

# Perceptions of Climate change, vulnerability and adaptation versus 'humanitarian' response in Afar region, Ethiopia.

## OBJECTIVE

To examine the roles that aid interventions play in facilitating long-term adaptation actions in Afar Region, Ethiopia.

## METHODS

**Ethnographic study:** based on local level interviews, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, observations and review of documents

## INTRODUCTION

Afar is a predominantly pastoral region in the northeast lowlands of Ethiopia. According to the Ethiopian Central Statistical Agency report (CSA,2007), the region has a total population of 1.4 million of which nearly 800 thousand people depend on government and non-government support every year. With a growing threat from Climate change and declining pastoralist income, how does aid enable the Afar people to adapt to long-term changes and uncertainties? We used ethnographic fieldwork to find out the practical ways in which aid supports or inhibits long-term adaptation in Afar region.

## FINDINGS

### **Climate change**

climate change is indeed a reality as reflected by many indicators e.g. increasing temperature, declining rainfall (more frequent droughts), and deteriorating forest cover.

### **Vulnerability**

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.



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## Pastoralist livelihoods



Figure 1: the Afars are pastoralists living in one of the driest parts of the world. Only few Afar now can depend on pastoralism. Average livestock per household has dramatically fallen in the last few decades. In Berahle (i.e. one of our study areas), the average is 3 goats per household.

## Pastoralist livelihood facing competition



Figure 2: Camels used to be important assets for salt trade. Camel based salt trade is declining because there are no camels and it is facing competition from trades with vehicle trucks.

## What's adaptation?

*“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).*

## Adaptation response

What has been done by the aid community in Afar to facilitate that adjustment?

Despite the presence of different humanitarian and development aid programs, their adaptation impacts are limited. This is because there is a need for transformation, but aid programs insist in keeping pastoralists where they are. This leads to *subsistence crisis*. - in which all aid efforts are limited towards achieving subsistence during a time of major changes. In many parts of Afar such as in Berahle, the situation is even beyond subsistence crisis. People are no longer engaged in pastoralism but, the aid community still considers them as pastoralists.

The academic literature and NGO community inspired by this literature seem to have developed a narrative in opposition to government's programs. As a result, aid works by humanitarian community are limited to supporting traditional pastoralist livelihoods opposite to government's works which are mostly oriented towards settlement.

Therefore, the question is: **How can we reconcile these two parallel narratives to support better adaptation? Is it possible to stay pastoralist for communities which face constant and irreversible changes?**

From our field based study, we concluded that climate change disasters in Afar are not **event based** and are almost a constant state of affair. *Disasters are an everyday reality and not events in Afar*. Local adaptation knowledge and capabilities are as a result overwhelmed and the Afars know very little outside pastoralism as they have historically been mainly pastoralists. Aid, be it humanitarian or development must be with the intention of supporting changes in the existing situation. The aid community needs to support positive local social dynamics and not prevent it. Current aid strategies do not support changes in the fundamental structures which would allow adaptation.

A stronger coordination among government and non-government programs is needed to support changes of these types.



*Figure 3: Education and creating of non-pastoralist jobs could be an adaptation strategy: humanitarian actors could hence make sure that education of children doesn't get compromised during disaster periods*