

Role of traditional institutions in water resource governance in the Borana lowlands, southern Ethiopia

For centuries and amid worsening climatic conditions, the Borana have devised an effective water management system based on traditional practices and institutions – how should development agencies best support this?

by Nega Emiru

MANAGING SCARCE water resources has long been a crucial challenge for people living in dryland areas. Good water management can mean the difference between life and death. Over time robust governance systems have been developed to enable people to regulate access to water. What can development programmes learn from this rich experience and how can these institutions be strengthened?

Background

The Borana lowlands are in the southern most part of the Ethiopian lowlands occupying a total area of about 95 thousand square kilometres. Water is the critical limiting factor to the socio-economic development of the area. The climate is semi-arid and subject to recurrent droughts and severe water shortages the consequences of which can be life threatening. Traditional wells, ponds, cisterns (both from roof and rock catchments), boreholes (with hand and motorized pumps), earth dams and water collected in depressions are the chief sources of water. There are nine clusters of Borana traditional deep wells, *Tula*

Saglan. Reportedly these wells have never run dry even during severe droughts. These reliable water sources have been serving the Borana for centuries amid worsening climatic conditions and increasing human and livestock populations. As a result, the Borana have devised strong traditional institutions to manage this vital resource.

Roles and responsibilities

The Borana water management system is a traditional institution which ensures the equitable distribution of access to water. The management body is made up of three major components: *Confi* (the founder and overseer), *Chora ella* (the management council) and *Aba herrega* (the daily supervisor). These components have defined roles and responsibilities to ensure the peaceful and long term use of water resources.

Confi is the title given to the person who oversees the general management of the well. The title is given to a descendent of the *Aba ella* (the well founder) and this title is transferable. *Aba ella* is the person who

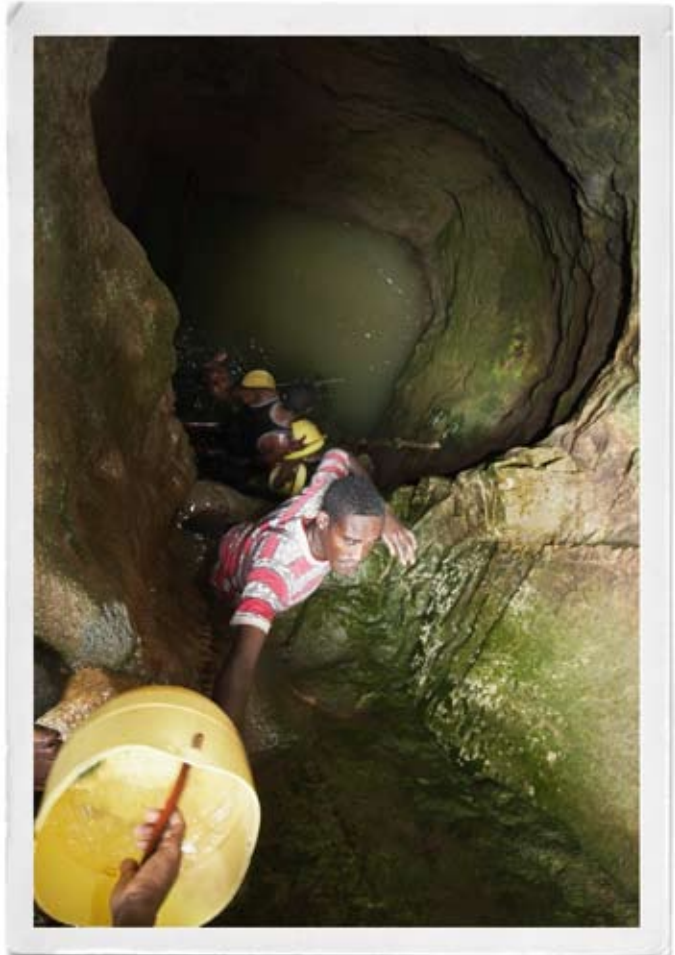
identified the site of a well or organized the community to excavate a well. Traditional wells are named after the person who located the site and the name of the clan who dug the well. A well's clan affiliation may be the same as that of the founder of the well. The relationship between the founder of the well and the well itself is defined by responsibilities and duties. These are called *Confi*, a kind of trusteeship. The well founder is the most influential person in the governance of this resource, and people who have personal relationships with him can gain access regardless of linkages they may or many not have with the clan demonstrating his degree of influence.

Chora ella is the management council who has overall authority on use of the well. The council is composed of 7 to 8 members, usually clan elders and well users descended from the well founder. Establishing the watering rotation is the council's most important task, especially when water volumes are low during the dry season and droughts. Clan members obtain user rights through lineage and their record of active involvement in well management and maintenance. The level of contributions to well maintenance and rehabilitation is also decided by this council. The amount of contribution is a function of the number of cattle the clan member owns. Settling rare disputes between users is equally the responsibility of this body.

In addition the council manages access to the wells for neighbouring pastoralist

communities. Clan affiliation, active participation in well management and seniority within a clan are some of the major factors which determine access. Other factors which are taken into account include herd size, the ability to present and to defend a claim before the council, labour contributions for well maintenance and the availability of surrounding pasture. Watering rights at traditional wells is obtained and maintained through participation in these well councils. Access to water indirectly confers access to nearby pasture.

The *Aba herrega* closely supervises the



Boran well

daily management and activities around the well such as cleaning ramps, repairing gates and lifting water from the source. He is appointed by the well council and is in charge of monitoring and supervising the implementation of council decisions. He controls the watering rotation, and the type and number of herds to be watered at a time. The watering rotation usually lasts for three or four days. He has this role for life or until the community feels he has shown misconduct or violated *ada sera Borana*, the Borana tradition. Members of these bodies do not receive a salary or extra incentives. Their only recompense is the strong sense of ownership and moral authority they assume when carrying out their tasks.

Current scenarios and evidence from the field

This traditional and community owned institution ensures equitable use of water resources, reducing resource-based conflicts within and between pastoralist communities, and improving livestock development in the area. Regulation of the seasonal use of water and the ability to deal with recurrent water shortages are further benefits. More recently, the government and NGOs have established community-based water management committees to oversee the management of newly constructed water points usually cisterns and hand or motorized pumps. The Zonal Water Resource office reports, however, that a large proportion of these water points fail due to administrative and managerial problems. Consequently, several water projects do not or only partially meet their objectives. In contrast, the older, traditional water points managed by the local community are functioning well thanks to their robust water governance mechanisms.

While a number of government and NGO agencies are actively working in the area,

research and development interventions have overlooked the importance of customary institutions and indigenous knowledge. Support to tried and tested practices and traditional drought management strategies which secure livelihoods is negligible. The integration of indigenous and external knowledge in development planning and decision making is minimal. And efforts to understand current practice and the challenges of applying and scaling up these approaches are weak or nonexistent.

What must come next

Better technical initiatives which support traditional institutions must build local capacity so that these mechanisms can function more effectively and provide better quality services to their communities. This should include upgrading problem-solving skills. Women's participation in decision-making processes must also be enhanced. In addition, central and regional government ministries and departments must have better links with traditional authorities in order to ensure the better coordination of actions and use of resources to achieve improved food security, rural development and sustainable economic development. Last but not least, organisations must make the best use of these traditional practices, processes and institutions to increase the impact of future projects and programmes.

Nega Emiru is an Ethiopian rural development professional working at the crossroads of agriculture, food security and natural resource management. His research and development interests include agricultural innovation, natural resource/watershed management and resource-based conflict resolution. Currently he works with the United Nations and prior to that he worked with an international NGO, CARE, on pastoral development projects. He can be contacted by email at n.emiru@yahoo.com

