

# **Contested Margins, Complex Pathways: *The Afar Triangle in the Horn of Africa***

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June 2014

## Executive summary

The 'Afar Triangle' straddles Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti in the Horn of Africa. Historically it has been at the centre of state building and contestation between state and society for over a century. The contemporary relevance of this area lies in the overlapping contestations of power, economic development and nationhood that continue to mark the present-day struggles of the Afar people. Understanding the challenges, dynamics, histories and continuities of this situation can help in providing future support to Afar development – across all three countries, but particularly in Ethiopia where the majority of the Afar live.

The paper traces key social, political and environmental issues and argues that the Afar Triangle, rather than a single contiguous shape, in fact represents many overlapping and contested 'margins' which range from areas of contested (political) control to territorial group identity, and from temperature gradients and rainfall isohyets to environmental and agro-ecological margins. These patterns determine the range and extent of Afar pastoral systems and their interactions with other, often competing, social groups. We identify key interrelationships between these margins and how they affect the security of Afar livelihoods, emphasizing the heterogeneity of experience, but also the major challenges that Afar pastoral systems continue to face.

The Afar have witnessed states emerge, develop and frequently engage in violent conflict throughout much of the 20th Century. As a group they have been both at the centre of but also marginal to many of these developments and conflicts, and remain so to this day in spite of new Afar political structures. Their influence in key development processes has been low, but at the same time they have been deeply affected by resulting economic and social change, including the impacts of some of the earliest 'land grabs' in the Horn of Africa. For the Afar, such intrusion and loss has caused a legacy of devastation, particularly when lost dry season grazing left them acutely vulnerable to drought from the 1970s onwards. They have not been passive onlookers, however, and their response to these developments has been at many different levels.

Whilst land appropriation has continued in recent years, particularly in the Lower Awash, there has been an attendant increased effort at settling the Afar. This has left the Afar at something of a crossroads: settlement can represent co-option and control, but also an opportunity to claim land entitlement at a time when their grazing areas are under more intensive pressure from competing pastoral groups, from state and private interests and from recently introduced, now out of control, invasive species.

The 'Afar Triangle' therefore remains a complex arena of contestation between state(s) interests, private Afar interests, and the greater incorporation of this periphery within new trade and development processes in the Horn of Africa. The analysis presented in this paper suggests the need for a more nuanced and complex set of development pathways that can help Afar groups respond effectively to the complexities represented by developments within this 'triangle', building support onto what the Afar do in response, rather than designing responses for them across these often complex and contested margins.

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## **Acknowledgements**

The authors wish to acknowledge the support and input provided by Dr Jeremy Lind throughout the writing and production process for this paper. They also note the important review comments and feedback received from Fiona Flintan on a later draft. Any omissions and errors that remain are the sole responsibility of the authors. The paper relies on research and input from a number of sources, including in the Afar region. The authors acknowledge these sources and continue to hope that the conclusions and findings reached in the paper can play a small part in supporting the future development of the highly resilient and adaptive Afar people.

## 1 Introduction

'The history of the Afar is not one of inertia and passivity, for these people are very practised in dealing with outsiders from all quarters. The simplified view which each 'centre' (Addis Ababa, Mogadishu, Rome) may have of this periphery is seen to be false from the perspective of that periphery' (Gamaledin, 1985, 237).

Within the Horn of Africa there are around two million Afar by current estimates. The population is a reported 1.4 million in Ethiopia (13.4 percent of whom live in urban areas (CSA, 2008)), in Djibouti at the last (2009) Census about 400,000, and in Eritrea about 350,000.

The primary purpose of this paper<sup>1</sup> is to increase understanding of contemporary challenges facing this unique people, through analysing the interplay of historical, political, economic and environmental factors within the so-called 'Afar Triangle' depicted in the map below.

The paper is organised into three sections: An introduction (this section) provides an analysis of historical and environmental contexts; Section 2 looks at Afar responses to development, including the complexity of their pastoral systems; Section 3 examines the significance of the Afar within a new 'centre' of development and explores contestations between state(s) and society(ies) in this new space; Section 4 concludes on the contemporary socio-economic position of the Afar, highlighting emerging development pathways.

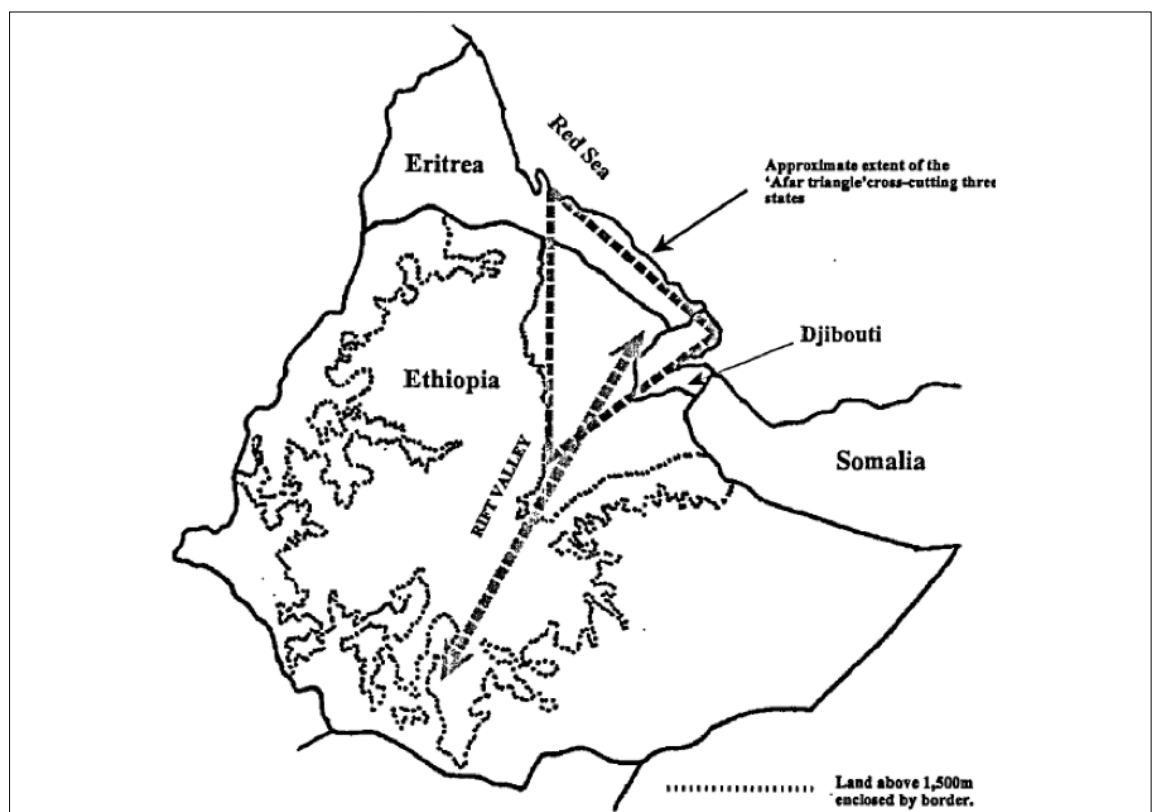
## 2 Resistance at the margins

Historically, the Aussa Sultanate (the largest of four Sultanates<sup>2</sup> within the Afar Triangle) emerged in the Awash River delta where rich agricultural lands met traditional inland trade routes to the coast in what is now Djibouti. State incorporation of the Aussa Sultanate during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century involved a mix of political violence, 'deal-making', state co-option and coercion.

The initial response of the Highland Ethiopian Kingdom to European adventurism in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was to 'push-back' European powers that threatened the country's ill-defined borders from all directions: Italians encroaching in Eritrea and Somalia, the French via French Somaliland and the British from Somaliland, Sudan and Kenya.

This growing European presence at the margins of the Emperor Menelik's newly-consolidated state helped shape current state territory of Ethiopia,<sup>3</sup> but also revealed the presence of rival power centres, including the semi-autonomous Aussa Sultanate at the bottom of the Awash Valley. This Sultanate was not just a competing political entity, but also part of a wider Islamic polity – in contradistinction to the largely Christian Highland kingdom – that lay beyond the territorial and environmental margins of the Ethiopian state<sup>4</sup> and, from Sudan at least, had proven a threat in earlier decades.

During this period of contestation with Europe, the rich agricultural resource of the Awash river's lower reaches had enabled remoteness and self-sufficiency for the Aussa Sultanate, but also subject the Awash



River valley to increased state attention as a potential source of wealth, particularly as the demand for cotton and sugar grew globally. The rich alluvial soils along the Awash were perfect for both mass cotton and sugar cane production. By mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the construction of the Koka Dam upstream on the Awash not only provided hydropower generation for Addis Ababa, but also flood control downstream. With this greater river regulation came greater capacity to harness seasonal flood pulses for large-scale irrigation in the Middle and Lower Awash areas.

The 1955 Ethiopian Constitution legalised full-scale exploitation of these lands through formalising state ownership of all pastoral lands under the principle of 'public domain'. The Afar were caught in a trap: paying no land tax<sup>5</sup> (or other taxes for that matter), the State could claim that the land was technically 'abandoned' and thus claim these key resources (particularly adjacent to the river) for state exploitation. Accelerated displacement of Afar from key dry-season grazing areas on the river was then hastened and set a pattern of displacement and vulnerability that continued for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

As noted at the head of this chapter by Gamaledin, however, the Afar were not passive onlookers. Their resistance to this state intrusion took place at different levels: from political reaction through the establishment of armed opposition to Ethiopian state intrusion, to resistance at the irrigation scheme level. These contestations of state authority increased after the institutionalisation of this authority and the exerting of its presence in the form of the Awash Valley Authority. Created in the 1960s<sup>6</sup>, the AVA was perceived as political cover for land acquisition by members of the Imperial family (Nicol, 2000, 158). Highly-fertile soils combined with reliable water supplies after the construction of Koka spurred on both individual and commercial exploitation of cotton and sugar cane along the river and the AVA came to symbolise a broader government strategy under Emperor Selassie to modernise (and mechanise) large-scale farming in the valley and to encourage foreign investment regardless of who lived on the land.

During the 1960s and early 1970s large schemes were developed which, at the time, were perceived to be a major threat to the Afar: "Tendaho [an irrigation project for sugarcane production] is the root cause of almost all of the complex of intense suspicions the Afar have regarding any outside involvement in their affairs, as they feel this initial take-over of what they regard as their land by outsiders is really just the beginning of things to come. They feel they were cheated and suspect they may be cheated again (Cossins, 1972)". Scheme-level reactions included local-level bargaining with farm managers as Afar elders demanded employment for clans and, when refused by farm managers, frequently led their cattle onto the valuable cotton fields (Nicol, 2000).

After the fall of Haile Selassie and the emergence of the authoritarian socialist regime – the 'Derg' – under Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, new land reforms forced

the integration of the Afar into a state system that was intent on destroying feudalism – including the Aussa Sultanate – and instituting a system of collectivised agriculture. This new situation presented specific risks to the state, including pushing the Afar 'into the hands of Eritrea and/or Djibouti groups hostile to the interests of Ethiopia as a whole' (Harbeson, 1975, 84). In other words, by intruding further into Afar production systems, the new regime threatened Afar political structures directly.

Given the strategic significance of the Afar Triangle, as one author noted in the 1970s, 'Any central government, of any ideological hue, holds a substantial stake, therefore, in the political manoeuvrings of the Afar communities' (Beshah and Harbeson, 1978, 250). This helps to explain the Derg's initial suggestion of an Afar 'triangle' encompassing large parts of Tigray and Wollo, which would have helped deny claims of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front to an Eritrean state (Clapham, 1992, 258).

This renewed intrusion also challenged the long-established Afar economic role in the lucrative salt or 'amole' trade from the Danakil Depression into the highlands as well as the trade in goods between the highlands and Djibouti. As the volume of this trade had grown so did the political significance of Afar sultanates (including those located on the coast) able to exert control over those seeking passage through Afar territory. The combination of demand for trade and desire to move state powers into the Awash Valley had led to the construction of the railway from Addis Ababa to Djibouti and, later, a road route through the valley to Djibouti and Assab ports.<sup>7</sup> Transport into and through the Afar Triangle came to cement control over this eastern borderland by the Ethiopian state.

## 2.1 *Coping with extremes*

The growing political and economic marginality of the Afar under disrupted transhumance patterns and erosion of their political power added to the challenges of surviving within the Awash Valley's harsh environment. From the 1970s onwards in drought years the Afar were forced into distress selling of livestock.<sup>8</sup> A slower onset impact has been increasing human-induced pressure on their grazing lands. This has resulted from shifting agro-ecological boundaries, particularly on the eastern side of the valley as overpopulated highland farming systems have forced farmers 'downslope' into more marginal crop-lands and towards Afar grazing areas.<sup>9</sup> This has also pushed Afar towards other groups (who themselves have encroached on Afar lands), in particular the Issa Somalis and Oromo Kereyu. These groups in their own way were subject to wider political forces, including the politics of Issa-Afar relations within Djibouti. In some years wider political forces affected group movements; in yet other years droughts have exacerbated these problems of shifting group 'margins' and precipitated clashes between farmers and herders as the latter move upslope into more settled highland areas (Hassan, 2008:225).

A further, biological driver of movement has been the devastating<sup>10</sup> impact of the virulently-invasive species, *Prosopis juliflora*. Around irrigation schemes where the plant (more salt tolerant than most native species) has thrived, a major problem has been the dry season movement into these areas and then movement out onto the surrounding plains as rains arrive. Goats in particular browse on the plant's seed pods and assist in the transfer of the species along livestock routes deep into the rangelands. The spread of this thorny shrub and in particular along water courses, that is almost impossible to eradicate once established, then limits pastoralist options and constrains the coping strategy of moving herds (Shiferaw et al, 2004). This encroachment by *Prosopis* in more recent years has compounded the challenges faced when, for example, attempting to restore cattle herds after the 2002/2003 drought (Rettberg, 2010: 257).<sup>11</sup>

Now in parts of the Afar Region it has so dominated the land that no other plants grow, limiting grazing options and affecting the quantity and quality of milk and butter that animals produce (Afar National Regional State Climate Change Plan, 2010: 18, 19).

The 2010 Afar National Regional Climate Change Plan notes that 'rangeland degradation is the most serious challenge for pastoral livelihoods in Afar'. It also recognises the challenges of drought and flooding extremes. The timing and duration of rainfall has changed in recent decades, with 'seasonality, distribution and regularity of rainfall' more of an issue than the overall amount (Afar National Regional Climate Change Plan, 2010: 14). Impacts are particularly serious in the lowest-lying parts of the mid- and lower Awash valley, leading to the loss of forage and further spread of *Prosopis*, increase in livestock diseases, and food insecurity (Afar National Regional State Climate Change Plan, 2010; Agrawala et al, 2003).

The Afar coping strategies to cope with these pressures are related particularly to their livestock multispecies approach. With both 'home' and 'satellite' herds, they use small stock with a high rate of reproduction as cash buffers. Large stock are used as 'big money', perhaps 'savings' accounts, (Somali Camel Forum Working Paper, 16). Whilst robust and adaptive and established over many years, more recently this pastoral production system has had to specialise further to cope with environmental and other extremes in terms of herd size and composition, and livestock products.<sup>12</sup>

Herd size is influenced generally by livestock births, deaths, sales, slaughter, gifts and thefts<sup>13</sup> and the Afar practice controls on breeding such as isolating or castrating males to avoid overpopulation. They also try to avoid dry season lambing/calving and indiscriminate mating in their herds (Getachew et al, 2010; Blench 2001). Reproductive rates—particularly those of cattle, sheep, and goats—are a crucial element of managing

herd growth, as pastoralists are less likely to rely on the market to build their herds (Negassa and Jabbar, 2008).

A key cut-off point is when herd size exceeds the labor available to manage. In this case surplus animals such as immature males and barren females are generally consumed or sold. After shocks, small-stock reproduce more quickly, provide faster herd recovery, and can be exchanged for larger animals in the future which, given the uncertainty and vulnerability of the Afar in the current context, has led to greater herd diversification away from cattle. This is particularly so during drought, when herds may be shifted to more drought tolerant animals (cattle to camels, for example) or to breeds that are most appropriate for the available feed conditions, which may include goats. However, given their capacity to 'scour' a landscape, goats in particular must to be frequently moved often to avoid overgrazing (Yagil, 1982; Baars, 2000:122).

The link between coping mechanisms, herd composition and the need to have different grazing areas and the capacity to move between them makes Afar systems particularly vulnerable to encroachment in their dry season grazing. The next section explores the recent development context in more detail.

## 2.2 Challenges within the valley

Whilst undoubtedly severely affected by state appropriation of lands for irrigation, not all Afar are pastoralist (or wholly pastoral in their livelihoods) and therefore a heterogeneity of responses and impacts has emerged over the years. So-called 'elite pastoralists' have benefited from some development schemes, using their wealth to procure access to scarce resources resulting in a de facto reinforcement of wealth and status, whilst poorer Afar have been pushed further towards the margins of livelihood security. Traditional coping strategies or adaptive responses may become prohibitively costly for some – e.g. changing herd species composition described above – but for others economic opportunities can create divergent pathways and a reordering of pastoralist practice undermining the livelihoods of some, while enhancing the advantage of others.

It is crucial that future development processes are responsive to the heterogeneity among the Afar, with particular consideration for poorer pastoralists. Decades of donor and government support of investment in livestock market infrastructure and export systems, has yielded little evidence of benefit to the least wealthy pastoralists (Catley, 2009). Development interventions should therefore be focused on supporting the herd growth and livelihood diversification strategies that poor pastoralists already pursue. This includes credit and financial services to mitigate the transaction costs of local trade; underpinning national poverty reduction activities with concepts and indicators more relevant to



pastoralists; and improving the access of the Afar groups that are most vulnerable to climate shocks to programs such as the PSNP (Productive Safety Net Program).

In particular commercialisation activities have tended to benefit groups better positioned (politically, geographically, economically) than the Afar, or the elites within Afar clans. Historically, the land tenure situation in the lower Awash enabled individual freehold share-cropping tenancies on the Sultan's land, where elsewhere there was communal ownership. 'To alleviate fragmentation and diminution of plot sizes resulting from the inheritance system, heirs in the Afar area took up livestock herding or sharecropping, or cleared and developed new land' (Kloos, 1982). Bondestam argues that this massive land concentration caused a new class structure to develop in Afar society creating a hierarchy based on land holdings, which was subsequently dismantled under the Derg.

For contemporary Afar, judging the wealth of an individual is based on 'ownership of livestock and support of the poor' (Davies and Bennett, 2007: 496). This attitude has been challenged by the fracturing of social ties in rapidly urbanising environments and arrangements that once meant resources could be transferred to households in stress have been weakened. Recent studies indicate that some households are so depleted they cannot help others; 'the successive droughts have calibrated the terms of trade against the pastoralists' (Hundie, 2010: 40).

Households with strong intra-clan ties are roughly twice as likely to get mutual help and this also depends on socioeconomic stratification: only 17.6 percent of poor households made contributions to others, against 45.0 percent of medium income, and 74.2 percent of higher income households (ibid). The variation is similar when looking at who received help: 17.6 percent of poor households, 35 percent of medium income, and 51.6 percent of better-off households. 'Better-off' households were more likely to participate in mutual help arrangements than poor or medium income households, both at the household level and intra-clan arrangements (Hundie, 2010: 43). In addition, traditional Afar systems of mutual help are weaker and 'vulnerable to environmental stress'... with the integrity of the clan loosening as people respond to economic and ecological changes (Piguet, 2001: 7, 11; Piguet, 2007). In short there is a breakdown in the pastoral unit, and increasing atomisation of pastoral society.

As urbanisation of towns along the Addis Ababa-Djibouti road has continued, this has also brought more diversity, highlighting the fact that settlement programmes that aimed to sedentarise the Afar have inadvertently attracted more migrant labor and increased competition with indigenous Afar – the original target of these programmes in and around large irrigation schemes. In the past, managers of state-run irrigation projects had to co-opt local Afar leaders in order to ensure scheme manageability. Without such co-option, surrounding Afar

clans would seek to disrupt scheme production. More recently the picture has become more complicated. Since the ANRS came into being Afar clans have varying levels and directions of accountability according to their new stakes in established schemes (related primarily to the amount of land they have had returned since the Afar National Regional State was created).

Some of the opportunities under urban expansion are being exploited by pastoralist women. Their innovation and entrepreneurialism opening up 'new possibilities for social and economic advancement', and offering services from fetching water to managing shops (Livingstone and Ruhindi, 2013: 232).

The Afar are limited by their remoteness and inability to manage the costs involved in getting livestock to market (transportation, water, fodder, etc.), a problem compounded by drought vulnerability as herds are smaller and weaker. Less obviously, it has been suggested that they are weak in the bridging social capital needed to successfully enter external markets. (Davies and Bennett, 2007: 505). This is in contrast with other social groups in the valley, including the Issa Somalis.

The economic push from Ethiopia's Somali region is felt keenly in Afar. The Somali Region is the 'least poor' among all of Ethiopia's emerging regions thanks to its link to the economies of Somalia and the Gulf States (Devereux, 2010: 680). So, although relatively politically marginalised, it is economically significant. By contrast, the Afar region is both economically and politically weak. The Afar are comparatively less able to participate in trade because of lack of knowledge, the more diffuse population, and their (contemporary) lack of control over trading routes (Flintan and Tamrat, 2002: 278).

Somalis benefit from not only livestock wealth but have also diversified livelihoods through cross-border trade (Pantuliano and Wekesa, 2008). As a result of their success the Somali Issa have increased their presence in the Afar, pushing towards the road to Djibouti and the Awash River in Middle Awash. The pattern of shifting transhumance between dry season grazing nearer to the Awash river in the west and wet season grazing on plains at a higher elevation to the east has pitted Afar clans against the Issa. The latter's attempt at seeking proximity to the fertile flood plains has led to intermittent conflict. The complexity of development processes in the Awash Valley as a result of this conflict has been noted for decades:

'During implementation of the Amibara Irrigation Project (since 1976)[Middle Awash] it was decided to sink eight boreholes in the plains to the east of the project, to compensate the Afars for loss of dry season grazing. By the time the wells were actually sunk and operational, however, most of the area in which they are sited had come under the control of the Issas, and the Afar had no benefit from them' (World Bank, 1998).



Pressure from Issas was also instrumental in forcing Afar into Kereyu lands and into highland areas, including the Borkena Swamp. This again triggered conflict with neighbouring groups. Relations with the Issa Somali and Kerayu are strained, as both groups are encroaching into traditional Afar areas (and have been expanding westward for 70 years). Conflict arises in part because the Issa are open about their desire to acquire Afar land and gain water access. They have, moreover, dominated informal market trade and 'consider the Addis Ababa highway as vital to their strategic interest' (Piguet, 2001:7).

The impacts of Issa expansionism have been exacerbated by Afar displacement from lands taken over by the government adjacent to the Awash River. This is further fueled as groups seek to expand their 'free zone' to exploit cross-border trade opportunities, and view livestock raids and counter-raids as a legitimate source of income (Hundie, 2010b: 140).

### 3 A new contested 'centre'

The creation of a new Afar ethnic state in the mid 1990s, the Afar Regional National State (ANRS, heralded a new political beginning for the Afar. In fact it has had relatively low levels of support from central government and given its lack of development and the low levels of educational attainment among the Afar, the state also has low absorptive capacity (Keller, 2002:44). Much of the civil service remains staffed from other regions of the country, with the exception of bureau heads. As a result, the new political 'centre' has proven relatively weak in encapsulating Afar development demands.

Within Afar politics, relationships are now weighted by opportunities and demands, dictated not only by scarce natural resources 'but also competition over new sources of revenue (e.g. government budget)' (Hundie, 2010b: 139). Political contestation over this new centre continues, with political violence continuing in the region. In a recent press release, ARDUF describes attacks throughout the month of March 2012 on forces of the 'Ethiopian dictatorial regime' in the Afar region and promised that the fighting will continue until the liberation of the Afar people 'from the current political, social and economic marginalisation and human rights abuse' (ARDUF, 2012).

Limited representation under the federal system in Ethiopia has done little to resolve issues surrounding Afar society's contrary connection to the government—including questions of land use and tenure, inter-state conflict (with neighbouring Somali Region), access to land resources, and their management (National Conference on Pastoralist Development, 2000: 59). At root of much of the Afar's lack of political influence lies low levels of educational attainment which prevents a cadre of qualified staff developing that can play a stronger role in regional government (Nicol et al, 2000).

It has been argued that they have been less successful than other groups such as the Somali at integrating traditional leadership structures with formal Ethiopian political structures, perhaps because of their resistance to co-optation (Tessema, 2012: 99). In short, their desire to remain apart and separate has weakened their capacity for influence via the new political 'centre' represented by the ANRS.

Within the Afar regional polity too there are significant faultlines. The ANRS Five-Year Plan states that because traditional leaders have 'moral authority' and yet are not participating in the administration it is very difficult to implement policies without their support (ANRS, 1998, 28). At a national level, the Afar's generally poor representation and influence also contributes to an inability to contest the state's operating authority over land use or the technical ability to benefit economically from irrigated agriculture (Hundie, 2006). This is part of a wider paradigm of pastoral disempowerment under which 'the impact of the sale and exchange of land... affected pastoralists more than anything else' (Abdullahi, 2007).

The current major faultline in the region continues to be the discussion over the future of pastoralism as practiced by the Afar. There is a challenge to the notion that so-called 'traditional' production systems sit in parenthesis of state-led development initiatives, neither affected by nor contributing to the rapidly changing regional and national economies. Recent research provides evidence that pastoralism in the Afar region is "either economically comparable or more advantageous than either cotton or sugar cane cultivation" (Behnke and Kerven, 2013: 10). The resilience in the face of shifting economies also serves to keep the Afar unincorporated. By remaining outside the formally incorporated economic activities of large-scale plantation agriculture, they are in a way their own parallel economy, the wealth of which is not recognised by (and therefore not appropriated into), national tax or export revenue.

Ethiopia's 2006 Plan for Accelerated and Sustained Development to End Poverty (PASDEP), states that a 'special effort' will be made to reach pastoral areas with education, veterinary, and infrastructure services, 'both to improve current conditions, and to facilitate the slow transition for those who want to shift towards settlement over time' (Government of Ethiopia, 2006:49). However, pastoral councils that were intended to bring Afar pastoralists together and transform the institutions that govern their lives have been poorly utilised (Government of Ethiopia, 2006: 196). At the same time, it has been suggested that 'in regions dominated by ethnic group such as the Afar... pastoralists now have a high degree of power independent of the central state'. The concept of a federal government is still largely superimposed over this structure (Flintan and Tamrat, 2002) and in theory Afar political autonomy exists. In practice, however, autonomy in structure is not translated into autonomy

of political function as so much of ANRS development thinking and practice remains still influenced from the (national) centre.

### **3.1 Divergent narratives**

In a sense the Afar are victims of a self-serving policy 'prophecy' whereby irrigation generates vulnerability and vulnerability (whether real or perceived) generates a resort to irrigation with pastoral production seen as a remnant of traditionalism. Current development policy seeks to settle 'vulnerable' pastoralists around new irrigation schemes, driven by narratives of livelihood insecurity (itself a function of irrigation development) and vulnerability to drought. In 2005, the State Minister of Foreign Affairs in Ethiopia argued, 'I feel the production technology that our pastoral communities use is very backward... They [the Afar] can't take new technologies, new improved ways of life' (Rettberg, 2010). The current government emphasis under the Growth and Transformation Plan is very much on pushing economic growth towards middle income status by 2015, with agribusiness, irrigation and market access core features (MoFED, 2010).

However, in this and other policy documents, the real contribution of pastoralism in the Afar region is largely ignored. According to a recent study, pastoral production contributes to the growth of export trade, the revenues of which were US\$211m in 2010-2011 at a national level (Catley and Akilu, 2013:87). Recognition of this kind of national contribution rarely filters down into development policy in regions such as ANRS. From the perspective of the national government, the economic performance of the region remains tied to export of cotton and sugar, and as previously mentioned, the value of pastoralist production is generally undervalued. Improved infrastructure, despite the comparatively low export volume from the Afar (the Oromiya Region, for example, has outpaced Afar in sugar production and export) could facilitate increased export contribution of the region and expansion into livestock export.

One of the strengths a discourse of this sort provides the states is a capacity to prefix 'marginal' to pastoral groups and other groups in the non-industrial and agro-industrial sectors that are not 'engaged' in the state (Azarya, 1996). As part of the 'traditional' sector, this provides an excuse for states to capture and close resources within their territory, and to shape the future development pathways to be taken by pastoral communities such as the Afar.

The APCDP (Afar Pastoral Community Development Project), funded by World Bank and IFAD from 2004 in its own words aims to assist pastoralists to solve their problems and diversify their means of livelihood through community-initiated projects, minimising drought vulnerability, and capacity building and knowledge development (Philpott et al, 2005: 24 AND also Piguet, 2001:23-24). The APCDP promotes worthwhile advances in risk management, but implementation remains poor

as Afar and even outside administrators lack capacity to conduct informative livelihoods assessments and determine the appropriate aid response, resulting in the de facto use of food aid (Pantuliano and Wekesa, 2008). In some areas, pastoralists and agro-pastoralists have received technical training in water supply management, but it is limited, ad hoc, and is unsustainable due to administrative and institutional shortcomings (Philpott et al, 2005: 9). Similarly, drought early warning systems are poorly staffed and ineffective (ibid, 20).

The key challenge, however, is turning around the lack of Afar indigenous capacity in the region, as noted by the region's own climate change plan, which states, starkly that 'there is insufficient capacity to design, plan and implement good programs at regional, wereda, kebele and community levels' (Afar National Regional State Climate Change Plan, 2010: 40). This gap represents more than a lack of capacity to implement the projects of 'others'; more fundamentally it is a gap in Afar capacity under the ANRS to generate its own development thinking.

By leaving the task to others – deliberately or by default – the region becomes an arena of contestation for development ideas and the political and economic ambitions of others, including social groups that are better able to accommodate and manipulate the relationships between state and society to their advantage. The Afar are in desperate need of their own professional champions within the region who are capable and committed to pastoral development (specifically in terms of economic and social security) within Ethiopia and, more widely, across the Afar Triangle.

There is evidence that some Afar are also adopting longer-term diversification strategies.<sup>14</sup> Pantuliano and Wekesa (2008: 9-10, 15) note that risk management strategies include efforts at putting at least one child in each family through school so that they can one day find paid employment, and increased demand for technical training in communities. They are also diversifying herd composition to more drought tolerant animals as well as trucking livestock to less affected areas (Pantuliano and Wekesa, 2008: 9-10, 15; Afar National Regional Climate Plan, 2010: 11, 27). These may be the important seeds of a more technically competent society able to engage with and influence future development pathways.

### **3.2 Sedentarisation: a complex space**

The newly emerging economics in the Afar Triangle have produced cultural and demographic shifts, with the establishment of small towns in or around large irrigation centres and the spread of roads. Sedentarisation, voluntary and otherwise, is part of a new complex of factors, some push and some pull, that drive change in Afar – and more widely across pastoralist society. More settled livelihoods entail complex and sometimes contradictory factors, including 'destitution as well as wealth, and the search for crisis survival options as well as opportunities to invest and accumulate' (Livingstone and

Ruhindi, 2013: 232). They also provide new opportunities for social and economic interactions that can stimulate new forms of livelihood security.

The challenge is capacity to benefit and ability to avoid costs. 'Plantation agriculture may or may not be good for the Ethiopian environment and economy, but it has been good for the government' converting pastoralists into 'tractable taxpayers' (Behnke and Kerven, 2011: 24). The relatively rich are able to maintain more purely pastoralist sources of income, whereas the poor settle and undertake distress sales... 'All activities situated outside of livestock herding are generally related to settlers, migrants and for the poorest to destitute pastoralists' (Piguet, 2001: 17). The poorest undertake low-paid, seasonal work (Piguet, 2007: 5). Much of the paid labor opportunities created by cotton, sorghum, and sugar large-scale farming have gone to highlanders, though some Afar benefit from renting out irrigated land (Philpott et al, 2005: 8). This has been noted as a source of conflict within Afar society, not all of which has been 'bypassed by developments in the valley'. This has increased conflict between a capitalist class employed on farms and traditional leaders (Flintan and Tamrat, 2002: 274).

This reality also contrasts with more established narratives on forced and 'distress' sedentarisation. Afar actions can also be viewed as 'voluntary responses to natural calamities' such as drought and flood<sup>15</sup> (Hundie et al, 2008: 5), and, also as a political act – a form of Settlement with a capital S in which establishing presence is a way of preventing the claims of others to critical territory.

Indeed voluntary settlement and the adoption of farming has been observed as a tactic to stop expansion of neighboring ethnic groups within the Afar region (Hundie, 2006: 24). Deliberate and permanent settlements in disputed areas can help to secure access to surrounding grazing areas and claim territorial rights on ethnic grounds. (Müller-Mahn et al, 2010: 669). This can also enable increased access to markets and government (Abdullahi et al, 2013: 121).

What is key in distinguishing voluntary and forced settlement is how far settlement precludes continued engagement in pastoralism, or whether systems continue, but use more distant management methods, including hiring out herders. The shift to agro-pastoralism or sedentary agriculture is noted in the ANRS NAPA as an increasingly common shift to more diverse livelihoods (Afar National Regional State Climate Change Plan, 2010: 38). The challenge of settlement – whether voluntary or not – however, is whether it can present a feasible livelihood option. At present the Ministry of Federal Affairs is responsible for Afar settlement schemes in the region, which are ostensibly voluntary. Whilst part of a longer-term 'sedentarisation' policy, the government also recognises that need for Afar to retain some degree of herd mobility.

Ethiopia's Growth and Transformation plan (2010) places heavy emphasis on establishing investor-led agricultural development and industrialisation, along with more commercialised highland farming systems. In the Afar region this has meant the expansion of commercial irrigation into the lower reaches of the river around the fertile floodplains of Dubti and Tendaho, with increases in irrigation area in recent years of up to 60,000ha and two new projects proposed in 2013 (Piguet, 2007: 8; Feyissa, 2011: 15; Ethionews, 2013).

In coming years, Ethiopia plans a potential five-fold increase in sugar production, with the majority of new plantations to be placed in the Lower Awash Valley (Müller-Mahn et al, 2010: 668). In June of 2012, the Ethiopian Herald reported that the nearly completed 30,000ha Kesseme-Kebena dam project would allocate two-thirds of the land for sugarcane production, and the remainder to local pastoralists (Abebe, 2012).

### **3.3 The pull of the triangle**

Not only are domestic political processes changing the development space in which the Afar inhabit, but regional processes are also having a significant impact on the strategic importance of the 'triangle'. To the northeast, the Afar triangle includes the Djibouti-Addis Ababa road corridor, which grows in importance as the capacity of Djibouti port increases and Ethiopia's economic boom accelerates trade. As many as five new container ports are anticipated by 2015, including one that would exclusively handle Ethiopian exports (McGregor, 2012). The creation and maintenance of trade routes are now not only crucial to the Ethiopian state's development agenda, but to the geopolitics of relationships to other nations – including Chinese and Gulf States. In the absence of alternative connections, the Awash Valley-Djibouti corridor therefore remains crucial for access to the Red Sea and cheaper access to cereal goods and sugar (Piguet, 2001).

It is argued that transport and trade changes have also highlighted the conflicting interests of the Ethiopian state. One example is the apparent reluctance of the Ethiopian government to prevent the Issa Somali (the politically dominant ethnic group in Djibouti) from expanding into Afar land in Ethiopia (Flintan and Tamrat, 2002: 279), even after the creation of the ANRS. The expansion of the Issa towards the Awash river (and main Djibouti highway that runs nearby) is part of a deal with the dominant political force within the Djibouti state, after the civil war of the 1990s led to a decisive defeat for the Afar. In recent years, IGAD (the Inter-Governmental Authority on Drought and Development) – a Horn of Africa regional body, headquartered in Djibouti – has grown in prominence. Whilst too early to note any particular trends relative to the Afar situation, it is likely to be increasingly aware of the regional dimension of Afar 'triangle' development issues, including Afar participation in regional economic activity.

Consider the evolution of Ethiopia's salt production and trade in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Historically, salt from the salt pans of the Danakil Depression played an important role in regional trade. Now the region's salt business brings in Ethiopian Birr 100 million annually and is responsible for Ethiopia's entire salt supply (Feyissa, 2011: 10). Despite political leverage over salt in the region, the Afar 'lack the financial capital necessary to graduate into large-scale producers and distributors to the national market' or become investors like their Tigrayan and Amhara highland neighbors (ibid, 10-11). Consequently the federal government has established the country's largest salt company—Enza—which has barred the regional government from administering the salt industry and, controversially, acquired large tracts of the salt pans, displacing some 500 small-scale Afar producers.

In recent years, roads are being constructed to connect the salt districts in Afar lowlands with central and northeast regions of Ethiopia. Some view this as a further example of the state's extractive development in the region which will negatively affect the Afar and Tigray, whose salt caravan culture has already been sidelined by the importing of salt from other countries (Gebrelibanos, 2009: 186, 191; Feyissa, 2011: 15).

Ethiopia's federal ethnic division, Djibouti's single entity multi-party system (but a system highly polarised between a northern part of state dominated by the Afar and the southern half by the Issa) and Eritrea's currently rigidly-centralised government present the Afar with a complex political triangle in which they are pulled in different directions.

In the ANRS itself, Ethiopian Afar politics consists largely of parties that are proxies of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). There is some recognition of the need for a federal arrangement (given the country's size, amongst other things), but opposition political groups – including the Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front (ARDUF) – are opposed to its ethnic basis (Mengisteab, 2001: 22). In recent years they have undertaken attacks against soft targets in the region, including tourist groups, in order to unsettle the Federal (and Regional) governments and press home their claim for a separate Afar state.

In Djibouti Afar predominate in three out of the five districts mostly living in the northern two-thirds of the territory. The relationship with their neighbouring Ethiopian Afar used to be close (Shehim and Searing, 1980, 218; Shehim, 1985), following historical tradition of relations with the Aussa sultanate. However, during the Djiboutian civil war from 1991-94 the Afar engaged in a guerilla campaign to achieve autonomy from the government in Djibouti in response to perceptions of bias towards the Issa. Early in 1994 the main rebel group involved – FRUD (Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy) – split and one faction began to negotiate with the government. Peace agreements were signed in 1995 and 2000, and the government was headed by a Somali president and an Afar Prime Minister

as a result. Afar in Djibouti now have a power-sharing agreement in which Issa Somali hold the presidency, the position of prime minister traditionally goes to an Afar (Africa Confidential 40.3, 1999). Among major political parties, the Republican Alliance for Democracy (ARD) is Afar dominated and participates in various opposition coalitions including the *Union pour le Salut National* (USN), though these coalitions are weakened by conflict between Issa and Afar members (Indian Ocean Newsletter, 15/2/13).

In Eritrea, the 'enemy of my enemy is my friend' holds sway as an approach to relations with the Afar. Afar opposition movements are seen as playing an important role in the destabilising of governments, and have therefore become players in the tangled conflict and politics between Eritrea, Djibouti, and Ethiopia, with all sides bidding for local Afar support. Eritrea has been looking for support from a faction of the Afar Liberation Front, and backing the Djiboutian Afar opposition movement *Front pour la Restauration de l'Unité and de la Démocratie* (FRUD). In response, Ethiopia has distributed ammunition to major opposition group ARDUF, and has sought support from Eritrean Afars, though they have taken no steps to acknowledge Afar demands. 'Addis Ababa's failure to devolve real power to locally elected regional governments in the country boosts opposition movements among the Oromo, Afar and Somali' and Eritrea exploits this failure by supporting these opposition groups. Ethiopia in turn backs Eritrean Afar opposition groups. (Africa Confidential 40.1, 2000; Africa Confidential 40.4, 1999). However, Afar groups have not entered blindly into the role of proxies in this scenario, evidenced by their distrust of the Eritrean government's motives (Indian Ocean Newsletter, 20/4/11).

On one level, governments recognise the potential the Afar represent as economic contributors, political game-changers, and demographic influencers. However, commitments to the demands and needs of Afar groups remain secondary to national concerns. The commonality between Afar across countries seems not to be a congruent political identity, but rather a dynamic and flexible identity under which Afar can navigate the contradictory dynamic of their presence within a state, but their largely marginal status as political powers.

### **3.4 The centre holds**

Limited representation under the federal system in Ethiopia has done little to resolve issues surrounding Afar society's contrary connection to the government—questions of land use and tenure, inter-state conflict, access to land resources, and their management (National Conference on Pastoralist Development, 2000: 59). Elders and traditional institutions still have a role in resolving conflicts, sometimes with the enforcement of regional government bodies (though this type of intervention is limited) (Reda, 2011: 44). Part of the lack of political influence lies in the continuing low levels of educational attainment. The Afar lack qualified staff needed for



a more representative and stronger role at regional government level (Nicol et al, 2000). At this same time it has been argued that they have been less successful than other groups such as the Somali at integrating traditional leadership structures within formal Ethiopian political structures, perhaps because of their resistance to co-optation (Tessema, 2012: 99). In short, a desire to remain apart and separate has weakened their capacity for influence at the centre and the centre, therefore, continues to dictate what happens at the periphery in a region such as ANRS. In reality, the centre continues to hold huge sway over key resource management and development issues at the ANRS level, with the Federal government having the final say over any land acquisition above 5,000 ha.

Within the Afar regional polity too there are faultlines. The ANRS Five-Year Plan states that because traditional leaders have 'moral authority' and yet are not participating in the administration it is very difficult to implement policies without their support (ANRS, 1998, 28). As a result in many ways the Afar are hanging on amidst contested development in their social and economic 'space' (itself contested by others), but are failing to capture the benefits of changes taking place. The Ethiopian state continues to engage in land appropriation in the Lower Awash at Tendaho and Dubti and Afar groups are being resettled in locations where they will have to adopt unfamiliar livelihoods and where they have had previous conflicts with other groups (e.g. Borkena swamps) (Tessema, 2012). To date, Afar engagement in investment decision making in the Awash Valley has been very limited, not least because so much development policy in the Afar – as an emerging region economically – is still driven from the centre.

The steady wearing down of social cohesion, the mounting pressures on established systems and the fragmentation of social systems at clan level due to heterogeneity in Afar socioeconomic status, conflict, and even the commodification of land has made people more individualistic and (for some) led them to view sedentarisation more positively. In common with rural development in much of East Africa, younger generations prefer engagement in the cash economy and the avoidance of risk-prone rainfed production systems: in the Afar case 'many of the young herders would prefer a more comfortable and less risky' – and arguably less marginal – settled life (Müller-Mahn et al, 2010: 670).

But these economic margins are themselves also difficult to navigate. Privatised sugar and cotton production has radically changed the ecology, but not increased the stability of performance, of the Awash valley (Behnke and Kerven, 2011:17, 20). New forms of production will have to emerge in response. In addition, cross-border trade remains largely unofficial (even after the Gulf States' ban on livestock imports from Ethiopia was lifted) but is estimated to be 100 times higher in value than official exports, or US\$ 105 million per year between 1993 and 2000 (Halderman, 2004:27). In general,

it is estimated that Ethiopia significantly undervalues (by a factor of more than three times) the contribution of livestock trade to its agricultural GDP (see IGAD, 2013).

The new economics emerging in the Afar triangle may include a growing informal economy, in which the Afar have less experience and fewer skills than other competing groups, including the Issa Somalis, and as a consequence are 'just coping', without substantial capacity to capitalise on new demands for resources and skills. Their major challenge remains a dispersal of power across states in which they are largely – with the exception of Djibouti – very marginal actors.

In one view, rather than powerless victims, they are designing new coping and adaptive strategies amidst future uncertainty. But present evidence suggest this may be limited to the richer 'elite pastoralists' who represent no more than 10 percent of the population. For the poorer Afar, their poverty is 'best described in terms of uncertainty, compounded by the dearth of alternative opportunities and supporting livelihoods assets' (Davies and Bennett, 2007: 507). In short, a weakening Afar pastoral unit means that traditional wealth redistribution is disappearing, making income and asset ownership disparities a far greater challenge for wider Afar pastoral development.

Whilst the Afar struggle to engage in this new economy, the central state, by contrast, continues to hold sway and pursue a long-term game plan. Generally, this entails decreasing the sources of conflict in the Afar region (and thus securing its legitimacy in the area), and making the region a larger contributor to the growth of the national economy. Specifically this involves a push to profit-oriented agro-pastoralism (Muller-Man et al, 2010: 667), development initiatives and infrastructure that are incongruous with the practice of Afar pastoralist livelihoods and lifestyles and simply displace them.

## 4 Conclusions: Old routes, new pathways

The Afar are not so much at a crossroads, rather at the centre of a major intersection with multiple routes, forms of traffic and at least three entities vying for control of a system with many unruly drivers. Their current levels of vulnerability are the result of this intersection being developed over the decades largely by outsiders. Successive paradigms of modernisation and state-led development have brought 'external' knowledge systems into the Awash valley from the 1950s and 1960s onwards, in particular, accompanying which has been an objectification of the inhabitants: they have been a barrier to development, a problem to be solved, a source of conflict. Little attempt has been made to understand Afar political, social and economic complexity, including at the supra-state level or, where understanding has been achieved, the results have largely been ignored by policy makers.

Official practice continues to focus on creating an environment that 'encourages pastoralists to settle voluntarily' (Government of Ethiopia PASDEP, 2005: 195), with government-sponsored settlement programs especially centered around irrigation projects (Little et al, 2010: 15), and considerable debate over the 'volunteerism' of this process. The political decision to return land to Afar clans in recent years has also been a highly significant move, both in recognising Afar de facto 'sovereignty' over natural resources in the Awash valley, and in changing resource regimes in place. Land returned as irrigated land is no longer used for grazing and so does not have the same tenurial regimes attached. Pastoralists now appear to be using this as a strategy to diversify their livelihoods. The result in policy terms could be an approach that 'supports settlement as it is occurring rather than a general policy of sedentarisation' (Little et al, 2010: 16). This would represent a shift in the locus of development in the valley, from external imposition of ideas – a form of contested knowledge (Nicol, 2001) that has plagued development in the past – to supporting local knowledge that implements solutions that work for the Afar.

This would represent a significant shift towards the acquisition and use of existing Afar knowledge within structures responsible for development, including long experience related to irrigation schemes. Development and management of irrigated farming in the future is likely to involve the continued contesting of margins between state and society in peripheral pastoral areas (the Omo Valley being a case in point) but the experience of the Afar shows that better ways of accommodating pastoralism and irrigation development have to be found. In the long term, however, the political development of the Afar triangle within each of its constituent states will be the major determinant of Afar livelihood security and development as a people within the wider Horn of Africa. Situated as they are at such a critical intersection in the global political economy, it is possible that their fate may well continue to be determined by far wider political and economic forces.

## End Note

- 1 Nicol, Alan (2000) *Contested Margins: Water Resources, Decentralization and the State in the Awash Valley, Ethiopia, 1995-1998*, SOAS, University of London
- 2 A 'Sultanate' being an area or country ruled over by a Sultan.
- 3 Menelik, on the other hand, pushed the frontier of the Ethiopian state to areas beyond the reach even of such renowned medieval empire-builders as Negusa Nagays Amda-Tsyon (r. 1314-1344). In the process, the Ethiopia of today was born, its shape consecrated by the boundary agreements made after the Battle of Adwa in 1896 with the adjoining colonial powers' (Zewde, 1991, 60). Italian intrigue was occasioned by the Awash valley being a key

route into the highlands, reflected in the Italian attempt to undermine Menelik in 1894 through the use of agents sent 'to work upon the religious antagonism of the Danakil and Galla Muslims towards the Ethiopians' (Perham, 1969, 340) .

- 4 An interesting contemporary echo of the 'Christian-Muslim' dichotomy came to light recently in the reported establishment in Mogadishu of a group called the Oromo-Somali-Afar liberation Alliance (OSALA) whose chairman stated that the group sought to 'put an end to centuries of Christian domination and Judeo-Christian Hegemony' (Inter-Press service, 10/9/97).
- 5 However, during the 1960s the Sultan had to transfer from the payment of taxes in kind (on livestock) to payment in cash, thus forcing that part of the Afar economy into the wider cash economy. Collection of the taxes was undertaken by the Balabats and elders (Voelkner, 1974, 11), whose decisions were executed by the faima associations.
- 6 To this day, the belief that the Awash river flows entirely within Ethiopia and thus is not subject to international water laws and norms oddly persists. In fact the final lake in the lower reaches of the river – Lake Abhe – is shared with Djibouti, as a quick scan of GoogleEarth will show.
- 7 The railway was begun in 1897 (the concession went to France) and was completed in 1917; the road route to Djibouti was completed under Italian occupation.
- 8 See Philpott et al, 2005: 18.
- 9 It is estimated that between 1972 and 2007, nearly half of the total land area in the northern Afar rangelands changed dramatically, with a 776% increase in cultivated land, resulting in less dry-season grazing areas for pastoralists (Tsegaye, 2010: 16-18).
- 10 The Afar in Middle Awash call the weed 'woyane', as it came around the same time as the TPLF fighters in the 1980s.
- 11 The government of Ethiopia has not defined a clear strategy to control or eradicate Prosopis. It has become a resource to some in the Afar region, who use it as fuel wood, animal feed (pods), fencing, house construction and charcoal (FARM Africa, 2008: 10). Some believe the spread of Prosopis can potentially be controlled by exploiting its positive uses, 'which provides economic incentive to local people to be involved in the management if planned and regulated carefully' but this is an underdeveloped idea (FARM Africa, 2008: 27). Local responses to Prosopis could be the answer, in the form of local cooperatives, improved transport facilities, and training on how to benefit from Prosopis-related business (HDRA, 2005). However, it is likely that any strategy based on 'harvesting' the resource would have to be accompanied by major efforts at mechanical and other means of

removal and prevention of further spread into key grazing areas.

- <sup>12</sup> The Afar were particularly severely hit by droughts in the 1970s, 1980s and 2000s. 'Michael Buerk's 'biblical famine' report at the Koram feeding in 1980 depicted mainly desperate Afar who had fled the lowlands to reach feeding centres in the highlands. The 1972-74 famine decimated Afar cattle herds by some 72% (Sandford and Yohannes, 2006, 6) and was not unanticipated. Similar problems arose in the 1980s, particularly due to adverse terms of trade, as cattle prices declined by 70% in 1984 and grain prices rose by 250% (ibid, 37).
- <sup>13</sup> The livestock population accounts for 0.8% of the national cattle population, 1.1% of the national sheep population, and 2.3% of the national goat population (Negassa and Jabbar, 2008).
- <sup>14</sup> Important to distinguish 'distress diversification' (Devereux, 2000) from more voluntary forms...
- <sup>15</sup> Indeed mobility is the main response strategy of the Afar to drought- (Pantuliano and Wekesa 2008: 15; Save the Children, 2008: 13),

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