

FEATURE

EMERGENCY WATER: KEEPING KEREYU PASTORALIST HOPES ALIVE



Wiye Roba fills her water container, fashioned from a truck tire's inner-tube, at the collection point near her hut where clean water is delivered by the UNICEF-supported EFDA (Education for Development Association) water tanker in Kokoro Tullu Dimtu, a sub-district of Fentale Woreda in Oromiya Region. Wiye and all the other women from the local vicinity have been lining up for hours waiting for the truck to arrive and deliver its life-giving commodity.

Wiye, a mother of five, has been doing this for several months now, ever since the community where she lives was identified for emergency water assistance and the water tankering service began. Wiye belongs to the Kereyu, a pastoralist people who live in the hot plains of the Awash River valley in Oromiya Region. Fentale Woreda is reeling from the effects of the protracted drought that has killed off large numbers of cattle, the mainstay of the Kereyu. One year ago, the fields and road that passes through Fentale were littered with the carcasses of cattle that had died. The survival of the Kereyu and their nomadic way of life hangs in the balance.

"The land we live on has suffered from drought," says Wiye's husband Roba Birru. "We survive with water assistance that others provide. If they were not there for us then the entire community would not be able to live here. There is no water in this entire expanse. Both the Awash and the Bulga rivers are far away. This drought began two years ago. Ever since our cattle died last year we have been receiving aid – food, water and fodder for the animals that survived. But none of our surviving cattle have given birth."



In normal times the Kereyu travel between rain-fed ponds along nomadic routes that they have been following for many generations. These ponds, as well as the Awash

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River that passes through their territory, usually suffice to sustain them and their cattle. The drought has dried out many of the ponds and as Roba testifies this has led to desperate measures.

“There is a Korean construction company building the road down there. Drought will make you eat and drink things that are not good. We took the run off water from the Korean [construction company] – water that they had washed in, mixed with their excrement. We dug the ground around there to collect it to give to our cattle. At that time, after many days had passed, government and relief agencies were conducting an assessment and they saw us. They tried to keep us away like baboons, but we returned. They would stop us during the day, and we would return at night because our lives depend on our cattle.

“Now if we are told that the water assistance will end, how will we be? We are fearful that that they will cut off the water on us.”

Robe Haile is a mother of five who is also dependent on the Kokoro Tullu Dimtu water point for her livelihood. She echoes Roba’s fears regarding the cessation of the emergency water supplies.

“Unless it rains we do not get any water,” says Robe, “and it has barely rained for over three years. There is no river around here. The cattle are taken down to the Awash river early in the morning and they return around 6:00 pm. If these people had not come you would not find one hut around here. Nobody could sustain leaving home at 6:00 am and returning at 6:00 pm every day. We go on foot, not by car.



ROBE HAILE



ROBE AWASS

Robe Awass is at the water point with her neighbor Robe Hailu. “Ever since the cattle all died, God has not sent us rain,” Robe Awass says. “Kereyu, who used to live drinking milk, are now depending on aid. There is no milk. There is no water here. If it rains we get water from the ground. If it does not rain then we travel far to the Awash river. We can live here only as long as there is someone who can help us. If there was no one [to help] then we could not live here anymore. I don’t know where we would go.”

Pastoralist communities like the Kereyu live in areas with sparse infrastructure where basic public services like schools and health facilities are rare luxuries.

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“Our children have not gone to school,” says Robe Awass. “Where would they learn? There is no place. If we had a school we would educate them. There are those who live near where there is a school who are sending their children to learn. The benefit would be for them to support themselves. In itself it is a big deal to know paper.”

So long as there are no alternative livelihood options for the Kereyu, including the possibility to send their children to school, they can only hope and pray that the weather will change in their favor so that they can resume their pastoralist lifestyle. “We can be self-sufficient again if it rains,” says Robe Awass, “if the grass grows, and when the cattle have given birth and we are getting milk again. It is cattle that will benefit us.”



EFDAs UNICEF-supported emergency water distribution project, which initially targeted 20,000 people at 20 sites, at present caters to approximately 40,000 beneficiaries. This assistance has brought relief to Kereyu women who had been forced to walk a full day to fetch water from the Awash River. 300,000 livestock, survivors from the drought that devastated the Kereyu for three consecutive years, are also benefiting from the water tankering activities.

Of the more than 15 million Ethiopians affected by the drought, 4.2 million are facing an acute lack of water and require emergency assistance. Of these, as of July 2003, UNICEF is assisting more than 1.4 million with emergency water supply interventions including water tankering, rehabilitating old schemes and constructing new water schemes.