

## Field Trip Report: Eastern Amhara Region & South Tigray Zone (February 28 - March 9 1998)

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### **The start of the *belg* season**

Many areas of the *dega* (highland) and, to a lesser extent, *weyna dega* (mid-highland) agroclimatic zones received early rains in December and/or January, which farmers used for early planting of *belg* crops. The following dry spell delayed the normal development of plants in many places. During the field visit, part of the early planted crops observed were still at their initial growing stage.

The seasonal *belg* rains generally started on time, with some delays to the south (Oromiya Zone) and in parts of the *dega* areas. The eastern escarpment generally received better rains than the central and western part of the area. Planting has been completed in areas receiving good rain coverage and is on-going in places with recent rain falls, while it is hampered or even stopped in some *belg* border areas (for details see zonal description).

During the time of the mission, rains had intensified and spread more widely over the main *belg*-producing areas with prospects for a rather good start to the season.

*Oromiya Zone:* The exceptional rains at the end of last year have been used by *belg* producing farmers to plant maize. Land preparation of the remaining area is completed and planting has resumed, mainly for teff. Local authorities stated that since the unusual rains at the end of last year, only one good rainy day had been registered by the end of February and that commencement of the normal *belg* rains were delayed by around three weeks.

*South Welo:* Driving through parts of Dessie Zuria, Were Ilu and Legambo weredas, the situation appeared very good with most areas of *dega* and *wurch* (frost-prone areas) planted and crops at different vegetative stages, according to planting time. Turning at Gimba town to the north towards Tenta and Mekdela weredas, situated on *belg* border areas to the north and west, the situation changes radically. While planting was on the way in the southern tip of Tenta, land preparation followed a slow path in the rest of the area, with farmers complaining about lack of rain. Low coverage and reduced harvest is anticipated for these two weredas.

In the other *belg* producing weredas, agricultural activities are at a normal stage. Tehuledere and Ambassel recently suffered from heavy rainfall, locally combined with hail, inflicting some crop damage and minor land slides. Young plants became stuck to the ground and many farmers were observed in the fields, occupied with a fastidious work freeing the leaves from the soil.

*North Welo:* In the highlands rain started in January, followed by a dry spell. Some planting has taken place, but many farmers complain about the lack of sufficient rains, a fact which has been confirmed by the zonal department of agriculture. In *weyna dega* and *kolla* (lowland) areas the rain started in February and farmers are busy with land preparation and

planting. Until now the *belg* rains are not evenly distributed and the eastern part of the zone is comparatively better-off than the western part.

Driving over the Chinese road from Woldiya up to the junction leading to Muja and Lalibella, most of the highland area is planted but somewhat slow in growth, awaiting adequate rainfall. Crossing Gedan wereda, the *belg* area north of Muja up to the ridge dividing the Tekeze from the Kobo watershed, only a few fields are planted and farmers have stopped land preparation for lack of rain, whereas the highlands of the eastern escarpment are mostly planted, with land preparation on-going on the remaining fields.

*South Tigray Zone:* The *belg* rains are reported to have started on time during the second half of February. According to the zonal department of agriculture, over half of the *belg* area is ploughed and partly planted. Prospects look good and farmers are rather positive.

Major parts of the eastern lowlands (Alamata, Raya Azebo) are still occupied by crops seeded during the unseasonable rains of last October/November. Accordingly, normal *belg* production in these areas will be lower than usual and when the current crop is harvested the fields will be mainly used for *meher* crops.

*All Visited Zones:* Due to the generally bad *meher* harvest 1997, vulnerable households are facing food shortages and even better-off farmers expect problems in the near future. In Dessie, the mission observed women and children from Kobo, who have come all the way to the former capital of the old Welo province to beg. The same phenomenon has been reported from Woldiya. As usual at the beginning of the year, relief needs are generally covered by carry-over stocks from the previous year, whereas new food supplies are not yet available. The resulting partial food shortage forces needy people to sometimes resort to exceptional measures to survive.

### **Outcome of unseasonally planted crops**

With the unseasonable rains of October/November 1997, some farmers of *belg* producing areas from *dega* to *kolla* opportunistically planted a range of crops which are now reaching maturity or are ready for harvest. Subject to lack of moisture at critical stages and to attacks from various diseases (e.g. mildew on pulses, rust on cereals), as could be observed in different places, harvest results are often disappointing. The impact of such crops on food security is therefore only of limited importance, restricted to few localities.

The Kobo/Alamata plain is the only place where, after a near to complete *meher* failure, the exceptional rains of October/November last year are expected to have a significantly positive impact. Large areas were planted mainly with maize, but also sorghum and some other crops of less importance. According to the zonal departments of agriculture of North Welo and South Tigray, the unseasonally planted crops cover an area of over 33,000 hectares with the following break down: 3,472 ha in Kobo, 13,995 ha in Alamata and 15,755 ha in Raya Azebo weredas.

Maize fields along the eastern escarpment from Kobo to Mehoni look very good and farmers are satisfied with the expected harvest. Sorghum fields look equally good, but being the only fields at maturing stage far and wide, an exceptional number of grain eating birds have established themselves in the area. Farmers complain that they have to mobilise their whole family from dawn to dusk, trying to protect the coming harvest from being eaten by the birds. Despite these efforts, pre-harvest losses are expected to be high for sorghum.

According to a zonal pre-harvest assessment, yield estimates are very low as compared to expected, with only 19% for Alamata and 32% for Raya Azebo weredas. Reasons given for this anticipated poor performance were decreasing rainfall and reduced irrigation possibilities in the eastern parts of Raya Azebo and in Alamata wereda. Despite the fact that the mission could not go further east into the plain due to bad road conditions, pre-harvest estimates are considered to be somewhat too pessimistic.

### **General situation of the rural population & prospects for the younger generation**

When talking with farmers about the actual climatic situation, crop and livestock performances, etc., the conversation leads sometimes to more basic issues like rural livelihoods and future prospects. After several years of repeated climatic hazards, low production and subsequent distress sales of productive assets, coupled with ever shrinking landholdings, farmer subsistence is gradually eroding and the vicious circle of impoverishment is tightening.

With poor prospects in agriculture due to the lack of arable land and hardly any alternative employment for youngsters, even for the more fortunate with a better education (up to twelve grade), the rural youth generally live a marginal life in nearby towns, with many boys becoming vagabonds and girls ending up in prostitution. When asked about the future of their children, farmers become hesitant, finally saying that they generally suppress their thoughts about the future, as prospects look so very bleak. Many farmers stop sending their children to school in fear of them leading a useless and miserable life in town, preferring them to share the meagre existence within the rural context.

Efforts are being made by the Amhara regional administration to improve the chances of paid employment for those seeking work, by setting up vocational training centres at different locations. Likewise, Terre des Hommes, Lausanne, have set up a professional hotel school at the Jari Children's Village in South Welo, who's first trainees will graduate in July of this year. Similarly, the South Tigray administration have opened a technical school in Maychew. It is hoped, that these commendable efforts in the right direction will be followed by many more initiatives in order to consistently improve employment prospects for the youth and likewise relieve the overstressed agricultural sector.

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