

## Underdeveloped, drought prone, food insecure: reflections on living conditions in parts of the Simien Mountains

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### Introduction and background

#### ***Objectives of mission***

Rumours of drought and late rains, indications of severe food shortcomings in the remote Simien Mountain area of North Gondar and various field mission reports from WFP, USAID and DPPC regarding food shortages and additional needs in some drought prone weredas, led the UN-Emergencies Unit to deploy an assessment mission to further investigate some of the underlying issues. The mission's objective was to reach some of the remote areas difficult to access in the eastern parts of the Simien Mountains and to obtain first hand information on the actual situation concerning general living conditions, agricultural and food security status of the population.

#### ***General overview***

The Simien Mountains are situated in the north-western part of Amhara Region, North Gondar Zone, roughly 850 km road distance from Addis Ababa. The area includes many peaks above 4000 m and Ethiopia's highest summit, Ras Dejen, above 4500 m. Temperature in these extreme highlands regularly falls below freezing at night. The topography in parts of the Simien Mountain areas, particularly in and around the National Park, comprises a dissected plateau, the edges of which plunge dramatically into deep gorges with rivers flowing towards the eastern and northern lowlands, mainly into the Tekeze River. The Simien Mountains are part of the afro-alpine zone with mostly short shrub and heather (*Erica arborea*) vegetation used partly for sedentary grazing and browsing. In some parts farmers cultivate barley and some other crops but the main means of living in the highlands is livestock raising, herding and trading for cash and food.

The Amhara Regional Administration classified all weredas in and around the Simien Mountains as drought prone and food insecure. Accessibility is difficult and most places can only be reached on foot or on horseback. In remote areas even the most basic infrastructure facilities such as access to safe water and basic health is still unavailable. The highlands, the lowlands and the escarpment areas alike are highly degraded, i.e. deforested, eroded and cultivable soil depleted.

Furthermore, there exists a contradictory relationship between highland and lowland areas. Excess rains harm crops in the highlands because they often are accompanied by hail storms and other natural disasters such as water logging and land slides. Whereas in the generally dryer lowlands, excess rain has a rather positive impact on crop production. In other words: poor production in the highlands mostly coincides with good production in the lowlands and vice versa. Weredas which include both highland and lowland areas are likely to suffer in one way or another nearly every year.

#### ***Underdevelopment, chronic food shortage and limited coping mechanisms***

The Amhara Regional Administration includes all 7 weredas situated around the Simien Mountains<sup>1</sup> into the 47 recognised as drought prone and food insecure in the region as a whole out of 105 weredas. Generally these areas are characterised by significant structural deficits, including high land degradation and lacking basic infrastructure facilities. Most of them are chronically food insecure and particularly people living in remote areas around the Simien Mountains and in the Tekeze River watershed have to deal with and accept

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<sup>1</sup> Belessa, Wegera, Dabat, Debark, Adi Arkay, Beyeda and Janamora.

that they have, due to the remoteness, only a limited range of coping mechanisms at their disposal to face climatic unpredictability.

### **Limited accessibility and poor general infrastructure facilities**

The remote areas in and around the Simien Mountains lack most basic infrastructure facilities such as access to safe drinking water and basic health services. The absence of any kind of roads in most parts of the area, is the factor which hampers any other type of development. This problem has previously been discussed in the UN-EUE report on a field mission to similarly remote areas in parts of the Tekeze river lowlands (see Guinand, 1999b).

Improved accessibility to remote weredas such as Beyeda, Janamora, parts of Adi Arkay, i.e. Tsellemt area, and parts of Debark (refer to the annexed situation map) by the construction of all weather feeder roads is planned by the regional road authority. The first of these remote areas to be supplied with an all weather road was Janamora wereda which was facing continuous serious food shortages since the mid 1980s. 85 km of the all weather road that will connect Janamora and Beyeda wereda to Debark town, have so far been constructed. 20 km of the remaining 30 km to Mekane Birhan, Janamora Wereda capital, should be accomplished by the end of next year (2000). But a couple of years will pass until the road will reach Beyeda wereda. Nevertheless, Mekane Birhan is now accessible by 4-wheel-drive vehicle. A while ago the wereda administration mobilised 25,000 people during three days to clear the existing mule track of big stones making it practicable as a rough track for off-road vehicles. Meanwhile, the brand new all weather road departing from Debark and being partly built in the Simien Mountains National Park, faces a number of shortcomings which prevent the use of heavy duty trucks. Slope gradients of 14% and hairpin bends, which even with a Land Rover are difficult to manage, suggest that only small trucks with a maximum load of 7 to 8 tons will be able to negotiate the way to Mekane Birhan. Furthermore, the high altitude with a pass to cross at 4300 m reduces engine power significantly. Besides this road, there exists only one other dry weather 4-wheel-drive track that leads to the remote Tsellemt area of Adi Arkay Wereda. The track branches off somewhere between May Tsebbre and Shire in Tigray Region and winds its way for about 200 km through to Feyelwuha in the Tekeze River lowlands. But in Adi Arkay village, an agricultural expert who once had visited the place by car, advised the mission not to do so and rather rent a motorbike or wheel cart for a visit. In other words: despite the existence of the Debark-Janamora road, accessibility is still only achieved with a good pair of feet or on horseback. The dramatic, precipitous, abrupt and difficult topography suggests that these areas will remain remote and difficult to access for a number of years.

According to data collected for the 1994 population census of Ethiopia (CSA Amhara, 1998), the percentage of rural population having access to safe drinking water, tap or protected wells is likely to be less than 5% in these remote areas of the Simien Mountains. A very low health standard can be observed with the prevalence of a wide range of diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria, intestinal parasites and others. Health service coverage is among the lowest in the country and the vast majority of the population is unaware of the most basic preventive health care and 'family planning' is a foreign word never heard of. The educational situation does not look much better and training opportunities are scarce to non-existent. Most people are illiterate and attendance for primary schools is still very likely to be less than 4%<sup>2</sup>.

### **'The dying soil', late rains and other unpredictabilities**

Besides erratic rains, the depleted 'dying' soils of very low fertility are the most significant factor limiting crop yields. Even in a good year, when rains are on time, evenly distributed and the amount sufficient, yields will remain low. Most farmers cannot afford to apply fertiliser. During the crop growing period the fertility gradient of the soil can be directly observed in most of the cultivated areas. Many crops, i.e. teff, maize, sorghum and niger seed show an unhealthy light green colour and are much too small in size for their actual growing stage. This compares to the few fertile pockets observed in some fields where plants grow normally and stand out by their dark green colour.

In North Gonder, late rains this year disturbed the *meher* cropping pattern and the farming cycle in all the

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<sup>2</sup> The 1994 CSA population and housing census quotes actual school attendance in 1994 for all surveyed rural areas of North Gonder at 3.31%. The strata of the population who attended in the past is 4.29% of the total rural population (CSA Amhara, 1998).

agroecological belts alike, be it high- or lowland. This contradictory relationship between highland and lowland areas described in the introduction is faced by all the seven drought prone and food insecure weredas. Last *meher* season (1998) the rains were on time but heavy, unevenly distributed and the amount well above average. This caused considerable damage in the highlands of Janamora, Beyeda, Wegera, Dabat, Debark, Adi Arkay and Belessa weredas but was favourable to the lowlands which had a good harvest. This *meher* season the late rains affected all the weredas in all the agroecological belts equally. But once the rains started, though with a two months delay, the distribution was even and not too heavy (with some exceptions in some pocket areas in Adi Arkay, i.e. Tsellemt area). If the rains continue up to mid October with showers every now and then, the crop harvest will be good in the highlands. If the rains stop prematurely, some crop yield reduction must be anticipated. For the moment, the crop situation and harvest outlook for this *meher* season looks good for most of the highland areas, but grim for the lowland yields where in addition to the delay, the amount of rain was inadequate.

Consequences of the late rains include the total failure of potato and cabbage crops cultivated in the highlands to secure food as a 'stop-gap' measure before the main *meher* crops, i.e. barley, wheat and teff mature. In some areas, the '*Belga*' barley, a short cycle variety maturing within three to four months, planted at the same time as potatoes, also failed to mature. To minimise the risk of harvest failure farmers in the highlands opted for short rather than long cycle crops. Farmers planted '*Belga*' barley again and other short cycle crops such as '*Bakele*' (Horse beans; *Vicia faba*) and '*Noug*' (Niger seed; *Guizotia abyssinica*) after rains started in June/July. At the time of the mission's visit, farmers in the highlands of Debark, Dabat and Wegera weredas were harvesting '*Belga*' and were immediately ploughing the soil to sow '*Shimbra*' (Chick pea; *Cicer arietinum*) or '*Misir*' (Lentils; *Lens esculenta*) or '*Ater*' (Field peas; *Pisum sativum*). These legumes are short cycle crops to be harvested in December. Farmers consider the actual soil moisture as sufficient for the legumes to mature and give an acceptable yield.

In parts of the lowlands farmers still planted their normal long cycle crops, i.e. maize and sorghum but the harvest outlook seems uncertain and yields are likely to be significantly reduced if the rains stop too early. The mission observed intercropping techniques whereby farmers try to minimise their risks by interspersing long cycle (e.g. sorghum) with short cycle (e.g. '*Belga*' barley) crops.

In general, this *meher* season in the highlands differs from normal in that long cycle grain crops have been substituted by short cycle but lower yielding legumes and grains. In the lowlands also short cycle crops such as teff and barley were favoured, partly substituting maize and sorghum.

### ***Distorted production and trading system***

Farmer's options for dealing with food shortages and the threat of famine are commonly referred to as 'coping mechanisms'. The way farm households are coping with food shortages is largely determined by their pre-crisis characteristics and involves a succession of responses to increasingly severe conditions (see Webb and Braun, 1994 for more details). Farmers usually develop a range of coping mechanisms to overcome eventual production shortages. In the Simien Mountains coping mechanisms are limited to increased livestock sales, individual migratory labour opportunities and, as a last option, out-migration of the whole family.

### ***Deteriorated 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. The comparison of market prices in Debark shows a clear deterioration of terms of trade at the peak of the drought just before and after the delayed rains started end of June and at the beginning of July (compare in Table 1). The price gap between last year's and this year's market prices is a clear stress indicator. Furthermore, milk, butter and ghee<sup>3</sup> have disappeared from the markets since May. Farmers interviewed in Chennek kebele, 70 km from Debark in the vicinity of the Simien Mountain National Park, said that since 1990 they had not faced such low livestock prices. Usually livestock prices remain stable or they fall only for a short period of time. This year, traders did not even bother to come up to the highlands to trade grain for cattle, mules, horses and donkeys. The value of sheep and goats, traded for grain at Debark markets decreased by three to four times, e.g. whereas a sheep or two are usually traded for 50kg of maize, in July 1999 the price for 50kg of maize was valued at 5 sheep!

<sup>3</sup> Ghee is a local butter, mostly found on markets in liquefied form of grainy consistency.

**Table 1: Average market prices in central markets of Debark, wereda capital**

Traded goods	June/July 1999 prices	June/July 1998 prices	Trend
<b>Crops</b>			
Wheat	200 Birr/quintal <sup>∇</sup>	~ 100 Birr/quintal	↑
Teff	260-270 Birr/quintal	~ 150 Birr/quintal	↑
Sorghum	150 Birr/quintal	~ 65 Birr/quintal	↑
Maize	150 Birr/quintal	~ 50 Birr/quintal	↑
<b>Livestock</b>			
Oxen	150-200 Birr/unit*	800-900 Birr/unit	↓
Cows	No cows were traded	~ 800 Birr/unit lactating cows > 1000 Birr/unit	↓
Goat	30 Birr/unit	Not available	-
Sheep	30 Birr/unit <sup>∩</sup>	~ 120 Birr/unit	↓

(Source: Debark Wereda Administration)

\* Since the beginning of September prices are recovering: Oxen are traded around 350 and 400 Birr.

<sup>∩</sup> Before Ethiopian New Year prices rose up to 60 Birr/unit.<sup>∇</sup> 1 Quintal = 100kgs.

At Adi Arkay, market prices have not been similarly distorted compared to last year. The price level remained almost the same and terms of trade are normal for all the compared and traded goods. Adi Arkay, as mentioned in the previous section, expects over all a good harvest with the only exception of the chronically food insecure and drought affected Tsellemt area.

*Forced livestock sales and animal deaths*

Due to the delayed rains and crop planting and as a consequence of the high grain prices, people from the highlands of Debark, Janamora, Beyeda and Adi Arkay weredas were forced to sell a significantly higher number of their livestock than they usually do. These forced livestock sales combined with drought and dry pastures, decimated herds to the point where many of the poorer households had lost all their livestock by the end of July. Even at the time of the mission, two months after the peak of the drought, a number of animal carcasses were observed along the road to Janamora. The following livestock losses were reported to the mission for Janamora wereda (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Livestock losses in Janamora wereda (March - July 1999)**

Livestock	Number of deaths (March – July 1999)	Total number	Losses in % of total number
Cows and oxen	3,094	97,483	3.2
Donkey/horses/mules	2,295	24,097	9.5
Sheep	15,404	68,019	22.6
Goats	6,975	43,546	16.0

(Source: Janamora Wereda Administration)

With sheep and goat losses quoted at 22% and 16% of the total population respectively these figures especially are significant. The wereda administration, despite not having statistics from previous years (there was no emergency situation and therefore no animal deaths caused by drought), stated that this season's situation was exceptional.

Deteriorated terms of trade in Debark and other traditional market places in the North Gonder highlands caused a diversion of livestock trade, especially goats, towards Tigray Region. Shire, the capital town for Western Tigray Zone, has become a major trade centre for livestock and many other goods. The presence of the Ethiopian army has opened lucrative trading opportunities for livestock traders from the Simien Mountains some 200km to 300km away. Local traders from Janamora and Beyeda weredas buy up goats from farmers for less than 50 Birr, herd up to 40 animals and travel in 7 days to Shire where the goats are sold for 80 Birr to 120 Birr. Though a useful alternative, it remains doubtful if this trade presents any significant benefit to local farmers in the Simien Mountains. It seems more likely that traders are naturally exploiting two extreme market situations due to drought and low prices on one hand and high demand and purchasing power on the other hand.

#### *Premature harvest sell-off and exorbitant interest rates*

The wereda administrators from Beyeda and Janamora reported in Bahir Dar that many farmers have mortgaged their forthcoming harvest to borrow grain for survival from their richer neighbours or local traders. They will have to pay back their borrowings with interest rates ranging from 100% to 200%, i.e. a considerable part of this season's harvest will go for paying off outstanding loans and there will not be enough food to last until the coming season next year.

The wereda administrator of Beyeda mentioned that a traditional coping mechanism, involving the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, did not work out this season. In normal years, richer people of the community would give cash contributions and contributions in kind to the church throughout the year. Then the church would redistribute these contributions to poor and needy families of the community. This year nobody contributed and in consequence nobody benefited; a clear sign of a generalised pattern of increasing impoverishment within the community.

#### ***Stress migration of able-bodied male family members***

Unusual and significant stress migration of able-bodied male family members has been reported for Janamora, Beyeda, Debark and parts of Adi Arkay weredas. Stress migration took (and is still taking place) for the last four months to wereda and zonal towns along the north-south Bahir Dar–Gonder–Shire road. Consequently North Gonder towns are currently facing an excess supply of unskilled labour. Former reports of depressed wage rates, i.e. from 5 Birr per day down to 2 Birr per day and less, are confirmed. Therefore, stress-migrants are now heading north towards Tigray Region. May Tsebbre, 30 kilometres north of Adi Arkay, is the first town most migrants pass in search of daily labour opportunities. Many choose to try their luck in Tigray Region due to a number of comparative advantages. Relief food supplies are steady and sufficient, land holdings are bigger in size and farmers of Tigray occasionally need to employ temporary workers for weeding and harvesting. In the vicinity of May Tsebbre daily labour wages in rural areas are said to be between 5 and 8 Birr per day with an additional meal provided. Wage labour in villages and towns is remunerated with up to 10 Birr daily. May Tsebbre's wereda secretary confirmed that significant numbers of labour migrants arrive from the drought affected areas of North Gonder. Fortunately the labour situation looks favourable this year and the market can absorb most of the newcomers. If not in and around May Tsebbre they usually find temporary work further north and on the state and commercial farms in Humera and Metema.

Unfortunately, as bitterly stated by all persons interviewed in Janamora and Debark weredas, families left behind are not benefiting from this so-called coping mechanism. The temporary out-migrants, though able to support themselves, are never able to accumulate enough cash savings to send back to their suffering families. Members of the Janamora Administration are understandably against this temporary out-migration. They argue: 'neither the wereda nor the community benefit economically. They [the migrants] rather harm the wellbeing of their families. All they bring back is malaria!'

#### ***Family out-migration***

The mission heard contradictory reports regarding family out-migration. At regional and zonal levels none of the interview partners had knowledge of family out-migration. At kebele level and when talking to farmers in the affected areas, the situation is significant enough to be a preoccupation. In Chennek farmers said a number of families had left after they lost all their livestock either due to forced sales or to death. The

mission was told some children of out-migrating families died on the way to Debark because they were already too weak to cope with the effort. At the Mekane Birhan administration 150 families are registered as having left. These families sold all their belongings before leaving the wereda. Their whereabouts are unknown. Family out-migration from Janamora wereda started in May and June of this year. Teachers encountered in the vicinity of Mekane Birhan, who were heading towards their duty station in Cherolebat village, confirmed the departure of a significant number of families from their kebele. The teachers noticed the departure because many pupils dropped out before the end of the school year and were not seen anymore.

#### ***Abnormal food stress, changed eating habits and reports of drought related deaths***

Consumption of wild food has been reported from a number of places, i. e. Debark, Chennek, Mekane Birhan, Adi Arkay and Amba Giyorgis. To cope with food shortage people are collecting and eating wild plants such as *Uzber*, *Sama*, *Nejiro*, and *Abarbawa*. In June and July people ate leaves of immature Irish potato plants before they dried up. *Uzber* is a wild cabbage variety. *Sama* has thick drought resistant leaves. *Nejiro* is a small plant which is dug up and eaten with its roots. *Abarbawa* seems similar to *Getin* mentioned in Welo, a nettle plant. All plants have to be cooked in water and are consumed like vegetables. The consumption of wild plants is increasing and so are the intestinal diseases. Most of this ‘*stress-food*’ causes diarrhoea when consumed excessively. Some, such as *Nejiro*, cause headaches and vision problems. Grass pea, also known as ‘*vetch*’ and in Amharic as *Guaya*, is cultivated in various places especially in the drier lowlands. Grass pea is promoted as livestock forage by the agricultural bureau. But people occasionally eat it as a survival food as in other chronically food insecure areas (such as South Welo) risking lathyrism, a disease causing irreversible crippling effects<sup>4</sup>.

The Debark health office said it had confirmed a number of cases of malnutrition in some of the drought prone kebeles in the east (Simien Mountains). It also said that cases of Kwashiorkor and Marasmus have occurred in the lowland areas of Beyeda and Janamora weredas. No figures are available but it was repeated that older people and children below 2 years of age have died from diseases caused by malnutrition. Nutritional surveys are not carried out. Similar to other parts of the country, these surveys need financing, trained and equipped personnel, all of which is lacking. Unlike other areas such as North Welo<sup>5</sup>, no international NGO has devoted itself to undertake and assure nutritional coverage in chronic food shortage areas of North Gonder.

Reports on unusual deaths could only be collected from Janamora. The wereda administration registered 209 deaths since March 1999, probably connected with the drought. The mission heard anecdotal reports of people who died while on the way to collecting their relief food rations either in Debark or Janamora. Some people died also while out-migrating from Janamora. But as usual, it is virtually impossible to get a thorough overview of the mortality situation due to lack of data and the remoteness of many affected places. Mostly people die without being registered and the causes of death remain largely unknown.

#### ***Increased number of school drop outs***

In Janamora wereda school drop outs during the 1991 (Ethiopian calendar) school year, which ended at the end of June 1999, were numbered at approximately 2000; roughly 6.5% of the total pupils. This number is double the school-drop-out-number for the previous year. In addition, many children left school towards the end of the term that coincided with the severe drought and food shortage period. In one school of Cherolebat village in Janamora wereda, around 40 from a total of 400 children, i.e. 10% left school prematurely.

#### ***Encroachment of the Simien National Park***

A minor problem brought to the attention of the mission concerns the Simien Mountain National Park and its wild animal population. This year’s drought caused competition for scarce grazing land between the protected park animal population, especially the Walia ibex, an endemic herbivore of the wild goat family,

<sup>4</sup> For further reading and details on human lathyrism see the following previous UN-EUE reports: Guinand, 1999a; Ahrens, 1997a, 1998; Klingele, 1998; Getahun and Haimanot, 1998; Tekle-Haimanot, 1994

<sup>5</sup> SCF/UK for example is assuring nutritional coverage in North and South Welo and a number of other drought prone areas in Ethiopia through its Nutritional Surveillance Programme (NSP).

and farmers' livestock herds which encroached the buffer zone areas as well as the park itself. As a result, national park guards fear a good number of the rare Walia ibex may have left the park area for good and may never come back.

## **Beneficiaries and relief food**

### ***Increased beneficiary numbers and food requirements***

According to the North Gonder Zonal DPPD, beneficiary numbers have increased in all 7 drought prone weredas. The World Food Programme and USAID in collaboration with DPPC fielded a number of missions in August and beginning of September to South and North Gonder to assess additional beneficiary numbers<sup>6</sup>. Data on additional beneficiary numbers, food distributed and rations given are also available from the World Food Programme office in Addis Ababa.

In addition to last year's caseload of 208,782, this season's late rains affected not only last year's vulnerable groups but also put new population segments at risk. An additional 76,119 people are listed as needing food aid. The total number of needy people for North Gonder zone is estimated at around 250,000 (as of September 1999). From last year's caseload 173,566 were listed to be under relief (as of January 1999). Generally, people in the affected weredas benefited from two food distributions between June and August. A total of 364 tons of mainly wheat has been distributed to 87,551 beneficiaries. But significant relief food distribution shortfalls seem to persist. According to the zonal DPPD, Janamora benefitted from two food distributions; one from the Debarok distribution site, the other from the temporary Chennek site. All together Janamora was supposed to receive 122 tons lasting for five months for 35,480 listed beneficiaries. This makes a ration of roughly 7kgs/person/month, i.e. almost half the recommended 12.5kgs/person/month. Considering that not all the food has been collected and that a significant part of the rations were used for paying local traders and other pack animal owners to carry the food back to Janamora, there may not be much left to be consumed by the needy people in remote Janamora Wereda.

There are also the following problems and constraints that add to the ones already discussed and which contributed to relief food assistance shortfalls at the peak of the drought period in July:

- last year's crop production was overestimated due to an overestimation of the cultivated area (the cultivated area was estimated twice as much as it effectively was<sup>7</sup>);
- lack of sufficient and adequate communication and information exchange between wereda, zonal and regional levels.

The second of the two problems was confirmed by the UN-EUE mission and discussed at various occasions at kebele, wereda, zonal and regional level. At kebele and wereda level people are complaining that zonal and regional officials do not seem to pay enough attention to their problems. In Chennek the mission was told that with the exception of the Zonal Integrated Food Security representative, who visited the area in June, not many officials have visited the area during previous years. In Mekane Birhan officials could not remember having ever seen an expatriate visiting their wereda. One constraint officials in Gonder and Bahir Dar certainly face is a lack of adequate transport. In view of the numerous problems the country faces in so many other places, it is not surprising that these remote areas are not receiving enough attention.

### ***Problems of targeting relief food and 'forced re-distributions'***

An imminent and apparently well known problem concerns the targeting of relief food. Free relief food distributions should be targeted towards the most needy and vulnerable within the community, i.e. children, old people and all those who are not able to do physical work. Beneficiary criteria are sometimes

<sup>6</sup> Food monitoring mission to South and North Gonder by WFP Food Monitors, 15 to 19 August 1999;

Joint assessment mission to South Gonder by USAID and DPPC representatives, August 1999;

Joint assessment mission to North Gonder by WFP, USAID and DPPC representatives, 2 to 9 September 1999.

<sup>7</sup> But on the other hand even this correction cannot be verified. The statement tries to underline the severity of the situation and is an attempt to explain why there isn't enough food even from last year's bumper harvest.

inadequate. For example, one of the beneficiary criteria is that only families without cattle are entitled to relief food. In the highlands farmers are living on livestock raising and trading. Everybody owns livestock and according to this criteria almost nobody would be entitled to relief food. But on the other hand and in most of the cases, targeting the poor, the most vulnerable and needy causes serious problems to the communities. To avoid that somebody may be left out, sometimes kebele beneficiary numbers coincide with its total population number. And frequently relief food allocations are too low. These shortfalls together with arbitrary decisions by local kebele officials often result in a significant reduction in ration scales. To cite an example from Adi Arkay wereda: 'Chinfera' kebele has a total population of 3782, all of which are listed as needy beneficiaries. The June distribution at a rate of 12.5kg/person/month (the 'standard' ration scale) could be distributed to a maximum of 1100 persons. According to the kebele administration a relief food gap existed for the remaining 2682 inhabitants of the kebele. Therefore, it was decided to distribute the available relief food equally among the entire kebele population, which resulted in a significant reduction in ration scale to the target group. Some call it 'equal sharing', some call it 'forced re-distribution'. Everybody is equally supplied with some relief food. But in terms of wellbeing and access to and control over important resources such as water, land and livestock, households differ. Therefore households can never all be the same. There are better-off, rich and poor in every community. The system of 'equal distribution' allocates food also to families who have alternatives and can cope with temporary food shortages and on the other hand may provoke severe hardship within the poor and destitute segment of the community. The problem of targeting relief food is mainly (but not only) faced in areas where neither EGS (Employment-Generation-Schemes) nor FFW (Food-For-Work) project support helps able-bodied community members to obtain food by working for the community. Unfortunately all weredas and kebeles in remote areas in and around the Simien Mountains are having relief food targeting problems. And as long as no monitoring mechanism is put in place at kebele level and as long as food allocations are insufficient, re-distribution is inevitable. Relief food distributions should be closely monitored at kebele level by a higher authority to prevent its diversion towards better-off segment of the population.

On the other hand, when looking at the problem from the communities' traditional, social, cultural and economic point of view, equal sharing may even be necessary. Implications concerning relief food allocations and distributions may be much more complex than outsiders such as humanitarian relief specialists and other persons who are unfamiliar with the local community's customs, may imagine. In any case, targeting relief food remains a controversial and unsolved issue not only among Ethiopian authorities at all administrative levels but also among concerned humanitarian partners.

#### ***Inadequate food aid distribution sites and storage facilities***

Using Debarq and even Chennek as relief food distribution sites for Janamora and Beyeda wereda, or using Adi Arkay as a distribution site for the Tsellemt area and also Beyeda, has proved highly ineffective. These distribution sites are out of reach for most beneficiaries. Chennek is at least two days walk (~45 km), Debarq and Adi Arkay are more than three days walk (>100 km) from the targeted area. This causes a number of yet unresolved constraints. Transportation means have to be available to pick up the food and bring it back home. The poor and vulnerable beneficiaries do not have these means at hand. Usually local traders are hired to fetch the relief food. In return, part of the allocated relief food has to be paid as transport fee. Many beneficiaries are selling their ration at dumping prices in Debarq on the local market and only bring back the gained cash. The latter is actually a very common practice applied at all the 'hard-to-reach' distribution sites. This practice should raise a series of questions for all involved humanitarian actors, particularly when knowing that the food is being sold at prices that cannot even cover transport costs from central warehouses to the distribution sites. On many occasions the mission was confronted with the following argument: instead of the present ineffective and high cost food aid system for remote areas, a simpler and more effective cash-based system should be set up. This appears rational, at least for the time being, while the targeted drought prone areas remain inaccessible for motorised relief food transport.

In addition, storage facilities are subject to serious constraints in places like Chennek. At almost 3700 m temperatures below freezing point damage stored food. Part of the July distribution delivered to Chennek for distribution, was damaged by frost. To place a Rubb Hall in Chennek would also cause problems with the National Park authorities (Chennek is within the National Park boundaries). And presumably people would still need to walk long distances and so the issue remains.



## Conclusions and recommendations

The Amhara National Regional State has prepared a food security action plan to ensure food security within five to seven years for a population of 2.5 million from the 47 drought prone and chronically food insecure weredas of the region.

Lack of a suitable road infrastructure and lack of access to markets have been recognised as major bottlenecks to the overall development of the region. Consequently the action plan includes an integrated cash-for-work (CFW) component specially designed and designated for weredas in and around the Simien Mountains for which access is difficult. This development programme is financed by the EU which is funding parts of the Integrated Food Security Programme for Amhara Region (IFSP) with 6 million US Dollars. The cash-for-work programme will comprise soil conservation, potable water, reforestation and road rehabilitation, construction and maintenance as its main components.

Cash-for-work seems to be a viable and logic solution for remote areas both in Gonder as well as many other parts of Ethiopia. In Beyeda and Janamora wereda a cash trading system is already in place whereby farmers sell their livestock either on the market or directly to traders for cash. This money is used to buy food and other basic necessities. Many local traders earn a living from supplying the highlanders with grain and other food they buy on markets along the main Gonder-Shire road and bring up with mules and donkeys. During drought periods, such as this year, this cash-based petty trade economy crashes. The deteriorated terms of trade between livestock (low) and grain (high) prices result in an erosion of farmers' purchasing power. The local traders look for other markets and cease to bring grain to these remote areas. The solution appears simple: strengthen farmers' purchasing power by giving them opportunities to earn cash on the spot by other means than livestock trading. Here cash-for-work programmes may bring quick, efficient and cost saving relief. Relief food distributions as they have been organised until now, are certainly not a viable solution, even if distribution sites could be brought nearer to the beneficiaries. Relief food distributions and even food-for-work programmes also potentially destroy or at least harm local petty trade. And moreover, most relief food beneficiaries who can make it to the far away distribution sites are selling their relief food ration anyway and are only bringing back cash to Beyeda and Janamora. This is a well known practice which should make all humanitarian actors involved in relief food supply and distribution consider other more adapted and economically viable solutions.

Road construction should be the first priority for any cash-for-work programme. Once even a dry weather-only road is established, additional market and economic incentives will follow. This proved very successful in other weredas of North and South Gonder, i.e. Belessa and Ibnat (see Guinand, 1999b). The Integrated Food Security Programme intends to pay 4 Birr/worker/day for the cash-for-work employment. This is 1 Birr less than the usual daily remuneration. By paying less, the cash-for-work programme hopes to avoid competition with the private sector and at the same time only attract poor households with no other alternative. Nonetheless, by bringing in cash and by boosting farmers' purchasing power it is hoped that local markets in Janamora and Beyeda may not crash during drought periods such as has happened again this season.

Another income generating activity that could be gained through the development of community roads is the application of a road toll. But road tolls for community roads have yet to be approved by the Federal Government. Once approved, the community, wereda or kebele would be able to collect road tolls and use the money maybe first to establish a road maintenance unit at wereda level and secondly to finance the road maintenance itself. This may be a means to prevent community roads from deteriorating soon after their completion and becoming impassable after the second or third heavy rain shower. Unfortunately, the latter happens all too frequently with roads constructed through FFW community efforts.

Another recommendation may be to boost and encourage small credit schemes such as proposed by the Amhara Rural Credit and Saving Institute (ACSI<sup>8</sup>). ACSI has already established offices in Debarq and Janamora. Through low-interest-rate-small-credit schemes a variety of income generating activities could be encouraged leading to beneficial diversification of the local economy. On the other hand, if conditions for

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<sup>8</sup> ACSI is an independent rural credit & saving institute, established in 1995 as a semi-autonomous body and previously part of ORDA. The ACSI concept is based on the Bangladesh experience of the Grameen Bank for the rural poor.

these credit schemes are unfavourable to poor farmers, i.e. the pay back deadline is too short, the security demanded and the interest rates are too high, then they will not be a successful means to help the poor. And unfortunately enough, even credit schemes intended to help the poor are mostly used by better-off farmers and traders.

## Annex

### **List of reports, papers and previous UN-EUE mission reports on Gonder**

- Ahrens J D (1997a) Beneficiary numbers to be increased: Amhara Region after the failed *Belg*, UN-EUE Field Mission Report, 20 to 26 July, Addis Ababa
- Ahrens J D (1997b) Parts of Gonder expecting poor *meher* harvest: Observations from Ibbat and Belessa, UN-EUE Field Mission Report, 21 to 27 September, Addis Ababa
- Ahrens J D (1998) South Welo expects a bad *Belg* season, UN-EUE Field Mission Report, 18 to 23 May, Addis Ababa
- Armstrong C (1998) Natural Resource Protection, an informal study carried out for the Bureau of Agriculture and GTZ, South Gondar Zone, Amhara Region, Bahir Dar
- CSA (1998) The 1994 Population and Housing Census for Ethiopia, Results at Country Level, Central Statistical Authority, Volume I, Statistical Report, Addis Ababa
- CSA Amhara (1998) The 1994 Population and Housing Census for Ethiopia, Results for Amhara Region, Central Statistical Authority, Volume II, Analytical Report, Addis Ababa
- Getahun H and Haimanot R T (1998) Report on new Lathyrism epidemic in Ethiopia, Report submitted to WHO, Department of Internal Medicine, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa
- Guinand Y F (1999a) North Welo – Food Security Situation: Effects on consecutive crop losses on farm households in selected areas, UN-EUE Field Mission Report, 15 to 20 March 1999, Addis Ababa
- Guinand Y F (1999b) North and South Gonder - Food security assessment in parts of the Tekeze River watershed, UN-EUE Field Mission Report, May 26 to June 7 1999, Addis Ababa
- Klinge R (1998) Looming Crisis in South Welo, UN-EUE Field Mission Report, 11 to 18 November, Addis Ababa
- Mach W (1997) Off-Farm Income Opportunities, Field Verification Report for Ibbat Wereda, ORDA - GAA Co-operation Project, IFSP Ibbat/Belessa, Bahir Dar
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- Tekle-Haimanot (1994) Lathyrism, in *Tropical Neurology*, eds. Raad A Shakir, Peter K Newman and Charles M Poser, p. 365-374
- Webb P and von Braun J (1994) Famine and Food Security in Ethiopia; Lessons for Africa, the International Food Policy Research Institute, Chichester

**Abbreviations and NGOs and other organisations operating in North Gonder**

ACSI	Amhara Credit and Saving Institute
CFW	Cash-For-Work
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)
EGS	Employment Generation Schemes
FFW	Food-For-Work
GTZ	Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (German Development Cooperation)
IFSP	Integrated Food Security Programme for Amhara Region
ILDP North Gonder	Integrated Livestock Development Programme for North Gonder; by the Austrian Development Cooperation
LWF	Lutheran World Federation
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)
UNICEF	United Nation Children Fund
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organisation

**Glossary**

<i>dega</i>	Expression for one of the altitudinal agroecological belts in Ethiopia. In Welo between 2500 to > 3000 msl.
<i>kebele</i>	Smallest administrative unit in Ethiopia
<i>kolla</i>	Expression for one of the altitudinal agroecological belts in Ethiopia. In Welo between ~1200 to ~1600 msl.
<i>meher</i>	Expression for the main growing season in parts of Ethiopia
<i>wereda</i>	Local administrative unit
<i>weyna dega</i>	Expression for one of the altitudinal agroecological belts in Ethiopia. In Welo between ~1600 to ~2600 msl.

**DISCLAIMER**

The designations employed and the presentation of material in this document do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever of the UN concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

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