

Diverting a River

to Raise a Standard of Living

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In the small village of Kilintina Derseda in the Afar Regional State in Ethiopia, the recurrent drought had made life difficult and unpredictable for the community. The traditional rain fed farming system is unreliable for making a living since rain is very scarce and unpredictable in the area. Although privileged to be located near Kadefage, a river with a high potential for irrigation, for years this water resource was underutilized for watering fields because of lack of awareness of its irrigation potential. In the meantime the community led their life as Pastoralists moving the whole family from place to place, making it impossible for the children to attend school. For the youth who dreamed beyond a pastoral lifestyle the only option they could envision was migrating to Djibouti or to other regions within the country in search of work.

Support for Sustainable Development (SSD), through the financial support of CARE Ethiopia, collaborated with the community and the District Agricultural Office to conduct a needs assessment. As a result, the consensus was that the Kedafage River could play a big role in addressing the farming challenges of the community. Thus a project committee was established to oversee the overall implementation. The first concern for them was the conflicts that could arise with the upstream and downstream villages due to the diversion. Thus the committee negotiated with them on a fair distribution of water based on the Watershed Study conducted by irrigation engineers.



Accordingly, work began to divert the river, opening an irrigation channel that works by gravity to water the fields. It took a labor force of 70 people per day participating through a Cash for Work program over one year to complete the work. After construction was completed, the sustainable irrigation scheme has the capacity to directly benefit 120 households by irrigating 40 ha. of land.

Urfolee Mohammed (50) is one of the beneficiaries of the project; he participated in the construction of the irrigation scheme and was given cash for his work, which at the time helped him cover his household needs.

"It was a great opportunity for me to work on this infrastructure. In previous years I would have sold at least a goat to cover costs for my household consumption but with the cash for work program I was able to earn enough for such costs, and at the same time I was contributing something towards a sustainable development for my village by working on this small scale irrigation"

Urfolee explained that he and others like him were selected to participate in the Cash for Work program based on the set criteria which were the ability to engage in a labor force as well as being in need of cash for immediate consumption. Women were given priority in the cash for work program and constituted 40% of the total work force.

"We were working through a shifting system so that most of us who needed the extra income could benefit, the selection process was fair and our community is happy," Urfolee recalls.

For SSD the biggest challenge in implementing this project was the lack of knowledge of the community with diversified livelihood. To tackle this challenging experience, meetings with participants of programs in neighboring villages and other districts that have improved their agriculture were arranged. Moreover, trainings on irrigation based agriculture, proper utilization of irrigation water, market accessibility and storage systems for products was provided by the project.

"The truth is I was never keen to engage in crop cultivation until I saw how the farmers were benefiting from their work during the experience sharing program. I had always believed it is too much work for such little output," said Urfolee referring to the discouraging situation of traditional farming in Kilintina Dersede.

The project equipped the beneficiaries with 10 oxen and necessary farm tools to be rotated within the community. The Irrigation Water User Association Committee ensures the fair use of these farm accessories. The District Agriculture Office also provided them with free improved seeds according to the size of their land before they set out to undertake this new challenging activity in their effort to advance their life. According to Urfolee the challenge the community took up did not fail them as they have begun reaping the benefits of irrigation agriculture.



“Previously on our land we could harvest once a year if we were lucky enough to have some rain. But most of the time rain was scarce and our land would just remain bare while we were displaced in search of pasture for our livestock,” he recalls.

The community in Kilintina Dersede now can remain in their own homes, with their family united, even if rain is not available. The irrigation scheme has given the community the opportunity to settle down and enjoy a routine lifestyle accompanied by opportunity for their children to attend school for a whole academic year. They are now harvesting enough maize to feed their families for at least 8 months and they can easily afford to purchase other necessities from market, as the income of the community increased. The project facilitated a market link for beneficiaries with the traders at the district level so that their products could be sold at the current wholesale market price. They sell mung bean and sesame, and make good profits.

“My life is no longer dictated by availability of rain. Now that I am cultivating and settled I can actually plan my next move. I am hoping to further develop my agricultural skills and produce more cereals for the market,” Urfolee said.

He further states that he and his colleagues strictly follow the bylaws of the Water Users Association that was established to ensure the sustainability of the irrigation infrastructure. The community during the harvest time contributes Birr 50 per household so it can be used later for purchasing maintenance materials in case of damage to the infrastructure. The project trained selected beneficiaries with technical skills to maintain the small-scale irrigation scheme; this way the community does not need to wait for the assistance of experts. However, if a major breakdown were to occur, there is an agreement with the district office that an expert would be assigned to maintain it.

Proudly describing his success, Urfolee talks about his financial growth by comparing the previous situation where he had to sell a goat to cover for any immediate household need (depreciating his asset) to how he is making a profit of Birr 13.250 a year from trading the products he harvested.

"My wife was carrying water jar on her back for household consumption from the water point which is 2 hours walk from our house but now with the profit I made selling the surplus of my produce I have bought a donkey. We use it to transport water and also to take our products to the market, our asset is increasing ... Thanks to the change the project has brought to our village I now have a dream I am working towards achieving" he adds.

With diversified income, people of Kilintina Derseda are more ready to face drought. In contrast to previous days they currently have alternative livelihoods. They use the water resource available and are involved in crop, horticulture, and livestock production. They can not only feed their families but also earn income from the surplus sold in nearby markets. By increasing their assets, they are more resilient to hazards that they may encounter along the way. Now if one road fails them they have an alternative path to take to keep them advancing. Every day they work on building this resilience even stronger as they are dreaming big and working harder to achieve bigger goals.

