



# ARE ETHIOPIA'S FARMERS DEPENDENT ON FOOD AID?

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## A perception of dependence

FOR TWO DECADES ETHIOPIA has been one of the world's leading recipients of food aid and the largest recipient in Africa. There are frequent claims that rural Ethiopia suffers from a food aid dependency syndrome that constrains productive investments and hinders sustainable development. Yet, is it true that rural households in Ethiopia are excessively dependent on food aid?

This research brief addresses food aid dependency in one of Ethiopia's most chronically food insecure areas: South Wollo (including the neighboring Oromiya Zone), which has been referred to as the buckle in the country's so-called "famine belt." Using household and community data from a three-year study, this brief argues that, while large numbers of Ethiopians receive food aid, only a small percentage are highly dependent on it, even during the frequent droughts. Instead of food aid, households often rely on purchases, gifts, and other sources to meet consumption needs. Uncertainties surrounding the amounts and timing of food aid delivery have taught local farmers not to depend on it. Yet, official perceptions of food aid dependency can be used to justify socially and economically costly programs like resettlement, while discouraging investments in local livelihoods. The research findings caution that these perceptions might be mistaken.

## Alternatives strategies to food aid

The analyses presented here draw on an exceptionally rich multiple-round study of 428 households during

2000-2003 that includes both quantitative and qualitative data. Recall data on household assets and drought-induced losses also were collected from the same households for the period 1997-1999. The research program covers eight different research *kebele* (an administrative unit made up of approximately four villages). Six of the eight *kebele* were strongly impacted by the 1999-2000 drought, and at least four were widely affected by the 2002 drought. Massive amounts of food aid were imported in both periods. Although the latter event received the most international attention, the 1999-2000 drought was more severe. During that year more than 70% of households in the area received assistance, and South Wollo was among the country's largest recipients of food aid.

Table 1 shows the percentage of households receiving food aid and the average amount of months they received aid during 2000 and 2002. Table 2 and Figure 1 disaggregate household food sources during the second half of 2000 when food aid imports were very high and agriculture had not yet begun to recover from drought conditions. The data show that 75% of households in the region received food aid. Yet, in only two of the eight *kebele*, Tebasit and Temu, was aid the most important source of food. Agriculture in those two *kebele* is dependent on the short rainy season, or *belg*, which is less reliable there than in most of the other sites. Even in those two *kebele*, food aid made up less than 60% of total food acquisitions.

Based on the high levels of food aid imported into South Wollo and Oromiya Zones during 2000, it may be surprising that food purchases were considerably more important in local diets than assistance. During July-December 2000 most households who received food aid indicated that they received it on a regular monthly basis, and in the six-month period households received some assistance on more than five different occasions. However, food aid was only the second most important source of food acquisition during these months.

If one looks at the effects of food aid on the household economy during the 2002 drought, even less dependence is revealed than in 2000. While almost half of all households received some food aid during the first half of 2002 (table 1), food aid was only the third most important source of household food, well behind purchases and own farm production. Figure 2 shows the relative importance of different food sources among the four *kebele*, where at least 50% of the households received food aid during January-June 2002. As the figure shows, the contribution of food aid to overall food stocks was minimal.

It should be noted that the significance of food sharing/gifts to local consumption probably is understated in the figures. Often food gifts are in the form of prepared foods and not grains per se, yet only the latter source is captured in the data. Chronically poor individuals especially rely on gifts of prepared food from wealthier family and community members.

Note the case of “Abayou,” a female-headed household head and widow from Yedo *kebele*, who owns no livestock and heavily depends on her kinsmen for assistance. (Cases are based on the author’s field notes and actual names have been changed.) Abayou lives in one of the poorest households in the study region. She says that she and her two sons can stop by any one of the six

Research site	% of households receiving food aid		Average # of months (out of 6) received aid per household	
	July-Dec. 2000	Jan.-June 2002	July-Dec. 2000	Jan.-June 2002
Chachatu	96%	27%	6.00	1.45
Kamme	98%	72%	5.89	1.92
Tulu Mojo	22%	17%	1.89	1.44
Yedo	32%	67%	1.60	1.00
Tebasit	100%	38%	6.00	1.00
Gerardo	45%	56%	6.00	1.07
Tach-Akesta	100%	72%	3.42	1.64
Temu	100%	29%	4.85	1.00
ALL <sup>2</sup>	75%	47%	5.16	1.58

<sup>1</sup> Analysis by author of data from the BASIS/IDR study of 428 households  
<sup>2</sup> Only among those who received food aid.

Research site (# households)	Food aid	Own farm production	Purchases	Gifts	TOTAL
Chachatu (56)	29%	36 %	35 %	<1 %	100%
Kamme (54)	22%	24%	51%	2%	100%
Tulu Mojo (54)	14%	16%	58%	12%	100%
Yedo (54)	12%	19%	66%	0%	100%
Tebasit (47)	59%	3%	38%	< 1%	100%
Gerardo (55)	18%	49%	32%	1 %	100%
Tach-Akesta (55)	25%	9%	64%	2%	100%
Temu (53)	59%	4%	36%	1%	100%
ALL (428)	33%	23%	43%	1%	100%

<sup>1</sup> Analysis by author of data from the BASIS/IDR study of 428 households.

families in the village that are related to her, and “they will give us grain, salt ... food and others things.” She often is given prepared foods at meals. In terms of food aid, Abayou received assistance about 9 months during 2003 but did not receive any during the 1999-2000 drought. Consequently, she does not rely too heavily on it. Unlike most of her neighbors, she does not have to carry out food-for-work (FFW) activities in order to receive food allocations.

The effects of food aid are more readily apparent in rural labor markets than in household food allocations. Most food aid in the study region is tied to work projects, and FFW activities are the overwhelming source of employment in South Wollo, as is true for other food insecure areas of Ethiopia. Figure 3 (next page) shows the percentage of households with members involved in non-farm employment (wage and in-kind) and the proportion of non-farm employment that is accounted by FFW activities.

As the data show, there was a fairly steep drop off in FFW activities in late 2001 as post-drought conditions improved, but a slight increase in 2002-2003 with the onset of the second disaster. During any four-to-six month period of 2000 to 2003, the participation in FFW ranged from a high of 66% of households to a low of 29%. However, the erratic nature of FFW work and its generally short periods of employment are disguised in these figures. For example, from July 2002 to July 2003 only 25% of households involved in FFW worked at least 60 days, or about 22% of their available work days. While FFW is clearly important in the area, households are not overly dependent on it as a source of non-farm employment.

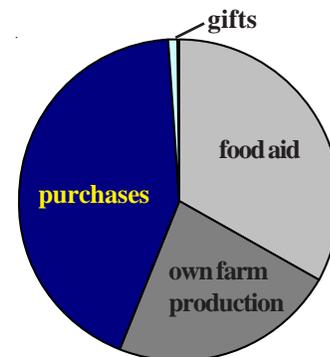
The following cases are typical of local perceptions regarding food aid.

“Mesfin” is a moderately wealthy, male household head who says that he and his family received no food aid during 2003. “One has to be a friend, not foe, to get the food aid.” He has learned that it is better to look for other means to acquire food during a drought, including migration to other areas to work, rather than to rely on food aid.

“Idrissa” is a widow who heads a household with two adolescent sons. She says that she gets along with local officials and they are kind to her. According to her, the chairperson of the peasant association decides who gets food aid and ranks villagers on their

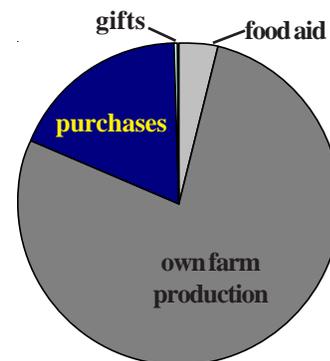
food needs. “We eat when they give us and no complaints if not included.” During the 1999-2000 drought she did not receive much food aid, but she is one of the few in her village who received food aid during late 2003, when conditions were better than in 1999-2000. Her sons were employed as herders during the 1999-2000 drought so they could eat.

**Figure 1. Household food sources during drought, June-December 2000**



Source: author analysis of data from the BASIS/IDR study of 428 households.

**Figure 2. Household food sources during drought, January-June 2002**



Source: author analysis of data from the BASIS/IDR study of 428 households.

Many local respondents emphasized that they often received only small amounts of food aid per month and were unaware of when deliveries would be made. The criteria for allocating food aid locally often were unclear or depended on relationships with the local administration.



## BASIS Briefs

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## Coping, not dependent

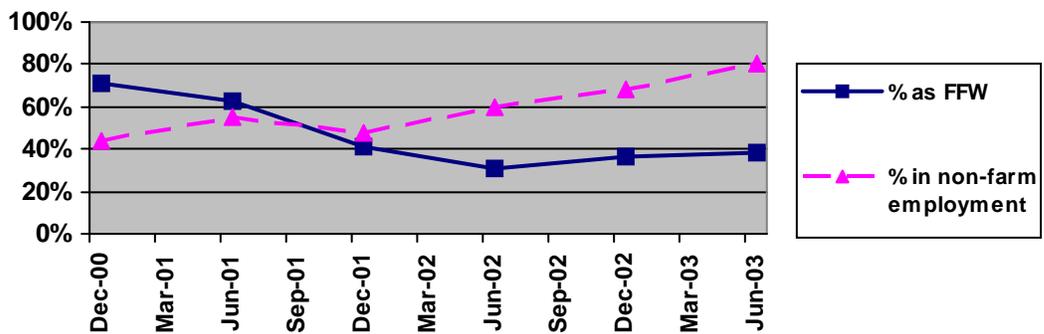
There is little question that the South Wollo region, including the neighboring Oromiya Zone, suffers from major food problems and widespread poverty, which has been highlighted in a number of recent studies. It is equally true that food aid has saved lives and played a very important role in assisting households and individuals to cope with major food deprivations in the area.

Nonetheless, it is important that the facts about food aid dependency and its implications are recognized and that policy directives not be premised on a misperception that local farmers are

the area being stigmatized as a “humanitarian basket case,” which then can be used by policymakers to justify drastic, often experimental measures, rather than promoting local development that builds on available resources and opportunities. As was shown in Ethiopia and elsewhere in Africa during the 1980s, and more recently in 2005-2006, the language of a food aid/food security crisis can justify a number of radical reforms—such as population resettlement—that can have serious long-term social, economic, and ecological impacts on local populations and economies.



**Figure 3. Importance of FFW activities, 2000-03**



hopelessly dependent on external assistance. In fact, the data presented here show quite the opposite pattern in South Wollo: food aid and FFW employment are just some (and usually not the most important) in a range of resources that households and individuals utilize in their livelihood strategies.

As many as 10-12% of the population can be classified as chronically food insecure and persistently very poor, even destitute. Recent development efforts to provide a cash/food safety net for them should be applauded. However, to present an exaggerated picture of food aid dependency can detract from the required development investments that places like South Wollo need in order to improve the livelihoods of the poor. It can also result in

## Related reading

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