

The Role of Local Institutions and Social Capital in Household Food Security: A Case Study at Two Rural Communities in Oromiya Zone, Amhara Region

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Abstract

The paper discusses the issue of how a number of local institutions and social capital contribute for accessing livelihood resources, which in turn help in augmenting household level food security. Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF) underpins the conceptual background of the study. Qualitative social research methods of observations, focus group discussions, key informant interviews and case studies were employed to generate first-hand data among the inhabitants of the two communities. Institutions such as *wedaja*, *fatimaye*, *telamma* and *abdoye* are practiced mainly in connection with peoples' belief through which they express their world outlooks and wishes. Absence of nature-related crisis (drought, flooding, human and livestock diseases) and human-induced problems such as disputes and conflicts are believed to be the outcomes of proper and timely exercising of the necessary rituals that are attached to the various institutions. Avoidance of the risk is equated with minimizing vulnerability to food insecurity. Other institutions like *kaya*, *kire*, *tassiga* and *hirppa* have overwhelmingly economic context since they were set up as strategies for getting access to livelihood resources. Social transfers among community members (through *zakka*, and borrowing human labour, getting access to farm oxen, etc), and transfers in kind and cash from government and NGOs have considerable role in maintaining livelihood and food security.

Key words: Capital, Food security, Institution, Livelihood, Resource, Social, Transfer.

1. Introduction

It has been argued that local institutions functioning at community level and social capital have their role in maintaining food security at individual and household levels. Institutions are the rules of games in a society (North 1990) that can enhance or constrain peoples' livelihood activities and survival strategies. A number of informal institutions such as *wedeja*, *fatimaye*, *telamma* and *abdoye* are found to be practiced by the people at

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Erenssa and Garbi communities of Oromiya Zone mainly based on their belief through which they express their world outlooks and own wishes. The people also apply the rituals of those institutions as coping mechanisms against various disasters occurring due to either natural or human induced factors. Other institutions like *kaya*, *kire*, *tassiga* and *hirppa* have economic context since they were set up as strategies for getting access to livelihood assets/resources. Understanding how local institutions function is of paramount significance for two reasons. First, having insights into the livelihoods of the people in isolation from their cultural practices is basically impossible. The rituals the community members practice inform about their daily life experiences. Second, the rituals can be seen as the risk management by which people survive the hard times. For instance, when their crop or livestock is hit hard by drought or epidemic, the event is understood as something *Allah's* deed, and an immediate attempt made by community members to look for explanation as to what went wrong, which might either be some undesirable acts or the failure to undertake the necessary ritual. Thus, rituals of some institutions are believed to minimize hopelessness and desperation.

Embedded within society, social capital constitutes one of the five forms of livelihood assets (along with natural, physical, financial, and human capitals) (Scoones 1998, Ellis 2000), which directly affect the level of food security at individual and household levels. According to Putnam (2000), social capital includes bonding capital and bridging capital. 'Bonding occurs when you are socializing with people who are like you; same age, same race, same religion and so on. Bridging is what you do when you make friends with people who are not like you'. Some segments of society who cannot directly engage in production activities rely on transfers for their basic means of survival. Eventually, assets and resources may transfer to people in poor condition from either relatively well-off counterpart members, from government or NGOs.

2. Intent and Objectives

Rural researches that are preoccupied by the 'modernity' thinking have regarded ritual practices related to local informal institutions as traditional and 'backward'. Hence, there has been little attention given to understand a variety of rituals that local people undertake as a part of various institutions. It is, however, impossible to thoroughly understand rural livelihoods and food security situations without having insights into some of the local institutions and related rituals, which form some of the components of social capital. This paper discusses empirical research findings concerning how a number

of local institutions and social capital contribute to households' food security at Erenssa and Garbi communities of Oromiya Zone in Amhara Region. The paper has been drawn from the relatively bigger research project that looked at rural livelihood, poverty and food insecurity in the zone under consideration (Degefa 2005). Two research questions will be dealt with in this paper: first, what are the main institutions and related ritual practices in which the local people involve, and why? Second, how far do social and public transfers contribute to food security of households?

The paper contributes a little in redressing the prevailing thinking that people who draw their basic needs from transfers persistently live under the situation of chronic food insecurity. The researcher hopes that future research on food security should profoundly look into how local institutions function and for what prime motives they were put in place, as well as trying to uncover the types of existing social capitals, and the linkage they have with peoples' well-being status.

3. Concepts and Theoretical Underpinning

3.1. Concepts

Before setting the theoretical framework of the work, it is important to provide definitions and descriptions of the core concepts underlying this paper: social capital, institution, ritual, reciprocity, and food security.

Social capital refers to 'resources that societies possess in the form of institutions, networks, associations, power, values and norms' (Baker 2000: 5). The definition puts forward the fact that local institutions are among the avenues through which social capital is expressed. According to Putnam et al. (1993), 'social capital is development enhancing institutions and the norms and values that sustain them'. The concept has been employed in this article in the light of this view whereby social capital has a paramount significance in sustaining livelihood and food security of people both at community and household levels.

Institution is another central concept of this work, which has been defined by North (1990: 3) as 'the rules of game in a society or, more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction'. Institutions can be formal or informal (Carswell et al. 2000), while the concern here is to the latter ones which have been exercised in connections with the community members' world outlook as well as their economic purposes.

A **Ritual** is 'a set of actions, often thought to have symbolic value, the performance of which is usually prescribed by a religion or by the traditions of a community by religious or political laws because of the perceived efficacy of those actions' (Bell 1997). Various works documented that the purpose of rituals are varied including: 'compliance with religious obligations or ideals; satisfaction of spiritual or emotional needs of the practitioners; strengthening of social bonds; demonstration of respect or submission; stating one's affiliation; obtaining social acceptance or approval for some event; or sometimes just for the pleasure of the ritual itself (Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland 1964, Geertz 1973, Bell 1997).

Reciprocity – entails 'a mutual or cooperative exchange of favours or privileges'. It is exemplified by the American expression 'you scratch my back, and I will scratch yours' and the Latin expression 'quid pro quo' - something for something. Coleman (1990) and Putnam et al. (1993) identify two types of reciprocity: 'specific reciprocity' and 'diffuse reciprocity'. The former refers to simultaneous exchanges of items of roughly equal value, whereas the latter refers to continuing relationship of exchange that at any given time may be unrequited but over time is repaid and balanced (Pretty and Ward 2001). The current study documented various forms of both types of reciprocities among the study community members.

Food security – quite a large number of definitions are given on this concept. However, it is commendable to give the one that better contextualizes the Ethiopian case, stated as: Household can be described as food secure when its livelihood activities allow to meet its food requirements and other basic needs, either through its own productions, i.e. crop cultivation and/or livestock rearing, through having opportunities to run own non-farm ventures or to work with somebody else, or getting access to food through transfers' (Degefa 2005). Hence, the three sources for household food security are own production, purchase on the market, and transfers. In fact, the focus of this paper is on the latter component of food security looking at how households who have limited capacity of engaging in productive activities sustain their food supply on the basis of social (from community members) and public transfers (from government and Non Government Organizations).

3.2. Theoretical and analytical framework

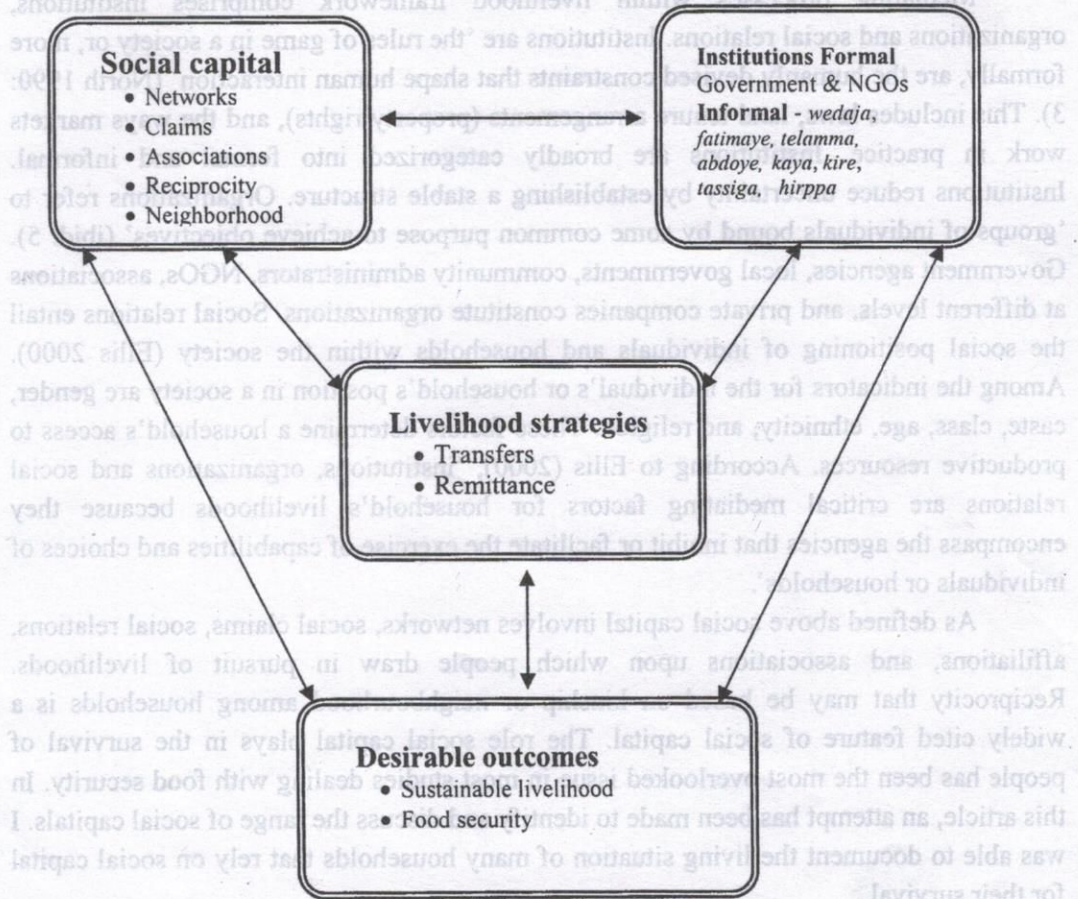
The argument in this article is underpinned on Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF) to explore the interrelations between local institutions, social capital, and food security. Figure 1 depicts how various components of livelihood affect the food security situations of households. Livelihood as a framework to understand food security emerged in the late 1990s, and at the beginning of 21st century, as initiated by many scholars (Scoones 1998, Carney 1998, Pretty 1998, Ellis 2000, Bebbington 1999, Rakodi 2002). The consensus among these authors has been that the framework enables to holistically examine livelihood and food insecurity. Many studies that have been undertaken based on the livelihood framework in several countries, such as Mali, Bangladesh, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia and Uganda have proved the validity of the framework.

Mediating processes within livelihood framework comprises institutions, organizations and social relations. Institutions are 'the rules of game in a society or, more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction' (North 1990: 3). This includes laws, land tenure arrangements (property rights), and the ways markets work in practice. Institutions are broadly categorized into formal and informal. Institutions reduce uncertainty by establishing a stable structure. Organizations refer to 'groups of individuals bound by some common purpose to achieve objectives' (ibid: 5). Government agencies, local governments, community administrators, NGOs, associations at different levels, and private companies constitute organizations. Social relations entail the social positioning of individuals and households within the society (Ellis 2000). Among the indicators for the individual's or household's position in a society are gender, caste, class, age, ethnicity, and religion. These factors determine a household's access to productive resources. According to Ellis (2000), 'institutions, organizations and social relations are critical mediating factors for household's livelihoods because they encompass the agencies that inhibit or facilitate the exercise of capabilities and choices of individuals or households'.

As defined above social capital involves networks, social claims, social relations, affiliations, and associations upon which people draw in pursuit of livelihoods. Reciprocity that may be based on kinship or neighbourhood among households is a widely cited feature of social capital. The role social capital plays in the survival of people has been the most overlooked issue in most studies dealing with food security. In this article, an attempt has been made to identify and discuss the range of social capitals. I was able to document the living situation of many households that rely on social capital for their survival.

Livelihood outcome is the end result of the interaction of various elements in a system. The outcome can be desirable or undesirable. The desirable outcome underlines the sustainability of livelihood and food security. Better access to assets enables households to offset other structural constraints to be able to cope with vulnerability. In the context of this work, food security is simply viewed as the situation whereby households are able to meet food requirements and other basic needs all year round either from own production, purchase on market or transfers.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework for the analysis of relationship among various attributes.



4. The Study Communities and Research Approach

Two rural communities – Erenssa (from Goda Galena *kebele*) and Garbi (from Garbi Messana *kebele*) - were purposely selected from Oromiya Zone of Amhara Region as case study sites. Erenssa is a community situated on the hill at about 12 Kms east of Kammissie Town (zone's capital), whereas Garbi is 8 Kms north of the same town along the main highway to Kombolcha. Erenssa with an altitude of 2210 m a.s.l is characterized by *weyna dega* agro-climate while Garbi having 1400 m a.s.l is situated in *kola* zone. Erenssa has a rugged topographic feature, whereas Garbi is a part of the extensive plain of Borkena wetland.

People at Erenssa draw their means of livelihood from mixed farming of crop major and livestock minor system. Apart from a variety of grains such as barley, wheat, sorghum and *teff*, the peasants were able to integrate cash crops, in particular coffee and *chat* into their farming system. Likewise, sedentary farmers in Borkena wetland largely rely on crops (predominantly sorghum and maize), and supplement their income from livestock rearing. The wetland also hosts agro-pastoralists staying part of the time of the year there. In addition, a few farm investors have launched commercial undertakings in cash crop production. Some households at both communities were found to be overwhelmingly depending on non-farm activities, and social and public transfers. The analysis in this article focuses on livelihood for the people relying on transfers – as mediated by social capital and local institutions.

As indicated earlier, this work is part of a bigger research project that relied on mixed approach, making use of qualitative and quantitative methods. The survey covered 140 households, 70 at each study communities. Nonetheless, the data inputs for this specific article are mostly from qualitative data gathered on the basis of ethnographic and participatory approaches. The specific methods employed are narrated as in the following:

- **Key informant interview** – four elderly informants and the leaders of various rituals were consulted in order to explore why various institutions are put in place and to uncover the processes involved into ritual practices.
- **Focus group discussions** – many local institutions contained groups made up of members of varying numbers. In connection with the specific purpose of data generation for this paper, six Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), four with men and 2 with women group were held. The distribution of FGD by community was 3 in each.

The discussions focused on the purposes of the institutions, their principles and details of the practices of various institutions.

- **Case studies** – some individuals and households were approached for in-depth studies in view of generating data through narration regarding their situations in relation to local institutions and relations with other members.
- **Participant observation** – A relatively longer period stay (a total of ten months) in the field has given me an opportunity to directly observe while local institutions were functioning and the real practices of the rituals were taking place. In fact, it was learnt that some of the practices were somehow sensitive for an ‘outsider’ to directly participate in. In this regard, much care was taken not to disturb the norm of the rituals.
- **Artifacts (photographing)** – Some rituals were documented through photographing as they were performed in real situations.

5. Discussion of Main Observations

5.1. Various types of local institutions

Institutions provide the social context within which livelihoods are constructed and mediate access to the key resources that are central to people’s livelihood (Carswell et al. 2000). Institutions can be broadly classified into two types: formal and informal. Government interventions and policies at macro level and the operations of the WVE Kammisse Area Development Program can be cited as good examples of formal institutions. My focus is, however, on the informal institutions, some of which seem to be related to the faith of people while others are more economic in nature.

5.1.1. *Wedaja*

Wedaja, which in its broad meaning refers to prayer, is a common institution in the study area. It has multiple forms (Figure 2) that have different purposes, each with their own ritual ceremonies. *Fatimaye* is a form of *wedaja* to be undertaken for a woman approaching child delivery. This takes place in the home of the woman and roughly eight months after conception. The main purpose of *fatimaye* is to offer good luck prayers to *Allah* for the process of delivery, and good health for both the mother and the newborn child. Relatives and parents, mostly women from both the woman’s and husband’s sides, participate in the ritual. The men also take part in a separate room. Serving food and

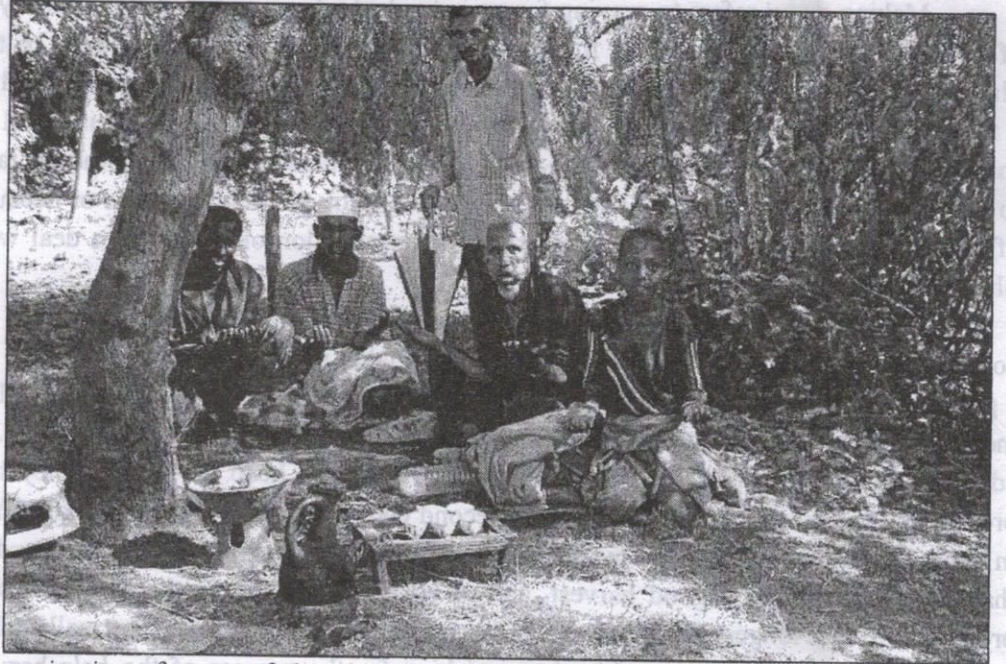
drinks, and *kamma* constitute part of the ceremony. The ritual of *fatimaye* can be seen from two perspectives. The first one is the mental preparation and confidence that a pregnant woman and her family members will develop following the ceremony. The other is that individuals who lead the ritual and the destitute community members take advantage of the situation in the form of food and drinks.

Making *duayi* refers to praying for an individual who is sick and is another type of *wedaja*. This may take place at the home of the ill person or by taking them to the place of *abaggar*. Before taking a person to a modern health service, *duayi* is practiced as a first aid service given to a sick person. People strongly believe that *duayi* is equal to formal medical treatment. This provides an insight into understanding why someone fails to visit a modern health service. The reason is not only for economic reasons or because of lack of access to the service but rather also as a reflection of intention to deal with illness through their own local practice.

There are also three big seasonal *wedajas* held by bringing together all community members. The Autumn *wedaja* normally takes place in September to wish for a good harvest to come. Every participant contributes food, *chat*, coffee, and money. The money is to buy a stock to be slaughtered at a place of *wedaja* in the form of sacrifice. In addition, some community members may provide a gift to keep a vow that they had promised at the previous year's ritual. The second community-based *wedaja* takes place in either December or January. This one basically aims at sharing joy after harvest and to thank *Allah* for giving a good harvest, and to wish for blessing so that the harvested products will last longer. The third is, the biggest *wedaja*, and one that normally takes place in April. This has many objectives: wishing for the success of the *belg* harvest through better rainfall distribution; it is also when land preparation for the main season is carried out and thus peasants jointly pray for good weather conditions during the whole growing period. Peasants also pray towards *Allah* to protect both *belg* and *meher* crops from diseases and pest infestation. There are certain distinguishing features of the April *wedaja*. First, people from many communities observe a ritual together at one site. Secondly the well-known *kaddi* are invited to lead the prayer ceremony. These major *wedajas* are not missed under any circumstances, except under situations of severe crisis where feast parts may be reduced and the number of participant can be smaller.

Figure 2. People observing mini-*wedaja* (at Garbi) – coffee boiling and *chat kamma* are parts of the ritual.

Occasional village- or community-based *wedajas* are organized when there are signs of abnormality at the beginning or cessation of rain, when flooding happens, when human and livestock epidemics suddenly break out, and when crops fail. The return to normality is believed to be *Allah's* blessing in response to the respective *wedaja*. Closer



examination of some of the objectives of different forms of *wedajas* reveals that their purpose is to seek better livelihood

situations. People attempt to relate their own traditions to their economic aspirations and expectations. Some are practiced in relation to human health, some to have a better crop harvest, some are for the betterment of livestock, some are for protection against natural calamities, and some are meant to create better community-based social relations. There are certain indications for the combining of traditional beliefs with the principles of Islamic religion. For instance, originally the Oromo society had its religion and people who believe in *waqa* (their creator God) and used to practice various rituals. These were gradually eroded when the society was compelled to accept Islamic and Christian religions. The important issue here is to explain how people attempt to minimize risks by practicing various rituals.

5.1.2. *Abdoye* and *Yeawure* prayers

The agro-pastoralists who stay during some months of a year and thus included in this study also practice two unique types of *wedajas* in relation to their livelihood. *Abdoye* (Wednesday Prayer) takes place at the home of the eldest person in the village. The ritual comprises of a number of elements: praying by *abaggar*, songs, *kamma*, and serving participants with meal, coffee and milk. The milk to be served at the ceremony must be collected from each household in such a way that the milk from all cows is included. The intention is that the blessing following the prayers should reach each cow from which the milk came (Figure 3). The central objective of *abdoye* is praying for *saa*: wishing for good health, wishing for impregnation (reproduction) at the appropriate time, aspiring for good weather conditions that would enable for better growth of pasture, and wishing for avoidance of all evil which acts against *saa*. A similar kind of *wedaja* takes place every Sunday evening, known as *yeawure*, which means prayer against wildlife attack on *saa* (livestock) during the night and day. According to an elderly inhabitant, these rituals have a long history and have been practiced for many generations.

5.1.3. *Kire* institution

Kire is a sort of semi-formal social institution for community members in order to get material help and psychological support upon the death of relatives. Evidently, the *kires* at the study communities are weak when compared with similar institutions in the same zone or other areas in the country. The *Kires* at Garbi and Erenssa become active only upon the death of a member or their relatives. The *kires* lack reserve money and other materials such as tents, and utensils for cooking, drinking and eating, which are essential at the time and place of mourning. These materials are sometimes the source of income for the institution when they are rented out to individuals celebrating other occasions, particularly weddings. Members contribute money when someone dies, in addition to labour. Neither of the *Kires* at the study sites have the capacity to support members, when they are accidentally confronted with various types of crises, such as shortage of money for treatment under severe illness and food shortage. However, there is potential to extend their scope beyond purely serving activities related to burial. For instance, *ider* institutions in some rural communities of Arssi have become the 'bank' for both cash and grain, where a member can lend and borrow during seasons of shortage and at times when facing accidental problems. Likewise, SOS Sahel has been attempting to introduce

seed and food banking in certain communities of North Wello Zone. Under situations such as this, the *kire* can play a versatile role in risk management.

5.1.4. *Tassiga*

Tassiga is a kind of feeding institution in which unmarried young boys participate. Many *tassiga* groups exist in each community. The ritual is observed once in a year, usually in October when the participants are free from any type of farming operations. Basically, it is organized by contributing money for buying an ox or a bull for slaughter. The site for holding the ritual must be slightly away from the homestead of the participants, so that the involved persons should not meet with the rest of community members in the course of participating in *tassiga*. In addition, *injera* (pancakes) and other accessories are prepared for the festival in turn. The feeding might take a minimum of a week and extends until all the meat is eaten up. The main objective of the ritual is to physically maintain the youths who become weak by working in cultivation and weeding in summer months, and to prepare them for the hard work they will engage in during crop harvesting, transporting and threshing in the following months. A young boy who has not participated in the yearly *tassiga* regards himself as weak and incapable of properly performing his duties. A parent who economically cannot let a boy participate in *tassiga* feeding ceremony cannot blame their son for his failure in agricultural operations. Moreover, the inability to pay the contribution of *tassiga* is regarded as shameful. However, the community members know who is unable to pay, and hence one of the participants is allowed to subsidize a boy who belongs to a poor household for one or more meals served during the ritual feeding. When families are unable to pay for more than one son, there is also a possibility of sharing the feeding with other brothers on a shift basis. Although the ritual is meant for unmarried youths, a father can also take the place of his son(s) at a couple of meals. A few individuals with wives and also other family members may sometimes take part when they feel that their weak bodies could benefit by participating in the *tassiga* feeding institution.

Tassiga feeding has a number of positive and adverse implications for food security at household level. One important positive aspect of it is the moral issue, i.e. giving a chance for the family members of very poor households to take part in feeding for free, or by contributing a little through labour inputs during the preparation process. Secondly, *tassiga* motivates the youths to develop the habit of saving money. Thirdly, it encourages youths to work hard on-farm and as wage labourers in slack seasons.

The adverse implication of *tassiga* is associated with intra-household resource distribution. For one thing, the fact that *tassiga* excludes girls or the absence of such feeding arrangements exclusively for girls, makes the practice unfair. Basically, the workload for girls is much higher than the boys because the former are expected to work on various domestic chores at home as well as participating in most work in the field. Secondly, the expenses a household has to meet to ensure a boy's participating in *tassiga* affects the overall budget that is to be used for making food accessible to other household members. The community perception towards parents who do not allow their children to participate in the ceremony compels them to pay for these children. In this regard, having cash to hand when *tassiga* feeding takes place is not a necessity for every participant since the relatively well off can cover the costs, to be repaid back upon harvests. This, in itself, becomes a challenge in a situation of crop failure or poor harvests.

Figure 3. *Urrane* community members observing *abdoye* ritual: the participants holding the milk collected from all cows (left), and the ritual leader with other participants offer prayers (right).



5.1.5. *Telamma*

An interesting observation was made in relation to the agricultural calendar at the study sites. Land preparation, which forms a crucial stage of the farm season calendar starts only after the community members jointly observe a *wedaja* known as *jahara*. While

physical presence may not be a necessity for each household, they must make contributions in the form of money. A selected elderly community member organizes a *wedeja* at the home of a *dacchi telammi* – a person who undertakes the first cultivation in a season. The person (male) is a well-respected elderly in a community who has inherited the responsibility from his father. No one is allowed to cultivate before a *telammi* announces that land cultivation in a given season has officially started. There is a belief that crops grown on farm land cultivated before *telamma* will fail, and the owner will also experience something bad, apart from the punishment he will face from community council of the elderly of the village. The decision taken to begin cultivation seems to be made by individuals. However, in reality, a *telammi* waits for *jahara* to be held before he undertakes his task the following day.

Although *telamma* has a social value for the people and in maintaining the ritual, it may have a number of practical drawbacks with regards to land-use dynamics and the cropping calendar:

- It limits individual creativity and differences.
- It confines peasants to the context of rain-fed situations.
- It does not leave room for converting one's land from food crops to cash crops.
- It negates the micro-ecological, economic, and agronomic variations, such as soil difference, microclimate, relief, individual endowment of draft power, and differences in land preparation for a variety of crops.

Although the matter needs further research, it can be commented that the idea of *telamma* seems to homogenize the local people in terms of decision making as well as with respect to endowment of various livelihood assets.

5.1.6. *Kaya*

The sedentary peasants and the agro-pastoralists somewhat complement one another. One of the ways by which sedentary peasants benefit from the agro-pastoralists is by receiving milk cows on the basis of *kaya*. One out of ten households studied at Garbi had received cows from the agro-pastoralists community through *kaya*. Two households at Erenssa also had the opportunity of getting milk cows through *kaya*. *Kaya* is of mutual benefit, because for the agro-pastoralists it is a way of dispersing livestock to overcome the problem of grazing land, while for a poor peasant it is a way to collect milk and milk products in exchange for labour and pasture. It is also a common practice among agro-

pastoralists to offer a bull to the sedentary peasants, for the purpose of taming it for ploughing. This is of much help for households facing constraints in terms of draft power.

Peasants assist each other financially upon the sudden death of milk cows or farm oxen. When a peasant encounters a sudden death of a farm ox during land preparation, he receives support in different ways. When such an event happens in a 'good year', people immediately contribute a sizeable amount of money and buy him a replacement ox. This community-based safety net is known as *hirppa*. However, if the money contributed is not sufficient to buy an ox in one season, people having their own farm oxen will assist him in cultivating his land.

5.1.7. *Zekka* and other forms of reciprocity

Some reciprocal relations exist among neighbours, the most notable being coffee drinking and *kamma* (chewing chat in groups). These are practiced on daily basis, but according to many informants at both sites, they are on the decrease as a result of the deepening poverty at household level. Apart from these activities, people also meet at occasional ceremonies such as weddings, holiday celebrations and deaths (mourning). The reciprocal institutions have much significance beyond having meal and drinks together. They function as opportunities to discuss what is going on in the localities regarding some aspects of livelihood, and also for community members to share experiences. They are the mini-meetings through which some village-based problems will be discussed and resolved.

The destitute and other poor people also get support from relatively better-off peasants. *Zekka* (the one-tenth share given to the poor) is a common practice. There are many households who are able to feed themselves through *maguguat* (begging) from peasants during harvest seasons. Many peasants at Garbi mentioned that they are no longer offering *zekka* nowadays since what they produce cannot cover their own household demands. The other forms of social support to the poor people include offering cooked food or grains, assisting some in cultivating their lands freely, taking their lands in a sharecropping arrangement, and giving opportunities for wage labour to those who are able to work. There is also a social obligation to assist relatives or persons with whom one has a lineage. A few households get their means of subsistence from their relatives. For instance, Hawa Nura is an elderly destitute who never purchases grain from market. Instead, she supplements a small harvest from her farm with the grain she obtains from two of her younger brothers, who live in another community nearby.

5.2. Social and public transfers for enhancing household food security

Households/individuals that rely on transfers for their livelihoods are those that are neither able to be directly engaged in production activities (agricultural and non-agricultural) or able to exchange their own endowments for other assets. Many factors explain the inability to generate their own income: lack of access to productive labour (due to illness, disability, old age, and, in the case of female-headed households, lack of capable male labour, lack of access to draft power and landlessness). One or a combination of these factors could be a constraint to generating a viable means of livelihood. Under these circumstances, people's incomes should be based on transfers from different sources, such as community-based social transfers, transfers from next of kin or lineage (remittance), and transfers from formal institutions, particularly the state and NGOs. The livelihood of households that survive on transfers is significantly different from others who depend on production-based livelihoods, as the former are not certain of obtaining income, either in cash or in kind.

5.2.1. Community-based transfers

Transfer of means of survival from community members to the needy people has many forms. The major ones include:

- i) assistance in terms of labour for households who lack labour, but owing other assets in activities such as crop harvesting and house construction
- ii) assistance in the form of lending farm oxen or cultivating the lands of people with no farm oxen under the *jimmat temmada* institution (Figure 4)
- iii) giving out *zekka* (in principle, about one-tenth) of own harvest for the needy people
- iv) assistance in the form of providing cooked food and drinks during various special occasions and ceremonies; many households were found out to be the beneficiaries of these social transfers and they combined them in a variety of ways.

5.2.2. Transfers from relatives

Several households depend on remittances for their survival, which might originate from within the same community or from somewhere else, including remittances sent from

abroad. The cases of two households shown in Box 1 serve to illustrate how such livelihoods depend on transfers from relatives.

Box 1

Cases of households that survive on remittances

1. **Hawa Hassen** is a 65-year-old woman living alone in the village of Erenssa. She mostly lives on support in the form of grains she receives from her two brothers who live in the neighbouring *kebele*. Hawa receives relief grain support in the years when it is given out in the community. She very much likes the village of Erenssa and was not willing to be hosted at the house of one of her brothers. She describes her attachment to the village thus: 'Erenssa is my birth place, where I got married and have lived my whole life. It is also where I lost all my children. It is a place where I experienced a lot of sorrow and also pleasant events. So, how can I leave this beloved community? I have decided that it is my body after death that has to be moved away from this place'.

2. **Zewude Yimam** is a widow and also an inhabitant of Erenssa. She has three children: two daughters (one married and living in the same village while the other has migrated to Djibouti) and one son who was employed as a soldier many years ago. Her land was partly sold off and the remaining was taken away from her by her brother-in-law. Zewude is totally dependent on the remittances from her two children, the daughter in Djibouti and the soldier. The brother-in-law also provides a limited amount of grain each year.

Figure 4. Neighbour peasants cultivating the land for a household not having farm oxen of its own.



5.2.3. Transfers from state and NGOs

Government transfers are mainly through food provisions in the form of food-for-work or free delivery in response to the early warning and food appeals, when some of the community members need external food assistance. Although such interventions are undertaken during years of severe food shortage, there were households who reported that recently they have been receiving food assistance each year in the two study communities. The survey indicated that a *c.*10% of the households in each community receive free food handout every year during food-deficit months. The WVE, an NGO working at both study *kebeles*, also transfers income to poor households in several ways. During the early years of intervention, this NGO used to provide financial support and food directly, as part of the households' rehabilitation from the famine crises in the mid-1980s. Among the principal direct provisions was money for the children of the targeted poor households and the provisions of a school uniform for every child in school as well as all necessary stationery items. The provisions in connection with school had two objectives. First, most households had not fully recovered from the famine crisis to be able to afford the materials for sending their children to school. The second objective was

to make schools attractive to both the parents and their children. With the exception of the financial support for a few children, all provisions were stopped recently. The WVE claims to 'shift from relief and rehabilitation interventions to development activities aiming at enhancing household livelihoods'. The government actors argue that the direct provision should be minimized or fully stopped since it has adverse implications in terms of developing the tendency of dependency among the beneficiaries. The community members on their part acknowledge the past and present interventions by the WVE in many ways and have shown their interest in the continuance of direct material support.

6. Concluding Remarks

The paper demonstrated the importance of looking at informal local institutions in order to have a deeper understanding on livelihood and food security situation of people. Eventually, the institutions covered in the study had two pertinent contexts, that is, faith (belief) and economic. Among those institutions associated with the people under study world outlook include *wedaja*, *fatimaye*, *telamma* and *abdoye*. *Wedaja* having multiple forms entails prayer for best wishes in relation to own family, community and wider society, and health for livestock. They are carried out in best wishes of human life in all respects. *Abdoye* and *yeawure* are prayers for *saa* (livestock) by the agro-pastoralists wishing for good health of stock, impregnation at appropriate time, good weather conditions and wishing for avoidance of all evil things. Good situations of *saa* means better living conditions for agro-pastoralists.

Institutions such as *kaya*, *kire*, *tassiga*, *zekka* and *hirppa* were found to be more of economic in essence. For instance, households become a member of *kire* as insurance in view of getting material and psychological supports upon death of relatives. *Tassiga* is a youth institution that aims at making them physically strong and efficient in the forthcoming crop harvesting season. Hence, it has paramount importance both psychologically and economically. *Kaya* is a mutual trust between sedentary peasants and agro-pastoralists to off-set asset constraints. Generally, whatever the case may be the people are convinced that involvement in one or more of institutions contribute to their satisfaction as well as to the improvement of their living conditions.

It is also important to point out that the practices of some institutions have got certain limitations. *Tassiga* feeding has gender bias since it favors boys than girls. Likewise, *telamma* is found out to view the community members as homogeneous group.

The paper also documents multiple forms of transfer that help much in the livelihood and food security of the poor people. People, who for certain reasons, are

to make schools attractive to both the parents and their children. With the exception of
 unable to involve in production activities, get assistance from other community members,
 from relatives somewhere else in the form of remittance, from government and NGOs.
 The contribution of this paper to debate on food security issue is that it shows the
 possibility to attain food security at household level depending on social and public
 transfer. The observation challenges the thinking that those who are unable to engage in
 production activities subsist under chronic food insecurity. Nonetheless, the big question
 here is whether transfers are sustainable or not. many ways and have shown their interest

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