

Policy Brief

Responding to Polycrisis in Ethiopia and Kenya

Summary

The spread of Covid-19 was layered on to various intersecting crises ('polycrisis'), worsening people's lives and weakening governments' responses to the pandemic. Many responses to multiple crises focus on single hazards. This brief highlights effective responses to Covid-19, drought and conflict from Kenya and Ethiopia, which may offer lessons for future policy and programming that equitably address multiple crises. It focuses on two examples of how governments and local actors have sought to strengthen people's ability to cope with multiple crises: through collaboration at different levels of governance across sectors; and strengthening resilience through water management.

Key messages

- **Coordination between stakeholders is common in responses to multiple crises – responding to complexity often involves different sectors, actions and skillsets.** Recognising that conflict and drought drive food insecurity in Ethiopia, government agencies and United Nations partners planned a single-operation approach for 2023 to address the growing needs of drought-affected areas, internally displaced people and food insecure host communities.
- **Various examples of activities targeting the water sector implicitly or explicitly respond to multiple crises, indicating the benefits that emerge from synergies.** The multi-stakeholder Ewaso Nyiro river camel caravan initiative in Kenya focuses on the water sector by responding to drought and peacebuilding. It seeks to restore the ecosystem of communities living along the river (e.g. through climate change training and lobbying government, and identifying 'peace ambassadors' to support social cohesion dialogue).
- **There is a need to contextualise polycrisis** to ensure that crisis responses are relevant to the people they seek to support and adequately consider trade-offs.
- **Governments should commit to building resilience to crises,** be ready to address them when they unfold, and adopt multi-sectoral responses.

Responding to polycrisis

Responses focus on single hazards

Covid-19 was layered onto intersecting crises (Table 1), known as ‘polycrisis’, worsening people’s lives, and weakening governments’ responses to the pandemic. Yet many responses to polycrisis continue to focus on single hazards. This could lead to less effective interventions, or create additional sources of risk and vulnerability

that cause impoverishment and destitution. For example, in Kenya resources were channelled towards combating the pandemic, including withdrawing security personnel from conflict-prone areas to help reinforce public health measures (McConnell 2021). In Ethiopia, violent conflict diverted state resources away from pandemic control, contributing to an economic crises.

Table 1: Examples of layered crises in Ethiopia and Kenya during the pandemic

Ethiopia	Kenya
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worst locust plague in 25 years • Covid-19-related disruptions to agricultural value chains • <i>‘The problems just followed one another. Two of my cattle died, and the other is not well. The drought has brought more harm to our household than the pandemic’</i> (female, Amhara, April 2021) • Violent conflict in Tigray and other regions, and internal displacement • <i>‘The price has kept on increasing due [to]... conflict in the country, Covid-19, international impact, etc.’</i> (development agent, Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples’ Region, 2022) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two consecutive below-average rainy seasons since 2020, with severe effects in arid and semi-arid regions • Massive numbers of deaths of domestic animals and wildlife due to lack of pasture and water • Political violence linked to land rights • Security challenges such as violence, looting, conflicts, livestock raids and others due to political and economic tension, as well as misinformation about the pandemic

Source: CPAN (2021) and key informant interviews.

Management of multiple crises

How have countries tackled polycrisis in ways that support people in and near poverty? This brief focuses on two examples, namely: through collaborating at different levels of governance across sectors, using evidence from Ethiopia; and strengthening resilience through a sectoral focus on water management in Kenya in response to drought and protracted conflict.

Collaboration between government and local actors to improve welfare and food security – lessons from Ethiopia

Collaborative programmes in Ethiopia have sought to bring together different actors to

“Governments should commit to adopting better institutional preparedness and building resilience to overlapping crises..”

respond to complex challenges. These efforts are increasingly finding ways to address the growing needs of drought-affected areas, internally displaced people and food-insecure host communities. Figure 1 outlines examples of collaborative multi-sectoral approaches in Ethiopia that have emerged or been scaled up in response to multiple crises.

Figure 1: Adapting existing programmes and implementing new approaches to respond to multiple crises through collaboration in Ethiopia

Adapting existing programmes	Implementing new approaches
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In Ethiopia, the fifth round of the Productive Safety Net Programme (2020–25) provides additional support for households included with the programme, specifically because of hardship caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, it stipulates that the amount of payment or grain provision should be adjusted due to inflation, thus helping address economic crises more broadly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Ethiopia Disaster Risk Management Commission, Food Security Coordination Office, Joint Emergency Operations and World Food Programme introduced a single operation approach in 2023. The programme is expected to reach more than 29 million food-insecure people affected by drought, displacement, and other crises (UNHCR 2023).

Source: Authors' own

However, various social protection efforts have been affected by crises in recent years. Implementation of lockdowns during the pandemic was challenged by the movement of people displaced by conflicts and wars. Resources were then diverted to the war in the Tigray region, and increasing numbers of people affected by displacement and Covid-19 were not adequately supported (Key informant interview). Partly in recognition of this, the single operation approach outlined in Figure 1 has emerged in an attempt to reach populations

across the country affected by displacement and other crises.

Strengthening resilience to drought as a response to multiple crises – lessons from Kenya

The Government of Kenya has also tried to put in place policies and mitigation measures to cushion people against drought and conflict in different ecosystems in the country. This has operated through actions among actors at various levels of national and subnational government. Figure 2 outlines some examples.

Figure 2: Government responses to drought and conflict during the pandemic in Kenya

<p>National-level policy framework: Kenya Vision 2030</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Through Kenya Vision 2030, Kenya is planning for drought risk management and ending drought emergencies, by which the government seeks to address drought and conflict simultaneously. This stems from a recognition that drought emergencies cannot cease unless key foundations for development in drought-prone arid and semi-arid regions are effectively addressed through infrastructure, education, health, livelihoods, and peace and security.
<p>County strategies responding to drought</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To increase production and marketing of drought-tolerant crops in semi-arid areas, several counties have adopted strategies that promote dryland crop production technologies such as conservation tillage and appropriate drought-tolerant seeds. This has helped address long-running competition over resources, which has heightened conflict. Samburu county in 2022/21 started rehabilitating disused water boreholes, building water pans to tackle water shortages and constructing watering points. The construction of the Yamo dam benefitted 64,000 families in Maralal town.
<p>Addressing underlying drivers of conflict</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The construction of the Yamo dam has directly reduced the scramble for resources and indirectly alleviated conflict associated with water scarcity and livestock theft around watering points. Alongside this, the government set aside a peace and security fund (worth 10.834bn Kenyan shillings, equivalent to US\$79.149m) for counties in arid and semi-arid regions to improve peace infrastructure.

Source: Authors' own

The annual Ewaso Nyiro camel caravan also targets drought mitigation and peace building in Kenya. The Ewaso Nyiro river passes through arid and semi-arid regions of Laikipia, Samburu, Isiolo and Garissa counties into the Merti Aquifer and Lorian Swamp in Wajir county. The aim of the camel caravan is to help restore the ecosystem of communities living along the river through climate change action, securing livelihoods and peaceful coexistence. It brings together: the government; community development organisation the Indigenous Movement for Peace Advancement and Conflict Transformation (IMPACT); nongovernmental organisation Merti Integrated Development Programme, uniting various community-based groups; community-based organisation Ewaso Nyiro North River Basin Development Authority; Isiolo Peace Link; and other stakeholders. Key informants identified a number of success stories related to the caravan. For example, the caravan has:

- Supported the development of local restoration committees through training by the Ewaso Nyiro North River Basin Development Authority, partly to create awareness of risks that people living in or around the river basin face.
- Helped lobby the government for ecosystem conservation and restoration.
- Contributed to identifying peace ambassadors to link communities, civil society and the state – these ambassadors are trained in methods of conflict resolution and conflict monitoring.
- Engaged in social cohesion dialogues to support informal conflict mediation and increase collaboration among ethnic groups living along the river, which culminated in regular political dialogue between county

leaders along the river – as a result of these efforts, in 2021 a peace accord was formulated between the Ingeysi Maasai and the Samburu, resolving protracted conflict between the two ethnic groups through traditional conflict resolution mechanisms and the involvement of peace ambassadors.

In another example, the Department of Environment, Water Resources and Energy and Special Programs of Samburu county government in collaboration with IMPACT undertook community-managed disaster risk reduction training for grazing and peace committees, Nyumba Kumi Initiatives (a model of community policing launched by the government), conservancy grazing coordinators, village councils of elders, village administrators and assistant chiefs. The training was intended to strengthen participants' capacities to assess hazards affecting their villages, and to come up with contingencies and community disaster risk reduction plans.

Engaging peace committees and village leaders in small-scale projects to strengthen resilience in the face of drought helped ensure that disaster risk responses were integrated into conflict resolution and peace-building plans. This included emergency water supply provision, rehabilitation of boreholes, provision of relief food and handwashing stations.

“Overlapping multiple crises require coordinated and innovative approaches that can address complexity in the medium to long term.”

Policy recommendations

The examples presented above highlight the need to build the resilience of populations as a cornerstone of effective long-term responses to multiple crises. Key lessons that speak to potential application of these experiences in other countries are outlined below.

Key lessons

Strengthen contextualisation of polycrisis – Chronic Poverty Advisory Network research suggests that in both countries, rural and pastoral communities have little knowledge and limited experience of Covid-19. Instead, in the context of broader food insecurity and conflicts, lockdowns were more damaging to livelihoods and people's safety than the virus itself. The lesson is that governments need to assess their own contexts, categorise them according to their severity, and respond accordingly in consideration of trade-offs. It is necessary to localise responses to global crises.

Develop multi-sectoral, multi-stakeholder responses – part of the challenge has also been the absence of a coordinated response to polycrisis. In Kenya, drought was left to the National Drought Management Authority, locust infestation to the Ministry of Agriculture and the National Environment Management Agency, and the response to the Covid-19 pandemic was multi-sectoral, but implemented separately by the Ministries of Health and Interior Security. In Ethiopia, the Ministry of Health established a national Covid-19 Task Force, including a Clinical Advisory and Multi-sectoral Team Task Force, which did little to integrate with conflict or drought responses.

Pre-emptively build resilience – overlapping multiple crises require coordinated and innovative approaches that can address complexity in the medium to long term. Governments should commit to adopting better institutional preparedness and building resilience to overlapping crises, for individuals as well as systems, and be ready to address them when they unfold. Part of this preparedness is at local level, where response mechanisms can be tailored to the local context.

“It is necessary to localise responses to global crises”

Further reading

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Authorship

Written by Yisak Tafere (Young Lives), Karinten Nashipai (IMPACT Trust) and Vidya Diwakar (CPAN/Institute of Development Studies). This brief was commissioned through the Covid Collective based at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and is funded by the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).

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Institute of Development Studies, Library Road, Brighton, BN1 9RE, United Kingdom. T +44 (0)1273 606261 W ids.ac.uk

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