

**PERCEPTION OF PASTORALISTS TOWARDS STUDENTS WITH  
DISABILITIES: THE CASE OF SELECTED PRIMARY SCHOOLS  
OF DASENECH WOREDA, SOUTH ETHIOPIA**

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**Abstract**

*The purpose of this study is to investigate the perception of pastoralists towards students with disabilities in selected primary schools of Dasenech woreda of South Omo Zone. To achieve this purpose ethnographical type of research design with qualitative methods was employed. The study was based on data generated from four sampled schools, namely; Kapusia, Ocholoch, Nebremus and Shera. The sources of data for the study were 30 in number; 4 school principals, 4 teachers, 4 Parent teacher association members, 10 students with disabilities, 6 pastoral parents of students with disabilities and 2 education experts. The technique used for identifying sample respondents and schools were purposive sampling. The instruments used for data collection were semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and observation. The data obtained from these instruments was analyzed qualitatively. The findings revealed that, pastoral parents expressed different reactions as a result of having children with disabilities. Their negative perception towards the causes of disability develop negative attitude towards person with disabilities. The beliefs held by parents about the causes of disabilities vary from real cause to sin, evil eye, curse, misdeed in previous life by parents violation of cultural rules, cultural elders' imprecation (Tregarm and Fergare), and misfortune. Some parents believed that children with disabilities have less learning potential, unable to accomplish household tasks, a sick person, helpless, dependent, beggar, burden to parents, marginalized, and unable to play and work like any other children. In order to alleviate the encountered problems regarding negative perception, the concerned neighborhood school and woreda agencies should arrange practical and continuous awareness rising session on the real cause of disability and overall personality of person with disability.*

**Key Words:** *Perceptions, Pastoralists, Students with Disabilities*

## Introduction

Nomadic pastoralists are characterized by mobility and sparse population distribution, absence of permanent or fixed domiciles and seasonally move in large or small groups in search of pasture and water within an area or across the border (Abebe, 1998, as cited in Abiynur, 2006). They are the most disadvantaged groups with respect to education and other social services. Pastoralism is one of the oldest socio-economic systems in Ethiopia in which livestock husbandry in open grazing areas represents the major means of subsistence for the pastoralists. Referring to the multifaceted challenges being faced by pastoralists UNESCO stated that; living in remote areas, with children heavily involved in tending cattle and livelihoods that involve movement across large distances, face major barriers to educational opportunity. Those barriers of time and distance are sometimes reinforced by problems in education policy, including failure to offer relevant curricula, provide appropriate textbooks and respond to the realities of pastoral livelihoods (UNESCO, 2010).

According to Ziyn (2013) the pastoralist nomads are estimated around thirty six million in the world and the majority of them inhabited in seventeen African Countries-Mauritania, Algeria, Egypt, Sudan, Niger, Mali, Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. UNESCO (2002) stated that, in Ethiopia Pastoral Nomadic people are found nearly all lowlands on the border of the country. The great Majority of those nomadic populations are found in Southern People Nation and Nationalities, Somali, Oromia and Afar region.

Therefore, the focus area of this study was one of the pastoralists' community groups in South Omo Zone of Southern Nation Nationalities people region. It is one of the peripheral regions in Ethiopia. The purpose of the study is to examine the perception of pastoralists towards students with disabilities in four selected primary schools of Dasenechworeda.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In Ethiopia attitudes of the society towards children with disabilities remained unchanged and many children were still kept at home. These beliefs vary throughout Ethiopia; with more than 80 ethnic groups and 250 languages, it is inevitable that different cultural ideas and linguistic expressions of the concept of disability and the attitudes towards people with disabilities will develop (MoE and UNICEF, 2012; Peters, 2009). These negative beliefs have led to the perception that a people with disability is limited physically and intellectually, cannot live independently, and cannot form a family in Ethiopia (Tirussew, 2005).

In almost all nations and cultures, people with disabilities frequently experience some form of social rejection. Mulatu (1999) stated that in Ethiopia, people with disabilities often are not participants in society because of the overall belief that disabilities are a result of a curse and/or are punishments from a deity. Ihunnah (2003) summarized the beliefs on the etiology of disabilities as:... a curse from the gods, breaking laws and family sins, offenses against the gods, witches and wizards, adultery, misfortune, ancestors, god's representatives, misdeed in a previous life, illegal or unapproved marriage, shows the omnipotence of god, evil spirit, killing certain forbidden animals, a warning from god, and fighting elders during harvest and planting seasons. Moreover, attitudinal studies in Ethiopia have confirmed that individuals with disabilities continue to face negative attitudes, stigma, and discrimination (Mulatu, 1999; Rhamet et.al., 2000).

In line with this fact and by 12 years practical observation of one of the researcher in pastoral community , in many local areas of Ethiopia particularly in pastoralist area, the perception of the community towards children with disabilities was send back to the perception before a century. This initiates the researchers to do further detail investigation on the real problem. Therefore, this study is conducted to explore the real perception of the pastoral communities towards children with

disabilities in selected schools of DasenechWoredaby intended to answer the following basic research questions:

1. How do pastoralists perceive the condition of children with disabilities?
2. What are the cultural beliefs held by pastoralists about children with disabilities?

### **Purpose of the Study**

- To identify the major perception of pastoralists' towards children with disabilities.
- To assess the cultural beliefs of pastoralists concerning children with disabilities.
- To indicate alternative strategies to alleviate the encountered problems in the study area.

### **Delimitation of the Study**

This study was geographically delimited to four primary schools of DasenechWoredaof South OmoAdministrativeZone.Regarding the problem delimitation it is specifically focus on the perception of pastoralists towards students with disability.

### **Operational Definition of Terms**

- **Disability:** is any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for human being
- **Pastoralists:** are people who depend for their living primarily on livestock. They are the most disadvantaged groups with respect to education and other social services.
- **Perception:** is the process by which sensory information (hearing, sight, touch, movement, taste, and smell) is recognized and interpreted. It involves both the intake of information through the senses, and processing and making sense of that information within cognition.

- **Primary school:** is an education level from grades 1-8. It is subdivided in two cycles, the first cycle (grades 1-4) and 2nd cycle (grades 5-8) were official age group is from 7 to 14.
- **Students with Disabilities:** Those students, who have physical (motor) disorder, Visual impairment, hearing impairment, mental retardation, leprosy, psychosocial disorders and multiple disabilities.

### **Method of the Study**

**Research Design:** in order to achieve the objectives of the study, the researchers employed ethnographical qualitative research approach. In ethnography, the researcher studies an entire cultural group in a natural setting over a prolonged period of time by collecting, primarily observational data and qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning of individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2009). It helps to collect data in order to answer questions concerning the current status of the subjects that exist in the study area. It is also concerned with identifying facts, practices that are prevailing processes.

**Participants and Sampling Technique:** the target populations of this study was students with disabilities, parents of students with disabilities, primary school principals, teachers and members of parent teacher association (PTA) who live in Dasenech worded of South, Omo Zone. Through purposive sampling 4 school principals, 4 teachers, 4 PTA members (out of 10), 10 students with disabilities (out of 18), and 6 pastoral parents of students with disabilities and 2 educational experts/officers were selected and used as a source of data.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

1. **Interview:** semi- structured personal interview guide questions were designed and used as the main source of data. It was designed for 10 students with disabilities (6 males and 4 females), 4 teachers (3 males and 1 female), 4

males' school principal and 2 education officers (1 male and 1 female). The guide questions were first designed in English language and during interview it was translated to Dasenech language.

2. **Focus Group Discussion:** It was carried out in order to come up with the participants' views, opinions, special concerns and interests about children with disabilities. The focus group discussion was consists of 10 participants (4 PTA members and 6 parents). For this regard two focus group discussions held with five participants in each group and 10 semi structured questions were designed in English language and translated to the Dasenech language.
3. **Observation:** the observation was done in the sampled primary schools and in the local home environment of children with disabilities. It was employed to substantiate the obtained data and to get the realities on the ground. To do the observation, 26 points checklist was developed in English language.

**Data Collection Procedures:** in order to collect the required information from sample population the researcher first communicated with school principals and students with disabilities. To get consent, with the help of those students with disability the researcher meet their parents. After the permission was secured the interview was made with students with disabilities, their parent and principals at school and education officer at his office. Based on the participants' consents all interviews were recorded and the interview of each student with disabilities lasted approximately in a range of thirty minute to one hour. Eventually, the interviewed data were arranged and systematically organized by the researcher.

Similarly, after getting consent of participants for FGD, the focus group discussion was occurred in one appropriate place. During the focus groups discussion the researcher acts as a moderator and he was assisted by a note taker, a tape recorder and video was used to record all the discussions. Two hours were used to each discussion and after the focus group discussion was finished, the researcher and the note taker was reviewed the tape-recorded notes and made reasonable summary of

the focus group discussion, that is very useful for data analysis. Beside of these, the researcher observed the sampled sites in order to triangulate or crosscheck the obtained data from the school and home environment.

**Data Analysis:** after collecting all the relevant and available data, the analysis was done based on the major research questions. Both the interviewed and focus group discussion information was translated from the local Dasenech language to English and presented qualitatively. The information obtained through observation was analyzed under each theme and discussed with the findings of other related studies.

## Results

### Background of the Participants

The background information of sampled students with disabilities, their parents and teachers, PTA members, principals and education officers from the four primary schools (Kapusia (K), Shera (S), Ocholoch(O) and Nebremus (N)) of Dasenech Woreda was presented by the following tables.

*Table 1: The Demographic Information of Parents and PTA Members*

Participants	Sex	Age	Occupation	Family size	Educational level	No of children with Disabilities
Parent K <sub>1</sub>	M	36	Pastoralist	8	Illiterate	1
Parent K <sub>2</sub>	M	33	“	6	“	1
Parent S <sub>3</sub>	M	40	“	7	“	1
Parent S <sub>4</sub>	F	38	“	4	“	1
Parent O <sub>5</sub>	M	29	“	7	“	1
Parent N <sub>6</sub>	F	26	“	5	“	1
PTA K <sub>1</sub>	M	31	“	6	“	-
PTA S <sub>2</sub>	M	39	“	6	“	-
PTA O <sub>3</sub>	F	28	“	5	“	-
PTA N <sub>4</sub>	M	36	“	9	“	-

As it can be seen from table 1 above the sampled parents were 6 (4males and 2 females) with age range from 26 to 40. Regarding the PTA members, they were 4

in number (3males and 1 female) with age range from 31 to 39. Commonly, all the parents and PTA members are pastoralist in their occupation, illiterate. Again, the sampled Pastoral parents have a child with disability and their family size was from 4 to 8 in number and each PTA members were 6 to 9 in family size.

**Table 2: The Demographic Information of Teachers, Principals and Education officers**

Participants	Sex	Age	Educational Qualification	Area of study	Work Experience (in year)
Teacher K <sub>1</sub>	M	28	Diploma	Geography	7
Teacher S <sub>2</sub>	M	30	Degree	Civics &Et.Ed	10
Teacher O <sub>3</sub>	M	29	Diploma	English language	9
Teacher N <sub>4</sub>	F	27	Diploma	Natural Science	6
Principal K <sub>1</sub>	M	34	Degree	EDPM	12
Principal S <sub>2</sub>	M	28	Diploma	Geography	7
Principal O <sub>3</sub>	M	30	Degree	History	5
Principal N <sub>4</sub>	M	29	Diploma	Natural Sciences	8
Edu. Officer D <sub>1</sub>	M	35	Degree	Geography	12
Edu. Officer D <sub>2</sub>	F	29	Degree	Biology	9

According to the above table 2 the participated teachers, principals and education officers were initially indicated, the teachers were 4 in number (3 males and 1 female), 4 male principals and the education officers (1 male and 1 female) were presented by coding 1 up to 4 and their age was ranged from 27 to 34 years. The table also affirmed that the sampled participants were qualified by Diploma and first Degree by different fields of teaching and administration professions. Regarding their work experiences all participants were well experienced from 5 to 12 years by their careers.

**Table 3: The Demographic Information of Students with Disabilities**

Participants	Sex	Age	Grade level	Type of disability /Impairment	On set of disability	Degree of Severity
SWDK <sub>1</sub>	M	15	8	Visual Impairment	Congenital	Blind



SWDK <sub>2</sub>	F	11	5	Physical disability	6 years old	Moderate
SWDK <sub>3</sub>	M	12	4	Suspected Intellectual Disability	4 years old	Moderate
SWDS <sub>4</sub>	M	12	6	Physical disability	3 years old	profound
SWDS <sub>5</sub>	M	13	7	Hearing Impairment	Congenital	Deaf
SWDS <sub>6</sub>	F	11	5	Visual Impairment	Congenital	Blind
SWDO <sub>7</sub>	F	12	6	Physical disability	3 years old	Moderate
SWDO <sub>8</sub>	M	17	8	Suspected Intellectual Disability	4 years old	Moderate
SWD N <sub>9</sub>	F	12	6	Physical disability	2 years old	Moderate
SWDN <sub>10</sub>	M	17	8	Visual Impairment	Congenital	Blind

According to table 3 all sampled students with disability were selected from the four sampled schools of Dasenech Woreda and they were coded by 1 up to 10. As it can be seen from the table there were 10 in number (6 males and 4 females) and they are found between age 11 and 17 years. Students have different types of disabilities like Visual and Hearing impairment, physical disability and 2 of them were suspected as intellectual disability. The students' problem was ranged from moderate to profound level of severity. Concerning the onset of the problem for two of them it was occurred at birth and for the remains it was happened when their age range was between 2 and 6 years. Currently the identified students were attended in different grade levels ranged from 4 to 8 grade levels.

### **Pastoralists Understanding about Children with Disability**

Initially, all the participant school principals listed types of disability that was observed in their schools, as they reported the available types of disabilities in their school, there are students with have visual impairment (blindness), hearing impairment (deafness), physical disabilities, and suspected intellectual disabilities. Then, for the question related to the pastoralists understanding about the meaning of disabilities, the school principal K<sub>1</sub> said that pastoralists were defined disability in terms of problems that comes from supernatural beliefs and they were seen as evil and they believe that disability as a punishment from a Devine. Again, the

other principal S<sub>2</sub> added that some pastoralist's perceived person with disability as a person who have lack of ability and their difficulties comes from accident or injuries and some of them associated the causes with hereditary/inborn.

Similarly, the participant teacher O<sub>3</sub> described about the views of pastoralists towards disability as; according the information I have most of the time pastoralists describe a disable person as a person who have no any contribution for the entire community and they assume as individual who have difficulties to do any day to day activities. One of the participant teachers N<sub>4</sub> from Nubrumus School stated that;

*“the pastoralists’ views on person with disability as useless, potentially poor, dependent, beggar and burden to parents. For this reasons person with disabilities were isolated, segregated, and dissocialized in the pastoral communities.”*

In addition to interview of students with disabilities, teachers and school principals, the perception of pastoralists towards disability was discussed in FGD. Here, most of the participant parents and PTA members said that, disability is a result of smallpox, evil spirit, curse, family sin, witchcraft and violation of cultural rules. When they added their feeling about people with disabilities, they are useless and burden person to their family as well as their community. Moreover, they perceive as sick, marginalized and neglected person from the social groups, a person who do not have any social respects, a person who do not married his/her friends and a person who have difficulties to fulfill his/her basic needs and need to be assisted by others.

One of the participant parents in FGD added that, in our pastoral community if the mother gave a birth to a child with disability, the husband will blame his wife and claiming that the spirited are caused by the wife's family. This kind of belief was very common especially in the rural area of our woreda. The other participant PTA member stated that, individuals with disabilities are just like everyone else but they

highly suffer by physical or mental problems that limit their productivity. Generally, based on the interviewed and FGD reports we conclude that the pastoral communities view towards disability were backward, negative and they perceive people with disabilities as very dependent individuals who need to be assisted in any personal activities.

The researcher home and school observation report also demonstrates perception of pastoralists towards disability based on the exhibited activities of pastoral parents and children without disabilities. In his observation, the majority of student with physical disabilities colleagues in Shera primary school were not interested to play and to form friendship. Because of this, he isolated and sited in one corner of the playground. Again, in home observation the researcher tried to observe a pastoral parents way of care and support for a student with visual impairment; all family members not gave due attention for the activities of this child and they were not interested to care and fulfill their child's basic needs, parents were not provide any facilities and the home entrance and exits are not conducive to this children with visual impairment. Surprisingly, as you can be seen from the figure 1 below, the researchers got one suspected children with intellectual disability in one home when he segregated and roped in one corner of a house.



*Figure 1:  
Shows roped  
suspected  
children with  
intellectual  
disability in  
Kapusiakebele*

Therefore, from this the researchers infer and assure that the majority of pastoralists in the study area have negative perception towards disability and they were highly marginalized them from social member and activities of the community.

### **Cultural Belief Concerning Children with Disability**

Regarding pastoralists' cultural belief towards children with disabilities, the informant education officer D<sub>1</sub> were mentioned that, in our woreda because of different negative cultural beliefs of pastoralists' children with disabilities are still exposed to and oppressed by prejudices and discrimination. In my opinion, the pastoralists' belief towards person with disability was highly associated with devil and curse of the cultural leaders as the causes of disabilities. The education officer added that, children with disabilities of pastoralists suffer an even more severe impact of the discrimination and attitudinal challenges. As children, they understood as powerless, a child who does not have any contribution to the community, dependent and incompetent in any school and home activities.

For the same question participant principal O<sub>3</sub> added that, in my view pastoralist's perception or common belief towards children with disabilities includes the derogatory stereotypes, beliefs that people with disability have a less position in society or that they have a diminished capacity to educate and contribute to the community due to their impairment or disability. Holding such attitudes leads people to maintain social distance from children with disabilities and exclude them from their personal and social activities.

Moreover, when the FGD participants reflected for the question related to the common cultural beliefs of pastoralists towards children with disability, most of them associated the cause of disability to that of cultural elders' imprecation; locally they termed as Tregarm and Fergare (team of cultural leaders who curse when the rule and regulation of the local community violated) in Amharic we call it “ትርኚርምእናፈርጋር”. When the FGD participants elaborate the issue of this cultural belief; if a child was born with disability in one of the rural village they believe that it is the result of parents' imprecation by Tregarm or Fergare. This cultural imprecation again manifested after birth in day to day activities of children with disability, when a child reach at adult age the decision of cultural elders' were not

allowed to married, to participate in cultural weeding ceremony (Demi), to eat with person without disabilities, their parents were not get any respect and marginalized from many social activities. From this we conclude that children with disability perceived as result of parents or ancestors imprecation by cultural leaders and they were not treated as human being as well as a member of pastoral communities.



*Figure 2: Shows students with Physical disability and Visual impairment at home environment.*

## **Discussion**

### **Pastoralists Understanding about Children with Disability**

Based on the data obtained from participants one of the findings of this study was related to the pastoralists' perception towards disabilities. The result indicates that they perceive disabilities as result of supernatural belief, evil spirits and they believe that disability as a punishment from a Devin. Again, they believe that the difficulty comes from smallpox, sin, witchcrafts, violation of cultural rules, accident or injuries and some of the causes are associated with hereditary. In addition, they describe a person with disability as a person who has no any contribution for the entire community, sick person, potentially poor/lack of ability, dependent, beggar, and burden to parents and they assume a person with disability as individual who have troubles to perform his/her day to day activities, marginalized and neglected person from the social groups, a person who do not have any social respects, a person who do not married his/her friends and a person who have difficulties to fulfill his/her basic needs and need to be assisted by others.

Correspondingly, the existing literature indicates that, the perception of a society about the causes of disability is a reflection of culture, religion and other belief. Previous studies reported that evil spirit, God wrath, punishment for sin and curse by somebody as possible causes of disability in Ethiopia (Sisay, 1996 and Arega, 1999). In addition, Caul Crick (1979) pointed out in Nigeria, the presence of different ethnic cultural beliefs regarding the cause for disability. These are curse from God, breaking laws and family sins, offences against gods, witches and wizards, adultery, misfortune, God's representatives, misdeed in a previous life, illegal or unapproved marriage shows the omnipotence of God, evil spirit, killing certain forbidden animals, a warning from God and fighting elders during harvest. If the believes and attitudes of the community about the disability and children with disabilities is negative, it affects families life and it also make children life hopeless. A sample study which was conducted by Tirussew (1995) on the attitude of the society towards persons with disabilities in Ethiopia revealed that most of the people have negative attitudes towards individuals with disabilities. Therefore, this kind of societal attitudes or perceptions towards disability indicates that there are still negative perceptions towards disability in pastoral society of Dasenechworeda and a person with disability faced a great negative impact on their overall development.

### **Cultural Belief Concerning Children with Disability**

The other finding of this study is related to cultural beliefs towards children with disabilities; the result indicated that the cultural belief towards children with disability was highly associated with curse of the cultural leaders. This cultural elders' imprecation termed as Tregarm and Fergare in Amharic they call it “ትርኚርምእናፈርጋር”. The pastoral community believed that if a child was born with disability in one of the rural village they believe that it is the result of parents' imprecation by Tregarm or Fergare. This cultural imprecation again reflected on the born children with disability at adult age and the decision of cultural elders'

were not allowed to married, to participate in cultural wedding ceremony (Demi), to eat with person without disabilities, their parents were not get any respect and marginalized from social activities. It is similar with the findings of Sisay (1996) stated that the presence of a child with disability places the family in cultural pressure and spiritual crisis which determine the development of the child and the social interaction of the family. For people with disabilities in Ethiopia, the opportunity to access social-cultural activities such as weddings, funerals, festivals, and general gatherings is very restricted (Tirussew, 2005); thus, accessing larger institutions such as education and employment has been even more difficult.

The cultural belief again includes the derogatory stereotypes, beliefs that people with disabilities have a lesser position in society or that they have a diminished capacity to educate and contribute to the community due to their impairment or disability. Holding such attitudes leads people to maintain social distance from children with disabilities and exclude them from their personal and social activities. By substantiating this, Yasseldyike and Algozzine (1995) stated that parents who have children with disabilities feel guilty, angry and afraid which affects their relationship with each other and the community. Due to the high stigma associated with disabilities in the Ethiopian culture, most people either hide or never declare a disability (Tirussew, 2005). People with disabilities often are not participants in society because of the overall belief that disabilities are a result of a curse and/or are punishments from a deity (Mulatu, 1999).

### **Conclusion**

According to the result obtained from the study pastoralists' perception about disability as a problem that comes from smallpox, witchcrafts, sin committed in the family, violation of cultural rules, evil eye, curse, accident or injuries and misdeed in previous life, misfortune or fate. The stereotypical beliefs held by the society towards person with disability are a sick person, helpless or useless, potentially poor, lack of ability, dependent, beggar, burden to parents, marginalized, neglected

person from the social groups etc. Misdeeds of parents, curse or bewitchment influenced some parents to have a feeling of guilt and disgrace. This in turn affected the social interaction of these parents. The study also identified one of the most known cultural belief to causes of disability in Dasenechworeda, it is the cultural elders' imprecation termed as Tregarm and Fergare. The pastoral society believed that if a child was born with disability they believe that it is the result of parents' imprecation/curse by Tregarm or Fergare.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study the following are suggested recommendations to ameliorate the problems related to pastoralists' perception towards children with disabilities in Dasenechworeda;

1. The concerned stakeholder in the local area should arrange the practical and continuous awareness rising session to minimize the existing negative cultural belief on the cause and overall personality of person with disability.
2. Parents as well as other family members can be sensitized and trained to care and promote the overall development of Children with disabilities during their day-to-day encounters at home.
3. The government must be arise knowledge of the society, teachers, students, parents and other participants of this study on the existing laws, policies, strategies and conventions regarding the right of person with disabilities.

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