

FROM BAD TO WORSE

Over the past three months, a foreseeable drama has unfolded in our project region in southern Tigray. In the context of Corona prevention, the decision of the central Ethiopian government to close all markets has led to a collapse of the rural earning and spending cycle. Over the past weeks, those who earn their living by selling at the markets have lost their income, and they have no reserves. It is not possible for our communities to buy fresh farm produce like eggs or chickens, vegetables or grain. Those dependent on the markets for casual employment have been without jobs and the ensuing income for months. The government lists of 'high-risk' families are growing constantly, and the first starvation deaths have been reported.

During this period, Ethiopian Enterprises has financed emergency food supplies for over 2'650 families of 5-7 persons each in our project zone of Debubawi. The allocation consists of a month's supply of millet and cooking oil, based on the number of family members. However, this is nowhere near enough. In addition, at this point the emergency food allocation process is becoming increasingly traumatic for our manager and his team as hungry folk who are not on official lists are joining those who are, and the scenes of desperate begging at allocation points are pitiful. In the past few days, a bajaj taxi driver brought two elderly and clearly weak citizens to our school and told our manager that their relatives could no longer feed them. He asked that our team do whatever they could to help them and otherwise to let them die there in peace. Orphans who in the past were supported by relatives or other families are in many cases without support while families struggle to keep themselves alive. We now have people camping outside our school in Mehoni as they have heard that grain is being stored there and see this as their last hope. Rural governments around the country have no budgets to help and appear paralysed; no official national or international emergency aid organization has entered our region since lockdown in early April despite our repeated requests. We are shocked and frustrated about this, but being shocked doesn't help.

There is some good news at least. The long awaited rain started in July and there should be a reasonable harvest in September/October. And while Corona spreads, the death toll so far according to experts in the country is surprisingly low. We believe that the immune systems of most Ethiopians which allow them to drink water and raw milk which would kill most of us may be better able to deal with the virus than we can. We hope it stays this way. In any case, as our manager rightly warns, it is hunger which will be by far the bigger killer in Ethiopia during this pandemic.

We are now collecting for our next allocation: a truckload of 300 tons of millet and 1'000 litres of cooking oil will help 5'000-6'000 more people to survive the coming 4-5 weeks, and costs CHF 25'000. We need to continue aid as regularly as possible until the new harvest arrives. While we well know that we can't help everyone and that the death toll will continue to rise, we are doing what we can.

Please help us to continue our relief work for the next few weeks. The cost of a family picnic at the local pool here in Switzerland can keep two or three families alive for several weeks. Right now there are no picnics in Debubawi.

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