

**COURTING
CATASTROPHE?**Humanitarian Policy and
Practice in a Changing Climate

Climate change, vulnerability and adaptation versus ‘humanitarian’ response in Afar region, Ethiopia.

Climate change poses an unprecedented threat particularly to pastoralists living in the drought-prone areas of the developing world. While research has already considered the challenges climate change poses to those in arid and semi-arid regions of East Africa (pastoralists and agro-pastoralists), the issue of humanitarian response and its role in adaptation to climate change and resilience building has been less explored. This research brief considers the interface between local views about climate change, vulnerability and adaptation on the one hand, and the nature of humanitarian response in the Afar region of Ethiopia. We used an ethnographic research approach to examine the roles that humanitarian interventions play in supporting long-term adaptation actions in Afar region-Ethiopia. Our study shows that there have been efforts to incorporate climate change adaptation into humanitarian intervention programs, but progress so far has been minimal in terms of supporting long term adaptation.

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Introduction

With mounting climatic distresses and an ever growing demand for humanitarian interventions, there is rising awareness among government and non-governmental actors for the need to help aid recipient communities adapt to climate change. Adaptation, as defined by the IPCC, refers to “the process of adjustment to actual or expected climate and its effects. In human systems, adaptation seeks to moderate or avoid harm or exploit beneficial opportunities. In some natural systems, human intervention may facilitate adjustment to expected climate and its effects.” (IPCC, 2014).

A community’s choices and adaptation pathways depend on how vulnerability is viewed by different actors. Power determines whose views and interests are included in the adaptation planning. The purpose of our study was to look into how climate change, vulnerability and adaptation are perceived by different actors and whose views matter most in the planning and practice of adaptation interventions in Afar region.

Methodology

This brief is based on an ethnographic study done in Afar region of Ethiopia which explored the perception of different local actors about climate change, vulnerability and adaptation and analyzed current approaches of

humanitarian/development responses to the climatic challenges of local communities. Its aim was to draw lessons for future adaptation policy making in Ethiopia and other similar settings.

Data collection has been done at different levels to this end. Semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions with local communities’ members, document analysis and observation, complemented by semi-structured interviews with key decision makers and humanitarian actors at Woreda and regional levels were the major tools of data collection.

Major findings

This study identified a number of important findings in relation to the local perceptions of climate change-related concepts and the nature of current intervention/support programs. The following are some of the major results of our study in Afar region, Ethiopia.

First, climate change is indeed a reality as reflected by many indicators e.g. increasing temperature, declining rainfall (more frequent droughts), and deteriorating forest cover. One of the respondents in Eli De’ar woreda said;

“There were seasonal variations in temperature in the past. Six cooler months and six warm. Now the six cooler months are also getting warm which affects the productivity and health of our livestock.”



Afar children attending school . Most schools in Afar have no proper classrooms and other facilities(©Teklehaymanot G.).

This has several impacts on health and livelihoods of local communities. Many households which formerly relied on pastoral livelihoods are now highly dependent on external support/aid. Grazing fields are shrinking enormously due to the decrease of forages in and around the forests (goats and camels feed from trees) due to the decline of forest coverage, and the unfortunate replacement of indigenous species with exotic invasive species not beneficial for grazing. The spread of *Prosopis Juliflora* (an invasive plant species) is a major problem in the region.

Second, children, elderly and women are seen as the most vulnerable sections of communities for many reasons. Elderly people face serious challenge due to changes in nutritional habits. They are used to dairy products in their early age and declining pastoralism has resulted in changes of dietary habits towards foreign products with lots of health problems. Furthermore, elderly people and children are significantly vulnerable because of mobility problems compared to working people who can travel elsewhere to find non-pastoralist employments. Women are particularly vulnerable because of increased work burden as a result of climate change as distance to water points are increasing and they are required to involve in additional non-pastoralist employment to secure more income for households.

Third, there are several governmental and non-governmental support programs aiming at addressing immediate humanitarian (relief aid in times of acute food shortages) and long-term adaptation needs (development support to address chronic poverty/food insecurity). However, many interventions have been criticized by local people because of (1) their limited scope and focus on solving immediate challenges caused by climate dynamics such as food and water shortages rather than supporting long-term adaptation (2) distributive problems (uneven distribution of support programs in different areas) and lack of coordination.

There is also apparent lack of coordination between many supporting NGOs (though relatively small budgeted) resulting in (1) uneven spatial distribution of resources (2) redundancy of activities leaving aid agencies with little capital to invest in livelihood-improving actions because of high administrative cost.

Despite their claims to be working with the communities, the planning and design of NGO intervention activities are usually done by non-local experts, mostly from outside the Afar region usually based in Addis Ababa or elsewhere. This makes the plans difficult to implement because the causes of the problem are less understood and contextual challenges to implementation of intervention projects not considered during planning. For example, soil and water conservation, reforestation and other public work activities in of the PSNP program are designed with the highland regions in mind because most of the policy makers are from the highlands.

There is apparently uneven distribution of aid programs and project across Woredas. For example, while there are close to 40 NGOs programs operating in Awash Sebat Kilo (close to the road between Addis Ababa and Samara), there are almost no NGO programs in Berahle and Eli Da'ar Woreda (far from Addis and Samara). Hence, there are only few support programs covering all Woredas/districts in Afar. One such program is the Productive Safety Program which is funded by the World Food Program and the government of Ethiopia with the aim of achieving food security. The Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP), even though still a pilot program aimed at supporting long-term adaptation to climate change in the lowland regions, it has done little to change the situation. There are two major reasons for the limited impact of the PSNP program in terms of adaptation.

First, the PSNP program has limited funds. Even though the number of people who are vulnerable to climate change related challenges is large, very few are covered by the PSNP.



Group discussions with members of pastoral communities in Berahle Woreda of Afar Region (©Mesele Abera)

For instance, nearly 27,000 of the 81,000 people in Berahle (one of the research *Woredas*) are beneficiaries of the PSNP program. However, the number of people who are in need of support is much higher than 27,000. As a result, people tend to follow their traditional survival strategies of sharing with relatives and neighbors of what has been provided by the PSNP program. This makes it hard for beneficiaries to build resilience through the support, as intended by the program. Therefore, the impacts of such support programs on resilience-building go unnoticed because beneficiaries share it with people outside the scheme. Second, the PSNP focuses on public work projects to realize long-term climate change adaptation. 80% of the resources employed in the PSNP project activities are local communities' labor. However, our local informants believe that these efforts will bring very limited change in terms of livelihood improvement as the problems require bigger solutions which involve bigger capital investments such as building big dams and drilling deep-wells. The previous Program Implementation Manual (PIM) did not allow local plans to go beyond what had been agreed between the government of Ethiopia and donors to the program in terms of budget. Furthermore, the activities in the previous PIM were not tailored to pastoralist contexts as the program was mainly designed for highland regions and agreements between donors and the government were based on highland requirements.

Conclusion and recommendation

The study generally shows that climate change is an everyday reality and is threatening pastoral lives of Afar, particularly the lives of the most vulnerable sections of society such as women,

children and the elderly. However, while what is needed in Afar is a move towards bigger change, current interventions mainly focus on shock responses aiming at reducing the consequences of immediate disasters. According to the local people, bigger changes are needed to transform livelihoods and build resilience to future changes.

A successful intervention strategy to deal with climate change adaptation challenges must be much longer-lived than it is today. Such strategy, as far as local actors concerned, should include comprehensive plans to reshuffle and resettle communities, coordinate NGOs activities with government programs and support rather than prevent existing local social dynamics.

Local people claim to have little knowledge of livelihood activities outside pastoralism. Aid programs should hence support people through training with new knowledge and skills to enable them adapt to new circumstances created by climate change. Some suggestions made by locals such as resettlements, irrigation-based farming and bigger financial and capacity building programs could be of great impact in facilitating stronger adaptation.

However, this is a controversial issue as many locals believed that irrigation projects are taking over their traditional dry season grazing lands and resettlement may also dismantle their cultural fabrics, proposing instead to keep pastoral livelihoods.

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Disclaimer

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The main research objective of this project is to critically examine the scope and practical ways in which humanitarian responses may contribute to adaptation to climate change. It draws on experiences and lessons from six countries in Africa and Asia.

Project partners

Main research partners

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- Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex, Brighton, England
- The Red Cross/ Red Crescent Climate Centre (RCCCC), Hague, the Netherlands
- Institute of Environment, Gender and Development Studies, Mekelle University, Ethiopia
- COMSATS Institute of Information Technology (CIIT), Pakistan
- Norwegian Red Cross
- The Development Fund

Other partners

- Nepal Institute of Development Studies (NIDS)
- Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)
- Local Initiatives for Biodiversity, Research and Development (LI-BIRD), Nepal
- Center for International Climate and Environmental Research (CICERO), Norway

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