

# **GLOBAL PASTORALIST GATHERING:**

REPORT BY DAOUD TARI

This is a report about the process and implementation of the global Pastoralist Gathering that was held in South Omo in Ethiopia at the end of January 2005. The event was facilitated by UNOCHA/PCI based in Ethiopia along with its many other partners. The report covers both the initial preparatory phase and the actual implementation of the event. I was privileged to be part of the team that had the opportunity to work on the event from the very beginning. I will try as much as possible to give my perception of the whole process as it worked out until the very end. Some of the issues I will be commenting on are activities done by my colleagues and thus my comments could be deficient. Any shortcomings of that deficiency are therefore mine. I very much welcome criticism to improve the perception I am putting forward.

From the very outset I should take this opportunity to thank PCI Team members for the wonderful support they accorded me during this time. I have always had a very helpful and enthusiastic support from all the members of the team whenever I required. The way the team worked together to make this happen is really commendable. Everybody was at his very best and it was a joy for me to have had the privilege to be part of this success.

From logistics to welfare to facilitation the team performed with sterling success. The idea to host a Global Pastoralist Gathering was conceived after another Global meeting on Pastoral Development Issues that was held in April last year in Nairobi, Kenya. This meeting was hosted by the UNDP Global Dry lands office based in New York. After deliberation by the “experts” on Pastoral developments the Global Dry lands Office of the UNDP come up with an initiative that they baptized and called WISP (World Initiative on Sustainable Pastoralism). They developed a huge proposal document that outlined how Pastoralism can be sustained into the future. Having been part of this meeting and seeing first hand how the so called experts suffer prejudice and thus exclude Pastoralist peoples from their own issues, the PCI team threw up challenge to UNDP. Why can't WISP not have direct input of Pastoralist themselves? Why can't the big International Development organization like the UNDP not engage the pastoralist peoples and hear their voices first and thus base their policies and programmes on the perspectives of pastoralists? Surprisingly the UNDP accepted the challenges and requested PCI to facilitate the process of engaging with the Pastoralists to which PCI also agreed. The event at first was meant to Challenge the big Development Institutions and Governments using the WISP process as entry point. As the visioning process of the event developed it became apparently very clear that the event will provide more wider opportunities for the pastoralist beyond the WISP programme. It is an event that will bring together Pastoralist leadership from 24 Countries of the World with Government, International Development agencies and Donars. As the thinking and visioning evolved the agenda of the event was kept loose to accommodate not only Pastoralist views but also their culture and norms of gathering.

The event had to be owned by some Pastoral Group who will be the host along with the Government. Thus the Hamma people Of South Omo in Ethiopia gladly agreed to Host the meeting. This they did after consultations among themselves and by that the event had its owners who will stand for it and protect it from any evil. The Ethiopian Government too pledged its support throughout its beauracracy from the Federal level to its lower institutions.

The next challenge was to have a Gathering that is akin to the lifestyle of the Pastoralist and conforms to their cultural setting. A camp made out of tents and local materials was developed by PCI and the Local Pastoralists. The events main venue was under tree shades that have been identified by the local Pastoralist leadership. The setting of the entire Gathering was in tune with the reality of Pastoralist. For the first time it is as if the world has turned upside down—it is for the “advanced people from the Cities to adjust to the reality of Pastoralists”. It was like the event is sending out a message, -- Adjust to our ways and norms or be damned.

Organizing the Global Pastoralist Gathering has been a complex web of activities. The team had to work together on all most all the issues. I was mainly tasked to ensure the participation of the East African Region. I was also to assist on West Africa and Institutions in Ethiopia.

From the very out-set we had set for ourselves a monumental task. Our target participants are not the usual workshop goers that can be easily identified. We have to bypass the usual gate keepers and get to the real leadership of the Pastoralist peoples. The process that led to selection of participants had to be very credible and be fully owned by the pastoralist themselves. Besides, they have to be mandated by their people to attend the Gathering on their behalf and report back to them whatever has transpired that is important to them. Legitimacy was thus crucial. We there fore had to set a process in motion that allowed for the Traditional Pastoralist Institutions to identify their delegates to the Gathering. All over the World major Pastoralist groups were mobilized to identify their delegate's. From the expansive Somalis in Northern Kenya to the Barabaigs of the Arusha slopes in Tanzania to the Turkanas and their Karamojog neighbors meetings and consultations were held to choose delegates to the gathering. The process was not without bottlenecks. The Gate keepers or intermediaries could not comprehend how unlettered Pastoralist elders who have lived all their lives within the realm of their own world could possibly interact and participate in an event that will be composed of people from government and international development agents. From language to culture and behavior, all were the things used to push pastoralist leadership out of the scene. It was that cultural prejudice against Pastoralist which PCI had to demystify. We had to play our game very diplomatically, avoiding to be seen to push others out of business but also at the same time not compromising our operating principles. Above all some of the intermediaries were later used to facilitate the process of assisting with the delegates participations from their countries of operation. They understood clearly that for Pastoralist to be empowered they should render themselves powerless. Theirs was facilitation of the process---Simple. Some intermediaries understood and supported the process; some did not believe it will work at all and insisted that they be invited. We had to be strong and resist the pressures of those powerful actors. To circumvent the jinx of language every Pastoral group had to bring one of their own as an interprator. He or she could be a part of the traditional leadership or an intermediary. The process was slow and we had to involve also the relevant government departments and intermediary institutions that later facilitated the process. The fact that it took place in remote parts of expansive and logistically challenging Districts far away from the capital Cities was by its own a nightmare.

The process of selection through the Pastoral Institutions was taking place in all parts of the Globe. During this time PCI worked with some very incredibly efficient partners in all the Regions .The in- country process was facilitated by this partners

with whom PCI have built relation over the years. The Governments of those countries also played a significant role.

The next major issue was the beauracracy of Governments including the most important one to the event—Ethiopia. How to get travel documents in time, book flights, obtain visas and arrive on time for the Gathering was a real challenge.

Everything worked but not without a drama and last minute gasp. Well, we kept vigil at authority's offices and got Visa approvals but we found out that it was even more problematic getting the visas to participants in their home Countries. People are not on emails, faxes don't simply work and time is running out. Sometimes I would say we were lucky that things worked and at other times we got exceptionally wonderful cooperation from Government authorities who virtually went out of their way to help the event. I do recall the episode of this Ugandan Karamajog group who could not get their travel document on time and thus could not be given the visa to travel on the plane. In less than half an hour the Ethiopian Authorities in Addis got in touch with Kampala and the Karamojog elder was on his way to the Gathering. It was now like the final sprint of a long race. From the one room office at the 4<sup>th</sup> floor of old ECA building the PCI team operated like an army at war. Every person was simply on the run to get this or that done. Every phone, computer, cars were all deployed to maximum use—all to ensure proper and timely arrival of delegates. They arrived on schedule and descended on Addis Ababa while others drove all the way to Turmi from their Countries. The travel in the Country to Turmi at the site of Gathering was all pleasure and thus they all came safely on the 28<sup>th</sup> February to their waiting camp as planned.

Their arrival in itself was very magnificent. They arrived adorning their beautiful traditional regalia, the flowing jallabiyas of the Tuaregs, the majestic Iranians from the old World, the immaculate Central Asians from Tajikistan, the custodians of the Gadda of the Oromo pastoralists of Ethiopia led by the all power and authority exuding Guji Abba Gadda all met with the unpolluted original people of Turmi. It was a huge emotional festival that was blessed with light shower from the sky. The rain confirmed the event is blessed from the Heavens and was thus a good omen for it—all perfectly fitting in the tradition of the Pastoral peoples on the eve of important issues. The introductions, greetings, informal discussions all went on till it was time for the gathering to be formally opened with blessings from the Hamma people and statement from the Local administration.

Then participants dispersed to take their positions under the tree shade which was going to be their meeting venues for the next four days of the event. Each and every Pastoral group did presentation about their state. They talked on many issues. From the workings of their institutions to how they are facing challenges of modern state and its development apparatus, they shared products developed out of their pastoral systems, they lamented on issues of external forces that are negatively impacting in their system, they shared examples of social political organization they operate in and many other issues. All this important discussion went on well for everybody through assistance of wonderful translation network provided to every language group. It was surely a complex web of translation that was implemented without assistance from the world of modern technology, and it worked perfectly.

In the evenings it was all goats roasting bonfires around which groups shared stories and also did serious discussions on things of common interest to each other. Away from the goats a select team of participants met to analyze and interpret the huge mass of issues emerging from under the trees. They had to fashion it into something that can be easily understood by the other partners i.e. Governments, Donors and

International Institutions. The brainstorming on the Facilitation process was also done by this team.

Many streams issues emerged but were later reduced to five major rivers that were flowing with Pastoralist Organization and Engagement, Drought and Risk management, Service Delivery and issues on Police and Politics. For effectiveness and benefit of the entire event turned into a huge market where clients sold and bought from the major rivers. It was one of the most fascinating times of events. The whole meeting arena was turned into a buzz of activities, an extravaganza where people engaged each other seriously on matters very pertinent to them.

The event was also graced by a high powered delegation of senior officials representing UNDP, DFID, USAID and a Government Official. They jetted in to stay overnight and get first hand glimpse of reality. I think they were really excited and humbled with the people and the scene. They also had opportunity to engage with some of the Pastoralist leadership. I vividly recall the intense discussions the Gujji Abba Gadda had with all of them. They gave statement of commitment of their organizations to issues of pastoral development and promised support for the same. The last leg is coming and the five rivers have all to drain into one big ocean of a power full statement that was endorsed by the event after some amendments. It made demands that the world cannot attain its development covenants while its pastoralist population is excluded. That internationally agreed development objectives like the Millennium Development Goals cannot be surely achieved without redressing the imbalances and deprivation experienced by Pastoralist. It also raised many other issues and with that got disbursed to external world.

It was now time to finally end the Gathering. Closing rituals had to be performed. Presents were to be given to every one of the 25 countries participating. Another round of emotional festival and farewell clouded the entire event. You could see serenity and tranquility of satisfaction descending on every one of the participants. The joy of bonding with fellow Pastoralist who not only share with you a production system but lots of cultural, social and other sentimental issues. Finally they had to go early in the morning and start the long journey home

I was skeptical at first whether PCI have the necessary ability to organize and facilitate an event of this magnitude. But believe in myself and my other colleagues encouraged me to soldier on .Yes, it had been both tough and complex requiring a virtually total commitment of all your energy but in the end what come out was worth it. For three months we almost lived Global Pastoralist Gathering and at the end of it all everybody left happy and emotional about Pastoralism and its place on this planet. They left with a renewed resolve in Pastoralism and that the people living it will continue to actively contribute positively to their welfare and that of humanity. They left having met and interacted with their likes from all corners of the planet. They left with renewed vigor, energy, understanding and confidence in themselves. They appreciated that Pastoralism is not a fading enterprise into oblivion of history but rather a profitable social, cultural, economic endeavor that is common to human race of every color, region and religion. Yes; they renewed their commitment to safeguard and manage the environment as its custodians for future generations. In Pursuit of these goals they are ready to co-operate, link and engage with all the actors, internally and external to Pastoral system.