

Arsi and Bale Zones of Oromiya: Increasing Vulnerability to Food Shortages

*Report of a Rapid Exploratory Assessment
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Introduction and Objectives

The plan to conduct a field assessment in the Arsi and Bale zones of Oromiya Region, areas not normally considered crisis-prone, was triggered by an examination of the relief food requirements listed by the Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Bureau (DPPB) of Oromiya Region DPPB, lists that included nearly all of the agriculturally productive/surplus and coffee growing zones.

The immediate objectives of this field mission were:

- To investigate the causes and level of food insecurity in the affected regions and review the current status of the local economy and livelihoods of the population.
- To monitor the progress and efficacy of any on-going relief operations.

The idea for the mission arose from a perception that relief needs in these two zones had received little publicity or attention from the donor community. It was felt that the lack of attention towards the area stemmed from a lack of understanding of the socio-economic environment and the livelihood systems in Bale and Arsi and its people. This gap in knowledge was believed to have led to the low level of response to the needs claimed by the local and federal authorities.

It is presumed by many observers that these zones are not structurally food deficit and that current problems are of a transitory nature caused by anomalies in rainfall this last year and the emergence of a mild drought. Moreover, it is generally believed that food shortages are localised and the aggregate level of food availability in the zones is sufficient such that shortages in some limited pocket areas are normally dealt with through traditional mechanisms of social support and the market with only very little external food aid support. These areas are seen as relatively resilient to shortages due to the favorable environmental factors and resource bases.

Over and above these considerations, the pressure on governmental institutions to meet needs in the traditionally vulnerable areas of the country (Welo, Tigray, Haraghe etc.) made it difficult to allocate limited relief resources to areas where the resource base is thought to be much better.

There exist, however, a number of reasons why due attention should be given to claims that certain communities in Bale and Arsi require relief assistance. For example, an analysis of available meteorological data for the period 1975-1995 suggests Bale is no less drought prone and vulnerable to drought induced shocks and food insecurity than a number of other parts of the country in that¹:

- a) Bale has a high probability for drought than many other zones and has suffered a series of rain failures over the past 9 years. The study indicated also that between 1975-1995, various parts of Bale and Arsi zones experienced drought spells that lasted more than 3 years.

¹ Background Information on Drought and Desertification in Ethiopia, Environmental Protection Authority, June 1998, Addis Ababa.

- b) Bale was one of the four *belg*-growing regions that were severely hit by drought in the *belg* seasons of 1979, 1981, 1983, 1985 and 1992. The same study inferred also that Bale should be considered a chronically drought prone area with a 40% probability of *belg* rain failure and extreme variability.
- c) With regard to the *meher* season, the study indicates Bale is again drought prone with a probability of failure of more than 30% - meaning that 3 out of 10 seasons can be affected by drought.
- d) Considering the occurrence of droughts with the failure of *belg* and *meher* rains together, Bale is among the more highly vulnerable zones, with a probability of one drought year out of two.

Furthermore, not all of Bale and Arsi are blessed with productive resource bases. There are many pocket areas with a sizable population and vast tracts of lowland plains are poorly endowed in natural resources and have much less carrying/absorptive capacity. Finally, it appears that most of Bale and the low-lying areas of Arsi have received relatively little development assistance now or in the past.

Bale and Arsi zones are equally subject to transitory food insecurity, and to the socio-economic factors that create and exacerbate conditions of chronic vulnerability. The government has acknowledged these claims and includes many weredas from the two zones in its national food security program.

Declining ratio of land to people, declining land productivity, increasing costs of production and removal of subsidies, relatively few relief and development NGOs, a poor system of marketing, low level of commerce and investment activities, relatively low investment in roads and other infrastructures are just some of the features prevailing in the zones. These have eroded the natural resource base/assets as well as the traditional social mechanisms employed by people to cope with rain failures and poor harvests. More weredas and people each year in these two zones are coming to be considered drought affected and increasingly vulnerable to food shortage due to drought or other shocks. The scope of vulnerability is widening to include even those weredas which are known to be traditionally very productive, like Hetosa, Digeluna Tiyo, Lemu Bilbilo and Tiyo.

Current food insecurity, its immediate causes and effects

During the 1998 pre-harvest assessment, a bumper crop harvest was expected from the main *meher* season crop in Arsi and Bale. Subsequently, the widespread occurrence of wheat stem rust resulted in a large reduction in the yield of the wheat crop.

The devastating occurrence of wheat rust has been blamed on a number of causative factors. The most widely cited reason is the misuse by the farmers of improved varieties of wheat which have been planted above their recommended altitude, encouraging the spread of the rust and infecting the crop well beyond the original point of occurrence. Agronomists in the zonal agricultural offices have reported that current protection measures against this fungal disease are not economical at the peasant level.

During the initial post harvest assessment conducted at the end of last years *meher* season it was found that some 35,150 people in 5 weredas were food insecure and in need of emergency relief assistance. The weredas affected were Dodota Na Sirre, Ziway Dugda, Cholle, Serru, and Lemu Bilbilo. A six-month food provision from January to June amounting to 3,163 MT of grain was requested based on a ration scale of 15 kgs/person/month. According to the data obtained from the relief coordination section of the zonal DPPD a total of 1,006 MT was received, enough for 18,424 people. Of the 1,006 MT distributed, only 500 MT was dispatched from Addis Ababa while the remaining amount was a carry-over of stocks from 1998. The first consignment of the relief food from Addis Ababa arrived only in May.

Food insecurity and shortages in Arsi during 1999 have been mainly due to anomalies in the main season rain and the widespread occurrence of rust in the wheat crop. In October, flooding of Wabe Shebelle river in Serru Wereda devastated farms cultivated by agro-pastorals on the valley bottoms alongside the river.

A second round of assessments in Arsi zone were conducted in May 1999. These had been brought

forward by nearly two months because it had become clear that the *belg* rains had failed to occur (they normally start in March) in all most all weredas of the zone. Out of the 17 *belg* producing weredas in Arsi, farmers in only 2 weredas were able to sow a *belg* crop. The dry spell continued until June 17 when the first *meher* rains were reported in a number of mid- and highland weredas.

The May assessment indicated that the number of people requiring limited (3 months) relief assistance has risen to 151,916 people in 10 weredas of Arsi. For these people, 6,836 MT of food aid was requested out of which only 975 MT was provided up to the time of the UN-EUE mission to the zone, from which 47,002 people had been provided with food.

Summary of main findings

The provision of relief assistance to the zones of Bale and Arsi during 1999 appears to have been characterized by the delayed allocation and provision of resources, narrow coverage, poor packages and inadequacy in terms of actual deliveries.

The identification and selection of relief beneficiaries follows the principle of targeting the poorest of the poor in that only the destitute and a few drought-affected farmers are selected. Relatively better off households in terms of having minimal assets like an ox and a few small sheep and goats were considered as not sufficiently needy. This approach may have led to some unexpected results in that some households not short-listed for assistance have been reportedly obligated to sell their remaining productive assets to cover their needs which means they have rendered themselves unable to cultivate their farms. There are also unofficial but widely reported cases of such farmers leasing out their farms to private/commercial investors in a desperate attempt to obtain money for food.

In general, the needy population figures determined by the zone have not been accepted by the regional and federal authorities. During joint sessions to agree beneficiary figures the delegates from the higher levels are reported to have insisted on reducing figures arguing the lack of resources, although they themselves often acknowledge the higher figures, reasoning that their superiors will not accept them. The claims made by the regional DPPB that "*harvest overestimation by the zonal agriculture and DPPD offices resulting in underestimation of relief requirements*" is questionable on the grounds that even for the downwardly revised numbers the amount of food assistance provided was much less than what was needed.

It appears that no supplementary food has been provided for children, pregnant women or other vulnerable groups and the only intervention in the agricultural sector has been an Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus/Lutheran World Federation project in Arsi which provided a distribution of seeds. This took place in Hitosa Wereda, where just over 8 MT of wheat seeds were given to farmers who lost their main crop due to rain failure.

Indicators of the prevailing food shortage

- There are reports of children eating an addictive weed (*Datura stramonium*) in Hetosa Wereda and then being hospitalized in Assela town.
- A sizable number of hungry people (including urban destitute but mostly women with babies and children) are reported to be gathering at the offices of the administration asking for relief food. This was reported from the Ziway, Hetosa and Dodota weredas.
- There are an increasing number of beggars in the streets of wereda towns and in the zonal capital of Assela.
- Significant livestock mortality has been reported by the Ziway Dugda and Hetosa wereda officials, but for now the cattle seem recovering due to pasture regeneration as a result of the *meher* rains.
- Agropastoralists from drought-affected lowlands of Bale and Arsi can be seen traveling long distances to highland market towns of Huruta, Iteya, Gedeb Assasa, etc, to buy food. This is because grain supplies are short/very expensive in other, closer, market towns partly due to

drought, and partly due to poor roads discouraging merchant activity.

- Consumption of unusual foods. People in the *belg* producing areas of Hetosa and Degeluna Tiyo weredas are now eating Amaranths, a kind of straw which is normally only used for horses in Arsi (but an edible crop in some other parts of the country e.g. Gambella). People consume the plant by mixing it with cereals and as a result the price of this straw has risen from Birr 0.30 to Birr 0.80 per kilogramme.
- In two weredas where there are state farms, daily labour wage rates have fallen from Birr 13 to Birr 4-5 per day due to the high labour supply.
- People from neighbouring weredas have been seen moving to Shirka Wereda apparently because the *belg* harvest has been good in Shirka.
- A significant hike in cereal prices, and concomitant fall in livestock prices has been recorded in a number of drought affected weredas in both Arsi and Bale. Market data were obtained from the DPPD offices of Arsi Zone showing prices of major crops and livestock types in the drought affected weredas of Dodotana Siree, Z/Dugda and Hetosa.
- An analysis of the market price for cereals (weighted average for teff, barley, wheat and maize averaged for the three markets) shows a 120% differential from Birr 183/quintal (100 kgs) in August 1998 to Birr 221/quintal in August 1999. On the other hand, the prices of oxen and shoats show a 35% fall over the same period.
- Both adults and children are consuming on raw/immature barley picked from the field especially in mid-altitude areas.

Future prospects

The main season *meher* rains have occurred for all most all weredas of Arsi although coming late for some. In Bale, normal timing and intensity of rains was reported for the mid- and highland weredas while delayed onset appeared to be the case for most low-lying areas (and none-occurrence for Medawelabu Wereda).

Crop stands in observed farm fields appeared to be sparse, a feature reported to be the result of late rains which led to moisture stress and uneven germination of seeds.

Apart from these negative factors, a good *meher* harvest is expected in the mid- and highland weredas. The only concern is that late occurring and heavy rains in some parts of the zone may have damaged some wheat and barley shortly before harvesting.

In Ziway Dugda Wereda maize fields observed by the UN-EUE mission were green but on closer inspection comprised fruitless stems only. Farmers had already begun to drive livestock onto the fields to graze the standing crop. According to the agricultural officer of the wereda, the damage occurred when the rains abruptly halted at a critical point in the growing season.

The Arsi Zonal DPPD has recently been out to field to investigate the field crops situation to determine if the timing of assistance by the relief food should be extended. The study came up with the conclusion that there is nothing significantly ripe for the people to sufficiently feed on, and hence the office requested the regional DPPB to extend the provision of relief food to the end of December when most *meher* crops will be harvested.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It can be concluded that an interplay of several different factors operating independently and concurrently underlie the prevailing food insecurity observed by the mission in certain parts of Bale and Arsi. Despite a reputation for being an area of relative abundance, it appears both kinds of food insecurity, chronic and

transitory, affect a significant proportion of the rural populations of Arsi and Bale zones. In this regards, it is not only the low-lying agropastoral areas - known to be drought prone – that suffer, but also to some degree the mid- and highland areas. Factors such as poor rainfall and infestations of crop pests have exacerbated the trend in recent years and a growing number of people and new areas are being identified as food insecure and in need of relief intervention. Given the general consensus that a decline in household food security does not occur due to a single crop failure, it follows that these newly identified vulnerable areas have been trapped in a cycle of increasing impoverishment characterized by a decline in productive assets over some considerable period. The processes that reduce the capacity of people to be self-sufficiency may have been taking place largely unnoticed or overlooked until now.

This is not to deny that there has been some limited relief assistance provided to most of the drought prone weredas in the two zones in recent years. But historically this support has been sporadic and infrequent and is only now becoming more regular, though limited to only a few of the most vulnerable areas and these largely in the lowlands.

The situation regarding food insecurity for the agropastoral areas this year has been further compounded by the reduced crop harvest in the mid- and highland weredas, which used to be the main sources of food supplied to the deficit weredas through market exchange or social claims.

Apart from the process related to climatic changes and an increasing prevalence of crop disease, there appears to be a shift in the socio-economic environment that has contributed to/failed to counter the processes that have led to the increased vulnerability of people to drought. There are other processes internal to the attitudes of the farming community that are often cited as contributing to the increasing vulnerability of rural areas. One of these is a decline in the traditional thriftiness of households whereby surpluses from good years are stored or used to establish credit or savings as an insurance against future hardship.

Recommendations

(1) Further study and analysis should be undertaken at regional, zonal and household level to better understand the root causes of vulnerability and the processes that lead to food security/insecurity in these two zones. A useful approach would be the household food economy analysis currently conducted by Save the Children Fund (UK) in conjunction with the federal DPPC in parts of northern and southern Ethiopia.

The findings of such studies will greatly contribute to the effective targeting of relief assistance as well help identify possible future relief interventions that might be launched during major droughts by government and the NGOs. The practical relevance of conducting these kinds of in-depth studies is unquestionable. All the more so given that these two zones still contribute about 30% of the national cereal grain production and have considerable potential in terms of unutilized natural resources, especially in Bale Zone.

Questions that need be answered to understand the processes that underpin food security in the two zones include, among others:

How is it that a household (in Hitosa, Digeluna iyo, Tiyo weredas for example) can appear to become suddenly food insecure, to the extent that external food support is required, as a result of the failure of one crop? To what degree do the following contribute to declining food security: Insufficient land for crop production; poor market/distributive infrastructure; loss of productive assets; environment degradation; lack of capacity to plan/prepare for drought (at household, wereda and zonal levels); population pressure; land fragmentation and land tenure issues?

(2) There is a need to consider cereal credit schemes as a component of an integrated emergency assistance approach. This will make it possible to reach the relatively better off households who, though equally drought affected, are not being targeted for relief assistance currently because they may possess certain assets (even though this might be nothing more than a single skinny cow).

The idea here is to provide assistance to a wider economic group so as to protect remaining rural assets and help the relatively better off avoid the trap of increasing impoverishment. A cereal bank supposes that farmers will be able to pay back loans when conditions are more favourable, a not unreasonable position in Bale and Arsi where the agricultural potential remains considerable. If not possible through the establishment of community cereal banks, such assistance might still be provided through Employment Generation Schemes (EGS) or even traditional food-for-work.

The various revolving loan funds now being administered by regional bureaus of agriculture and the Ethiopian Development Bank as well as through farmers' service cooperatives can also be used as an effective means to support community initiatives to combat the processes of impoverishment and prevent the erosion of household assets in areas subject to transient food shortages due to climatic and other sudden shocks.

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