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RAIN RELIEF; WHERE ASSISTANCE CAN STILL MAKE A HUGE DIFFERENCE AND OUR EDUCATION PROGRAM

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1. How the rain has helped us

The last update was written just as the breaking rain of March 21st was falling. Despite the gloomy prediction of FEWS¹ in December, Afar Region and many surrounding areas have had the best short rainy season in 10 years (including Saudi Arabia where flooding reportedly drowned 25 people). Rain storms came quite steadily from March 21st to 28th and then more sporadically on through April with a couple of storms in the first week of May. Now most areas have had at least one storm including areas on the Eritrean border that had been bone-dry for the past 3 years. The few pockets of land that are still dry are Sardo in northern Dubte; some areas in Kori and Eli Daar; some parts of Dallol and in eastern Sifra, where very little rain fell and the herdsmen are still grazing far from their homelands.

While some districts such as Mille now have the greenest - looking pasture for the past 10 years, there are still menacing pasture - deficit areas - mainly in Eli Daar, Kori, Bidu, parts of Magaale, parts of Erebti, Sardo in northern Dubte and Teeru. The great thing is that most dams, ponds, cisterns, sub-surface dams and shallow wells were again charged so that the water shortage for now is markedly less. More sobering is the fact that much of this water is unprotected and highly exposed to contamination that will cause diarrhea. While health extension workers and APDA health workers battle on together to establish community - level sanitation, it hardly fits the lifestyle and the latrine structures themselves quickly spoil in wind storms and the like.

2. The animal herd: the family asset and the family nutrition

The battle to keep alive remaining herds still continues in above - mentioned areas and malnutrition that spiked in February/ March is still not relieved where pasture is insufficient for herds to resume milk producing. Eli Daar is probably still the worst affected district. APDA has located 221 households in the north of the district who moved in February/ March from distant kebeles on the Eritrean border to where they could access relief food - moving distances of up to 150 kilometers. They now live on the outskirts of the woreda's roadside towns in order to be part of relief assistance having little or no shelter or domestic animals. Aside from those people identified with severe or moderate malnutrition who may receive additional food, the rest must survive on a mono-diet of relief grain that has been plagued by delayed distribution. APDA supported by a partner organization who visited these people very recently is hoping to fill the particular needs of these drought - displaced families. One enormous challenge for such people is that most of their pack-animals have died. Without the means to transport a bag of grain into their distant communities, many people are still trapped without assistance in the hinterland.

Recommendations from a technical rapid assessment to Eli Daar in late April include supplementary animal feed and treatment/ vaccination and re-stocking. The throbbing heart of the pastoralist livelihood is the herd. Too little attention is directed to this to the point people become destitute and dependent. This

¹ The December FEWS (Famine Early Warning System) maps showed that Afar Region would have minimal rain along with much of the eastern lowland

has in fact happened in the region's extreme north west, Dallol where the vast majority of the herd died from 2011/12 and finally in 2013. Driving through the woreda, there is a realization that there are almost no goats. Dallol is also suffering food deficit - in April, the woreda government reported having received one month relief assistance in the past 8 months. In fact grain was not available to be purchased in the district but if available is sold for twice the price in more southerly districts (500.00/ 50 kg). APDA has begun a 6 month dry ration and supplementary food distribution for 1,670 households in that district.

Looking at each aspect of the effect of poor food security, APDA has also begun a project feeding 1,836 non-formal education school students from highly drought - affected areas twice daily with faffa (protein - based powder they make into a porridge) that they complete this school year. the community development committees in each site are cooking for the students.

3. Ongoing prospect of recovery

While this season has been good, some of the pasture, especially in Geega has been eroded by locusts and a tree grub. With all these uncertainties, it cannot be said that the Afar herd overall is now headed toward sustaining a recovery. Much still needs to be done. As mentioned above, it remains paramount to support small and highly vulnerable household herds in areas where pasture has not rejuvenated. APDA has begun to supplementary feed goats in Sardo and Saha in northern Dubte (total of 350 beneficiary households) - there households of only 2 to 5 goats are common. The organization hopes to begin to work similarly in Eli Daar, Kori and Teeru in the near future. This, of course is combined with animal treatment and vaccination.

While there is a massive effort from four international NGOs to implement nutrition screening and malnutrition treatment, this is on a short-term emergency basis and also does not necessarily reach to communities in remote areas. Where possible, APDA health workers are supporting this effort by walking into distant places to carry out the activities. Still the greatest concern is maternal nutrition as so many mothers and their very young children are surviving on a diet of grain only. APDA is trying to support mothers with lentils to boost protein and iron intake.

The region has gone into the *Hagay* or hot season and the next rainy season is expected from July to September.

The now eight water shed management schemes that have been developed in various parts of Afar Region through APDA projects hold out hope for environment recovery; pasture production and protection; gaining water access as well as providing water for small-scale irrigated food and fodder production plots. All these schemes got their first rain in this season. This then charges the associated dams and sub-surface dam that is created by closing gullies as well as begins to feed in moisture to the depleted soil. APDA is now carefully training the beneficiary communities in various skills including rangeland management; crop production and rotation; marketing and market link as well as in disaster risk management, the baseline skill needed to direct the Afar community through ever-difficult times. In most cases, the organization has chosen to form these beneficiaries into production cooperatives giving them skills in cooperative management and legality that they can develop a sustaining base to what should be local economic growth.

4. Securing and developing suitable education for the pastoralists

As we work at tying up another academic year in Ethiopia and look to moving on, it is abundantly clear there are still vast issues to be conquered to secure what is known internationally as quality education. What we have been able to do is to establish Afar literacy and numeracy in several communities - APDA currently teaches literacy in 206 remote rural pastoralist sites teaching a total of 11,763 students of whom 43% are female (March 2013 figures). This provides the essential base/ ice-breaker in the community who are traditionally illiterate and provides the energizer that alternative basic education (up to grade 4) can be taken up. Moreover literacy provides the base from which the community can develop an enquiring mind to change ideas and traditions that block female participation through repressive marriage traditions and the like.

A recent visit to one of the program's highly innovative teacher's site illustrates how change is slowly grinding on. The teacher with his community has constructed a basic shelter with 3 rooms to teach level 1, 2 and 3 in alternative education as well as teaching Afar literacy. APDA has supplied him with a solar light so that he can night - teach as well as in the daytime. To push his community on to further innovation, he has also constructed a model water cistern that waters a very small garden growing grass for his goats in one of the driest environments in the region - Kori. In a conversation with 4 young Afar teenage girls there, it is clear they have caught onto the 'education fever' - they expressed they WANT to go on with their education to BE someone. A year ago, their community responded to APDA's offer to provide hostel accommodation for pastoralist children to continue beyond grade 4 in the town of Logya. They sent 18 males - no females. On this Kori visit, an old man asked if we came with the intention to take girls for higher education - HE was utterly nervous and, we were told, planning to see that the girls were married quickly to prevent this. In short community leadership is highly ambivalent to the idea that girls should continue education fearing they may fall into pre-marital sex; refuse traditional marriage; marry outside of the Afar culture. Of the 112 students APDA now supports in hostel learning from 5 areas including Kori, only 7 are female students and each of these females has her own desperate story of struggle of how she managed to get this chance.

The other huge factor in the process of securing education for pastoralist is the extension of the use of the Afar language. The Regional government has recently agreed that Afar will be the language of education in formal as well as alternative basic education schools. This then begins with the new school year in September when all formal schools will teach grade 1 in Afar, increasing a grade annually until they reach grade 8. Again, all district - level governments have been ordered to run internal administration in Afar. Currently, there are 2 woredas that have succeeded to do this - Dallol and 'Adda'ar and another 5 who are close to achieving this. Critical to all this succeeding is the printing of adequate school books as well as writing and printing more material for the community to read - in short, to make this efficiently possible, a printing press is needed.

5. Facilitating change from traditions inhibiting and hurting females

With 3 other NGOs, APDA goes into a project aiming to improve education access for females including that of ongoing education - the issue strongly revolves around the Afar traditional belief and cultural practices system that this can accommodate educated Afar girls and women. This therefore strongly links to all efforts to support the community dialogue toward stopping harmful practices affecting females. The most commonly known of these is female genital mutilation (FGM) but an organization - employed religious leader has identified 11 practices he believes must stop to allow females equality in their development. He and his team are discussing with the community in extremely remote parts of Afar Region and finding great resistance to change particularly from the older generation. This can only be tackled by great persistence, literacy and daily dialogue as is supported by the women extension workers, health workers and teachers who live in the community. The message must be continual and linked to their daily life and development. Our Mille emergency maternity hospital is treating girls and women affected by FGM and carefully opening the scar to release trapped urine and menstrual blood.

6. Toward safe motherhood - again, the need to facilitate behavior change in the community

The second major battle that links to that of getting girls access to school is getting pastoralist mothers the maternal care and protection they need to deliver safely. Again, this is largely to do with changing the community perspective that they see their role in getting the mother to antenatal checking; prepare for the delivery in terms of the possible need for referral as well as supporting the mother with all she requires in nutrition, sanitation and health checks along the way. For this, the harmful practices awareness team along with the community development army of health workers, women extension workers, community teachers and program trained traditional birth attendants are the actors. APDA has completed production on a new film on safe motherhood to spark the community in to action. At the top of the referral tree, APDA's Barbara May Maternity Hospital continues to provide the life - saving treatment for mother and baby as well as treatment for many women with years - long standing gynecological problems such as uterine prolapse.