



SELAM AYALEW/BBC/WT

## About Africa Talks Climate

Africa is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Its effects are already being felt by citizens across the continent, yet too often their voices are absent from national and international climate debate.

Africa Talks Climate is a groundbreaking African-led research and communication initiative, founded on the belief that those worst affected must be better informed in order to understand and effectively respond to their changing climate. It has been launched ahead of the crucial UN climate change summit in December 2009 that seeks to broker a new climate treaty.

The research explores the public understanding of climate change in Africa. Discussions were convened with over 1000 citizens from DR Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda, and interviews carried out with nearly 200 policy-makers, religious leaders, business people, journalists and civil society representatives.

It draws upon the expertise of a global advisory network of representatives from research and academic institutions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and donor organisations.

## Climate Change in Ethiopia

Climate change presents an additional stress for Ethiopians already struggling with the challenges posed by climate variability, ongoing environmental degradation and widespread poverty. The interrelation of climate change with other factors is complex and still evolving.

Climate change is projected to result in rising temperatures, highly variable rainfall events, more frequent droughts and flooding and the spread of disease, including malaria.

Pastoralists and farmers will suffer the most. Drought has already devastated the livestock of some communities in the Afar, Oromia, Somali and Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's regions. Changing weather patterns, in addition to other environmental stresses, have increased soil degradation and led to crop failure. Pastoralists and farmers are forced to compete over dwindling natural resources. While the effects of climate change are less immediately critical in urban areas, the impacts on agriculture and energy production will affect the whole country.

Despite taking a lead role in international negotiations and developing a National Action Plan for Adaptation, the government's response is still in its early stages. Increasing the availability and quality of information and engaging the public will play a critical role in determining the success of Ethiopia's response.

### KEY INSIGHTS

#### Knowledge gap

Knowledge of climate change and global warming is very low in Ethiopia. Most recognise neither the terms nor the concepts. Despite being the most profoundly affected by climate change and keenly aware of local environmental problems, the predominantly rural population knows very little about the subject.

#### A greater burden

Ethiopia's rural population is already struggling with the challenges put on the land by a growing population and ongoing environmental degradation. While in urban areas it is not yet a matter of life and death, climate change could soon push rural communities to breaking point.

#### The will of God

Most Ethiopians, regardless of their religion, feel that God alone has the power to change the weather. Very few believe that human activity has a role to play. This could pose an obstacle to their understanding of the science of climate change.

#### An emerging response

Traditional community and religious leaders, are the least knowledgeable about climate change. In contrast, climate change is an emerging concern for many opinion leaders based in Ethiopia's urban centres. Despite relatively high knowledge of the subject among policy-makers, and a prominent role in international climate change negotiations, Ethiopia is still formulating its response.



# Ethiopia: weather and the will of God

## THE MAIN FINDINGS

Ethiopia is not a country that 'talks climate' a great deal. Most Ethiopians interpret the term 'climate change' to literally mean 'weather change', largely because the term 'climate' is little used or understood. Similarly, there is very low awareness of the concept of climate change, particularly in rural areas. Those familiar with climate change say the term means little to most Ethiopians: that despite experiencing unpredictable seasons, extreme weather and increasing temperatures, most Ethiopians would not link such events to climate change or any other global phenomenon.

There is slightly greater recognition of global warming, though most Ethiopians

are still unfamiliar with the concept and understand the term to mean an increase in temperature. Instead of linking it to the warming of the earth by greenhouse gases produced by human activity, the majority of Ethiopians connect it to localised increases in temperature caused by local activities that produce visible pollution or smoke, such as the burning of firewood for fuel. For a very few Ethiopians in urban areas, global warming is inaccurately associated with their prior knowledge of ozone depletion.

Although awareness of climate change and global warming is low, people recognise that their weather is changing and that these changes are profoundly affecting their lives: "When there was cold weather," says a trader from Afar, "people were able to survive while going from one place to another. But now there is no such cold weather and hence they are dying due to drought and heat while they are searching for water." Citing erratic and insufficient rainfall, dwindling water sources, failed harvests and dying livestock, people explain that the land simply cannot support them anymore.

### Coping with changes from God

People mostly attribute changes in the weather to the will of God. Almost all rural Ethiopians, regardless of religion, say that weather changes and subsequent hardships are caused by God. "The secret is with Allah. Allah brings the rain. The one who causes the drought, who sends us the drought is Allah," says one Afari woman. Given that this view is especially widespread among rural inhabitants and that rural Ethiopians account for over five-sixths of the population, the belief that God controls the weather is a major obstacle to most Ethiopians understanding the science of climate change.

Despite this, most rural people are doing what they can to respond to worsening conditions. Farmers and pastoralists explain that they are diversifying into mixed livelihoods, with varied results. "If there is rain, I farm the land for subsistence", says an agro-pastoralist from southern Oromia. "But now over the last three years, we haven't had rain, which has resulted in the death of cattle and forced us either to eat them, or sell them to buy some cereals." Others report that they are starting up small-scale businesses in order to survive, such as selling tea and other goods. Farmers feel that the pressures put on the land from changing weather as well as population growth, land degradation and deforestation, are frustrating



## A personal story from north-eastern Ethiopia



**Ummed Issie - pastoralist, Geleha, Afar**

"My name is Ummed and let me tell you what I have encountered as a result of drought. From the very beginning I have been a pastoralist. I had around 30 goats. I lost all of them while moving from one place to another looking for pasture and grazing land as a result of the drought. Then as an alternative, I started farming on the banks of Mille River. I grew sorghum on one and a half hectares of land but failed again, because the river dried up before the sorghum was ready.

"Everything has gone. Now I depend on my relatives. Thanks to Allah, the Afar people are supportive by nature. If some of your relatives have enough to subsist, they will share with you. So that is how I am surviving right now. I have nowhere to go, other than staying here and waiting for the good time to come to start farming again. When I say good time I mean when the rain comes and the river starts flowing.

"At this time the Belg rain [the short rainy season that normally runs March-May] was supposed to be here and cattle would have been grazing newly grown grass. But as you can see nothing is happening. The sky is so pure. So we have to wait for Allah to bring us the rain."

*Translated from the original interview in Afari.*

## Research methods

This Research Briefing is based on the findings of 16 focus group discussions with citizens and 18 in-depth interviews with policy-makers, religious leaders, business people, journalists and civil society representatives. Fieldwork took place in May and June 2009.

The four fieldwork locations (Addis Ababa, Amhara, Afar, and the Borena zone of Oromia) were selected in consultation with the Ethiopian advisory network to represent areas experiencing environmental challenges which have been linked to or are predicted to be exacerbated by climate change. Selection sought to ensure appropriate geographic, ethnic, linguistic and urban/rural diversity.

The focus groups were single sex, and contained approximately eight participants. Within each group participants were of a similar age and socio-economic class or profession. Moderators were the same gender as participants. The groups were carried out in the Amharic, Oromiffa and Afari languages.

Verbatim local language transcripts and full English translations were produced for each focus group and interview. These were systematically coded by a team of international researchers, using a common list of codes to group and cluster the data. The codes were then analysed to identify the insights and emerging themes.

their attempts to adapt. In many cases adapting has led them to migrate, either in search of areas that can better sustain their traditional livelihoods, or to regional market towns.

**"Over the last three years, we haven't had rain, which has resulted in the death of cattle and forced us either to eat them, or sell them to buy some cereals"**

In urban areas the additional stress presented by climate change is not, for the moment, a matter of life and death. Urban Ethiopians do not yet suffer from food and water insecurity to the same extent as those in rural areas. They are keenly aware, however, that the problems experienced by the rural population also have implications for urban dwellers. One young man in Addis Ababa explains: "if someone else is affected it also means I am affected; if for example one farmer is affected by the temperature increase and his produce decreases, this will also affect me."

### Opinion leaders: an emerging response

Knowledge of climate change varies among Ethiopia's policy-makers and opinion leaders.

Despite their influence over and proximity to the people most affected by climate change, local community and religious leaders are generally unfamiliar with the subject. Although this research relies on a relatively limited number of interviews with Ethiopian opinion leaders, their comments suggest that opinion leaders based in Addis Ababa, including those from the national government, media, NGO and private sector, are better informed.

Opinion leaders' comments suggest that the NGO sector and the national government are leading Ethiopia's response to climate change. Opinion leaders detail a wide range of events, documents and plans for future coordination, yet when pressed for actual interventions, most cite a series of governmental tree-

planting initiatives. Despite high profile engagement at the international level, the research suggests that the government's response to climate change is in its nascent stages. Nevertheless, its planned response is multi-sectoral, involving a variety of governmental and non-governmental groups,



and is rooted in the practical needs of those most affected by climate change.

While there is a strong will among most opinion leaders to tackle the problem of climate change at a policy level, so far, little has been done to engage the public on the issue. They recognise that rural Ethiopians are living with the impacts of climate change without understanding the phenomenon, nor the full extent of the problem. It is generally thought that communicating about climate change to the public is essential to improving people's ability to adapt. As one policy-maker says, "if a person knows about a problem and its

consequences, he will not throw himself into hell, knowing what causes it".

Most opinion leaders know that any such engagement will be difficult. Although they say the terms 'climate change' and 'global warming' would be understood if they were translated into the languages used in Ethiopia, they consider the concepts themselves a far greater challenge. Some opinion leaders think that the belief that God controls the weather could prevent people from understanding climate change. They point out that this belief is widely held. The comments of some opinion leaders reflect this traditional belief: "if it is

found that the problem is caused by humans it can be settled with humans so that people won't be affected, but if it comes directly from God the solution is talking to God directly." Yet faith can provide opportunities to engage the public in environmental stewardship, as one religious leader explains: "everybody respects their religion, religion teaches people to care for their environment". This suggests that there is both a need and an opportunity to set any discussion of climate change within a context that takes account of the importance of religious belief in Ethiopia.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- The information and communication needs of Ethiopian citizens must be at the heart of any national response to climate change.
- A successful information provision strategy should recognise that Ethiopians' response to climate change will be determined by the availability and quality of information.
- Of immediate concern are the needs of information-poor rural communities, who are already struggling with the challenges posed by climate variability and poverty. For them, climate change represents a tipping point. If these communities are to survive, there is a need for targeted information and resources that will enable them to cope with the impacts of climate change.
- All evidence suggests that international climate change discourse is inaccessible to most Ethiopians. There is a need for information and debate that harness Ethiopians' understanding and experience of their changing weather and environment to create a discourse relevant to their religious beliefs, and that promotes citizen engagement in Ethiopia's response to climate change.

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All climate change impacts described in 'Climate Change in Ethiopia' are fully sourced from the following references:

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BBC World Service Trust, Bush House, Strand, London WC2B 4PH, UK

Tel +44 (0) 20 7557 2462

Fax +44 (0) 20 7397 1622

Email [ws.trust@bbc.co.uk](mailto:ws.trust@bbc.co.uk)

Web [bbcworldservicetrust.org](http://bbcworldservicetrust.org)

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