

BARWAAQO PROJECT – Building Resilience and Prosperity in Somalia’s Rural Drylands



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A New Chapter for Somalia’s Drylands

What if Somalia’s drylands, long seen only as barren and fragile, could become the beating heart of resilience? For decades, Somalia’s rural dryland areas have been confronted the harsh reality of being barren and inhospitable for decades— a vast expanse of fragile ecosystems where rural families have frequently walked hours each day to fetch water, herders have lost their animals to drought, farmers have watched and struggled with cracked fields, and entire communities have been forced to leave their ancestral lands in search of survival. This fragility cycle has shaped daily life and global perceptions of Somalia. How is it possible to transform such a barren land into an oasis?

Yes today, a different story is emerging — one of renewal, strength and hope. At the heart of this socio-economic and ecological transformation is the Barwaaqo Project, a multi-million national initiative led by the Federal Government of Somalia in partnership with the Federal Member States, and financed by the World Bank.

Barwaaqo,” a Somali word meaning *prosperity*, carries an aspiration far greater than a single project. It reflects a shared vision: building lasting resilience, restoring dignity to rural life, and laying the groundwork for a more inclusive rural community development by providing water, restoring degraded lands, supporting agriculture and livestock, and empowering communities to lead their own development journeys.

Community Engagement: The Foundation of Resilience

The approach of Barwaaqo project was to engage the target community through community-driven development (CDD) to drive their development as they possess unique knowledge and insights to their pressing challenges and priorities but often lack financial resource and technical know-how. The willingness and engagement with the target community became the most important resource in the project implementation and the project success stems from the collaboration among the project stakeholders (project teams, government institutions, the community and the World Bank team). The Barwaaqo project exemplifies a major shift by turning the idea of community-driven

Water: The Entry Point of Resilience

Water is a source of life. Without reliable access to water, no other development can take root. That is why Barwaaqo has placed water infrastructure at the center of its mission and entry point for change. The project integrates productive and planning sectors such as water, agriculture livestock, environment and planning, and it is implemented in a technically selected target community in rural areas.



Figure 1. A haffir dam constructed by the Barwaaqo Project in Barwaaqo village (formerly Kalluun-Dacar), located 20 km outside Dhusamareeb, Galmudug. Photo/Barwaaqo Project



Figure 2. A woman fetches clean water from a Barwaaqo-supported water point, reducing the burden of long daily walks and improving the household resilience. Photo/Barwaaqo Project

Across Somalia, the project has constructed new sand dams and haffir dams and rehabilitated boreholes and shallow wells to provide reliable, clean water for households, irrigation and livestock. The impact is transformative:

- **Women and girls**, who once spent hours carrying jerrycans across dusty terrain, can now spend that time on education, income generation, or caring for their families.
- **Children** once tasked with fetching water — often at the expense of their schooling — are now free to attend class regularly.
- **Herders** report that their animals are healthier, journeys shorter, and losses fewer.

One community member captured the change simply: *“Before, we walked hours for water.*

But Barwaaqo project is going further than simply installing infrastructure. It trains local water committees on Operation and Maintenance, ensuring that these facilities are not just built but sustained and managed properly. Communities are learning how to manage water equitably, prevent overuse, and plan for drought periods. This local stewardship is what transforms water systems from short-term relief into long-term resilience assets.

Agriculture and Livestock: Protecting and Diversifying Livelihoods

Somalia's rural economy depends heavily on livestock and smallholder farming – two sectors highly exposed to climate shocks. When drought strikes, animals die, crops fail, and households lose both food and income. This vulnerability has kept rural communities locked in cycles of crisis and aid dependence.

Barwaaqo is helping farmers and herders adapt by expanding veterinary services, introducing climate-smart farming practices, and providing training to strengthen productivity.



Figure 3. A flourishing irrigated farm supported by Barwaaqo demonstrates the success of climate-smart agriculture and improved food security. Photo/Barwaaqo Project



Figure 4. Veterinary officers supported by the Barwaaqo Project provide treatment and vaccination for livestock protecting livelihoods from disease outbreaks. Photo/Barwaaqo Project

Barwaaqo is breaking this cycle and helping farmers and herders adapt by providing veterinary services, introducing climate-smart farming practices, and giving trainings to strengthen productivity. Among its interventions:

- **Expanding veterinary services** to protect animal health and prevent disease outbreaks that can wipe out herds.
- **Introducing climate-smart farming practices**, such as drought-tolerant seeds, soil conservation techniques, and efficient irrigation systems.
- **Training farmers** in modern methods, from post-harvest handling to market access strategies, so they can earn more from what they produce.
- **Supporting women's cooperatives**, enabling them to process and sell milk, meat, or crops collectively, which improves bargaining power and income.

Healthy animals mean food security and dignity for pastoralist families. Improved farming practices mean better harvests and less dependence on food aid. Step by step, these efforts are laying the foundation for stronger, more resilient rural economies that can weather shocks and contribute to national growth. Through the project, a change of culture from herders to farmers is observed.

Environment: Restoring Degraded Lands

Decades of drought, deforestation, land degradation and overgrazing have left vast areas of Somalia's drylands stripped bare. Without vegetation cover, soils erode, floods intensify, and droughts deepen – creating a vicious cycle of environmental degradation and poverty.

Barwaaqo is reversing this trend. Thousands of hectares of rangeland have already been rehabilitated, allowing pastures to regenerate and providing sustainable grazing areas for livestock. Communities are taking ownership of tree planting and land management by fencing off recovery zones to allow vegetation to return, ensuring that restored land is protected for future generations.

The return of greenery is more than an environmental achievement. It symbolizes dignity returning to rural life and restoring balance between people and nature. Importantly, Barwaaqo emphasizes community ownership of land management. Local committees decide areas to rehabilitate, how to protect them, and who may graze animals where. This participatory approach ensures that restored lands remain protected for future uses.



Figure 5. Aerial view of community-led rangeland restoration in Galmudug, where fenced areas allow vegetation and trees to regenerate. Photo/Barwaaqo Project

Communities: Leading Their Own Development

Perhaps Barwaaqo's most transformative element is not physical infrastructure but community empowerment. Through the Community-Driven Development (CDD) model, the project has

helped establishment of more than hundreds of Village Development Committees (VDCs) across Somalia. These committees give ordinary citizens — including women and youth — a direct voice in planning, decision-making, and implementation. For many, this is the first time they have had such ownership over development decisions that affect their lives.

As a result, projects respond more closely to real needs and a renewed trust between citizens and their government. The community is consulted whether it is building a well, rehabilitating rangeland, or supporting a school garden. Communities also contribute land, labor or funds, strengthening their sense of investment.



Figure 6. Community members gather in a Village Development Committee (VDC) meeting (Dhuun-Xaluul, Beled Weyne), ensuring inclusive participation in local decision-making. Photo/Barwaaqo Project

As one VDC leader summed up the shift: *“Because we decided, we protect it.”* This sense of ownership translates into better maintenance of infrastructure, greater accountability, and renewed trust between citizens and their government.

Achievements and Lessons

The results of Barwaaqo are already visible across the country:

- **Dozens of haffir dams and wells** constructed or rehabilitated.
- **Thousands of hectares of rangeland** restored and protected.

- **Hundreds of Village Development Committees** established, with **women and youth in leadership roles**.
- **Veterinary and farming services** reaching thousands of households.

These outcomes demonstrate what is possible when communities are at the center. They also offer important lessons for Somalia and beyond:

- **Community ownership** is the strongest guarantee of sustainability. When people feel something belongs to them, they maintain and defend it.
- **Women’s and youth leadership** make development more inclusive and effective, as these groups bring new perspectives and energy.
- **Collaboration** between the national government, federal member states, partners, and citizens is not just beneficial but essential to building resilience.

Challenges on the Journey

The road is not without obstacles. Climate change continues to intensify droughts and floods, testing even the strongest systems. Insecurity disrupts progress in some areas. And community needs remain far greater than available resources, creating difficult choices about where to intervene first.

Yet each challenge reinforces the urgency of Barwaaqo’s mission: to build systems and communities that can withstand shocks, adapt to change, and thrive despite adversity. The project team continually refines its approaches, learning from setbacks and successes alike, to ensure that investments deliver maximum impact.

Part of a National Vision

Barwaaqo is not a standalone project. It is part of Somalia’s broader journey of transformation. The project closely aligns with the concluded National Development Plan (2020–2024), current National Transformation Plan (2025–2029) and Somalia’s long-term Vision 2060. All frameworks place resilience, inclusivity, and sustainability at the heart of development — and Barwaaqo is one of the clearest demonstrations of these priorities in action.

By investing in water, land, livelihoods, and community empowerment, Barwaaqo also contributes to peacebuilding and state-building. It helps rebuild trust between citizens and institutions, reduces competition over scarce resources, and creates conditions where people can imagine a future beyond survival. By pursuing these priorities, Barwaaqo can help shift Somalia’s drylands from zones of vulnerability to hubs of resilience and innovation.

Conclusion: Prosperity in the Making

Somalia's drylands have long been seen only through the lens of fragility as places where drought, poverty, and displacement define life. Barwaaqo is changing that perception and comes an integrated model of socio-economic development and ecological transformation. Providing water, restoring land, protecting livelihoods, and empowering communities shows that prosperity is not only possible, but already taking root.

The journey is far from over, but the direction is clear. Somalia's rural communities are no longer just surviving drought after drought — they are beginning to build a future of resilience and dignity.

BARWAAQO means prosperity. And prosperity is what Somalia's rural drylands deserve.

