

Conditions faced by the Relic Returnee Population in Gode Zone, Ethiopian Somali National Regional State: A Situation Report and Analysis

Written by Ahmed Y. Farah, Consultant anthropologist, Emergencies Unit for Ethiopia, January 1996

Overview

This brief study is based on a short visit paid by the author to Gode town in Gode zone of the Ethiopian Somali National Regional State (formerly known as Region 5), for a period of one week starting 10 December, 1995. The author is a social anthropologist who speaks fluent Somali and has intimate knowledge of the Somali society and its culture.

In collaboration with GOAL, an Irish non-governmental organization, MSF Belgium operated, from July 1992 to end of 1994, a nutritional and health assistance programme to camp-based populations in and around Gode town. This camp support system saved the lives of many war and drought-affected, largely returnee, urban poor sheltering in camps established in Gode town (Gode 1, 2) and in the neighboring village of Bohol Xagar.

Bohol Xagar is located within a disputed buffer zone of two Ogadeni groups: the Tolumugge - whose clansmen constitute the dominant group in Gode district, and the neighboring Cawilyahan clan which controls a large part of the territory in the adjacent Afdheer zone. Although the full explanation for what happened to the old camp population needs further research, the inter-clan land dispute seems to have discouraged continued presence of the returnees in Bohol Xagar, while instability discouraged the returnees from investing in land and cultivation along the bank of Webi Shabelle river. In practice, shortage of non-agricultural opportunities in the desolate camp village, whose development has been stymied by the still unresolved inter-clan land dispute, contributed to dispersal of the returnees in Bohol Xagar. The majority of the returnee camp population probably became absorbed, without external assistance, to the predominantly nomadic home areas inhabited by their kin groups, while others may have drifted to the large villages, including Gode.

The total beneficiary population, including both camp populations and others who had reintegrated (absorbed) within Gode town, was estimated at 28,445 by MSF at the closing of its relief program in November 1994.¹ The physical structure of the camps adjacent to Gode town are still in place although many huts appear abandoned and show no sign of human habitation. This suggests that those who abandoned the camps have somehow managed to reintegrate to the local economy usually by starting cultivation. Most returnees who have successfully reintegrated are members of the local clan. Membership of a kin group, which guarantees members access to agricultural land and primary resources occurring in its sphere of influence, and moral assistance from closely related kinsmen, appears to have been a crucial in the reintegration process.

Successfully reintegrated local returnees seem to have broken the bond of relief dependency by becoming farmers, producing staple crops of maize and sorghum for their sustenance. For the agro-pastoralists in Gode area, this has been a slightly less than an average year although it has been a good year for farmers in Kelafo, where areas inundated during the April/May floods have supported a bumper crop in the main season of *gu'*. Thus, the economically active

¹ Monthly Activity Report, Emergency Health Care Assistance to the Displaced Populations in the Area of Gode, Region 5, November, 1994.

groups in Gode district, nomads, agro-pastoralists and townspeople, seem to have managed well since the withdrawal of external assistance. There are no signs of food shortages, although the limited circulation of cash due to a reduction in the trading of goods from Mogadishu, has impaired the local economy and left many marginal groups with little purchasing power.

Those local returnees who have successfully reintegrated have left behind a residual camp population which is languishing at sites on the periphery of the town. The “stayees” in those old camps can be classified into two categories. One is a small group comprising the extremely poor members of local kin groups who have failed to acquire the resources that are necessary for reintegration. The second, much larger, group are returnees whose clansmen live outside the district. The most desirable settlement option, that is, crop production and the raising of a primary stock of cattle, remains a possibility closed to these outsiders, who have no customary land rights in the area.

This “relic” population remaining in the old camps at Gode town probably form the most vulnerable group in the Somali National Region. Not engaged in the productive sector of the local economy or in urban employment and trade, they eke out a precarious living from low income activities. The major activities undertaken by the less successfully reintegrated returnees include the collection and sale of firewood, gathering incense, water delivery and petty street trade - usually carried out by women and children. During the relief program of prior years, income derived from these activities supplemented the camp assistance. This had the effect of ensuring safe sustenance and a remarkably rapid recovery from the devastating impact of displacement and civil strife. Withdrawal of humanitarian assistance without putting in place mechanisms which could help secure access to basic necessities for survival, exposed them to the vagaries of the local market. Continuing instability in southern Somalia, the prolonged closure of the seaport and airport of Mogadishu, combined with recent poor rains over much of southern Somalia, has led to a significant increase in food prices over the last few months. This has eroded the purchasing power of the urban poor and caused the rapid marginalization of a significant portion of the local population. Though food is available, the loss of market access among the poor has led to deteriorating food security and signs of impending starvation.

The majority of the residual population still living at the sites of the old camps in Gode, were poor, even before their return from war-ravaged Somalia in 1991-1992. First displaced from Gode zone by the 1977/78 war between Ethiopia and Somalia over the control of the “Ogaden”, some were given shelter in refugee camps, while others merged with the general population and engaged in low income activities in Somalia. They developed an urban inclination as a result of prolonged dependence (14-15 years) upon camp welfare and support services provided by the government of Somalia with assistance of UNHCR and the international community. Gode attracted an exodus of these urbanized returnees through an expectation of relief assistance and due to its status as the administrative and trade center of the zone.

Causes of Food Deficiency

(a) Price Increase of Food

As in other parts of the Ethiopian Somali National Regional State, Gode zone is economically and culturally linked to neighboring Somalia and the self-proclaimed “Republic of Somaliland”. In this economic zone, goods and people move freely across the porous and practically notional border. The regional export economy heavily depends upon livestock produced on both sides of the border which are exported via ports in southern Somalia and “Somaliland”. The proceeds from exported live animals are purchased with food and manufactured consumer goods that enter the region through Somali ports, but are distributed throughout the region by an effective trade network linking a mosaic of independent and often antagonistic clans.²

From 1977/78 relief food delivered to camps in Somalia sheltering Ethiopian refugees became an important source of wheat grain and other food commodities e.g. cooking oil, to both nomads and other economic groups in Somalia and the linked Somali-speaking eastern region of Ethiopia. After 1988, camps in what was Eastern Hararghe, sheltering Somali refugees from northern Somalia and Ethiopian returnees, replaced camps in Somalia as a crucial source of traded relief grain in this region.³

Since 1994, the flow of relief food, which sustained the lives of card holders in the camps and made available subsidized cheap food to nomads and the urban population, has been drastically reduced. The Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs, UNHCR national counterpart organization in Ethiopia, conducted a revalidation exercise in the camps in Eastern Hararghe in September 1994. This reduced the case load from a disputed and rather inflated number of about 800,000 to roughly 184,000. As of July 1995, the number of refugees receiving humanitarian assistance has been estimated at about 275,189. Out of this, 90,289 were described as new arrivals displaced by the latest round of violence which started in the northwest in October 1994 between forces loyal to Mohammed Ibrahim Egal (president of the self-proclaimed Republic of Somaliland) and the Garhajis opposition.

In line with the policy of the government, seeking to shift assistance from relief to rehabilitation and self-sufficiency, and in the light of improved nutritional situation of the drought and war-affected population in the interior of the Ogaden, large scale relief assistance, which started to be distributed outside the camps in 1992 in the “Ogaden” came to an end. Thus at the end of 1994, MSF Belgium withdrew its emergency assistance to the returnees in Gode area.

The closure of the port of Mogadishu and the capture by SNA fighters of the strategically important interior town of Baydhawa in October last year, disrupted the trade between Gode town, the principal commercial center of Gode zone, and Mogadishu in southern Somalia. This contributed to an increase in the price of food in Gode town in the months of November and December. Although Gode is also linked to Somaliland and receives food imports from there through Dhagaxbur, imports from the south compete with those from the north. This has the impact of stabilizing the price of food and consumer goods. Table 1 shows a remarkable increase of imported and local food items in November and December 1995.

Table 1: Food prices in Gode town during the period November 11-December 13 1995

² For Details of the trade between Gode Zone and Somalia, See “Permanent Agricultural Settlements along the Webi Shabelle River in Gode Zone of the Ethiopian Somali National Regional State, UNDP-EUE Study, Ahmed Y. Farah, Addis Ababa, November 1995.

³ For a Summary of the Characteristics of the Refugee Camps in Eastern Hararghe, See ‘Salient Features of the Refugee Camps in Eastern Ethiopia, UNDP-EUE Report, by Ahmed Y. Farah, 27 September 1995. For a Comprehensive View of the Social and Economic Profile of the Camps, See GOING BACK HOME “Determinants of a large-scale Return-home Movement: Integration of Camp Dwellers in Eastern Hararghe. Original Research Commissioned by SCF (UK) and The Administration of Refugee and Returnee Affairs, The Transitional Government of Ethiopia, with Funding Provided by the British Overseas Development Administration. By Ahmed Y. Farah, April 1994, Addis Ababa.

Food Item	Unit	Price (Birr)					
		week I	week II	week III	week IV	week V	week VI
CEREALS							
Imported red rice	50kg	180	190	210	235	250	200
Local red sorghum	50kg	85	85	90	95	100	90
Imported sorghum (relief)	50kg	not available					110
Imported yellow maize (")	50kg	not available					
Local white maize	50kg	75	80	95	105	120	100
OTHER COMMODITIES							
Cow peas	50kg	120	135	150	175	180	100
Imported vegetable oil	5 litre	35	35	40	50	50	35
Local red onions	1kg	6	6	6	6	6	7
Local tomatoes	1kg	5	5	5	5	5	8
LIVESTOCK							
Male goat - 1st quality	Head	180	180	180	180	180	120
" " - 2nd quality	"	130	130	130	130	130	70
" " - 3rd quality	"	95	95	95	95	95	50
Male sheep - 1st quality	"	190	190	190	190	190	110
" " - 2nd quality	"	140	140	140	140	140	90
" " - 3rd quality	"	100	100	100	100	100	60
Male cattle - 1st quality	"	1050	1050	1050	1050	1050	-
" " - 2nd quality	"	850	850	850	850	850	-
" " - 3rd quality	"	480	480	480	480	480	-
Male camel - 1st quality	"	1200	1200	1200	1200	1200	-
" " - 2nd quality	"	950	950	950	950	950	-
" " - 3rd quality	"	750	750	750	750	750	-

Source: SERP, Ogaden Branch, Gode

The noticeable change in the price of food in Gode in the month of November reflects a sustained increase of the price of food in general, both local and imported. Thus the price of staples, local sorghum and maize, witnessed price increases of 30 and 80 Birr per quintal respectively, in no more than four weeks. In the same period, the price of imported rice jumped from Birr 380 to Birr 500 per quintal. These dramatic increases are a direct consequence of a breakdown in trade following the closure of the port of Mogadishu which has reduced food imports to Gode from Somalia. During the second half of December, the data shows a slight drop in the price of locally produced staples, with sorghum down by about Birr 20 per quintal and maize by Birr 40 per quintal, the result, possibly, of raised expectations of new relief food distributions.

After a long period of stability, during early December, livestock prices began to decrease significantly. For instance, the price of first quality male goats decreased from Birr 180 in mid-November to Birr 120 in the middle of December. Although nomads will always benefit from cheap food, particularly in the dry season when they consume more grain, the present high price of cereals is not expected to have a major impact on their overall food security provided the terms of trade relative to the price of livestock can remain favourable. The present decrease in the price of livestock is not especially unusual for the time of year. The dry season, which has already begun, is always a difficult period for pastoralists and a negative shift in the terms of trade can be expected. However, presently, there are no signs of difficulty in access to food among the nomads in Gode zone, and unless the dry season is

prolonged or the price of cereals and other staples resume the recent hike in price, nomads can be expected to survive the dry season without too much hardship.

Security problems and, presumably, factors affecting crop production (less rain), have created an increased demand on the Somali side of the border for sorghum and maize produced in the farming corridor of Gode zone. During September and October, traders exported a lot of grain to Beletweyn, and the continuing demand for grain across the border is another factor that has contributed to the high cost of grain in Gode town.

It is very difficult to give an estimate of the total agricultural production following the main growing season in Gode zone. It is also very difficult to give an estimate of the amount of local grain hoarded by merchants for future speculation in Gode and Kelafo markets. However, it seems that the farmers have been induced by the attractive grain price to sell most of their production. If the farmers have already sold most of the surplus grain, as is most likely, and if there is little grain in the stores of local merchants, one can expect a further increase in the price of grain before the *deyr* harvest, which should have commenced by March on both sides of the border.

(b) Gode State Farm

Management problems experienced by the state farm at Gode (now a co-operative of local farmers), most important of which have been administrative changes, delayed the arrival of the government subsidy and therefore prevented a timely planting of the next annual crop. The delayed planting of 1008 hectares of prime irrigated land, distributed earlier to individual farmers (mainly returnees), means that more than a thousand families are yet again unable to achieve self-sufficiency and therefore remain dependent on welfare support.

Counting on the missed second harvest crop, the resettled returnees reportedly sold most of their harvest from the main *gu* ' season and are now very short of food. Also the returnees did not receive their food-for-work ration, which has been part of the project strategy to help resettled farmers attain self-sufficiency, reportedly because of inefficiency on the part of the regional Relief and Rehabilitation Bureau in Jigjiga. Thus, failure of the state farm to plant the second annual crop has not only further contributed to food scarcity in the zone, it also affected the resettled returnees-reduced yield because of late planting.

The newly appointed state farm manager reported that preparations for the planting of maize are now underway. Given the food shortages facing the resettled returnees and overall food shortage in the zone, the manager rightly stressed the need for this planting to proceed despite the increased risk of crop failure. At best, a somewhat reduced yield will help to alleviate some of the food shortages facing the farmers while, at worst, the crop will least provide fodder for the few cattle owned by some of the resettled farmers during the coming dry season.

The first consignment of food-for-work for the resettled returnees arrived in Gode during the field trip. This will certainly solve the immediate hardships being faced by the beneficiaries and will contribute a little, depending if deliveries can be sustained until the next harvest, to stabilizing the price of food generally in the zone.

Conclusions

Those most affected by the rise in food prices since November 1995 are the relic returnee population still living in the old camps established five years ago around Gode town. Their vulnerability to market fluctuations largely derives from the fact that they do not produce the

food they need to sustain themselves. They consist of a residual urban poor, which did not reintegrate as expected in the rural economies of agro-pastoralism and traditional stock breeding that have already absorbed the majority of the returnee population in the zone.

These remaining returnees also lack the skills necessary for taking part in the limited employment opportunities available in Gode and other urban centers in the zone. Most of them do not have the capital necessary to start viable businesses or to trade, in spite of the fact that many returnee women sell cheap domestic goods along the streets of the market of the town. They also generally lack professional skills or educational qualification to compete for the limited number of government posts.

The residual camp population in Gode town did not remain idle after the termination of the camp support system. They engaged in low income activities, most importantly incense and firewood collection, and the collection and sale of water. Most earn a limited cash income which is currently not enough to buy them sufficient food at the increased market price. Therefore, many have become under-nourished in the past two months and are now showing signs of early malnutrition.

Incense collection in the long-term seems the most viable activity to be undertaken by the urban poor in Gode. However, its market value in the zone is very low. The retail price of one kilo medium quality incense was Birr 4.50 at the time of the visit. In an average year an experienced collector produce about 500 kgs of incense. This could earn the incense collecting family an annual income of roughly Birr 1500, which in normal times is a valuable income but, alone, is still not enough to feed a large family. This explains the part-time nature of incense production in the zone. The urban poor in Gode currently engage in incense collection not as their primary economic activity but as a supplement to other family ventures - usually small-scale trading by women and street work carried out by the children, including begging.

Incense produced in the interior of the Ogaden is sold in Jigjiga market at about twice its Gode price, and much more in Addis Ababa. This implies that incense collection profits the merchants more than the destitute producers. Unfortunately, this trend will continue until the network of roads in the region, which are in disrepair, can be improved and the region linked by all-weather roads to the highland areas of the country. Improved roads could help entice the actual individual producers to transport their incense product to more lucrative markets in Jigjiga or even further afield to Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa.

Relief food pre-positioned for local returnees anticipated to be airlifted from refugee camps in Kenya has already arrived in Gode. This consignment, and the food-for-work destined for the resettled returnees at the Gode state farm mentioned earlier, has not yet been distributed to the intended beneficiaries. It is too early to gauge the impact of distributing this relief food. Nevertheless, the arrival of food has already raised expectations of a return to the large scale free food assistance of the past.

The hungry returnees in the old camps and urban destitute in Gode have started to maneuver to secure their entitlement to this relief food. They have begun to complain and lobby, rather persistently, to the regional authorities and to anybody else whom they think might enhance their chance of getting the assistance. This partly explains recent news stories in the local press concerning starvation in Gode zone. Expectations of free food distributions also reportedly instigated market speculation and retention of food by the local merchants, who are wary that large scale distribution of free food may knock down the relatively high food prices. In the short-term this may have the effect of artificially pushing prices even higher.

If, as expected, the available relief food is distributed to the targeted beneficiaries only, this will almost certainly lead to discrimination against those who need help the most - the urban poor, mostly returnees, in and around Gode town. The management of subsequent distributions of relief food supposedly "targeted" at selected beneficiaries in accordance with the mandates of the agencies concerned (ARRA, RRB), could also prove to be a recipe for disturbance. Unless given priority, the urban poor are, understandably, very likely to mobilize in order to disrupt distributions without considering the possible consequences.

The problem of the urban poor in Gode, a legacy of past wars between the neighboring states of Ethiopia and Somalia, as well as Somalia's prolonged civil strife, will not go away for some time to come. The fate of this residual returnee population much depends on the return of normality to the urban centers in Somalia and those of the Ethiopian Somali region, whose development and prosperity are very much linked. In order to relieve the present food deficit affecting vulnerable group in Gode, some short-term intervention is required. However, any wider distribution of relief assistance through food-for-work or other means, must target the most vulnerable regardless of category - farmer, urban poor or dependent returnee. This can also help reduce demand and stabilize the price of staple foods until the next harvest is fully gathered in March and April.