

GENERATION EL NIÑO:

LONG-TERM IMPACTS ON

CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING

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The 2015 El Niño episode caused drought across large parts of eastern, southern and central Ethiopia. Failed *belg* and delayed/erratic *kiremt* rains caused acute and widespread crop failure, asset depletion and food insecurity. Children were amongst the most vulnerable to the 2015 El Niño drought, and their well-being was affected across numerous indicators. The episode was neither unfamiliar, nor unpredictable, being a severe iteration of a natural climatic phenomenon affecting Ethiopia and the wider Horn of Africa. In general Ethiopia experiences significant variability in rainfall, and research suggests that the country is experiencing further warming trends driven by climate change (USGS and USAID, 2012). These characteristics and trends point towards a likelihood of recurrent drought in future decades, badly afflicting certain parts of the country whose populations are dependent on rain-fed agriculture and/or pastoralist ways of life. Persistent drought episodes will place millions of children at risk in terms of their long-term well-being and future development. To place children on positive, long-term development trajectories, it is critical to ensure children's needs and aspirations are integrated within a clear strategic framework of resilience-building that provides a shared reference point for humanitarian and development efforts.¹

A long-term perspective: children's well-being and resilience

A long-term focus is important since children's well-being not only matters in the "now" but also for their "well-becoming" into adulthood (Tafero and Woldehanna, 2012).

Irreversible capability failures later in life, and dependency in adulthood, can be influenced by experiences in childhood (such as acute or chronic malnutrition, violence and erratic school attendance). At the same time, childhood represents a life stage where children's future capabilities can evolve in different ways – for example, through childhood learning/skills development (Comim et al., 2011).

Children are defined as all individuals under the age of 18, in line with the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Ethiopian Family Code. Childhood reflects a diverse range of experiences, expectations and lifestyles.

¹ The qualitative driven research informing this brief was undertaken between August and October 2017 across Afar, Amhara, Oromia, SNNPR and Tigray. A total of 649 respondents (adults and children, male and female) at regional level and 21 key informants at federal level informed the research through focus group discussions, key informant interviews and household case studies. Woredas and kebeles were purposively sampled to include pastoralist, agricultural and agro-pastoralist sites that were amongst the 'worst affected' by the El Niño drought in 2015.

Children at the fore of immediate impacts...

Children’s well-being was clearly compromised as a short-term result of the drought. Crop failure resulted in an immediate reduction in the amount of self-cultivated foods and income earned from selling cash crops in agricultural and agro-pastoralist *kebeles*, and lack of animal feed in pastoralist and agro-pastoralist *kebeles*. The frequency, size and dietary diversity of meals was affected – with chronic hunger impacting on children’s attendance and performance at school. Children (between 7 and 12 years) in Tigray stated: “*we had hunger every day*”, and there were reports of critical nutritional outcomes across Ethiopia’s eastern, central and southern regions. Livestock herds were sharply reduced through death and destocking. There were major impacts on water availability for domestic use, as water sources (natural and piped) dried up. Thirst, alongside dry, cracked and itchy skin conditions resulted from reduced water availability.

Resilience, comprising social, political, material and economic aspects, reflects the capacity of people to anticipate, absorb and adapt to shocks without long-lasting development consequences (Bahadur et al, 2015).

Cycles of livelihoods decline

A lack of resilience has serious implications for children’s long-term well-being. When a household is unable to maintain its livelihoods base, the negative coping strategies undertaken (e.g. migration, labour, withdrawal from school) influence long-term threats to familial unity, children’s safety, as well as social and human capital. (See Figure 1.)

As yet, many households have been unable to recover from the severe drought in 2015-16, and are highly unlikely to be able to absorb future shocks, climatic or otherwise. Indeed, restricted consumption patterns were retained in some households to cushion against future crises. In the absence of real resilience, this cycle is likely to spiral, leaving households and especially children increasingly vulnerable.

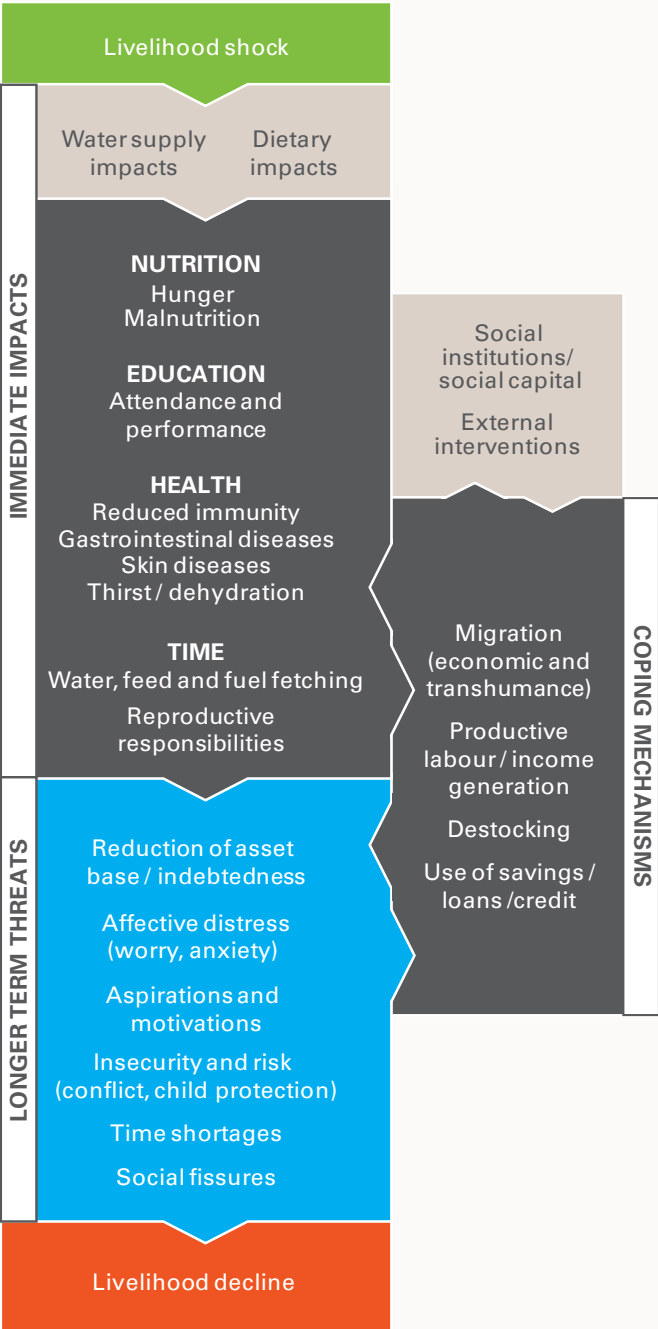
“In our age we know that our families had many cows and the milk supply was quite enough. Nevertheless, in recent years because of the successive drought we lost majority of our cows and now depend on goats as main milk sources.” (Afar, Tirtira kebele, Girls 13-18).

Intensified coping: migration, transhumance and work

Intensifications or transformations of existing coping strategies were influenced by livelihood orientation – as well as being mediated by external factors and interventions. Broadly, the drought increased children’s participation in work, with implications for educational attainment and human capital accumulation in the long-term.

FIGURE 1:

Cycles of livelihood decline in the context of shocks



Increases in economic migration (in many cases a long-standing tradition), saw older boys (13-18) seeking work in nearby towns, large cities and the Gulf, and expanded participation of younger boys (7-12). In pastoralist communities, transhumant journeys were undertaken by older boys (13-18) and their fathers. Distances travelled in search of water and pasturelands were longer. Water collection increased in duration and distance, with trade-offs in the time use of women and girls, who were also exposed to potential abuse along the route. Migration lasted longer and children were exposed to poor treatment, whilst prolonged absences of mothers and older sisters (fetching water) saw younger children (7-12) left at home for longer periods.

"I fear for the drought to return back. I am afraid that my aspiration will be discontinued by the decision of my parents. I fear my parents will marry me and discontinue my education."
(Afar, Addu, Older girl)

Exacerbating deficiencies: capabilities, education and aspiration

For many children, dreams and aspirations centred on escaping the hardships and grinding realities of *kebele* life, to become urban-dwellers with white-collar jobs, or to train as doctors and teachers and return to serve their communities in this capacity. Yet, this was articulated alongside sadness, fear and worry about the future – exacerbated by what drought implied for the decisions households faced. Children (7-18) expressed a general sense of disempowerment and lack of agency in determining their future life courses.

Indeed, despite school feeding programmes being implemented and widely reported to be successful in increasing enrolment, immediate impacts and coping strategies had negative impacts on school attendance and drop-outs, especially among older boys (13-18) who often did not re-join.

In all sites, there was a tradition of girls leaving school prematurely to get married. Drought, in some cases, resulted in the postponement of marriages to avert economic outlay and due to the migration of older boys. Yet, following the drought, early marriage was resumed, posing a threat to girls' life choices and educational opportunities, with older girls (13-18) not returning to school.

"Sometimes there is conflict...if loss of peace is coupled with loss of resources, we wouldn't have existed. If things continue to get worse, you start to hate yourself, so you hate everybody else."
(Oromia, Faji Gole, Father)

Social capital, solidarity and recovery

Social capital was an important factor in enabling households to cope and/or recover (especially in pastoralist *kebeles*). At the same time, social capital was considered to be weakening due to strain placed upon mechanisms of reciprocity and trust by shocks and poverty, and as a result of lack of resources and migration at a community level. Security concerns between clans revolved around conflict and competition over resources, which increased as a result of drought.

In agricultural and agro-pastoral *kebeles*, children were increasingly "urban" in terms of their aspirations, attitudes and activities. This, along with trends of migration and industrialisation, contributed to feelings of social isolation and a perception that traditional networks were dissolving.

Conclusions and implications for policy and programming

It is critical to take a long-term perspective on how to reduce vulnerability and "drought proof" human and socio-economic development. A child-focused perspective should take into account children's particular needs, contexts, developmental trajectories and aspirations. Bridging the traditional division between "development" and "humanitarian" activities, within institutions and policies, would improve coordination and efficiency of programming and facilitate learning on innovations and best practices developed in each (e.g. crisis modifiers). This could provide a context for transformative interventions that save lives and – more fundamentally – build the conditions for sustained well-being and resilience to future crises.

An approach to resilience should be sensitive to the nature of risks faced and to the dynamic nature of the socio-economic fabric and trajectories of rural and urban communities, taking account of children's contexts, realities and perspectives.

Strengthen institutional and strategic foundations for child-sensitive disaster risk management (DRM)

Supporting a paradigm shift towards DRM requires an integrated approach to delivering a cycle of actions from risk prevention and risk reduction, through to response and recovery. Pre-arranged systems for financing disaster response are an important element of a DRM strategy, and options such as risk insurance at micro, meso or macro level could be considered within an overall strategy based on risk layering.

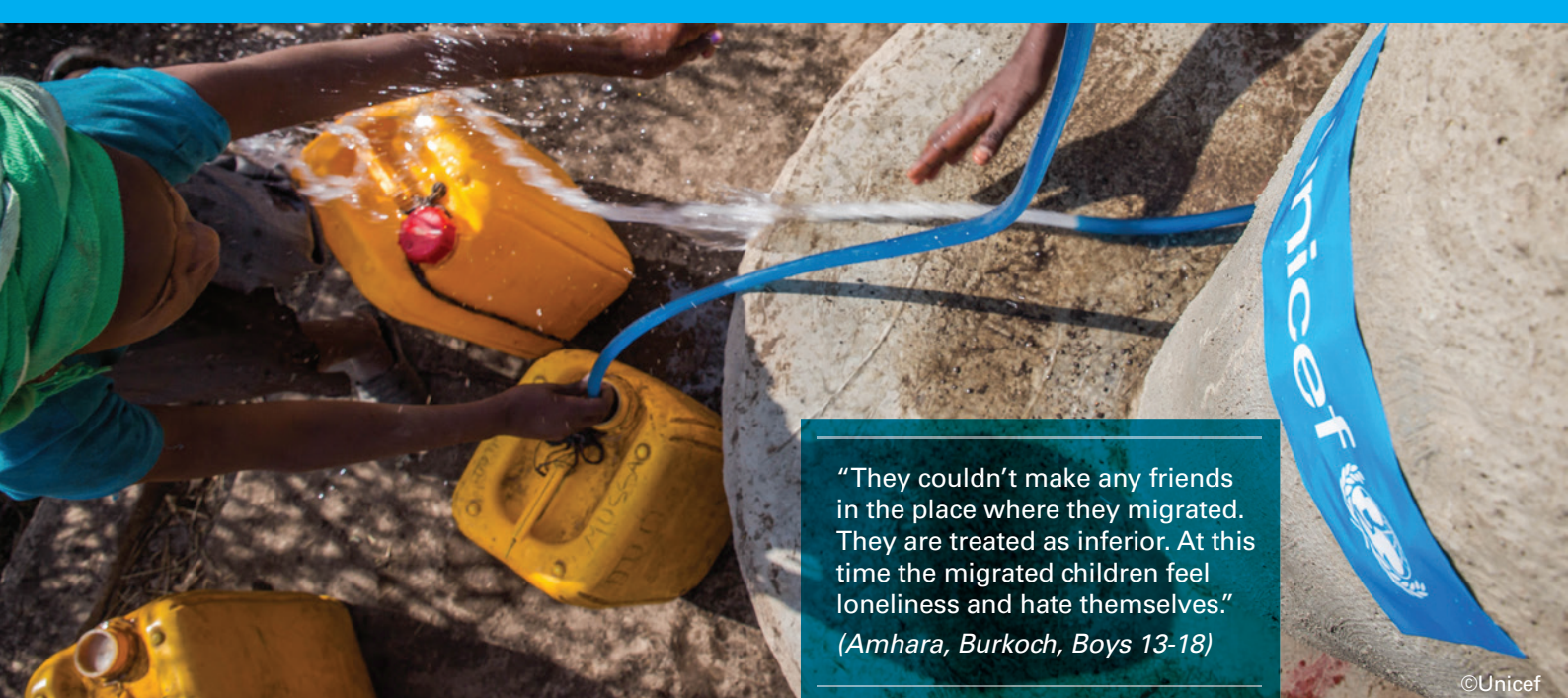
Develop a comprehensive strategy for building children's resilience across sectors

Ideally anchored in government and aligned with disaster-risk, child specific and sectoral strategies, a resilience strategy would provide the framework for development partner alignment. Dialogue which acknowledges the reality of shifting populations and changing landscapes, should be used to develop understanding of the implications of resilience for the national policy framework relating to children.

"Drought is lack of access to food, it is absenteeism from school, shortage of grain from home and buying food from market, it means shortage of water, it means lack of rain, it is eating only once a day"

(SNNP, Maddo Mukanekka, Young Child)





“They couldn’t make any friends in the place where they migrated. They are treated as inferior. At this time the migrated children feel loneliness and hate themselves.”
(Amhara, Burkoch, Boys 13-18)

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Sectoral considerations include:

Nutrition and health: alignment of nutrition with climate proofing and agricultural interventions, support to the institutionalisation of school feeding (in line with the National School Health Nutrition Strategy), and interventions to support children at key ‘nutrition windows’ into adolescence should be incorporated into development planning and budgets.

Education: promotion of the role schools play as key ‘convergence-points’ for children’s wellbeing during drought, through nutrition, child protection, WASH, education and skills training interventions; encouragement for these interventions to be put in place before drought; support to efforts/advocacy for flexible education – including provision of services away from children’s home-base (recognising migration/transhumance patterns); and support for the provision of school materials.

WASH: support for interventions that “drought proof” water supply, whilst considering the sustainability of the entire water table; awareness raising and support for hygiene and sanitation interventions; and analysis to underline the gender sensitivity of WASH.

Child protection: support to campaigns that shift norms (e.g. around marriage); advocacy to mainstream child protection across sectoral strategies and interventions, as well as to close the gap in terms of considering livelihoods, resilience and child protection. Strengthening of local institutions and community based mechanisms, alongside broader sensitisation, to understand and respond to issues.

Design strategies and interventions that build skills, contacts and support for youth employment

Industrialisation and increasing urbanisation requires efforts to strengthen the quality of technical and vocational training to equip youth with the skills required to develop secure livelihoods, including links with decent employment and non-formal learning. Further, core skills development from an early age (primary) should support children to find information about options, requirements and support for their futures.

Support mechanisms that build social capital and strengthen urban and rural social institutions

The importance of social capital for resilience and recovery reinforces the need for non-conventional approaches (e.g. to water management and community savings/loan schemes), that draw on existing social structures but take into account a youth population whose outlooks are increasingly urban and open to migration.

“One night we had a very small amount of food for dinner and our eldest son was not happy for that and he complained and said, ‘I wish one of us (from the family) to be eroded by the flood in order that the number of hands competing for limited food is decreased’...I [the mother] responded shouting, ‘if somebody is to be flooded, I wish it to be you’. Then he became angry and disappeared in the morning. I still regret my response.” (Tigray, Adishum Bereket, Mother)

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