

Aiding Pastoralists in the Horn of Africa

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Courtesy of WFP/Melese Awoke

USAID is working to help African herdsmen, such as this woman driving cattle near Zeway, Ethiopia, to sustain their livelihood.

In Ethiopia, an innovative collaboration between a U.S. government foreign aid agency and nongovernmental organizations has allowed herdsmen not only to survive drought but also to rebuild their lives.

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Abdul Hussein is an old, grizzled veteran of many droughts in the drylands of Borena in southern Ethiopia. He sits with eight other elders in a cramped local government office, knees touching the USAID monitoring team, as he talks about the last drought — while welcome rain finally lashes the ground outside. Like the others gathered here, Abdul is a pastoralist, dependent on livestock to feed his family

and buy his needs, occasionally planting some grain if the rain conditions are particularly good in this parched land. Herding their sheep, goats, and camels requires seasonal migration to access pasture.

“We have never had this happen before. Our animals have died from drought many times, but this time the people from [the humanitarian organization] CARE helped us to sell our cattle before they died,” he said. “I sold one cow, and I was able to use the money to hire a truck to take my other cows to a place farther north, where they could survive. Now the drought is over, and I still have my cattle.”

Many development experts misinterpret pastoralists’ apparent increasing vulnerability in the Horn of Africa as a sign that their livelihood is no longer viable. As a result, they often advocate that pastoralists transition into farming or other more sedentary productive activities.

But these experts fail to appreciate the remarkable efficiencies inherent in the pastoralists’ way of life that

are being undermined primarily as pastoral groups suffer political, social, and economic marginalization. Few national governments adequately recognize the importance of pastoralist livelihoods or provide the right kind of support. Support to sell or maintain animals in a drought and to have better access and higher prices from livestock markets has proven to have a remarkable effect.

USAID INITIATIVES

Since the late 1990s, USAID has directed support in the Horn of Africa to the pastoralist people through projects such as the Southern Tier Initiative and Emerging Focus, which addressed health, education, and veterinary services. In addition, massive humanitarian assistance was provided during droughts in 1999-2000, 2002-2003, and 2005-2006, both in food and nonfood aid. As a result of the droughts and the concomitant loss of livestock, the resource base of more than a million pastoralists has eroded to the point that they now depend on food assistance for several months every year.

In October 2005, USAID's mission in Ethiopia launched the Pastoralist Livelihood Initiative (PLI), a \$29 million investment, programmed over two years, that is changing the way USAID addresses pastoralist vulnerability in the Horn of Africa. Support came from the Famine Prevention Fund, a flexible USAID contingency fund used to prevent and mitigate famines quickly.

The PLI project aims to address the underlying causes of hunger in such a way as to effect long-term, positive change. USAID proceeded with PLI because of the urgent need, together with indications of growing commercial prospects for the meat market, keen private-sector interest, a supportive government stance, and the presence of an experienced regional nongovernmental organization (NGO) network already in place.

The project employed a development approach — building and updating the linkages between the pastoralists and modern meat and livestock markets — in the context of an emergency. In this way it successfully protected livelihoods during the 2005-2006 drought and created sustainable market relationships that should significantly increase the pastoralists' ability to manage through future droughts.

GETTING STARTED

The USAID mission in Ethiopia worked through a consortium of NGOs, as well as the Tufts University Famine Center and the private, nonprofit Agricultural Cooperative Development International/Volunteers in Overseas Cooperative Assistance (ACDI/VOCA). The PLI's original objectives were to build long-term livelihoods for beneficiaries through livestock support and marketing, improve emergency response mechanisms, and promote policy reform to improve market access. The work took place in three pastoralist regions of Ethiopia: the Somali region (3.8 million population), the Afar region (1.8 million population), and the pastoralist areas of the Oromia region (2.4 million population). The project directly assisted 400,000 pastoralists and indirectly assisted some 2 million people.

The project's rapid start-up proved fortuitous. In December 2005, just two months after the project's official launch, it became clear that the rains had failed badly in the southern part of the project area. PLI cooperating partners adjusted by redeploying their resources to respond to the effects of the 2005-2006 drought. They were able to use flexible mechanisms, including emergency purchase of animals before they perished, both commercially and for slaughter for use as food aid, emergency animal health care, and protection of breeding herds through the provision of fodder and water.

Within one month, the PLI was facilitating animal sales by introducing traders who normally procured their livestock from the Northern Highlands to the suppliers in the drought-affected region in the south. PLI facilitated that purchase and slaughter of livestock by commercial traders and butchers, provided emergency water, and helped maintain livestock breeding herds by supplying feed and animal vaccination. Through these emergency operations, the pastoralists had cash from the sales and a core of breeding herd with which to begin rebuilding their flocks.

An innovative loan program for traders made the commercial sales feasible. PLI partners made loans totaling \$250,000 available to traders and placed an additional \$50,000 in a loan fund through an NGO, which was 100 percent repaid. With the extra money, traders could buy substantially more animals. The traders also committed an estimated \$1 million of their own capital for emergency livestock purchase.

How It Worked

For the pastoralist households, commercial livestock de-stocking provided most of the cash to hold them through the drought; nearly half of the money was used to buy food and fodder. Tufts University estimated the cost-benefit ratio at 1:41. Through de-stocking, private traders bought tens of thousands of animals from pastoralists who would have otherwise been destitute, providing them cash to buy animals after the drought.

Supplementing these activities were animal fodder programs to preserve the core breeding herds. The PLI partners, in cooperation with the regional governments and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), helped to vaccinate 3 million animals and provide veterinary treatment to more than 2.8 million animals. As a result of the PLI emergency response alone, the estimated survival rate of livestock increased by 10 percent, and the value of livestock assets protected was worth more than \$22 million.

Once the rains returned in April, PLI partners and their government counterparts resumed the originally approved activities aimed at strengthening pastoralist livelihoods, such as restocking and marketing. Coincident with the PLI, there was a fundamental shift in regional meat and livestock trade patterns. By introducing the pastoralists in the southern regions to northern traders, the PLI emergency response helped these herdsmen benefit from the evolving market trends.

Traditionally, the cattle from southern Ethiopia traveled to the Kenyan markets, and sheep and goats to Somalia. Now, as demand for meat outstripped the Highlands meat supplies, traders looked southward for additional supplies. As a result, the pastoralists gained access to the slaughterhouses and live-animal markets in the north. In addition, the Somali pastoralists shifted their camel trade away from their traditional market trek to the south to the more lucrative Egyptian and Saudi Arabian markets for live camels.

New Markets

At Filtu, in a southern Somali region, women beneficiaries talked about the help they got from PLI partner Pastoralist Concern Association of Ethiopia (PCAE).

“Before, we would sell our sheep and goats to Somalia in the south, and sometimes to the Mandera market in

Kenya,” Aisha Abdulahi said. “Now those people are coming here to sell their sheep and goats. We are selling every animal to go north to Negelle and Addis Ababa, and we are getting better prices than ever before.

“When there was drought or war in Somalia, we used to suffer,” she said. “Now it doesn’t matter; we sell our animals in Ethiopia. Many members of our women’s savings and credit association are using credit to buy sheep and goats in the market here, then selling at a profit in Negelle.”

The impact of the PLI was also manifest in the dynamic growth in the local economies. The PLI replaced informal bush markets with modern livestock facilities, including permanent fenced enclosures having livestock corrals and watering areas. This change allowed for more orderly exchanges and provided sanitary conditions for the livestock, thus attracting traders from the north, who sent fleets of trucks to the roadside markets with proper pens and loading facilities.

Perhaps more important were the associated enterprises that began flourishing around the new facilities. Within two weeks of the inauguration at Harobake of one of the PLI’s 25 modern livestock market facilities, a number of small restaurants, hotels, pharmacies, and retail shops had sprouted.

Fofu Gezu, the local organizer for ACDI/VOCA, explained the electrifying impact of the new market: “We spoke to the community when we planned this, and they told us this was the place for the market. Because this was their choice, the local officials said yes, and now we see what has happened. The community knew that this place could grow, and they support it. Now they are planning a whole town here, and they say this will be the new center for the whole area.”

Lessons Learned

Pastoralists, though a nomadic people, are not always on the move. The women and children of the pastoral household tend to be relatively sedentary, residing in small rural towns at least six months of the year. USAID-funded pilot micro-finance programs have helped women to form or expand lucrative cooperatives; operate small grain mills; and conduct petty trade, small ruminant trade, and other enterprises. The steady stream of income from these activities complements the more seasonal income generated from the pastoral activities.



Courtesy of USAID

Across the Horn of Africa, goat herders and other pastoralists need money and technical expertise.

Building on the success of these activities, USAID encouraged Ethiopia's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development to form a Livestock Policy Forum. Five working groups have been building government policy on emergency de-stocking, emergency animal health care, emergency fodder provision, restocking, and natural resource management. One result already: Ethiopia's government has agreed to make concessionary loans to traders to purchase livestock in an emergency.

The PLI helped pastoralists to withstand the drought, maintain their self-sufficiency, and preserve their herds.

One key lesson is that agencies with a long-term presence and expertise can exercise flexibility in redeploying funds immediately to protect livelihoods. Such technical capacity and funding flexibility should be the norm for future emergencies. Adequate contingency funds need to be available at the national level and from bilateral and multilateral donor sources. Recurrent drought in the Greater Horn of Africa need not mean recurrent distress for pastoral communities. National and regional governments should implement policies and interventions to strengthen, not erode, pastoral livelihood systems.

A second key lesson is that the pastoralist livelihood is viable when it has robust links to national and regional economic and financial systems. The Pastoralist Livelihood Initiative strengthened the resiliency of the pastoralist livelihood simply by strengthening the links between pastoralists and commercial meat and livestock markets. In turn, this had a positive and dynamic impact on the local economy.

The PLI successfully and quickly addressed the root causes of vulnerability among pastoralist communities, helping to retain their livelihood by fostering financial and economic integration with the society at large. While this program has successfully completed the objectives, it has also developed new areas for programming.

Because the initial funding covered only two years, alternative funding sources will need to be identified to build on the valuable lessons learned. Implementing partners, USAID, and the Ethiopian government hope that the progress made in the first phase will convince other donors, both bilateral and multilateral, to provide the needed support to continue increasing the capacity of these pastoralists to thrive in the modern economy. ■