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Pastoralist food security further endangered by locust infestation...

November 6th 2019

1. The accumulative affect of the main rains of 2019

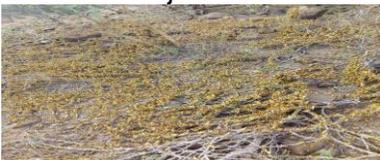
Overall, the vicious storms of August/ September brought more devastation to livestock and environment than actual soil moisture to rejuvenate the pasture. Many areas now are slipping into what the Afar describe as dry season ahead of the expected time as actual ground-soaking rain was very limited. Here included is the pasture areas of Teeru and Erebtu in central Afar Region, 'Adda'ar and parts of Mille and Sifra further south as well as Kori and northern Dubte (Geega, Saha, Dagaba, Unduru).

Eli Daar, Bidu and Afdeera received a very late rainstorm in early October that established limited grazing pasture. In short then, the main rainfall of 2019 was well below productive level and will be remembered for the violence of hailstorms, lightening strikes and utterly destructive rain/ wind.

2. Locusts – persistent despite spraying

As of mid- August, desert locusts that had been swept in from Yemen were noted initially in 9 fairly scattered woredas: Erebtu and Magaale in central north; 'Adda'ar, Mille, Sifra, Uwwa, Awra, Guulina and Tallalak– all adjoining in central Afar stretching to Zone 5. Now, parts of Dawwe and Daali Fagi are being eaten through with locusts pushed on from Tallalak as well as those that flew in from adjoining Amhara Region where the government tried to destroy them. Government agricultural support from the Federal government intervened in Afar Region with both aerial and nap-pack spraying. What this seems to have done is moved the swarm on to other areas. As of November, the problem is persistent, the young locusts being the most resistant to the poisonous sprays. High caution was taken not to affect domestic animals making it even harder to overcome the problem. In fact, with warm to hot dry days, apparently climatic conditions are highly favorable for their breeding and further spread.

Locusts that just arrived in Dawwe, November 3rd



3. Consequence of deteriorating food security

Getting food in any house now is subject to an extra-ordinary hike in food prices. In the north and the west of Afar Region, 50 kilograms of unground wheat is selling for 1,000 ETB, a price not before seen and way above the average 250.00 ETB per 50 kg bag. For a pastoralist household, a bag may last from 10 to 15 days. Sugar too is up to 50.00 ETB kilograms making the calories of sweet tea a luxury. According to the reports APDA has from its' various program areas, adults are concluding to eat every second day in an attempt to manage. The Ethiopian Demographic and Health Survey now reports Afar Region as having 43% children enduring stunted growth, a recent rise from 41% as recorded in March. With such damaged and poor pasture as is eventual this season, milk in the house is now reducing and fading as of this month rather than lasting until January/ February. This is and will affect all APDA's program:

- In the recent 10 days, when asking communities to find strategies to prevent school drop-out in Tallalak, the parents and community leaders pointed to the overwhelming locust outbreak in parts as the inevitable to moving to find pasture even before December.
- Pregnant mothers are surviving on wheat grain made into bread or porridge. They and their unborn child are malnourished.
- Vitamin C deficiency, scurvy is already widespread, one symptom of a deteriorated immune-system
- In northern Dubte (Geega, Dagaba and Saha), whooping cough, measles, pneumonia and bacterial dysentery is widespread. Milk is almost absent from the household diet.
- Guhum in Saha, around 55 kilometers out of Samara has considerable malnutrition
- In Teeru, herds and communities are grouping on the remaining pastures in Digdiga, Namma 'Ara and Mammara from Iwiidi, Barantu, Yewe Dullul where *prosopis juliafora* has all but overtaken any remaining grazing land and overall, rain in the district was much below average.

4. Immediate and medium – term action to take

Relief food/ malnutrition response

Probably the current most intense area of malnutrition is on the Eritrean border where this community has not only suffered the ravages of drought but been utterly isolated for 20 years by border conflict until now. APDA is currently distributing 2 months support to 1,250 malnourished pregnant and breast-feeding mothers in Alaab, Bidu, treating mothers and their unborn and newborn infants... when the food was delivered, the community commented that this was the first time they had seen a truck in 20 – odd years!!!! In that district, there are another 2,000 mothers similarly in need, the danger time being from now to May/ June 2020. Coverage of pregnant and lactating mothers is critical to curbing the stunting rate of children/ chronic malnutrition.

As the dry season further evolves, malnutrition surveillance in all remote areas is essential as is APDA's mobile health team's practice. Such supported activities were completed in September in Teeru and Afdeera and, being the herd is not producing milk, this needs to resume.

Boosting milk production with animal treatment and fodder

Currently, APDA is supported in veterinary treatment and distribution of fodder (alfalfa hay the government supplies). In a household on the verge of destitution with less than 15 goats, this strategy supports the family in the danger period that the herd can hopefully reproduce once there is sufficient pasture re-growth as a result of rain. In fact, with the need from locust-infested areas demanding the project, it needs extension in time and capacity. Veterinary experts are also seeing the need to add mineral blocks to improve the animal's body capacity.

Again, APDA would like these activities to emerge as sustainable in that the community was able to pay for cost-price treatment and fodder/ animal feed was readily available getting the community to adopt the strategy of feeding milk-producers for the sake of the house and if possible, the market.

Increasing access to water...

Constructing more cisterns (roughly 10,000 USD per structure); excavating more dams for the herd and the household and rehabilitating damaged water sources in the community is vital to the whole process of lowering vulnerability and easing the pain of actual drought. The cisterns in particular become the

vessel to store trucked water when the community is suffering actual life-threatening thirst.

Immediate disease outbreak response and prevention

Almost all geographic areas in Afar are now highly vulnerable to disease outbreak. The rain that fell is now contaminating in open pools as it goes through the process of drying out. The Awash Riverside is also a potent place of disease contamination as the river runs with a high level of contamination. Too as the heat breaks and the cold winds begin, respiratory illness is awaiting such a poorly malnourished population along with vaccination – preventable diseases due to the extremely low level of vaccine coverage. APDA is currently vaccinating against measles in remote communities in northern Dubte.

APDA needs to strategically distribute soap, water-purifying chemicals and have all the basic medications available.

Then the medium to the long-term...

This must be a strategy to get the community strong in their own local economy through petty trade, animal fattening and marketing and locally –produced goods. Cooperatives, microfinance are all means to achieve this. Again, APDA involved in the recent International Enterprises Forum picking up a range of ideas for food production and produce to put on markets to break the current stalemate of no production, no marketing and no economy. This however needs willing capital support initiative to kick-start it. What has to be done is to move the pastoralist society into improved food security that involves a range of food in the diet, not just wheat flour + milk when available. Urgently, Afar needs to work out how to feed the weaning child with an affordable group of grains produced into usable flour.

On the development side:

Hostels running and off the ground but still bumpy:

APDA has found support for 14 of the children that required scholarships to continue education leaving a further 20 to be found. Children have been put into education in the hope that individuals will support them in the 10 school months each year till they reach grade 12. As was reported, this costs 13,500 ETB or 474 USD for the entire year for one child – his/ her food, living, school - books and health. Literally, in this critical time, Afar Region needs all the qualified people they can muster to manage the challenges.

Community voices expressing their will and ability to change:

Clan leaders now understand how they can play the significant role in stopping female genital mutilation. They are now taking the lead by agreeing to expose and punish those who practice FGM under clan law of spilling the blood of an innocent person. Youth are increasingly demanding their freedom to complete education rather than marry to please the clan. Mothers and women are seeing how they can benefit from reproductive health services and now gaining confidence to express their actual need for treatment rather than retreating behind the mask of needing to be shy and reserved as tradition demands.

While these changes are happening, it is adamant that the facilities of education, health services are made available and sustained in the communities that these community changes can grow and flourish.