

“Belg labour dependency” contributes to food shortage in Wag Hamra

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Introduction

Although the 1998 *meher* harvest was generally considered to have been very good in many areas of Ethiopia, localized crop failure due to erratic or excessive rains, hailstorms, weeds, pests, and environmental degradation have created conditions of severe food insecurity in localized areas of the country. In places where the 1998 *meher* harvest was good, farmers were able to put a stop to, but not to reverse, the previous two years of economic decline. Where the harvest failed, however, the decline was accelerated and many of the poorest have now reached the limits of their coping strategies. The failure of the 1999 *belg* rains has placed many people in an even more insecure position, both those who depend on the harvest for their food supplies and those who rely on daily wages from working in *belg* producing areas.

Chronically food insecure, Wag Hamra Zone is solely dependent upon the *meher* harvest to meet its food production needs. Rainfall is usually erratic, and drought is frequent. In order to offset the effects of regular food shortage, people in Wag Hamra's three woredas rely on a combination of waged labour, trade, and food aid to make up their household food basket deficit. *Belg* dependent areas that surround Wag Hamra (North Wollo, South Tigray) provide an important source of employment during the months of most significant food shortage. This year, the failure of the *belg* season has resulted in a collapse in the *belg* season labour market for households in Wag Hamra whose 1998 *meher* harvest was inadequate. For the residents of Dehana woreda, this was a particularly serious blow, as they have experienced at least three years of poor *meher* harvests. Farmers' coping strategies have been stretched to the limit by the need to meet household food and nonfood requirements. The current situation is a classic example of “Belg Labour Dependency” and of the implications of the crop failure for those who depend on it for cash.

The present mission was undertaken by UNDP-EUE, with logistical support from MSF-Switzerland, to assess the current conditions resulting from the failure of the 1998 *meher* harvest in the zone, and to investigate the impact of the failed *belg* harvest in surrounding zones on Wag Hamra's local economy. Household economic conditions were found to be severely deteriorated in Dehana woreda, with labour and stress migration occurring both within the zone and from the affected woreda to surrounding zones (North Wollo, North Gonder, South Tigray). Livestock prices for cattle have drastically fallen, and cereal prices in many areas are unusually high. These trends have been ongoing for at least the past three years. Households were found to be disposing of their assets, in particular livestock assets. Labour opportunities are limited by the *belg* failure and are expected to be further reduced by the suspension of some development projects during the rainy season.

While relief food is being delivered to the zone, and food is being distributed on a food for work/EGS basis, the quota is generally insufficient and targeting is limited. Selection criteria encourage erosion of assets and general economic decline. This in turn places strain on the social fabric of the communities; the poor, who normally rely on their richer relatives and neighbours to provide seeds and oxen for ploughing, are finding it increasingly difficult to find these resources, as people are disposing of their assets. Differences between socioeconomic strata appear to be diminishing, leading to a general decline in communities' abilities to meet their food requirements.

Methodology and Itinerary

The mission was undertaken as a collaborative effort between UNDP-EUE and MSF-Switzerland (MSF-CH). Since 1996, MSF-CH has been working in all woredas of Wag Hamra in water resource development and an integrated sanitation programme. Many of the project sites are in kebelles that are situated away from roads of any type and are only accessible on foot. MSF-CH staff facilitated meetings with government officials, community leaders, and farmers in the areas in which they work.

The mission visited each of the woreda capitals. Officials in Sekota from the Zonal Administration, Departments of Agriculture and Health, and Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Department were consulted. In addition, a three-day trip by foot and mule was made through the highlands of Sekota woreda, stopping at the villages of Kativ and Tsata. In view of the reports of serious food shortages in Dehana woreda, four villages in the woreda were visited: Amdewerk (woreda capital), Chila Meda, Kewzba, and Asketema. Markets in Sekota, Amdewerk, Kewzba and Chila Meda were visited.

The mission interviewed government officials, traders, and farmers. Extensive crop production and market price information was obtained from the respective agricultural extension workers.

General Information on Wag Hamra Zone

Wag Hamra Zone, in the Amhara People's National Regional State, is bordered to the north and east by Tigray region, to the south by North Wollo zone, and to the west by North Gonder zone. Wag Hamra is constituted by three woredas: Sekota, Dehana and Ziquala and has a total of 30 kebeles. Geographically, the zone comprises highlands (*dega*), midlands (*weina dega*) and lowlands (*kolla*). The terrain is rugged and characterised by scarps and deeply incised valleys. A significant proportion of the area is severely eroded with numerous basalt stone outcrops, and the organic soil layer in arable areas is often less than 15 cm deep. Steep slopes and the bare plains with little foliage cover, coupled with erratic seasonal rainfall (generally decreasing from south to north) are major causes of decreased retention of ground water and high run-off, which in turn results in extensive soil erosion.

The estimated population of the zone in 1999 is 313,195.¹ The capital of Wag Hamra Zone, Sekota, is located 100 km west of the main Addis Ababa-Mekele road (at Korem) and 130 north of Lalibela. Accessibility is one of the principle constraints not only to provision of relief but to longer term development of the zone. In recent years, several roads projects in the zone have helped to open up the area (new roads from Sekota to Tsiska, and Sekota to Amdewerk are under construction, and construction of the Korem – Sekota and Lalibela –

¹ WFP Site Visit Report, April 1999, projected from 1994 Census Figures.

Sekota roads have recently been completed).² During the rainy season this year, it is expected that Tsiska and Amdewerk will be inaccessible to trucks and other heavy vehicles. The most reliable (and often the only) way to travel throughout much of the zone remains foot and mule.

Due to this inaccessibility, essential social services such as health care, education, and access to clean water are largely unavailable to most residents of Wag Hamra. Rates of access to health care are estimated at 27% - 45% per woreda, and access to education 18-29%. It is estimated that access to potable drinking water ranges from 1.5% to 10% per woreda.³ Poor accessibility also hampers the government and international community's efforts to provide food aid and other relief and development inputs to the affected areas, and may minimize the effectiveness of food aid since many recipients sell all or part of their rations in the distribution areas as they are unable to carry the full amount to their homes.

1998 Meher Crop Results: Failure in Dehana Woreda with Generally Good Harvest Elsewhere

1998 *meher* crop failures in Wag Hamra, particularly in Dehana woreda but also in a few kebelles in Sekota woreda, are attributed by government officials and farmers to excessive rain, hail, weeds and pests. The following chart shows the relative impact of various crop hazards in Dehana woreda:

Cause	Quintals	%*
Excess rain	26,371.7	31
Weeds	30,643	36.1
Flood	1519.43	1.8
Hail	11,844	13.9
Disease	11,323.1	13.3
Pests	2173	2.6
Rain shortage	1123.023	1.3
Total	84,997.253	100

Source: Dehana Woreda Agriculture Office

Dehana woreda agriculture office staff report that prior to the excessive rain and hail in October, it was expected that 210,529 Q would be harvested in the woreda. Instead, the yield was only approximately 125,000 Q. The failure of the Dehana *meher* harvest signifies the fourth poor growing season in a row.

Although there was a general improvement in crop production over the last four years in the zone, on a woreda by woreda basis, it is clear that such generalization masks the problem of increasing food shortage in Dehana. 1998 production figures dramatically improved in Ziquala and Sekota weredas but Dehana showed only a slight change from the previous year. Dehana is by far more heavily populated than Ziquala, and if one were to factor out the urban population of Sekota, more than Sekota woreda as well.

² On the Korem – Sekota road, work has yet to be completed on a bridge across the Terrare River. Depending on the extent of the rains this year, this could make travel to Sekota on this road difficult. The Lalibela – Sekota road, however, should be passable all year.

³ Food Security Advisor, Wag Hamra Zone.

In a “normal” year, estimated average crop yields for the zone are:

Type of Crop	Productivity/hectare in 1997
Sorghum	8 quintals
Teff	5
Wheat	6
Barley	7
Pulses	5

Source: Zonal Food Security Advisor, Wag Hamra

Wag Hamra’s topography, with steep slopes and highly eroded topsoil, as well as the small size of individual landholdings, prevent its residents from achieving food self-sufficiency from the *meher* harvest even in a good year. In one sub-district (made up of seven kebelles) of Sekota wereda, for instance the production in 1998 amounted to only 1.011 quintals per person.

Limited Size of Landholdings

Average size of landholdings varies from .75 ha/household in Sekota wereda to 1.63 ha/household in Dehana wereda, according to local Department of Agriculture statistics. In Sekota wereda, farmers reported that the last land distribution by the TPLF/EPDM was made in 1989 (G.C.)⁴ and that many people were away at that time (either in resettlement areas, displaced by the civil war that was then going on, or engaged in waged labour). Others were physically present in the communities when land was allocated, but were too young to receive a plot. Ten years later, they are among the most physically able to carry out farm work, but are idle if they lack access to land. Similar complaints by those who did not have access to farmland were heard in Dehana.

Local officials say that the policy of the government is to promote agro-industry and other forms of employment rather than to redistribute land. Further redistribution of land would, it is feared, further reduce the size of holdings to the point where household food insecurity would be increased rather than decreased, and land productivity would be further degraded.

The Role of *Belg*-Labour in the Wag Hamra Local Food Economy

Wag Hamra is not, in itself, a *belg* producing area. While *belg* rains normally fall to the north, east, and south of the zone, Wag Hamra is shielded from the rains by the Simien mountain range, which causes the wind and rain pattern to “skip over” the area. Still, it is correct to consider Wag Hamra as an area affected by the failure of the *belg* harvest, since the zone is dependent upon waged labour opportunities in *belg* producing areas to make up its cash needs during the leanest time of the year.

Normally, farmers’ response to a crop failure that is basically limited to one wereda or to more widespread but “normal” (i.e. non-severe) food deficits, would be for one or more family members (usually young men) to migrate to the surrounding *belg* producing areas to

⁴ The area was under joint TPLF/EPDM administration for many years prior to the takeover of central government by the EPRDF in 1991. At that time, men 22 years of age or older, and women 15 yrs. or older, were allocated 0.5 hectare. Children older than 1 yr. and younger than these ages received “1/3 of 0.5 ha.”

work in the fields in exchange for two meals a day and a small daily wage. While they may or may not bring food or cash back to the household when they have finished their work in the fields, their very absence from their household during what would otherwise be nonproductive times eases the strain on the remaining family members. The absence of such work opportunities in 1999 has compelled people to intensify their use of other coping strategies: disposal of assets (particularly livestock), reduction of food intake, consumption of “famine foods”, and migration of entire families to urban areas in search of relief food and marginal employment (See section on “Labour and Stress Migration” below).

Asset erosion and increasing imbalance in terms of trade

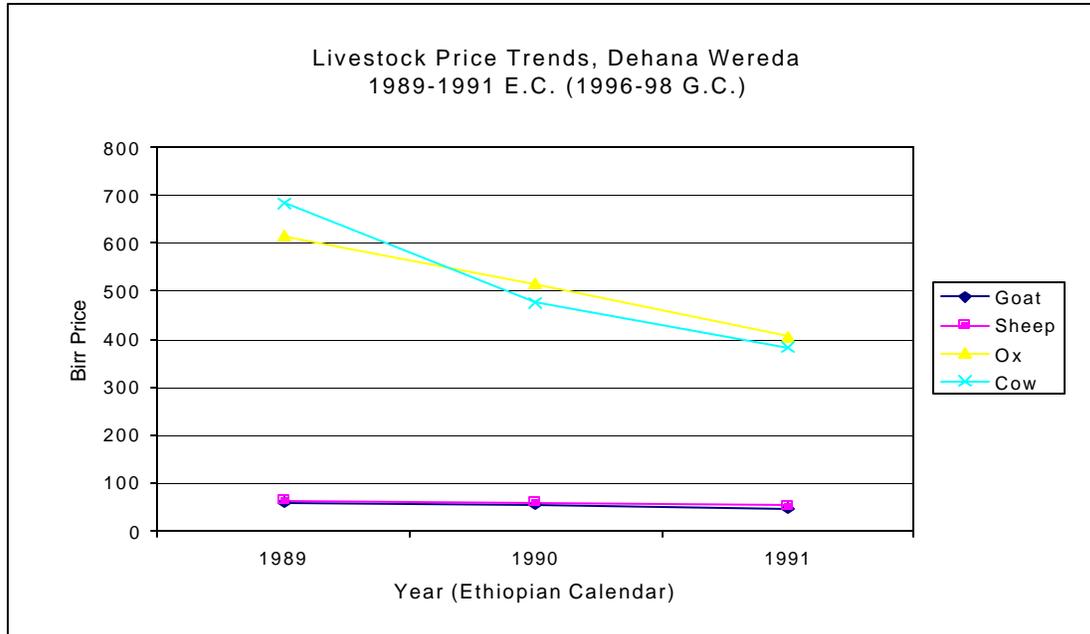
Both personal testimonies of farmers and review of relevant indicators (market prices, crop yield statistics, etc.) indicate that by the time the 1998 *meher* crop failed, many households had already lost most of their assets.

In all markets visited (Amdewerk, Kewzba, Chila Meda and Sekota) and in all statistics obtained from the zonal Agriculture Department (monthly crop and livestock price and availability records for the past two years), it is apparent that there is a worsening imbalance in the cereal-livestock terms of trade. Increasing numbers of people are selling their animals, particularly their oxen. Most of those interviewed who were selling oxen confirmed that they were selling either their only ox or a member of their only pair of oxen. They cited shortage of seeds, indebtedness to creditors, and lack of food reserves for the family as the principle reasons for selling their animals. In all markets in all woredas, oxen were selling for 200-400 birr each.

Overall, the health of the oxen offered at the market appeared quite good. Even those farmers who lost a significant percentage of their *meher* crop were able to salvage the stalks of the grain for use as fodder, and most have ample supplies of fodder to get them through to the next harvest. The depression of prices, however, is attributed to the lack of demand for livestock. In one kebele, farmers said that for them, there was no difference between this year and other drought years in which they have been forced to sell weak livestock for low prices.

In many PAs visited, people reported that they were selling their last ox in order to qualify for food aid. It is clear that in this climate of severe food shortage, food aid is considered to be a more reliable source of food than the harvest from one’s field. In addition, farmers are not able to preserve their assets for the medium and long term; immediate food needs demand that farmers forsake their prospects for the longer term. Most people are still able, at this point, to borrow or rent plough animals (usually in exchange for work or a percentage of the harvest) to plant their fields. Should they be unable to purchase draught animals for next year, and if the trend of livestock disposal continues, this practice might not be feasible next year.

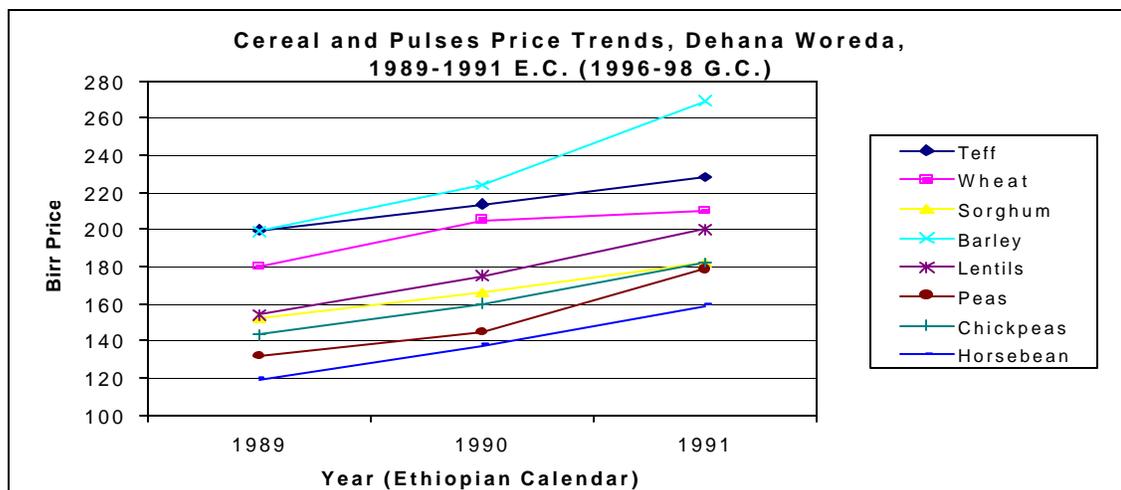
The following chart shows the dramatic drop in livestock prices over the past three years:



Source: Dehana Agriculture Office

An interesting counterpoint to the dramatic drop in cattle prices is the relative stability of shoat prices. This is attributed to the fact that livestock traders from Tigray have been buying shoats in large numbers for sale in Mekele. According to local sellers, this is the first year that shoat sales to Tigray have been so high, although in past years cross-regional trade has been somewhat common.

Cereal prices have undergone a corresponding increase in all woredas. The chart below shows the increases over the past three years of cereal prices in Dehana woreda:



According to the SCF-UK/NSP, mean cereal prices have recently risen from 135 birr/quintal to 142 birr/quintal (May 1999). In Sekota and Ziquala woredas, however, the average cereal price for the months September to April in 1997-98 and 1998-99 are nearly the same, reflecting the fact that although the *meher* crop was far better in these woredas, the general

level of food availability in the markets is the same as in 1997-98, following a particularly poor harvest.

The markets of Sekota and Amdewerk are typically larger markets, serving as entry points for traders coming from North Wollo and South Tigray (Sekota market) and North Gonder (Amdewerk market). People buy from these markets at lower prices and then transport cereals to the smaller markets where they are able to sell for higher prices. These traders reported that in previous years, cereals grown in Dehana woreda were sold in the other woredas of Wag Hamra. In fact, Dehana's name is derived from a call to "the poor (to) come here," a reflection of the relative productivity of the land in years gone by. For the past few years, due to shortage of grain in that woreda, cereals and pulses have been brought in from North Gonder, driving the prices higher. The SCF-UK/NSP May report observes, "At present a household must trade a minimum of 3 shoats to obtain 50 kgs of grain. This is alarming when we consider the asset depletion that has taken place in response to recent harvest failures and the fact that no harvest is expected until October/November."

In the smaller markets, the smaller grain traders are mostly people who wish to sell small amounts of grain in order to obtain sufficient cash to buy other food items (such as berbere or oil) or nonfood items (clothing, soap, etc.). Many traders also said that they were selling grain in order to obtain money for seeds or to pay their farmers' association tax. Without exception, all of those selling wheat were selling all or part of their food aid allocation. Other grains were being sold from meager household grain reserves in the house, or from food left behind by relatives who had migrated in search of employment.

It should be noted that the level of activity observed at the markets in Wag Hamra during this mission was probably higher than in previous weeks, as many people were buying seeds for this year's *meher* crop.

Labour and Stress Migration

The food shortage in Dehana began to result in stress migration as early as January 1999. According to SCF-UK/NSP, "Compared to last year, the number of villages that have reported absent heads of households due to migration has increased in Wag Hamra...Likewise, while it is normal for the able bodied members of households to migrate in search of daily or seasonal labour opportunities, currently entire households including women, children and the elderly are migrating." Several migrants interviewed in Tsiska town (Ziquala woreda) said that they had left their homes during that month, when it became clear to them that they would not have enough harvest to bring them to the next agricultural season. They were supporting themselves by hauling fuelwood and water for the Tsiska residents. The Ziquala woreda administration reported that it had given emergency food rations on a one-time basis to approximately 100 destitute individuals who had come from Dehana.

Most of the waged labour opportunities in Ziquala woreda were being reserved for that woreda's residents. One feeder road construction project funded in 1998 by UNDP and implemented by ORDA was reported to have employed 600 people. Employment generation (cash for work rather than food for work) should be seriously considered as a means of assisting people and as an alternative to relief food/EGS schemes.

While it is not known exactly how many people have migrated in the past several months, the DPPC office in Sekota reported that 325 households from Dehana woreda had appealed for

assistance in Sekota. Their names were recorded and forwarded to the Dehana woreda administration, and they were instructed to return to their homes.⁵ Dehana woreda officials say that these were the only figures they received from areas receiving migrants, so they have no idea how many in total left the area. According to information obtained by WFP, however, 3640 people are said to have migrated out of the woreda. Many of those who migrated this year reported that the last time they left their homes was during 1984-85.

The increase in numbers of people searching for employment has led to a decline in wage rates. SCF-UK/NSP reports a drop in the average daily rate to 3.8 birr from 5.5 birr at the same time last year. In addition, the shortage of employment opportunities on farms or local development projects has meant that more people are engaging in such activities as fuelwood, dung and water sales. Zonal officials expressed concern that Sekota woreda residents have begun to sell dung (collecting it from the already marginally productive fields), a practice that they say has not been common in that area previously.

Impact on School Attendance

The woreda educational office also reported that 1900 students had stopped attending school in Dehana. (WFP's April Site Report cited a figure of 600 dropouts in the woreda). This is a significant decrease in attendance. Usual numbers of drop-outs are estimated to be 200-300 in an average year. While some of these drop-outs are expected to be due to migration of entire households out of the affected area, another cause is reported to be the fact that children do not have an adequate diet and so are unable to concentrate in school.

Nutritional Status

According to SCF-UK's Nutritional Surveillance Programme (NSP)'s May 1999 report, the nutritional status of children under five throughout Wag Hamra has dropped in recent months: "Although an improvement in wfl [weight for length] was witnessed in Wag Hamra following the *meher* harvest, the mean wfl has declined significantly since the post harvest survey and is currently reported at 89.2, which is below the DPPC cut off point for intervention." Local officials at health facilities throughout Dehana woreda also reported increases in malnutrition and associated diseases (malaria, tuberculosis, and diarrhoeal disease), although exact figures to support their claim were not available.

Health facility staff report that they are unable to cope with the problem of malnutrition since they do not have any supplementary food. Generally, parents bringing malnourished children to health care centres are only given advice for improved feeding practices and treated for secondary complications resulting from the malnutrition.

Food Aid Requirement and Problems with Targeting

In the DPPC's most recent revision of Emergency Relief Needs in Ethiopia in 1999, the number of people estimated to be in need of assistance in Wag Hamra was increased from 66,980⁶ to 93,360.⁷ This figure is only slightly different from that given by the zone, at

⁵ An additional 125 households reportedly came to Sekota from Bugna woreda in North Wollo zone seeking assistance; they too were told that food could only be distributed to them within their home woreda.

⁶ DPPC: "Assistance Requirements for 1999," Dec. 10, 1998

⁷ DPPC: "Emergency Relief Needs in Ethiopia in 1999," 27 May 1999

92,664 (see below). This increase was attributed to “additional *meher* crop damages after the (post harvest crop) assessment.” This situation has been exacerbated by the “total failure” of the 1999 *belg* harvest in areas surrounding Wag Hamra.

Woreda	Population in 1999	People in need of food assistance – 1998	People in need of food assistance – 1999
Sekota	148,783	115,000	24,504
Ziquala	55,465	47,820	18,160
Dehana	109,666	38,376	50,000
Total	313,195	201,196	92,664

Source: Zonal DPPC

Based on a ration of 12.5 kg/person for nine months, food requirements for the zone are estimated to be 10,560 MT. In addition to this amount, the Food Security Advisor to the Zone reported that he obtained an extra 1085 MT of cereals from the regional food security reserve for distribution, which has already been distributed. So far, two distributions (for April and May) have been completed, and food deliveries continue (in most cases going directly to woreda distribution centres). The first distributions were diverted by the zone from Sekota and Ziquala to Dehana in light of the urgent needs in that woreda. Woreda and zonal officials, as well as farmers, say that the quotas for those in need reflect more accurately the amount of food that will be made available than the actual number of people in need. The needs are expected to be much higher than this.

Due to the low food aid quota for the zone and impossibility of selecting the most vulnerable people in each kebele and woreda, officials in every kebele visited reported that they had had to split rations, often by as much as one half, in order to meet the needs of everyone. Most kebele leaders said that they had resorted to this tactic even after having disqualified anyone who owned one ox, cow or donkey, or five sheep or goats, from receiving aid. In only one kebele visited, leaders reported that they were distributing assistance to those who had one or two oxen as well, since these people had “nothing in their houses to eat”. The practice of cutting rations is referred to by Sharp as the “thin blanket syndrome.”⁸

The effect of splitting rations and denying assistance to those with livestock has had two major impacts:

1. the most vulnerable who have nothing at all in their homes are not receiving adequate food relief, and their nutritional and economic vulnerability is not sufficiently relieved.
2. those who have few assets, and upon whom the poorest normally rely for provision of plough animals, credit, and seed, are forced to dispose of their assets, thereby rendering the entire community more vulnerable and weakening the social fabric.

The remedy for this problem rests in a two-pronged approach: increasing the food aid quota for those woredas and/or kebeles that show signs of severe stress due to food shortages, and increase in cash-for-work and other employment mechanisms to improve people’s access to the local market economy.

The World Food Programme has included Wag Hamra in its emergency operation (EMOP) for drought affected areas. The EMOP is for 103,253 MT (93,600 MT Cereals, 6033 MT of

⁸ Kay Sharp, “Targeting Food Aid in Ethiopia: Summary Report”, July 1997.

blended foods, and 3620 MT of pulses) at a total cost of \$40,500,794. Also to be included in the EMOP are funds for additional food storage and intra-wereda transport costs, so that food can be brought closer to the beneficiaries, and areas inaccessible during the rainy season can preposition food. This will be especially important in Ziquala woreda, where three kebeles are cut off by the Tekezze River during the rainy season and people are unable to travel to Tsiska, the wereda capital, to obtain their rations. An additional Rubb Hall storage tent would facilitate prepositioning of food for the next six months. There is also a need for an additional storage space at Asketema, in Dehana woreda (on the main road from Sekota to Lalibela).

Good news

Since the beginning of relief food distributions, people have begun to return to their homes. They are not only collecting rations, but also preparing their land for the coming *meher* season. Some migrants interviewed in Tsiska reported that they would only return to Dehana to prepare and plant the land, and then would return to Ziquala woreda to work until harvest time. Others said that they would try to borrow from neighbors and relatives in order to stay on their farms. In all cases, migrants said that they would have to borrow or rent plough animals from others in order to prepare their land.

The fact that people are still able to prepare their land, that there are still enough plough animals in the communities that people can have access to them, and that it is still possible for very poor farmers to obtain seeds from more wealthy farmers indicates that the social fabric of the communities has not yet been strained to the breaking point. However, current targeting practices for EGS and other FFW projects seems to be eroding this social insurance system. The differences between poor, middle, and wealthier households are becoming less and less.

Current conditions and predictions for *meher* season

Although national forecasts for the kiremt rainy season (which feeds the *meher* crops) are encouraging, the onset of the rains has not yet begun in Wag Hamra. This is a worrying sign for farmers, who had expected to have been able to plant by now. Some are planting without rain, hoping that the rain will come in time for germination. Additionally, there have been reports of armyworm in the zone, and the problem threatens to become a serious threat to the crops if the rains do not come in sufficient quantities. If the rains are very delayed, farmers may resort to planting short season crops that have a lower yield.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The current situation in Wag Hamra provides an important insight into the role of regional labour markets to areas that are chronically food insecure. A complete picture of the food economy of the area must take into consideration the role of labour migration as a coping mechanism and a strategy for maintaining one's farm.

In addition, this case shows the difficulties that are arising with targeting practices and the problems associated with distribution of rations that are substandard in quantity. It is clear that local officials have little option but to reduce ration sizes given the inadequacy of their current kebele allocations; yet this practice also undermines traditional methods of mutual assistance and rental arrangements that have enabled land-poor or livestock-poor households to obtain access to these resources.

In the long term, alternatives will have to be found to agriculture in Wag Hamra. It is clear that the area cannot sustain a population that is solely agriculture-based. Labour intensive infrastructural development can provide important opportunities for obtaining access to cash, and can open up heretofore inaccessible areas for trade, marketing, and small-scale industry.

ACRONYMS/Abbreviations

EC	Ethiopian Calendar
EGS	Employment Generation Scheme
EPDM	Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement
GC	Gregorian Calendar
ha	hectares
MSF-CH	Medecins Sans Frontieres-Switzerland
MT	metric tons
Q	quintals
SCF-UK/NSP	Save the Children Fund – UK / Nutritional Surveillance Program
TPLF	Tigrayan People's Liberation Front
UNDP-EUE	United Nations Development Programme-Emergencies Unit for Ethiopia
wfl	weight for length
WFP	World Food Programme

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