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REGIONAL SITUATION AND DEVELOPMENT NEWS

February 28th 2011

1. The two-edged sword of the current vulnerability: drought and flood

As we move on into another year of climatic uncertainty/ surprises, the community is left wondering as the winter rains of December 2010 were a virtual non-event barring very scant showers in the southern Awash vicinity as well a few pockets on the western border. In fact, the western border saw thick rain clouds forming daily before sunset only to roll away. Since it did rain further west in Amhara and Tigray Regions, Afar herdsmen moved into this border zone to graze their cattle and goats in particular on new grass.

As of December, communities from Kori, western and northern Eli Daar have been urging APDA to assist in transporting water for thirst – threatened communities. This need is currently being met using a donated water truck and project support. The last rain they had was below-average falls in mid- August. By January, some communities in Kori and Biru were found to be walking up to 24 hours round trip to get household water!! Animal diseases have begun to appear, even in camels in these districts.

Communities in Kutubla and Afambo that were flooded in August continue to battle the same waters since as waters of the irrigation dam periodically are released, flood levels then rise again.

Currently, APDA treats severe acute malnutrition in severely drought – affected communities as well as those who were and are bound by flood exemplifying the need to re-build assets in these communities.

1.1 Drought – inflicted vulnerability

The dry districts of the region constitute the same drought - belt as in previous years: Eli Daar, Biru, Erebti, Kori, pockets in northern Dubte Woreda parts of Teeru and hilly peripheries of Afdeera. Other districts such as northern Awra and Magaale are showing the vulnerability of fast-drying pasture. Without affective rain since mid-August, these communities are highly becoming dispersed. In late January, APDA answered the urgent call of the Kori/ northern Dubte community to rescue their camels: up to 20 were dying daily from some form of respiratory ailment. 1,391 camels were treated in the Saha grazing plain stopping the spread of the illness. Again, goats in Eli Daar are affected by infectious diseases as well as parasites associated with lack of pasture. It is known that in all these districts there is an all-time low herd number due recurrent herd loss. Household milk is extremely scant and APDA health workers are currently treating a total of 379 cases of severe acute malnutrition as follows: 77 cases in northern Eli Daar, 65 in Erebti; 160 in Magaale and 77 in the Assaita Eritrean refugee camp. Of the Erebti cases, around 30% are also Eritrean refugees. In Kori and Biru, collaborates with the government in treating cases: currently Biru has around 160 cases and Kori 45. As the season progresses, it is feared these numbers will rise.

APDA has just collaborated with the Bureau of Health to implement a Region – wide measles vaccination campaign including these districts.

1.2 Flood – inflicted vulnerability

While flood sites in the Middle Awash of Zone 3 are now dry, the community remains seriously affected by malnutrition in Gawwaani and Buurimudayto. This is now a perennial problem as grazing land is highly limited by the overgrowth of *prosopis juliflora*, the thorny weed-shrub; 10's of thousands of hectares are now in the hand of commercial farmers and the Issa conflict makes alternative hilly land grazing out of bounds. Thus the milking animals are taking far away to Zone 5. Herds left behind are in distinctly poor condition. 718 people are being treated for severe acute malnutrition and over 1,000 require supplementary support.

Flood sites in Afambo (specifically Geneti and Orra Gubi) and Kutubla in Assaita remain totally flood-bound with sporadic rises in the water-level since they are down-stream from the Logya (Tendaho) Dam that channels the Awash River for irrigated sugarcane. While APDA has assisted 1,300 households with replacement household goods and house-making mats, the greatest concern among them is again poor nutrition. 334 people are currently being treated by APDA health workers who must swim/ row on rafts to reach the affected community. Crocodiles and hippos are an ongoing menace.

1.3 The threat of acute watery diarrhea and work toward reducing vulnerability

APDA dare not take its eyes off this threat realizing the ingredients for a substantial outbreak remain in many communities. Currently, the organization is working to rehabilitate a total of 68 flood-damaged water sources in Zone 1 and 3; support the community in constructing safe household latrines in Sifra and Afambo; construct 10 exemplary institutional latrines; work with the daily-labor farm communities toward sanitation and hygiene awareness in Zone 3; coordinate information sharing/ reporting/ response and lesson learning from the community hygiene and sanitation committee level to the woreda to the region as well as re-enforce blanket awareness in the communities on all means to prevent and halt AWD.

1.4 Household recovery and rebuilding lost/ damaged assets

As mentioned above, the chronically malnourished communities require asset-rebuilding. APDA is currently working on increasing water access in Kori, northern Dubte (Geega and Dagaba) and northern Awra. Aside from constructing double cisterns that hold 216 m³ of tested potable water (water in covered, cement-rendered cisterns tests harmful bacteria free), APDA is in the process of securing 10 shallow wells in otherwise dry areas. Already 3 well sites have proved fruitful bringing hand-pump accessible water to communities for the first time. The situation is hopeful since wet soil has been reached in the remaining 7 sites, the community having dug to depths of over 20 meters in some places. In Kori, APDA has 3 prospective sites – this will literally obtain the first – ever covered – well water in this district!!!!

The other excitement is that APDA now has a second-hand front-wheel loader and is in the process of excavating 10 ponds to increase water for herds as well as humans. As is proven in these notoriously dry areas, the most successful way to increase water access is more dams and cisterns but also the sub-surface dam concept is appropriate. Again in Kori, APDA has its first sub-surface dam with a hand-pump installed to collect the water. The other technology that is clearly important to restore these dry environments is water-shed management: the process of terracing the water inlet slopes to a gully; closing the gully with check dams that then brings to the water table up so that hand-pumps can be installed, a lake forms and the surrounding land can then be 'greened' with pasture, trees and horticulture.

In order to avert further herd-loss and deepening malnutrition APDA is anxious to begin supplementary animal feed to remaining goats in herds less than 15 in Eli Daar, Kori and Biru. APDA uses the strategy of supporting drought-affected households to undertake public works through cash/ food for work. Since grazing is depleted through drought, re-forestation is demanded. This is possible through constructing shallow pools that collect water and germinating dormant shrub and tree seeds. In Erebti, both the refuge and the local community need restocking as well as improved access to water and pasture.

There is now concern that the people of Kutubla must resettle to other land. APDA has been assisting them from the Datta Bahari side to establish cereal farming along with improved animal husbandry. This is proving very successful and replicating it for other beneficiaries may well be the community-chosen way ahead since these people were growing all their grain needs as well as herding prior to these monumental floods.

2. Development news: small strides for a productive future

2.1 Afar language to become the internal working language of the Region

After much effort and the timely discussion in the December-held Afar Development Conference, the Afar government has now mapped out a plan of 3 months wherein Afar language will become the administrative language firstly at the woreda level and then within the regional bureaus. For this purpose, APDA is informed by the Afar Language studies and Enrichment Center (ALSEC) that there are 14 established schools for learning communication Afar in the town of Samara alone as well as in each woreda.

2.2 Afar Language Center

APDA is joining forces with the ALSEC and the Afar Students' Union in Samara to establish Afar and English learning centers in Samara and Logya to facilitate the above – stated good news as well as to enhance English learning for university students, high school students and others in APDA who need English to advance themselves. Afar language learning is the leading objective of this new project that the language gains usability. This is strongly backed by a number of leading people on a voluntary basis. So far, two centers are operational: one in Samara University and the other in APDA field office. APDA is looking for voluntary English teachers as well as the voluntary support of all Afar who share this objective.

2.3 The meeting of the two 'worlds'

In February, APDA met with 25 students from Vienna's University of Technology, a senior lecturer and architect from Johannesburg University and lecturers from Addis Ababa University in a joint venture of exploring environment-friendly and appropriate construction for a school in Uwwa using clay bricks. The visitors learnt of Afar traditional architecture and lifestyle while sharing their dream to join with APDA in a project to promote clay bricks to construct quality institutional and town structures.

Again 35 high-school students from the Netherlands came to discover the essence of education among the pastoralists in Sifra, a project they have been supporting. The APDA- supported youth group introduced them to Afar dancing and music and they spent the night under the stars with the locals.

2.4 Advancing APDA's monitoring skills

At long-last, APDA has developed a method to computerize and analyze the volumes of information the organization collects over its 6 program sectors. This is being substantiated by the creation of a monitoring and evaluation sector and further training. While informally practicing it, the organization has recently decided to formally take on the 'strengths – based approach' as distinct from the 'needs-based approach'. This then entails a much tighter community ownership and empowerment that is actually highly enshrined in Afar traditional culture. Monitoring then becomes a positive tool to advance in the community hand.

2.5 Working with youth

APDA is expanding its collaborative work with local youth groups: two new youth groups along the line of the Sifra and 'Adda'ar youth groups whose objective it is to forge an exemplary way to prevent HIV transmission, preserve culture and language while being dis-associated with *kaat* chewing and the like have been formed. These 4 associations have deliberate links and are highly strategic in the western Afar market-belt where potentially harmful town practices are present – Sifra, 'Darsa Gita, Eli Waha, Yallo and Kalwaan weekly markets. The youth use the market days to raise awareness and influence other youth.

2.6 Planning for safer motherhood

APDA is building up a comprehensive plan to develop a system of exemplary safe motherhood for the pastoralist people. The new referral institute, the Mille Barbara May Emergency Obstetrics Unit is near completion. The two main buildings are now going through end-stage construction and 'touch-up' to make it the most appropriate and practical unit. The British voluntary obstetrician is leading this process. With the government, staff is being recruited and 2 other voluntary midwives will soon arrive to assist in start-up training. All going well, it will be functional by May. This then becomes the training and referral hub for 8 surrounding districts. In each of the 8 surrounding districts APDA plans to establish a waiting area for mothers with a trained Afar midwife in the premises of the government health center. This waiting area will be the focal referral point for the community-based health workers, women extension workers and TBAs.

At the community level, APDA is planning to strengthen the effort toward safe motherhood involving all possible stakeholders. Since almost all deliveries currently take place in the household, TBAs are central to this. In a recent refresher TBA training in Sifra, women expressed their delight in the practical knowledge they now have to reduce death and injury in childbirth. The information that immediate breast-feeding assists the placenta to come out is exciting for them, for example. These 72 women brought a new idea to the program in that they requested to have cover-clothes for the delivery – this will distinguish them as TBAs who have been trained, have equipment and are networked to a health team as distinct from the TBA who only has her cutting knife and probably even has no soap. Stopping harmful practices and sensitizing males to their responsibility to get their pregnant wives checked in the antenatal phase is essential to the effort.

2.5 APDA's working relationship with the local government

APDA's mandate in establishing health and education services in remote areas is to eventually hand it over to the respective woreda. This has been very successful in Afdeera, in part in 'Adda'ar and APDA is in process to hand-over teachers in Eli Da'ar, Mille and Assaita. A very recent woreda conference in Eli Da'ar has mapped out how this will happen.

In recent visits to woreda administrations where APDA-trained people are now working, it is apparent that these workers have breathed new life into their respective woredas of the love and the appreciation of the Afar language in education as well as the ability to go from house to house in remote areas in the woredas to work. In most woredas, it is ex-APDA teachers who are teaching the woreda administrations Afar literacy. The other aspect that is very pleasing is the team-work between the APDA field workers and the government field workers: sharing transport, joint monitoring and planning, assisting each other to see that there is an Afar teacher in a particular remote area and generally supporting one another. What is clear is that where APDA established Afar education under a tree, the government has come along and constructed a school. There are 3 such sites in Sifra and 4 in 'Adda'ar as well as in other woredas. In discussing APDA's ongoing relation with the woredas, the officials stressed the need for APDA to include their workers in APDA training courses, particularly for those workers who were taken over by the local government from APDA. Woreda officials stressed that APDA's trade-mark of the utilization of Afar language and culture and ability to mobilize the people is not found with other NGOs and therefore they are very keen to retain a relationship with the organization.

2.6 Afar Development Conference document

APDA is in the process of completing a document containing all 14 papers presented in the Afar Development Conference, December 2010. This document will be made available on the website www.apdaethiopia.org as well as in hardcopy on request.