

**UPDATE ON BORENA ZONE:
LOSS OF LIVESTOCK AND SHORTAGE OF DRINKING WATER AS A
RESULT OF SMALL RAINS FAILURE**

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Introduction

Increasing vulnerability of pastoralists in Borena Zone has been reported since the failure of the 1998 *hagaya* (small) rains. Most recently a mission report from UN-EUE, "*Borena Zone: Outcome of Small Rains Anxiously Awaited*" (by Negussie Belay, 14 October 1999) warned that failure of this year's *hagaya* rains (expected October–December) would have severe implications on food security, patterns of migration, livestock conditions, and potential for conflict over grazing and water access.

Since this report was issued, the federal Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission (DPPC) has revised its estimates of food requirements, and has increased the numbers of beneficiaries in Borena Zone from 146,400 to 268,700 for the months September–December 1999. Satellite imagery continues to show rainfall and vegetation levels well below normal for this time of year. In view of these indicators, UN-EUE and a mission from USAID/OFDA conducted a short mission to the area from 24–26 October to assess the drought situation and to identify possible interventions that could be undertaken to alleviate the severity of the situation.

The team found that the situation is steadily deteriorating due to the failure of the last two rainy seasons as well as the cumulated effect of several years of drought and other socio-economic problems, which has severely affected sedentary and agro-pastoral crop production as well as pastoral production and productivity. Ponds and other surface water sources are drying up, and pastures, particularly in the western lowland areas around Yavello wereda, are becoming depleted. Herders are said to have moved their animals to dry and drought season grazing areas, whereas under normal circumstances they should be able to graze in the wet season pastures close to the settlements. Calves and older animals too weak to walk to these far off pastures were observed close to the settlement areas – in the western part of the zone in particular, they appeared to be weak and numerous deaths of calves were reported by zonal officials and representatives of the Yavello wereda agricultural department. In general, the Borana face increased susceptibility to the impact of drought and are increasingly unable to cope with the conditions that they now face. Even with emergency interventions, the situation is expected to further deteriorate in the coming months: livestock losses and increasing malnutrition are expected to develop quickly. All indicators suggest that these processes have already begun to take effect.

Failure of the 1999 *hagaya* rains

Of most immediate concern is the fact that the *hagaya* rains have failed the Boranas once again. This rain is normally expected to begin in late September/early November and stops in late November/early December. This year, the rains were reported to have begun on time in the highland weredas, but in Liben Wereda (midland to lowland) the rain began late (in the

second week of October) and was reported to have only lasted for two days with varying intensity. In the lowlands, particularly in the western and southern parts of the zone, the rainfall has been inadequate or nonexistent. Even if the rains were to begin now with regular intensity and distribution, it is too late to be able to expect the recovery of water points and pasture land in most lowland areas of the zone.

Highland farmers better off than lowland pastoralists

As a result of the onset of the small rains, farmers of the highland weredas have sown their fields with pulses and short duration cereals. However, a few farm fields along the Addis-Negelle main road cutting through the wereda were seen unattended. According to one farmer, the reason for this is that a considerable number of farm owners migrated to adjacent weredas in search of other income generating activities, particularly in the traditional alluvial gold mining localities around Shakiso.

It is very likely that farmers are resorting to waged labour and gold panning, thereby forgoing farming this year, because of the lack of confidence they have in the performance of the small rains. In this regards, crop growers in the four mid- and highland weredas of Borena Zone have already seen four consecutive crop failures in the *hagaya* season mainly due to erratic rainfall. Though these alternatives are not considered to be viable options for farmers, they are compelled to seek alternative sources of income out of desperation. Some farmers report that they have sold their ploughing oxen to buy food in the past and have no other assets to sell.

While the sedentary agricultural areas in the high- and lowlands may have some reason to expect at least a minimal harvest if the rains continue, the situation in the pastoral areas is much more severe. The indicators of stress observed during the September UN-EUE field mission have now intensified and become widespread. A report that people close to the Kenya border had resorted to eating monkey meat was received in September. In addition, a conflict over the untimely movement of Borana cattle herds in search of grazing areas out of their normal range between Borana and Hameri people near Lake Turkana resulted in the deaths of at least 26 Borana herders. Finally, unconfirmed reports of hunger-related deaths in Moyale were also received in September.

In some parts of the Borena rangelands, sporadic rains have enabled annual grasses to sprout and the dried acacias and bushes have begun to turn green. Parts of Arero Wereda visited were relatively more green than Liben and Yavello weredas. The rains will have to continue unabated for several more weeks if the impact of this greening is to be significant, however.

Unfortunately, the rains appear to have withdrawn and the indications are that they are unlikely to resume. All pastoralists met have already lost hope on the *hagaya* rains and expect the dry weather to persist. The team observed the *warra* herds only, i.e., those local herds which are kept near to the homesteads - usually the calves, milking cows and immature and the small ruminants. There was no time to see the *forra* (satellite) herds that are driven to the far off dry season and drought reserve-grazing areas. From what was observed cattle are not in a good shape in a way that is considered usual given normal rains at this time of the year.

Calves and the milking cows are in a bad condition, and in the Did Hara *olla* (community) visited, a very skinny calves brought back from the field and a near-dead animal were observed. About a dozen skins hung on the Olla fence reportedly belonged to animals perished from lack of feed and water, although this was difficult to verify.

There was a degree of variation in the condition of the different livestock herds seen at different places. Some were in a better physical condition than the others. This may be explained by the difference in the level of herd management among herd owners rather than differences in the varying intensity and distribution of the rains that occurred for only a couple of days over a varying geographical area. What has sprouted now from the rains are the annual grasses which, though succulent, have little effect on cattle body weight due to the poor nutritional value. These grasses will only last a week at best without the resumption of the rains. The observed greenery is thus deceptive to the eyes of those with little knowledge of the Borana pastoral environment.

Effects of external forces on pastoralists

Externally induced pressures upon the pastoral society increase the vulnerability of the Borana pastoralists. These external factors constrain their traditional and often effective coping strategies of risk minimization, absorption and strategic response mechanisms. Some of these external factors are a socio-economic and demographic nature reflecting a lack of sympathy for and neglect to the dynamics of the pastoral system on the part of policy makers and development administrators at all levels.

One external factor is the absence of livestock marketing agencies operating in the zone. The government livestock marketing corporation has been privatized recently and the latest information obtained from an informal source is that the new agency is currently conducting detailed market studies in the region and has not yet begun to purchase animals. Other sources of local demand for Borana cattle are the purchases made by local towns people and slaughter houses for domestic consumption, as well as by commercial and private buyers coming from the urban areas of the zone and the central Ethiopian highlands where market demand for beef is high.

Settled farmers also purchase Borana male cattle for interbreeding and traction power for their crop fields. These local sources of demand appear to have diminished recently for several reasons. Due to low crop production and small marketable surplus of the upland farmers in neighbouring weredas, most town dwellers and farmers in Borena have experienced a fall in purchasing power. This decline in purchasing power is the result of repeated drought-induced harvest failures over the past three years. Farmers have had to sell their traction animals in order to purchase grain which, in turn, has increased the numbers of animals coming onto the market. All of these factors have led to a sharp decline in local demand and an increase in pressure on limited water and grazing resources as pastoralists strive to maintain the health of their cattle herds.

Cross-border trade with Kenyan merchants and private buyers who normally provide an important market outlet for the Borana, often at much better prices relative to the domestic market, is now constrained by the stringent control and closure of the border due to the directives issued by the Ethiopian Standards Authority and Ministry of Trade in a bid to protect the interest of the domestic revenue tax income sources.

Development and mitigation assistance, but little emergency response

Some supplementary food has been distributed by SCF-USA in Adola Wadera and Liben weredas in June (through the DPPC). These distributions were based on a ration of 12 kg/person/month for three months, and were targeted for children who showed signs of acute malnutrition. This is far in excess of the ration being given in other areas (3 kg/person/month).

Basic grain rations of 12.5 kg/person are being distributed to a maximum of four people per household. While this relief food might have helped somewhat in saving human lives, in stabilizing the grain market prices and also in delaying the sales of livestock assets by those beneficiaries reached, the amount of assistance was reported to be unsatisfactory and not commensurate with the magnitude and scale of the problem.

Experience in the past shows that both pastoralists and relief agencies typically continue to hope that the rains will resume until it is too late for an effective emergency response. Such has been the case in the Borena rangelands during the 1984 and 1991 drought. It appears that few if any organizations working in Borena are engaged in emergency preparedness activities to deal with an impending crisis.

The SCF-USA Borena Programme has just concluded its annual food security assessment in the zone, which is currently limited to Liben Wereda only. While the programme may be expanded to include other lowland weredas in the future, concrete plans have yet to be made. They currently do not intend to conduct emergency relief operations in Liben Zone, although it is acknowledged that the rangelands are facing a critical situation.

CARE Borena has been operational in the rangeland weredas for many years, focusing on development, rehabilitation and relief activities. They are reported to be phasing out, and CARE's main activity now is an emergency livestock destocking project. Under this project, weakened livestock unlikely to survive the drought are traded for cereals, then slaughtered. The meat is dried and distributed as a supplementary food ration to the most vulnerable, particularly children. This project is seen as an important intervention and one of the few viable emergency operations for a pastoral environment in the context of drought and the absence of a viable market for livestock. Such projects have been previously tested in the northern Kenya Turkana district by Oxfam and shown to provide considerable support to herders.

SORDU (Southern Rangelands Development Unit) was, until recently, an important semi-autonomous governmental organization with a huge capital budget and staff experienced in pastoral and rangelands development. It is now a rudimentary organization largely incapable and unprepared to carry out even the smallest of relief activities due to lack of budget and by the apparent low prioritization given to the pastoral sector by the regional agricultural bureau. According to the manager of SORDU, a new 5 year plan and project proposal was formulated with the technical assistance of the Rangelands Development Department (formerly Third Livestock Development Project) of the federal Ministry of Agriculture and has been submitted to the regional bureau of agriculture for funding.

SORDU, with its wide acceptance by the pastoralists has the ability to mobilizing the necessary popular participation and with its unparalleled knowledge of the local socio-cultural and economic environment, could provide an important institutional mechanism for the coordination and implementation of assistance to the pastoral sector, as well as presenting a useful partner for other agencies, if it can be strengthened.

Prospects

Just as it takes a series of drought years to erode the resilience and coping ability of pastoralists, the pastoral production and ecological system when hit by destabilizing drought the consequent losses takes many years to restore itself to pre-drought levels. Unlike the agricultural farming household, where the amount of time needed for restoration to pre-drought conditions may be only a couple of months (until the next rainy/crop season), the

consequence for the pastoral household is far reaching since herd size is limited by its own reproductive rate.

A Borana household possesses an average herd of 15 cattle plus half a dozen small stock. It is not unusual for such herds to suffer losses of 50% or more due to drought and the capital required to reconstitute such numbers, if such an option is available, would be considerable. More important, however, is the number of years it takes to restore the herd to its original size through natural means, if it is ever possible given the frequent incidence of drought in the area. Studies conducted pertaining to herd recovery in 1994 indicated that pre-1984 livestock numbers had not been fully restored, as Borana lowland herders had lost about 70% of their animals. The occurrence of an intense drought in 1991 then again in 1996 inflicted more livestock losses, further decimating herd numbers.

The main cause for concern currently is the long period before March - May 2000 when the next rains are expected. Water and pasture sources that are already nearly depleted will not be replenished for another four months at least. It is likely the condition of livestock will deteriorate significantly during these months, with large losses expected. In addition, particularly near the settled areas around Yavello, drinking water was observed to be at a minimum. At one site, as many as 50 people were lining up to collect water trickling from a spring. Some women reported that they had been waiting all night for their turn to collect water. Prices per 20 litre jerrycan of water have risen from 50 cents to 3 birr. Emergency water supplies will be needed.

Conclusions and recommendations

There is no reason for complacency and very little time left to launch an emergency operation to help avoid human suffering and prevent widespread livestock death in the rangelands of Borena. There are indicators of stress with respect to health and nutrition, and livestock productivity. The indications already widely observed should be considered sufficient to trigger emergency operations to prevent the worst effects of the drought which is expected to intensify with serious consequences for livelihoods. Possible results may include social disorder including conflict over grazing and water resources the basis for which are old rivalries between the Borana and other groups. The security situation is even more fragile in some border areas as a result of the ethnic associations of certain armed opposition groups.

Rather than wait for the outcome of the DPPC-led pastoral areas assessment due to commence in November, humanitarian agencies and other actors need to start undertaking emergency measures now. Past experience has shown that in the pastoral context, effective relief operations take time to plan and implement and the inevitable delays in the likely response have to be taken into account when considering the needs of pastoralists in Borena¹. It is also important to take note of the value of the timing of interventions in helping to mitigate the effects of droughts. Both operational effectiveness and cost-effectiveness are largely determined by the appropriateness and timing of the response, delayed interventions in particular tending to be ineffective and costly.

With this in mind, there are perhaps very few emergency interventions in the pastoral context that would be appropriate given the current logistic, resource, organizational and time constraints.

¹ Richard Hogg (1997) Drought Contingency Planning to Support Pastoralist Livelihoods in Ethiopia, UN-EUE

Based on the information currently available and based on the synthesis of past experiences and knowledge accumulated on drought emergency operations in Borena pastoral areas, urgent consideration should be given to the following humanitarian interventions:

1. An immediate inter-regional discussion and reconciliation forum that involves elderly and local tribesmen from major ethnic groups, including Borana, Hameri, Garri etc., should be organized as a measure to reduce the potential for drought-induced ethnic conflict that might further contribute to loss of human life and constrain the traditional mobility of livestock in search of grazing. Such a forum would be an important risk minimization and mitigation effort, as cattle raiding and conflict becomes increasingly common among the pastoral community during times of drought.
2. The impending crisis has to be immediately made known to agencies/actors that have a stake financially, technically as well as organizationally in drought relief activities. Most importantly, NGOs working in the zone need to be mobilized to divert some of their resources - temporarily - from development and rehabilitation to emergency relief.
3. The emergency destocking operation that is currently being carried out by CARE Borena should be expanded, perhaps with the involvement of SORDU. This destocking operation is all the more important in the absence of livestock marketing agencies in the region. In the absence of commercial buyers, purchasing for such an expanded destocking operation should be planned around the larger livestock markets.
4. Timely provision of relief and supplementary food for the needy pastoralists as well as for the peri-urban poor, with appropriate targeting in lowland areas, remains a priority.
5. Water tankering for domestic consumption as well as for livestock (especially calves) should be carried out by organizations with experience in this particular activity. This distribution should start immediately around those *ollas* where there are a number of private and communal cisterns.

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