

# Water in a dry land

How is Progressio, along with our partner organisation Candlelight, helping people in Somaliland make the most of the available water?



Shukri Ismail Bandare, the founder of Progressio partner organisation Candlelight in Somaliland, answers our questions

## What are the issues in Somaliland?

For the last ten years Somaliland has experienced constant droughts. Before that, we used to have droughts every eight or ten years; we gave each drought a name, and then people used to remember. But nowadays it's not the same. We are experiencing constant droughts and it has a very negative impact on the environment and on the people and their livelihoods.

## What is the impact on the environment?

The problem is, number one, the water is not going into the ground. There is no infiltration at all: the ground is so hard that you have to dig it with a pickaxe. So when it rains there is a lot of run-off. Last year we had a lot of rain. If you had stood next to the dry riverbed here in Hargeisa, you would've been amazed how much water was passing, going straight to the sea.

Number two, there is a lot of soil erosion. In Somaliland, the backbone of our economy is livestock, but we don't have any food for the livestock, so we have a lot of overgrazing. Whatever grass that comes out, it will go like this [clicks fingers]. Last month I was visiting some projects outside Hargeisa and I saw three goats kneeling and digging the ground ... and they were eating from the roots. Once you see a goat or a sheep going all the way to the root, you know that that area is zero.

## What does that mean for the people?

Before, the nomads or the pastoral people used to stay in one area for three months. They used to stay there, graze their animals there happily, bring their products into the cities or into the small villages. Now, it is not like that. Nowadays you don't have a house, you have a donkey or you have one camel and you have a few things on

**Opposite page: Pastoralists at a waterhole in rural Somaliland**

the top. And you will see a woman and the future they are running after, walking and walking, coming from miles away, settling their things for a week or so, leaving again, trying to look for pasture. You know, it's never been like this.

**So what can you do about it?**

We need to make people aware of the problems. One example is that the trees are going – people are cutting them to make charcoal, particularly the rural youth [who have few employment options or other means of earning money]. They do nothing else, except charcoal, and there's a constant demand. But because of that, nothing is growing. Usually the grass and shrubs grow under the trees, and that keeps the water there. Immediately the tree is cut and everything goes into the sea.

People don't consider what this tree is doing, the value of the tree – that this tree is literally, you could say, supporting our health and our environment. But it's a tree, and in Somaliland we always say, "it's none of your business". If you see someone cutting a tree, it's none of your business.

So we are constantly on the TV or in the radio or in the newspapers, trying to make people aware of the importance of the environment. We bring out our own newspaper called *Deegaankeenna*, it means 'our environment'.

And at the same time we are trying to work with the government and at least engage them in all our activities. Because in Somaliland we have good policies, but if the policy is not working, then what's the use of the policy? We need to be pushing the policy, and making it work.

*continued overleaf*



**Women are bearing the brunt of environmental changes in Somaliland, says Shukri Ismail Bandare (above)**

"They are the ones who are suffering. It's as if the whole drought is for the women – they are walking a long way, taking care of the animals, doing all kinds of jobs. You can see how the role of men and women in rural areas is changing so dramatically, so quickly. It's touched the women a lot; it has increased their responsibility.

"They usually walk a long way to take the animals for watering, and they walk a long way to get water for their families. And most of them, the majority of these women, are anaemic, underfed. Culturally women are the last to feed themselves in our society. And now it is worse. What they have is white rice or sugar and black tea and oil.

"That's what they have at the moment. They used to look to the good rains but for the pastoral people, the milk is not there any more. I have seen a woman, last week I was there, she had milked 150. None of the goats had a bit of milk for the children, none. Nothing."

### Do you run practical projects too?

We are trying to focus on regenerating the earth, both in pastoral and agro-pastoral areas. We are trying to de-silt the water reservoirs; making stone terracing in areas where it's needed; training the agro-pastoral farmers in soil and water conservation systems.

We promote water harvesting through rehabilitating the *berkads* [traditional underground cisterns] and *ballehs* [traditional surface dams]; harvesting water from the roof; building wells and sub-surface dams. Most of our projects are for agro-pastoralists in rural areas – training the farmers, giving them seeds. A lot of the agro-pastoralists don't have that much experience in farming [because of their pastoral background] – that's another problem we have. We have two good trainers who are constantly on the move, training the people on the ground.

### What impact do your projects have?

The long-term projects that we have – you would never believe the results! In one area, it used to be full of trees, but over the years everything had gone. So we started from scratch, and built it up as a communal grazing area. And we have seen the difference, how people have benefited.

Thousands and thousands of animals now come and graze when we open it [it's closed for part of the year, to prevent overgrazing].

### And what about the training projects?

They have tangible results too. We had one bee-keeping project in the Sahil area – still I remember this one young boy. The bee-keeping training class was full but this lady came with a young guy and she said 'can you add him, my son?', and we said 'fine, let him sit.' And now they are honey sellers, they have a small farm. Literally, their livelihood changed, and that young guy now is driving a car – he bought a car, not straight away, but over the years. But if he did not come to the training, probably he would have gone and joined those people who are burning the trees...

*Interview by Isabel Gammie, Progressio's Programmes Officer. Isabel visited Somaliland in April 2012.*

Candlelight for Health, Education and Environment was founded in 1995 and has been a Progressio partner organisation since 2010. For more information see [candlelightsom.org](http://candlelightsom.org)

"I took this picture of the river in Hargeisa at 5pm one afternoon following a storm," says Progressio's Isabel Gammie. "When we drove past the next morning at 9am, it was completely dry. There was no water in the riverbed at all."



“I’m conducting research on youth unemployment in Hargeisa together with a market research team composed of Candlelight’s staff,” says Aide Botta. “This work requires me to be curious, tenacious and patient, because there is little reliable information on the issue. It’s necessary to be a good listener and set aside your own ‘mental filters’ in order to really understand and collect the correct messages – messages that often contain deep sufferings and frustrations.

“It’s becoming more evident to me every day that there is a strong connection between the environment and livelihoods. The environment is being severely damaged by a vicious cycle. Climate change, deforestation and the lack of water storage systems mean pastoral communities cannot survive by breeding livestock like they did in the past. The only way they have



Progressio development worker Aide Botta started working with Candlelight in March this year

to generate income is the production of charcoal – and that is the main cause of the deforestation that causes soil erosion and infertility. Some forecasts say that within 10 years there will be no trees in Somaliland.

“So it is extremely urgent to find alternative and sustainable job opportunities for such communities to stop the destructive cycle. An awareness campaign without concrete alternatives and job opportunities will not produce any positive effects.”



Lemma Belay has completed two years as a Progressio development worker with Candlelight

“My role involved building the capacity of Candlelight staff as well as pastoralist and agro-pastoralist communities in order to ensure food security through sustainable farming and water management.

“Developing and strengthening sustainable farming systems included pest management, organic vegetable production, fruit tree nurseries, and small and large scale composting.

“The work on water included promoting integrated water management; developing drip irrigation schemes; advocacy work for water saving technologies; developing water harvesting schemes and small dams to collect water runoff; strengthening or introducing soil and water conservation activities; and research on water availability, supply and strategies for coping with scarce water resources.”

➔ See a slideshow of community members rehabilitating a surface dam at [progressio.org.uk/blog/development-worker](https://progressio.org.uk/blog/development-worker)