Kenya: Drought in the north

The drought in the Horn of Africa from 2016–17 has been described as one of the world’s most devastating humanitarian crises. Food insecurity affected an estimated 2.6 million people in the Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASALs) of northern Kenya, including half a million in the ‘emergency’ category. Unlike previous drought crises, the response was led, not by international humanitarian actors, but by national and local institutions, notably the National Drought Management Authority (NDMA). In November 2016, the government allocated $19 million towards the drought response, rising to $72 million by March 2017, for sectors including food and safety nets, water, livestock, agriculture, health and nutrition, education, peace and security, the environment and coordination. County governments also played a critical role, supporting activities such as water trucking, the rehabilitation of water points and infrastructure and the provision of relief. At the height of the drought, several counties reorganised their budgets to reallocate funds and prioritise emergency interventions. Meanwhile, international actors have designed increasingly fine-tuned programmes to complement and support government and civil society initiatives.

Cash transfers were widely implemented during the response through national social protection and safety net programmes. The Hunger Safety Net Programme (HSNP) provides regular, unconditional electronic cash transfers of $50 to 100,000 poor and vulnerable residents in the arid northern counties of Mandera, Marsabit, Turkana and Wajir. The programme also contains an emergency scalability mechanism to extend coverage to additional households to cushion them against the effects of crises and shocks, such as drought and floods. As one respondent in Turkana put it:

“The money has less logistical complications with it. You just go and you get the money, you don’t have to worry how you’re going to transport the food, like they had to do that with the maize before, and then the good thing is you can use it for different needs. You can use it for health, you can use it for education, depending on what exactly you need at that time.”

While some implementing partners considered the amounts distributed under the HSNP insufficient and organised their own cash transfers, the programme’s harmonised household register – in place since 2013 – was crucial to a quick response. Although partly out of date, agencies felt that the register was still useful in identifying the most affected households if the information was cross-checked with communities.

The response has also faced a range of obstacles, including shortages of skilled staff, a lack of transparency, poor infrastructure, the geographic distances involved and insecurity in Kenya’s northern regions. Conflicts over livestock are escalating, and it is becoming much more difficult to access Marsabit, Wajir and Turkana because of increased fighting among pastoralists and attacks by Al-Shabaab. The response was also coloured by the political atmosphere in the country, with national and county elections in August 2017 and a postponed presidential election in October 2017. Attention was focused on the polls, and there was little concerted debate and discussion on an issue affecting a substantial number of Kenyans in the arid north.

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