

AFAR PASTORALIST DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATION QAFAR DACARSITTOH DADALIH EGLA

P.O. Box 592, Addis Ababa

afarpda@yahoo.com, afarpastoral@ethionet.et, www.apdaethiopia.org

Telephone: (251) 011 5159787, (251) 033 5500002

Fax: (251) 011 5538820, (251) 033 5500352

Update on the Critical Situation in Afar Region and Program Development Activities

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In summary:

Following the 5 days of unexpected rain in late October, the region has had one night of rain on January 24th and a second storm on February 6th. The January storm was more widespread assisting Uwwa and Sifra in the west, Assayita/ Dubte in the east and much of Zone 3 in the south with irregular falls in the Kori drought district and southern Eli Daar. The recent storm was very limited and did not reach any drought areas. This then leaves us with the following urgent needs to be met:

- Water trucking to avert extreme thirst in northern Eli Daar, Kori and Biru
- More animal feed to keep alive the remaining goats in almost destitute households
- Mobilization to prevent the spread of measles that is killing both unvaccinated children and adults
- Ongoing effort to combat severe malnutrition and recovery to household food security.

a) Thirst and the prospects of rain and water sustainability

Communities that had survived on rain in October are now desperately thirsty in northern Eli Daar, Kori and Biru. APDA has been trucking water to undertake constructions of water cisterns but that trucking has just ended. Six trucks are needed immediately to stop people dying of thirst: two in northern Eli Daar from the borehole in Su'ula; two on the Afdeera road taking water from Logya traveling up to Soddonta (140 kilometers) and 2 trucks traveling east to Kori from Logya.

In the past 3 months, APDA with the community has constructed 6 cisterns in Kori and Bidu that can store trucked water as well as collect rain water. Four dams are being excavated in the same district. At the Kori administration site, the government has succeeded at sinking a 240 meter deep borehole but the quality of the water is still under test – much of underground water in the region is too high in minerals for safe consumption. The government, agencies and NGOs are working to find sustainable water sources for these communities.

The next rainy season is expected to begin in mid-March. This short rainy season does not have a promising forecast. Without it, the now drought – affected communities will advance into extreme danger since the short rains lead into the annual hot, dry season waiting a further 3 months before the main rains.

b) The status of the animal herd

Grazing is now scant in all the above – mentioned thirsty districts including Erebti, parts of Barahale and Aba'ala. APDA's experience of providing animal feed targeting remaining milking goats has proven the unprecedented value of this activity to rescue the household not just from imminent destitution but also this brings the pastoralist the joy of milk for the vulnerable family members. Goats getting supplementary concentrated feed gain weight fast and reproduce even without available pasture. APDA backed up this assistance with animal treatment and vaccination. The organization's health workers have seen families come out of severe malnutrition through this program.

c) Disease outbreaks

Measles continues to play havoc on the most affected communities. APDA health workers with the Bureau of Health undertook a mini campaign to halt measles in the northern communities of Kori and Biru where some 45 people affected died. Again, with the Bureau's collaboration, APDA is about to vaccinate all children under 15 years in Teeru having received reports of 48 measles deaths there. Again, the outbreak has reportedly reached Erebti and Barahale. UNICEF, WHO and the Bureau of Health are considering a region – wide campaign to vaccinate all under 5 year old children from measles.

d) Food security and the effort to overcome malnutrition

Inflation in the market has not in the least diminished and food/ household goods remain up to 200% above prices in late 2007. While grain prices fluctuate, they are quick to rise if the relief assistance in the community is delayed. Availability of supplementary food such as pulses remains limited in malnutrition – affected districts. In Kori and Biru, two extremely remote and logistically difficult woredas, the number of distribution points has been increased. APDA will boost the amount of available food in Kori and Biru over the next 2 months.

In the 'drought – belt', the organization has identified a number of absolutely destitute households and is currently in the process of re-stocking 350 of them with 10 goats each. Fortunately in the targeted area of Mabay, the January rain fell and there is pasture. A further 200 households will be household recovery assistance in Daaba and Lubak Daa, the two worst – affected kebeles of Kori.

The of displaced people from the Eritrean border now settled in Su'ula, northern Eli Daar who are 60% with absolute destitution remain without recovery assistance.

News of the APDA development program

1. Income generation in the community

APDA is working hard to assist community cooperatives connected to the organization to boost their activities in the face of household price inflation and general acute vulnerability of the pastoralist to gaining in the market. Animal trade has improved and they are selling grain at lower cost to the community. Overall, there is a clear climate of realization that diversity is better. In 11 woredas where the organization has established grass-roots facilitation for such cooperatives, 25 new ones have sprung up in the last months. These now need capacity and capital backing to strengthen them.

The eight women's income generating association set up through APDA's field workers all have literate membership and are active in selling household goods in the community. A further 4 groups of women are just beginning to gain this opportunity in Zone 3. They will first learn literacy and numeracy for 6 months and then move on to training in association and income generation management before getting a start-up grant for each member on a revolving fund basis.

2. Female education in the community

This is an essential part of APDA's overall drive for community development. In the past quarter, deliberate effort to mobilize girls and women toward learning boosted the overall female participation in the education program to 41%. Now the difficulty is holding it at that. There are so many social issues, household jobs and health issues that detract females from education and pull them out. Therefore all sectors of the program are taking the issue of female education on: women extension workers are teaching females the beginning of writing letters, all members are challenged to see that their wives are literate, the harmful practices awareness campaign clearly directs the community to female education as a major part of the solution to stopping harmful practices. All female students in the program got incentive of a traditional blouse in December. Securing female students is also not easy as still the Afar community see the employed female as first a home-maker and child-raiser.

3. Youth on the frontline against HIV transmission

The program is finding great joy in establishing youth groups that intersect and exchange with one another. The new thing for them is developing an unstoppable love of their culture by learning dances, games and songs from parts of Afar they did not know including reviving traditional dancing that has been lost from the current culture. A group of 36 such youth in Darsa Gita, 'Adda'ar two months ago were spending their day chewing kaat with no specific aim. Now they have all stopped chewing and are teaching each other to read and write!! Their overriding objectives are to develop a lifestyle that HIV transmission is not part of. The organization is planning for a region-wide youth conference where they can synthesize their ideas and gain a platform to present these to the government and all other helpful bodies.

4. Vaccination coverage

The fight to get coverage that will halt outbreaks such as are current as mentioned above goes on. Clearly, 'fixed – post' strategy of vaccination does not work in the truly pastoralist society. APDA believes house to house campaigning over wide areas is the only way through. There needs to be more and more of it and the frequency can not be less than 2 years. APDA is continuing to work in 5 woredas at present to gain a full EPI coverage of the now 8 available vaccines. Of course the most obviously troubling for the Afar are measles, whooping cough, hepatitis B and hemophyllus influenzae. Doing this means taking a team of 25 to 30 APDA health workers to the target woreda with a refrigerator and generator for up to 15 days to walk with the vaccines to all pastoralist settlements.

5. Pastoralist Day, 2009

This year, Afar Region had the privilege of hosting the national celebration. Thousands of pastoralists and government dignitaries came from pastoralist regions of the country and neighboring farming regions for the two – day celebration of January 25th and 26th. APDA hosted the Oromo delegation from Borana near the Kenyan border. The main discussion resolution of this ceremony was that pastoralists want and demand a particular policy for education and a ministry to direct it led by pastoralists.

6. The status of APDA's field workers

Realizing that building academic capacity is needed and demanded, the organization is undertaking a number of strategies to bring APDA – trained community teachers, health workers and women extension workers into line with government expectation. Long-distance learning is currently being undertaken by 51 teachers. A further 25 will get opportunity soon. Health workers are currently learning English and a total of 30 health workers completed accelerated learning to grade 5 standard in 2008. Another 15 will gain this chance.

APDA is pressured to stay within the bounds of funding due to the critical climate of financing. Therefore, having failed to find another fund to support health and education activities in Konnaba, north-western Afar Region, the organization was forced to drop the support of 21 community teachers, 24 mobile health workers and 14 women extension workers in the woreda as of January. This has naturally left the district in great dismay as they are unable to assume all these field workers yet they are providing an essential community service and have opened up development opportunity in Konnaba. APDA is working with the individuals to boost their education standard. The district women are drastically in need as traditions disabling their participation in development are strong. It is also a strongly drought – affected district with a considerable number of destitute and near – destitute households.

7. Emergency maternity unit near completion

Thanks so many amazingly visionary individuals and the UNFPA, the center to treat, train and network to safer motherhood is about to be realized in Mille. Construction is nearing completion. The next step is to link it strongly with the 8 surrounding woredas that the community deliberately supports the safety of mothers in child-baring, each district has its own waiting/ birthing center for 'mothers at risk and we gain volunteers willing to put the project on the road to the correct standard to achieve.