



Voices from the source: struggles with local water security in Ethiopia

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This assessment explored local water security in two very different sites in rural Ethiopia – a pastoral district in the eastern Somali region (Shinile), and a somewhat remote agricultural district in the south (Konso). The following questions were addressed using a combination of field research and analysis of available secondary data and literature:

- What are the physical, social, economic and political drivers of water insecurity in different locations in Ethiopia?
- How have different communities responded to situations of water stress?
- What should be the public policy and institutional priorities to improve resilience to water stress at a local level, and reduce the negative impacts on communities?

The findings clearly reveal that water security, from the perspective of communities, cannot be reduced to a single diagnostic. Neither volumetric measures of water use, nor the presence of an improved source within a certain distance (1.5 km is the official standard for coverage in rural Ethiopia), adequately capture the way in which households in these environments achieve – or struggle to achieve - a basic level of water security. People use water for different purposes from multiple sources with different profiles in terms of convenience, quality, reliability, cost and access rights, across different seasons and years, according to their wider livelihood priorities and pressures. Wealth status, access to labour, transport and storage assets, particular livelihood or health needs, household composition, and intra-household relations all come into play in determining which sources to use, and how much water to use for which purposes. Convenient unimproved sources are consistently preferred over more distant improved sources, unless sources are specifically known to be contaminated or unpleasant to drink. Motorised boreholes present in some sites are expensive - in some cases similar to the cost of piped water in the UK - partly due to the high costs of fuel but also due to the need for adequate funds for maintenance and repairs. Financial and institutional models to ensure reliable, affordable supply in these conditions remain elusive.

Social relations emerge as critical for ensuring water security in a context where many face long and difficult journeys (and long queues) to access water, exacerbated by frequent drying and/or breakdown of sources. Possibilities to share or borrow either water itself, transport assets (principally donkeys) and labour for water collection (and other activities e.g. farmwork) provide vital flexibility for households in managing the allocation of their assets. These enable them to avoid the worst effects of poor access and, to some degree, to control the opportunity costs of lengthy water collection times. These arrangements also provide a social buffer for households who may face a sudden access difficulty either due to source failure or to non water-related factors such as sickness of household members, or loss of a donkey. They do have their limits

however, and extremes of poor water access are seen to drive outmigration from the worst affected locations.

In spite of the social buffer, water insecurity remains a significant challenge. In both sites communities face difficult water access in the dry season, and have struggled with successive years of rainfall failure in recent years. They report having to sacrifice agricultural work and paid labour as a result, as well as restricting water use for hygiene and in some cases removing children from school. Women bear the brunt of the labour demand for water collection, and may extend their working hours well into the night when water collection times are long and coincide with peak demands for agricultural labour. Missed agricultural labour or domestic tasks can be a cause of domestic conflict. Under extreme shortage, however, men may share the task of water collection. This is just one illustration of the fact that drought responses are not simply an extension of normal dry season coping patterns, but represent a step change once certain thresholds are breached.

The study initially focused on access to water supply (for domestic and productive uses). However, the impact of high rainfall variability on both agricultural and livestock production emerged as the most important dimension of water insecurity for most communities. People respond to this pressure, where they can, by diversifying livelihoods or migrating to more promising areas. Both of these responses may be temporary or permanent, and may be either a planned accumulation strategy or a survival response. Livelihoods are thus highly dynamic over time in both of the districts studied. Some new activities are non water-dependent – such as wage labour – while in other cases people are exploiting previously untapped water availability to increase irrigation. Survival-type diversification may involve further degradation of the natural environment, for example firewood sales and charcoal production contribute to deforestation.

In the first sections of this report, these pressures on livelihoods and household-level responses are discussed in detail. This is followed by an examination of government responses at local and national level, and discussion of possible ways forward. It emerges that local government is highly constrained in terms of its ability to respond to the complex water security situation in an integrated, livelihoods-based fashion. National policy makes some interesting and ambitious proposals, and is increasingly paying attention to ensuring the sustainability of water schemes and exploring possibilities to better support households' own water investments by enabling and regulating self-supply. Outstanding gaps include linkage of water service provision with resource management for buffering of groundwater supply, and greater clarity on the various water- and livelihood-related thresholds of water security which would inform more locally-responsive planning and drought response.



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This summary is drawn from the Working Paper of the same name written by Mengistu Dessalegn, Likimyelesh Nigussie, Wondwosen Michago, Josephine Tucker, Alan Nicol and Roger Calow.

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