

# Saving lives, seeking solutions

Oxfam America's response to drought  
in Ethiopia, 2008–2011





## Introduction

From the rugged slopes of Tigray in the north to the vast pasturelands of the Borena and Guji zones of the south, millions of Ethiopians eke a living from the land. Some are farmers, tilling the often-parched earth with hoes or, if they're fortunate, with a plow and the help of a pair of oxen. Others are herders who spend their days shepherding cattle and camels, sheep and goats from grazing areas to watering holes. And some do both, coaxing what they can from rain-fed plots while fortifying their households with the income and nutrition livestock provides.

For all, drought is a constant threat. It withers crops, kills cattle, and robs families of the resilience they need to survive in harsh environments where basic resources are already scarce.

"Drought is like fire," said an elder from Hadhessa in Guji. "It just destroyed every household."

In 2008, a global food crisis sent the price of staples—rice, wheat, and corn—rocketing worldwide, compounding the hardship many Ethiopians were already enduring because of drought: in some parts of the Somali region, rain had not fallen in two years. Across the country, more than 4.5 million people needed emergency assistance by July of that year, and 75,000 children suffered from severe acute malnutrition, a situation both grave—and familiar. Over and over again in the poorest communities, drought drags families deeper into poverty, casting a wide net and snaring the most vulnerable. How can the cycle be stopped?



That question lies at the heart of the two-phase response Oxfam America and its Ethiopian partners launched for about 225,000 people in the Tigray and Oromia regions. Its goal was not only to save lives, but to save the assets and build the resources families would need to support themselves once the crisis had passed.

“Emergency response can only be effective if it’s linked to development and helps build people’s resilience to disaster,” said Nazereth Fikru, Oxfam America’s regional humanitarian coordinator for the Horn of Africa. “Meeting basic needs is our first responsibility. But it’s not our only one. Listening to people, working with them, helping them to develop their own long-term solutions to these crises—that’s when we’ll begin to slow the downward spiral of drought.”

With generous support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the ELMA Relief Foundation, that was the mission Oxfam America undertook in August 2008—a two-year campaign to stand by some of Ethiopia’s hardest-hit farmers and herders as they wrestled with the consequences of increasingly erratic weather and strove to change their lives in ways they hope will ensure a better future.

# The setting: Ethiopia 2008

It's June 2008. In the West Arsi zone of central Ethiopia, the convergence of failed rains, chronic poverty, and a wild spike in food prices has left 320,000 people needing relief assistance. In the yard outside a cluster of huts, an old woman—a widow and a grandmother of 10—describes the meager meals her family has been surviving on since January: a bit of corn and coffee in the morning, and nothing else for the rest of the day. Some days there is no food at all, she said.

At a feeding center in West Arsi's Shalla district, mothers rest on a long line of benches under the shade of a giant tree, small children curled quietly in their laps. They are awaiting their allotment of Plumpy'nut, a nutrient-packed food supplement for malnourished children.

"We are facing so many disasters at the same time," said an elder. "Drought, flood, disease."

Further south, in the Dire district of the Borena zone, a herder counts the livestock he has lost in recent weeks: 30 cows, 50 goats, a camel.

"When the cattle are good and give milk, we drink milk any time," he said. But he hasn't seen that kind of sustenance in months. "The cattle are not giving milk. The situation is very bad."

Nearby, in a small bramble-fenced community, or *olla*, a young mother nurses a child in the smoky darkness of her hut. Worn out from hunger, she yawns repeatedly as she tells visitors just how bad the situation has become in her olla. She lives in an area where no farming is allowed, a measure designed to preserve the local land for pasture. Outside her hut, the ground is as hard as cement and ash gray. A calf totters by, more bones than flesh.

"We cannot afford to buy even one kilogram of maize from the market because of the high price," she said.

## From emergency to recovery

### First steps

In early July 2008, as the United Nations warned of a humanitarian emergency that could snare 14 million people across the Horn of Africa, Oxfam America was pulling together a response that would focus on 225,000 Ethiopians—not only helping to meet their immediate needs but positioning families to preserve their assets and build their resilience for the future.

"We wanted to do more than keep people alive," said Mike Delaney, Oxfam America's director of humanitarian response. "We wanted to ensure they had a way to recover and be strong for the next time trouble strikes. And for that, we needed to stick with them."

In a strategic move not all aid agencies are capable of, Oxfam America committed extra time and resources for a two-phased response designed to encourage longer-term solutions to a crisis that has been returning with worrisome frequency. In many communities, the response targeted women, providing programs that drew on their skills and met their particular needs. Because of their many household responsibilities—including care for children—women are often most vulnerable to the effects of drought. They also have fewer opportunities to move to new locations in search of food and work.

The first step was to help people get access to what they needed most: food—for themselves and for the animals on which they depend. In the Liben district, for instance, more than 2,300 animals received emergency feed, including hay, intended to restore their strength so they could reproduce and provide herders with milk and income.



To the neediest families, the program delivered food directly. In the Shashemene and Adaba districts of West Arsi, for example, Oxfam worked with the Center for Development Initiatives (CDI) to make sure that 4,840 malnourished children received supplementary food—oil and Famix, a high-energy porridge—for two months.

Food was also made available in other ways. CDI gave cash transfers to 2,880 mothers whose children were receiving Famix to allow them to buy food for their households from local markets. This aid ensured that other family members also had something to eat and lessened the chance that the Famix, meant specifically for the children, would be shared among everyone.

Elsewhere, other Oxfam partners engaged thousands of people to work on community projects, giving them food or cash to buy household essentials. In the Borena zone, for instance, the Gayo Pastoral Development Initiative (GPDI) organized community members to clear invasive brush from 1,000 hectares of pastureland and to rehabilitate six ponds that their animals rely on for water.

“The project’s work activities were in line with the highest priorities of this office and the community,” said one district official. “Drought is periodic and frequent, so the labor works were chosen to mitigate effects of future drought.”

Other cash-for-work or food-for-work projects designed to benefit communities over the long term while helping families hold onto their assets included land terracing, dam construction, spring rehabilitation, and road construction—like the road to Malka Halloye, a remote settlement along the banks of the Dawa River in Guji.

“The road is everything,” said Huka Balambal, a herder turned part-time farmer who led the effort to have the road built. Now, villagers have a way to get their goods to market and to seek out medical care when they need it.

▲ Through a cash-for-work program in the West Arsi zone that included planting 200,000 tree seedlings, families received money that helped them meet their immediate needs for food or other household essentials. And the trees they planted will help restore the landscape.  
*Eva-Lotta Jansson / Oxfam America*

## Interconnections

Immediate impact together with lasting benefits, like the road, are what Oxfam has aimed for in this emergency response. A strategic linking of programs—with a holistic view of a community's past experience and needs—make that long-term objective possible.

“All the steps we took in this response are interconnected,” said Nazereth Fikru, Oxfam America's regional humanitarian coordinator for the Horn of Africa. “Each one leads to the next. The ponds people rehabilitated now provide water for their herds. For families left destitute by the drought, we helped them restock their animals. And we provided veterinary care and fodder to ensure herds stay healthy.” In the Liben and Borena districts, more than 400,000 heads of livestock received treatment.

One of the best examples of these linkages was a project to distribute seeds and construct grain banks that followed a supplementary feeding initiative launched by CDI. The supplementary feeding saved lives while the grain banks are helping families build their assets.

“Sometimes people sell the roof over their house if there is a problem. The purpose [of the seed distribution and grain banks] is to preserve their assets,” said Mekonnen Koji, of CDI, which distributed teff and wheat seeds to 1,485 farmers in West Arsi. The seeds were a loan, to be repaid later when the harvests came in and farmers could use that bounty to help stock four newly created grain banks. Grain banks are storehouses run by community members, many of whom are women, who pool their resources to build a capital base from which they can leverage a better price for their grain. The banks also serve as a buffer, storing grain for local use when times are bad. (To learn more, see page 9 for “Case study: Grain banks can help families build their assets.”)

“Starting in communities where children were malnourished because of drought-related crop failure, we have now wound up with grain banks local farmers can rely on during tough times,” said Girma Legesse, an Oxfam America program officer, noting that two of the four banks Oxfam helped establish were ranked first and second in a government evaluation of 19 similar facilities in West Arsi. “These are the asset-building steps that can help communities move out of emergency mode toward longer-term development. And, most important, initiatives like these help reduce the risk of future disasters.”



▶  
At local grain banks, villagers can pool their harvests, keeping some for times of shortage and leveraging the rest for sale at a good price.

*Eva-Lotta Jansson / Oxfam America*



## Listening to communities

Listening to the needs of a community and embracing the solutions community members propose were driving factors in Oxfam's approach. Throughout the response, Oxfam relied on a participatory capacity and vulnerability assessment (PCVA) to understand community needs. PCVA is a method of working with a community to discern its biggest hazards and who is most at risk from them.

"The PCVA is a very important tool," said Emily Farr, Oxfam America's humanitarian livelihoods specialist. "It gets to the core of the issues in a community. It explores gender, location, [and] wealth groups, and helps you figure out the root causes of problems and the dynamic forces that are at play. You start with this analysis, and you end up with an action plan that the community is totally involved with."

The construction of a large earthen dam across a gulch in the Menkerake watershed in the village of Gararsa in Tigray is a case in point. Severe shortages in the area meant women and children often had to trek more than 11 miles to fetch water for their households—a grueling and time-consuming task. Oxfam had proposed rehabilitating some of the small ponds in the area, but villagers pointed out that these would hold water for only a few months at a time. It would be far better, they said, to dam the gulch and create a rain-fed lake that could serve them long term.

"We listened and went with the dam," said Fikru, "We worked with our partner, the Women's Association of Tigray, while sharing the cost with the community and the regional government."

The lake that now stretches between the rocky slopes of Gararsa is just a short distance—a 15- to 20-minute walk—from the homes of many people who rely on its water. The lake substantially reduces the risks they face from drought, such as the violent clashes that can flare when resources are scarce.



In Tigray, an earthen dam Oxfam helped to build across a gulch created a lake that is now providing families with a nearby source of water. Before the dam, women and children had to walk more than 11 miles to get water from neighboring areas during severe dry times. *Eva-Lotta Jansson / Oxfam America*



Qaballe Sirba and her son were among those who received a small herd of goats during a restocking program organized by Oxfam's partner DUBAF in the village of Kanbi. *Eva-Lotta Jansson / Oxfam America*

## Disaster risk reduction

Reducing risks, especially as the frequency of drought seems to be increasing, was one of Oxfam's key objectives throughout this two-year response to drought in Ethiopia. It's one of the reasons Oxfam helped develop a drought early warning system (DEWS), which taps women for their community-based knowledge on topics such as household nutrition and disease outbreaks. It combines that information with broader data on harvests and markets to track trends that could signal trouble.

"The reason why all our informants are women is because, in our community, they are the first to feel the effect of drought," said Terefua Bagajo, one of the data collectors who visits the DEWS communities on a regular basis. "They know better about problems in the house, [with] children and cattle. ... They know what it means to have something and then lose it."

Launched as a pilot in the Borena zone with Oxfam partner GPD, DEWS has now expanded into new communities, giving villagers a chance to develop new coping mechanisms for drought. For example, some households are now using biosand filters to improve the quality of water they fetch from local ponds.

## Local traditions

Still, the old ways people have for taking care of each other during times of hardship continue to have great value. Oxfam modeled part of its response around one approach called *hirbaa-dabare*, a traditional method of helping families restock their herds. The system is based on sharing: When a herding family's animals die because of drought or disease, others in the community that are better off loan or give the destitute family animals from its own herds, helping that family recover their losses.

Oxfam partners DUBAF, the Organization for Development in Action (ODA), and GPDI incorporated the spirit of that tradition in the restocking initiatives they launched. They distributed goats or sheep to some of the neediest households in the communities in which they worked. And when those animals reproduced, a second group of villagers received the first offspring.

“This is highly sustainable,” said Mulugeta Kechema, executive director of ODA, which focused its restocking program on providing women with sheep. In GPDI’s goat restocking program, women were the focus, too—in part because of their resource management skills.

“Now I can raise these goats and build my assets,” said Faduma Jatani, a 30-year-old widow who received a small herd from GPDI. “I can get milk for my children. And after [the goats] reproduce, I can sell them and buy other household items.”

## Working with the government

In several cases, fostering a close working relationship between local government officials and Oxfam and its partners was essential to carrying out the response—and to planting the seed for future development. For example, a small-scale irrigation project along the banks of the Dawa River in the Guji zone has inspired the local government to explore other sites where similar initiatives could be launched.

“Oxfam was the first to try this kind of project,” said Abdullahi Ali, vice chairman of the local pastoralist development office. “No one had dared do such a thing in such remote pastoralist areas.”

Oxfam had originally proposed to help local herders by providing them with new animals. But again, listening carefully to community needs, Oxfam altered its plan when villagers made it clear that the regularity of droughts—and the livestock deaths they cause—would undermine that initiative. Irrigation is what they wanted, so that they could produce food for themselves and their remaining animals without having to be dependent on rainfall. When the government agreed to provide technical support for the project—as well as help to manage and implement it—that sealed the deal.

While the project ran into challenges—flooding wiped out the first pump house, for instance—hope remains high that small plots with a reliable source of water will prove to be a successful way for herders to diversify, providing both food for their families and extra income. With the irrigation system now fully functional, Oxfam is in the process of handing the project over to the community and local government.

“We have seen that the project is really changing the life of pastoralists,” said Abdul Kadir, vice chairman of the Liben district and chairman of the irrigation task force, a government-sponsored group that has supported the project from its inception. “The food security situation has improved. Some have even started to produce for the market.”

## The power of local partners

As important as the government’s participation has been, equally vital is the role Oxfam’s local partner organizations have played. It is in these groups—well-known by the communities in which they work, smart about village dynamics, and keen to help—that Oxfam puts its faith. Some long established, others newer, the handful of Ethiopian aid groups Oxfam relied on during the response provided the lion’s share of support for farmers and herders.

Working through partners allows Oxfam to be more responsive to the complexities of each situation. Through the eyes of its partners, Oxfam is able to understand the social structures and gain a clear idea of where an investment of resources will have the biggest impact.

# Challenges and lessons learned

The relentless cycle of drought—fed by a changing climate where patterns of rain are increasingly unpredictable—is one of Oxfam’s biggest challenges in helping to meet the emergency needs of Ethiopians. There is so little time in which families can recover between crises. But in that tiny window—stretched a bit bigger by Oxfam’s longer-term approach—Oxfam strives to make a lasting impact.

Of course, success can be intermittent, fleeting. In the first year of the small-scale irrigation project near Melka Guba, families planted more than 50 hectares of crops. But in the second year, following major damage by flooding when a set of small temporary pumps broke, land under cultivation fell to just 1.5 hectares. With completion of the flood rehabilitation, a third season is now under way. A new large pump started operating in April 2011 and approximately 85 percent of the irrigable land is planted. The local government has assigned two development agents and a supervisor to the site, and has arranged for regular monitoring visits from the regional water office. Farmers who planted during this round were expecting a harvest of green maize by the fourth week of July—even as a new food crisis was affecting other communities.

Throughout the emergency, the scope of need was daunting. Local government officials noted repeatedly that the amount of aid made available by all those responding simply wasn’t sufficient. That, in turn, made the selection of beneficiaries very difficult: many people needed help, but who would get it?

## Lessons for the future

Despite the challenges, this two-year response to drought in Ethiopia has helped confirm what program designers deeply believe: that short-term interventions are just that, short term.

“The number one lesson from this experience is that the effectiveness of emergency response lies in linking that response to adequate recovery,” said Fikru, as a new drought and food crisis affecting more than 10 million people gripped East Africa in July 2011. “Three months is not enough. Without a longer-term investment that helps people hold onto their assets—or restores what disasters destroy—recurring drought can erode the progress made during a short emergency intervention.”

Many humanitarian organizations have funding to respond to immediate emergency needs only: they can plug the hole, but they can’t help people rebuild the dike and make it stronger. Oxfam can.

As essential as making a long-term commitment is developing strong working relationships with the government. It’s through those relationships that good ideas and strategic planning can turn into powerful action.

“Leveraging government resources is very important for us,” said Fikru. “We’ve learned a great deal through the small-scale irrigation project in Liben and the dam construction project in Tigray about how to work with the government.”

That knowledge, and the interpersonal skills on which it is built, have been invaluable in helping Oxfam achieve its goal of assisting 225,000 people: they are the traits that set Oxfam apart from other aid organizations.

## CASE STUDY

# Grain banks can help families build their assets



For Momina Shuko, the 150 birr—or about \$9—she contributed to join a grain bank is a down payment on what she hopes will be a brighter future for her family.

Shuko's household is among the more than 500 that have become members of one of the four new grain banks Oxfam America and its partner the Center for Development Initiatives (CDI) helped to start in 2010 in the West Arsi zone of Ethiopia, where lingering drought and a food crisis had taken a serious toll on villagers.

"We wanted to have a share in the bank to escape from poverty," said Shuko, who is working hard to make sure all seven of her children continue with school. Two of them have already completed 10th grade and taken national exams.

Grain banks are essentially storehouses run by community members who have pooled their resources to build a capital base from which they can leverage a better price for their harvests. The banks serve two purposes: to keep a stock of grain on hand for times when food is in short supply in the community and to improve market opportunities for members, by holding onto the grain until the price goes up.

Over the years, CDI has helped launch a total of 20 of these grain banks. Together they now have 3,077 members. Recently, nine of the grain banks joined to form the Mira Service Development Union, which, in turn, struck a deal with the World Food Programme to sell it 600 tons of white corn.

Grain banks, owned and managed by their members, play an important role in all of this by bringing together farmers and providing them with resources they can use to improve their production.

Members pay a fee to join—matched by a contribution from CDI—which the banks then use to buy their initial stock of grain. Following the harvest, banks buy grain from their members at a fair price,

holding onto some for emergencies and selling the rest at the best rates they can get. Once the grain is sold, members can divide the profit among themselves or reinvest it back into the bank. Shuko planned to put her earnings into better seeds, which would increase her future harvests and bring in more money, allowing her to expand a small trading business she has started.

For Demitu Gurmessa, a mother of nine children, her membership in a grain bank in Jello Dida has already helped her family through hard times. In June 2010, with food in short supply, the bank agreed to loan about 60 households 45 kilograms of corn each to tide them through the "hungry season," until their crops were ready to harvest. They would pay the loan back in cash.

Besides the corn, Gurmessa also borrowed a supply of wheat seeds from the bank, which she planted in July. One morning a month later, with a sickle in hand, she marched to her fields with visitors in tow. The rain had been abundant and shades of green—corn, wheat, and grassy pastures—bathed the landscape. Gurmessa had high expectations for her wheat.

"I have planted improved seed, and I have applied fertilizer," she said. "So I expect a good harvest."

There's one unknown, though: the weather.

For poor farmers in Ethiopia who must rely on rain to feed their crops, uncertainty is a wearing fact of daily life. But Gurmessa has strategies for coping—including, now, the security of her membership in the grain bank.

▲  
Demitu Gurmessa joined a grain bank in Jello Dida. The wheat she had planted a few weeks before this picture was taken was growing well and she was looking forward to a robust harvest. *Eva-Lotta Jansson / Oxfam America*



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**COVER:** Fetching water for household use often falls to women and girls. During the dry season, the task can become even more grueling when water sources close to their homes dry up. Through a drought early warning system that Oxfam helped establish—and later expanded with donor support—community members identified the importance of maintaining this pond in southern Ethiopia. *Eva-Lotta Jansson / Oxfam America*

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