

# Designing livestock interventions for emergency situations in southern Africa

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## Background

Emergency responses to shocks that cause widespread food insecurity have largely focused on food aid and cropping interventions. Livestock are crucial to the livelihoods of many households in southern Africa but their role in food security and emergency response have not been fully understood or exploited.

Assessing livelihoods is an important component of efforts aimed at preserving assets and supporting livelihoods in emergency situations. The livelihoods framework can be used to examine the roles of livestock in household livelihood strategies and identify the links between vulnerability and livelihoods.

Understanding the links between vulnerability and livelihoods leads to a systematic identification of appropriate emergency response options. These options can guide the design and implementation of relevant and effective interventions in emergency situations.

*Income from livestock sales is an important component of household income in many parts of southern Africa, contributing over 25% of total incomes in all food security categories.*

## Major sources of vulnerability to food insecurity

Research conducted by the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) and partners in Lesotho, Malawi and Zambia aimed to assess the contribution of livestock to livelihoods and its role in risk management. The objective of the study was to identify the livelihood assets and strategies of households, taking into account differences between men and women and the contexts that translate household capabilities into livelihood opportunities. The study suggests that there are marked

differences in ownership of productive assets, in livelihood strategies and in vulnerability between men and women.

The results of the study showed that households in southern Africa are exposed to a variety of shocks with cumulative impacts that can trigger an emergency. The main factors contributing to vulnerability to food insecurity include drought, widespread crop failure, animal diseases and declining access to livestock service delivery. These factors affect all households in a community but in different ways.

## Identifying the vulnerable

The results of the study provide evidence that food secure and food insecure households exhibit different abilities to insure against risky events. This is mainly because of differences in ownership of critical assets, such as livestock, and capacity to manage risk.

Some groups were more vulnerable than others. Gender was an important factor that explained differences in vulnerability across different social groups. In general, women were often more vulnerable to food insecurity than men were across all the study sites. Women, particularly the elderly, widowed and divorced women, and female-headed households, were disproportionately represented among vulnerable groups due to lack of key assets such as land and livestock, labour constraints to cultivate their fields, and non-existent or loss of supplementary income from a partner. These marked differences in asset ownership, asset productivity, and livelihood strategies often increase the vulnerability of women to a range of shocks that force them into chronic poverty. Targeted interventions that provide safety nets and productive fall back options for such vulnerable groups would enhance the robustness of their livelihoods.

*Women and female-headed households in southern Africa are more likely to be vulnerable than the general population because they tend to have fewer livestock.*

## How households cope

Households use a wide range of informal and formal strategies to manage and cope with risks. Effective livelihood responses in emergency situations should help households preserve their livestock assets and avoid coping strategies that deplete critical assets. The outcomes differ depending on a household's level of food security. Effective emergency response options to address vulnerability to food insecurity need to be based on a clear understanding of the complexity and diversity of household capabilities, activities and circumstances that lead to specific outcomes.

Most households recover from shocks by building up and selling the assets they own and through their social networks. The more food insecure households often supplement their risk management strategies with food aid, the more food secure households use risk management strategies focusing on building up assets and diversifying activities on and off farm.

Households frequently resort to coping strategies that deplete household assets with severe consequences on their existing and future livelihood. These negative coping strategies include the distress sale of livestock when there is drought and the associated loss of access to meat and milk. Several households are unable to recover from shocks by replenishing their herds after droughts because of the high prices of livestock. Households that are food insecure, especially those headed by women with limited asset holdings are more likely to suffer from the consequences of negative coping strategies. These households tend to be among the most vulnerable and are often characterized as being in a state of chronic food insecurity.

*Loss of livestock assets often can mean rapid descent of households into chronic poverty.*

## Potential interventions

Results of the analysis suggest that effective responses in emergency situations should help households avoid coping strategies that deplete critical assets such as livestock. The likelihood that a shock will lead to an emergency situation depends on:

- the characteristics of the shock
- the status and trends in household food security before the shock
- the severity and history of threats to human life
- the likelihood of permanent negative impacts that sharply reduce the ability of households to respond to recovery

and development interventions in the short- to medium-term.<sup>1</sup>

The results of the study found that livestock play a key role in household livelihood strategies and response to risk in the study areas. Livestock were also important in *ex ante* risk management strategies and in *ex post* coping strategies. However, the role of livestock in these strategies varied across different social groups. These differences in risk response suggest that emergency interventions that help households preserve their livestock assets would have significant payoffs in addressing chronic poverty and vulnerability in southern Africa.

*Donor agencies and government response to food insecurity in emergency situations has mainly focused on food aid and cropping interventions, often ignoring livestock.*

## Recommendations

Key recommendations for designing and implementing livestock based emergency responses include:

- sound analysis of livelihoods and vulnerability, including an understanding of the roles of livestock in livelihoods, and of how livestock assets are affected by emergencies;
- identification of clear linkages between livelihood analysis and program design, clarifying the objectives for emergency responses and generating a tool kit of emergency response options;
- use of geographic and household targeting of interventions;
- focus on context-specific interventions;
- improvement in knowledge and understanding of the emergency context;
- use of monitoring and evaluation in order to learn lessons and identify issues appropriate for use in scaling up.

*Development and humanitarian agencies can build on the study results and recommended pilot interventions as a basis for the design and implementation of effective livestock based interventions in emergency situations.*

1. Hoddinott J. 2006. *A conceptual framework for appropriate emergency response options*. Working Paper. IFPRI (International Food Policy Research Institute), Washington, DC, USA.

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