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Position Paper



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Charting a path to drought
resilience in Somalia

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The intensity and the scale of the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding in the Horn of Africa will likely result in irrevocable change. For millions of people, life will not return to how it was before.

A humanitarian catastrophe on an extraordinary scale is unfolding across the Horn of Africa. As of the end of 2022, 2 million people had fled their homes and 20.9 million people are experiencing significant food insecurity (IPC level 3 or above). In Somalia, 8.3 million people are expected to face Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or worse acute food insecurity outcomes between April and June 2023. 1.8 million children are facing the short and long term impact of acute malnutrition, including 513,550 children who are likely to be severely malnourished through July 2023.

Yet, the pathway to recovery in Somalia looks increasingly difficult, or even unlikely. Firstly, the humanitarian response in Somalia today is doing just enough to keep millions of people on the brink of famine, but not enough to curb displacement, malnutrition, health and food insecurity and excess mortality, that continue to force people into harmful coping mechanisms. Secondly, the current scale of the response is unsustainable, with funding unlikely to be maintained at the same level in 2023.

Finally, the Humanitarian Development and Peace (HDP) nexus, might be more damaging than we think to Somalia's socio-ecological system. Indeed, in many instances, the humanitarian response does not consider local capacities, or the medium to the long-term impact of interventions — and in so doing undermines the resilience capacities of communities. And development aid, delivered in parallel to the drought response, regularly fails to recognize the need for shock-responsive, adaptable, and decentralised approaches, thus damaging local capacities to deal with increasing uncertainty and volatility. In other words, the "Do no harm" principles that are so very central to the humanitarian actors tend to be environmentally blind.

As a result, even if the next rainy season (March to May) was withing average, it will likely not be sufficient to change the humanitarian outlook for 2023 or of the following years. It has become evident, in 2022 more than ever, that the conceptual continuum of crisis, recovery, resilience and development is implausible in Somalia, as in many other protracted crises. There is no “normal” to which the country can return. There is no “normal” that is conducive to development or graduation from poverty in Somalia. Hoping that the country will return to what it was a year ago – or 10, 20, 30 years ago - and that it will resume its development pathway is wishful thinking. So, finding a path out of this crisis will require reframing how our system, the Humanitarian Development and Peace nexus, plans and programs for protracted crises, by embracing a common priority to build local resilience to climatic shocks, and by taking a common commitment to address our systemic shortcoming with both intention and urgency.

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Irreversible change?

The severity, duration and geographic spread of the drought — compounded by decades of conflict, weak governance, and climate change — are precipitating two interlinked dynamics.

The first is the accelerated degradation of the ecosystem, which is severely and rapidly undermining the viability of the traditional Somali economy. Multiple consecutive failed rainy seasons and decades of human malpractice have pushed ecosystems across critical thresholds where soil formation, pollination and nutrient cycling are degraded. Vegetation cover, which was already minimal, is fading to nothing because of the drought. Soil quality is also badly affected by the current conditions, as well as the capacity of aquifers and other water systems to refill. Added to this, the long-term impact of man-made activities such as overgrazing, enclosure and charcoal production exacerbate the fragility and undermine the coping capacities of Somalia’s fragile ecosystems, upon which millions of pastoralists and farmers rely entirely for food and health security. Across the Horn, an estimated 10 million livestock has already died because of the

current drought. It is estimated that it takes 5 to 10 years to rebuild flocks and herds, providing rangelands and access to water is available. These conditions make it increasingly unlikely that agricultural livelihoods can remain the foundation of the Somali economy, unless the country implements a serious plan to fight against aridification.

The second dynamic is that of a massive rural exodus that is met with the absence of urban livelihood opportunities and services. The environmental crisis is playing out against the backdrop of a degraded levels of governance and a protracted conflict that has escalated in recent months. The current crisis has stimulated a community response in some regions, leading to a unique push-back against Al Shabab and offering a new platform for the government-led offensive. This more active conflict is increasing insecurity for local communities and pushing more and more people into displacement. Together, conflict and drought have driven more than 1 million people to leave their homes in 2022. This compounded forced displacement is accelerating the rural urban transition, up to levels that are by far overwhelming the capacities of the services and economy provided the towns and cities of Somalia. Many displaced people surveyed have said they will not return to their places of origin. In the absence of coordinated investments and efforts towards integrating these populations, Displacement Affected Communities (DACs) might well be condemned to a life of poverty for generations to come, and growing protracted humanitarian caseloads.

Both these challenges should systematically be at the core of the response to the crisis and the strategic thinking of the actors involved.

What can be done?

So far, actors are looking at Somalia from their own perspective: humanitarian, stabilisation, development, security, counter-terror, private investment, etc. However, protracted acute crises, such as Somalia, demand a different and joint approach, which prioritises resilience. In our understanding, resilience is not an additional step in a continuum of emergency, recovery, and development - quite the opposite. As a purpose and an approach, it has the potential to bridge the gap between all actors around a common priority. This collective vision is that national and international stakeholders work

together so that hazards in the future do not have to be disasters and those poor and marginalised people can fully integrate the socio-economic fabric of the country — and in so doing contribute to the stability and development of their country.

This vision starts with all taking responsibility for the lack of systemic change in the past 30 years, and more specifically since the last famine in 2011, as well as acknowledging the urgency of pulling together forces and resources to rethink the way the HDP sector engages in Somalia. It continues by recognizing that all aspects of the problem are both causing it and affected by it. Conflict destroys ecosystems and natural degradation causes conflict. Marginalisation is the enabling ground of insecurity, and insecurity generates more isolation and destroys social structures. Poverty and the absence of economic inclusion create the conditions for harmful social norms, specifically affecting women and girls. Yet, at the same time, keeping women away from education and family planning exacerbates poverty. All aspects of the system are interconnected, and, at the moment, contribute to the continuous worsening of resilience capacities of systems, communities and people.

It is also equally true however that community and women empowerment can have an impact on ecosystem rehabilitation and local accountability which in turn can positively impact financial integration, which in turn can positively impact conflict and security — and so on. A comprehensive roadmap should unveil the risks ahead but mostly propose a scenario for national actors to lead the HDP system on a resilience-building pathway; a scenario that encourages the system to challenge itself; and that provides guidance to key decision-makers to make the right investment decisions.

A vision for resilience

There is no stand-alone solution or short-term shift that will change this outlook, but after implementing tens and tens of single-year-responses, and experiencing another failure to prevent extreme excess mortality, we must take stock. We must aggressively pursue a vision adapted to the challenges of the coming years. We cannot allow the severity of the crisis facing Somalia to justify programming across the HDP nexus that is ultimately counter-productive to local resilience capacities and is not built around a clear vision of

Complex and protracted crisis

No emergency, recovery, development continuum

Each shock turns into a disaster

Flooding

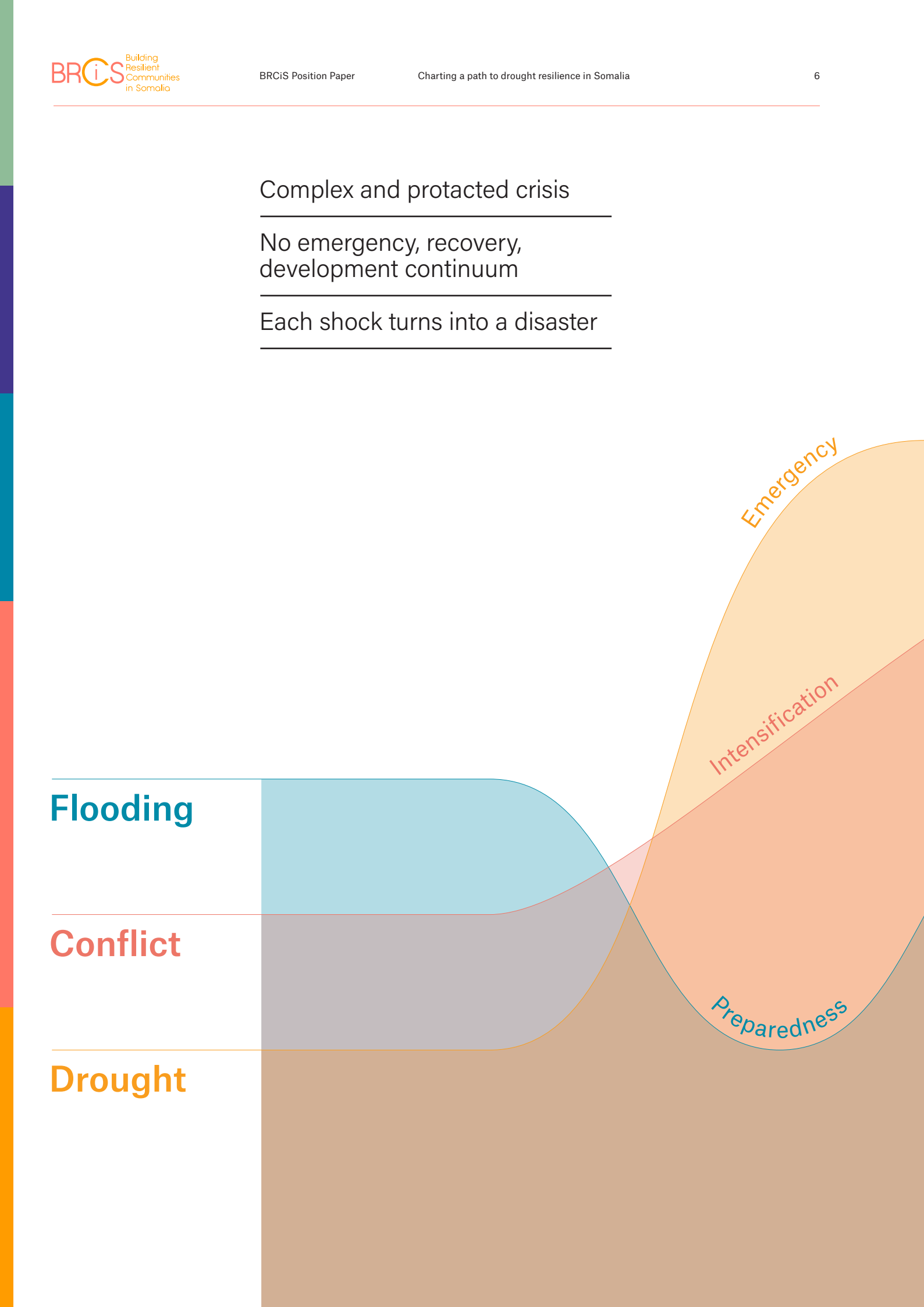
Conflict

Drought

Emergency

Intensification

Preparedness



the complex crisis and how to engage with it, and what a climate-resilient Somalia looks like.

The responsibility of articulating and bringing to life this vision falls under everyone who has stakes in the country, from the government to its citizens, including the various international institutions. However, the power imbalances that are currently prevalent mean that most of the capacities to imagine and power that vision lies with both the government, including the clan leadership, and the international institutions which are designing and implementing development, stabilisation, and humanitarian projects. Put another way, the humanitarian, peace, and development industry must take a systemic risk approach, instead of looking at each challenge in isolation, and to be proactive in engaging the country's leadership in the development and delivery of a resilient vision for Somalia.

This means a radical change in our ways of working, engagement, and empowerment of local actors, strengthening inclusive accountability systems, etc. But if we do not use the learning accumulated over decades to take courageous decisions, change the standards and institutions in favour of models that are better adapted to the challenge that lay ahead, and if we keep circumventing the mechanisms of community and local institution-engagement and dialogue that are critical to understanding how the people most affected by the crisis – and who will live with the outcomes of our interventions – we are failing as a system, and we should be held responsible for the damage.

Practically, this means ensuring that HDP programming is accountable, smart, and climate adaptive and reflects what we already know to work: plan humanitarian assistance to reflect the protracted nature of the crisis as well as the cyclical nature of shocks, so that the impact of the investment is maximised towards reducing root causes of disasters and building resilience; plan development and stabilisation investments by taking into account the vulnerability and risk context of Somalia so as to strengthen systems to better absorb and manage these risks; help them to transform for the future reality of climate change; mainstream inclusive empowerment of local structures and people so that they can hold the system to account.

In addition, securing a path to a resilient Somalia will require some new perspectives and approaches. The most significant of which is to 'mainstream'

climate adaptation and environmental programming. There can be no long-term or sustainable approach to programming in Somalia that does not consider the question of how viable — in terms of climate change — is the outcome that we are seeking to achieve. Practically this means programming to promote a healthy environment: regenerative ecosystem practices, for water, soil, vegetation, and other natural resources, across rural, urban and peri-urban contexts.

A parallel focus will need to develop a pathway to a viable alternative economy, with a reduced focus on agricultural production, and diversification towards value addition and commerce. Idealising the Somali economy of the 90s, with its heavy reliance on food production and exports or developing the irresponsible exploitation of marine resources are short-sighted views of what an inclusive Somali economy could be. While the restoration of natural capital should be a priority to support local food production, the Somali population cannot rely only on water and soil — or other natural resources — dependent livelihoods in the future. On the other hand, the Somali business community is one the most connected and agile in the world, able to keep markets supplied and prices under check even during intense economic stresses. They could be at the heart of the solution to provide pro-poor services as well as livelihood options for Displacement Affected Communities, urban economic migrants and poor people in general.

Building on these ideas, there is a real opportunity to project a collective vision for a resilient and inclusive Somalia that all parties — from the government to businesses, to national and international civil society — could start delivering in 2023. With each major catastrophe, the humanitarian community could reflect and improve. Both national and international actors must ask themselves whether they are ready to take up the challenges of trying to address the situation at hand, not only in the short term, but also in the long term, to be more accountable to the citizens of Somalia and to their government, and to take the risks that the situation demands.

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