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Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises

ISSUE BRIEF

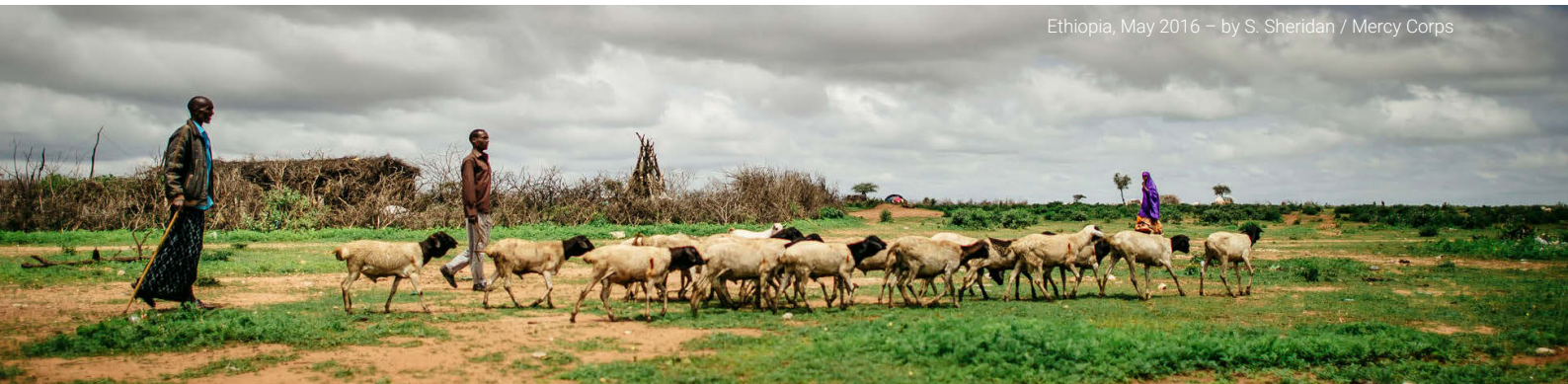
UNRAVELLING THE KNOT: ADDRESSING WICKED PROBLEMS THROUGH STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Comparative insights on how to address root issues and build resilience from Ethiopia and Kenya

Kamran Hakiman and Chloe Stull-Lane

Key messages

- In tackling complex, 'wicked' problems underpinning instability in the Horn of Africa, stakeholders must effectively address four aspects of decision-making: political will, evidence, stakeholder coordination, and institutional capacity.
- The SHARED approach offered a structured framework and tools to address these aspects, primarily by facilitating high-quality evidence flow and by implementers serving as neutral mediators within the political landscape.
- Decision-making for resilience is not a discrete event, but a long-term process of improving governance. In our cases, the SHARED approach was constrained by short funder time horizons, which primarily focused on specific decision points or policies, while having limited resources and mandates to build long-term institutional capability.
- Building political will was often a determining factor of issues that could be tackled. However, SHARED's capacity to build political will was dependent on staffing for resource-intensive stakeholder engagement. As a result, in some circumstances, SHARED implementation was not able to address foundational issues.
- Technology is powerful in generating excitement, but care is warranted. Technological tools for collecting and displaying data in a central platform generated excitement, but, in both cases, their latter usefulness was overestimated. The cost threshold for technological tools to operate at scale was higher than implementers or funders anticipated. As such, the tools did not have realistic, long-term-use cases.
- Stakeholder engagement is resource intensive. Solving complex and interrelated problems requires engaging diverse stakeholders over long time horizons. Funders and implementers should modulate the intensiveness of implementation according to the challenges in specific political economy environments.



Ethiopia, May 2016 – by S. Sheridan / Mercy Corps

The mission of Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) is to explore models for building the resilience of communities as they navigate the compounding effects of climate change related to conflict, environmental fragility and weak governance. This issue brief investigates the application of a decision-making tool for governance specifically designed to these tackle complex, wicked problems – Stakeholder Approach to Risk-informed and Evidence-based Decision-making (SHARED). It builds on a previous brief: Innovation in governance: Integrating technical and contextual perspectives to address fragility.

1. Introduction

Although the Horn of Africa bears scant responsibility for human-made climate change, the region stands at a crossroads, grappling with its accelerated impacts on ecosystems and populations. The Horn's vast drylands and pastoralist communities face this grim reality, further compounded by the region's history of natural disasters, unresolved border disputes and ongoing conflicts involving military and militia forces (Gavin, 2022). While 'building resilience' has become the catchphrase for addressing these challenges facing dryland, (agro)pastoralist communities, building resilience requires confronting 'wicked' problems – characterised as ill-defined, involving multiple stakeholders across levels, and having no clear answers . Such policy problems as food security (Candel, 2014) and climate change (Vink et al., 2013) are not only complex but also ambiguous, contested among political actors and span multiple scales. As such, these challenges resist the simple application of predetermined solutions or 'best practices'.

This issue brief investigates the application of a decision-making tool for governance specifically designed to these tackle complex, wicked problems – Stakeholder Approach to Risk-informed and Evidence-based Decision-making (SHARED). SHARED is an innovative example of a wider class of stakeholder engagement frameworks, a common yet understudied response to wicked problems. These frameworks involve multiple stakeholders in order to uncover locally relevant and politically legitimate solutions. SHARED was selected for study as it has a history of application in sub-Saharan Africa, and strongly foregrounds using evidence and data as key elements for navigating intractable problems. Our work builds on previous research focusing on the impact of SHARED in single-country contexts (Neely et al., 2021; Vågen, et al., 2018). However, to our knowledge, this is the first comparative study addressing factors for success and limitations.

We draw from studies of two SHARED applications from northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia, examining the framework's strengths and weaknesses in addressing two complex country-specific issues. In Kenya's case, SHARED was applied to improve the allocation of public funding within Turkana County, a dryland area of Kenya experiencing chronic water shortages. The Ethiopia case examines decision-making with regard to reversing deforestation in Ethiopia's drylands, involving both national and sub-national policies and stakeholders.

2. Background

Governments and communities in the Horn of Africa are confronting the intensifying realities of climate change, including a devastating drought threatening more than 22 million people with extreme hunger, as the region confronts multiple ongoing conflicts. As humanitarian and development funding is marshalled to address these challenges, two parallel questions arise: how to best allocate and deploy resources, and what policy shifts are necessary to solve systemic and deeply rooted issues. It is apparent that there are few, easy answers to these questions. Weak governance, the shadow of instability and the deep complexity of these topics requires they be approached as wicked problems. As such, solving such problems requires engagement with diverse political and community stakeholders to devise and implement creative, locally derived solutions. This study sets out to more systematically understand stakeholder engagement by looking at the SHARED model, which highlights the role of both technical and contextual knowledge in this process. In Ethiopia, we examine the operation of SHARED in shifting policy and coordinating efforts to reverse deforestation, especially in drylands while in the Kenya case, we look at SHARED's role in helping Turkana County improve its developing planning process in the midst of a drought.

A key challenge for development is improving decision-making processes meant to tackle wicked problems within complex and often fragile environments. To better understand the challenges and opportunities for improving local decision-making, this brief presents key learnings based on a comparative study of two cases in Kenya and Ethiopia. In both cases, a single decision-making framework was applied: the Stakeholder Approach to Risk-informed and Evidence-based Decision-making (SHARED). SHARED is a comprehensive multi-stakeholder engagement approach specifically designed to tackle complex problems in developing contexts, and the framework has been used within numerous sub-Saharan African countries. Our selected cases represent 'most different' (Seawright and Gerring, 2008) applications of this same underlying framework. As such, we are able to explore both the promise and limitations of SHARED and similar stakeholder engagement processes by focusing on the challenges and successes that hold for both. All data was collected between February 2022 and September 2022, including in-person and remote interviews with implementers, non-governmental organisation (NGO) partners, community members, farmers and government officials.

2.1 Comparative cases

We summarise the many differences between the cases as existing on an intensive versus extensive spectrum of application, which could also be described as breadth versus depth. Kenya's application is characterised as an intensive application of the SHARED approach, while Ethiopia's application is extensive. As Table 1 notes, the Kenya case was implemented in a sub-national unit, while Ethiopia's was national. Kenya, compared to Ethiopia, had a higher ratio of dedicated SHARED implementers to activities and overall far more stakeholder touchpoints with diverse sets of government and NGO stakeholders (e.g. Kenya had nine SHARED stakeholder meetings between November 2016 and February 2017, while Ethiopia's was more or less annual). In the Kenya case, SHARED was directly solicited by the county government to lead a stakeholder engagement process to improve decision-making. This direct and unmediated relationship between the SHARED implementers and the county government also allowed for greater buy-in and authorisation for the SHARED process. While SHARED had good relations with

BOX 1. THE SHARED APPROACH AND CASE BACKGROUND

Developed by scientists and engagement specialists in the SHARED Decision Hub, based at the international research organisation World Agroforestry (ICRAF), the SHARED methodology emphasises an inclusive multi-stakeholder approach for tackling difficult problems.

The SHARED engagement takes place within a four-stage process:

- understanding political and ecological context
- integrating scientific evidence
- planning
- iterative learning

The method also draws deeply on philosophies of human-centred design and systems thinking, which are meant to uncover and address issues at their root.

Application in Kenya (Turkana County)*

SHARED's application in Turkana County was born from the county government's desire to improve county-wide development planning, by which it prioritised public funding to projects. The purpose of implementing SHARED was both to improve the county development plan (CIDP), which was implemented from 2017 through 2022, and to assist the government in building long-term systems (e.g. reporting requirements, cross-sector collaboration, clearer prioritisation processes drawing on both public participation and evidence) for improving the quality of public planning. Related to SHARED was the development of online data dashboards, meant to bring high-quality and comprehensive data to decision-makers' fingertips.

Building on previous relationships between the designers of the SHARED model, SHARED was directly solicited by a key government department, with strong support by the Turkana County Governor. A core group of SHARED implementers worked intensively on this project throughout the four-year implementation, allowing for dynamic and multi-channel interfacing with local stakeholders.

Application in Ethiopia (national)

SHARED's application in Ethiopia takes place within the multi-country initiative Regreening Africa, an ambitious EU-funded project aiming to reverse land degradation across eight African countries, engaging 500,000 households and transforming 1 million hectares. For Ethiopia, Catholic Relief Services headed the consortium for implementation. Here, SHARED was the primary framework for shifting national and sub-national policy – an aim of the initiative – and for increasing coordination during implementation between government, NGOs and communities. The main interface with national and sub-national stakeholders occurred during semi-annual stakeholder meetings, led by both SHARED implementers and NGO consortium partners.

Embedded in a larger project and spanning eight countries, SHARED nonetheless had minimal direct staffing (with no dedicated county-level staff). Thus, the implementation of SHARED in this context demonstrates how the principles and tools of SHARED can be distributed and implemented in a wider project, but also the limitation of such conceptual diffusion and implementation without adequate staffing.

* For more detailed case descriptions, please refer to SPARC's previous piece on SHARED: https://www.sparc-knowledge.org/resources/innovation-governance-integrating-technical-and-contextual-perspectives-address-fragility.

TABLE 1. CASE COMPARISON

	Intensive application: Kenya	Extensive application: Ethiopia
Geography of engagement	Sub-national (single county)	National and sub-national (multiple states)
Dedicated SHARED implementation staff	Ongoing	Episodic
Discrete components	Inclusive multi-stakeholder meetings, problem mapping and presentation of evidence	Inclusive multi-stakeholder meetings, problem mapping and evidence walls
Intensity of implementation	High	Medium–low (intense during semi-annual meetings, low otherwise)
Substantive topic(s)	County-level development planning (all public issues)	Land restoration policy and interventions
Relationship of government(s) to SHARED	SHARED directly solicited by the Governor's Office	Embedded within the EU-funded project Regreening Africa
Funder	Multiple streams of grant funding	EU funding via Regreening Africa
Years implemented	2014–2018	2018–2023

Source: Authors.

national and sub-national governments in the Ethiopia case, it was mediated, as the stakeholder engagement was embedded in a larger project.

Both cases involve similar components, such as inclusive multi-stakeholder meetings, problem mapping and evidence walls. However, the qualitative differences within the Kenya case allowed for implementers to respond to issues and complications as they arose. This included discrete analytical tasks, such as mapping information flows between different government sectors. More importantly, they were able to spend considerable time building relationships and consulting with various government stakeholders on an ongoing basis.

Broadly, an **intensive application** of SHARED seems better able to address deeply rooted political barriers, especially the (sometimes) politically sensitive topic of land-use policy between pastoralists and farmers. However, in Kenya, the intensive application of SHARED produced a trade-off where the effects of the decision-making process were largely limited to a single county. In contrast, the extensive application in Ethiopia sought, and found some success, in shifting national policies. However, as will be discussed below, an **extensive application** was better suited for relatively less wicked problems in which technical solutions are more readily available and political will (mostly) exists.

A limitation of our study is that, in both cases, the SHARED implementers – the primary facilitators of stakeholder engagement and/or evidence generation – were associated with either a well-known international research institute, ICRAF, or I/NGOs. As discussed below, this positionality likely granted the facilitators significant legitimacy and power within these cases.

3. SHARED and the four key dimensions of decision-making

Successfully shifting decision-making to build resilience in drylands and address the impacts of climate change requires stakeholders to successfully navigate four interconnected dimensions of decision-making: political will, evidence, stakeholder coordination and institutional capacity. Across both cases, a combination of these elements (though not necessarily all) was missing, and was able to be (at least partially) addressed by the implementation of SHARED. However, as we discuss in the next section, tackling these problems is an ongoing task that requires long-term and sustainable investment.

Across both cases, there was a clear demand for decision-making support, as expressed by government and NGO stakeholders who felt SHARED provided critical resources, staffing, expertise stakeholder engagement and access to data. Government respondents across both cases, spanning from the local to the national level, felt they were in the dark regarding both evidence and coordination between different levels and sectors of government.[1] This led to decisions based on heuristics or unverified impressions of decision-makers rather than evidence. Both cases also stressed that government actors were often starved of information, with limited real-time data on the societal problems facing communities. This limited the ability for governments to tailor policy or allocate public goods with attention to local needs. For instance, in the Kenya case, the county had previously allocated public spending using rough heuristics of proportionality – equal funding per geographic unit (ward) – as it lacked systematic data on the prevalence of underlying needs across wards. And, in the Ethiopia case, there was limited

1 This was expressed by both government and non-government actors.

capacity to monitor state-led national or sub-national reforestation efforts in real time.

Pastoralism and nomadic communities also present unique challenges for stakeholder engagement, as was most clearly demonstrated in the Ethiopia case. Pastoralist–farmer interactions often span distinct government departments and require engaging transitory populations across wide geographies – pastoralist groups may not be politically represented in many of the areas through which they migrate. Pastoralist–farmer tensions may also represent a roadblock to engagement, where political actors may not have the necessary political capital or motivation to wade into such tense relationships.

In the face of these challenges, respondents felt the SHARED approach provided a clear and navigable roadmap as well as tools for addressing these problems. Our findings indicate that the SHARED model should be considered as a flexible approach and set of tools rather than a formulaic intervention.

4. Main findings

4.1 Political will and evidence: political economy as a mediator for SHARED's success

To navigate our four main dimensions, the SHARED approach offers two key tools: scientific evidence and data, and facilitation and guidance for navigating political economy. While these two strands are distinct, evidence and data (and the control of this information) often have important interactions with political economy. To quickly illustrate, central governments typically trust new data, except in cases where the findings would diminish their power (e.g. in Kenya, county officials did not accept better-than-expected poverty statistics, which may have threatened national funding allocations). Thus, one of the main value-adds of SHARED was **using evidence** to influence the political economy within an inclusive decision-making process. However, a major caveat is that data is only one factor within the political economy, and there were multiple situations where there was not significant enough political will to tackle root issues. Most notably, within the Kenya case, there was insufficient political will to internally fund a sustainable SHARED process, meaning the fruits of SHARED's labour gradually diminished and were rather weakly institutionalised – this is despite the SHARED intensive application in Kenya making significant strides in building internal capacity.

In Ethiopia's case of extensive SHARED application, we find that implementers were able to successfully influence government policy at the national and sub-national levels. However, this was only the case when policy aligned closely with pre-existing political will (e.g. in supporting national reforestation through innovative methods). For the thornier and more politically divisive topic of land rights (including pastoralists' right to graze on farmland during the off-season and the encroachment of farmers onto communal pastureland – well-recognised challenges for reforestation), government stakeholders and SHARED implementers alike felt that there was simply too little political capital and buy-in. Instead, the government actors and ICRAF sought external funding to begin a new process specifically meant to convene stakeholders to address pastoralist–farmer land use in reference to reforestation.

4.1.1 SHARED, political economy and investment

For applications of stakeholder engagement models, understanding the political economy in relation to problems of interest is the major factor for deciding whether an intensive or extensive application of the SHARED model is best suited to improve decision-making. In our cases, we find three different states of political economy (aligned, mixed and adverse) vis-à-vis problems of interest, each requiring a different input from SHARED implementation and ascending intensity. That is, applying SHARED in a state of adverse political economy regarding a specific problem requires more intensity than mixed or, even more so, aligned.

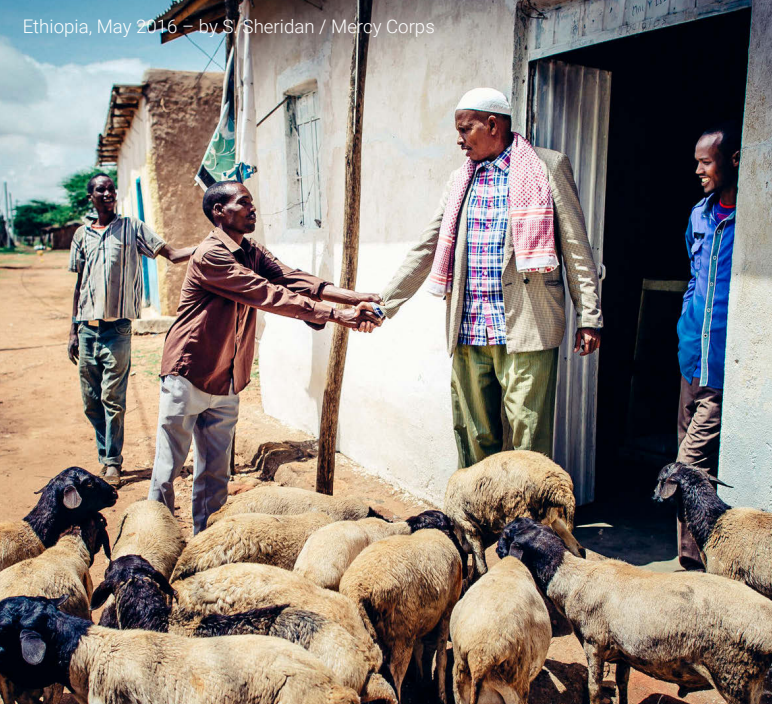
We stress that technical knowledge, or 'evidence', plays a crucial role across all three situations, but we separate the *technical* value of evidence from its *political* value, arguing that the role differs according to whether political will already exists.

Technical value of evidence and aligned political economy

Across both cases, technical evidence produced its most immediate impacts when political will already existed to solve a problem *and* scientific evidence supports policy actions which do not threaten political actors. This condition, where political economy is aligned and suggested policy is non-threatening, is the simplest for SHARED applications, as there is significant demand for technical evidence due to pre-existing political economies. In these situations, stakeholder engagement through SHARED was still valuable for overcoming coordination barriers and institutional inertia. However, there was limited need to shift political preferences, as powerful political stakeholders were brought into the process.

Both cases showed that evidence and coordination were effective when political will was largely pre-existing. In the Kenya example, when funding was external, there were only a few political barriers to SHARED operation. The Turkana County Governor and a powerful county department solicited SHARED implementers to help them design an evidence-based planning process.[2] This solicitation was not random but flowed from previous engagements by the SHARED implementing team

2 The County Integrated Development Plan (CIDP), a mandated five-year development plan for each county.


Ethiopia, May 2016 – by S. Sheridan / Mercy Corps

working within the county, and the team was specifically invited by the governor to assist with this process. The Governor's Office wields significant power and authority within Kenya's devolved county system, and the support of these two actors allowed the SHARED implementers to significantly shift the county planning process. For instance, they were able to: enforce a certain degree of prioritisation within department budgets, disallowing unrealistically ambitious sectoral plans; develop flagship projects that spanned sectors and required additional planning coordination; and require all sectors to specify the evidence that supported their published plans. There were also high-profile examples of technical evidence shifting decision-making, such as shifting development priorities to preserve soil health (Vågen et al., 2018). This was accomplished through several high-level meetings across all county departments, and many of the changes were formally adopted as best practices within the county government. These changes did impose some political pressure on actors, especially disparate sectors that previously could create development budgets with little oversight, but the political will to establish and institutionalise this approach already existed.

An analogous example in the Ethiopia case was the inclusion of an innovative reforestation model within Ethiopia's drylands: farmer-managed natural regeneration (FMNR). The SHARED implementers achieved significant policy success by facilitating the official recognition of the practice within Ethiopia's guidelines for Community Based Participatory Watershed Development – though these were waiting to be published at the time of the interview. Stemming from multi-stakeholder meetings attended by government officials, the inclusion of FMNR within official guidelines is a meaningful policy change, as the practice will be distributed via Ethiopia's powerful central government through agricultural extension services nationwide. Coordination for providing technical and fiscal support for seedling planting within Ethiopia was also a low friction activity, as the government was able to easily count and publish the number of trees planted and had established patterns for motivating populations to come to mass planting events. Unlike in the Kenya case, this was not primarily accomplished through a close relationship with the government, but rather because the national government was highly motivated to accomplish its national Green Legacy Initiative[3] during this time.

Using evidence to build political will and mixed political economy

A second category of evidence use was in building political will, especially when political will to engage in evidence-based problem solving was present but insufficient among stakeholders – a state we describe as mixed political economy. Notably, the ability of SHARED to bridge this gap **was dependent on the intensity of implementation**, in both funding and staffing. In this type of situation, there is substantial friction around addressing a problem (e.g. local leaders and their risk-aversion; see below). However, the implementers of the SHARED approach were able to overcome such friction through mapping political stakeholders and strategically advocating for new policies alongside the provision of credible evidence. When combined, these allowed for new approaches to be piloted and for shifts in policy, albeit more marginally than in the previous examples.

The Ethiopia case provides a clear example of considerable friction for evidence uptake. But, the SHARED model's joint **emphasis on contextual and technical evidence** was able to marginally shift policy despite this. Within Ethiopia, local administrators and national leaders alike expressed significant concern that allowing *any* tree-cutting on communal land would result in disastrous results, as significant over-cutting would rapidly diminish tree growth. Given very strong directives from the national government to protect trees on communal land, local government staff were largely disinclined to allow cutting. However, a key technical suggestion that arose from the SHARED approach was to allow tree pruning by community groups, who would also provide ongoing protection of the communal land from overuse. This suggestion was premised on extensive evidence that pruning improved tree growth by raising the canopy and allowing for grass to grow underneath, thus improving the quality of the ecosystems.

As is a classic common pool resource problem, the technical advice provided by experts within the SHARED approach was correct, but represented a political risk for local politicians to undertake. In Ethiopia, two factors seem poised to break this stalemate paving the way for scaling several pilots. First, there was intense discussion between international experts on tree management and government officials. This broke through initial scepticism,

3 A major national commitment to plant 20 billion trees in four years, which ended in 2022 (https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/green-legacy-initiative).

allowing for small pilots across selected districts. These early pilots began to produce **local evidence** that small-scale pruning may be mutually beneficial to community groups – by increasing firewood and grass quality – and the government's long-term Green Legacy Initiative goals. Multiple government officials reported feeling confident the pilot would expand in the short-term and potentially scale more widely. This may be considered a genuine innovation within Ethiopia, which had strict no-pruning policies for communal land prior (de jure, as illegal cutting is an ongoing issue).

Where additional investment is needed and adverse political economy

Finally, both the Ethiopia and Kenya cases demonstrated that while stakeholder engagement models are important tools, deep-seated political economy challenges require significant and sustainable investments over long time horizons. However, such commitments are often unavailable from local governments or external funders. This is especially true for pastoralism. Major political cleavages often centre on pastoralism (e.g. pastoralist–farmer conflicts and ethnic divides that intersect with pastoralism), plus pastoralist communities often do not overlap cleanly with static political geographies. Insufficient investment in building political will – either before, during or after the application of SHARED – meant that the stakeholder decision-making process was unable to root out and/or address foundational causes, especially in the long term.

In Ethiopia, the implementers of SHARED did not have the institutional backing, resources or long-term mandates to address pastoralism-related issues. There were multiple factors underlying this. Pastoralism and grazing patterns were a primary issue for reforestation (e.g. livestock eat seedlings), yet the government department responsible for pastoralist affairs was, seemingly, not engaged with Regreening Africa, the project in which SHARED was embedded. While this was recognised across stakeholder meetings as a foundational issue, the SHARED implementers were unable to significantly bring up pastoralism with relation to overgrazing and/or (perceived) farmer encroachment on public pastures within the five-year project. Traditional authorities within pastoralist communities were also not approached, both due to a lack of contextual understanding about how to approach them, and to an oft-repeated sense that doing so would be too politically sensitive. In the end, there was mention of a possible external grant to address this issue. This need for outside resources further emphasises that the gap in political requirements necessitated an intensive and concentrated approach, which the Regreening Africa project did not, at least in its then form, have the resources to mobilise.

4.2 Institutional capacity: a model versus an investment

4.2.1 Limitations of short time horizons: consolidation and accountability

In both cases, short timeframes hindered SHARED's ability to create lasting change. External funding often involves standardised, brief cycles, which may not be suitable for addressing complex challenges. To tackle these issues, a combination of interpersonal engagement and long-term institutional support is necessary.

The importance of long time horizons and sustainability for ensuring accountability, even when the application of SHARED is intensive, can be seen in the Kenya case. There, SHARED implementers worked with the county to build data and administrative systems that were well-regarded and significantly shifted the county planning process. Plus, the county identified an ongoing budget line to fund SHARED and build internal capacity for the SHARED process. However, for unknown reasons, this budget line was never accessible and ultimately respondents felt that much of SHARED's successes were lost after funding ended. And, because SHARED's engagement ended with the conclusion of county-level planning, it was unclear whether the resulting county plan was actualised in government spending and projects. In interviews, respondents expressed doubt that political actors were 'constrained' by the formal planning document, even if they agreed that the document itself was a reasonably accurate reflection of needs within the county.

In Ethiopia, there was a different issue, which is the inability for short-term multi-stakeholder platforms to consolidate and provide institutional stability for long-term planning or policy change. The prime example is Regreening Africa

Kenya, October 2011 – by B. Gutoff / Mercy Corps

itself. Operating as a relatively standard five-year project, it acted as a platform bringing together various actors. However, in interviews, other multi-stakeholder and/or government platforms were mentioned multiple times. In fact, nearly identical technical tools[4] (e.g. the Regreening Africa app) were also being developed by other NGOs, even those directly involved with Regreening Africa. This signals that short-term, siloed donor funding may be inefficient and, at least in the Ethiopia case, fail to produce scalable solutions.

4.2.2 Investment in technology

In both Ethiopia and Kenya, an online datadashboard was a central component of the SHARED application, aligning with the framework's emphasis on integrating data with cross-sectoral decision-making. These online platforms aggregated existing secondary data on diverse social and ecological topics (e.g. child nutrition, soil health, education). In Ethiopia, the Regreening Africa app was custom designed and built to track reforestation efforts across the country in real time, a capacity the government lacked.

Throughout interviews, government and implementing staff expressed enthusiasm about the potential of the Regreening app (Ethiopia case) and data dashboards (both cases). They emphasised the possibility for profoundly increasing the capacity of both NGOs and governments to monitor afforestation projects. However, within our two cases, such promises of cheap, scalable capacity seemed to be fool's gold. The primary reason for this was a significant underestimation of both upfront and maintenance costs required to build **scalable and usable** technological tools – to aggregate and summarise complex, multi-dimensional data is an immense undertaking, and requires a high upfront investment in design and development. While both programmes had allocated significant budget to development, no respondents felt the design had allowed them to *independently* access and navigate the data in most cases – a key signal of wider usability. Moreover, generating real-time data and maintaining the technical platforms are necessary to justify the high fixed cost of software development, yet strategies for long-term funding and data input were unclear.

In both cases, we find that the technological platform was useful, but generally this use was symbolic. It generated excitement about the possibilities for governments and funders to track and monitor data. However, there were extremely few cases in which the technological tools were used organically by the populations they were designed to help. That is, the SHARED implementers were able to use the technical tools within meetings, but even then, data was often printed on physical paper or manually shown to stakeholders and explained. There remained a significant usability gap between the rather complex and technical data dashboard and the policy-makers they were designed to help. The impression of respondents was that significantly more funding and design work would be needed to really integrate such technology into common use.

More fundamentally, none of the technological tools had firm sustainability plans once the SHARED engagement completed. While there were high-level plans for this in Kenya, they failed to materialise, likely due to political will or funding constraints. In Kenya, multiple respondents bemoaned that the county did not own the platform, and therefore could not manage after 2017, when SHARED implementation completed. Similarly, in Ethiopia, there was a first-order limitation to data collection for the Regreening Africa app, as it required significant human resources to manually travel to locations to collect data for populating the app. This could not reasonably be crowd-sourced because it was not translated into local languages, literacy was low and smartphone penetration was perceived as weak.[5]

Overall, our study cautions against a fixation on technological tools to provide ongoing capacity for decision-makers to access data, unless there is a realistic commitment to provide far larger technological development budgets alongside clear precommitments for continuing the budget line, given performance, beyond grant cycles.

4.2.3 Sustainability of NGOs as intermediaries for policy change

Finally, both cases present the conundrum of external, expert facilitators being the primary implementers of SHARED. Across both cases, SHARED was perceived as a useful toolbox, accessible to all, but the main implementers of SHARED were highly educated, expert, NGO-affiliated actors. This further diminishes the likelihood for the model to sustain beyond the programme's end.

This is complicated by the unmeasured effect of power via positionality of NGOs, which provides a degree of perceived political neutrality and gravitas, especially for international NGOs, as the implementers of SHARED. While we could not study this directly, as all implementers were international-NGO affiliated, the SHARED toolkit does not address this. It could be an area for study, especially as devolving the SHARED model further may be of interest, for instance as a train-the-trainer model.[6]

4 An overemphasis on technological solutions was a special case where donor incentives and exaggerated expectation seemed to lead to inefficient spending, as discussed in Section 4.2.2.

5 According to the Groupe Speciale Mobile Association (GSMA), only 58% of the population has a smartphone (https://www.gsma.com/mobileeconomy/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/GSMA_ME_SSA_2021_English_Web_Singles.pdf).

6 This was directly suggested during interviews.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

SHARED is just one example of a wider category of stakeholder engagement frameworks intended to enhance resilience in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. These frameworks are particularly well-suited to tackle the intricate and challenging issues faced by pastoralist communities and governments in the Horn of Africa as they confront the harsh realities of climate change. Despite their significance, stakeholder engagement frameworks are often overlooked as direct subjects of study. This study examines how the intensity of application, use of evidence and states of the political economy affect them.

Addressing complex social problems is an ongoing endeavour that can benefit from well-defined stakeholder engagement frameworks like SHARED. Nevertheless, the implementation of such frameworks varies depending on the specific issue, context and available resources. Based on our findings, we propose the following recommendations:

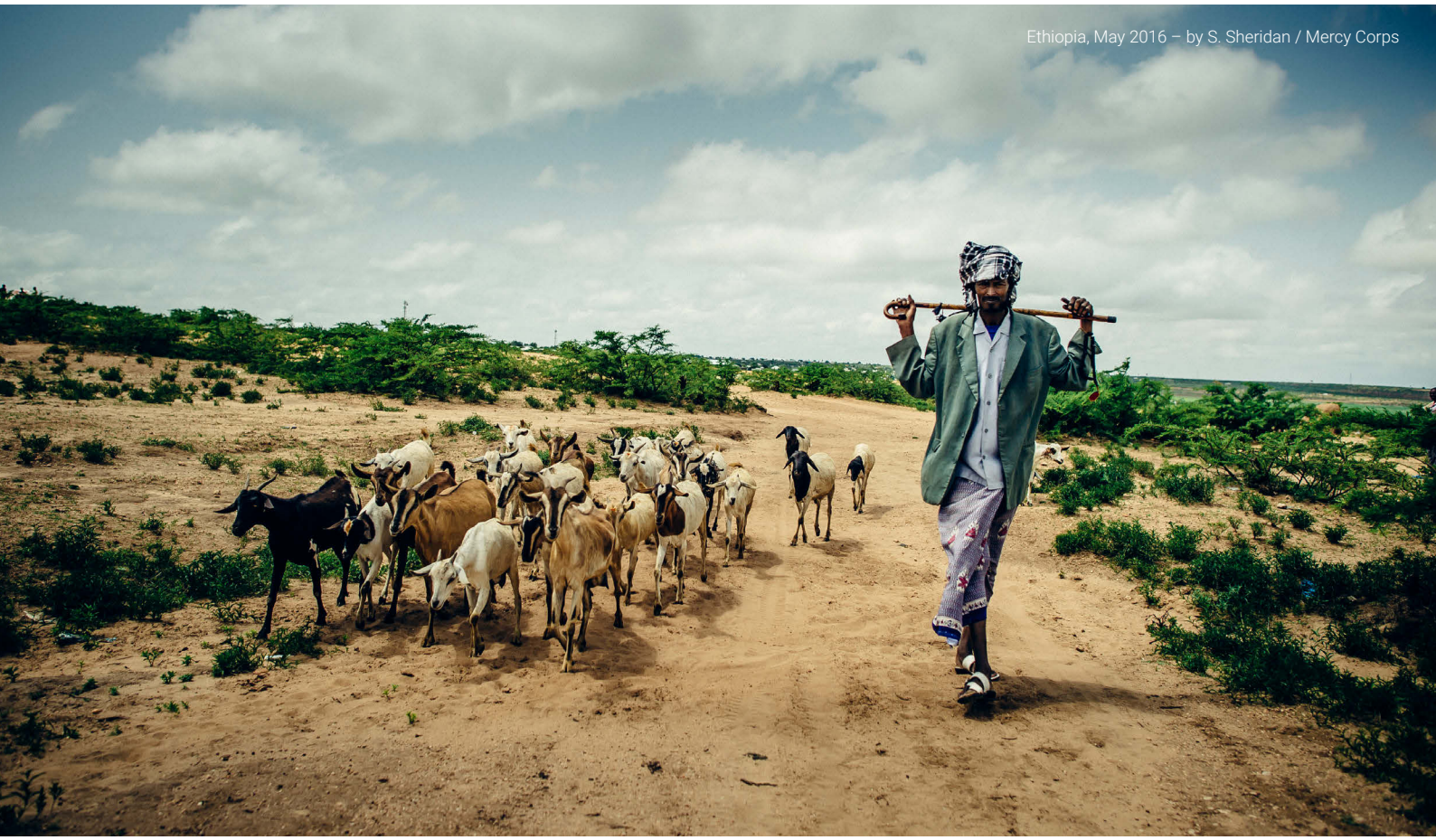
1. Match intensity and resourcing to the state of the political economy: The deployment of intensive versus extensive application of engagement models should depend on the state of the political economy (aligned, mixed or adverse). Intensive applications are more suitable for issues facing an adverse political economy, where political will is limited or non-existent.

2. Encourage longer time horizons for investments in decision-making: Extending stakeholder engagement timelines beyond the standard five-year framework, alongside long-term resourcing for institutionalisation, allows for system-level change.

3. Prioritise the development of institutional capacity: Alongside proximate policy decisions, engagement must build local, long-term institutional capabilities that can ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of implemented solutions.

4. The stakeholder engagement required to address wicked problems is resource intensive: Funders and policy-makers should allocate sufficient resources for the active cultivation of political will among diverse stakeholders. While transaction-intensive, this can facilitate the resolution of foundational issues and promote long-term change.

5. Resist the urge to view technological tools as quick fixes: While technological tools hold promise and can generate enthusiasm among stakeholders, project designers and funders should be cautious in equating technology with innovation, and likewise consider what is required to deploy truly scalable and sustainable tools.



Ethiopia, May 2016 – by S. Sheridan / Mercy Corps

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