



Photo Credit: National Asset Project

**FATIMA JIBRELL** is the co-founder of the Horn of Africa Relief and Development Organization, and a member of the constitution committee of the Somali Peace Conference. In 2002, she received the Goldman Environmental Prize for her work on behalf of grassroots education, peace, and the environment. Jibrell spent her early years in a community of pastoral nomads, and she remembers a time when the Somali landscape looked different:

"It was a good life at that time. But now it looks like hell, dusty, with lots of gullies, and no grass. Water does not stay. We used to drink water from many places, but it's a very different environment now, a destroyed environment. The cutting of the acacia trees for charcoal has made the land into a desert.

"Somalis are responsible for Somalia's future, and have to play a part in the peace-making initiatives. Peace is a rare commodity. I want to bring the voice of the pastoralists to the center of the constitution, so that it will carry their wants and wishes. As long as I can remember, the pastoralists have never been consulted, yet they are the backbone of the economy.

"Somalia needs advocacy. I think we are suffocating. We are dying. We are becoming the market of guns. Nobody knows about it. We cannot blame anybody, because people do not know. Probably there are a lot of international citizens who would be on our side and oppose the repressive elements, both locally and internationally, if they knew what was happening. But I believe that the positive forces will win in the end."



Acacia trees.

# Harvesting Water in the Desert

## Somalia's Horn Relief

IN THE HORN OF AFRICA, acacia trees spell the difference between blowing sand and a grassland ecosystem. The keystone species of the Somali desert, the acacias hold water, soil, grass, and shade, making life in the desert possible. Somalia has long been a country of nomadic pastoralists who lead their livestock from the grasslands to the highlands and back again, year in and year out. Now after years of civil war, the old ways of Somali life – caravans and tents, camels and cattle – have eroded along with the desert landscape. Too often, young men growing up in Somalia today have two choices: take up arms for a warlord, or cut acacia trees to burn and sell for charcoal. As the trees have been cut down, water and grass for livestock have gradually disappeared.

Somali pastoral communities are now working together to reverse these trends and restore their ecosystems. Humans cannot turn deserts into rainforests, but they can transform dying deserts into living ones. For thousands of years, one of the most important ways that human communities have added value to local environments is by investing in water conservation. They build check dams and canals to store and redirect water, and plant trees whose organic matter turns the soil into a giant sponge that absorbs rainfall and then slowly releases water over time. Both forms of

storage benefit human communities and wildlife by stabilizing the supply of water through the year.

In Somalia, an ancient technique of water conservation is being revived by the Horn of Africa Relief and Development Organization ('Horn Relief' for short). Established in 1991 in response to the country's profound humanitarian crisis, Horn Relief's first mission was to assist displaced persons driven from their homes by the civil war. Horn Relief now works towards long-term development by supporting community-based projects in education, natural resources management, economic development, and peace building.

One of Horn Relief's successful initiatives has been to bring back the lost art of building 'rock dams.' A wall of rocks is placed in a gully to block the path of water during Somalia's rare rainbursts. The water pools and soaks into the soil, where the acacia seeds are already waiting. In a week or so, the spot is full of seedlings. Most are eaten by goats, but a few survive long enough to grow protective thorns. In the past six years, thousands of rock dams have been built, and the oldest trees are now tall enough for people to sit in their shade. By renewing this practice, Horn Relief is helping the desert ecosystem and the pastoral economy to bloom once more.

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