

**Report on a rapid field assessment of the current situation in Afar Region**  
**By Oxfam International, 22 – 28 November 2004**

## **1. Introduction**

Afar Region is located in the north-eastern part of Ethiopia bordering with Eritrea in the north and north-east; Djibouti in the east; Tigray Region in the north-west; Amhara Region in the west; Oromiya Region in the south and Somali Region in the south-east (sketch map attached). Administratively, the region is divided into 5 zones, which are subdivided into 29 woredas. The regional capital, Semera, is located some 600kms north-east of Addis Ababa on the main Addis – Djibouti tarmac road. The total population of the region is estimated at 1.3 million; of which over 90% are primarily livestock-dependent pastoralists while the remaining 10% are agro-pastoralist. There are different figures of the estimated livestock population in the region, most sources estimate at around four million. Afar keep mixed types of livestock including cattle, sheep, goats, equines and camel. The region receives three rainy seasons. The main rain, locally known as *karma* is from mid-June to mid-September, followed by rainy showers from mid-November to mid-December called *dada*, and finally *sugum*, the minor rainy season during March through May. Disruptions on the performance of any of the rainy seasons will have an impact on the availability of pasture and water as well as the overall food security of the pastoral and agro-pastoral communities.

Afar use a traditional administrative system to manage their resources, i.e. their livestock, water and rangeland. There are two types of institutions functioning together, *Medaa* and *Adaa*. *Medaa* has a hierarchical structure, with the head of a household on the bottom and clan leaders at the top, and it is the highest decision making body. *Adaa* is a cultural mechanism that is managed through the application of various rules and regulations such as resource management, marriage arrangements, conflict management, and external relations. The rules govern everyday life situations. For example, if some families do not have enough food they have the right to get food from those who have a surplus (DCG, 2001)<sup>1</sup>.

During 2002 – 2003, Afar experienced one of the worst droughts resulting in the death of many livestock and much food insecurity. Government and the international community, including Oxfam International, responded to the crises with a major focus on saving human lives and protecting further depletion of assets.

This year (2004), as a result of poor *karma* (main) rains in most parts of Afar, there were reports of shortage of pasture and unusual migration of livestock from the area. Reports coming out of the regions lacked sufficient details to understand the magnitude of the problems. In recognition of this lack of adequate information from other sources, Oxfam International (OI) decided to conduct a rapid field assessment. The objective of the assessment was to gather firsthand information and to better understand the current emergency situation in the region. A team, composed of OI and APDA<sup>2</sup> conducted the field assessment during 22 – 28 November, 2004. The assessment team visited two of the three reportedly most affected zones; zone 1 (Dubti and Chifra woredas) and zone 4 (Ewa, Awra and Gulina woredas). Information was gathered through discussions with the relevant regional and woreda officials, NGOs (ACF, LWF-Mekane Yesus Church, WV and APDA) operational in the area and a multi-agency team that was on an assessment mission in Afar. The OI team visited water sources and grazing/pasture areas and also held discussions with elders, community groups and women. Additionally, the team visited the bordering North and South Wello zones of Amhara region and the BGI Kombolcha brewery. The purpose of visiting BGI was to gather information on the by-products of the factory that could be used for livestock feed. Information was also gathered about situations in zones 2, 3 and 5 that were not visited by the OI assessment mission.

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<sup>1</sup> Traditional Coping strategies of the Afar and Borana Pastoralists in Response to Drought, Dry Land Co-ordination Group (DCG), Report No. 17, November 2001.

<sup>2</sup> APDA: Afar Pastoral Development Association, a local NGO operating in the region.

## 2. The Assessment

### 2.1 Rainfall situation

Overall, information gathered from various sources suggested that, during the last five years the amount of rainfall in Afar has been decreasing. This year, *sugum* rain (March – May) was poor in most areas and has totally failed in areas like Chifra woreda of zone 1. The *karma* rain in almost all areas started late (mid-July) and terminated early (mid-August). The multi-agency assessment mission that the team met in the field reported that the *karma* rain only extended up to mid-September in some areas of zone 5. The distribution of the rain was also reported to be very erratic and in some areas, for example in Ewa woreda of zone 4, it only rained for few days in August. The *dadaa* rain, which was expected to commence around mid-November did not start on time. There was a rain on the evening of 23 November that covered most areas of zones 2 and 4 as well as Chifra woreda and parts of Mile woreda of zone 1. Communities were hoping that the rain would continue. However, as the *dadaa* rain is normally small in quantity and distribution, its impact on improving the pasture situation will be minimal. To some extent it may improve the water situation. Nevertheless, until this report was compiled, no further rains of *dadaa* were reported from the region.

The volume of water of the major rivers in the region (River Mile, Logia, Awra, Gulina and Megale) was very low this year. This is linked to poor rains in the area as well as the neighbouring highlands of Amhara and Tigray where the rivers originate. According to information from ACF who have been regularly monitoring the situation in zone 4, flooding of the rivers into the Teru depression was not as good as previous years. This mainly affects regeneration of pasture, particularly grasses.

### 2.2 Water situation

The major sources of water in the area are: rivers, ponds, stagnant water during rains, springs, *birkads*, hand-dug wells, motorized deep wells and *elas*<sup>3</sup>. The hand-dug wells and motorized deep wells are concentrated in and around towns (e.g. Asayita, Logiya, Mille, Chifra, etc). For the majority of the pastoral and agro-pastoral communities and their livestock, ponds, rivers, *birkads* and stagnant water during rains are the major sources of water. The assessment team observed in northwestern parts of Dubti woreda some ponds and *birkads* that are completely dry.

A *birkad*<sup>4</sup> that was constructed by APDA at Somma village and the pond at Gulublie could be examples of observed dry water sources. *Birkads* are advantageous compared to open ponds because during the dry season water can be tankered and stored as water loss due to seepage and evaporation is very minimal. At Somma, people from the surrounding pastoral communities were observed waiting for a water tanker truck to fill the *birkad*. At Gulublie, the regional DPPB truck has been transporting water by jerycans from Logiya town (about 150 km) that is then stored in a Roto tank with 10,000lt capacity, which was installed at the village. Whenever the water distribution is discontinued, women have to travel to the hills in the north to fetch water from *elas*. According to Momina Mohamed, a mother of seven children in the village, it takes her three days to collect water from the *elas* using her one donkey. In one trip, she would only be able to collect about 30lt of water that will last for two days. According to the sphere minimum standards<sup>5</sup>, Momina's family requires 135lt of water for a day (9 persons x 15lt/day). The family was only able to get an amount of water equal to about 10% of the sphere minimum standard. The head of the Regional Food Security Department and the multi-agency assessment mission also report that water distribution for human consumption is ongoing in other woredas of zone 1 (Elidar), zone 2 (Erebt and Berhale), zone 4 (Yalo) and zone 5 (Semu Robi).

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<sup>3</sup> *Elas* are traditional shallow wells. In Afar *elas* are located around hilly areas.

<sup>4</sup> *Birkads* are underground concrete water reservoir structures with corrugated iron sheet roof.

<sup>5</sup> The sphere minimum standards for provision of potable water is 15 lts/person/day.



The team has also observed ponds and *birkads* with a good amount of water. Crowds of livestock and people collecting water for home consumption were observed at the current water provision sources.

There is hope that the current *dadaa* rains will improve availability of water in the area. It was estimated that, if the *dadaa* rains perform well, the available water will sustain most

of the communities and their livestock up to the next rains, *sugum*, which are expected during March – May 2005. However, there will still be pocket areas that would require water rationing for human consumption where water has been a chronic problem (e.g. Elidar) and that have been depending on water trucking.

### 2.3 Livestock situation

#### *Pasture situation*

Due to consecutive poor rainy seasons, availability of pasture has significantly reduced in the areas visited. As a result, the traditional migration pattern in search of pasture and water has been disrupted. Jara in Chifra woreda and Musuli in Dubti woreda of zone 1, which extend to Awra woreda of zone 4, are amongst the major rangeland areas commonly used for wet season (June – October) grazing. These rangelands would have been covered with tall grasses in ‘normal’ years. This year, those livestock that have been moved to the rangelands following their traditional migration pattern had to return back early as the pasture available was depleted quickly. This was mainly because of the poor *karma* rain of the current year coupled with the subsequent decline in the amount of rainfall in the area and ensuing unfavourable pasture growth conditions. Furthermore, additional livestock moved to the rangelands from zone 4 that would have stayed in their zone under ‘normal’ conditions.

There is a serious shortage of pasture in most visited areas. Areas known for grazing of very tall grasses such as Jara rangelands are now left with almost nothing for animals to pick. Pasture depletion is much more severe in zone 4 where the team observed grazing areas affected down to their root systems, which may delay future regeneration and therefore pasture availability.



Due to lack of pasture, particularly grass for cattle and sheep, pastoralists were forced to move their livestock (mainly cattle) to the neighbouring Amhara and Tigray regions as well as other zones (zone 3 and 5) within Afar. The team observed livestock that have moved to the North Wello of Amhara region. Hillsides and crop fields (in the areas where crops are

harvested) are being used for grazing. The Afar pastoralists are required to pay some amount of money (Birr 200 – 300) to the owners of the hillside farmlands in order to graze their livestock.

Officials of Chifra, Ewa, Awra and Gulina Woredas expressed concerns about potential conflict as a result of the current livestock movement to other areas. Ewa woreda officials reported that one of their community members was killed and another wounded in the bordering Amhara region. To prevent further conflict, government officials of the bordering Afar and Amhara woredas have formed a joint committee. Similar concerns were expressed about a potential conflict with Somali

Isas bordering zones 1 and 3. Even though many cattle have moved to the neighbouring Amhara region and other parts of Afar, still some weak or pregnant cattle are left in their localities. Unlike cattle, which young adult men and boys have moved with to other areas, goats and camels remain in their localities herded by mothers and young girls. Those boys that are around were observed only tending camels. It has become the responsibility of women and girls to attend to camels, goats, sheep as well as those weak and pregnant cattle. This is a clear indication that women and young girls are much more stressed during droughts.

Apart from the problem of depleted pasture due to rain shortages, an exotic plant weed known as *Prosopis juliflora* (locally known as *weyane* tree) is rapidly invading large grazing areas. The plant has also invaded the Awash river bank and its surroundings, and as a result livestock are not able to access water from the Awash River. Pastoralists also reported of another noxious weed locally known as 'democracy' (*Parthenium hysterophorus*). According to the pastoralists, the weed requires very little rain, grows quickly, and suppresses the growth of other pasture. Livestock find the weed plant quite unpalatable. Milk from a cow, goat or camel that has consumed the weed plant will be very sour.

### ***Livestock diseases***

In most of the areas visited, the occurrence of common livestock disease was reported. Furthermore, disease seems to be spreading due to the movement of livestock. There are very limited veterinary services being provided in the area. APDA and ACF through their community animal health workers provide services covering limited areas, while the government provides next to nothing. The regional government's veterinary drug store has no stocks of essential drugs, vaccines or equipment, except limited quantities of albendazole and diazinone. The region was not even able to collect important vaccines that are provided for free by the federal government. Overall, the concerned departments in the region are not prepared to support the pastoral and agro-pastoral communities to deal with the current problems related to lack of pasture and veterinary services. This could possibly be due to lack of information, as most of the regional concerned line department staff to whom the team talked to have never been out to the field for a significant length of time. More disease outbreaks are expected as more stresses on animals may occur as a result of rain and increased chances of exposure to soil-borne infections associated with low levels of grazing. The importance of providing preventive animal health care services to limit the potential livestock deaths is glaring.



Death of livestock, particularly cattle, was observed in areas such as Dubti town and Chifra woreda of zone 1 and Awura woreda of zone 4. Much more livestock death was reported in other parts of zone 4. The major cause of livestock death is starvation. Diseases also weaken the affected animals' ability to move around and feed themselves. Most of the livestock dying are cattle followed by sheep. Goats and camels are in relatively better

condition. This may be associated with the different feeding habits of goats and camels, which can browse from trees and shrubs, unlike cattle and sheep that are mainly dependent on grasses. Adult camels are said to be in better physical condition, with reports of death amongst young camels in zone 4. This suggests that even camels are not getting sufficient browse. Even if most cattle are moved to other areas, those cattle that are left in their localities have poor chances of survival unless the *dadaa* rains come soon or some sort of feed rationing is practiced at selected sites. Most of the woreda government officials claim that nearly 100% of cattle and a large proportion of other livestock have died. From the interviews the team conducted with some pastoral families, an estimated 10 – 60% of cattle, and insignificant proportions of goats, sheep and camels have died at household level since August 2004.

## ***Market***

The major livestock markets, e.g. Bati and Kobo are out of the region. Therefore, most of the pastoral communities do not have easy access to market for their livestock. In 'normal' seasons they travel long distances to markets to sell their livestock. Now the livestock in the area that are weakened due to lack of pasture and diseases can not travel the long distance to the market. The nearby small markets are over flooded by livestock in poor condition that command poor prices.

Although the total number of livestock brought to the local markets for sale is said to be much higher than under 'normal' conditions of this season, it is evident that many pastoralists do not make many sales because of the difficulty of moving their weakened animals to distant market places. The swell of animals for sale is not the only indication of the severity of the current drought. Female animals, such as female camels that are not normally brought to the market are now for sale. Livestock prices in general are declining (by 60 –75%), while prices of food grain are increasing (e.g. a quart of wheat grain is sold on the local market from Birr 200 to 260).

## ***Milk production***

One effect of the current drought is the absence of milk supply from animals. Most areas report very little milk supply from cattle. Communities also report quantities of milk from camels and goats that are insufficient to feed their children. According to estimates by pastoral families interviewed by the team, no more than 15% of households in the area own camels, from which the team inferred that most households rely on milk from goats. The reported death of young camels in some parts of zone 4 also indicates the absence of adequate milk supply to calves.

## **2.4 Food situation**

Milk and purchased food, i.e. maize grain and other additives from sale of livestock (mainly sheep and goats), constitute the major sources of household food. Due to the poor physical condition of livestock and the distance to markets, income from livestock sale has reduced. At the same time, milk production has diminished significantly. Some communities, such as those of Gulublie, reported that since the last three they have lost all their cattle and they the cows have not produced milk since.

Relief food distribution is being distributed by the DPPB and a few NGOs. The team observed food distribution at Chifra and Dubti by LWF-Mekane Yesus and WVE respectively. In both cases, the monthly allocation of food for a beneficiary includes 15kg of wheat grain, 4.5kg of CSB, 1.5kg of pulse and 0.5kg of vegetable oil. However, observed redistribution by communities was observed at a rate of 12.5kg of wheat grain, 4kg of CSB, 5kg of pulse and 0.75kg of vegetable oil per household. The two NGOs cover 5 woredas (except Elidar) in zone 1 and the rest is covered by the DPPB. At Kalwan (Gulina woreda of zone 4) communities reported that they were receiving only wheat grain. In general, availability of food at the household level is decreasing and the relief food distribution is not handled properly, as local authorities claim that food should be distributed to all households irrespective of their food security situation. This approach may also lead to misappropriation of the relief food. The team observed at least two bags of CSB stacked in a small shop at Kalwan. It is very likely that relief food is being sold either by the beneficiaries themselves or by the authorities managing the distribution. The team did not observe any signs of malnutrition among children. However, the multi-agency assessment mission reported some moderate cases of malnutrition among children in zone 2.

### 3. Conclusions

There is very little information about the current situation at the regional level and understanding by the concerned technical departments is also limited. Lack of early warning systems to collect and analyse information on a regular basis is a major constraint in the region.

In the region as a whole, this year's *sugum* and *karma* rains were poor. The amount of rainfall in the region has been progressively decreasing over the last five years. As a result, availability of pasture, particularly grasses, is almost nil in all areas visited. Large numbers of cattle have migrated to other areas in search of pasture. Goats, sheep and camels are left behind to feed on the poor shrubs and bushes. Most of the livestock observed, particularly cattle, are emaciated and diseased. The current movement of livestock coupled with the very weak veterinary services in the area have aggravated the spread of livestock diseases. Unless the current pasture situation improves and the livestock migrants return, conflict with the neighbouring communities could be aggravated. The sprawl of noxious plants such as *Prosopis juliflora* is seriously threatening livelihoods of the pastoral and agro-pastoral communities both.

There are no signs of malnutrition as a result of lack of food. However, there are some pockets where water shortages are placing inordinate stress on women who are responsible for fetching water from far distances. Those areas require potable water provision. Moreover, the primary concern is the continuous depletion of the asset base, i.e. livestock of the pastoral and agro-pastoral communities over the last few years. The current situation is further exacerbating the depletion of household livestock base. In order for this negative trend to be reversed, a comprehensive long-term development approach is required over short-term interventions.

### 4. Recommendations

The current problem of the pastoral and agro-pastoral communities of Afar Region is more of a cumulative effect of the consecutive drought that has been depleting the livelihood bases. It should therefore be addressed through an appropriate long-term livelihoods development approach. The following recommendation, that mainly focuses on the immediate needs are proposed with this understanding.

- a. Water is already being distributed by the regional DPPB and APDA in some areas. Further plans are also made to continue with water rationing, although funding is not secured yet. Supporting the current water distribution for human consumption could be considered where for the areas that are not covered by the regional DPPB and NGOs in the area.
- b. Lack of pasture is the foremost cause of the poor physical condition of the many livestock that have died or been forced to migrate. Livestock diseases have also aggravated the situation. In addition, there are limited veterinary services. To reduce mortality and morbidity rates of livestock, it is recommended to support emergency veterinary services.
- c. Emergency livestock feeding for selected breeding livestock.
- d. Support to strengthen the early warning capacity of the region.
- e. Lobby for targeted, appropriate and regular food relief distribution.

**OI rapid field assessment mission in Afar, areas visited by the team**

