Well-Being Differentiation and Uncovering Poverty on the Basis of Poor People Tells: A Case Study at Two Communities in Oromiya Zone, North-Eastern Ethiopia

Degefa Tolossa (PhD)*

Abstract

The article narrates the output of field research that was undertaken in two communities in Oromiya Zone on the basis of participatory research approach. The participatory wealth ranking was used to differentiate households on the basis of the community members' own criteria for labelling households according to well-being status. The method allowed to come up with wealth rank matrix that puts households in the case study communities into four well-being strata: Of-danda'a *(rich),* Juddgalesa *(average),* Iyyessa *(poor) and* Dhaba *(destitute). Among the main attributes that the participants (in individual or in group) of wealth ranking exercises considered include: livestock ownership, own landholding size and the capability to access land by other mechanisms, size of crop harvest (how long a peasant can feed his household from his own harvest), production of cash crops, additional income from non-agricultural activities, labour supply, health situation of a household's breadwinner and other members, size of remittance received, whether or not a beneficiary from social transfers, and capacity to use modern farm inputs. My central arguments in this article are two-fold. The first is related to methodological issue that participatory wealth ranking can provide clearer and more complete picture of well-being inequalities in a community than when we apply a single variable of income data to be generated through household survey. Secondly, the approach empowers people at community level by giving them the chances to narrate on their livelihood situations, and to explain in their own terminology regarding the constraints and processes involved in their mobility between different strata of well-being. As such, it is suggested that there is a need to reconsider our research approaches to have deeper understanding of poverty.*

Keywords: community, livelihood, poverty, survival strategy, wealth ranking

* Assistant Professor of Geography & Development Studies, College of Development Studies, AAU, P.O. Box 150229, E- mail: gedefa8td@yahoo.com,

Background

Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries of the world, with a GDP per capita of *c.*110 USD. According to United Nations Development Program's (UNDP's) Human Development Index (HDI), the country ranks 169 of the 177 countries for which the measurement was done (UNDP, 2008). Out of an estimated population of 67.2[1] million, almost half – 28 million – live in deep and long-term poverty (Robinson, 2003). The country also records the worst situation with respect to other indications of well-being. The average life expectancy is 51.8 years and the age dependency ratio is 1 person for every economically active individual (UNDP, 2008). The adult literacy rate is 35.9%, and the gross enrolment ratio is 42.1%. Only 25% of the total population and 15% of the rural inhabitants in Ethiopia obtain drinking water from protected sources.

However, as for other developing countries, the issue of poverty in Ethiopia attracted little attention in terms of research that was carried out on the situation in pre-WWII, and hence there is a big information gap about the magnitude, depth and distribution of the phenomena. According to some historical outlines (Iliffe, 1987; McCann, 1987; Mohammed, 1990), pre-20th century Ethiopia was highly unequal society in terms of well-being, with a large number of chronically poor people. Tracing back some accounts from early travellers to Ethiopia, Iliffe (1987) writes about the poverty situation: 'The Ethiopian poor were innumerable and ubiquitous'. The same source identifies the poorest people as the crippled, blind men and lepers, as well as people afflicted with epilepsy, polio and other disabling diseases. Traditionally, poverty has been conceptualized similarly among different ethnic groups of the Ethiopian society, though with each having its own terminology. A poor household or individual is termed as *deha* among the Amhara, *iyyessa* among the Oromo, and *dekha* among the Tigrayans. What remains common among different groups is that poverty has largely been understood to mean the deprivation of basic means of survival such as proper shelter, clothing and food.

Some 38.7% of the Ethiopian population is poor and hence unable to meet its basic needs – the minimum nutritional requirement and other non-food necessities (Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (MoFED) 2006). The 'poverty line' for the country was set based on the amount of money needed to buy a 'basket of food' yielding 2,200 kilocalories, i.e. the minimum food requirement per adult per day. Considering the non-food expenditure as well, Birr 1,075 is used as a poverty line[2] (of which Birr 647.81 is meant for food, and the remaining Birr 427.22 for non-food expenditures). The national per capita consumption expenditure in 1999–2000 was Birr 1,057, with wider gap between rural (Birr 995) and urban (Birr 1,453) areas (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) 2002a, 2002b). However, the national average figures are very crude for depicting the spatial distribution of the incidence of poverty and its depth.

Poverty incidence is higher in the rural settings (39.3%) than in urban areas (35.1%) (MoFED, 2006). Considerable disparities exist among the regional states of the country. The regions of Addis Ababa, Harari and Dire Dawa had the highest per capita consumption in 1999–2000, indicating the relatively lower prevalence of poverty in urban areas. The Tigray region depicted the lowest per capita consumption expenditure and the highest rate of poverty. Taking the 1995 data as a base, the regional states of Tigray, Afar, Somali, Oromiya, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, and Harari have witnessed a decline in per capita consumption expenditures (FDRE, 2002a; 2002b).

Whether poverty increased or decreased over time in Ethiopia has been a debatable issue. On the one hand, government official documents (FDRE, 2002; MoFED, 2006) and a few other studies (World Bank, 1998; Dercon, 2002; Dercon and Krishnan, 1998; Bigsten *et al.*, 2003; Dercon *et al.*, 2006) claim decline in the incidence of poverty during the last decade of the 20th century. On the other hand, many studies that have relied upon close contact with the poor people found that there has been a downward spiralling in people's living standards (Aklilu and Dessalegn, 2000; Yared, 2002; Aspen, 2003; Devereux *et al.*, 2003; Dessalegn, 2003; Degefa, 2003; Degefa and Baudouin, 2004; Shumete, 2004; Degefa, 2005).

Half of the population in Oromiya Zone of Amhara Region are poor, and thus unable to meet their basic needs. Evidences also show that the living standard of the people has deteriorated over several decades. The well-being situation of the inhabitants at two case study communities was the worst. According to villagers' perceptions, 35% of the households were poor and 25% were destitute at Garbi community. The corresponding figures at Erenssa were 30% and 20%, respectively (Degefa, 2005).

Intent and Objective

The diversity of livelihood activities and the multiple ways by which households combine the available means of livelihoods clearly imply that rural people are quite heterogeneous and unequal in terms of their well-being. Crompton (1993: 1) noted:

> *All complex societies are characterized, to varying extents, by the unequal distribution of material and symbolic rewards. It is also the case that no persisting structure of economic and social inequality has existed in the absence of some kind of meaning system(s) which seek both to explain and to justify the unequal distribution of societal resources.*

One of the advantages of underpinning a research problem in the livelihood framework is the possibility to uncover the complexity and heterogeneity of community members according to their material wealth and the corresponding social status. In light of this, I have attempted to understand how the peasantry at the study sites perceived the inequalities among themselves and what attributes are mostly considered by them to label a household as either well-off or destitute. I found the qualitative in-depth studies and the community participatory wealth ranking to be appropriate approaches to identify who is poor or rich, and to identify the indicators used in categorizing people, and explore what proportion of the community members falls into each stratum. In this respect, Chambers (1997: 143) has made the following point: 'Comparisons with questionnaire surveys have shown that wealth ranking takes less time and generate more complex and nuanced findings'.

The article addresses two pertinent research queries:

- How much do the people perceive the inequalities existing at community level and, what do they think explain the well-being differentiations?

- Given the multiple constraints that operate against the livelihood of people, how have the poorest segments of the people survived?

The article would contribute to the works in relation to poverty analysis in two different ways. It demonstrates the effectiveness of the participatory wealth ranking approach in uncovering well-being inequalities as perceived by the community inhabitants themselves. The other importance of the paper is its contribution with respect to putting additional empirical insights on the body of literature on poverty.

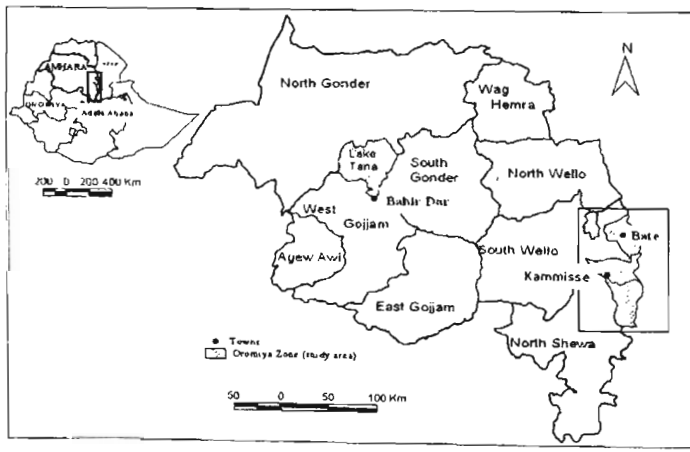
Setting of the Study Area

Dawa Chaffa *Wereda* (district) in Oromiya Zone of Amhara Region (Figure 1a) was purposively chosen for the study. The two *kebeles* (the smallest administrative unit in Ethiopia) selected for the study were Goda Galena and Garbi Mesanna. *Kebele* selection took into account a number of contrasting features, including agro-climatic differences, past and present rural policies' intervention differences, and differences in accessibility to town, main highway and source of water (Table 1).

The purpose of the study and the selected methodology for addressing the problem have played a significant role in the decision as to whether I should consider the whole territory of the two *kebeles* or concentrate on a specific *gott* (community with in the *kebele*). Since my intention was to differentiate households, I selected one community from each *kebele* for in-depth investigation. When selecting the community, the main consideration was the *gott* where the largest number of poor people lives and where food insecurity was believed to be more prevalent. A pilot study across most communities and consultations with the DAs (Development Agents) and the

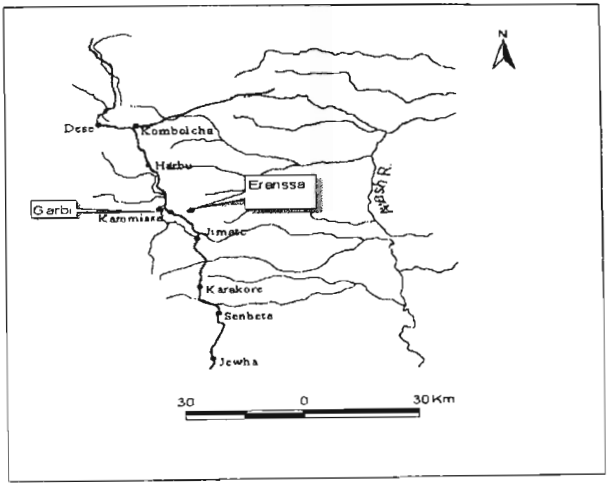
kebele administrators were of much help in the selection of one community from each *kebele*. Accordingly, Erenssa from Goda Galena *kebele* and Garbi from Garbi Messana *kebele* (Figure1b) were selected as the case study communities. The choice of Garbi had another complication since the village is one of the three big villages (with more than 200 households) created under the *Derg* (the former Ethiopian government that ruled between 1974 and 1991) villagization program. Thus, considering the whole village as a case study was not possible for two main reasons: first, the scale of difference compared with the other villages under study would create problems for comparative analysis; second, there would be difficulty in completing the intended in-depth investigation within the time frame available for fieldwork if all households were to be included. The option was to consider a smaller stratum that was already in place. In each rural *kebele*, there are many groups, each comprising 30 to 50 households, which are locally known as *mangistawi buden* (equivalent to a government task force group). The groups were organized for the purpose of mobilizing peasants in various community-based activities. Of the six groups at Garbi, I selected '*Buden 1*' and '*Buden 6*' for the purpose of this study.

Figure 1a. Location of Oromiya Zone in Amhara Region



Source: Author's map (2003)

Figure 1b. Relative location of Garbi and Erenssa communities



Source: Author's (2003)

Table 1. Main contrasting features of the study *kebeles*

CHARACTERISTICS	GODA GALENA	GARBI MESSANA
Selected case community	Erenssa (2210 m a.s.l.)	Garbi (1400 m a.s.l.)
Agro-climate	Midland (*weyna dega*) and lowland (*kola*)	Lowland (*kola*)
Relief	Highly rugged	Less rugged and plain
Water availability	Shortage	Wetland
Irrigation potential	Low	High
Food insecurity prevalence	Moderate	Severe
Main source of livelihood	Food and cash crops, small number of livestock per household	Predominantly annual crops and livestock raising
Farming systems	Sedentary mixed farmers integrated with agro-forestry	Sedentary mixed farmers, agro-pastoralists and commercial farmers
Recent land policy intervention	No official redistribution in 1997	Redistribution took place in 1997
Problem of land shortage	Severe	Moderate

Source: Author's field study (2003)

Methodology

Two participatory approaches were employed to generate the main data for this research: Community inhabitants' wealth ranking, and household life history narrative. The process of household differentiation involved many steps and was undertaken under two separate phases of fieldwork. Since the issue was quite sensitive a one-time Rapid Rural Assessment (RRA) may not enable me to capture the correct picture of the well-being situation of the people. Above all, it was very important to make clear to each community member that my purpose of differentiation was mainly to understand the situation of livelihood inequality, and hence was not aimed at introducing immediate intervention, be it in the form of relief food distribution or as a target to begin some development projects. In the context of rural Ethiopia, studies with two such different purposes are likely come out with different observations and findings, because when community members anticipate some kind of support they will withhold information, underreport their assets and wealth, or exaggerate the livelihood constraints.

The differentiation process involved the following activities:

- First, important key informants were identified in each community. In this regard, people with different experiences and roles were included. These were the elderly (from better-off and poor), female heads of household, development agents stationed in each community, *kire* (burial association) leaders, the *kebele* administrators, the *gott* and the *buden* leaders, and in case of Garbi, the veterinary technician working for the community.
- Second, each participant was informally consulted regarding several issues concerning the lives of people in their community.
- Third, with the help of a semi-structured interview guide, I inquired whether they experienced there was any inequality in their own village, how they perceived the disparity among households, and what they thought explained the inequalities, if any.
- Fourth, separate group discussions were held with women, the elderly, the DAs, the veterinary technician, and the *kebele* administration members.

- Fourth, separate group discussions were held with women, the elderly, the DAs, the veterinary technician, and the *kebele* administration members.
- Fifth, bringing all participants together as a sort of panel to discuss matters and either reach a consensus or to reflect on issues on which divergent opinions were emerging.
- Sixth, I undertook in-depth studies of households that were assumed to be representative of different strata. I had to be extremely cautious when it came to property, asset ownership and income, particularly for the relatively well-off and the average people. As much as possible, I tried to generate the sensitive data in indirect ways. I was able to learn significant lessons from people's underreporting of their assets and wealth, even when people became unwilling to disclose information.
- Seventh, intensive observations were made about the activities and the lifestyles of the case households.

The activities under steps four to seven (above) were repeated during the second phase of the fieldwork in 2003. It was very important to test the consistency of the informants' responses and the reliability of the information collected during the first phase of the investigation.

Poverty was explored as a process and as a dynamic phenomenon. One social research approach for capturing its features is by sharing knowledge with poor people through listening to the tales of their life histories. Some 30 households (15 from each community) that were regarded to be the relatively poorest members of the communities under study narrated the ups and downs of their life and what their households encountered[3].

Wealth Ranking: Discussion of Approaches and Observations

It was apparent that the people in the same village had similar perspectives regarding what explains inequalities in well-being. However, the main differences were found to be when it comes to estimating of the proportion of households falling into each category. This is partly because of the multiplicity of factors involved in household stratification, as well as unequal weight given to the criteria by different informants. It should be noted that the local administrators wished to underreport the proportion of the poor and the destitute dwellers in each community. Nevertheless, this divergence on the consensus does not show the weakness of the method employed, but rather an expression of different realities (Chambers 1997). Looking at the issue from the perspective of different groups would enable comprehensive understanding of inequalities. Involving different groups also helps minimize distortions.

As shown in the matrix (Tables 2 and 3), the households at the two rural communities are categorized into four strata of well-being: *of-danda'a* (rich), *juddugalessa* (average), *iyyessa* (poor), and *dhaba* (very poor or destitute). Three important points must be kept in mind when interpreting the peasantry's stratification. First, rural livelihoods are quite dynamic and there can be upward (gain) or downward (loss) fluctuations affecting a household. Thus, a household's living situation can improve or deteriorate within a short span of time. On the loss side, vulnerability to different external shocks such as crop failure due to drought or livestock death resulting from disease can suddenly push a relatively well-off household into a poverty trap. On the gain side, for instance, a poor peasant household might emerge out of poverty following two seasons of better harvests of onion or *chat* (*Cata edulis*, a narcotic cash crop), or by investing money from remittances. Second, the concept 'rich' must be understood as a relative term, since 'rich' may not exist in absolute terms in the rural setting under consideration. A household that was considered as rich because of their better-off situation compared to other community members might be intermediate (average) when compared with peasants in another community. Third, it is not possible to make a clear-cut demarcation between various strata, and it would be better to think in terms of a

continuum between the two extremes, i.e., the destitute and the rich. Discussion of the main characteristics of households in four well-being categories will be presented in what follows.

Rich

Erenssa: According to the villagers' estimates, the rich households constituted *c.*10% of the inhabitants of Erenssa. Basically, such households want to have large landholdings, and what they officially hold does not satisfy them. They attempt to access additional land by sharecropping and through land purchase. In this way, larger lands are concentrated in the hands of the rich peasants. Rich peasants in this community own a pair of oxen, two or more cows, and other types of livestock. The focus of such households has now shifted from the production of annual food crops, such as sorghum, maize, barley, horse bean to cash crops. They devote most of their own holdings to the cultivation of coffee and *chat*, while the sharecropped lands and farm plots at the distant sites are used for the production of annual crops.

The rich are both self-sufficient in food and feel secure in their livelihoods. They produce crops that can cover annual food requirements, and their financial capacity allows them to purchase food on the market in cases when facing deficiency. The rich also have better options to make their livelihoods from non-farm activities, since the start-up financial capital is not a big problem for them. Among the rich peasants in the community are some working as guards at the Rike state forest, some who own petty trading enterprises such as tea trading, small shops, and also one who owns a grain mill.

Normally, because of their diversified livelihood activities the rich households are short of labour supplies. Consequently, their additional labour needs are met by employing wage labourers on daily basis or on permanent basis through hiring herders or individuals assisting in various farm operations. Well-off households have healthier lifestyles due to having better financial situations, which enable them to meet their health expenditures as well as afford relatively better diets.

The rich have good social relations and networks within and outside the community. They donate grain and cash to their own kin members and the other poor people living in the community. A few households had attained the level of well-off through the support and/or remittances they received from their children who had migrated to neighbouring countries.

Garbi: The number of better-off households at Garbi is less than those at Erenssa. One distinguishing feature of the rich at Garbi is the possession of a relatively larger number of stocks (minimum of two pairs of oxen and 5 cows, and many other animals). These households take advantage of the extensive communal grazing lands in the Borkena Wetlands (during the dry season) and in the surrounding hills in summer. A few rich households also raise camels, a very important pack animal contributing significantly to households' additional earnings.

Rich peasants have also better access to sufficient land for crop cultivation, either from their own holdings, or from having the possibility to sharecrop in from many poor households. Papaya and eucalyptus are important cash crops for the rich peasants. Some rich households engage in livestock and grain trading, and members of some households also work in petty trading. Financial capital to carry out such ventures is not a problem for the rich. Many rich peasants employ wage labourers during peak agricultural operations, and some hire children as herders and adults as farmers.

Rich households play an important role in creating favourable situations for social networks at community levels. The heads of rich households mostly take the initiative of organizing and leading various forms of rituals. They are given the priority in leading informal community-based institutions and taking part in local administration. Rich peasants at Garbi donate milk and milk products widely to the needy people. Some better-off peasants regularly offer *zekka* (donation of about one-tenth of own crop harvest), and lend grain to community members during seasons of food shortages.

The rich are the first to accept new innovations for two reasons, i.e., less fear of failure, and better financial capacity to afford new inputs. Thus, the majority of those who have started to use chemical fertilizers for their crops and those who buy medicines for stock are rich people.

Table 2. Household well-being differentiation matrix – Garbi

Resource/asset endowment and source of livelihood	**HOUSEHOLD TYPE**			
	***Of-danda'a* (rich)**	***Juddugalessa* (average)**	***Iyyessa* (poor)**	***Dhaba* (destitute)**
Proportion of the total households	3–5%	30–35%	25–35%	20–25%
Livestock ownership	4 or more oxen, more than 5 cows, one or more camels	A pair of oxen, 1 or more cows	1 ox or a cow, and chicken	No livestock
Land holding	Sufficient own holdings, and can acquire more through sharecropping or purchase	Hold sufficient land, sharecrop sometimes	Hold own land mostly sharecrop out	Mostly landless, and if any, sell it off or sharecrop out
Annual crop harvest	Mostly meet own annual food consumption, can purchase in case of deficiency	Own harvest can cover food requirement for a minimum of 6 months	Can cover consumption needs for up to 3 months	Mostly with no own harvest and subsist one or two months on grains obtained through *zekka*
Cash crops	Grow papaya and eucalyptus trees	May grow onions under a cooperative, grow papaya in garden	Grow onion through cooperative, grow vegetables using hand-dug well irrigation	No cash crop of own
Non-agricultural income	Livestock trading in slack season, renting camels, and petty trading	A member may work in wage labour, sell firewood in times of crises	Mostly work in wage labour, sell firewood, handicrafts, petty trading	Those who are capable fully depend on wage labour and firewood selling
Labour	Own labour, and employ wage labourer during peak season, may hire herder or cultivator, occasional labour exchange	Mostly depend on family labour, and sometimes labour exchange	Excess labour and seeking employment	Those capable are permanently hired as herders or cultivators

Table 2.... cont'd

Health of breadwinner	Healthy and can afford treatment fees	Fairly healthy	Has no capacity to pay for treatment	Ill health or physically disabled
Remittances	Remit to kin and other poor people in the community	Remit upon harvest	Seek remittance in seasons of food shortage, borrow grain and cash	The aged and disabled fully depend on it
Social transfer and network	Support needy people – lend ox, give grain/cash in loan	Give out food to the poor occasionally	Beneficiary of different forms of support	Beneficiary of social transfer in most cases
Use of modern farm inputs	Can afford modern inputs and medicines for stock	Can apply on credit basis	Cannot afford to utilize	Non-users

Table 3. Household well-being differentiation matrix – Erenssa

Resource/ Asset endowment and Source of Livelihood	**HOUSEHOLD TYPE**			
	***Of-danda'a* (rich)**	***Juddugalessa* (average)**	***Iyyessa* (poor)**	***Dhaba* (destitute)**
Proportion of total households	5–10%	30–40%	25–30%	15–20%
Livestock ownership	A pair of oxen, two or more cows	One ox and one cow	No livestock, except perhaps chickens	No livestock
Land holding	Hold a minimum of 4 *timad* (one quarter of a hectare) but can access more through purchase and sharecropping	Inadequate holding unless supplemented by sharecropping	Own land but partly sharecrop out	Mostly landless, and if any either sell off or sharecrop out
Annual crop harvest	Mostly meet own annual , can purchase in cases of deficiency	Own harvest can cover up to 9 months, food consumption needs. purchased the rest of the time	Can cover consumption for up to six months	Mostly with no own harvest and live 1 or 2 months on grains obtained through *zekka*

Table 3.... cont'd

Cash crops	Grow large crops of coffee and *chat*	Own some trees of coffee and *chat*	May or may not have *chat* (mostly for own use)	No cash crops
Non-agricultural income	Small shop, tea house, own grain mill (one case), guarding state forest	Craft (blacksmith), bakery, guarding state forest	*Chat* trading, guarding state forest, firewood selling	Firewood selling, *shakal*/wage labour (hoeing *chat*, crop harvesting, picking coffee beans), petty trading
Labour	Use own labour, employ wage labourers mostly, and employ a cultivator	Family labour, community labour exchange	Excess labour and seeking employment	Those capable are permanently hired as herders or as cultivators
Health of breadwinner	Healthy and can afford medical treatment	Fairly healthy, can afford medical treatment	Unable to cover treatment costs	Totally unable to visit modern health services, and hence ill health
Remittances	Remit to kin and other poor people in the community	Remit upon harvest	Seek remittances in seasons of food shortage, borrow grain and cash	Those who are unable to work fully depend on remittances
Beneficiary of social transfer	Support needy people – lend oxen, give grain and/or cash as loan	Give food to the poor occasionally	Beneficiary of different forms of support	Beneficiary in most cases
Use of modern farm inputs	Can afford, but the application is not very common in the area	Non-users	Non-users	Non-users

Source: Author's field study (2002–2003).

Note: The differentiation does not encompass the agro-pastoralists and is confined to the sedentary farmers at the study communities specifically. According to the *kebele* administrators and the DAs working in the study community, the proportion of people in each strata of well-being is more or less applicable to the distribution of the *kebeles* under study.

Average/middle

Households with average well-being constitute the majority at both Garbi and Erenssa. Basically, average households are of two types – those who are emerging from poverty, and those who are falling from the well-off strata.

Erenssa: Most of the average households own a single ox, and therefore need to arrange *mekanajo* (pairing of oxen by individuals possessing a single ox) with other peasants having similar status. Two factors discourage the keeping of a pair of oxen among the peasants in this group: first, the lands of some peasants must be cultivated manually by hoeing on farms on hillsides; and second, there is severe shortage of pasture land in this *kebele*.

For the majority of average peasants, their own landholdings sizes are insufficient unless supplemented by sharecropping, particularly if annual crop production is to be maintained. The strategy that the peasants use to partly overcome the land scarcity is to shift from annual crops to cash crops. At the time that fieldwork was undertaken, it was difficult to find both a rich and an average peasant who were without some *chat* and coffee trees.

Average peasant households at Erenssa can produce crops that enable them to consume for a minimum of nine months. Many of these households also supplement their livelihood from non-farm activities; namely, guarding, livestock trading, bakery, and producing handicrafts.

Garbi: Average households at Garbi normally have fairly better access to draft power, and hence a farm ox may not be a serious problem. They have access to land, and have also the option to obtain more land by sharecropping from poor peasants or the destitute. In most cases, average households can harvest crops that can cover their food requirement for about six months. A few of the households also grow cash crops, particularly onions, by becoming a member in an irrigation cooperative, and some of them grow papaya at their backyards. Working as a wage labourer and selling firewood is common practice in order to make up seasonal food deficits. Average well-being households mostly rely upon their own members' labour, and sometimes involve in labour exchange with other community members.

Under normal harvests, average households donate *zekka* to the poorest segment of the population. Average households that are affected by declining livelihood earnings have the amount of support they offered

reduced correspondingly. Most average households cannot afford to buy technological inputs unless they are backed with farm credit.

Poor

Erenssa : The majority of poor households in Erenssa do not own big stock, only chickens. The tiny landholdings, coupled with difficult terrain, and lack of access to draft power, seeds and technological input, have locked the households into a poverty trap. Consequently, the benefits from lands belonging to poor households must be shared with either average or rich peasants. Under these circumstances, a poor peasant who is able to meet his own household members' food need for six months is regarded as the one who is doing very well.

There are other options by which the poor households have been struggling to survive. Some engage in various forms of petty trading, some work as guards in protecting the Rike forest under the FFW (Food for Work) scheme, some carry firewood on a regular basis, and some undertake 'illegal' production and trading of timber.

There is an excess of labour among poor households as economically active adult members seek employment. Consequently, the chance to find wage labour locally is quite limited and competitive. Hence, migrating out of the area has been a necessity for the members of poor households. There was much evidence that the poor households have been emerging out of destitution by receiving significant remittances from members who have migrated abroad. Some segments of poor households have also received benefits in the form of donations by NGOs and government relief agencies.

Garbi: One-third of the inhabitants of Garbi were said to be poor. The distinguishing features of poor households there include having few stocks, and having access to land that is mostly used under sharecropping or left unused (fallow). Most of the poor expect to sharecrop out their own landholdings, which results in less demand for land. The decrease in crop yield over many years in the area has partly contributed to the decline in the demand for land at this locality. The poor live under chronic food shortage – as the production of crops from their own land allows them to meet their

food requirement for less than one-third of the year. Poor households that have had an opportunity to join an irrigation cooperative have shown good signs of improvement in their livelihoods.
The non-farm activities option for the poor here are not so different from the situation in Erenssa, as most households carry firewood to Kammisse almost throughout the year, some work in local crafts, and some attempt petty trading. The commercial farmers that have begun to work in Borkena wetland also provide occasional wage labour to a few individuals. However, the gap between the number of people seeking job opportunities and the number of individuals getting employed is very big.

Thus, the poor people in Garbi are compelled to cope with seasons of severe food shortage by seeking support in the form of grain loan and cash from the relatively well-off people, as well as by receiving relief grain from the government, the WVE (Wold Vision Ethiopia) and other NGOs. Poverty forces many youths to leave Garbi each year. Some of those who have left for neighbouring countries have succeeded, while others have come back after failing to adjust. Seasonal migration to other rural areas for wage labour, as well as to nearby towns, is commonplace.

Destitute (both sites)

The differences in the proportion of destitute and their survival strategies at the two sites are not significant. As can be noted from the differentiation matrix (Tables 2 and 3), the proportion is slightly higher in Garbi, where nearly one-quarter of the households fall into this category. The main characteristics of destitute households are lack of access to livelihood resources (land, livestock and cash), and inability to work in viable livelihood activities, both agricultural and non-agricultural. The destitute peasants who have access to limited land are compelled to sharecrop out, sell it or leave it unused. The crops such households receive from sharecropping might cover their food consumption needs for a maximum of two months, and crops donated from *zekka* may enable them to survive for an additional month. The rest of the year remains a difficult time for the destitute.

Distinction can be made between two types of destitute people: the able-bodied or economically active destitute, and the disabled or economically inactive. The former mainly survive on their own labour, and the latter must rely on transfers and remittances. The economically active destitute regularly work in wage labour, and activities such firewood selling take place throughout the year. It is commonplace for the young members of destitute households to be hired by the relatively well-off peasants in the same community or to migrate somewhere else.

Many factors contribute to the worst health situation that characterizes members of the destitute households. Among the important factors contributing to the precarious health situation of destitute people are insufficient quantity and quality of food, problems related to environmental sanitation and personal hygiene, the inability to visit health facilities, and old age.

Many interesting observations on livelihood and food-security emerged from the participatory wealth ranking and the stratification of the community members, some with empirical and others with methodological implications. First, it is realized that in order to better understand the livelihood and food security situation of a population, there is a need to undertake intensive research at household and community level. This is because the contexts, the opportunities and the constraints vary from one locality to another, and between households within one village. The differences between people's livelihood within and between the studied communities would rightly demonstrate this reality. For instance, cash crops that specifically supplemented the peasants' livelihood earnings were completely different between the two studied communities: the important crops are *chat* and coffee in Erenssa, and papaya, eucalyptus and onion in Garbi. Likewise, it is impossible to compare the rich households at the two sites on the basis of single criterion, as is demonstrated for instance in the case of livestock and farm oxen ownership, due to the fact that rich households in Garbi were better endowed than their Erenssa counterparts. Another implication here is the need to consider a variety of issues because depending on only a few criteria cannot allow meaningful differentiation.

Second, differentiation on the basis of the livelihood approach has indicated that issues of livelihood and food security go beyond income generated from crop and livestock production. This is because the poor and the destitute rely mainly on human (labour) and social capital for their livelihoods and for their food. This means the relatively well-off households have moral and social obligations to support their kin, as well as other poor households and individuals who cannot generate their own incomes. Conversely, the wealth accumulation by the well-off partly depends on the lands to be sharecropped in or purchased from the poor, as well as the dependency on the labour from the poor community members.

Third, the interventions and activities of formal institutions – both government and NGO – have brought about considerable differences with respect to livelihoods and food availability. As indicated, these institutions have the capacity to enable or constrain the peoples' livelihood activities. The irrigation cooperatives that were partly supported by the WVE enabled households to improve their living standards by engaging in the production of cash crops, particularly onions. Similarly, the existence of Rike state forest has opened up employment opportunities for many households at Erenssa. There were a few households who had moved from 'poor' to 'average' and from 'average' to 'rich' by taking advantage of employment opportunities as forest guards. It is also important to note that there might be 'losers' as well as 'gainers' from the same intervention. The shrinking of farmland size of the peasantry of Erenssa, and the alienation of the *Urrane* (agro-pastoralist) grazing lands in Borkena wetland demonstrate the losers compared to other land users.

Fourth, the consultation with community members clearly shows that with the exception of the rich households that are characterized by high resilience and low sensitivity, households in the other strata evidently have high sensitivity and low resilience to food shortages. However, this does not contradict with the inverse correlation between the level of well-being and the degree of vulnerability, in that the destitute are more vulnerable than the poor, in the same way as the poor are more vulnerable than the average household.

Processes of Impoverishment and Survival Strategies of the Poor

It is apparent from the discussion above that a multiplicity of impediments works against the livelihoods of the poor people – including those who are the most food insecure. Yet they were able to survive for decades. The pertinent question here is: How do these poor people survive? In order to answer this question, I attempted to explore the demographic and economic history in depth, as well as the current livelihood situation of many case study poor households. Here, the life history narratives are intended to depict how the poor people view themselves with regards to their poverty. The stories also demonstrate how the analysis could be weak when a complex and diverse situation relating to the poor is reduced to homogeneity. The interpretation is not attempting to make generalizations regarding the characteristics of the poor people. Rather, the discussions are intended to reflect on the diversity among the poor people. The stories reveal that different households are impoverished because of varying combinations of multiple factors. From another perspective, households attempt to survive on the means available to them.

Poor Household Case 1 (Erenssa)

Frew Zefu, a 45-year-old man, has an 11-year-old daughter. His birth place was in the same zone, at a locality known as Garado, a few kilometres south-east of Kammisse town. Frew became a widower seven years ago, and he brought up his daughter alone. Apart from these family-related challenges, he has neither land nor livestock and grain production of his own. His life history records how the household coped with the destitution and the resultant food insecurity.

Frew migrated to Erenssa in 1987. He stated the reasons why he migrated as: 'I married to one woman at Garado with whom I lived for 5 years. We had 1 hectare of land for agriculture, but we had no livestock of our own. Above all, our big worry was the inability to have a child after five years of staying together. Finally, I decided to marry another woman because my wife was unable to deliver a child. We discussed the matter and reached an agreement that we should divorce. After divorce, I gave all land to her and came to

Erenssa. Thus, the divorce decision resulted in Frew losing his land rights at his birth place. After coming to Erenssa, Frew married another woman who had previously divorced twice. This lady had a small plot of land for crop production. During 10 years of their stay together they had two children, one of them died 6 years ago, and one year after the death of the mother. The death of the wife had significant implications for Frew's household livelihood, because her land was inherited by her four children (three from her previous marriages, and Frew's daughter) who had to sell off the land and share the money. This made Frew desperately landless, without space even to construct his own shelter. The teachers at Erenssa Primary School who understood his situation gave him the opportunity to stay in a small hut that they used as a kitchen. This is where he has been for the last six years. His appeal to the *kebele* administration for a parcel of land, at least for settlement, was not successful due to the unavailability of land for individual land claimants like Frew.

When asked as to how he lives, Frew gave a detailed account of his sources of livelihood: 'I and my daughter depend largely on my labour. I work in wage labour the whole year in activities such as hoeing, weeding, harvesting, and threshing, from which I earn our means of subsistence. The earnings from this vary, depending on the success or failure of harvests. A crisis year for the peasant farmers means severe food shortage for those of us who depend on working for them'. Firewood selling is also an activity that Frew undertakes on a regular basis in order to supplement his income. His daughter has also begun to contribute to the household's subsistence. She collects firewood for both home consumption and for selling (which the father carries to market place), and she earns small amounts of money by fetching water and washing clothes for some teachers living in the community. The unfortunate thing is that when she began to bring in a little income, she was pulled out of her school. The father said: 'I got the permission from the *kebele* administration that she could leave her school and assist me in my struggle to make a livelihood'. This is a good example demonstrating how poverty contributes to illiteracy. What is surprising in this case is how the school teachers who, to certain extent, take part in *kebele* administration, have accepted the dropout from school by a girl whom they know personally.

Frew has a feeling that his long history of working in labour activities coupled with poor nutrition has caused his health to deteriorate. His limited income also barely enables him to visit modern health services. Therefore, he is very worried about the possibility of his current living situation continuing in the coming years: 'My situation now will not allow me to go to the resettlement

site, which we have already been asked to do by the *kebele* administrators. My intention and my daughter's interest is to return to my birth place, where I may get more help from my relatives and kin. Of course, some of my kin give me material and moral support even today, by coming and visiting me in Erenssa'.

Frew did not conceal information about the relief food support he has obtained in years when his *kebele* has been targeted as aid grain beneficiary. This has been mostly through the food-for-work scheme. He complained very much of the kind of exclusion and discrimination he has observed relating to invitations to participate in ceremonies such as weddings. He stated: '*yenach labash* (those who dress in white) are given priority over poor people like me'.

The observations from the case studies considered in this study of which few were presented clearly indicate that impoverishment is a continuous process which might be induced by different factors. The way people become poor, the duration of poverty, the trends (whether a household is falling into poverty or emerging out of it), and how people survive varies considerably from one household to another. In this respect, Hulme and Shepherd (2003: 404) offer the following warning: 'Pressure to view poor people as a homogeneous group can both weaken analysis and distort policy'. The way people attempt to cope with seasonal shortfalls and adaptation to long-term destitution are also different for different households. This is because households' coping and adaptation, among other things, depend on the degree of vulnerability and the context in which they live, and their access to various assets and opportunities (Tables 2 and 3) (Poor Household Cases 1 to 5). The theoretical implication is that the sequential coping mechanism model advanced by many (Watts, 1983; Corbett, 1988; Maxwell and Frankenberger, 1992) does not hold for the current study population for two reasons. First, the sequence model assumes that all households in rural settings purely depend on crop and livestock production for their livelihoods, yet this is not normally the case, as the present study sites demonstrate. Second, according to the model, some of the ways of life being practiced by poor people on permanent basis are regarded as short-term coping strategies. Further, according to the sequence models, a household relies on minor and less expensive mechanisms when food shortages are less. As the problem progressively moves from minor to severe, households are expected to take serious measures, such as selling off

assets and even leaving the area. However, there are many cases exemplifying how people had started to migrate when they had no opportunity to practice minor coping strategies, i.e., strategies which households are assumed to attempt first, by remaining at their place of residence.

Poor Household Case 2 (Erenssa)

Zenebu Dawud is an elderly woman (65 years) who was joined by her daughter Ansha and her family when they returned from a resettlement site in 1993. Theoretically, Zenebu now heads a family of 6 members. Nonetheless, because Zenebu is economically inactive, Ansha is in charge of meeting the basic needs of the whole family. Zenebu has been married to 4 different husbands, from whom she had 7 children, four of which are still alive. Except for a few years in Kallu with her first husband, Zenebu has been living in Erenssa her whole life. The small plot upon which she built a house was inherited from her mother. Many years ago, Zenebu used to earn some income from petty trading in the same village, selling food and drinks, such as *yeabish tella* (a local drink made of fenugreek) and tea. Due to lack of access to land, the household had never experienced a large amount of crop harvest to cover a consumption over a considerable time of a year. Zenebu blamed her parents for this: 'unlike other people, they did not hold adequate land for themselves, and hence we inherited almost nothing from them. When land was distributed among people during the 1975 land reform, some people were largely allocated land from their parents or kin holdings, which we lacked'. Similarly, Zenebu does not remember ever having her own livestock, except chickens.

Ansha is the last born child of Zenebu. She was brought up in Erenssa and married when she was 16 years old. Her household had 1 hectare of land and a few livestock. However, the household was displaced by the drought and famine in 1985, and taken to Illubabor under the *safarra* (resettlement) program. By the time of their resettlement, the family size had grown to three: the husband, Ansha, and one daughter. Thereafter, they had two more children, though unfortunately both of them died there. Her first husband has also died there, which made Ansha desperate. She then married someone with whom she had son, but divorced shortly after. Finally, she returned to Erenssa with her two children. Although the living situation improved somewhat during their stay in Illubabor, the personal crisis that Ansha faced has undermined the situation. She said: 'I was not in a position to come with a large amount of

money and other assets. The money was mostly used for transportation, and we also took some clothes and other minor things. Hence, given the little money I came back with, it was not possible to start a viable livelihood activity here'.

Ansha found her mother (Zenebu) in a very bad situation, both economically and health wise, when she returned from the resettlement site. She explained the situation thus: 'My idea was divided between two things – one was to be with my mother and taking care of her, and the other was to begin my own life, getting married again if possible. I have attempted both of these, but with no success. I have been married to five men since I came back and have had two more children. The main cause of the failures in my marriages was having many children who were not well accepted by the new husbands. Over the last three years, I have fully abandoned the idea of remarrying and have decided to settle with my mother, though I am unable to take care of her sufficiently nor able to feed myself and my children'.

The land that belonged to Ansha's household before leaving for resettlement was relatively good for growing coffee and other field crops. It is unfortunate that part of it was alienated by the state forest and the rest was taken over by other needy people. Thus, there was no longer an option for her to make her livelihood from this land. So, how do the household members survive? Firewood selling has become the main source of earning for Ansha's household. The eldest daughter also contributes to the household income by gathering firewood. Although the opportunities for women are somewhat low, Ansha also tries to work in *shakal*, such as by weeding and harvesting. The *kebele* administration recognizes Zenebu (the mother) as a resident, and as a result Ansha participates in the Food-for-Work scheme in the name of the mother. Unfortunately, the occasional free handouts of grain do not take into account the other members of the household at Zenebu's home. Ansha hires out two of her sons (10 and 13 years old) as herders, who earn an annual salary of Birr 80 and Birr 100 respectively. The big problem, however, has been that the children are not willing to work and that they remain at home longer. Ansha said: 'they forcefully stay during the season of short supply and when they have nothing to eat at home'.

Two of the family members had severe health problems: Zenebu and the youngest daughter suffered from calf and chest pains. Using modern health services are unthinkable for such a destitute household, whose incomes rarely cover their subsistence needs. Ansha is very concerned about them, both in terms of her ability to feed them and to meet other necessities.

Some poor households have large families, and sometimes these are extended. The burden of dependency that mainly falls on the heads and the other active members is quite substantial. Under such circumstances, moral obligations are given more weight than economic capability to support members of kin. When, for whatever reasons, a divorced son or daughter returns to the parents' home, perhaps together with grandchildren, the parents often accept them willingly, regardless of their own economic capacity. According to the evidence presented here, the benefit is sometimes mutual. The sons and daughters engage in whatever activities they are able to, in order to bring some additional income to the household. In turn, they enjoy sharing a place of residence and obtain labour support from other family members who take care of the grandchildren. Although this observation does not lead to the conclusion that large family size is an advantage for the poor households, the cases reveal how people cope with the livelihood constraints by pooling the assets available to them. Those who have no place of settlement for whatever reasons are able to cope with the problem by joining their kin, while the disabled or aged overcome their inability to work by accommodating others at their home, and sometimes engaging in other activities such as taking care of children.

The poor households have been involved in migration in search of a better living situation once or many times in their life time. The data show that the causes were mostly push-factors, since the migrants had no clear information about their destination prior to leaving. However, the outcome in terms of improvement in livelihoods has been mixed.

Poverty has an implication for the social organization at household level, as many cases depicted the fact that the poor households are characterized by frequent family breakdowns, separations, and high rates of divorce and remarriage. It was clearly observed that women are disadvantaged in terms of making decisions related to social organization and economic matters. Expenses for social ceremonies, such as marrying off a child can exacerbate poverty. It was learnt that people give priority to trying to meet community expectations rather than considering their own economic viability and capacity. Poverty reduction efforts that aim at enhancing households' food

security need to change peoples' attitudes when it comes to such harmful practices.

The poor households are also actively involved in the social network in their community. Labour is mostly the disposable asset for them in assisting the others being hired among the relatively better-off peasants or assisting the needy people for free in their respective communities.

Poor Household Case 3 (Garbi)

Zemzem Aliy is a widow taking care of five other family members – her four children and an elderly female dependent. Zemzem's household hosts the elderly woman purely on a moral and humanitarian basis, since they have no kinship ties with her. The woman is blind and unable to undertake any type of domestic work or to lead her own life alone. Zemzem's husband died 12 years ago and the whole responsibility of making a livelihood has fallen upon her: 'By the time of the death of my husband we had a lot of *saa* (livestock) and hence there was no scarcity of livelihood resources apart from shortage of male labour. Even the demand for labour was low due to the fact that we mostly depended on *saa* rearing and had only a little crop production that was meant for *eshet* (green harvest)'.

The process of impoverishment experienced by this household has many interesting features. First, the household is said to have been self-reliant about 10 years ago. According to the head of the household, 'Just before the crisis caused by the drought of 1985, my household owned about 20 milk cows. In those days we mostly met our need for grain from the market by selling butter. The drought killed most of our stock. Even then it did not take much time for us to recover and we were able to accumulate stock again'. Second, within a short period of time the household shifted from a livelihood dependent on livestock to one dependent upon crop production. The shift was at the expense of many stocks. The land redistribution in 1997 gave Zemzem's household access to 5 *timad* of land. The land had never been cultivated before. Converting it into crop land for the first time required an investment of Birr 1150 to pay for the hire of a tractor. That money was entirely generated from the sale of livestock. The household was convinced that investment in land was more profitable than keeping stock. Zemzem justified the reason why she moved from being herder to crop producer as follows: 'A severe drought in one season or an epidemic outbreak can quickly impoverish you if your

livelihood purely depend on livestock, but this is not the case if you are a crop producer'. Third, the household has also been earning supplementary income from the eldest son, Seid, who dropped out of school from Grade 8 for economic reasons. Initially, he was employed as an assistant to a grain mill owner in the same village, which enabled him to bring in additional income for the household. The mill was subsequently moved to another community, making Seid jobless. The Community Water Committee in Garbi realized Seid's problem and gave him an opportunity to work as a guard for one of the two water points. The monthly salary from this job is Birr 60. Seid's mother reported that from this income Seid pays land tax, fees for hiring tractors (Birr 100 in 2002), and sometimes for purchasing food. Because of the declining need for sharecropping and better benefits, people have started to hire tractors to cultivate their land.

Fourth, becoming poor has been very humiliating for Zemzem and other family members, which has manifested itself in different ways. For instance, the members consider it a shameful matter to get milk and milk products from kin members and other community members. Likewise, working as a wage labourer for somebody else is not acceptable for members of the household. They would prefer to work as firewood sellers and sugar cane traders, the activities mostly undertaken by the mother and one of the daughters respectively. Zemzem regards seeking remittances from her relatives as undesirable. She mentioned that two of her brothers and one sister are living in Djibouti though she has never asked them for any remittances so far. From this standpoint of the household it can be deduced that it is regarded as a good quality to try to avoid dependency when faced with adversity. A positive aspect is that household members work hard to emerge from their poverty. However, the household was unable to avoid receiving relief grain. The support that Zemzem's family gives to the elderly women tells how social networks act as a safety net in times of hardship.

Poor Household Case 4 (Garbi)

Kedija Mohammed heads a household with an extended family. She lives with two of her divorced children – a son and a daughter, each with one child, the newly married son and his bride, and two orphan grandchildren. One of Kedija's daughters returned home with a child after having divorced from her husband. Aliy is an ex-soldier who returned to the community two years ago. He has recently been divorced from his wife who went to her parent's home. She took one of their children and the other was left with Aliy. Currently,

Kedija and Aliy are economically inactive mainly because of health-related constraints. The mother has been almost blind for many years, while the son is physically disabled to engage in livelihood activities. Aliy's divorce is mainly attributed to his illness.

What caused Kedija's sight problem and why did she fail to get treated at an appropriate time? Her eye illness started during the *Derg* time. She narrated how she became blind and dependent on her children: 'One of my sons was involuntarily recruited to go to the war front under the *Derg* regime. That caused me to feel extreme sorrow, as a result of which I used to cry day and night for some time. That was how for the first time I felt serious pain in my eyes. I was not in a position to immediately visit a modern health service. Eventually, I reached the stage of being unable to see. I decided to go for a major medical treatment. The Boru Meda Hospital in Dessie was suggested as a place I should go to for treatment. I went there and one of my eyes was operated on. I stayed in the hospital for seven days and was released to come back home. It was unfortunate that while coming back home, the car, public transport, was crushed by another car. I and my caretaker were injured. After getting help at hospital we came home. I thought the bandage on my eye was also damaged during the accident since I was not cured by the time the doctors had expected to see changes. I had no economic capability to go back to the hospital for another check-up. That was how I became blind and remained at home. I can no longer work both at home and in the field'.

Aliy also became dependent on other family members. He divorced his wife because of severe illness. Aliy explained: 'My wife had been taking care of me for more than a year. I used about Birr 3000 for medical treatment alone and my situation did not show improvement. So, we agreed that my wife should not suffer with me and we dissolved our marriage so that she could be free to join her parents'. So, the burden of feeding Aliy and taking care of him and his one child became the responsibility of his brother and sister at home.

The household has 4 *timad* of land and a hand-dug well for irrigation. The son who has recently married has been taking care of cultivating the land. He owned one ox that was sold off to cover the cost of his marriage, which ended the household's prospects of land cultivation. They were ready to sharecrop out the land on *ye-ekul* (sharecropping on half share) basis. The water to be used for irrigation was also no longer used, hence it was no longer possible to generate any income from these sources.

Poverty deprives individuals of access to social services, such as education, health and information, which tends to keep the poor in a cycle of poverty. It is unlikely that an illiterate and unhealthy person will obtain a viable livelihood sufficient to enable them to emerge from poverty. The poor and their family members suffer most from illnesses. They have limited access to preventive care (sanitation, nutritionally adequate food) and curative interventions (low financial capacity to visit health facilities). The illness of the breadwinner can impoverish a household further, since households' means of production (assets) will be used in non-viable ways. For instance, land has to be sharecropped out to other individuals, and the irrigation water may remain unused for the purposes it was intended for.

There are many cases of rural poor who have never possessed their own livestock in their whole life. This clearly suggests that their diet is lacking in milk and its derivatives (protein), a deficiency which has obvious health implication in terms of under-nutrition and malnutrition.

The poor are the victims of both natural calamities (drought, flooding, epidemic, etc.) and inappropriate human actions (poorly designed policies and deliberate conflicts). In other words, the poor are the most vulnerable to 'external shocks' and they lack economic capacities enabling them to recover quickly in post-crisis periods. Two concrete instances are relevant in this respect. The legacy of the 1984–1985 drought has not yet fully disappeared for many of the poor households studied. The other instance relates to the *Derg* resettlement program, which displaced many people who subsequently remained the poorest after returning from the resettlement sites.

An attempt to shift from one form of livelihood system to another was witnessed as the cause of impoverishment for a few households. For instance, the decision to shift from a crop-dominant to livestock-dominant livelihood system or vice versa pushed households into the poverty trap (Poor Households Case 3). The non-head members of poor households significantly contribute to the household's livelihood earnings. This suggests the need for researchers to include non-head economically active members, if possible, when undertaking investigations pertaining to rural

livelihoods. Focusing on the situation of the head alone will not give a complete picture.

There is a direct correlation between economic power and political power at household and individual levels. In other words, the poor are not given due regards and are rarely given the chance of being elected as community leaders, either in informal or formal institutions (see Poor Household Case 5). The poor are thus marginalized and made politically powerless. Their direct involvement in government services could help to improve the livelihoods of poor households. It was observed that land to which poor people were not given access was rather given out to individuals involved in national defence (i.e., military service). This is a clear signal that the involvement of government actors could create the situation by which households can be pulled out of poverty. This has also significance in that it suggests government is discriminating between the poor themselves. Every individual needs to enjoy equal citizenship rights, regardless of whether or not they are directly involved in any government activities.

Poor Household Case 5 (Garbi)

Shikur Hassen is a 60-year-old elderly who told me about change and continuity of life in Garbi and the ups and downs of his own household within the trap of poverty. I was able to learn a lot from this elderly man as he was a knowledgeable informant and also a member of one of the case study poor households. The focus here, however, is to record few of his personal and household issues.

Poverty was what drove Shikur out of Borena Sayint (his birth area) 35 years ago: 'I was young when migrating in the hope of getting employment at a commercial farm around Chaffa. A few individuals who had left our area many years before sent rumours that there were plenty of jobs, particularly for young men', Shikur explains how he came to Chaffa for the first time. He then married his first wife with whom he had five children; two of them died and three are still alive. Between the time of his first marriage and now, Shikur has married five different women. Initially, Shikur worked as a guard for a private farm for many years until he stopped in 1973. Thereafter, he moved to the Garbi area and started to earn a livelihood as a cultivator and as a charcoal maker.

Shikur was elected as a *kebele* chairman during the early period of the *Derg*. Unfortunately, he only had the position for one year. According to Shikur himself, he could not stay in the post for several reasons. One was the lack of kin and close friends who could support him with ideas. Secondly, being poor, Shikur was criticized for highly sympathizing with poor people, which put him in disagreement with other committee members as well as with the administrators at *wereda* level. During the *Derg* regime, his household had access to 10 *timad* of land, most of which was cultivated under a sharecropping arrangement.

Because of high vulnerability and lack of assets, Shikur's family was among the hard hit households during the 1984–1985 drought and famine. As a result, the household was willing to voluntarily resettle in Illubabor. Shikur explained the government propaganda system to convince people at that time: 'The political *cadres* came to us with a maize-cob specimen of about a half a metre long, telling the villagers that they should take the advantage of settling on fertile ground where such crops could be easily harvested twice a year. This was very tempting and I decided right away to go for *safarra*'. The situation at the settlement site was rather challenging in various respects. In the first place, the settlers were put in the existing village in the form of *sigsaga* (mixed with the host people), which created difficulties of communication because of the language barrier for households like Shikur's, who could only speak Amharic. Secondly, the promises from the government to provide farm oxen, clothes, and free medical services were not met. Third, it was practically impossible to adjust to the environment, which was somewhat colder than their place of origin. Thus, frequent illness was commonplace, and Shikur's family lost one of its members. Fourthly, the host people were not happy about the settlers since they had not been properly consulted before the aliens were brought to their site. These and other factors compelled Shikur's family to return home after about four years.

The original home community did not accept the returnees from the resettlement sites happily. Shikur's 10 *timad* of land holding were taken over by other community members. Thus, there was not even a proper place for Shikur to build his own shelter. The bad situation in which his family fell was expressed by shikur as: '*Ezeya benehed* ***Kabarro ezeh benmetta Zenjaro***', which literally means 'we were perceived as if we were wildlife. In particular, the host regarded us as "foxes" and my own community members in Garbi considered us as "monkeys"'. This was therefore a terribly difficult period in their life. The change of government in 1991 culminated in the condemnation of the *Derg* policies when the returnees succeeded in attracting the attention of

the new government actors. This was a time when the returnees were given some land and some credit for purchasing farm oxen. Shikur obtained a pair of oxen through a loan, one from the WVE and the other from the *wereda* MoA. It was unfortunate that one of the oxen died after just one growing season and the second had to be sold off since it lost a considerable amount of weight.

Another government policy that worked against Shikur's household was the 1997 land reallocation policy. As indicated above, Shikur's working as a *kebele* chairman during *Derg* categorized him as a member of bureaucracy, and as such he was given access to only 1 hectare of land. Part of the household land was reallocated to other community members. So, the household was in a situation of severe poverty since the land had to be sharecropped out, and thus yield grains barely covered the household's annual requirements. Therefore, it has become a necessity for the household to cope up in other ways. The housewife regularly carries firewood to Kammisse, both in good time and in bad periods. Despite his suffering from asthmatic problems, Shikur tries to catch fish, mostly for sell. It was observed that fish caught from a river such as the Borkena is a very difficult task. One of the challenges is that catching takes place in the evening hours when the fish are expected to come to the fringes of the river bank. There is also a risk of being attacked by other wildlife, such as hyena. Because of the barrier formed by the dyke nearby Garbi village, it is necessary for fishermen to go to distant places. The fact that fishing is undertaken using traditional methods means that the ability to swim is essential. In addition, the health implications of the activities should not be overlooked.

It is difficult for some households to accept becoming poor. These are mainly households who have experienced poverty relatively recently. Consequently, receiving social support from kin and other members in the community is regarded as shameful. Such households strongly believe in working hard as a way out of poverty. Creating favourable conditions through enabling them access to the assets that they lack can pull such households out of the poverty trap within a short time.

Different households were found to be at different stages in the poverty trend: some have shown many fluctuations (ups and downs in their well-being), some are still falling into poverty, and there are households that show signs of emerging from poverty. This is one of the indicators of the heterogeneity among the poor households, which challenges the

conventional thinking that the poor are a homogeneous group, and thus practical policy interventions attempting to overcome their problems need to give room for diversity. Different trends also tell about the dynamics and complexity of poverty and food insecurity.

Concluding Remarks

The reliance on different livelihood strategies is manifested in the heterogeneity and inequalities of rural households in their well-being status. The community members are aware of this, and can identify who is in which strata and what explains the inequalities among themselves. The consultation with the villagers enabled me to identify four strata of well-being: the rich, the average, the poor, and the destitute. It was possible to learn more from this participatory well-being differentiation than from the survey questionnaire data from the same community. Thus, the methodological implication of the exercise is of much importance. In fact, there have been many similar studies done in other parts of developing regions, such as among the Maasai of Kenya by Grandin (1988), and among Mongolians by Mearns *et al.* (1992). What differentiates the current exercise from others is: first, I repeated the process over two years of fieldwork; second, I tried to combine various participatory methods, specifically individual interviews, group interviews, panel discussions, and observations. The data show that with the exception of the rich, households in other categories are characterized by livelihoods with high sensitivity and low resilience to food insecurity.

Another important point of observation from the study is that if properly addressed, the main livelihood constraints and their possible remedies can be drawn from the local people themselves. Thus, any efforts directed towards poverty reduction and the minimization of the risk of food shortages must allow people to use their own knowledge to identify their predicaments and allow them to become involved and/or participate in the process.

The life history tales and the experiences of the poor people indicate their complex realities, their heterogeneity, the differences in the causes of their impoverishment, and their varying coping mechanisms and survival

strategies. The observations confirm that the sequential coping mechanisms that have been advanced by various authors (Watts, 1983; Corbett, 1988; Maxwell and Frankenberger, 1992) do not apply to the cases of poor households at the current study sites. This is due to various reasons such as the involvement of poor household members in a multiple of livelihood earning activities, and the fact that some of the coping strategies of the poor have become the permanent survival strategies. The life history narratives of many poor people have revealed a number of characteristics of poor households. Among the distinguishing features are: having large families, frequent migration, unstable social organization, having protein-deficient food and in most cases, subsequent malnourishment of children and under-nutrition of adults, and falling into poverty when trying to shift from one form of livelihood system to another.

The following are some policy implications drawn from the pertinent observations related to poverty:

- The multidimensional nature of poverty calls for integrated poverty reduction programs addressing the economic, social, environmental and political constraints whereby various development actors (government, NGOs, and private sectors) have their own share to contribute to.
- Putting in place a sort of safety net program in terms of credit provisions and skill training interventions has a paramount importance in protecting poor people from falling into destitutions while trying to shift from one form of livelihood activity to another. Such supports can help the strategies of livelihood diversification whereby households can start new ventures without abandoning the previous livelihood activities.
- Any rural development intervention should take into account the participation of local people from the planning stage to the implementation of the program, as a number of policies designed in top-down fashion have failed in reducing poverty.

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Endnote

[1] This is according to the estimate of the total population of Ethiopia in 2003; the 2007 census result put the population at 73.3 million.

[2] The same figure of poverty line has been used in the country since 1995.

[3] Despite a number of strengths and advantages discussed here, the qualitative participatory methods are not free from certain limitations. Among others, the methods will not allow us to make generalizations; they cannot be applied for large scale poverty measurement (which should rely on a relatively bigger quantitative survey); and the data drawn on the basis of these tools may not allow comparisons of observations across large number of geographical entities.

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Errata

Page	*Paragraph*	*Line*	*Error*	*Read as*
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Addis Ababa University
P.O. Box 1176, FAX 55-13-33,
Telephone: +251-0111-231074/ 239721
E-mail: EJDR2010@yahoo.com
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