



Outcomes of a Pastoral Sustainability Conference: The Borana People Must Better Manage Rangelands and Diversify Livelihoods for a Brighter Future

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Abstract

The Borana Plateau is an important region for Ethiopia— but it is challenged by very serious problems. Both the human and livestock populations are growing while poverty is increasing for the majority of pastoralists. The rangeland also shows signs of extreme degradation including gullying, bush encroachment, and high rates of pond siltation. This brief summarizes points made at a pastoralist conference held for 71 participants during December, 2014, in Yabelo town in the Borana Zone. The purpose of the conference was to chart a way forward for the Boran society to better address problems. The conference included speakers from the pastoral community, policy-making realm, private sector, and research organizations. It was concluded that the pastoralists must begin to better manage grazing, rehabilitate the land, and diversify livelihoods. Both the traditional leadership and the government must work together in this process, but it is the people themselves who have the power to make these changes. 

Background

In late 2012 the research venture, “Project Kalo”—supported by the Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Collaborative Research on Adapting Livestock Systems to Climate Change program of USAID—began to address problems in the Borana Plateau. Striving to boost forage and livestock productivity despite ecological degradation from overstocking and overpopulation, participatory methods were used to learn what the region’s pastoralists needed most. Results showed that a lack of drinking water for both people and animals was the most important problem. This led to the study of pond systems connecting forage, livestock, and people with water.

Through experimentation it was discovered that, when nearly denuded pond catchments are encircled with bush fencing, the vegetation inside recovers quickly. Resulting thick grass could then be lightly utilized by cut-and-carry methods or grazing by calves. In addition to serving as a feed resource, the improved vegetation cover also reduces pond siltation and improves water quality and quantity. Corridors restricting livestock activity allows for livestock to access the ponds while maintaining the protective cover of the vegetation. Sieve dams, trenches, and silt traps have also worked well to heal numerous catchment gullies in the study area.

Additional research indicated that, while the pastoralists are aware of the importance of grazing management to protect the land, it is difficult for them to enforce. Though different herds have carefully allocated access to certain foraging areas each year, it is common for nearly all of the edible plant material to be removed by livestock. The lack of formal policy requiring a minimum percentage of grass to remain after grazing presents a barrier to protecting the



Gullies can be repaired using local plant materials to make sieve dams, check dams, or trenches. The people must commit themselves to maintaining rangeland improvements if they are to be sustainable. (Photo credit: Seyoum Tezera)

Research Brief

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soil of grazing areas. This stands in contrast to such rules forming the basis of grazing management in the US. It is typical on US federal lands, for example, that 30 to 50% of grass material must remain after a grazing season is over.

Participating pastoralists expressed an additional concern: few herd owners are becoming very wealthy while many others are becoming poorer. The wealthiest herd owners have the vast majority of the animals that consume most of the forage and water. New grazing rules to limit forage utilization would be difficult to enforce unless elite herd owners agree to comply.

Such findings led to the organization of a conference to disseminate the project's research findings and facilitate an exchange of ideas from stakeholders to move the situation forward in the Borana Plateau. A meeting was held at the OARI facility in Yabelo that featured a variety of speakers including a policy maker, pastoralists, researchers, and a private-sector representative. The audience included staff of GOs and NGOs in the area. The talks were followed by break-out group discussions. The meeting was conducted in the Oromiffa language. This report briefly summarizes the main points and conclusions from this gathering.

Meeting Speakers Provide Important Perspectives

The research method used by Project Kalo has been unique in its participatory and culturally relevant approach. Input from a variety of stakeholders stressed the need for improved rangeland management to reduce the threat of rangeland degradation in Borana. To begin the meeting, a traditional blessing from Abagada Guyo Goba was given, followed by a formal opening from Drs. Assefa Ta'a and Tesfaye Alemu of the Oromia Agricultural Research Institute (OARI), Addis Ababa.

Mr. Jaldessa Doyo, a scientist with the Pastoral and Agropastoral Research Center of OARI in Yabelo, reviewed the results from Project Kalo with a focus on the work concerning pond-catchment management. Mr. Bedasa Eba, also of OARI, then spoke about the principles and practices of sound grazing management that begins with proper stocking rates.

Dr. Waktole Tiki, a scientist with the CHAINS research project that—like Project Kalo—is supported by the Livestock Innovation Lab, discussed the problems of livestock marketing. Pastoralists need to be more pro-active about selling animals to get the best price instead of waiting to sell when livestock are thin and less valuable. Lack of informal credit and need for land restoration to improve production further constrain marketing. Wealthy herd owners and members of the traditional leadership must provide the funds and help organize the labor needed to make the changes necessary to improve livestock marketing.

His Excellency Hon. Hussein Galgalo, a member of the House of Parliament of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, spoke about the needs for livestock development. He noted marketing constraints that included lack of credit, a need for contract enforcement, and livestock disease challenges.

Mr. Tesfaye Dechassa, manager of the Yabelo branch of the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia (CBE), explained the structure of CBE and the



Participants at the Pastoral Sustainability Conference in Yabelo listening to a morning presentation. (Photo credits: OARI staff)

services provided. In rural areas CBE is focused on awareness raising and savings mobilization. Outreach education is needed to help people understand the benefits of savings and the safety of personal deposits in CBE. As livestock are a high-risk investment during droughts, pastoralists should diversify their livestock assets to include financial options with CBE. To meet this end, the CBE is promoting special bank services for women, men, and youths.

Mr. Cheri Korbessa, a local pastoralist leader, described his own livelihood transformation. He said that the Boran society well-understands the problems at hand. Finding solutions is the responsibility of the people. Pastoralists live under conditions of high risk and uncertainty and are gradually losing their livestock-focused wealth. To adapt, Mr. Korbessa began to diversify his livelihood years ago. By using some of his livestock capital to build rental properties and a hotel in town, his income has greatly increased, showing the utility of mixed livestock and non-livestock investments for struggling pastoralists.

Pastoralists Must Take Action against Climate Change, Poverty, and Rangeland Degradation

Abagada Guyo Goba, the current supreme leader of the Boran, welcomed the conference participants. He echoed the points made and said the society is at a turning point: Borana's future is in peril. He emphasized the challenge of climate change, which has led to lower and less predictable rainfall, while the population of humans and livestock has increased greatly. Camels and goats may survive where cattle and sheep cannot. The Boran must be smarter about how livestock wealth is used through timely marketing of animals and diversification of livestock wealth into complementary, non-livestock options. The Boran must improve rangeland management and restore the environment; they have seen interventions that work. To succeed, the Boran need reliable opportunities to regularly sell their animals. Government and NGOs must assist the Boran in improving livestock markets.

Mr. Nura Dida, chairman of the Oromia Pastoralist Association, also reflected on what he said were the obvious problems of rangeland

degradation, climate change, poverty, and anxiety among the people about the future. He stressed that the Boran need to take action themselves. The Boran cannot rely on GOs or NGOs to do this for them. Government can provide public services, but it is up to the people to control their destiny. He concluded with a traditional story about “a man and a bird,” illustrating that one must listen to advice, use the resources one has, and push for positive change; however, do not regret losing the past.

Discussion Groups Developed Solutions to Grazing Management and Livestock Marketing Problems

Four groups were formed from among the participants to discuss two main issues: 1) grazing management and 2) livestock marketing. Within each group, challenges, opportunities and solutions were proposed. The following summarizes the overall discussion.

Proper grazing management—including new ideas for forage utilization—will be implemented at the Reera and Dheeda spatial scales. This process should be led by customary institutions. Government can assist with implementation. Identified challenges included the need for herd mobility, the weakening of traditional governance, unfavorable distribution of some settlements, expansion of cultivation and private enclosures (kalo), violation of grazing bylaws by some herd owners, high numbers of livestock, bush encroachment, and gullying. To meet these challenges, stocking rates should better match the conditions of the land and be reduced by selling more animals. To do so, pastoralists must be educated about the multiple advantages of selling animals on a more-timely basis. Additionally, the wealthy must maintain their herd numbers at a socially acceptable level and cultivated areas must not occupy valuable grazing land.

Opportunities for improving grazing management include the large rangeland area, the ability and willingness to strengthen customary institutions, ideas to optimize how settlements are distributed, and the high consumer demand in Ethiopia and elsewhere for milk and meat. Strengthening of customary institutions can occur by making new bylaws and improving the ability to take action. Customary institutions can be complemented by government structures and formal government institutions can help enforce rules created by traditional means.

Pastoralist Education is the Key to Improving Livestock Marketing

Livestock marketing was identified as another priority that needs to be dealt with. The ability to sell animals is important for regulating the stocking rate. But, livestock markets are not very predictable, and this hinders planning. Related challenges include the lack of market information, poor choices by pastoralists in when they sell animals, and too few direct linkages between buyers and sellers. The availability of informal credit is poor and diseased animals cannot be sold. Persistence of traditional social values compel some herd owners to accumulate too many animal numbers, further exacerbating the overstocking issue. Other problems include the general lack of entrepreneurial skills, livestock marketing skills, and knowledge about alternative investment in the population. Some types of animals have no market at all, such as cows, additionally limiting economic opportunities.

Post-Conference Tour Reveals Livelihood Diversification

On the second day participants gathered in Yabelo at a hotel named “The Pastoralist Hotel” built by Mr. Cheri Korbessa. He made a speech and offered an analogy between changing pastoral livelihoods and the behavior of termites. Termites build a mound, and then when it is degraded they build a new one. The same is for pastoralists. When the old livelihood is degraded, pastoralists must build a new life. Pastoral livelihood diversification to include non-livestock options is the key to success.

Comments were made by Mr. Arero Galgelo, a local pastoralist who is 82 years old. “...I like the ideas I am hearing...my herds have grown and then crashed my whole life... we need access to land for housing development if diversification will be successful...”

Ms. Tuni Kerarsa and Ms. Dama Boru were among the five women who attended the meeting. They said, “We all have a common understanding of the issues... fear of trying something new is the problem... many of the current resource problems are because of over-exploitation by the wealthy few...” The women also noted, “a few years ago we were poor but we diversified our livelihoods and we are successful today... there are wealthy herd owners we know who have huge numbers of animals but no alternative investments and they need to be educated... our survival depends on livelihood diversification.”


Mr Abera Ayele, zonal administrator, spoke about the difference between farmers and pastoralists. “Farmers and pastoralists both grow a product but the farmer is smarter about how to harvest and make economic use of his product... an interesting difference is how much faster the town of Hageremariam (100 km to the North) is developing when compared to Yabelo. This difference is due to more committed individuals in Hageremariam who are from rural areas but they participate in urban development... yet, most of these people do not have the high level of personal wealth that some Borana pastoralists have... the regional government has a plan to convene a five-day conference soon to gather pastoralists from all across the Borana zone to stimulate a process of asset building and development...I encourage you to contribute to the development of urban areas...we will lease land for you to build your houses.”



Gully erosion is the culmination of many years of over-grazing by livestock. Restoring the rangeland and implementing improved grazing management practices needs to occur, or the productivity of the system will irreversibly decline. (Photo credit: Brien E. Norton)

Conclusions

By approaching persistent problems of grazing management and market access created by climate change and overpopulation with community-relevant and participatory approaches, solutions can be created and supported internally. By doing so, individuals, communities, and governments can make the sustainable changes necessary to protect the future of pastoralism. Summary recommendations overall are as follows:

- 1) Changes in grazing management are vital and must begin at the largest spatial scales;
- 2) A paddock system with rotational grazing is important for fodder conservation systems and land management;
- 3) Grazing enclosures (kalo) should be for community members to share and not for private ownership;
- 4) Construction of new ponds requires approval by communities, GOs, and NGO actors;
- 5) GOs and NGOs need to focus on strengthening and diversifying livestock markets and educate pastoralists about best practices for selling animals;
- 6) GOs and NGOs must help with improving credit availability and promoting best practices for livestock trading;
- 7) GOs and NGOs should put more emphasis on educating pastoralists about entrepreneurship, small business management, and the value of sending their children to school; and
- (8) Similar participatory meetings should be organized for the future. 

Further Reading

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Sustainable Pastoralism on the Borana Plateau: An Innovation Systems Approach

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This project is focused on the study and testing of best-bet land and livestock interventions that can move the Borana pastoral system back towards sustainability. These efforts will consider livestock herd diversification, improvements for forage production, changes in common-property management, as well as pastoral livelihood diversification. A partnership including Utah State University, the Oromia Agricultural Research Institute (OARI), Managing Risk for Improved Livelihoods (MARIL PLC), and other stakeholders will be forged to help meet project objectives.



Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Collaborative Research on Adapting Livestock Systems to Climate Change is dedicated to catalyzing and coordinating research that improves the livelihoods of livestock producers affected by climate change by reducing vulnerability and increasing adaptive capacity.

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