

## **Food and famine in Ethiopia**

Having enough food is often a problem in parts of Ethiopia. This article looks at food and famine, and then investigates the problems facing an area called Wadla.

### **Is there enough food in the world?**

There is more than enough food in the world to feed everyone, yet people are still 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.

### **Food within a country**

To stop hunger there needs to be enough food available within a country to feed all the people in that country.

National food availability = (food produced + food imported) – food exported

Sometimes a country does not have enough food and will need to produce or import more to meet people's needs. Most of the time countries do have enough food, but if it is not distributed evenly some areas may lose out.

### **Food in the household**

Households need to be able to grow, gather or purchase enough food for their needs. They also need to have ways of resisting sudden shocks like a poor harvest or loss of wages due to sickness.

Even in households with enough food, some people might lose out if food is not shared fairly. 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. Famine is caused by many complex factors including: poor climatic and environmental conditions, population growth, market failure or war.

### **Food aid**

Sometimes a country may be forced to ask for aid in the form of money or food. Emergency food aid is given in times of famine or disaster, and often helps the short-term survival of many people. However, the majority of food aid is delivered on a continuous basis as programme or project aid. It has been argued that this is actually a way for Northern countries to get rid of extra food, and 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.

### **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 on less

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than US\$1 a day and over 80% of the population rely on agriculture for their livelihood.

## **Why are food and hunger a problem in Ethiopia?**

Ethiopia has suffered from several famines, and many Ethiopians are chronically hungry. This is due to political, economic and environmental reasons.

The most commonly given reason for famine is drought, and parts of Ethiopia do have unpredictable rainfall that can lead to droughts. However, drought occurs frequently all over the world, and doesn't always lead 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 such as selling equipment, sending children out to work or eating less.

Unequal trading systems also contribute to hunger in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian government purchases crops from farmers at low fixed prices. International organisations encourage Ethiopia to produce cash crops to export, which reduces the land available for growing crops. The world price for agricultural exports such as coffee is also very low.

Another 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 years. Every time land is redistributed it is divided between more people, so each farmer gets less. Lack of investment, and the need for large yields from a small area, leads 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.

## **Welcome to Wadla**

Wadla is in North Wello zone in Amhara region. 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.

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## Why is food 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.

- Isolation and a lack of infrastructure. There is only 13.5 m of road and 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 hectare 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 jobs and small business 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)

## 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. 5864 farmers have received seed and irrigation systems have been introduced.
- Financial management. Credit groups have been set up so that farmers can get loans to invest in agricultural equipment.
- Improving land quality. 1021 people have been trained in environmental rehabilitation and conservation techniques. Projects are planting trees and controlling 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

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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 better access 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.

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