Investing in Resilience Helps Families Find Hope in the Face of Drought

Drought is a perennial feature of the Horn of Africa. For families who live in this region of East Africa, it means dealing with major shocks regularly—shocks that make it difficult to ever really escape poverty, despite their best efforts.

Many make a living as farmers and pastoralists, relying on the earth and the skies for income and food. When the rains don’t come, livestock and crops die. As families face this hardship year in and year out, they lose their ability to bounce back and have to turn to outside assistance to survive.

The odds are stacked against countries that regularly have to deal with drought, but they are shifting. Feed the Future is helping vulnerable families break this cycle of hunger and poverty.

A range of development activities in areas of recurrent crisis like the Horn of Africa are helping bring about lasting change and making it possible for families to escape poverty for good. Results are beginning to emerge and point to positive changes in areas reached by these activities.

Resilience Amid Drought

Drought is intensifying once again in the Horn of Africa. Millions of people in the region are at risk of starvation. Food and water prices are rising. The crisis is straining national governments, the international humanitarian response community, and neighboring countries, and shows no signs of letting up.

But in countries like Kenya and Ethiopia, proactive drought management measures—put in place after the drought and resulting food crisis of 2011—have enabled early response to recent droughts and worsening conditions, preventing the situation from becoming as dire as it could be.

In 2016 in Ethiopia, Feed the Future’s investments to build resilience helped the country mitigate drought. During that
drought, Feed the Future regularly collected data from households in areas reached by resilience programs. What it found was promising: Among households that experienced the most severe drought conditions, those in communities reached by comprehensive resilience programs experienced a minimal decline (4%) in their food security, while other households declined significantly (30%).

![Diagram showing change in food security vs. drought severity](image)

Comprehensive resilience programs are helping households like these improve their health and human capital as well as helping to expand economic opportunities both in and outside of agriculture and strengthen governance and local institutions so they can better manage shocks. This is a smart investment: Every $1 spent on resilience will result in a $2.9 return over 20 years, according to a U.K. study.

To help households manage risks, Feed the Future helps them diversify into more resilient crops and livestock, accumulate assets savings, and purchase insurance to get through the hardest times. The initiative also helps people step out of agriculture into alternative livelihoods that can hold the key to a less uncertain future.

**Better Prospects for a Brighter Future**

Nim’an Yusuf is one such individual looking toward a better future. A grant from USAID helped him start a business with some friends making and selling chairs in Eastern Ethiopia. Through it, they’re building the skills they need to secure even better jobs later on. “Now I see a bright and better future as a qualified worker and I am forming my own enterprise in the short run,” he said.

Tigist Tesfaye is dreaming big too. After attending a USAID training, she partnered with her husband to start a small business that will provide greater income and stability for their family.

A Feed the Future scholarship program in Ethiopia helped Tigist and Nim’an attend classes at local vocational training centers, where they, along with more than 1,000 other students across Ethiopia’s lowlands, are building vital entrepreneurial and financial skills for in-demand jobs. They’re learning the skills necessary to work in non-livestock trades such as woodwork, machine operation, construction, and auto mechanics. A more secure future for them has meant transitioning out of pastoralism, which is highly vulnerable to drought. Today, they are finding and creating opportunity where there once was none.

What’s more, the scholarship program is leading to systems-level change. It has empowered local technical colleges to respond to shifting labor demands. As the job market shifts, young people in Ethiopia are able to get the training they need to change with it—and make a living that gives them the financial freedom to dream big.

To date, 200 students from the program have already secured jobs or have started their own businesses. For them, this
makes the difference between living in a cycle of poverty and being on a path to a more hopeful future.

While droughts in Ethiopia and across the Horn of Africa may be a perennial fact of life, poverty doesn’t have to be. Coupled with leadership and investment from partner country governments, development programs can help families, communities and countries build resilience to future hardships.

Investing in resilience now makes long-lasting food security possible, even when drought strikes.

The success stories above are from the Pastoralist Areas Improvement through Market Expansion (PRIME) project, a USAID-funded effort under Feed the Future. Led by Mercy Corps in partnership with international and local partners, PRIME is helping vulnerable households increase their incomes and enhance resilience through market connections in Ethiopia's Afar, Oromiya and Somali regions. For additional information on the data above, please see this fact sheet.

Read More:

- Resilience in the Face of Drought in Ethiopia: New Evidence
- Resilience at USAID: 2016 Progress Report