



Drought, Livestock and the Young: An Ethnographic Analysis of Pastoralist Child Malnutrition in the Afar Region, Ethiopia

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Abstract

Pastoralist communities in the Horn of Africa are highly vulnerable to climatic shocks, with drought recurrently threatening food security and health. The Afar Region of Ethiopia exemplifies this, where livelihoods are intrinsically tied to livestock. The socio-cultural pathways linking environmental stress, livestock loss, and child malnutrition in these settings require deeper understanding. This ethnographic study aimed to analyse the socio-cultural and economic mechanisms through which drought-induced livestock loss correlates with child malnutrition among Afar pastoralists. It sought to understand community perceptions, coping strategies, and the lived experience of household food insecurity. An immersive ethnographic approach was employed. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with caregivers and community elders, and focus group discussions. The research was conducted across multiple settlements to capture varied experiences of drought and its impacts. A direct and culturally mediated link between livestock depletion and child malnutrition was identified. The loss of milking livestock caused an immediate reduction in children's milk consumption, a dietary staple. Gendered coping strategies emerged as a key theme; women reported sacrificing their own food intake and engaging in precarious labour to protect children, often with limited success. Nutritional decline was commonly described as a gradual process following herd loss. Child malnutrition here is not solely a biomedical issue but a consequence of eroded pastoralist livelihoods. Drought affects nutrition by disrupting culturally embedded food systems and depleting economic assets, forcing harmful adaptive strategies that disproportionately affect children and women. Public health interventions must look beyond emergency food aid to support the pastoralist economy. Programmes should incorporate livestock protection schemes, such as emergency veterinary care and fodder provision during droughts. Nutrition support and education should be integrated with existing community structures. Pastoralism, child malnutrition, drought, livestock, ethnography, Afar, Ethiopia, food

security. This study provides an in-depth, contextual understanding of the socio-cultural mechanisms linking livestock loss to child malnutrition, highlighting the need for livelihood-centred public health strategies in pastoralist communities.

Keywords: *Pastoralism, Child Malnutrition, Drought Vulnerability, Horn of Africa, Medical Ethnography, Livelihoods, Food Security*

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