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EUE-UNSO-Field Report SNNPR No. 3

Konso Special Woreda Condition Serious

Assessment Mission: 28-30 June 2003

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The objective of the mission was to conduct a quick field assessment and follow up on the status of relief operations (by Government, NGOs and Churches) in Konso Special Woreda, SNNPR. The assessment covered both the lowland and midland areas of the woreda with farm visits, direct observations, transect walks, interviews with farmers, local experts and officials. This report provides an overview of the food security and of humanitarian responses in the woreda. **It is provided for information purposes only and is in no way to be considered as a comprehensive assessment of the situation in SNNPR.**

1 Background

Konso Special Woreda (main town Karate, 44 kebeles) is one of eight Special Woredas of Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNPR) about 600 kilometers south of Addis Ababa. Total population: aprox. 250,000. Land area: 1800 km2. Population density: aprox. 130 people/km2.

The arable land holding size per household is estimated to be less than one hectare. More than 50% of the farmers cultivate less than one-fourth of a hectare. The livelihood of Konso people, (well over 90% of the population), is dependent on rain fed agriculture. Traditionally they practice quite sophisticated traditional soil and water conservation. However, even in the best years less than 30% of the population can be considered as self-sufficient in food production, hence external assistance is the norm and not the exception.

Konso lies at an altitude of between 500 to 2,500 meters above sea level, with a landscape that is characterized by a network of intersecting valleys. The valley bottoms are relatively rich in alluvial soils supporting a range of different crops and vegetation. Overall, Konso is classified as lying in a semi-arid ecological zone with erratic rainfall and poor soil fertility.

The average annual rainfall of the area is 570mm. The climate is known for its long dry spells punctuated by unreliable and poor rains. 57% of the annual rainfall of Konso is concentrated in three months (March, April and May) and 62% of this is received in April.

There are two cropping seasons in Konso: *Belg* (February-May) accounting for 65-75% of the annual crop production and *Meher* (*Hagaya*). *Belg* crops include maize, sorghum, teff, haricot bean, barley and wheat. In Konso, sorghum is harvested twice: the main harvest comes from the *Belg* production while a secondary *Meher/hagaya* harvest in October/November is obtained from ratooning (allowing new growth from the rootstock left in the ground).

Konso is known for its industrious people who are skilled in carving sculptures out of wood. The people are also held in high regard for their traditional natural-resource conservation-practices and rural road construction works in very rugged and difficult terrain. Konso people are also known for their prudence in saving surplus food stocks for bad times.

The Konso farmers are experts in intricate, diverse and intensive inter-cropping and relay cropping techniques. Certainly in Ethiopia, and possibly in the world, Konso is an area where the most intensive kind of intercropping is practiced, not only due to severe land shortage, but also to avert the risk of recurrent crop failure emanating from recurrent unfavorable climatic conditions and related factors. Over 15 food crops are planted at one single time on the same small plots of farmland. This enables the farmers to have meager/small but sequential harvests from each of the crops planted[1].

Agricultural practices like fallowing and crop rotation are unthinkable in Konso due to land shortage. More than 60% of the farmers cultivate their land continuously without fallowing, the result being a steady decline in soil fertility. Low agricultural productivity is a reality faced by the majority of farmers. This has contributed to low capital accumulation and increasing rural impoverishment. The food insecurity in Konso is chronic. It accelerated economic poverty aggravated by the usual crop failure or inadequate harvest.

Konso is an area that has suffered repeated episodes of drought and famine and since the 1950s, drought induced famines have hit Konso and the immediate area about once every ten years. In more recent years, the frequency and intensity of such occurrences appear to have increased markedly.

For the last six years, the people of Konso have faced severe food insecurity. Recurrent erratic and unfavourable climatic conditions, crop pests, human (malaria) and livestock diseases have undermined the capacity of the farming community to feed itself, despite the peoples' solid and dependable courage and effort to achieve sustainable production and livelihoods.

[1] Konso farmers, particularly in the midland areas, intercrop/plant many varieties of food and cash crops as a means of risk aversion including; cabbage, Irish Potato, barley/wheat/teff, haricot beans (varieties of them), maize, amaranths, millet, Sunflower, pigeon pea, safflower, sorghum, sweet potato, coffee, cotton, Khat and many more wild foods-used as a survival strategy in bad times. The maturity and harvesting of the intercropped crops follow the same order of citation herein. The only crops not intercropped are barley, wheat and teff because of their similar edaphic and nutrition requirements.

2 Weather condition and crop performance: late rains, moisture stress

The onset of the 2003 belg rains in March was late by one month and erratic, forcing repeated re-planting of maize and sorghum, up to 3 times. The late-planted crops are subject to moisture stress as they are currently at vegetative or flowering stages. Lack of rain over the last ten days in the woreda places the crops in their vegetative and flowering stage under considerable risk. Moisture stress at the flowering stage is historically what commonly threatens the production of crops in Konso woreda and the major contributing factor to poor production and food insecurity. The lack of seeds is also a commonly recurring problem.

2.1 Late harvests expected, more rains necessary

This year farmers experienced a serious shortage of seeds both for belg and meher season plantings. In response, the NGO Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) distributed locally purchased seeds to the affected farmers free of charge. 442 metric tons of seeds of different crops (maize 99 mt, sorghum 90 mt, teff 101 mt and haricot beans 152 mt) were distributed to 18,232 farmers/household heads for the *belg* planting season. Farmers reported that performance of the seeds was satisfactory and good. But the delayed and irregular planting pattern has resulted in crops that lack uniformity in growth and maturity. The fact that the onset of the belg rains was delayed has pushed the harvesting of mainly maize and haricot beans to July instead of June.

As of July the number of needy people in the woreda is expected to drop. This may be confirmed by the belg pre-harvest assessment mission, which is conducted in the woreda at the end of June. A considerable proportion of crops planted late need rain in the coming two to three weeks. However, according to farmers in Konso, June and July are usually dry months. “We are expecting unexpected rains to make a difference in our production prospects”, the farmers said. If rains fail to come then field crops that wither at the flowering stage will have to be used as livestock feed – a practice common during drought. An outbreak of Armyworm (*Spodoptera exempta*) in mid-May had inflicted limited damage (in 30 kebeles with mild levels of damage) on cereal crop, mainly teff, but was controlled immediately with insecticides.

2.2 Floods destroyed potential harvest

Heavy rains received in April and the subsequent floods in catchments of the woreda and its neighbouring highland areas destroyed crops, roads, hillside terraces and riverbank farms (Segen River, for instance) leading to widespread crop losses. According to the woreda Rural Agriculture and Development Coordination Desk (RADC), the flood had damaged and destroyed 25% of belg crops, mainly maize and sorghum, both major staple crops of the Konso people.

Meher crops include ratoon of sorghum, teff, haricot bean and chickpea. *Meher* Seeds were donated by the governments of the Netherlands and Canada. If the rains fail to continue, the next production from the ratoon sorghum, which should be harvested from October/November, will be jeopardized. Normally, ratooned sorghum provides some harvest. However, the scarcity of this years belg rains, which were erratic in nature, adversely affect the growth and vigour of the sorghum stalk. This has negative implications for the coming ratoon production.

Landslides were reported from a kebele called Birbirsa where 76 households of people lost their food crops and are at risk.

2.3 Livestock situation normal

Aside from the usual and epidemic tryps and CCPP (a respiratory shoat disease), no outbreak of diseases was reported. The physical condition of livestock was good as was water and pasture availability. This is mainly due to the heavy rains in April that replenished water sources in almost all parts of the woreda.

3 Relief food distribution: shortages, management problems

The population in need in the woreda increased to 74,304 up from 65,000 before January 2003. Beneficiaries receive 929 mt of food per month. No supplementary food has been provided so far. The 12.5kg/person/month ration is applied with a maximum of 5 family members illegible for relief per household. Relief food was distributed for free to 7,210 beneficiaries and on an EGS (Employment Generating Schemes) basis for 67,094 beneficiaries. The EGS activities include the construction of rainwater harvesting schemes currently implemented by the government. The plan of the woreda was to construct 795 ponds, with a capacity of 60m3 of water each, by June 2003. But to date, only 101 have been completed.

General food distribution was handled by DPPC for the time from September – November 2002 and for January, February and June 2003. Distribution for December 2002 as well as March – May 2003 was managed by NCA (Norwegian Church Aid). It is imperative that the distribution be continued by the DPPC from July 1993 onwards as there is no other organization to do the job. Food for the month of June came in during this mission, but it was a bit late in terms of distribution. From July 2003 onwards the figure of needy people is expected to decrease as some farmers should be able to harvest some crops, which were planted early.

Konso boasts six stores (Karate, Fasha, Kolme, Gawada, Turo and Gumaydey) and distribution points, but has only one storekeeper. There are many logistics problems. The DPP Desk monitor does not have a motorbike with which to monitor food distribution activities. Another problem is coordination and communication for transport of relief foods. Sometimes unwanted deliveries were made to stores because of lacking communication between the head office and the woreda. This has forced rerouting and forward shipping of food stocks to other stores, which has been difficult. Unfortunately, two rub halls provided by WFP, have not yet been erected, apparently due to technical and logistics problems and administrative barriers according to the woreda DPP Desk.

Despite the very fragile condition of the woreda, not even a basic working environment is provided for the DPP staff to monitor the situation. Lack of a transportation budget, office chairs, desks, stationery, and other essential working materials are ongoing problems.

4 Human health and nutrition: Malaria, malnutrition

Malaria is the major danger in the lowland parts of the woreda. To minimize its spread, the woreda health bureau at the end of June sprayed DDT (in other countries banned anti-

malaria insecticide) in 10 kebeles with malaria outbreaks. The kebeles are neighbouring the Wayto and Segen rivers.

From September 2002 till 30 June 2003 a total of 167 severely malnourished children were admitted to the Nutrition Rehabilitation Unit (NRU) in Karate town. 32 children died there (19.2% mortality rate). Currently, 42 severely malnourished children are receiving treatment by the Mekane Yesus Clinic staff. Unfortunately, these dedicated people are seriously lacking logistical and personnel support, which severely limits the impact of their efforts. The high rate of mortality can be attributed to lack of regular budget, lack of manpower, lack of sanitation and accommodation, limited capacity of the Unit - designed to serve 30, but currently treating 42 children. Lack of training in handling and management of malnourished children and mothers is another problem. The caretakers (mothers/fathers) are malnourished themselves despite the best efforts of their family members, who are fetching food-stuffs from their homes.

The main constraints at the moment in the NRU are; shelter, day and night clothes for both, mothers and children, mattresses and mats, utensils, detergents, washing materials, latrine facilities, water containers, etc.

Although the presence of severely malnourished children with symptoms of Kwashiorkor and Marasmus in the NRU of the Mekane Yesus Clinic is not a clear indicator for the situation in the whole woreda, it suggests that thorough and regular nutrition surveillance in the area is an absolute must. SC/USA (Emergency Health and Nutrition Program) was conducting a rapid nutrition assessment in the woreda at the time of the mission, and the results of the survey will be released soon.

Another major issue is the fact, that after being discharged from the NRU, the children will be sent back into the same environment of food shortage and malnutrition. This makes their return to the NRU inevitable after some weeks or months.

5 Market condition: High cereal prices

Prices of cereals were higher compared to the same time in previous years. The increment is attributed to depletion of food stocks in the woreda as a result of repeated crop failure in the past seasons and due to blocking of roads by floods, which intermittently cut off the woreda from the neighbouring areas of Arba Minch, Yabello (Oromia) and South Omo Zone woredas, the usual suppliers of grains to the local markets of Konso woreda.

6 Resettlement status

Though not yet started, there is a plan by the Woreda to resettle 3,100 households from September 2003 onwards. In accordance with this plan 16,760 people who are allegedly registered for the resettlement program, are to be moved, most likely, to the woredas of South Omo Zone, according to the woreda RADC Desk.

7 Conclusion and recommendations

The crisis in Konso is the result of several years of consecutive rain failure. This has resulted in failed harvests, which undermined food security, increased the level of poverty

and greatly reduced the capacity of the people to cope with the present situation without external assistance.

Following a failure of the belg and meher crops last year, there is very little prospect for the farmers to be self-sufficient, hence food distribution should continue for some months to come and at least until the farmers harvest their own crops. As malnutrition increases, the danger of an outbreak of preventable diseases is increasing. With a severe shortage of medical drugs in the area, the spread of disease can become very serious and result in epidemics. In general, lives and livelihoods are at risk and unless additional assistance is made available quickly, an increase in child mortality is likely.

What needs to be done immediately: Raising the rate of the general food ration to 15 kg/person/month. Giving additional food assistance. Distributing supplementary foods to children under five and to lactating and pregnant mothers. Providing drugs and clothing, especially to the NRU of Mekane Yesus Clinic. Building the capacity of the woreda DPP desk at least by providing them the basic working conditions is crucial and urgent.

What needs to be done in the long term: Establishing recovery and rehabilitation programs for the farming community with the goal to restore their capacity and asset base, in order to make them productive again, must be a top priority.

The fact that the food security situation and survival prospects of Konso people are so fragile, coordination of all partners at woreda and region level must be strengthened. Close monitoring of the situation is essential and an improvement in communication absolutely imperative.

June 30, 2003

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