

Tackling food crisis in Somalia:

How resilience programming has reduced the impact of the current drought



Concern Worldwide's *Building Resilient Communities in Somalia* programme, funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), has been working to help communities withstand disasters since 2013. Drought in 2016, which has since escalated into a catastrophic nationwide food crisis, has posed a severe challenge to communities in our programme areas. However, early indications are that our resilience work has been successful in reducing the impact of the drought and supported people to better adapt to extreme conditions. Moreover, our resilience programming has helped enable a faster and more effective humanitarian response. A 'no regrets' approach to early warning – based on probabilities of the scale of the disaster rather than certainties – has enabled us to provide support to communities months before conventional humanitarian actors. And by drawing on our understanding of the communities, developed through long-term engagement, we have been able to tailor our interventions in a cost-effective way to meet their complex needs, addressing the impacts of conflict as well as drought.

Above: A farmer trained at a BRCiS Fodder Field School stands in front of surplus fodder, produced before the dry season to feed to his milk animals.

Building Resilient Communities in Somalia

Since 2013, Concern has been working in consortium with four other agencies¹ to build the resilience of people across 22 districts of southern and central Somalia.

The BRCiS² programme aims to help communities withstand and absorb the impact of disasters, such as drought and localised outbreaks of conflict, without undermining their ability to move out of poverty.

A crucial aspect of the programme is an in-built flexibility which allows it to adjust and scale up different activities, depending on the needs of BRCiS communities who play a central part in the design and implementation of the programme.

During times of relative stability, the BRCiS consortium focuses on longer term development activities, such as Disaster Risk Reduction and income-generating activities for the poorest people, but if the risk of a disaster starts to

escalate, the programme is able to change its focus to meet urgent needs.

This has been the priority of the BRCiS programme since June 2016 when weaker than usual April-June Gu rains began to place communities at heightened risk of food crisis. Since then, subsequent weak rains across Somalia have led to the most serious nationwide food crisis since the 2011 East Africa drought, putting more than 6.2 million people, half the population, in need of humanitarian assistance.

Although the regions in which BRCiS operates have been badly affected, the programme has allowed us to respond quicker than conventional humanitarian actors without existing resilience programmes.

BRCiS communities have coped better with the current crisis than many neighbouring communities.

Benefits of Early Warning Early Action

Central to the BRCiS programme is the principle of Early Warning Early Action. The potential benefits of early action are clear: it can save lives and prevent suffering, it can reduce the need for a costlier humanitarian response and protect the development gains of communities.

If we can respond quickly enough to the threat of a growing crisis – particularly a slow-onset food crisis – we stand a better chance of preventing it escalating into a disaster or reducing the impact on affected people if it does.

Interpreting Early Warning signs

Analysing the warning signs of drought is not an exact science; by the time, a fully developed picture of the needs and situation is available, the opportunity to act early has often already passed.

Donors and agencies should therefore be willing to act on the basis of probabilities rather than certainties. Responding quickly to mitigate the likely impacts of a disaster in a way which is proportionate to the probability that the disaster will occur, is highly cost-effective over the long term.

Through our BRCiS programme we use an approach which aims to strike an effective balance between gathering sufficient data to understand the developing situation, and responding as quickly as possible to people's needs.

It involves combining seasonal data from weather satellite reports³ which allows us to assess rainfall patterns, with information on other key factors which contribute to making people vulnerable.

These include factors such as access to water resources or markets, vulnerability to conflict and levels of political and cultural inequality – information which is drawn, in part, from our long-term understanding of the communities built up through the BRCiS programme.

Whilst this does not provide the degree of certainty which can be achieved by delaying response until the arrival of post-rain technical reports, we believe this approach provides a sufficiently robust basis for action.

This approach has allowed us to identify areas of growing vulnerability, which we term 'Red Flags', and deliver pre-emptive responses, months prior to conventional humanitarian actions.

“The potential benefits of early action are clear: it can save lives and prevent suffering.”

Below: People forced to leave their homes by local conflict received essential Non-Food Items ensuring they did not need to displace too far from their communities.



Tailoring our response to communities' needs

“The BRCiS programme has provided relief to 5,600 Dhamasa residents, two-thirds of the village population, and helped to prevent the twin disasters of drought and conflict from destroying the resilience of the village altogether.”

Since we began responding to warning signs in June 2016, the nature of our response has been based on an understanding of villages communities' vulnerability and needs, enhanced through the past three years of resilience programming and building upon pre-existing BRCiS structures. It includes action in three key areas:

Cash:

Our experience suggests that cash transfers function well in the parts of Somalia in which we operate. Despite the crisis, markets continue to function and food remains available for purchase.

Cash therefore enables people to acquire the food they need while stimulating local markets and livelihoods. It also helps people to retain some of their most important assets; at times of crisis, people are often forced to sell or consume the very things that can allow them to survive in the future, such as livestock or seeds for next season's planting.

When the probability of a major disaster was first seen to increase in June 2016, Concern began supplying modest cash transfers of \$30 per month to the poorest households in vulnerable villages in Gedo, with 803 households receiving \$30 per month.

In November 2016, when the subsequent October to December Deyr rains began to fail and probability of disaster increased further, Concern proportionately increased the amount to \$50 per month and doubled the number of recipient households to 1,606.

By early December it became clear that the Deyr rains had indeed failed. By this time, 20 to 40 percent of target village populations in Gedo were receiving cash support.

With wide-scale emergency funding coming into effect, the monthly cash transfer cost was handed over from BRCiS to humanitarian funders in February 2017, in total providing relief for 11,242 people and helping them to retain the household assets that will be so important to their long-term resilience.

Fodder Production:

Fodder is essential to prolonging the productivity of household milk animals during drought and therefore supports the nutritional status of the entire family, particularly children.

Under the BRCiS programme, training farmers to produce and market fodder, as well as purchasing and redistributing this to particularly vulnerable households, has proved a cost-effective response to drought.

Following the late Deyr rains, fodder prices rose out of reach of the poorest households. Concern therefore worked with farmer field schools, previously established through the BRCiS programme, to cultivate additional fodder which was then distributed to the poorest households on the basis of need.

As a result of the BRCiS programme intervention and for a cost of \$60,000, a total of 267 acres were under cultivation in time to serve the drought-affected.

This has provided a gross income of over \$350,000 to village residents during the current 2017 dry season, including 184 BRCiS-trained farmers. The nutritional impact of this will be felt by approximately 22,500 drought-affected people, 6,000 of whom are extremely poor and are receiving fodder free of cost.

Response to additional hazards:

In many parts of Somalia, people's vulnerability to drought is compounded by additional hazards, such as conflict.

The BRCiS programme has been designed to recognise and address the complexity of risk in the regions in which it operates, responding to the variety of threats people face rather than drought alone.

For example, an outbreak of fighting between Al Shabaab and Kenyan defence forces caused most of the 1,200 households of Dhamasa village to displace in late June and early July.

As a village already red-flagged on the basis of its vulnerability due to weak rains, Dhamasa had been receiving cash transfers which helped mitigate the impact of this additional shock.

Following displacement, the BRCiS programme responded with daily water trucking to Internally Displaced People (IDP) settlements and later, shelter kits to meet the additional needs of people.

Now that people have returned to Dhamasa after almost five months of displacement, cash transfers continue. In total, the BRCiS programme has provided relief to 5,600 Dhamasa residents, two-thirds of the village population, and helped to prevent the twin disasters of drought and conflict from destroying the resilience of the village altogether.

Case study

Shaalay village, Lower Shabelle region, was originally selected for the BRCiS programme due to high levels of vulnerability to food crisis, flood and drought. It is constantly threatened by outbreaks of conflict and is unable to regularly access the livelihood opportunities and aid of the closest government controlled town.

Yet following a range of activities delivered through BRCiS programme, such as farmer field schools, Infant and Young Child Feeding promotion, the construction of a new shallow well, elevated water tank and solar pumping system, the village shows signs of much greater stability.

Needs remain high and the grip of the drought could still tighten further, but the indications are that resilience programming has played a positive role in mitigating the impact of the drought, and despite the failure of the 2017 Deyr rains, their situation is one of relative stability compared to their neighbours.

A key sign of the village's resilience, compared to nearby communities, is that people from Shaalay



Above: BRCiS target village representatives meet with Concern staff to discuss disaster preparedness in advance of the 2017 drought.

have not had to displace and indeed are now starting to host IDPs from elsewhere.

Approximately 2,100 people have arrived in Shaalay, 80% of whom are from neighboring villages. Relations between villages mean that Shaalay is sharing much of its harvest with the people they host.

Impact of the BRCiS Programme

Although it is not currently possible to definitively measure the impact of the BRCiS programme⁵, our observations suggest that the villages in which BRCiS operates are faring better as a result of early response and the longer term resilience programming.

We have yet to receive a single recorded case of displacement due to drought in a BRCiS community, whereas rates of displacement in a number of villages in the surrounding area are high.

This is all the more significant as the villages under the BRCiS programme were originally chosen due to their particularly high levels of vulnerability. They now appear more stable than their neighbours and, in most cases, are hosting IDPs from neighbouring villages.

Reducing displacement, and helping those who have to displace to remain as near as possible to their communities, reduces the cost of humanitarian response, and gives people a better chance of maintaining their homes and livelihoods in the long term.



1. Cooperazione e Sviluppo (CESVI), Concern Worldwide (CWW), the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and Save the Children International (SCI)

2. *Building Resilient Communities in Somalia*

3. Produced by the Africa Flood and Drought Monitor by Princeton University

4. Such as those provided by for FSNAU/FEWSNET

5. This is due to the diversity of its resilience projects, unavailability of control group villages and the fact that the crisis is still unfolding

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