

Traditional Wells and Water Management Systems: GWI Experience with Pastoralists in Southern Ethiopia

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Traditional Wells: A Core Resource for Pastoral Communities

Due to the scarcity of surface water, traditional wells are the most important source of water for pastoral communities in the Borana Zone of Southern Ethiopia where the Global Water Initiative (GWI) program operates. These wells, known in the local language as *elas*, are a significant part of social, economic and even religious aspects of pastoral life. *Elas* are considered to be a communal resource and all clans in the zone have equal rights of use. For centuries, this traditional implementation of natural resource management (NRM) in Southern Ethiopia has survived without any formal government assistance.

Well Maintenance

Each traditional well is governed by a complex set of rules and regulations that are administered and enforced by a group of elected community members. This well council, called the *Chora Ella*, operates under the supervision of respected community elders. The final authority over the wells rests in the hands of this council while daily routines are supervised by an officer known as the *Abba Herregaa*, who is appointed by the well council. The *Abba Herregaa* is appointed based on his individual qualities and commitment to serve the community; the position is a major social responsibility. This person performs routine duties such as cleaning ramps, making small repairs, and providing general well maintenance.



Community members participating in maintenance of a traditional well in Miyo Woreda, Borana

Water collection by the community takes place on a set rotation whereby community members can collect water and bring their livestock to drink every three days. Users are required to contribute labor to the maintenance of the well or participate in its governance through the well council; failure to do so will bar them from using the well. Exclusion from water resources is the worst sanction in pastoral society due to its importance to sustaining local livelihoods.

Working with Traditional Governance Structures

Given their importance to pastoral life, the wells and their attendant governance systems must be core considerations of any NRM work in this area. When working with the community to improve the traditional wells, instead of introducing a new governance system for the activities, GWI worked through the well councils and engaged in extensive community dialogue before the rehabilitation

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activities began. The *Abba Herregaa* and the well council were instrumental in getting the community mobilized and ensuring community participation in well rehabilitation and maintenance. The traditional governance structure proved to be capable in the overall management of this initiative.

Rehabilitated wells managed by the well council are more likely to be sustained due to the following:

- Each well user is required to participate in the well council in order to maintain water privileges for a specific well. If someone is not willing to contribute what is required from him/her, the traditional system will punish the user accordingly, which often means the user will be barred from using the well. Protection and maintenance of the wells are a central concern of all pastoral communities in Borana and it is in every community member's vested interest to contribute.
- Although women are not traditionally eligible to assume the position of *Abba Herrega*, GWI partners ensured that women are actively participating in related community dialogue and decision-making on well councils.

Lessons and Recommendations

Water development interventions in this region have often failed in part because of a lack of in-depth analysis and recognition of the traditional well system and water management governance structure. There already exists a high degree of ownership and participation through the traditional well management system; therefore working within it to find ways to strengthen overall well functionality and efficiency has shown to be effective in the GWI program.

However, program partners have observed that this traditional system is being weakened by new NRM responsibilities taken on by formal government structures. For example, political boundaries sometimes overlap the traditional resource boundaries (*Madda*) for pasture and water management. Consequently, the *Madda* is becoming weaker and weaker. As a result, the power of the traditional NRM institutions is taken away by the formal government leaders. In that case both the traditional NRM boundaries and the decision-making power over the resources by the traditional institutions are weakened.

Water development in the area could be more sustainable and collaborative if the existing well councils are consulted and engaged by the government from the very beginning. Participation of well councils from the onset up to the final project phase is of paramount importance. GWI should continue to strengthen these well councils because they are viable institutions for effective water resource management.

The GWI supports communities to improve their traditional wells with the full participation of the existing well councils. These wells are massive structures and normally require a chain of at least eleven people to pass water up to the ground level from the source. Additionally, the sides are often quite steep, making it difficult for livestock to travel down to the base to drink water. As a result, livestock, the most precious asset of pastoralists, were dying from the dangerous journey. Through rehabilitation of the wells, the GWI helped the community collect water more efficiently and safely. The labor requirement was reduced to seven people for water collection and the slopes have been shaped to be less steep and are now safer for livestock.