

Reducing the vulnerability of communities to improve food security in Ethiopia

Background



Photo: Eleanor Bentall/Tearfund

In 2008, Tearfund's partner, **Wolaitta Kale Heywet Church – Terepeza Development Association (WKHC-TDA)**, began to use Tearfund's tool, the Participatory Assessment of Disaster Risk (PADR) to help reduce the vulnerability of poor rural communities in their target areas.

One such community was Gale Wargo, which is particularly vulnerable to food insecurity. Participatory techniques were used with over 300 men, women and young people who together analysed the hazards that their community faces, their vulnerabilities and local capacities. Then they agreed on actions that could be carried out to mitigate against the defined hazards and reduce some of the vulnerabilities.

Hazards

The major hazards identified were drought, soil erosion (mainly due to deforestation and poor agricultural practices) and crop damage by wild animals.

- Drought causes severe water shortages, reduction in crop yields, loss of livestock, increased mortality of humans, labour migration, community and family conflict, robberies and petty crime.
- Soil erosion and loss of top soil lead to soil infertility and reduced land productivity. The resulting food insecurity and lack of forage lead to ill health and death of both humans and animals.
- Wild animals repeatedly cause damage throughout the growing period of the crops and particularly in the period leading up to harvest. Crops that are damaged are tubers, pulses, fruits, maize, and others. This contributes to food shortages, disease and death of humans and livestock.

Vulnerabilities

The above hazards lead to loss of household assets, debts and malnutrition among children and vulnerable adults.

The most vulnerable groups are farmers without many resources, who rely on small plots of land for subsistence, female-headed households, landless households, the elderly and children.

Able-bodied men and young people often migrate to urban areas in search of employment. While the remittances that migrants send enhance the coping capacity of individual households, such migration leads to labour shortages on the farms and increases the burden on women, children and the elderly.

The inability to access improved agricultural inputs such as seeds and fertilisers (mainly because of cost and supply issues), a poor culture of saving and a lack of cooperation in tackling pressing communal issues all make the community even more vulnerable.

Capacities

Community capacities exist in the form of human resources, indigenous knowledge, petty trading activities and traditional mutual support institutions. Some perennial crops such as cassava, ginger, enset, mango trees, coffee trees and wild fruit trees have better survival capacity in drought years.

Community action plan

The main activities in the community action plan:

- Soil and water conservation methods (e.g. construction of terraces and tree planting) on private and communal lands to reduce soil erosion and improve land productivity.
- Fence construction and ditch digging to minimise wild animal damage to crops.
- Promotion of organic farming and compost making to address the high cost of agricultural inputs and delays in supply.
- Enhanced sustainability of the community seed bank through the repayment of seed and fertilizer loans.
- Establishment and training of Self Help Groups and mobilisation of members to start to save regularly.
- Development of a culture of unity to successfully carry out activities such as tree planting, road maintenance and construction and other community development works.

Impact on beneficiaries

This action plan is currently being implemented with the facilitation and accompaniment of WKHC. Many groups have been formed and trained:

- 13 groups (around 280 farmers) are carrying out wild animal control and soil and water conservation activities
- 13 Self Help Groups with an average of 19 people in each group have started to save regularly
- 41 groups (around 210 farmers) are involved in compost making.

This community has demonstrated that, with the right kind of facilitation, they can see a way out of their predicament by acting together to address their vulnerabilities. People may feel hopeless individually, but if they are supported to act together by mobilising their own human and local resources, combined with their own creativity, many of the issues that threaten their health and food security can be improved.