

Joint Situation Assessment Mission to Benishangul- Gumuz Region

Field Assessment Mission: 28 August – 8 September 2002

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1 Introduction and background

Benishangul-Gumuz Region is one of the peripheral regions of Ethiopia bordering the Sudan. The region has 20 weredas and two Special Weredas making three Zones of the region. Topographically, the region ranges from 600 (areas bordering the Sudan) to 2731 masl (Wanbera wereda areas) with an average monthly temperature of 20.6-35.20⁰C. Lowlands cover 75% of the region while midlands and the highlands cover 25% and 5%, respectively. The region, especially Assosa Zone, has conducive climatic conditions for fruits, especially for mango production, and is known for excellent quality mango fruits production which unfortunately in time of harvest (March to May) is just wasted almost for nothing (a big sack of mangoes does not fetch more than ten Birr). So far this potential is under-exploited and is not used for other than local consumption, mainly due to lack of market and the underdeveloped/nonexistent transport infrastructure in the region. Main annual crops grown in the region include: maize, sorghum, haricot bean, sesame, noug (niger seed), millet and peanut. Normally, meher rains (meher production covers 100% of the region's annual crop production) start in April and continue up to end of September/October. Some of the income sources of the region include: small-scale gold mining (limited to some weredas), "wild foods" collection (threatened by heavy deforestation largely by wild fires and settlement activities) and wage labour. This script is an account of a rapid situation assessment (mid-meher 2002) conducted in the region from 28 August to 8 September 2002 by a team of experts drawn from Federal DPPC, UN-EUE and Benishangul-Gumuz Regional DPPB.

2 Objectives and methodology

The objective of the mission was to assess the overall food security situation and in particular the overall situation of the mid-meher season production of 2002 and the prospects in 2003 for the region. Discussions were held with regional DPPB and BOA, Zonal Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Department, Zonal Department of Agriculture, Woreda Department of Agriculture and Woreda Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Committees. However, due to an inaccessibility problem, the team visited only Assosa Zone of the region in which 5 weredas (Mao Komo Special Wereda and Bambasi, Assosa, Menge and Komosha Weredas) of the zone were visited with the assistance of experts from different line departments who joined the mission. Primary and secondary information sources, farm visits, observations, transect walks and interviews with farmers (aboriginals and settlers), development agents and officials were employed in the course of the assessment. At the end of the mission, the team had a meeting with Regional DPP Committee members and shared its findings and conclusions of the assessment mission.

3 Assessment results

3.1 Weather Conditions

Normally, Benishangul-Gumuz Region receives rains from April to end of September/October. Last year the onset was late by two weeks and this year the onset was late by 45 to 60 days (started in May/June). The amount and distribution of the rains was erratic varying within and across each wereda. In some instances there was a one-week intermittent cessation of rains subjecting crops to moisture stress. On the other hand, some pocket areas have received heavy rains and experienced flood damages but the extent of the damage was tolerable.

3.2 Crop production and prospects

As already stated due to the delayed onset of the rains, planting of maize and sorghum- major food crops in the region was delayed. This late planting had and will have the following adverse effects in crop production.

- A) It forced farmers to shift farm plots prepared for maize and sorghum to oil crops (noug, flax and sesame) and pulses like haricot bean which are not as productive as maize and sorghum in terms of productivity per unit area of land. Consequently, this will greatly influence the annual crop production balance and certainly diminishes the total crop harvest in the region compared with normal times of production (though lack of quantitative information from line departments all the way from Region to Wereda levels could not enable further and quantitative analysis of the subject).
- B) The delayed planting also risked late planted crops to a greater extent and due to moisture stress/shortage, unless the rains extend up to mid-November, there could be total failure of crop harvest in the area. Farmers reported the unlikely situation of getting rains after October at least from their experiences and are worried of being unfortunate and being subjected to the worst scenario possible.
- C) Late planting also forced overlapping of agricultural activities. For instance, farmers were engaged in weeding maize and sorghum crops at the same time they were planting teff and noug crop --also used as an important cash crop. Overlapping of activities induces shortage of time for giving the necessary care and management to crops planted and hence ends up in poor harvest.
- D) Compounded with intermittent dry spells, late planting favoured incidence of insect pests, mainly maize stalk borer, which infested almost all parts of the Zone though the effect of pest was diluted by heavy rains received in July and August. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the damage inflicted by the pest is qualified to cause reduced harvest in maize and sorghum though it was difficult to quantify the extent of damage and yield reduction, due to lack of quantitative information from Agricultural offices at all levels.

The other very prominent production constraint observed in two weredas of Assosa Zone (Mao Komo and Bambasi) was rat plague that infested and heavily damaged crops mainly maize (green maize ready to be consumed) and haricot bean -- at their seed setting and maturity stage. The outbreak has taken place since mid July 2002 in the lowlands of both weredas. Eight PAs in Mao Komo Special Wereda and one PA in Bambasi wereda, which

are bordered by bamboo forests, are affected by the plague. It was reported by old and knowledgeable people in the areas that 39 years ago there was similar outbreak of rats associated with an extensive and total drying of bamboo forests in the area. The rats also feed on succulent shoots of bamboo trees. So the drying of the mother bamboo trees apparently suspected to be due to a soil born disease (?) destroyed young shoots of bamboo plants, which are food stock to both rats and local people.



Succulent shoots of bamboo used as food (human) and feed (rats) dried and triggered invasion and damage of maize crop by rats (Photo by Dechassa Lemessa, UN-EUE, September 2002)

A recent report from Mao Komo Special Wereda Office indicates destruction of 560 hectares of maize and haricot bean with a damage level of up to 90%. According to the report, 16,970 rats (excluding deceased in obscured places like holes and bushes) were killed with the application of rodenticide (chemical used against rodents) known as Zinc phosphide by the farmers with technical assistance from wereda agriculture experts and development agents. The fact that chemical application was not in a campaign form (not all farmers act together to control the pest) the effort made to control the pest was defective to suppress the pest completely and in a short period of time. Thus, there is a huge worry and fear from grassroot level experts and farmers that if there is no a control campaign in all the affected areas, the outbreak could expand further to other areas not yet experiencing the outbreak. The fact that most areas including farm lands and backyards are intensively covered with dense grasses and bushes not only tangled control efforts but also gave the pests a luxurious opportunity to wield damage on crops and household utensils and even in attacking people in the evenings (a farmer was bitten by rats two times on his feet in one night while sleeping in a hut). Grassroot experts and farmers were complaining of lack of chemical and adequate support from Zone and regional agricultural offices. If no adequate support is provided to the weredas and an effective control campaign is launched as soon as possible, the pest will get a chance of reproducing and invading additional places and could do more damage to crops and domestic assets. The report also indicates death of hens, monkeys and birds in Mao Komo Special Wereda due to the chemical applied against the rats. This calls for better technical support to the low-level development workers who are actively involved in the control activities with local farmers.

3.3 Livestock Situation

Agricultural offices at regional, zonal and wereda levels have reported an outbreak of goat disease called PPR (*Peste de petit ruminants*) caused by a rinderpest like disease, in Menge and Komosha weredas in June and July this year. According to their report, thousands of goats died (only in a PA called Menge 480 goats died) in both weredas. The disease was reportedly introduced to the weredas affected from Sudan territories bordering the region. The asset depletion inflicted against households who had lost their goats was considerable and painful according to the farmers and experts from agricultural offices contacted. It was also reported that trypanosomiasis, an endemic livestock disease in the region, was exerting a persistent depletion of animals in the region. Diseases like pasteurellosis and blackleg have been reported but were controlled. Other than what has been described here, no special incidence of epidemic livestock diseases was reported.

3.4 Human Health Condition

Other than malaria that is an endemic human disease in the region, no special health related problem was reported. In fact, due to extensive abundance of favourable conditions like stagnant water bodies including in Assosa town, city of the region, most residents were viewing their worries that unless necessary preparations and actions are taken on time, the incidence of malaria in September and October following the usual ending of the rains could be enormous.

3.5 Market Conditions

Although it was not possible to draw meaningful conclusions on market conditions due to lack of price data in the region, except that which was verbally reported by farmers and experts, generally grain prices, mainly for maize and sorghum, have risen since June this year. The price of 100 kg of maize has risen from Birr 20-25 to 65 in August, for example. But it was clearly reported and understood that at this point in time the grain stock is not in the hands of farmers/producers but what ever is available with small scale traders and there is no way that farmers could make the most out of the higher grain price. Similarly, livestock prices have risen a bit apparently due to the Ethiopian New Year --one of the national holidays traditionally demanding killing of livestock in millions country-wide.

3.6 Food security prospects

Long cycle crops, maize and sorghum, do cover the lion's share of food needs of the region in terms of annual production. Unfortunately, the delay in planting of these crops due to the delayed onset of the rains necessitates an extension of the rains up to mid-November 2002. Delayed planting subjects the crops to insect pests, weed infestation and poor field management due to overlapping of agricultural activities. These in turn forces farmers to undertake inadequate crop field management activities like weeding and cultivations useful for better crop production. From experience, farmers and local experts are worried of adversities expected in September and October including crop pests like African bollworm. According to agricultural offices contacted, poor productivity --aggravated by reduced use of farm inputs due to poor grain prices as opposed to the escalating prices of improved seeds and fertilisers has also contributed to the anticipated reduced crop production in the region in general. The biggest worry in the region is

that if the rains fail to extend up to mid-November, it will result in a serious humanitarian crisis in the region.

4 Conclusion and recommendations

At least based on this assessment mission, there will be no serious situation at this moment in time that calls for an immediate emergency intervention in the region. Nevertheless, the huge loss of goats that significantly depleted the productive assets of many households, the effect from the rat plague compounded with the adversities described in this report, certainly increase the vulnerability of households already affected in Assosa Zone.

Should the rains fail to continue up to mid-November, this will give a completely different picture in which the region faces the worst scenario (even West Wellega Zone of Oromia Region bordering the region) as most crops grown in the region require rains up to the said time for reasonable harvest. An extended rain is crucial not only to long cycle crops but also for most crops grown in the region including teff and noug crops. Unfortunately, however, from their past experience farmers were anticipating the unlikely possibility of the rains to extend up to mid-November. Therefore, suspecting the worst scenario and conducting close monitoring of the over all situations in the region are necessary. Last but not least is that Federal and Regional level experts and researchers need in-depth professional study on the rat plague that took place in the area.

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Abbreviations

DPPC	Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission
DPPDB	Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Department/Bureau
UN-EUE	United Nations Emergencies Unit for Ethiopia
MASL	Meters Above Sea level

