

Reviving hope How a UK-funded water project transformed lives in Ethiopian villages



As part of SCRS–WaSH, in partnership with Water Aid, NIRAS is delivering expert advice to strengthen climate-resilient delivery systems in drought-affected areas and amplify the impact of financial aid provided to the Ethiopian Government.

Rehabilitation of the failed Samte water supply system brings relief and resilience to Harari region communities

"Water is life." This phrase, though often repeated, holds an undeniable truth. Without a safe water supply, communities struggle with health issues and economic hardships. Recognising this, Ethiopia and Turkey joined forces in 2009 to build the Samte multi-village water supply system, aiming to serve over 18,000 people across 13 villages in the Erer district of the Harari Region. The system, which draws water from a 74-meter-deep borehole at a rate of 29 liters per second, was designed to provide ample water through six distribution points fed by three masonry reservoirs.

Excitement gives way to disillusionment

Despite the significant investment, the Samte water supply system fell short of expectations. A lack of post-construction support—such as a dedicated management institution, skilled maintenance workforce, and effective water tariff structures—undermined the project's sustainability. By 2014, the system had ceased delivering safe water to nearly all of its intended beneficiaries, having functioned properly for only five years. This failure forced communities to return to unsafe water sources, resulting in economic and health challenges, including waterborne diseases like diarrhea.

The UK is working with the Ethiopian Government through a programme called 'Strengthening Climate Resilience Systems in Water Sanitation Hygiene (SCRS-WaSH)'. This initiative is part of a broader commitment to support sustainable development and climate adaptation strategies in vulnerable regions across the globe. The project's objective is to enhance the capacity of local systems, ensuring they are robust enough to withstand the increasing unpredictability and severity of climatic conditions.

Learn more about the project and NIRAS's role [here](#).

The issues caught the attention of the [FCDO-funded Strengthening Climate Resilience Systems in Water Sanitation Hygiene \(SCRS-WaSH\)](#) project, supported by NIRAS. Feedback from local communities and government bodies highlighted the failed Samte scheme's impact. Recognising the urgency, SCRS-WaSH and the Harari Regional Water and Sewerage Authority conducted a diagnostic assessment, revealing critical barriers: no management institution, skilled staff, financial management, or tariff structure, and high risks of over-extraction, drought, and flooding.

The assessment recommended immediate rehabilitation, establishment of a legal management institution, appointment of a dedicated manager and staff, securing startup funds, and capacity building at both management and technical levels, with coaching to institutionalize the system.

From breakdown to breakthrough

In response, SCRS-WaSH initiated a comprehensive capacity-building programme. This included training for the scheme manager, staff, and regional water board personnel, along with learning exchanges with top-performing utilities. A strategic business plan and an action-oriented strengthening plan, including system rehabilitation, underscored the commitment to revitalise the Samte scheme, supported by vigilant supervision and monitoring.

These interventions have been transformative. Staff competency, motivation, and leadership engagement have improved markedly, leading to increased functionality and success, bolstered by continuous support from SCRS-WaSH and the Harari Water Supply and Sewerage Authority. Thanks to the project's capacity-building efforts, the water supply scheme's workers and administrators have gained valuable maintenance and operational skills, resolving previous issues. Today, the Samte water supply system provides safe water to over 18,000 people.

Women, primarily responsible for water collection, expressed relief at the return of safe water. Their workload has significantly reduced, allowing more time for family activities and enabling children to attend school earlier. The availability of clean water also reduces disease prevalence, fostering a healthier, more productive community.

"We used to spend hours searching for water from early morning until late in the day. It took us six hours of travel to reach a water source, with additional waiting time before we could collect water. Often, people with around 150 donkeys would be waiting alongside us to fetch water. The water scarcity even affected the education of my children," says Fatuma Ibro Mume, a beneficiary from Marko Kebele of Erer Woreda. "Thanks to the assistance of SCRS WaSH, we now have access to water within our village through the communal water points [colloquially called bono]. This has made it much easier for us to collect water, as we receive water supply services whenever there is no power outage. Looking ahead, we hope to eventually have household water connections installed."



Fatuma Ibro Mume and Usnia Ismael, project beneficiaries from Erer woreda Arerbulte Kebele

The revitalisation of the Samte water supply system underscores the importance of capacity building, demonstrating how training, experience sharing, and local engagement can empower staff and sustain water supply systems. This initiative highlights the critical role of post-construction support in transforming communities through improved public health, education, and reduced burdens on women, ultimately fostering a stronger, more resilient community

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