Resilience of Ethiopian Communities: Measure, Understand and Act

Wood for construction extracted from grazing areas. Photo contributed by Gary Burniske.

Community resilience to violent conflict is fundamental to prevention and reconciliation, particularly when facing recurrent shocks. *But how do we measure the resilience of a community? Further, how can we support a community's resilience?* Ethiopia is challenged by recurring extreme weather events, forced migration, famine, and violent conflicts, often happening simultaneously. Ethiopian actors, supported by the international community, are building resilience to alleviate suffering, but more can be done, and better. To enhance the effectiveness of development assistance, measures of community resilience that are based on local lived experience and are scientifically established can be incorporated into program development.

MEASURING RESILIENCE IN COMMUNITIES

The project aimed to co-design a framework for assessing community resilience focusing on (a) a complex system of conflict shocks and community-level vulnerability factors, differentiated by gender and age groups, (b) how community level components and connections show capacities for responding to shocks, and (c) current capacities for sustainable peacebuilding and conflict resolution.

The project team has a history of working with local communities on conflict prevention and post-conflict reconciliation in Ethiopia. The team's prior work in Ethiopia shows that violent conflict shocks are nestled in a complex system of recurring shocks and factors. To uncover the information needed to design a framework for assessing community resilience, the team held focus group discussions in two woredas affected by recurring shocks, which informed the design of an in-depth survey which was administered to 750 participants across age groups, gender, and occupation.

Key Takeaways

Implement measures to **support locally driven community resilience strategies** building on existing strengths of communities.

Consider the **interconnectedness of different types of shocks** (e.g., conflict, climate, economy).

Consider how **groups experience various types of shocks differently** when developing programs.

Strengthen the networks of women in conflict-affected communities.

Build stronger relationships between **mistrusted or marginalized groups** and community members.

CONTEXT

The sites of research, the **Babile and Gursum woredas in the Somali region**, are prone to drought and the population suffers from food and water insecurity. For instance, year after year of inadequate rainfall for the past five years have left communities without sufficient food reserves. This follows a locust infestation and the drought of 2016—worsened by El Niño— which affected over 100,000 people living in the Fafan zone, and the Babile woreda was one of the four worst affected woredas in the zone.

Political violence in Somali region (April 2018-April 2021)
Source: Ethiopia Peace Observatory,
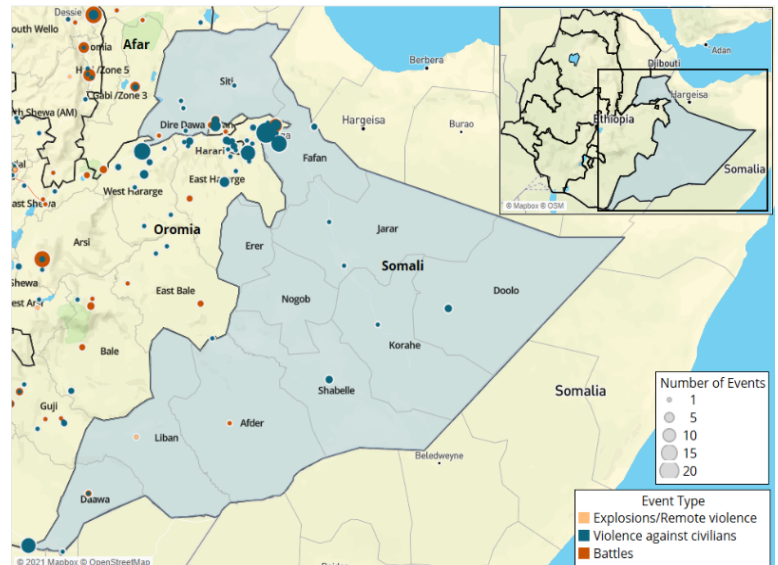https://epo.acleddata.com/somali/

The movements of agro-pastoralists across regional state boundaries, both to and from Somali regional state, take place through these woredas. The woredas are thus the sites of **intense competition over resources** such as land, water, grazing and farming areas between communities. They are also the **battleground in the conflicts** between the neighboring communities.

WHAT WE LEARNED

The conflict ecosystem in the northwestern Somali region is complex and dynamic. Environmental, economic, political, and historical factors within and surrounding the communities contribute to this. Compounding this complexity is an interdependent system of shocks (e.g., drought, conflict) that community members of different demographic and social groups experience and perceive differently.

→ The conflict ecosystem in the Somali region is complex and dynamic. It is related to many factors.
→ These communities have developed their own systems, resources, and capacities for adapting to conflict and other shocks.
→ Our research findings reveal a locally driven resilience system that is grounded in a web of local (community level) relationships.

Community members are dependent on each other, and they trust local (community level) actors more than higher level institutional actors. We found that locally driven processes exist and are utilized by community members: (a) local processes for preventing conflict and addressing resource shortages; and (b) local ways of enforcing rules.

PROGRAMMING RECOMMENDED, CONSIDER THESE FINDINGS

The research findings support the following recommendations for programming.

1. **Include measures to support communities in preparing for and responding to different types of shocks as they are likely to continue.**
    Although individual households may show the capacity to adapt to shocks, a resilient community depends upon the mutually supportive practices between and among households, as well as upon broader institutional actors. Further, relationships and flows which exist beyond the boundary of a given community (e.g., youth's migration, diaspora) can act as strengths or weaknesses for community resilience. Supporting community efforts for building the absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities of communities requires considering local mechanisms for conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Additionally, programming should prioritize broader system-level solutions to address underlying vulnerabilities that contribute to shocks, such as poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation.

Water tanker filling community barrels.
Photo contributed by Gary Burniske.

2. **Consider the interconnectedness of shocks, such as conflict, climate change, economic instability, and vulnerabilities faced by communities.**
    Programming should take a multi-sectoral and holistic approach that considers the multiple shocks and vulnerabilities faced by communities. Our study participants noted that conflict shocks are interconnected with a range of ecological, social, economic, and historical factors. One way to address this interconnectedness is to integrate peacebuilding interventions with other development sectors such as disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation, and livelihoods. By doing so, programming can address the root causes of conflict and violence, while also promoting resilience in the face of different types of shocks.

3. **Recognize that different demographic and social groups are experiencing conflict and other types of shocks differently and to target them accordingly.**
    Programming should be tailored to specific needs and experiences of different social groups. This may include targeted interventions such as youth-led initiatives that specifically address the needs and perspectives of young people in conflict-affected communities or programs which aim to reduce the tension surrounding limited resources between internally displaced people and host community members.

4. **Strengthen the informal organizing and networks of women in conflict-affected communities.**

Women's informal organizing in particular plays a crucial role in exchanging support when resource shortage needs to be addressed. Women participants as well as agropastoralists and traders in our study reported a large proportion of women in their support network. Capacities for community resilience can be enhanced by supporting women-led initiatives, such as cooperatives or community-based organizations, and providing them with resources and training to enhance their leadership skills and organizational capacity. Additionally, programming efforts should address the underlying gender inequalities and barriers that prevent women from fully participating in community-level decision-making processes and accessing resources.

5. **Address the underlying reasons for the mistrust toward social groups, and work towards building stronger relationships between them and other community members.**

In the two woredas, several social groups and institutional actors such as farmers, internally displaced people, and federal government were reported to be less trusted. The difference found between the two woredas indicates that trust relationships might be embedded in broader social, historical, and environmental factors. Opportunities for interaction across social groups could potentially be valuable for peacebuilding. This can be done by creating opportunities for dialogue and collaboration between these social groups and other members of the community.

6. **Prioritize the importance of locally driven community resilience strategies and mechanisms and build on existing capacities and strengths of communities.**

Communities have developed a locally driven resilience system that is grounded in a web of community level relationships. Traditional leaders such as religious leaders, sultans and ugases, and community leaders were highly trusted by study participants in their capacity to deal with conflict and other shocks. Participants mentioned various informal ties – family and relative, friend, neighbor, elder, religious leader, and local administrator – as sources of support when they need resources. Programs should engage with and support such informal and formal institutions, and work with them to develop context-specific community-led solutions that are inclusive of all social groups. This can include strengthening the traditional money-saving systems, cultivating informal support networks, and promoting community dialogue to resolve conflicts.

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