

## **Meher prospects in Tigray and Welo: good harvests anticipated**

*(Mission: 20 – 30 September 1998)*

---

*By Joachim D. Ahrens, Senior Field Officer, and Yves Guinand, Field Officer, UNDP-EUE*

---

### **Introduction**

In late September the Emergencies Unit for Ethiopia (UNDP-EUE) fielded a mission to Tigray Region to assess the current situation of displaced people. While a separate report has been prepared on that subject, the mission also tried to gather some brief summary information on agriculture production prospects in the Region. The same attempt was also made while driving back to Addis Ababa in Woldyia for North Welo Zone and in Dessie for South Welo Zone of Amhara. Important to note at this point is the fact that by the time of the mission's visits, in Tigray as well as in the two zones of Welo, the regional and zonal crop assessments were just about to be undertaken by the local authorities. Therefore, the information provided has to be seen as rather general and preliminary indications of crop prospects. While data collection at regional and zonal level was scheduled to take place during the first half of October, the federal level main *meher* season crop assessment under the leadership of the Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission (DPPC) was due to begin on 26 October with twelve multilaterally composed teams covering Ethiopia's important cropping areas.

### **Tigray: Possibly "the best harvest in ten years"**

Driving from Mekele through Wukro to Adigrat and then west to Adua, Axum, Shire (also known as Inda Selassie) and all the way to Shiraro town, the impressions gathered through "windscreening" were similar to those gathered in the lowlands and highlands of South Tigray Zone: In all the areas visited crops looked, considering the differences due to different agroclimatic and altitude conditions, very promising. Even locations that often present a rather arid image were, in late September, covered with lush, green vegetation. In Eastern Tigray Zone, as well in a few of the other areas, some farmers were already seen harvesting early-matured crops of *teff* and barley.

Focusing on Central Tigray Zone, the DPPB in Axum indicated that rains had started relatively late in June. By the beginning of July, however, the main season *kiremt* rains were well established and were very favourable in amount and distribution. While the scarcity of rains towards the end of the *belg* had negatively affected the planting of long cycle crops, the abundance of rain later on led to a promising outlook. The Central Zone expects "a very good yield", according to the DPPB, with the harvest of *teff*, barley and wheat (the latter in the lowland *kolla* areas) expected to start in the last week of October, while the harvest of sorghum, finger millet and maize (the latter being of minor significance) is expected to take place from November through January.

Looking at the region in general, the Tigray Bureau of Agriculture and Natural Resources in Mekele confirmed that overall agricultural production prospects indeed looked very promising. The Bureau Head, Berhane Hailu, pointed out: "The coming harvest could be the best of the last ten years." The information for Central Zone, provided above, applies by and

large for the entire region: Even though rains started late, causing in some areas substitution of long cycle crops such as maize and sorghum by short cycle crops like teff, wheat, barley and pulses, the amount and distribution of the rains later in the year were above normal. As the Regional Head of Agriculture put it: "That is absolutely unique – in the end, not even one village suffered from rain shortages."

In the commercial farming areas of western Tigray significantly less cotton and sesame were planted this year due to the late onset of the rains. But as a substitute significantly more sorghum was cultivated, hence increasing the traditional western potential for local purchases. The bureau estimates that in the western commercial areas up to 90 per cent of the crops could consist of sorghum. According to the bureau head, this could lead to a situation where overproduction could eventually pose marketing problems.

In addition to favourable rains, the absence of pest-infestations and diseases so far (e.g. armyworms, shooflies, leaf-rust) represents another positive aspect enhancing good expectations. Negative factors like increasing problems of *striga* affecting certain sorghum areas and localised flooding due to very heavy precipitation (in Southern Zone about 700 hectares were flooded) will not affect this overall favourable outlook. Even in eastern areas, surplus production cannot be ruled out, possibly further increasing the potential for local purchases by aid agencies which would eventually have positive effects on the local economy.

Tigray Region, which has about one million hectares of arable land in total, is also successfully expanding its agriculture extension programme. While in the year 1997, 210,725 participating farmers used some 127,000 demonstration plots, the number was increased to 180,000 plots with 266,000 participants this year, the bureau head emphasised. Due to the expansion of extension services, considerable yield increases have been recorded since the programme started in 1994. *Teff*, for example, used to produce a yield of 4 to 5 quintals per hectare (1 quintal = 100 kg) before the introduction of the extension programme. Now, the regional average is 12 quintals, while reportedly some especially successful farmers even achieve significantly more than the average yield.

### **North Welo: Optimism despite of localised flooding**

The short *belg* season was generally a failure in the North Welo Zone of Amhara Region, and the main *meher* season also started with problems. Especially in higher altitudes, excessive rain led to stunting in the initial and vegetative crop stages. This retardation in crop development, however, might be compensated if the rains extend up to mid-October.

According to data collected by the North Welo Bureau of Agriculture, high rainfall was observed in eight weredas during the month of August, accompanied by hail, floods and landslides in some areas. Preliminary estimates indicate that significant crop damage occurred on some 6,000 hectares, affecting some 12,000 households, particularly in the weredas of Kobo, Gubalafto, Bugna and Gidan. The final magnitude of the damage had not yet been assessed by the time of the mission's visit.

Despite the problems mentioned above, the zonal Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Bureau (DPPB) in Woldyia was, at the end of September, optimistic. While in some areas farmers were able to start harvesting in late September and early October, the main harvest is expected to take place in November. Since the impact of the localised floods had yet to be analysed and with the zonal and federal level crop assessment pending, the acting head of the bureau was not in the position to provide quantitative information. However, the DPPB expects for the coming year in the *meher* dependant weredas a reduction of the relief beneficiaries who numbered 446,929 people this year.

## **South Welo: This *meher* expected to be better than last year's**

In South Welo, experts of the DPPB mentioned a similar pattern as in North Welo: Despite problems induced by excessive rains, expectations are generally positive.

While reportedly the rains did not negatively affect crop development in the lowlands, the excessive rain led to landslides and waterlogging in a number of locations at higher altitudes, resulting in stunting of the crops. In some western weredas, maize and sorghum also appeared to be affected by pests (stalk borer).

According to preliminary findings obtained from the zonal Department of Agriculture, out of a total area of 376,390 hectares cultivated, 11,805 hectares had suffered crop losses due to excessive rains, hailstorms, landslides and waterlogging. Some 330 animals were also lost and the livelihood of an estimated 22,800 people affected. The weredas which suffered most from adverse weather conditions were: Were Ilu, Dese Zuraya, Kalu, Tenta, Wegedi, Ambassel, Kelela and Kutaber.

Another concern expressed by the DPPB is that in *woina dega* (mid-highland) areas a growing number of farmers were planting *Guaya* (grass pea, also called chickling pea or vetch – *Lathyrus sativus*) which leads, if consumed in excessive amounts and not carefully prepared, to neurotoxic disorders with finally irreversible crippling effects (*Lathyrism*). Reportedly, farmers were resorting to this crop - after having lost the first sown crops – because the *Guaya* seeds are relatively cheap to purchase.

While characterising the 1997/98 *meher* season and this year's *belg* season as "bad", the DPPB expects, despite the problems mentioned above, the coming *meher* harvest to be "at least significantly better than last year". Without being in the position to quantify the overall expectations as assessments are pending, the DPPB, however, anticipates a reduction of the number of relief beneficiaries for next year. Currently this number stands at 616,486 for South Welo Zone.

As the DPPB pointed out, relief resources for the last *meher* victims were "insufficient" while the bureau was "completely lacking resources" to support the most needy 114,633 victims of the failed *belg*. The only stocks currently available are earmarked to support returnees from Eritrea. On 30 September, 5,283 returnees were registered in Dessie, with the number expected to rise to "over 7,000 soon". (At federal level, the number of returnees in South Welo officially stood at 3,791 people as of 24 September.) One of the problems the DPPB is facing in this context is that significant numbers of poor people are trying to pose as returnees in order to benefit from government support. One of the key methods during the screening process to establish the eligibility of returnees is checking on the existence of an Eritrea-issued identity card.

### **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.

12 October, 1998

UNDP-EUE  
P.O. Box 5580  
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Tel: 251-1-51 10 28/29  
Fax: 251-1- 51 12 92  
E-mail: undp-eue@telecom.net.et