Northern Ethiopia: what's on the menu?

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Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in the world where the population is 90 per cent rural-based and only 10 per cent urban-based. Of this predominantly rural population, over half are considered “food insecure”, that is, they do not have sufficient food to allow them to sustain their livelihood all year round.

Since 1991, with the return of political stability, the Ethiopian government along with international aid agencies and NGOs, have been trying to tackle the problem of food insecurity. So far, the government has concentrated almost exclusively on increasing production in the agricultural sector. They have also begun to include conservation in their strategic planning policy. Through watershed management schemes and terracing of hillsides the groundwater levels have increased and degradation of the environment has reduced. However, at a recent symposium in Addis Ababa (Food Security and Sustainable Livelihoods in Ethiopia, March 2000) the issue was raised that unless these conservation plans are integrated with development policies at a micro and macro scale, they will just become “dead-ends” without long-term benefits.

Studies are now being done on “livelihood strategies”, that is, the strategies employed by peasants to sustain their livelihood and food security. This is seen as the most effective way of drawing together all the different strands that affect everyday life (agriculture, economics, natural resources, standard of living) that need to be considered for a successful and integrated development policy.

When food security is threatened, farmers rely on a variety of “coping mechanisms” to get them through the crisis. The way a household copes with food shortage is largely dependent on their pre-crisis position. The mechanism chosen is a result of “a progressive narrowing of options that leads from broad attempts to minimise risk in the long term through actions designed to limit damage caused by a crisis, to extreme measures aimed at saving individual lives, even at the expense of household dissolution” (Webb and Braun, 1994, cited in Guinand, 1999).

An important component of coping strategies is wild or “famine” foods, that is, wild plants that tend to grow outside of the cultivated area and would not normally be consumed due to local taboos or unpleasant side effects. Although famine foods may form...
an essential part of food security in less extreme conditions, they are considered an important indicator of famine conditions due to the increased reliance on them in times of crisis.

To date, famine foods have been studied only in the broader context of household food economy studies (Save the Children Fund, 1988, UK). There is very little literature on what the famine foods actually are and how important they are as a dietary supplement. In December 1999 the United Nations Emergency Unit for Ethiopia (UN-EUE) wrote a preliminary report on the utilisation of famine foods in the Sidamo region of southern Ethiopia. Alongside this report a provisional field guide was compiled. Their reason for doing this is that it is thought that some of these wild plants may have the potential to become valuable staple foods (if cultivated) and so be an important strategy in tackling food insecurity.

Many areas of Ethiopia have been cited as "biodiversity hot-spots", but due to increasing population pressure[1] and food shortages, many areas are being rapidly degraded. This is especially true of the northern provinces of Ethiopia where the high population densities and increased occurrence of drought have resulted in a decrease in the number of indigenous wild foods available. However, there is still a wealth of local knowledge on a variety of famine foods, even if they are no longer available, and the recording of this information now is therefore crucial, before the knowledge disappears as well.

In March and April 2000, Ethiopian Venture, a scientific expedition, interviewed farmers in northern Ethiopia in order to add their knowledge of famine foods to the UN-EUE’s database.

Ethiopia is divided into three agro-ecological zones and interviews were carried out in all three. The zones are:

1. **kola** (land between sea level and 1,500m);
2. **woyna dega** (land between 1,500m and 2,500m); and
3. **dega** (land above 2,500m above sea level).

In each zone there were between 15 and 25 famine foods described as being utilised by the local population, however, in some areas, particularly in the **woyna dega** and **kola** zones, many of the famine foods are no longer available due to drought and over-utilisation.

The zone where famine foods were most prevalent was the **dega** zone. In this zone at least three different famine foods are collected and then sold or exchanged in the local markets. Due to the very low purchasing power of the local population, many peasants refused to sell their produce for money but preferred to exchange them for an alternative crop. For example, **gaba** (*Ziziphus spinacias*), a small yellow fruit that grows wild all over Ethiopia, was seen being exchanged for **abashow gomen** (*Brassica carinata*), a leafy spinach-like vegetable that is an often-used substitute if traditional staple crops are lacking or too expensive to buy.

Even though they are so publicly utilised, such foods carry negative cultural connotations and many are associated with insults. For example, to be called a **wozberchari** after a type of wild cabbage is to be called a “dirt-digger”. For most people it would result in “loss of face” were they to admit to eating these wild foods, as it is looked down on by everyone. However, all the interviewees admitted that despite the low regard in which these famine foods are held, many of them (especially the vegetable-like green plants and grains) are eaten by all members of a poor rural community. The collection of them is undertaken by the women and children and they are then prepared by the women for consumption. Those that can be eaten raw, for example the majority of fruits, are picked and eaten “on site” by shepherds and children.

In the **woyna dega** zone one of the most popular wild foods, which is also often sold in the markets, is the **beles** fruit (cactus). However, this, like many other wild plants, can have unpleasant side effects if eaten in excess. The **beles** can cause constipation and stomach-ache; **nechelo**, a small green creeping plant, causes drowsiness and dryness of skin, but is often collected, boiled and mixed with other foodstuffs to increase a meal’s bulk.

Throughout the Ethiopian countryside songs and proverbs have developed reflecting on the food situation and thanking God for particular wild plants that help them bridge the food gap between harvests. One such plant is **hamle kulitch** – a spinach-like plant that is eaten in the **kola** zone. The saying goes:

If I survive until July and August, I will survive until the next year due to **hamle kulitch**.

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That is, the famine food, *hamle kulitch*, gets people through the rainy season (July and August) after which they can harvest their staple crops (the Ethiopian New Year is in September).

*Hamle kulitch* gives us the green light to eat *digla*.

That is, *hamle kulitch* provides food in July and August and then *digla* is available to tide them over in September (should the harvest be late or insufficient).

*Digla* is a wild seed that has been cultivated in some lowland (*kola*) zones of northern Ethiopia. It is fast growing and can be used as a substitute for *teff* in the traditional bread and porridge. (*Teff* is an indigenous grain and is the most favoured for making *injera*, the traditional Ethiopian bread that is eaten at every meal.) Where there is sufficient food from the normal harvests, this type of crop (as with most famine foods) is ignored, as people who eat it are considered “inferior”.

It is hoped that on publication this information, gathered by the UN-EUE for the whole of Ethiopia, will enable further specialised research to be undertaken on the nutritional value and toxicity of wild plants and their potential for domestic consumption. They would not be a substitute for the cultivated staple food crops, rather they would be an important supplement. Improving food production through the exploitation of wild plants is a naturally sustainable, cheap and locally available alternative to resolving at least part of the food shortage problem. It would also help maintain biodiversity. In the light of this report it can be seen that wild foods are an important component of developing strategies to fight rural food insecurity and develop integrated development programmes for chronic food insecure areas in Ethiopia as well as in other parts of the world.

For a full report on Ethiopian Venture and associated links go to: http://www.ethiopian-venture.org.uk

**Note**

1. Population growth is currently 3 per cent per annum (DFID Report, March, 2000).

**References**


**Further reading**


Guinand, Y.F. (1999), *North and South Gonder ± Food Security Assessment in Parts of the Tekeze River Watershed*.
