



THE AGRICULTURE KNOWLEDGE, LEARNING, DOCUMENTATION AND POLICY PROJECT (AKLDP)

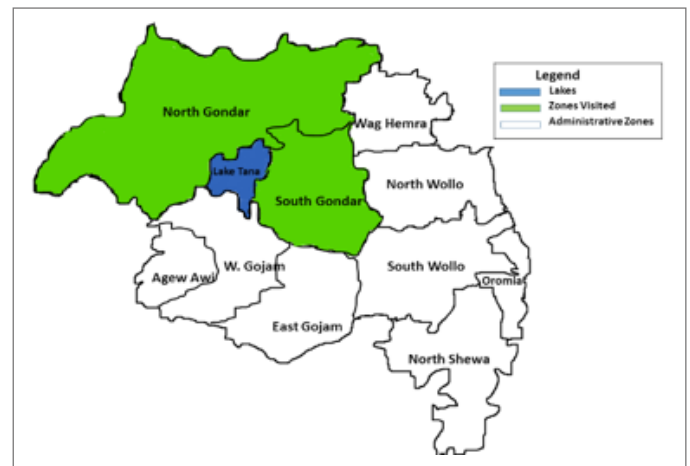
EL NIÑO IN ETHIOPIA

IMPACTS OF DROUGHT ON YOUNG RURAL WOMEN IN AMHARA NATIONAL REGIONAL STATE

Introduction

In January 2016 the AKLDP produced a set of Field Notes that documented the early impact of the El Niño on smallholder farmers in selected drought-affected areas of Amhara National Regional State (ANRS). As a follow up, in March 2016 the AKLDP commissioned two women researchers¹ to undertake an impact assessment of the El Niño on the lives and livelihoods of young rural women in North and South Gondar.

The assessment methodology was based on eight focus group discussions comprising 87 young rural female youth and young women between the ages of 15 and 25 years². The focus group discussions were organized in severely affected woredas – including Dabat, Debark and Wegera in North Gondar and Tach Gaint and Lay Gaint in South Gondar³. The focus group discussions were structured around key questions including the impact of drought, household coping strategies, and interventions that might help address priority needs. While the researchers did not profile the interviewees by wealth group, every effort was made to interview



poorer young rural women including those living in remote locations who, it could be expected, had suffered the worst impacts of the drought. Field work was done between the last week of March and the first week of April 2016.

Impact of the 2015 El Niño on young rural women's lives and livelihoods

The young women interviewees confirmed that the summer meher rains had been late, erratic and poor with the result that by mid-September 2015 many areas of North and South Gondar were experiencing drought-like conditions. They also reported that

the drought continued to intensify through to April 2016 with the result that they experienced increasing hardship. In order to understand better the impact of the drought on different aspects of the lives and livelihoods of the young women interviewees, the researchers structured questions around the following themes: workload, health and diet, home and community life, and education and training.

I. WORKLOAD

Following the onset of drought conditions in mid-September 2015, all interviewees reported a substantial increase in their daily workload. In particular, they noted that the distance and time taken to collect water and firewood had increased from about 1 hour to between 3 and 4 hours, while some interviewees reported up to 5 hours each day⁴. Young women living in the more remote areas of North Gondar also said it took up to 3 days to walk to food distribution centers to collect emergency food assistance and return to their homes. While all the interviewees expressed appreciation for the emergency food assistance, they noted that it took a good deal of time to hand-grind the grain to prepare flour.

As a result of the additional time taken to complete their work, interviewees with young children explained how they had considerably less time to spend caring for them than before the onset of the drought. The only time that they really had to care for their children – including breast feeding – was in the early afternoon and then again in the evening.



Food aid distribution site of PSNP in the Wegera woreda, North Gondar

2. HEALTH AND DIET

All the interviewees reported they had suffered from common ailments and they associated this with the limited availability and quality of water. For example, the interviewees noted that limited water availability led to many cases of scabies and trachoma, while poor quality water resulted in widespread diarrhea and occasionally, vomiting.

Interviewees further explained that the drought caused loss of food and livestock production, and reduced local wage employment, and so families had little cash and were less able to afford health care when family members were sick⁵. However, they also reported that family planning and pregnancy-related services were affordable as they are provided free of charge by the state.

Although it was not a planned topic of the focus group discussion, some interviewees expressed the view that in addition to other health concerns they were also suffering from fatigue and exhaustion and in some cases they used the word for depression '*debert*'⁶.

All interviewees said they were eating a monotonous diet⁷ – mainly wheat in the form of bread '*dabo*' and roasted wheat '*kolo*' – and that they were also eating fewer and smaller meals each day. For example, few of the interviewees did not have enough food to eat before mid-day and they therefore combined breakfast and lunch. Some poorer young women reported they only ate one meal a day because they were trying to keep enough food to feed their children. One of the researchers, also a nutritionist, observed that a number of the women were suffering from moderate acute malnutrition⁸.

When asked about the lack of dietary diversity, the interviewees reported they were unable to buy other food types as they did not have enough cash and that their families had already taken the maximum possible amount of credit from local traders to

purchase food. Until they had paid off their debts they were unable to ask for additional credit.

For some, food availability and access problems were compounded by remoteness and the time it took to walk to the nearest market⁹. As the interviewees were often hungry, they said they did not want to make long journeys to markets unless they were absolutely sure they would return with food for the household.

3. HOME AND COMMUNITY LIFE

Almost all the interviewees reported an increase in tension within the household – specifically around the management of food – and an increase in the divorce rate, as a result of the drought. They confirmed that in some villages up to 50 per cent of the men had migrated out of the area to search for wage employment, and some were sending remittances to their families. Some men would visit periodically, while others had not been seen for several months. It was reported that men had migrated to Metema and onwards to the Middle East. In contrast, no women had migrated as they recognized the need to stay at home to look after the children and elderly relatives, and to take care of their farms and livestock. However, some explained that if conditions continued to deteriorate – in particular the poor availability and access to water and food – they would also consider migrating to nearby market towns.

All the interviewees also reported that the drought had impacted significantly on community life and that there had been few or no social gatherings in recent months. They also reported that there had been no marriages since September 2015 as households simply lacked the required resources.

4. EDUCATION AND TRAINING

All interviewees confirmed a steep increase in the drop-out rate from local schools, in particular Grade 5 and above. The reasons given included that children were required to help collect water and firewood and to do other household and farming chores, or that their parents are unable to afford the cost of uniforms, shoes and school stationery.

In addition, some interviewees confirmed that without the knowledge of their parents boys as young as 14 to 16 years had migrated to nearby towns in search of casual wage labor, including on construction sites. Typically, these boys earned between Eth Birr 25 and 40 per day (USD 1.2 to USD 1.9) and they either lived alone or in small 'family' groups with their peers. The interviewees reported that these boys were often sick and that they are also vulnerable to exploitative landlords. This was underlined by the fact that some of the boys had returned to their homes and that they were less healthy than before they had left home.

Food and Cash Assistance

In the woredas visited, all interviewees confirmed that food and cash assistance play a central role in household coping strategies in times of drought^a.

While recognizing the importance of food and cash assistance – typically 15 kg wheat, 0.5 ltr oil and 1kg pulses, or between Eth Birr 78 to 150 per person per month^b – the interviewees reported they had received only 2, or in some cases 3 or 4 distribution rounds, since October 2015. They observed that the distributions were neither regular enough nor adequate to meet household needs.

It should also be noted that the distributions were reduced further because recipients felt it necessary to share their rations with their neighbours who had not received emergency food assistance, but were recognised as being in equal need.

Finally, the women expressed their concerns that they had to travel long distances to collect the food and that having arrived at the distribution point they often had to wait for several hours before they received their food transfers. At time these delays required that they spent another night away from home.

Notes:

- a Food assistance is provided to rural communities in Amhara Region through three mechanisms – the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP), emergency food assistance and the USAID Food for Peace supported Joint Emergencies Operation Program (JEOP)
- b It was not made clear to the researchers why the PSNP cash distributions varied between woredas

Coping strategies

As mentioned, most of the women interviewees were from poor or very poor; remote smallholder farming households that had been severely affected by drought, from mid-September 2015. When asked about different coping strategies 'mequaquamiya', they provided the following information:

- Food and cash assistance (see box, page 3)
- Preparing and selling local beer and alcohol: but interviewees reported that as the drought deepened fewer women were making local beer tella and locally-made alcohol areki, as water was less freely available and fewer men had the cash to purchase these items
- Collecting water: Eth Birr 5 (USD 0.23) per 20 ltrs for people who were not able to travel long distances to collect water for themselves
- Livestock: the sale of livestock – but many livestock had died and livestock prices had fallen by up to 50%. As a result, households were forced to sell more livestock to secure the same amount of cereals i.e. that they faced declining terms-of-trade
- Remittances: from family members who have migrated to secure wage labor

Women's needs and priority emergency assistance interventions

The interviewees were asked to identify and prioritize short-term humanitarian and medium-term resilience interventions that they felt would help improve their lives. The results are shown in the table below.

SHORT-TERM HUMANITARIAN PRIORITIES	MEDIUM-TERM RESILIENCE PRIORITIES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to safe drinking water • Access to food for all community members • Improved gender-related management of food aid and distributions at kebele level • Access to livestock feed supplementation • Access to seed and fertilizer • School uniforms, stationery and materials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Road construction • Irrigation schemes • Soil and water conservation activities • Credit access with low interest • Start-up capital for business activities • Skills training programs • School feeding programs

Conclusions

The 2015 El Niño drought was having a profound impact on lives and livelihoods on young rural women in these areas, exacerbated by physical remoteness. Female youth and young women identified and explained a range of problems related to workload, health and diet, home and community life and education and training.

Although government and international assistance was being provided, the levels of assistance were seen as inadequate to meet needs, and the provision of both humanitarian and longer-term assistance needed to be improved, including increased consideration to gender equity issues.

Of great concern was the high school drop-out rate. The interviewees suggested that children who drop out of school and in particular those children who migrate to nearby market towns are unlikely to return to school to complete their education. Unless these children do return to school, the impact on education – on both boys and girls – may be one of the most significant long-term impacts of the drought in these areas.

Looking to the future, to the recovery phase and the interviewees' longer-term aspirations, while some did make reference to additional public sector investment in agriculture – irrigation and soil and water conservation – many of spoke of the importance of road construction to improve access to markets and associated services including schools, banking and credit services. The importance of access to credit with low interest rates and start-up capital to start new businesses was repeatedly mentioned – these young women made it clear that they did not want to be restricted to farming for their longer-term futures. They aspire rather to be able to continue with some farming activities but also to be able to diversify their livelihoods into small businesses and in this way, be less dependent on agriculture in the future.

Endnotes

- ¹ Silvia Possenti and Mestawet Gebru
- ² This age group was selected because many of them have one or more children – the result of early marriage in the rural areas of Ethiopia
- ³ North Gondar: Selamye kebele, Dabat; Atamta kebele, Debark; Chichikit and Silare kebeles, Wegera. In South Gondar: Jedoda and Endwa kebeles, Tach Gaint; and Checheho and Amba Mariam kebeles, Lay Gaint
- ⁴ The interviewees also explained that walking long distances to collect water did increase the exposure rate to gender-based violence
- ⁵ It should be noted that the cost of health care in rural areas of Ethiopia is subsidized by the state and that the typical cost of treatment for common ailments is less than Eth Birr 20 or USD1.0
- ⁶ Words in italics such as 'debert' are Amharic words used by the interviewees; the English translations are provided ahead of the word
- ⁷ The AKLDP commissioned a study 'Dietary Diversity and Associated Factors Among Rural Households, South Gondar zone, Northern Ethiopia', through Gondar University in November and December 2015. It was found that only 16.2% of the study participants had high dietary diversity – consuming seven or more food groups – even at harvest time
- ⁸ UN-OCHA estimates the current caseload for moderate acute malnutrition in Ethiopia is 665,000 children and pregnant and lactating women of which 546,257 received treatment in the first quarter (Government of Ethiopia (2016). Ethiopia: Drought Response, Situation Report No. 01. Disaster Risk Management – Technical Working Group)
- ⁹ The AKLDP study cited in Endnote 6 above also found that households that were able to purchase food in local markets were 2.2 times more likely to enjoy higher levels of dietary diversity than those who could not afford to purchase food in local markets.
- ¹⁰ Separate research carried out by the AKLDP confirms that livestock prices fell by as much as 50% in parts of Amhara Region in the period November 2014 to November 2015. El Niño in Ethiopia: early impacts of drought in Amhara National Regional State <http://www.agri-learning-ethiopia.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/AKLDP-Field-Notes-Amhara-Jan-2016.pdf>