

PROMISING PRACTICES

Systems change as a route to resilience

RESILIENCE & ADAPTATION LEARNING FACILITY
MARCH 2026 | JENNIFER LEAVY



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Acronyms

EKISIL	Securing Peace and Promoting Prosperity
FCAS	Fragile and conflict-affected settings
GEDSI	Gender, equity, disability and social inclusion
HIC	High-intensity crisis
IBLI	Index-Based Livestock Insurance
ICARR	Collective Action for Rangeland Regeneration
ICRAF	The Centre for International Forestry Research and World Agroforestry (CIFOR-ICRAF)
ISF	Institutional and social fragility
JASS	Justice and Stability in the Sahel
MIC	Medium-intensity crisis
MSME	Micro, small and medium enterprise
PEA	Political Economy Analysis
RANGE	Resilience Approaches in Natural Rangeland Ecosystems
RIPA	Resilience in Pastoralist Areas
RRA	Rural Resilience Activity
SAFE	Strengthening Agricultural Markets and Food Security

Executive summary

Fragile and conflict affected settings (FCAS) face overlapping crises - climate impacts, conflict, governance failures, and economic fragility - driving persistent humanitarian need. In these contexts, people rely heavily on local systems - markets, social networks, natural resource governance, informal institutions - yet these systems often exclude marginalised groups, fail under stress, or inadvertently contribute to conflict. Short term responses that bypass or weaken systems can reinforce vulnerability, while systems-strengthening responses can contribute to long-term stability and resilience. This report outlines how systems change - targeting underlying rules, relationships, incentives and power dynamics - can serve as a critical pathway to strengthening resilience and supporting long-term adaptation in FCAS.

Purpose of the report

This report explores how systems change can strengthen resilience and adaptation in contexts that are fragile and/or affected by conflict or climate shocks. It draws primarily on insights from programmes delivered in Ethiopia, Mali, Niger, South Sudan and Sudan. By exploring the different 'fragility typologies' and realistic 'goals' for systems change, it identifies promising interventions to strengthen systems in order to improve short and long-term outcomes for various levels of crisis and institutional stability. It advocates a holistic approach to resilience building and adaptation and provides a set of guiding principles and actions to support effective programming which supports systems change in FCAS.

Key findings

1. CONTEXT-SPECIFIC, POLITICALLY INFORMED SYSTEMS ENGAGEMENT IS FOUNDATIONAL

Systems programming for adaptation in FCAS must be grounded in ongoing political economy and conflict analysis, not one-off contextual assessments. While in some contexts, national government uptake of resilience-building mechanisms is possible, in other cases, local institutional reform is critical and transformative. Outcomes depend on a deep understanding of local political, social and conflict dynamics, rather than applying generic systems strengthening models.

2. BOUNDARIES MUST BE CLEAR BUT FLEXIBLE

It is important to be explicit about which part of the system you are working in, where you have legitimacy, and what is feasible, practical and meaningful. This may require looking beyond the immediate system or area.

3. FLEXIBLE AND ADAPTIVE DELIVERY HELPS SYSTEMS FUNCTION IN VOLATILE CONTEXTS

Adaptive management is not optional in FCAS systems programming. It is a core mechanism for adaptation and resilience. Programmes that could pivot activities and partnerships in response to changing conditions are better able to support resilience.

4. CHANGE MUST BE INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE

Systems often favour those with power and access. Excluded and marginalised groups are more likely to experience worse outcomes during shocks than groups with more power and access to resources. Systems change means shifting decision-making, resources and agency towards marginalised groups.

5. THE INCENTIVES THAT DRIVE BEHAVIOUR – BOTH FORMAL AND INFORMAL – NEED TO BE UNDERSTOOD AND ADDRESSED

A key element of systems change is understanding incentives that drive key actors within systems. Often incentives for long-term change, such as resilience, are weak and competing with (or even counter to) immediate, short-term priorities. Institutional and individual decision-making cycles also tend to work on short time-frames.

Adaptation and resilience in FCAS rely heavily on informal and hybrid systems, which should be strengthened rather than bypassed. Supporting and strengthening these existing local systems in times of crisis can form the building blocks of adaptive capacity and a resilient recovery. Local market actors, informal institutions and hybrid arrangements often sustain system function where formal systems falter.

6. INTEGRATED, MULTI-SYSTEM APPROACHES CREATE DEEPER AND MORE DURABLE CHANGE

FCAS adaptation requires integrated systems pathways, as single-system interventions are insufficient to address compound vulnerability. The strongest systems shifts occur where programmes address multiple, interconnected systems simultaneously, rather than isolating economic, social or ecological domains.

7. RELATIONSHIPS, PARTNERSHIPS AND COORDINATION ARE ESSENTIAL FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE

Building and sustaining relationships and coordination mechanisms are essential in achieving systems change to support resilience in FCAS. Resilience strengthening in fragile contexts needs collaboration, as no single actor or intervention is sufficient. Coalitions, partnerships and influence across different systems matter, including engaging with political actors.



NAOMI, PARTICIPANT IN THE FRA PROGRAMME IN NIGERIA
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Conclusion

Systems change is essential for sustainable resilience in FCAS. Strengthening resilience requires shifting the underlying rules, relationships and incentives that shape vulnerability, beyond immediate service delivery. Effective systems-focused programming works across governance, markets, natural resources, and social cohesion, grounded in conflict and political economy realities and implemented through adaptive, inclusive, locally rooted approaches. When done well, systems change reduces long-term humanitarian need, builds adaptive capacity and supports transitions toward more equitable, stable and climate-resilient societies.

Introduction

Humanitarian and resilience investments are under growing strain. Climate change is accelerating the frequency, severity and intensity of shocks, while conflict and fragility undermine the institutions needed to manage risk, causing overlapping crises. Building resilience and adaptation in the face of shocks relies on supporting and strengthening systems both to meet needs and to tackle the underlying drivers and root causes of vulnerability.

Evidence from diverse contexts shows that even in crises, people rely heavily on local systems – such as markets, social networks and local institutions – not just humanitarian aid. When they do receive formal aid, affected households often use aid to uphold these important systems that they will continue to rely on when the aid is gone.¹

However, systems are imperfect, and system-level barriers limit their ability to support resilience. Some systems function better for some actors than others. Power imbalances exclude the most vulnerable from decision-making and Gender, Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) issues are poorly understood.²

While there are considerable opportunities to improve systems as a route to increasing resilience, short-term responses tend to be favoured over this kind of long-term risk reduction. These often neglect systems and may undermine them. For example, in fragile contexts, aid actors prioritise meeting immediate needs for food, health and shelter – sometimes weakening existing markets, driving inflation or locating communities in inappropriate locations. Action (development and humanitarian interventions) is fragmented across actors and sectors, with gaps between policy and practice. In some cases, systems change is perceived as only possible or legitimate if national government has effectively incorporated resilience building responses such as national social protection systems. While this is a transformative element of systems change, this view often overlooks other critical, or incremental systems-based responses that are foundational to resilience in fragile and conflict-affected settings (FCAS).

In FCAS, weak governance, insecurity and protracted crises intensify the barriers to resilience. This leaves people vulnerable to shocks and stressors, including human and natural disasters. Weak or exclusionary systems (including governance, markets and social institutions) fuel grievances and resource competition, contributing to instability and conflict. In turn, these magnify climate impacts and other shocks, which weakened systems are unable to adapt to or absorb. The result is persistent humanitarian need. Short-term fixes bypass or distort local systems, leaving them no stronger or even weakening them further for the next shock. Gains in resilience are temporary. Resilience therefore cannot be strengthened sustainably without intentionally changing the systems that produce risk.

Purpose of this report

This report explores how systems change can strengthen resilience and adaptation in contexts that are fragile and/or affected by conflict or climate shocks. It draws primarily on insights from programmes delivered in Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Niger, South Sudan and Sudan (See Annex for further details).

All of the programmes we review operate in fragile places with compound and protracted crises, combining conflict, climate stress and weak governance, rather than discrete short-term shocks. This includes:

- › active or residual conflict (South Sudan and Sudan)
- › climate-driven livelihood stress (Kenya and Niger)
- › chronic insecurity layered with climate variability and decentralisation challenges (Mali and Niger)

¹ See: [Sharing to Survive: Investigating the role of social networks during Yemen's humanitarian crisis](#), and [Informal Social Protection Networks & Resilience in Conflict Affected Contexts: Lessons from South Sudan and Yemen](#)

² Integrating Gender, Equity, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) analysis into resilience programming is critical for any people-centred interventions that recognise diverse experiences, needs and vulnerabilities - especially among marginalized groups. Understanding and responding to differential risks in crisis-affected communities is a core element of programme design and delivery



No case reflects a single-shock environment. Across all contexts, crises are layered, interacting and evolving. They tell us a lot about what systems failures can look like and what shifts can realistically be made – and reinforce the relevance of approaches that are adaptive and respond to this complexity.

We also look at different types of fragility, assessing how systems change manifests under different conditions, rather than whether it is possible at all. Where fragility is primarily institutional (e.g. Sudan and South Sudan), systems work focuses on informal and hybrid governance. Where fragility is ecological and/or economic (e.g. Kenya), interventions leverage markets, producer and ecological systems.

By exploring the different ‘fragility typologies’³ and realistic ‘goals’ for systems change, this report identifies promising interventions to strengthen systems in order to improve short and long-term outcomes for various levels of crisis and institutional stability. It advocates a holistic approach to resilience building and adaptation and provides a set of guiding principles and actions to support effective programming which supports systems change in FCAS.



WALEED, PARTICIPANT IN THE SAFE PROGRAMME IN SUDAN
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Systems change and resilience in FCAS: what did we learn?⁴

Strengthening resilience and adaptation in FCAS is highly complex and uniquely challenging. FCAS present risks that undermine conventional programme models. These risks are interconnected and compounding: conflict amplifies climate impacts; environmental degradation drives economic collapse; and weak governance undermines recovery, further fuelling potential conflict. Addressing this complexity requires holistic, systems-oriented strategies.⁵

3 See Reference Document

4 This section draws on a review of programme ‘exemplars’ to illustrate how key characteristics of systems change for resilience strengthening in FCAS play out. Links to programmes are in Annex 2

5 See Glossary (Annex 1) for links to additional reading

Resilience is not just about recovering from shocks, it is about **maintaining systems and improving how they function under continuous stress**, particularly where state presence is weak or contested. Systems ‘thinking’ helps donors balance immediate lifesaving objectives with longer-term stability and resilience outcomes. Critically, the goal is not to restore a fragile pre-crisis ‘normal’, but to support transitions toward more inclusive and adaptive systems.

Understanding systems failures

The structure and functionality of systems, including incentives and power dynamics, influence vulnerability and adaptive capacity across different groups. Systems also determine the extent to which shocks turn into crises among particular populations. Weak and poorly functioning systems that exclude certain groups are often the main drivers of crises.

Common systems barriers or failures identified in our cases include:

- › exclusion of marginalised groups from decision-making ([JASS](#) and [SAFE](#))
- › misaligned incentives within markets and governance ([Currency of Connections](#) and South Sudan)
- › weak coordination across actors and sectors (Kenya [Rangelands](#) work)
- › ecological degradation undermining livelihoods (Kenya [Rangelands](#))

The core challenge is rarely a single system failure, but misalignment between social, economic and governance systems.

Taking multiple pathways

Taken together, our examples demonstrate **multiple pathways to systems change**, rather than a single replicable model. Most cases engage multiple systems simultaneously (economic, social, ecological and governance), primarily at local to sub-national levels. While shifting national policies and practice towards resilience-building may be possible in relatively stable contexts, such as national social protection systems in Ethiopia, an exclusive focus on national systems change as a benchmark of resilience building misses other critical opportunities and avenues for long-term transformation in a wide range of FCAS settings. Effective cases work across multiple system levels (local–meso–national), even when direct engagement is local. For example, the [RANGE](#) programme works to integrate the development plans developed by Ward Planning Committees with natural resource governance at the resource and landscape scales in Samburu, Isiolo, and Marsabit, working across institutional and system levels.

Rather than ‘building systems’, programmes often reconfigure relationships, incentives and information flows within systems. These include:

- › market facilitation (Kenya [Rangelands](#), [Currency of Connections](#) and [RRA](#))
- › knowledge and evidence brokering (Kenya [Rangelands](#))
- › social norm and power-shifting approaches ([JASS](#), [SAFE](#))

The strongest examples of integrated multiple systems-strengthening pathways (e.g. Kenya [Rangelands](#) and [JASS](#)) integrate ecological management, market systems, governance and conflict mediation, as well as short-term coping mechanisms with long-term adaptation. Weaker integration is evident where security constraints dominate (Sudan). Intentional multi-system integration remains the exception across the programmes reviewed.

Improving systems

We have observed a number of system shifts in the cases reviewed. These include:

- › improved coordination and trust (Mali and Niger)
- › new informal financial and trust mechanisms (Currency of Connections, South Sudan)
- › strengthened market linkages and more inclusive market participation (Kenya Rangelands and [RIPA](#), Ethiopia)
- › increased local adaptive capacity (South Sudan)
- › shifts in gendered power relations (JASS in Mali and Niger; RIPA, Ethiopia)
- › strengthened government policy and systems to better govern natural resources and improved cross border trade ([EKISIL](#), Uganda).

While important, system shifts are often **partial, incremental and uneven**, rather than transformational⁶ in the short term, which requires longer time horizons. They also mostly benefit groups **indirectly** through improved system function, which risks perpetuating or exacerbating inequity if power dynamics are not explicitly addressed.

Addressing power dynamics

Power and political economy matter. The state may itself be a driver of vulnerability, and poorly designed interventions can deepen divisions or strengthen harmful actors. Most of our examples explicitly note that systems are **functioning for some actors but not others**. Therefore, **systems change often requires shifts in power and agency** to meaningfully improve resilience outcomes. Conflict sensitivity and attention to power imbalances are essential. In FCAS environments, resilience investments that fail to engage system dynamics risk low effectiveness and unintended harm.

Resilience through systems change

Viewed through a resilience lens, **systems change shifts the focus from responding to shocks to improving how systems function before, during and after shocks**, and how these **systems interact with and heighten vulnerability**. This includes how decisions are made, whose voices are heard, how, where and to whom resources flow and services are delivered, and how institutions adapt under pressure.

Systems change strengthens resilience by addressing the underlying structures, incentives and power dynamics that shape vulnerability and adaptive capacity – and even the emergence of risks in the first place. By targeting these deeper dynamics, systems change does not simply support coping and recovery. It establishes the ability to adapt and transform in the face of accelerating climate and conflict risks. In addressing underlying constraints rather than symptoms, systems change shifts resilience investments from short-term mitigation to long-term risk reduction.

⁶ See glossary for definition



Promising practices: what's possible

The programmes we have reviewed show that the **type of fragility being experienced within a context fundamentally shapes what systems change can mean in practice**. Effective FCAS programming aligns its approach to fragility conditions. High-conflict contexts prioritise continuity and coping. Lower-conflict contexts allow for deeper transformation. There is no single model of resilience, but multiple pathways shaped by conflict intensity, institutional presence and ecological stress. However, across the board, relationships and coordination are the common currency of resilience pathways. Systems function because actors remain connected.

The diagram below outlines the 'goals' for systems change as they relate to different levels of crisis and conflict. It also highlights some of the approaches taken in these contexts and the ways in which they have been successful. They are not a blueprint for action but are clear starting points for consideration and programming.

	SYSTEM GOALS	PROMISING PRACTICES
HIGH-INTENSITY CONFLICT (HIC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Keep systems functioning for those most affected  Do not undermine local systems  Safeguard (or support) systems from collapsing 	<p>System resilience depends on informal and market actors when the state is absent or contested. In both Sudan and South Sudan, formal institutions were either non-functional or inaccessible. Yet food, finance and basic services continued to flow through local businesses, traders and social networks. This indicates that resilience is embedded in informal and hybrid systems, not state structures alone.</p> <p>Adaptation is primarily about continuity, not transformation. Systems programming in these contexts focused on keeping systems operational under extreme volatility (e.g. food availability and economic exchange), rather than longer-term system reform.</p> <p>Flexibility in partnerships and delivery is essential for survival. SAFE's ability to rapidly shift partners and ways of delivering interventions in Sudan mirrors findings in South Sudan, where trust, security and access changed frequently (Currency of Connections).</p>
MEDIUM-INTENSITY CONFLICT (MIC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Make judicious systems improvements  Address constraints to systems inclusion & access  Prioritise integration and layering of actions & processes to identify entry points 	<p>Local governance and social systems are viable entry points despite conflict. JASS demonstrates that even in insecure environments, municipal institutions and social cohesion mechanisms can be strengthened when programming aligns with decentralisation processes and land governance realities.</p> <p>Addressing power, exclusion and conflict within systems is central to resilience. Not treating land conflict and gendered exclusion as side issues but as core system constraints shapes adaptation outcomes.</p> <p>Systems change emerges through integrating and layering approaches, not sequencing. Governance (focusing on either strengthening formal Natural Resource Management policies and plans or establishing informal natural resource sharing/management agreements with enforcement mechanisms) social norms and livelihoods were addressed simultaneously, enabling more durable shifts than sector-specific approaches (JASS Mali and Niger). JASS used land conflict as an entry point to integrate governance, social cohesion and institutional strengthening.</p> <p>Combining climate adaptation activities with conflict-sensitive interventions that strengthen social cohesion and climate resilience decreased support for violence and negative perceptions of others, and increased agricultural outputs and household resilience against climate shocks and stressors, further supporting reduced violence and conflict (Ben ni Baara).</p> <p>In such contexts, efforts to reduce conflict/fragility can reduce barriers to adaptation, relieving other pressures that could be contributing to conflict. For example, reducing conflict can open up livelihood opportunities (or lift restrictions on them) alleviating economic strain and, by allowing for adaptation related investments to go forward, further decrease a driver of conflict.</p>
INSTITUTIONAL & SOCIAL FRAGILITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Design resilience of systems themselves into systems strengthening objectives  Envision and partner for structural transformation  Increase policy engagement 	<p>Ecological stress can be a primary driver of fragility, even where conflict is low. The Kenya cases show that climate variability, rangeland degradation and market exclusion create chronic vulnerability despite relatively stable governance. The Kenya Rangelands (CGIAR) case combines ecological systems (rangeland and forest management) with livelihoods, conservation and governance institutions. In Uganda (EKISIL) resource sharing agreements led to resuming of cross border trade due to reduction in conflict.</p> <p>Systems strengthening benefits from longer time horizons and stronger institutions. Compared to high-conflict contexts, these cases demonstrate deeper and more sustained systems change through research, policy engagement and market facilitation. RRA's experience in Ethiopia underscores how visible results may not be immediate but even incremental shifts can lay the groundwork for more sustainable and self-reliant communities. Patience, strategic support and a long-term vision driving systemic change leading to more resilient markets, businesses and communities.</p> <p>Multi-system integration enhances adaptive capacity. Linking ecological management, livelihoods, markets and governance created reinforcing feedback loops for adaptation (Kenya Rangelands).</p>

Challenges and gaps

While the rationale for addressing root causes of vulnerability by applying systems approaches to resilience strengthening in FCAS is clear, solid evidence that links system shifts to reduced humanitarian need (and the cost-effectiveness of this) is still lacking. Establishing contribution, much less attribution, of a programme or process to systems change also poses challenges when it comes to evaluating and ‘measuring’ change. Likewise, clear evidence of trade-offs between saving lives and systems support was not apparent in the cases reviewed. This partly reflects time horizons: resilience takes longer timeframes to manifest, while systems shift by their nature also need time, pointing towards the value of longer-term evaluation horizons and legacy studies for capturing these dimensions.

Guiding principles for systems change

A systems approach is about how we work.⁷

1. CONTEXT-SPECIFIC, POLITICALLY INFORMED SYSTEMS ENGAGEMENT IS FOUNDATIONAL

Systems programming for adaptation in FCAS must be grounded in ongoing political economy and conflict analysis, not one-off contextual assessments. Outcomes depend on a deep understanding of local political, social and conflict dynamics, rather than applying generic systems strengthening models, or an exclusive focus on national policies and practice. SAFE demonstrated the importance of continual crisis analysis and location-specific responses, particularly as conflict dynamics shifted rapidly. Currency of Connections highlighted the importance of understanding context in shaping how economic and social systems function under extreme fragility. JASS worked through land conflict management and decentralised governance structures, reflecting political and institutional realities.

Action: Treat political economy and conflict systems as the foundations, with their own dedicated systems change goals. Build this analysis into any other intervention area for systems change, including market recovery and natural resource access.

2. BOUNDARIES MUST BE CLEAR BUT FLEXIBLE

It is important to be explicit about which part of the system you are working in, where you have legitimacy, and what is feasible, practical and meaningful. This may require looking beyond the immediate system or area. JASS in Mali worked to build stability and bolster conflict resolution in Mali and wider Sahel by focusing on improved land use/resilience alongside governance interventions rooted in developing partnerships with government to tackle causes of instability. They applied an “integrated stabilisation” approach, connecting social cohesion, inclusive governance, and climate adaptation in mutually reinforcing cycles.

Action: Align goals across systems and set up concrete, flexible plans and milestones to create clarity on where to focus. Adjust boundaries as systems evolve, focusing resources where influence and comparative advantage are strongest.

⁷ Useful resources on how to work to achieve systems change can be found in the Wasafiri Systemcraft guide for tackling complex problems: <https://wasafirihub.com/systemcraft/> and in their systems change archive: <https://wasafirihub.com/category/systems-change/>



SAADIA, PARTICIPANT IN THE ASAL ADAPT PROGRAMME IN KENYA
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3. FLEXIBLE AND ADAPTIVE DELIVERY HELPS SYSTEMS FUNCTION IN VOLATILE CONTEXTS

Adaptive management is not optional in FCAS systems programming. It is a core mechanism for adaptation and resilience. Programmes that could pivot activities and partnerships in response to changing conditions are better able to support resilience. By adjusting engagement across municipalities, JASS was able to work with evolving land and governance dynamics.

Action: Experiment and adapt. Build learning and reflection into programmes, update approaches as contexts change, and share learning across partners. Enable adaptive management, including learning, course correction and flexible funding mechanisms. Incentivise process and outcomes over outputs. Integrating systems change with more direct delivery approaches is especially important in fragile contexts.

4. CHANGE MUST BE INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE

Systems often favour those with power and access. Excluded and marginalised groups are more likely to experience worse outcomes during shocks than groups with more power and access to resources.⁸ Systems change means shifting decision-making, resources and agency towards marginalised groups. Participatory methods to involve the community in CGIAR's rangeland management work in Kenya has been important in ensuring longevity of the implemented plans.

Action: Support under-represented groups as change makers not just beneficiaries. Design approaches and tools that empower under-represented groups and develop learning products that serve them. Create horizontal as well as vertical information flows between communities. Value indigenous knowledge, local innovation and responses by creating formal spaces and structures for under-represented groups to engage and contribute 'missing' views and knowledge.

8 [Resilience Evaluation, Analysis and Learning \(REAL\) Resilience in Action Technical Brief](#)

5. THE INCENTIVES THAT DRIVE BEHAVIOUR – BOTH FORMAL AND INFORMAL – NEED TO BE UNDERSTOOD AND ADDRESSED

A key element of systems change will involve understanding incentives that drive key actors within systems. Often incentives for change are weak and competing with (or even counter to) immediate incentives. Institutional and individual decision-making cycles also tend to work on short timeframes. Through [index-based livestock insurance \(IBLI\) in Kenya and Ethiopia](#), using insurance premiums to incentivise household resilience meant insured households were able to keep more animals alive, avoid distress sales and better protect livelihoods during drought.

Action: Use tools such as Political Economy Analysis (PEA) to identify existing incentives and develop alternative incentives at levels you can influence.⁹ At the institutional/policy level, advocate and influence for policy change. Engage with a wide range of credible storytellers to share aspirational stories of why key system changes matter, and where they have delivered political benefits. Use stakeholder mapping to develop advocacy strategies for different audiences. At the household and community levels, identify and change the incentives that inform current behaviour.

6. HYBRID AND INFORMAL MARKET AND GOVERNANCE SYSTEMS ARE CRITICAL FOR SUPPORTING RESILIENCE

Adaptation and resilience in FCAS rely heavily on informal and hybrid systems, which should be strengthened rather than bypassed. Supporting and strengthening these existing local systems in times of crisis can form the building blocks of adaptive capacity and a resilient recovery. Local market actors, informal institutions and hybrid arrangements often sustain system function where formal systems falter. Currency of Connections (South Sudan) documents reliance on informal financial and social networks to maintain economic exchange. Under SAFE in Sudan, local businesses and market actors continued supplying food when humanitarian agencies could not access communities. Valuable support can also be provided by, for example, providing cash to market actors, supporting natural resource-sharing agreements (e.g. EKISIL in Uganda).

Action: Work through and support local systems that communities rely on in crisis, using political economy and context analysis to identify how things work at the local level and for whom. Engage local, informal governance arrangements alongside formal market, natural resource and governance systems.

7. INTEGRATED, MULTI-SYSTEM APPROACHES CREATE DEEPER AND MORE DURABLE CHANGE

FCAS adaptation requires integrated systems pathways, as single-system interventions are insufficient to address compound vulnerability. The strongest systems shifts occur where programmes address multiple, interconnected systems simultaneously, rather than isolating economic, social or ecological domains. Rangelands followed an integrated multisectoral programming strategy that brought together five interconnected components, each incorporating gender, equity and social inclusion considerations: (i) pasture and water management for rangeland health; (ii) inclusive and accountable governance; (iii) market systems for rangeland management; (iv) climate information services; (v) and conflict management and peacebuilding.

⁹ See: [The Policy Practice Thinking and Working Politically and Adaptive Management](#) and [Chapter 35 of the Elgar Companion to the World Bank: Thinking and working apolitically](#)



Action: Design programmes that tackle all relevant components in a system or work in tandem with complementary programmes to ensure the overall strategy is comprehensive and not duplicative. Ensure the components line up with systems mapping through PEA and context analysis (see point 1).

8. RELATIONSHIPS, PARTNERSHIPS AND COORDINATION ARE ESSENTIAL FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE

Building and sustaining relationships and coordination mechanisms are essential in achieving systems change to support resilience in FCAS. Resilience strengthening in fragile contexts needs collaboration, as no single actor or intervention is sufficient. Coalitions, partnerships and influence across different systems matter, including engaging with political actors. SAFE layered partnerships across local, national and market systems to stabilise food availability during conflict escalation in Sudan which was central to rapid adaptation and local coping mechanisms.

Action: Act collectively and collaboratively with systems actors across informal and formal institutions, encompassing humanitarian, development, climate and peace actors in public and private sectors – this is essential for aligning efforts and sharing resources. Build coalitions and create formal and informal structures that include under-represented people.

Conclusion

Systems change is essential for sustainable resilience in FCAS. Strengthening resilience requires shifting the underlying rules, relationships and incentives that shape vulnerability, beyond immediate service delivery. Effective systems-focused programming works across governance, markets, natural resources, and social cohesion, grounded in conflict and political economy realities and implemented through adaptive, inclusive, locally rooted approaches. When done well, systems change reduces long-term humanitarian need, builds adaptive capacity and supports transitions toward more equitable, stable and climate-resilient societies.

Annex 1: Glossary

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY SYSTEM?

A system is a set of interconnected elements that together produce patterns of behaviour over time.¹⁰ These elements include people, institutions, rules, relationships, resources and flows of information or capital. Resilience-building approaches focus on complex adaptive systems that have many interacting parts, unclear boundaries and constant change. Cause and effect are difficult to predict, and outcomes emerge from interaction rather than design. Examples include communities, ecosystems, markets and governance arrangements. These systems are shaped by deeper drivers such as power relations, values, beliefs, social norms and political incentives.

WHAT IS A COMPLEX SYSTEM?¹¹

Government Office of Science has a useful set of resources on system thinking for civil servants.¹² It defines complex systems as:

“Complex systems behave in a way that is greater than the sum of their parts – you can’t understand the system just by looking at individual elements, it needs to be studied as a whole. Likewise in complex systems there are underlying patterns – feedback loops – which mean that it becomes difficult to relate cause to effect and actions to consequences”.

Complex systems are by their nature dynamic and continuously changing. It might take time before changes are observed. However, by **wrapping a systems thinking approach around existing processes – introducing new tools and approaches to improve what you already do – you will increase the chance of delivering the right solution to the right problem.** You will have created a safety net to steward the system effectively and impactfully within this complexity to create intelligent, empathetic and impactful outcomes.

See Figure 1 for a visual summary on the difference between ‘complex’ and ‘complicated’.

Is it complex? Or just complicated?

Not all problems are the same...

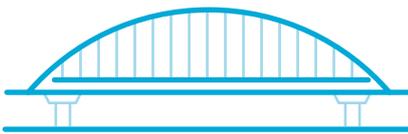
COMPLICATED PROBLEMS	COMPLEX PROBLEMS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Difficult but predictableCan be solved repeatedlyExpertise and technical solutionsProblems can be defined and bounded	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Adaptive & changingNo single owner or root causeNo fixed solutionInterventions may have unintended effects, and what works today may fail tomorrow
	
E.g Engineering a bridge PLANNING. EXPERTISE. EXECUTION.	E.g An evolving city ADAPTATION. LEARNING. COLLABORATION

Figure 1: Complex or complicated?

¹⁰ [Government Office for Science guidance on Systems Thinking](#)

¹¹ The Systemcraft course at [Systemcraft - Wasafiri Consulting](#) is a comprehensive resource for supporting systems thinking. See for example Module 2: What is complexity?

¹² [Government Office for Science guidance on Systems Thinking](#)

WHAT IS SYSTEMS CHANGE?

Systems change is the process of shifting the underlying conditions that shape how systems function. This includes formal and informal rules, policies, norms, power relations, infrastructure, and incentives. In relation to resilience, systems change addresses the barriers that prevent people, especially marginalised groups, from accessing the resources, services, and opportunities they need before, during and after shocks and stresses. This goes beyond coping or incremental adaptation. Systems change can also alter dynamics that perpetuate vulnerability and humanitarian dependence while strengthening systems to be able to evolve and manage future risks. Without systems level change, communities may recover from crises only to return to an unjust status quo or be stuck in cycles of managing risks while the fundamental “rules of the game” remain largely unchanged.

SYSTEMS CHANGE AND SCALE

Systems change and scale are distinct but complementary. Large-scale delivery does not automatically shift or strengthen systems, while targeted system shifts may initially affect fewer people while laying the groundwork for wider change, unlocking broader, more durable impact over time. **Systems change and scale can support and enable each other but one does not always lead to the other.** Many scaling efforts focus only on increasing adopters of a product or service while ignoring the organisational and institutional context required for sustainable change. This means programmes may reach many people but still leave structural inequalities intact.

TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE

The UK Government defines transformational change as ‘*change that catalyses further changes*’, enabling either a shift from one state to another, or faster change. However, it can entail a range of simultaneous transformations to political power, social relations, decision-making processes, equitable markets and technology.¹³

Annex 2: Background to programmes reviewed

A range of programmes spanning climate resilience, market systems, governance, social cohesion, and ecological systems provide evidence for how to strengthen resilience through systems change in FCAS.

In terms of fragility typology:

- › **Sudan and South Sudan** (SAFE; Currency of Connections) exemplify **high-intensity conflict and institutional fragility**, with limited state capacity and fragmented authority.
- › **Mali** (JASS and Ben ni Baara), **Niger** (JASS) and **Ethiopia** (RIPA) sit between high and medium conflict, with functioning but uneven decentralised institutions. **Northern Nigeria** (RRA) faces severe insecurity, significant economic disruption and high volumes of displacement of people, with highly constrained humanitarian access.
- › **Kenya** (RANGE and work by CGIAR) and **Uganda** (EKISIL) reflect lower conflict but high **ecological and livelihood fragility**, with market and governance asymmetries.

¹³ [Methodology to report against key performance indicator 15 as part of the UK International Climate Finance results](#)

FOCUS

While entry points differ, all cases explicitly engage with systems-level constraints to resilience rather than standalone direct service delivery. The spread across geographies allows comparison across chronic fragility, active conflict, climate stress, and institutional collapse. Primary groups include: pastoralists and smallholder farmers; conflict-affected and displaced populations; crisis-affected market actors. Institutional conditions range from: Absent or contested state presence (e.g. South Sudan; parts of Mali); Functioning but weak sub-national institutions (e.g. Kenya; Niger).

REPORTED OUTCOMES INCLUDE

Reduced vulnerability to shocks (Uganda); higher confidence in ability to withstand shocks and a greater willingness to adopt new practices (Mali, Niger); more stable livelihoods (Sudan); greater trust, cooperation and less conflict (Mali and Niger); increased self-reliance (Sudan, pre-war); land restoration (Kenya, Mali, Niger). Increased food security and resilience (Ethiopia, Sudan). Unintended effects include elite capture risks and exclusion of the most marginal (Mali, Niger, South Sudan). Limited systemic resilience at national level in high-conflict settings.

ENABLERS TO SYSTEMS CHANGE: LOCAL LEGITIMACY AND TRUST

Local legitimacy and trust: Working with local and permanent actors including the private sector (Kenya rangelands) Inclusive, Community-Led Governance Structures (JASS; Kenya rangelands) Integrated multisectoral programming (JASS). Strong land tenure arrangements (rangelands). Importance of understanding local social systems and connections and working with them (Currency of Connections).

BARRIERS TO SYSTEMS CHANGE

Insecurity and access constraints. Areas with high levels of violent events show fewer outcomes; Elite capture; Limited representation in decision making bodies (improving but long way to go) (JASS). Kenya Rangelands – lack of local government support.

Summary table of programmes reviewed

PROGRAMME NAME	COUNTRY	SUMMARY
Resilience in Pastoral Areas - North (RIPA-North)	Ethiopia	The programme aimed to improve the resilience capacities of households, markets and governance institutions, collectively contributing to enhanced food security and inclusive economic growth.
Resilient Approaches in Natural Rangeland Ecosystems (RANGE)	Kenya	The programme aimed to strengthen community resilience through sustainable economic and social development. RANGE engaged local government, NGOs, and community structures to promote participatory climate adaptation, inclusive natural resource governance, and locally led action against drought and conflict.
Restoration of degraded land for food security and poverty reduction in East Africa and the Sahel: Taking successes in land restoration to scale (ICRAF/CGIAR)	Kenya	The programme implemented rangeland management interventions to avoid degradation, restore land where it has already been degraded, and improve productivity to reach food security and poverty reduction outcomes.
Incentivizing Collective Action for Rangeland Regeneration (ICARR)	Kenya	The programme aimed to address systemic rangeland degradation, weak governance and gender inequities among pastoralist communities by strengthening inclusive, community-led governance and incentivising sustainable land use and restoration practices.
Strengthening Agricultural Markets and Food Security (SAFE)	Sudan	The programme focused on improving the livelihoods and food security of smallholder farmers by using market systems development approaches to strengthen agricultural input/output and financial markets, build private sector partnerships, and support sustainable service delivery.
Currency of Connections	South Sudan, Uganda	The research initiative sought to understand how informal social protection networks—comprising kin, non-kin, and livelihood-based relationships—support household resilience in conflict and displacement settings.
Ben ni Baara	Mali, Niger	The programme had the objective of strengthening human security by addressing the root causes of conflict, improving economic and climate resilience, and enhancing inclusive governance.
Justice and Stability in the Sahel (JASS)	Mali, Niger	The programme works to strengthen equitable, inclusive land and resource governance and conflict resolution systems, targeting communities affected by insecurity and climate stress. JASS uses a locally led, adaptive approach—supporting community-level institutions and promoting social inclusion, climate resilience, and peaceful dispute resolution—to reduce conflict and improve justice outcomes for marginalised groups.
Feed the Future Nigeria Rural Resilience Activity (RRA)	Nigeria	The programme aims to move people out of chronic vulnerability and poverty by expanding economic opportunities, strengthening resilience capacities and facilitating recovery in conflict-affected areas. It employs a market systems development approach, supporting smallholder farmers, MSMEs, women and youth through interventions in financial inclusion, climate-smart agriculture and adaptive programming.
Securing Peace and Promoting Prosperity in Karamoja EKISIL (EKISIL)	Uganda	The programme used people-to-people and systems approaches to address the root causes of inter-ethnic conflict, support trauma healing and promote reconciliation. It aimed to strengthen individual agency, fostering civic engagement, enhancing both horizontal (community-to-community) and vertical (state-society) social cohesion, increase women's and elders' roles in land and resource dispute mediation and reduce violence through community-based interventions and improved natural resource governance.

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About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.

About The Resilience Learning Facility

While evidence and analysis of “what works” in resilience building has grown in recent years, much of it remains fragmented and hard to operationalise, particularly in dynamic and politically complex contexts.

With the support of FCDO, Mercy Corps undertook a six-month project, the ‘Resilience Learning Facility’ to provide practical, actionable evidence to support donors and delivery partners to identify opportunities to link immediate crisis response with long-term resilience in a range of settings. Four reports focus on the following themes:

1. Markets based responses to build resilience in FCAS where conflict risks and climate intersect;
2. Land and natural resource governance to increase household resilience;
3. Getting finance to actors and affected populations who need it most;
4. Integrating a ‘systems change’ element into programmes and approaches.

Each report draws on existing research and case studies from multiple FCAS and has been developed in consultation with FCDO staff and a range of external experts. Together, they explore what is feasible and appropriate across different contexts, considering levels of conflict and fragility, the functionality of existing systems, and the range of resilience outcomes that different approaches can deliver.

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IFRAH - PARTICIPANT IN THE RIPA PROGRAMME, ETHIOPIA
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