



Research Article

Indigenous Social Protection Mechanisms among the Somali Pastoral Communities in Lower Juba

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Abstract

This research paper examines the role of indigenous social protection mechanisms in strengthening the resilience and livelihood security of Somali pastoralist communities in Lower Juba amid recurrent shocks and structural challenges. It documents and analyses the traditional social protection practices employed by pastoralist communities in response to recurrent shocks and life-cycle events and assesses their effectiveness and adaptability in the context of protracted conflict, climate change, urbanization, and external humanitarian interventions. By adopting a mixed-methods design, the research gathered both quantitative and qualitative data through a survey of 512 participants and 30 interviews with key informants using purposive sampling. Data collection took place between September 10 and November 15, 2025. Findings indicate that Somali pastoralist households face significant challenges, primarily due to drought, conflict, and displacement. Despite these vulnerabilities, traditional support systems remain vital, with help coming from kinship networks rather than formal sources. This aid is rooted in a culture of reciprocity, emphasizing ethical duty over charity. Indigenous practices offer preventive measures through risk-pooling and support for widows and orphans. Customs like Xeer (traditional law) and Tacsii (support during funerals) have historically aided conflict mediation and resource redistribution during droughts. However, these systems now struggle with legitimacy and effectiveness, weakened by armed conflict, reliance on external aid, and diminishing elder authority. Factors such as sedentarization also hamper pastoral mobility. Additionally, women and youth are often excluded from decision-making within these crucial support networks, despite their willingness to engage.

Keywords

Social Protection, Resilience, Shock, Traditional Elder, Climate Change.

1. Introduction

Pastoralism is not just a livelihood practice in Somalia; it is a lifestyle intricately connected to cultural identity, social structure, and adaptation to the ecology (Lewis, 2008). Over the centuries, the Somali pastoralist societies have been able to cope with the hardship of the arid and semi-arid environment by an advanced system of indigenous social protection, based on clan solidarity, customary law (xeer), mutual resources sharing, and collective decision making (Ahmed & Hassan, 2020). These mechanisms, which have proven themselves over time, have helped communities to absorb frequent shocks, droughts, disease of livestock, conflicts and displacement, and social cohesion and economic resilience do not rely on formal state-led safety nets (Magnani & Ancey, 2023).

However, these indigenous systems are under unprecedented pressure today. Protracted conflict, climate change, forced sedentarization, large-scale land enclosures, as well as decades of humanitarian aid interventions, have all contributed to the destabilization of the institutional base of traditional support structures (Hartmann & Sugulle, 2009; Nori, 2022). Although external support has sometimes been critical, it has also—again, inadvertently, but always—eroded the reciprocity and self-sufficiency that have traditionally characterized resilience in pastoralists (Devereux, 2002). Simultaneously, fast social change, urbanization and a shift in the generation are questioning the process of imparting and applying traditional knowledge and practices among pastoral communities (UNDP, 2015).

Although indigenous social protection systems are central to daily survival, in Somalia pastoral regions, this has not been recorded, and even largely omitted in national and regional policies (Federal Government of Somalia, 2019). This is a critical gap: there can be no effective efforts to enhance social protection in Somalia without the knowledge of how these systems operate, evolve, and devolve because any such undertaking can be culturally misplaced, ineffective, or even counterproductive (Sabates-Wheeler & Devereux, 2008).

In an environment where more than 80 percent of the population depends on informal support systems, the renewal of, rather than the substitution of, indigenous social protection is not only a practice to support cultural imperatives, but also a strategic option in achieving long-term resilience in Somalia's pastoral heartlands (World Bank, 2017; Little, 2003).

2. Literature Review

Contemporary global social protection initiatives represent strategically ambitious efforts to address systemic gaps in coverage and financing, yet a critical synthesis reveals a persistent blind spot: the systematic marginalisation of indigenous, informal, and community-based mechanisms that constitute primary resilience infrastructure for pastoralist and rural populations across the Global South. These social protection programs that emphasize "integrated and coordinated employment and social protection policies" privilege formal, state-centric institutional arrangements, while its reliance on biometric registries and results-based budgeting presupposes administrative infrastructures often absent in contexts where social protection gaps are most acute (Joint SDG Fund, 2025; Rohregger, 2025; Glennie & Alemañy, 2024).

Similarly, some of the social protection initiatives originally conceived as a transformative framework integrating social protection, climate adaptation, and disaster risk reduction its operationalisation has progressively narrowed toward short-term, shock-responsive measures that marginalise the preventative and transformative functions of indigenous systems—such as xeer-based conflict resolution, communal migration coordination, and drought-resilient livestock management—which are inherently long-term, relational, and embedded in cultural norms of reciprocity (Davies et al., 2009).

Financing frameworks compound this marginalisation through structural and epistemic mechanisms. While Glennie and Alemañy's (2024) principles of "all contribute, all benefit, all decide" represent a significant conceptual advance toward equitable global financing, insufficient attention is paid to how such mechanisms would interact with indigenous reciprocity networks, risking the erosion of practices like livestock sharing when externally designed cash transfers substitute for mutual obligation.

Aid denominated in foreign currency influence operates through negotiation, conditionalities, and surveillance enabled by structural currency hierarchies—rendering the marginalisation of indigenous systems not an oversight but a structural outcome of preferences for formal, monitorable interventions (Fischer's 2026). Postcolonial power asymmetries—manifesting through agenda-narrowing, aid conditionalities, and the export of Western knowledge models—dismiss traditional practices as "informal" rather than recognising them as legitimate, adaptive forms of social protection, though practical pathways for operationalising decolonial recommendations within entrenched financial architectures remain underdeveloped (Roelen et al.'s 2025).

Pastoralism is vital to Africa's socio-economic and ecological landscape, with around 268 million pastoralists occupying 40% of the continent's land and contributing 10-44% of GDP in many African nations (African Union, 2010). Pastoralism is a culturally adaptive and economically important system in arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs). In 2010, the African Union endorsed a Policy Framework on Pastoralism that recognizes pastoralists' rights, promotes inclusive governance, and aims to integrate mobile livestock systems into development planning. The framework also supports indigenous institutions like customary land tenure and conflict management while emphasizing gender equality and financial inclusion through Regional Economic Communities (AU/DREA, 2010).

Official policies assert that pastoralism is a viable livelihood in arid and semi-arid regions, emphasizing the need to recognize indigenous knowledge and harmonize cross-border policies on mobility, land tenure, and disaster resilience. However, food sovereignty and traditional ecological practices are often undermined by a bias towards modernization and

commercialization, resulting in regional instruments lacking binding authority ([Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa, 2017](#)).

Despite continental commitments, implementation is lacking, with national laws undermining AU principles by promoting sedentarization, agricultural development, and land grabbing, and criminalizing pastoral movement and weakening community rangeland management. In the Horn of Africa, pastoralists face climate change, conflict, and political marginalization, resulting in a significant policy-practice gap ([AFSA, 2020](#)).

At the regional level, cross-border mobility and resource rights are recognized in the IGAD Transhumance Protocol (2020) and the EAC Livestock Policy (2019). However, bureaucratic stagnation, political marginalization, and donor-driven modernization favour sedentary agriculture over mobile pastoralism, increasing vulnerability and conflict ([Nori 2022](#)).

Informal social protection systems play a crucial role for communities along the Kenya-Tanzania border and reveal that 42.1% of households rely on kinship ties, while 69.7% depend on community groups like women's associations and livestock-sharing programs to cope with shocks such as drought and economic hardship. These systems provide preventive, protective, and promotive support, fostering education, enterprise, and social cohesion. However, their effectiveness is diminishing due to rising poverty, environmental degradation, urbanization, and poor internal administration ([MacOpiyo 2022](#)).

The Afar of Ethiopia have a hierarchical, consensus-based conflict resolution system led by elders (*mada'a*) and spiritual leaders (*mabbotto*), utilizing restorative justice mechanisms like compensation (*guma*) and reconciliation oaths. Similarly, the Borana Oromo employ *Buusaa-gonofaa*, a community solidarity system for crisis support. While these institutions are credible and functional, they face threats from state encroachment, loss of authority among elders, and the marginalization of women and youth ([Wako et al., 2023](#)).

In Somalia, where 55% of the population are nomadic pastoralists and 25% agro-pastoralists, indigenous social protection is deeply rooted in clan and religious structures, a system that extends across Somali communities in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti ([Ahmed & Hassan, 2020](#)). These resilient and institutionalized systems rely on governance structures like *xeer* (customary law) and the *Guurti* (council of elders), which resolve approximately 90% of local conflicts through cultural legitimacy and reconciliation ([CHF International, 2007](#); [Kader & Abdi, 2022](#)).

Economic and social mechanisms, including livestock circulation through pre-inheritance transfers, dowry, interest-free loans (*irmaansi*), and religious duties like Zakat, facilitate shared herding and labour and enable communities to navigate dryland environments with dignity and autonomy, offering vital assistance to vulnerable groups such as widows, orphans, and the elderly ([Magnani and Ancey, 2023](#)). These risk-pooling and asset-saving strategies provide collective support during life-cycle events such as weddings, funerals, and displacements, as well as during ecological shocks like droughts, while indigenous ecological knowledge, including celestial navigation and seasonal forecasts, guides herd management in challenging conditions ([Ahmed and Bihi, 2019](#); [Magnani and Ancey, 2023](#)). Therefore, community-based risk management practices have historically connected Somali pastoral communities through strategic mobility, long-distance migration, destocking during droughts, and reciprocal exchanges of food and livestock, prioritizing support for vulnerable groups ([International Livestock Research Institute \(ILRI\), 2022](#)).

These systems utilize traditional knowledge and customary institutions as key elements of social protection and climate resilience, where mechanisms such as *xeer* (customary law), clan-based mutual assistance (*habar*), livestock-sharing (*irmaansi*), and religious duties (*Zakat*) serve as culturally specific safety nets. Coordinated by societal norms and decisions from elders (*odayaal*) and councils (*guurti*), these systems provide preventive, protective, and promotive support during crises like droughts, livestock loss, diseases, and displacement ([Ahmed, M. E., & Hassan, A. M., 2025](#)). The efficacy of these networks was evident during the 2011-2012 famine, where families with strong inter-clan connections experienced less food insecurity by accessing broader support networks, blending informal safety nets with formal responses like the Unconditional Cash and Voucher Response ([Hedlund et al. 2015](#); [Truelove and Duncalf 2012](#); [Majid, Abdirahman & Hassan 2017:15-33](#); [Mercy Corps and Tango 2013](#)).

Additionally, remittances from the Somali diaspora, totalling around \$1.2 billion annually, strengthened household resilience by providing access to food and healthcare, though they benefited only about 20% of households ([World Bank 2017](#)).

Despite this historical resilience, Somali pastoralist institutions are currently in crisis due to frequent droughts, land fragmentation, and political instability, which undermine customary resource rights ([Unruh, 1995](#); [Hartmann and Sugulle, 2009](#)). The effectiveness of *xeer* is diminishing, particularly in land and water disputes, as environmental degradation,

youth unemployment, and a growing disconnect between formal state frameworks and customary governance undermine the legitimacy of customary dispute resolution ([International Livestock Research Institute \(ILRI\), 2022](#)).

Government land reforms, sedentarization policies, and the co-option of elders have further weakened customary governance, while the exclusion of women and young people from decision-making limits the sustainability of these systems ([CHF International, 2007](#); [Mamade et al., 2016](#); [Kader and Abdi, 2022](#)). Externally driven interventions often compromise these adaptive systems, as state programs like cash transfers or livestock insurance fail to accommodate pastoral mobility and household complexities, resulting in low adoption rates ([Magnani and Ancey, 2023](#)). Formal social protection programs mainly target sedentary populations and fail to regulate pastoral movement, while fenced farms, urban sprawl, and strict policies undermine traditional transhumance despite pastoralism being an economically viable practice ([Fre & Dixon, 2017](#); [ODI/HPG, 2009](#); [Flintan & Cullis, 2007](#)).

Critically, Somalia Social Protection Policy (2019) by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs recognizes traditional safety nets, such as *zakat*, *sadaqah*, remittances, and clan solidarity networks, as crucial for protecting the poor ([Federal Government of Somalia, 2019, pp. 23-32](#)). Nevertheless, it fails to integrate these existing systems into a nationally owned social protection framework, instead proposing a parallel, state-led cash-based system reliant on biometric registries and digital IDs that reflects donor priorities rather than Somali cultural realities ([Federal Government of Somalia, 2019, pp. 23-32](#)). The policy lacks a nuanced approach, failing to propose specific strategies for co-designing programs with older adults, religious leaders, and women's organizations, or overlooking how existing *zakat* committees could serve as delivery partners ([Federal Government of Somalia, 2019, p. 24](#)).

Moreover, by relying on universal lifecycle targeting and assuming state capacity to verify age or disability in a context where many lack identification, the policy disregards the collective nature of Somali household economies, which share resources across kinship networks rather than through individual cash transfers ([Federal Government of Somalia, 2019, pp. 12, 29-30](#)). Although it claims to promote complementarity with traditional systems, there are no budget lines or mechanisms that truly integrate formal and indigenous approaches, potentially undermining resilience and increasing dependency on aid ([Federal Government of Somalia, 2019, p. 25](#)).

1.1. Objectives of the Study

This research paper aims to understand the role of indigenous social protection mechanisms in enhancing the resilience and livelihood security of Somali pastoralist communities in the face of recurrent shocks and structural challenges. Specifically, the study's objectives are:

1. To document and analyse the traditional (indigenous) social protection practices employed by Somali pastoralist communities in response to recurrent shocks and life-cycle events.
2. To assess the perceived effectiveness, adaptability, and current status of these indigenous mechanisms, including factors contributing to their resilience or decline in the context of protracted conflict, climate change, urbanization, and external humanitarian interventions.
3. To identify opportunities for synergies between indigenous social protection systems and formal or modern social safety nets.

1.2. Research Gaps

Regardless of the expanding academic interest in the indigenous knowledge systems and community-based resilience approaches, there are still considerable gaps in the literature on the study of indigenous social protection practices in Somali pastoral societies. These loopholes are deficient in a holistic view of the functioning, adaptation and integration of traditional systems with formal social protection systems- especially in situations that are characterized by state weakness and frequent climate shocks and prolonged conflict.

To begin with, although anecdotal and ethnographic records provide a lot of information on pastoral life of Somalia (e.g., [Lewis, 2008](#); [de Waal, 1996](#)), a significant deficiency of empirical studies that capture the working procedures, coverage and performance of indigenous institutions like *xeer* (customary law), *diya* (blood compensation) and mutual support systems like *habar/reer* in modern contexts can be identified. In the absence of a strong body of empirical evidence, these systems would become simplified or neglected in policy discussion platforms.

Second, there is little analysis of the interaction of indigenous mechanisms with formal or humanitarian-supported social protection programs- cash transfers, food aid or government safety nets. Synergies, tensions, or integration of traditional social protection into governance have not been studied properly ([Sabates-Wheeler and Devereux, 2008](#)). Such interactions are essential to understand and develop inclusive and contextually relevant social protection policies that do not substitute the existing community structures.

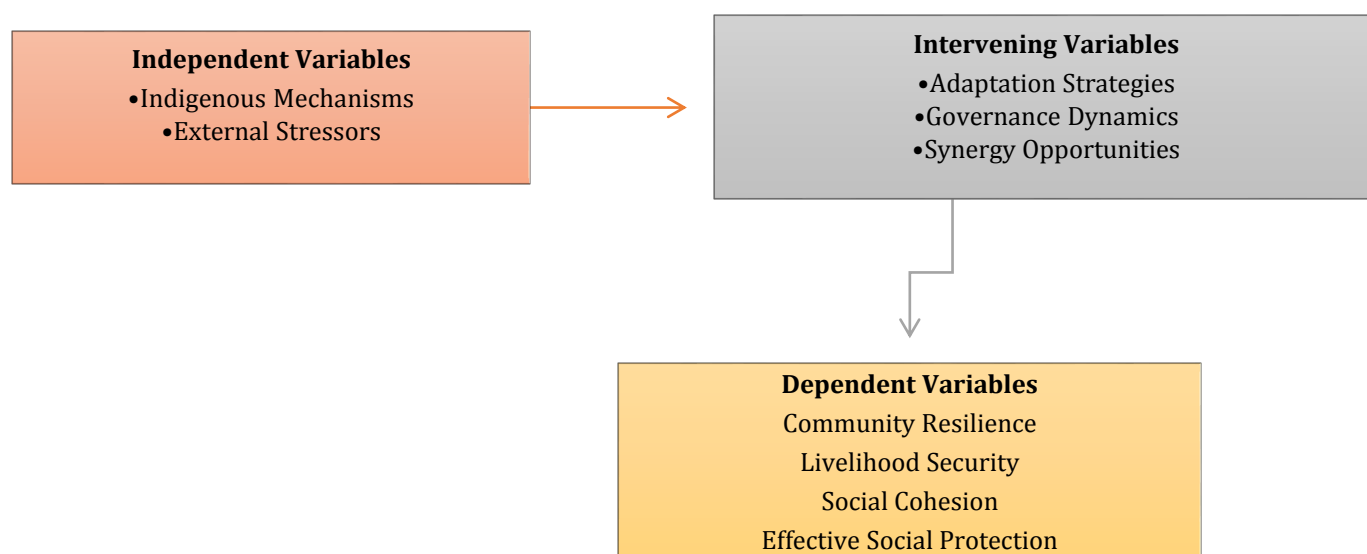
Third, there is an exposure of Somali pastoral communities to a growing climate variability and insecurity. However, there is a paucity of research into the adaptation of indigenous social protection systems to these novel stressors (or a lack thereof) (Little, 2003; Pavanello et al., 2012). Institutional resilience, institutional transformation or institutional erosion when faced with cumulative shocks is a subject area of longitudinal evidence most lacking, which constrains the capacity to predict future vulnerabilities or provide some support to adaptive capacity.

Lastly, even though the importance of customary institutions in daily governance and delivery of welfare is central, limited research examines how the institutions are formally recognized or not within the national policies of social protection and the law in Somalia (UNDP, 2015). This invisibility in the institutions undercuts the attempts to accommodate the indigenous mechanisms into the development planning system to the extent that the legitimacy and sustainability of such mechanisms would be compromised.

The study fills in interrelated gaps since it concentrates on the voices of the communities and the experiences of the indigenous social protection of Somali pastoralism. It creates evidence that advances academic knowledge and helps to make social protection approaches in fragile pastoral settings more equitable, effective and culturally informed.

3. Conceptual Framework

As per the Figure 1, indigenous social protection outcomes emerge from the interaction between foundational traditional assets and external pressures, where independent variables consist of indigenous mechanisms such as *Xeer* (customary law), *Habar/Reer* (clan mutual assistance), and *Irmaansi* (livestock sharing) operating within a fragile context of external stressors like climate change, conflict, and humanitarian aid policies that often disrupt traditional systems. These inputs are processed through intervening variables, including adaptation strategies (e.g., mobile money usage, modified migration), governance dynamics (elder legitimacy, women and youth inclusion), and synergy opportunities between formal and informal networks, which collectively determine how effectively communities navigate shocks. Ultimately, these relationships influence dependent variables representing the study's desired outcomes: enhanced community resilience, livelihood security, social cohesion, and overall effective social protection, thereby demonstrating how traditional systems can be strengthened rather than substituted to ensure sustainable pastoral livelihoods.



4. Theoretical Framework

The article relies on the Social Protection Theory (extended to informal systems), Commons Theory, and its Collective Action. Traditional social protection theory, as proposed by Stephen Devereux and Rachel Sabates-Wheeler (2004) defines the "transformative" function of social protection, which focuses on social justice and addressing structural causes of vulnerability. This theory has conventionally stressed on formal safety nets generated and led by the state, like cash transfers, pensions, and unemployment insurance (Barrientos, 2013). Nevertheless, in much less developed countries

such as Somalia, where the capacity of states is weak and formal systems are not yet present, scholars have advocated a more liberal definition that encompasses informal and indigenous processes (Devereux, 2002; Sabates-Wheeler and Devereux, 2008). This broad perspective acknowledges that households and communities usually rely on kinship networks, reciprocity, customary institutions and shared resources as primary means of shock and vulnerability protection. This paper is inclusive of this definition because it puts Somali pastoral practices (xeer (customary law), diya (blood compensation), and mutual aid groups) somewhere on a continuum of social protection.

The study examines community-level management of shared resources (such as grazing lands and water points) and crisis management, as practiced by the pastoral communities using the commons theory, as proposed by Elinor Ostrom (1990) in her book *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, which is the foundational work, demonstrating how communities manage shared resources through self-governance. This theory states that the maintenance of collective action involves locally generated rules, trust, reciprocity and monitoring, which are also present in Somali indigenous social protection. The framework assists in explaining that communal norms and sanctions in the form of xeer enable the sharing of resources and conflict resolution, which acts as a kind of social insurance.

5. Methodology

This study on the indigenous social protection systems of Somali pastoral communities in the Lower Juba region uses a mixed-methods approach. The researchers combined quantitative surveys, qualitative key informant interviews (KIIs), and a thorough literature review to get a well-rounded understanding. The researchers interviewed 512 pastoralist respondents from Kismayo's livestock market, a hotspot for nomadic and agro-pastoralist populations who are grappling with various ecological and socio-political challenges through purposive selection.

The researchers administered a smartphone survey (translated into Somali) that was organized into six sections, covering demographics, exposure to shocks, indigenous practices using 5-point Likert scales, and frequency recall items from before the 1990s. The researchers also looked into institutional trust, adaptability, and intergenerational continuity. The semi-structured KIIs allowed the study to delve into the complexities of traditional processes like *xeer* and *habar/reer*.

Additionally, the researchers interviewed 30 key informants, including traditional elders (odayaal), local leaders, and religious scholars, all chosen for their knowledge of customary law (xeer) and community governance. Data collection took place between September 10 and November 15, 2025.

To ensure ethical standards, we obtained informed consent, ensured voluntary participation, and anonymized all identifiable data to protect respondents discussing sensitive issues like conflict and displacement. The researchers analysed the quantitative data using SPSS for descriptive statistics and conducted correlation and regression analysis, while the qualitative transcripts underwent systematic thematic coding. This process started with open coding of concepts such as clan mutual aid and institutional decline, moving to axial categorization that aligned with the study objectives. This approach enabled the study to triangulate the findings with the survey results and literature review insights, ensuring validity and leading to actionable, community-driven recommendations for enhancing indigenous social protection. The researchers also performed a correlation analysis and a reliability test (Cronbach's Alpha).

As per Table 1, the internal consistency of all constructs is acceptable to excellent, which justifies their use as a reliable composite scale in future analysis.

Table 1: Results of the Reliability Test

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Interpretation
Clan & Mutual Support	0.84	Good
Elder & Xeer Effectiveness	0.88	Good
Historical Practices (Pre-1990s)	0.93	Excellent
Perceived Decline	0.79	Acceptable
Support for Hybrid Systems	0.86	Good

6. Results

6.1. Demographic Information

285 respondents were female (56% of them) and 227 males (44%) which shows a moderate majority of women, suggesting their proactive participation in the community-based support mechanism and their availability or readiness to discuss the social protection, especially considering that their central and yet informal roles in caregiving, postpartum care and household-based resilience approaches are central to Somali societies.

Table 2: Gender of Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Female	285	56%
Male	227	44%
Total	512	100%

Source: Field Data, 2025

The respondents' age distribution indicates that the largest proportion is 25-34 years (25%), followed by 35-44 years (23%) and 45-54 years (21%), which translates to 69 percent of the total number of respondents. The young respondents (less than 25 years old) comprise 12% and 55-64 and 65 and above comprise 13% and 7%, respectively. The high representation of adults in the pastoralist communities is captured in this distribution, though it still represents intergenerational viewpoints that are vital in the interpretation of the transmission and the contemporary position of the indigenous social protection mechanisms.

Table 3: Age of Respondents

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Under 25	62	12%
25-34	128	25%
35-44	115	23%
45-54	109	21%
55-64	64	13%
65 or older	34	7%
Total	512	100%

Source: Field Data, 2025

The livelihoods of the respondents indicate a dynamic and diversifying pastoral economy in Somalia where livestock herding is the only major occupation (28%), though it is complemented well with trade/business (23%) and remittances (21%) and crop farming also plays a significant role (19percent). Wage labour also has a smaller share (8%), and only 2% has other sources. This distribution highlights a marked change in the overall configuration of nomadic pastoralism to mixed and settled survival approaches, which are influenced by environmental stress and violence as well as integration into the market. The importance of livestock, however, points at the cultural and economic significance of pastoralism despite the fact that some of the people involved in other income-generating activities still practice the activity.

Table 4: Sources of Livelihood of Respondents

Livelihood Source	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Livestock herding	142	28%
Crop farming	98	19%
Trade/business	115	23%
Wage labour	42	8%
Remittances	107	21%
Other	8	2%
Total	512	100%

Source: Field Data, 2025

6.2. Correlation and Regression Analysis

There was a significant positive relationship between the memory of the respondents concerning the powerful historical traditions (e.g. resolution of conflicts by elders, sharing of livestock during droughts, support of the collective burial, etc.) and their view of the present-day mutual assistance based on the clan. This indicates that those societies whose historical social protection frameworks were stronger still possess higher reciprocal support levels in the current times which highlights the historical nature of such community institutions.

It is interesting to note that the perceived decline of traditional mechanisms and support of integration of traditional social protection into governance (formal recognition of *xeer* or co-management of social protection by elders and local authorities) is positively moderately correlated ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.001$). This means that those communities that are most affected by a loss of indigenous systems are not abandoning the tradition; they are just the ones who are most interested in institutional affirmation that supports and connects customary and formal systems.

The positive correlation between the inclusion of women in decision-making (e.g., resource sharing, conflict resolution) and support of innovative and integrated methods, such as community livestock banks or youth training in conventional values, is also moderate and positive ($r = 0.49$, $p < 0.001$). This emphasizes the fact that inclusive societies are more flexible and tolerant to synergistic solutions.

Also, there is a strong relationship between trust in the institutions elders lead and intergenerational continuity: respondents who rated elders as effective in dispute resolution were more likely to believe youth would maintain such systems with their support ($r = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$). This identifies elder legitimacy as an important facilitator of cultural transmission.

Interestingly, although 78 percent of those who responded to it agree that external aid has undermined traditional reciprocity, such an impression is not significantly related to unwillingness to cooperate with formal actors. As a matter of fact, recipients of NGO assistance were as likely, or even more likely, to endorse hybrid forms of intervention, which implies that communities make a distinction between ill-conceived assistance and well-calibrated and respectful collaborations.

These correlations demonstrate that Somali pastoralists are not opposing the modernization process, but they are demanding culturally based, inclusive, and co-designed social protection regimes that respect the native knowledge, yet are responsive to the changes in the modern world. The evidence is overwhelming to the effect that, instead of replacement, a change to reinforcement is required- utilizing the validity of *xeer*, clan unity, and the reciprocal exchange to the form of strong, locally initiated safety nets.

The conventional social protection systems in the pastoral communities in Somalia as illustrated in Figure 1 are based on community backup systems that are used in mutual assistance by the clan systems where members help each other in times of crisis. The elders are also important in that they settle disputes and create social harmony. Also, the habit of sharing experiences in a reciprocal manner through other activities like loaning of livestock enhances community solidarity. These systems have involved historical practices such as livestock sharing and common management of resources but these are challenged by the modernization and the outside forces.

Regression analysis indicates that participation in reciprocal contributions is near-universal (98%) and not significantly predicted by demographic variables (gender, age, livelihood), suggesting that engagement with indigenous social protection represents a normative obligation embedded in pastoral identity rather than a discretionary choice.

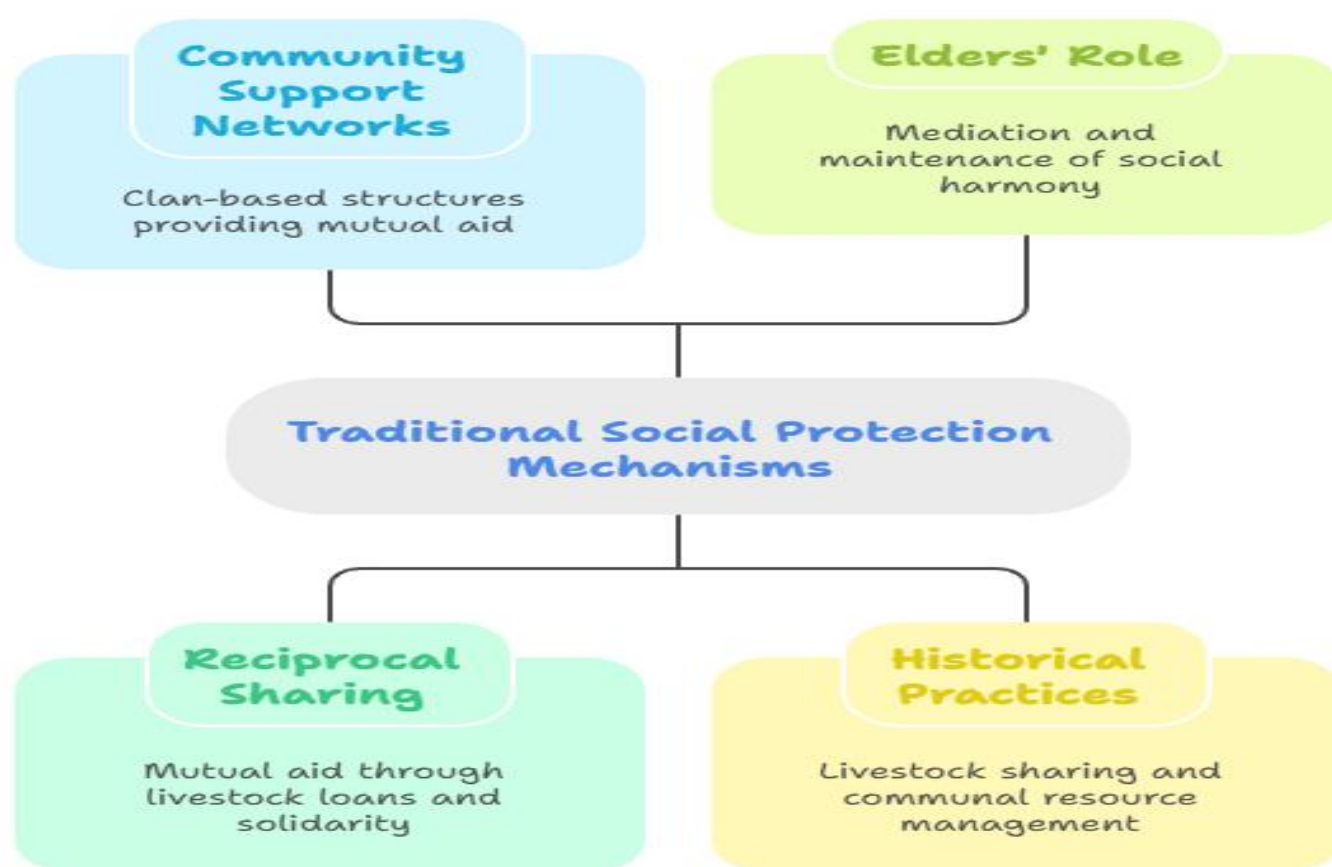
Assessing perceived effectiveness and adaptability, the analysis identifies both resilience and vulnerability within these systems. While the indigenous mechanism strength index yields a moderate-high mean score of 3.52/5.00, 89% of respondents agree that traditional practices have declined, with multivariate correlation analysis revealing that perceived decline is most strongly associated with armed conflict and displacement ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$), followed by dependence on external humanitarian aid ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.001$) and erosion of elder authority ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$).

However, 63% of respondents report that their communities have actively modified traditional practices to address contemporary challenges—such as integrating mobile money for resource transfer or adjusting migration routes in response to land fragmentation—demonstrating institutional bricolage rather than passive erosion. Moreover, the positive correlation between indigenous mechanism strength and support for integration of traditional social protection into governance ($r = 0.31$, $p < 0.01$) indicates that communities experiencing stronger traditional systems are more, not less, open to

synergistic integration with formal approaches, challenging assumptions that cultural preservation necessitates rejection of external engagement.

The analysis reveals strong community-level demand for co-designed, hybrid social protection frameworks. Over 90% of respondents endorse specific integration measures: formal government recognition of xeer (96%), involving elders in program design (93%), training youth in traditional conflict resolution values (89%), supporting community-managed livestock or milk banks (87%), and linking pastoralist networks with drought early-warning systems without displacing local knowledge (85%). Trust dynamics further underscore the strategic value of indigenous institutions: 87% agree that traditional mechanisms are more trustworthy than formal government support, suggesting that externally designed programs risk low adoption unless they complement rather than substitute customary systems. However, key barriers persist, with 48% citing lack of government recognition and 42% identifying erosion of elder authority as major obstacles to effective synergy.

Figure 2: Traditional Social Protection Mechanisms Function. Source: Key Informant Interviews



6.3. Exposure to Shocks

Findings indicate that the pastoralist households (Somali) are experiencing intersecting and intense shocks, the most common being drought (92% of respondents), closely followed by conflict or displacement (89%), livestock disease (85%), flood (78%), and illness or death of an important household member (76%). These responses highlight the long-term susceptibility of pastoralist populations to environmental, health, and socio-political stresses that necessitate the imperative and urgent development of strong, adaptive and contextually specific systems of social protection, specifically, indigenous systems that have traditionally cushioned households against such routine catastrophes.

Table 5: Shocks Exposed to the Respondents

Shock Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Drought	471	92%
Conflict or displacement	456	89%
Livestock disease	435	85%
Flood	399	78%
Illness or death of key household member	389	76%
None	12	2%

Source: Field Data, 2025

In terms of assistance, the vast majority of households (98%), had in some form of assistance when they encountered shocks like drought, conflict, livestock disease or displacement with only 12 households (2%), having no support at all, which proves that the purpose of social protection is almost universal in such a Somali pastoralist setting, which is primarily based on indigenous networks like family, clan, livestock disease or displacement.

Table 6: Receipt of Assistance During Shocks

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	500	98%
No	12	2%
Total	512	100%

Source: Field Data, 2025

6.4. Source of Assistance During Shocks

Indigenous, community-based support is in the form of immediate family (41%), extended clan members (28%), and neighbouring clans (18%), all of which together constitute 87 percent of all support received by Somali pastoralist households during shock periods, with an added 9 percent being contributed by local elders and *xeer* councils. Conversely, formal external actors, including NGOs, government agencies, and religious institutions, have an insignificant role, and each of them provides at most 2 percent of the aid. This extreme dependence on kinship and traditional networks highlights how the core of indigenous social protection systems is to protect the pastoralist populations against frequent crises.

Table 7: Source of Assistance

Source of Assistance	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Immediate family	205	41%
Extended clan members	140	28%
Neighbouring clans	90	18%
Local elders / <i>xeer</i> councils	45	9%
Religious institutions	10	2%
NGOs/Government	10	2%

Source: Field Data, 2025

6.5. Personal Contribution

98% of the respondents say that they have personally donated livestock or other resources to help other members of the clan in need. It is not just a once-in-a-while charity but a deeply rooted cultural requirement that is core in indigenous social protection. This outcome reflects an excessive order of reciprocity and support in Somali communities, and it is one of the pillars of resiliency when faced with repeated shocks such as drought, warfare, and loss of livestock. These findings prove that indigenous social protection in pastoral Somali communities is participatory, reciprocal, and actively preserved by the members of the community.

Table 8: Participation in Contributions

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	504	98%
No	8	2%
Total	512	100%

Source: Field Data, 2025

6.6. Traditional Practices that Help Communities Survive Crises

The study displays a highly organized and holistic indigenous social protection framework, which is deeply rooted in the Somali culture of pastoralists, where mutual aid/support is triggered in a systematic way throughout the life cycle and in reaction to the periodically recurring ecological and social shocks. A vast majority of respondents said that in the pre-major disruption (before 1990s) times, the community elders would resolve violent conflicts in 94 percent of incidents, highlighting *xeer* (customary law) as the stronghold of social order. In the same way, in times of droughts, which were the worst environmental shocks in history, 91% confirmed the redistributive ethic whereby richer households shared livestock and particularly the milking animals because they viewed collective survival based on redistributive ethics as a priority over individual accumulation.

Key informants confirmed that in 1973-1975, during the *Dabadheer* (long-tailed) drought, the government airlifted more than 100,000 destitute nomads in the drought-afflicted north to the southern Lower Shabelle and Middle Juba areas, which were agricultural and fishing settlements. The resettlement program taught the nomads farming skills such as growing maize and sorghum, and the use of fishing to ensure that they become self-sufficient as opposed to the animal approach. The host communities embraced the initiative. Military services and student volunteers were sent to help in the administration of the camp, transportation and farm labour.

The mobility, which is an important adaptive tactic, was enabled by scouts (*sahan*) who provided safe migration pathways (89%), so that pasture and water availability were guaranteed without causing much inter-clan violence. The community had high standards of responsiveness to the neediest: 88 per cent of the dead were all over with the burial expenses paid, widows were given a share of milk and grain (85 per cent), and groups of women were made available to grant postpartum care (83 per cent). Even social milestones such as marriage were put on a cushion by extended kin networks, with 80 percent reporting livestock contributions to help alleviate economic burdens. In acute nutritional emergencies, like the failure of livestock to yield milk, 82% recorded milk sharing daily, indicating a reciprocity culture of neediness, with immediate neediness. These practices represent not only a form of ad hoc generosity, but a logically structured, culturally constructed safety net based on clan loyalty, gender division, and ecological expediency mechanisms, which in the past allowed pastoralists to survive in one of the harshest habitats on Earth.

Table 9: Traditional Practices for Survival

Practice	% Often/Always
Conflict: Elders mediated violence	94%
Drought: Wealthier households shared livestock	91%
Migration: Scouts shared safe routes	89%
Death: Community covered burial costs	88%
Widows: Regular milk/grain shares	85%
Childbirth: Women's groups assisted postpartum	83%
Marriage: Extended family contributed livestock	80%
Milk shortage: Daily milk sharing	82%

Source: Field Data, 2025

The key informants have attested that several traditional systems serve as safety nets and the sustenance of livelihoods with high degrees of social capital, cultural norms, and a sense of reciprocal obligations. These systems enable the house-

holds to use and control key livelihood assets- mainly livestock and labour- in times of crisis, drought, death, or displacement. They are dynamic, practical and strong tools that have historically been used to support livelihoods based on pastoralism.

- *Tacsi*: This is a localized transfer system that is triggered by the death of the household head. The members of the clan and neighbours offer livestock and cash to fund the orphaned children below 15 years. It should also be pointed out that *Tacsi* is not restricted to the members of the clan; any member of the village can contribute and benefit through it, which makes it an inclusive welfare mechanism.
- *Guus*: It is a sharing of labour among men, primarily in mutual labour sharing, during activities that involve a lot of labour, e.g. crop farming or harvesting. It increases productivity as a result of collectivity and social solidarity.
- *Allabari and Duco*: These are practices that are spiritually driven and help to pool resources and build solidarity in the community in periods of crisis.

Interviews affirmed that the connection between resilience of Somali communities to crises was significantly associated with their traditional practices, especially the custom of *xeer* (Somali customary law). As a mechanism to resolve conflicts, *xeer*, as well as the moral and operational cornerstone of indigenous social protection, was identified as the most essential framework to crisis management across the board.

According to key informants, *xeer* is much more than a blood feud-solving mechanism--it is the rule book on moral and social conduct that holds the Somali pastoralist society together. According to their explanation, *xeer* commits clans to assist each other in droughts, widows, and lost livestock, as well as being hospitable to strangers, which unites communities with mutual duties. Unless we have *xeer*, they said, we are but clans in fragments.

Intimately related to *xeer*, is the system of *reer/habar*, a clan based mutual aid that serves as a social safety net of an informal nature. Once the family has losses on livestock, the *reer* will automatically organize support, which includes milk, goats and cash without any external assistance. They observed that this internal solidarity was what helped her community to endure the drought in 2022, and noted their dependence on endogenous systems rather than humanitarian hand-outs.

Livestock-sharing practices, especially the *irmaansi*, the temporary donation of milking animals or interest-free loans of livestock, were also found by informants to be essential in the event of nutrition emergencies, and were found to be a life-saving practice. One pastoralist remembered how a relative gave him six months of a milking camel, with no return due, keeping his children alive in the face of severe shortage- an illustration of how kinship networks can be made to work in reality.

In the case of vulnerable people, including widows and divorcees, collective guardianship became one of the fundamental mechanisms of *xeer*-based protection. They confirmed that a widow is never abandoned under *xeer*: her brothers-in-law of the late husband provide her with a herd, the clan feeds her children, and upon her request elders help to remarry her in a proud manner. They insisted that it was not charity, that it was duty--an implication of the role of *xeer* in institutionalizing care and accountability.

Key informants also explained how the coordination of migration is important to ecological stability. Pastoralists have an elaborate, mutual trust system of early warning through the use of scouts (*sahan*), and inter-clan agreements. According to them, the old knowledge of wells and pastures is actively circulated at times of crisis, in this case, when there is a drought. *Sahan* warns not only their relatives but also friendly clans, and organized migration will save them all from conflicts with each other, conspiring in the rangelands. This common management of traveling pathways, they stated, is not simply logistical--it is an alive manifestation of *xeer* adaptive prudence in the undergoing of climatic conditions.

The traditional pastoral culture of the Somali people was mainly concerned with communal self-sustenance, in which families were reliant on one another before the colonial powers transformed the customary practices. This change opened the path to another culture of politics and economics that disintegrated their land and divided families and relatives. Moreover, Somali women may seek reimbursement for missed appointments caused by political instability. In addition, Abdi Ismail Samatar suggests that Somali women can demand reimbursement due to the missed appointments because of the political instability ([Framing Somalia, 2022](#)).

Table 10: Indigenous Mechanisms Using Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler's (2004) Framework

Preventive Function	Promotive Function	Transformative Function
Norms discourage resource hoarding	Builds social capital for collective action	Institutionalizes care obligations for widows/orphans, addressing structural gender vulnerability
Risk-pooling reduces individual vulnerability	Strengthens kinship networks for livelihood diversification	Challenges individualistic welfare models; affirms collective rights to support
Builds resilience through asset circulation	Enables productive investment via interest-free credit	Redistributive ethic counters accumulation-based inequality

Table 10. illustrates how indigenous mechanisms align with Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler's (2004) framework by fulfilling preventive, promotive, and transformative functions that collectively enhance community resilience. Preventively, these systems mitigate risk through norms that discourage resource hoarding and risk-pooling arrangements that reduce individual vulnerability, thereby building resilience via asset circulation. Promotively, they foster social capital for collective action and strengthen kinship networks to facilitate livelihood diversification, while mechanisms like interest-free credit enable productive investment. Most significantly, these mechanisms serve a transformative function by institutionalizing care obligations for vulnerable groups such as widows and orphans to address structural gender vulnerabilities, challenging individualistic welfare models through the affirmation of collective rights to support, and employing a redistributive ethic that counters accumulation-based inequality.

Xeer as Transformative Social Protection is aligned to Social Protection Theory (Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2004) and the study highlights how widow support mechanisms, where 85% receive milk or grain shares, and collective guardianship address structural vulnerability beyond immediate relief.

Examining Commons Management in Pastoral Social Protection via Commons Theory (Ostrom, 1990), the findings reveal how *Sahan* scouts coordinate migration for 89% of respondents, alongside communal water point management and inter-clan agreements on pasture access that reflect Ostrom's design principles.

The finding that 91% of respondents reported livestock sharing by wealthier households during droughts operationalizes Ostrom's (1990) principle of proportional benefits and costs in commons management, demonstrating how pastoral communities internally regulate resource redistribution to maintain collective resilience.

Exploring Collective Action and Reciprocity Under Pressure using Collective Action Theory, the data underscores a 98% personal contribution rate that faces significant erosion due to external aid, with 78% reporting undermining effects, while youth knowledge gaps threaten intergenerational transmission. This structured approach ensures that empirical evidence is consistently interpreted through robust theoretical frameworks to elucidate the functionality and challenges of indigenous systems.

6.7. Decline and Causes of Traditional Social Protection

The evidence indicates that there is a general belief among the Somali pastoralist communities that traditional social protection practices have greatly reduced, with 89 percent of the respondents concurring or strongly agreeing. This has been caused by armed conflict and displacement (95%), then closely behind by the reliance on external aid by NGOs (88%), which many feel has replaced reciprocal support systems with dependency. 85 percent give the erosion of elder authority and traditional institutions as a central cause and 79 percent mention the urbanization and Sedentarization policies that upset mobile pastoralism and community tenure of land. The findings provide an insight into the existence of a legitimacy and functionality crisis in the indigenous mechanisms due to the interplay of political, humanitarian and socio-ecological pressures.

Table 11: Decline of Traditional Practices

Statement	% Agree/Strongly Agree
Traditional practices have significantly declined	89%
Decline due to armed conflict/displacement	95%
Decline due to dependence on external aid (NGOs)	88%

Decline due to weakening of elder authority	85%
Decline due to urbanization/sedentarization	79%

Source: Field Data, 2025

6.8. Current Strength vs. 10 Years Ago

A tremendous proportion of the respondents report a sharp decrease in the power of indigenous social protection mechanisms over the past decade with 68% (n=348) of the respondents indicating that such mechanisms are much weaker than they were ten years ago and 22% (n=113) indicating that they are somewhat weaker, leading to a 90% decline in the perception of the strength of such mechanisms. A very small fraction (7% and 3% respectively) said that no change occurred, or it improved, which underscores a vast amount of agreement that the traditional support systems have greatly diminished over the last ten years because of conflict, displacement, sedentarization, and increasing prominence of foreign aid.

Table 12: Strength of Indigenous Social Protection Mechanisms

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Much weaker	348	68%
Somewhat weaker	113	22%
About the same	36	7%
Somewhat stronger	10	2%
Much stronger	5	1%

Source: Field Data, 2025

6.9. Impact of External Aid and Inclusion on Traditional Social Protection Systems

78% of the respondents think that traditional social protection systems have been undermined by external assistance provided by NGOs and other humanitarian actors, and only 13 percent (n=65) of the population disagrees with this view, with 9 percent (n=47) staying undecided. This vision of aid-related undermining of indigenous practices is accompanied by a massive exclusion of gender in local governance: women are central to informal support networks, yet only 12% (n=61) of the respondents have ever thought that women are involved in decision-making practices regarding resource sharing or conflict resolution, 21% (n=107) report that they are occasionally included, and the vast majority (67%, n=344) of the sample report that they are never or rarely involved in such processes, showing the persistence of a huge mismatch between.

Table 13: Aid and Traditional Social Protection

Question	Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Has external aid weakened traditional systems?	Yes	400	78%
	No	65	13%
	Not sure	47	9%
Are women involved in decision-making?	Yes, regularly	61	12%
	Occasionally	107	21%
	Rarely/Never	344	67%

Source: Field Data, 2025

6.10. Youth Understanding of Traditional Social Protection Systems

Although only 25% of those surveyed state that the young people in the community know traditional support systems such as xeer and livestock sharing well or very well, a majority (74) of the respondents say that the younger generations would be likely or very likely to revive and maintain such systems given an incentive--leading to a critical lack of

knowledge in the current generation and a wide gap in potential between current and future possibilities, and the opportunity to overcome such a gap through inter-generational mentoring and institutional reinforcement.

Table 14: Youth and Traditional Support Systems

Indicator	Response	Percentage
Youth understanding of xeer/livestock sharing	Well/Very well	25%
	Slightly/Not at all	75%
Youth willingness to maintain systems if supported	Likely/Very likely	74%

Source: Field Data, 2025

6.11. Opportunities for Synergy of Traditional Social Protection Systems with Formal Systems

The support of integration of traditional social protection into governance is high, with 63% of the respondents showing strong support and another 28% showing general support. This is indicative of a major agreement of participants who have expressed a preference for this form of governance, and this proposes a blended strategy with a wide spectrum of stakeholders. However, the proportion of neutral respondents (5%) and those who are opposed to the idea (3% and 1% strongly opposed, respectively) is very low. This massive support presents a new awareness regarding the advantages of having the hybrid forms of governance by integrating of traditional social protection into governance.

Table 15: Inclusion of Traditional Social Protection in Governance

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly support	320	63%
Support	145	28%
Neutral	25	5%
Oppose	15	3%
Strongly oppose	7	1%

Source: Field Data, 2025

6.12. Enablers for Strengthening Indigenous Systems

96% of the respondents said the government should formally acknowledge xeer (customary law), 93% supported the use of elders in the design of social protection programmes, 89% supported the idea of training the youth in traditional values and conflict-resolution strategies, 87% felt an idea of connecting pastoralist networks to the modern drought early-warning systems, and 85% thought a community-managed livestock or milk bank would be important in restoring reciprocal sharing. These results suggest a strong need for hybrid, culturally based solutions that combine age-old institutions of Somali pastoralists with external, complementary assistance.

Table 16: Enablers for Strengthening Indigenous Systems

Proposal	% Agree/Strongly Agree
Formal recognition of xeer by government	96%
Involve elders in social protection program design	93%
Train youth in traditional values	89%
Support community livestock/milk banks	87%
Link with drought early-warning systems	85%

Source: Field Data, 2025

6.13. Challenges that Threaten Indigenous Traditional Social Protection Mechanisms

Findings indicate that the greatest impediments to the incorporation of indigenous social protection systems and formal government or NGO-led programs have a strong institutional and relationship-based nature. The most common barrier, cited by 246 respondents (48%), is a lack of government recognition, which highlights the urgent issue around policy

frameworks and legitimacy on the ground. Decay of elder authority (42%, n=215) is a manifestation of the undermining of traditional structures of governance that had in the past organized mutual support and conflict management. Lack of trust towards external factors such as NGOs and state agencies is noteworthy, as 148 respondents (29 people) demonstrate a lack of trust in the external interventions. A smaller number of respondents cited inappropriate rules (16%), insufficient youth interest (15%), as significant impediments, pointing to structural and political elements as the fundamental obstacles to successful synergy between formal and traditional systems, instead of technical and generational disengagement.

Table 17: Challenges that Threaten Indigenous Mechanisms

Barrier	Frequency	Percentage
Lack of government recognition	246	48%
Erosion of elder authority	215	42%
Mistrust of external actors	148	29%
Incompatible rules/timelines	82	16%
No interest from youth	74	15%

Source: Field Data, 2025

All 30 key informants expressed deep respect for their traditional systems—xeer (customary law), clan-based mutual aid (habar), and livestock-sharing systems. However, they unanimously highlighted systemic, interlocking threats undermining these traditions both internally and externally. Issues like declining institutional legitimacy, limited spatial access, weakened social cohesion, and generational disconnect are eroding pastoralist resilience.

The changing Somali society disrupts social protection rooted in xeer, clan solidarity, and mutual support. Elders note that today's youth prioritize technology over wisdom and no longer consult the guurti (council of elders) to resolve disputes. Since xeer is an oral tradition, its fading down the generations is concerning, leading to a gap in Indigenous wisdom that once guided justice, resource sharing, and social unity.

The key informant interviews reveal that young people feel frustrated by a system that excludes them: "The elders make all the decisions, but we are the ones facing the consequences of conflict and drought. If you want us to uphold xeer (traditional law), then we should have a seat at the council." Similarly, women challenge the gender-based marginalization inherent in traditional governance. While men decide on the distribution of livestock, women are aware of who is hungry and in need. These systems will not be effective until women are included at the guurti (council) table. They are not calling for the abandonment of tradition, but rather for a democratization of the system to make it more inclusive.

A key informant observed that ancestral migration routes are no longer viable due to modernization, causing pastoralists to be labelled as illegal grazers on their historic lands, with essential water sources now controlled by farms or military bases. In response, communities are diversifying their livestock and strengthening inter-clan bonds, offering mutual support when needed. However, reliance on external aid is growing; people now often wait for food from the World Food Programme instead of seeking help from their clans. This shift has diminished the dignity of seeking support within the community. Many still incorporate external assistance strategically, blending traditional practices with NGO programs to reinforce safety nets. Interestingly, mobile technology has become a vital tool for sharing information and coordinating aid during emergencies, especially in drought situations.

Communities are not just responding to changes; they are adapting. One young leader noted, "We are changing our ways." To tackle challenges like youth unemployment, traditional values must evolve to include contemporary employment and skills training methods. Our dispute resolution also adapts; while we still use the xeer system, we now engage in community discussions for modern conflicts, such as resource competition and migration issues. However, when traditional customs are manipulated for political gain, it undermines these adaptations. Elders are appointed for their own interests rather than the clan's, leading to a politicized xeer system where justice often comes at a cost, eroding the credibility of institutions meant to maintain social order.

6.14. Modification of Traditional Practices to Respond to New Challenges

Majority of the respondents affirm that Somali pastoralist communities are in the process of adapting their traditional social protection systems to new challenges: 63% of the people responding affirm or strongly affirm that their community has altered their traditional practices in response to the challenge of climate shocks, displacement, and changing socio-economic circumstances: adjusting migration routes, utilizing mobile phones to communicate community support, and introducing cash into reciprocal sharing. Moreover, 58 per cent confirm that conventional mechanisms have been able to co-exist with or supplement external support by NGOs and government programs, and this indicates that hybrid strategies are possible but already organically occurring in certain regions. This illustrates an active and resilient ability to innovate the indigenous systems, disapproving of the idea of their permanence and the impossibility of adapting to the contemporary interventions.

Table 18: Modification of Traditional Social Protection

Statement	% Agree/Strongly Agree
Community has modified practices for new challenges	63%
Traditional mechanisms coexisted successfully with NGO aid	58%

Source: Field Data, 2025

This is also affirmed by the key informants who pointed out that mobile money services have redefined the tradition of sharing of resources by making the process faster and more efficient and also bringing out the fact that environmental changes have compelled communities to change in their livestock management operations so as to make them sustainable and resilient. The significance of cultural adaptation occurred repeatedly as well because the recognition of changing socio-political trends has brought about a more accommodative approach to community work.

6.15. Theoretical-Empirical Synthesis Matrix

The integration of Social Protection Theory, Commons Theory, and Collective Action Theory with empirical findings from Somali pastoral communities reveals indigenous mechanisms not as static relics but as dynamic institutions fulfilling protective, preventive, promotive, and transformative functions through xeer, clan mutual aid, and livestock sharing.

Empirical data confirms that 87% of shock assistance originates from indigenous networks, validating Social Protection Theory's assertion that informal systems address structural vulnerabilities, while Commons Theory elucidates how self-governed resource management via sahan scouts and communal water points sustains collective action despite environmental stress. However, findings indicating an 89% perceived decline due to conflict, aid dependency, and eroded elder authority align with Collective Action Theory's warnings on reciprocity erosion and critical analyses of global financing frameworks that marginalize informal systems through conditionalities and currency dilemmas. The strong community support (91%) for integration of traditional social protection into governance, coupled with evidence of adaptation through mobile money and modified migration, demonstrates proactive resilience, yet highlights critical gaps in inclusive governance where women and youth remain excluded, necessitating policy shifts that recognize customary legitimacy rather than substituting it with formal state-centric arrangements that often undermine local reciprocity networks.

Table 19: Theoretical-Empirical Synthesis

Theoretical Lens	Core Proposition	Empirical Validation	Critical Tension
Social Protection Theory (Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2004)	Social protection serves protective, preventive, promotive, and transformative functions	98% participation in mutual aid; 87% assistance from indigenous networks; xeer institutionalizes care for widows/orphans	89% report decline: external aid substitutes reciprocity with dependency (78%)
Commons Theory (Ostrom, 1990)	Communities self-govern shared resources through local rules, trust, and monitoring	Sahan (scouts) coordinate migration (89%); communal water point management; inter-clan pasture agreements	Land enclosures and state co-option of elders undermine collective-choice arrangements
Collective Action Theory	Reciprocity persists when normative enforcement outweighs free-riding incentives	98% contribution rate despite poverty; correlation between elder legitimacy and intergenerational continuity ($r=0.41$)	Aid dependence correlates with perceived

			decline ($r=0.58$), suggesting motivation crowding-out
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7. Discussion

The results of this study on indigenous social protection systems in the Somali pastoral community reveal a set of activities that are not only essential for sustaining life but also deeply ingrained in these communities' culture. Conventional systems, including *xeer* (customary law), clan-based mutual assistance (*habar/reer*), and livestock-sharing (*irmaansi*) serve as systematically operated, culturally codified safety nets that are triggered according to the events in the life cycle, as well as to systematically-staged shocks, like drought, conflict, displacement, and death. Traditionally, such mechanisms have helped communities to endure the uncertainties of the environment, social instability, and economic instability due to reciprocity, shared responsibility, and responsiveness.

The study elucidates that indigenous social protection systems are not static, pre-modern relics but dynamic institutions undergoing continuous institutional bricolage. The empirical data reveals that communities are actively reconfiguring traditional mechanisms to align with contemporary realities by modifying practices to address climate shocks and displacement. This adaptation manifests as technological integration—utilizing mobile phones for rapid crisis coordination and mobile money for resource transfer—and ecological adjustment, such as altering migration pathways in response to land fragmentation and diversifying herds with drought-resistant species, which signifies proactive resilience, rather than passively absorbing shocks. Pastoralists are selectively adopting modern tools to reinforce, rather than erode, their cultural identity and values of solidarity, which aligns with Commons Theory, suggesting that community-level management of resources is evolving to maintain collective action despite changing environmental and technological landscapes.

However, this institutional stamina is increasingly compromised by structural strains that threaten the social capital underpinning these systems. Policies driving armed conflict, forced movement, land enclosure, and sedentarization have not only restricted communal access to rangelands but have also fundamentally undermined the authority of the elders who enforce *xeer*. Most critically, the reliance on external humanitarian assistance has introduced a moral hazard, inadvertently substituting reciprocal obligation with top-down dependency, indicating that external aid has weakened traditional systems, pointing to a severe tension between emergency response and long-term resilience. External aid disrupts the reciprocity cycles that traditionally ensured self-sufficiency by bypassing indigenous networks, thereby weakening the social unity required for collective survival.

Consequently, the demand for synergistic incorporation rather than the rejection of outside involvement represents a call for integration of traditional social protection into governance. The overwhelming support (over 90%) for a hybrid model—where formal schemes like drought insurance and cash transfers are co-designed with elders and aligned with *xeer* indicates a desire for legitimacy and co-production of security. The study proposes not the substitution of modern systems but rather the institutionalization of customary institutions (e.g., community-controlled livestock banks) to serve as the foundational logic for effective policy. This reflects the transformative function of social protection (Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2004), where the goal is to address structural vulnerabilities by integrating formal state capacity with informal community strength.

Inclusive governance remains a critical vulnerability. While women are pivotal in informal support networks (postpartum care, food sharing), their exclusion from formal *xeer* council decisions creates a governance deficit. Similarly, the oral nature of *xeer* and the marginalization of youth from councils risk an intergenerational rupture. Analytically, this exclusion is not merely a rights issue but a sustainability threat; without gender equity and intergenerational mentorship, the system may lose the adaptive capacity and representative legitimacy required to survive modern pressures.

Ultimately, the study concludes that Somali pastoralists must be recognized not as passive victims of crisis but as active institutional entrepreneurs managing resilient social protection systems. The policy imperative, therefore, is not to displace these indigenous mechanisms but to strengthen them through enabling environments. This requires policies that acknowledge the legitimacy of customary law, combine the logic of formal and informal safety nets, and specifically empower women and youth to build resilience. Such an approach shifts the paradigm from aid dependency to sustainable development, ensuring that social protection in Somalia is culturally grounded, politically inclusive, and ecologically adaptive.

8. Conclusion

This study highlights that the social protection systems among Somali pastoralists are not just relics of the past; they are vibrant, functional institutions that form the backbone of resilience in a fragile state. The evidence shows that these systems—rooted in Xeer (customary law), Habar/Reer (clan mutual aid), and Irmaansi (livestock loans)—serve as the first and most trusted line of reliance during crises, often more so than formal external actors. The findings suggest that these indigenous practices effectively provide preventive (risk-pooling), promotive (livelihood diversification), and transformative (social justice for widows and orphans) functions. Additionally, the way pastoral communities coordinate migration routes and grazing lands through Sahan scouts and inter-clan agreements demonstrates their sophisticated self-governance in managing shared resources without needing state intervention. However, the study uncovers a significant paradox: while these systems are crucial, they are facing serious erosion. Respondents feel that these mechanisms are weaker than they were a decade ago, influenced by a mix of structural stressors like armed conflict, reliance on external humanitarian aid, and policies pushing for sedentarization.

Although external aid is essential for emergency relief, it often unintentionally undermines the community's sense of reciprocity, shifting their mindset from self-reliance to dependency. This decline is further complicated by internal governance issues, particularly the systematic exclusion of women from decision-making and a notable knowledge gap among the youth regarding traditional systems, which threatens the passing down of institutional knowledge across generations. In the end, achieving sustainable resilience is not about replacing indigenous systems with formal state-led programs; it is about strategically reinforcing them by integrating traditional practices into modern governance frameworks.

Nevertheless, there are also a few limitations of the study. The research is mainly concentrated on particular pastoral areas, which might not necessarily represent the whole diversity of the practices among all Somali communities. Also, although the paper sheds light on the adaptive character of the indigenous processes, it fails to explore the consequences of external interference, including humanitarian assistance, on the indigenous systems in the long term.

Further studies are needed to examine the complex interplay between the social protection systems of Indigenous people and state safety nets, especially in the environment of state weakness and climate change. Longitudinal studies would help give information on how these systems evolve with time and what makes them resilient or not. Moreover, research on the functions of women and youth in these conventional practices may help to shed light on ways to make governance and decision-making more inclusive.

Overall, aligning formal resources with indigenous legitimacy, stakeholders can foster a synergistic model that addresses structural vulnerabilities while preserving the cultural cohesion and adaptive capacity that have historically sustained Somali pastoralism.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest related to this research work.

Competing Interest

The authors declare no competing interests.

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