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Borana women and children living near Kushu pond in *Gayo kebele*.

BRIEFING NOTE 1: THE CONTEXT

This Briefing Note describes the context in which the NRM-Borana project operates: the Borana people, their traditional system of governance, the growing frequency of droughts, and the disconnect between government and customary institutions.

THE BORANA PEOPLE

Pastoralism, especially the keeping of cattle, is more than a way of life for the Borana people; it is bound up in their sense of identity, their culture and traditions established over many generations. One of the major Oromo nations, they have been living in the area that they currently occupy since at least the 13th century, and probably before that. As often found in pastoralist societies, the Borana measure their wealth in terms of the number of cattle that they own. The animals serve as their bank: an investment in good times, and an asset to be sold in bad times. It is estimated that the Borana number well over 1.2 million people, the majority living in Southern Ethiopia but spreading also into Kenya and Somalia. Within the 16 *kebeles* (spanning five *woredas*) covered by the NRM-Borana project, the population amounts to some 70,600 (36,300 women). The estimated number of cattle owned by all the Borana of Ethiopia before the 2020–2022 drought was 6.8 million.

The Borana practice an indigenous system of governance known as *Gada*. This is based on the concept of five generational classes, each of eight years (one *Gada*), with a full *Gada* cycle lasting 40 years. The community decision-makers are elected from the men in the eldest generation; after serving their eight-year term, they step

down, allowing men from the next generation to take over. The system is patriarchal with little opportunity for women's voices, but is otherwise democratic in covering legislative, executive and judiciary functions. The highest legislative body of the Borana is the *Gumi Gayo*, or general assembly, which (with one exception) has been held every eight years since 1697 at the settlement named Gayo. At the *Gumi Gayo*, customary laws are reviewed and promulgated, *Gada* councilors, customary healers, prophets, and other forecasters are evaluated, and unresolved conflicts at different lower-level meetings are resolved. There is also a campaign process to elect the new *Abba Gada* from the next generational class.



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A Borana elder of *Dhas kebele*, *Molu Dubu*; he is the *Konfi* (traditional owner) of the *Gadulicha* deep well described in Briefing Note 3

The hierarchy of the traditional Borana system of governance is outlined in the figure below.

Gumi Gayo, Raaba, Abba Gada	The highest level of decision-making. The <i>Abba Gada</i> (President) may adjudicate himself or discuss within a group with other elders (<i>Raaba</i>); issues deemed to require community discussion are referred to the general assembly (<i>Gumi Gayo</i>)
Hayyu, Lichu and other elders	These are rare and usually complex cases, decided by respected elders specializing in customary law, notably <i>Haayu</i> (councillors) and <i>Lichu</i> (lawmakers)
Abba Dheeda Abba Madda	These are issues that require decision-making over a wider area; <i>dheeda</i> (made up of several <i>reera</i>) for pastures or <i>madda</i> (a territorial area named after a water point)
Jaarsole Reera	Issues that cannot be resolved within the village are taken to the village cluster or <i>reera</i> for deliberation by the group of elders (<i>Jaarsole</i>). Most issues are resolved at this level.
Abba Olla	Minor disputes are resolved at village (<i>olla</i>) level by the village chief (<i>Abba Olla</i>)
Individual household	Interactions over uses and abuses, especially pasture enclosures (<i>kaloo</i>)

Under their traditional system of natural resource management, the Borana consider the pastures and water resources to be common property, subject to clearly defined rules or by-laws determining access to and use of predefined dry-season and wet-season rangelands. The seasonal movement of livestock between these different pastures ensured that the use of natural resources

was optimized and avoided a “tragedy of the commons” scenario of indiscriminate exploitation. Indeed, the traditional system broadly complies with the eight principles of common property management defined by Nobel prize winner for economics Elinor Ostrom (see text box), although traditionally women do not have an equal voice, and principles 7 and 8 no longer fully apply. Borana gov-

The Borana traditional system of natural resource governance and the eight principles of Common Property Management

1. Clearly defined boundaries and rules: This holds true of the Borana traditional system, although in terms of geographical boundaries, the area recognized by the Borana people as part of their heritage spans three countries (Ethiopia, Somalia, and Kenya), and the boundaries are often contested.

2. Rules should fit the local context: The system developed by the Borana has been tried and tested over many generations; one example of its fit to the local context is the recognition of different types of grazing lands and their differentiated patterns of seasonal use.

3. Decision-making must involve all users: This is implicit in the general assembly held at the mid-term of every *Gada*. Decision making follows a hierarchy from village to higher levels. However, the traditional system did not allow an equal voice for women users.

4. Adhesion to the rules must be monitored: This is ensured by groups of elders at different levels, according to the resource. For example, the amount of water taken by households from each deep well during dry seasons is monitored by an overseer or *Abba Herrega*.

5. A scale of graduated sanctions: Heavy punishments can cause resentment – hence the elders generally impose fines in a graduated manner, in a way that is broadly accepted as fair.

6. Conflict resolution mechanisms must be easily accessible: This is ensured by local resolution mechanisms set within a hierarchy; if a local resolution cannot be found, the dispute is taken to a higher level.

7. Commons need the right to organize (self-determination): Although the Borana are not denied the right to organize, their system of governance is not legally recognized by government authorities. Instead, the imposition of modern government structures has weakened the customary ones and created conflicts, as outlined in other Briefing Notes (notably 2, 3, 4 and 7).

8. Commons function best when nested within larger networks: Traditionally, the Borana’s system of governance can be seen as a nested system of hierarchical decision-making. However, the superimposition of local government structures that do not correspond to customary boundaries has generally broken this nesting.

Source: Ostrom, Elinor (1990). *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

ernance emphasizes community solidarity. This extends to support in times of difficulty under a system known as *Busa Gonofa*. For example, households that lose relatively few animals during a drought are required to give one or two animals as breeding stock to households that suffered exceptional losses. Food is also shared, and priority given to breastfeeding mothers and infants during water and food shortages.

A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT:

CLIMATE CHANGE

The Borana are familiar with drought and have their own traditional coping mechanisms of community solidarity. However, they observe that the droughts of recent years are more intense and frequent than before. Respondents recall that their first experience of external aid was during a major drought in the early 1970s – in Borana terms, during the 65th *Gada*. Since then, they have generally experienced one drought per *Gada*, the severity of which would vary. However, the frequency of droughts is increasing and there have already been three in the current *Gada*, as shown in the diagram. This equates to five droughts in the last 10 years.

The lived experience of drought is summarized by one community member as follows:

“We are a pastoralist community and drought is a part of our life. In my lifetime we used to experience drought once in every Gada. But now it is repeating within the Gada period. We would usually have 3–4 years of good rains to fully recuperate, and in the earlier droughts the calves and heifers survived so we saved the core breeding stock. But currently even the young and strong animals are starting to die, threatening herd regeneration. And that is unprecedented.” Abba Kubsa Kuroftu (aged 51), pastoralist, Gayo kebele, Borana, March 2022

A further complication observed by Borana people is that when it has rained in recent years, the pattern has been sporadic and uneven. As a result, herders have all rushed to the area where there was rain, and grass had grown – quickly exhausting the pasture.



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Drought is occurring with increasing frequency in Borana, with water in short supply for people and livestock – as here, in March 2022.

Scientific evidence linking changing rainfall patterns to global heating

The latest findings from the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change, the IPCC's 6th Annual Report, show that although Africa's population has contributed least to global heating, “key development sectors have already experienced widespread losses and damages attributable to anthropogenic climate change, including biodiversity loss, water shortages, reduced food production, loss of lives and reduced economic growth.” The IPCC also notes that mean surface temperatures and hot extremes are increasing, whilst in North-East Africa there has been a decrease in mean rainfall that is reliably attributable to climate change. This is compounded as the IPCC predicts, with rising temperatures, more intense rains which, unless carefully managed, are likely to result in destructive flash floods rather than alleviating growing conditions for crops and pastures.

Source: IPCC (2022) Sixth Annual Report, Chapter 9, Africa https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGII_FinalDraft_Chapter09.pdf

Frequency of droughts by *Gada*

Jaldesa Liban (64th)	Goba Bale (65th)	Jilo Aga (66th)	Boru Guyo (67th)	Boru Madha (68th)	Liban Jaldesa (69th)	Guyo Goba (70th)	Kura Jasso (71st)
1961 – 1968	1969 – 1976	1977 – 1984	1985 – 1992	1993 – 2000	2001 – 2008	2009 – 2016	2017 – 2024
1 severe drought	1 major drought; first external aid	1 drought	1 drought	1 drought	More than 1 drought but varied intensity	More than 2 droughts but varied intensity	3 droughts already



Women collecting water for domestic purposes at Burkuke pond, Baha kebele. The photo was taken in March 2022, when water was in short supply.

THE IMPACT ON WOMEN AND GIRLS

Disasters are rarely “gender neutral”; in the case of drought in Borana, it has a particularly negative effect on women and girls. As water resources become increasingly scarce, it is women and girls who must walk long distances to collect and carry home water for drinking, cooking and other domestic purposes. Those who can afford it do so with a donkey; some may be aided by a male relative who has a motorbike, but the poorest must carry all their water needs themselves. Often it is difficult to maintain hygiene, and people will drink untreated pond water. It is also women who are responsible for seeking out fodder for livestock; this too takes more time. One significant “ultimate resource” is the pods of Acacia trees, which are quite high in protein and especially good fodder for goats. The trees must be climbed or battered with poles to dislodge the pods and then collect them on the ground. As women spend more time in water and fodder collection, someone else must look after younger children; this task generally falls to girls, who then drop out of school.

The traditional system of Borana governance gives women little opportunity to voice their opinions, despite their heavy engagement in water and pasture collection. Within local government the situation is not very different. Positions of authority in *kebele* and *woreda* government administrations are also generally male dominated, although there is a specific department for women and social affairs.

“I asked, how can it be that those who suffer the most from natural resource degradation – the women who, for example, have to carry water and fodder from such long distances – are not involved in the decisions over these resources?” Abarufa Jatani, Project Manager, NRM-Borana Project

THE EROSION OF TRADITIONAL SYSTEMS OF RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Under the federal Ethiopian government system, the Borana Zone falls within the Oromia Region and is divided into 13 *woredas* (districts) and smaller *kebeles* (municipality or commune). The boundaries of these administrative territories are at odds with Borana concepts of geographical units and their well-developed traditional system of governance. More than this, there is a difference in mind-set. The government strategy, particularly during the socialist regime (1974–1991) but continuing to the present day, is to favor fixed settlements to which services can be readily channeled, and administration facilitated. In addition, through promoting food crop cultivation as a drought response intended to reduce dependency on livestock, the government has favored land enclosure and privatization. Enclosures are often associated with elite capture of the best lands. In contrast, the pastoralist way of life requires freedom of seasonal movement of people and animals, and respect for customary rules of resource use. Moving from one rangeland

to another not only minimizes grazing pressure; it also reduces the build-up of disease in livestock.

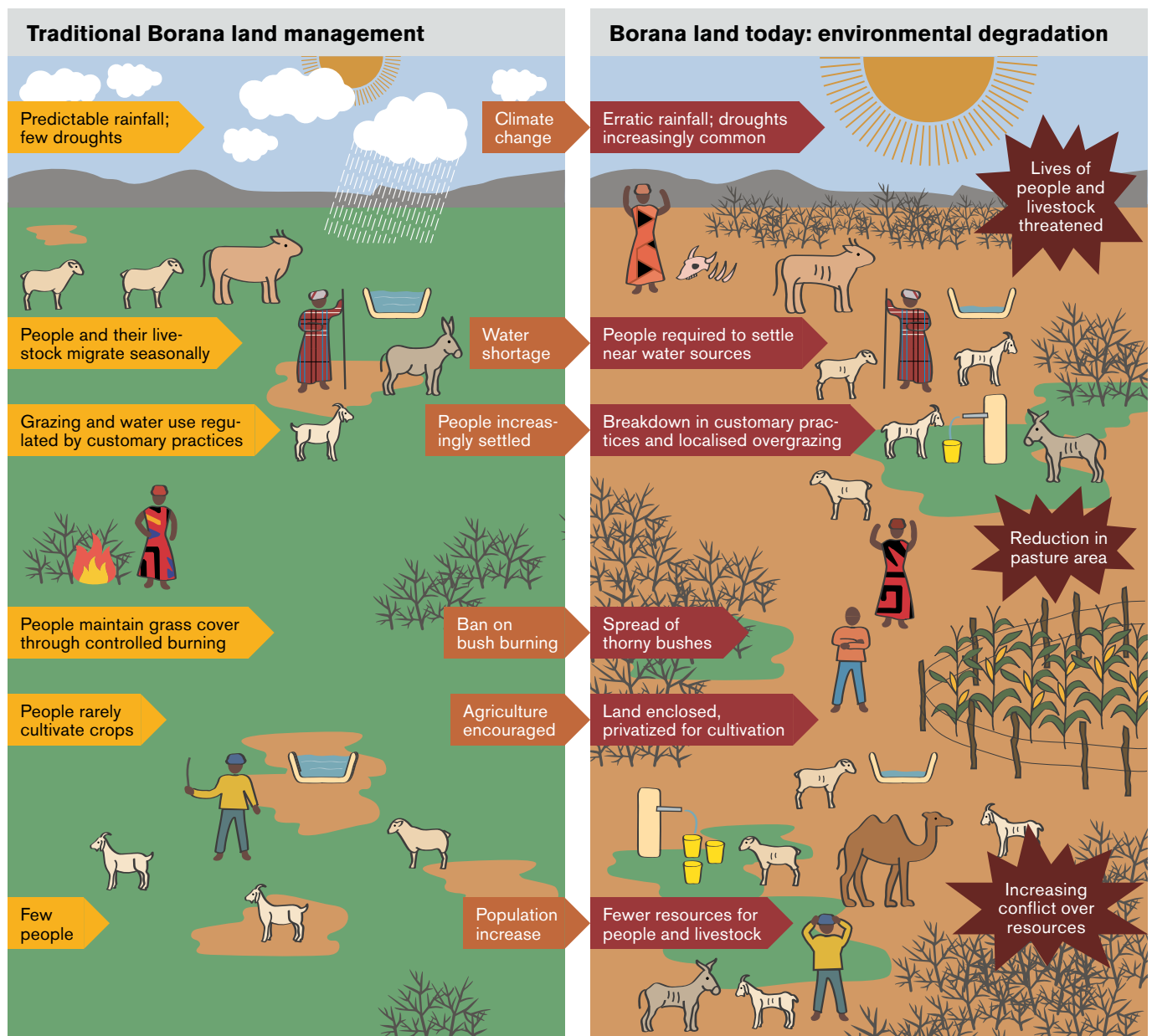
Another government decision directly linked to a decrease in available pasture is a total ban on bush burning. In the past, the Borana practiced controlled burning to promote new grass growth and prevent the establishment of woody species. The burning ban, introduced for military reasons by the earlier socialist government but still in force, has unintentionally resulted in the invasion of thorny bushes which are very difficult to eradicate.

The disconnect between the roaming pastoralist and sedentary mind-set is also to some extent generational: between the traditional viewpoint of the elders and the “modern” viewpoint of younger Borana who have joined government service and may not even be fully aware of local customary use patterns. As both international and local NGOs tend to implement activities already ap-

proved in government plans, they are often perceived as an extension of government services and may unwittingly contribute to further marginalizing customary institutions. Although such institutions have not been completely lost, their revitalization requires considerable effort.

GROWING DISCORD AND CONFLICTS

Whilst available pasture is shrinking, the human population trying to earn a livelihood from the land is increasing, and with it the number of animals, since every household seeks to own at least a few heads of cattle. Indeed, the numerous interwoven strands of the current context all combine to create a downward spiral of natural resource degradation and conflict. It is the poorest and most marginalized community members who are the first to suffer; often they are women.



A downward spiral of environmental degradation fuelled by poor rainfall, bush encroachment and agricultural settlement around water sources.

THE PROJECT APPROACH:

FACILITATING RESILIENCE

Facilitation rather than direct implementation

The approach of the international NGO partners Helvetas and WHH is to bridge the gap between the traditional authorities and local government at the same time as bringing women into decision-making processes. This entails facilitating activities, rather than direct implementation. The project works with a wide range of stakeholders: not only representatives of the traditional authorities, women's groups, and local government, but also line agencies, research institutions, local NGOs, co-operatives, and the private sector. The logic is to build mutual understanding and promote collaboration in finding sustainable ways of managing the natural resources on which so many people and animals depend.

Building resilience in multiple arenas

In its sixth Annual Report on Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability, the IPCC notes that building resilience to climate change requires interventions in multiple arenas: political, economic, socio-cultural, ecological, knowledge-technology, and community. Although the NRM-Borana Project was designed well before this latest IPCC report, its interventions cover all these aspects, often in an interlinked manner. The project also complements the five federal pastoral development policy objectives of the Ethiopian government, as summarized in the text box.

The five federal pastoral development policy objectives of the Ethiopian government

1. Respond to the demands of pastoralists for growth and development in a holistic manner by taking their **livelihood system as a base**.
2. Guide sectoral policies and strategies that have been developed in a segmented fashion, based on the constitution, national policies and strategies, and regional conventions, to be revised considering the **livelihood basis and ecology of pastoralists**; and **coordinate such policies and strategies** so that they will be implemented in cooperation.
3. Coordinate government and non-government pastoral development actors so that they will **work together and exchange experiences for a common goal**.
4. Coordinate efforts to **make pastoral areas sustainably food secure, peaceful; and where democracy and good governance are enshrined**.
5. **Narrow the gaps** in development and capability indicators between pastoral areas and relatively developed neighboring regions and the national average.

The overall NRM-Borana project approach can be summarized as one of inclusivity: building community resilience to climate change at the triple nexus between development, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding. The way in which the project has operated is further outlined in other Briefing Notes.

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