Rural poverty in Ethiopia

Source: IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development)
Location: http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/web/guest/country/home/tags/ethiopia

An agrarian society in a land of drought

In one of the world’s poorest countries, where about 44 per cent of the population lives under the poverty line, more than 12 million people are chronically or at least periodically food insecure. Most of them live in rural areas.

More than eight out of ten Ethiopians depend on agriculture as their main livelihood. But agricultural production is extremely vulnerable both to climatic conditions and to the disruptive impact of war and civil conflict. The increased incidence and severity of drought have caused major fluctuations in agricultural and economic growth.

The persistent lack of rainfall is a major factor in rural poverty. Recurring droughts leave poor farming families without food crops, causing periodic famines. People lack coping mechanisms for facing drought-induced famines, and contingency planning is inadequate. The situation worsened recently because of sharp increases in the prices of food and fertilizers on world markets, which made it more difficult for poor households in Ethiopia, as elsewhere, to secure adequate food supplies.

Who are Ethiopia’s rural poor people?

The largest group of poor people in Ethiopia is composed of small-scale farmers. Most rural households live on a daily per capita income of less than US$0.50. More than half of the country’s 12 million smallholders have 1 hectare or less of land. Their productivity is low and they are vulnerable to drought and other adverse natural conditions. About a third of rural households cultivate less than 0.5 hectare, which is not enough land to produce adequate food for the average household. A large number of poor households face a prolonged hunger season during the pre-harvest period.

In addition to farmers, Ethiopia’s rural poor include women and men who depend on herding for a livelihood. And, like farmers, herders are vulnerable to increasingly recurring droughts, which can wipe out their livestock and assets. Because livestock is the single most important sign of status and wealth in Ethiopia, there is a strong correlation between lack of livestock and poverty, particularly among households headed by women.

Poor people in rural areas face an acute lack of basic social and economic infrastructure such as health and educational facilities, veterinary services and access to safe drinking water. Households headed by women are particularly vulnerable. Women are much less likely than men to receive an education or health benefits, or to have a voice in decisions affecting their lives. For them, poverty means high numbers of infant deaths, undernourished families, lack of education for children and other deprivations.
Where are Ethiopia’s rural poor people?

The incidence of poverty in rural areas is greater and poverty is more severe than in urban areas. There is a uniform distribution of poverty throughout the country’s rural areas. An exception is the region of Oromiya, where the level and intensity of poverty is significantly lower, and where the cultivation of enset, a banana-like plant, provides a buffer against famine.

In order to survive, most rural households resort to seasonal or permanent migration to urban areas in search of wage employment.

Why are rural people poor?

Major historical shifts in the political climate, as well as upheavals and migrations caused by civil conflict, have had a strong impact on Ethiopia’s rural poor people. The onset of drought in 2001 and its increasing recurrence has dramatically narrowed the horizons of the country’s rural households.

Among the more specific causes of rural poverty in Ethiopia are:
- wide fluctuations in agricultural production as a result of drought
- an ineffective and inefficient agricultural marketing system
- underdeveloped transport and communication networks
- underdeveloped production technologies
- limited access of rural households to support services
- environmental degradation
- lack of participation by rural poor people in decisions that affect their livelihoods

The HIV/AIDS pandemic is driving poor people even deeper into poverty, depriving families of the young adults who are their most productive members. It is estimated that about 6 per cent of Ethiopia’s adult population is HIV-positive. Together, the HIV/AIDS pandemic and malaria seriously affect the health of large numbers of Ethiopians, many of them in rural areas.

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<tr>
<th>Statistics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population, total (2008)</td>
<td>80,713,434.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rural population (2008)</td>
<td>66,992,150.2</td>
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<td>Number of rural poor (million, approximate) (2008)</td>
<td>30,146,467.6</td>
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