

ETHIOPIANS EXPOSED TO HUNGRY SEASON



When imagining a drought affected area, stretches of arid, dusty land is what comes to mind. Yet much of West Arsi zone in Southern Ethiopia is deceptively green.

Here people call it 'green hunger' – a period of food shortage following the failure of the first harvest, when the second harvest is months away.

Earlier this year drought resulted in almost total harvest failure and widespread death of livestock in this and other regions of the country.

Now Ethiopia finds itself in the grip of a complex humanitarian crisis, triggered not only by drought but by global inflation of food and fuel prices.

The impacts are being felt throughout the Horn of Africa and amongst the worst affected are the 4.6 million people identified by the Government of Ethiopia who require emergency food assistance.

The situation is expected to escalate further as the hunger season progresses.

Moges Abebe, who works for CAFOD's diocesan partner Meki Catholic Secretariat explains that this part of Siraro in West Arsi has been a surplus producer in the past but is now one of the worst affected areas.

"Even though the second rains have come and some crops are growing, things are precarious" explains Moges.

"For the next harvest in October so much depends on the rains. The next few months are critical and in the meantime people are struggling."

We witness the severity of this 'green hunger' upon arrival at a food distribution centre in Siraro Woreda run by Meki diocese.

Here the most vulnerable families with children under five are given 5kg of FAMIX (a blend of cereals and pulses) and 0.6 litres of edible oil per child to supplement the general food rations allocated by the government.

Amongst the multitudes who have gathered, Moges introduces us to some of the women who have come to get food for their babies.

Despite not understanding the language native to this part of Ethiopia, even before translation, it is easy to feel you know what the women are saying as their urgent tones are punctuated by the cries of hungry children.

Ramate who is married with two children looks much older than her 35 years.

Her youngest, Geneme Kibler aged one and a half, is strapped to her back and is clearly severely malnourished.

"All our income comes from growing crops" explains Ramate. "Because the last crop failed we are exposed and we don't have enough to feed ourselves."

One of the staple foods throughout Ethiopia is "injera", a spongy textured flat bread made from teff grain, but the price of teff has risen rapidly in the last year, and most quickly in recent months

"We buy pieces of injera as and when we can afford it rather than buying teff grain to prepare it ourselves", she says, adjusting her baby on her back.

"The grain is too expensive now. Last year I could buy two jugs of teff for one birr, now one jug costs ten birr (about 75 cent) and that is not even enough for one person."

The communities themselves have found other ways to cope during this drought period by eating cactus and whatever wild edible fruits they can. But despite this resourcefulness many are reaching breaking point.

When asked what needs to change for things to improve another woman in the group, Keriya is very clear,

"What we need right now is food aid" she says. "But we also need to make preparations for cultivation for the next harvest."

"For this we need seeds before the planting season ends. We have already planted the seeds we had in the last season, but they did not grow. The ones we saved we ate because we were hungry."