

# **Effect of Climatic Change on Indigenous People – the Afar Experience in Ethiopia**

## **1. The Afar People and their Place in Ethiopian Society**

The Afar people are around 2,000,000 million among Ethiopia's 76 million living in the extremely fragile environment of the country's north – east. They are nomadic pastoralists moving to keep the balance between the environment and their use of the land using their system of traditional ecology.

The land is the beginning of East Africa's Rift Valley, an ancient volcanic land formation. Much of the region is semi desert to desert and temperatures reach up to 50 degrees with an annual rainfall ranging from 150 mm in the east and far north to 300 mm in the south and west.

Being a pastoralist society, the people did not benefit from any form of social or economic benefit prior to the recent decade. The population is probably around 17% literate now after the struggle of Afar Pastoralist Development Association, APDA, the community's organization, modeled and implemented a system of education that adapts to the lifestyle. Thus, with such a recent experience of gaining education, the society has almost no political power or influence in the country. Again, this is very limited in terms of influencing development within their own society. Thus while the Afar people have been the masters of their land protecting it from deterioration, now government large – scale development projects have come and taken much of the natural balance away.

The best example of this is the use of the main water course for national development: the government has constructed one of the largest dams in the world on the terminal end of the Awash River to irrigate 60,000 hectares of land for sugar plantation. This is taking away from the normal livelihoods of the Afar since they use the river basin for dry – season grazing and gravity irrigated farming including a centuries – old date plantation.

## **2. The Visible Affects of Climate Change in Afar Region**

In the past 10 years, there is a remarkable reduction in the quantity of rain in each of the region's 3 seasons as well as in the reliability of this rain. By and large, the rain is late and finishes early. This has led to extended dry seasons with some districts facing longer than 12 months without rain. The consequence of this is accumulative animal death to the current situation of 2008. At this point, there are substantial numbers of households in the central and northern Afar who are either close to destitution or destitute. The pasture does not get two consecutively good rainy seasons whereby it can recover thus allowing the animal herd to recover. The staple food for Afar is milk and bread. There are now long stretches where milk is minimal and goes down to none. Butter in the house is a thing of the past in most cases.

When the rain does fall, it is nearly always torrential and there is damage of flash – flooding, river courses changing direction leaving whole areas without water.

Therefore the visible consequences are

- increased desertification from dried pasture and eventual loss of grass – seed
- traditional water wells in some areas are now very much deeper
- herd loss is around 60% of the herd 3 years ago – more drastic in some areas
- household is exposed to hunger and thirst

### **3. What is Currently being Done**

As with other parts of Ethiopia, the government is trying to respond to emergencies: the actual system of 'early warning for emergencies is far from effective. This is working from the perspective of an outside – devised way with little understanding of traditional coping mechanisms and without good contact with the traditional leadership. Again, the region has no real policy to protect the environment.

### **4. Course of Action the Afar could Take**

If the pastoralists were able to organize their own coping mechanisms including early warning with a full focus on the pasture, water points and the herd as they have for centuries, there would be less impact on the family through herd death. The knowledge of Afar in preserving grasses, shrubs should be used and the pastoralists should be the owners of the agenda toward land protection making use of their traditional laws.

Through the system of Desso for example, Afar have reserved grazing for emergency times. Now the pastoralists are restricted in moving in all areas – particularly from moving toward the rivers.

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