



Image credit: Turkana, Kenya, March 2011. Andy Hall/Oxfam.

THE IMPACT OF FOOD ASSISTANCE ON PASTORALIST LIVELIHOODS IN HUMANITARIAN CRISES

About this evidence brief

This brief provides an overview of *The impact of food assistance on pastoralist livelihoods in humanitarian crises* – an evidence synthesis published in January 2017 by the Humanitarian Evidence Programme and carried out by a team from the University of Toronto. It summarizes key findings in response to the research questions identified, indicates the country contexts from which evidence is drawn, outlines the methodology, highlights research gaps and provides references to the original literature.

The brief aims to assist policy makers, practitioners and researchers in assessing the available evidence in this field. It does not provide advice on which interventions or approaches are more or less appropriate in any given context. The varied and varying nature of crisis, vulnerability, goals of humanitarian programming, local conditions and quality of available data make the evidence highly contextual. *The views and opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of Oxfam, Feinstein or the UK government.*

Objectives of the evidence synthesis

The evidence synthesis represents the first ever attempt to identify, synthesize and evaluate existing evidence on both the short- and long-term impacts of in-kind food assistance on pastoralist populations and their livelihoods in humanitarian crises. Specifically, it set out to respond to 12 research questions, thematically grouped in the following six outcome areas:

- changes in livelihood strategies and asset and income dynamics
- mobility patterns
- access to in-kind food assistance
- household- and individual-level socio-demographic factors
- social relations and governance
- security.

About this evidence synthesis

The protocol, full evidence synthesis and executive summary on which this evidence brief is based are available from [Feinstein International Center](#), [Oxfam Policy & Practice](#) and [UK government websites](#). Citation:

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About the Humanitarian Evidence Programme

The Humanitarian Evidence Programme is a partnership between Oxfam GB and the Feinstein International Center at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, Tufts University. It is funded by the United Kingdom (UK) government's Department for International Development (DFID) through the Humanitarian Innovation and Evidence Programme.

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Figure 1: Summary of evidence synthesis findings. Source: The research team

Thematic outcome	Number of studies*	Evidence strength**	Research question***	Findings
Changes in livelihood strategies and asset and income dynamics	11	Medium	Q1: In what ways have pastoralist livelihood strategies changed since 1967 (and to what extent have non-pastoralist livelihood strategies supplanted them)? What is the potential causal relationship between these changes and food assistance?	Food assistance can undermine the livelihood strategies of pastoralists.
			Q2: In what ways have pastoralist asset dynamics changed? What is the potential causal relationship between these changes and food assistance?	Food assistance can lead to reduced livestock sales and strengthen herd growth.
			Q3: In what ways have income dynamics changed? What is the potential causal relationship between these changes and food assistance?	Food assistance may fill gaps in pastoralists' incomes.
Mobility patterns	9	Limited	Q4: In what ways have mobility patterns changed? What is the potential causal relationship between these changes and food assistance?	Food assistance can lead to changes in pastoralists' mobility patterns, and especially to sedentarization.
Access to in-kind food assistance	7	Limited	Q5: What types of in-kind food assistance interventions have been offered to pastoralist populations in the context of humanitarian crises? How have these interventions, the nature of the strategies, the distribution of food assistance and its duration changed over time?	Food assistance to pastoralists can be insufficient and unbalanced.
			Q6: In what ways do pastoralists use the food they receive? Do they consume it, or use it as livestock feed or as a commodity to sell or barter?	Four publications claim that food assistance can lead to dependency, but there is no relevant empirical evidence.
			Q7: In what ways has access to food and non-food items in pastoralist areas changed, including in relation to markets? What is the potential causal relationship between these changes and food assistance?	According to one publication, food assistance can lead to an increase in alcohol production. In some cases food assistance targeting has been controversial where pastoralists have perceived issues of unfairness, unequal distribution and elite capture.
Household- and individual-level socio-demographic factors	7	Limited	Q8: What household-level shifts have taken place among pastoralist populations? What is the potential causal relationship between these changes and food assistance?	Food assistance can encourage pastoralist women to seek alternative livelihood strategies.
			Q9: What individual-level shifts have taken place among pastoralist populations? What is the potential causal relationship between these changes and food assistance?	According to most publications, food assistance leads to decreased malnutrition. Others report, however, that food assistance can have negative impacts on recipients' health outcomes.
Social relations and governance	4	Limited	Q10: What shifts have taken place in the social relations of pastoralist populations, including in relation to social support networks? What is the potential causal relationship between these changes and food assistance?	Food assistance can both strengthen relations within existing social networks and contribute to the emergence of new political leaders (and displacement of their predecessors).
Security	4	Not applicable	Q11: In what ways have the security conditions within which pastoralist livelihoods take place changed? What is the potential causal relationship between these changes and food assistance?	The publications do not make a causal link between food assistance and security.

Notes: * Some publications report more than one outcome and are included in one or more themes. ** Evidence strength: medium = moderate-quality studies, medium-size evidence body, moderate level of consistency; limited = moderate-to-low-quality studies, medium-size evidence body, low levels of consistency. *** The evidence synthesis addresses 12 research questions (Qs). Evidence on 11 of them is presented in Figure 0.1. A further question (Q12) – 'What are the populations and regions affected by food assistance interventions targeting pastoralists? What are the commonalities and variations between these populations and regions?' – is considered in the following section, 'Findings'.

Findings

- **Food assistance can, in some cases, achieve its primary goal of addressing food insecurity.** Evidence from **Kenya** and **Somalia** indicates that some food assistance interventions have led to a decrease in rates of malnutrition. On the other hand, **provision of food assistance in Ethiopia and Sudan is claimed to have had negative impacts on health outcomes.** The strength of evidence relating to this theme is *limited*.
- **Provision of food assistance** can contribute – and, as evidence from Kenya and Sudan indicates, has contributed – to the **erosion of pastoralist livelihoods.** However, interventions in Kenya seem to have **enabled some pastoralists to hold on to their assets,** including livestock, and to have supported their incomes. The strength of evidence relating to this theme is *medium*.
- There is fairly uniform – but, because of **limited strength of evidence,** not necessarily reliable – evidence from Kenya and Sudan that the **provision of food assistance leads to changes in pastoralists' mobility patterns,** especially sedentarization. The strength of evidence relating to this theme is *limited*.
- **Claims that food assistance can lead to dependency are relatively widespread,** but there is **no identified empirical evidence** of a causal relationship. On the other hand, food assistance can have other detrimental effects: according to one publication, provision of food assistance in Kenya has led to an increase in alcoholism. The strength of evidence relating to this theme is *limited*.
- In some reported cases – in Kenya, Mongolia and Sudan – the **modes of targeting of food assistance have led to internal controversy** (related to unequal distribution, perceived unfairness and elite capture) **within pastoralist communities.** Elsewhere, they have effectively encouraged the emergence of new political leaders who have sought to channel assistance to their clients and, by extension, have restricted some intended beneficiaries' access to food; evidence from Kenya and Sudan indicates an association between food assistance and the creation of new power structures. Conversely, one publication reports that an intervention in Kenya encouraged sharing of food and thereby strengthened existing social networks. The strength of evidence relating to these themes is *limited*.
- There is no evidence in the included publications of the existence of a causal link between the provision of food assistance and the security situation in areas inhabited by its beneficiaries.

Definitions

This review uses the term 'pastoralists' to refer to people who depend on livestock for a significant proportion of their food and income, including those who might also cultivate crops and/or carry out other economic activities.

The term 'livelihoods' is used to refer to the 'capabilities, assets (including material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living' (Scoones, 1998: 5). The review covers a wide range of livelihood systems, based on a list derived from Hesse and MacGregor (2006: 5).

For further detail on the definitions used, see the box 'Definition of common terms included in this review' on pp.1–2 of the full report.

Methodology

Of the 23,424 publications identified in an initial search of academic databases, and an additional 1,442 from grey literature sources, 24 were deemed suitable for synthesis following screening and quality appraisal. These publications:

- are all in English (the search strategy was limited to English and French)
- were all published between 1983 and 2015 (and mainly since 2000)
- are mainly primary studies (n=20)
- include studies that used qualitative methods (n=13), quantitative methods (n=6) and mixed methods (n=5).

Collectively, the selected 24 publications report food assistance interventions during or after humanitarian crises that:

- took place between 1967 and 2012
- lasted between one and 20 years
- were predominantly drought-related (n=21) but have other identified causal factors, including conflict (n=3), famine (n=4), flood (n=2) and disease (n=1)
- took place primarily in countries in the East and Horn of Africa, with the remainder in Algeria, Niger and Mongolia
- targeted Mongolian herders in Asia (n=2) and a range of African pastoralist ethnic groups, including the Beja, Gabbra, Oromo, Pokot, Rashaida, Saharawis, Somalis and Turkana
- targeted populations of between 6,000 and an estimated 20 million people
- involved unconditional provision of food in-kind (n=23) or in exchange for assets (livestock) and work (n=2); nine publications fail to identify the modality of food assistance provision
- were carried out by non-governmental organizations (n=7), United Nations agencies (n=5), national governments (n=4), religious bodies (n=2) or a combination of these (n=6).

Research gaps

- This review uses guidelines developed by DFID and published in the *Assessing the Strength of Evidence* note (DFID, 2014) to evaluate the strength of evidence reported in the included publications. Based on their conformity with the criteria defined by the note, **this review does not consider the strength of evidence reported in any of the publications to be high**. Because of the lack of high-strength evidence, the assessment of the impacts of food assistance on pastoralists contained in this review is inconclusive:
 - the strength of evidence in **13** publications is classified as **moderate**
 - the strength of the remaining **11** publications is classified as **low**.
- While the research team has chosen not to exclude publications on the grounds of the strength of reported evidence, claims made in most of the included publications are not reliable.
- Causal inferences made in included publications are especially problematic. In most publications, the method of analysis is not reported; causal claims are not supported by evidence and are reported as the authors' impressions of observed events or outcomes.
- While the **difficulty of conducting research in the context of humanitarian crises should be recognized**, the inadequate quality of the included publications makes it **impossible to reliably evaluate the impacts of common types of humanitarian intervention targeting some of the world's most vulnerable populations**. As such, it can prevent identification of potential harmful impacts and other deficiencies of the provision of food assistance to pastoralist populations.
- The findings of this review highlight, therefore, the necessity of future multidisciplinary research and evaluation that can make valid inferences about the causal relationships between food assistance and various aspects of pastoralist livelihoods. Such high-quality research could be both qualitative and quantitative, but it should include experimental and prospective cohort studies, as well as retrospective cohort designs which rely on validated methods. New research should also disaggregate outcomes by age, gender and mobility patterns.

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