

North and South Gonder - Food security assessment in parts of the Tekeze River watershed

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Introduction and background

Objectives of mission and methodology used

The objective of the UN-EUE mission to North and South Gonder was to assess the food security situation in weredas bordering or being part of the Tekeze River watershed. Furthermore, the mission tried to understand a variety of historical aspects concerning agricultural and other development activities as well as food aid and relief activities in these areas. Please refer to the map annexed to this report for itinerary and places visited.

The information and results presented in this report were collected during the field mission using Rapid Rural Assessment (RRA) and the more adequate field-level Participatory Rural Assessment (PRA) techniques. Apart from having met most of the principal governmental and non-governmental actors at regional, zonal, wereda and kebele level, the mission conducted a number of group discussions with farmers as well as discussions with experienced and knowledgeable key informants in the target areas. In two places (Qualissa, Ibnat wereda and Hamusit, Belessa wereda) resource ranking games were conducted with representatives of two 'Gots'¹. Resource ranking gives indications concerning the stratification of the population living in the area. Furthermore it gives indications about available resources and their respective importance for households of each defined category². In addition spontaneous farmer interviews at markets, in the field, along the road etc. were conducted.

Also available secondary literature and data were consulted in order to compare the current situation with previous years as well as to review the work and achievements of other institutions and organisations involved in development and humanitarian activities in the visited areas.

General overview

The Tekeze River watershed is considered as one of the most remote areas in Ethiopia. The climate is hot; the land is rocky and arid. The sandy soils are of poor quality and were long considered unsuitable for farming. Original settlers used the Tekeze River lowlands more for their livestock as pastureland than for agriculture. The area was also neglected for many years and there were few if any development activities. The two major reasons for its neglect were its remoteness and the fact that the area became a TPLF (Tigrean People's Liberation Front) stronghold during the former socialist government.

¹ A 'Got' represents the lowest and smallest officially organised unit consisting usually of 40 to 70 households. The representative of a Got is elected by all the represented households.

² For more elaborate information and discussions on resource ranking and its usefulness for agricultural and other research activities in rural areas, please refer to the manifold literature available on this subject. See also Guinand (1999a).

Looking at the demography of the area, the population density today is well above the sustainability margin of the area's fragile ecological system. Increased population pressures, especially in the highland areas, put more and more pressure on available land and parts of the formerly rich highlands are currently changing into food deficiency areas. Many poor farm families were forced to leave the highlands and to open vulnerable areas such as escarpment areas and steep slopes for cultivation. Eventually, the Tekeze River watershed was the only place left to open new land for cultivation. In some of the Tekeze River lowland areas people began to settle as far as forty years ago. Then there were only few. But nowadays the persistent search for cultivable croplands, for example on steep slopes, has resulted in massive deforestation which in turn has led to significant soil erosion, decreasing soil fertility and even marginalisation and complete depletion of land (see picture in annex).

The area is meher dependent with only one harvest per year. The main crop planted is sorghum. For the last ten to twenty years rains are said to have become erratic, with poor *kiremt* rain seasons becoming the norm rather than the exception. Erratic rainfall patterns and periodic rain shortages have become a fact of life for farmers in and around the Tekeze River lowlands with long dry periods being followed by heavy rains and hail storms, which damage crops. These heavy rains cause flooding and substantial erosion while on the degraded surface water run-off rate are high and water infiltration low. Nowadays less water flows from permanent springs and some of the seasonal springs provide water for only a short period of time or have dried out for good. The causes and the remedy are unknown or at least vague to farmers who say 'only god knows'.

Nevertheless, with the new government in place since 1991, some basic development efforts have been undertaken in selected weredas bordering or being part of the Tekeze River watershed. Especially bnat wereda of South Gonder zone and its neighbouring Belessa wereda of North Gonder zone received considerable attention and benefited from road construction programs, terracing and small scale irrigation projects mostly carried out under food-for-work (FFW) development activities and employment generation scheme (EGS) relief activities. Many farm families are gaining income and are receiving food aid through these channels. But apart from creating temporary employment opportunities for farm households, some of these projects are of questionable effectiveness and their sustainability.

About the difficulty to restore lost household assets and resources after famine

All weredas the mission focused on are included among the 47 weredas (out of 105 in Amhara Region) defined as "food insecure" by the region. All food insecure weredas are situated in the east of Amhara Region, i.e. in the *belg* belt and its adjacent areas of both Gonder zones around the Tekeze River watershed.

Since the last serious drought in 1984, farm households tried to accumulate assets such as cattle, plough oxen, 'shoats' (sheep and goats) and cash. But only few managed to gain back what they lost. Nowadays the majority of the population is left more impoverished than before 1984. The cycle of natural and especially man-made disasters is becoming shorter to a point where reestablishment of pre-disaster conditions becomes impossible without massive inputs and help from outside. Reestablishment of pre-disaster conditions has become virtually impossible due to high population growth rates, high rates of natural resource degradation, poor health and sanitation conditions, low levels of farm technology, limited off-farm employment opportunities, none or very limited market access, high levels of illiteracy and school non-attendance, other government priorities leading to the diversion of needed and already scarce resources and many more such factors indicating and defining severe underdevelopment.

As a matter of fact, subsistence farming is now wishful thinking for the majority of farm households in the visited areas. Furthermore, in 1997 the government, for the first time since 1975, undertook yet another land distribution, leaving quite a number of people landless and many more with an insufficient amount of land.

While realising that targeting the poorest is a primary necessity, food has to be supplied in sufficient amount even to the better-off segment of the population to prevent a general erosion of assets in chronicle food shortage areas. The way food aid still is targeted towards the poorest strata of a population in an already very poor, underdeveloped and impoverished environment represents an important obstacle to the restoration of lost household assets.

Social strata of the population in the visited areas: the 'non-subsistent' majority

Table 1 represents a compilation of resource indicators and wealth categories from different sources, i.e. author's resource ranking in Qualissa (see picture in the annex) and Hamusit kebeles, key informant assessments, FHI (Food for the Hungry International) wealth ranking for Lay-Gayint, and SCF-UK (Save the Children Fund - United Kingdom) wealth characteristics for the Tekeze River lowlands.

From the compiled resource indicators and from interviews conducted throughout the assessed areas it became clear that the number and type of animals are the prime determinants of wealth. Especially plough oxen are a status symbol indicating wealth. Surprisingly the amount of cultivable land is not an important criteria for defining wealth. Farmer in Qualissa, for example, explained that households owning enough land for subsistence farming but who don't own oxen or only one, are considered as poor because without oxen they won't be able to plough all their land and consequently would have to give away part of their land for cultivation. On the other hand, a household which owns a couple of oxen can make a living almost without owning land as renting out oxen will provide enough revenue to live. Households that manage to raise and keep a substantial number of cattle are able to sell some off on a regular basis and acquire land with the money they earn. The prevailing free grazing system also has a significant influence on the relative importance of resources. For keeping cattle and oxen no private land is needed. Animals freely graze everywhere. But this inappropriate land and livestock management system seems to be one of the key causes of the serious environmental degradation and its various consequences.

Table 1: Wealth categories and compiled resource indicators for assessed areas

Resource indicators	'The Destitute'	'The Very Poor'	'The Poor'	'The Middle'	'The Rich'
Number and type of animals	No animals	Have poultry	- No oxen - A couple of shoats - Some poultry	- 1 to 2 oxen - Some cattle - Can have up to 40 shoats	> 2 oxen, > 5 cattle, > 2 donkeys/mules, > 40 shoats
Level of subsistence	Not subsistent	Not subsistent	Not subsistent	Subsistent	Subsistent
Eligibility for EGS and FFW activities	Are unable to work in EGS and FFW	Primary target group for EGS and FFW activities		Can get involved in EGS and FFW if necessary	
Amount of cultivable land	No land or only one plot	0.5 to 1.5ha	1.5 to 2.5ha	Enough land for subsistence farming, usually more than 4ha	
Income generating activities	None	- Women who brew and sell 'Tella' in local bars - Farmers in these categories are not able to trade - Daily and casual labourers		Petty traders, trading with basic consumption goods, crop trading, transport business with donkeys and mules	
Seasonal migration	None	Seasonal migration of usually one family member (usually male head of household)		Migration for wage labour not usual	
Type of household, marital status	- Old people - Disabled people - Widows, abandoned and divorced women	- Many female headed households - Old people - Disabled people - Widows, abandoned and	- Many female headed households - Old people - Disabled people - Widows, abandoned and	- Majority are male headed households - Husband and wife work together	- Majority are male headed households - Husband and wife work together

		divorced women	divorced women		
Educational level	-	None	None	Basic education, primary school level	Basic education, can also get up to secondary school level

All the three 'poor' categories, i.e. 'the destitute', 'the very poor' and 'the poor', are not able to make a living from their available resources. Consequently the farm households classified in these categories are 'non-subsistent'. The four examples in Table 2, where assessed households are stratified into wealth categories, show that more than 50% of these households are found within the 'non-subsistent' categories. The two resource rankings the mission did in two drought prone and food shortage kebeles in the lowlands of Tekeze River indicates that in such structural deficit areas $\frac{3}{4}$ of the farm households may not be able to practice subsistence farming. Furthermore, a high percentage of these households may not, even in 'normal' years, be able to meet their food needs without some form of assistance and support, i.e. relief food distributions, EGS or FFW.

People from the 'poor' and the 'very poor' wealth categories are the primary target groups for EGS and FFW activities (see Table 1). This seems reasonable since households from these categories need additional income sources to make up the food production deficit on their farms. Free relief food is distributed to the lowest wealth category. And households from better-off categories can get involved in EGS and FFW activities if necessary.

The number of female-headed households is more prevalent in the 'poor', 'very poor' and 'destitute' categories than in the two better-off categories.

Table 2: Examples of households classified within wealth categories

Households ranked	'The Destitute'	'The Very Poor'	'The Poor'	'The Middle'	'The Rich'
Ibnat wereda, Qualissa, 'Got' No.1	12 HH 21%	12 HH 21%	21 HH 38%	6 HH 11%	5 HH 9%
Belessa wereda, Hamusit, 'Got' No.2 'Bisraleo'		50 HH 77%		12 HH 18%	3 HH 5%
Lay-Gayint, Kebele No.26 'Debre Sina' (FHI survey)		598 HH 50.3%		408 HH 34.3%	162 HH 13.6%
Zequalla woreda and around Tekeze River (SCFUK estimations)		~ 60%		~ 20%	~ 20%

When looking at the necessary resources available and assuming that the four examples of household classification are representative for the surveyed areas (even though they may not), only the 'rich' are not yet in danger of slipping further down the social ladder. In consecutive drought situations the 'middle', not eligible to food aid, will sooner or later be forced to sell their one or two oxen for food purchases and will undoubtedly lose their social status and become food aid dependant. Looking at the percentages, only roughly 10% of the example households are on the safe side, being able to look after themselves even in times of food shortage. The remaining 90% will not be able to cope for an extended period of hardship. This means even in relatively good times with enough rain and good harvests, the majority of the population remains at high risk because a range of internal and external circumstances do not allow them to accumulate the necessary assets which would allow them to pull away from the struggle for survival towards a life with a prospect for development.

Current relief and development activities

Infrastructure development: basic programmes initiated

Over the previous decade people living in and around the Tekeze River watershed were repeatedly and severely affected by civil war which devastated the physical and social infrastructure. Furthermore, part of the area was repeatedly drought-stricken. In the past years, approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ of the population of Ilnat, Belessa and Lay-Gayint weredas depended on external food aid. The Government of Ethiopia, together with international partners, initiated an integrated food security program to stabilise food security through basic infrastructure development and a number of natural resource rehabilitation activities.

Food-for-work road construction: pay more and construct better roads

Substantial efforts have been put into road constructions, which are partly carried out through Employment Generation Schemes (EGS) and Food-For-Work (FFW) and partly through the Regional Road Construction Authority. Within the last five years a reasonably good road system has been established (especially in Ilnat and Belessa weredas) to allow access to remote areas with chronic food shortage in the Tekeze River lowlands. In other weredas such as Lay-Gayint, Touch-Gayint and Semada, local road infrastructure does not yet allow easy access. But the importance of accessibility to drought prone areas through an all-weather road network has widely been recognised.

Roads are an essential basic need for remote communities, especially in drought prone areas as they can open the way to significant development activities. As a matter of fact, development projects usually avoid areas where there is no access by road. Roads bring access to education, health and markets; they promote communication and the exchange of ideas. Roads bring food distribution points near to the affected population. People can reach the distribution points and fetch food without walking for several days. In other words roads are the basic means for take-off of development in general.

Road construction through food-for-work were being carried out in all the visited chronic food deficit weredas. In Ilnat and Belessa wereda, it is ORDA, in Debre Tabor and Farta it is GTZ's 'Integrated Food Security Project' and in Lay-Gayint it is ORDA and FHI which are in charge of these activities. But in these areas the quality of the roads differs immensely and depends on person/days invested and on the material and tools employed. Generally, the more person/days invested per constructed kilometre, the better tools and materials supplied to the workers, the better the quality of the road. Appropriate tools have to be supplied by the implementing project and/or the governmental authorities. Roads cannot be constructed by hand - appropriate tools are essential. Basic, cheap dry weather roads need regular and significant maintenance and cannot be used during part of the rainy season. Feeder roads to chronic food shortage areas have to be accessible at any time of the year. Therefore, they have to be all weather roads with an acceptable drainage system.

How many person/days should be invested to build an acceptable all weather feeder road? WFP suggests 2,000 person/days per kilometre. These norms were developed in the beginning of the 1980s, hastily and under pressure of famine when Ethiopia suffered from bad droughts. The only objective was to get food as quickly and effectively to the affected populations. Until now it remains unclear under what criteria this work norm was based. All the projects the mission visited stated that 2,000 person/days are not sufficient and can only be seen as a realistic calculation for roads constructed on flat ground with an easy workable surface. And furthermore, these 2,000 person/day per kilometre roads only give '(...) a very rough dry weather road of bad quality, demanding every year a high maintenance work' (Berhanu and Waeldele, 1999). Topography, soil and surface types and auxiliary activities such as stone collection etc. have to be included among other considerations in the person/days per kilometre calculation. ORDA, for example, invested up to 6,000 person/days per kilometre constructed road in their intervention areas in Ilnat and Belessa. The steep topography with its partly rocky underground is very labour intensive when worked by hand. Appropriate tools and mechanic support are indispensable for constructing an all weather gravel road of good quality.

Recommended payment of road workers is 3 kg of grain plus 120 grams of vegetable oil per worker/day. Specialists such as masons get cash payment according to local rates. Unskilled labour can also get cash payment, usually 5 Birr per worker/day. ORDA also distributes pulses beside grain and oil for payment. The GTZ project in Debre Tabor suggests a revision of the quantity and type of food given in exchange of labour. In certain areas the vegetable oil is directly sold and not consumed.

None of the areas visited had a permanent and institutionalised road maintenance system in place, mainly due to financial constraints. GTZ in Debre Tabor is planning to create local structures for road maintenance and is already training future road workers directly on the job. Similar structures and on-the-job training are encouraged and undertaken by ORDA in Ilnat and Belessa weredas. But to keep such a maintenance unit running, the government must be willing to provide the financial means to do so.

The Rural Road Construction Agency under the Regional Administration of Amhara also does Road construction. These roads are of professional quality. One of these roads under construction will cross the Tekeze River and connect Belessa with Wag Hamra Zone, finally ending up in Mekelle, Tigray Region.

In Ilnat and Belessa weredas the effects the new road accessibility are obvious for those kebeles that are connected to the road network. In Qualissa the school has again a teacher for the first time since long. Warehouses have been installed directly in the drought prone areas so people do not have to walk long distances to fetch their food allocations.

Food-for-work dam constructions and small scale irrigation: designed to benefit a limited and privileged target group

The development organisation 'Sustainable Agriculture and Environmental Rehabilitation in Amhara Region' (SAERAR) is constructing a number of water dams and small-scale river diversions in Ilnat and Belessa weredas. Some projects have recently been completed and some are still under construction. The mission visited the Aterkayna Earth Dam in the vicinity of Guhala, wereda capital of Belessa (see picture of dam in annex). All the SAERAR projects seem to have some common characteristic: although mostly constructed through food-for-work activities, the design is sophisticated, over-dimensioned, the technology applied is complex, the person/days invested are very high and the sustainability in some cases remains questionable. The Aterkayna dam has just been completed and is in use for the first time. It has been observed, that despite its impressive dimension, the dam is not able to hold all the water from the catchment area because part of it seeps out underground. Furthermore, not enough attention was paid to the catchment area in the nearby mountains. Not having constructed the necessary erosion control measures, the streams carry a lot of material and the dam is already silting. It is only a matter of time until the dam will be filled with eroded material. From the planned 70 ha of land to be irrigated, only 30 ha can actually be irrigated. It is very limited in comparison to the size of the dam and the quantity of water that could be held and gradually released.

Other irrigation projects constructed by SAERAR face similar difficulties. Some of them may never be operational. Considering the work and effort invested, the economic output and the benefit for the local population seems limited. Only very few farmers benefit from such constructions, with the majority just benefiting temporarily during the construction period.

Environmental rehabilitation through food-for-work tree planting and terracing activities

Tree nurseries and tree planting activities have been initiated in several places. ORDA has a number of nurseries where they raise a variety of tree seedlings (see picture of an ORDA tree nursery in the annex). From the total area of 249,427 ha in Ilnat wereda, 681 ha are forested and

only 150 ha of natural forest remain, and these have to be guarded. Poor farmers still take the risk and cut trees during the night. A bundle of 10 kg is sold in Ibnat town for 4 to 7 Birr. ORDA development and extension experts admit that farmers have surprisingly little knowledge of the importance of trees. Nevertheless, in the highlands farmers are now growing more Eucalyptus due to market opportunities now available through the new road and construction activities in Ibnat and other centres. In the dry lowlands Eucalyptus cannot be grown. Other species have been tried but the survival rates are very low due to free grazing animals that eat everything in their way.

Roadside plantations are another means to try to reintroduce trees into the area. ORDA opted for *Schinus molle*, the pepper tree. Around Ibnat and Guhala village trees have been planted following the road for a few kilometres outside of town (see picture in the annex). Farmers who own fields beside the road are the owners of the trees planted on the limits of their plots. But ORDA had to employ permanent guards on a food-for-work basis to patrol the growing trees or the trees would already have disappeared as food for free grazing domestic animals.

Unless farmers have permanent control over the trees, promoting and planting trees in Ibnat and Belessa seems somewhat hopeless. But farmers cannot grow tree seedlings around their homes because they are too far from the nearest water source. Some farmers visited on the road to Qualissa plan to grow fruit trees along a permanent river where there is enough water to water them in their initial growing stage. They plan to guard the trees day and night to prevent destruction by free grazing animals or by jealous neighbours. Such solutions seem very optimistic considering the constraints they face but ORDA tries its best to carry out at least some basic development activities in such hostile environments where all resources are extremely scarce. Much of the work and farmer's motivation is acquired through food-for-work payments. Few of the development activities are through farmer's own initiatives. Therefore the question of sustainability still remains.

Hillside terracing has been and is still being carried out in many parts of Ibnat and Belessa weredas (see picture in the annex). Some of the first stone terraces established a few years ago are in bad shape and partly destroyed. Again free grazing animals did much of the damage, but also heavy rains caused landslides. These terraces, constructed through FFW and EGS, perfectly reflect farmers' attitude towards projects and initiatives planned and designed without their participation. They are not motivated and do not manifest any sense of responsibility towards maintaining them because they do not see their utility.

The problem of sustainability and development through food-for-work projects

The major problems food-for-work and its relief-based brother, the employment generation schemes faced and are still facing are, among others, limited technical resources, few tools, insufficient funds for materials, limited monitoring facilities and doubtful project sustainability. Any sustainability through food-for-work can only be realised with a participatory planning and design of the activities together with the involved communities. Participatory planning and design would also minimise the risk of starting projects and initiatives which do not reflect the necessities and wishes of the people confronted and affected by specific problems such as food and water shortage. Development activities addressing food security issues are currently facing similar problems as other, particularly rural agricultural development and research programmes and projects in developing countries. For too many years top down approaches have and are still being used. If food-for-work activities are to become self-reliant and sustainable, the approach has to be changed radically towards participatory involvement of the target population with a long-term development focus.

A number of development specialists believe that relief food delivered over the last 20 years to chronic food deficit areas like Welo and parts of North and South Gonder has somehow "spoiled" farmers and led them into a dangerous relief food dependency. GTZ's 'Integrated Food Security Project' in Debre Tabor is likely to face difficulties with sustainability of their various development activities, e.g. the hope that these activities will be taken over by the community and the local authorities. GTZ's project co-ordinator says that it is becoming increasingly difficult to mobilise

farmers for sustainable development activities under FFW and other development projects. The consistent, on-going food aid has minimised initiatives within the population for self-reliance and self-help activities.

Basic health structure and family planning: development efforts to be increased significantly

Malnutrition and Anaemia, the lack of iron, are permanent health problems in all visited areas, indicating chronic food shortage for some segments of the population in some areas. Generally the incident rates of the most common diseases fluctuate throughout the year, mainly depending on and negatively correlated to the availability of food. Malaria, respiratory infections, e.g. tuberculosis, intestinal parasites, diseases causing diarrhoea, skin infections, malnutrition and anaemia are the most common diseases reported to health centres. Merasmus and Kwashiokor have been reported for some isolated cases. So far no trend has been observed indicating an increase in malnourished children.

Generally no nutritional surveys are carried out due to lack of material, personal and logistics. The mission did not encounter any severely affected children showing acute or chronic signs of malnutrition.

Family planning activities are being carried out by a number of organisations. GTZ is active in North- and South-Gonder zones since 1994. The project trained approximately 8,000 voluntary local health workers in four different zones. On the local and the household level there is an objective and subjective demand for family planning information. But family planning faces a number of major constraints and difficulties. In many places, but particularly in the eastern parts of North-Gonder zone around the Tekeze River watershed, local health facilities and capacities are often too weak to implement family planning activities and accessibility to many health stations is a problem. Health centre equipment and the quality of trained personnel cannot even meet the most basic standards and requirements to carry out family planning activities. Most of the voluntary local health workers trained by GTZ are no longer available. By using traditional channels and volunteers for family planning activities, projects and programmes face problems of sustainability, partly because there is not enough monitoring of on-going activities. On the other hand, even though health and family planning have been recognised as priority intervention at the local level, the national policy does not attach the required importance to the development of the health sector.

Population growth rates in Ethiopia are among the highest in the world. In many parts of Ethiopia such as the drought prone and chronic food shortage areas around Tekeze River watershed, population density has reached a point where subsistence livelihood and sustainable land use are no longer practicable.

Agricultural development and extension services need appropriate attention

The agricultural system in the assessment area can be characterised by low technology, low productivity and high-risk levels. Yields and crop production are poor, even in so-called bumper harvest years such as for the 1998 *meher* season. The area was neglected by former governments and the few development and extension programmes carried out were developed centrally in a typical top down manner. People were forced to participate in FFW afforestation and soil conservation activities. And even though the new extension strategy is said to be more participatory, development agents and specialists still often approach farmers with a 'top down' attitude.

Furthermore, a number of problems are still unsolved. Due to shortage of funds many governmental field staff lack experience, practical training and in-depth knowledge. Improper fertiliser application, for example, can do more harm than good. As priority is given to increase food production. Agricultural development activities are concentrated on grain and little extension work is done on pulses, oil crops and vegetables.

Herd size in the area, especially towards the Tekeze River lowlands, is too high for the area and

livestock condition at the time of the visit looked poor. Due to the lack of grazing management, i.e. paddock system, all livestock can graze freely damaging crops and trees. This livestock overpopulation, combined with inappropriate management, is certainly among the causes for the serious environmental degradation. Unfortunately agricultural extension services do not attach enough attention to problems related to livestock. Awareness should be created among farmers to keep few livestock in good condition rather than many animals in poor condition. However, as noted elsewhere in this paper, livestock are both a status symbol and the families' social security system. Social status and economic uncertainties as well as free grazing all combine to encourage farmers to have more animals rather than less.

Due to a very basic or in certain areas non-existing all-weather road system, marketing of agricultural products is very limited. Also rural credit and input supply system are not yet well-established. The credit system offered by governmental institutions needs adjustments as farmers feel that the repayment time period is too short and interest rates are too high.

Food security and coping mechanisms

The farmer's options for dealing with food shortages and with famine are commonly referred to as 'coping mechanisms'. The way farm households cope with food shortages is largely determined by their pre-crisis position and involves a succession of responses to increasingly severe conditions (Webb and Braun, 1994). Activating and using coping mechanisms is a result of '(...) a progressive narrowing of options that leads from broad attempts to minimise risk in the long term through actions designed to limit damage caused by a crisis, to extreme measures aimed at saving individual lives, even at the expense of household dissolution' (Webb and Braun, 1994). These various mechanisms are aimed at risk minimisation, risk absorption and risk-taking.

Farmers have developed a range of coping mechanisms to overcome crop production shortages. But the reader has to keep in mind that not all households within an area are the same. Each household has its own trade-offs between and within various coping options according to its available resource base and where its development stands within the continuum of life, i.e. new, and young versus old households. In the assessed target area the following variety of coping mechanisms are used.

Crop diversification for risk minimisation

Around Ilnat town, in the more fertile highlands, farmers grow up to 15 different crops on their farms adapted to the different soil types and micro climatic conditions. But further towards the lowlands, where soils are less fertile, the choice of viable crops is reduced to a maximum of 7. This means that lowland farmers are left with only half the crop choices and, even more significant, with double the risk. Lowland farmers are also much more vulnerable to erratic climatic conditions and lack of rainfall. Farmers were pushed into these high-risk areas in an effort to escape the ever-growing population and land pressure in the highlands. It seems very likely that households' wealth status is decreasing the further down into the Tekeze River lowlands the proceed with the poorest living in the lowlands, while the wealthiest live in the more fertile areas and less degraded areas of the highlands.

Daily labour

The 'rich' and 'better-off' households, who have large herds of small stock, hire shepherds from 'poorer' households to look after their herds. Usually these shepherds are young boys. An SCF-UK study states that such daily labour may count as much as 20% to 30% of a household of five's calorific intake (SCF-UK, 1998). Limited daily labour opportunities are also available in small trading centres such as Guhala and Arbaya in Belessa wereda, Ilnat and Qualissa in Ilnat wereda, Nefas Mewcha in Lay-Gayint wereda and other centres along the Chinese road. Such daily labour opportunities consist mostly of carrying, loading and unloading goods.

Migratory labour

Many heads of families temporarily migrate to Gonder, Bahir Dar and other urban centres for daily labour opportunities. Some also try to find work further away in the Humera area on commercial cotton farms.

Petty trade

Petty trade as a source of income and a coping mechanism applies to only few people and households in the assessed areas, mostly for people from the 'middle' and 'rich' wealth categories. Poor households neither have the capital to start a small trading business nor the pack animals needed. Most trade is in grain and basic consumables and with pack animals as means of transport.

Spinning, cotton processing and weaving

Spinning, cotton processing and weaving is mostly practised by the Muslim part of the population of Ilnat and Belessa wereda. Men and women are involved and share the work. The raw cotton, either locally produced or imported from Matama, is bought on the market. The raw cotton is directly spun, washed and woven. A blanket (*gab*) sells for 12 Birr on the local market. Nowadays also Christian households are learning the skills to diversify their off-farm activities and to increase their income. However, since less than 3% of the population is of Muslim origin and Christian households are just being introduced to this income generation activity, it cannot be regarded as an important coping mechanism.

Beverage making (Tej, Tella and Araki brewing)

In local centres such as Ilnat, Guhala, Qualissa, Arbaya etc. women brew *Tella* and *Araki*, local alcoholic drinks sold to farmers in local bars. Women can make a profit out of the brewing throughout almost all the year. Furthermore, many farmers own bee hives which produce the required honey for Ethiopia's *Tej*, a honey based alcoholic drink. Honey is harvested once a year and the farmer can earn as much as 40 Birr per hive. In Ilnat and Belessa wereda honey production is limited to the midlands, where there are still enough flowering trees and plants.

Livestock sales

Surplus livestock is sold to buy additional food, which cannot be produced on-farm. Livestock is also kept for social security reasons. If a family member is ill, the selling of an animal may cover the expense for drugs and treatment. Livestock may contribute around 25% of the total annual food needs of the 'rich' and 'middle' categories (SCF/UK, 1998), but is of little importance for the 'poor' and 'very poor' categories with only few or no animals.

Fire wood sales

Only a very limited number of people use firewood cutting as a source of income. It is only practised in the lowland areas. In the *dega* and 'high *dega*' highlands of all the visited areas there are not enough trees left or planted to make it a source of income for farmers.

Selling of straw

The 'very poor' and the 'poor' households do not own significant numbers of livestock and therefore are willing to sell the straw remaining from their crops to farmers who have animals to feed. Especially in the lowlands and even in poor years, straw for fodder can be produced. The SCF-UK study (1998) states for their surveyed wereda that '(...) the sale of straw from their [farmers] fields brings more income than the sale of the 20-40 kg of grain available.' But it is not said whether the selling of straw is an important source of income or not. The mission could not verify this finding but for the 'poor' with some land it contributes to their income.

Prostitution

A study done by ORDA in Ilnat wereda (Mach, 1997) investigating off-farm income opportunities, identified 26 different activities. Interviewed farmers ranked the activities according to their relative importance and prostitution was ranked most important. Unfortunately, the study does not give any explanation and reasons.

Other off-farm income opportunities

A number of other off-farm activities are practised within the assessed areas, but only a minority of people are involved and mainly in urban centres. Furthermore, activities like carpentry, masonry, pottery, tannery and food services are not normally regarded as coping mechanisms.

Underdevelopment and food shortage indicators

The following underdevelopment and food shortage indicators could be identified in the areas visited.

Poor access to potable water

In the Tekeze River lowlands the percentage of rural population having access to safe drinking water, taps or protected wells is likely to be less than 5%³, which means the area is among the poorest concerning access to safe water.

Pasture, livestock and herd size (deterioration of livestock condition)

Generally the livestock population is too high in the area. Consequently, livestock condition is poor and the remaining pasture areas chronically overgrazed. A further deterioration of livestock condition has not been observed in Ibnat and Belessa weredas but in Lay-Gayint the situation seems deteriorated compared to other years. Market prices are still more or less stable in Ibnat and Belessa, but have dramatically decreased in Lay-Gayint (see section on market conditions below).

Nutritional status, decreasing general human health condition

Nutritional surveys are not carried out on a regular basis. GTZ did a nutritional baseline survey for their intervention areas in South Gonder. The survey, done in 1997, shows a satisfactory situation with weight for length above 90⁴. Generally the health situation, which is low in these underdeveloped areas anyway, does not look more alarming than usual with the exception maybe of Lay-Gayint. In Lay-Gayint it has been reported that many people come to Nefas Mewcha for begging because they have no more food in their homes. But nutritional status of the population remains unknown. See also the section on basic health structure and family planning.

Deteriorating terms of trade

Terms of trade in rural areas of Ethiopia are defined by the amount of grain that can be bought by selling livestock. In Ibnat and Belessa weredas common crop and livestock prices remained more or less stable due to last year's good *meher* harvest and the fact that ORDA is supplying enough relief food to the area. Therefore, also livestock prices, even though livestock condition is poor, remained stable. Also, in these areas farmers have not yet had to sell livestock in order to buy food. In Lay-Gayint, however, a slight deterioration of terms of trade can be observed. Livestock prices are lower compared to the same period last year and more people are offering livestock for sale, needing cash to buy food. Grain prices on the other hand increased and are higher. In Table 3 actual market prices in Lay-Gayint for most common crop and livestock are listed and compared with June 1998 prices. The price gap between last year and this year gives indication for food stress in parts of Lay-Gayint wereda.

Table 3: Average market prices in central markets of Lay-Gayint wereda

Traded goods	June 1999 prices	June 1998 prices	Trend
Crops			
Barley	195 Birr/quintal	187 Birr/quintal	↑

³ The statistic made by WFP/VAM unit is made on wereda level whereby generally the better accessible and more developed highlands of the visited weredas have better access to save water sources than the less developed lowlands.

⁴ The mission could not get hold of a copy from GTZ, but the result was stated by the GTZ project coordinator in Debre Tabor.

Wheat	192 Birr/quintal	172 Birr/quintal	↑
Teff	230 Birr/quintal	210 Birr/quintal	↑
Sorghum	170 Birr/quintal	148 Birr/quintal	↑
Maize	150 Birr/quintal	217.5 Birr/quintal	↓
Livestock			
Oxen and cows	250-300 Birr/piece	500-550 Birr/piece	↓
Goat	50 Birr/piece	57 Birr/piece	↓
Sheep	50 Birr/piece	62 Birr/piece	↓

(Source: FHI Nefas Mewcha and Addis Ababa)

Abnormal food stress and changing eating habits

No abnormal food stress has been reported or has been observed in Ilnat and Belessa weredas.

In Lay-Gayint wereda FHI reported people eating wild plants such as *Getin* and *Sama*. *Getin* is a nettle plant and *Sama* has thick drought resistant leaves. Both plants have to be cooked and are consumed as a sort of vegetable. Other wild plants such as *Wushesh*, *Wofe* and *Gilmana* were mentioned. The consumption of wild plants is increasing. Cooking and eating frequencies may change as well. To what extent these habits changed or may change in the coming months could not be evaluated.

Grass pea, also known as 'vetch' and in Amharic as *Guaya*, is cultivated in various places especially in the drier lowlands. In Lay-Gayint FHI promotes grass pea as animal fodder. But people, like in other areas suffering from chronic food shortages, also eat it as survival food, risking lathyrism, a disease causing irreversible crippling effects⁵.

Selling-off permanent household assets

To sell-off permanent household assets to buy food is an act of desperation and is only taken as a last ditch measure. Draft oxen are permanent household assets representing wealth and pride of a family. Unlike in neighbouring North Welo, not many oxen had to be sold. There are signs of unusual selling of shoats in Lay-Gayint, but the situation has not yet deteriorated to the point where households begin to sell-off their oxen. The sell-off of permanent household assets has also not been mentioned as a particular stress factor in either Ilnat, Belessa, or in Lay-Gayint wereda.

Increasing temporary and permanent outmigration

Apart from the normal seasonal migration for daily work to the highlands, into urban centres of North and South Gonder and Gojam and on cotton and sorghum farms in the western part of Gonder and Tigray, no particular stress migration has been reported so far from Ilnat and Belessa weredas. People are getting enough food through the various relief and development activities organised by ORDA.

A slightly different situation has been reported by FHI officials in Nefas Mewcha for Lay-Gayint. Temporary migration has accelerated and the number of people looking for daily labour is unusual for this time of the year. Even in Nefas Mewcha, the wereda capital of Lay-Gayint, an unusual number of people are roaming the streets begging and looking for work.

Increasing number of school drop outs

The mission could not gather any relevant data concerning school drop outs in the areas visited. However, in Ilnat and Belessa the two schools in Hamusit and Qualissa were visited and neither mention an unusual number of school absentees.

⁵ For further reading and details on human lathyrism see the following previous UN-EUE reports: Ahrens, 1997a, 1998; Klingele, 1998; Getahun and Haimanot, 1998; Tekle-Haimanot, 1994

Increased relief food requirements

In Ibnat and Belessa weredas food distribution quantities have constantly risen since the first distributions took place after the end of the war in 1992. Whereas in 1992 a total of 5,000 MT were distributed, the amount reached 20,000 MT in 1997 with the upward trend continuing. But it is worth emphasising that the amount of food distributed in 1992 could by far not meet the population's needs. The amount of food distributed each year could be risen because the availability for food and the distribution means such as all-weather feeder roads and stocking facilities were greatly enhanced and more needy people could be reached. Nowadays Ibnat and Belessa weredas represent two exceptional cases of chronic food shortage weredas where food requirements are actually met and all the beneficiaries get their food rations throughout the required period of time.

For Lay-Gayint and most of the other 47 food insecure weredas of Amhara Region, food deliveries rarely meet normal requirements. When requirements should be increased due to an aggravated food shortage, authorities and international organisations are hardly ever capable of meeting these needs. For more details see also the next section where beneficiaries and food requirements are discussed.

Beneficiaries and food requirements

Most relief food in the weredas and areas visited is needed and distributed in the Tekeze River lowland areas. FHI in Lay-Gayint estimates that 50% of its total 191,000 people are normally in need of additional food for a certain period of time. Estimations for Ibnat and Belessa are similar and over the last few years beneficiary numbers for each wereda were around 80,000 to 100,000, i.e. approximately half of the population. In the weredas in and around the Tekeze River watershed it is no exaggeration to estimate that approximately 50% of the population depend on relief food for approximately 5 months per year, usually between April and September. In Lay-Gayint wereda average food production, for example, covers only 5.6 months of the total annual food requirements. In other weredas the total annual food production is similarly low.

Due to 1998 bumper *meher* harvest expectations at pre-harvest assessment time, only around 10,000 beneficiaries were estimated to have been affected in Ibnat and Belessa weredas. But there are more people in need as beneficiary numbers were underestimated during last year's pre-harvest assessment. Unfortunately, no post-harvest assessment was carried out and it is difficult to know either the effective crop production or the exact number of affected people. Post-harvest assessments are also missing in many areas, paradoxically especially in vulnerable drought affected areas where post-harvest assessments would actually be very helpful in targeting food aid interventions.

North Gonder's Tekeze River lowland weredas such as Beyeda and Jana Mora, situated on the verge of the Simien Mountains, are not accessible by road. Walking from Beyeda wereda to Adi Arkay village on the main road to Tigray Region, takes a farmer approximately three days. For the population of Beyeda wereda, Adi Arkay is the nearest food distribution site. Very few farmers pick up their food and most sell their rations immediately after collection as they would rather have the money that is easily transported back home. A DPPB official in Gonder told the mission that beneficiaries sell their relief food in Adi Arkay at prices even below transport costs. Therefore, it seems legitimate to propose cash payments for beneficiaries in remote drought prone and chronic food shortage areas. Subsidising food beneficiaries with cash instead of food would be much more cost effective and economic. But somehow this proposition of cash subsidy payments for food shortages is not discussed at national and international decision making levels.

In Ibnat and Belessa ORDA is managing a good early warning system. Food is reaching beneficiaries on time and in sufficient amounts. Most of the food is distributed through FFW and EGS. ORDA's FFW and EGS employees can get around 60kg of grain per month. Many FFW road employees we spoke to in Ibnat and Belessa weredas have more than one family member

working periodically in ORDA's FFW and EGS projects. Consequently, each family enrolled for FFW or EGS gets on average more than 60kg of grain per months. Many farmers are able to sell part of their harvest on the market, which is sort of paradox for a chronic food shortage area. Without relief food they would not even be able to meet their basic needs and feed themselves. Hence, with regular and sufficient relief food supplies, farmers are able to sell up to 50% of their harvest to buy basic goods and pay government taxes – and, more importantly, they do not have to sell productive assets to survive.

Conclusions and recommendations

Special governmental attention makes the difference for chronic food shortage areas

The Tekeze River lowlands were neglected for a long time. Having served as a stronghold for the TPLF in their fight with the former socialist government, only very little development assistance was accorded to the area. It was only at the beginning of the 1990s that some efforts were undertaken to address basic development issues. Today the area is still largely underdeveloped and far from being able to cover its basic needs. Basic infrastructure development is under way, but agricultural assistance, for example, is not sufficient and the potential for intensive agricultural is limited due to unfavourable agro-ecological conditions. Recent land distributions did not ease the pressure for land and voluntary migration and resettlement are not really options at this time.

In the two “show cases” of Ibnat and Belessa the government proved its emergency and development capabilities. Both weredas show that with special governmental attention and a certain political will and interest it is possible to provide enough relief food through EGS and FFW to feed the population and contribute to the development of basic infrastructure. But the two cases also show that political willingness is a necessary precondition for effective intervention and efforts undertaken to move towards re-establishing food security in chronic food shortage areas. On the other hand, the government may not have the necessary resources available to duplicate and spread efforts undertaken in Ibnat and Belessa to all the other drought prone and chronic food shortage areas of the country.

Targeting relief and food aid towards the destitute and the poorest causes further erosion of assets within the society

In many food deficit areas of the country food distributions have fallen well below requirements. In some areas where requirements were not met for the last couple of years, people coped at the expense of their productive assets. Further land degradation through deforestation and massive soil erosion has taken place. Many families are using their last reserves. By providing insufficient food to a needy area for some years, say only 60 to 70% of the requirements, the whole population of an area may become destitute. Furthermore, relief and food aid, because of limited supplies, are usually targeting the ‘poorest of the poor’ within an intervention area. The ‘rich’ and ‘middle’ families, which traditionally provide employment opportunities for their poorer neighbours through daily wage labour in the fields, herding opportunities, employment within the household and the rental of pack animals are not included. However, the ‘rich’ and ‘middle’ are crucial for the survival of the ‘poor’. In times of severe stress it is just as important to make provisions for this strata of the population as it is to provide assistance to the poorest segment of the population. If the ‘rich’ and ‘middle’ are impoverished traditional social structures and mutual support systems break down and there are even fewer off-farm opportunities for the poorest segments of the population. Erosion of assets of the ‘rich’ and ‘middle’ makes the struggle for survival even harder and increases dependence on outside aid.

Relative and absolute poverty has to be measured within an area of intervention. It is very likely that even the available resources of the so-called and defined ‘rich’ families of an area may be insufficient for subsistence farming. This has proved to be the case in areas visited in North and South Gonder and also in other chronic food shortage areas visited earlier (see Guinand, 1999b). When looking at the available resources (see section on social strata of the population), the majority of the families are left with a non-subsistent farming system with insufficient off-farm

income opportunities to compensate for the agricultural production gap. Hence, in such areas a larger part of the population has to be supported by outside development efforts to prevent the erosion of assets within the whole population.

Food aid in Ethiopia does not seem to have a clear purpose and objective. Often food aid is only provided to save lives. Less often food aid is designed to protect lives and the productive assets necessary to make a living. Rarely has food aid really contributed to the restoration of assets and resources in famine stricken areas. Hence, long term food commitments for food deficit areas with structural problems are needed. Development incentives created through and with the provision of food under *ad hoc* interventions discourages good planning and creates 'stop and go' interventions which contribute little to the creation of effective food security mechanisms and structures.

Short, mid and long term development incentives⁶

In the short term relief and food aid in form of EGS and FFW for infrastructure development has to be maintained and intensified in some areas such as Lay-Gayint to meet food requirements of the population.

A next step would be to create sustainable self-help structures with outside financial support (from governmental or other sources) for maintaining infrastructures build under these schemes e.g. roads and health centres.

Agricultural and health extension services would have to be substantially enhanced as described in the respective sections of the report. Reforestation and other development programmes for soil conservation have to include economic components and create market opportunities for the products promoted. Trees, for example, should be treated and seen as an essential cash crop for income generation.

In view of the immense development problems Ethiopia is facing, it may be worth investigating if it is worthwhile to concentrate and invest major development resources in extremely vulnerable areas without combining these measures with development programmes in other more progressive and less vulnerable areas of the country. The government decided to choose two of the severely affected weredas during the 1984/85 famine and to develop them as examples for similar, future, interventions in other weredas. By giving special attention to food security stabilisation, more efforts have to be directed towards the development and diversification of off-farm activities. As mentioned in several sections of this report, agricultural intensification is very limited and cannot solve the problem of chronic food shortage in these overpopulated, ecologically labile and fragile environments.

In the areas where basic infrastructure development is under way, off-farm activities may soon be developed and available for some farmers. All-weather roads provide access and represent the basis for trading, construction and other development activities. The collection and selling of 'incense' resin from *Boswellia papyrifera* trees may only be one of the new marketing potentials for the Tekeze River lowland areas. These frankincense trees grow in the dry *kolla* agro-climatic zone in shallow sandy river valleys unsuitable for agriculture. The trees are protected and it is forbidden to cut them. Unfortunately, however, the management for 'incense' collection is sometimes done improperly. Part of the tapped tree die after some years of improper tapping management. Marketing structures are already in place with the Gonder based 'Natural Gum Processing and Marketing Enterprise', a governmental enterprise which collects and exports 'incense'. 'Incense' is exported to Arab and European countries and is used for pharmaceutical purposes and in Ethiopia essentially for traditional ceremonies. Unfortunately, the 'Natural Gum Processing and Marketing Enterprise' in Gonder has no yet shown any interest in working in Belessa or in Ilnat because it is not yet cost effective.

⁶ Please refer to the UNDP-EUE mission report done in March for North Welo (Guinand, 1999b). Therein a number of solutions and options are discussed for chronic food shortage areas.

Once more discussions will have to take place on the issue of migration and resettlement as this is one of the options to restore food security in food shortage areas of Ethiopia. Free, voluntary migration should be encouraged and supported by making alternative settlement areas available to willing migrants.

In general, any development incentive, in whatever sector, that aims to become sustainable, needs to be designed, planned and implemented together with the target population. Direct participation, as already discussed for FFW activities, minimises the risk of starting programmes and projects that do not reflect needs felt by the targeted beneficiaries. Emergency and rehabilitation programmes and projects, especially concerning food aid, are very much concerned with saving lives by moving relief to the affected areas. Decisions are made centrally among the government, donors and relief organisations. The affected population is generally not consulted. But even in emergency and rehabilitation situations it may be crucial to let the affected population participate in the development of the relief activities. Otherwise in the future we will encounter even more of this 'spoiled' farmer attitude, relief dependency and lethargy which abolishes all initiatives for self-reliance and self-help among people living in food shortage areas.

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Webb P and von Braun J (1994) Famine and Food Security in Ethiopia; Lessons for Africa, the International Food Policy Research Institute, Chichester

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NGOs and other organisations operating in South and North Gonder

ACT	Action by Churches Together
ARA	Afar Relief Association
ARRA	Administration for Refugees and Returnees Affairs
DPPB	Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Bureau (mostly at Regional level)
DPPC	Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission (Federal Government level)
DPPD	Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Department (mostly at zonal level)
ECHO	European Community Humanitarian Office
EGS	Employment Generation Schemes
EOC	Ethiopian Orthodox Church
ERCS	Ethiopian Red Cross Society
FHI	Food for the Hungry International
FFW	Food-For-Work
GAA	German Agro Action (Deutsche Welthungerhilfe)
GTZ	Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (German Development Cooperation)
JACH	Jerusalem Association Children's Homes
MoH	Ministry of Health
ORDA	Organisation for Relief and Development in Amhara
RHB	Regional Health Bureau
SCF	Save the Children Fund
UNCDF	United Nations Capital Development Fund (work in North Gonder)
WABE	Ethiopian NGO working with Children in Nefas Mewcha, Tach Gayint wereda
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organisation

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SOURCES:

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Itinerary

Addis Ababa – Bahir Dar (26.5.99), Bahir Dar (27.5.99), Bahir Dar – Debre Tabor (28.5.99), Debre Tabor – Gasay - Mekane Eyesus - Arb Gebeya - Bahir Dar (29.5.99), Bahir Dar (30.5.99), Bahir Dar – Ibnat (31.5.99), Ibnat – Qualissa - Ibnat (1.6.99), Ibnat - Guhala – Hamusit - Guhala (2.6.99), Arbaya – Meksenyit - Gonder (3.6.99), Gonder (4.6.99), Gonder - Nefas Mewcha – Woldyia (5.6.99), Woldyia - Dessie - Addis Ababa (6.6.99)

Distances and time table