



The making of unsustainable livelihoods— An on-going tragedy in the Ethiopian drylands

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The dryland areas surrounding the central and northern plateaux of Ethiopia are inhabited by pastoral and agro-pastoral communities of different linguistic groups, including the Afar to the east, the Somali to the southeast, the Oromo-Borana to the south and several smaller groups to the southwest and west. Droughts are recurrent events in the region, and have cyclically affected it throughout history. Natural events, however, are *not* the cause of the recurrent famines currently plaguing these people. Far from being the consequence of climatic vagaries, their famines are the symptoms and effects of a crisis in the relationship between human communities and their living environment—a crisis of livelihood.

In the last century, despite (or perhaps because of) the availability of modern technologies, the modernising efforts by several governments, the liberalisation of much of the Ethiopian economy and its integration to the international market, the country's capacity to cope with environmental extremes has been steadily decreasing. From the 1960s onwards this has taken the shape of a permanent "livelihood crisis"¹. As a matter of fact, since the infamous famine of 1973-74 the Ethiopian drylands have been assisted by food-relief programs on a permanent basis. In 1984-85, three million peoples were affected by hunger throughout the country. The number increased to 10 million during the 1998-2001 drought, although causalities greatly decreased due to the improved emergency capacity of national and international agencies. In the year 2000, the international community donated 1,300,000 metric tons of food, at a cost of 287 million dollars. Early monitoring data analysed by the World Food Program (WFP) in June 2000 show that more than 76% of the Ethiopian population—including urban residents, in principle less affected by drought—was in need of food assistance. These people spanned the Borana Zone, the eastern part of Bale Zone and the Western Hararge Zone in the Oromo Region, most of the vast Somali Region, some parts of South Omo Zone (Southern Nation, Nationalities and People's Region) and several other scattered areas. This scenario is little short of a rural production collapse. The socio-economic impact of droughts becomes progressively more dramatic, affecting a growing portion of rural population. Famines become peak events in a situation of chronic



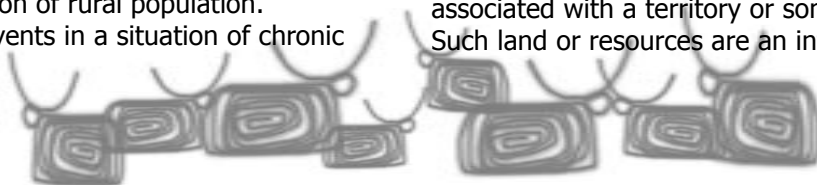
Figure 1. Community planning session. A Dassanetch elder showing how the excavation of a small diversion canal from the Omo river could open new land to flood-irrigated cultivation. (Courtesy Marco Bassi)

food shortage, a continuous threat to the survival of large numbers of peoples.

Traditional natural resource management systems

The livelihood crisis so seriously affecting the Ethiopian drylands is the result of a process of cultural, social, economic and political marginalisation of its peoples. The autochthonous residents possess their own systems of natural resource management, based on pastoralism and minimal traditional farming, stupendously adapted to low and unreliable rainfall conditions. Such systems are capable of exploiting large extensions of lands of limited fertility, unsuited to agriculture. Stock and people mobility provide an immediately flexible response to the irregular distribution of rains in time and space. In all, such systems are well-recognised, today, as effective and ecologically sound². And yet, not much attention is being paid to the crucial conditions that allow them to exist. These include the perpetuation of accompanying norms, values, and enforcing mechanisms—the constituents of any cultural/ethnic whole—and the existence and dynamic management of a number of critically complementary natural resources.

In the Ethiopian drylands each ethnic group or clan is associated with a territory or some specific resources. Such land or resources are an integral part of the





identity of the group, and being a member of the group implies having access rights to those resources. Such rights are highly regulated through a flexible balance



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of individual and "common property" entitlements. An example is provided by the deep *tuula* wells in Borana (see Figure 2 and 3). Access to a well, and thus to water—the critical resource—determines the possibility of using the surrounding grassland during the dry season. The excavation and maintenance of wells is highly labour-intensive, and labour is provided on a clanship basis. Clanship is also a title of access, but, in case of competition, those who have directly invested their labour have a priority. Careful evaluation of the potential of a grazing area determines the decision on the excavation of a new well and/or the repair or abandonment of an old one, contributing to rotational grazing and a long-term equilibrium between livestock and pasture. The Dassanetch fields along the lower Omo valley provide a second example. The flooded surface is subject to high yearly variations, forcing the ones in power to re-allocate the cultivable plots on a yearly basis.

Regarding the "critically complementary natural resources" an excellent example are the wetter land pockets with high bio-mass productivity found at different slope elevation and exposition. In the semi-arid Borana Zone many of these are encountered around the towns of Nagelle, Arero, Mega and Arero. In the past, most of these areas were kept under forest cover or used as fall-back grazing areas by restricting its access in normal times (*kaalo*). In time of environmental crisis these pockets provided the only available safe pasture, allowing the survival of at least part of the livestock and of most of the human population. The animals that had a chance of grazing there would survive and reproduce after the drought. Imbalances among families, such as total number of animals lost by any one family, could be borne out through mechanisms of mutual assistance, from immediate distribution of food to redistribution of female livestock after the drought, or through temporary client-patron relationships. Inter-group solidarity networks would also be activated (especially among the smaller ethnic unities of south-western Ethiopia) with exchanges of goods and people.

In the arid environment of the Dassanetch the cultivation of sorghum in the flooded fields is a necessary diet

complement for human beings. And the river resources are also necessary for the herds, as access to the grasses of the Omo embankments, to the fodder in the flooded areas and to the by-products of agriculture has always been important for the pastoral economy, even in years of normal rainfalls. Other key livelihood resources are salt and minerals, needed to complement the livestock diet. These are traded across the ethnic boundaries.

The roots of the crisis

Two momentous processes set in motions during the last century— demographic growth and agricultural encroachment into pastoral land— are at the roots of the current livelihood crisis. The Ethiopian drylands have seen the increment of their autochthonous residents but also powerful in-migration from the Ethiopian highlands, a process started at the end of 19th century under the Ethiopian Empire. The armed soldiers from the Abyssinian highlands settled in the most favourable places for agriculture, like Nagelle, Arero and Yavello, in the Borana Zone. They brought farmers from various parts of Ethiopia as servants, to cultivate their fields in the peri-urban zones. These early settlements later



Figure 2. Borana *tuula* well. Cows at the drinking trough, located 15 meters underground to reduce the distance to lift the water. In one day up to 2000 heads of cattle can be watered at a single well on a three days rotation basis. Animals are sent down the well ramp in small groups. (Courtesy Marco Bassi)



Figure 3. Borana *tulaa* well. Between the trough and the well shaft there are intermediary reservoirs. Water is lifted rapidly by flinging small buckets (traditionally made of giraffe-hide) from hand to hand. Outside the narrow shaft the speed of water extraction may reach 340 litres per minute. (Courtesy Marco Bassi)

developed into towns, attracting more farmers, merchants and operators of the growing public sector.

The latter (administrators, teachers, policemen, civil servants) came prevalently from areas where access to education was easier and the Ethiopian official language, Amharic, was prevalent. The new migrants and new towns took over exactly the fall-back resources crucial for the viability of the pastoral system. On their side, the rural population remained marginal to the process of urbanisation. In particular, they were excluded from education, both because it was based in the towns and because it exclusively used the Amharic language (the local languages were introduced in the Ethiopian educational system only after the fall of the socialist regime, in 1991).

Some of the late innovations—such as veterinary services, development of infrastructures and monetary exchange of livestock for grain and sugar—

brought some benefits to the rural population, but on the whole the amount of livestock available per each family drastically dropped below the survival threshold. Trade was and remained controlled by the urban elite, with terms of the exchange highly disadvantageous to the



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pastoralists. As a result, more and more families saw themselves basically forced to take up crop production in the semi-arid lands, just to try feeding themselves. The overall effects was a further reduction of the pasture available for pastoral production, while agriculture progressively encroached into a non-suitable environment, highly exposed to crop failure because of low and irregular rainfall.

Big time for “development”

The socialist government (1974-1991) attempted a state-controlled modernisation of the country. Veterinary services were improved and infrastructure development project established in the pastoral lands. The government agencies acquired, built and managed new livestock transport facilities, fattening ranches and meat-processing factories. Private trade was complemented by the *quota* system, forcing each pastoral association to deliver a fixed amount of livestock to the relevant public agency. The government

was buying livestock from the pastoralists in local currency at a government fixed price and

was exporting it in dollars, mainly towards the Arab countries. The high difference between the official exchange rate and the black market price was a net profit for the government, which persecuted direct inter-board trade by the pastoralists as ‘smuggling’. From the national point of view the attempt was successful. The traditional pastoral system kept producing high quality livestock and derived goods, the main national export along with coffee. But the system was steadily losing its capacity to cope with environmental crises.

Migration toward the drylands was further promoted through large-scale resettlement programmes. People were often forced to move from the northern highlands to the new locations. Most available development

funds, including international development aid, were used to implement resettlement programmes and to provide agricultural technologies to the resettled people. In the drylands, large-scale irrigation schemes were set up along the rivers. In many cases the newly ‘developed’ areas dramatically reduced the resources





available for the local mobile people, including access to key river embankments and water available for the pockets of previously flood-irrigated agriculture. Among the most affected

people were the Karayu and the Afar on the Awash river (eastern Ethiopia), the Tsamai and the Arbore on the

Weito river (southern Ethiopia), the Dassanetch on the Omo river (south-western Ethiopia).

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Repatriation was done without consideration of the livelihood system of resident communities and with no understanding of the ethnic dynamics, a fact that in itself

caused serious inter-ethnic clashes and environmental degradation³.

After the socialist period, the Ethiopian government

promoted a policy of structural adjustment and liberalisation of the economy. From 1993 to 1998 the country enjoyed a strong international support and financial assistance was provided in form of grants and low-rate loans by the World Bank, the IMF, the USA, the European Union and several European governments. The total influx is estimated at above 2 billion dollars. The fresh financial flow was partly channelled through a renewed banking system and made available to private investors. Rural land was not privatised, but long-term leasing agreements opened the possibility to invest in the rural sector. The rural population was entirely cut out from this opportunity. On the one hand, local people were mostly incapable of dealing with the required credit procedures. On the other, as the land and resources were still state-owned, they did not possess the necessary collateral. Large-scale investors, on the other hand, got quite interested in the irrigated state farms, state ranches and facilities for livestock marketing in the drylands, a process not at all conflict-free. In the Borana Zone, some local communities were forced to compete on a public bid against well-organised private investors to gain back the communal control of Dambalaa Waaccuu Ranch. The same ranch was established within communal land during the socialist period, without any compensation⁴. The pastoralists found themselves forced to buy back the land that, in customary law, had always been their own!

In addition, the urban population who owned a house could obtain small credits to engage in rural investment, e.g. to cultivate small plots assigned and registered by the town administrators. In the year 2000, I visited the Borana Zone after an absence of a few years. The cultivated area around Yavello and other towns had multiplied by several times! Tree cover had all but disappeared (people burned the trunks to kill the trees). Some had invested in agricultural implements (tractors, fertiliser, improved seeds, etc.) and grain marketing facilities. Most of these small and medium investors were town dwellers and, like most administrators, did not



Figure 4. Strengthening a family's solidarity in Boranaland. The family's members gathers from different residential places at the founder father's grave and perform some simple rites. One of them is the *buna qalaa* ('slaughtering' the coffee), a common domestic ritual during which coffee beans are broken, fried in butter and served with milk and salt on a wooden bowl, just after a collective prayer. (Courtesy Marco Bassi)

More land was also alienated from the pastoral resource management system as a result of the repatriation policies promoted and assisted by UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees). Especially after the fall of the socialist government, many refugees were repatriated to southern Ethiopia from neighbouring countries, and settled in new villages. The package of assistance included low-technology inputs for agriculture.

belong to the autochthonous ethnic group, the Borana. My visit took place at the height of a two-year drought, which had stopped all agricultural activities. The farmers were unable to pay back their credits. Meanwhile, the herds of the pastoralists had exhausted the little pasture available to them, and had died. Only a few heads survived through long-range transfers to remote areas. The food emergency was worsened by the marketing conditions. Before the drought, the Oromo farmers of the Bale highlands were selling their maize to urban traders for 30 birr per quintal, while the Oromo pastoralists in the Borana Zone, less than 200 hundred kilometres away, had to pay the same maize about 100 birr per quintal. During the drought the price of maize increased to 200 birr in the Borana Zone, all the while the price of cattle dropped from 400-600 birr to 200 birr for a three-year old steer.

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Big time for authoritarianism and violence

An unfortunate characteristic of the Ethiopian modern State— imperial until 1974 and socialist dictatorship until 1991— has been the authoritarian approach, cause and effect of virtually permanent internal armed conflicts. During the 1960s and 70s, the opposition to the government in the eastern and south-eastern drylands was framed within the Somali irredentism, involving in guerrilla activities both Somali speaking and Muslim Oromo-speaking groups. Later, the political opposition was organised along ethnic lines, until the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) liberated the country, in 1991, and formed the bulk of the Ethiopian Transitional Government. Their government introduced the principle of federalism along ethnic lines, formalised in the new Ethiopian Constitution in 1995. This was a great opportunity, which could have promoted

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grassroots participation in the Ethiopian political processes and reversed the Ethiopian authoritarian tradition. Unfortunately, all this is still an aspiration. The EPLF managed to organise an official referendum in Eritrea and gained full independence. The Oromo are the largest cultural and linguistic group in the country, living in the eastern, central and western highlands and extending into the southern lowlands and across the Kenyan border. In 1992, the OLF enjoyed a large popular support but decided to withdraw from the first national election, claiming gross violations of political rights by the TPLF army. Since then, OLF members have been persecuted, which prompted them to start underground political activities. Soon, they were followed by the Ogadeni National Liberation Front (ONLF) in the Somali Region, and by several other organisations in Southern and South-western Ethiopia.

Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, other human rights organisations and the relevant international media

regularly report of human right abuses, including massive arrests and illegal detentions of students all over Ethiopia, repeated shooting and killing of demonstrators, the common practise of torture of detainees, massacres of civil population even outside the national territory, violations of the freedom of the

press, arrests of intellectuals and human right activists, and the like⁵. Human rights organisations connected to the opposition parties, such as the Oromia

Support Group, can provide long lists of disappeared people and details of extra-judicial killings, mass arrest of rural people and sexual abuse of rural women. They also accuse the Ethiopian army of having provoked the fires that, at the beginning of 2000, destroyed 70,000 hectares of forest in southern Ethiopia. The disaster was likely unleashed in the hope of controlling guerrilla activities. Currently, the country is caught in a situation of diffused, low-intensity civil war, with devastating impacts on its food production capacity. The connection between political instability and famine is so strict that



there is a nearly perfect overlapping between guerrilla areas and zones where more than 76% population is in need of food assistance.

Rebuilding ethnic livelihoods

For the autochthonous peoples of the Ethiopian drylands, a judicious and sustainable use of natural resources is the heart of normal life. Most unfortunately, throughout the last century their ethnic-based livelihoods were marginalized, exploited and ultimately rendered impossible by unequal and oppressive relationships with successive national governments—imperial powers, socialist dictators, greedy developers and violent liberators alike. Their exclusion from decisional processes over their natural resources led to the erosion of their natural resource management systems as well as attacks on their identity, culture and customary rights. Their well-adapted productive systems have disastrously lost their effectiveness and capacity to cope with environmental crises. And yet, no viable alternative has emerged. At least for the Oromo-Borana, there is an acute need to recognise the value and wisdom of their complex, traditional, ethnic-based resource management systems. Some international voices are starting to claim this more and more forcefully⁶. In this, it is important to remember that sustainable livelihood systems are not confined to their environmental dimensions. Economic diversification is a necessary component—the only one capable of coping with demographic growth. National and international trade of the products of the Ethiopian drylands has been monopolised by outsiders, limiting the capacity of the autochthonous communities to engage in alternative economic activities. Their exclusion from basic services, especially education, also impeded their access to job opportunities, and the recent economic liberalisation processes only exacerbated the existing unbalance in entitlements. Political openness, the cessation of human rights abuses and a journey towards more equitable systems are also critical dimensions of sustainable livelihoods. As well expressed by Farvar (2002): “Neither the survival of human communities nor that of natural systems will be assured while huge disparity in wealth, power and privilege exist”.

Clearly, rebuilding sustainable livelihoods requires long-term efforts by all concerned institutions and individuals. In a particularly difficult and vulnerable natural environment, such as the Ethiopian drylands, this must start from the full recognition of traditional,

ethnic-based knowledge, skills, norms and institutions, and from the respect of the customary rights of the autochthonous people. On those premises, a patient, non-violent process of negotiation of further economic and environmental rights and responsibilities among a variety of parties can indeed begin.

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Notes

- ¹ Fassil Kiros, 1993: 1; 65)
- ² See, for instance, Mutombo 1980: 110; Tolba 1987: 103-4, 207; Thébaud, Grell and Mieke 1995; Lusigi 2001: 13; Darkoh 2001: 38; Baxter 2001.
- ³ Bassi, 1997.
- ⁴ Boku Tache, 2000: 85-8.
- ⁵ See, for example, IRIN 23 April 2001; IRIN 4 July 2001; IRIN 11 September 2001; IRIN 6 Nov. 2001; IRIN 24 May 2002; reports for BBC News by Nita Bhalla in April and May 2001; BBC News 24 May 2002; Kenya Human Rights Commission, 2000: 78. See also the *European Parliament Resolution on Human Rights Violations in Ethiopia* of 17 May 2001.
- ⁶ See the “Dana Declaration on Mobile People and Conservation”, reproduced in this same section of *Policy Matters*.

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