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Policy Brief

No. 3 February 2025

Durable solutions to Somaliland's displacement crisis will require support for pastoralists

Climate change has severely impacted rural livelihoods in Somaliland, especially for pastoralists, resulting in widespread displacement. Consecutive droughts have decimated water sources and rangelands, leading to massive livestock losses and contributing to a growing displacement crisis. Over half a million people now live in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, most of them pastoralists. This policy brief argues that finding durable solutions to Somaliland's displacement crisis requires increased support for pastoralists. In the following, we provide recommendations for policies that strengthen and sustain pastoral livelihoods in the face of these challenges. Such strategies must be informed by an understanding of how the impacts of climate change are deeply intertwined with pre-existing vulnerabilities in the pastoral sector. This is also significant, as pastoralist livestock production systems are a key pillar of the Somaliland economy, supporting most of the population.

Methodology

This study is based on field research in Togdheer region (in camps in Burco and Odweyne) and in Sool region (in the camp in Caynabo), as well as interviews with key international agencies involved in programming for IDPs. Research methods included field observations, key informant interviews and focus group discussions with IDPs, government authorities (local, regional, and central), and humanitarian actors. In addition, a stakeholder workshop in Hargeisa, bringing together a group of 28 participants from all public stakeholder institutions, provided significant feedback on the study. To visualize our data, we have used GIS mapping of IDP settlement distribution sites around Burco Municipality.



Photo by SORADI. Burao IDP camp

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Project

Pastoralist Climate Change Resilience in Somaliland (PACCS)
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 Roskilde University


SORADI
Social Research and
Development Institute


PACCS
PASTORALIST
CLIMATE CHANGE
RESILIENCE IN
SOMALILAND

Key Findings

- 1** Climate change impacts are deeply linked to pre-existing vulnerabilities and marginalization of the pastoral sector, highlighting the need for policy reforms to address these issues of the sector, to ensure long-term strategic support.
- 2** Strengthening and sustaining pastoral livelihoods is a necessary component in solving Somaliland's displacement crisis.
- 3** Support for pastoralists could include providing funds for restocking, establishing grazing reserves and other types of rangeland management collaborations, and providing on-site support to prevent displacement.

The displacement crisis and pastoralist livelihood

The Togdheer region in Somaliland illustrates some of the acute vulnerabilities of pastoral communities in the face of climate change. From 2015 to 2018, and again from 2020 to 2022, consecutive droughts have decimated water sources and rangelands, leading to massive livestock losses and contributing to the growing displacement crisis. During a 2017 drought alone, Togdheer's pastoralists lost an estimate of 80% of livestock.

These losses have left many pastoralists impoverished, driving large-scale relocation as they sought survival and assistance. Recent assessments estimate that around 92,888 households (557,328 individuals) now live in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. The vast majority of the IDPs in Togdheer are pastoralists and agro-pastoralists, while the remainder includes long-term IDPs from the Somali civil wars and recent clan conflicts.

The situation in Togdheer mirrors wider patterns affecting Somaliland's socio-economic landscape in critical ways. The displacement of pastoralist households has severely disrupted the livelihoods of families who once depended on livestock and pastoral activities, diminishing their economic opportunities and rendering them increasingly poor. Beyond these personal losses, the crisis in pastoralism also poses a significant threat to the national economy, as the livestock production sector is a key pillar of Somaliland's economy and a major source of government revenue.

Moreover, displacement has intensified since the consecutive droughts began in 2015. A decade later, many pastoralists remain in informal settlements, with no sustainable solutions in sight to address their long-term displacement. As this situation becomes protracted, it appears to become increasingly difficult to restore livelihoods and transition to life beyond IDP camps. The camps often develop into more permanent settlements with their own hierarchies and governance structures, resulting in protracted but unsustainable living conditions placing significant pressure on urban areas, particularly as camps and aid access are primarily placed in the peripheries of cities.

Policy gaps

The protracted displacement crisis of pastoralists stems from the loss of key resources needed to sustain the pastoral livelihood system — i.e. livestock, land, and water — but it is also aggravated by gaps in policies, governance, aid, and institutions to help secure these resources. First, there are longstanding donor and policy biases toward reforming and settling pastoralists, prioritizing sedentary livelihoods and (for rural areas) crop production — with limited support adapted to support pastoralist livelihoods.

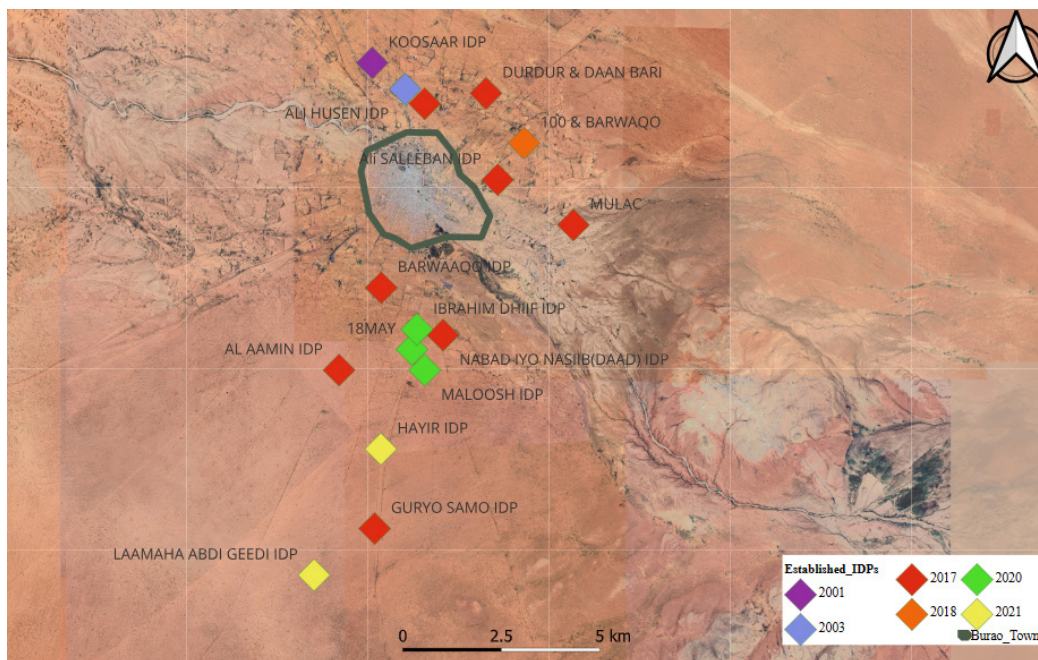
Secondly, states deemed 'fragile' tend to receive more funding for crisis and emergency responses than for prevention, and thus face barriers to climate funding that could enhance local capacities over the long term. The lack of international recognition for Somaliland adds to this hurdle, as most donor frameworks are designed at the level of Somalia, limiting tailored support despite Somaliland's stable governance. However, although Somaliland hosts conflict-related IDPs and while conflict and climate-induced displacement patterns overlap to an extent, Somaliland is not marked by large-scale armed conflict, but rather characterized by significant stability and functioning governance and government structures.

Somaliland’s general stability and existing institutions, together with the fact that climate-induced displacement is often gradual in nature (compared to conflict displacement) open opportunities for much more strategic, preventive and forward-looking policy and aid planning, including for pastoral rural livelihoods.

Urban IDP camps and pull factors

One example of unsustainable (in the long run) aid schemes is when peri-urban IDP camps become main distribution hubs for aid and relief, while rural areas lack adequate support for pastoral adaptation and relief. In this case camps can act as a ‘pull factor’ for further pastoral displacement. For example, camp-based cash transfers in urban peripheries are difficult to convert into assets for sustaining a pastoralist livelihood rooted in rural rangelands.

In some cases, as pastoralist communities join relatives and kin in camps, new settlements form—as seen in Burao, where GIS (see map) visualizes the rapid increase in camps from 2017 and onwards. This strains host communities and overextends social services, especially in prolonged displacement situations. The ongoing pull of labor away from pastoralism, without sufficient employment opportunities in urban areas, negatively impacts not only the pastoral economy but also the broader national economy.



Source: SORADI generated GIS map, Burao (2024). IDP distribution and time of establishment.

Recommendations for supporting pastoralist assets

Approaches to pastoralist IDPs often push for diversification away from pastoralism while insufficient focus has been placed on supporting pastoral systems by prioritizing the key strategic resources that sustain them. More emphasis is needed on options for pastoralist IDPs to revive their livelihood, which could also contribute to addressing Somaliland’s longer term sustainable development and economic needs. Foundations for such options do already exist and warrant greater focus.

Restocking as an element in recovery strategies for current IDPs

Restocking has been recognized as an effective asset-building intervention helping pastoralists recover from climate-induced challenges across the Horn of Africa.¹ In interviews, the strategy of restocking was highlighted as an attractive yet underexplored option for reducing displacement in Somaliland, both by current internally displaced persons (IDPs), primarily in Burco—home to the largest IDP population in Somaliland—and in Caynabo in the Sool region, and in discussions with local government authorities.

To maximize the effectiveness of these strategies, it is essential that restocking models are developed through consultation with pastoral community representatives and local government officials. Focus group discussions revealed significant motivation, knowledge, and concrete ideas about what such a scheme could entail. For instance, focus group participants suggested that to establish a basic herd

for a start-up stock, each family would need an estimated 30–40 mixed heads of sheep and goats. IDP families would have the option to remain in their current settlements, while the herd is expected to grow by about two-thirds of its original size each year through natural reproduction. To ensure the success of this restocking initiative, an additional 12-month asset protection program, which includes food-for-work, could be implemented. During this period, families could engage in climate adaptation initiatives, improve breeding practices, and enhance feed supply systems. After two to three years, these families would be positioned to revive their pastoralist livelihood and achieve self-sustainability.

Such restocking initiative could be piloted in selected households in settlements across Togdheer, Sool, and Sanaag. The Somaliland government could lead this initiative in collaboration with, and supported by, the diaspora, national business community, and international donors.

Inclusive Rangeland Management: public, pastoralist, and IDP Cooperation

Investing in rangeland rehabilitation and pasture improvement is crucial for sustainable, long-term climate adaptation for pastoralists. While support has often focused on crop-based agriculture—sometimes to the detriment of rangelands and biodiversity—experiences from Somaliland illustrate the potential of state-pastoralist rangeland management collaborations. One model, seen in the re-establishment of a grazing reserve in Aroori (Togdheer), involves regulated enclosures that restore forage, pasture, and biodiversity, providing crucial resources during droughts.

The example of Aroori and recent patterns of community-protected grazing and land management, such as village grazing lots, demonstrate that well-supported rangeland restoration and community-state land protection can significantly reduce the impact of droughts and lower vulnerability (as highlighted by recent PACCS research). Engaging pastoralist IDPs in rangeland rehabilitation initiatives could help them return to their livelihoods by providing access to revitalized pastures, rebuilding their asset base, and regaining self-sufficiency. This could support reintegration into pastoralism by offering biodiverse grazing areas that reduce reliance on aid and camp dependency.

However, land-use systems are often in tension with one another, and gaining community buy-in for enclosing land can be very challenging. Balancing these competing interests requires careful negotiation and inclusive planning, to ensure that all stakeholders benefit from land management initiatives.

Preventative on-site support

Preventing displacement should be prioritized by focusing on local climate-adaptation support to communities on-site before they are forced to move. While it can appear more cumbersome to support nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralist communities in rural areas than to provide aid in peri-urban camps, it is a significantly more sustainable approach than camp-based support. This having been said, we fully recognize the need for aid for IDPs.

Supporting people within their familiar environment allows for more efficient aid and adaptation support, as existing local structures – such as communal relationships, customary governance and relief systems, infrastructure and other resources – can serve as foundational assets. Such assets reduce the need for extensive external resources or interventions, making aid delivery more manageable and sustainable.

Flexible localized solutions – building on existing strategies

Pastoralism has adapted and transformed with wider socio-political and climate changes, and policy actors need to build on these strategies already used by pastoralists and IDPs—including strategies of combining pastoralism with other income-generating activities like small-scale farming or urban small businesses.

Our research shows that women have demonstrated particular ability to adapt to urban livelihoods, including in response to displacement from rural areas. Many have successfully started small businesses, such as selling clothing to rural communities or running milk and meat shops. Dividing households across different locations has thereby emerged as a livelihood strategy, often resulting in better educational opportunities for children and youth. Support for pastoralism and pastoralist IDPs, therefore, must remain adaptable and flexible to support existing strategies in this rapidly transforming livelihood.



Focus Group Discussion with IDP women Photo: SORADI



Focus Group Discussion in Burao Photo: SORADI

Conclusion

In conclusion, this policy brief emphasizes that addressing Somaliland's displacement crisis effectively necessitates better support for pastoralists, based on strategies that address the intersections between climate impacts and existing vulnerabilities shaping pastoral livelihood systems. Consequently, climate impacts should not be viewed merely as 'natural' or 'environmental' phenomena but as indicators of the need for policy reforms to address the underlying marginalization of the pastoral sector and the insufficient long-term strategic support it receives. Rather than focusing solely on diversification or on replacing pastoralism with alternatives, our research highlights the potential for policies that strengthen and sustain pastoral livelihoods, enabling them to adapt in the face of these challenges and changes.

1) E.g.: https://www.financialprotectionforum.org/news/16-million-pastoralists-in-the-horn-of-africa-to-benefit-from-a-regional-scheme-to-protect-0?utm_source=chatgpt.com