

FOOD SECURITY IN ETHIOPIA

Introduction

This Geofile unit looks at different concepts of food security, famine and food aid. It takes Ethiopia as an example of a country where food security is a problem and presents a case study from Wadla in northern Ethiopia.

What is food security?

The 1974 UN World Food Conference defined food security as the availability, at all times, of adequate world supplies of basic foodstuffs, to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and prices. However, although there is currently more than enough food in the world to feed everyone, people are going without. Every day, 35,000 children in the world die of hunger-related causes. Over one billion people are chronically hungry and lack sufficient food on a long-term basis. This indicates that there is more to food security than world supplies of food.

National food security

National food security can be thought of as having enough food available within a country to feed all the people in that country.

National food security can be achieved by producing enough food to feed the population (self-sufficiency) or by generating enough money from exports to buy imported food. Opinion is divided as to which of these is the better option:

- Free trade is being promoted by powerful countries and institutions who believe an increase in world trade would boost the world economy and benefit everyone.
- Self-sufficiency is promoted by those who believe that farmers should be encouraged to grow food for local consumption, rather than cash crops. Organisations such as ActionAid argue that existing trade policies favour MEDCs over LEDCs, and that corporate control of agriculture is eroding poor people's right to food.

Figure 1: Food aid



Credit: Jenny Matthews/Network/ActionAid UK

Food security in the household

Since 1974, the focus of food security has moved from the global level to that of the household or individual. This is because global or national food security does not always guarantee people having enough to eat. A country may have enough food for all its residents, but if it is not distributed evenly, some may lose out.

Food secure households need sustainable access to enough food, and ways of resisting shocks. Access to food depends on the ability to grow, gather or purchase enough food. This can be affected by environmental conditions, availability of work, price of food and season. Households may have sufficient food to meet immediate needs but their source may not be sustainable due to decreasing land fertility, increasing prices or a dependence on wages from seasonal labour. Households must also have reserves to withstand shocks such as crop failure, death or illness of the wage earner, conflict or a deterioration in the world's economy.

Even within food secure households, food may be shared unevenly, leaving some individuals without enough to eat. In some countries, food reserves may be given to boys before girls. Many poor women go hungry in order

to ensure that their children have enough to eat.

What is famine?

Famine contains three elements: food shortage, starvation and excess mortality. It has a greater effect on the most vulnerable in society, and leads to them being unable to sustain their livelihood. Famine is caused by many complex factors including, but not limited to, poor or varying climatic and environmental conditions. Wider causes of famine may include growth of the population, market failure or war. Conflicts disrupt food production, local economies, trade and aid, whilst creating refugees and undermining coping strategies.

What can be done at a national level to ensure food security?

One way to respond to an increased need for food is to produce more. If agricultural production is intensified, however, care must be taken to ensure these changes are sustainable. Overly intensive production, without replenishment of soil nutrients, may damage future food-producing potential. Attention needs to be paid to growing crops that are suitable for the area, and using efficient production methods.

Another way to increase the amount of food available is to import it. This depends on countries having available capital from export of other goods and services.

Good infrastructure is needed to ensure efficient processing and distribution of food. Ways of earning an income need to be available to people who cannot grow their own food. Certain cultural practices, such as that of favouring boys, may need to be questioned to ensure all members of society receive the food they need.

Even with these measures in place, there may be times when harvests fail and food is short. Advance planning can help people respond without risk of famine. Governments can set up grain reserves or emergency stocks of food in order to cope with times of shortfall.

Food aid (Figure 1)

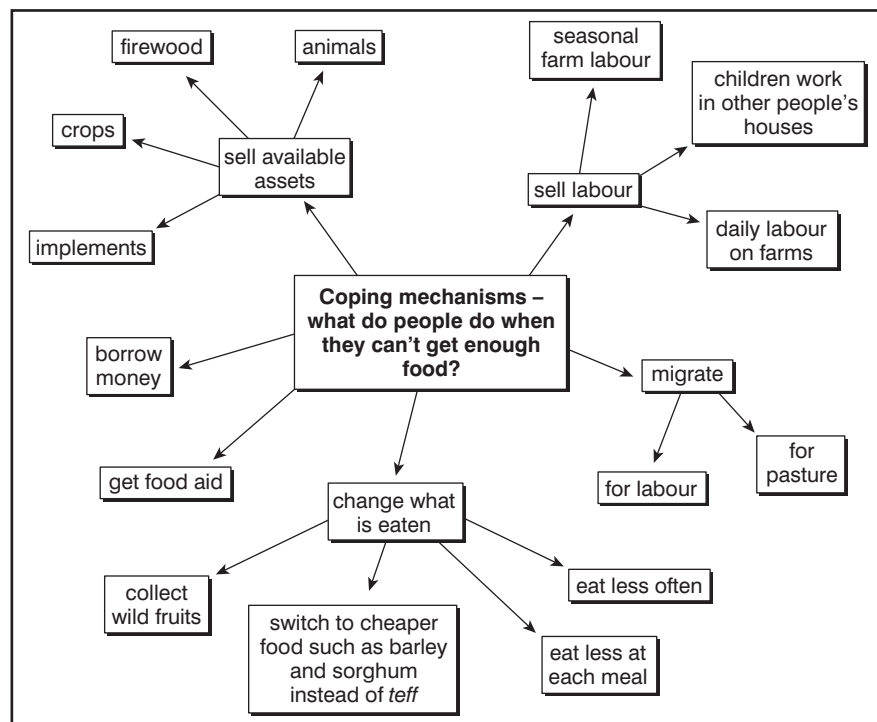
If the measures outlined above fail, a country may be forced to ask for aid from MEDCs. This could be in the form of money or food.

The issue of food aid is controversial. Few people argue against emergency relief in times of famine, but until recently emergency relief has only accounted for 10% of food aid. The majority of food aid is delivered on a continuous basis as programme or project aid. Programme food aid is sold to governments for them to store or sell on local markets. Project food aid is targeted at specific vulnerable groups to support specific activities. Examples include school feeding projects and food-for-work schemes.

Supporters of food aid argue that Northern countries with a surplus of food should supply it to Southern countries that do not have enough. However, it has also been argued that the majority of food aid is actually a way for Northern countries to get rid of surplus food, that it encourages dependency, changes eating habits, allows Northern countries to exert influence over Southern countries, keeps prices at an artificially low level and drives food producers in developing countries out of business.

Over the past few years, the proportion of food aid compared to other aid has decreased and relief aid now makes up 50% of food aid. This reflects an improvement in food aid donation, although problems still exist

Figure 2: Coping mechanisms



with the delivery, timing and administration of food aid. It is generally recognised that financial aid is more effective in combating poverty and so the amount of food aid given is expected to continue to decline.

Introducing Ethiopia

Ethiopia is in the Horn of Africa. It has a varied landscape including cool highlands, temperate lowlands and hot deserts.

Ethiopia has a population of over 67 million, 84% of whom live in rural areas. Over half of the Ethiopian population live in absolute poverty (on less than US\$1 a day). Per capita GDP in 2002 was estimated at US\$90. The economy of Ethiopia is mainly based on agriculture, and over 80% of the population rely on agriculture for their livelihood.

Why is food security such an issue in Ethiopia?

Ethiopia has been subjected to several highly publicised famines, and many Ethiopians are chronically hungry. The reasons for this are complex and include political, economic and environmental dimensions.

The most commonly given reason for famine is drought. Certainly parts of Ethiopia do suffer from unpredictable rainfall, and rain failure has been a contributing factor in previous famines. The 1985 famine, in which as

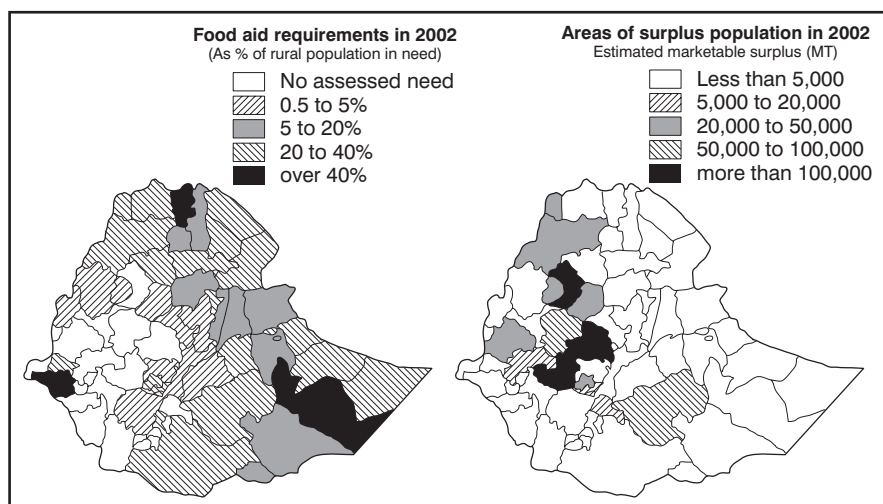
many as a million people died, was preceded by three successive seasons of dry weather. However, drought occurs frequently all over the world, and only occasionally leads to famine. Weather is only ever one of several factors causing famine or chronic hunger.

The main factor leading to famine in Ethiopia is poverty. Poor people do not have the resources to deal with shocks, and are more likely to be pushed into unsustainable ways of coping (Figure 2).

Unequal trading systems also contribute to hunger in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian government purchases crops from farmers at fixed prices, which often fall below market rates, yet each farmer is required to sell a certain amount of crop at this rate. International pressures, such as the need to obtain foreign currency to repay debts, encourage Ethiopia to produce cash crops to export. This reduces the land available for growing subsistence crops. As the world price for agricultural exports falls, the income that farmers receive becomes less than they need to survive. Ethiopia's many coffee farmers have been particularly badly affected by low prices.

Another important factor contributing to hunger is the agricultural system. In Ethiopia, individuals do not own land. It is assigned according to the size of a family, and redistributed every few

Figure 3: Maps showing food aid requirement and surplus production in 2002



years. Every time land is redistributed it is divided between more people, so each farmer gets less. Many farmers are reluctant to invest in the quality of their land as it may be given to someone else in the near future. Others simply cannot afford inputs such as fertilisers. Lack of investment, and the need for large yields from a small area, lead to land degradation.

There have been frequent conflicts in Ethiopia. In the early 1990s, 60% of the national budget was being spent on war. Obviously this reduces the money available to improve agriculture or provide relief for hungry people.

About 7 million Ethiopians receive food aid each year but the giving of aid is highly political. Ethiopia is a socialist country, and in the past received aid from the USSR. During the 1985 famine it suffered because the USSR was no longer in a position to help, and Europe and the USA were reluctant to help a socialist country. When aid did finally arrive, the Ethiopian government did not distribute it to rebel areas.

Poor infrastructure in Ethiopia means that food distribution is a problem. At times there have been areas of Ethiopia which have had a surplus but it is difficult to get the food to those areas where it is needed (Figure 3).

Wadla case study

Wadla is in North Wello zone in Amhara region (Figure 4). Most of the area is highlands, and 62% of land is under cultivation. The rainfall in Wadla is unreliable making the area arid. Wadla has suffered repeatedly from food shortages and recurrent

famine and many people are chronically hungry.

Why is food security a problem in Wadla?

Like other areas in Ethiopia, Wadla suffers from the effects of unfair trade, a debt burden, conflict and a lack of government support. Wadla also has specific problems (Figure 5).

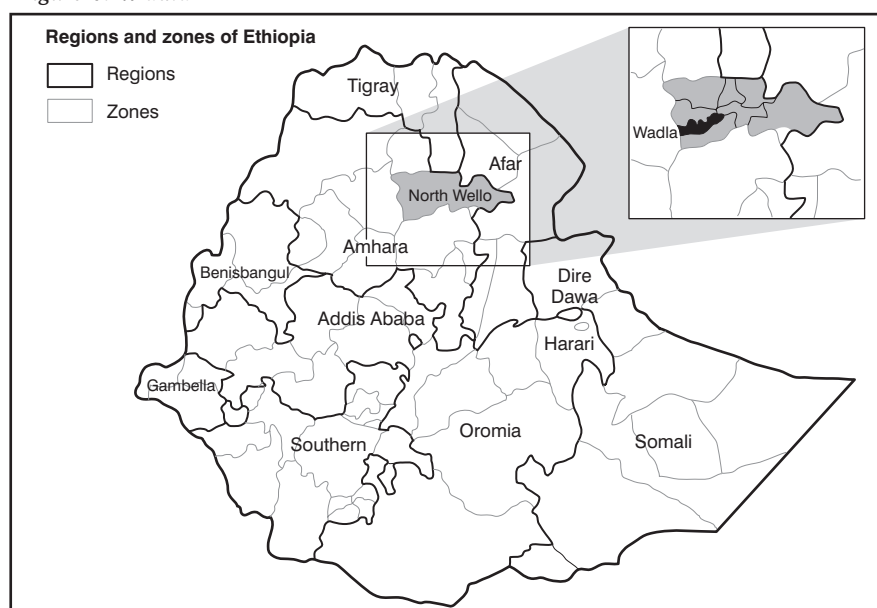
- Isolation and a lack of infrastructure. The roads are almost non-existent and there are no electricity, transport, telephone or postal services, even in Kone, the capital of Wadla.
- Poor climate. Rainfall is unreliable and rains have been shorter in recent years. Frost is common and can damage crops.
- Lack of land. The average amount of land for a household (average 4.6 people) is only 1.1 hectares.

- Land degradation. Over-exploitation of fuel and timber resources has led to deforestation. Overcrowding means that it is not unusual to graze up to 40 sheep on 0.1 hectares of land. These factors have resulted in Wadla having very little vegetation. Severe erosion has occurred, with the loss of 50 to 100 tonnes of soil per hectare annually.
- Lack of income generation opportunities. Over 95% of people depend on subsistence farming and there are very few opportunities for formal work. People with little or no land find it especially hard to ensure they have enough food.
- Poor land management. The need to feed a large number of people from a small amount of land means that it is impossible to leave land fallow. Most farmers are unable to afford inputs such as irrigation and fertiliser, and dung and crop residues are used for fuel rather than manure.

These factors combine to give a situation where people cannot meet their food needs in a sustainable way.

‘My family has 1.5 hectares and I used to grow barley, wheat, lentils, beans and peas for a family of eight. We had two horses, one cow, an ox and five sheep. In a good year there was enough to eat if we sold some animals but in a bad year we had to rely on food aid.’ Malesh Mogus (25)

Figure 4: Wadla



What has been done to improve the situation?

ActionAid is working with a local organisation called ORDA on a range of initiatives:

- Improving agricultural methods. Twelve vegetable nurseries have started and 514 farmers have been trained in the production of new vegetables which are easier to grow in the climate. Almost 6,000 farmers have received seed, and irrigation systems have been introduced.
- Financial management. Credit groups have been set up so that farmers can invest in agricultural equipment.
- Improving land quality. 1021 people have been trained in environmental rehabilitation and conservation techniques. Interventions have been started to improve forest cover and control soil degradation.
- Income generation. 101 people have been trained in skills such as carpentry, pottery and weaving. Some people have been provided with eucalyptus seeds so they can grow trees to sell.

'During the redistribution of land I was too young to get a plot. Considering this problem the government gave this land and ActionAid gave the saplings. I planted the trees and I'll use them as a source of income, to construct my home and for fuel. There is a girl I'd like to marry and so I need this source of income.' Tesfaye (24)

- Improving infrastructure. This has led to easier access to food aid and a better flow of products to markets. Construction work created employment for 224,000 person days.

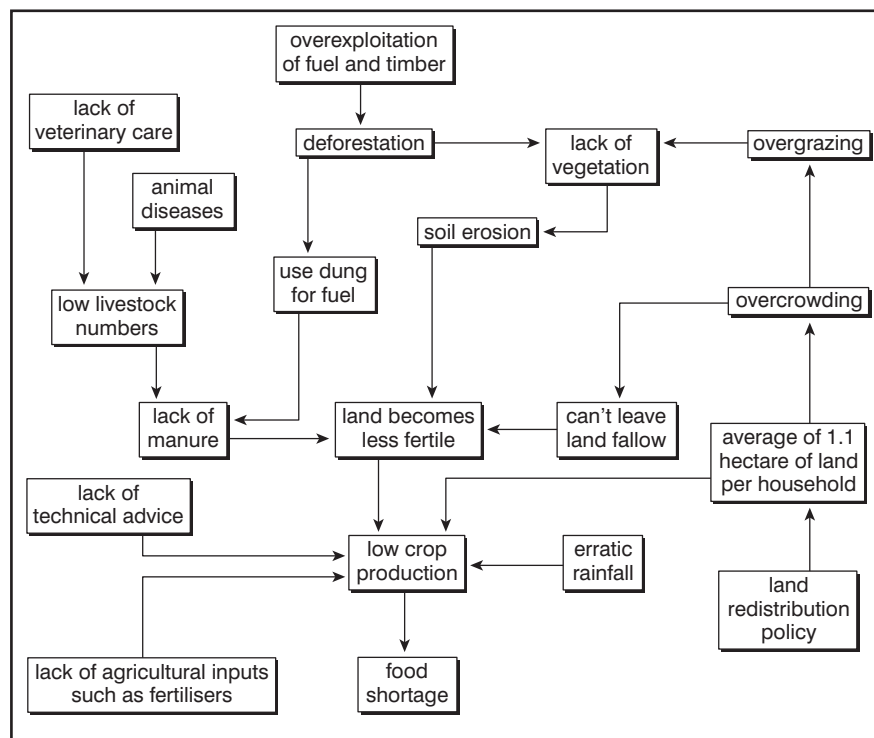
There is now a need to focus further interventions on the poorest people and women, who have not been included in some of these projects.

Sources of further information

Food For Thought, ActionAid 2002. A decision-making activity pack looking at food security in Wadla, Ethiopia. Contains background, detailed case study information and activities.

www.actionaid.org.uk/schools. Has downloadable information, game, photos and video from Wadla, Ethiopia.

Figure 5: Flow chart showing causes of food shortage in Wadla



Biography

Jane Davies is senior education officer at ActionAid.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- Study Figure 2 showing ways of coping with food shortage.
 - Draw a table or diagram showing the long-term consequences of each of these coping mechanisms.
 - Which mechanisms are sustainable and which are unsustainable? Explain your answer.
- Study Figure 5 showing causes of food shortage in Wadla. Alter the flow chart to show the potential implications of some of the interventions described above.
- To what extent is famine:
 - a natural disaster
 - within human control
 - aggravated by socio-economic factors?