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The region's and APDA's news

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1. Rain and odd rain

After a single storm on March 24th, the annual short rains of March/ April began in earnest with rain on March 30th and 31st in the Region's southern and western woredas as well as some but much more scattered falls in the central and northern areas. These occasional storms have persisted through May to date rain falling in isolated places in the drought-belt and more intensely again on the western border with Tigray and Amhara Regions. This highly extra-ordinary rain, for the Afar called '*konnahayto*' or fifth is one of the 'lost seasons' of the western areas and has not been seen for the past 15 years. The season however gives little added value aside from the western border areas where there is now a flourishing of short green grass. It falls when temperatures are in the high 40's and therefore whatever growth does come is short and short-lived – the most common grass is called '*bunkuta*' which has trailers and is good grazing for the few days it exists for all herd species. The problem in the hinterland with this phenomenon the herd is moved every few days as the grazing only lasts that period making the herd and the herdsman exhausted as they chase tantalizing grazing. What this rain does is stop/ decrease the immediacy of water shortage. The other affecting issue with this strange season is that many of the community are predicting the main rains expected to begin in July will be late in onset since the winds of '*hurrur*' or '*Kamseen*', hot winds that come off the Arabian Peninsula – 50 days of searing winds then wind from another direction comes in heralding the season – there is no sign of this happening as yet. Predictions are the main rains will be up to 6 weeks late leading the herd into the uncertainty of poor pasture and distant watering sources.

2. Flash – flooding on May 23rd

The abnormal rain described above originated in the highlands adjacent to Afar Region particularly along the Tigray/ Afar border. On May 24th, a vast flash flood destroyed almost 150 households; 20 hectares of the crop ready for in Barahale as well as crops that had been planted in 'Aba'ala. Hundreds of animals were swept away in Erebt, Barahale and 'Aba'ala. The Regional Disaster Prevention and Food Security Coordination Office is reporting that emergency food assistance is required for these communities for 5 months. Of course, the unprotected riverbanks are now further eroded. Finally to add insult to injury, the borehole providing water to the town of Barahale and the adjacent refugee camp has broken – the government is requesting urgent support to put in a new borehole.

3. The consequences of this for the dry drought-prone districts

In the most notorious drought areas of Kori and Eli Daar single isolated storms provided the community of Musle in Kori for water that lasted 5 days and in Andabba, northern Eli Daar, watershed from a river filling into a cistern provided 9 days drinking water in early May. Otherwise these communities in northern Eli Daar, Kori and Bidu remain reliant on trucked water to spare them from thirst – a total of around 12,500 people. Field visits in the last days show now an alarming lack of both water and pasture – the communities are again sinking into deterioration as they wait for the main rains. This vulnerability is now evident in rising malnutrition and herd stress on the few remaining animals. The same scenario is described in Saha, Guhum and Bargaale in Sardo – kebeles in northern Dubte – new malnutrition cases are being reported and the herd is endangered.

4. Nutrition status under these circumstances

Nutrition status in the Afar pastoralist society is close to synonymous with the status of the animal herd – the herd is THE source of protein and without milk sufficient for food, children under 2 years in particular, pregnant mothers and lactating mothers are fully food insecure. Thus, without resolving livelihood problems: too few goats to market or milk; eroded and degenerated grazing lands; lack of water; unsafe water – it is not possible to actually get rid of severe acute malnutrition (SAM) that requires strict 15 – daily nutrition surveillance and treatment of the identified cases with antibiotics; vitamins and ready – made balanced nutritious food (RUFT) – once one case in a household is treated and the body-weight up to moderate malnutrition, another member will fall victim to this.

Being a totally community-based NGO working on social service delivery in remote areas, it is impossible for APDA to walk away from the problem and do nothing – the organization continues to treat SAM cases in Kutubla a situation arising from the floods of 2010 when many livestock were lost and still not resolved; in Afambo in 3 kebeles; in much of rural Eli Daar where the highest caseload persists due to the high number of destitute households; northern Awra; Teeru; Afdeera – all three areas with high destitution/ semi-destitution from the accumulative affect of drought and Gawwaani/ Buurimudayto where poor sanitation and unusually high population density where the population do NOT move leading to frequent child-disease outbreaks and lack of grazing land leading to the milking animals being taken far from the family home. The organization is arranging to get support in 3 of these districts to undertake ongoing, regular nutrition surveillance but, since the issue while being an emergency in that children/ people die without the treatment, it is also ongoing thus requiring secure, long-term funding.

Too health worker – teams have and continue to take the precautionary action of carrying out full routine immunization in these communities over a 4 – round campaign – styled action using a refrigerator generating ice powered by a generator within the target community. To date, Gawwaani, part of Buurimudayto and Eli Daar routine vaccination campaigns are completed. Campaign in Kutubla is almost complete and that in Afdeera and Teeru will complete in the next months.

5. Household livestock, grazing and fodder

For the Afar, the most obvious impacting reality of drought/ land erosion is the serious change in the grazing lands: the grasses that literally hid you no longer grow and in their place, when the rain does fall, the grass is only centimeters high or trailer – grass close to the soil that dries and dies off fast. Currently, there is an abundant display of ‘green’ through Zone 5 to ‘Adda’ar and north through Sifra, Uwwa, Awra, Guulina, Yallo. This, as described above will be very short-lived due to the intense temperatures of this season. The change from shoulder-high grasslands to green patching of the landscape wherever rainfall was caught is only around 5 to 7 years old on the western plains of the region. Ten years ago, there was a special traditional festival to celebrate the grass/ milk/ production and productivity in August where Afar from many corners of the region came to Uwwa/ Awra grazing plains to sing and dance and compete in traditional fast-ball – this ceremony now has lost its place the community year.

Thus the need to re-seed these plains and to support this with re-forestation in such a way to avoid the invading species of ‘*prosopis julafora*’ and ‘*pantium*’ grass is blatant. Again, to encourage the use of / sale of fodder that milking animals are supported through dry seasons is essential. As previously reported, APDA is working on this through watershed management schemes; through pasture rehabilitating and seeding and through encouraging re-forestation. While when looking at these grasslands as they dissipate into dust bowls as the infrequent rains fail to maintain the stubby vegetation one sees a vast challenge, this challenge needs to be met with urgent priority that the balance of life for the pastoralists can continue – the continuum of the environment verses the use of the land. APDA needs to work harder to facilitate the community to rehabilitate pasture – grass-seeds are available but quite costly.

6. Livelihoods for refugees

Eritrean refugees living in the government/ UNHCR – established camps in Assaita and Barahale will soon have a 3 – room vocational training center in each camp for that women learn tailoring; men and women learn leatherwork to make belts, shoes and other saleable goods and metalwork to make fuel – saving stoves for the camps and the community – with the latter, the initial plan is 1,400 stoves costing around 200

ETB each. In Assaita, the organization has established a machine for pressing tree rubbish such as *prosopis juliafora* or even the waste from chewing *kaat* into fuel briquettes – these briquettes cost around 4.00 ETB and fit into the stove. While the beneficiary number for training and income generation is only 600, it is hoped this will spark other production in these camps where inaction and inactivity is a problem. Youth in the camps are being encouraged to work for environment protection since the actual locations of the camps are in extremely arid settings.

7. Building the capacity of community teachers

With the annual extreme heat having struck the region, APDA has begun annual refresher training for the first group of community teachers – in all, the organization employs 327 community teachers in 271 sites. The organization has modeled its current education program in remote parts of the Afar region on the principle of training, employing and building the capacity of a person from the community to be taught. This then means that is highly likely that teacher is below the standard requirements of the government but necessarily the teacher from the community will not leave; will take exceptional pride and energy to work well and will be well – accepted by that community in comparison to the teacher educated and trained in the town who simply cannot live under such remote conditions. Lets take the example of an area called Undurur between Eli Daar and Dubte in Sardo Kebele – during the recent Eli Daar vaccination that APDA extended to include this community, it was discovered that there are no less than 12,000 people living there – now vaccinated for the first time and having two teachers from the community that were trained to teach Afar literacy and basic numeracy – this has been going on for the past 3 years now – the 2 teachers are currently attending their third annual training. Each year, these Undurur teachers' individual ability is being notched up gradually – APDA is investing capacity – building in these people so that these 12,000 people have access to education. The dream is that in another 3 years or so, these people will be capable of teaching Level 1 non-formal education and they themselves will have learnt to formal grades reaching them up to Grade 5. Once the individual teacher has accomplished grade 5 standard, then APDA supports them to go higher through distance learning. The challenge for APDA and the government is that system can be appreciated so that people like those in Undurur can have the opportunities that education offers. To do this, APDA has a team of 8 trainers and does involve the Bureau of Education that the government can verify each step of the process.

8. Going further than stopping FGM – treating the consequences

While the campaign to stop FGM/ C is getting exposure and the effort of a wide range of stakeholders, the community or the health institutions do not cater for the suffering endured by those who WERE circumcised. Being the society that Afar is, the sufferers must endure in silence as any discussion about sickness related to the vagina and the urethra is 'shame'. It is known for example that teenage girls can fall to the ground in a frenzy of seemingly fitting, totally out of control – they writhe with the pain of the clots of menstrual blood as they try to pass them and yet cannot talk about it. More common than this is difficulty to pass urine to the extreme of absolute urinary retention in the young girl or the teenager. Again, to her horror, the young bride may face a knife that her husband is able to penetrate her on her wedding night.

APDA health workers and women extension workers have been engaged in awareness raising at the household level that the community firstly acknowledge the symptoms and then seek urgent treatment for the sufferer. The organization's emergency obstetrics and gynecology hospital is assisting to open the FGM scar that menstrual blood can flow; that the urethra is exposed and that the newly married does not face torment. Since FGM only began to stop in the Region some 10 years ago, then the vast majority of females above 10 are fully circumcised. APDA envisages a long and ongoing struggle that the affects of FGM are accepted as demanding attention and treatment and that these females need special protection to avoid the long-term consequences of kidney disease initiated by stagnant, retained urine. In this respect, the organization capacity, including that of the hospital needs strengthening.

9. More small business people emerging in Afar Region

With the government Micro and Small Enterprise Agency, APDA is in the process of providing revolving loans or around 2,500 ETB to 500 beneficiaries identified as destitute or very close to destitution. To date, all chosen beneficiaries are female and the vast majority literate in Afar or otherwise in the process of gaining literacy skills. They are trained and then given the loan provided the finance plan they present is judged viable. Already, for example, a mother of 4 who got a loan in January has increased her capital by

2,400 ETB by making 200.00 ETB weekly on the local market selling 3 to 4 goats. Now she is about to double that by selling more and also venturing into fattening the animals before market. For her family, she has reserved a milking goat and plans to begin returning her loan at the rate of 250.00 ETB per month from June.

10. Trying to serve mothers at risk of difficulty in child-birth

With the news of a mother having died yesterday 3 hours after a seemingly normal delivery in her home, it is apparent that one of the greatest development dilemmas the Afar pastoralist society faces is safe motherhood. That the mother SHOULD deliver in a health institution assisted by a qualified attendant is fully agreed and the ultimate. However, how to get the mother to safety who is pregnant upwards of 5 hours walk from a health institution is part of the crux of the dilemma.

As a midway strategy, APDA is in process of establishing 8 waiting areas in the health centers of districts within a 250 - kilometer radius of the Mille Barbara May Maternity Hospital. Focal midwives/ nurses are about to be supported to manage these centers with a monitoring/ collaboration/ networking relation with the medical management of the hospital.

What has been gratifying is that in the past 3 months, numbers of births (mostly difficult, referred cases) in the hospital has risen as the hospital continues to expand and build its services.

11. Mapping out the ongoing development future of pastoralist Afar

The organization is planning to hold the 4th Afar Development Conference starting the week August 17 aiming to engage the wider Afar community (including from Djibouti and the Diaspora) to clarify the way forward on a number of issues around education, the economy, females in development, protecting the environment, safe motherhood as well as the looming issue of fundamentalism in the Afar territories in light of a recent attack in Djibouti as well as the ongoing situation in Somalia. The week will begin by celebrating the fact that APDA has turned 20 years old and hopefully come up with material that will lead the organization into its 4th 5 – year strategic plan as of January 2015.