

## Migration and the Environment: Let's Talk About Goats

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**Written by Jeffrey Labovitz**

Conflict, insecurity, political unrest and the search for economic opportunities continue to drive migration in the East and Horn of Africa. However, one of the biggest drivers of displacement is not related to war or the search for better jobs but rather to changing weather patterns. After five years of drought, more than 1.5 million people were uprooted from their homes as their soils slowly, year by year, dried and cracked.

This year the skies opened up, lonely clouds joined each other, and the rains finally came. The immediate effect was not joy as one would hope, as whenever there is drought, what follows are floods. Soil hardened by years baking in the sun, turn into racing river beds. Hundreds of thousands who withstood the long dry period lost their homes to an unrelenting wet season. According to the Famine Early Warning Systems Network, the heavy rainfall is likely to impact positively on the food security of pastoral and agro pastoral households. At the same time, food security outcomes are likely to be more severe than previously projected for households in flood prone areas, most notably in riverine areas of the Horn of Africa.

After suffering from a sustained dry period and now a definitive wet period, dare we hope for a return of internally displaced peoples to normalcy with sustained and viable livelihoods?

Today, we need to talk about goats.

Goats are the prime offering at any celebration in East Africa whether its barbequed over the fire, breaking the fast of Ramadan, enjoyed for Christmas dinner, or the culmination of a wedding feast. *Nyama choma* is the Swahili word for barbeque and it's the talk of any party. The success of an event corresponds with the quality of the meat.

Goats are omnipresent in the city and in any village. You can see them on the side of bustling markets, dodging cars and people, grazing, dirtied by the East African red cotton soil. They stand below the blooming jacaranda, filling open spaces of a football pitch, crossing pot holed streets while a fresh-faced boy with a pointed stick, wearing a tattered shirt and shorts urges them onwards.

Among many rural households in East and Horn of Africa, goats represent the rural community's social safety net. They represent a marriage dowry, a measure of wealth and prestige.

In Kenya, one goat can sell at market for US\$70. A juvenile, cherished for its soft meat, goes for \$30. In countries where half the population live on less than \$1.5 a day, this is the family fortune, their bank account, their life savings. When goats go missing, when they die of thirst or starve, so does the resiliency of the entire community. Then, it is the people who are endangered.

While we are talking goats, we can talk about cows, and camels. Cows can be sold for upwards of \$500, and camels fetch upwards of \$1,000 when sold to Saudi Arabia. All in all, experts estimate that about 20% of the entire livestock of drought affected areas have died this past year. While these estimates are not precise, it is safe to say millions will have died. It is not a stretch to think we could be looking at upwards of 10 million livestock deaths.

As aid workers, we talk about people, and we should. When the Horn of Africa last had a famine in 2011, we talked of numbers which are hard to articulate. Years, on it is still hard to imagine the scale of a drought which resulted in an estimated 250,000 deaths. This past year, aid agencies have been working hard to avoid another famine, and it looks like large scale death has been averted. This is a success and humanitarians have optimism that we have avoided a repeat of 2012. However, this is not a celebration.

Sacdiya, an elderly woman from Balli Hille, Somalia complains, "This drought is absolutely terrible. It's even worse than the last one in 2011. I have already lost 150 animals to thirst and starvation. How am I supposed to provide for my family with no livestock?"

Ahmed lives with his family in a makeshift home built from aluminum and fabric in the outskirts of Hargesia, Somaliland. "I lost all of my animals decades ago during my first famine in the 1980s. Back then, as all of my animals were dying, we got so desperate that we started selling the skin hoping to make any money at all. In the past three droughts, I have seen in my lifetime, this one is by far the worst I have seen."

My organization, the UN Migration Organization, tracks displacement of people. We know that when people leave their homes, they have lost their survival mechanisms. People don't leave their goats behind, their homeland, unless they fear they will die. It's that simple. This is why nearly 40,000 new people were internally displaced in Kenya this past year. Those drought displaced numbers have nearly reached a half of a million in Ethiopia and surpassed 1 million in Somalia.

The sudden onset of rains has not yet helped. In fact goats died in the recent months due to flooding, adding to the desperation of families who have lost their livelihoods.

For these people we need to ask, what will they do?

The Famine Early Warning System network, which offers evidence based analysis to governments and relief agencies, warned of a fifth consecutive year of below average rain. Now we have some hope that with the rain we are seeing will mean we are nearing the end, but we still have millions in need of our help.

We as humanitarians need to remind the world that we continue to need resources to help our people to survive. We also need to remind the world we need to take care of our goats as we need livelihoods for sustainable return or people will have nothing to go back to.

More importantly we need to diversify livelihood strategies if indeed changing weather patterns continues to result in displacement.

For the more than 1.5 million people displaced over the past year, they will be stuck in dismal camps for years to come and dependent on our generosity.

The irony is that all they want is their goats.

*Jeffrey Labovitz is the Regional Director for East and the Horn of Africa for the International Organization for Migration, the UN Migration Agency. IOM is working help people survive in war torn and environmentally affected countries. IOM works towards the dignity of migrants globally.*