

“We share what little we have”

In villages across drought-stricken Somaliland, women’s groups are pooling remaining resources to help those who need it the most.

By Anders Nordstoga, CARE Communications Officer

“It is part of our culture. I cannot keep my things when someone next to me is dying. We have shared what little we have”, says Shukri Mohamud Abdi, a grandmother of 24 in the village of Haro-Sheikh, four hours’ drive east on barely passable roads from Hargeisa, the capital of Somaliland, a self-declared independent state in the north of Somalia.

As in all of rural Somalia, livestock is the backbone of the village’s economy. Most people are pastoralists depending on their animals for a livelihood, and everyone else depends on pastoralists for their businesses. Five months ago, after more than two years with barely any rain, animals started dying. As the fourth consecutive rain season appears to be failing, an economic crisis is turning into a human catastrophe.

Shukri is the elected chairwoman of a Village Savings and Loans Association (VSLA), a method of collective microfinance through which groups of women put individual savings into a collective box, providing capital for small business investments and a social fund for emergencies. Her group is one of four set up by CARE in Haro-Sheikh. Before the drought, members earned money by setting up shops and sewing clothes, managing to accumulate substantial savings. It has all stopped now.

“People will die”

“We used the money we had saved to support families who need it, but now we have not been able to save anything for two months, and nobody is taking up loans, because they are afraid they will not be able to pay back” explains Shukri. “If life gets even harder now, everyone will withdraw all their money. Two of the groups have 200 dollars left in their box and the other two have 150 dollars. When you divide that by 22 members in each group, it will not even buy a sack of rice.”

On the outskirts of the village, a camp has been set up for people who have been displaced by the drought. With more people arriving every day, the total number is approaching 300 families, adding 60 percent to the village’s population. Some have been brought to the village in cars sent by local authorities to pick them up.

“We may come from different places, but we are all Somalis. All we can do is to help each other”, says Jamal Hussain, the deputy mayor. “When people lose their livestock, the only option we have is to bring them here from the bush so we can support each other.”

Hussain appeals for urgent help as the community is running out of resources. The village’s main source of water, a pump and tank constructed by CARE, is drying out. Food is getting scarcer and more expensive.

“It is a dire situation”, says Shukri. “People have not died here yet, but it is going to happen if we do not get more help soon. We have received a lot of migrants and we have consumed all we had, so we

are all in the same situation now. We have health problems like diarrhea, and children suffer from malnutrition. We have to go to Hargeisa for treatment, but transport costs 150 dollars.”

Health hazards

In addition to helping the weakest with cash and food, the women’s groups decided a few weeks ago they needed to deal with the health hazards of dead livestock lying scattered all across the village. They paid some men to help dig a big hole to dispose of decomposing carcasses.

“And we will make sure people use it”, declares Shukra and the three other VSLA chairwomen confidently as they stand by the edge of the hole, near a heap of half-burned carcasses.

While people who have lost everything come to the village for help, others have migrated further away in search for pasture for remaining animals. Shukra’s four grown children went west several months ago. Two of her grandchildren, Hemse Ali and Nada, both four years old, remain with her. The family keeps in touch by telephone.

“They had 200 livestock. Now they have 30. They have found some pasture for them near Dilla, about 80 kilometers west of Hargeisa”, Shukra tells us.

When we ask what can be done for them to be better able to cope with prolonged droughts, Shukra and the other chairwomen suggest expanding women’s opportunities for investing in bigger businesses.

“We were not prepared for this drought. If we get rain, we will invest in new businesses and make more savings. We ask CARE to support us”, she says.

“Without us women, more people would have died”

In the village of Ulasan, the two lanes of the main road between the cities of Burco and Caynabo are briefly separated by an enormous old tree. When a Chinese company constructed the road in the 1970s, villagers explain, they were obliged to lay down the tarmac around the tree.

For the last six years, groups of women have met under this tree once every month to pool savings in a collective box and take up loans from each other to start businesses. Until a few months ago, it worked very well.

By October of last year, the prolonged drought brought an economic crisis, which in turn has become a full scale humanitarian emergency. So far around 300 pastoralist families have arrived in a camp next to the village seeking food and water. According to the villagers, four of them were so weak they later died – the last one week ago.

“When somebody needs help, they call us”

“Those who have migrated have almost nothing. Some have only two or three animals, and they are very weak”, says Ugaaso Bulaale Warsame (66), the chairwomen of one of the five women’s groups in the village.

“Children and pregnant women are malnourished. We have given them money, food, water, shelter, and we have donated clothes. All groups contribute. The last time, we helped 15 of the weakest families. Without us women, more people would have died. When somebody needs help, they call us”, she says.

Ugaaso, a mother of eleven and grandmother of 79, came to Ulasan 25 years ago. Before that, she lived in Burco, the regional capital of Togdheer, two hours’ drive to the east.

“Before the civil war, we lived a decent life. I had a big business, a petrol station, in Burco. I lost the business because of the war and came here as a migrant”, she recounts.

“When I arrived here I started a business, but I earned only very little. I lived hand to mouth. When CARE came to set up the savings groups and gave us microfinance, we learned to save and borrow, and I used a loan to open a small shop. Before the drought I earned 50 dollars a day selling clothes, food, soft drinks and snacks.”

Praying for rain

Members of VSLAs have so far been affected only financially, according to Ugaaso: “Nobody is buying anything from our shops. We used to trade with animals, but now there are no animals to trade with. Before the drought, each group collected 100 dollars in savings every month. We have used these savings to buy food and keep our livestock alive, but now we are running out of money.”

“We are praying for rain in April. If it does not come, both we and the migrants will be affected.”

The women have made one achievement, however, which the drought cannot take away from them.

“Our role as women in the village has changed because of our economic activities. Before, nobody called women to meetings. Now there are women in the Village Council and there will be female candidates in the next election” says Ugaaso.

Helping the most vulnerable

It is the same story in Suuqsade, 30 minutes off from the road between Burco and Barbera, where four groups of women are using their savings to help internally displaced coming for the village’s relatively plentiful water. This is thanks to a water pump powered by a solar panel installed by CARE last year¹. So far around 400 displaced families have come from the surrounding highland.

“We are helping the weakest families coming from other villages, giving them food, water and money”, says Amina Mohamud Abdillahi (62), the chairwoman of one of the groups.

In a meeting with CARE staff, group members calculate that they have assisted twenty families over the last six months with a total of 1,350,000 Somaliland shillings, or more than 200 dollars. But now the money is running out.

“Our livestock was our livelihood. When they are gone, we have no money to save. We used to have shops selling food and soft drinks, but most have now closed” Amina tells us.

¹ See separate story: «Stricken by Drought, Saved by the Sun»

NOTE on spelling: The city of *Burco* is also sometimes spelled *Burao* (*as it is pronounced*).