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Severe drought continues to threaten livelihoods in the drylands of the Horn of Africa

Reflecting on how drought has affected the livelihoods of pastoralists in the Horn of Africa, and looking forward. Read more here.

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The last thing that the 20 million rainfed farmers, agro-pastoralists and pastoralists living in the drylands of the Horn of Africa needed was a drought. Having already faced the worst plague of locusts in 70 years and a pandemic that tipped regional livestock markets, economies and remittance flows on their heads, they are now facing a third consecutive year of drought.

International weather services that report on global weather systems, such as La Niña episodes, first forecast the transition to La Niña in the summer of 2020. La Niña episodes shift global weather patterns and typically result in drier/drought conditions in the Horn of Africa and the United States, and floods in Australia.

Uncharacteristically, the first La Nina episode of 2020-2021 was followed by a second in 2021-2022. Both episodes have led to poor autumn and spring rains, and the current poor spring rains are the fourth successive poor seasonal rains in the Horn of Africa region. This is the worst consecutive run of poor rains since record keeping began in the 1920s. Most worryingly, recent forecasts offer a 50-50 chance of a third La Niña episode. This would then be the worst drought event in more than 100 years.

The last strong La Niña of 2010-2011 was made worse in Somalia by conflict and reduced humanitarian access. It resulted in famine from which around 258,000 people, mainly women and children, died.

Huge livestock losses: the impact on livestock keepers

Local livestock keepers first reported early drought conditions in January-February 2021. Local rains have brought temporary respite for some, but the drought has progressively deepened and a region-wide crisis has unfolded. While wealthier households have trekked and transported hundreds of thousands of sheep, goats, and cattle to the less drought-affected highland areas, millions have remained.

Diaspora, governments, international and local NGOs, and livestock keepers themselves have

purchased and transported feed to help feed core breeding animals. In some cases, people have shared their food aid to protect their animals. Despite these efforts, millions of animals have starved and carcasses litter the rangelands. Estimates of losses vary considerably, but even the most conservative agree that 5-6 million animals have died. Using local April 2021 prices, the value of livestock lost since January 2021 is around US\$350 million. The true figure could be more than US\$600 million.

Unlike ranchers, who produce beef animals for urban markets, agropastoralists and pastoralists depend on their animals to produce milk, for home consumption and sale, although they also sell surplus males. As the drought has deepened, pasture and browse have dried and water points have failed, animals have been trekked ever further between grazing and water. They have lost body condition, become emaciated and no longer give milk. Annual milk production in Somalia alone has been valued at US\$6 billion. While the real figure may be more modest, lost milk production across the drought-affected areas of Somalia, Djibouti, Kenya, and Ethiopia could certainly be around this figure.

With little or no milk at all, hundreds of thousands of women and children have joined their relatives in nearby market towns or enrolled in drought displacement camps, where they are dependent on grain to meet their dietary needs. Grains are either provided in the form of humanitarian assistance or purchased with the resources they have left or receive from relatives and friends.

The drought is however also affecting terms of trade. In January 2022, FEWSNET reported that terms of trade in local markets had fallen by up to 70% since September 2021. On the Ethiopian-Kenya border, the sale price of a goat in March 2022 bought just 40kg of grain, down from 180kg of grain in March 2020. These terms of trade are unlikely to bounce back any time soon, given that grain supplies from Russia and Ukraine will no longer be reaching the region and global food prices are on the increase. Oxfam is predicting that without improved access to humanitarian assistance, one person will likely die from hunger every 48 seconds.

Much more needs to be done

In April 2022 the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the European Union's Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations co-hosted a High-Level Roundtable in Geneva, Switzerland. At this roundtable, donors pledged US\$1.4 billion for humanitarian and development response for the current drought. This is roughly half the amount pledged in response to the drought of September 2010-2011. The figure is reduced further as an estimated US\$700 million is recycled and not new money. The region will need significantly more if the October-November 2022 rains are again below normal.

Looking forward, it is unlikely that livestock keepers who lose all their livestock will remain living in rural areas. This is because it will take them time to rebuild lost flocks and herds and typically another disaster will occur before their livestock numbers fully recover. These people are hence caught in a cycle of poverty from which they cannot easily escape. Rebuilding viable flocks and herds is also made more difficult as, at times, they are forced to sell young breeding animals to meet their daily and weekly food and other household needs. They therefore need both immediate assistance and longer-term support to transition to alternative, probably more urban-based, livelihoods. As this transition is unlikely to be smooth, policymakers will also need to ramp up existing state-supported social protection programmes to meet increased needs.

For those livestock keepers who have trekked animals to less drought-affected areas or been able to secure adequate feed to protect key breeding animals, the hope is that when the rains return and

pastures recover, they will be able to start to build back viable flocks and herds. Typically, after such a severe drought, it will take 5-6 years for sheep and goats numbers to recover, 9-10 years for cattle and up to 12-13 years for camels.

During this time, households will be vulnerable to future droughts and shocks that result in the loss or sale of more breeding animals. Animal health services will have to perform well in this rebuilding phase, to protect core breeding animals and minimise mortality rates in young stock. Heavily dependent on cereals until normal milk production is achieved, livestock keeping families will also require stable grain prices and improved goat-to-cereals terms of trade. Without a return to stable prices, the recovery will take even longer.

The April 2022 high-level roundtable was an important event and will certainly help to alleviate immediate suffering. But all the pledges that have been made must be honoured, and additional new money will need to be found to plug gaps as and when they emerge. Further annual roundtables will also be required at least until 2026 - also the United Nations International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists - to ensure that drought affected smallholder farmer, agropastoral and pastoral households that are forced to move to urban areas and abandon their former livelihoods, as well as those who are able to remain, receive appropriate resilience-building support.

Perhaps it may be more appropriate that future roundtables take place in the Horn of Africa region, rather than being held in Geneva, and that the next event also prioritises the renewal and updating of the IGAD Drought Disaster Resilience and Sustainability Initiative to make it fit for purpose. For it seems certain that in the decades ahead, climate change is going to have an ever greater disrupting effect on seasonal weather patterns leading to more severe and prolonged drought.

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