

# How can preventive humanitarian interventions support climate change adaptation?

## A case study of Siaya, Kenya



**COURTING  
CATASTROPHE?**

Humanitarian Policy and  
Practice in a Changing Climate

The communities of fishers and farmers in Siaya, Western Kenya are increasingly affected by climate-related risks such as floods and droughts. The Kenya Red Cross Society and the Norwegian Red Cross have carried out pilot efforts in Siaya to integrate short term humanitarian responses to disasters with long term goals of strengthening the population's resilience to climate change. In this brief, we report on ongoing research investigating how and under what conditions such preventive humanitarian approaches can support climate change adaptation, and identify lessons that may inform future work by the Red Cross and other humanitarian actors. Our preliminary findings indicate that these humanitarian approaches hold significant potential for climate change adaptation, but also that challenges remain: at local levels in ensuring that interventions respond to factors causing vulnerability to climate risks, and at programme level in improving planning, reporting and funding practices to become more flexible in the face of changing needs.

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### Introduction

Humanitarian actors are increasingly recognising the need to put more focus on long-term adaptation and resilience in the face of climate change. However, there is as yet little evidence on whether and how it may happen in practice, and the opportunities, obstacles and ways forward to achieve this shift in humanitarian policy and practice. In 2012, the Kenya Red Cross Society and the Norwegian Red Cross embarked on a 26-month humanitarian effort called the *Integrated Food Security and Livelihoods Project in Siaya County* (IFSL). Siaya, in Western Kenya, has been heavily affected by recent climate-related hazards (floods and droughts) that have disrupted livelihoods, damaged local environments, and created major health risks. These stresses combine with longstanding high prevalence of HIV/AIDS and deep poverty. The major aim of the Red Cross project is to improve the resilience of the local population to environmental hazards. The IFSL project aims to deliver food and livelihood security mainly by providing a new cassava cultivar selected for higher yields, tolerance to disease, and farmers' acceptance.

### Research approach

The research this brief is based on (see overleaf for details) has two main objectives. First, it aims to understand how the **current context** of humanitarian interventions can support adaptation to climate change in ways that are equitable and sustainable. This contextual

analysis focuses on the kinds of climate knowledge, priorities and views of adaptation present among different stakeholders, and whose adaptation priorities and knowledge get precedence. Second, the research aims to **identify lessons** from current humanitarian interventions – such as the IFSL – on how to reduce long-term vulnerability and empower voices of the vulnerable in adaptation decision-making.

Data collection is conducted at three levels: village, county and national. Methods include semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and transect walks, complemented by semi-structured interviews with decision makers and key humanitarian actors at county and national levels.

### Preliminary findings

Findings from the initial round of fieldwork in Siaya during May-June 2014 suggest a number of areas where humanitarian efforts, such as the IFSL project in this case, have **significant potential** for supporting adaptation:

1) The integration of different humanitarian components (e.g. DRR, nutrition) can address different, mutually reinforcing stressors, simultaneously. For example, removing stagnant water during floods may reduce malaria risk, thus improving health. Nutritional supplements also improve labour capacity at the busiest time of the year.

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Photo: Comparing cassava varieties (© Andrei Marin)

2) The cassava variety distributed through the IFSL project tolerates drought, matures very early (8-10 months) compared to local varieties (2-3 years), has edible leaves (local varieties have poisonous leaves) thus contributing to vitamin intake, and higher yields.

3) Greenhouses, planting material and related training can have significant contribution to improved nutrition of vulnerable children (esp. orphans, fatherless) by allowing schools to waiver their school fees, or provide a daily meal at school.

Nevertheless, preliminary findings suggest that there are also **significant challenges** for the IFSL project – or similar integrated efforts by humanitarian actors – to succeed in achieving increased resilience and climate change adaptation. The challenges **at the local level** include:

1) Cassava cuttings are susceptible to drought right after planting. Swift and timely distribution of the cuttings (i.e. matched to favourable weather forecasts) is therefore essential.

2) Local people may have cultural biases against the usage of cassava as staple food (“food of the poor”), or against its palatability (treating the leaves of the improved variety as equally poisonous as leaves from the local varieties).

3) The beneficiaries of the intervention needed to be organized in groups and have access to land. This requirement may have excluded some of the more vulnerable people and reduced the effects of the intervention on securing livelihoods.

Interviews have also brought up some important challenges that humanitarian actors are facing **at programme and policy levels**:

1) The system of funding humanitarian interventions based on earmarking specific disasters (e.g. floods but not droughts) and short-term projects, challenges long term programming: funds are available but cannot be used, qualified humanitarian personnel is lost due to short-term budgetary plans.

2) The short planning horizon of humanitarian actors (e.g. 3-year Consolidated Appeal Processes are considered long term) results in, among others, challenges in identifying the most appropriate organisational set-up to sustain efforts at the local level.

3) Finally, building resilience requires attention to structures and factors that do not easily fit into current reporting formats for humanitarian efforts, which puts emphasis on easily measurable quantitative indicators.

## Conclusion

The above preliminary findings demonstrate that there are significant opportunities in supporting adaptation through more integrated approaches to humanitarian work. At the same time, there are key challenges at village as well as programme and policy levels, as exemplified in the case of the IFSL project. The study will continue to explore the above issues through further fieldwork in Siaya and at national level to understand better the social and political contexts that affect humanitarian work and adaptation prospects alike.

## Disclaimer

*This research brief does not represent the official view of project partners or the Norwegian Research Council. Responsibility for the text remains with the authors.*

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The main research objective of this project is to critically examine the scope and practical ways in which humanitarian responses may contribute to adaptation to climate change. It draws on experiences and lessons from six countries in Africa and Asia.

## Project partners

### Main research partners

- Department of International Environment and Development Studies (Noragric), Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU), Ås, Norway
- Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex, Brighton, England
- The Red Cross/ Red Crescent Climate Centre (RCCC), Hague, the Netherlands
- Institute of Environment, Gender and Development Studies, Mekelle University, Ethiopia
- COMSATS Institute of Information Technology (CIIT), Pakistan
- Norwegian Red Cross
- The Development Fund

### Other partners

- Nepal Institute of Development Studies (NIDS)
- Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)
- Local Initiatives for Biodiversity, Research and Development (LI-BIRD), Nepal
- Center for International Climate and Environmental Research (CICERO), Norway

For more info, see the project webpage:

<https://www.nmbu.no/en/about-nmbu/faculties/samvit/departments/noragric/research/clusters/chsd/projects-and-activities/courting-catastrophe>