

Poverty: The Ethiopian Reality

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Background

With a population of over 65 million whose composition is marked by ethnic, socio-cultural and geographic diversities, Ethiopia is one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world. The country has a total land area of over 1 million km² that qualifies it as one of the largest in the Africa. According to Action Aid (1994:4), Ethiopia is famed for its varied climatic types ranging from cool temperate to arid desert with annual average temperature varying between 15⁰c and 30⁰c. It is endowed with natural resources like vast expanse of agricultural land consisting about 63%¹ of the total land area, and commands a large livestock population and a network of rivers and lakes with considerable potential for irrigated agriculture and fishing. These potentials, however, are not adequately tapped in a manner that could alleviate the pressing problems that negatively impinge on the day-to-day life of society. Poverty stands at the forefront of a plethora of predicaments that Ethiopian society faces at present. The quest for overcoming this problem, however, is constrained by a mix of the vagary of nature and human folly anchored in climatic, socio-cultural, and economic and political factors.

Poverty is demonstrably present both in the urban and rural areas of Ethiopia, the magnitude of which is severely felt in the latter. Famine episodes that recurrently unfold in the drought-prone regions and the country at large transformed what could have been transitory poverty into a chronic one (Ramachandran 1997). Notwithstanding its considerable endowments in a number of ways, the prevalence of a number of anachronistic systems and factors of production and means and ways of sustaining established livelihood systems seriously undermined successive efforts geared towards reducing and eliminating poverty. Heavy dependence on rain-fed agriculture, reliance on traditional skills and backward techniques of production, increased fragmentation and marginality of land, engagement in conflict situations over a prolonged period of time, continuous environmental degradation, high rate of population growth, adverse climatic conditions, and poor performance of the Ethiopian economy lent a structural dimension to the poverty situation in Ethiopia. The unabated persistence of the aforementioned factors tended to offset and seriously undermine attempts and efforts towards withstanding the causes and effects of poverty. As a result, poverty poses as the major underpinning of the conditions of life of a significant portion of Ethiopian society.

Vulnerability that increasingly became the hallmark of rural livelihood systems engendered increased temptation to embark on rural-urban migration on the part of rural producers. This trend of moving to urban centers with the hope of securing better opportunities was mainly propelled by recurrent drought and famine episodes and the progressive failure of traditional life support systems and coping and adoptive strategies in the rural areas. In the face of the fact that agriculture still remains the mainstay of the economy and the major source of livelihood, notwithstanding its misgivings and drawbacks, the dismal performance of the sector greatly contributed to the entrenchment of urban and rural poverty in Ethiopia.

This article aims at highlighting the salient features of poverty in Ethiopia by providing an overview of the prevalent situation. It also sheds light on the current policy directions presumed to address the problem.

Ethiopia Profile: An Overview of the Poverty Situation

According to Niang (2001), the hierarchy of needs taken as a means for defining poverty in Africa includes food, housing, clothing, and health in order of priority and importance. Thus poverty is

¹ Only 20% of the total land suitable for agriculture is under cultivation.

generally perceived in Africa, as a state of deprivation in terms of the above needs. The same source cites the World Bank that a member of society is considered to be poor when “his/her living standards fall below an acceptable norm according to the prevailing socio-cultural values in that society”. “Acceptable norm” is often interpreted as what is termed the “poverty line”, which became an operational tool for measuring poverty. On this basis, the “poverty line” is understood in terms of income that a household or individual would require for purchasing a minimum basket of goods and services deemed necessary to sustain an acceptable level of physical and social existence. This is calculated using the 1993 purchasing power parities (ppp) as not less than US \$1 per day.

Poverty in Ethiopia is a longstanding social problem affecting a significant portion of urban and rural communities of the country. The Action Aid Strategic Plan (1994) provided several indicators depicting the prevalence of poverty in Ethiopia. Accordingly, it is stated that life expectancy at birth is 46 years, and child mortality and maternal mortality are recorded as over 220 per 1000 and 900 per 100,000 respectively. GNP per capita stands at a little over US\$ 100 whereas the monthly minimum wage is currently Ethiopian Birr 200 (less than US \$ 25 at the current exchange rate).

Nearly half of the population does not have access to health facilities within a radius of 10 km., 40 percent of primary school-age children are enrolled, and about 15 per cent of eligible students attend secondary schools (Berhanu 2001: 171). The agricultural sector accounts for 55 per cent of GDP, which registered average annual growth rate of 6.2% in the 1990s. The growth was attributed to good weather, higher coffee prices, and allocation efficiency gains expressed in effective utilization of excess capacity. Betterment in this regard was mainly offset by a series of shocks like the famine episodes that occurred at short intervals, and an increasing trend of decline in the price of primary export commodities.

Poverty in Ethiopia is mainly driven by two underlying factors, namely, poor economic performance and acceleration of population growth (World Bank 1992: 4). A progressive decline in growth rate has been experienced over the last two decades adversely affecting the different sectors of the economy. This unhealthy trend that assumed alarming proportions during the final days of the previous regime (the *Dergue*) contributed to the augmenting of the extent of the poverty phenomenon in both the rural and urban areas. In addition to the agricultural sector, industry was also hard hit by registering a negative growth rate of over 16%². Based on data obtained from the World Bank and pertinent Ethiopian Government sources, the Action aid Strategic Plan Document (1994) estimated that about 13 million rural people (30% of the total rural population) were living under chronic poverty. A study by the planning Ministry of the Ethiopian Government (1992) classified a total of over 12 million people in the rural areas of the country as chronically poor, very poor, and poor. Nearly 7.5 million were designated as vulnerable with a propensity to succumb to some kind of shock that may unfold any time. The Table 1 illustrates the poverty situation in the rural areas of the country in the early 1990s.

As could be gathered from the Table, the rural population in every region is affected by incidence of poverty at varying levels. It is worth noting that, Wollo, Hararghe, Gamo Goffa, Sidamo, and Tigray figure out as most affected in order of the extent of magnitude. In the early 1990s, nearly 47% of the rural population lived under different levels of poverty classified as chronic, temporary, and vulnerable. With brief intervals of relative betterment accruing from improved performance, better natural conditions, and favorable policy environment, the overall situation remained more or less the same due to periodic shocks, notably recurrent drought and famine episodes, as is the case now.

² Data provided by the National Accounts Division of the Ministry of Planning (Government of Ethiopia), 1990.

Table 1: Summary of Poor Rural Households by Region

Region	Total rural popn. (.000s)	No. of hhs. '000s	Status of Poverty (Households)			Total in '000s (hhs)	% of total rural popn.
			Chronic	Temporary	Vulnerable		
Arssi	1855.8	371	-	55	-	55	15
Bale	1162.8	233	60	-	53	113	49
Gamo Gofa	1552.3	311	75	131	-	206	66
Gojjam	3850.1	770	-	147	-	147	19
Gonder	3495.3	699	91	128	-	219	31
Hararghe	4649.5	930	487	-	206	693	75
Illubabor	1192.0	238	30	-	102	132	55
Keffa	2863.2	573	-	156	-	156	27
Shoa	8719.3	1744	224	-	436	660	38
Sidamo	4517.4	904	206	-	385	591	65
Tigray	2498.3	500	213	-	92	305	61
Wellega	2969.0	594	-	140	-	140	24
Wello	3628.7	726	380	-	209	590	81
Total	42952.5	8590	1766	757	1484	4007	
Total poor population			8823	3789	7425		
% of total rural population			20.5	8.8	17.3		

Source: Social Dimensions of Adjustment Study Group, Ministry of Planning, 1992

Urbanization is a relatively recent phenomenon in Ethiopia. The steady rise in rural-urban influx resulting from the weakening of rural livelihood systems contributed to the entrenchment of poverty. Growing rural-urban migration is mainly driven by drought and food shortages, declining holdings and marginality of land resources, and localized civil unrest. According to Berhanu and Befekadu (2000), about 4 million (58%) of the nearly 7 million urban dwellers in Ethiopia live below the poverty line with a monthly income of Birr 244 (less than US \$ 30). The progressive and dramatic increase in the population of urban centers in Ethiopia is forecasted by World Resource (1996), which estimated that it would reach a staggering figure of 38 million by 2025. Ammanuel (2000) argues that urban life in Ethiopia is bedeviled with a plethora of social and environmental problems. With regard to the latter, problems associated with provisioning of housing, employment, water supply and sanitation, water resource management, and solid waste and air pollution management are listed. On the social front, lack of employment and adequate income for sustenance of family livelihood stand at the forefront of a host of predicaments that undermine efforts of the urban poor to achieve a modest degree of betterment. In 1994, for instance, 22% of the total labor force considered to be economically active was unemployed (Berhanu and Befekadu 2000).

Citing a 1997 Report by the Addis Ababa City Administration, Ammanuel (2000) laments the sorry state of housing conditions in the capital city. The problems mentioned include severe shortage whereby available residential units satisfy only nearly 50% of the actual demand. The majority of the houses (65 %) are over 25 years characterized by congestion as expressed by 2.1 occupants per room, and 4 persons per bedroom. Such state of affairs provided a favorable ground for the easy transmission of communicable diseases. A significant portion of housing units in the urban centers of the country are marked by poor quality and quantity of construction material, absence of standard cooking and sanitary rooms, and lack of open space in homesteads.

An official document of the Ethiopian Government entitled ‘**Ethiopia: Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Program**’ (MOFED 2002) provided information on the Poverty Profile of Ethiopia. This was based on the Household Income Consumption and Expenditure (HICE) surveys carried out by the Central Statistics Authority (CSA 1995/6 and 1999/2000). The latter survey brought to light that incidence of poverty was much higher in rural than in urban areas (MOFED 2000a: 4). On the other hand, the rural areas registered more per capita calorie intake whereas this declined in the urban areas between the period 1995/6 and 1999/2000. The study, however, cautioned that more food/calorie intake should not imply better quality.

According to the 1999/2000 CSA Survey, the proportion of people in Ethiopia designated as absolutely poor during the conducting of the survey was 44%. The percentage of people that are classified as poor are 37% and 45% in the rural and urban areas respectively (*ibid.*: 6). The same source also revealed that about 85% of the households in Ethiopia live in low quality houses of which 65% are grass roofed. Urban houses were found out to be of better quality than rural residences. According to the survey results, the average family size for Ethiopia stood at 4.9 persons per household, and the poorer households tend to have larger family sizes of between 5.4 and 5.8 per household. Poorer households in rural areas tend to have a larger family size than their urban counterparts. Moreover, it was found out that household heads of poorer families are older in terms of age than those of richer household heads. Females head 26% of the total households in Ethiopia. In the urban and rural areas, the percentage of female household heads stand at 41% and 23% respectively (*ibid.*). An official document of the Ethiopian Government (MOFED 2002:17) concluded that poverty in Ethiopia is highly correlated with the size and composition of households, the educational level of the household head, the degree and extent of dependency within the household, asset ownership (particularly ownership of oxen in rural areas), the occupation of household heads, and several variables pertaining to institutions that provide access to public services.

Tassew and Tekie (2002: 98-106) brought to light the situation of Poverty in Ethiopia by addressing different dimensions of economic activity and livelihood patterns. Accordingly, the national consumption expenditure for the year 1999/2000 was calculated at US\$ 139. Higher consumption expenditure was registered for urban areas as compared to that of rural areas. The study established that the proportion of people that are absolutely poor in 1999/2000 was 44.2% on the average (37% in urban areas and 45% in rural areas). It is worth noting that there exist regional variations in terms of severity of the occurrence. One outstanding reason explaining the persistence of rural poverty in 1999/2000 is attributed to the then prevalent drought and the Ethio-Eritrean war.

In terms of food poverty, the study (*ibid.*) estimated that it is less than total poverty in rural areas and more than total poverty in urban areas (41% in rural areas and 47% in urban areas). Findings relating to health and nutrition depict a national level of 1.8% as regards child wasting. Child wasting was found to be higher in rural areas than in urban areas. The same applies to stunting, which is a reflection of long-term malnutrition. Wasting and stunting are more reflected among children born to poorer households than those born to richer households.

In 1999/2000, the overall literacy rate for the country was 29.4%. Female literacy rate was found to be lower than males (19.5% and 40% respectively). Literacy rate in the urban areas was higher (70.4%) than in the rural areas (21.8%). The increment in literacy rate has been much higher for males than for females. During the same period, gross and net primary school enrollments were registered as 59% and 34% respectively, whereas gross and net secondary school enrollments were 15.5% and 11.5% respectively. Both primary and secondary school enrollment rates were found to be higher in urban areas.

Measuring the Poverty Profile in Ethiopia

The Forum for Social Studies³ (FSS 2001) provided snapshot figures presumed to help in measuring the poverty profile in Ethiopia. These could be presented as follows:

- If the current annual population growth rate of about 3% persists unabated, the population of the country (currently about 65 million) will double in 23 years thereby exacerbating the poverty problem.
- Ethiopia's urban population is 17% of the total whereas the figure is 34% for Sub-Saharan African countries. This implies that limited urbanization entails lesser opportunities for economic improvement thereby augmenting the magnitude of poverty.
- If the poverty line is defined as income below US\$1 per day, nearly a third of the Ethiopian population falls below the mark.
- At GNP per capita of US\$100, Ethiopia ranks the least in the face of per capita for Sub-Saharan Africa standing at US\$500.
- Per capita food output in Ethiopia is marked by progressive decline since the 1970s thereby constraining the ability of the country to feed its population. This is signified by output per capita registered as 174 kg. In 1980/81, 142 kg. in 1989/90, and 97 kg. in 1993/94.
- The ability of the population to secure food self-sufficiency is deteriorating thereby precipitating increased dependency over time. For example, 6.1 million people were affected by food shortages in 1992. This figure fell to 4 million and 5.8 million in 1995 and 1998 respectively [*this has currently soared up to over 10 million*].
- Child and infant mortality rates for Ethiopia in 1998 were 173 and 107 per thousand respectively. The average for Sub-Saharan African countries during the same period was 151 and 92 per thousand respectively.
- The prevalence of malnutrition among children under five was 48% while the figure for Sub-Saharan Africa was 33%. In 1995/96, 44% of Ethiopian children under five were severely stunted while 67% were stunted.
- Adult literacy rate in 1998 was 42% for males and 30% for females whereas figures for Sub-Saharan Africa were 68 and 61 percent respectively during the same period.
- Life expectancy at birth in 1998 was 42 years for males and 44 years for females. The figures for Sub-Saharan Africa during the same period were 49 and 52 respectively.
- In 1995, only 8% of the population had access to sanitation, and 26% to safe water. For Sub-Saharan Africa, the figures were 48% and 47% respectively.
- Ethiopia's Human Development Index ranking has deteriorated, according to the UNDP. The country ranked 138th in 1992 and 171st in 1998.

Moreover, Aklilu (2001) cited a number of prevalent features of poverty in Ethiopia. He stated that in 1997 there were 195 radios, 5 television sets, and 3 telephone main lines for every 1000 people. The situation of educational and health services are lamented for being inadequate in terms of quantity and quality of provisions and budgetary allocation. The same source indicated that HIV/AIDS has affected over a tenth of the adult population in 1999. The pandemic targeted the most important group of people in terms of productivity and labor, which make up 90% of AIDS cases. As a result, the country stands among the highest affected in the world. At present, the average size of farmland per household is less than a hectare in most of the cereal growing parts of the country. Land holding in "enset" growing areas is less than half a hectare per household. The ecology is increasingly threatened as a result of deforestation, which occurs at an annual rate of 624 sq.km. In 1994, 770,000 (2.9%) economically active persons were unemployed thereby adding increased burden to the already precarious position of the country's development endeavors (*ibid.*). It was also learnt that only 51% of the population has access to health services in the year 2000. The Interim poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (IPRSP) envisaged that targets of 55% and 90% would be achieved by 2002 and 2017 respectively in terms of access to health services (Yasmin 2001: 7).

³ An indigenous think-tank and a Center for Research and Debate on Development and Public Policy.

Towards Poverty Reduction

The Ethiopian Government issued an Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (IPRSP), which outlined poverty reduction approaches based on a) Agricultural Development-Led Industrialization, b) judiciary and civil service reform, c) decentralization and empowerment, and d) capacity building in the public and private sectors as its major contents. These were presumed to help in realizing goals and objectives relating to poverty reduction (MOFED 2000b). In addition, the document incorporated sectoral and sub-sectoral development programs (agriculture, education and health, infrastructure). As could be observed in the policy reduction matrix of IPRSP covering the period between 2000/01 and 2002/03, the Government pledged to address concerns associated with poverty through a series of policy measures and interventions that were deemed crucial in bringing about improvements in, among others, food security, agriculture, industry, and prevention of HIV/AIDS. Poverty reduction program indicators of IPRSP embraced such welfare components as reducing poverty and inequality through increase in average income, progressive increase in average yield per hectare, augmenting the share of education, agriculture, and health in budget allocation, and improving access to health and educational services and clean water. On the other hand, reduction of infant, child, and maternal mortality rates were set as targets to be achieved during the period in question.

Issues pertaining to the preparation and subsequent submission of IPRSP in terms of the participation of the public in general, and stakeholders in particular attracted some controversy. While the government alleged that this was preceded by extensive debates (MOFED 2000b: 38), others (Dessalegn 2001: 5) opined that the government's claim of involving people in discussion in connection with the May 2000 Elections cannot serve as a substitute for open public debate of the document.

State of affairs pertaining to the performance of the economy during the 90s was summed up by an official document (MOFED 2002), which is a summary of the final PRSP. Accordingly, it is alleged that an overall trend of declining poverty expressed in annual GDP growth rate close to 5% was witnessed during the period between 1992/93 and 2000/2001. Sectoral growth rates during the same period were registered as 2.5% for agriculture, 5.3% for industry, 6.3% for distributive services (transport, communications, trade, tourism), and 8.2% for other services (MOFED 2002:1). The same source asserted that in the 2000/01 Fiscal Year, positive outcomes were realized as expressed by a 7.9% GDP growth, negative inflation, and decline of external current account to 4.9% (from 5.2% in 1999/00). Detailed program costing has been carried out on a sector-by-sector basis for each poverty-oriented component. This was done by taking into account capital and recurrent expenditure requirements (*ibid.*: 23). Apart from future commitments of external assistance, there is a resource deficit of about Birr 16 billion that is required to bridge the gap between available resources and the total PRSP resource requirement of Birr 51.6 billion (*ibid.*: 24). In the face of Ethiopia's share of external assistance of about \$13 per capita as things stand now (compared to \$25 on the average received by Sub-Saharan African countries), securing external assistance on this scale could prove very difficult.

Conclusion

The reform measures that commenced in the early 1990s were in the process of leading to piecemeal and steady improvements in the performance of the Ethiopian economy. Given the prevalence of total poverty in the rural areas, the rural and agriculture-centered policy of the Ethiopian Government as enshrined in the ADLI document was presumed to address pressing problems associated with poverty. Notwithstanding the fact that lending primacy to agricultural and rural development concerns tallies with the Ethiopian reality, it does not appear that poverty reduction efforts have produced the desired results as envisaged. The launching of ADLI as the cornerstone of the country's development drives since the mid-90s did not bring about commendable results in poverty reduction at the desired level. The following, among others, could be cited as explanatory factors for the persistence of poverty in Ethiopia as is experienced at present:

First, the agricultural component of ADLI emphasized the extension package as an important variable for ensuring productivity in a manner that could address the structural nature of food insecurity prevalent in the country. The extension package that is mainly preoccupied with familiarizing improved inputs and better techniques resulted in more yield in areas where the vagary of nature did not negatively interfere with farm activities. However, years characterized by bumper harvest also experienced fall in demands and prices accruing from a host of factors like paucity of market information and outlets. This, in turn, became a disincentive in the sense of prompting the reluctance of the peasant producer to endeavor towards producing more through increased activities and investment.

Second, opportunities for gainful non-farm and off-farm employment are lacking in most of the Ethiopian countryside. Highly limited investment in the different sectors of the economy characterizing the overall economic landscape perpetuated a situation of heavy reliance on the progressively diminishing land and environmental resources for sustaining established livelihood systems of the majority of the population. As a result, productivity of labor through deploying excess manpower from agriculture to the other sectors of the economy could not be realized. The impact of such state of affairs is that the heavy dependence and pressure on land could not be eased thereby leading to increased marginality and fragmentation.

Third, recurrent drought and famine episodes neutralized every commendable achievement the moment they unfold thereby undermining efforts geared towards poverty reduction. The impact of these mishaps on societal life and government planning is expressed in such things as diminishing of household and community assets, increased rural-urban influx and dependence on relief handouts, disruption of productive activities, and shifting of priorities in resource allocation from development to emergency life saving operations.

Fourth, periodic land redistribution practices in the past prompted reluctance to invest in farm activities. This was compounded with small size and marginality of holdings that entailed adverse effects on land productivity.

Fifth, in spite of the enactment of a population policy and the establishment of an institution dealing with population issues in 1993, no commendable achievements in this regard were experienced to date. If population growth is allowed to persist at the current rate, it is estimated that it will double in less than thirty years from now. In the light of the current poor performance relating to family planning and other mechanisms of control, unabated population growth is likely to offset future achievements in other fields thereby leading to the further entrenchment of poverty.

Sixth, the Ethio-Eritrean War of 1998-2000 seriously undermined efforts towards poverty reduction by absorbing colossal manpower and financial resources, and expressed in massive dislocation thereby rocking the basic fabrics of different aspects of life. Thus, resources, time and energy, and focus that could have been deployed to tackle the poverty problem were channeled to boosting the country's war efforts.

Seventh, the abuse and mismanagement of public office and resources as exemplified by prevalent petty and grand corruption in a number of parastatals and other service delivering public agencies constrained endeavors aimed at poverty reduction.

Eighth, the huge gap between available resources at the disposal of the country and costs required to successfully implement plans pertaining to poverty reduction as outlined in the PRSPs could continue to menace the realization of objectives in the years to come.

In summary, poverty reduction efforts would be rendered futile in the absence of labor productivity, market outlet for surplus products, non-farm/off-farm gainful employment opportunities, security of tenure, effective control on population growth, peace and stability, alternatives to heavy reliance on

the forces of nature, and unconstrained external resource flows. At this interjection, it should be noted that the UNDP human poverty index (UNDP 2000: 108) dealing with differences in the size of poverty between countries revealed that Ethiopia has a 56% human poverty in 1997. Of the total of 76 developing countries covered in Africa, Asia and Latin America, Ethiopia stands ahead of only a few countries like Burkina Faso (59%), Sierra Leone (58%), and Niger (66%) in terms of the extent of human poverty. The World Bank (2001: 274) also ranks Ethiopia among the least developed economies of the world in 1999 in such matters as GNP and GNP per capita.

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