

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is presenting clear challenges and glitches on the livelihood of subsistence smallholder farmers in Ethiopia. Its impact is much more severe on PSNP households who lead hand to mouth existence and depend on state transfers and livelihood diversification.

The Ethiopian government has been implementing diverse actions to reduce further spread of the virus. Following the state of emergency, all schools closed, all public gatherings banned, mass sporting activities prohibited, physical distancing recommended, mandatory quarantine for travelers implemented, bars closed, and travel through land borders with the neighboring prohibited. Several regional governments also adopted the above-mentioned actions. Even though these practical measures are anticipated to slow the spread of the virus, it is significantly affecting the agriculture sector and the livelihoods of the society.

Nearly 40% of the population in Ethiopia is self-employed and more exposed to COVID-19 economic shocks. The recent government (MoA) statistics show that 2.5 million households (7,997,218 persons) are targeted with Productive SafetyNet Programme (PSNP). These households are significantly dependent on cash and food transfer that covers about six months of their needs while they pursue other livelihood options to make a living to cover the remaining months. And the COVID-19 pandemic mobility restriction that is affecting migration, casual labour, petty trade and other livelihood options that depend on mobility, is already having a big effect on the livelihood and food security conditions of vulnerable population in general and PSNP farmers in particular. In addition, the agricultural sector which makes a significant contribution to economic growth and poverty alleviation is impacted resulting in limited availability of agricultural inputs, labour scarcity and considerable price reduction and fluctuation at farm gate.

THE EFFECT OF COVID19 ON AGRICULTURAL CASUAL LABOURERS: A CASE OF SESAME BELT MIGRANTS FROM AMHARA AND TIGRAY

KEY MESSAGES

1. The sesame sector attracts more than 500,000 casual labourers at different growing cycle: planting, weeding and harvesting. By so doing it plays key role in income generation and livelihood security.
2. A significant number of PSNP households especially the youth entirely depend on casual labour wages earned in the sesame growing areas.
3. The disruption caused by COVID19 and inability to earn income that contributes to consumption smoothing and investment in agricultural inputs such as fertilizer and improved seeds purchase - aggravating their vulnerability in both short and long terms.
4. The PSNP programme support through public work and permanent direct support payments transfer is insufficient due to the increased family sizes related to migrant returnees and increasing inflation.
5. Reassessment of eligible PSNP beneficiaries is required since COVID 19 is negatively impacting many more households who were not considered eligible prior to the pandemic.
6. The agricultural operation of smallholder farmers particularly PSNP households need financial support and postponing repayment and cancelling of agricultural loan and credit support arrangement for agricultural inputs.
7. Reduced labour productivity and precarious health condition of casual labourers may worsen with the continued COVID 19 pandemic, unless appropriate measure is taken.
8. The Tigray and Amhara regional and national governments need to work with sesame investors to facilitate casual labourers movement to sesame areas as well as provide protective facilities and infrastructure in destination areas.

Therefore, this rapid assessment is designed to evaluate the early effects of Novel Coronavirus pandemic (COVID19) on PSNP households wage income in sesame growing areas of Tigray and Amhara regions.

Methodology

This rapid assessment was conducted in 20 PSNP woredas of Tigray and Amhara regions which are target areas of BENEFIT-REALISE programme. The study used face to face and telephone interview to assess the effect of COVID 19 on PSNP household's migration to work as casual labourer in sesame growing areas in the western part of Tigray (Humara, Welkayit and the Tahtay Adiabo) and northwest of Amhara (Metema, Mirab Armacho, Tach Armacheho, Shinsa and Quara). A total of 125 respondents participated in the interviews. We purposively selected the interviewee from PSNP households, kebele office head, woreda level subject matter specialist and regional experts.

The information was collected by REALISE programme cluster staff using checklist. The data and information interpretation followed content-based analysis.

Who is more affected?

The poor are disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and associated challenges. From the poor category women, youth and those who depend on social safety net are more affected because of their weak buffer to prevent from unexpected and prolonged disruption in their livelihoods. ILO study also indicated that societies with a lower economic status are more vulnerable to the /rising rates of chronic illness from COVID-19 further complicated by economic and social welfare hardships (ILO, 2020).

Characteristics of casual laborers

The participants of casual labourers in Amhara and Tigray regions are characterized as able bodied experienced labourers who are constrained by other livelihood opportunities and are short of income and food supply. Gender wise both men and women participate in casual labour but the overwhelming figure is inclined to men. Women participation is limited to nearby areas whereas men travel further to get well paying seasonal jobs. In terms of age the participants mostly

comprise youths but also include underage categories as low as 15 years old and as old as 60 years.

Mobility restriction

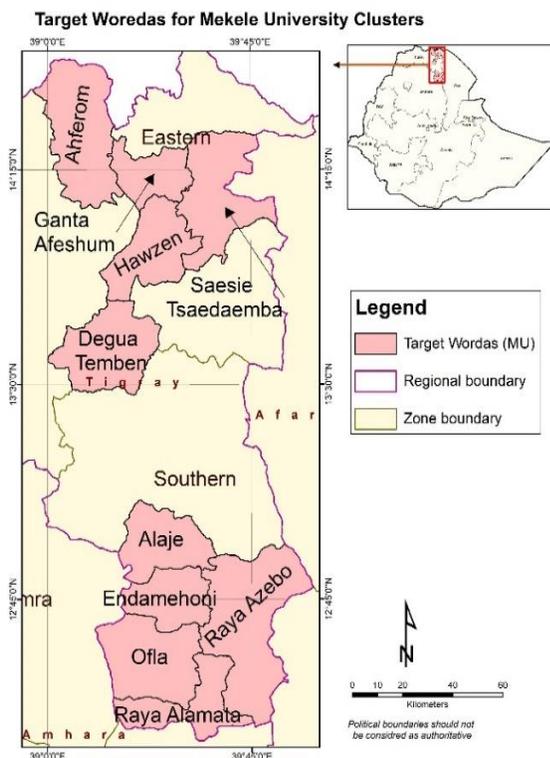
COVID-19 restrictions imposed on travel such as reducing the numbers of passengers by half, doubling transport fee and the associated fall in transportation options have stranded many migrants, unable to make a living in their destination or return home. The assessment in PSNP areas showed that some family members who migrated to sesame growing areas are stranded while some have returned to their home. In both cases the consequences are negative. The migrants in the sesame growing areas are vulnerable to contracting COVID19 due to poor housing, working facility and lack of protective measures. The poor payment and the recent price hike also challenge them to make ends meet. The returnees on the other hand face loss of income, and stress due to the mounting pressure to ensure food and nutrition security.

FAO (2020) report indicated measures affecting the movement of people that result in labour shortages will have an impact on agricultural value chains, affecting food availability and market prices locally, nationally and globally. The study also showed that labour wage contributes to sustaining the livelihoods of many households, representing about 60 percent of the total annual income. Households heavily reliant on wage or remittances will likely be the worst affected.

The status of PSNP households who depend on casual labour in Tigray

PSNP farmers especially from woredas close to Mekelle (south east zone e.g. D/Temben woreda), move to Mekelle to work as daily labourer in the construction sector while few adults work as guards. And those from southern zone mostly move to Alamata, Maychew, Mokoni and Korem. Farmers from east Tigray go to Adigrat, Wukro, Saesie Tsaeda Emba and farmers from central zone go to Axum and Shire. And from almost all woredas farmers move to Humera sesame growing belt in Tigray during weeding and harvesting time.

The level of labour absorption of the sesame growing areas is significantly high. The state of emergency which ban travel and the employers fear of the expansion of COVID-19 pandemic resulted in low demand for casual labourers which means a drop in wage income.



Consequences of mobility restriction

The rapid assessment findings showed that loss of seasonal jobs and income will hinder casual labourers capacity to access and purchase adequate and nutritious food for themselves and their families. In addition to facing distress due to mounting food insecurity and malnutrition, those who returned are increasingly facing discrimination due to fear of contracting COVID 19. The assessment team has witnessed a huge increase in household family size as most of the seasonal migrants have returned due to lack of employment. On the other hand, some workers to sesame growing areas are struggling to return to their rural areas of origin due to lack and high price of transportation.

The interviewed casual labourers highly criticized the mobility restriction saying “we do not want to die from hunger fearing COVID-19, this is a matter of survival for us”. Some of the youth respondents revealed that they attempted to go to towns and sesame growing areas out of despair, but the cost of transport was too high, beyond their affording capacity. The mobility restriction increased stress on the poor as they fail to secure sufficient foods and income to meet their daily needs.

Key findings

1. Many of the rural poor, including both those with and without productive safety net access, depend on mobile livelihoods and on seasonal migration. The partial lockdowns restriction impacted both movements, those who want to work as well as those who wanted to return back home, sometimes leaving them stranded and excluded from family support. This situation increases their vulnerability to COVID19 exposure and day to day livelihood related challenges.
2. The doubling of transport payment and price hike on basic goods and services required them to spend more from their earned wages creating difficulties to make ends meet.
3. The food and nutrition insecurity situation of the PSNP households exacerbated due to increase number of returnees with no income from off-farm livelihood options.

4. The ability of PSNP households to invest on fertilizer and improved seeds in the upcoming agricultural season is low which could aggravate their vulnerability and livelihood insecurity both in the short and medium terms.
5. The youth, who entirely depend on wage income for their livelihood are the most affected by COVID19 related state of emergency restrictions.

The status of PSNP households who depend on casual labour in Amhara

The majority of men and women PSNP farmers in Amhara region in REALISE target areas participate in agriculture labour. Young women and men mostly engage as daily labourers at construction sites. Only men participate in sesame growing areas as daily labourers and some PSNP farmers go to sesame areas during February to rent in land for sesame farming. Some travel across regions such as Oromia and Benishangul Gumuze as seasonal migrants to participate in commercial farms and private farms. Major destinations include Metema, Shewarobit and Jawi areas in Amhara region;

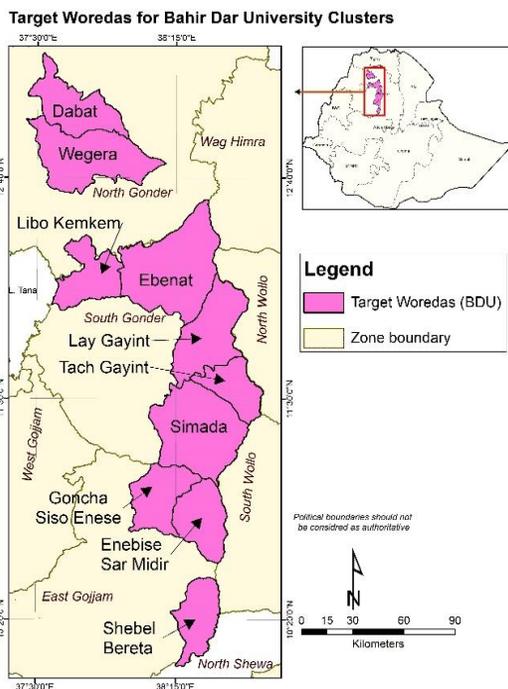
Humera in Tigray region, Metekel zone of Benishangul Gumuz region, nearest urban and pre-urban areas as well as crossing the border to Sudan.

Consequences of mobility restriction

In Amhara, the mobility restriction imposed following the COVID-19 pandemic affected the continuity of activities impacting migratory livelihoods disproportionately. Its impact on income is creating challenges in meeting the basic necessities and household food security. The rapid assessment showed that if the mobility restriction is prolonged it might lead to social and economic crises and affect peace and stability in the area.

Key findings

1. Due to movement restriction, PSNP farmers are unable to travel to areas where there is casual labour, which in turn affects their income and livelihood conditions of the laborers.
2. Prior to the state of emergency, some of the farmers who traveled back to their home village were charged high transportation cost which depleted wages already earned.
3. Most PSNP households, especially the youth indicated that they are unable to get jobs and other livelihood opportunity in their locality
4. Despite the continued transfer from PSNP, the additional household members who returned home exacerbated the household food and nutrition insecurity.
5. Most PSNP households are depleting their asset to survive the influence of COVID19 pandemic.
6. PSNP household's ability to buy fertilizer and seeds is low unless credit and other arrangements are put in place.



Contributing organizations

This rapid assessment was 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. Tigray Bureau of Agriculture
4. 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.

References

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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 Safety Net Programme (PSNP) in Ethiopia. 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).

<https://benefitrealise.org/>.

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