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## System failure – time to reboot?

Taking a systems perspective to the problems of  
timely response to crises in the Horn of Africa

A report on lessons learnt from RELPA/PACAPS work  
on Early Response in the Horn of Africa  
2007-9

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September 2009

**RELPA**  
REGIONAL ENHANCED LIVELIHOODS  
IN PASTORAL AREAS

**PACAPS**  
PASTORAL AREAS COORDINATION,  
ANALYSIS, AND POLICY SUPPORT

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**The Pastoral Areas Coordination, Analysis and Policy Support (PACAPS) project is implemented by the Feinstein International Center of Tufts University, under USAID grant number 623-A-00-07-00018-00. The early warning and early response components of the project are supported by FEG Consulting.**

The author's views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Agency for International Development, the United States Government or Tufts University.

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## (iii) INTRODUCTION

The RELPA (Regional Enhanced Livelihoods in Pastoral Areas) programme, a two-year USAID funded initiative working regionally in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia, has just come to a close. One of its components was “Pastoral Areas Coordination and Policy Support” (PACAPS). One objective of PACAPS was to improve both timeliness and appropriateness of humanitarian response in protecting the livelihoods of populations living in the border region of the Mandera Triangle. This paper summarises the project’s experience in Early Response (ER). During the project’s two-year life, an understanding of the underlying problem preventing effective ER changed. This led, at the project’s end, to a very different approach to improving ER. The new approach is one that moves beyond providing a technical fix to individual components of ER but instead works at the systems level in order to improve the functioning of the ER system as a whole.

### PART 1: Diagnosis of the Problems in Early Response

#### i) A Technical Diagnosis of the Problems in Early Response

ER is a response system that for the “early” part to be functional, three elements must be in place: (i) Early Warning (EW) of a crisis; (ii) Contingency Plans (the “what” to do); and (iii) Preparedness Capacity (the “how” to respond). Over the last twenty years, EW systems have been technically refined and new systems established. Similarly, inter-agency contingency plans are increasingly used for coordination at local level in both Ethiopia and Kenya (at woreda<sup>1</sup> and district level). Nonetheless, weaknesses in all elements are apparent.

**Early Warning:** The key problem in EW is that the message often does not trigger a timely response. In part the fault lies in the message which warns of crises but does not provide an analysis of what “being on time” for livelihood protection would actually look like. According to this diagnosis, PACAPS would work with EW partners and implementing agencies (IAs) to improve their skills in livelihood analysis in order to make better decisions about when and how to respond.

**Contingency Planning:** The key problem in contingency planning is that too much, rather than too little, is being invested in contingency planning. Time is spent in training, in planning workshops and in writing lengthy plans.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, plans are often written for very generic contingencies – ‘drought’, ‘flood’, and ‘conflict’ – in the event of which various projects would be implemented. Most worryingly, contingency plans did not detail the series of steps that is required to be ready for action (‘preparedness capacity’). Just as importantly, plans rarely gave responsibility to any identified person or organisation for action. Finally, budgeting lacked any explicit rationale for the scale of planned interventions, either in relation to estimated needs or to the funds likely to be available.

#### **Box 1: Why are contingency plans rarely helping people plan for contingencies?**

Many contingency plans across Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia are long documents with a great deal of information, but they often do not include important elements that would help speed up response in the case that the contingency actually occurred. Many plans lacked many or even all of the following:

<sup>1</sup> for simplicity, woredas in Ethiopia will be referred to as Districts.

<sup>2</sup> An analysis of their common strengths and weaknesses of the contingency plans of agencies and of districts from across Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia was conducted in early 2008 at PACAPS ER Workshops in Nairobi and Addis.

- clear triggers for deciding when to implement
- clear criteria for the programme to be needed on the ground\*
- anticipated calendar months for implementation
- indicators that need to be monitored and how this will affect start or start-up\* dates
- rationale for the interventions
- impact targets
- justification or rationale for the proposed scale
- an overall strategy to which the various planned interventions were to contribute
- a clear link to budgets likely to be available – are the plans realistic?
- specific actors given specific responsibilities for which they could be held accountable
- a link to the prevailing situation, what was most expected or feared
- reference to the prevailing, expected or feared state of issues such as conflict, freedom of movement, etc. as well as discussion of specific locations that would need most/least help
- references to – and predictions about – what was going on outside the area, e.g., movement of livestock in or out.
- a link to an assessment of the degree of help needed (if people needed livelihood support to protect their herds or to survive, how much?).

The gap between the plan and action was found in other ways too. Activities were not related to an explicit overall strategy that agencies in the district had decided to adopt, making plans a patch-work of the various projects that each individual agency had proposed.

**Box 2: Why strategy matters**

Area plans are usually the sum of individual IA plans and not the result of a shared strategy. This was illustrated in a cross-border workshop in Mandera, where the various IAs in one district in Somalia were planning for possible rain failure. One agency was planning to support the opening up of new pastures, currently unavailable to cattle because there was no water there. Providing water would increase the grazing potential, and could be an attractive project to any donor. Other agencies plans were based on the belief that it was best to encourage animals to stay out of the District for as long as possible, so that this untouched pasture could be kept as a last resort for when livestock finally returned after all other options failed. Had the agency that wanted to truck water gone ahead it would have totally undermined the strategy of everyone else. This surely was the kind of discussion that contingency planning should stimulate, and yet it had clearly never been raised when they wrote their plan.

**Preparedness Capacity:** Delays caused by the need for multiple assessments or waiting for a Government declaration of emergencies are well known. Delays also occur after a decision has been taken to start a project due to inefficiencies in IA's early response procedures. See page 14 - 16.

The key to improving these three elements (the EW-ER link; contingency plans and preparedness capacity) seemed to be to “find the right tool” - one tool that could be used both in EW and in response planning. This tool would provide the basis for real planning which is related to real time (not generic contingencies) and real livelihoods. To promote real planning, **the Crisis Calendar** was introduced as an effective tool to address limitations in planning and its weak link to early response. Part 2 elaborates on how the calendar was used.

ii) **Beyond technical problems: looking at how the system works**

Our first diagnosis was that we needed to enhance preparedness procedures and technical capacity in livelihood analysis for earlier responses. When thinking about technical fixes we then realised that we had to go beyond the plan, the warning and the procedure and look at **the process** of planning.

A focus on processes was also coming out of a separate analysis of the way agencies responded in crises. Across the three countries, different actors were asked why response was so often delayed, and they all gave very similar answers. The assessments of individuals working for central and local Governments, UNOs and NGOs, EW organisations and donors are given in box 3 below.

**Box 3: What delays early response? A self-assessment\* from those involved**

**a) *Structural or institutional barriers within the humanitarian sector as whole***

- the need for multiple assessments before people accept the problem (delays response by months)
  - \* lack of agreed standards of assessment, agencies wanting to use their own approaches.
- donors and IAs wait for an “official emergency”
- politicisation of EW and assessments
- poor coordination at all levels; regional, national and district
- lack of funding for preparedness
- high turnover of technical staff, poor institutional memory / technical experience
- Decision makers have limited understanding of realities of remote areas
- weak links between local organisations and (international) organisations at national level

**b) *Donor - Agency Relations***

- agencies are measured by donors on ‘formal accountability’ not impact.
- There are no agreed standards for ‘fast-tracking’ accountability
- Some specific donor requirements cause delays (e.g. vet drug procurement, VAT exemption).
- ‘donor rationing’ – aid only given for full-blown crisis
- Donors unwilling to respond on prediction: need to “see” the crisis to believe there’s a crisis.
- donors and agencies don’t have ‘pre-approved’ proposals, conditions, etc.
- Rigidity by some donors on fund utilization and on funding terms.

**c) *Early Warning***

- No enough trust in credibility of EW reports (leads to multiple assessments, and failure to respond to assessments, *see above*)
  - \* questions about the validity (i.e. factual basis) of some reports
  - \* lack of transparency about analysis, how conclusions are drawn from information
- Response linked to assessments, not to EW monitoring.
- No agreed ‘triggers’ or agreed thresholds for different indicators that EW can refer to.
- Little quantified analysis of impact on livelihoods; what is seasonal hardship; what is a real crisis?
- Most EW limits prediction to meteorological factors, limited predictions of livelihood issues
- Poor information flow between the field and decision making centres in capitals (even within IAs)

**d) *Technical issues around livelihood analysis***

- Most specialized humanitarian agencies lack expertise in pastoral livelihoods and so don't recognise impending crises. Specialised pastoral agencies lack expertise in humanitarian response.
- Limited long term development support to pastoral livelihoods, into which humanitarian action can be incorporated.
- common structural separation of emergency and ‘development’ sections (Gov’t, donor, NGO, UN)
- Structural arrangements of many donors, NGOs and FAO, with strict division of emergency and development sections – and sometimes even competition between the two.

\*Interestingly, agencies tended not to identify deficiencies in their own systems as a cause of the problem.

Source: PACAPS Workshops on ER, Addis, Nairobi, Mendera (2008).

The list of problems is long. Many of the observations are about the relationship between different agencies. If, instead of thinking only about how to build agencies' capacity to work better, we think about how agencies work together in a single "system" geared towards providing early humanitarian response, this transforms both the diagnosis and the prescriptions. For instance, if there is a system problem, we need to change the way in which the different parts of the system interact. Thinking about systems means looking at the way agencies communicate with each other<sup>3</sup>, the outputs they give each other, which behaviour is 'rewarded' by others in the system. Some examples below illustrate some of the problems in how ER functions as a system.

**Early Warning:** EW is set up specifically to trigger early response. If it is not doing so, then the system is not working. If users do not have full confidence in EW, why are they not talking to EW agencies about what they do want to see instead? Why are donors both mistrustful of early warnings yet still spend money, setting up more EW systems? Why do EW actors, if their warnings are not heeded, engage with information users to examine together what works and what needs changing? EW agencies also need to define their task as "to trigger a response". This puts them squarely "in the system", forcing EW to engage more systematically with planning agencies.

**Donor-IA Interaction:** Each side is frustrated with slowness and lack of coordination of the other. Yet there is no platform for solving these problems. As a result, neither side is giving the other what it needs to support faster and more effective response. They operate as if they saw the system boundaries differently. The donors regard themselves as part of a system that includes tax payers and their own Governments. Many NGOs tend to see the donor as a source of funds into 'their system', but not really as an actor in the system itself. Some redefinition both of the boundaries and objectives of the system is needed.

**District level:** Every agency develops its own projects. 'Coordination' means the sharing of information about each others projects. There are several reasons why there is little debate about a real response **strategy** to which everyone contributes. Each agency concerns itself solely with its own projects because the 'system' itself only holds the IA accountable for reporting back against money received (against its own proposal). Thus the agency does not need to answer for final outcomes at District level.

**Agency level:** Individual agencies (both Governmental and Non-Governmental) also function as systems for supporting livelihoods. At District level, ideally all IAs would contribute to optimising a District wide response. Most, however, are implementing ideas developed in central offices.

## **PART 2: Putting the right tools in Place: The Crisis Calendar**

Notwithstanding the need to apply a systems perspective to improving ER in the region, introducing a new, simple and practical technical tool in ER proved a useful way to bring people together around a shared analysis of what they are trying to do. We called the new tool "the Crisis Calendar".

### **(i) Crisis Calendar Analysis**

Crisis Calendar Analysis (CCA) is simply a prediction of the development of a likely or potential crisis drawn on an actual calendar. It can be drawn up very simply by anyone with some experience of similar crises in the area and who knows local realities. Users of Crisis Calendar Analysis can plot

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<sup>3</sup> and also internally. Any agency can also be looked at as a single system, made up of different teams or departments.

any scenario on to the calendar. We tended to use drought calendars, partly because these were the most likely crisis that people feared in 2008/9<sup>4</sup> and partly because they tend to follow a more predictable path than other crises such as conflict. In principle, the crisis calendar should be just as applicable for conflicts, closed borders, livestock epidemics, etc. Recently a CCA was done in Garissa looking at the predictive impact of the flooding on pastoral households living in Garissa, Kenya and Lower Juba, Somalia.

There is no rule as to which parameters need to be plotted. This will partly depend upon the scenario, partly on the local livelihoods. In our calendars, we plotted parameters such as: pasture condition, water availability, livestock condition (of each important species separately), livestock mortality (ditto), livestock price (ditto), grain price, milk availability, breeding (conceptions, births). In some contexts, it may be necessary to consider other livelihood issues, e.g. other income sources. The tool could also be used for moving the analysis beyond livelihoods<sup>5</sup>.

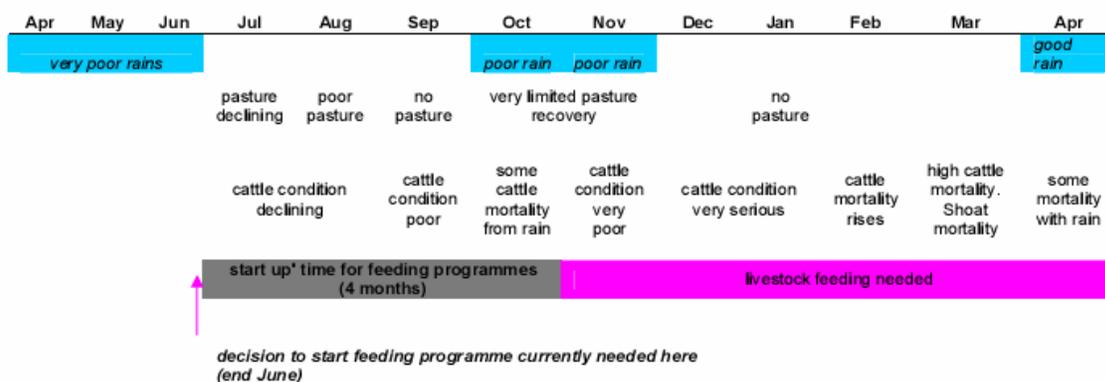
**Fig 1: Schematic seasonal calendar for generic pastoral livelihood areas, normal year**



Fig 1 represents a normal year from a livelihood perspective for much of the pastoral areas in the Horn of Africa. A standard seasonal calendar is the starting point for any analysis. Any number of livelihood parameters could be included: for illustrative purposes, Fig 1 gives only the bare essentials. (The calendar is a useful way of finding out just where information gaps exist. How great is the price fluctuation of grain and livestock during a normal year? In which months do households of different economics groups sell animals? Buy grain? Have other food or income sources?)

There was general agreement that a 'drought' cannot be said to have occurred when one rains fail, since pastoral livelihoods can cope with this. A crisis only develops where a second consecutive rain fails. This means that we need a drought calendar covering at least three seasons (18 months) – 2 failed rains and the following rains for 'recovery'. During analysis sessions, we used much longer calendars to analyse a likely recovery timeline. However, in this paper, we will focus on the period up to the final arrival of the rains.

**Figure 2: Example of a Crisis Calendar with a typical drought scenario affecting cattle plotted on the calendar**



Early response is based on the premise that the aim early in the drought cycle is to protect livelihoods. Later, when a drought (or other shock) deepens and livelihoods collapse, humanitarian concerns become paramount and the fundamental goal switches to saving lives. Thus, the timing of livelihood protection interventions has to do with production calendars: seeds and tools have to be distributed when it's about to rain, not when GAM rates reach a certain threshold.

After plotting livelihood parameters during a normal year, the next step is to plot the impact of the crisis on the normal calendar. This is called plotting the “drought scenario” (see simplified version in Figure 2 above). The third step is then to plot when different livelihood protection strategies would be most appropriately implemented – their **‘windows of opportunity’**. If supporting the feeding of breeding livestock through a drought is an appropriate intervention, then it makes sense from the time that animals are in danger from lack of fodder to the time when their survival is ensured from pasture. On the generic calendar in fig 1, this could be from around April to August. Supporting off-take through livestock marketing makes sense when livestock prices fall considerably (due to lack of demand, poor body condition and sometimes because traders are waiting for prices to collapse) until the animals are no longer marketable – and certainly when they are too weak to reach the market and be transported long distances. On the crisis calendar in Figure 2, this could be from July-September. We cannot know for certain several months in advance the windows of opportunity for each intervention, since we cannot predict perfectly how quickly pasture (or other parameters) will deteriorate, etc. However, we can have a pretty good idea of when it is likely to be, and these predictions can progressively be modified as the crisis develops – or is averted.

In order to plan for livelihood protection, we need to think about different protection strategies we could use, and for each one when during the crisis calendar it is likely to be appropriate. Quite simply, unless we are able to meet the windows of opportunity then it would be better not to waste resources on the interventions at all. This kind of planning is perfectly feasible both for district level teams and for pastoral communities.

#### **Box 4: What can be done to protect pastoral livelihoods?**

Protecting pastoral livelihoods through crises is a new science. Although international consensus is growing on standards around programming<sup>6</sup> there is still little experience in practice about how best to do this and limited knowledge about the conditions under which different interventions will be most cost effective. Briefly, the following are the kinds of activity which could be used, depending on the objectives that are identified.

- a) *support to maintaining core breeding herds*: improve their condition before the pasture disappears (control of parasites) and keeping them alive after pasture disappears (fodder supply, vet care); and enabling them to access other pasture (water interventions, support to migration).
- b) *maximising income from non-core breeding animals*: improving their condition (parasite control/vet care, fodder supply, moving to short term ranch land, water); improving the price (market interventions).
- c) *maximising value of un-saleable animals (slaughter de-stocking)*

These intervention types can be carried out in many ways. For example, fodder supply can be done as free distribution, as a subsidised sale or by support to supply side and by support to developing a (free) market for fodder. Support to migration could be done by financial support to transport, conflict management to remove barriers to movement, etc. Market support could include a range of subsidies to traders, capital for local herders to take animals to market, supply of market information, acting as a broker in the market, direct activity in purchase/sale of animals, etc.

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<sup>6</sup> Livestock Emergency and Standards Guidelines [www.livestock-emergency.net](http://www.livestock-emergency.net)

Whatever the merits of these interventions, the priority for us is to increase our understanding of how pastoralists prioritise the use of resources to achieve different objectives over the calendar of a crisis.

### (ii) Combining the Crisis Calendar with Livelihood Analysis

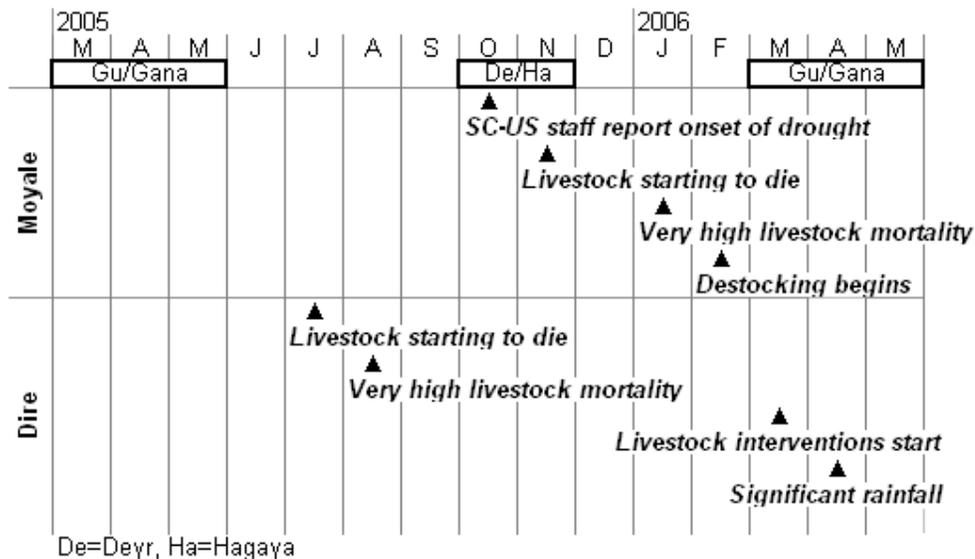
Whether or not an intervention would actually be justified as an early response is a slightly different question. (Just because the window of opportunity for marketing support is from March to June doesn't mean that we ought to support marketing intensively in those months – it means that trying to do it any other months is pointless.) To decide whether or not to provide any kind of assistance as a livelihood protection measure, we need to judge whether or not the populations could cope without help. In principle, the calculation is a technical one: a measure of resources needed vis a vis resources available. Tools such as household economy analysis (HEA) are suited to calculating the ability of pastoralists (or different economic groups) to cope with or without support. However, the answer to the question “can they cope without support?” is as much a political one as it is a purely technical one and for livelihood protection measures, predictions are often met with caution thereby stalling the early start-up of activities.

### (iii) Start-ups and starts – Preparedness Capacity

Assistance does not happen on the ground just because someone in Nairobi or Washington decides that it should. There is always a delay from the time that an agency decides to implement a particular project to that project actually providing any benefits. In practice, this delay can be anything from two to five months, depending on many factors. During this period, resources have to be sourced, staff have to be recruited and trained, purchases made and items transported, etc. This period could be called the “start-up” period. We have found that staff in most agencies have the capacity to make reasonable estimates of this length of the start-up period.

If an agency knows that a project will only really ‘start’ (i.e. will be seen on the ground) four months after its start-up (the final decision to run the project), then we need to add on to the crisis calendar a ‘revised’ window of opportunity – not the window for running the project, but the window for decision making about the project. This window could run anything from two to five months before

Fig 3: The timing of the crisis and the response, Ethiopia 2005 source: ODI, 2006



the window for implementation. In the previous case of feeding livestock, if this intervention only makes sense from April until August, and if we assume (for example's sake only) a start-up timeline of four months, then the decision making window starts to close four months before April, i.e. in December. A decision taken after January will mean that we only cover part of the window. Any decision taken after April will mean that we have missed the window altogether.

**Box 5: The 'aha' moment: when understanding lateness is half the battle to being on time**

Several evaluations of humanitarian response in the Horn showed that agencies were sometimes so late in their response that they were distributing fodder after pasture was already regenerating after the end of the drought. It was hard to understand how this could happen, until looking again at Fig 2 (from an ODI evaluation) with the understanding of CCA. Two simple mistakes would make such lateness not just understandable – but almost inevitable.

First, an agency often waits until there is a clear crisis before deciding to intervene. Then, suppose they decide to intervene by protecting livestock. In Moyale, according to Fig 2, this would have been in October-November, when the rains had failed again and as livestock started to die. Now imagine that the NGO **and their donor** both forget the difference between the start-up and the start of the project. So, in November, they agree to start a fodder distribution project. A typical start-up timeline for distributing fodder is 4-5 months. It would be impossible, then, to start distributing hay before the beginning of April, just after the following rains had finally arrived.

These challenges are not for the IAs alone, nor indeed for any set of actors in isolation. The challenges posed are for the system as a whole. The next section looks, therefore, at how system thinking could help us meet those challenges and rethink the way the various actors involved in humanitarian response can work together.

## **PART 3: Finding a System Solution**

### **(i) Can a simple tool help catalyse a system solution?**

For all the reasons we have seen, livelihood protection in pastoral areas is not possible without very good contingency planning. It is the process of thinking about contingencies, and about what we would all need to do if they arose, that should bring us together before any crisis. The tool for planning has to be objective, it has to be predictive and it has to be focused on livelihoods. It has to tell us what we will need to do and when, and how much of it – in what conditions. It has to be flexible, so that it can cope with different livelihood types and different scenarios, and it has to be open to modification so that plans can constantly be re-drawn as a crisis grows or fades at different speeds. The 'crisis calendar' serves all these purposes.

### **(ii) Facing the challenges made explicit by the crisis calendar**

The fundamental, underlying challenge comes from the final decision time for starting up a humanitarian intervention for livelihood protection. As was clearly seen in using the crisis calendar (see fig 2), decisions often need to be taken before the second rains have failed. In the calendar, we can make it seem that we know a crisis is coming. In practice, everyone is hoping for good rains. By the time we know they have failed, it is too late to respond. How can anyone start responding to a

crisis before we even know that a crisis is going to occur? (Some emergency interventions, such as animal health, actually require decisions to act before even one rainy season has failed!)

It is not as impossible as it may seem. A number of measures will be necessary, each of which represents a challenge in its own right.

### **Challenge 1: The start-up timelines must be made shorter.**

If it only took one month to bring benefits instead of five, this alone would transform the response context because many projects would be possible if decided upon as soon as it was clear that the second rains were failing. Work with agencies on shortening the start-up timelines shows that it is possible to bring them down considerably – possibly to as little as 2-3 weeks in some cases. But the challenge needs many actors to work together.

- NGOs are systems with many teams and departments and offices. All have to come together to agree priorities and ways of working.
- There needs to be a donor–agency partnership. This requires longer term support between donors and agencies to help each other raise the level of preparedness and to also be flexible in uncertain operating conditions.
- At the local level, District Steering Groups should pull agencies together under one joint strategy.

Nothing will run perfectly the first time. Evaluations should not just tell us a project was late – which we usually knew – but should audit the timeline to tell us why it was late, and exactly what needs to be done to get it right (or better) next time.

### **Challenge 2: Earlier release of funds**

Livelihood support will be late unless funds are available on time – and this usually means funds must be released before we know whether or not a crisis will actually occur. If everyone decides that the system objective is to make funds available quickly, a system design can be found. One element which is currently being introduced in Kenya is a contingency fund: a few NGOs already have their own similar funds. Ideally, contingency funds should be held at the District level although local pressures will likely be brought to use these resources for other purposes. The politicisation of the funds, or their capture by political interests, can best be limited by having transparent and objective criteria for the release of ER funds.

Improved preparedness at the donor level will also improve start-up timelines. For example, the best time for the technical analysis of response options is before there is a crisis. Some donors may be able to be more proactive by discussing the technical merits of different potential response strategies and interventions with IAs before a crisis. They could also hold round table discussions with a range of agencies working in a geographical area about interventions in principle (i.e., without discussing individual agencies' proposals). Moreover, several donors could agree on a standard proposal format. There could be a common clearing house for submitting proposals. Donors would come together to strategically choose who would accept what. All this means that donors should have contingency plans of their own in order to be prepared for rapid response.

### **Challenge 3: When the start-up deadline will still be too early**

Even with the best preparedness, sometimes a project cannot be implemented on time. There will be projects, in other words, that need to start-up before we are sure that we need them. This is a

challenge – no one agency can overcome it alone – but a system solution can be found. For instance, projects could be designed so that they start-up but spend few resources before the crisis is for sure. Tender processes could begin with no payments before commitments are made. Some costs could be written off as insurance: a donor could commit to a certain project on given conditions, with a ceiling on what can be spent before these conditions arise.

#### **Challenge 4: When any start-up is too late**

Projects such as veterinary care can never be provided adequately if they are started up in response to a perceived crisis. The crisis calendar clearly shows that for decisions on vaccinations to be on time to protect animals they have to be taken before even one rainy season has failed. In other words, these need to be permanent programmes. Establishing structures for making fodder available in times of stress should also be permanent. (As with veterinary care, whether these are free-market based systems or State Reserve Banks is not the question here.) These structures can be run in different ways in times of crisis vis a vis non-crisis years: services can be paid for at certain times then be subsidised at others. Running a long term programme that can ‘change gears’ in this way is again something that can be done only when the response system as a whole – not just one actor - puts new operating processes in place, including government policy, donor funding regulations, IA implementing procedures and EW systems to provide triggers for action.

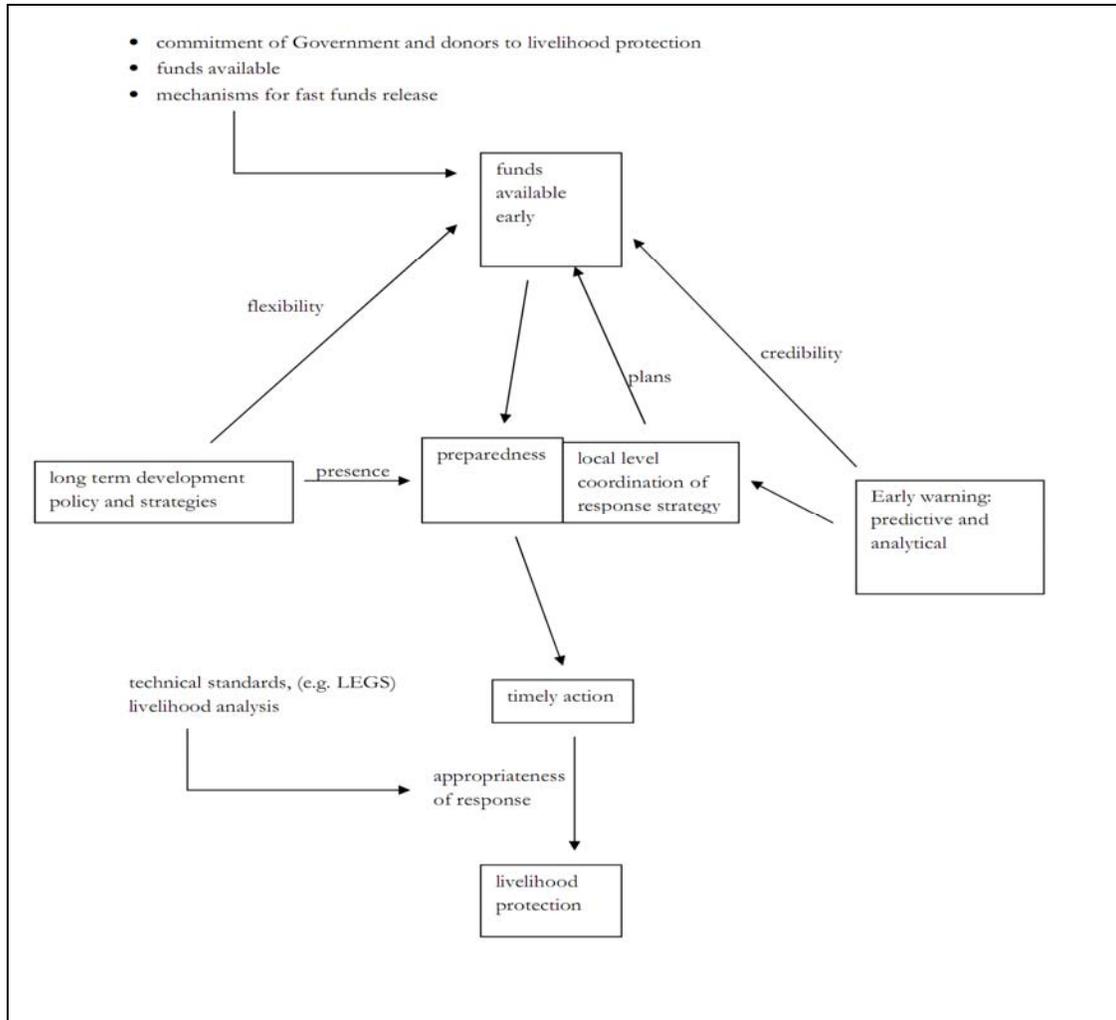
#### **Challenge 5: Rethinking Early Warning**

EW’s role can only be defined in relation to the response system that it feeds. Thinking about livelihood protection has developed enormously in the past twenty years. That change has to be reflected in the different ways we think about early warning. Only then will EW serve dual purposes: warning about impending crises; and, predicting the impact on livelihoods and lives. To do that, EW needs to incorporate livelihood analysis and a clear calendar, showing probable outcomes with and without intervention and what these depend on (e.g. migration, future rains, markets, etc).

#### **iii) Preparedness Clinics: A First Step to Re-booting the System**

A system diagnosis is not straightforward. Achieving the solution will not straightforward. First, it needs to be composed of a number of interdependent elements: re-thinking EW systems; local level consensus about the situation and predictions; a response strategy for defined scenarios; heightened agency level preparedness capacity; fast, flexible funding mechanisms; early interventions that support livelihood protection; and development programs that incorporate crisis response. Second, these elements all need to be addressed by multiple actors together. This re-booted system is illustrated in Figure 4.

Fig 4 What is needed for an effective early response system?



In order to test whether a system solution could be possible – in short, in order to find out whether or not change of this magnitude is realistic - PACAPS decided to pilot two initiatives to effect this change, playing the role of an external facilitator or catalyst.

Our pilots would work at two levels. We would work with individual agencies to look at their preparedness and how to cut their response times; and we would work at the ‘response system’ level to see how different agencies could work together differently to improve response times. The two strands are complementary. Obviously, system response is determined partly by the capacity of each element in the system to respond. At the broader, systems level, we wanted to look at how people worked together, how they defined the objectives of their jobs, and to see whether a tool like the crisis calendar could bring a common language and shared objectives to their work.

#### (iv) Implementing Preparedness Clinics at the Agency Level

Looking at ‘system problems’ is all very well, but each component still needs to be working optimally. PACAPS piloted a way to tackle the technical issues by facilitating a NGO through a ‘preparedness clinic’ to address why agencies are often so slow to respond.

## What are agencies doing that takes so long?

The list of tasks that need to be completed before a project really ‘starts’ can be long. See box below:

### **Box7: What needs to be done before start-up**

- The first hurdle is getting funds. Concept notes may have to be written, discussion with donors and then a full proposal – in a different format for each donor. Many donors demand proof of a degree of participation in the design of the project, so writing the proposal may take time, if consultation meetings need to be held with local Government, beneficiary ‘communities’, other NGOs, etc. There may be more discussion before agreement, or head office approval may also be needed. Once the contract is signed, money still needs to be transferred to a bank near where it will be spent.
- The second hurdle is starting processes at the local level. Although most agencies can do little until they have confirmation that funds will be forthcoming, many do not need the actual money to start some processes. For instance, the programme office could be busy in establishing agreements at local level. This may involve MoUs with local Government personnel who will give technical support. Training may be needed, which entails more time to get all the elements in place.
- Purchasing and logistics can be a serious bottleneck – this is the third hurdle. A tender process needs an advertisement (written by one person, edited by a second, approved by a third, then submitted to the media by a fourth after getting payment authorisation from a fifth.) Time needs to be given for firms to submit bids, a committee for evaluation of the bids needs to sit. Trading licenses must be verified followed by contract discussions. The whole process is repeated for a tender to supply transport for whatever was purchased. Importations can cause the biggest delays, especially if tax or duty waivers are needed by donors or if an item is unfamiliar.

Although no-one that we spoke to had ever thought of trying to quantify their start-up period, most agencies felt that they were as quick as they could be. When asked to give a list of every single task that needed to be done before starting a particular project, they were reasonably able to estimate how long the start up would take. The challenge came when they were asked which of the tasks could have been done before the crisis – before the start-up or the decision to go with the project. It quickly became apparent that apart from signing contracts and transferring money, very little should have been left to wait for the start up.

What can be done in advance? Draft concept notes and proposals can be written based on long standing discussions with communities and local government about what would need to be done in the event of different contingencies. Concept notes and proposals could be discussed in principle with various donors, even to the extent of checking that all the right information was in (though of course with no commitment to fund). Since every agency knows reasonably well what it is most likely to do in different crises, it knows what it is likely to need. Suppliers can be pre-qualified, trading licences checked, and contracts can even be agreed in principle, so that all that remains is filling in a price. The list goes on: draft job descriptions can be prepared and approved by head offices; internal secondments can be organised in advance; emergency rosters can be kept regularly up to date. More innovative solutions can be found too: agencies can combine to ‘pool’ staff, so that sort term secondments will be agreed in advance.

Agencies were given a straightforward task, to identify every step that they would need to do during the start up, and find what could be done before there is a crisis. For almost every task people were able to find a way to prepare for it so as to make it quicker in the event of a crisis.

## Taking a look at the system causes

Agency staff showed they were able to solve the technical problem. So why had agencies not done something before about it? This goes to the heart of the ‘system’. We found that by beginning with the technical issues first, which people are open to responding well to, then we could more openly address the ‘system’ causes of the ‘technical’ issues.

The next step was for staff members of different departments of a single agency to sit down together to see themselves as a single team (or ‘system’) with a single shared objective – to deliver livelihood protection aid on time (as opposed to ‘as quickly as possible’). After all, delays in starting mean a window of opportunity may close. This discussion then went deeper, looking at not just about how we work but about how we work together.

### **Box 8: The devil is not always in the detail: when a technical solution can’t solve a system problem**

One NGO had made enormous strides to improve fast response. They had even prepared specially fast administration and financial systems for use in emergencies, and clear rules on when tenders could be waived, so that these would not slow down response. Staff reported that these were not always used. Individuals felt that ‘excessive’ use of tender waivers was somehow frowned upon. It should be resisted unless essential. The problem was, that they had no way of knowing what ‘essential’ was. To define essential all programme staff ought to go through the crisis calendar and look at possible start-up timelines – and then make a decision about if ER procedures should be used in that case. ‘Fast’ administrative systems are not a ‘soft’ option. Thus, how systems work is not just about formal processes but about the ways in which people use these processes. Sometimes, the devil is in the bigger picture, the details are the easy bit!

We saw the importance of this mental shift in action. During one preparedness clinic with an agency that had invested enormously in preparedness and in team building - including having concept notes for emergency interventions – they came to see how communication problems (i.e. the system) were blocking quick response. See Box 9. They realised that it was better to spend time getting their ways of working sorted out because if they could get the ‘system’ working then all the ‘technical’ problems could be addressed quite quickly.

### **Box 9: It’s good to talk**

During an agency ‘preparedness clinic’, one NGO realised that it could cut its start-up timelines considerably if it improved communication between teams. Notably, this NGO had prepared several concept notes for emergency interventions but most staff did not know they existed. Subsequently, the NGO set itself the following tasks:

1. The HR and the Programme teams to talk about:
  - contingency recruitment strategies
  - employment terms for recruiting back former staff on emergency programmes
  - approval process for job descriptions
  - developing a checklist for programme managers for recruitment, making clear the roles and responsibilities of each party
  - developing a ‘service agreement’ between HR and Programmes
  - reviewing the concept notes for assessing contingency recruitment needs
- 2 The finance and logistics teams to talk about:
  - devising a system for speedier payments to suppliers
- 3 The finance and programme teams to talk about:
  - reviewing prepared concept notes and prepare draft budgets

4 Logistics and programme teams to talk about:

- How to speed up turnaround times
- what communication each one feels would help them speed up programme delivery.

Only experience will show whether or not the clinics have worked to deliver earlier response.

#### **(v) Changing the response system in one District – The Wajir Story**

In this pilot initiative, PACAPS would try to persuade all the actors in the system to re-think how they interacted with each other in one, quite small, administrative area. Together we would create the pilot of a negotiated system. Objectives could be agreed. Moreover, each party would explain what it needed others to do to enable them to respond to their needs. Hence, the necessary steps for ER would be agreed by all. As donors could not promise specific funds for one area, this could be something of a limitation. But there would have to be trust that everyone, including the donors, would work in good faith and respond as positively as possible to a system that had responded to their design requests, subject to their overall constraints and policies.

We chose to pilot in Kenya simply because of the level of interest shown. In Kenya there is already a structure which brings together all the relevant actors at local level. This is done at District level, where all actors, including local government, are members of the District Steering Group<sup>7</sup> (DSG), established as a structure by the Arid Lands Resource Management Project (ALRMP<sup>8</sup>) and responsible for food security and humanitarian concerns. Moreover, Kenya's EW system as well as the new National Drought Contingency Fund all work using DSGs as the basic unit. Thus, this was obviously the best level to use if we did not want to create a new structure. Wajir District was chosen – a District which included a cross-border dimension, reasonable security, with a reasonably well functioning DSG, and with an NGO very committed to supporting the process.

We began with individual meetings to gauge the interest of different people and institutions (most people responded enthusiastically). Then a series of occasional meetings were held with a small group of actors involved in humanitarian work in NE Kenya – DMI/ALRMP, interested donors, UN-OCHA, and some NGOs operating in the area. A common vision of the problem and where solutions must come from was eventually reached. It took a whole year to bring on board the number of actors necessary to start a pilot in one District. This is important to note: initiatives to improve system level working need to think in terms of longer time frames. However, this approach, albeit slow, bore fruit. ALRMP became convinced that the approach had relevance for the country and requested that PACAPS offer technical support for a State (“Government”) initiative under ALRMP (through its capacity building project, Drought Management Initiative, DMI).

An initial visit was made by DMI and PACAPS to assess the perceptions of the various District actors. Typical comments – many of which illustrate underlying ‘system’ problems – were:

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<sup>7</sup> Local Government is at county level, and Districts offices are Departments of central, not local, Government. In theory, the DSG is a sub-committee of the District Development Committee, but because the DSG is linked to a ‘project’ with a dedicated secretary, it functions better and largely independently.

<sup>8</sup> ARLMP is a major World Bank funded project, formerly under the Office of the President (Special Projects). Recently, the European Union has begun funding a component of ARLMP, the Drought Management Initiative, focussing on capacity building at District level and the establishment of a contingency fund mechanism.

*“there is a lack of coordination”* – though all who said this agreed that the DSG met every month and sub-committees met even more frequently.

*“we had a meeting to talk about contingency planning but the DSG never did anything about it”* – though all who said this agreed that they were members of the DSG.

*“one of the main problems is the food aid, it is killing pastoralism”* – though the monthly recommendations from the District always included the continuation of food aid.

*“the DSG never discusses broader strategic issues about food security”* – though they admit that the DSG meetings have an open agenda, and all participate (or are invited).

What was the problem? Kenya has a structure for bringing together everyone working in the field of food security where they can discuss issues, coordinate with each other, analyse early warning information, and prepare contingency plans for the District as whole. This structure has a direct and official line of communication to the central Government and other key decision making forums, through the District Drought Management Officer (DMO) to ALRMP and on to KFSSG. Moreover, the DMO was respected. Collegiality among DSG members was also good. And yet, members were not using the structure to its full potential in any of its possibilities.

So – what was the real problem? One problem was the issue of ownership. The DSG – and by extension the DMO - was seen as belonging to ARLMP. When people said ‘the DSG hadn’t ...’ they meant that the DMO had not taken responsibility for doing something because ‘it was his job not theirs’. However, there was great enthusiasm in the district to improve their response strategy. Given this eagerness, why then had no other actor tried to use the DSG as a vehicle for advancing their own agenda? In this case, the system failed to work properly because people did not use the system to achieve the things that they themselves want to get done.

At this point, the local MP became involved. His involvement was natural - in Kenya, MPs hold considerable development and humanitarian funds, and they are often very active in setting *de facto* policy at District/ constituency level - but because this was also the Minister for Northern Kenya, the political ramifications became wider. Despite interest from District actors, donors, ARLMP and the Ministry for Northern Kenya, questions were asked about the mandate of PACAPS as a regional project to become involved in national level politics, and the project had to withdraw this support.

A follow-up workshop for DSG members was nevertheless held in Wajir, but under the sole auspices of DMI/ARLMP. During the workshop, the DSG analysed together the crisis calendar of the likely emerging drought<sup>9</sup>, appropriate strategic responses and what immediate steps were needed for preparedness. Time alone will tell whether or not the performance of the DSG in Wajir will remain substantially different and whether or not that will lead to improved humanitarian response and livelihood protection.

## **Part 4. What is to be done?**

Most attempts to improve early response have focused on improving the performance of one or two actors, or introducing a new tool in order to arrive at better and faster response. We have tried to explain why we feel that such interventions are needed, but only if they are a part of a much more

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<sup>9</sup> The workshop was held at the end of April 2009, when it appeared that the rains had ended prematurely, though this was still not certain. It proved indeed to be true.

holistic approach to putting things right. There are many areas where things can be improved, and many are currently being addressed to some degree.

- Faster release of funds is needed. The UN has established a mechanism for rapid response funds, and the Government of Kenya is in the process of establishing a national Drought Contingency Fund.
- Decision making at international level on humanitarian crises needs to be based more on need, and the FAO is rolling out the IPC to try and make it possible to compare the severity of different humanitarian situations.
- Many Districts need to be better at planning responses, and in Kenya the DMI/ARLMP is running capacity building, especially for new Districts.
- Early Warning needs to be more predictive and analytical. the FSNAU in Somalia is producing ‘predictive IPC maps’ and HEA livelihood analysis to guide decision making. The Government of Ethiopia has also adopted livelihood (or HEA) based methods as the basis for its national EW system as well as for analysing seasonal production outcomes and for predicting upcoming needs.
- NGOs need to be much faster in response, and agencies such as Oxfam GB are establishing systems especially designed for fast and flexible response.
- The divide between short-term emergency aid and long term development support must finally be torn down. ‘Emergency’ donors such as ECHO are recognising this by moving into ‘the grey zone’ with innovative funding mechanisms; new conceptual ways of thinking about programming (“tracking strategies”) are being developed by ICRC and FAO; and more and more agencies such as Oxfam GB are trying to realise the idea of a ‘one programme approach’ to tackle both emergency needs and chronic poverty.
- We need much better use of livelihood analysis that is transparent and predictive. Progress is being made here too, with the increasing adoption of Household Economy Analysis by the Government Ethiopia, by more NGOs in the three countries different, and by FEWS regionally.
- The response toolbox needs to be better developed, with more options and clearer understanding about when to use different kinds of intervention. Progress is being made, with a first recognition that standards need to be developed, through initiatives such as LEGS, and over time evidence should build up to guide the analysis of which interventions are most effective in which situations.

There is more going on than these few examples, and reason to believe that some things may improve.

Other areas are receiving less attention.

- There are still obstacles in taking a cross-border perspective on livelihoods which cross borders, even for regional and international organisations which work on both sides of the borders.
- There are still only nascent links between initiatives in the area of conflict management and livelihood protection, despite the fact that conflict, and the curtailment of free movement and trade which it brings, is the most serious threat to livelihoods in pastoral areas.
- The long term development of pastoral regions is still poorly supported, both in policy and in the flow of funds for infrastructure and services. In some cases, political marginalisation risks increasing, as ‘national growth’ is looked for from what are defined as high potential areas, which never include pastoral areas.

The list of positive developments also risks overshadowing the fact that efforts are not being focussed on how any of the individual elements link up with each other. Improving capacity is important but the initiatives above don't address the weakest link in response – which is the linkages themselves between the actors in the system. What is required is for many actors together to think differently about how they communicate with each other: and together to establish rules and principles that maximise the likelihood of positive outcomes as defined by common objectives. This sounds an obvious prerequisite for any 'teamwork', and yet it is not happening in the area of livelihood protection.

We hope that this paper contributes to this in two ways: signalling the need for a system solution, building on our work at piloting such solutions; and providing a simple tool that can help focus attention on a shared goal and perhaps catalyse some changes. If the Wajir pilot proves successful, we hope a new actor will replicate the district solution in other districts, and then re-think the whole national response system. Ultimately, the PACAPS ER work was about learning lessons from testing new ways of responding to slow onset crises of particular relevance (but not sole relevance) in the semi-arid pastoral areas of the Manderu Triangle.

## What is needed for early response in pastoral areas of Kenya?

We need:

1. EW with predictive analysis
2. Preparedness
3. Accessible and flexible funding at District level
4. Response capacity at District level
5. Longer term development funding, which incorporates humanitarian response

### 1 Early Warning

- Decision makers must trust it
  - Credible baselines used as reference point (they don't exist for most areas)
  - Multi-actor participation in the analysis (preferably, at District level)
  - Transparent analysis using credible data
  - An establish track record of credible predictions
  - Produced by District level actors (or at least output referred back to them for review)
- Provides predictive livelihood outcomes
  - Uses quantified baselines – good understanding of local livelihoods
  - Uses quantified scenarios
  - 'Calendar analysis'
  - Not confined to drought
  - On-coming crises are monitored, and scenario predictions regularly updated
  - EW monitoring is guided by preparedness and contingency planning
  - Allows for disaggregation to local level – can trigger response in just part of a District
- Product must be timely
  - Output is released soon after data collection
  - Analysis done in District?
  - Output probably monthly, especially for emerging crises
  - Move away from relying on 'bi-annual assessment' towards using monthly updates
- It must be used!
  - Must meet all above criteria (timely, credible, predictive, etc. etc.)
  - National system takes it up
  - Feeds into regional system?
  - Right product
    - i. Timely, Comparative, Short, Easy to read, Analytical, Useful, Accessible (on the web...), 'owned' by the right people

## 2 Preparedness

- District-wide preparedness
  - Buy-in to a common process and framework
  - Scenario and response analysis – in shared framework, joint analysis
  - better preparedness at District (system) level
  - Getting prepared (e.g. using the Guide)
  - Linking preparedness and EW
  - Collaborative – different District Depts., NGOs, etc.
- Agency level preparedness
  - as discussed in report
- Donor level preparedness
  - Are funds available?
  - Having analysis done before crisis, understanding which responses are worth supporting
  - Identifying potential partners
  - Work with partners on response times (working on proposals, auditing partners' preparedness, smoothing' procedures at interface, etc.)
  - Good coordination – between sectors, different donors, etc.

## 3 Funding

- Widespread knowledge of the funds available
  - Agencies know who has what money and what funds are available for
- National level funds working, feeding District funds
  - National Contingency Fund functioning smoothly
    - i. clear disbursement criteria and mechanisms
    - ii. practical 'flow mechanisms' for fast replenishment, accounting, etc.
- Optimal use of District funds
  - Transparency on different funds available and their disbursement criteria/mechanisms (e.g. DCF, CDF, line Ministry budgets with Dist Gov't, etc.)
  - Shared vision of fund-holders, or coordination on use of funds
  - Improved decision making processes at fund level
    - i. Transparency
    - ii. Participation – including wider population ('community') representatives
    - iii. Decisions linked to facts through clear analysis and rational prioritisation
    - iv. Livelihood perspective included in analysis
- Other funds available and optimised
  - Funds are available
  - Donors have technical capacity to evaluate proposals and to decide quickly
  - Agencies have capacity to meet donor requirements on disbursement rates
  - Agency credibility (for the ones that really are good)
  - Interface Donor – Implementing Agency works quickly to allow funds to be made available (contractual obligations, procedures, etc.) *see also preparedness*
- Development funds are available and have flexibility (for 'tracking')

*See 5 below*

## 4. Response capacity at District level

- Good problem analysis

- Good response analysis
  - Collaborative, all District actors
  - Livelihood perspective, calendar analysis
  - Technical competency
  - Coordinated response plan (linked to funding availability)
- National structures support District initiatives  
national structures must themselves use, and allow Districts to use independently:
  - transparent decision making and analysis
  - livelihoods perspective

## 5. Longer term, flexible development funding

- Road map for development of pastoral areas
  - Clear problem analysis – widely shared
  - Prioritisation of interventions – widely shared
  - GoK uses this for clear policy and prioritized requests for support
- Funds are available for longer term work
  - GoK funds available
    - i. MoNK has budget – needs a policy
    - ii. Line Ministries have funds which are prioritized adequately for Northern Kenya
    - iii. Funds are well used
      - Good prioritization , based on good overall analysis and policy
      - Accountability in use of funds
  - Other funds available
    - i. Donor commitment to North (i.e. development)
    - ii. Donor consensus on North (see above)
  - Private sector development - ???
- Flexibility in fund use
  - Consensus on need for ‘tracking strategies’
    - i. Donors, GoK, implementing agencies
  - Modalities established on how to allow flexibility with accountability
    - i. agreements on criteria for ‘changing gear’ within projects<sup>10</sup>, what interventions are possible, etc.
    - ii. clearly built in to GoK spending regulations and funding contracts

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<sup>10</sup> ‘changing gear’ means shifting to work on the same objectives in different ways, in response to changing conditions, e.g. supporting privatised animal health services paid by users, but then giving free vaccination vouchers in a crisis