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Yezihalem Tesfa Dagnaw

St. Mary's University College, Ethiopia, yezihalemt@yahoo.com

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Critical Factors Hampering Agricultural Productivity in Ethiopia: The Case of Northern Ethiopian Farmers

Yezihalem Tesfa Dagnaw,
Instructor and Assistant Researcher,
St. Mary's University College
P.O.Box 16229
Addis Ababa
Ethiopia
E-mail- yezihalemt@yahoo.com

Abstract

Why we Ethiopians are celebrated for unforgettable images of chronically malnourished children with large skeletal heads clinging to their mothers dried up breasts? Why we are still forced to seek for food aid when there is ample local potential to feed ourselves? Why does drought, famine return almost every decade in Ethiopia?

The paper attempts to demonstrate convincingly that Ethiopian droughts and famines are not sudden natural disasters nor are they simply caused by lack of rainfall. It tries to show the weaknesses of successive strategic development related policies intended to reverse the situation which considered and treated natural factors specially rainfall and external financial assistance as constant factors. The paper attempts to elucidate the weaknesses of farmers to allocate reasonable time and resources to work in the farm. It also tries to show the impacts of farmers' health and nutritional status on their productivity and efficiency.

In order to identify the various political, religious, economic, cultural, and educational, land, and policy factors that hampered agricultural productivity, selected farmers and development workers (community, health) were interviewed. Besides, relevant literature was consulted.

The study results reveal that almost all of Northern Ethiopian farmers were unable to empower themselves since they are tied by the strong twin forces of traditional religious practices and cultural taboos.

Surprisingly, from among the thirty days of a month farmers spent almost ten to fifteen days for religious and cultural practices. It is also ascertained that most farmers have assumed and even accepted food aid as the only or in many cases the most efficient means of addressing food security. Results also indicate the subsequent failure of policy makers to understand the real situations about farmers.

The paper attempts to recommend various key points to enhance agricultural productivity in Ethiopia in general and to empower farmers of Northern Ethiopia in particular.

Background

Undoubtedly, Ethiopia, one of the poorest country on earth, is severely affected by chronic food insecurity and rural poverty. Above and beyond, the country with more than 65 million people is the second most populous in sub-Saharan Africa, with a population growth rate that is among the highest in the world. According to the 1994 census, about 85 percent of the population lives in rural areas (CSA. 1998) and entirely depends on the largest and most critical sector of the economy, that is, agriculture, which is vital not only for food production, but also for the livelihood of 80 percent of the working population.

Truly, the country has been an independent nation for centuries with the exception of the Italian occupation between 1935-1941. However, Ethiopia is celebrated for unforgettable images of chronically malnourished children with large skeletal heads clinging to their mothers dried up breasts. The great famine of 1888 which cost feudal Ethiopia 90 percent and one third of the then cattle and human population respectively. The Tigray famine of 1959 that consumed at about 100,000 persons, the Wag-Lasta famine of 1966 that remained unknown to most Ethiopians according to some historians, had seriously challenged humanity in Ethiopia, the obscured famine which was considered as the forerunner of the major Wollo famine of 1973 made the country known more than athletics sport and historical heritages that attract the attention of people all over the world. The Green famine of 1994 that slew one million people which brought biblical pictures of desolation to the world's television screens was followed by another visible horror of the millennium famine (2002), that gave rise for exceptional brave decisions of the human race across mother earth of urgent response to spare an estimated 15 million images from a hell in flesh.

Meanwhile, in recent decades Ethiopia has also suffered from severe political instability in the form of civil wars and military coups, and a series of drought –related food crises.

Why we Ethiopians are still forced to seek for food aid when there is ample local potential to feed ourselves? Why we are not successful in maintaining food security following major production shortfalls? Why does drought, famine return almost every decade in Ethiopia? Why Ethiopia is the leading country where food production per-capita has been declining to the point of being a matter of serious concern for the world community? Surprisingly, the per capita income from the agricultural sector has been declining at the rate of 1.2 percent per annum for the last 42 years. In Ethiopia, where the large majority of the population lives in rural areas, we need no further evidence than the ever-worsening poverty situation of the rural population to demonstrate what kind of pitiable livelihood the rural population and, therefore, the majority of the country's population leads. The majorities of the people were and are still scraping through life by means of a highly backward agricultural economy totally dependent on nature as it is. Even worse, as the size of the country's population continuously increases, the per capita income gained from this economic sector has been declining, as a result of which the people have reached a stage where they could even barely make it through life. Why have consecutive Ethiopian governments failed miserably in providing the most basic needs of all-food? In general, why is the agricultural picture of Ethiopia is so gloomy? What needs to be done? Is there any hope to break this cycle?

The above mentioned facts force me to question the root causes of poverty and thereby help to ascertain and highlight critical factors that hamper agricultural productivity in Ethiopia in general and the northern part in particular since it is the most drought prone area usually marked by low agricultural productivity.

The northern regions of Ethiopia studied here include the Amhara and Tigray regional states which cover 19 percent of Ethiopian population. Obviously, these regions have supported human settlements for more than a millennium. Historical accounts indicate that some crops (for example, barely and wheat) have been under cultivation in these areas since before the beginning of the Christian era (Mesifn). The series of low agricultural productivity, crop failures, and famines etc... the inhabitants of these areas

have endured for the last several decades appeared to be linked directly or indirectly to the agricultural sector.

Further, these factors also urge me to question the political, economical, land, policy, cultural and religious practices and institutions etc... of the Ethiopian society that allow its members to die of famine and drought.

Objectives

The major objectives of this study are the following:-

- ❖ To clearly identify the various political, economic, policy, land, cultural, religious, educational and other factors that hampered agricultural productivity in Ethiopia.
- ❖ To demonstrate convincingly that Ethiopian droughts and famines are not sudden natural disasters nor are they simply caused by lack of rainfall.
- ❖ To examine critically the formal interrelationship between subsistence producers of northern Ethiopia, the prevailing political and economic as well as natural forces on the one hand and how deeprooted religious and cultural practices and institutions negatively affect the over all interactions of the three sub systems in a subsistence production system.
- ❖ To examine the impacts of food aid on agricultural productivity.
- ❖ To show the weaknesses of farmers of northern Ethiopia to allocate reasonable time and resources to work in the farm and to show the impacts of farmers' health and nutritional status on their productivity and efficiency.

In general, the chronic problems of food shortage and starvation which have coined Ethiopia as the most famine prone country at the end of the 20th century deserve a thorough examination. A combination of famine, food insecurity, revolution and internal wars has characterized the country for many years. What is even more depressing is that none of these problems which have been plaguing the Ethiopian people for decades, show any sign of subsiding.

Methodology

A. Primary Sources

In order to identify the various and major critical factors that hampered agricultural productivity in Ethiopia, a total of 250 randomly selected farmers of both the Amhara and Tigray region each represented by 150 and 100 farmers respectively were interviewed. Each area of farmers was selected based on their frequent vulnerability to food insecurity and famines. A focus group discussion on issues particularly related to agricultural productivity were carried on with groups of fifteen to twenty farmers each group represented with numbers of five to ten farmers, and each lasting about two to three hours. These were the most valuable experiences for a student of Ethiopian peasants. Besides, questionnaires were used to collect data from selected development workers (community, health, and agriculture.)

B. Secondary Sources

As secondary sources, review of related literature including books, unpublished materials, journals, government publications, reports of international and regional organizations were thoroughly consulted.

Results

Political Factors

It should be borne in mind that a number of political shocks are responsible for the deteriorating agricultural productivity throughout the history of Ethiopia. Dozens of political situations have a direct devastating impact on agricultural productivity on each period of the country. Among these, some of the most critical ones are the following:-

- Government is one major factor that produces vulnerability to food-insecurity or famine. A famine situation exposes the failure of governments for various reasons. The mere existence of a subsistence system of production with all its weakness and vulnerability demonstrates, on the part of governments, a lack of sensitivity to the problems of the rural masses. Quite similarly, the interaction of the peasant world with the government and other socio-economic structures produces the peasant world's vulnerability to famine. Surprisingly, the meager production of the peasant

world continuously flows out in the form of taxes, rent, debt, bribery, corruption and other various forms of extortion. Ethiopian peasants were quite for a long time depoliticized masses playing only a very marginal role in the incessant conflict for political supremacy in their mother land.

- Ill conceived democracy marked by unstable political environment.
- Lack of political will to implement good agricultural policy targeted to food – security.
- Civil unrest, conflicts and war are unfortunately a monopoly of the northern part of Ethiopia. A clear and visible example could be the debilitating effects of the civil war which the military regime was waging against the Tigrean Peoples’ Liberation Front (TPLF) and Eritrean Peoples’ Liberation Front (EPLF) in the northern part of the country. These wars played a major part increasing the country’s vulnerability to endemic food shortages and insecurity thereby paralyzing agricultural productivity. In due course, a number of different political issues leading to internal and external confrontations, with destruction and forced migration of the productive population.

Economic Factors

One of the components of Ethiopia’s food security policy is economic growth where the focus is in fact on agricultural income growth. It should be borne in mind that, throughout Ethiopian history, the peasant world is more susceptible to food insecurity, famine or low-agricultural out put by the subsistence production system. Almost all agriculturalists are subsistence farmers who maintain themselves by growing crops or rearing livestock. For the most of the year, the vast majority are market –dependent, even for the fulfillment of basic consumption needs. Subsistence production system could be identified at least with the following five characteristics:

1. Small and often fragmented land
2. Primitive tools and implements
3. Production geared to personal needs rather than to market
4. Lack of alternatives or seasonal employment opportunities and
5. Almost total absence of reserves of either grain or cash

Subsequent failure of different economic policy makers to understand the real situations about farmers. Quite surprisingly, in Ethiopia, the various policies and projects for rural agricultural development have been devised and promoted almost always without the participation of the politically unrecognized peasants.

There is ill-coordination between the peasants and their agricultural agents for consultation. Almost all of the respondents have ever taken the initiative to consult their agricultural agents. Besides, weak market links between producer and consumer regions within the country had contributed to price declines and the government unwillingness to open up cell phone markets is also a major obstacle to information flows in agriculture.

Surplus production of the same commodities which lower profit margins of farmers, example, Teff. And lack of detailed follow up of the economic potential of farmers both before and after major production shortfalls.

High input costs, example, for seeds, fertilizers, veterinary drugs etc... and lack of credit and saving associations on most of rural northern Ethiopian regions.

Absence of alternative seasonal employment which would enable peasants to earn cash and lack of specialization in producing high value crops for market. Above all, inconsistency economic policies, inappropriate utilization of resources like water, low technology options, increased corruption and severe taxation of rural Ethiopian peasants by consecutive Ethiopian governments have jeopardize agricultural productivity.

Religious and Cultural Factors

There is an Ethiopian saying that:

No crown with out the poor,

No food with out the peasant

From this saying, one can simply understand that, in Ethiopia agriculture has been simply a way, for many the only way, of life and not a business enterprise. Ideally, the farmer is

supposed to produce everything that he requires for himself and others (Mesfin, 1984). However, it should be borne in mind that farmers' productivity is associated with a number of different factors.

The following are, therefore, the major critical religious factors that jeopardize agricultural productivity in Ethiopia.

- Strong and deep-rooted religious and cultural practices by the bulk of Ethiopian farmers is one of the serious factors for low agricultural productivity. These cultural and religious practices and institutions negatively affect the overall interactions of the following three subsystems in a subsistence production system (see fig. 1 below).

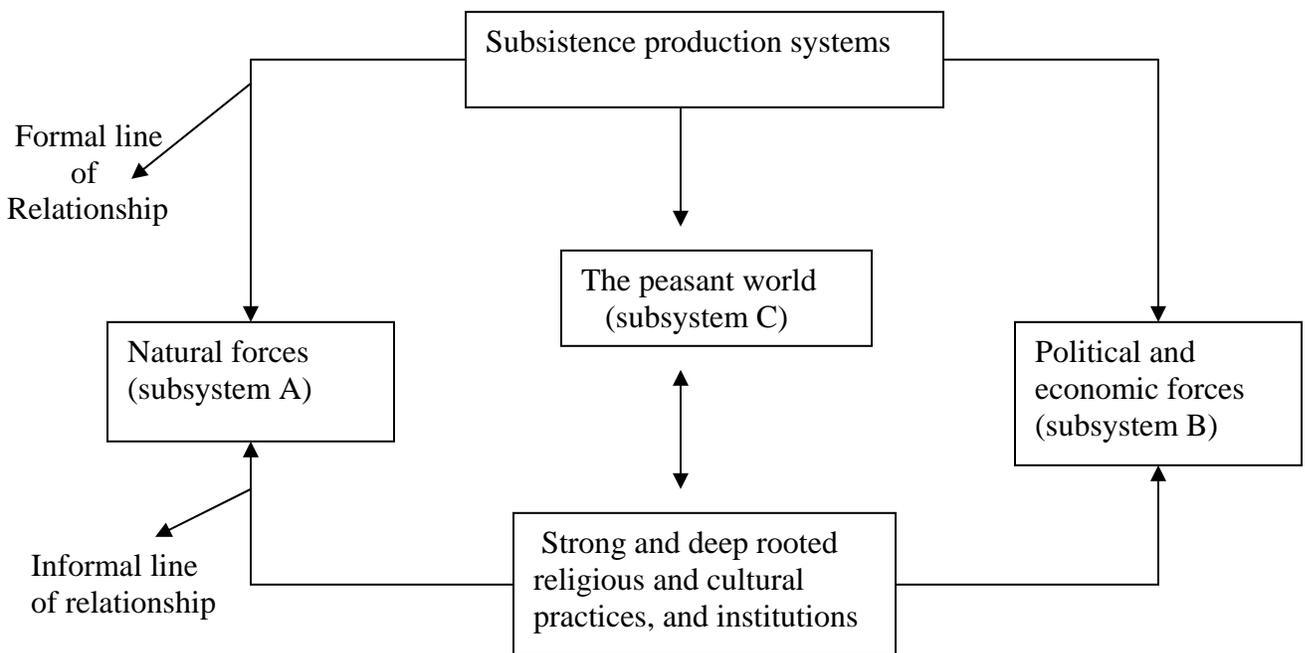


Fig 1. Adopted from Mesfin (1984), Rural Vulnerability to famine in Ethiopia: 1958-1978

According to fig. 1, the peasant's productive capacity has eternally been sandwiched between two risks, one from the natural sub-system and the other from the socio-economic sub-system. The peasants perceive the two-systems as a unit organized, directed and controlled by God. When they are able to identify the elements of the natural sub-system,

they perceive them, too, as even more under the control of God, and outside the realm of human beings. When the natural system is favorable, for farmers, it is a real expression of the mercy and forgiveness of God. Consequently, the reaction of peasants to the changing conditions of the natural sub-system is prayer and devotion on the one hand, and appreciation and thanks giving on the other. But I do strongly believe that the peasants do not find such a neat explanation for, nor do they find a suitable reaction to the socio – economic sub-system. Confused by what they call the cruelty of man to man, they tend to join the socio-economic and the natural sub-system together and give them a religious or supernatural explanation. Ultimately, their role in responding to adverse conditions whether originated from the natural or from the socio-economic sub-system, is solely associated with God as the final arbiter. By and large, the general belief of the peasants exaggerates the role of God and diminishes their own.

In the context of Ethiopian culture, food crises, food insecurities, famine or droughts are not a natural calamity, nor does it have anything to do with society and its political and socio-economic systems. Famines, droughts are an act of God. It is punishment to people who have sinned, and of course, as often happens in life, what comes for the sinner does not spare the virtuous. Or, it is simply the price of sin and the victims accept it as such.

Another point is that, since both government and people perceive famine as a special act of God, no mortal being is held responsible for it. Quite surprisingly, for the government this perception of famine, droughts and other food related crises have proved to be a convenient and successful means of disclaiming its responsibility and obligation to avert the situation. The same perception has enabled the people to accept suffering and death with peace and equanimity.

Imagine, surprisingly, from among the thirty days of a month the majority of farmers of northern Ethiopia spent about ten to fifteen days for cultural and religious practices. The following days of a month, in Ethiopian calendar, are not subjected to work by farmers with the special reasons associated with in praise of God. For example, the 1st day is left in praise of St. Lideta Maryam, the 7th day in praise of Sillassie (the three trinities), the 12th

day in praise of St. Mikael and the like. In these and other days the farmers will lose a considerable amount of time for religious and other cultural practices and are far from the farm.

Land Factor

Land, the most basic resource for peasant life, is under the hands of most government officials (land lords) and at the same time these officials directed development where they had a great deal of land. However, the majorities of the peasants were landless or use a small and fragmented farm lands. Most peasants cultivate an area of land that is too small, often less than one hectare. Even this small holding is fragmented into two or four or even more plots. The small holdings are limited by either inheritance or the peasants' capacity which in turn is determined by the available labor and oxen-power.

Most of the households included in northern Ethiopia are small holder farmers who have on average less than two hectares of land. Land is of highly different quality in different districts of northern Ethiopia. Besides land is state owned and farmers are not allowed to buy and sell land. They can only obtain land from the local peasant associations.

Food aid

It should be borne in mind that, the majority of the farmers particularly farmers of north-central Ethiopia have assumed and some even accepted food-aid as the only, or in many cases the most efficient means of addressing food security since they are landless and are tied by the strong twin forces of religious and cultural practices.

Though food aid imports have been and are necessary to address short term food shortages, food aid has the following side effects.

- Negative impact on producer's income thereby increasing the dependency on future food aid.
- A major effect in further depressing Ethiopian grain prices especially in the years of high production (Mesfin, 1984).
- Market uncertainty for domestic grain traders (Demeke and Freed, 2004).

Policy Factors

It is one of the decisive elements that have a direct relationship with agricultural productivity. Some of the policy factors that greatly hamper agricultural productivity are:-

- Weak agricultural research policy development.
- Lack of capacity and educated man power to handle new technologies.
- Absence of policies and instruments to intervene in the interest of national food security.
- Weak and sporadic linkages between government agricultural policy institutions, agricultural research institutions with the subject people (farmers).
- Lack of Education and skilled manpower in most rural Ethiopia.
- No clear-cut policy was formulated to benefit the rural poor.
- Farmers' indigenous knowledge, community resources and the ability of farmers to be experimenters in their own right are not taken in to consideration as huge potential to be unleashed. Besides, farmer to farmer linkage and role in technology adoption and dissemination as well as linkage of actors and different cross cutting issues are not built into the extension system and thus the potential is not exploited.
- Another major challenge related to policy is the limited awareness and limited contribution towards policy formulation and implementation at the lower levels of the agricultural systems.

Health ad demographic factors

The seriousness of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Ethiopia is widely acknowledged. Since the first HIV case was recorded in 1986, prevalence rates rose rapidly during the 1990's. The disease is taking its toll on life expectancy and is undermining the country's efforts to reduce poverty. There have been substantial efforts recently by the government of Ethiopia to address the disease through a multisectoral approach with increasing attention being paid to reaching the rural areas. However, addressing the epidemic is particularly challenging in such a poor country, where per capita expenditure on health is in the order of US \$ 6, including out-of-pocket contributions.

As a demographic factor, the recent civil war in the north caused large population displacement and cross boundary migration. During the intensification of the civil war in the late 1980's and early 1990's, many rural people had to leave their villages for urban areas or other unaffected areas. Obviously, the last three or four decades in Ethiopian history brought so many disasters, and hence the population situation of the country must be understood in the context of significant environmental degradation and social disruption. Besides, in rural Ethiopia malaria, animal disease, lack of birth control, poor nutrition, migration and population growth are still rampant.

Natural Climatic factors

Last but not least, several natural climatic factors are responsible for low agricultural productivity in Ethiopia. Some of them are weather changes, soil erosion and lack of adequate rain fall.

General Recommendations

Above all, to improve agricultural productivity and to empower farmers in Ethiopia, the following key points should be taken in to account.

- ❖ Setting up good governance.
- ❖ Creating conducive political and policy environment.
- ❖ Setting up good agricultural system.
- ❖ Proper planning and management of resources.
- ❖ Focusing agricultural investment on the small holders.
- ❖ Teaching rural farmers about the impacts of different religious, cultural practices as well as the negative effects of food aid.
- ❖ Taking into account the ideas, innovations, decisions of farmers not only for the sake of moral reasoning but because the knowledge base of innovative farmers is very powerful and realistic.
- ❖ Sustained government public investments in agricultural technology, and extension irrigation and market infrastructure.
- ❖ Directly involving the youth in various agricultural issues.

- ❖ Creating favorable linkages between farmers, governments, researchers and other agents of agriculture.
- ❖ Creating new ways of science and technology on the sector.
- ❖ Farmers (whether small or large holder) should be linked to the market, and innovations should address the needs for both group.
- ❖ Sustainable core funding is vital to support various types of research on agriculture.
- ❖ Creating National Agricultural Research Forums.
- ❖ Involving the farmers in development, implementation, advocacy, monitoring etc.
- ❖ Improving primary health care and other facilities in rural areas.

Conclusion

It should be noted that, poor agricultural policy, landlessness, land fragmentation, environmental degradation, population pressure, drought, famine, war and political crises have all been responsible for Ethiopian poverty and backwardness. In addition, low socio-economic status, poor weather conditions, lack of basic infrastructures for intensive land use, different policies, land, cultural, and religious factors have undermined agricultural growth and reduced the labor-absorption potential of farming in Ethiopia.

Generally, be it this or that way, a design for combating the root causes of Ethiopian poverty should be a necessary part of any strategy to avoid food insecurity in the country. Thus, resolving Ethiopia's current food insecurity problem would entail significant policy changes of various types on factors that hinder and hamper the overall agricultural productivity of the country.

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