

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Predicaments of rural development interventions in Tigray region, Ethiopia**

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**This ethnographic study was conducted in Tigray region of Ethiopia with the aim of assessing the problems of rural development interventions during the last twenty years<sup>1</sup>. The main objectives of the study were; to identify major intervention areas, examine community perceptions of government led interventions and examine overall challenges and prospects of the rural development option in Tigray region, Ethiopia. The data for this paper was obtained from the Southern, Eastern and South eastern zones of Tigray region. Field data was collected using qualitative research methods. The specific tools include, key informant interviews, focus group discussions and case studies. The findings of the study revealed that although, there have been tremendous efforts and improved government commitment in Tigray region in the post-1991 period, rural development has been impeded by a number of factors. The challenges identified include, compulsive agricultural extension system, erroneous incentive schedules and lack of proper devolution of power to the grassroots, hasty non-participatory implementation of projects, absence of functional integrations among development agents, lack of proper utilization of public funds, and problems related to evaluation and monitoring activities. Besides, it was evident that poor work ethic, the culture of overconsumption, low adult literacy and lack of proper incentives to frontline workers were also identified as major problems. These together with the challenges emanating from ecological calamities (shortage of rainfall, land fragmentation and population pressures) have impeded rural development in the study area.**

**Key words:** Development interventions, community assessment, Ethiopia.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Ethiopia with a population of more than 80 million is the second most populous country in Sub-Saharan Africa (CSA, 2005). The country has long-standing history, diverse cultural heritage, and reasonably good resource potential for development. Yet, the majority of the population lives in absolute poverty. Ethiopia has a per capita income of only about 20% of the African average (Diao and Pratt, 2005). The incidence of poverty in the country is high, with about 45% of the rural population

and 37% of the urban population living below the Woldehanna, 2004). Thus, poverty eradication is the central development agenda of the government that guides its development activities. In 2002, the government of Ethiopia committed itself to the Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Program, SDPRP (MoFED, 2002) and achieved the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The overarching objective of the government has set itself to reduce poverty at the same time as maintaining macroeconomic stability (Hagos, 2003).

Tigray (Figure 1) is located in the Northern tip of Ethiopia. It covers an area of approximately 54,572 sq km and has a total population of 4.33 million of which 82% live in rural areas (CSA, 2007). The region comprises a

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<sup>1</sup>In Ethiopia, a new government led by the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took power in 1991 after a 17-years bloody war against the dictatorial Derg regime.

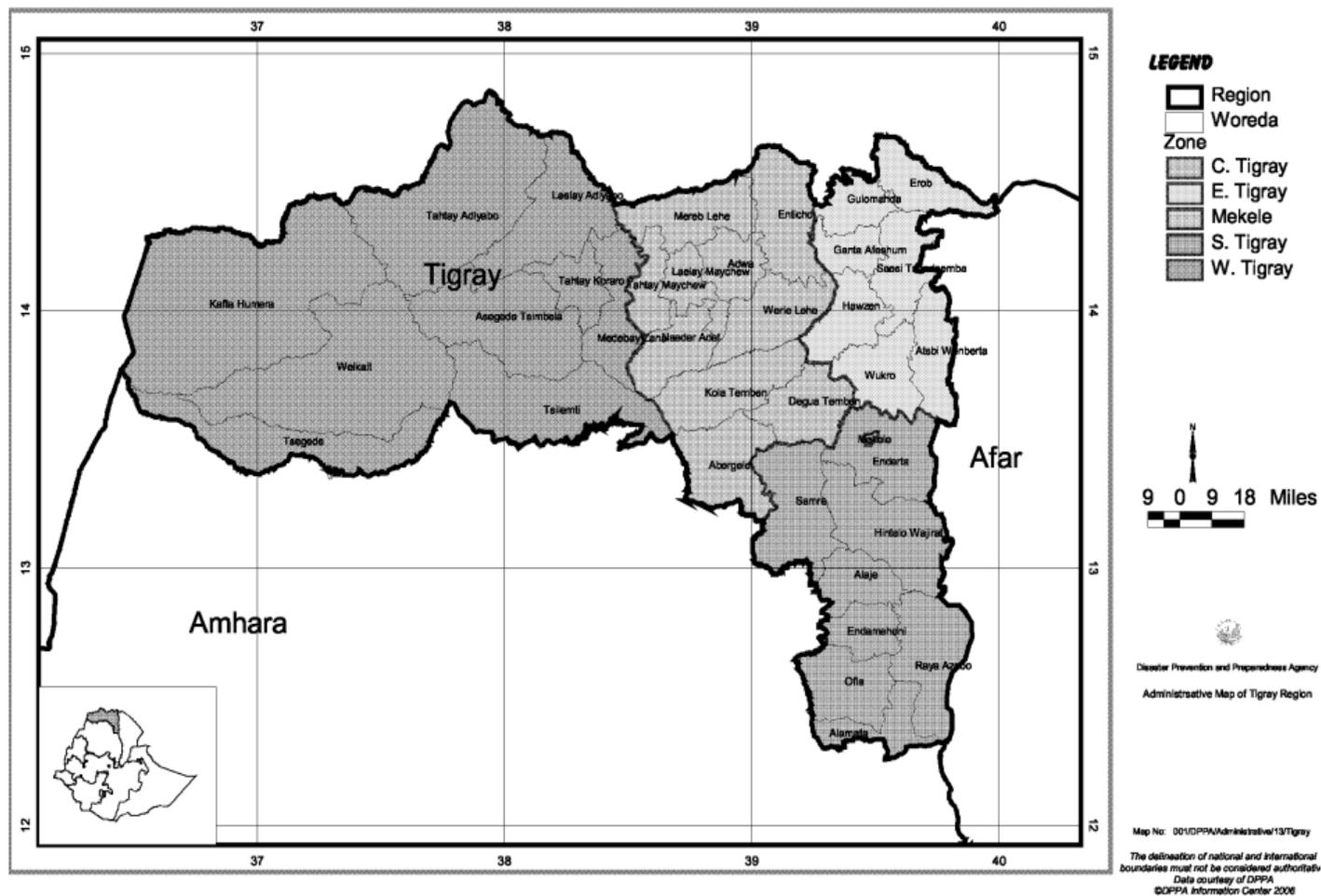


Figure 1. Map of Tigray Region, Ethiopia (DPPA, 2010).

total of 34 rural Districts (districts), 12 urban Districts and 660 villages (sub-districts) (CSA, 2005). In Tigray region of Ethiopia, rural development is based on agricultural knowledge and livelihood systems that are key elements in the policy making and implementation of agricultural extension systems (Araya and Edwards, 2006; Lemma, 2007).

## OBJECTIVES

The overall objective of the study was to assess the challenges of rural development interventions in Tigray region, Ethiopia. The specific objectives include:

1. To identify major components of rural development interventions in the study area
2. To examine grassroots' perceptions of rural development interventions in the study area
3. To examine the challenges, weaknesses and strengths of major interventions

4. To suggest possible recommendations on the way forward based on inputs from farm communities in the study sites

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted in Tigray regional state in federal Ethiopia. Six specific sites were selected from the Southern, Eastern and South-eastern zones of the region on the basis of their proneness to recurrent drought and poverty status. Data was collected using qualitative approaches using ethnography as the dominant methods. This method was preferred to formal survey research because of the preliterate nature of the communities considered for the study and sensitiveness of the research topic. 31 focus group discussions were held with a group of 6 to 12 community members representing different socio-economic categories (age, gender and wealth status). Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with 38 key informants (opinion leaders) selected on the basis of their proven knowledge of agricultural extension and rural development related practices and interventions. Often, regular chit-chat with key informants followed by long hours of informal discussions in the farmers' own settings constituted a major part of the data collection process. Cases

studies were also conducted with adopters and non-adopters using in-depth interviewing. 12 local administrators and district level officials (2 from each specific site) were also approached for structured interviews. The use of participant observation as an ethnographic helped the author to gain trust and get access to authentic feelings of the farmers. Secondary data was also used to augment empirical observations from the field.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Copping with challenges to productivity

The main crops grown in the study areas are cereals and legumes. Cash crops such as sesame were also grown in the lowlands. The most prominent cereals grown in the region are sorghum, Teff, barley, wheat, maize, millet, peas, beans lentils. Generally, the areas suffered from shortage and erratic rainfall, sporadic pest infestations, livestock diseases including anthrax, black leg and *ovine pasteurellosis* as well as, land fragmentation and resource degradation. This was further complicated by the 17 years of bloody warfare between the TPLF<sup>1</sup> and the Marxist Derg regime. As a result, the areas have repeatedly been haunted by drought and famine. The 1984 Ethiopian famine for example has claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in Tigray region alone.

Farmers have developed meticulous coping strategies in order to deal with harsh ecological conditions and lead viable livelihoods. Poorer households with limited assets depended on additional off-farm and non-farm incomes as a direct response to declining productivity. These include wage labour migrations<sup>2</sup>, and involvement in petty trade. Vulnerable households often sold small stock animals (shoats). Kinship based economic support networks played a significant role in the provision of loans to the needy. However, the last two agricultural seasons (2010 and 2011) were exceptionally good in terms of rainfall amount and distribution. Farmers especially those who used inputs harvested a good deal of produce despite fears of possible outbreak of pests and erratic rainfalls during harvest periods (in December) which rarely occurred.

### Post 1991 changes in policy framework

Since the coming to power of the Ethiopian Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in 1991, the country has undergone major shift in economic policy, political administration and governance. Command economy gave way to free market economy and a totalitarian

political administration was replaced with a multi-cultural policy that gave rise to the evolution of 9 ethnic based federal states. Improved commitment and political will of the government, sound policies and the relative peace achieved after 17 years of bloodshed has generally resulted in expansion of infrastructure across the Tigray region. There has been tremendous government investment particularly in the area of education and health; as well as, the expansion of rural road networks which facilitated market access. Communication facilities have also immensely grown throughout the region over the last couple of decades. The Eastern and Southeastern zones are no exception in that regard. The Tigray regional state has Agriculture and rural development bureaus that operate under the auspices of the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. Tentacles of the regional bureau for rural development extends up to the *Tabia*<sup>3</sup> level while major policies are the same across the regions; the modalities for intervention may vary from one state to another depending on variations in resources and environmental conditions.

The rural economy in Tigray is based on mixed farming which combines cereal production with animal husbandry. All livestock species are reared in the area but more importance is given to large stock animals particularly cattle as they are considered the source of household insurance and symbols of social status. However, livestock production is often constrained by the spread of diseases and the increasing shrinkage of pastoral resources which forced government authorities to discourage open and unregulated access to grazing land.

### Social services

The biggest achievements since the incumbent government took power are reflected in the massive expansion of schools (basic elementary school education), clinics and health posts. There have been huge investments particularly in those two sectors but not without trying challenges. Sending children to school had to be weighed against the role played by young boys and girls in supporting the family not only in domestic chores but also in income earning ventures. Local farmers often had to make bitter decisions especially in the wake of the fact that, being uneducated themselves, they hardly perceived education would bring any difference in their livelihoods. In fact, most local farmers felt education could possibly spoil children by cultivating feelings of resistance and rebellion against the statuesque in which long standing norms such as respect to elders and gerontocracy are entrenched. Despite such pressures from the grassroots, the government pursues child education as one of its top priorities and any attempt for

<sup>1</sup> TPLF stands for the Tigrean People's Liberation Front. It is the main political faction of the ruling party

<sup>2</sup> The boom in the construction sector in the region has attracted a large number of the youth into the major towns. Remuneration for daily labour is souring given the increasing demand for construction workers.

<sup>3</sup> Tabia is an administrative unit below the woreda (district) level.

blockade is often considered as a violation of the political order.

The health policy of the region is based on preventive care. More funds are now going to awareness campaigns and sensitization measures household health packages have been introduced in recent years with a focus on maternal health care, child inoculation programmes, environmental sanitation and personal hygiene. The deployment of more trained health professionals and equipment including ambulances (at least 1 ambulance for 2 sub-districts) has created a favorable condition in the villages although, achievements are still far from the actual need; and demands are higher than supplies. New roads and telecom facilities have also been constructed. However, the bulk majority of the roads linking rural villages with nearby market destinations at a Woreda and zonal levels tend to be dry-weather roads and hence, may be inaccessible during the rainy season. Besides, while rural roads are fundamental to marketing efficiency, the mounting cost of transportation and existing high inflation have had negative impacts. Telecom services are also far from sustained. Each Tabias (sub-district) is provided with only one usually wireless gadget or/ and solar apparatus stationed in the administration. The network is often poor and not reliable while apparatus failures are common features. Despite the fact that Ethiopia is often considered the powerhouse of Africa and there are huge investments in this sector in terms of utilizing the renewable energy potential of the country, electricity supply in rural villages of the Tigray region is far from adequate. The bulk majority of the people still use traditional biomass as a source of fuel.

### **Present approaches to agricultural extension in the region**

The approaches to rural development by the current regional government have exhibited major shifts over a period of time. In a bid to sympathize with the poor, some of the interventions that took place in the 1990s erroneously administered reward systems that were ultimately damaging. Aid and government support were rendered to those who prove to be very poor. This created the culture of dependence on government resources and seriously hampered the motivation of farmers to economically prosper as a result of lack of incentives. This trend was later corrected with government incentives being allocated to model farmers who have demonstrated innovative advancements in terms of boosting productivity and designing of new income earning strategies that served as examples to others. This often linked up with the tendency to promote encouraging the adoption and diffusion of new technologies and ideas.

In Tigray, there has been further restructuring of political administration in a way that promoted the empowerment of the local districts as key actors in development. However, serious problems of governance

have been reported at the grassroots particularly prior to 2005. In a bid to bring about change and swift socio-economic transformation in the region, rural development policies were often implemented through intimidation and the use of force. Exclusionist approaches characterized by unfair treatment of resistant farm households, the differential denial of access to credit and basic agricultural inputs as well as, enrolment in food for work/cash for work programmes were put into effect. Development agents at the grassroots level were in turn forced to ensure the adoption and diffusion of new technologies, ideas and practices by farmers. Failure to achieve predetermined objective set by higher officials at the district level or beyond often resulted in severe criticisms, stalemates in promotion or the denial of other fringe benefits of grassroots civil servants.

Informants were asked to prioritize their major problems according to the degree of seriousness. The results revealed that food insecurity was still the biggest problem. Unemployment problem (particularly of the landless youth) was also a major concern for rural households besides the lack of water and health facilities. Although, micro-dams have been constructed, the extent to which farmers make effective use of available resource using appropriate irrigation technology was still poor. The rain water harvesting techniques introduced recently could not also make any significant difference in alleviating water shortages because of high evaporation rates and seepage. The government tried to tackle the problem of unemployment in various ways including the allocation of communally owned hillside land to the landless. Nevertheless, given the prevalent land degradation and shortage of rain water, it was hard to discern significant gains in the foreseeable future.

A relatively current approach to rural development in the region is the identification of growth corridors upon which specific form if investment can be made to harness the potentials in varying agro-ecology. However, making use of potentials is a capital intensive venture and needs a substantial amount investment.

### **Types of rural agricultural interventions**

#### **Safety net programmes**

There are two modalities for safety net programmes in the area; direct support for those who cannot contribute to labor due to old age or poor health conditions; and public works schemes in which able-bodied male and women farmers are involved in productive activities. Food for work projects were until recently being practiced in the area. This was conducted in response to policy advice towards downplaying the role of aid in development. Under this package, several activities related to watershed management, construction of micro dams, reforestation and other forms of environmental rehabilitations were carried out. Although, some success stories of this

approach were documented, there were also serious shortcomings, the biggest problem being the fact that food for work schemes discriminated poor farm households with shortage of labour. The all-inclusive Safety-net Programmes were introduced in many parts of the region especially, after 2005 in order to overcome problems of marginalization. Safety net schemes were useful because long distance labour migrations by household heads could be avoided giving them easy opportunity for alternative non-farm income and facilitating proper land management thereby, positively affecting productivity in the long term. Selection of beneficiaries is more transparent and often carried out by committees composed of farmers, youth, community, and women's association representatives. Decisions are often discussed with local community in the villages before implemented. Although, in principle, everybody has the right to participate, the poorest of the poor and women are given priority for enrolment given the shortage of funds. Appeals on inclusions and exclusion are also filed and processed in a transparent manner.

The activities associated with the productive safety net programme, which is often carried out between December and June include soil and water conservation, gully treatment, the construction and renovation of schools and roads. Results of the series of focus group discussions indicated that community members were generally satisfied with the type and quality of the activities because such public works have improved the community's access to schools, market links and other social services. Pregnant and lactating women are advantaged because they can enjoy pay without work for about 6 months as per the guidelines in the project implementation manual.

However, Safety-net Programmes operate under a set of challenges: according to some informants and the inclusion of the right people into the programme remained flawed for many years. The safety net scheme was designed for the resource poor. In reality, people representing the poorest of the poor were sometimes still systematically left out in many instances. Besides, women were assigned to the same type of tasks as that of men which puts them in difficult positions.

### Household asset development

The extension system in Ethiopia after the 1990s was based on the Sasakawa global approach of providing inputs and chemicals to farmers to boost productivity. The extension systems gave prior attention to the diffusion of new technologies and outputs into the farming system. New seed varieties, fertilizers and other inputs and services were introduced. Blanket recommendations on ways and means of addressing rural poverty were the hallmarks in rural Tigray. Global experiences particularly from developing countries were applied to local

conditions often to necessary avail. A case in point is a water harvesting technique locally called *Horeyie* in which farmers spare a fraction of their farm land to prepare a water harvesting apparatus. This approach did not work out well because of high rates of evaporation and seepage.

According to informants, the introduction of new seed varieties and fertilizers (such as UREA and DAP which are identified by local farmers as black and white) were initially met with persistent resistance from farmers. Firstly, farmers felt the new inputs were not suitable to the agro-ecological conditions in their respective localities and had low level of performance in terms of resistance to drought. Secondly, the price of such inputs was also unaffordable. Farmer's dissatisfactions were reflected in many ways ranging from failure to attend consultative meeting with local administrative authorities to direct voicing of grievances to relevant bodies. Farmers' resistances had been met with tough sanctions by local administrators particularly at grassroots level who often put adoption of the extension system as a precondition for enrolment in Safety-net programmes. Such stiffness of the local authorities at the lower levels of political decision making was partly propelled by the erroneous monitoring and evaluations structures which held Tabia level personnel responsible for any failures in rural development intervention. Hence, although the policies promoted voluntarism and were people-friendly, their implementations were problematic.

Developments in the last 3 to 5 years point towards the need to focus on raising farmers' awareness. The opening of Farmer Training Centers (FTCs) and the structural and managerial skill building programmes targeting district and village level decision makers are manifestations of such a paradigm shift in policy orientations in rural development. Today, farmers' demand for improved seed varieties has substantially increased albeit the ever increasing price propelled by high inflation.

The economic empowerment of rural people through credit packages constituted a major part of the rural development interventions in the study area. Besides providing saving facilities aimed at fostering thriftiness, the Dedebit Credit and Saving Institution (DECSI), a local microfinance institution in the Tigray region, plays a significant role in providing credit to farmers with the aim of helping small producers to become financially independent and enhance their capacity to produce thereby, promoting food self sufficiency. Credit is provided not only in the form of input supply (improved seed, fertilizers and pesticides, etc) but is also targeted towards organizing micro enterprises. Microfinance institutions have a programme on general loan services for income generating activities in agriculture, handicrafts and services. The regional bureau of agriculture and rural development has also a share in such efforts. Inclination towards specific types of package varies across gender. Men usually engage beehives, dairy cows and animal

fattening schemes while the women would generally like to participate in shoats, poultry and cash for petty trading. There is little doubt that these packages are playing a significant role in tackling rural poverty. However, the presence of some social and cultural hindrances means that it is hard to reap the fruits in the short term. Farmers' risk averse behavior together with poor saving culture, unhealthy consumption and expenditure pattern and some administrative inefficiency were identified to be the major challenges. Specific problems identified by focus group discussants include; mounting increase in interest rates, increasing prices and shortage in such inputs as fertilizers, seed varieties, modern beehives fuel (for water pumps), and lack of proper veterinary services. Frontline extension and rural development agents sometimes lacked the motivation to stay in the villages and farmers reported about the high attrition rates. Many of them left the villages in search of other jobs or moved to towns for education and training purposes. Recently, incentives in the form of opportunities for further training have been put in place; but the push factors seem to be more pronounced than such reinforcement schedules.

### Gender issues

The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia (Art. 35 and 40) provides a clear legal framework for the empowerment of women. Such provisions demonstrate women's equal rights over property ownership and use. In a broader sense, the constitutional rights of women in the social, economic, cultural and politico-legal arenas are protected by law. These rights are intended to be fulfilled through five strategies that are included in the National Women's Policy: awareness creation, capacity building, and gender mainstreaming, organization of women, and networking and research. The Women's Affairs Bureaus and standing committees in the parliament indicate the special attention given to gender issues in the country's struggle against poverty. Women constitute a large proportion of rural populations in Tigray. However, despite their active role in the traditional plough agriculture, their status has remained very low for centuries. According to informants, women's involvement in important economic, social and political decision making both at the household and community level have for long been minimal given their low educational background and as a result of repressive cultural stereotypes. Policies to support women and empower them economically could not bear fruits because of the lack of clear strategies and programs that went beyond rhetorical presentations. On the actual ground, women headed households were found to be the most vulnerable because of the absence of fundamentals factors of production. Those women headed households with shortage of male adult labour suffered most because their livelihoods would have to depend on share cropping arrangements in which women leased out their land or

invited other farmers for partnership. The produce was then shared among partners. Often women household heads could hardly contribute more than land which resulted in substantial decline in their share in the context of such contractual arrangements.

### Conclusion

The Tigray region faces serious poverty and food security challenges. In spite of the regional government's efforts to ensure rural development through various pro-poor policies, programmes and strategies, rural development still remains elusive. Although, some positive developments have been observed, the impacts on rural livelihoods tend to be generally low. The lack of capital and modern technological inputs coupled with crippling cultural values (poor work ethic, overconsumption and overpopulation, etc) were some of the constraints of rural development in the area. Community members in the study areas expressed very little doubts (if at all) about proper policy making at higher levels. However, it was noted that serious problems arise when policies were translated into action. Hence, the challenges outweighed the achievements. Nevertheless, the achievements so far made could be used systematically to build on the social capital and motivate people to put more efforts towards achieving sustainable development. The study found out that there are already encouraging developments in terms of creating an enabling environment for various self initiated rural development ventures. One of the biggest challenges in the years to come is not only to sustain such efforts but also to look for other innovative ideas for rural development. There is also a need to devise programmes which target women farmers as they are the ones who pay the highest price in poverty situation.

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