

Looming Crisis in South Welo

Field Trip Report: November 11-18 1998

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*After the 1984/85 disaster
The evil of famine has come back to visit us
Acquainted with the poor he knows from before
He is caught by surprise by the poverty of the former rich*

This rough translation of a poem circulating in the rural area of the South Welo highlands gives a clear impression of farmers' perceptions of recent history, the actual situation and future prospects. In the light of a generally better than expected 98 *meher* performance, the pessimistic forecast of the people might at first seem surprising, if not exaggerated. But, as will be explained hereafter, the situation in South Welo is in fact alarming and a future disaster is anticipated if adequate preventive measures are not taken soon.

1998 Relief Activities and Impact on Rural Population

By the end of 1997 over 600,000 people of South Welo were considered to be in need of relief for a period of up to nine months, requiring some 73,900 M/Ts of relief food. In addition, the EWS report, "1998 *Belg* Production & Food Prospects" (August 1998) identified 486,600 people needing assistance from August to November 1998, requiring additional relief food of 16,330 tons.

Up to mid November, South Welo received and distributed some 28,635 tons of relief food, representing less than 40% of the initial requirements, while the additional needs, resulting from a poor 1998 *belg* performance, have never been considered. The overall performance of relief activities as compared to the total of anticipated needs for 1998 stands at a mere 32%. According to the zonal DPPD, taking into account the serious shortfall in the availability of relief food, all distressed weredas were assisted for four months with Sayint and Mekdela weredas receiving food for five months, reaching a total of 511,000 people. An additional 8,000 people of Tehuledere wereda (the initial request was for 24,000 people) got relief food for the month of September after an exceptionally high number of farmers were observed selling their livestock assets.

Confronted with the poor relief response, farmers, after having exhausted their usual coping strategies, were forced to gradually resort to exceptional measures. In the highland areas (especially Mekdela & Tenta weredas) the poorer segment of the population depended heavily on the collection and consumption of wild plants like the annual weed *aluma*, whose tobacco-sized seeds are used to prepare an *ingera* like food, and *chachate* (monkey food), whose bulbs are roasted for consumption. *Aluma* seeds are also being stored by farmers anticipating future food shortages and until the recent start of the harvest were even sold on the market, fetching 3 birr for 5 cups. These wild plants are only eaten during very bad times, as was the case during the 1984/85 famine. In other areas, especially at lower elevations (*weyna dega & kolla*), many farmers were forced to sell their future *meher* harvest on credit, in order to meet their essential daily needs.

Against the background of bad agricultural seasons in 1997, not to mention the many preceding meagre years, and another *belg* failure combined with very scarce relief resources in 1998, the situation has deteriorated to an extent far beyond the harsh conditions of last year (described by Joachim D. Ahrens in a UNDP-EUE field report, August 97).

The actual developments show, on one hand the accuracy of the recent South Welo relief need estimates, while, on the other hand, highlighting the stark conclusion that even the most sophisticated early warning system, combined with accurate harvest assessments, become meaningless, as long as adequate relief responses are not available.

Actual Situation

The current harvesting of the *meher* crops has temporarily eased the food situation. The harvest is expected to be quite good in *kolla* and part of *weyna dega* agroclimatic zones despite a Bollworm infestation on sorghum; a pest farmers say they have not observed for over 50 years. Despite the assistance of NGOs, the provision of insecticides has been insufficient to successfully combat the pest. The infestation has been most severe in the weredas of Kalu, Werebabu, Tehuledere, Ambassel and part of Dessie Zuria.

The occurrence of very intensive rains during the *meher* season, mainly in *dega* and part of *weyna dega* agroclimatic zones, has inflicted damage on standing crops through water logging, flooding and land slides and caused substantial yield reductions. According to the zonal department of agriculture, the most affected weredas are Debre Sina, Wegedi, Kelala and, to a lesser extent, Jama and Wereilu. In the *weyna dega* area of the three first mentioned weredas much of the *teff*, as well as parts of the wheat crop, have been replaced by vetch (*Vicia sativa*, causing irreversible paralysis similar to lathyrism when consumed exclusively & excessively during hunger periods) and chick peas. Other weredas like Mekdela have also registered heavy rains and, according to the wereda administration, nearly 20% of the cultivated area was damaged.

Despite the late onset of the *kremt* rains and the damage caused by heavy rains, pests and diseases, all in all the 1998 *meher* harvest is generally expected to be better than that of last year. The recent pre-harvest assessment has identified 314,211 people in need of relief assistance, roughly half the number of beneficiaries of last year. Given this kind of reduction in beneficiary numbers one could get the impression that the situation has eased or even improved compared to last year, with no major problems ahead. The reality shows a somewhat different picture.

People in the lowlands suffer from an epidemic outbreak of *woba* (malaria) and *tekmat* (diarrhoea). While malaria is endemic in the lowlands, especially during and after the rainy season, and the widespread lack of access to potable water is notorious in rural areas, the high morbidity and mortality rate this year is a clear indicator of the weak condition people are in. A recent nutritional survey done by the wereda health office of Kutaber confirms the actual trend (60-70% of children under five malnourished).

According to the zonal health department, all weredas of South Welo are affected by the malaria outbreak (mainly caused by *Plasmodium falsiparum*), but the situation is most serious in Kelala, Wegedi, Sayint, Mekdela, Werebabu and Kalu. The health department has sent its medical staff in the field to treat people and try to contain the epidemic but there is a crucial lack of sufficient medicines and a high incidence of resistance to available drugs, especially for chloroquine and to a lesser extent Fansidar. A previous assessment in Kombolcha has already revealed a high resistance to chloroquine, which is still the main drug available.

Extensively used for more than twenty years, DDT is still the main insecticide available for preventive sprayings, even so it was banned from the world market over two decades ago for its cumulative toxicity and its efficacy has become more than doubtful. Spraying campaigns, wherever undertaken, have therefore little to no effect on preventing massive outbreaks of malaria.

According to a zonal official, recently back from a field mission to Kelala wereda, people are enclosed in their houses with their animals, receiving no help, dying daily at a rate of sometimes over ten people a day. Too weak to bury their victims, it is the people from the highlands who help to dig the graves. Similar accounts have been told by farmers of Mekdela wereda. In less affected areas, still several people die weekly.

The zonal health department is in desperate need of efficient drugs and insecticides in sufficient quantities, in order to successfully contain the ongoing epidemic.

Acute diarrhoea generally caused by contaminated water has mainly occurred in Kalu, Kelala, Sayint and Mekdela weredas. According to the zonal health department, the outbreak has been controlled, despite some resistance to available drugs.

The lack of an adequate relief response in 1998 has inflicted severe and avoidable human suffering and has resulted in the further impoverishment of many farmer households who have been forced to sell important productive assets and even part of their anticipated harvests for a low price in order to satisfy their daily food needs. This situation will further exacerbate rehabilitation needs, which, like in the past, might never be satisfied.

Future Prospects

The current harvest, expected to be low in *dega* and part of *weyna dega* and reasonably good in the remaining areas, will improve the nutritional status of people and subsequently their resistance to endemic diseases, but those already suffering from malaria will only be saved if efficient drugs are quickly made available.

But the harvest period is also the time for loan repayment, taxation (reportedly to be increased from 20 to 60 birr per farm household!) and other expenditures. With many farmers being highly indebted through small credits from better-off farmers and merchants, selling the anticipated harvest on credit, government credit schemes to help farmers improve their income through animal fattening, etc., all, unfortunately granted during a high price period, the *meher* harvest is expected to be quickly exhausted. With only limited off- and non-farm income possibilities and widely exhausted productive assets due to previous distress sales, many farmers will soon depend on relief assistance for survival. In this light, the anticipated number of beneficiaries by the pre-harvest assessment (314,211 people) will be insufficient.

Should the 1999 relief response once again fall short, South Welo may face disaster as predicted by the farmers in the poem quoted at the beginning of this report.

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