

“Debt relief and food security in Ethiopia”

ATMO 1 PRAYER

Debt relief and food security in Ethiopia – a co-production of Radio Ethiopia and Deutsche Welle German International Radio.

ATMO 1 PRAYER (up)

NARRATOR 1:

Standing with his eyes closed and his arms stretched, Fikade Semagne (Semanj) offers a prayer in the ancient Ge'ez language. He asks God to send rain, and stop being angry with his people. Fikade is a „Merigeta“, or local village priest. With 11 million Ethiopians facing starvation in 2003 as a result of drought, priests and village elders across Ethiopia are praying that they'll be spared the worst.

NARRATOR 2:

It wasn't always like that. A 16th century traveller described the fertile valleys of the northern highlands as a „Garden of Eden.“

Ethiopians consider themselves a chosen people: One of the oldest civilizations in the world, their country is the birthplace of coffee, the source of the Nile, and home to the legendary Queen of Sheba. Every child knows about the Battle of Adua when imperial troops crushed a superior Italian army. Subsequently, Ethiopia became the only African country to escape the European scramble for Africa. Today it has its own alphabet, its own clock and its own calendar.

NARRATOR 1:

But there is a second, more disturbing image of Ethiopia: that of a country unable to feed its people. A country where six million people – one in ten – are chronically food insecure.

This year, the *meher*, or summer rain, started late and stopped early, resulting in a drought that is threatening 15 million people with starvation. Some say it could be worse than the devastating famine of 1984/5 that left 1 million people dead.

So what went wrong ? What's behind the ever more frequent droughts? The village priests will tell you that it's a punishment meted out by God. Others put it down to more practical matters: changing wheather patterns, and poor policy decisions.

One thing, however, is certain: something has to be done, and it has to be done fast.

NARRATOR 2:

Ethiopia is a desperately poor country. With an average per capita income of 120 US dollars a year, it ranks among the poorest in the world. Add to that a crippling foreign debt of 5,4 billion US\$, and you know there's no way the country could escape the vicious circle of hunger and poverty on its own.

NARRATOR 1:

That is why the international community is now throwing Ethiopia a lifeline. The World Bank and other donors have agreed to forgive the country 2 billion dollars in foreign debt under the so-called „HIPC“ initiative. But there are strings attached: the government must pledge to use the money to fight poverty.

Despite initial reservations, the government has signed up to the plan, and after consulting church and other non-governmental groups it produced a „*Sustainable Poverty Reduction Strategy Program*“. This program aims to reduce poverty by increasing the food security situation of Ethiopia’s farmers, who account for 90 % of the country’s poor.

NARRATOR 2:

90 % of the poor, that’s a very high proportion of the population. I wonder, just how can this ambitious goal be achieved ? How can debt relief contribute to poverty reduction by improving food security ?

Getachew Adem of the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development responsible for the Poverty Reduction Plan, is upbeat about its potential to lift Ethiopia out of poverty. He says that for the first time, all Ethiopians were included in the consultation process.

OTON 2 Getachew Adem (ENGL)

„The involvement of all other actors in the development process is very crucial. So in that sense what is new about the PRSP is it has brought all actors – civil society, NGOs, private sector – to rally around the government to get programs that are on the ground to be implemented. After all we have to depend on domestic resources- of course external resources are very important, but at the end of the day ultimately we have to depend on domestic resources. so in this respect, I think, this initiative, the program will make a change to ordinary Ethiopians“.

NARRATOR 2:

Well, then, let’s go see for ourselves.

ATMO 3 WOMEN SHOUTING

NARRATOR 2:

Ebenat is a small town in South Gonder province, 700 hundred kilometres north of the capital Addis Abeba in the Amhara Region, home to the largest of Ethiopia's many ethnic groups, the Amhara.

This morning, a large crowd has gathered outside what looks like a huge warehouse. As it turns out, it's a food distribution centre run by the local government. There may be 400 or more people, some squatting on their haunches, others leaning on a walking stick or an ancient rifle.

They're farmers, and they've come to collect their monthly ration of food aid, courtesy of the UN's *World Food Program*. As farmers arrange the bags in neat rows outside the warehouse, you can make out the words: „Donated by the Federal Republic of Germany“.

Some of the farmers have walked for half a day or longer from their remote villages to get here. They look tired, almost indifferent. They've been receiving hand-outs for six months. Now the rains have failed them again, and an already desperate situation is getting worse.

ATMO 3 WOMEN SHOUTING

NARRATOR 2:

There's shouting and screaming from a group of farmers nearby.

They're haggling over their share of a 50 kilo bag of wheat.

OTON 4 Woman Ebenat (Amh.)

„I've walked for six hours to get here to collect my share of wheat. The drought is very bad this year. I have no land of my own, and I have no livestock either. So what can I do but come here and rely on hand-outs. We eat less and stretch the 12 kilos they give us so it will last us longer.“

NARRATOR 2:

70.000 people in the Ebenat area are already receiving food aid. By early 2003, the number is expected to double to 140.000.

Yenenesh Alemayehu is the Administration Officer of Ebenat Distribution Centre. She says that the food situation is very bad indeed, and that it's likely to deteriorate even further in the months to come.

OTON 5 WFP (Amh.)

„We're going to see many more people. The drought is spreading throughout the province. The rains should have started in May but they only arrived in July. And then stopped early. Already we're seeing farmers beginning to sell their livestock. They also become susceptible to illnesses. That's because they can only afford to eat once a day.“

NARRATOR 2

The deputy administrator of South Gonder, Eyasu Belachu („Belatschu“), says the drought situation is of great concern to the government:

OTON 6 Belachu (AMH)

„The drought in South Gonder this year is very severe. In the past, only few of the woredas, or administrative zones, were affected. This year, most of them have been hit. The drought brings with it health problems: especially malaria. That's a big problem. There is also a severe shortage of water for humans and livestock.“

NARRATOR 1:

South Gonder province is one of many in the central highlands considered chronically food insecure. It borders Wollo, the scene of the devastating 1984/5 famine.

That's why, in 1996, the German Development Agency GTZ and the local Bureau of Agriculture chose South Gonder as the site for an integrated food security project. Its aim: to increase farmers' food security by increasing productivity.

It's really very simple. Improve the traditional plough, introduce new, high-yield crops, and stem erosion so fertile soil doesn't get washed away, and you can double or triple output.

Six years down the line, the project has become a national show case. Farmers and government officials do the 700 km-trek from the capital Addis to the GTZ- project site in South Gonder province to see for themselves.

NARRATOR 2:

Arriving at the GTZ office in South Gonder, the visitor is greeted by a most spectacular scene: Here, in the epicentre of a drought-prone area, grow strawberries, bananas, passion fruit, salad, cabbage, onions, potatoes, and much more. Towering above the vegetables is a beaming Klaus Feldner, the 55 year-old project manager. An agriculturalist and hobby farmer, German-born Feldner has 30 years of experience in food security management in Africa.

OTON 8 KLAUS (German)

„So, here you see our strawberries, and look how many there are. That's salad over there, then there are peppers, cabbage, Brussels sprouts - you name it. In my opinion, Ethiopia needn't go hungry. It has everything to ensure food security for it's people: good soil, water, a huge labour force. All it needs are some technical improvements, and this country could be self-sufficient“.

NARRATOR 1:

Some „technical improvements“ ? Is that really all it takes to reduce the risks of famine in Ethiopia ? And how can debt relief help in this ? Have farmers in these remote parts of Ethiopia been consulted on how best to combat drought ?

ATMO 9 CAR

NARRATOR 1:

We're accompanying Habtamu Wubshet, the project's *Natural Resource Expert*, to Qualisa Village. It's said to be one of the worst-affected areas. On the way there, the vegetation grows more and more sparse. No more of the occasional green patches we'd been passing earlier on.

Qualisa is a small dusty hamlet, just a few tin-roofed huts scattered about a barren valley. We're greeted by a now familiar scene: a large crowd of people has gathered outside a government feeding centre. This time, though, it's American maize that's being distributed.

Tiringo Grimay has walked for six hours from her village to reach the centre. She is visibly exhausted from the long march. Leaning against the pole of a makeshift-hut to escape the intense sun, she relates her story:

OTON 10 GRIMAY (AMH)

„I have eight children. We're suffering from hunger. People are dying of illnesses that are a result of the drought. The able-bodied are leaving the areas that are worst-affected. The others are left behind to die. God must be angry with us. All we can do is pray“.

ATMO 11 DOG BARKING/STORE

NARRATOR 2:

Tareken Biyargo, a local farmer, invites us back to his homestead. There he opens the lids of huge clay grain stores, displayed prominently in the compound, and motions us to take a look inside. Under normal circumstances, Tareken would be considered rich, because he has two grain stores. Most farmers are lucky enough to own one. But these are not normal circumstances. Both grain stores are empty.

OTON 12 Tareken(e) (Amh.)

„ We planted sorghum and beans, but everything has been destroyed. We have no grain left so I went to the market and bought some. We use it to make kollo, roasted grain, that’s all we can afford. We used to eat injera, the local, bread-like staple three times a day. These days we sometimes go without any meal. God has turned his back on us. The cattle are starving, too, so there are no dairy products. I’ve already sold some of them. I am waiting for the next rainy season in May. In the meantime I am dependent on the government for food aid.“

NARRATOR 2:

In Ethiopia, they say, the status of a household is measured by the amount of smoke that rises from the *tukul*, or straw hut. Smoke from a cooking fire means there is money to buy food. As we looked around the Tareken family compound, there was no smoke at all.

NARRATOR 1:

Like his neighbours, and indeed many millions of farmers across the country, Tareken has fallen victim to increasingly erratic rain patterns. This year, the *meher* was late by six weeks. When the farmers had finished planting, it stopped in September, when it should have lasted through October.

As a result, much of the crop has been lost. That’s bad enough. But the late onset of the *meher* rains has also resulted in farmers replacing long cycle crops with short cycle crops. Because short cycle crops have a lower yield, farmers will have less sorghum and wheat in the next harvesting season. Poor rains have also meant a severe shortage of pasture and water for livestock. If a farmer loses his oxen as a result of a lack of fodder or water, he will find it hard to plough his field in the next planting season. And so the vicious circle keeps repeating itself.

ATMO 13 FIELD

NARRATOR 2:

Tareken leads us to the small plot behind his homestead. This is harvesting time. He should be out there with his sons bringing in sorghum, wheat and teff to fill the grain baskets. But as it is, there's not much to harvest this season:

Habtamu, the GTZ's Natural Resource Expert, is visibly shocked:

IN: OTON 13 Habtamu (Engl.)

„This is the first time to see such a catastrophic thing. Actually, I happened to see it on Television, but in the field, with my own eyes, it's the first time – in my life, actually.“

NARRATOR 2:

The Ethiopian government says the best way to reduce poverty, as stipulated by the debt relief initiative, is to make sure farmers produce enough food to feed the country.

So, does Tarekene know about the government's anti -poverty campaign? Has there been a meeting with the local administration ? Or has the village chief passed word down ?

We draw a blank from Tareken Biyargo. „No, never heard of it, he says with a shrug“.

We ask him how he feels about land ownership. It's a highly sensitive issue in Ethiopia. Under Ethiopia's constitution, farmers are not allowed to buy land. Instead, they lease it from the government. This is to prevent individuals from acquiring large tracks of land, thereby threatening the existence of small scale farmers. Says the government.

Critics say it's a policy designed to exercise maximum control over the farmers. They argue that farmers will be much more productive if they are allowed to own their land.

Tareken doesn't want to comment. It's clearly not an issue he feels comfortable discussing with a stranger.

What he does say is that the size of his land has dramatically decreased over the past few years. This is a common problem across the country. As a result of population pressure, the size of the average landholding is down to 1 hectare. Many farmers have to make do with as little as a quarter of a hectare. You don't have to be an agriculturalist to realize that this is simply not enough to feed a family of eight, let alone produce surplus to sell on the market.

When we say good-bye to Tareken, he points to one of the *tukuls* where his wife and three children are down with malaria. Malaria has always been a problem in this part of the country. But this year its particularly bad.

Back at the GTZ office, we are greeted with exciting news: After four years of designing, testing and going back to the drawing board, GTZ experts have developed an improved version of the traditional local plough. Ideally suited to farm the rugged terrain of the central highlands, the „Maresha“ has been in use in Ethiopia for more than 2000 years. But thousands of years of ploughing have created a compact top layer that prevents the roots of crops from penetrating deeper into the soil. By replacing the wooden ploughshare with a blade, the new so-called “*Tenkara Kend*” will dig deeper into ground, thereby improving yields by up to 50%.

ATMO 15 PLOUGH

NARRATOR 2:

The improved plough is an instant hit. Farmer Mihret Abebe can't hide his excitement.

OTON 15 Mihret Abebe (AMH)

„I'm using the plough for the first time today. It penetrates deep into the soil. It's also not heavy on the oxen. I'm sure it will increase productivity. May be this will help me escape hunger in the future. The old plough costs only 50 Birr. But I am quite prepared to pay as much as 200 Birr for this new one. In the long run it will bring more yield and increase my income.“

NARRATOR 2:

Klaus Feldner and Gavin Armstrong, the South African designer of the new plough, are excited, too:

OTON 16 FELDNER/GAVIN (Engl.)

„Gavin, look at this big deep furrow now. This is the second ploughing, but even the first ploughing was impressive, and they can still lengthen the blade, which is pretty easy, I am really impressed. (GA) Long time in the making

(KF) No, I am very happy.

[ATMO 15 PLOUGH]

NARRATOR 1:

While the plough can go a long way towards reducing hunger in Ethiopia, the most promising project by far is the recent introduction of a new crop called “Triticale”. Triticale is a cross breed between wheat and rye. It's more tolerant to diseases, drought and the frequent hail storms.

But most importantly, Triticale has shown a yield increase of up to 100 %, and has all the potential to significantly improve food security in the country.

ATMO 17 BEANS (under)

NARRATOR 1:

At Worden village, the GTZ 's Natural Resource Expert Habtamu is meeting with members of the peasant association.

When we arrive, the women and children are busy picking out pig beans. The farmers use them as fodder or to make a tasty sauce.

ATMO 17 BEANS up

NARRATOR 1:

Habtamu is relieved to hear that the farmers have accepted the new crop Triticale. Not only has it proved more resistant to drought conditions. It's also suitable for making the local staples Injera, Kitta and Kollo, says Erkie Teshale, the village's head woman.

OTON 18 Erkie Teshale (Amh)

„Triticale well-suited for this climate, with the frequent hail storms. It has a higher yield, and more nutritional value. What's more important: it doesn't taste any different from the staple grain, te'ff.“

NARRATOR 1:

But not even the „wonder crop“ Triticale could prevent the people of Worden village from being hit by the current drought. They can no longer afford to eat injera three times a day.

NARRATOR 2:

After four days of travelling hundreds of kilometres across the province, talking to farmers, government officials and members of village co-operatives, we're headed back to the capital, Addis. What we've seen in South Gonder doesn't bode well for the future. With the grain baskets empty, and the next harvest almost a year away, people will continue to depend on food aid for their survival.

Before we leave we want to know from Klaus Feldner, the GTZ project manager, whether the government's *Poverty Reduction Strategy* under the debt relief initiative likely to improve the food security situation of farmers in the area. He's not too impressed:

OTON 20 KLAUS FELDNER (Deutsch)

„The headline makes for good reading alright. What worries me is the content. It's a bit of a mixed bag, they want to do everything, and I am afraid that in the end nothing or very little will have been achieved. As far as I'm concerned, you have to get your priorities right first, and then you do what you've decided to do.“

ATMO 21 CAR TRAFFIC

NARRATOR 1:

Back in the capital Addis Abeba. After tranquil, if desperately poor, rural Ethiopia, Addis Abeba is a shock. Called „New Flower“ in the national language Amharic, Addis is a sprawling mass of tin shacks with the odd high-rise block thrown in. Although it has retained pockets of green, it is by no means an attractive city. The number of polio cripples and street children begging at the street lights seems to increase by the day.

Clearly, the *New Flower* has lost its bloom.

In a nutshell, the capital has all the ills of modern-day Ethiopia: huge population pressure – at 6% annual growth, it's one of the fastest urbanizing cities in the world - a lack of infrastructure and basic services, and an administration that has neither the capacity, nor the financial means, to improve the situation.

NARRATOR 2:

Well, that's why the debt relief provided by international donors is such a welcome opportunity for Ethiopia, isn't it? It can use the money freed up under the HIPC-initiative to improve not only the food security situation, but also living conditions in the cities.

ATMO 22 MERKATO

NARRATOR 2:

It's a Saturday morning at the *Merkato*, Africa's largest open-air market in the old part of Addis. The name is a legacy of the brief occupation by Italian forces back in the 1940s.

Saturday is a particularly busy day: people everywhere, chatting, haggling, gossiping. There are literally thousands of stalls, selling anything from recycled plastic bins to vegetables and fruits.

IN ATMO/OTON 22 VENDOR

NARRATOR 2:

This vendor sells second-hand electrical appliances. He says he can feel the effects of the influx of people from rural areas. But, does he know about debt relief and the government policy to fight poverty in the country? He shakes his head, shrugs and says: „I expect nothing from the government“.

NARRATOR 1:

Back in downtown Addis, we ask people in the street: Do they know about the government's anti-poverty drive, and if so, what do they think?

OTON 23 VOX POP (English)

V1: „I think, it's about reducing our debt, poverty of the country in the near future. Devising some kind of strategies so that it could really help us to reduce this poverty in a given time. It is a sort of plan. But i think it needs a lot of financing, and we got a lot of problems, so we need a lot of helps, all the helps we can get.“

NARRATOR 1:

This man singles out one specific country to come to the help of Ethiopians:

V2: „If the German government would help it would be easier to eradicate this poverty in the last. And I hope it will be helpful if the government of Germany will prospect in this poverty reduction in the existing poverty.”

NARRATOR 1:

But according to this man, the debt program is a foreign concept imposed on the government by foreign banks.

V3: „I really believe that it is a policy imposed on the government by the IMF and other international organisations. I don't really believe it is an indigenous idea of the government. And I really doubt that it really works. Because in a country like Ethiopia, where poverty is so rampant where poverty is so deep and you can't change the poverty by just bringing a certain new policy. I think the government need to do more better jobs and more deeper jobs than just putting a policy on the paper.”

NARRATOR 1:

But the World Bank country director, Ishac Diwan, is adamant that all stakeholders were involved, and that the anti-poverty campaign is Ethiopian-owned:

OTON 24 Ishac Diwan (Engl.)

„This plan is completely owned by the Ethiopians. We played no part in writing it, there are parts of it we may not like even. But we take it as given. And then we ask ourselves how we can support this society in delivering their own plans. After all it is a contract between the government and its own society where the government lays out the vision with the participation of society, and is accountable for the results. But it is also a contract of mutual accountability I would say, between the government and the external donors where the government is accountable and if they don't deliver results they won't get the financing. And the donors are also accountable to play by the rules of this game.”

ATMO 26 WATERFALL, in: SONG

NARRATOR 2:

At the world-famous Nile Falls, where the Blue Nile drops over a sheer chasm more than 150 feet to the valley below. The falls are known locally as "Tisissat", which means "water that smokes".

ATMO 26 SONG (up)

For a small fee girls recite songs for visitors. The songs the girls are singing pay homage to the *Abay* and its waters that have sustained Ethiopians for thousands of years.

The waters of the Blue Nile and two rainy seasons, provide Ethiopia with abundant water resources. The country also has fertile soil and a cheap labour force. Yet it cannot feed its people.

Technical improvements like a new plough could potentially go a long way in achieving better food security for Ethiopia. But what is also needed is a concerted effort on the part of the Ethiopian government. That's where the debt relief initiative provides an unique opportunity: It allows the government to channel money from debt repayment service to poverty allevation projects.

ATMO 1 PRAYER fade under, establish

NARRATOR 1:

With government agencies around the country only now beginning to implement the program, it will take some time before Ethiopians begin to see a change.

Until that time, they will continue to pray for rain, as they have for thousands of years.

ATMO PRAYER bring up

NARRATOR 1:

The priest in Worden Village hadn't quite finished his prayer when dark clouds moved in overhead. An hour later, heavy rain drops were drumming on the tin roofs of the village.

ATMO 27 RAIN, fade in: PRAYER

NARRATOR 1:

For a moment it seemed God had made his peace with the long-suffering people of Ethiopia.

ATMO

Debt relief and food security in Ethiopia.
You've been listening to a co-production of Radio Ethiopia and Deutsche Welle German International Radio. The program was produced by Asfaw Geremew and Ludger Schadomsky.

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