

Access to life:
The gravitational pull of water that saves and improves lives in Beeyodhadher
By Ib Knutsen

The UN Joint Programme on Local Governance and Decentralised Service Delivery (JPLG), is contributing, in selected districts in Somaliland and Puntland, to: (a) building gravel roads and side drainage system; (b) construction of water system; and (c) construction of public infrastructure (markets, health posts, schools, and police posts).



The small community of Beeyo Dhadher does not initially seem so remote. It is located just 50 kilometres from Berbera, Somaliland's second largest city. It is only when you start driving there, barely seeing the dust-gravel-dirt road, with steep hills on each side, criss-crossing dry river beds, which have suddenly become not-so-dry, that you realise that this area is literally off the beaten path.

Arriving after some one-and-a-half hours, we see a somewhat typical Somaliland village. It is dry, simple, and small. There are maybe 15-20 huts, each representing a family, and is a centre of sorts for another 100 families, living in the surrounding area.

Apart from the people and their goats hiding away in the shade, there is a lot of sand and rocks; some trees, but that is about it. The village is right next to a vast riverbed, but the last time water was flowing here is well over a year ago. The dry season has not released its grip this year, and in many parts of Somaliland, as well as further south, a devastating drought has lasted for three months already. By some estimates, it is the worst in ten years.



Beyo Dhaadheer was identified by the Berbera district authorities to be the site of an innovative water harvesting technique, spearheaded by ILO, and implemented through the multi-donor UN Joint Programme on Local Governance and Decentralized Service Delivery (JPLG).



Mr. George Okutho (2nd from right) talking to Community Leader (extreme left). It is customary to talk to elders while seated.

“Water is life, says George Okutho, the ILO Country Director for Ethiopia and Somalia, and there is not enough water here for people and animals.”

The dry riverbed belies the fact that under the meters of fine sand deposited over the years, there is a rich water source. It is clean, because it is filtered by the fine sand, and it is sustainable, as it is refilled each year by the seasonal river. This year though, there is only a pittance left, as even underground water flows downward, and it



Erecting the wall across the dry river

And just like an establishment after closing hours, the riverbed is scattered with dry water-holes; in some places as deep as 6 to 8 meters. The compact sand made it easy – but exhausting - to dig virtual straws into the deposit below last year, but as the channel got deeper, and deeper, it became harder and harder to access. And there is an ever present hazard of falling in. Either from stumbling, or that the edges of the hole suddenly give in.

The basic idea of the sustainable reservoir is simple. You sink a wall into the dry riverbed to create an underground pocket, while enabling the seasonal surface water to flow undisturbed. Then you dig a concrete well, and voila, you have permanent access to water, without the dangerous digging.

“We tried the principle in another village 30 kilometres from here”, says Berbera District Engineer Mahmoud Hassan Douale, who worked with ILO Somalia on the project. Even now, when the riverbed would normally be empty of water, they still have plenty because of their reservoir, he says.



The resulting water kiosk, down the valley, that is saving the community from walking kilometres in search of water.

But the project does not end there. The water will be pumped to a nearby hill, and then piped down to the village some 500 meters away. Once the 10 000 litre reservoir is full, the community will only need to turn one of the four taps, as gravity will do the rest. “You can see the work has been well done”, says Village Elder Abokor Liban Hersi. We welcome the changes, and will do our part to maintain it.

The simple technique and relatively low cost have made the gravity well an attractive option also for larger settlements. All that is needed is a water source and an elevated spot near the city. In the 5000 people-strong Sheikh town, stabilising the water supply has long been a priority.

“We held a community meeting, and discussed which areas were most important to address”, says Mayor of Sheikh town, Mr. Ibrahim Abdillahi Abdi. We do not have a stable water supply today, so the people felt that this was the most important.



The principle is the same, albeit at a much larger scale. The well is 115 meters deep; the overlooking hill rises 85 meters, and the town is 5 kilometres away. While the original idea was to simply connect the elevated tank to the existing water-supply network, new challenges came up.

“We realized that getting the water to the boosting station was only one problem solved, say ILO Engineer Abdullahi Elmy. The old pipes that we were going to connect to were leaking, and the Sheikh engineers estimated that as much as half of the water disappears underway.

“Regardless of what we have to do or what it takes, we have to make sure that the water reaches the town. Even if this means we have to temporarily cut other activities. It is a question of priority; ILO Director emphasises their commitment not allow the project to become a ‘white elephant’.



sma Mr. George Okutho (right) with Mayor of Shiekh

The ILO works through strengthening the capacities of the local level. So in the two water projects, ILO Technical Staff will train city and regional technical personnel, as well as administrative and political staff. When the project is being implemented, employment intensive hiring practices are used, ensuring that the local community is left with the skills to build and maintain a project, as well as having a

that the project generated. “That we have your support is the most important, continues the Mayor. Money we can get from different sources, but technical expertise is the key to making this project work.”
