

**Community Consultation
to inform FAO-WFP-UNICEF Resilience Strategy**



*Surgudud
3rd October 2012*

Surgudud

There was a group of about twenty women, most of whom had been at the full community consultation the day before but not been very vocal compared with the men. After introductions, a distraction was caused by two armed escort guards quarrelling (but the women were not too concerned: “It’s not something big, they always quarrel, this is the normal tradition of Somalis and soldiers”). Several of the women spoke of their gratitude at being consulted: “People normally pass or stop only in their vehicles. We are happy that you are here and sitting on this mat with us”.

At times the conversation was dominated by a middle-aged woman making repeated requests for aid in the context of discussion about local resilience. Again, the shift in thinking from looking only at vulnerabilities/needs to exploring strengths and capacities (that can be supporting through resilience-based programming) applies not just to us; communities too are un-used to this approach in their dealing with outside humanitarian agencies.

Overall an interesting discussion was had about local realities, with the following key points:

- **Loss of pastoralism (through loss of viable herds):** it was apparent that this was seen as a cultural and even psychosocial loss as well as a material/economic one, illustrating the **importance of that livelihood locally**. To emphasise this, a story was told later by a local staff member about a man who ‘went mad’ when his herd was lost to drought; alternative livelihoods could not restore his loss
- **Dynamic livelihood diversification:** women were engaging in small business and trade, and with sisal handicrafts and firewood selling; many in the community worked on farms for income; **connectivity** to larger towns was clearly vital to the viability of all livelihoods in terms of supply chains and market access
- **Conflict:** conflict had affected this community badly and caused loss of lives and livestock but also perpetual mobility (and this was a community we could access; those further from Dolow in less secure areas would undoubtedly have experienced the **material and psychosocial effects of conflict** a lot more)
- **Mobility:** families had moved to escape drought and conflict, and expected to move again. Sometimes movement was in and out of camps, or across the border; **preparation** could be done in terms of scouting/surveillance, but old ways of preserving food (especially dried camel meat) had been lost. Women spoke of the serious **health risks to children caused by long journeys, and by the congested camps** they often transit through
- **Youth:** they were largely absent, most busy chasing work, income, or aid (through stays in IDP and refugee camps). Parents fear their children being subject to bad influences.
- **Education:** the community knew well the **importance of education** as a way for children to escape the hardships of local life, and also a way for them to support their families (through remittances); informal schooling through **Quranic schools (duxsis)** was valued as providing an important **moral as well as religious influence on children’s lives**, something that makes them stronger and more resilience
- **Health:** many local midwives exist but are not formally trained, and there are no local CHWs
- **Resilience:** individual women can display **very different degrees of resilience** based on their own abilities, initiatives, and will to endure

What follows is as close as possible a transcript of what was said, based on translation from Somali to English.

Today's situation

Middle-aged woman

Life now is pathetic, we are in a season where we face a lot of drought, and we have faced a lot of drought before. We have a problem because we're facing a drought and we don't have enough food. Our children are getting very weak now that we're in a drought situation. If agencies can help us, we are requesting for assistance.

Old woman

Drought today is totally different from the previous ones. We used to have a lot of animals here, but our animals died and now we don't have enough animals. Almost all our livestock died and the few that are remaining are not enough to sustain our livelihood. Whatever remnants of animals there are, they are very weak. Look at that cow! [*pointed at a single cow looking thin, alone in an enclosure nearby*]. People here were depending on livestock, so when the animals died people also became weak and their livelihoods became finished.

Middle-aged woman

People are different. Some are casual labourers and they go to the bush to get sisal for weaving and sell those woven goods. But after this drought the sales of those woven goods wasn't so good. There are also some farmers here, but their harvests have now been so good. There are others who cut firewood and then sell it. During the dry season the sales of things like firewood and sisal is not as good. So that's the situation we're in, it's a very bad situation, so we're requesting to be assisted if possible – otherwise it's only God who can help us.

Social support

Middle aged woman

People normally get credit as support here, but the ones who get that credit are the ones who have something they can use to pay it back.

There's a proverb about twins: because they loved each other they carried each other, and because they were both equally weak they dropped on the ground together. The people of Surgudud are like those twins: they love one another and they help one another and they carry one another. But because they are weak, all together, they drop on the ground at the same time.

The people here who are better off and can support themselves are the ones who own the water pumping machines. They make some money, but whatever money they make from that is not even enough for fuelling of those pumping machines. All others are equal, not very different from one another.

From the fall of our last government headed by Siad Barre up until now we have been in drought and at war. All the people that died died, and the ones like us who remain are in a very weak situation. At the moment we are in two groups: the ones who live on the outskirts of the village or outside it, and the ones who live inside it. Within the village we have some water pumps. Twenty people share one pump within this village. The people who live in the outskirts of the village have mostly lost all their animals, totally. The ones who had hundreds of animals now might remain with ten now. They had a donkey for fetching water from the water points, but most of the donkeys now are dead.

As a people we were disintegrated: some moved in this area, some moved across the border to Ethiopia after all these problems. Many of the ones who remained in the village after all their animals died formed a cooperative, approached those with farms, cultivate the land for them and then share the harvest and profits with the owners of the farms and with the cooperative. The river we rely on now is seasonal, for 6 months it's totally full with water. For the six months we're supposed to plant our crops we face problems like pests, and we even have floods that can destroy our crops – those are the problems we experience. As we face that problem and maybe all our crops are destroyed we go to towns like Dolow and borrow from a friend in that place, take credit to buy food with, when we have that problem. If the harvest is not good because of pests and other things, then the credit we took will turn out to be a bad debt. If the harvest is good, we can pay our credit back with whatever we harvested. For the last few years that we've been facing drought and floods, it has been humanitarian organisations that came in and assisted us – that's how we survived. To finish, I am saying that we are expecting a bad drought right now and there is very little assistance to us from humanitarian organisations, it's been four or five months that we've not received assistance.

Old ways of dealing with drought

Middle aged-woman

In the old days we got out of bad situations, whatever God has given us, by going to the bush and cutting trees and selling what we get from those trees [firewood, sticks for building]. So we use our muscles at those moments.

Old woman

We used to have animals in the old days, during the old droughts. We could sell animals to get through drought, and we could slaughter animals to eat and get through drought. Those animals are not there now; the drought has finished them. The remaining ones are very weak; they are standing physically but they are not productive. In the old times we used to take our animals to areas of pasture, but now there are no pastures areas to take them to. If you release them for grazing they'll just come back to you, looking for food from you.

Conflict

Old woman

When it comes to conflict, there might be militias who settle on opposite sides of this village. What we do is move away from here, migrate, so that we won't be caught unaware by their fighting. We leave this place and we might even become refugees. In this village there was a time when two rival militias came in from opposite sides, and they fired bullets and all the donkeys and animals we had died on the spot. One young lady was shot, she was critically injured and was taken to Addis Ababa in Ethiopia. So many people were injured. We face so many conflict here. When there is no government structure in the area we face those kinds of issues, there is no resolution or help for these kinds of conflicts. After the disintegration of the government of Somalia, from that moment until now we've been in conflict. We blame the conflicts we see on lack of government.

Woman

Those two soldiers you saw quarrelling here – it can start just like that, with the quarrel enlarging into a conflict. The problem of conflict is because of lack of government, when all these people around us and all the militias are well armed. If we had had a government and a president, these events would not have happened. Now people fight in terms of clans and areas, problems are caused and become conflicts because there is no structure to control it. Now we are expecting that with the new government, this problem will come to an end – that is our hope and we pray to God it will be so.

Middle-aged woman

In a household you might have children, a mother and a father. Through conflict, the father dies. What kind of a family will be left behind? They'll be orphans! It will be orphans who are left behind. We have had humanitarian organisations helping with orphans, and in some ways this community is an orphan.

We do have ways of looking after orphans. Those who are well off in this community will come and help the weaker ones. People assist each other depending on what they have.

We have two kinds of orphans. Those whose parents died in the war, and all of us who have not had a government or a President. A president should be like a backbone, and we haven't had it. That's the problem that we've been in and the thing which has been weakening us. Now we have hope in this new government that has been formed and we pray that strength comes to our side. But we still feel the impact of there having been no government for so long, we still feel like orphans.

Woman

We do have elders who take the role of government in this community with certain things, that's how we are surviving now. We have village Chiefs, and we have elders; in case of any conflict these elders come together and solve it, they sit down and they solve it.

Elderly woman

In the case of conflict or any problem that arises, it is the village elders who come together and sit together and solve it, and whatever they decide is what will happen.

If a woman lost her husband to conflict she would go to the village elders and they would give her advice and small gifts to her – animals, money or whatever, and they would try to make sure she can cope with that problem she is in. From that day the children of that mother will be in the hands of that village in general, everyone has responsibility for them. If they have a farm, we assist by cultivating it for them: planting, digging, we do everything for them. We will assist them through their problems. If they are not farmers, if they are livestock owners, we'll assist them by looking after those animals. Maybe they don't have strong people to look after those animals, we'll assist them by looking after those animals. If they have neither farms nor animals we will come together and collect whatever we have that they might need, and assist them in that way. That's how we help them.

Middle-aged woman

There's an organisation called COOPI here, we are all poor here and we have nothing, but that organisation COOPI was the best, giving us all the assistance we required during that time; our life improved during that time. Whatever they brought as assistance was sealed completely. But we might be living in a household of ten or fifteen; in such a large household, with a small amount of food like

20kg, it doesn't go very far, it's not enough. When they were coming we were a bit better, but now we are totally grounded and very weak. We are requesting humanitarian NGOs to come and assist us.

Woman

The person who is strong is the one who can assist herself or himself. Children face disease problems: because of this movement from place to place, children face many different diseases. The last movement was about a year ago, and when we moved we joined IDP camps and refugee camps across the border, but children got a lot of diseases in these camps. It's hard for children to move like this. We don't move with vehicles, we move on foot, and in that process of walking we face problems like lack of water and lack of food that is hard for children.

Woman

When we move children don't go to school, but when we get to IDP or refugee camps the children who did not die on the journey will go to schools in those camps. We have quite a good school here, but it's just up to class four – after that we take the children to Dolow town.

When children get education they can improve their living standard, and they can even move to a different country for work. Lack of knowledge is lack of light. If these children are educated, they can help themselves and they can also assist their parents and families in future: when they move to another country they can send you money. We see education as a very good thing for improving children's lives. When they're here, they cannot help us, only the children who leave here can help us. There are no jobs for educated children here, it's not a town.

The Somali proverb, “What kills a first born, a mother fears for her last born”

Various women

We know that proverb. It's true, as mothers we do all we can to save the last born child, we may even sacrifice ourselves. We do casual labour for them like cutting firewood, cutting sisals, to make income so they will survive.

We make sure our children are healthy all the time by giving them drugs when they're sick and keeping them clean. They also learn with us how to do casual labour or how to look after animals. If there are farms, they will be taught how to cultivate them.

We give them education, that's a priority, and we have a local form of education in a *duxsi* where they learn the Quran.

When they learn at the *duxsi*, they might open their own *duxsi* and become a teacher and teach the other children. That brings an income, all parents pay the *duxsi* teacher. The *duxsi* here is right there [pointing], next to the mosque. Children go very early in the morning to the *duxsi*, and stay until 8am, then at 8.30 they go to the other school until 11.

We go to riverbanks to look for sisal and firewood to make sure our children don't leave the *duxsi* or the school. If we can't do this, we take credit to make sure the children don't have to leave school. The worst time for children missing school and *duxsi* was when we were in the IDP and refugee camps. When we move we don't leave them behind, whether we're moving because of drought or conflict.

Health of children

Various women

We have health problems here for children. Like we have measles outbreaks, we have flu or common cold, we have diarrhea – those are the kinds of problems our children normally face in terms of health. We normally go to this health post here in Surgudud, but if they don't have the drugs we need we go to Dolow town. All the people sitting here can't really help each other with health issues, we rely on those facilities. The only thing we have is bonesetters, they are here. We don't normally go to hospitals when our bones are broken, we have a local person who is expert in those things and we will give them special food to the person with the broken bone to make sure it heals very quickly – *hararsima*, which includes camel meat and other things.

Midwives

Midwife

Six of us sitting here are midwives in this community. Only one has been trained officially by an organisation, but all of us know how to deliver children and it is God who helps us. We teach each other skills we have when it comes to this, and these things depend on how strong you are, how brave you are, how faithful you are.

Woman

We mobilise our children in this way too, teaching them to do things together as a group or a community, whether it is in farming or other things, we want them to learn to work together.

Future migration

Middle-aged woman

Only God knows if we will move again, to us at the moment we will only move from here if we die.

Before we move to a certain place we have to send certain people to go and survey the area where we are thinking about settling, it's called *sahan*. A group of young men usually do this *sahan*. Today the people who do *sahan* can use mobile phones to call us in our homes and tell us the information, it's faster than when we had to wait for them to return or the message to reach us in other ways.

We move with our semi-permanent structures, they are ready to move and can be put on the back of donkeys or on donkey carts if we have them.

Middle-aged woman

We normally carry uncooked food, and as we go we have to stop and cook our food; after eating we again start moving.

Old woman

We used to take preserved food when we moved. In the old days we would slaughter camels and dry the meat and put it in a special place, a big container it could stay in for a very long period. That dried meat was what we used to eat as we moved. Now we don't have animals to slaughter, we are very poor now.

We listen to radio here, we have them and hear news and other things through them.

People here have relatives abroad who send money to them through their phones, they then have to go to Dolow to collect the money sent to them through their phones.

Cross-border trade to sell sisal and other goods.

Youth

Woman

Activities for the elderly are very minimal, but the youth – our children – are the ones who fetch water for us from the river, cultivating the land and looking after animals, cooking cleaning clothes and the house (women only), and do all the activities for the elderly. They have a lot of work. They are the backbone of the family.

Woman

We fear for our youth; like we fear that our daughters will choose someone unsuitable for marriage. We want them to choose someone suitable, like someone who is good, who is religious, who doesn't chew khat or eat tobacco, and someone who is a teacher in the *duxsi*, and someone who is well off and can take care of the family and its daily needs.

For young boys we fear they will become someone irresponsible, someone who chews khat or is lazy or becomes a thug. With drugs around like khat and tobacco, there are some even now who are out of our hands.

Woman

Even when they go to the river we fear for them, there are so many crocodiles in the river and we fear they might be eaten by the crocodiles.

Woman

We hope they will have a good education, we hope they will attend and learn from the *duxis*, we want them to marry and settle and start their own family.

Woman

We want them to be obedient to their parents and their relatives.

Middle-aged woman

We are suffering from conflict and droughts. Now what can we expect from you after this?

[Explained that the visitors are from 3 different agencies and want to build long-term strength of communities, so are beginning by understanding what it is that can make communities and households and parents and children strong.]

We had expected for the three agencies to bring cash and clothes for us. But we are very happy when we see ladies coming here. We are seeing you and sitting on the same mat with you and we are very happy.

Deputy DC [who arrived at the end]

I am in charge of the area, I am from the District Commissioners' office, and I know how things are here. Surgudud is an area where very vulnerable people live, and they don't have animals. There is land around but it is very bushy and hard to farm. There are only 7 water pumps here. The majority of people don't have animals and they don't have farms, they do casual labour and they depend on their muscles. It's an area that really needs humanitarian assistance. The school here is now closed because of lack of money from the NGO that used to support it, it's now closed. Since the three great NGOs are now together as one we expect great things from them. The assistance these people were getting before allowed them to sit, but not stand; we want you to assist them to stand up by themselves.

We are very grateful that you came here to assist us, we thank you once more again for the great thing you are doing. The people of Surgudud are different from the rest of Somalia – not one of them has ever joined Al Shabaab. Feel welcome, we are happy you are here.

The meeting closed with thanks and the elders offered food to the guests.
