

The Food Emergency in Ethiopia: What the Drought Conceals

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Le Centre de réflexion sur l'action et les savoirs humanitaires (CRASH) a été créé par Médecins sans frontières en 1999. Sa vocation : stimuler la réflexion critique sur les pratiques de l'association afin d'en améliorer l'action.

Le Crash réalise des études et analyses portant sur l'action de MSF dans son environnement immédiat. Elaborées à partir des cadres et de l'expérience de l'association, ces textes ne représentent pas la « ligne du parti » MSF, pas plus qu'ils ne cherchent à défendre une conception du « vrai humanitaire ». Leur ambition est au contraire de contribuer au débat sur les enjeux, contraintes, limites – et par conséquent dilemmes – de l'action humanitaire. Les critiques, remarques et suggestions sont plus que bienvenues, elles sont attendues.

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The Crash carries out in-depth studies and analyses of MSF's activities. This work is based on the framework and experience of the association. In no way, however, do these texts lay down the 'MSF party line', nor do they seek to defend the idea of 'true humanitarianism'. On the contrary, the objective is to contribute to debate on the challenges, constraints and limits –as well as the subsequent dilemmas- of humanitarian action. Any criticisms, remarks or suggestions are most welcome.

The Food Emergency in Ethiopia: What the Drought Conceals¹

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According to the Ethiopian Prime Minister and the United Nations (UN) food agencies, around 11 million people in Ethiopia will face serious food shortages in 2003 as a result of 'drought'. Unless the international community provides one and one-half million tons of food aid, Ethiopia will allegedly be the scene of 'mass starvation'.

This appeal, relayed by the majority of humanitarian organizations, comes barely three years after Ethiopia declared that it was on the brink of a famine 'rivalling that of 1984–85'. While at war with Eritrea and engaged in a crucial election period, Addis Ababa claimed in 2000 that a serious drought threatened the lives of 10.5 million people.

As a result of an intense advocacy campaign involving the Western media, the UN, nearly all NGOs, and even Sir Bob Geldof, donors gave the government one of the highest volumes of assistance in its history: 1.2 million tons of food. Despite this substantial aid, several thousand Ethiopian Somalis died of hunger in the Ogaden region because they did not receive sufficient relief.

The rapid succession of these appeals and the mixed results of previous aid operations raises the question of whether it is Ethiopia's climate that condemns the country to regular famines, or whether the priorities and policies of the government are partly to blame.

A real risk of famine

There is a real risk of famine in Ethiopia. Commercial food imports are limited by economic constraints and the country has to rely on its own agricultural production to feed its people. Yet the farming sector has difficulty keeping up with demographic growth. The Ethiopian population doubled between 1969 and 1999, but the five-year average of cereal and pulses production rose by only 50 percent. After a significant drop in the 1980s, per capita production has now recovered to levels comparable to the 1960s. However, there are periodic downturns (as in 2002–03), and output just meets national demand: assuming that all the food available in Ethiopia were equitably distributed, the country would be experiencing moderate but widespread scarcity, even in 'good' years.

In reality, however, the entire population does not pay the price of the national food deficit; rather, it is the politically- and economically-marginalized communities that face a growing inability to cover their food needs even when they receive good rains.

These include sedentary farmers in the highlands who live in densely-populated areas where there are few job opportunities. Their small agricultural plots (less than 0.5 hectare) are situated on rocky soil prone to erosion and in zones particularly vulnerable to climatic hazards.

For some years, small farmers in Tigray (East and Center), Wollo, Wag Hamra and Hararghe have experienced regular food shortages, obliging them progressively to deplete their meagre capital.

¹ This article first appeared in the March 2003 issue of the *Humanitarian Exchange*, the magazine of the Humanitarian Practice Network, whose website is www.odihpn.org

Caught in a spiral of pauperization, they are becoming structurally dependent on outside food aid. A well documented study by SCF-UK in Wollo², for instance, shows that the proportion of households with no animal holdings doubled between 1996 and 2000 (rising from 15 to 20 percent to more than 30 to 40 percent).

Nomadic communities on the arid and semi-arid plains surrounding the Abyssinian plateaus are also exposed to a high risk of famine. For the last few years, the nomadic economy has been experiencing a deepening crisis caused, among other things, by the encroachment of farmland on grazing areas; obstructions to pastoral migration; the increasing scarcity of fodder; and the disappearance of caravan trading.

The experience of the Afars, one of the main victims of the 2003 food shortages, is a good example. The development of cotton growing on state farms in the Awash valley has considerably reduced traditional grazing areas and encroached on fallback pasture formerly used during droughts. At times of low rainfall, the irrigation of cotton fields deprives sedentarized agro-pastoral communities downstream of the water they need for the crops.

In addition, there is evidence of wastage: diverting the river transforms pastures into unproductive marshes that livestock are unable to graze. Moreover, the Afars face competition from other pastoralists—Somalis in this case—facing a similar economic crisis, and are engaged in a veritable war for the control of pastures, water points, and commercial and smuggling routes.

In such fragile conditions, it only takes small disturbances, such as low rainfall or the reduction of animal export opportunities (as is currently the case due to the closure of the Eritrean border and the lack of demand for Ethiopian beef following a recent outbreak of foot and mouth disease) to trigger food shortages which can lead to famine if nothing is done to prevent it.

Localized famines are not new to Ethiopia: they have punctuated the country's history since the Axumite empire of antiquity. In the second half of the 20th century alone, there have been two major crises: the 1973–74 famine, which killed between 50,000 and 200,000 people and precipitated the overthrow of Haile Selassie's imperial regime; and the 1984–85 famine, which caused a million deaths. The latter was skilfully manipulated by the Mengistu regime in support of a policy of forced population displacement and asphyxiation of the Eritrean and Tigrayan³ guerrilla movements.

The various actors on the Ethiopian political scene have used famine alternately as a weapon and as a threat. Hunger has often accompanied—when it has not precipitated—radical transformation in Abyssinian society.

The failure of agricultural development

Tensions dividing the Ethiopian polity oblige the government to handle the shortage carefully. Food issues are high on the official agenda of the current regime, with no less than 12 national programs wholly or partially devoted to them.

The food security strategy and program (1996 and 1998) aims at ‘the elimination of food security problems within seven years (1998–2004)’. Despite the enthusiastic declaration of the Ethiopian

² Ellen C. Mathys, E. Kebede, Monitoring the Impact of Food Aid: The SC (UK) Programme in north and south Wollo Ethiopia in 2000, Save the Children (UK) Ethiopia, November 2000.

³ Cf. JEAN (François). – Du bon usage de la famine. – Paris : Fondation Liberté Sans Frontières, 1987.

Deputy Prime Minister in 1998 that ‘hunger in Ethiopia has been eliminated’, results have been mediocre.

Ethiopian farming suffers from serious structural problems. The consequences of the famines of 1974–75 and 1984–85 have repercussions to this day: studies have shown that the inhabitants of regions hard hit by the 1984–85 crisis had only achieved 60 percent restocking of their herds by the beginning of the 1990s⁴.

Furthermore, in the mid-1990s, two-thirds of Ethiopian households had farms of less than one hectare whose average productivity was among the lowest in Africa. This poor performance is partly due to deforestation and soil erosion, rudimentary farming techniques, and dependence on erratic rainfall (barely 3 percent of farmland is irrigated). Moreover, public ownership of land discourages farmers from investing in improving their fields and prevents land consolidation.

The main initiative taken by the authorities to achieve food security has been to extend the economic liberalization introduced by Mengistu toward the end of his reign in 1988, and to launch an extension program (PADETES) designed to increase crop yields.

The package includes the sale of improved seeds, pesticides and chemical fertilizers, education in new farming techniques and ‘preferential’ access to credit. Loan-repayment conditions, however, are draconian. Farmers who cannot repay their debts due to a poor harvest have their belongings confiscated or are sent to prison (this has triggered several revolts in the southern regions). Under such conditions, only the richer farmers in traditional surplus-producing areas participate in the program⁵.

Furthermore, the government refuses to consider changing the public ownership of land, because it wants to prevent farmers selling their plots and migrating en masse to urban centers. Travel permits from the Mengistu regime have been replaced by the threat of permanent expulsion if farmers abandon ‘their’ land, even temporarily.

Finally, the regime has had no more success than its predecessors in pastoral development. In a bid to encourage the sedentarization of nomads, it is encouraging the development of irrigated cash-cropping on the semi-arid plains, further reducing grazing areas. Very little is being done to stop the collapse of the pastoral economy. The few projects devoted to this have been designed around a technical approach to soil conservation, ignoring the complexity of the relationship to the land in nomadic cultures. All the projects have encountered steadfast hostility from the populations concerned⁶.

Although the food situation in Ethiopia has improved substantially since the fall of Mengistu, this improvement is fragile, and does not benefit all segments of the population. Not surprisingly, it is the nomadic groups and marginalized farmers who form the majority of the ‘beneficiaries’ registered as ‘natural-disaster victims’ on the distribution lists of the Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission (DPPC), the government ministry in charge of relief.

⁴ Cf. DERCON (Stefan). – “Growth and Poverty in Ethiopia in 1990’s: an Economic Perspective”. – Centre for the Study of African Economies, Oxford University. – October 2000.

⁵ cf. DERCON (Stefan), opus cit.

⁶ Cf. Cf. HOGG (Richard) ed. – Pastoralists, ethnicity and the state in Ethiopia. – London: Haan Publishing, 1998.

The relief system

The DPPC plays a key role in assessing food crises and implementing relief operations. With few exceptions, donors, NGOs and UN agencies have to accept its estimates, follow its beneficiary lists, and at no time intervene in distributions except to 'monitor' operations. As Ethiopian legislation states, 'needless to say, NGOs should adhere to the policy of the Government, and need not interfere with or override the operations which it organizes'⁷.

According to USAID and the public statements of NGOs working in Ethiopia, the national distribution system is 'effective and transparent'. This was not, however, the conclusion of a 1998 survey of more than 4,000 households⁸ cited in T. S. Jayne et al., *Targeting of Food Aid in Ethiopia: Chronic Need or Inertia?* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University, 2000) which sought to identify the profile of groups that actually received food aid from the DPPC in 1995–96. The survey exposed the lack of correlation between 'needs' and 'allocations' and showed that households suffering from a shortage of food received less food aid than households with a surplus. Families with an intake of more than 2,800 kcal per person per day received as much as those whose intake was less than 1,000 kcal per person per day, and those receiving the least assistance were found in the critical bracket of 1,000 to 1,679 kcal per person per day. Average aid per capita allocated in Tigray (where the regime's leaders originate) was eight times higher than the national average. Finally, the researchers observed that 'households are more likely to receive food aid in the current year if they received food aid in past years', regardless of their actual vulnerability at the time of distribution.

In regions where aid operations are well established after several years of investment in monitoring and targeting procedures – usually financed by NGOs – the bureaucratic infrastructure has become blind to real developments in food security. 'Beneficiaries' have developed skills enabling them to take advantage of these institutional arrangements. A small farmer in Wollo, for example, might plough his field but not sow anything in order to claim that his harvest has failed and convince the authorities of his eligibility for food aid, which will bring him two or three quintals more than a risky harvest.

Rather than a 'dependency syndrome', he and other beneficiaries have developed genuine skills allowing them to diversify their methods of obtaining food. Strategies such as these flourish mainly in areas such as Wollo, where farming no longer provides enough to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged.

Targeting 'errors' also reflect political choices. Disparities between regions are the direct result of the central government's control over the allocation of relief. Priority is given to 'politically useful' areas and regions that have powerful representatives in Addis Ababa able to tip the balance in their favor. In other words, decisions about food allocation reflect the balance of power between the various components of the ruling coalition as much as the actual or supposed status of food security across the country.

At the lowest tier of the distribution system, local government officials are responsible for identifying beneficiaries. Their room for manoeuvre and administrative functions encourage them

⁷ Guidelines for NGOs Operation in Ethiopia. – RRC, July 1995, p. 1.

⁸ JAYNE (T.S.), STRAUSS (John), YAMANO (Takashi), MOLLA (Daniel). – Targeting of Food Aid in Ethiopia : Chronic Need or Inertia ?. – MSU International Development Paper, n°23, 2000.

to use relief to support patronage or policing. Hence, during the famine in the Ogaden in 2000, some communities spared by the food crisis received relief while others, although disaster-stricken, were excluded because they did not belong to the dominant clans in the areas in which they sought help.

Clearly, the national production deficit recorded in 2003 will, together with the drought, make things worse for hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians who already face chronic food shortages. While it is not up to humanitarian agencies to solve the food problems of Ethiopia, humanitarian NGOs do have a responsibility not to hide the social and political origins of the crisis afflicting marginalized populations, and to ensure that relief actually gets to those who need it. It is crucial that they preserve their operational independence from the DPPC in order to reach those who might otherwise be excluded from vital assistance.