"LIKE A DROP OF WATER ON A FIRE"

INADEQUATE INVESTMENT IN DURABLE SOLUTIONS FOR DROUGHT IDPS IN ETHIOPIA

Ann Hollingsworth

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Cover Photo: Young girl displaced by drought in Ethiopia. Photo Credit: Refugees International.
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SUMMARY

In the Somali region of eastern Ethiopia, drought internally displaced persons (IDPs)—people who have been forced to relocate because of the effects of severe drought—are now a forgotten population. More than 500,000 IDPs in the country have been displaced by drought and other climate-related causes, and almost 350,000 of them reside in the Somali region. Although they received some humanitarian assistance, including food and water, in the immediate wake of the devastating 2015–2016 drought, most of that initial support has ended. Now the situation is getting worse, especially for women and girls.

It became clear early on that the reason IDPs could not return home was because they had lost their livelihoods—most are pastoralists whose herds were decimated by the drought. Nevertheless, neither the government nor the international community made substantive investments in durable solutions, such as recovering livelihoods or facilitating the refugees’ integration into their new homes. IDPs therefore remained dependent on a humanitarian lifeline that offered them limited opportunity to become self-reliant and failed to promote the overall resilience of the host communities in which they settled. This missed opportunity has only prolonged aid dependency and suffering.

Drought IDPs have settled in IDP sites in sedentary Somali communities in and around the outskirts of towns and cities. They are often on friendly terms with their neighboring host communities. However, those local populations have also felt the impacts of the drought, lack access to sufficient public services, and generally have few resources to share. In locations where local clans are not the same as those of the displaced, integration can be even more challenging.

The humanitarian and development communities both have taken steps to acknowledge the importance of durable solutions, but challenges remain regarding policy implementation and securing adequate resources. The Somali regional government has worked with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to create a co-led Durable Solutions Working Group (DSWG). The DSWG has conducted laudable analysis but needs to further strengthen humanitarian and development actors’ support for drought IDP responses. The Ethiopian national government and the Somali regional government, as well as the international humanitarian and development communities, should rapidly shift their strategic planning and financial resources to supporting durable solutions, including local integration. They also must provide support for creating new livelihood opportunities and extend the reach of local services.

Finally, although drought predictions in the near term have been scaled back moderately, it still is imperative that planning be put in place to prepare for anticipated future droughts, given the vulnerability of those currently displaced and the potential for new displacement.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

• Donors should increase funding and scale up food assistance and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) programs, including for hygiene and disease prevention, in recognition of ongoing humanitarian needs.

• Donors should support durable solutions and invest in long-term funding commitments, especially efforts to integrate the drought IDP population into new host communities and provide them livelihood support.

• The Somali regional government and humanitarian and development actors should prioritize improving public services, including access to water and sanitation, in communities hosting IDPs. These interventions will help vulnerable populations, including women and girls, to increase their resilience, especially in the face of future droughts.

• The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the UK Department for International Development (DFID) should support new pilot projects in the Somali region to help build resilience among those displaced by drought.

• Donor priorities for programming support should encompass the following: local integration, including access to basic services; increased access to water through investments in borehole rehabilitation in peri-urban areas to benefit both host and IDP communities; and skills training to enable IDPs to switch livelihoods away from pastoralism.

• The national and regional governments, along with the international community, must prioritize preparedness for future droughts and make plans to lessen the expected emergency needs of those displaced by drought.
BACKGROUND

A low-income country of more than 100 million people, Ethiopia has made impressive socioeconomic progress over the last decade. The poverty rate has been cut roughly in half, and access to education, health care, and other basic social services has markedly increased. Nonetheless, significant development and humanitarian challenges persist. Eighty percent of the population relies on rain-fed agriculture for its livelihood, and a third of the population is food insecure.

In 2018, Ethiopia had the highest number of newly displaced people in the world: almost 2.9 million. This movement was driven largely by intercommunal violence, but also by drought. The country experiences frequent, sometimes severe droughts, as well as seasonal flooding, which disrupt food production, worsen food insecurity, and lead to displacement. This highly variable climate system and the underlying vulnerability of Ethiopia’s population make them vulnerable to natural hazards and the effects of climate change.

In 2015–2016, Ethiopia suffered one of its worst droughts in 50 years, caused in part by El Niño climatic changes. The impacts were compounded by below-average rainfall in 2016 and 2017, which primarily affected the south and southeastern parts of the country. The protracted nature of the droughts, followed by severe flooding in parts of the country in 2018, left many households unable to recover. Millions of people continue to require humanitarian support in the face of high levels of food insecurity, and approximately 508,000 people remain displaced by climate-related causes such as droughts.

The Somali region was one of the worst-affected areas in Ethiopia. Almost 350,000 individuals who have been displaced by drought and other climate-related causes reside in the Somali region. The drought internally displaced persons (IDPs) whom the Refugees International team interviewed were largely destitute pastoralists who had faced catastrophic, unrecoverable loss to their livestock. Most have been displaced for three to four years and are living in peri-urban areas. In general, they have settled in places where local integration is more feasible because the host community is of their same clan. These host communities are generally welcoming but have few resources to share.

A vast majority of the IDPs whom Refugees International interviewed do not want to return to a pastoral way of life. However, there was a notable generational divide. The older generation was willing to return home to restart their pastoralist life, but the younger generation—especially women and teenagers—wanted to learn new skills, such as farming, or start their own businesses.

Context in Ethiopia: International and Government Efforts to Address Resilience and Ongoing Challenges

Recognizing the threat that climate change presents to Ethiopia’s development and the human security of its people, the government of Ethiopia has been partnering with development and humanitarian partners to promote resilience—that is, the capacity of individuals and communities “to resist, absorb, accommodate, adapt to, transform and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner,” preserve stability, or even adapt in a more sustainable way. 

In the Ethiopian context, as elsewhere, building resilience serves several critical purposes. First, it enables displaced populations to seize opportunities for development and withstand future shocks. Second, it ensures that communities hosting IDPs can better address the needs of the displaced even as they themselves face challenges. Third, for all communities, resilience building helps ensure that natural hazards do not become disasters that cause suffering and displacement in the first place. It is important to understand resilience building in Ethiopia in the context of all of these objectives.

It has become clear that resilience building for climate-related disasters must be made a higher priority; however, investments unfortunately have fallen short thus far. In 2014, the Somali regional government worked with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to establish and then co-lead the Durable Solutions Working Group (DSWG). Early on, the DSWG conducted an IDP Verification and Intentions Survey to inform strategic planning. Subsequent analysis showed an increase in the proportion of persons displaced by climate-related causes rather than conflict. In addition, Refugees International was told that the results of the intention survey clearly

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demonstrated the need for durable solutions, including shelter, educational support, and income-generation activities. In field interviews, Refugees International learned that the focus on conflict displacement resulted in only a limited number of political and financial commitments made to populations displaced by climate-related causes.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and others, including government officials, have supported efforts to bridge the humanitarian-development divide, which creates opportunities for increasing investment in resilience building. In 2018, the government of Ethiopia, OCHA, and humanitarian partners developed a Humanitarian and Disaster Resilience Plan (HDRP), whose primary components include a pillar on prevention and mitigation. However, in response to a sharp uptick in intercommunal violence that left 1.4 million people displaced in 2018, the majority of funding was shifted to emergency food distribution and nutrition. As a result, other elements of the plan designed to assist drought IDP communities in becoming more self-sufficient were left significantly underfunded. Refugees International has reported on the challenges facing conflict IDPs, including concerns about how the government is responding to their needs.

The 2019 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), developed in partnership with the Ethiopian government, designated 2019 as a transition year, calling for stronger ties to development programming even as the risk of new humanitarian emergencies persists.12

“In this period of transition, where additional challenges and climate shocks may result in further humanitarian needs and the accentuation of existing vulnerabilities, the importance of early action and investment in prevention and recovery, cannot be stressed enough. This will not only reduce costly emergency operations, but avert unnecessary suffering.”

– Mr. Aeneas Chapinga Chuma, UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator

OCHA currently is working with the government to develop a multiyear strategy for the period 2020–2023 that aims to further bridge the humanitarian-development divide. This strategy development affords a new opportunity to foster buy-in and engagement on making resilience investment and policies a priority. However, Refugees International’s interviews with key stakeholders in Ethiopia pointed to multiple challenges in achieving this goal. First, there is a divide between the humanitarian and development organizations and their priorities. Many actors agree that sustainable solutions are the best way forward, but they remain deeply concerned about how portfolios and funding streams may change.

Second, responses of the government of Ethiopia and the international community to internal displacement, especially to those displaced by drought, still focus largely on lifesaving humanitarian interventions.

Certainly, addressing the acute problem of chronic food insecurity remains imperative—of the 8.3 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in Ethiopia as of June 2019, about 4.6 million suffer from moderate acute malnutrition (MAM) or severe acute malnutrition (SAM). The population of drought IDPs in the Somali region has ongoing emergency humanitarian needs, including improved access to water, food, and shelter. Women and girls are especially vulnerable, as families are under enormous pressure to meet even their basic needs. Nevertheless, humanitarian workers in Ethiopia told Refugees International that, as assistance continues to shift to new emergencies, conditions for this population are only getting worse. Even in the face of dire needs, aid provided in the early years of the response is no longer available.

Meanwhile, the critical transition to development-oriented responses and durable solutions has made only limited headway. Over the past decade, both the Ethiopian government and major donors, including the United States, the European Union, and the UN, have invested in resilience programs and projects in Ethiopia, including expanding water use for agriculture and providing vocational training. However, as described above, their needs are not being adequately met. Moreover, the government has not engaged in robust planning to mitigate the effects of future droughts. Donors should increase funding and scale up food

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assistance and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) programs, including for hygiene and disease prevention, in recognition of ongoing humanitarian needs. However, they must also invest in resilience-building efforts.

Humanitarian Needs Are Growing

“We miss one day of food. Then there is another day.”

- BILAN, 40 YEARS OLD, FABURO IDP SITE

Families that the Refugees International team interviewed told of the devastating losses they faced to their livestock during the drought. Some were able to sell some of their livestock when the drought started, but the majority watched their animals die; families lost anywhere from 20 to 200 animals, including goats, sheep, and camels, to the lack of water and food. They fled to IDP sites with very little, having lost not only their livelihoods, but their lifestyle as well.

In the four IDP sites Refugees International visited, little humanitarian assistance is available to the population. Mothers spoke about going without food so their children could eat. “They used to laugh more,” said Faduma, a 30-year-old mother. “They say, ‘We are hungry, mama.’” It is difficult to understand how the IDPs can survive. They often eat just once a day, usually either rice or sorghum. Although the Refugees International team was told that aid organizations provide limited food support in some of the four IDP sites, the IDPs interviewed said it was not enough. Recipients still must buy rice in the neighboring community to supplement those provisions if they can scrape enough money together to afford it.

Family displaced by drought at the Idora IDP site. Photo Credit: Refugees International.
Many IDPs—especially women—also told the team of their need for adequate shelter. Large families sometimes live in a single hut, and many structures are not built from durable materials that can provide safety or protection from the harsh sunlight. Rather, IDPs have constructed huts from sticks, and sometimes nets or plastic sheeting they received earlier in the IDP site. “When the wind and rain come, we are not protected,” said Faduma.

Above all, however, drought IDPs’ most urgent need is water. The government does provide water to some of the IDP sites Refugees International visited. However, it is not enough to meet families’ needs for drinking, washing clothes, and bathing. As a result, individuals must spend hours each day walking to water-access points to supplement what they receive.

IDPs whom the Refugees International team interviewed said they could sometimes access health care in host communities, and both operational organizations and IDPs told the team that the government provides vaccinations in IDP sites. However, it does not provide medications, which are unaffordable from the marketplace for most. IDPs also have other health concerns, such as measles outbreaks—including one that affected many children—scabies, and ringworm.

UNIQUE VULNERABILITY OF WOMEN AND GIRLS

“Women don’t control income.”

– HUMANITARIAN WORKER

Institutional, social, and financial barriers leave fewer adaptation strategies available to women than men. For example, male heads of households often temporarily migrate to nearby towns and large agricultural areas.
"Like a Drop of Water on a Fire": Inadequate Investment in Durable Solutions for Drought IDPs in Ethiopia

Woman and her child displaced by drought at the Idora IDP site. Photo Credit: Refugees International.
to find alternative work during times of poor harvest; female heads of households and women in general, however, are less likely to migrate because of child-rearing responsibilities. Some women the team interviewed want to start a business or learn more about farming, many acknowledging that the pastoralist way of life is no longer viable for their families. Indeed, many of the women Refugees International interviewed have large families, whose needs they struggle to meet. Women in the IDP sites often spend hours each day walking to get water for their family and collecting sticks to sell so they can buy food. Operational groups on the ground also warned of the effects of early marriage on girls.

Jamilah, one mother with whom the team spoke, was pregnant with her eighth child. She has been living in the IDP site for three years. Her family had 100 goats, two camels, 15 cows, and three donkeys before the drought. After losing all their livestock, they were forced to move to find help. “We have no food and no money to buy what we need,” she said. Some of her children had had whooping cough, and the family had little water. Jamilah’s husband was in the IDP site with her and could not find work in neighboring towns. “My biggest hope,” she said, “is that my children will have health care, food, and some form of help from the government and NGOs. And to get an education.”

PRIORITIES FOR DURABLE SOLUTIONS

According to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons, “A durable solution is achieved when internally displaced persons no longer have any specific assistance and protection needs that are linked to their displacement and can enjoy their human rights without discrimination on account of their displacement.” Durable solutions can
be achieved through, among other options, “sustainable local integration in areas where internally displaced persons take refuge.”

Resilience-building is important for achieving durable solutions because it may enhance society’s capacity to accommodate IDP populations. Resilience programming supports communities in mitigating and recovering from shocks and builds a foundation for IDPs’ self-sufficiency. As one NGO representative said to Refugees International, “Resilience is hard to make tangible and can be hard to measure. But resilience is [about] giving people options.”

“No more data is needed. Now is the time for action.”

- UN OFFICIAL

Unfortunately, however, recurrent shocks, including climate-related disasters and interethnic strife, have overtaken progress in increasing resilience and food security. As a result, the humanitarian caseload is growing, taking away resources from resilience programming in what has become a vicious cycle. The government and international community should have made more substantial investments earlier to promote resilience and self-sufficiency in the face of possible long-term displacement. Specifically, those whom Refugees International interviewed spoke of the importance of improving water management and livelihood support.

Water Infrastructure Management

“The water is not clean.”

- DROUGHT IDP

Access to clean water is a daily struggle for the IDPs Refugees International interviewed. Water trucking, for example, has been used in the past but has proven expensive, inefficient, and prone to corruption. Finding sustainable options for water access is an important ingredient of durable solutions. The government has made some water delivery to two of the IDP sites that Refugees International visited, but IDPs said it was not enough. Boreholes exist in some host communities but are often broken. UN officials told the Refugees International team that some were “easily fixable” but too expensive for the community to maintain. Refugees International heard most often that petrol, often required for borehole maintenance, can be difficult to access and afford for some host communities. In one IDP site the team visited, there were plans for a water supply project to establish water points and form a committee to help maintain it that would consist of members from the IDP site and host community. However, some IDPs with whom the team spoke said they were not allowed to use the boreholes in neighboring host communities. Individuals in IDP sites need reliable access to water, so water management must be a priority.

Livelihood Support

“We have no food to eat. We need to be independent and stand alone.”

- ABDULLAHI, 40 YEARS OLD, FABURO IDP SITE

The team heard many stories from IDPs about their frustrations in trying to find work and their desire to earn an income. Livelihood support, including vocational training, was a key issue. The IDPs Refugees International interviewed had been in these sites for years and, although describing their host communities as generally helpful, those communities are poor themselves and do not have many resources to share. IDPs often walk to the nearest host community or town to look for work. However, as the team learned in its interviews, they are not always successful. Some of the men who had gone to Djibouti were able to find jobs doing manual labor or as security guards, enabling them to send a small amount of money to their families in the IDP sites in Ethiopia.

“I walk three hours every day to town to try and find work. I walk three hours back each day. I have been doing this for three years but have never found work.”

- GURAY, TEENAGE IDP

Others were unable to find work, however. Some men told Refugees International they had trouble finding even day labor work. The majority of the IDPs the team interviewed earned only some income by collecting and selling sticks. Some wanted to start their own businesses in the neighboring host
community, while others wanted to learn new trades, including farming. Ultimately, the IDPs are a willing workforce with little opportunity anywhere to work—investing in livelihood programming thus would be beneficial to both the IDPs themselves and the neighboring host communities.

“Drought IDPs need a durable solution. What they need is alternative livelihoods.”

- REPRESENTATIVE FROM A LOCAL ORGANIZATION SUPPORTING LOCAL FARMERS AND CROP PRODUCTION STRATEGIES

There is an opportunity to build capacity within the government to extend basic services to displaced persons while also supporting local host communities. Operational actors on the ground described promising projects in peri-urban areas, including irrigation and water conservation for farming services, support to farming households in growing crops, and jobs created to provide packaged food for school lunches serving IDPs and host communities.

PLANNING FOR POSSIBLE FUTURE DROUGHTS

Refugees International is concerned by the humanitarian and development communities’ lack of substantive preparation for future droughts. Although drought predictions in the near term have been scaled back moderately, it still is imperative that planning be in place for future droughts.
to prepare for anticipated future droughts, given the population’s vulnerability.¹⁶

In previous years, the U.S.-run Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWSNET) and other early warning systems have helped mitigate the harmful effects of droughts. However, interviews with humanitarian workers and UN officials raised concerns that there had been little investment in preparedness ahead of future droughts. The forecasting that has been done shows that the government of Ethiopia has implementation and planning capabilities. However, the current situation is straining the government’s resources just when possible additional drought displacement may be expected and incorporated into planning. The Somali regional government and humanitarian and development actors thus should prioritize improving public services—including access to water and sanitation and public hygiene—in host communities so they will be able to absorb those likely to become or remain displaced. These interventions will help to increase the resilience of the entire population, especially in the face of future droughts.

**Conclusion**

Going forward, climate change is expected to continue presenting significant challenges for Ethiopia by increasing the frequency and intensity of natural hazards, further undermining food security and exacerbating conflict over already limited natural resources.¹⁷ The needs of the forgotten population of drought IDPs in Ethiopia’s Somali region must be made a priority in both immediate and longer-term response planning. Unfortunately, urgent humanitarian needs also remain and must be addressed, including individuals’ access to water, shelter, and food. Durable solutions for this population, including water management investment and livelihood support, will help integrate the IDP population into neighboring communities and improve their self-sufficiency and resilience, both now and in the future.

*Names of IDPs have been changed to protect their identities.
Thanks to Alice Thomas for her contributions.

¹⁶. “Improved Meher Rains,” FEWSNET.
ABOUT

THE

AUTHOR

Ann Hollingsworth is director of government relations and senior policy advisor at Refugees International where she leads the organization’s advocacy efforts within the U.S. foreign policy community and on Capitol Hill. Follow her on Twitter @AnnEahollin.

ABOUT

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL

Refugees International advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises around the world. We do not accept any government or UN funding, ensuring the independence and credibility of our work.