

Introduction

The first confirmed case of COVID 19 in Ethiopia was reported on March 13, 2020, and the numbers have been increasing since. The government has enacted a state of emergency and introduced a set of preventive measures such as partial lockdown of offices, full lockdown of schools, banned large gatherings of people, and restrictions on travel and transportation services to limit the spread of the pandemic and minimize its impact. These preventive measures have negatively affected the social and economic life and activities of individuals, communities and the country at large. Social distancing measures and stay-at-home orders is affecting social relationships both in urban and rural areas resulting in psychological distress, frustration and confusion among people. On the other hand, mobility restrictions on travel and limitations on logistics and in in-person meetings and discussions, is slowing down business activities.

Although the full extent of the effect on the economy is not yet clearly captured, preliminary studies indicate that community members who were already vulnerable before the pandemic will be the ones who will be hit the hardest (ILO, 2020 and FAO, 2020). These include informal workers, casual labourers, street vendors, etc.

Agricultural casual labourers play a significant role in Ethiopian by providing key inputs throughout the production cycle in agriculture. Particularly, commercial farms and farmers in high potential areas that are engaged in the production and marketing of commercial crops heavily depend on casual labourers for their labour requirements.

The mobility restrictions imposed by the government to contain the spread of COVID-19 infections restrict workers from traveling to areas where there is work. As farms lose and reduce their production and income gains, farmers are affected by a significant loss of income.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON AGRICULTURAL CASUAL LABOURERS IN PSNP AREAS

- Alert 1:** COVID-19 mobility restriction and doubling of transportation tariff is limiting the movement of casual labourers to find work, jeopardizing the very means of income for food and other livelihood necessities.
- Alert 2:** Casual labourers inability to earn income not only effects the food security status of their households, but also means low investment for seed and fertilizer that significantly impacts next season productivity and future wellbeing of the households.
- Alert 3:** Due to the nature of their work, causal labourers face higher risk of infection and need special attention in daily monitoring of their physical health and provision of necessary personal protective equipment.
- Alert 4:** Insufficient data and information on causal labourers and their mobility is making it challenging to meet the demands of the labour market.
- Alert 5:** COVID-19 has unprecedented impact on the poor and vulnerable groups. The way out requires government's as well as NGOs and donor's effort to facilitate special financing arrangement which mitigate households and individuals' vulnerability to food security and abject poverty.

This in turn affects casual laboureres who in most cases are resource poor farmers (male and female) and youth who depend on incomes gained from working on these farms to support their families for some months of the year.

COVID-19 pandemic affects casual labourers and other vulnerable section of the community more significantly than others due to their low income, limited availability and access to foods and other livelihood necessities. This keeps them in what is called chronic food insecurity and poverty trap.

The seasonal nature of the work coupled with low pay, does not enable them to save as most of their income goes to covering expenses for basic needs such as food. Supply shocks resulting from the mobility restrictions also lead to price hike in food items, worsening food shortages at household level.

This rapid assessment conducted by BENEFIT-REALISE aims to better understand the effects of COVID-19 on the livelihoods and food security of casual labourers at household level, especially those in PSNP areas.

Methodology

The rapid assessment adopted a qualitative approach. It was conducted in selected 17 zones and 24 PSNP woredas in six clusters of BENEFIT-REALISE programme: Woldiya, Haramaya, Arsi, Oda Bultum, Hawassa and Arba Minch.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the requirements for social distancing and limited mobility, most of the data collection was done through phone conversation, e-mail communications as well as exchange of information through social media apps such as telegram and imo. Where possible, focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with farmers, Development Agents (DAs) and Kebele administrators; and key informant interviews were conducted with Heads of Woreda offices of agriculture, SMS and DAs. Social distancing, face masks, sanitizers and other precautions were applied during these face-to-face sessions. A total of 324 respondents (30% women) participated in the data collection process as key informants and discussants.

Results and Discussion

Characteristics of casual labourers

Since rural youth have limited access to productive resources such as land and credit, they are predominantly engaged in casual labour to generate income. Except for few fragmented data at Woreda Offices of Rural Job Creation, the size (proportion) of this group is not well studied and documented. The participants of this assessment indicated that it is mainly youth (both male and female) from resource poor families who engage in casual labour in both agriculture and non-agriculture activities. However, the number of women engaged in casual labour is small compared to their male counterparts. In terms of age, casual labourers may range from as low as 15 to 50 years old. In terms of the criteria for participation, a person has to be of the appropriate age, physically fit, with good behavior/ conduct, and has sufficient experience to be hired.

Destinations for casual labour

The destinations for agricultural casual labourers can be either commercial or individual farms. Individual farmers often hire casual labourers during planting, weeding and harvesting times whereas irrigated commercial farms need labour throughout the year. Distance as well as the demand for labour determines their level of mobility. How far agricultural casual labourers travel to get work depends on the demand for labour, the duration of the work, payment, and the distance from their home.

In terms of payment, agricultural casual labourers are paid from 50-100 birr per day. Some labourers may prefer to work not far from their localities, in areas where they are familiar with the site, where there are people they know and can depend on. For instance, Hawassa cluster reported that some casual labourers from Kambata work on private farms in the nearby Halaba zone, mostly during crop establishment and harvesting, while others travel longer distances to sugarcane plantations in Wonji, Metehara, Tendaho, Omo-Kuraz and large-scale commercial farms in South Omo. Similarly, casual labourers in Arsi work on commercial farms around Fentale (Methara Sugar Factory) and in

other high potential woredas in West Arsi and East Showa zones. In Arba Minch cluster, Mirab Abaya is a major destination for casual labourers due to the presence of commercial farmers who are engaged in the production of banana and vegetables along the shores of lake Abaya.

There are also individual farmers with relatively large size farmlands who hire casual labourers during planting and harvesting periods. Often men are engaged for planting and loading of produce to markets, while women are hired for harvesting activities. In Oda Bultum, even though there are no commercial farms, Khat producing farmers often hire casual labourers to do the cutting and preparation for marketing. Similarly, smallholder farms with access to irrigation in the lowlands of Dawa Chefa and Raya Kobo woredas are popular destinations for agricultural casual labourers in eastern Amhara region.

Periods of movement for casual labourers

Crop growing seasons of Belg and Meher are the months when agricultural labourers move to areas where there is labour demand to do land preparation, weeding, harvesting, and threshing activities. However, in areas where there is irrigation, casual labourers might be engaged for most of the year. According to the informants, the usual timing for sugarcane agricultural laborers work is from January to April. Other commercial farms engage labourers all year round.

Effect COVID-19 related mobility restrictions on the movement of casual labourers

The assessment show that the travel restrictions imposed due to COVID-19 has affected the movement of casual labourers to areas where there is demand for labour. In order to limit the volume of public movement from one location to another, and keep social distancing the government has issued a state of emergency in which it provides a clear guideline for transport service providers. According to the guideline, privately owned vehicles that provide transportation service are to reduce the number of passengers by half and charge double the normal rate for their services. The doubling cost of transport serves as a prohibitive strategy to curb the spread of COVID-19 and compensate for the 50% reduction in passengers size has

disproportionately affecting the poor due to their weak economic capacity.

When looking at the demand side, prior to COVID 19, investors/ companies used to arrange transportation to large-scale commercial farms for casual workers in woreda towns. Since COVID-19, this service has stopped, limiting casual labourers from traveling outside of their woreda/ locality to look for work. This has led to more and more casual laborers going back to their families where they have nothing to do and have no source of income. The mobility restriction has, therefore, deprived the casual labourers of their income and resulted in increased vulnerability to food shortage and insecurity in their families.

Livelihood challenges faced due to COVID 19

Mobility restrictions, slowing down of business activities as well as the risk of contamination constrained the possibility of casual labourers getting jobs, dropping their income significantly. This led to inability to cover expenses for basic needs such as food as the dependency rates at household level rises. Moreover, these households are unable to pay for agricultural inputs such as seed and fertilizer, which further increases the vulnerability of the households over extended period of time since they are unable to produce crops in the coming season on their farms to sustain their families.

Formal and informal supports

There is no formal or informal support that specifically targets agricultural casual labourers. However, in some areas, funds are being raised from local community members, government staff as well as other individuals outside of the woreda, to support severely affected households. Moreover, awareness creation on the COVID-19 transmission mechanisms and precautionary measures to be taken by individuals is being delivered through the health office, government structures, NGOs, religious leaders as well as volunteers. There is no other organized effort by NGOs, civic societies, religious organizations and others to support casual labourers.

Recommendation for Future Action

1. Government should make arrangements to move agricultural casual labourers to areas where there is labour demand in order to avail the much-needed labour in high potential areas and commercial farms. This not only helps to ensure that farming activities is not disrupted due to the pandemic and contribute to national production, it also sustains the income gain by workers and their families, contributing to consumption smoothening.
2. The COVID-19 pandemic has a double cutting edge. Not only does it affect the current food security status of the household through low income prospect, it also compromises the future wellbeing of the poor households through low investment for seed and fertilizer that resulted in low productivity. The way out requires government's as well as NGOs and donor's effort to facilitate special financing arrangement which mitigate households and individuals' vulnerability to food security and abject poverty.
3. To protect casual labourers and minimize the risk of infection, commercial farms should invest in their medical services such as testing capacities as well as daily monitoring of the physical conditions of their workers. Moreover, workers should be fully informed on the transmission mechanisms of COVID-19 supported by sufficient supply of protective equipment. The financing arrangements for these services should be discussed and agreed between the government and the private investors.
4. Local government should keep a record of casual labourers, to coordinate and ensure that the demand for labour are easily met. Here also, a coordinated effort between government, the private sector as well as other social structures is important.
5. Expand and improve emergency food assistances and social protection programmes not only to those already targeted but also to those potential new entrants who slipped into vulnerability due to COVID 19 pandemic.

Contributing organizations

This rapid assessment has done with active involvement of the following organizations. We extend our heartfelt gratitude for the key informants and discussants who provided valuable information and share their opinions. The assessment involved representatives from:

1. Ministry of Agriculture (MoA)
2. Amhara Bureau of Agriculture
3. Oromia Bureau of Agriculture
4. Tigray Bureau of Agriculture
5. SNNPR Bureau of Agriculture
6. Food Security Coordination Directorate

We also thank those households who participated in this rapid assessment as respondents for their valuable time and sharing what they experienced due to COVID19 pandemic.

BENEFIT-REALISE - Realising Sustainable Agricultural Livelihood Security in Ethiopia (REALISE) aims to contribute to sustainable livelihoods through the introduction of improved farming practices, innovations and social experiments to strengthen the current Productive Safely Net Programme (PSNP) in Ethiopia. <https://benefitrealise.org/>. It is one of the five programmes under the umbrella of the Bilateral Ethiopia-Netherlands Effort for Food, Income and Trade (BENEFIT) Partnership (ISSD, CASCPAE, ENTAG, SBN and REALISE).

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