier herds despite the severe drought conditions. They were less likely to experience animal deaths, and in particular were able to protect their breeding females, a critical component of a healthy and resilient herd. The lower animal mortality rate suggests that PRIME’s support to veterinary care and animal markets allowed households to avoid losing weakened livestock.
- » **No impacts on coping strategies:** Both PRIME and comparison group households used similar types and amounts of response mechanisms to manage the effects of the drought. The most common coping strategies include destocking animals at low prices, feeding livestock food meant for the household, unusual migration of all household members, and various forms of reducing food consumption.
- » **No impacts on ‘downstream’ shocks:** There were no differences between PRIME beneficiaries and the comparison group concerning shocks experienced, including any knock-on effects of the drought like market price shocks or animal disease. This means that PRIME did not appear to enable beneficiaries to use adaptive practices to completely avoid being affected by shocks.

⁶ Based on the Ethiopia Progress Out of Poverty Index

Recommendations

This study has demonstrated that investing in innovative, long-term resilience interventions, like PRIME, can help mitigate the worst effects of humanitarian emergencies and protect development gains in vulnerable communities. The results lend support to the efficacy of multi-year, multi-sectoral approaches aimed at strengthening systems (markets, ecological, livelihood) that enable households and communities to respond and adapt to the major shocks and stressors they face.

We therefore recommend that donors and policymakers:

- » **Increase investments in strengthening resilience in contexts experiencing recurrent crises.** Specifically, expand the amount of multi-year, flexible funding that enables programs to pursue long-term development goals and be responsive to meeting emergency needs. The US government should increase funding for key accounts that fund resilience programming, including Development Assistance, Economic Support Funds, and Food for Peace non-emergency accounts, while maintaining essential funding in lifesaving humanitarian accounts.
- » **Provide greater support to “systems approaches.”** Increase investment that can spark transformative changes in the market, ecological, and governance systems that underpin people’s ability to effectively manage shocks and stresses like drought.

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About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



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