

After the failed *belg*, how do people cope? Observations from South Welo

Field Report 18 - 23 August 1997

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Introduction

The failure of this year's *belg* short season - which accounts for 5 to 10 per cent of Ethiopia's annual agricultural production - has been officially acknowledged. The Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission (DPPC) as well as a number of independent agencies, have produced several documents over the last months reflecting the current situation. Most recent DPPC publications include the July Early Warning System Report on "*The 1997 Belg Production and Food Prospect of the Belg Growing Areas of Ethiopia*" (released on 1 August 1997) and the "*Assistance Requirement to address Emergency Food Needs in the Belg Producing Areas of the Country*" (21 August 1997).

Rather than seek to quantify possible relief needs arising from the poor *belg* (detailed figures are provided in the documents mentioned above), the objective of this mission was to visit one of the areas severely affected by the *belg* failure and to see at first-hand how serious the current food shortages are and what strategies people are pursuing in order to cope with the situation.

The eastern parts of Amhara Region (North and South Welo, North Shewa and Oromyia Zone) are among the country's more significant *belg* producing areas. While overall the *belg* output in these areas contributes up to 20 to 25 per cent of the total annual production, the importance of the *belg* season is even more significant in certain weredas. In Legambo (South Welo) for instance it makes up 90 per cent of annual production. Therefore the mission tried to include particularly that wereda in its field trip, focusing generally on the weredas west of Dessie, South Welo's zonal capital. While time constraints and difficult road conditions prevented a visit to the western-most weredas (Mekdela, Sayint, Debresina), the mission was able to cover Desezurya, Kutaber, Tenta and Legambo. Before returning to Addis Ababa, the important livestock market of Bati was also visited.

Without having the time or manpower to choose a scientific-statistical approach, the mission conducted random semi-structured interviews at farmer and household levels in the field, comparing the observations made with the views of the respective wereda administrations and some health workers. At zonal level consultations were held with the Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Bureau (DPPB) and SCF/UK in Dessie.

It was clear from the visit that South Welo has been badly hit by the poor *belg* rains and that serious food shortages are beginning to emerge. People, however, are employing a range of different strategies to cope with the situation, including the sale of livestock, obtaining waged daily employment either locally or further afield, trading in firewood or charcoal, by securing credit and by reducing their overall food intake. While there is no major emergency right now, there is every reason to be concerned about the future food security of the area if the main season rains withdraw early.

Observations in Kutaber, Desezurya, Tenta, and Legambo Weredas

As the zonal DPPB pointed out, virtually all weredas of South Welo are affected by the failed *belg* season and all are therefore in need of relief food. However, due to limited resources, it was agreed with the central DPPC that (according to the June *belg* report mentioned above) only 7 of the 15 rural weredas (Dessie and Kombolcha are the two town weredas) would receive relief food for the time being. Whereas the official June figures seem to reflect minimal requirements of 29,529 tons to support 328,100 beneficiaries in the entire zone until the *meher* main season harvest, actual needs expressed at zonal and wereda level would appear to be considerably higher. Distributions have taken place covering needs in some weredas up to August (Tenta, Mekdela, Sayint), in others only up to June.

At the time of the visit all available relief resources had been delivered from the zone to the weredas and distributed thereafter. According to the DPPB, no stocks whatsoever were left. While the current *kiremt* rains feeding the main *meher* agricultural season were described as being “insufficient”, the Bureau head’s concern was aggravated by the fact that already, well ahead of the *meher* harvest, “daily more and more people are seeking relief food”. Increasing numbers of people from rural areas were reported to be flocking to urban centers like Dessie and Kombolcha to seek labour opportunities. The DPPB also noted that people from the former resettlement areas in Wollega, Bale and Pawe, were leaving again after having seen the poor conditions here in their native land. With some malnutrition among children under five being reported from all weredas, information had also reached Dessie that in Legehida, a location in Wereilu Wereda, that around 80 people had become crippled after excessive consumption of the toxic Chick Pea (*Lathyrus sativus*; locally known as “Guaya”).

Relief Food only for “the Poorest of the Poor”

Reflecting the scarcity of relief food resources, very strict criteria have been applied to select beneficiaries. Only “the poorest of the poor” became eligible. The basic criterion to determine that “very poor status” is livestock ownership. As verified later during field interviews, generally only people and families having no farm animals at all were being chosen to receive relief support (traders or relatively well-off people whose livelihood is otherwise based on non-agricultural activities not being considered at all). It was claimed that even a family with one chicken left was not considered to be eligible. Unfortunately, as conditions worsen, this approach may force “better-off people” to sell off their animals in order to raise the cash needed to buy food on the market. Only once every animal has been sold, including plough oxen and pack animals, will such families become “very poor”, and therefore eligible to receive relief food.

Kutaber: Some People having only One Meal a Day

The mission drove to Kutaber town, the capital of the wereda of the same name, which is located some 20 kilometers north-west of Dessie, trying to continue all the way to Wegel Tena in Dawint Delanta Wereda of North Welo Zone. It was not possible to go beyond the village of Kundi (38 kilometers north-west of Dessie), however, since fording the river at this point would have been very risky given the high water levels. On the way, a number of people were interviewed.

In the village of Alainsha, just south of Kutaber town, a farmer confirmed limited relief food distributions in the area. He pointed out, however, that “many people in need did not get anything”, while the practice of nepotism had led to a situation, where “important people and relatives of people in charge of distribution” were benefiting from distributions. An old farmer in a location called Ruga - some five kilometers north of Kutaber - indirectly corroborated this claim by saying that his family of eight had received relief food (12 kg per person) one month ago despite still having animals. Even so, this family was selling animals in order to cover their continuing food needs, including a plough oxen. The man also reported a trend of unfavourable terms of trade, which was later repeatedly confirmed by other interviewees: while livestock prices are coming down, grain prices are going up. According to this old

farmer, one big ox now fetches between 400 and 500 Birr whereas in normal times, the same animal would raise around 1,000 Birr at Kutaber market. And while one quintal (100 kg) of Teff would normally cost around 125 Birr at this time, the present market price is 200 Birr. Unlike many of their neighbours, nobody in this relatively better-off family was looking for labour possibilities. In order to generate additional cash, however, family members were trying to collect firewood for sale. This is becoming more and more difficult, though: resources are scarce - the wereda suffers from significant deforestation problems - and firewood prices have declined significantly due to generally decreased purchasing power. With these coping mechanisms in place, this family manages to take two meals a day, which appears to be the average in all the areas visited.

While the physical appearance of most people encountered along the stretch covering some 30 kilometers north-west of Dessie seemed to be satisfactory, visual impressions further north reflected bleaker images: very skinny people, adults and children suffering from skin diseases. In Kundi, a number of people were interviewed. The village, located deep in a river valley (mid-highlands), belongs to a *meher* dependent area. Reportedly last years harvest was so poor that households had insufficient food stocks to help them over into the next harvest. As the villagers mentioned, in June this year only 150 of the 1,500 families said to live in and around Kundi received relief assistance. To cope with the food shortage - expected to increase due to the current poor *kiremt* rains - people had started to sell livestock to buy grain brought by merchants. At the time of the visit, already 75 per cent of the village's livestock has been sold, the people stated. Furthermore, they said that "significant numbers" of young men still strong enough to work had left the village, looking for labour opportunities on the Kombolcha-Asab road or, much further away, in the coffee plantations around Jimma. Asked about the consumption of wild plants, the villagers explained that no wild edible plants were available except for cactus fruits. But while those fruits were not mature yet, many, once ripe, are eaten by birds before people can harvest. The majority of people in this area eats only one meal a day (in normal times, two), and reportedly some of the villagers can afford a meal only every second day.

Most of the problems observed en route and reported by villagers were later confirmed by representatives of the Kutaber wereda administration: All the 17 kebeles in the wereda were reported to be facing problems of varying degrees - mainly due the failure of the *belg* harvest. The *kiremt* rains began poorly, it was confirmed, followed by an improvement in the first half of August. However, fears were expressed that if the rains stop too early in September, a major out-migration from the area could be expected. It was also reported that insufficient stocks of relief food had been made available, the terms of trade were unfavourable ("sometimes sellers come back with their animals from Dessie because there are no buyers") and, due to deforestation and harsh terrain, very limited possibilities to generate cash-income by collecting and selling firewood. Wereda officials expressed an urgent need to increase relief assistance, linked with development by expanding food-for-work-programmes, such as engaging in re-afforestation and rural road construction.

Health problems such as diarrhoea, malnutrition and skin diseases were confirmed both by the wereda administration and at the hospital in Berumeda, which is mainly a specialised institution (treating eye- and leprosy-patients) but which has also a Mother and Child Care Department. Here, indications were presented that dehydration caused by diarrhoea and marasmus (general lack of food) and kwashiorkor (protein deficiency) were on the rise: While in the entire month of July 36 patients with dehydration and 45 children with marasmus were registered for treatment, the numbers for August up to the 19th only (day of the visit) were 54 and 80 respectively.

Livestock Selling in Western Weredas

Driving through the weredas of Desezurya, Legambo and Tenta, the mission interviewed numerous people, asking them about food availability and how they cope with food

shortages. The information provided is summarised, adding mainly aspects not elaborated above.

In Gimba (Legambo wereda), a village located some 70 kilometers West of Dessie at an altitude of 3,200 meters, the mission observed on small plots of land the (very late) *belg* harvest (barley) going on. Farmers, pointing out that many crops have been damaged by hailstorms earlier, were expecting very little yield (the mission witnessed a severe hailstorm with frost conditions where hailstones were not melting away immediately but covering roads and fields in white). Forced to buy additional grain on the market (Akesta) they said that the price of 1 quintal of barley had risen from 80 Birr (normal) to between 120 and 150 Birr. At the same time, prices for sheep and goats (normally 50 to 60 Birr) had dropped to 30 Birr per head. Having no possibilities for marketing firewood in this area and with very limited possibilities of locally available daily labour, this year ("the worst in the last three years") a number of people had migrated long distances to seek employment. "Last year nobody did this in Gimba", one man said. Another one, head of a family of seven and as an animal owner not eligible to receive relief food, had sold all his 10 shoats in order to buy market food. "I'm still considered to be too rich, now I will start selling my cow and then the two plough oxen", stated the farmer and pointing out that this year he did not get any yield at all from his barley crops. The man, with painful joints and skinny limbs, also mentioned, that the food stocks held by the household would last his family for one more week only.

In Tenta wereda, were reportedly 60 per cent of the *belg* crops failed, the mission met several farmers harvesting what was left of their barley crops. One of them, who also sold several animals to buy additional grain, said that his current yield would help him to feed his family of five up to October. After that, he would have no other production until the 1998 *belg* harvest. Running out of animals to sell, he was hoping for relief support for the time between November and the next harvest.

The administration of Ajibar, capital of Tenta wereda, stated that up to the month of May, daily about 100 people came to the town asking for food. Subsequently, after relief food distributions started, such congregations became considerably smaller, however, without ceasing completely since the relief food available was not sufficient to cover all people in need. Last distributions were given to 45,000 beneficiaries covering their needs for July and August. The administration feels that in recent weeks another 40,000 people are in need, but no more stocks of relief food are available. While food prices on the market have increased (1 quintal of barley 250 Birr), prices for daily labour have hit a record low (2 Birr per day). Equally the market prices of firewood has dropped: Whereas in good times a bundle of firewood could fetch up to 10 Birr, the price had fallen to 3 Birr or less. Malnutrition, according to the wereda administration, is reported from all kebeles, with the worst affected areas being Kurkur and Chena in the south-western part of the wereda (extremely muddy roads hampered attempts by the mission to reach that area).

In Akesta, capital of Legambo wereda, officials deplored the fact that not enough relief food was available to cover all the needs. Apparently 50,000 beneficiaries were covered for June and July, while from August onwards "at least" an additional 46,000 people would be in need of relief support. During the last distributions violent confrontations reportedly took place because people declared not eligible were nevertheless desperate for relief food. Of the wereda's 32 kebeles, 24 were considered "seriously affected" by the *belg* failure, according to the administration. While the wereda is about 85 per cent *belg* dependent and facing a generally failed season, being affected by hailstorms, even the few *meher* crops are not promising. Almost daily, kebele delegates are arriving at the wereda town handing over petitions emphasising their food needs. Such a delegation was met by the administration immediately prior to the mission's visit. The kebele of Salamber had claimed in a letter, dated 18 August, that six people (two children, four adults) had died due to lack of food - a serious claim, which the mission was unable to verify. Firewood prices are down from 8 to 2

Birr per bundle, while wages for daily labour are also down to 2 or 1.50 Birr per day. Some people are even happy to work on road repairs, where they at least get lunch provided. Despite the fact that construction on the new wereda hospital (which is not operational yet) has been completed, a number of people are still congregating around the site seeking employment. Temporary out-migration (to Jimma, Wollega, Asayita, Dubti) is taking place to a major extent. Health workers reported that the six clinics in the wereda have treated in June and July “significantly” more cases of marasmus and kwashiorkor compared to the same period last year. The trend appears to be “increasingly worrying”, they said.

Unfavourable Terms of Trade

Save the Children (SCF/UK) undertook extensive surveys in South Welo during July and August and is planning to release a comprehensive report soon. The mission had consultations with the member of a team which had covered Wereilu and Jama in the south-eastern part of the zone and Desezurya and Kutaber weredas in the central-eastern part from end of July to mid-August. According to this survey, the nutritional status of children in the areas covered is satisfactory (around 93.5% wfl). Moreover, the trend from May to mid-August appeared to be stable. But, as noted by the SCF team, these findings may only reflect the fact that through various means the population had managed to cope with the existing food shortages and with the critical period through September up to mid-October still ahead, the nutritional status might soon start to deteriorate and possibly accelerate as survival strategies begin to lose effectiveness.

Although the SCF/UK information is tentative and subject to further analysis, preliminary findings confirm the various observations described above. Particularly unfavourable terms of trade seem to persist in general. While in a good season the value of one shoa (sheep/goat) buys 40 to 80 kg of grain, it now fetches 28 kg in Desezurya and Kutaber and only 20 kg in Wereilu and Jama. Average grain prices (several cereals statistically combined) have increased considerably, while relief food distributions appear not to have stabilised the trend:

Table I. Average grain prices in selected weredas (Birr/100 kgs)

Period	Wereda	
	Desezurya/Kutaber	Wereilu/Jama
August 1996	112 Birr	136 Birr
May 1997	147 Birr	150 Birr
August 1997	165 Birr	176 Birr

Source: SCF/UK Dessie (preliminary figures)

Currently, the grain supply to markets is low and virtually all the grain is grown outside the area. In Desezurya and Kotaber 78 per cent of the population are dependent on market purchases of cereals while in Wereilu and Jama it is 79 per cent. Only 14 per cent of children under five have access to cows milk. In the former area, 75 per cent of people seeking work have access to daily labour (fetching 5 Birr a day), in the latter 40 per cent (fetching 7 Birr a day). In Jama wereda, 10 per cent of household heads left to travel long distances seeking employment opportunities outside Welo. The consumption of two meals a day turned out to be the average in the areas surveyed.

From the western weredas of Sayint and Debresina SCF/UK reported that many people are living on credit, while others have leased their land and houses to relatives, leaving the area thereafter to look for better conditions elsewhere.

Bati Market: Very low Livestock Prices

Before returning to Addis Ababa, the mission visited Bati in Oromyia zone of Amhara Region. The town is a major livestock market, attracting sellers and buyers from North Shewa, South Welo, Oromyia Zone, but particularly from the neighbouring Afar region. These days, as people interviewed in Bati reported, the radius of influence has shrunk, while prices and demand for animals are very low. Except for professional merchants, hardly anybody wants to buy. A sheep fetches now 20 to 30 Birr (whereas in a normal year the price might be around 100 Birr). A quality ox goes for 300 to 400 Birr (normal price: 1,000 to 1,500 Birr), a camel for 400 to 500 Birr (normally 1,000 to 1,500 Birr). At the same time, grain, brought by merchants all the way from Addis Ababa, is very expensive: 1 quintal of Teff is offered for 400 Birr (normal price: 250 Birr), Red Sorghum for 260 Birr (normally 200 Birr). As people pointed out, this year is, both for the town and the surrounding areas, "the worst of the last four years". The area is *meher* dependent but with last years harvest described as having been "very poor", many people suffer from food shortages. Since reportedly no relief food distributions have taken place, the coping mechanisms described above and summarised below are being observed.

Summary of Coping Mechanisms

In the areas covered, but also in other areas from where the mission obtained secondary information, mainly six kinds of strategies to cope with food shortages (under conditions, where no relief food or insufficient amounts of relief food were distributed) seem to prevail.

1. Livestock Sales

Selling animals, even plough oxen, to buy grain with cash. The prices of grain, not produced locally but brought to the markets by merchants from Dessie and Addis Ababa, are high, while livestock prices are low.

2. Daily Labour

Shepherding for the "rich" or seeking opportunities in wereda "urban" centers, at road works or in Dessie, the zonal capital. Young boys are most often employed to look after herds while the stronger men look for waged labour opportunities further afield.

3. Migratory Labour

Land leasing to relatives, thereafter traveling within the zone or long distances to Jimma (coffee plantations), or Afar (cotton plantations around Dubti and Asayita), or seeking opportunities at inter-regional road maintenance works.

4. Firewood/Charcoal Trade

Limited by resource scarcity (deforestation), long distances to markets and decreased market prices.

5. Living on Credit

Mostly small scale private credit, also combinations of land-leasing to relatives and friends having plough animals and temporary out-migration thereafter, seem to help some people over the critical period.

6. Belt Tightening

Most people encountered still managed to have the average two meals a day although the volume of these meals (usually *injera* with *shiro-wot*) might be reduced. In some areas food intake reduction from two to one meal a day or less seems to have begun. Consumption of wild foods - only available to a very limited extent - was not observed but reported from some places (e.g., people eating leaves in some parts of Kalu wereda).

Conclusion

Both the direct field observations and secondary information indicate for the time being there is no famine situation, since up to now people were able to cope with the shortages through a number of different strategies. However, the potential for the development of serious food shortages is clear. The current situation *per se* can be considered to be a late warning. If the 1997 *meher* season fails also or falls short of needs, then the area might face a major emergency. Not knowing exactly how the situation may develop, measures need to be undertaken to be prepared for the worst and in order to be in the position to intervene immediately, when the need arises. However, additional allocations of food aid are not only needed in terms of disaster preparedness but also to cover adequately currently existing needs and insulate people from any unnecessary loss of productive assets.

The latest available DPPC figures on beneficiary numbers and relief food requirements are certainly credible for this area. Moreover, even taking into consideration the inclination of some wereda authorities to exaggerate actual needs, the central figures seem to reflect the minimum needs. But with only limited relief resources available, the criteria for selecting food aid beneficiaries is, perhaps unavoidably, too strict. In South Welo the possession of even a few small animals makes a person "rich" and - reportedly - not eligible for relief support. This forces people to sell off productive assets that will be vitally important if there is to be a rapid recovery from the present difficulties. The current practice, created of necessity by shortage of resources, not only represents a potential setback in attempts to eradicate poverty, it could even contribute towards increasing poverty and dependence.

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3 September, 1996

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