

**BORENA ZONE:
OUTCOME OF SMALL RAINS ANXIOUSLY AWAITED**

Report on a Rapid Assessment Mission, 14-24 September 1999

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INTRODUCTION

Context and purpose

Following the near failure of the 1998 small rains (*Hagaya*) in Borena Zone (Oromiya Regional State), an initial assessment undertaken by the Federal Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission (DPPC) jointly with the Oromiya authorities and CARE in January 1999 revealed that 146,000 people in 8 weredas of Borena Zone were in need of emergency food assistance.

A second joint assessment in July 1999 was prompted by the failure of the main rains (March-April 1999). Among the recommendations made in this assessment were: (a) 268,734 people in 10 weredas of the zone required emergency food assistance up to December 1999, and (b) close monitoring was necessary to follow developments the food security and drought in the zone.

It was in the context of these recommendations as well as other information indicating that the area is facing increasing hardship that the UN-Emergencies Unit for Ethiopia fielded a mission to Borena Zone during the period 14-24 September, 1999. The purpose of the mission was to investigate the prevailing food shortage, review the impact of the poor rains on the economy of the area and obtain information on the status and impact of relief operations. The mission also undertook to ascertain the response of people in the zone in the context of possible changes in traditional patterns of behaviour and coping strategies.

With regard to the upcoming short rains (October - December), the mission attempted to ascertain the possible implications for overall food security in the zone as well as for patterns of migration and the potential for conflict over grazing and water. An attempt was made to determine the extent to which the rains might reverse or further exacerbate the effects of the current drought. It is hoped that the information collected will be of value in terms of planning and crisis prevention/mitigation in the face of prevailing uncertainty about the weather¹.

Methodology and sites surveyed

Borena Zone has 12 weredas, out of which 10 are currently reported to be drought-affected to varying degrees. Of these, the mission visited 6 sample weredas. The selection was based mainly on the agro-ecological heterogeneity of the weredas, selecting Liben, Yavelo, Dire, Moyale, Teltelle weredas from the pastoral lowlands and Adolawadera wereda from the mixed farming mid/high altitude areas.

¹ *Greater Horn Of Africa Climate Outlook Forum, Forecast for Sept-Dec. 1999.* According to this forecast and statements of the forum there are enhanced probabilities of below normal rainfall conditions over much of Borena Zone. The probabilities of the *hagaya* rainfall at below, near and above normal amount in Borena is 40, 40, and 20 % respectively. However, the eastern parts of *Liben* and *Moyale* weredas will have even higher probabilities of the rains in the below normal range than the rest of Borena. (See map attached).

Information was collected through contacts with all relevant line departments (agriculture, health, education, DPPD) at zonal and wereda levels and from meetings with NGOs actively working in the zone. Direct field observations in the countryside and individual and group interviews were also undertaken to gain a first hand impression of the effects of the drought.

THE SURVEY AREA, AN OVERVIEW

Socio-Demography

Borena, one of the 12 administrative zones of Oromiya Regional State, is located in the far south of Ethiopia bordering Kenya. The zone's 12 weredas, are further divided into 448 peasant associations (PA) as the lowest formal administrative structures. Very broadly, six of the weredas are lowland (500-1,500 m), characterised by an arid to semi-arid climate, while the remaining six weredas are in the mid- to highlands (above 1,500 m).

The zone comprises 190 PAs (69 in the upland weredas) which are either agro-pastoral or purely pastoral, 179 PAs in the mixed farming system, and 79 coffee growing PAs, all of which are in the upland weredas. The zone has an estimated rural population of 1.4 million with 27% in the lowland weredas. The Gujji Oromo clans dominate the highland while the Borana Oromo are the majority in the lowland weredas.

The lowland weredas of Borena are also located in what is referred to as the southern rangelands, an area that accounts for about 7-12% of the country. Livestock exports from the zone normally contribute substantially to national foreign exchange earnings. The area provides high quality animals to the highland areas for traction power and as a genetic base for inter-breeding.

Borena is known for its traditional *Gada* system, an indigenous and complex socio/political structure that governs the strategic interests that are reflected in all of the day to day life of Borana society. The Borana are also well known for having some of the finest grazing land in Africa and by their cattle breeds that are hardy and possess good productivity characteristics. Until a few decades ago, the southern Borena rangelands in fact had the reputation for being a model for traditional African pastoralism.

Borana society is considered to be more socially cohesive, co-operative and open minded to development interventions than other pastoral areas of the country. These and the relative security in the region has enabled the implementation of successful pastoral and range development programmes. The Southern Rangelands Development Unit (SORDU) is the most widely known and one of the more effective development projects in the area. Under the auspices of SORDU, infrastructural works such as roads and ponds were constructed and improvement in veterinary health achieved. However, project works also had a negative, especially in eroding traditional social structures for range management and herd control. SORDU is now in the process of phasing out, and in the last three years its operation have scaled down due to lack of funds.

The Borana are semi-sedentary pastoralists, with cattle constituting the larger portion of the household herd. Lately, however, herd diversification to include more goats and camels is being pursued as an insurance measure to mitigate vulnerability to drought. This is a rational choice considering that close to 70% of the regional herd was lost during the 1991/92 drought alone.²

The Borana Oromo clan dominate the southern rangelands. There are however other tribes living interspersed with the Boranas: the Gujji are predominately in Liben; the Garri in Liben and Moyale; Merihan and Degodia Somali clans in Liben and Moyale; Konso, Arbore and Hamar tribes in Teltelle and Dire weredas. The Borana have fought with all these groups except the Konso at various times in the past. Clashes with Gujji arise over salt licks and are often settled fairly quickly by elders from both sides. Fierce fighting between the Borana and the Garri in 1991-92 and again in 1996 resulted in heavy

² Coppock D. Layne, Synthesis of Pastoral Development & Change, Borana Central Plateau Of Southern Ethiopia, 1994

losses on both sides. Territorial claims and rights over resource use has been the cause. The Borana have also lost a number of traditional wells (*ellas*) and important wet season grazing areas in Moyale and Liben to the Somali clans. Although most conflicts are settled quickly through government mediation, Borena zone is recognised an area where ethnic tensions are present and often exacerbated by drought conditions. As a case in point, clashes between the Arbore and Hamar over grazing lands were reported recently.

Drought and coping mechanisms

According to Borana oral tradition, droughts are cyclic. They occur if the *Ganna* (main) rains fail, and if both the *Ganna* and *Hagaya* (short) rains fail the resulting prolonged dry season can give rise to severe drought conditions. In such an event forage grass fails to grow, livestock deprived of feed lose their productivity and mortality rises. Due to the typically uneven patterns of rainfall in the zone, pocket areas will always be under some stress even in relatively good years. In such cases of localised drought herders respond by moving with their animals to wetter areas. Periodically, rainfall is more generally insufficient resulting in a region-wide drought in which case the benefits of mobility become limited.

The severe droughts that have occurred this decade are those in 1991/92 and 1996. Oral sources suggest that drought is increasing in frequency as every 2-3 years of favourable rainfall is followed by a year of drought, either locally or regionally. It is also reported that the distribution of rainfall is becoming patchier. Normal dry spells are becoming prolonged and more severe, increasing stress and leading to livestock deaths. More livestock are said to die as a result of stress than a decade ago. With a deterioration in the rangelands, the livestock sector alone can no longer meet all the dietary needs of pastoralists.

This explains the spread of crop cultivation as an internal response to growing food insecurity and a means of economic diversification. Grain has come to constitute a significant part (45%) in the diet for about 90% of Borana households. The Borana cultivators, however, seldom produce a surplus, even during favourable seasons and home produced grain is barely sufficient for more than four months. These days, however, harvest failures and reduced yields are becoming increasingly common.

Herd diversification, rotational grazing and seasonal rangeland differentiation into wet, dry and drought grazing reserves are primary coping strategies. Changes in consumption habits in terms of reducing the number of meals/day and diet diversification to include wild fruits, bush and famine foods, cattle blood, boiled skin and hides are also mechanisms typically employed by the Borana and other groups in Borena Zone to cope with food shortages.

Redistribution of available food and water, restocking of unfortunate cattle owners who lost their herds as a result of drought are among the various social obligations and tribal claims that also help to mitigate the impact of drought among the Borana. Since the droughts of the 1970s, however, external food aid and non-food assistance has become an important part of drought management and mitigation measures.

Markets and the local economy

The attainment of food security for the Borana depends heavily on the expansion, development and networking of small towns in the region and improvement of the marketing system. Towns are currently poorly developed and lack marketing and bank facilities.

Borana herders sell only a few cattle in periods before and after drought. The chief reason to sell livestock is to buy grain and consequently the demand for grain and the reasons for selling livestock are greater during drought than normal years. The larger numbers of animals being brought to the market lowers effective demand and helps to push prices down. In the 1983/84 and 1990/91 droughts livestock prices fell by 60% and 92% respectively, while grain prices over the same period escalated by 150%.³

³ GTZ Borana, BLPDP Office, 1998 *Programme Report, Negelle and Assessment of Indigenous Range*

The main livestock markets are concentrated along the main roads from Addis Ababa to Moyale. The largest markets are in Dubuluk, Moyale and Negelle towns in that order. The majority of Borana people do not have access to these relatively better markets because of the long distances involved. While market demand is low in Borena, the Borana face transport constraints in moving their livestock to markets in the highlands where there is a higher demand for meat and draught power. A market information system is lacking in the region though livestock traders and middlemen reportedly have an informal network for market/price information which is often used in a manner counter to the interests of pastoralists.

There is a long-term trend of increasing numbers of people and livestock competing for resources in the ever-declining rangelands. External pressures from other tribes over grazing lands and water points, the alarming rate of bush encroachment and a declining grassland-woodland ratio further exacerbates the situation. These in turn increase the stress on livestock even during a normal dry season let alone in a drought year. The processes together are increasing the pressure on traditional coping mechanisms and undermining the ability of people to cope with drought. The Borana pastoral system is already stressed and the people are becoming increasingly food insecure.

SURVEY FINDINGS

1999 drought; its effect and severity

The current food shortage in Borena Zone is the result of the failure and lower than normal occurrence of rainfall for the last two consecutive seasons. This has led to the failure of crops in the mixed farming highland weredas and among the agro-pastoral crop growers in the six lowland weredas. The same drought has also led to fodder shortage and reduced livestock productivity in terms of milk and meat output.

Drought in the highlands

For the four highland weredas, poor rains last year led to serious crop losses with a significant impact on food security and household income. Livestock in these mixed farming zones tend to be very few in number, being kept mainly for traction and subsistence milk production for children. As a result, there is a high dependency on crop production. Following each crop failure people have been making ends meet by selling off their assets: jewelry, oxen, donkeys and other animals, which further diminishes their ability to withstand subsequent periods of hardship.

In lower areas, maize, haricot beans and wheat are major crops in that order. Maize and wheat are planted during the main season in March, while haricot beans are sown in the short *Hagaya* season, i.e., late September - early October. The 1998 crop harvest was minimal and estimates indicate that only 5% of expected production was achieved. Moreover, the bean crop sown in 1998 *Hagaya* was a total failure in all weredas (except for very little harvest in Liben).

Following the poor main season rains in March-May 1999, the already difficult food security situation deteriorated further. As a result, an assessment undertaken by DPPC, CARE and the regional/zonal authorities in July identified a total of 115,675 people (out of which 20% were estimated to be children) as drought affected and in urgent need of food assistance.

The absence of a standing crop in the farms, the increased volume of fuel wood being gathered for sale, the unusually high number of small ruminants and other animals brought to the market were all observed as clear indicators of hardship. The high numbers of rural people coming into Adola and Wadera towns and moving to neighbouring weredas in search of employment were also recognised as indicators of

increased stress. Similarly, high school dropout rates from the last academic year and the low level of student enrolment for the current academic year reported by most rural elementary schools are seen as indicators of significant stress.

Understandably, in Adolawadera wereda - as elsewhere - farmers were anxiously awaiting the commencement of the small rains, normally expected by mid-September. At the time of the mission's visit (16 September) the clouds were becoming dense and darker and farmers were optimistic, having already prepared their field to sow haricot beans and other short maturing pulses.

Drought in the lowlands

The failure of the 1998 short rains and 1999 main rains in almost all lowland weredas resulted in a region-wide drought and the loss of crop production for two consecutive seasons. Though the lowlands are generally characterised by opportunistic cultivation, in a normal year home-grown grain could be expected to support an average household for about three months. This year, crop production has been virtually non-existent. For livestock, the poor rains resulted in an extended dry season which in turn led to severe shortage of grazing and fodder and unusually early (July) use of the traditional deep wells (*ellas*). Normally *ellas* are used from December onwards.

Most of the hand pumped shallow and motor driven deep water wells lie unusable because of mechanical problems. Nearly all machine and hand dug ponds in the zone were reported to be dry by as early as July. Faced with poor pastures and little water, Borana pastoralists began to move their cattle in July to ever more remote areas in search of grazing and water. Normally at this time cattle graze close to wet season grazing areas not far from the ponds designed to capture and store water from the main season rains. A number of informants, however, said they had never seen such a serious shortage of food and grazing in the period between the *Ganna* and *Hagaya* seasons, i.e., between March and September, also citing that for the first time in 20 years some of the largest ponds, including Harobura in Yavello, are completely dry. Others believe that though serious the current drought is less severe than the drought of 1996/97 which would have been catastrophic had relief assistance not been provided promptly.

Dry season reserve grazing areas are now in use year round, a practice not seen before. Traditional *ellas* are already much reduced in water volume and rate of recharge. In one of the *ellas* visited in Liben, it took a series of 12 people to pull water from the depths of the well where only 8 people are required normally, and the length of time cattle must wait until the *ellas* is recharged has become considerable.

Liben received relatively better rainfall in March and April. All other weredas received good rains in March but little or no rainfall in April and May. In Yavello, for instance, not a drop of rain has fallen. In Dirre, the *Ganna* rains started on March 20 only to stop after April 15. There are some PAs and pocket locations in Liben and other weredas where it has not rained even for a single day. In Dirre and Arero, household encampments were seen abandoned.

Towards the south skinny cattle become a common sight with calves being in the worst condition. The vegetation cover is completely dried out and livestock are rarely seen because herds have already been moved to drought grazing reserve areas located in far and isolated/remote areas. Normally at this time of year cattle are seen grazing not very far from the ponds.

Market survey data obtained from GTZ-Borena does not reveal any notable decline in livestock market prices (Dubuluk, Metegefersa, Moyale, Negelle) while grain prices are increasing. A dry cow attracted a market price of 555 Birr in January, 622 Birr in April and 587 Birr in August this year. The price of maize, however, rose from between 93 and 100 Birr/100 kgs in Dubuluk and Metegefersa market in January 1999 to between 145 and 180 Birr by August 1999. The price has remained fairly stable in Negelle and Moyale markets for maize while a slight increase was observed for other cereals, notably for wheat.

The failure to observe a significant decline in livestock prices may be explained in terms of lack of effective market demand. This can be illustrated by the number of animals brought to market: 85,803

from January-August 1999 compared to 147,816 over the same period in 1998. Only those animals in good shape are sold with an attractive price, while the remaining skinny animals find no buyer. The traders are not willing to purchase even at lower prices and the sellers have no choice except to drive the cattle back home. On average, only 41% of livestock offered to the market are sold this year in contrast to 63% and 49% for 1997 and 1998, respectively. Despite the lack of market activity, more and more milking cows, calves and heifers are being brought for sale, which is most unusual for the Borana.

The parastatal-trading agency that used to buy cattle from all the major markets in Borena has ceased to exist, and the institution as a whole is now in the hands of a private investor. For reasons unknown, this new marketing agency is not presently operating in the zone. The marketing problem is further confounded by the strict controls now imposed on cross-border trade between Borana cattle-owners and Kenyan traders. There is thus no alternative for the Borana other than the local markets that are currently not functioning properly.

Due to the regional nature of the current drought, mobility is no longer effective as a coping strategy. Mobility itself is also constrained by the reduced range of grazing areas available to the Borana due to the loss of two important *ellas* (el-Ley and el-Gof), with their associated range areas, in Moyale and one other in Liben. These were delineated to fall under the Somali Regional State administrative territory during the regionalization process. There are also some other dry season grazing lands currently lying unused due to ethnic tensions.

External responses to the drought

The administration of the relief food aid appears to have shortcomings particularly in the slow pace at which it is being distributed to needy people in the zone. Current emergency relief operations appear to lack promptness and are considered not to be commensurate with the severity of the drought. Coverage is inadequate and there are some needy but remote localities that have not received any relief assistance (for instance, Hadhesa & Qorati in Liben). Relief assistance targeted at children, pregnant and breast feeding mothers and the elderly has also been lacking, even though 20% of all recognised beneficiaries are children.

A total of 5,800 MT of grain was distributed to 146,000 people in Borena during first round distributions in July and August. Out of this CARE, SCF/USA and CISP contributed 4,000 MT, 110 MT of grain and 42 MT of supplementary food, respectively, while the difference was covered from by the Federal government. The volume of food assistance approved for the second round of emergency distributions is far less than the required 3,392.5 MT for 268,734 beneficiaries in the zone applicable from September to December 1999. Out of this required amount of food aid, at the time of the mission it was reported that a total of 1,764 MT of grain had been transported to the zone.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

The longer-term average amount of the *Hagaya* rains (October-December) in Borena Zone accounts for about 30-35% of the total annual precipitation received by the zone and in absolute amount ranges between 150mm and 230mm. The *Hagaya* rains however have become increasingly variable and erratic in recent years. Given this uncertainty, the benefits provided by the upcoming rains may be limited to replenishing the ponds and other surface water resources currently at critically low levels. It may also enable annual grasses (not perennial) and pasture to sprout and grow for short-term grazing. The rains are unlikely to be sufficient to recharge the *ellas*.

Even so, there have been periods, like that of 1997/98, when the rains continue from September right through to March, overlapping with the main *Ganna* rains. Given the current situation in Borena, this would be the most favourable outcome. With national and regional weather forecasting not helping to improve the current state of uncertainty, for the local population there appears to be more confidence in traditional indigenous knowledge than scientific methods of prediction. In this regard the mission tried to obtain the perceptions and expectations of many pastoralists, local experts and farmers on the likely performance of the *Hagaya* rains. While farmers in the highlands wait optimistically, the pastoral Borana

do not seem to be as hopeful. They think the rains will come, but they fear they will be of little importance or value and not enough to reverse the trend towards a major drought.

These estimates seem to parallel those of the forecast and the guiding statement made by the recent *Greater Horn Of Africa Climate Outlook Forum*. It seems likely that the volume and intensity of precipitation will not be enough to refill the ponds that now have been empty for more than four months. Furthermore, the rains would need to be exceptional if they are to fully recharge the traditional *ellas*. Even if the *Hagaya* rains are favourable, relief assistance should continue until at least December 1999. Only after December will the benefits of the rain in terms of crop production, and milk and meat be seen.

Apart from an intensification of the drought, another implication of a failure of the *Hagaya* rains could be the rekindling of ethnic tensions between the Borana and other opposing groups. Existing tensions might be further inflamed due to increased competition over scarce grazing and water. There are already indications that conflict may flare-up in the coming months, for example: (a) an elderly informant contacted in Liben mentioned that Borana youths in Hadhersa & Qorati were provoking the neighbouring Degodia Somalis who had been allocated the best grazing range recently and, (b) people belonging to the Hameri reportedly killed 26 Borana herders in Teltelle in retaliation for an earlier Borana incursion into Hamer territory close to Lake Turkana. The Borana went there in search of dry season pastures to cope with the stress in their usual grazing domain.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The current drought has inflicted significant suffering, enough that there is concern that a major crisis could emerge if the *Hagaya* rains fail or are below normal. Relief assistance made available to date has not been adequate and there appears to be a lack of preparedness to make full use of the upcoming rains in mitigating the effects of the drought. The departments of agriculture at wereda and zonal level as well as other agencies do not appear to be ready to provide assistance in the form of seeds to those farmers waiting for the rains to come. Finally, observations in the field appear to support the argument that the number of people identified by the assessment in July 1999 as requiring relief assistance has risen considerably.

Recommendations

1. Additional relief food assistance, including supplementary food, is imperative.
2. For the sake of greater preparedness, close monitoring of the performance of the upcoming *Hagaya* rains is essential.
3. To support local markets, serious consideration should be given to the organised purchase of surplus animals and to initiatives that promote trade between the grain producing highlands and the livestock-rich lowlands.
4. Both settled and opportunistic farmers in drought affected weredas should be assisted with the supply of seeds and tools, preferably on a grant basis.
5. Measures should be sought to improve the organisational and logistics capacity of governmental relief administration and management institutions at all levels, including a strengthening of zonal early warning capacity.
6. Rural students should receive assistance to enable them to attend classes. This could include provision of exercise books, water (filling school cisterns) and meals.
7. Official and traditional mediation should be organised to avoid an potential upsurge in ethnic conflict driven by competition over the current scarcity of resources.
8. Consideration should be given to securing funds to enable SORDU to continue its pastoral community development work in the lowlands.
9. Ways and means of diversifying the rural economy in Borena and promote new business activities should be sought.
10. Water resources development in the zone should continue to be a priority.

11. Further research is required on the rangelands and pastoral economy of Borena in order to understand current circumstances and provide a firm basis for the formulation of appropriate emergency preparedness measures as well as future development priorities.

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