

The Food Aid Scenario in Ethiopia: pro-poor or pro-politics?

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Abstract

Ethiopia is one of the leading aid recipient countries in the world and Africa with 5-6 millions peoples approximately requiring urgent food assistance on a non-stop basis in rural areas alone. The country receives between 20-30 % of the food aid allotted to sub-Saharan Africa. Attributed to ill-favored aid architecture including the local political economy and targeting mechanisms, according evidences drawn from empirical research works, currently in the country, food aid is bringing more harm than good with a serious of debilitating repercussions on local development especially, on the socio-economic issues. This paper is based on critical review empirical research works of the scenarios of the sate of food aid and food aid dependence in selected regional states of Ethiopia (Amhara, Tigray, Somali, Afar and South Nations Nationalities and Peoples Regional States) with the main objective of assessing the impact of food aid dependence on social and economic issues across the various regions of the country and to see whether food aid provisions are married to patronage of politically motivated objectives to maintain the political interest of the government and donors or to really support the needy. The result of this review show that food aid has substantial impacts on local market and production, local consumption pattern, and creating dependency syndrome and moral hazards mainly due to poor management, mode of delivery, political-favoritism and targeting mechanisms. This paper recommends that for food aid to be effective in helping the needy and assist local development efforts there has to be efficient targeting mechanism that hardly allows targeting errors of inclusion and exclusion and nepotism. Food aid programs should also be re-engineered in a manner that helps recipients' in long-term asset creation and welfare of the people.

Keywords: Food aid, Food aid architecture, Aid dependence, Labor disincentive, political favoritism, Ethiopia

1. Introduction

Today Africa faces the world's gravest hunger problems with high rate of aid dependency syndrome. Even more disturbing, Africa is the only continent where hunger problem is projected to worsen over the next two decades and currently, produces less food per person than three decades ago and remains one of the most malnourished regions in the world (John, 2009).

From sub-Saharan Africa, the Ethiopian economy is among the most vulnerable. Each year on average, about four million people in the rural areas have problem of securing enough food for themselves, and need assistance (FDRE³, 2002). The economy is heavily dependent on the agricultural sector, which is characterized by dwindling production and productivity picturing the country to be one of the countries in the world consistently receiving substantial quantities of food aid. Famine and drought are the most documented natural disasters that occur in Ethiopia becoming part of the recent history of human misery. The history of famine in Ethiopia caused by drought dates back to 11th century and according to the Ethiopian Red Cross Societies between 1900 till to date, about 18 periods of famine recorded (EEA/EEPRI⁴, 2004). As a result, the country has become a net food importer since 1959/60 (Abraham 1994:213 cited in UNDP, 2000). Over the last twenty years or more, an annual average of 800,000 tons of food aid was imported to address food insecurity in the vulnerable regions of the country. The highest food aid import had occurred during the 1984/85 crisis in which the imported volume reached 26.2 percent of domestic production of food crops (FDRE, 2001).

There is no doubt that food aid is of a great significance for Ethiopia with millions of starving people, especially when it is deployed effectively in an accountable manner as part of a wider development strategy; it makes a lasting difference in helping the needy and assist local development efforts. The proponents of aid like Sachs (2005) and Levinsohn and Margaret (2007) say that the poor in developing countries cannot afford to save and are thus trapped in a cycle of poverty and this cycle can be broken by massive increase in aid since the ultimate objective of food aid is poverty alleviation. According to the above authors, food aid is an effective means of decreasing starvation; when used for food for work programs, it stimulates local development; and by reducing

³ Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia

⁴ Ethiopian Economic Association/Ethiopian Economic Policy Research Institute

the need for food imports it has prevented large cumulative deficits in poor countries. In parallel, Fraser and Whitefield (2008) note that food aid is of a great significance for Ethiopia with millions of starving people, especially when it is deployed effectively in an accountable manner while respecting the country's food aid sovereignty, as part of a wider development strategy; it makes a lasting difference in helping the needy and hungry and assists local development efforts. Food aid programs, either in the form of free food or food-for-work are vital to the health, improving nutritional status and wellbeing of many food deficit households.

However, all those advantages of food aid are not without debilitating costs. Wemos (2005) argue that food aid is a necessary evil; it should only be given for short period to overcome disaster. Arguments show that food aid often does more evil than good. The cost associated with long-term food aid dependence includes; the collapse of national price, labor disincentives, changed food habit, declining of local food production, and local markets and declining incentives to improve local infrastructure (Ibid). Supplementing Wemos's arguments, Easterly (2006) mentions the evils of dependency on food aid includes; damaging of democracy, displacing local concerns and solutions, rampant corruption, constraining the policymaking options of aid receiving countries by demanding that their aid is spent on their priorities (i.e. in return to much needed finance, recipient governments change their economic and social policies), imposing policies and sequence of reforms (political, institutional and policy) and spending priorities, institutional overload and capacity weakening, loss of sovereignty and weakened ownership of policies and plans, revenue instability, repetitive budgeting, budget fragmentation, and the undermining of accountability and democratic decision-making.

Attributed to the limited aid negotiating capacity recipients have over ownership and control over foreign aid and end up conditionality and identify their priorities and the less power they have assumed to establish their own systems to coordinate donors and only accept aid that comes only on their terms adds up additional vulnerability(Fraser and Whitfield, 2008).

Currently concerns are being raised regarding the efficiency and real benefit of different food aid programs to helping the needy recipients and assist local development efforts. According to reports made by independent bodies like Amnesty International and anecdotal evidences, in Ethiopia food aid is bringing more evil than good attributed to two major reasons from two sides; both from the donors and the recipient countries. The first one is the misuse of aid by some authorities within the country for personal economic and political gains and the way how aid is managed and given targeting those who deserve the aid. Even if it is clearly stated by the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Right that access to adequate food supply is a nondiscriminatory right, the tendency of some local politicians within the country to selectively offer food aid received from donors favoring their political supporters in exchange for ballot cards to prolong their political tenure (vote buying and forge connections) is the other predicament limiting the far reaching impact of food aid (Caeyers and Dercon, 2011). The other critic emerges from the donors' political economy agenda and use of undemocratic and inappropriate policy conditionality upon the receiving country in a way that skews recipients' accountability away from the citizens (Wemos, 2005). The lack of real policy ownership from the side of the recipient due to the donor centralized nature the food aid possess and the problem emanating from the mode of aid delivery are some of the reasons restricting the far reaching impact of aid in helping the deserving and assist local development efforts of the country flourish. To this connection, the aim of this paper is to explore the impact the current food aid scenarios on social and economic issues based on review of empirical research works conducted mainly in five Regional States of Ethiopia (Amhara, Tigray, Afar, Somale and South Nations Nationalities and People's Regional States).

The impetus to deal with this research review springs from the very fact that currently in Ethiopia it is not uncommon to observe a number of food aid giving international NGOs and agencies, however, the impact of the aid in narrowing up the gap of poverty, helping the needy and assist local development efforts is minimal. Research outcomes, anecdotal evidences and independent reports by organizations show that instead poverty is growing, hunger is mounting (last year alone FAO (2011) in its report mentions the number of people requiring an urgent food assistance increased from 2.8 to 3.2 million as compared to the previous year), aid dependency syndrome is increasing, food price is sky rocketing, self-reliance is diminishing, local concerns, priorities and solutions are being displaced and systematic impositions of policies and ideologies are becoming prominent. This research review hopes to make certain contributions to different stakeholders. The first contribution this research hoping to make is to the academic community as it may add certain elements to the emerging body of knowledge in the subject and will serve as means to instigate other research works. The second contribution of this research review is to policy makers and development practitioners. The third contribution is to aid giving agencies and NGOs as the finding of the study will help them consider the local situation and people's demand.

2.1 Ethiopia and its food aid history: Birds'-eye view of the past and the present

Despite the historical motive of food aid which is about purely humanitarian, .i.e. to reduce hunger, famine and

human suffering too frequently political motives have impaired its far reaching impact in realizing its far reaching impact. Mainly after the Second World War food aid been a regular feature of international development programs. Food aid has also been used as a weapon to launch new marketing opportunities and promotion of American products so as to reduce surplus foods. While the USA was the leading food aid donor in the 1960s, the European Union (EU) was the largest food aid donor in the 1990s.

Since at least 1980, Ethiopia has been structurally in food deficit. Though agriculture is the mainstay of the Ethiopia economy, its contribution to ensuring food security has dramatically declined and has failed to keep pace with the ever changing population growth (Devereux, 2000). Between 1990-99 alone, Ethiopia received 795 thousand Metric Tons of food aid annually. According to WFP (2011), currently, there are 5 to 6.2 million people in rural areas need food aid on a non-stop basis, even in good agricultural years which accounts 10% of total domestic grain production.

Soon after 1974 the military junta, Derg⁵, came to power and made an attempt to manage relief activities by establishing Relief and Rehabilitation Commission which paved the way for foreign aid agencies a point of entry, although its functions were jeopardized by many factors including lack of roads, storage facilities, transportation, and high fuel costs. During that period there was no early warning mechanism other than some nutritional surveillance program.

As of 2005, the current Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government, in order to address the food security situation and ensure food self sufficiency of household, has launched special programs, Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) and Other Food Security Program (OFSP).

Nevertheless, Ethiopia remains ready to receive food aid every year, and the donors seem willing to continue providing food indefinitely (Devereux, 2004). Despite its relevance, its disadvantage is currently outweighing. Dependency syndrome is now rooted in the culture of the rural people (Fraser and Whitfield, 2008). Leave alone dependency at household level, government has also developed dependence on the western world for aid has been increasing. Relief has not been only institutionalized but also the expectation of relief assistance has become entrenched in the federal government's budgetary planning (Ibid).

2.2 Food aid definition and types

According to Von Braun (2003), the definition of food aid should not just be focused on its source of funding, or by specific transactions, such as 'items donated from external donors to recipient', but should include consideration of a) all related international and domestic actions and programs, and b) the role of non-food resources brought to bear jointly with food to address key elements of hunger problems. As such, food aid can be understood as all food supported interventions aimed at improving the food security of poor people in the short and long term, whether funded via international, national, public and private resources.

In the Ethiopian context there are three types of food delivery: project food aid, program food aid and emergency food aid. All three types have historically taken two major forms: free food distribution (FFD), which is generally categorized as 'emergency' distribution, and food-for-work (FFW), which targets on labor to work on creating assets in the process of channeling food to needy areas.

- **Emergency food aid:** It distributes food for free in times of disaster and extreme food "insecurity".
- **Programme food aid:** is bilateral development support to governments of developing countries, which is sold for below market prices on the local market in order to generate income for the government. This conversion of food aid into cash is called the "monetization" of food aid.
- **Project aid:** is provided to support specific activities and projects, mostly by aid and development organizations. The performance of this programme is poorly controlled.

Wemos (2005) argue that if the original objective of the limited role of food aid is to be preserved and the dumping of food aid to be avoided, the prevailing power dominance of the rich nations on food production and distribution should not be abused. According to Wemos food sovereignty⁶ should be the first priority. The objective of food aid should be the: "alleviation of poverty and hunger of the most vulnerable groups, and consistent with agricultural development in those countries". It should allow countries to establish and implement its own food policies in order to feed its whole population.

Fraser and Whitefield (2008) in their paper dealing with politics of aid, they critically analyzed how the African

⁵ A military junta came to power by overthrowing the Emperor Haile Silasie through military coup. The Event marks the end of the imperial era in Ethiopian history. The military junta, led by Mengistu Haile Maryam, ruled Ethiopia for Seventeen years till finally power is snatched by The EPRDF government after a fierce battle.

⁶ It deals with the freedom of recipient countries in utilizing the aid received in accord of its national food policies and priorities to the extent of refusing food aids coming with further conditionality which are not compatible with the national policy agenda of countries.

states deal with their sovereign rights in negotiating aid. They ask the question how African states use aid to pursue their own policy preferences, resisting donor priorities while still taking the aid. Their analysis focus on how African countries deal with donors regarding ownership and control and the degree of exercising those policies agreed upon during negotiation. In doing so they distinguish competing issues of ownership as control over implemented policies and ownership as commitment to a pre-determined policy set. They found out that Ethiopia is placed next to Botswana in terms of degree of control (Faresr and Whitefield, 2008). See Figure 1. The Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government's negotiating strategy has been to adapt those policy prescriptions of the bank that it finds acceptable and in accord with its development agenda despite the fact that Ethiopia is one of the leading aid recipient countries in the horn of Africa. According to Xavier and Smith (2007), Ethiopia does not want outsiders 'in the kitchen' and has retained ownership over its policy agenda greater than elsewhere.

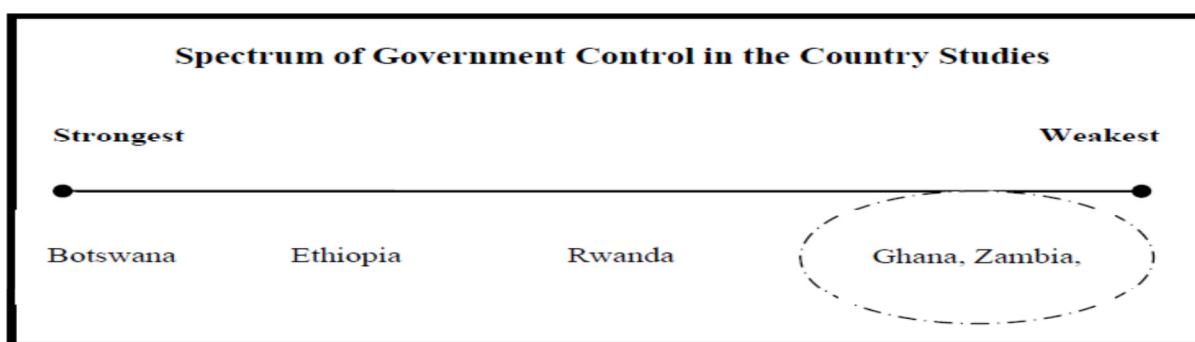


Figure 1. Spectrum of Government Control in the Country Studies

Source: Adapted from Freather and Whitefield (2008)

Ethiopia is placed next in terms of the degree of control achieved. Unlike Botswana, Ethiopia remains aid dependent and receives an increasing share of its state finances from donors, yet the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government is in control of its development strategy, negotiating with donors only at the margins. The EPRDF government's negotiating strategy, since it came to power in 1991, has been to adapt those policy prescriptions of the Bank and Fund that it finds acceptable to its own development agenda and to reject others. It has largely succeeded in controlling the pace and degree of reform (Fraser and Whitefield, 2008).

2.3 Impact of political favoritism and connection and food aid targeting

Targeting refers to the effort made to get food aid into the hands of the hungry people. Food aid targeting is defined as "restricting the coverage of an intervention to those who are perceived to be most at risk, in order to maximize the benefit of the intervention whilst minimizing the cost" (Jayne et al., 2000).

Most households in Ethiopia does not understand the one who is targeted for aid and the quantity of food allocated per household (Gilligan and Hoddinot, 2005). A research conducted by PANE⁷ (2006) disclosed that despite the fact that most of the research districts have been receiving food aid for a long time, beneficiary communities have limited awareness about targeting mechanisms and the right of the vulnerable groups. PANE found out that respondents complained about lack of transparency and equity in aid targeting. Respondents put blame on distributors saying that they distribute aid based on political favoritism and nepotism. In addition, the finding further reported that except for few government officers, the communities do not participate in food aid assessment programmes.

Political connection seems to matter in the free food allocation and targeting procedure in Ethiopia though only clearly in the period after the drought. In this period, targeting based on need seems to be only weakly significant. Households with political connection or in vertical network had more than 12 % point higher probability of obtaining food aid than other households (Caeyers and Dercon, 2011). Politician may use food aid to forge connection and for different forms of vote buying (ibid).

2.4 Socio-Economic impacts of food aid in Ethiopia

2.4.1 Food aid impacts on local food market and local production

Barrett (2006) studied the meso level unintended consequences of food aid on price; he asserted that food aid can drive down local (or national) food prices in three ways. First, monetization of food aid can flood the market,

⁷ Poverty Action Network Ethiopia

increasing supply. Second, households receiving food aid may decrease demand for the commodity received or for locally produced substitutes or, if they produce substitutes or the commodity received, they may sell more of it. Finally, recipients may sell food aid to purchase other necessities or complements, driving down prices of the food aid commodity and its substitutes, but also increasing demand for complements.

According to PANE (2006), the disincentive effects may result from targeted food aid for various reasons. The poor may receive more food aid than they need and sell the excess on the local market. Alternatively, targeted food aid, although intended only for the poor, may be distributed to the non-poor who otherwise would have purchased. These 'un-needy' recipients who have accepted free food will decrease their purchase of food from local markets resulting in a decrease in food demand and loss of sale for local producers. This will lead to a disincentive to the staple food producers and may cause local farmers to other activities than food production as the market shrinks. A study conducted by PANE in Afar Regional State of Ethiopia show that food aid has not contributed to improving agriculture or livestock production activities.

PANE (2006) summarized the impact of food aid from an economic viewpoint on local market and production saying that programme food aid functions in deficit years to fill the gap between demand at existing prices and income levels, on one hand, and the normal available supply of food through domestic production, on the other hand. The economic impact of food aid is based on the fact that introduction of more grain into the market decreases the price of grain. If food aid is sold in the open market at a market-clearing price, the price of cereals will fall. This means lower prices for local producers and cheaper food for local consumers. Decreasing prices mean that producers' profits will diminish which will lead to decreased production.

2.4.2 Food Aid impacts in distorting local consumption pattern

The delivery of food aid often involve foods which are exotic to that country, e.g. wheat or rice, which results in people developing a taste for those foreign foods, creating a future demand and bringing disincentive by in the production of local grain. As Wemos (2005) noted, the objective of America behind food aid in kind holds the promotion of trade in the name of pure humanitarian purpose of aid. On the contrary, Barrett and Maxwell (2005) show that the objective of food aid in its objective of promoting trade by changing consumers' preference, to introduce to the new foods and thereby endogenously stimulate demand for foods with which they were previously unfamiliar or formerly accounts only a minor share of their diet has failed. In Ethiopia, the government has developed a strategic grain reserve supplied from local stocks for use in emergencies. One function of this is to avoid creation of a demand for imported foods.

The empirical research works disclosed that in situations where delivery of food aid involves foods normally foreign to that area, a taste for foreign foods often develops creating future demand for those foods thereby depressing the production of local grain. A research conducted by PANE(2006) in Ethiopia show that in Asaita of Afar Regional State, food aid has reportedly replaced the consumption of maize bread (qixa) eaten with milk, with wheat bread (qixa) eaten with chickpea sauce (shirawat). In Shininle Zone of Somali Regional State respondents indicated that food aid has caused some change in the dietary habits of the community by introducing new foods that were unknown before.

2.4.3 Food aid impacts, moral hazards, labor disincentive and dependency

From literatures we can understand that some of the frequently mentioned debilitating impacts of food aid have a strong domain in severely paralyzing people's attitude towards agricultural activities, bringing large scale labor disincentive and deep rooted dependency.

Barrett (2006) in his review work mentions how the Ethiopian farmers in a food for work (FFW) program planted trees upside down in their anticipation to allegedly encourage the ongoing delivery of food aid program. According to him this shows a community-wide moral hazard. Samuel (2006) writes in his research article entitled '*Food aid and Small-holder agriculture in Ethiopia*' a typical example of moral hazard and how the Ethiopian framers are accustomed to food aid. The story reads like this: the farmer in Amhara Regional state when asked about the weather in his village he replied 'I pray for the good weather in Canada to continue'. Samuel (2006) in a separate study also noted that this aid dependency syndrome now is rooted in culture of rural people in Ethiopia. They say that the not long ago proud Ethiopians, who hardly sought credit let alone "aid" now began to account for food quota in the reciprocal traditional wedding statement, that is pronounced as *Habitish, Habte* (meaning, *your property is my property*) by supplementing it with *Erdatash, Erdtaye* (meaning, *your aid quota is my quota*).

A study conducted by Oxfam Great Britain (2004) on the impact of food aid in Tigray and Amhara regional states of Ethiopia assessed the issue of food aid dependency. The study concluded that dependency exists in most cases when relief food is supplied to the needy people freely. Households suspending productive work on their farm plots in preference to waiting for food aid also manifest dependency.

Empirical research works and literatures agree that most of those unintended consequences of food aid bring

labor and production disincentive and others are the result of an ill-favored mode of delivery and targeting error of inclusion. Barrett (2006) noted that perhaps the most pervasive and we believe, misguided claim is that food aid somehow makes people lazy, that food aid unintentionally discourages people from working. It is certainly true that microeconomic theory suggests that because transfers increase recipients' welfare, they generate income effects that will tend to reduce labor supply simply because even hard-working people prefer more leisure to less. Evidences demonstrate that the labor supply becomes more responsive to change in income as people grow wealthier. The implication is that targeting errors on inclusion magnify the labor market disincentive. According to Barrett, a slightly different sort of labor distortion can arise when food-for-work (FFW) programs are relatively more attractive than work on recipients' own farms/businesses, either because the FFW pays immediately, or because the household considers the payoffs to the FFW project to be higher than the returns to labor on its own plots.

From these studies conducted within the five Regional States of Ethiopia it is found that the propensity to engage and contribute labor to agricultural and non-agricultural business activities dwindles for those households who have previous exposure to food aid than those who have no exposure. A study conducted in Ethiopia and reviewed by Hodinott (2003) showed that households that had previously received food aid spent considerably less time supplying labor to permanent and semi-permanent crops. Less time was also spent on non-agricultural business activities. On average, households not receiving food aid worked five times as many days in these activities than households that had received food aid. However, children in households receiving food aid spent more time in wage work than children in households not receiving food aid. In terms of improving agricultural activities, discussants argue that there has been a slight improvement in soil fertility through food-for-work programmes. However, they reported a negative impact on marketing local agricultural products. They also mentioned that there is now a weak attitude towards agricultural activities that that has led to the decreased productivity of farmers as a result of food aid distribution. In Humbo area of the South Nations and Nationalities People's Region of Ethiopia, a negative consequence of food aid activity on asset creation was reported. The community cannot accumulate wealth because of food aid, as they would rather lose valuable assets in order to be included during the selection of beneficiaries, resulting in lack of oxen for agricultural activities affecting production.

3. Conclusion and Directions

From the review of empirical research works and literatures across regions of Ethiopia, it is found out that lack of transparency and equity in aid targeting is prevalent which is manifested by an ill-favored aid distribution based on political favoritism and nepotism. Findings further show that except for few government officers, the communities do not participate in food aid assessment programmes have no acquaintance pertaining the targeting mechanisms.

As far as the socio-economic impacts of food aid concerned three major areas concern have been observed. Food aid impact on local market and production, aid impacts in relation to the local consumption pattern, food aid impacts on dependency and moral hazards are the major elements.

Research findings revealed that the unintended meso-level consequences of food aid on local market and price can be seen from three perspectives. First, monetization of food aid can flood the market, increasing supply. Second, households receiving food aid may decrease demand for the commodity received or for locally produced substitutes or, if they produce substitutes or the commodity received, they may sell more of it. Finally, recipients may sell food aid to purchase other necessities or complements, driving down prices of the food aid commodity and its substitutes, but also increasing demand for complements.

The promotion of exotic food in the form of food aid plays a role in switching the local dietary pattern by developing taste for those foreign foods and creating a future demand and bringing disincentive in the production of local grain.

The existing situation in Ethiopia clearly demonstrates that the overall aid architecture is problematic and instead of ensuring peoples welfare level rather leading to a number of multifaceted plights and predicaments. Some of the directions/recommendations proposed from the findings are as follows:

- Food aid should serve as a short term solution and provided when it is most needed.
- So as to minimize challenges emanating from aid provision married to patronage of clientelism and political favoritism and minimize targeting errors and ensure equity and transparency, the involvement of the local people in food aid need targeting and beneficiary selection deemed crucial.
- The government should look into alternative aid delivery mechanisms and type of aid provided to the people. For instance, if there is domestic market for food, cash handouts/transfer to the needy is by far important than food transfer.

- Currently food aid does not contribute to secure people's long term welfare and the creation of asset. Emphasis should be given to development projects having a substantial significance in boosting up peoples welfare level and creation of productive assets.

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