

EUROPEAN COMMISSION



Humanitarian Aid

REGIONAL DROUGHT DECISION : Q&A

Populations in the drought-prone regions of the Horn of Africa are finding ways to lessen the impact of failing rains by developing strategies which enable them to live through and even prosper during times of drought. A programme funded by the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO) is aiming to help communities prepare for the increasingly frequent failure of rains through a broad range of livelihood-based responses. **Lammert Zwaagstra** is leading the Regional Drought Decision (RDD) programme for the European Commission.

Q: What is the aim of the project?

Lammert Zwaagstra: The aim of RDD is to build up resilience in communities which are particularly vulnerable to drought, so they can cope better when rains fail. The programme is preparing these communities to deal with drought conditions which are becoming ever more frequent. In the past, communities had traditional coping methods; they might have saved some water in storage, they would have stored adequate food and they might have expected a few animals to die. Today, largely because of population growth as well as changes in climatic conditions, those traditional coping strategies no longer work. Pastoralists rely on livestock to feed their families and they need more livestock to feed the growing number of family members. The problem is the land cannot support more animals. In Moyale district in northern Kenya, for example, the population growth rate has been estimated at almost 3.5%, which means it is becoming increasingly difficult to provide enough food in times of drought.

Q: What strategies are you promoting?

LZ: The EC is working regionally with partners across the Horn of Africa on a variety of different strategies which are sometimes unique to a particular area. For example, in Mandera, in the north-eastern corner of Kenya, on the border with Somalia and Ethiopia, the European Commission is promoting fodder production. In Uganda's Karamajong region, communities are being supported to build water harvesting pans which will provide water through dry seasons. In Moyale in northern Kenya, camels are being introduced as a more drought resistant animal which can provide income through the sale of milk. And in Ethiopia veterinary health workers are being given the means to provide a better service to pastoralist communities with the aim of increasing the health and quality of local livestock herds.

Q: How big an impact is RDD making?

LZ: The programme began in June 2006 and is set to run until June 2009 with total funding of €40 million (US\$57m). Already we are seeing a huge change in people's lives. Farmers who are growing fodder crops in Mandera are making a good wage and are able to send their children to school for the first time. It also means that pastoralists can buy the fodder which will keep their livestock alive through the dry seasons. Communities which have built pans are managing to survive through dry seasons without losing livestock and with less reliance on food aid. Another significant benefit of the regional nature of this programme is the reduction in cross-border conflicts. Pastoralists often cross borders in search of water for their animals and use the resources of other communities, which can lead to serious conflict situations. Providing water closer to their homes has reduced the number of incidents. It has also reduced livestock theft as individuals no longer need to plunder animals from other pastoralists to replace their animals which have died.

Q: Does this approach represent a departure from traditional humanitarian aid?

LZ: Yes, it is a massive shift in approach. The European Commission's Humanitarian Aid department has always focused on addressing emergency situations caused by natural disasters or man-made conflicts and this will continue. The drought preparedness work we are doing is anticipating the problems that failed rains bring and encouraging communities to find solutions to those problems before they happen. This approach ultimately means that fewer people will need food aid when a drought happens as they have already established a safety net to cope for that eventually. There will, of course, always be a need for an emergency response as some droughts are so catastrophic that even the best prepared communities will not be able to cope.

Q: Is drought preparedness a long-term solution?

LZ: Preparing communities for the likelihood of drought provides a short-term solution. What typifies all the communities in the countries the programme is targeting, from Eritrea to Kenya and Ethiopia to Uganda and Somalia, is the lack of long-term development assistance they have received. The programme can help to build livelihoods through fodder production or camel rearing, but what is needed is a long-term strategy to deal with the fundamental issues such as population growth and the creation of jobs.

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