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## **The Best Rains in 20 Years then Massive Floods – Utilizing the Opportunity and Facing the Challenge**

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### **1. The best rains but where is all the water???**

This year's main rain, '*Karma*' was the most prolific rainy season in living memory: there is variance throughout the region and even inside each district but in general, the rain left no place untouched and in some areas, extensive flooding causing property and livelihood loss. For example, it is hardly known that the season continued beyond late September but some areas of Eli Daar and Kori received their first rain for the season in mid-October.

The northern 'drought-belt' experienced relatively minor disasters of loss of life through lightning strike and flash floods affecting people and their herds. In Afdeera, the Erebti River eventually forced a river-closure wall to open up that APDA and the community had constructed to re-divert the river onto its original course. This wall had withstood 8 flashfloods of the river as water came pouring down from the highlands and broke on the 9<sup>th</sup> such flood in early September. This now requires some repairs that the woreda government and APDA are working through together.

Likewise, massive devastation was experienced in consecutive floods in the Middle and Lower Awash affecting over 15,000 households in total: firstly in Assaita on the terminal Awash in mid-August, then in Ami Bara/ Gawwaani/ Buurimudayto in the Middle Awash few days later. This then re-occurred in October with a massive wall of water breaking flood dykes in Ami Bara/ Awash Fantele. Thousands of hectares of cotton growing land owned both by investing companies and individuals became an ocean. The Federal army with a helicopter and army trucks shifted stranded people into school – houses while dropping immediate food supplies and mosquito nets. This rescue continued for some days from October 16<sup>th</sup> getting Ethiopian television publicity and attracting immediate NGO – donor relief support coordinated by the regional government with a temporary command post in Awash town. Fortunately, no lives were lost but over 7,000 households lost homes and property; the communities were swung into the emergency of no potable water; no food and exposure to malaria as well as any waterborne diseases.

By October 25<sup>th</sup>/ 26<sup>th</sup>, floodwater eventually spewed over 8 of Gawwaani's 10 kebeles and 4 of Buurimudayto's 15 kebeles 120 kilometers further north on the Awash River. While the situation in Buurimudayto is relatively containable, in Gawwaani, 1,068 homes were swept away, around 9,000 hectares of food crop – producing land submerged and a total of 11,944 people left at dire risk of disease and malnutrition. The woreda government using investor-tractors brought people into buildings in the town of Gawwaani but even there they are not safe as the town has been without a workable water-well for some 5 months – the community must buy water from Mattaka by jerrican, a town some 25 kilometers south on the highway. Mosquito nets enough for around 70% of the displaced were distributed. The local authorities are really struggling to cope – a couple of diarrhea outbreaks have been caught before it spread but were suspiciously like acute watery diarrhea. APDA health team is also struggling: malnutrition is currently being screened again but the chronic malnutrition that has plagued the woreda for the past 6 years has peaked and there is extreme health vulnerability. The needs are as follows:

- Traditional mats to construct shelter for 1,068 households at 3,000/ house
- Water PUR to assist 1,068 households: 3 sachets/ per day

- Soap, diarrhea/ malaria/ chest infection – treatment medications
- Water trucking for the town of Gawwaani from Mattaka
- NFIs for 1,068 households
- Supplementary food – 4,180 nutrition - vulnerable people

APDA has an ongoing health/ maternity project in Gawwaani and does have community familiarity and network to reach the most vulnerable – even those that must be reached by wading/ swimming through the water.

## **2. Harvesting/ harnessing and utilizing the waters that flow to Afar Region**

The threats/ crises that confront Afar Region are manifold:

- An underdeveloped but developing infrastructure
- The impact of climate change on land degradation; deepening ground – water; herd-loss and indeed livelihood impairment – already there are thousands of households living with a less – than viable herd of a handful of goats
- Over 70% of the region has less than 200 mm rain that is highly erratic leading to growing thirst and depleted pasture

Despite the above deteriorating, grim picture, there ARE as yet untapped opportunities and ways to tackle the issue that APDA is learning. For example, with the vast volumes of water that come down from the Ethiopian highlands each rainy season, much of this goes underground within 30 kilometers of the western border. There is a ground table of water. For the split time when the rain storm hits and the water is on the surface, there are means and ways to harvest and harness this resource that both the available water increases and the soil moisture is boosted to engender plant-growth.

One method that APDA has learnt and gains an impact with the first rain that falls after the structure is in place is water - spreading weir. This technology has worked well for almost 20 years in Niger and other West African countries. Rain – water pouring down a gully is dispersed over a plain area initially swamping the land for around 3 to 4 weeks causing the ground water table to rise up; the first crust into which plant life is rooted to be saturated supporting immediate growth. Once the ground water is raised, this can be used for consumption: human, animal and small-scale irrigation. The technology involves constructing cement/ gation – enforced walls/ wings to divert the water – a relatively simple technology that the community can grasp, handle and maintain. This then is a very useful watershed management technique along with hillside terracing; trenches in the plan – land to trap rainwater for plant –growth as well as erosion gully closure with small check dams. All this APDA has now deployed in 11 sites with a further 8 sites are under construction. The construction is very intimately bound to the community; their knowledge and understanding of their own environment and their motivation to regain a productive, protected pasture. Once the pasture/ fodder production is there to protect the herd from dying, then APDA is also facilitating that community to regain their domestic economy by linking them to the market as well as encouraging them to diversify their food consumption and production with the introduction of fruit trees; crops such as onions; bee-production and the like. This APDA believes is the answer to the depressing herd destitution that can only lead to malnutrition.

## **3. Hostels – bringing children from education – un-serviced areas to government schools**

Having begun the opportunity of education in the pastoralist society now some 18 years ago through learning Afar literacy and numeracy leading to being able to start alternative basic education in the community in 2005, APDA's and the region's greatest challenge is how will those children from remote settings continue education?? – there are extremely limited number of schools with the government that can provide the middle and upper levels of learning and necessarily, these are in the towns.

APDA has chosen the strategy of supporting the children's living needs in the town as a hostel. This is both laborious since each student's needs must be satisfied; the children must be safely housed and cared for and they must be in a conducive learning environment within which they can retain very good discipline and psychological health. For this, we need an appropriate building, good food and daily needs supported. It costs around 2 USD to feed them per student per day. Moreover, taking on such a strategy is indeed a commitment and requires a strategy of long-levity that the students fulfill their education dreams and reach the level they can join tertiary studies.

APDA has a total of 4 hostels: one for the cut-off community of Kutubla who live between the terminal bends of the Awash River in Assaita woreda; a hostel for the students of Uwwa in the administration town; a third hostel in Awra again in the administration town and finally, in Logya where students from Geega and Dagaba in Dubte woreda attend as well as students from Kori. With these 4 hostels, the total number of beneficiaries is 156 of whom a mere 38 is female. This is THE greatest challenge in the process: the community totally resist allowing a young teenage girl to leave her community area to learn – they fear they will lose culture; be submitted to the ‘wrongs’ of the town; refuse to marry as before after higher education. With enormous struggle each of the 38 were brought and each has their tale of how they themselves struggled to gain this opportunity – slowly, as hostels are seen as a reliable place and the girls do well, this will change but this needs time.

For sustainability, APDA is planning to construct a hostel building in Logya – currently renting – improve the buildings in Uwwa and Awra. Also, that each hostel develop kitchen garden to supply vegetables and the like as well as teaching the students handicrafts that they can raise funds for the hostel is also part of the plan. Again, being that this is a TOTALLY inadequately met need, APDA suggests to all its supporters that we devise a system of people contributing to one student’s future through sponsorship. This would be around 75 USD/ month and around 675 USD per year for 9 months of the year in the hostel. APDA would gladly set up the connection that the person gets bi-annual letters and photos – that would also promote English learning!!! – interestingly, with the students we have, we find they come near the top of the class as learning Afar is a total head-start to learning English and they are so determined to do well, they study extremely hard!!

#### **4. Other issues...**

The community radio is advancing gradually – now has government registration and is working toward the balance of community contribution and funding – by mid 2015, it is hoped it will be on the air.

Waiting centers for mothers at risk in the woredas are now operating in 4 sites and hopefully will operate in another 4 sites soon – APDA supplies traditional housing for the mothers and is working toward having a women’s cooperative that will manage each center in terms of the urgent and immediate upkeep of the mother. Construction in our Barbara May Maternity Hospital has begun to develop a separate wing for outpatients; the laboratory and pharmacy. Again a laboratory supplies company from Australia generously trained the hospital laboratory technician and established the system to get the needed reagents – wonderful link!!

The Afar development conference is still planned for February – summary papers of what was concluded as the hindrances to development as well as the possible solutions were documented in English and Afar and distributed to the government offices. It is hoped that the February conference will lay down a plan of action for the various challenges we face. These can be found on APDA’s webpage.