

Field Assessment Mission Report: Wolayita Area, North Omo Zone

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Synopsis

The purpose of the mission, undertaken from 17 to 21 August, 1999, was to carry out a rapid assessment of the prevailing food situation and follow up on-going relief operations (by Government, NGOs and Churches) in the Wolayita area.

This year, the North Omo Zone of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNPR) is facing a serious food shortage as result of drought. Drought conditions have been brought about through delayed and uneven distribution of *belg* rains (February–May) and failure of the seasonal light showers (October/November) locally known as *sapia*, which are vital for easing land preparation and planting of sweet potato in the area. This food shortage was further aggravated by an outbreak of Armyworm (*Spodoptera exempta*) which occurred from April – June depending on the areas visited.

Out of the 22 weredas of North Omo Zone 16 of them are affected and requiring humanitarian assistance in various forms. Based on an assessment carried out by the zonal authorities in mid July the number of weredas affected has increased from 10 to 16 with a total of 414,247 victims out of which 162,931 (39%) are seeking immediate relief assistance with the remaining figure subject to close monitoring of their food situation.

Chronic and acute malnutrition cases (kwashiorkor and marasmus) have been reported from the weredas affected. Cereal price has increased, terms of trade is declining in particular in the lowland areas of Wolayita.

Despite the severity of the problem, the responses made so far to address the situation are not adequate and not in proportion to the scale of the problem. Hence, the crisis remains real and the shortage of grains, supplementary food and medical drugs in these areas requires further urgent and effective intervention.

The *meher* cropping season also seems gloomy due to an early cessation of the main, *kiremt* rains in the lowland areas of North Omo. Unless the rains resume, the food security situation of North Omo weredas will be even more precarious.

Methodology

Drawing on a range of rapid rural assessment techniques, primary and secondary information sources, farm and household visits, direct observations, transect walks and interviews with farmers, Development Agents and officials were employed to generate the information.

Background information

Wolayita is recognized for both its fertility and population pressure - a combination that can deceive people who are not familiar with the area. During times of food stress, the term "*green famine*" is often used to describe the situation seen. In recent years there has been a progressive increase in food insecure households and production per capita is said to be steadily diminishing. This is attributed to an acute shortage of land due to population pressure, natural resources degradation, erratic rainfall and drought, crop and livestock pests and diseases coupled with human diseases all leading to a much reduced asset base and precarious food security.

There are two cropping seasons in Wolayita; *belg* and *meher*, with the former accounting for 60–70% of annual production. The farming system in Wolayita could be considered as more *gardening* than arable farming; small quantities but wide range of crops are produced at homesteads with an intensive inter-cropping of annual and perennial crops with frequent cultivation by traditional hand tools.

The findings of this report depicts that there exists severe shortage of food in Wolayita emanating from the unfavorable climatic conditions and a range of socio-economic constraints.

Causes of the problem

1. Unfavorable climatic conditions

Failure of light showers in October/November 1998. This short rain which is locally termed as *sapia* is commonly used for land preparation and sweet potato planting. The failure of the rains resulted in to no/poor harvest of sweet potato, the main food source in the period February-May, normally identified as a hungry period. Consequently, instead, households were compelled to resort to *enset* (false banana) which is important in maintaining the food security equilibrium in the area during times of stress. Apparently, the current scarcity of food might have reduced the available stock of mature *enset* in gardens leaving behind immature *enset* stands that should be left for several more years before being ready for harvest. This makes the food security situation of Wolayita more precarious.

The delay and uneven distribution of belg rains (February-May). This year's *belg* rains were delayed by at least two months leading to the late planting of *belg* crops and therefore a delayed harvest (September/October). This late planting further affects production in two ways: reducing crop productivity and reducing area planted by impeding the traditional double cropping practices. In normal years, green (immature) maize is ready for harvest in June/July, thereby releasing farm plots for further cropping. However, this year the maize has not been ready for harvest, even in August/early September.

The unfavorable climatic conditions did not permit enough moisture for forage/grazing replenishment thereby exacerbating the existing fodder shortage in the area and eventually affecting performance and resistance of livestock against recurrent diseases such as trypanosomiasis, Foot-and-Mouth and black-leg.

The *belg* season is a period when substantial physical labour is required to carry out agricultural activities. The failure of *sapia* rains and the delay and uneven distribution of *belg* rains this year have affected the readiness and capacity of farmers for *meher* cropping. This

is because farmers have exhausted their limited food stocks and other assets in the course of attempting to deal with the prolonged hungry period.

2. Pest outbreak

The outbreak of Armyworm (*Spodoptera exempta*) in April/May/June damaged immature cereal food and forage crops thereby adding to expectations of a poor harvest. Due to the limited and inefficient control of the pest, mostly due to logistics problem, it re-occurred in most areas which gave the pest additional chance to further damage crops and force replanting.

Although there is insufficient information regarding the scale of damage and extent of yield reduction on both food and forage crops, the incidence of Armyworm has clearly been a significant factor in suppressing overall production this year.

Main season rainfall and cropping prospects

Rainfall received in July and August (until the third week) in the lowland areas of North Omo has been low and inadequate. During the current field visit the rain had stopped for about a week in most places causing some anxiety among farmers. Farmers are particularly concerned because *meher* crops (*teff* and haricot bean) and the long cycle crops like maize are suffering from moisture shortage particularly in the lowlands. Surprisingly, *teff* is being sown just on dry soil in the hope that the rain will resume.

Rainfall data recorded for Damot Weyde wereda (lowland dominated) for instance, reads 41.2 mm (9 days) from July to mid-August this year while it was 187 mm for the same time last year.

The likely trend of the food security situation in Wolayita

Due to the expected poor *belg* harvest (covers 60-70% of the annual production) and already depleted food stock plus the likely stoppage of the *meher* rains, unless it resumes soon, the fragile food security situation of Wolayita area will worsen.

To this effect, the potential consequences might be: shortfall in food supply; severe shortage of seeds and planting materials for the forthcoming planting seasons; inability of farmers to cover their social and financial obligations (tax and loan repayments); reduction in students turnout due to lack of schooling fees and associated requirements; and, above all, the psychological trauma of households.

Indicators of the problem

- Malnutrition in children (kwashiorkor and marasmus) due to poor nutrition status.
- Market prices: the price of cereals in Kindo Koyisha wereda for last December was Birr 61 per 100 kgs but escalated to Birr 174-180 from February-May which is the hungry period in the area. By the same token, the price of fuel wood in Damot Weyde for instance was 10 Birr/donkey load last year in August while it has decreased to 2.5 Birr for the same month this year. In general, the terms of trade (ratio of grain purchased/shoat) is reported to be declining.

- Consumption of immature *enset*, sweet potato, and early harvest of green maize when it is not ready.
- Depleted food stock in households.
- Poor performance of crops at field level, ineffective setting of cobs in maize, for instance.

The relief response to date

Despite the severity of the problem, it appears measures so far employed to reverse the situation have not been adequate. Nevertheless, there are important efforts being made by the regional government, NGOs and churches working in North Omo to expand and increase relief assistance to the affected populations.

Birr 3 million has been allotted by the regional government to help compensate farmers for the unpromising *belg* harvest through provision of seeds and planting materials. Furthermore, the region has allocated 1,266 MT of maize and wheat which was distributed in July for the affected weredas. Mekane Yesus and the Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) provided 2,276 MT and 5,000 MT of grain respectively for 9 affected weredas. Meanwhile, SOS Sahel has pledged some 3,000 MT of food grain for affected Peasants Associations (PAs) in Kindo Koyisha wereda. Inter-Aid France also secured 4.59 MT of supplementary food (Faffa) for children under five, lactating and pregnant mothers in 22 PAs of the same wereda.

Specific features of the visited weredas

Kindo Koyisha

Kindo Koyisha wereda is located 43 kilometers from Sodo on the road to Jimma town. The total population of the wereda is estimated to be 147,000 in 32 PAs.

Food security research undertaken by SOS Sahel in 1993 indicated that only 6% of the households could be classified as food secure in Kindo Koyisha. This year, all the PAs are affected and the wereda is considered as among the seriously drought affected weredas of North Omo. The causes of the problem are similar to the factors already cited. A total of 38,000 people are identified as victims of this adverse situation. At the same time, 6,600 children under-five have faced chronic and acute forms of malnutrition: kwashiorkor and marasmus cases.

Until mid-August 27,288 people were provided food amounting to 2,346 MT with three rounds of distribution. At the same time, 6.49 MT of supplementary food, Faffa (4.59 MT pledged by Inter Aid France), is currently under distribution to 4,000 children in 22 PAs identified as priority areas. SOS Sahel has requested a loan of 3,000 MT of grain from the Emergency Food Security Reserve on the basis of confirmed pledges with the loan to be used for food-for-work and free food distributions to some 8,000 households in the wereda from September to November, 1999.

The regional government, meanwhile, has allocated Birr 34,000 for the purchase and distribution of seeds and vines/cuttings of sweet potato to drought-affected farmers.

Bolosso Sore

The wereda is situated 18 kilometers from Sodo on the way to Addis Ababa via Hosaina town. 40,000 people residing in 40 PAs are adversely affected by food shortages among whom, 5,462 beneficiaries have received food aid in 25 PAs. Mekane Yesus have allocated 500 MT of cereal for 21 PAs and distribution is on-going. At the same time, 10 MT of grain from 1998 stocks held by the local Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Bureau has also been distributed to victims. Reportedly, 10 MT of Faffa has been distributed to children under five but is considered insufficient given the scale of the problem in Bolosso Sore.

WFP is running conservation and feeder roads construction activities in 10 PAs in collaboration with the wereda office of agriculture which could also contribute to mitigating the current food shortage in the area.

Humbo

Humbo wereda is situated 20 kilometers from Sodo town on the way to Arba Minch. It comprises 30 PAs which are all considered drought-affected with a total needy population of 32,000 people. In August, Mekane Yesus provided 400 MT of maize for free food distribution to 31,864 people. The regional government, meanwhile, has allocated 205 MT of maize for 30 PAs along with 541 MT of maize taken from stocks carried over from 1998.

4.3 MT of supplementary food has been distributed to 1,300 children in 17 PAs. World Vision International is also playing a key role in generating information and procuring and distributing supplementary food to the affected people in its project area.

Sweet potato vines distribution has taken place to 17,000 farmers, 18.5 MT of haricot bean to 2,466 beneficiaries, 5.2 MT of chick pea to 693 farmers and 6.7 MT of teff seed to 984 farmers in 29 PAs. However, there has been little rain since July.

Currently, there are no stocks either of food or other relief materials in the wereda to be distributed to the affected people and during the field visit children were observed begging on the roadside.

Damot Weyde

This wereda encompasses 48 PAs of which 33 are considered drought-affected having 22,720 beneficiaries who had received food in May and June.

As a means of combating the problem, Mekane Yesus has so far provided 300 MT of food grain to some 25,000 people residing in 33 PAs distributed as a single round. Meanwhile, 100 MT of grain was distributed to 13 PAs from the previous stocks held by the government. In addition, 15.9 MT of supplementary food has been distributed to some of the affected PAs. As an input to food-for-work activities, 168 MT grain was also distributed. To compensate crop yield reductions, funds have been allotted by the wereda for the provision of sweet potato cuttings and haricot bean seeds to affected farmers.

Lowland PAs of the wereda received very low rainfall in that starting from July to mid-August only 41.20 mm of rain was recorded. This is not enough to support good crop performance. Maize (at flowering stage) and haricot bean (at 4 leaf to about flowering stage) crops are suffering from moisture stress while teff crop is being sown on dry seed beds.

Conclusions

As a result of the delayed *belg* rains and prolonged dry period, the 1999 season harvest could be very minimal, particularly as much of the maize crop has been depleted through being harvested green. *Meher* cropping in the lowland areas of North Omo is also looking bleak as the area did not receive enough precipitation, especially in July and August when teff and haricot bean crops were badly in need of moisture for germination and subsequent growth. This situation requires close monitoring

It is important that additional food relief be mobilised together with supplementary foods and drugs for the most seriously affected areas. While the dismantling of the DPPB appears to have resulted in a serious reduction in relief management capacity at the zonal level, the weredas appear ready to handle the targeting and distribution tasks once the resources are made available. This is because there still exist relief focal points within the administration starting from wereda down to PA level. In all the weredas visited committees have been identified for each PA where assistance is needed.

Recommendations

Short term

- Where possible, general rations (cereals) and supplementary food for children and pregnant and lactating mothers should be dispatched side by side for better impact of the food aid. Current food distributions should continue until the end of December when the present *meher* crops are expected to be harvested.
- There is critical shortage of pediatric drugs in the affected areas. Hence, it is urgently required to address the supply of these drugs.
- Adequate funds should be allocated for the purchase and distribution of seeds/vines for the late planting of crops like chickpea and sweet potato.
- Continuous monitoring of the food security situation is essential.

Mid term

- Sweet potato is the main food source next to *enset* and maize in Wolayita and is very important in that it fills the February-May hungry season. Consideration should therefore be given to establishing sweet potato multiplication sites in different weredas that could be used as source of planting materials in case of any shortfall.
- With the regional authorities, review institutional support to the Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Bureau with a view to re-building its capacity to co-ordinate and manage relief operations in the zone.
- Given the predictable/cyclical nature of the current situation, establish a means of developing and placing in readiness project activities that could be used for temporary employment/income generation during periods of acute food insecurity.
- Strengthen the remote sensing and forecasting capacity regarding migratory pests such as Armyworms. Prevention is better than cure!!

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Annex I.

