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Somalia's Drought Crisis: From Emergency Relief to Institutional Resilience.

Impacts, Governance Challenges, and Policy Solutions.

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Somalia faces an escalating drought crisis, driven not only by climate variability but also by systemic weaknesses in governance, infrastructure, and development capacity. Consecutive below-average rainy seasons in 2025, have severely reduced pasture and water availability, undermining agro-pastoral and pastoral livelihoods, decreasing agricultural productivity, and contributing to acute food insecurity. Approximately 4.8 million people are experiencing crisis-level food insecurity, while 1.85 million children under five are at risk of acute malnutrition, including nearly 310,000 in Puntland. Waterborne and communicable disease outbreaks, including cholera, measles and diphtheria, and large-scale displacement, highlight the urgent humanitarian and public health dimensions of the crisis.

In Puntland, nearly one million people require humanitarian support, with significant displacement reported both within the region and across borders. Critical infrastructure deficits, particularly non-functional boreholes and disrupted public services further exacerbate vulnerability. The Puntland government has responded by establishing a coordinated drought relief committee that has mobilized nearly \$1 million in emergency funding, delivering water, food assistance, and rehabilitating boreholes.

Addressing Somalia's drought vulnerability demands a strategic, development-focused approach. Key policy priorities include strengthening climate governance, securing water resources through infrastructure investment and groundwater regulation, protecting pastoral and agro-pastoral livelihoods, reinforcing community-based adaptation, conserving critical natural habitats, and enhancing extension services for climate-smart agriculture. Effective implementation requires predictable financing, coordinated federal and regional action, and alignment of programs with national policy objectives. Without these measures, Somalia will remain trapped in recurrent drought cycles, with escalating impacts on human security, economic productivity, and national development.

Climatic Stress:

Somalia's recurrent drought vulnerability is rooted in the country's ecological, economic, and institutional configuration. Situated within an arid and semi-arid climatic zone, Somalia experiences high rainfall variability, prolonged dry seasons, and rising temperature trends that collectively influence livelihood sustainability.

However, the severity of drought impacts is determined less by climatic conditions alone and more by structural development constraints affecting governance, infrastructure, and adaptive capacity.

Economic Vulnerability:

The national economy remains heavily dependent on pastoral and agro-pastoral production systems. Livestock assets serve multiple functions as productive capital, household savings, and key export commodities making them central to both micro and macroeconomic stability.

Consequently, drought-induced reductions in pasture and water availability translate directly into livelihood loss, market disruption, and weakened national export performance.

Humanitarian Financing Constraints:

The drought situation is unfolding in a context of humanitarian financing limitations. The 2025 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan remains only 23.7% funded, forcing humanitarian actors to scale back assistance programs (OCHA Somalia, 2025).

Failed Rainy Seasons and Agricultural Impact:

During the 2025 Gu' season (April–June), below-average rainfall affected several agropastoral and pastoral areas, particularly in northern parts of the country. The rainfall deficit reduced pasture and water availability and negatively affected crop production, placing additional pressure on communities that depend heavily on rain-fed agriculture and livestock.

These conditions were further compounded by the poor performance of the 2025 Deyr season (October–December), which also recorded below-average rainfall across much of the country.

The consecutive seasons of insufficient rainfall weakened agricultural output and livestock productivity, contributing to declining household food production and increasing vulnerability among drought-affected communities.

Food and Nutrition Crisis:

Approximately 4.8 million people experienced high levels of acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 or above) in January 2026. This included about 1.2 million people (6 percent of the population) in IPC Phase 4 (Emergency), and more than 3.6 million people (19 percent of the population) in IPC Phase 3 (Crisis). An additional 7.4 million people were classified in IPC Phase 2 (Stressed). (FSNAU, 2026).

Additionally, approximately 1.85 million children under five years of age are at risk of acute malnutrition through July 2026, reflecting a severe human capital vulnerability trajectory.

Health Threats:

Outbreaks of waterborne and communicable diseases, including acute watery diarrhea, cholera, measles, and diphtheria, continue to affect southern and central Somalia, driven primarily by severe water scarcity and limited access to safe sanitation.

Population Displacement:

Approximately 212,000 people are projected to be internally displaced between 1 December, 2025 and 31 March, 2026 across Somalia, according to IOM. Of these, 64 percent are expected to be displaced due to drought, and 36 percent due to conflict.

Introduction:

Drought conditions in Puntland are intensifying humanitarian and livelihood pressures, reflecting the combined effects of climate variability, fragile infrastructure, and limited institutional response capacity. Recent assessments highlight rising displacement, water scarcity, and service disruptions across several districts. On 10 November, Puntland authorities formally requested humanitarian partners and donors to scale up drought response efforts, prioritizing water access, food security, and livelihood protection for vulnerable communities.

Urgent Humanitarian Need:

Official estimates indicate that nearly one million people within Puntland require humanitarian and livelihood support, including approximately 130,000 individuals in immediate need of assistance.

Displacement Hotspots:

Subnational assessments conducted in Jariiban district on 23 November reported the displacement of 1,370 individuals from Bari, Galgaduud, and southern Mudug regions, demonstrating localized mobility pressures associated with resource scarcity.

Approximately 50,000 people have migrated from rural settlements to urban centers within Puntland, while some households have crossed into the Somali Regional State of Ethiopia in search of pasture and water resources for livestock livelihoods

Infrastructure Vulnerabilities:

Infrastructure degradation remains a major vulnerability driver. More than 130 strategic boreholes are reported non-functional due to maintenance deficits and limited investment in water systems. Public service delivery has also been affected, with the closure of 36 rural schools disrupting education access for more than 26,500 learners.

Food and Nutrition Crisis:

Approximately 1.85 million children under five nationwide are experiencing acute malnutrition, including nearly 310,000 in Puntland. Immediate policy and programmatic interventions are required to prevent further deterioration, strengthen nutrition services, and protect child health and development in drought-affected areas.

4 Puntland Government Response to the 2026 Drought

The Puntland authorities have established a coordinated drought relief committee, integrating government officials, clerics, and business leaders to oversee emergency interventions. To date, the committee has mobilized nearly \$1 million in emergency funding, with allocations prioritized for water delivery, food assistance, and borehole rehabilitation. Specifically, over 4,000 water tankers have been deployed, 5,000 families have received food support, and strategic boreholes have been repaired to maintain water access. These measures demonstrate a structured, transparent, and targeted government response, aiming to alleviate immediate humanitarian pressures while supporting vulnerable communities during the worsening drought.

However, without continued investment in water infrastructure and a coordinated drought response, the risk of increased vulnerability and population displacement remains high. Sustained efforts to strengthen resilience and expand humanitarian support are essential to protect livelihoods and mitigate the impact of recurrent droughts in Puntland.

5 Conclusion:

Somalia's vulnerability to drought extends far beyond climate variability, reflecting deep-seated challenges in governance, infrastructure, and overall development capacity. While climate shocks amplify humanitarian pressures, recurring drought crises are largely driven by systemic weaknesses in national and local policy frameworks, institutional coordination, and resilience mechanisms.

Ad hoc responses alone cannot secure long-term stability. Building durable resilience requires strategic, development-focused approaches that integrate climate adaptation into planning, invest in critical water infrastructure, and strengthen the climate resilience of livelihoods.

Achieving these goals depends on predictable financing, effective coordination between federal and regional authorities, and alignment of programs with national policies. Without sustained systemic reforms, Somalia will continue to face recurrent drought cycles, with escalating impacts on human security, economic productivity, and national development

6 Policy Recommendations:

1. Integrated Climate Governance

Establish an integrated climate governance framework to strengthen coordination, accountability, and policy implementation across federal and regional institutions. Enhance environmental governance by improving enforcement of laws and regulations to prevent unsustainable resource use, ecosystem degradation, and unregulated land and water exploitation.

2. Water Security and Infrastructure Investment

Strengthening water security is critical for climate-resilient livelihoods in Somalia. Policy actions should focus on rehabilitating strategic boreholes, expanding rural water storage, and ensuring community-level access during prolonged dry periods.

A national groundwater management policy is needed to regulate extraction and protect aquifers, while improving water distribution infrastructure will reduce losses and promote equitable access. Integrating water security into national resilience and development planning is essential to support sustainable, climate-resilient objectives.

3. Protecting Pastoral and Agro-Pastoral Livelihoods

Safeguarding pastoral and agro-pastoral systems is critical to reducing climate-related vulnerability in Somalia. Key measures include protecting grazing corridors, livestock insurance and risk transfer, and strengthening veterinary emergency networks to reduce livestock losses. Stabilizing livestock markets and enhancing early warning systems will support household incomes and enable timely responses to drought and disease, reinforcing overall livelihood resilience.

4. Strengthening Community-Based Resilience

Integrate community-based adaptation into national disaster frameworks by supporting local coping networks and indigenous mutual aid systems. Establish village-level resource management committees and improve coordination between national and subnational water authorities to ensure equitable resource use, effective early warning, and locally led adaptation.

5. Protecting and Managing Critical Natural Habitats

Establish and legally protect terrestrial and coastal conservation areas while restoring degraded ecosystems of high ecological value. Prioritize forest systems, wetlands, marine and coastal nurseries, biodiversity hotspots, and ecological corridors, especially those spanning altitudinal and climate transition zones to enhance ecosystem connectivity, species adaptation, and resilience.

6. Enhancing Extension Support for Climate-Smart Agriculture

Programs should focus on promoting drought resilient crop varieties and livestock breeds, alongside sustainable land and water management and effective pest and disease control. Extension support must also link producers to markets through digital platforms providing weather data, climate guidance, and real-time market information. Establishing feed and fodder trading systems can stabilize pastoral incomes, while investments in post-harvest management, processing, storage, and hygienic handling reduce losses, improve food safety, and enhance access to higher-value market

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