Leaving the old behind: The hard decisions of survival

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One day in February, as my colleagues and I were travelling to Hargeisa, Somaliland, we came across the village of Warabaley. To our shock, the village looked completely deserted. Homes had been abandoned. Warabaley was an empty place with empty huts. I looked out of the car window and wondered: “Where are all the villagers? Where had they gone? Have people left their homes in search of food and water? Will they come ever come back?”

Somalia is in the grips of a severe drought. Over six million people—every second Somali—is in need of food and water due to the consecutive failures of rains over the last two years and one of the strongest El Niño events ever recorded. Families leaving their homes in search of food, water and pasture for themselves and their animals. In some areas, the distance to the nearest water points is as far as 50 kilometers.

All of sudden, I noticed an old man seated next to one of the empty huts. We stopped the car and walked towards him. He told us his name was Guuleed Warsame and that he was 80 years old. Guuleed had eight children and was grandfather to over 90. When we asked what he was doing all alone in Warabaley, he told us his family had left him behind because he was too weak to accompany them when they left the village. “They left to save the young children and the remaining livestock. Out of 240 goats and 15 camels, we only had five goats and twelve camels left”, he said. His family’s experience mirrors that of many other Somali families: devastating losses of livestock—which are their main source of income. The roads in Somaliland are littered with animal carcasses. For many, leaving their homes and villages is their last chance to survive the drought.

In the Somali culture, children do not abandon their elderly parents. But the magnitude of the drought has forced families to make heart-wrenching decisions. Guuleed explained: When my children made plans to leave, I decided to stay behind so that they and their own young children would survive. Our village was one of the first places hit by the drought. People started fleeing to the coastal areas. This drought has been going on for years. It has affected every corner of our lives. We faced severe water shortages and increasing hunger. Every household in our village lost their livestock. You can see how dry and empty the village is. In a situation like this, only God can help us”.

Like millions of other Somalis, the drought has pushed Guuleed and his family over the edge. With high food prices and little money to spend on food because the
livestock they could have sold have died, many families only eat one meal day. The little money they have is spent to buy water. Children are dropping out of school because their parents cannot afford education costs. Parents also need their children to help them with household chores and in the search for water. As is often the case in such situations, women and girls are the most affected; they are eating last, and least.

Over the past year, my colleagues and I have seen the devastating effects of the drought first-hand. We left Guuleed and his village heartbroken, knowing that the needs of the Somali people are immense.

If immediate funding is not received to help thousands families like Guuleed’s cope with the drought, Somalia will slide into famine as it did in 2011 and over a quarter of a million people lost their lives. The world needs to act now. Such terrible history should not be allowed to repeat itself.

CARE Somalia has reached over 300,000 people across with clean water, cash transfer, relief supplies, nutrition support and protection of women and girls.

Photos: https://www.careimages.org/?c=3904&k=448b9d4546