

Eritrea



Pathways to Reconstruction in Eritrea

SEFIRA, ERITREA

As the new millennium dawned, Eritrea was a country saddled with more than 1.1 million refugees and thousands of internally displaced persons. After a gruelling border war with Ethiopia, which had claimed 70,000 lives between 1998 and 2000, both countries were in economic, political and emotional turmoil, having already endured three decades of an independence struggle that had resulted in Eritrea's emergence as a separate nation.

Today, countless households—many of them headed by widowed women—are still coping with the aftermath of war and impact of the prevalent drought in this region, in addition to ever-present economic difficulties. Fatouma Sale, 38 and the mother of six children, is one of these people. A member of the nomadic Muslim tribe, the Saho, she lives in Sefira, a town about 120 kilometres south of the capital, Asmara, near the dramatic heights of the 2,400-metre high Qohaito plateau. The Saho, together with members of other nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes, comprise about 35 percent of Eritrea's 4.5 million population.

Mrs. Sale works as part of a team of local Saho on the reconstruction of footpaths along a treacherous trailway that snakes for dozens of kilometres through steep and rocky terrain near what once was a frontline between warring factions in the area. The trails whereabouts are ancient ones, having been used since the beginning of Christian times, as well as by Arab traders transiting south from the Red Sea to the Kingdom of Axum—present day Ethiopia.

But in recent decades these economic and social lifelines have deteriorated badly as a result of floods, landslides and the disrepair occasioned by inadequate maintenance in times of war. It is in this connection, as part of a US\$18 million national peacebuilding initiative that the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and its wide circle of partners, have been carrying out a scheme to assist the Saho in securing proper access to food, water and livestock.

The umbrella plan, largely funded by the Government of Italy, is known as the Post-War Emergency Rehabilitation (PoWER) programme. The project for the Saho people, however, seeks to ensure that they and their livestock can traverse the mountain footpaths in their area, without the physical hardship and perils they have had to face during the recent years of military conflict in the Qohaito region. Rural recovery efforts focused on increasing access to essential services and markets and also involve income-generating projects, most notably, encouragement of a traditional honey industry.

Security enables development

"Based on participatory and assessment discussions with the local communities, we decided that our main priorities were the repair of footpaths and beekeeping," says Columba O'Dowd, Assistant Country Director of the Irish aid agency Concern, in Asmara. "Once we received funding from PoWER, we immediately began implementing the programme," says Ms. O'Dowd.

Working in partnership with local groups, Concern canvassed local people as to what were their greatest needs.

According to Mrs. Sale: "The footpaths

Right: Many buildings were destroyed during the war in Eritrea.



Fatouma Sale and her children outside their home.



Abdullah Mohammed, head of the Footpath Construction Committee.



were so narrow that you couldn't even carry your sick family to seek medical help. And many of our donkeys and camels would slip and could not make it across to deliver food and goods to the other villages."

As enthusiasm for the community effort grew, Abdullah Mohammed, head of the Footpath Construction Committee, assigned more than 100 people to carry out various duties. Women for the most part were assigned to carry water, work with hoe and spade or to carry refreshments to other labourers. In addition, about 30 percent of the women who are beneficiaries of the apiary project, including Mrs. Sale, have been trained in beehive management. With support from the Eritrean Ministry of Agriculture and a \$120,000 grant from PoWER, hundreds of hives have been imported from Greece and local associations have been set up so that households in the area can work together to get honey to market.

Beekeeping is a rich and ancient tradition among the Saho, and the red and white honey that they refine fetch as much as 24

Eritrean Nakfa (about \$1.75) a kilogramme. A typical workday for Mrs. Sale consists of rising at dawn to pray and make breakfast for her family, then clean house and do the washing before tending to her beehive or to work on the footpaths, where she can earn the equivalent of about \$32 for a 16-day work cycle. It's a far different life from that of the not-too-distant days when people in Sefira played reluctant host to hundreds of internally displaced people fleeing the nearby war front. Being part of a temporary security zone that opened as people returned to their homes there, the Sefira community did not fall into a category that was an obvious candidate for relief funds.

"This was an area where we could fill the gap and where the objective of the programme was to improve the livelihood security for the community," explains Ms. O'Dowd.

Restoring productivity

Through funds provided by UNDP's PoWER programme, Saho families—for \$25—are able to purchase a hive of bees at a local market, together with a beehive, artificial wax for honeycombs, a honey extractor and all the other paraphernalia necessary to put together a household unit for producing one of nature's most nutritious



foods. Each hive is capable of producing some 40 to 50 kilogrammes per harvest.

Programmes such as PoWER have significantly helped vulnerable groups to resume their economic and social lives. To date, \$270,000 has gone to rebuilding footpaths and implementing the beehive programme.

UNDP, the UN's global development network, continues to work with the Government of Eritrea advocating for change and promoting recovery in a variety of other ways: repairing water systems, health care facilities, schools and houses; clearing landmines; and providing seeds, tools, and household items. Such efforts are helping communities to restore economic productivity and re-establish local institutions, and are enabling families to cultivate their lands and rebuild their homes.

Other PoWER donors include Canada, the European Union, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States. As Eritrea shifts from relief to recovery mode, the overarching objective of UNDP's strategy is to strengthen national capacity by linking relief activities to sustainable long-term development. From support to widows—who have lost their spouses in the fighting—to cash-for-work projects, PoWER is a bridge from the emergency phase to the period of reconstruction in Eritrea. ■

Tala Dowlatshahi is a Communications Specialist in UNDP's Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery.

Fatouma Sale checks her beehive for honey.