

'Ignorance is Like Drought'. Education Dynamics among Afar Pastoralists in Ethiopia

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During the last decade in Ethiopia, there has been an impressive rise in enrolment rates at all levels of the school system. In 2008-2009, the national gross enrolment rate at primary level was 94.2%, making Ethiopia's achievement exemplary to other African countries. Yet, this expansion of primary education hides wide regional and local disparities in participation and achievement. Like in most African countries, pastoralists have the lowest rates of educational participation. In the Afar National Regional State of Ethiopia, mostly inhabited by Afar pastoralists, the primary gross enrolment rate has considerably increased, especially over the last five years, from 7.2% in 1994-1995 to 16.62% in 2003-2004 and to 31.2% in 2008-2009. Still, it remains the lowest in the country. Recent studies on pastoralism and education have acknowledged that mobility and young people's labour are crucial to the pastoral production. For their authors, low educational participation is the result of inadequate provision of education as well as of pastoralists' strategies of education to combine socio-economic reproduction with adaptation to change. All in all there seems to be a strong relationship between access to education/knowledge and mobility. The aim of this paper is to discuss this relationship in the case of Afar pastoralists in Ethiopia and to evaluate the extent to which it is pertinent for the understanding of education dynamics in the region. Based on an extensive fieldwork conducted between 2007 and 2010, the paper analyses i) how the provision of formal and non-formal education has developed in the last decade to respond to the lifestyle of pastoralists and their 'mobility'; ii) how Afar pastoralists view this provision in relation to their lifestyle and demand for education; and iii) how families accommodate to it through various socio-economic and educational strategies. These strategies could consist in arrangements related to the pastoral production (e.g. reorganisation of labour, settlement of some of the family members), to the social capital of a family (e.g. fostering, matrimonial strategies) or to the education system (e.g. postponing the age of entry at school, participating in the development of education provision, children attending both formal school and non-formal education programmes).