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No Real Short Rains... How to deal with looming disaster – where to prioritize...

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Looking over another precipice of failed rains

By all appearances, the short rains for 2017 (one of the 2 annual seasons Afar depend on for pasture and water from March to April) may have quietly slipped away. There was one night of rain on March 25th on the western border that did not effect any change in the now thirsty north and central hinterland. That rain was more of a tantalizer than anything else. Herds diverged onto where rain had rejuvenated pasture like a magnet, for example Dirma grazing plain between Yallo, Magaale and Teeru. This grass will not last more than another 15 days. The pastoralist community is now dividing into those who are on the desperate and despairing edge and those who are inevitably being pulled to that edge.

Indeed, the hot season came in with sustained temperatures over 40 degrees came in earlier than other years; the skies are clear and for the most part, there is no wind to hail the coming of rain – in some parts such as Afdeera and parts of Teeru there are blinding, dry dust-storms that hamper efforts to move for much of the day. It is now expected these harsh conditions are here to stay up till the main rains in July/ September.

Communities are increasingly hungry and tired as they move to keep what remaining herds they have alive with water and pasture. Due to rising fuel prices some months ago, cost of basic food commodities have all risen. The further the market from the regional center and the Addis – Djibouti Road, the higher the prices. This is aggravating coping at this stage in the crisis.

APDA is concerned for the following:

- a) Ability to continue trucking water as long as people are thirsty. In Eli Daar, the current water-trucking contract ends on April---. The organization is supported to supply a very thirsty and isolated community in Dagaba for 90 days. Kori has been drinking stored rainwater from the February 14th rain. That has around 10 days remaining and again 17,100 people will fall back to dangerous thirst.
- b) As many as 1,340 under 5 - year old children in remote areas of Teeru, Afdeera, Eli Daar, Erebti, Magaale are currently estimated have severe acute malnutrition – APDA does not have the resources to reach them. Then behind them, there will be another 6,700 – odd children who are moderately malnourished who need to be helped before they become severely malnourished.
- c) A killer whooping cough outbreak is raging in Afdeera, part of the community's status of poor nutrition. The community needs urgent vaccination reaching into all communities but there are no resources to do this and the medicines to treat early – stage whooping cough are exhausted.
- d) Animal diseases are now killing in Awra, Erebti, Geega and parts of Uwwa. Veterinary medicines are urgently needed since further loss to the herd is intolerable for an already highly destitute community.

Current on-going effort:

APDA as part of the regional emergency taskforces works concurrently with woreda governments directed through the regional authorities avoiding overlapping with other NGO effort. Currently, the organization is

- a) **Supporting water need as follows:**
 - Transporting water daily with 2 trucks in Eli Daar – contract completing
 - Transporting water to Andaale in Dagaba, Dubte Woreda with one truck
 - Just completed rehabilitation of 7 cisterns in Teeru and assisted Namma 'Ara, southern Teeru with water trucking since they were and are desperately thirsty

- About to rehabilitate a further 3 cisterns in northern Awra (UriKoma and Sidiha Malif) where thirst has stopped education
- Two more new cisterns are being constructed in Dagaba, Dubte Woreda and Besinka, Uwwa Woreda
- Completed construction of three 7,200 m³ dams in thirsty northern Eli Daar and about to construct another 3 to capture any rain that may fall
- Completed 3 new boreholes: one in Immino, Eli Daar to 130 meters; in Kifilu, Dubte woreda adjoining Kutubla to 194 meters and Dangale Gita to 120 meters.

b) Improving the rangeland

- A watershed management scheme in Maska, western Eli Daar is now complete and fully functional. Water was diverted back to the drying grazing forest; watershed management scheme has been seeded and new grass is growing with collected water; two new reservoirs are full of water – constructed dam and a dam that has become part of the river diversion system. This was rain in March.
- The water spreading weir in Kori is being enlarged to carry the capacity of water that comes down the Li'I River when it is in flood to widen the pasture rejuvenation on the Musle grazing plain
- Water spreading weir is about to begin in Burka, Uwwa for a community who are chronically migrating in dry seasons for pasture and water.

c) Restoring household assets

- Currently 220 households in Eli Daar are receiving 10 breeding goats each (9 females and 1 male). Fortunately in all but the north of Eli Daar, the March rain did fall so there is both animal drinking water and some pasture. This will relieve the extreme malnutrition in that woreda – purchased animals are pregnant or recently given birth. This is accompanied by treating the re-stocked animals
- 100 households in Erebtı had 4,000 ETB as a loan given to them to establish businesses. In a month, the first collection of this loan will begin to pass on to other destitute households

d) Human health

- Health teams have now completed 3 rounds bringing routine vaccinations that include 10 antigens to Eli Daar including the remote area of Unduru between Eli Daar and Dubte and Erebtı as well as 2 rounds in Magaale. In each of the 3 woredas, 4 rounds are planned, the fourth round as a 'mop-up' to the three making sure there is a good measles coverage and also tetanus toxoid for child-bearing aged females. To date, the results show that these woredas will be secured against the obvious killing diseases of measles and whooping cough as well as pneumo-coccus that is said to be the cause 45% of under- five year old pneumonia deaths.

The ever-present menace of acute watery diarrhea

Government and NGOs continue to hold weekly WASH taskforce meetings to deal with this outbreak. It is now the 3rd month that the disease has lingered in the sugarcane plantation workers of Assaita and Dubte causing spot-outbreaks in the vicinity. While quite a vicious outbreak affecting some hundreds people in Dawwe was quelled through the efforts of APDA mobile health workers and the woreda government, it is still making sporadic appearances in Gala'alu. In all areas, the issue is contaminated water and in the commercial farming settlements, the issue of unsafe or no latrine facilities. APDA is working to assist at the household level providing an inventory of all that could make for protection from outbreak and safety in the case of one person in the household getting the disease.

Other Development News

a) Working on supporting female participation

As is known, this is the most difficult area to demonstrate results since the behavior change required is deep – rooted to paternal values in the society. APDA has and continues to work intimately with the issues deterring females from full education participation; from safety in motherhood and from ability to involve in local economic life. In Kori, for example where much progress has been made to the point that FGM is only practiced in a few remaining communities and forcing girls to marry has almost stopped there remains some resistance in a girls joining education with the same opportunity as boys in towns where they can complete their grades. APDA is discussing this with the religious leaders and clan elders to see how they are prepared to resolve this.

Again, since early age marriage is still the root cause of the girl's interrupted opportunities, APDA has begun a system of reporting marriages community by community to understand who of the community – level religious leaders are actually marrying people with disregard to the law and Islamic teaching. Through community development workers reporting the age and the presence or absence of consent to marry, it is then possible to find the religious acting improperly. These people then will be trained but if they are unrepentant to change then their Islamic authority will be notified. On detecting FGM, communities are compliant to under 2 year old girls being checked for any sign of genital cutting. Through these more demonstrative ways, the community can move to practical change.

b) Community FM radio

The community FM radio as broadcasted from Samara is becoming the vehicle APDA dreamed to mobilize development ideas and action. Broadcast now reaches as far as Tallalak; Digidiga in Teeru; parts of Awra; Mille; Kori; southern Eli Daar. The radius is extending and it is hoped after government inauguration in late April, it will connect with an even more powerful aerial that most of the region is included. Community interaction is filtering through to the radio mostly by mobile phone but the community listening groups are playing a more intense role. It is hoped to be able to monitor change through radio broadcast especially on issues of improved health seeking practices for maternal health and other activities.

c) Children's book writing

There are now 12 children's books illustrated and prepared for publication. APDA has a working group with the Bureau of Education; Afar language development in Samara University to edit and review books and to see that the process to produce more and more books is accelerated. The group is aiming at books that will apply within the curriculum and are extra as supplementary reading books.

d) Improving the standards of Afar rural teachers

Currently, APDA's teacher trainers are themselves taking 15 days training on pedagogy in the Regional Teachers' College. The Bureau of Education has offered also to involve senior teachers along with APDA teacher trainers in this year's annual training course. The challenge is that in the remote communities where APDA is initiating education, it is not possible to find a person with the education standard of the government to be the teacher. The Bureau of Education in realizing this is supportive to grade up the teachers APDA is working with that they will eventually be under the government once the government is able to reach that site.

e) Barbara May Maternity Hospital

The hospital continues to see a range of cases that are the extreme in both the obstetrics and gynecology caseload. An Afar General Practitioner eager to study obstetrics and gynecology has joined the team and this will lead to improved outreach to waiting areas for mothers at risk.

In the month, 8 mothers distressed by fistulas were repaired. One such mother had tolerated her condition for 8 years and then there is still another 'granny' in the deep rural area to come in who has been a fistula case for the past 22 years. One of the girls repaired had been damaged through the illiteracy of a man trying to remove her undelivered placenta after the birth who stuck a stick in to take the placenta out.

The hospital will become internally more efficient when it moves into the new building in the coming month so that there is a separate outpatient block that also houses the pharmacy, laboratory and administration.