



Briefing no 1.

COPING WITH HUNGER
AND POVERTY
IN ETHIOPIA

Stories from twenty rural areas

Alula Pankhurst and Philippa Bevan

Key points

- 1 We should be talking about hunger and poverty rather than 'famine'
- 2 People and communities affected by hunger have a considerable understanding of the processes involved
- 3 Individuals and households are actively engaged in struggles to survive and prosper
- 4 Food aid is an important response to the threat of famine, but there are problems in the way it is delivered

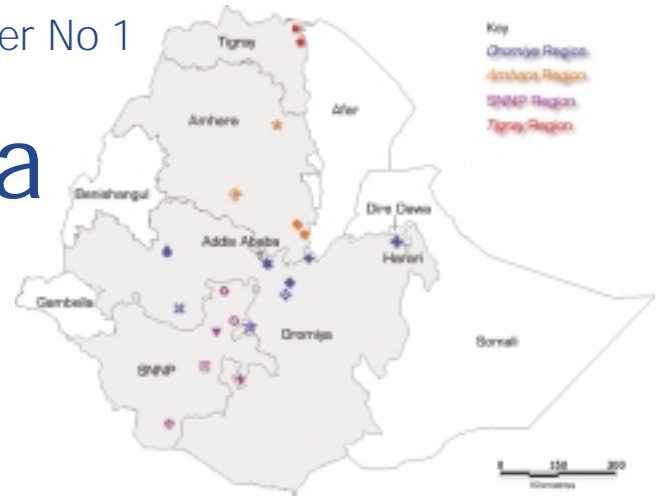
This *Briefing* is one of a series produced by the **Wellbeing in Developing Countries** research group at the University of Bath (UK), in collaboration with partners in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Thailand. This multi-disciplinary research on poverty, inequality and quality of life is funded by the ESRC and focuses on four rural and two urban locations in each country. The *Briefings* are designed to summarise research findings and encourage feedback.

This Briefing describes the subjective views of groups of two or more men in different social positions in each location. A short summary such as this loses much of the complexity and nuance of the data; however, more detail is available on the research programme's website:

www.wed-ethiopia.org

WeD Briefing Paper No 1

Ethiopia



Twenty years since Western media brought to the world's attention the widespread famine in the Horn of Africa, social science research is providing valuable new perspectives on Ethiopians' struggles with hunger and poverty.

Between July and September 2003, researchers in the Ethiopia Wellbeing in Developing Countries programme interviewed people in twenty locations across the four main regions of the country – Amhara, Oromia, Southern and Tigray, together representing the bulk (86%) of the population.

Forty researchers explored a range of topics, including how people experienced famine, food aid, child malnutrition and death.

There is a general feeling among respondents that food insecurity has increased. Food aid in response to the threat of famine has also become increasingly important - nine locations have experienced chronic food insecurity and are dependent on food aid. A respondent in Harerghe noted:

Survival: if there was no food aid, we would all have been dead or we would have become labourers.

FAMINE EXPERIENCES

Hunger, poverty and death

It is difficult to say that an individual has died due to famine, although there were deaths [in 1994].

(Jima area)

Comparing the major Ethiopian famines (1973, 1984/5 and 1994/5) in terms of mortality, only four of the twenty villages were never affected. The 1984 famine was perceived to be the worst, affecting fourteen places, compared with four in 1973 and six in 1994.

But without food aid, many more locations would have been affected in 1994, and southern areas were affected for the first time. This suggests that famine, often assumed to be largely in the North and East, is now spreading, particularly in the South.

The twenty villages can be classified under three headings: 1) those never affected by food production failures (four); 2) those affected but not regularly (seven); and 3) those facing chronic food insecurity and that are dependent on food aid (nine).

Differences in opinion and hesitation to attribute deaths to 'famine' suggest that preoccupation with famine deaths, both in the media and among researchers, may no longer be useful in understanding famine. Instead, the focus should be on coping strategies, links between food insecurity and poverty, and differences between and within communities.

People suffered from poverty, yet I know of no one who died

(South Omo)

Food security

From 1991 to 2004, people generally reported a bad year or two, especially between 1999 and 2003, and some report continuous problems.

Given significant variations there is need for caution in generalising over the entire country. Nonetheless, it is clear that 2002 was generally a bad year, while trends for 2003 seemed fairly good at the time of the research.

Historical perspective

Comparing food security across three political regimes – the Imperial reign of Haile Selassie (up to 1973), the communist Derg regime under Mengistu (1974-91) and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF, 1991 onwards) – food production is generally perceived to have declined.

However, a respondent in Tigray noted that *food security* during the EPRDF has been better than during the Derg even if *food production* is worse. Food security is not limited to production alone since taxation and market policies are also critical:

In the Imperial period, there was excess product but it was taken by the Balabat (landlord); during the Derg, there was sufficient produce, but it was taken by the Agricultural Market Corporation; under the EPRDF, there is increased production, and we hear about famine in faraway areas.

(Gonde, Arssi)

Causes of food insecurity

The general view of increasing food insecurity is explained mainly by the weather (twelve locations). Other natural factors included decrease in land size and quality, animal and plant diseases, and reduction of trees and wild products.

Human factors mentioned included population increase, governance issues, some development policies, indebtedness, conflict, loss of work values and irreligious behaviour.

Better food security was explained by food aid, increased productivity and land cultivated, improved seeds, irrigation, knowledge and NGO assistance.



Threshing with oxen in Arssi

COPING WITH HUNGER

Selling assets

The livestock became thin and bony. Just at the beginning of the famine, they were sold with less price. However, in the middle of the famine, who would buy them?

(Shashemene Area)

The main strategy for asset sales was selling livestock, though in famine conditions, prices in relation to grain plummet. People also sold household assets, gold and 'even land'. Trees, firewood and charcoal were also sold, mainly by women:

Almost everybody started to cut trees for charcoal and firewood. Especially the women became involved in carrying the firewood to the nearest cities for sale. They became the backbone of their families.

(Dodota, Arssi)

Work

During bella (lack of food for a short time), people work for others. During shantu (lack of food for a long time like a year), people migrate to other areas, particularly urban areas.

(Jima area)

Migration was reported as the main work-related strategy, including rural and urban migration, seasonal and daily wage labour, work on state or private farms, and hiring out children as herders or domestic servants. Wage labour for richer households within communities was reported as limited to shorter crises; as conditions worsen, people go further, notably to towns. Seasonal labour migration for harvesting and coffee picking is a normal strategy and only intensifies under famine conditions.

Irrigation is new and limited to a few locations. There is insufficient water for everyone.

Borrowing

Ask help from relatives in and outside the area/country? Not often, since only a few people have relatives with enough resources. No more borrowing but free gifts expecting reciprocity.

(Kereyu)

Borrowing food was reportedly common, especially from relatives but also from neighbours and the rich. But relatives may not be able to lend, and the rich may be less willing. Children are sometimes sent away to relatives. People borrowed money from the community, town traders and government agencies; but interest was high and credit limited during famines.

Begging and stealing

Although people used to steal in the night before, during the famine people used to steal in the day-time.

(Shashemene area)

Begging was mentioned both locally and in nearby or distant towns, especially by the old and disabled. Theft of livestock and crops was also reported, though in Kereyu, both begging and stealing were culturally condemned in times of misfortune.

Food and diet

They rarely or do not eat injera, but bread, beles, kunti, and the meal reduced from twice to once a day.

(Tigray)

Reduced consumption and meal frequency and changes in diet were common. In cereal cropping areas, this meant a change to vegetables and pulses, notably cabbage and potatoes, as well as low-status foods. In enset false banana growing areas, people ate the root not usually consumed, and in pastoralist areas, a move from milk to cereals and blood was mentioned.

Wild foods were also consumed although in some locations these are rare and limited, or sought only by the poorest.



The experiences of women, older people and babies

If there is shortage of food at home, the one who suffers is the woman. They give priority to their children. A man will go and get some food for himself. (Tigray)

Generally, men thought that women were more affected. Reasons included that they feed their family first and need good food while pregnant, giving birth and breast-feeding.

Others suggested that they are weak but work harder than men, and support the family while men look for work locally or migrate. In two locations, women reportedly walk far to get food or off-farm income.

During the drought, women are engaged in off-farm work like collecting and selling firewood and charcoal. The whole family depends on the women for food. (Dodota, Arssi)

Most respondents thought older people were more affected, mainly since they cannot move around looking for food or work and cannot participate in 'food for work' programmes.

Others said they lack teeth to chew food; they need food more frequently and that when food is served young men eat faster.

There were cases where people committed suicide as they could not bear to see their starving children. (Bako area)

All respondents recognised that babies were worst affected due to their regular need for milk, problems of milk supply from hungry mothers, their

inability to eat famine foods and food aid, and their lack of resistance to diseases.

Other factors were lack of care when mothers search for food, etc., and inability to afford medical fees.

Babies are highly affected because of disease and having nothing to eat. Their mothers also cannot breastfeed their children since the breast has no milk. (Shashemene area)

Food allocation within households

Hired people, old people, children, women, young people, men [ranking in getting less first]. (Jima area)

Informants generally agreed that food reduction is not equally distributed. Most mentioned adults, but in half the locations women and children were also mentioned and the elderly in five locations.

Women, because they have the burden of childrearing and home activities and they provide what is to be consumed by their children, husbands and other household members. This is why women are labelled as 'mirake dendanna' - their saliva is thick and serves as food for them. (Wollo)

Only in three locations was it suggested that food reduction is equally distributed.

Our tradition is to share the available food during both good and bad times. (South Omo)

*Famine, poverty and the rich
In times of drought there is famine, which finishes all resources leading to poverty. This in turn creates vulnerability to famine.* (Tigray)

The connection between famine and poverty was generally recognised. Most picked up on the progression from drought to famine to poverty; a few identified a causal link from poverty to famine.

In our community, agriculture is the sole important means of livelihood. Agriculture is fundamentally rainfed. For a long time, there has been a shortage of rain; rain has been unreliable and irregular. These events were the basic factors that have a lot to do with poverty. (Wollo)

In thirteen locations, respondents said that people get richer during famine. Some said that the rich lost more stock, but better resistance by the rich was also noted:

Rich farmers who have oxen cultivate more; they manage to produce drought resistant crops including sweet potato, cassava, yam. Thus, they benefit more and could resist survive in the period of drought and famine. (Gamo)

Moreover, in the post-famine period, the rich may capitalise on having survived better:

Those who were rich can survive the famine and buy livestock and property at cheaper prices from the hungry. (Tigray)

The potential for food aid as a source of enrichment was mentioned; individuals bought property at low prices and lent food and money at high interest rates; traders, local officials, and militia manipulated food aid through corruption, nepotism and theft.

During famines, there has always been food aid. There are some people who manipulate the aid through corruption and nepotism. Some get a lot of aid for their own personal benefit. This is true for village officials and administrators. They and others become richer during famines in a short cut way. (Wollo)

Famine and conflict

Yes, there will be conflict between people who have and who have not. Those who do not have they steal from the 'haves' and when they protect it for themselves, there would be disappointment and people kill each other.

(Shashemene area)

In more than half the locations, conflict was reported resulting from theft of livestock and food, competition for water and firewood, reduced tolerance owing to hunger, disputes over food and repeated demands and refusals. Yet seven locations reported no conflict.

No such conflicts among the South Omo, we are a peaceful community.

(South Omo)

Theft was said to take place at night and on the way to market:

Unemployed armed individuals have robbed houses during the night time and when people are on the way home from the markets.

(Wolayita)

Famine was also reported as potentially leading to conflict within households:

Yes, if a person does not get food, after working hours in the family he becomes angry and quarrels with his wife, children and cattle. He lacks patience.

(Kembata)

POLICY INTERVENTIONS

Food aid

Even in seasons where food is relatively secure, the community receives food aid.

(Wollo)



Failed water-harvesting in Arssi

Regular dependence on food aid was reported from nine communities, in one case going back many years, in others beginning around 2000.

Patterns vary between and even within locations. In the Bako area food aid in 1983-4 was too late; in 1994, it was insufficient to go round and was looted; and in 2003, it was targeted to the most needy.

In nine locations suffering from chronic food insecurity, food aid saved people from death, reduced indebtedness, and prevented livestock sales, wage labour and out migration.

Survival: if there was no food aid, we would all have been dead or we would have become labourers.

(Harerghe)

But negative effects of food aid included long-term dependency, laziness and reduced reliance on self and God. Moreover, aid may be late, insufficient and far away.

For those lazy fellows who depend on the food aid it has a negative aspect. Hard-working farmers want a permanent aid to pull them from this type of life for ever

(Dodota, Arssi)

Four occasionally food aid dependent locations reported that some people sold aid to buy cigarettes, and that low grain prices may affect merchants.

In most chronically food insecure locations, distribution was perceived as unfair because of corruption, nepotism, inefficiency, delays or incorrect reporting.

Other reasons mentioned included discrimination against the 'rich', older or poorer, people 'cheating' through double registration and high NGO salaries.

They say the rich must not get aid. But even those who are called rich have nothing to eat.

(Tigray)

Food for work

The community is engaged in food for work programmes whenever there is food aid distribution.

(Harerghe)

Food aid was generally reported as linked to 'food for work' programmes. Benefits were that people could work locally rather than migrating, that some work is useful (soil conservation, ponds, forestry) and encourages a work



Water pump in Harerghe

spirit, and that people participate in their own development.

Major constraints were conflicts with labour needs and people's own priorities at peak times, low payments, and late arrival of food.

In addition, not everyone is involved, the work is often compulsory and results in disincentives for individual and community initiative.

Negative aspects arise when people seek for an incentive (food) before they involve in development programmes that benefit the community. It is bad for people to wait for an incentive before they work for their own wellbeing. They could have done it out of self initiation.

(Wollo)

The work may also be shoddy or even dangerous.

The wells are not constructed well. They have no cover and children have died by climbing inside the well.

(Kereyu)

Employment generation

Airport construction and irrigation schemes were some of the employment generation schemes [EGSs]. Now there are no EGSs in the community.

(Wollo)

Employment generation schemes reported in four regularly food aid dependent locations include road and other construction, terracing, irrigation, tree nurseries and a coffee-processing machine.

Advantages were the cash, environmental rehabilitation and avoiding migration.

Negative aspects were that an airport and irrigation schemes took people's land and the coffee-processing machine poisoned the water.

