

Field Trip Report: Welayita Area - North Omo (19-23 January 1998)

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Review of the 1997 agricultural seasons

The excessive 1996 rains resulted in unsatisfactory harvests and low household food stocks at the beginning of 1997. A widespread attack of sweet potato butterfly and an extended dry season seriously affected and partially destroyed the sweet potato crop, the main staple food during the normal stress period starting towards the end of the first quarter of the year and lasting until the harvest of green maize, normally June.

Two months delay of the 1997 *belg* season, bad distribution of rains in the highlands and prolonged dry spells in the lowlands had a negative effect on the development of the *belg* crops, whereas the erratic nature of the 1997 *kremt* rains, interrupted by intermittent dry spells, was not promising. Finally, unseasonable heavy rainfalls in October/November damaged the *meher* crops.

All in all, the 1997 agricultural seasons were characterised by serious problems, leading to anticipate increased food shortage starting as early as the end of the year.

Current situation

Despite these facts, conditions in Welayita are far better than initially expected. The anticipated food shortage toward the end of 1997 did not materialise as expected and the majority of people are still left with some food stocks. This positive development has been possible due to the following factors:

- The 1997 relief assistance was adequate in timing and amount; thus not only preventing an imminent disaster, but also enabling the more vulnerable households to harvest mature crops, initially maize.
- The unseasonable rains, despite their damaging effect on standing and harvested/stacked crops (mainly teff and pulses, but to some extent also harvested/stacked maize, as farmers did not expect additional rainfall), had a generally positive impact on root crops like sweet potatoes, taro, yam and cassava and led to improved livestock conditions with exceptional pasture for this time of the year.

Discussions held with farmers revealed that better-off households (households, which were not entitled to receive relief food during last year) expect their maize stocks to last until end of February, while the most vulnerable households will enter the stress period by the end of January.

As an example can be mentioned the case of a woman met in Bolosso Sore. Head of household, she has around 0.3 hectare of land, including some immature *ensete* (false banana) plants and several coffee trees. As a mother of seven children, she is dependant on other people to cultivate her land on a crop sharing base, where each side gets half of the harvest. After the 1997 *meher* harvest, the man who usually cultivated her land did not show up, leaving her land bare of any root crops. She mentioned that the man might have found better opportunities elsewhere, as she is not able to regularly provide him with food whenever he is working on her plot. Dependent on the goodwill of neighbours and relatives for the family's daily meals, she is hoping to receive relief supplies as soon as possible in order to support her children. Living from half of her land's product, petty trade on a credit basis and income from coffee, this household is clearly dependent on regular assistance for survival.

According to preliminary reports of Save the Children Fund UK, the nutritional status of children under five years of age is satisfactory to good and has been stable since the end of the *meher* season for the lowlands of Welayita. Similar results are expected from their ongoing survey in the highland areas.

Despite the lack of planting material (sweet potato cuttings) following the extended dry season, coupled with heavy pest infestation on sweet potato, the actual coverage is satisfactory, even if the development is partially delayed due to late planting because of the unseasonable rains. This quick recovery of the sweet potato crop has been made possible thanks to a nearly one million birr contribution from the regional authorities to the zonal department of agriculture for the purchase, transport and distribution of sweet potato cuttings to the most needy farmers in 17 weredas of North Omo. This timely intervention by the authorities will have an important impact over the next few months as vulnerable households, after several successive bad years, have already depleted their *ensefe* plantations and now depend almost entirely on sweet potatoes for their daily diet during the stress period.

Taking into account the importance of the sweet potato crop for food security and considering the repeated damage and subsequent yield reduction due to regular infestation of sweet potato butterfly, this pest should be considered a major problem and the zonal department of agriculture should be provided with the necessary means to undertake adequate measures to combat the pest efficiently. Currently, farmers have to pay to have their fields sprayed and the MoA can only intervene on their behalf once a major outbreak has been declared. Unfortunately, on the one hand individual spraying of fields does not usually contain the pest while on the other hand the time-lag between a pest outbreak and the declaration of an epidemic is too long with the result that there is irreparable damage to the crop by the time effective control measures are undertaken.

With the early rains beginning January, land preparation is ongoing and a few farmers in the highlands have already planted maize and haricot beans. However, farmers in Welayita did not take advantage of the unseasonable rains in October/November to plant crops except for the usually planted sweet potatoes and, eventually, some other root crops. Welayita therefore shows its usual pattern for this time of the year with more than half of the arable land still bare waiting for the coming *belg* planting.

When asked why they did not take advantage of the unseasonable rains, farmers replied that they had followed their normal agricultural calendar, being afraid of losing precious seeds (after having re-seeded already once or twice for the *meher* crops), as they were doubtful about the continuation of the rains. Lack of seeds, shortage of land coupled with the fear of having the land "occupied" during *belg* planting time were other reasons mentioned by different interlocutors for not planting during the unseasonable rains.

Future prospects

The prevailing satisfactory conditions will gradually deteriorate with the beginning of the stress period. Relief assistance will be needed as of March 1998 until the harvesting of green maize and should continue for the more vulnerable households for another two months after that, thus continuing the strategy which has already shown such positive results in 1997.

After a normal agricultural year relief assistance has to cover the structural food deficits of an estimated 300,000 people in North Omo (out of an estimated 1998 population of almost 3 million) for three to five months. After an unsatisfactory agricultural year such as 1997 where, according to the zonal department of agriculture, there were 40-50 per cent harvest losses in the lowlands and an average loss of 22 per cent for the whole zone, additional people may be in need of relief food and beneficiary numbers could increase accordingly.

The situation in Welayita highlights both the difficulty of determining relief needs as well as the ongoing debate about whether the purpose of relief is only to save lives or includes the broader

concept of saving lives and productive assets. The DPPC appeal of November 1997 lists 53,000 beneficiaries requiring 4,770 tons of food assistance for 6 months while the FAO/WFP Food and Crop Assessment report of December 1997 lists 306,500 beneficiaries for North Omo and 10,800 tons of food but only for a period of 2 months. These different views on both duration of assistance and beneficiary numbers may be reconciled by the post-harvest assessment undertaken by the zonal early warning committee as well as the central DPPC's post-harvest assessment mission scheduled for late February.

Mid-term prospects

With no comprehensive development approach in view and all major projects likely to generate employment being implemented on the basis of a purely capital intensive approach (e.g. road construction), vulnerability will gradually increase, making relief assistance an unavoidable and permanent partner for survival.

While the above mentioned problems still await innovative solutions, there are measures that could be taken in the field of relief and rehabilitation to improve food security in the mid-term. Unfortunately, many of the poorer or most vulnerable households in Wolayita have depleted their *ensete* plantations in response to repeated food shortages, resulting in the increasing consumption of immature plants. As *ensete* plants need seven to nine years to reach maturity, there is now a vicious circle of chronic food stress, consumption of immature and much less productive *ensete* plants and less and less time allowed for the *ensete* to reach maturity.

A joint commitment between the DPPC, donors and relevant agencies that would guarantee timely and adequate relief assistance over a five year period would enable the farmers to rehabilitate their *ensete* plantations in such a way as to restore its important role as a household level food security reserve system. As these very vulnerable households will require relief assistance on an *ad hoc* basis anyway, such a mid-term strategy would not require additional relief resources while at the same time providing farmers with assurance that their food needs would be met so that they could concentrate their efforts on the restoration of their plantations. The other advantage of this strategy of guaranteed food assistance would be that multi-year Employment Generation Schemes could be planned and initiated. If such a long-term food assistance programme could not be undertaken through the relief food mechanism then another alternative would be a targeted development intervention – i.e. a Food for Work Programme.

Complemented by an adequate cash component, such a joint effort could equally favour the development of basic rural infrastructure, with works to be carried out through Employment Generation Schemes, preceded by a one-year identification and planning phase.

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