

Aid needs to be more than food

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Getting herdsman to break a 2000-year tradition of regarding cattle as their sole means of wealth is behind an initiative to harness a multi-billion-dollar asset that will help deliver them from poverty. Cahal Milmo reports

THE skeletal acacia trees that surround Magado village are testimony in more ways than one to the drought that has destroyed the lives of its inhabitants.

The bare branches and parched earth are evidence of the six months of rainless heat that has wiped out up to 70 per cent of the livestock owned by the 11 million nomadic pastoralists spread across the Horn of Africa in the worst drought for a decade.

But in Magado, a tiny isolated community of herdsman deep in the arid bush of southern Ethiopia, the acacia trees have helped extract a terrible price for the

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Village elder Galamo Dima

drought and the failure of the outside world to react quickly to their plight.

Humanitarian aid to Africa has grown almost six-fold in the past eight years from US\$946 million to \$5.6 billion (\$8.48 billion). But Magado's share of this windfall came too late.

One day, three months ago, herdsman Worish Catalo, 60, walked out to one of the acacia trees under which he had watched his herd of 80 cattle from dawn to dusk and hanged himself among the wasted corpses of his cattle.

Catalo, who had six children, was only the first. By the time the October rains arrived, four more men had made the journey to acacia trees. Five of the 13 heads of family had killed themselves from the shame and despair of watching their cattle, raised from birth and treated like offspring, dwindle and perish. Of the 2000 cattle before the drought began

at the start of this year, only two remain, an attrition rate of 99 per cent.

Magado people belong to the Borena, a once-feared tribe of nomadic herdsman who hold their livestock in such high esteem that when kinsmen meet they ask about the wellbeing of their herds long before that of wives or children. Nine million Borena live in an increasingly lawless region straddling the Ethiopian and Kenyan border.

No one in Magado has died from starvation. In March, long after the cattle were beyond salvation, emergency food aid arrived to keep the pastoralists alive. The village is proof of what experts say is an international community failing to provide help when it is needed most. Across the Borena lands, it is estimated 150,000 cattle have died or two-thirds of the entire herd.

Village elder Galamo Dima, 45, now has a meagre supply of beans and maize to feed her seven children. The milk and meat her 10 cattle once provided are a stomach-cramping memory.

She sits on a stool, watching a sudden deluge that eight months ago would have been greeted as a salvation. Now the rain has turned the empty cattle enclosures into quagmires and washed the dust from five new stone tombs. Most of the herdsman stand around trying to keep dry the piles of firewood they have collected for sale at the nearest market, an eight-hour walk away.

Dima said: "The aid came too late for us. We were given livestock feed but there were no animals to give it to. Yes, we have survived. But because we have lost our source of income, we can no longer send our children to school. It has been a terrible time. We must make a living from firewood, wild crops. We have lost people and animals. We are proud; we have no wish to live off others. Perhaps it is better for the men who have gone."

Magado, and the thousands of other Borena pastoralist settlements spread across southern Ethiopia, are part of the Horn of Africa's great cow economy. For more than two millennia, the Borena have eked an existence from the bleak landscape, shifting to seasonal feeding grounds and using communal wells set out according to a traditional co-operative system called gada.

That way of life is now under threat. The gada, which relies on well-off families donating cows to those who have lost animals in a drought, no longer has the resources to restore the fortunes of herdsman such as the people of Magado.

The nomadic tribes of the region stretching from Eritrea to Kenya and Somalia to Ethiopia have long been persecuted or ignored by national Governments anxious to restrict access to water sources and traditional grazing lands. But with a bull valued at about £350 (\$994) and a breeding cow at £150, they possess considerable wealth. One assessment put the value of the livestock in southern Ethiopia prior to the drought at between £3 billion and £4.5 billion.

So why was not more done to ensure this asset was preserved after the alarm about an impending drought was raised last December? Care International says it is due to an aid system that responds only when an emergency is at its height and relies too heavily on distributing food. From the famine in the west African country of Niger to the drought in the Horn of Africa, it is estimated that 35 million people faced starvation this year in crises which could have been prevented by an earlier response.

Care UK chief executive Geoffrey Dennis said: "What's needed is a fundamental overhaul of the way emergencies are funded so we can respond quickly, protect people from the worst effects, such as losing livestock, and support the recov-



**NEW APPROACH:
More than just
food aid is
needed to
deliver Africa's
poor from the
cycle of poverty
exacerbated by
the vagaries of
nature.**

PICTURE / REUTERS

show nearly 80 per cent of appeals for food aid in the country were met by donors this year. But just 35 per cent of requests for non-food aid — amounting to US\$110 million — actually received money.

A senior executive of an international agency based in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, said: "We know what we want to do, we know how we can do it but there is a wrong-headed bureaucracy in international aid that stops things being done in a timely fashion to prevent disasters resulting from drought."

However, a groundbreaking attempt to change such thinking is centred on the Borena and communities surrounding Magado.

The £2.5 million project, funded by the US Government's development department USAid, swung into action at the height of the drought by setting up small-scale slaughter houses to kill animals weakened by drought. The meat was dried and sold to provide savings for the owners to buy new animals once conditions improve. Other initiatives included bringing fodder from further afield to ensure the survival of a core breeding herd.

USAid figures show that for every US\$1 spent on such emergency measures, including a mass vaccination programme for drought-related disease, there was a benefit to the Borena tribesmen of US\$22. By the end of next month, they will know whether the "short rains" in Ethiopia, lasting from October to November, have been sufficient to prevent another drought next year and allow the restocking of the pastoralist herds.

But an obstacle to the project to restore the livelihoods of the Borena is persuading them to abandon 2000 years of tradition — dictating that cattle are accrued as a symbol of wealth and status — and send their animals to be slaughtered or exported to markets in the Middle East.

— INDEPENDENT

ery afterwards. Without this, the downward spiral will continue. Each time people fall into emergency, they become poorer, less able to escape poverty and more likely to be hit by emergency again."

The disparity between emergency food

aid, often subsidised surpluses grown by countries such as the United States, and longer-term development aid is particularly severe in Ethiopia.

Figures from the London-based think-tank, the Overseas Development Institute,