Livelihood History and Humanitarian Knowledge in Protracted Food Crisis: A Case Study of Save the Children-UK in Wollo, Ethiopia

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Executive Summary

This thesis forms part of a larger research project exploring the relationship between local knowledge of livelihood history and international emergency food interventions in settings of protracted crisis. The project assumes that when humanitarian relief agencies operate in the same area for an extended period of time, they have an opportunity to acquire "thick" contextual understanding of the causes of food insecurity, malnutrition and famine vulnerability in affected communities, as well as local precedents for nutritional well-being and livelihood resilience. Ideally, such organizational learning would involve ongoing dialogue with recipients of humanitarian assistance, whose participation in an agency's assessment of needs, outcomes and impact would result in improved programming—and, it would be hoped, the reduction of food insecurity—over time. Where a different trajectory of change occurs (e.g. where food security fails to improve, or worsens, despite prolonged relief programming), the project also assumes that humanitarian organizations would, in the interests of accountability, seek to understand why interventions have not achieved their core goals, and would work as closely as possible with local stakeholders to strengthen their capacity to do so. In this regard, the project also addresses current debates around impact assessment methods for emergency nutrition and food security programming, a subject that has inspired much reflection and hand-wringing—but little practical consensus—in recent years.

Through a case study of Save the Children-UK's early work in Wollo, northern Ethiopia during the 1972-74 famine, the thesis examines the foundational stages of the relationship between local livelihood knowledge and humanitarian food programming in a situation of "chronic crisis." Long considered one of the world's famine epicenters, northern Ethiopia has experienced the sustained presence of large numbers of foreign relief agencies since the catastrophic famine in Wollo and Tigray provinces in the early 1970s opened the region to external aid. Yet today, nearly 40 years later, Wollo continues to exhibit very high rates of chronic and acute malnutrition, and its rural population as a whole exists in a state of livelihood crisis, with many households needing food assistance even in years of good agricultural or pastoral production. As a desk study intended to lay the groundwork for a larger project involving archival and field research, the thesis draws on the abundant academic and gray literatures on famine and food security in Ethiopia, combined with key informant interviews with Save-UK staff and the organization's published material on the region, to address the following research questions:

(1) What can we learn from published literature about the history of rural livelihoods and food security in Wollo prior to the 1970s? What does this literature tell us about famine causation, the social dynamics of vulnerability, and local methods of agroecological and food supply management before the arrival of Save-UK to Wollo?

(2) What role did Save-UK play during the 1972-74 famine in Wollo? How did the organization's previous history in Ethiopia shape its analysis of the crisis and its strategies for emergency response? What kinds of information and assumptions guided its interventions at this critical time? What direct or indirect roles did aid recipients play in this process? How might victims of this crisis themselves have explained the famine's causes and outcomes?

(3) What did Save-UK learn from its experience of the 1972-74 famine? How did the organization assess the impact of its interventions on nutrition levels, agrarian food systems, livelihood resilience, etc.? What direct or indirect roles did aid recipients play in this learning process? Did this organizational learning lead to any immediate programming changes for Save-UK in Ethiopia, given the devastating effects of the famine on rural production systems?

I. Introduction

a. Motivation and Research Problem Area

The question motivating this thesis arose nearly two decades ago while I was conducting doctoral field research in Mozambique, in a district still partially occupied by RENAMO rebel forces despite the formal end of the country's long civil war (1976-92). During a short visit in 1992 and a 15-month stay in 1994-96, I repeatedly encountered relief workers from international humanitarian organizations whose lack of knowledge about the disaster-affected population they served was as starkly apparent to their "beneficiaries" as it was to a wide-eyed graduate student watching uneasily from the sidelines. I realize now that I was just as ignorant of humanitarians' operational context as they seemed to be of the fragile social worlds they trampled on, in pursuit of their well-meaning goals. I am quite sure, though that my ignorance had little impact on relief workers' ability to earn their livelihoods, nourish themselves, maintain social ties, and imagine a better future for themselves and their families. What humanitarians didn't know, on the other hand, hurt Mozambican men, women and children—already victims of trauma and extreme deprivation—in all of these ways. Humanitarians' lack of contextual knowledge meant, among other things, donations of maize that farmers couldn't plant, aid schedules that thwarted family resettlement plans, gleaming new schools (so many!) where no teachers would work, and hasty HIV-prevention campaigns that drove restless RENAMO soldiers to violence against their war-captive "wives." Just as dangerously, even in government-held areas, the throng of relief NGOs meant lucrative jobs paid in hard currency for a select few local men, a risky proposition in communities used to managing inequality through witchcraft and spiritist revenge. In myriad ways, what humanitarians didn't know fuelled microsocial power struggles of the most perilous kind, for in their oblivion to the delicate balance among traditional and state authorities, ethnic and religious factions, and gender and generational roles, they strengthened some people's influence and undermined others', with disruptive consequences for countless relationships and individual lives.

Without doubt, relief and rehabilitation measures were helpful, even life-saving for many victims of the Mozambique conflict—significantly, the first humanitarian crisis to be labeled a "complex emergency." Yet if this crisis was "complex" for foreign observers, how much more so must it have been for the people who suffered through it, only to face another wave of nameless intruders when the conflict was done? At the time, I wondered whether the good relief interventions outweighed the bad (rather sanctimoniously overlooking the intrusive burden of *my* presence). Perhaps typically for an academic researcher, I was also unaware that the wider international humanitarian community, reeling from recent events in Somalia, Rwanda and Bosnia, was already asking questions along the same lines.

Where did responsibility lie when a relief operation influenced the dynamics of "local" conflict, or inadvertently harmed the people it was supposed to help? To what extent were humanitarian actors responsible for knowing, let alone redressing, any negative consequences of their actions? Where did the humanitarian imperative to alleviate suffering end, and who had the authority to make that call? What expectations and rights could aid recipients claim, and who would ensure that their voices were heard? My concerns in post-war Mozambique, it turned out, were neither unusual nor especially profound. Other humanitarian crises of the mid-1990s were already forcing the profession to confront much deeper problems, and the global relief system would undergo many years of scrutiny as a result.

By now, a range of international organizations, established standards, and a burgeoning literature on humanitarian accountability together sustain an industry discourse on the importance of considering "beneficiary views" in all phases of emergency programming, including assessment of impact—"the changes in people's lives…that result from a humanitarian project."[1] "Participatory" approaches to evaluation are growing in popularity, along with an array of published guidelines and tools for gathering, quantifying and analyzing the opinions of aid recipients about the outcomes and effects of emergency response. Yet in the realm of nutrition and food security interventions, systematic evaluation of humanitarian impact has proven particularly challenging, especially as programming has increasingly incorporated longer-term livelihoods objectives.[2] While influential industry voices have asserted that "relief aid must strive to reduce future vulnerabilities to disaster as well as meeting basic needs,"[3] and that "evaluations should…examine the degree to which livelihoods of the affected population are supported or disrupted by the intervention,"[4] a range of obstacles continue to bedevil impact assessment where food security—a core livelihoods outcome—is concerned. Among the most commonly cited of these obstacles is the "absence of baseline data"[5] against which to measure impact; by definition, it seems, "emergency" conditions rule out the possibility of informational preparedness. Despite the fact that, in the last decade, "humanitarian assistance has become increasingly concentrated among countries in *protracted* crisis," and that "food aid remains the best-supported

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[1] Emergency Capacity Building Project. *The Good Enough Guide: Impact Measurement and Accountability in Emergencies*. Oxford: Oxfam GB, 2007, 2.

[2] Jeremy Shoham, *Assessing the Impact of Humanitarian Assistance: A Review of Methods in the Food and Nutrition Sector* (London: Humanitarian Practice Group, 2004).

[3] International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies & ICRC, "The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief" (http://www.ifrc.org/en/publications-and-reports/code-of-conduct/, accessed July 5, 2012).

[4] ALNAP, *Evaluating Humanitarian Action Using the OECD-DAC Criteria: An ALNAP Guide for Humanitarian Agencies* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2006), 29.

[5] Alistair Hallam, *Harnessing the Power of Evaluation in Humanitarian Action: An Initiative to Improve Understanding and Use of Evaluation* (London: ALNAP, 2011), 20.

humanitarian response,"[6] the notion that timing precludes baseline knowledge of pre-emergency food systems still seems to hold sway. The result is that even after 20 years of sectoral self-scrutiny about aid effectiveness, commentators still assert that "very little is known about the impact of emergency programs on the lives and livelihoods of crisis-affected people."[7] Whether poor knowledge of impact directly causes harmful outcomes such as those described above is a question only answerable through empirical research in specific contexts. However, the mere fact that the "acute lack of an evidence base" means that there are "key areas of uncertainty about the relative usefulness of certain types of [emergency feeding and food security] interventions"[8] creates ample reason for concern, given the scale of lives and material resources at stake.

Now, as in Mozambique in 1994—armed with an overlong bibliography on local livelihoods history, and working in archives full of economic, agricultural and nutrition data from colonial and post-colonial times—I receive statements about the "absence of baseline data" with some astonishment. Clearly, relief workers on the frontlines of a crisis, even a protracted one, do not have time to work in archives, or to learn a local language so they can communicate with the people who know pre-emergency realities best, as academic researchers have the luxury to do. But major relief agencies—MSF, Oxfam, Save the Children, CARE, World Vision, etc.—had been operating in Mozambique since the mid 1980s. Their routine dependence on local institutions and staff for logistics purposes, for instance, could have opened a channel for knowledge exchange between humanitarians and aid recipients, neglect of which was not lost on the district government officials and traditional authorities I knew. Moreover, while their conceptual frameworks and vocabularies may have differed, academic researchers had been writing about household food security, coping strategies and vulnerabilities in that drought-prone region—relying, in part, on interviews with farmers—since the 1950s. And by the mid-1990s, Mozambican university students were pursuing fieldwork-based thesis projects on the impact of relief interventions in rural communities brutalized by the war. How was it possible that with so many channels to local knowledge at their disposal, and a decade of continuous in-country programming under their collective belt, humanitarian actors still functioned without sufficient awareness of recipient

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[6] The proportion of humanitarian assistance to countries in protracted crisis tripled from 15% to 45% between 2000 and 2008. See Food and Agriculture Organization, *The State of Food Insecurity in the World: Addressing Food Insecurity in Protracted Crises* (Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization, 2010), 27 (my emphasis).

[7] John Burns & Andrew Catley, "Participatory Approaches to Impact Assessment: Experiences from Humanitarian Interventions in Zimbabwe," in Alpaslan Özerdem & Richard Bowd (eds.), *Participatory Research Methodologies: Development and Post-Disaster/Conflict Reconstruction* (London: Ashgate, 2010), 63.

[8] Arabella Duffield et al, "Evidence base for interventions in complex emergencies," *The Lancet* 365, 9462 (2005): 842-843.

perspectives and context to prevent the negative impacts I saw? Was the problem really just lack of time? Did humanitarians' institutional culture somehow discourage recognizing (let alone learning from) aid recipients as sources of knowledge? Or were relief organizations "eschewing acknowledgement of relations of power and of context" in order to preserve "only *voluntary, self-defined* and hence *optional* structures of accountability," as some researchers have claimed?[9] If these arguments hold true for Mozambique in the 1990s, do they adequately explain why humanitarian accountability efforts through impact evaluation "still have a long way to go" even two decades later?[10]

b. Case Study: Save the Children-UK in Wollo, Ethiopia

The topic of this thesis, and of the larger research project of which the thesis forms a part, emerged from my puzzling over these questions against a backdrop of significant change in the operational and philosophical landscape of humanitarian action over the last 20 years. The larger project explores the relationship between local knowledge of livelihood history and international emergency food interventions in settings of protracted crisis. The project assumes that when humanitarian relief agencies operate in the same area for an extended period of time, they have an opportunity to acquire "thick"[11] contextual understanding of the causes of food insecurity, malnutrition and famine vulnerability in affected communities, as well as local precedents for nutritional well-being and livelihood resilience. Ideally, such organizational learning would involve ongoing dialogue with recipients of humanitarian assistance, whose participation in an agency's assessment of needs, outcomes and impact would result in improved programming—and, it would be hoped, the reduction of food insecurity—over time. Where a different trajectory of change occurs (e.g. where food security fails to improve, or worsens, despite prolonged relief programming), the project also assumes, ideally, that humanitarian organizations would seek to understand why interventions have not achieved their core goals, and would work as closely as possible with local stakeholders to strengthen their capacity to do so. In this regard, the project also addresses current debates around impact assessment methods for

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[9] Sue Lautze, *Humanitarian Action, Livelihoods, and Socio-Cultural Dynamics in Uganda: An Exploration of Theoretical Considerations for Impact Evaluation* (Camp Sherman, Oregon: The Livelihoods Program, 2009), 13 (emphasis in original).

[10] Hallam 2011, *Harnessing the Power of Evaluation*, 7.

[11] From Clifford Geertz's concept of "thick description" in ethnographic research, referring to contextually detailed accounts of field experiences that seek to explain both observed patterns and deeper meanings of cultural and social relationships. See Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture, in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3-30.

emergency nutrition and food security programming, a subject that has inspired much reflection and hand-wringing—but little practical consensus—in recent years.

As a first step towards this larger project, this thesis uses a case study of Save the Children-UK's work in North and South Wollo Zones, Amhara State, Ethiopia from 1974-84, to examine the foundational stages of the relationship between local livelihood knowledge and humanitarian food programming in a situation of "chronic crisis." Long considered one of the world's famine epicenters, northern Ethiopia has experienced the sustained presence of large numbers of foreign relief agencies since the early 1970s, when a catastrophic famine in Wollo and Tigray provinces killed over 200,000 people and opened the region to external aid. Save the Children-UK (Save-UK) has been an especially active humanitarian presence in Wollo[12] (see Figures 1 and 2) since the organization established an Ethiopia office in 1974, in the wake of that famine.[13] After another terrible famine in 1983-85, which took more than 600,000 lives nationwide and hit Wollo especially hard, rural communities throughout Ethiopia's northeastern highlands entered a period of livelihood crisis—and dependence on food transfers—from which many have not yet recovered.[14] The global food price spikes of 2007-08 and 2011-12, and the 2011 Horn of Africa drought, are only the most recent shocks to have worsened food insecurity for many Wollo residents. Throughout this nearly 40-year period, Save-UK has not only sustained continuous humanitarian programming in Wollo but also demonstrated an extraordinary commitment to field research, longitudinal data collection and the development of information systems for nutrition and food security programming in this vulnerable region. The most prominent of these efforts include the Nutrition Surveillance Programme (NSP), which Save-UK operated from 1985-2002, and the Household Economy Approach (HEA) to food security analysis, developed between 1992 and

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[12] "Wollo" will be used as shorthand to refer to the present area of North and South Wollo Zones, which previously formed part of Wollo (or Wello) Province. The territory of Wollo Province underwent a number of administrative reorganizations in the 20th century. After Ethiopia was liberated from Italian occupation in 1941, Wollo was enlarged through the addition of Amhara, Sayint, Azabo, Lasta, Raya, Wag and Yeijju Provinces. Between 1984 and 1994, the Ethiopian government restructured its administrative boundaries twice, resulting in the redrawing of provinces into 25 administrative regions and five autonomous regions based on ethnic lines. Wollo Province was divided between the Afar Region (which took the area of the Afar Depression in the east), Tigray Region (which took Wollo's northwestern corner), and Amhara Region (which absorbed the remainder, in the highlands). Within Amhara Region, the former territory of Wollo Province was divided into South Wollo (capital Dessie) and North Wollo (capital Woldeyia). See Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia: 1855-1974* (London: James Currey, 1996); and Alemneh Dejene, *Environment, Famine, and Politics in Ethiopia: a view from the village* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1990), 6.

[13] John Graham, "An Overview of SC UK Work in Ethiopia," January 2001, 1; Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, *The Challenges of Drought: Ethiopia's Decade of Struggle in Relief and Rehabilitation* (Addis Ababa: Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, 1985), 19.

[14] Peter D. Little et al,"'Moving in Place': Drought and Poverty Dynamics in South Wollo, Ethiopia," *Journal of Development Studies* 42, no. 2 (2006): 203.

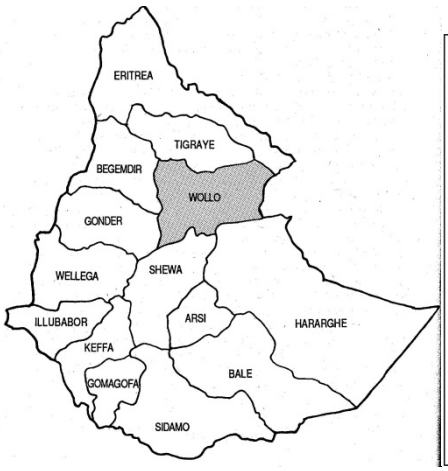

Figure 1: Administrative structure of Ethiopia prior to 1989, showing Wollo Province (Dejene 1990).

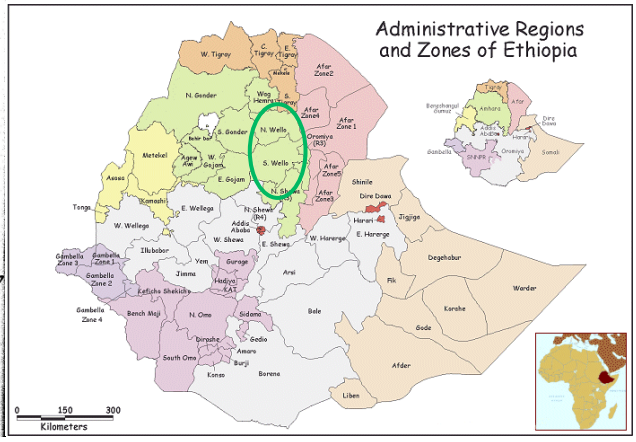

Figure 2: Current administrative structure of Ethiopia, showing North and South Wollo Zones in Amhara Region, highlighted in green (http://www.idp-uk.org/Resources/Maps/Administrative%20Regions/Ethiopia%20Map%20-%20Administrative%20Regions%20and%20Zones.gif, accessed June 4, 2012).

1997 by Save-UK in collaboration with the FAO's Global Information and Early Warning System (GIEWS), largely on the basis of the agency's research in Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan.[15] Ethiopia still figures prominently in Save-UK's work on humanitarian effectiveness, as in its 2007-11 collaboration with Save the Children-U.S. to examine the impact of American development and relief aid through a cluster of country-level studies.[16]

Given Save-UK's long involvement in Wollo, the thesis starts from the premise that the agency has had a unique opportunity for organizational learning about the impact of its nutrition and food security interventions over time, and thus the means, at least in theory, to turn "lessons learned" into improved program effectiveness. As a desk study intended to lay the groundwork for a larger project involving archival and field research, the thesis draws on the abundant academic and gray literatures on famine and food security in Ethiopia, combined with key informant interviews with Save-UK staff and the organization's published material on the region, to understand the first formative decade (1974-84) in the relationship between local knowledge of livelihood history—i.e. aid-receiving communities'

[15] The HEA has been widely adapted and refined, and it continues to be used for emergency needs assessment, early warning, livelihoods analysis, monitoring and evaluation, and many other purposes in sub-Saharan Africa, Central America, the Balkans and Asia. See John Seaman et al, *The Household Economy Approach: A Resource Manual for Practitioners* (London: Save the Children, 2000); Penny Holzmann et al, *The Household Economy Approach: A Guide for Programme Planners and Policy-Makers* (London: Save the Children, 2008); and the website of the Food Economy Group (www.feg-consulting.com), a consulting firm formed in 1998 to promote HEA.

[16] See Save the Children, *Modernizing Foreign Assistance: Insights from the Field—Ethiopia* (Washington, D.C.: Save the Children, 2009). Other countries in this initiative were Malawi, Tajikistan, Haiti, Liberia and Bangladesh.

knowledge of local food systems, agroecology, risk management, vulnerability, famine causation, coping strategies, etc.—and Save-UK's organizational learning about "best practices" in emergency nutrition and food security assistance. The larger project will seek to understand how and to what extent the agency has taken advantage of its unusual learning opportunity in Wollo, and particularly whether evolving methods of impact assessment for food security programming have demonstrably enhanced Save-UK's ability to protect the "lives and livelihoods of crisis-affected people" from 1974 to the present.

Today, North and South Wollo Zones exhibit unacceptably high rates of severe chronic and acute child malnutrition, and according to FEWSNET, levels of acute food insecurity ranging from stressed to crisis-level (see Figure 3).[17] Although there are no pre-1983 nutrition or food security baseline data to enable a statistically valid analysis of longitudinal trends, an array of secondary sources indicate that overall malnutrition and poverty levels in Wollo rose significantly between 1983 and 2008.[18] While commentators advance a range of explanations for Wollo's apparently deepening hunger crisis, most emphasize the lasting damage to household assets caused by the 1983-85 famine along with the region's historic (with climate change, worsening) susceptibility to drought. In the last five years, others have cited as a contributing factor problems related to the implementation in Wollo of Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP).[19] This thesis shifts the spotlight to the role of emergency nutrition and food interventions at a crucial moment in Wollo's food security history, and uses the Save-UK case study to investigate the relationship between one relief agency's efforts to assess and learn from the impact of its interventions, and the effectiveness over time of relief programming for the food security of Wollo households. Given the ongoing debate in the humanitarian sector about evaluation

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[17] See FEWSNET, *Ethiopia Food Security Outlook for March to June 2012* [http://www.fews.net/docs/Publications/Ethiopia_FSOU 2012_03_final.pdf, accessed July 24, 2012]. For studies with recent data on acute and chronic child malnutrition in several South Wollo districts, see Sarah Style, "History of Nutritional Status and Concern's Response in Dessie Zuria Woreda, Ethiopia," *Field Exchange* 40 (2011): 43-45; Bridget Fenn et al, "An evaluation of an operations research project to reduce childhood stunting in a food-insecure area in Ethiopia," *Public Health Nutrition* (2012) [Available on CJO 2012, doi:10.1017/S1368980012001115, accessed August 6, 2012]; and Anne M. Cafer, *A Survey of Agricultural Productivity and Nutritional Status in Rural South Wollo, Ethiopia*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Nebraska, 2011.

[18] See Kay Sharp et al, *Destitution in Ethiopia's Northeastern Highlands (Amhara National Regional State)* (Brighton & Addis Ababa: Institute for Development Studies/Save the Children UK, 2003); Stephen Devereux & Kay Sharp, "Trends in poverty and destitution in Wollo, Ethiopia," *Journal of Development Studies* 42, 4 (2006): 592-610; Peter Little et al, "'Moving in place': Drought and poverty dynamics in South Wollo, Ethiopia," *Journal of Development Studies* 42, 2 (2006): 200-225; Michael R. Carter et al, "Poverty traps and natural disasters in Ethiopia and Honduras," *World Development* 35, 5 (2007): 835-856.

[19] Ato Tsegahun Tessema et al, *Meket Livelihood Development Project Evaluation Report* (Addis Ababa: Save the Children UK, 2009). See also Daniel O. Gilligan et al, *The Impact of Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme and its Linkages* (Washington, D.C., IFPRI. 2008).

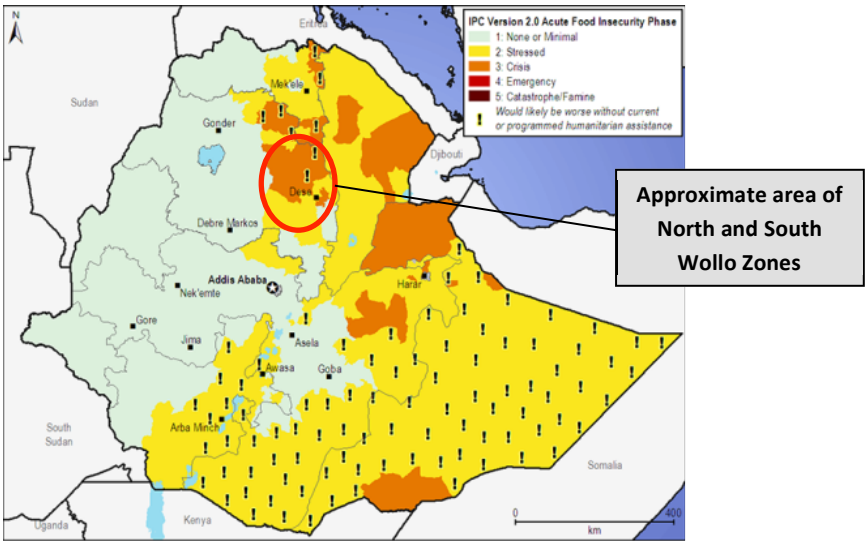

Figure 3: Current estimated levels of food insecurity for Ethiopia, December 2012 (FEWSNET, accessed January 2, 2013).

methods and "downward accountability" to aid recipients, along with important recent advances in participatory approaches to impact assessment, the thesis also aims to contribute to discussions about the advantages and limitations of grounding humanitarian evaluation of nutrition and food security interventions—and broader organizational learning in the food security and livelihoods sector— more firmly in local knowledge, particularly local knowledge of food systems and livelihood history.

c. Research Questions

The larger project addresses the following research questions:

(1) What can we learn from academic and grey literatures about rural livelihoods and food security in Wollo prior to the 1970s? What does this literature tell us about famine causation, the social dynamics of vulnerability, and local methods of agroecological and food supply management—for famine prevention and mitigation especially—before the arrival of Save-UK to Wollo? Such information, by pointing to local methods of understanding, preparing for, coping with and adapting to the challenging circumstances of agrarian life in Wollo, represents a potentially valuable resource for emergency needs assessment and response analysis. It can also provide a window on changing nutrition, food security and livelihood conditions prior to the study period (1974-84), not as a "baseline" so much as a dynamic and diverse profile of both resilient and vulnerable livelihoods in the past. How did rural households in Wollo prepare for and manage environmental (and other) shocks to their livelihood and food systems before the 1970s? How did this repertoire of strategies—and memories of their effectiveness—shape individual and household actions when severe drought struck in the early 1970s, and in response to

early relief interventions? How might Wollo residents conceptualize a "baseline" of food security and nutritional well-being that humanitarian assistance would ideally help them return to or rebuild?

(2) What role did Save-UK play during the 1972-74 famine in Wollo? How did the organization's previous history in Ethiopia shape its analysis of the crisis and its strategies for emergency response? What kinds of information guided its nutrition and food security interventions at this critical time? What direct or indirect roles did aid recipients play in this process? How might victims of this crisis themselves have explained the famine's causes and outcomes? This set of questions involves summarizing the prolific published material on the 1970s crisis, with the aim of examining Save-UK's actions in Wollo within the broader context of rural livelihood change—from the perspective of the famine's victims—as well as the agency's own history in Ethiopia. The latter draws on the limited published material on Save-UK's intervention in Ethiopia during the Italian invasion of the 1930s to sketch a "baseline" for humanitarian action in the 1972-74 Wollo famine—that is, institutional ideas and assumptions about Ethiopia's nutritional character that predisposed Save-UK to interpret events of the 1970s, and Ethiopian relief needs, in a particular way.

(3) What did Save-UK learn from its experience of the 1972-74 famine? How did the organization assess the impact of its interventions on nutrition levels, agrarian food systems, livelihood resilience, etc.? What direct or indirect roles did aid recipients play in this learning process? Did this organizational learning lead to any immediate programming changes for Save-UK in Ethiopia, given the devastating effects of the famine on rural production systems? As indicated above, the thesis assumes that the longevity of Save-UK's presence in Wollo would have made it difficult to avoid an evolving organizational understanding, from 1974 on, of the agroecological, economic and sociocultural context of the agency's relief work. However, understanding of local context is not the same as understanding local *knowledge*—for the purposes of this study, the knowledge systems and skills of farmers and pastoralists whose lives and livelihoods have been affected, directly or indirectly, by the distribution of humanitarian aid.[20] Nor does awareness of context guarantee organizational *learning*—the "process of knowledge-

[20] Robert Chambers defines "knowledge systems" as "including concepts, beliefs and perceptions, the stock of knowledge, and the processes whereby it is acquired, augmented, stored and transmitted" (Chambers, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* [Harlow: Longman, 1983], 83). The extensive and ongoing debate about the meaning of the terms "local knowledge," "indigenous knowledge," "people's science," etc. is beyond the scope of this study. My position on two issues in this debate is worth mentioning, however. (1) I understand "local knowledge" as dynamic, changeable and open to external influence; and (2) I assume "local knowledge" to be heterogeneous, differentially shared and internally contested—i.e. individuals within a community will, depending

based change through the questioning of means and/or ends of addressing problems… [manifested in] the acquisition of knowledge and reviewing of experience, leading towards the development and implementation of new rules and routines for the organization's actions."[21] This research question asks whether and to what extent Save-UK's first interventions in Wollo were grounded in an understanding of historical context, local livelihood knowledge, and/or a self-conscious commitment to knowledge-based programming and organizational learning. Did Save-UK seek to understand local perspectives on nutrition, food security and agriculture-based livelihoods? If so, did the agency strive to implement this knowledge in its initial food-related programming? Why or why not?

The above questions address one of the motivating concerns of the larger research project: to the extent that a relief agency such as Save-UK does try to incorporate local knowledge of food security and livelihood history into its emergency programming, does this knowledge make a difference to aid effectiveness, particularly in terms of protecting the longer-term livelihoods of aid recipients? Current literature on humanitarian accountability leaves little doubt that donor and NGO institutional culture, and the ideological underpinnings of Western humanitarian aid, continue to inhibit even the largest and most sophisticated organizations from fully integrating the expertise of "beneficiaries" into all stages of programming (see Part III, below). One of the reasons for taking a case study approach is the hope that, by focusing more closely on the experiences—and best (or worst) practices—of a single agency in a specific place over an extended period of time, it might be possible to come up with an alternative analytical framework for humanitarian organizational learning that genuinely centers the perceptions, priorities and expertise of aid recipients, even where the agency in question has not necessarily or consistently succeeded in doing so itself. Although the thesis tries to avoid counterfactual arguments, it is reasonable to assume that *not* granting aid recipients a role in planning, managing and evaluating humanitarian interventions runs the risk of compromising program effectiveness, and perhaps even harming lives and livelihoods in ways that cannot be undone. Aid recipients are aware when their knowledge is being neglected or devalued, and may hedge their bets on the utility of (or cynically re-purpose) relief assistance if they question its intent or appropriateness to their needs. In a context of protracted food crisis and long-term aid dependence such as Wollo, neglect of local knowledge may also

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on their identity and social position, have different access to and different views on the "concepts, beliefs and perceptions (etc.)" of that community's knowledge system.

[21] Andrea Binder, "Humanitarian Performance through the Implementation of Lessons Learned (Draft)," (Berlin: Global Public Policy Institute, 2008), 2.

have the effect of undermining and ultimately erasing the historical repertoire of livelihood skills, strategies and expertise on which communities once relied for independent survival.

* * * * *

Since the thesis is intended to contribute to a larger research project on the history of food security and livelihood change in a setting of protracted crisis such as northeast Ethiopia, where humanitarian assistance has become indispensable to many households' survival, the conclusion will present questions raised by findings about the critical early years in Wollo's relationship with Save the Children-UK. An additional practical concern involves what we can learn from this case study about strengthening impact assessment methods for humanitarian nutrition and food security programming, particularly through the more systematic, equitable and historically informed integration of aid-receiving communities in humanitarian information and evaluation systems.

II. Methodology

a. Sources

Ethiopia's extraordinarily well-documented early history combined with Wollo's long and tragic experience with famine means that there is an abundance of both academic and grey literature on agricultural and environmental change, food security and nutrition, politics and policy, and development and humanitarian activities in this region. Economic approaches dominate this literature, particularly in historical scholarship, and work from sociologists and anthropologists is more rare. However, much of the writing influenced by livelihood studies at least touches on the important social and cultural dimensions of food security history in Wollo. Presentist concerns such as the impact of a particular disaster (e.g. the 1983-85 famine), policy (e.g. resettlement, the PSNP), national political event (e.g. the downfall of the Derg, the war with Eritrea) or global crisis (e.g. the 2007-08 food price spikes) tend to drive trends in scholarly, practitioner and popular literature alike—producing, for instance, a sub-genre of famine journalism, including a handful of "famine memoirs" from the 1972-74 crisis. However, even the more politicized examples of writing motivated by current events can be useful, if read carefully, for illuminating social, agroecological and institutional processes on the ground. For example, Save-UK's prominent presence in Wollo from the mid-1970s on means that the agency often figures as an actor—sometimes benevolent, sometimes not—in journalists' famine stories.

Save-UK itself has generated a rich body of material on Wollo nutrition and livelihood trends, dating especially from the early 1990s. Sponsored research projects involving household-level data collection have led to such important publications as Julius Holt and Mark Lawrence's *Making Ends*

Meet: A survey of the food economy of the Ethiopian northeast highlands (1993); Kay Sharp, Stephen Devereux and Yared Amare's *Destitution in Ethiopia's Northeastern Highlands* (a.k.a. the "Destitution Study") (2003); Arabella Duffield et al's *Thin on the Ground: Questioning the evidence behind World Bank-funded community nutrition projects in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Uganda* (2003); and Claire Chastre et al's *The Minimum Cost of a Healthy Diet: Findings from piloting a new methodology in four study locations* (2007). In addition, Save-UK's influential Household Economy Approach (HEA) framework for food security analysis—which the organization piloted in 1998 as a method for assessing the impact of food aid in Wollo—has generated a prolific body of writing on its own, including detailed practitioner manuals and reviews of the framework and its application in specific contexts. While these materials are mainly useful for the post-1984 period, many of them contain both some primary data and analysis of the dynamics of food insecurity, malnutrition and poverty in Wollo in the 1974-84 period.

Finally, key informant interviews conducted with past and current Save-UK Ethiopia staff, consultants, evaluators and researchers add fascinating depth to processes and politics of organizational learning at the country and local levels. These oral sources can be deeply politicized too, even (perhaps especially) when key informants are recalling events from as long ago as the 1970s or '80s, and are influenced by hindsight and knowledge of developments in Ethiopia and Wollo itself since their last posting there. Again, though, interviews (if used carefully) are essential for getting at "offstage" perceptions and realities of humanitarian organizational learning that agencies themselves might not think or choose to document in writing, and that we could not know otherwise.

b. Limitations of the study

Given the constraints of a desk study, and the multicausal nature of malnutrition and food crisis, the thesis cannot establish a systematically evidence-based causal link between Save-UK operations in Wollo and "changes in people's lives…that result from a humanitarian project "—in other words, it cannot attempt an impact assessment of its own, especially for the first decade of Save-UK's operations in Wollo. Without fieldwork and research in Save-UK, Save the Children International (SCI) and Ethiopian district- and provincial archives, there is much missing from discussion of Save-UK operations, perceptions and learning processes in Parts VI and VII below. However, the published and oral sources described above provide enough information to form a preliminary sketch of the intertwined histories of Save-UK organizational learning, local livelihoods knowledge, and food security in Wollo between 1974 and 1984, and to identify key areas for future investigation.

III. Literature Review

The subject of this thesis touches on several themes in literatures within and beyond the field of humanitarian studies, including organizational learning and accountability; monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment methods; theories of famine causation; emergency nutrition and food security programming; and African agricultural, environmental and social history. Because there is far too much material on each of these themes to summarize them all fully here, the review presented below will highlight key points in the academic and grey literatures on two topics: (1) the emergence of, and debates around, methods of impact assessment for the humanitarian sector; and (2) impact assessment for humanitarian nutrition and food security programming.

a. Humanitarian impact assessment (HIA): origins, challenges & debates

> *The ultimate test of humanitarian action is not what was intended by humanitarians, but whether the results are judged positive by the beneficiaries themselves….*
>
> Larry Minear, *Humanitarianism Under Siege* (1991)

> *Another principal conclusion drawn from the Study is that the present accountability mechanisms within the humanitarian aid system are quite inadequate…. While accountability to donors is important, it should not be forgotten that relief agencies should also be accountable to the populations they are seeking to assist. The Team was struck by the very limited attempts by agencies to obtain the views of beneficiaries on the assistance they were provided with….*
>
> Steering Committee of the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda, *The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience* (1996)[22]

> *Humanitarian agencies have multiple accountabilities, and there is always a danger that "upwards" accountability can squeeze out accountability to other stakeholders, particularly beneficiaries.*
>
> ALNAP, *Humanitarian Action in Drought-Related Emergencies* (2011)

Although interest in impact assessment in the development sector arose as early as the 1950s,[23] until the 1990s "few humanitarian organizations thought to measure the consequences of their

[22] Steering Committee of the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda (JEEAR), *The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience—Synthesis Report* (1996), Ch. 3 (http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/32/7/50189495.pdf, accessed June 25, 2012), 31.

[23] Chris Roche, *Impact Assessment for Development Agencies: Learning to Value Change* (Oxford, Oxfam UK, 1999), 164.

actions"—according to some, because of the presumed benevolence of relief work.[24] It was only in the mid 1990s, when international relief agencies faced a groundswell of critique for their actions in Somalia, Bosnia and Rwanda, that growing concern with effectiveness and accountability fuelled interest in impact assessment for humanitarian operations.[25] Unlike in the development sphere, however, discussions of humanitarian impact from the outset tended, as the quotes above suggest, to be "beneficiary"-centred, referring to the importance of "downward" as well as "upward" accountability—that is, of providing evidence of positive results not only to donors but also to recipients of emergency aid. To a lesser extent at this time, discussions of downward accountability also mentioned the need to involve aid recipients in project and program evaluations, to ensure that interventions were meeting their objectives and, if not, adjusted to make meaningful improvements.[26] Other, broader trends in the 1990s converged to intensify the pressure on humanitarian agencies to define, measure and assess the impact of their work, notably the dramatic rise in the overall volume of emergency assistance,[27] accompanied by a desire by funders for greater scrutiny over how those funds were spent; the rapid increase in the size and number of relief agencies; the shift toward stricter performance metrics and results-based managerial regimes among Western governments, donors and non-governmental organizations (NGOs);[28] and the birth of a number of initiatives to improve accountability and

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[24] K. Proudlock, B. Ramalingam, et al, *Improving humanitarian impact assessment: bridging theory and practice* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2009), 9. See also Barbara Harrell-Bond, *Imposing Aid: Emergency Assistance to Refugees* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). According to Harrell-Bond, "As relief is a gift, it is not expected that anyone (most especially the recipients) should examine the quality or quantity of what is given" (xii).

[25] Critiques of the humanitarian sector from this time include Minear, *Humanitarianism Under Siege*; David Keen, *The Benefits of Famine: A Political Economy of Famine and Relief in Southwestern Sudan 1983–1989* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Mark Duffield, "The Political Economy of Internal War: Asset transfer, complex emergencies and international aid," in J. Macrae & A. Zwi (eds.), *War and Hunger: Rethinking International Responses to Complex Emergencies* (London: Zed Books, 1994); Mark Duffield, "The Symphony of the Damned: Racial discourse, complex political emergencies and humanitarian aid," *Disasters* 20, 3 (1996): 173-93; Alex de Waal, *Famine Crimes: Politics & the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Jonathan Moore (ed.), *Hard Choices: Moral Dilemmas in Humanitarian Intervention* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997); Peter Uvin, *Aiding Violence: The Development Enterprise in Rwanda* (Sterling: Kumarian Press, 1998); May Anderson, *Do no Harm. How Aid can Support Peace – or War* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1999)..

[26] Alistair Hallam, *Evaluating Humanitarian Assistance Programmes in Complex Emergencies* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 1998), 11.

[27] Between 1990 and 2000, official humanitarian aid doubled in real terms, from $2.1 billion to $5.9 billion; it also increased as a proportion of total official development assistance, from 5.83% to 10.5%. See Joanna Macrae et al, *Uncertain Power: The Changing Role of Official Donors in Humanitarian Action* (London: Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute, 2002), 3.

[28] See Macrae et al, *Uncertain Power*; Hofmann et al, *Measuring the Impact of Humanitarian Aid*, 4; Sadhvi Dar & Bill Cooke (eds.), *The New Development Management: Critiquing the Dual Modernization* (London: Zed Books,

professionalism in the humanitarian system.[29] The latter development, which involved the creation of collective performance standards (including in most cases an explicit commitment to improved evaluation systems), gave rise to the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief (published 1994), People in Aid (established 1995), the Sphere Project's Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response (launched in 1997), and the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP, founded in 1997 following the multi-agency evaluation of response to the Rwanda genocide). As interest in tracking and evaluating humanitarian performance quickened in the early 2000s, new initiatives and organizations included the Fritz Institute Humanitarian Impact Project (founded 2001),the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International (HAP International, founded 2003), the Emergency Capacity Building Project (founded 2003), and DARA (founded 2003) .

Yet for all the evidence of collective good will, and general acceptance of the need to build an evidence base for the relative effectiveness of various types of interventions, a "significant gap between the rhetoric of impact assessment and the reality"[30] seems to have characterized humanitarian evaluation efforts through the 2000s. In 2004, Hofmann et al concluded that "assessment of impact is… consistently poor" in the humanitarian sector, while a 2006 report described HIA in general as insufficiently rigorous.[31] Key findings published in a series of ALNAP reviews over the next several years confirmed that this tension between promise and practice endured, and to a considerable extent continues to this day. For instance: "Humanitarian impact assessment is still relatively unusual, often being perceived as too difficult and too expensive" (2009); "Despite…some real improvements within agencies in how they carry out evaluations, there remains a feeling among many in the sector that the

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2008); Chris Mowles et al, "What contribution can insights from the complexity sciences make to the theory and practice of development management?" *Journal of International Development* 20, 6 (2008): 804-820.

[29] Peter Walker & Daniel Maxwell, *Shaping the Humanitarian World* (New York: Routledge, 2009), Ch. 6.

[30] Cathy Watson, *Impact Assessment of Humanitarian Response: A review of the literature* (Addis Ababa: Feinstein International Center, 2008), 4-5.

[31] Charles-Antoine Hofmann et al, *Measuring the Impact of Humanitarian Aid: A review of current practice*, HPG Research Report (London: Humanitarian Practice Group, 2004), 1; Center for Global Development (CGD), *When Will We Ever Learn? Improving Lives through Impact Evaluation: Report of the Evaluation Gap Working Group* (Washington, D.C., Center for Global Development, 2006). See also Hallam, *Evaluating Humanitarian Assistance Programmes*; and Fritz Institute, *Evidence of Impact: Challenges and New Directions*, Proceedings of the 2006 Impact Conference (Sebastopol, California: Fritz Institute, 2006). See also James Darcy, *Acts of faith? Thoughts on the effectiveness of humanitarian action* (London: Overseas Development Institute, Humanitarian Policy Group, 2005).

full potential benefit of humanitarian evaluations is not being realised" (2011).[32] And as ALNAP's just-released *State of the Humanitarian System 2012* (SOHS) laconically notes, "there are very few examples of *true* outcome/impact evaluation of humanitarian assistance."[33]

Typically, commentators attribute this "rhetoric-reality gap" to the uniquely challenging practical and methodological constraints that emergencies pose for evaluation activities of any kind, and for impact assessment especially. Chief among the constraints discussed in the literature are:[34]

- Acute crisis situations create extreme time pressure and urgency to prioritize the immediate survival needs of disaster-affected people over data collection for evaluation purposes.

- The grueling, volatile and often dangerous circumstances of relief work can make reliable information difficult to come by and prevent accurate prediction and planning for the full spectrum of aid needs. New crises may occur while an intervention is in progress. The operational environment may also prevent accurate understanding of "normal" social and physical conditions for disaster-affected populations, especially in protracted crises. Both issues undermine an agency's ability to define impact objectives with certainty at the outset of an intervention.

- The presence of multiple actors/agencies from many countries, with different perspectives and goals, can cause tension and reduce operational efficiency; conflict situations may also polarize perspectives, leading to opposing interpretations of events on the ground.

- Often, the goal of humanitarian assistance is to "avert negative change" (e.g. prevent death) rather than to achieve positive results. Only counterfactual assessment (i.e. "What might have happened in the absence of the intervention?") is possible in this situation.

- Humanitarian aid also involves intangible support such as dignity and protection, which are difficult to measure.

- The organizational culture of aid agencies "often values action over analysis" and may "promote defensive behavior and a culture of blame" rather than a willingness to evaluate objectively.

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[32] Proudlock et al, *Improving humanitarian impact assessment*, 2; Alistair Hallam, *Harnessing the Power of Evaluation in Humanitarian Action: An initiative to improve understanding and use of evaluation*, ALNAP Working Paper (London: ALNAP, 2011), 1.

[33] ALNAP, *The State of the Humanitarian System 2012* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2012), 17 (my emphasis).

[34] This list is compiled from ALNAP, *Humanitarian Action: Improving Performance through Improved Learning* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2002); ALNAP, *Annual Review 2003. Humanitarian Action: Improving Monitoring To Enhance Accountability and Learning* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2003); ALNAP, *Evaluating humanitarian action using the OECD-DAC criteria: An ALNAP guide for humanitarian agencies* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2006), 15; CGD, *When Will We Ever Learn?*; Chris Roche, *Impact Assessment for Development Agencies: Learning to Value Change* (Oxford: Oxfam UK, 1999); Hofmann et al 2004; Arabella Duffield et al, *Review of the published literature for the impact and cost-effectiveness of six nutrition related emergency interventions* (London: Emergency Nutrition Network, 2004); Tayech Yimmer et al, "Difficulties of Impact Assessment in 'Semi-Emergencies.'" *Field Exchange* 27 (2006); Watson 2008.

- Short-term funding mechanisms, high rates of staff turnover and weak interagency cooperation hinder sustained processes of organizational learning.

- Lack of baseline data prevents accurate measurement of change (from before to after the intervention) in the lives and livelihoods of aid recipients.

- Ethical concerns (e.g. inappropriateness of using a control group in an emergency context) and logistical realities (e.g. presence of multiple NGOs in program area) prevent use of "gold standard" evaluation methods such as randomized trials, making it difficult to attribute change to a particular intervention.

- Insufficient training of field staff in standardized methodologies can result in poorly implemented data collection and unreliable analysis.

HIA also poses a set of methodological challenges that arise principally from a definitional ambiguity that both raises and skirts around some contentious debates in the field of emergency aid. Not only is "impact" itself "not a value-free, neutral term,"[35] but its definition also depends on how one understands the context, objectives and scope of humanitarian action—distinctions that rest in turn on one's position within the system as a whole. Impact on what, for what, by what measure, against what reference, on what time frame? Answers to these questions depend on whether the objectives of emergency aid are limited to the immediate goal of saving lives or also extend to supporting livelihoods, a decision that may or may not be articulated or known at the outset of an intervention. They also depend on the express purpose for which an assessment is being conducted (what is being evaluated—a project, program, sector, country-wide intervention, the "humanitarian system"?) and the stakeholders who will have access to the findings (donors, aid agencies, donor publics, media, national governments, targeted beneficiaries, the entire crisis-affected population?).[36] Moreover, the most transformative or lasting consequences of an intervention may not be visible until long after the program has wrapped up, and because the change process may be "cyclical or iterative"[37] rather than straightforward, effects visible at one moment in time may turn out to be ephemeral or secondary to changes yet to emerge.

The situational contingency of impact's meaning contributes to the inconsistency in system-wide attempts to define the term for user purposes. For instance, the Sphere Project's definition of impact as "the wider effects of interventions in the short to medium term, positive or negative, intended or

[35] Hofmann et al, 7.
[36] Hofmann et al, 10; Watson, 9ff; Proudlock et al, 13ff.
[37] Watson 2008, 4.

unintended,"[38] differs in important ways from ALNAP's temporally more expansive but empirically narrower (and technically more precise) definition, stated recently as "the measurement of long-term changes in conditions attributable to interventions."[39] Yet both draw on the OECD-DAC definition of impact, which was identified as one of five core evaluation criteria for the development sector in the early 1990s, then adapted as one of seven criteria for evaluation in complex emergencies in 1999:

> *Impact* looks at the wider effects of the project—social, economic, technical, environmental—on individuals, gender and age-groups, communities, and institutions. Impacts can be immediate and long range, intended and unintended, positive and negative, macro (sector) and micro (household).[40]

Significantly, ALNAP *dropped* "impact" from the list of criteria used for its 2012 system-wide evaluation of humanitarian performance, "in recognition of the challenge of evaluating/attributing impact in the context of humanitarian programming and the general lack of data"[41] (see Table 1).

Definitional ambiguities foster not only what some commentators have described as a "methodological anarchy"[42] in HIA, but also great uncertainty about the most suitable way to conceptualize and measure impact in emergency contexts. Definition of impact dictates how—with what specific methods and indicators—an intervention's consequences will be identified and assessed.

Aid Evaluation Criteria, 1990s-2012		
OECD-DAC (1990s)	**OECD-DAC 1999/ ALNAP (2006)**	**ALNAP (2012)**
Development	**Complex Emergencies**	**Humanitarian System**
efficiency	efficiency	efficiency
effectiveness	effectiveness	effectiveness
impact	impact	--
sustainability	--	--
relevance	relevance/ appropriateness	relevance/ appropriateness
	coherence	coherence
	coverage	coverage/sufficiency
	connectedness	connectedness

Table 1: Evolution of performance criteria for evaluating emergency interventions.

[38] The Sphere Project, Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response (Rugby: Practical Action Publishing, 2011), 70.
[39] ALNAP, *State of the Humanitarian System 2012*, 17.
[40] OECD-DAC, *Guidance for Evaluating Humanitarian Assistance in Complex Emergencies* (Paris: OECD, 1999), 22.
[41] Glyn Taylor et al, *Inception paper for State of the System Review 2012: Humanitarian Outcomes* (London: ALNAP), 9. See also ALNAP, *Evaluating humanitarian action using the OECD-DAC criteria*.
[42] OECD-DAC, *Guidance for Evaluating Humanitarian Assistance in Complex Emergencies*, 2, quoted in Proudlock et al, 10.

What evidence matters for which kinds of changes, how that information will be gathered and analyzed, from whose perspective it will be understood—such decisions must frame the selection of impact measures, but they require a careful operational definition of impact first. Problematic definitions of impact, then, generate equally problematic conceptual frameworks, methods and indicators. For instance, what the Sphere and ALNAP definitions have in common, besides their frustratingly vague language, is their rootedness in the "results chain" framework of results-based management (RBM) (Figure 4). For humanitarian purposes, this framework analytically separates relief interventions from their local context, positions aid recipients as passive objects, strips them of social identity and autonomous agency, and asserts top-down, unidirectional causality in processes of change. Even the most recent iterations of this framework for HIA perpetuate this way of thinking (see Figures 5 and 6).[43] Such approaches also ignore the crucial matter of *meaning:* how an intervention is experienced dialectically through the cultural attitudes, values and worldviews of people whose lives are affected by it, on any timescale. These criticisms are not new, but the humanitarian community continues to struggle with their implications for how impact should be defined and measured, and no alternative framework has yet emerged. Moreover, because of the challenges to HIA listed above, relief agencies still gravitate toward using indicators that relate to project/program implementation (inputs, activities, outputs) rather than effects (outcomes, impacts). Proxy indicators of impact are sometimes used, but these require a sound evidence base to establish causal connection with longer-term effects.[44] The result, as ALNAP's SOHS 2012 notes, is that although "there is more acceptance of the idea that impact evaluation is important," there is as yet "no standard treatment of the criterion" for measuring it, and in a significant number of cases the concept is conflated with that of effectiveness."[45]

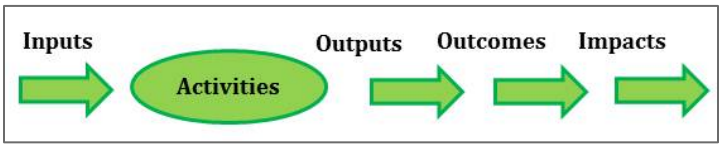

Figure 4: The "results chain," a widely used conceptual framework for evaluation originating in Logical Framework Analysis in the 1990s and central to "results-based management" today. Impact is viewed as the final step in linear chain of results.

[43] Roche 26ff; Hofmann et al, 8; Watson, 3-4; Proudlock et al, 16.
[44] Proudlock et al, 21-24; Watson, 22; Andy Catley et al, *Participatory Impact Assessment: A Guide for Practitioners* (Medford: Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, 2008), 20-21.
[45] ALNAP, *State of the Humanitarian System 2012*, 65. Another frequently cited reason for the emphasis on evaluating project implementation rather than impact is the increasing strictness of donor demands for financial accountability and cost-effectiveness, measured in terms of goods or services delivered (Burns & Catley, "Participatory Approaches to Impact Assessment," 63).

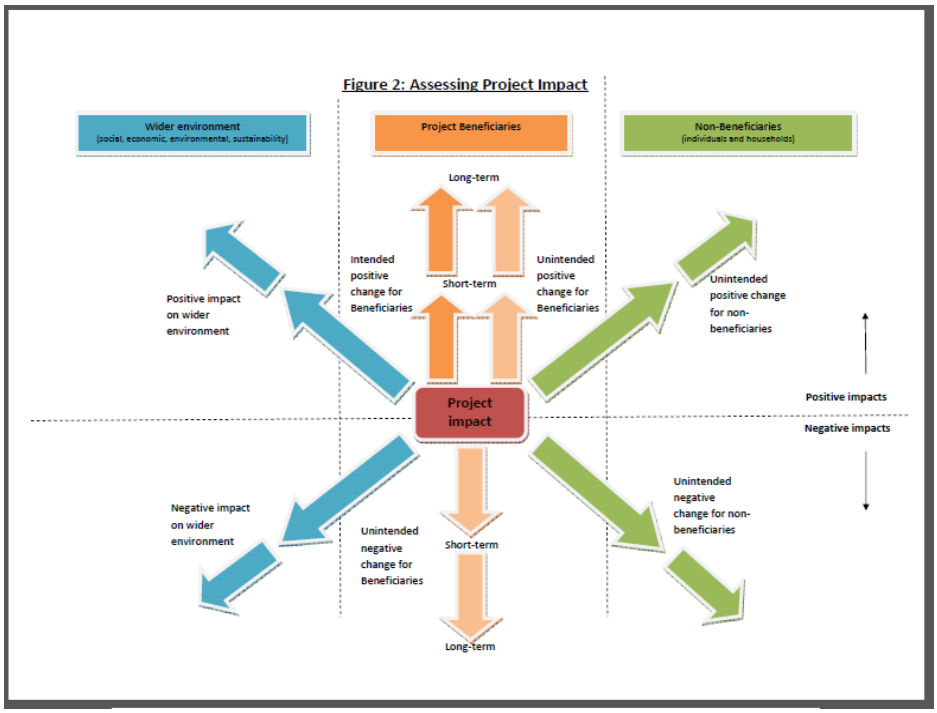

Figure 5: Framework for assessing multiple dimensions of humanitarian project impact (from Watson 2008, 7). While recognizing the wider and unintended ripple effects of an intervention, this framework still positions "beneficiaries" on the receiving end of a linear, one-way process.

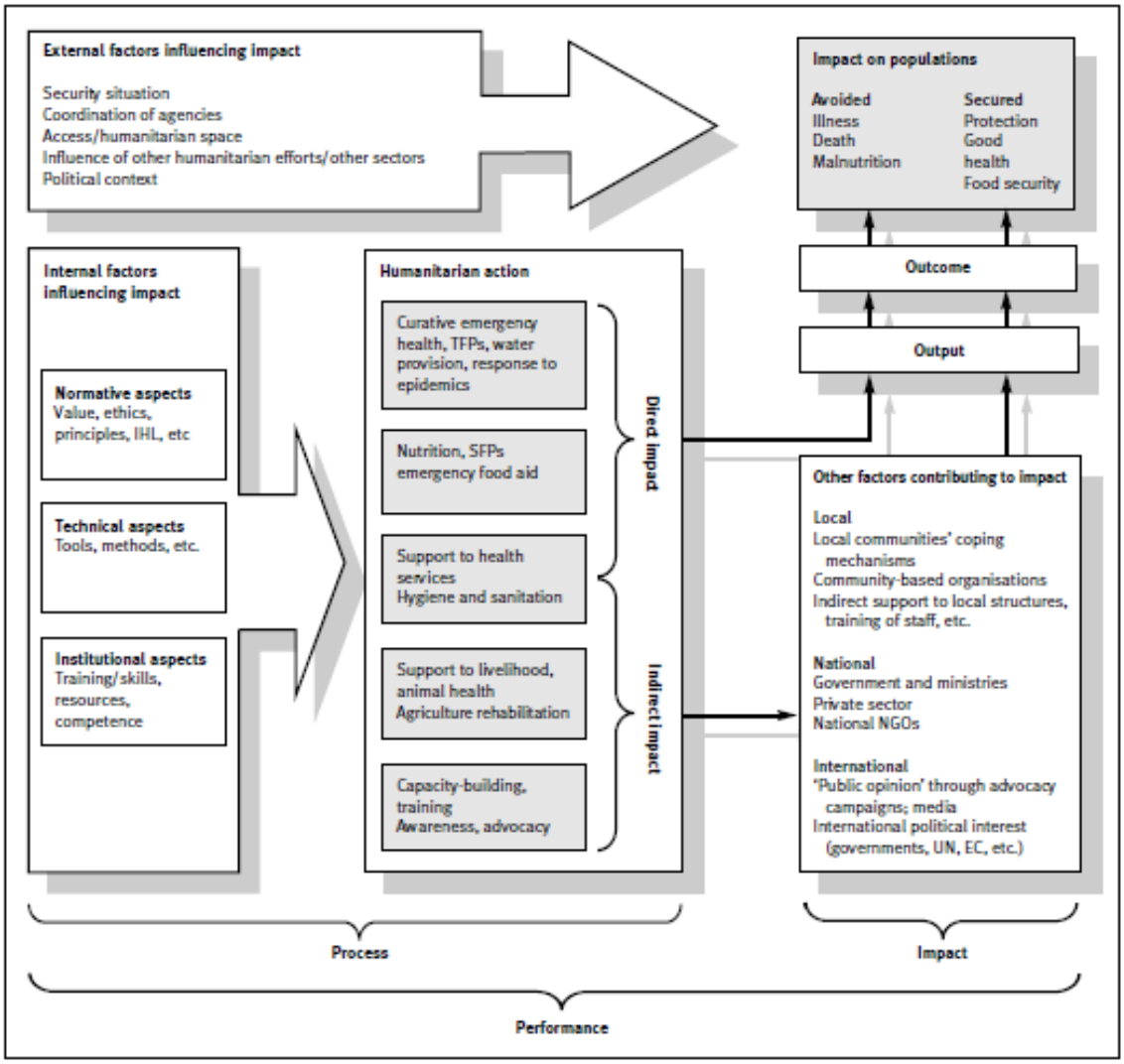

Figure 6: Another framework for assessing the dimensions of humanitarian impact (from Hofmann et al, 2004, 9). "Impact on populations" is still the final box in the results chain, though here the chain also includes factors external to the intervention.

In response to the growing realization that the relief sector also needed "'context-in' approaches, which start with people and changes in their lives, and then work back towards causality,"[46] participatory methods of HIA began to emerge in the early 2000s. These methods drew on innovations in development practice and theory pioneered by Robert Chambers and others in the 1980s, which produced a new generation of "people-centred" research methodologies—Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), and Participatory Learning and Action (PLA)—based principally on qualitative techniques of data collection. These approaches started from the premise that the

[46] Hofmann et al, 8.

knowledge and analytical perspectives of poor people themselves should drive development projects and programs.[47] (Another variant of this view from the same period is Paul Richards' "people's science," which advocated that development academics and practitioners learn from smallholder farmers' agroecological knowledge systems before trying to teach them anything new).[48] Early applications of participatory techniques in humanitarian settings appeared during the 1990s, but the real push in this area began in the early 2000s under the leadership of researchers at the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University, through assessments of emergency human health and livestock interventions in Ethiopia, Sudan, Mali, Niger, Malawi and Zimbabwe.[49] The most important outcome of this initiative was the publication in 2008 of a practitioner's guide to conducting project-level participatory impact assessment of livelihood interventions in the humanitarian sector.[50] With an eight-stage assessment method serving as a "generic and flexible methodology" rather than a fixed blueprint indifferent to the uniqueness of local contexts, this guide offered practical, "beneficiary"-centred solutions to the core dilemmas of HIA: attribution, weak or non-existent baseline data, and how to conceptualize impact through community-based rather than externally imposed indicators. With this new articulation of

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[47] Chambers and his colleagues at the University of Sussex were the chief proponents of this approach—see Chambers' *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (Harlow: Longman, 1983); with Arnold Pacey & Lori Ann Thrupp (eds.), *Farmer First: Farmer Innovation and Agricultural Research* (London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1989); *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the Last First* (London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1997); and *Revolutions in Development Inquiry* (London: Earthscan, 2008). Academic literature and practitioner manuals on participatory methods for agricultural research especially abound. See, for example, D. Brokensha et al, *Indigenous knowledge systems and development* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1980); J.N. Pretty et al, *A Trainer's Guide for Participatory Learning and Action* (London: International Institute for Environment and Development, 1995); M. B. Anderson & P. J. Woodrow, *Rising from the Ashes: Development Strategies in Times of Disaster* (Boulder: Lynne Riener Publishers, 1998); A. Cornwall & G. Pratt (eds.), *Pathways to Participation: Reflections on Participatory Rural Appraisal* (London: Practical Action, 2004).

[48] See especially Paul Richards, *Indigenous Agricultural Revolution: Ecology and Food Production in West Africa* (Boulder; Westview Press, 1985).

[49] Burns & Catley, "Participatory Approaches to Impact Assessment,"65. The methodology was also influenced by ActionAid's "soft systems" participatory assessment approaches in Somaliland in the mid 1990s. Publications from this initiative include D. Abebe et al, "Using Participatory Impact Assessment (PIA) to inform policy: Lessons from Ethiopia," in I. Scoones et al (eds.), *Farmer First Revisited* (London: Practical Action Publishing, 2009), 296-300; D. Abebe et al, "Impact of a commercial destocking relief intervention in Moyale district, southern Ethiopia," *Disasters* 32, 2 (2008): 167-189; J.C. Burns & O. W. Suji, *Impact Assessment of the Chical Integrated Recovery Action Project, Niger* (Medford: Feinstein International Center, 2007); J.C. Burns & O. W. Suji, *Impact Assessment of the Gokwe Integrated Recovery Action Project Zimbabwe* (Medford: Feinstein International Center, 2007); J.C. Burns & O. W. Suji, *Impact Assessment of the Zimbabwe Dams and Gardens Project* (Medford: Feinstein International Center, 2007); G. Bekele & T. Abera, *Livelihoods-based Drought Response in Ethiopia: Impact Assessment of Livestock Feed Supplementation* (Medford: Feinstein International Center, 2008); A. Catley et al, "Impact of drought-related vaccination on livestock mortality in pastoralist areas of Ethiopia," Disasters 33, 4 (2009).

[50] Andy Catley et al, *Participatory Impact Assessment: A Guide for Practitioners* (Medford: Feinstein International Center, 2008).

participatory humanitarian impact assessment (PHIA) as a research methodology, relief agencies had a valuable resource for bridging the "rhetoric-reality gap" in accountability efforts, and for putting into practice Sphere's dictum that "the affected people are the best judges of change in their lives."[51]

A commitment to the principle and practice of PHIA has certainly grown across the humanitarian sector since the mid 2000s, with enough successes to its credit that Hofmann et al's bleak 2004 observation that "the humanitarian system is largely ignorant of the views of affected people as to the assistance being provided"[52] no longer holds true across the board. The experiences, voices and perspectives of people on the receiving end of emergency aid are at the core of such recent "downward accountability" initiatives as the CDA's Listening Project (begun 2005),[53] the Emergency Capacity Building Project's 2007 *Good Enough Guide*,[54] DARA's Humanitarian Response Index (launched 2007),[55] and the People First Impact Method (introduced 2010). The latter, commended in ALNAP's SOHS 2012, was used by several major NGOs to evaluate responses to the Haiti earthquake and interventions in Darfur and South Sudan.[56] More organizations are using participatory tools for humanitarian M&E activities, operating complaints mechanisms, and recognizing the value of contextualized, "mixed method" approaches that embrace a blend of quantitative and qualitative sources of information and, in some cases, let indigenous knowledge inform program improvements.[57] In this respect, methods that combine standardized, repeatable techniques of qualitative data collection with conventional sampling strategies and statistical tests, and that allow construction of retrospective baselines and tracking of change over time, represent a critical watershed in the humanitarian field (see Table 2). Indeed, more and more agencies are concluding that, when implemented well, approaches that "increase the inclusion of and accountability to disaster-affected people" build greater trust with local communities and enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of humanitarian operations.[58] Some studies have

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[51] Sphere 2011, 70.
[52] Hofmann et al, 32.
[53] CDA, *The Listening Project Issue Paper: Whose Development?* (Cambridge: CDA, 2011); CDA, *Feedback Mechanisms in International Assistance Organizations* (Cambridge: CDA, 2011).
[54] Emergency Capacity Building Project, *The Good Enough Guide: Impact Measurement and Accountability in Emergencies* (Oxford: Oxfam, 2007).
[55] See http://daraint.org/humanitarian-response-index/humanitarian-response-index-2011/.
[56] ALNAP, *SOHS 2012*, 65.
[57] Helen Banos Smith, *The right to a say and the duty to respond: The impact of complaints and response mechanisms on humanitarian action* (Geneva: The Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International, 2009); ALNAP, *Humanitarian Action in Drought-Related Emergencies*, ALNAP Lessons Papers (London: ALNAP**,** 2011), 7; Boku Tache, *Participatory Impacts Assessment of Drought Reserve Areas in Guji and Borana Zones, Oromia Region* (Addis Ababa: Save the Children USA, 2010).
[58] ALNAP, *Humanitarian Action in Drought-Related Emergencies*, 7. On the need for mixed-method approaches in time-pressed settings, see M. Bamberger et al. "Shoestring Evaluation: Designing Impact Evaluations under Budget,

found that PHIA methods—especially those for generating community-based indicators—can yield more accurate results than quantitative surveys, attribute change more convincingly, and reveal effects of interventions not visible via traditional methods.[59] There are also examples of PIA findings influencing policy, as in Feinstein researchers' successful translation of assessment results from a pastoralist livelihoods project in Ethiopia into improved public support for Community Animal Health Workers.[60]

Participatory Qualitative Data Collection Tools
interactive workshops
focus groups
semi-structured interviews
historical timelines
critical event analysis
simple ranking & scoring (income, food sources)
before & after scoring
scoring against a nominal baseline
before & after proportional piling
matrix scoring
pair-wise ranking
ladder or step scoring
impact flow diagram
community mapping
well-being mapping
impact calendars (seasonal)
daily routines
time-savings benefits
radar diagrams
network diagrams
transect walks

Table 2: A list of methods recommended for participatory impact assessment.[61]

Time and Data Constraints," *American Journal of Evaluation* 25, 1 (2004): 5-37; Cesar G. Victora et al, "Evidence-Based Public Health: Moving Beyond Randomized Trials," *American Journal of Public Health* 94, 3 (2004): 400-406.

[59] Catley et al, "Impact of drought-related vaccination on livestock mortality in pastoralist areas of Ethiopia"; Burns & Catley, "Participatory Approaches to Impact Assessment;" Robert Chambers & Linda Mayoux, "Reversing the Paradigm: Quantification and Participatory Methods," presented at "New Directions in Impact Assessment for Development: Methods and Practice" conference, University of Manchester, 2003. For an important study of the advantages of participatory wealth-ranking from the development sector, see Sarah White & Jethro Petit, "Participatory Methods and the Measurement of Wellbeing," *Participatory Learning and Action* 50 (2004): 88-96.

[60] Abebe et al, "Using Participatory Impact Assessment (PIA) to inform policy."

[61] Catley et al, *Participatory Impact Assessment*. See also Irene Guijt, *Participatory Monitoring and Impact Assessment of Sustainable Agriculture Initiatives*, SARL Discussion Paper, 1998; M. Estrella & J. Gaventa, *Who Counts Reality? Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation:A Literature Review* (London: Institute of Development

And yet, PHIA is still in many ways a work in progress, especially beyond the project and program levels. "Participation" is no less broad, subjective or context-dependent a notion than "impact," and the obstacles impeding fulfillment of PHIA's most radical goals—empowerment of the poor in organizational planning and decision-making, reversal of conventional hierarchies of expertise—are many and daunting. Intra-community and intra-household power dynamics, social inequalities and cultural biases—often aggravated in situations of conflict—can prevent a fully representative range of local actors from engaging in public discussion and/or result in one-sided (typically elite-dominated) interpretations.[62] (Women, the elderly, youth, ethnic minorities, the disabled, and people living with HIV/AIDS are groups likely to be marginalized in many contexts).[63] Moreover, as critics note, the application of the concept of "participation" varies across organizations, emergency settings and stages of the project cycle. In most cases, participation still consists mainly of aid recipients supplying information rather than actively contributing to—let alone initiating or managing—the design, planning, implementation or evaluation of humanitarian interventions.[64] Rarely treated as "end-users" of a service with a right to obtain feedback on evaluation results or make recommendations for change, recipients are often not wholly (or uniformly) aware of the aid process itself—"who is entitled, what they are entitled to, how they can access it and who to contact if they encounter problems accessing it."[65] With the persistence of these challenges at the project/program level, it is difficult to imagine recipients' voices reaching the ears of sectoral, country-level or system-wide decision-makers in an effective and consistent way. More critically, for all their success at promoting the use of qualitative evidence and an innovative set of "people-centred" data collection tools, PHIA approaches have not

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Studies, 1998); Robert Chambers, *Who Counts? The Quiet Revolution of Participation and Numbers* (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2007).

[62] ALNAP, *Humanitarian Action in Drought-Related Emergencies*, 15.

[63] On gender as a challenge to participatory approaches, see D. Mosse, "Authority, gender and knowledge: Theoretical reflections on the practice of PRA," *Development and Change,* 25 (1994): 497-526; DARA, *The Humanitarian Response Index 2011: Addressing the Gender Challenge* (Madrid: DARA, 2012); Dyan Mazurana et al, *Sex & Age Matter: Improving humanitarian response in emergencies* (Medford: Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, 2011); ALNAP, *SOHS 2012*, 52.

[64] Tania Kaiser, "Participatory and beneficiary-based approaches to the evaluation of humanitarian programmes," *New Issues in Refugee Research* (Geneva: Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, UNHCR, 2002); European Commission, *Evaluation of Humanitarian Aid by and for NGOs: A guide with ideas to consider when designing your own evaluation activities*. Independent review financed by the Directorate-General for Humanitarian Aid, DG-ECHO and Prolog Consult, 2007; Chambers, *Revolutions in Development Inquiry*; Watson, 13-15; Proudlock et al, 40-41. On participation as a "spectrum" in this context, see P. Oakley et al, *Outcomes and Impact: Evaluating Change in Social Development* (Oxford: INTRAC, 1998), 137.

[65] ALNAP, *State of the Humanitarian System 2012*, 72. See also Daniel Maxwell et al, "Preventing corruption in humanitarian assistance: perceptions, gaps and challenges," *Disasters* 36, 1 (2012): 140-160; and L. Gostelow et al, *SCHR Peer Review on Accountability to Disaster-Affected Populations: An Overview of Lessons Learned* (Geneva: Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response, 2010).

offered a viable alternative to the conceptual framework of "results-based management" that dominates humanitarian accountability and learning systems, with its top-down model of impact based on an exogenous and unilinear "theory of change."

b. Impact assessment for humanitarian nutrition & food security programming

> *Debates about what is the most appropriate type of nutrition programming for the poorest sections of these communities are ongoing but, for now, there is virtually no good quality data on the impact or cost of different intervention models….*
>
> Yimer et al, "Difficulties of Impact Assessment in 'Semi-Emergencies'" (2006)

> *Even with good information on potentially confounding factors, diminutions in malnutrition and improvements in food security can only strengthen the conviction that there is a causative association—it [sic] cannot be taken as scientific proof. The best that can be shown with certainty is that the programme is not having the desired impact, i.e. if nutritional and food security status decline.*
>
> Shoham, *Assessing the Impact of Humanitarian Assistance* (2004)

In the realm of emergency nutrition and food security programming, impact assessment—above all, impact assessment grounded in the perspectives and priorities of aid recipients—seems to have encountered an especially stubborn array of obstacles. According to a 2004 review of HIA methods in the food and nutrition sector, "there are very few examples of assessments to determine the impact of humanitarian interventions on livelihoods protection and food security."[66] It is also in this field that methodological discussions tend to become especially polarized (or stymied) around the use of quantitative versus qualitative measures of change resulting from emergency programming. Even Sphere guidelines are inconsistent on this point, for while Core Standard 5 asserts that "outcome and impact assessment must include people's feedback, open-ended listening and other participatory qualitative approaches, as well as quantitative approaches,"[67] Sphere's key indicators for food security and nutrition are overwhelmingly quantitative in nature and mainly assess service delivery and outputs (e.g. coverage, default rates) as proxies for impact. Whatever one's preferred method, capturing in a precisely measurable way the impact of an emergency intervention on nutritional status or food security—especially at population level—is considered a challenge because of the scarcity of baseline data (especially problematic in areas of long-term chronic undernutrition) and the multicausal character of undernutrition. The latter makes attribution difficult unless one can control for the many

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[66] Jeremy Shoham, *Assessing the impact of humanitarian assistance: A review of methods in the food and nutrition sector*, HPG Background Paper (London: Humanitarian Practice Group, 2004), 52.
[67] Sphere 2011, 70.

confounding variables at play—e.g. other types of programming, such as health or income support, which may contribute to improved nutrition outcomes; or external events, such as crop failure or environmental shock, which may compromise program impact.[68] An even trickier question for impact assessment in this area relates to lack of clarity, predictability and inter-agency consistency around the objectives of humanitarian nutrition and food security interventions. Depending on the nature of the emergency and an organization's mission, the goal of programming may be to prevent death, to prevent preexisting malnutrition (wasting, micronutrient deficiencies) from getting worse, to reduce malnutrition to pre-crisis levels, to secure food supply and food access for the short term, and/or to protect livelihoods for the foreseeable future. Each of these goals implies a different definition, timescale and measure of impact, and could involve indicators ranging from crude mortality rates and anthropometric data to crop production statistics and market price trends.[69]

Despite their centrality in methods of emergency needs assessment, quantitative measures of nutritional status are "an imperfect indicator"[70] for assessing the impact of an intervention, for additional reasons than those just described. Anthropometry— the use of body measurements such as weight, height/length and mid-upper arm circumference (MUAC) along with the age and sex of a child to assess nutritional status—can be a late indicator of nutrition gains as well as of food crisis, although the latter issue continues to be debated.[71] Moreover, there are a number of basic challenges to using anthropometry in humanitarian operating environments. The risk of rushed and/or imprecise estimations of age, weight and height in an emergency setting means that a child's measurements and their conversion to nutritional indices (weight-for-height, height-for-age, weight-for-age) may themselves be unreliable. Determining nutritional status from these measures requires comparing them with growth standards or reference values, i.e. with the expected value of a child of the same height or age from a reference population, by calculating either percentage of the median (i.e. child's weight-for-heigh, WFH, is 80% of the expected value or median) or Z-score based on standard deviations (i.e. child's WFH is 2 standard deviations below the expected value or median). This process not only requires

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[68] For these reasons, proponents of SMART (Standardized Monitoring & Assessment of Relief and Transition), which stipulates the use of Crude Mortality Rate (CMR) and nutritional status of under-five children as the two "most basic essential indicators" for monitoring overall humanitarian effectiveness, acknowledge that this method cannot be used to assess impact for any single agency or intervention (Shoham 2004, 43).

[69] Shoham 2004, 49-50; Yimer et al 2006, 3-4; Watson 2008, 20-21.

[70] Shoham 2004, 5.

[71] Helen Young & Susanne Jaspars, *The Meaning and Measurement of Acute Malnutrition in Emergencies: A Primer for Decision Makers* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2006), 27; Fiona Watson et al, *A Review of Save the Children UK's Nutritional Surveillance Programme in Ethiopia* (London: Nutrition Works, International Public Nutrition Resource Group, 2006), 8.

considerable skill but also relies on a set of normative values whose global applicability is still being questioned.[72] Furthermore, "normal" WFH (i.e. an absence of wasting) may mask severe micronutrient deficiencies, which anthropometric methods do not pick up.[73] Conversely, improved nutritional status may be evident in increased physical activity and a strengthened immune system, yet show no measurable anthropometic impact.[74]

Using individual nutritional status to assess changes over time at population level (e.g. in malnutrition prevalence), as through repeated small-scale surveys, introduces other layers of difficulty in a crisis context. Nutrition assessment surveys present sampling problems (e.g. lack of robust sampling frames, hampered access to the required number of clusters), inability to disaggregate data (e.g. to detect distributional inequities), seasonal variation in consumption and nutrition levels (including micronutrient status), and issues related to timing/timeliness and cost.[75] The fact that nutrition surveys in emergencies typically aim to measure wasting in children aged 6-59 months can cause malnutrition to be missed in other vulnerable demographic groups (e.g. adolescents, the elderly), especially when the food intake of under-five children is protected by adults forgoing meals.[76] Whatever age group defines the sample, a method based on individual body measurement cannot capture the causes of malnutrition, above all the relational dynamics of consumption—the inescapably social nature of people's decisions about what and how much to eat at any given time—or cultural practices shaping intra-community and intrahousehold food access at different points in the agricultural year (e.g. first-fruits celebrations, weddings, funerals). Other limitations stemming from the narrowness of nutrition indicators involve the intervention choices they encourage (i.e. food aid), and their inability to capture wider structural effects of those interventions, such as unintended impacts on markets, settlement

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[72] On the implications of replacing the 1983 NCHS/WHO reference values with the new (2006-07) WHO growth standards for nutrition assessment, see M.B. Duggan, "Anthropometry as a tool for measuring malnutrition: impact of the new WHO growth standards and reference,"*Annals of Tropical Paediatrics* 30 (2010): 1-17. On the debate over the role of MUAC (versus WFH) in identifying severe acute malnutrition, see for example André Briend et al, "Mid-upper arm circumference and weight-for-height to identify high-risk malnourished under-five children," *Maternal & Child Nutrition* 8 (2012): 130-133. On the recent questioning of the validity of WFH as a malnutrition measure for children in pastoralist populations, see Mark Myatt et al, "The effect of body shape on weight-for-height and mid-upper arm circumference based case definitions of acute malnutrition in Ethiopian children," *Annals of Human Biology* 36, 1 (2009): 5-20.

[73] F. Assefa, "Scurvy outbreak and erosion of livelihoods masked by low wasting levels in drought affected northern Afghanistan," *Field Exchange* 12 (2001): 14-16; Andrew Seal & Claudine Prudhon, *Assessing micronutrient deficiencies in emergencies: Current practice and future directions* (New York: United Nations System Standing Committee on Nutrition, 2007).

[74] Shoham 2004, 10.

[75] Shoham 2004, 8-9; Helen Young & Susanne Jaspars, *Nutrition Matters: People, Food, and Famine* (London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1995), 36-37; Young & Jaspars, *Meaning and Measurement*, 24-25.

[76] Young & Jaspars, *Meaning of Measurement*, 6.

patterns or protection (e.g. sexual exploitation, political conflict), which also contribute to population nutrition and food security in the short and long term. In other words, malnutrition prevalence is not an adequate proxy for household food (in)security, and population-wide anthropometric changes in the context of emergency nutrition and/or food assistance provide neither innately reliable nor sufficient evidence of improvements in the food security of crisis-affected communities. Most obviously, they also cannot tell us whether relief food assistance is "a principled endeavour"[77] that supports the protection and dignity of recipients, a concern that should be attentive to cultural notions of an acceptable diet.

In recognition of the need to interpret nutrition data in the context of household food security, and as emergency food programming widened its scope to include livelihood protection, interest grew in the use of livelihoods analysis for HIA purposes.[78] Many iterations of the livelihoods framework have appeared since its emergence in the early 1990s, but in its simplest sense the term "livelihoods" refers to the bundle of assets and strategies people use to make a living, enabled or hindered by the processes, institutions and policies in which their lives are embedded (see Figure 7). "Processes, institutions and policies" ("PIPs") include the "informal and formal practices, norms and rules that constitute the institutional environment"[79] (or the "governance environment"), which mediates households' use of the physical, natural, human, financial and social assets they own, have access to or control. Households pursue livelihood strategies to achieve desired outcomes such as food security, nutrition, income, health, etc.; in crisis settings, these strategies also aim to minimize risk and vulnerability while maximizing resilience—the capacity to withstand and recover from hardships or shocks.[80] Because the

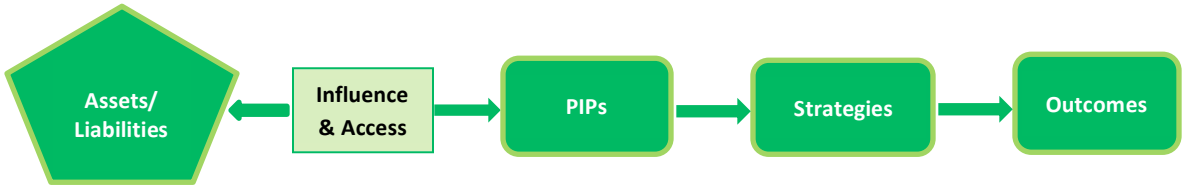

Figure 7: Simplified livelihoods framework for humanitarian settings (from Stites & Lautze 2005).

[77] Hofmann et al 2004, 5.
[78] Hofmann et al 2004, Watson 2008, 29.
[79] Sue Lautze et al*Risk and Vulnerability in Ethiopia: Learning from the past, responding to the present, preparing for the future* (Medford: Feinstein International Center, 2003), 79.
[80] For key stages in the evolving framework, see Robert Chambers & Gordon Conway, *Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: practical concepts for the 21st century*, IDS Discussion Paper (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 1992); Ian Scoones, *Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: A Framework for Analysis* (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 1998); Frank Ellis, *Rural livelihoods and diversity in developing countries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Sarah Collinson, *Power, livelihoods and conflict: case studies in political economy analysis for humanitarian action* (London: Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute, 2003); Sue Lautze & Angela Raven-Roberts, "Violence and Complex Humanitarian Emergencies: Implications for Livelihoods Models," *Disasters* 30, 4 (2006): 383-401.

livelihoods framework conceptualizes food security and nutrition as desired outcomes, it offers a way to assess the impact of humanitarian interventions on households' ability to achieve those outcomes. The strength of livelihoods analysis for this purpose lies in its inclusion, through the five asset categories and PIPs, of the many economic, environmental, social and political factors that influence food supply and food access (i.e. food entitlements). Instead of assessing changes in people's lives through anthropometric measures alone, and from an "intervention-out" perspective that positions crisis-affected households as passive "recipients" of relief aid, a livelihoods approach has the advantage of being "context-in," making it possible in theory to evaluate the effect of an intervention from the vantage point of households' larger repertoire of livelihood assets and strategies.[81]

As a consequence of its households-centredness, the livelihoods framework encourages the use of a more diverse set of assessment methodologies, including qualitative and participatory data collection techniques (such as those described in Part IIIa). In contrast to nutrition surveys, livelihoods-based HIA requires an understanding of how and why households access and utilize assets in particular places and times, a complex task that demands field research, conversations with aid recipients, and knowledge of the intervention context. In-depth fieldwork may not be possible in sudden-onset disaster or conflict settings, but in the protracted and slow-onset crises that are becoming the more typical terrain for humanitarian work, learning enough about livelihoods to identify at least the key areas of aid impact on food security and nutritional well-being—from recipients' point of view—should be within evaluators' grasp. Indeed, several livelihoods-based assessment methods and research initiatives since the mid 1990s illustrate the model's potential for evaluating impact in these areas. Save-UK's Household Economy Approach (to be discussed in Part V), the Coping Strategy Index (CSI) developed by Daniel Maxwell for CARE, and Oxfam-Great Britain's livelihoods approach—all initially designed for emergency assessment of food insecurity and intervention needs—have also been used to track a crisis-affected population's food security status over time and to assess the impact of interventions, principally food aid, on recipient households.[82] Participatory research projects taking a livelihoods approach to evaluate the impact of humanitarian programming have successfully combined traditional

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[81] Elizabeth Stites & Sue Lautze, *Through a livelihoods lens: A case study on the impact of humanitarian assistance in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, HPG Background Paper (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2005), 3; Watson 2008, 29.

[82] Shoham 2004, 17-29; Stites & Lautze, 3-4. On the CSI, see Daniel Maxwell, "Measuring food insecurity: the frequency and severity of 'coping strategies," *Food Policy* 21, 3 (1996): 291-303; Daniel Maxwell, "The coping strategies index: monitoring food security status in emergencies," *Field Exchange* 13 (2001); Daniel Maxwell & Richard Caldwell, *The Coping Strategies Index: A tool for rapid measurement of household food security and the impact of food aid programs in humanitarian emergencies--Field Methods Manual* (Washington, D.C.: USAID, 2008);

quantitative methods with qualitative interviews, focus groups, retrospective baselines, and before-and-after-scoring to measure the influence of food aid over time on household livelihood adaptation strategies in Bosnia;[83] changes in food sources and crop yields resulting from a drought-recovery and famine-mitigation project in Zimbabwe;[84] and shifts in agricultural income, asset holdings and food sources in response to drought and food price shocks in Eastern Tigray, Ethiopia.[85] Most importantly, these projects have demonstrated the value of participatory methods and qualitative data for generating community-defined food security indicators, perceptions of risk, and asset thresholds necessary for livelihood resilience. These and other "beneficiary"-derived measures have proven uniquely helpful for strengthening attribution of change to a specific intervention, and for identifying unintended (positive and negative) impacts of humanitarian aid.[86] Moreover, a recent ALNAP review of humanitarian action in drought-related emergencies found that interventions supporting pre-crisis livelihood strategies and using participatory impact assessment methods "were more successful and likely to be spontaneously replicated."[87]

Both as a conceptual framework and in practice, however, the livelihoods model has some limitations for assessing impacts of emergency nutrition and food programming. According to Shoham, these include the difficulty of eliciting information on livelihood strategies that people view as "unlawful, immoral or damaging"; the unlikelihood that evaluators will have baseline quantifications of livelihood assets; the lack of quantifiable objectives for livelihoods-based interventions (i.e. an objective comparable to wasting levels for nutrition programs, such as levels of asset protection); and the lack of consensus around (or standardization of) livelihood assessment methodologies, which prevents comparison of impact across contexts.[88] Others have criticized the model's reliance on the household as unit of analysis, given abundant evidence of differential food access (by gender, age etc.) within households, and the implications of intrahousehold inequities for food program effectiveness.[89]

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[83] Stites & Lautze 2005.
[84] Burns & Catley 2010.
[85] Daniel Maxwell et al, *Participatory Impact Assessment: Africa Community Resilience Programme--Tsaeda Amba Woreda, Eastern Tigray, Ethiopia* (Medford: Feinstein International Center, 2010).
[86] Watson 2008, 26; Emergency Capacity Building Project 2007, 18; Chambers 2007; Catley et al 2008, 48-56; Proudlock et al, 2009, 2. See also Caroline Ashley & Karim Hussein, *Developing Methodologies for Livelihood Impact Assessment: Experience of the African Wildlife Foundation in East Africa* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2000); Mirjam Steglich & Gezu Bekele, *Participatory Impact Assessment of Women Income Generating Groups under CARE intervention in Borena, Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa: CARE Ethiopia, 2009);
[87] ALNAP, *Humanitarian Action in Drought-Related Emergencies* (London: ALNAP, 2011), 3.
[88] Shoham 2004, 19-20. See also Ashley & Hussein 2000; Hofmann et al 2004.
[89] See Linda Mayoux, "Intra-household Impact Assessment: Issues and Participatory Tools," *Enterprise Impact News* 35 (2004): 1-6; also Stites & Lautze 2005, 19; Watson 2008, 28.

Yet a deeper set of problems arises from how the livelihoods framework has been applied to measure household food (in)security in emergency contexts. Space does not allow discussion here of the vast literature on this topic, but three key points of direct relevance for HIA in the nutrition/food sector are worth mentioning. First, because livelihoods-based assessment methods originated as tools for *needs* assessment—i.e. to determine the need for emergency asset transfers in response to a food crisis—their conceptual focus and indicators are predominantly economic, emphasizing household income, food production, consumption and expenditure over other categories of livelihood assets and strategies. Even the CSI, which is attentive to important social-relational and behavioral responses to food stress (e.g. borrowing, fostering children), primarily measures food insecurity in terms of short-term consumption patterns. These approaches to livelihoods tend to sideline the crucial social dimensions of food crisis, which are highlighted in anthropological and historical research but seen as beyond the practical scope of assessment in humanitarian settings, despite recognition of the role of social capital in shaping food security outcomes.[90] Second, while the livelihoods framework is helpful for illuminating dynamics of asset use, risk and vulnerability both at "snapshot" moments and as these change over time, it does not tell us much about the structural causes of inequality, or the historical processes that constrain the organization of livelihoods in particular ways, places and times. Describing the livelihood context of food insecurity is not the same as explaining it; by the same token, conceptualizing relief aid as a "transfer" into a household's asset portfolio[91] runs the dual risk of overstating recipients' agency (i.e. their freedom to decide what to do with the transfer) and erasing the relations of power that shape what any transfer means in the context of a crisis. Yet such structural forces, which operate at multiple levels, will heavily influence the effect—and effectiveness—of an intervention, and for that reason need to be taken into account when assessing impact.

Finally, and because of these limitations, the livelihoods model cannot easily capture or suggest an analytical approach for understanding how or why emergency nutrition or food assistance may

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[90] In its simplest framing, "risks and disasters both influence and are products of human systems" (Doug Henry, "Anthropological Contributions to the Study of Disasters," in D. McEntire & W. Blanchard (eds.), *Disciplines, Disasters and Emergency Management: The Convergence of Concepts Issues and Trends From the Research Literature* (Emittsburg: Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2005). For a discussion of the need for ethnographic methods in HIA, see Sue Lautze, "Humanitarian Action, Livelihoods, and Socio-Cultural Dynamics in Uganda: An Exploration of Theoretical Considerations for Impact Evaluation," unpublished manuscript (Camp Sherman, Oregon, The Livelihoods Program, 2009). For an early argument on the social dimensions of famine, see Parker Shipton, "African Famines and Food Security: Anthropological Perspectives," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19 (1990): 353-394. According to Shoham, "Impact on social capital must…be factored into any livelihoods impact assessment. The methods for doing so are however as yet unclear but probably reside in the realm of anthropological study" (Shoham 2004, 29).

[91] E.g. Catley et al 2008, 20.

permanently alter a livelihood system, by changing access to key assets (e.g. land, social networks, credit), strategies (e.g. cropping systems, non-farm income-earning, caring practices), or outcomes (e.g. nutrition, education, health). Especially in situations of protracted crisis, interventions that have continued for a long period of time need to be conceptualized as somehow integral—whether in positive or negative ways—to livelihoods in communities affected, directly or indirectly, by the humanitarian presence.

IV. Wollo livelihoods today: A (blurry) snapshot

The West's poster child for famine since the mid 1980s, Ethiopia remains one of the world's poorest and most food-insecure countries, ranking 174th out of 187 on the 2011 Human Development Index and topping—by far—the World Food Programme's list of food aid recipients in 2011, the latest year for which numbers are available.[92] While Wollo was the epicenter of the famine that first put Ethiopia in the humanitarian spotlight, the area rarely captures such attention today. Yet by any measure, large parts of North and South Wollo Zones still suffer from extremes of poverty and hunger as deserving of global outcry now as they were nearly 40 year ago, when "Band Aid" took the stage. With very high rates of chronic and acute malnutrition (see Table 3), the population of Amhara Region as a whole exists in a state of protracted livelihood crisis, with "many people need[ing] food aid, even in years of good harvest."[93] In certain districts (*woredas*) of Wollo itself, such as Dessie Zuria and Kalu in South Wollo Zone, global acute malnutrition (GAM) rates—which vary from season to season and year to year—are known to soar as high as 18%, in spite of a substantial proportion of the population receiving food aid and/or participating in the national safety net program, the PSNP.[94] According to FEWSNET's most recent Food Security Outlook report for Ethiopia, poor households in the eastern parts

[92] Ethiopia has held this distinction nearly every year since the late 1980s. In all years but one since 1999, Ethiopia has occupied the first or second spot on this list. In 2011, Ethiopia received 749,678.6 metric tons of food aid from WFP, nearly twice the quantity delivered to second-place Pakistan (http://www.wfp.org/fais/reports/quantities-delivered-two-dimensional-report/run/year/2011/recipient/All/cat/All/donor/All/code/All/mode/All/basis/0/order/0, accessed Aug. 12, 2012). In 2010, 10% of Ethiopia's population relied on food aid (Reuters, "Ethiopia, UN launch food appeal for 2.8 mln people," Feb. 7, 2011 [http://af.reuters.com/article/topNews/idAFJOE7160MB20110207, accessed Jan. 2, 2012]). Ethiopia has received more emergency support per capita than any other Sub-Saharan African nation—on average, 700,000 metric tons of food aid per year since 1990 (Sarah Coll-Black & Matt Hobson, "Emergency Food Security and Livelihoods Project in Amhara and Oromia regions," *Field Exchange* 40 [2011], 1). See also United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2011—Sustainability and Equity: A Better Future for All* (New York: UNDP, 2011).

[93] Ato Tsegahun Tessema et al, *Meket Livelihood Development Project Evaluation Report* (Addis Ababa: Save the Children UK, 2009), 8. See also Style 2011.

[94] Emergency Nutrition Coordination Unit, *Emergency Nutrition Quarterly Bulletin (First Quarter 2007)* (Addis Ababa: ENCU, Early Warning Department, Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Agency, 2007), 2.

of North and South Wollo Zones are currently selling off livestock and other livelihood assets to bridge food consumption gaps, yet even so are meeting only minimum nutritional needs.[95]

Child Malnutrition in Amhara Region (2010-2011)				
Nutritional Indices	2010-11 WHO		2011 DHS	
	Amhara Region	Ethiopia	Amhara Region	Ethiopia
Height-for-Age (stunting, below -2SD, %)	51.8	44.2	52	44.4
Severe (below -3SD, %)	23.4	20.2	24.2	20.6
Weight-for-Height (wasting, below -2SD, %)	10.9	10.1	9.9	9.7
Severe (below -3SD, %)	3.6	2.9	3.1	2.8
Weight-for-Age (underweight, below -2SD, %)	33.6	29.2	33.4	33.4
Severe (below -3SD, %)	9.8	9.5	9.7	8.8

Table 3: Percentage of Children Under 5 Years Classified as Malnourished, based on WHO Child Growth Standards. Sources: WHO, *Global Database on Child Growth and Malnutrition*; Central Statistical Agency (Ethiopia) & ICF International, *Ethiopia Demographic and Health Survey 2011*, 159.

Explanations for Wollo's state of chronic food deficit typically point to one or more of the following: the region's drought-prone climate, rapid population growth, ecological degradation (primarily, deforestation and soil erosion), shrinking farm size, lack of basic services, lack of non-farm employment, poor national policy. In fact, every item in this list accurately describes the current reality of many if not most Wollo residents. As Table 4 indicates, North and South Wollo Zones have unusually high population densities, tiny average household land and livestock holdings given that close to 90% of the population survives by ox plow-based agriculture, and abysmally poor access to such basic infrastructure as electricity and roads. Evidence of catastrophic levels of deforestation and soil erosion is widespread, most visibly in vast expanses of bare rock, gullies stretching from the top to bottom of hillsides, and high levels of surface runoff that sweep topsoil into streams and rivers at an alarming rate.[96] Factor in the forbidding landscape of Ethiopia's northeastern highlands, with their towering mountains, craggy gorges and steeply sloped ravines, and it would be easy to assume that Wollo's isolation is simply a function of geography, and that the region's food security problems are the

[95] FEWSNET, *Ethiopia Food Security Outlook, October 2012 to March 2013* (http://www.fews.net/docs/Publications/Ethiopia_OL_10_2012.pdf, accessed January 3, 2013), 8.

[96] Dejene, *Environment, Famine, and Politics in Ethiopia*, 35-36; Eyasu Elias & Daniel Fantaye, *Managing Fragile Soils: A Case Study from North Wollo, Ethiopia* (SOS Sahel, 2000), 5. It is commonly reported that in 1900, 40% of Ethiopia's forest cover was still intact, the majority of it in the highlands. Deforestation in the highlands is said to have accelerated during the reign of Haile Selasse (see below). In 1980, total forest cover in Wollo Province was only 2.2%, a roughly 50% decline since 1960. See Tobias J. Lanz, "Environmental degradation and social conflict in the northern highlands of Ethiopia: The case of Tigray and Wollo Provinces," *Africa Today* 43, 2 (1996): 168.

inevitable result of human expansion exceeding the capacity of what nature meant to be an agricultural no-man's land.

Current Demographic Data for Wollo		
	North Wollo	**South Wollo**
Population (total)	1,500,303	2,518,862
Density (per sq km)	123.25	147.58
Household size (avg)	4.21	4.21
Land area (total, sq km)	12,172.50	17,067.45
Land per rural household (avg, ha)*	0.7	0.7
Livestock equivalent owned per household (avg)*	0.7	0.6
Access to electricity (%)*	6	13
Road density (km/1,000 sq km)*	69.7	76.1
Urban population (%)	10.35	11.98
Non-farm employment (%)*	13.2	10.6

Table 4: Values are from Ethiopia's 2007 Census (CSA 2007) except for items marked *, which are from various World Bank publications cited at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semien_Wollo_Zone.[97]

The predominantly Amharic-speaking peoples of Wollo probably know that the roots of their livelihood dilemma are more complicated than that, and that describing the problem does little to explain its causes. For one thing, their physical surroundings are immensely more diverse, and more assiduously shaped by centuries of human effort, than the preceding descriptions suggests. While "nearly two-thirds of the 8.2 million hectares of land in Wollo is very hilly," a great escarpment bissects Wollo roughly into western and eastern catchment areas whose topographic features can differ dramatically—between majestic, wind-swept alpine peaks and hot, arid plains—but "rise and fall like huge waves" throughout, until descending to meet the Afar lowlands on the eastern edge.[98] Families have been carving livelihoods out of this rugged and varied terrain for millenia, whether in the cool *dega* (highlands) 2,500 meters or more above sea level, where rainfall ranges between 600 and 1,000 mm per year but temperatures can drop below freezing at night; the *woina dega* (mid-highlands) between 1,600 and 2,500 m, where warmer weather and annual rainfall between 500 and 900 mm create the friendliest farming conditions and the densest settlement; or the more sparsely populated *qolla* (lowlands) below 1,600 m, where farming is more difficult and livestock, especially cattle, assume crucial

[97] World Bank, "Ethiopia—Second Road Sector Development Program Project" (World Bank Project Appraisal Document, published 19 May 2003); Klaus Deininger et al, "Tenure Security and Land Related Investment," WP-2991, 2006; World Bank, *Four Ethiopias: A Regional Characterization* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2004) (http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTETHIOPIA/Resources/PREM/FourEthiopiasrev6.7.5.May24.pdf, accessed Aug. 15, 2012).
[98] Dejene, *Environment, Famine, and Politics in Ethiopia*, 13.

importance. These general altitude bands dictate the timing and duration of the short *belg* rainy season (February/ March through May/June) on which farmers in the *dega* depend, and the longer *meher* rainy season (roughly June/July through September/October), which are of primary importance in the *woina dega*.[99]

Altitude and rainfall together heavily influence household livelihood choices—which cereals farmers grow for food (as opposed to roots and tubers or *enset*, more important staple crops in the south), and which pulses they produce for consumption and sale. In the *dega*, barley, wheat, oats, field peas and lentils predominate. In the *woina dega*, teff and smaller amounts of sorghum and maize join the cereal mix; vetch, chickpeas and fava (broad, or horse) beans are additional pulse crops. Agricultural options are narrower in the *qolla*, with cereals limited to sorghum, maize and some finger millet, and vetch the main pulses where cultivation is possible. Animal holdings also vary by altitude, although household livestock ownership has declined throughout Wollo over the last three to four decades. Sheep and cattle are more common in the *dega*, joined by goats in the *woina dega*. In the *qolla*, cattle dominate livestock holdings, along with goats and some camels for transport. Poultry, donkey and horses are found in all three altitude bands.[100]

Perhaps most important, Wollo's "sharply variegated"[101] topography creates a patchwork of microenvironments, a fact that both influences land-use strategies for food production and causes livelihood success (or failure) to diverge markedly by space and time. As one environmental historian notes of Wollo, "deadly famines [can] occur only a few kilometers as the crow flies from abundant

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[99] The term *belg* is also used for the secondary (short) agricultural season. The rains of the longer *meher* season, known as *kremt*, are associated with the primary (major) agricultural season. The *meher* harvest takes place between August and November The timing of both rainy seasons varies from one part of Wollo to another.

[100] Information on Wollo's geography, climate and livelihoods draws on Dejene, *Environment, Famine, and Politics in Ethiopia*, 13-14; Julius Holt & Mark Lawrence, *Making Ends Meet: A survey of the food economy of the Ethiopian northeast highlands* (London: Save the Children, 1993), 2-3; Kelkilachew Ali & Million Tafesse, *Ethiopian Village Studies: Shumsheha* (Oxford: Centre for the Study of African Economies, Oxford University, 1996), 2-3; Dessalegn Rahmato, *Famine and Survival Strategies: A case study from Northeast Ethiopia* (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1991), Ch. 3; James C. McCann, "The Myth and Reality of Agricultural Crises in Ethiopia: Empirical Lessons from History, 1900-87," in Marina Ottaway (ed.), *The Political Economy of Ethiopia* (New York: Praeger, 1990), 177-196; Food Economy Group (FEG), *Livelihood Profile Amhara Region, Ethiopia--North Wollo Highland Belg Livelihood Zone 2007* (http://www.feg-consulting.com/feg-shared-folder/liu/amhara/livelihood-profiles/NHB%20-%20North%20Wollo%20Highland%20Belg.pdf, accessed Aug. 12, 2012); FEG, *Livelihood Profile Amhara Region, Ethiopia--South Wollo & Oromia Eastern Lowland, Sorghum and Cattle Livelihood, 2007* (http://www.feg-consulting.com/feg-shared-folder/liu/amhara/woreda-profiles/Bati.pdf, accessed Aug. 12, 2012); FEG, *Livelihood Profile Amhara, Ethiopia--South Wollo Meher Livelihood Zone 2007* (http://www.feg-consulting.com/feg-shared-folder/liu/amhara/livelihood-profiles/SME%20-%20South%20Wollo%20Meher.pdf, accessed Aug. 12, 2012).

[101] James C. McCann, *From Poverty to Famine in Northeast Ethiopia: A Rural History 1900-1935* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 22.

harvests."[102] Rainfall variability increases inversely to altitude: at lower elevations, not only is total annual rainfall reduced but the unpredictability of the seasons worsens, making drought and harvest loss more likely. Agricultural lessons learned in any given season may never be applicable again, for "one area may be in a rainshadow in one year, another in the next."[103] For this reason, Wollo farmers have ideally sought to cultivate two types of farmland: *guaro*, the more productive and fertile plots around the homestead where major annual food crops and some perennial crops are grown; and *ersha*, multiple scattered plots located away from home, usually in different ecological zones—a crucial risk-minimizing and diet-diversifying strategy common in traditional sub-Saharan African farming systems.[104] Moreover, the heightened seasonal and inter-annual rainfall fluctuations of recent years have caused Wollo farmers to make frequent livelihood adjustments, such as adding sweet potatoes to their repertoire, increasing production of more drought-resistant cereals such as sorghum and less labour-intensive grains such as maize, expanding cultivation onto once-common pasture land, or spending larger portions of time working for pay on other people's farms or in town.[105] In other words, it is not only difficult to generalize about Wollo livelihoods in the present; it would also be misleading to suggest that what farmers and agropastoralists raise, sell and eat now—and why—is the same from one generation or even one growing season to another.

These highly localized and mutable livelihood patterns have also made ties of interdependence and cooperation among households, within and across villages (*kebeles*), essential for rural survival. Rural households exist within interlocking livelihood webs—social networks and institutions sewing the ecological patchwork of the region into a dynamic economic whole. At the most local level, these webs consist of practices such as reciprocal work groups, funeral societies, Christian prayer circles, Muslim

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[102] McCann, *From Poverty to Famine*, 28. See also Dejene, *Environment, Famine, and Politics in Ethiopia*, 71; Dessalegn Rahmato, *Famine and Survival Strategies*, 68.

[103] Save the Children UK, *Ethiopia Food Economy Map* (http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/96161DCEA4079353C1256F2D00484AA6-fews_eth080803.pdf, accessed Aug. 12, 2012).

[104] Dejene, *Environment, Famine, and Politics in Ethiopia*, 13-14; Dessalegn Rahmato, *Famine and Survival Strategies*, 79. See also Paul Richards, *Indigenous Agricultural Revolution: Ecology and Food Production in West Africa* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985). Ethiopia's 1975 land reform, and the rural villagization campaign launched in 1985, fundamentally challenged this historic system, viewing scattered plots as an obstacle to rural development (Dejene, 14). According to Dessalegn Rahmato, land reform "dealt a serious blow" to this practice but did not entirely abolish it (79).

[105] Ibid. See also USAID & Government of Ethiopia, *An Atlas of Ethiopian Livelihoods: The Livelihoods Integration Unit* (Addis Ababa: USAID/Government of Ethiopia, 2011), 84-85; and Rahmato, *Famine and Survival Strategies*, 76-77. On the rapid spread of maize cultivation in Ethiopia during the last three decades, see James C. McCann, *Maize and Grace: Africa's Encounter with a New World Crop, 1500-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). On the inherent flexibility and weather-adaptability of Wollo farming practices, see Rahmato, *Famine and Survival Strategies*, 86.

coffee clubs, labour-for-oxen deals, seed exchanges, shared granaries, interfamily food loans.[106] But less visible, informal social networks are vital in this regard too. As Ethiopian scholar Dessalegn Rahmato writes of Wollo residents, "Men and women often attempt to spread their personal relationships as widely as possible, often through marriage and other personal ties, as a form of insurance against hard times; this involves forming relationships not just in one's own community but in others."[107] Extra-community networks fuelled by ecological diversity include ties of economic exchange between highlands and lowlands areas of Wollo, although these linkages have been subject to considerable pressure in the last century (see below). Spiralling outward, the relational mesh in which Wollo livelihoods are embedded also includes the many larger institutional and network actors that, now and historically, have brought the region into their operational sphere: merchants and missionaries, tradesmen and travellers, soldiers and separatists, dictators and developers—and, increasingly through the 20th century, the tightening arms of a modernizing state. In the 1970s, international humanitarian organizations joined the cast of characters whose actions affect Wollo residents' daily work of making a living. Whether local, national or global in origin, such trans-household entities must also appear in a snapshot of Wollo's contemporary livelihood landscape. The resources they offer, and the power they exercise, are key features in Wollo's food security story, in the past and today.

V. Historical Background: Food Security and Livelihood Change in Wollo, to 1970

The pre-1970 history of rural livelihoods and food security in Wollo could fill a thesis of its own, as could an analysis of the devastating 1972-74 famine, which killed over 200,000 in Wollo and Tigray provinces and affected at least two million people nationwide. This section provides an overview of the most relevant elements of Wollo's historical background prior to the 1970s. It is a lengthy section because there is much history to cover, and because one of the basic arguments of this study is that Save-UK's experiences and impacts in Wollo cannot be disconnected from longer-term trends in the region's agrarian past. The discussion addresses, first, the political economy of food production in northeast Ethiopia prior to the 20th century; second, local food systems and heightened livelihood vulnerability in Wollo under Imperial rule from the late 19th century to 1940; and third, the tightening hold of Haile Selassie's centralizing "empire-state" on the Wollo agricultural economy after World War II, leading to the livelihoods crisis that erupted in the 1964-67 famine.

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[106] See, for instance, Sharp et al, *Destitution in Ethiopia's Northeastern Highlands*, 60, 95.

[107] Dessalegn Rahmato, *Famine and Survival Strategies*, 28. This book offers the most detailed study available of farmers' cooperative survival strategies—including a large variety of interhousehold arrangements for borrowing or renting draft animals—and famine response as a "collective endeavour" in rural Wollo (see 74ff).

a. Rural livelihoods and the political economy of food security, earliest times to ca. 1900

> *Wollo is virtually impossible. There is such an obscuring weight of disbelief, suspected innuendo and antagonisms; such a mess of mis-government at petty levels, and such a lading of landlords that there is almost nothing to start with and nowhere to start that will not go wrong or sour. Changes and innovation will inevitably be resisted and resented, and even if a foothold of development thought and action is established, its small flower would soon be checked by the smothering welter of the weeds of an entrenched and stagnant society.*
>
> Noel Cossins, *Still Sleep the Highlands* (1974)

> *The rural economy of northern Ethiopia is…an ancient, complex and successful adaptation to a difficult but rewarding environment, using a wide range of native and exotic cultigens and, crucially, the ox-plough, which economized labour and so freed people to build the Ethiopian superstructure as soldiers, governors and priests.*
>
> C.C. Wrigley, "Ethiopia Starves" (1988)

It is not easy to find dispassionate historical writing on Wollo, at least not in literature published in the West after 1970. Perhaps not surprisingly given the dramatic events for which the region is best known, non-Ethiopian writers have tended to take extreme positions on Wollo's past, portraying it either as a doomed, dysfunctional backwater of a byzantine Ethiopian state, its development potential ruined by reactionary politics at all levels; or a land of wise and resilient peasants, whose ability to adapt to a harsh environment proves that the region's chronic hunger problems can be solved by indigenous means.[108] Ethiopian scholars have similarly examined Wollo's history through the lens of its recent vulnerability to famine, but have offered more nuanced readings of the relationship between long-term livelihood change and contemporary food crises. Many of these writers assert the need for institutional reform to remove political and economic constraints on smallholder farmers, while stressing the absolute limitations of Wollo's agricultural landscape—in Dessalegn Rahmato's words, a "land of humble potentials."[109] While there is no single correct position within this complex discursive field, there are some broad contours on which most analysts agree, including the heavy weight of the region's deeper history on all institutional and individual actors with a stake in Wollo's food security today.

By 3500 BCE, the highlands of northeastern Ethiopia were populated by sedentary agriculturalists who had domesticated such indigenous crops as the small-seeded cereal *tef*, the oil plant *noog*, and the starchy *enset* ("false banana"). Although little is known about these early farming communities, their skillful manipulation of one of the most challenging agricultural environments in

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[108] For the former, see for instance Jack Shepherd, *The Politics of Starvation* (New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1975). McCann's *From Poverty to Famine* illustrates the latter category well.

[109] Rahmato, *Famine and Survival Strategies*, 58. For another good example of this approach, see Mesfin Wolde-Mariam, *Rural Vulnerability to Famine in Ethiopia 1958-1977* (Addis Ababa: Vikas Publishing House and Addis Ababa University, 1984).

Africa laid the foundations for a sophisticated and influential ancient civilization. Archaeological evidence indicates that highland residents supplemented their incomes and diets through small-scale animal husbandry and trade, and lived in scattered homesteads located mostly between 2,000 m and 4,000 m, deliberately avoiding the livelihood constraints of the highest and lowest altitude zones (frost in the former, malaria in the latter). Early trade networks connected the region with ancient Egypt, Arabia and Persia. Sometime between 2000 and 1000 BCE, the profits of this long-distance commerce, to which the highlands contributed exports of gold, timber, perfumes, and animal hides, fuelled the emergence of a number of centralized chiefdoms, including by the first century CE the embryonic state of Aksum, located in present-day Tigray (see Figure 8). By the 4th century CE, Aksum had become the first in a series of powerful highland kingdoms that would rise and fall, expanding and contracting their frontiers of control and extraction, for the next fifteen hundred years. At Aksum, monumental stone architecture, the adoption of Christianity as a state religion, minting of coinage, and deepening involvement in the Red Sea slave trade attested not only to the kingdom's elaborate government and commercial prosperity but also to the agricultural success of its rural base, whose reliable generation of

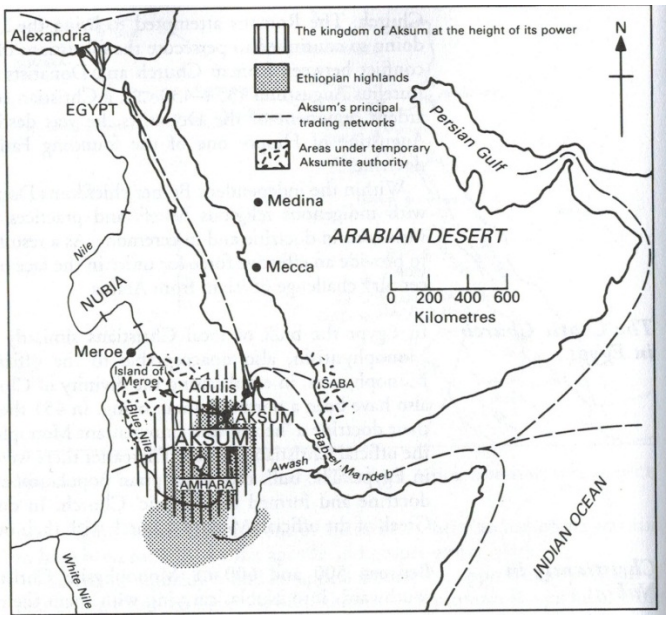

Figure 8: The kingdom of Aksum, 100-700 CE (Shillington 2005, 68)

food surpluses was essential to sustain non-productive political, religious and merchant elites. The eclipse of Aksum by Persian and Arab states in the 8th century CE led to Aksumite rulers' move south into the central highlands. The subsequent rise of the Zagwe (12-13th c.) and Solomonid kingdoms (13th-16th

c.) brought the area of present-day Wollo directly into what historian James McCann calls the "geographic heart of the highlands political tradition" (see Figure 9).[110] During the Solomonid era, this

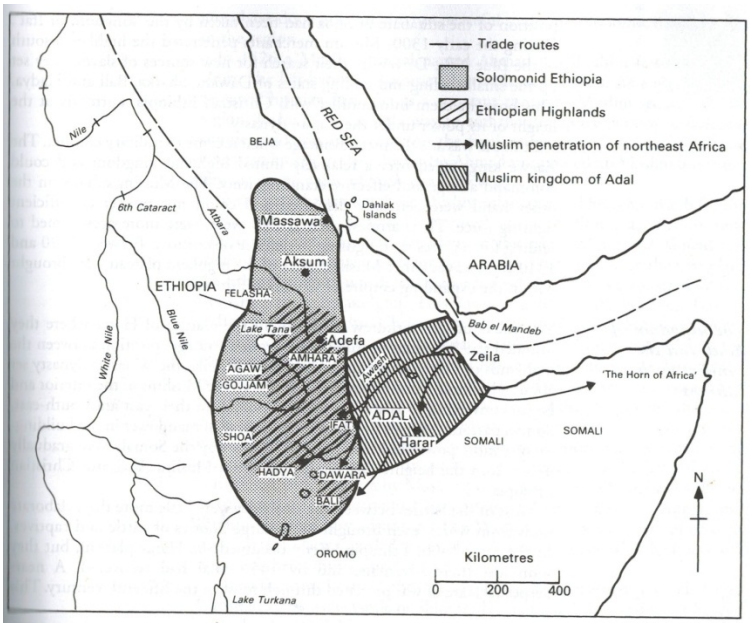

Figure 9: Solomonid Ethiopia in the 15th century (Shillington 2005, 111).

highlands "tradition" became identified with Amharic culture, more like tropical Africa in its architectural and political forms, and more dependent on an agricultural economy controlled by a landed aristocracy with limited connection to the outside world. European and Asian powers knew the region as Abyssinia.[111]

From what we know of Wollo before the 20th century, the prosperity of the Abyssinian highland kingdoms was neither equitably shared nor ecologically sustainable, despite farmers' best efforts to practice soil- and water-conserving cultivation techniques.[112] Environmental decline around the royal capital in particular, caused by over-cultivation and deforestation for fuel, compelled ruling elites to relocate frequently, especially as campaigns of imperial expansion swelled the court, bureaucracy and army clustered at the state's center. Food emergencies linked to natural disasters were an occasional

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[110] McCann, *From Poverty to Famine*, 4.

[111] Information in this paragraph draws on Kevin Shillington, *History of Africa*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 19, 67-70, 106-114, 283-87; McCann, *From Poverty to Famine*, Ch. 1. The Amharic language emerged through the mixture and intermarriage of pre-Christian Ge'ez speakers—skilled agriculturalists who had migrated to the highlands from southwestern Arabia—and local Cushitic peoples.

[112] Dessalegn Rahmato describes the range of traditional methods Wollo farmers used to manage their environments, including fallowing, mulching, ratooning, crop rotation, and the application of animal and green manures to retain moisture and revitalize the soil; contour terracing, stone or earth bunds, and hedging to prevent soil run-off; and irrigation systems using canals, trenches, contour ridging and artificial ponds, archaeological evidence of which dates "to antiquity" (80-84).

fact of life across the region beginning in at least the 3rd century BCE.[113] From the 9th century CE on, Ethiopia's royal chronicles, hagiographies, church records and European traveller accounts documented famines occurring in the highlands with rising regularity through the next thousand years (see Table 5).[114] While the writings of Ethiopian observers typically linked the occurrence of famine to some combination of drought, locusts and "plague" (usually cholera, smallpox or influenza), they ultimately attributed catastrophic food shortages to supernatural causes—famine as an act of God—and highlighted the institutionalized charity of monasteries, parish churches and (less predictably) the imperial court to mitigate famine's effects on the poor.[115] Foreign observers, on the other hand, emphasized how the oppressive rule of these very religious and secular authorities was responsible for demotivating rural producers and undermining food security. Outsider accounts from before 1900 also drew attention to the unequal experience of food crisis among various categories of Ethiopian society. Residents of arid lowland regions; pastoralists who had lost their livestock or could not exchange animals for grain; people who "had recently adopted agriculture and were still unskilled in it"; scorned occupational groups, such as artisans; and vulnerable social groups such as the "wretched poor," the aged, the infirm and children, were all particularly vulnerable to starvation in the event of drought or other disaster.[116] Even in the catastrophic *yakefu qan* ("cruel days") famine of 1888-92, when Italy's introduction of rinderpest-infected livestock into Eritrea reportedly cost Ethiopia one-third of its population and over 90% of its cattle, "at [Emperor Menelik II's] court, as before, nothing was lacking."[117]

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[113] Patrick Webb & Joachim von Braun, *Famine and Food Security in Ethiopia: Lessons for Africa* (New York: Wiley, 1994), 20-21. These authors identify Ethiopia's central and northern highlands (including northern Shewa, Wollo, Tigray and eastern Eritrea) as one of two major zones of food-related crisis throughout the country's history.

[114] Most discussions of Ethiopia's early famine history draw on Richard Pankhurst, *The history of famine and epidemics in Ethiopia prior to the twentieth century* (Addis Ababa: Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, 1984) and Richard Pankhurst, "The Great Ethiopian Famine of 1888-1892: A New Assessment," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 21 (1966): 95-124. See also Charles A. Wood, "A preliminary chronology of Ethiopian droughts," in David Dalby & R. J. Harrison Church (eds.), *Drought in Africa: Report of the 1973 symposium* (London: University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, Centre for African Studies, 1973).

[115] One historian describes local Orthodox churches as the "refuge of first resort during food shortages" (McCann, *From Poverty to Famine*, 47).

[116] John Iliffe, *The African Poor: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), Ch. 2.

[117] Quote is attributed to Menelik II's secretary, Guebre Selassie (see Iliffe, *The African Poor*, 13). On the demographic and livestock impact of the 1888-92 famine, see Richard Pankhurst, *The History of Famine and Epidemics in Ethiopia Prior to the 20th Century* (Addis Ababa: Relief & Rehabilitation Commission, 1984), 62, 89; Mike Davies, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London: Verso, 2002), 133; John Graham, "Multiplying Impact: Evidence-based Policy Change in Ethiopia," unpublished, 2009, 1.

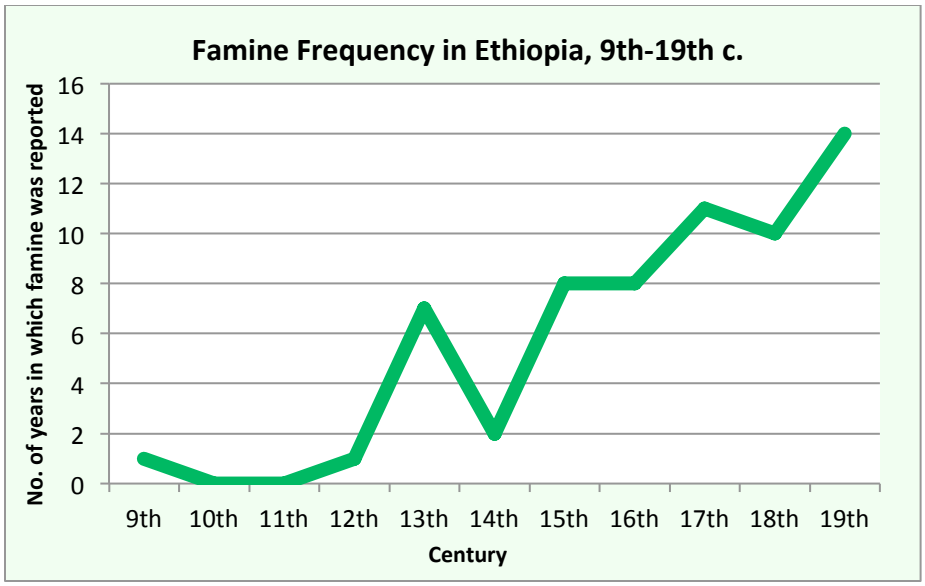

Table 5: Number of famines per century as reported in Ethiopian documents. Sources: Pankurst 1966, Wood 1973, Pankhurst 1984, RRC 1985, Hancock 1985, Degefu 1987.

However, European visitors may not always have appreciated the intricacies of the political economy they fleetingly observed, for when the imperial regime was strong, inequality coexisted with a measure of state- and church-sponsored social protection for the rural poor. As Table 5 shows, the frequency of famine in Ethiopia increased steadily between the 16th and mid-19th centuries, the same period when the Amhara-centered empire, weakened by internal unrest, geographic over-extension, and war with Muslim sultanates to the east, underwent a long period of fragmentation, contraction and decline.[118] In that era, political power in Wollo devolved mainly to local aristocrats or autonomous warlords whose exploitation of rural producers could go unchecked in the absence of overarching imperial rule.[119] Militarized local elites not only controlled the means of production but skimmed liberally from farmers' harvests and labor through various forms of taxation and tribute along with armed raids. One historian estimates that residents of the northeastern highlands in the 18th and 19th centuries lost on average at least 30% of their produce each year to the arbitrary exactions of

[118] Hancock notes that the 17th and 18th centuries were "particularly bad…for famines" (Hancock, *Ethiopia: The Challenge of Hunger*, 64).
[119] McCann, *From Poverty to Famine*, Ch. 2; Shillington, *History of Africa*, 283; Robert O. Collins, *Eastern African History*, Vol II of *African History: Texts and Readings* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publications, 1997), 14. According to Collins, "the empire of Ethiopia disappeared" in the 1700s, in part the imperial capital became too geographically isolated after its move to Gondar in the previous century.

noblemen.[120] During the reign of Emperor Tewodros II (1855-68), who sought to reunify Ethiopia by centralizing government control, many local elites took up arms to defend their lucrative autonomy, provoking brutal reprisals from imperial forces. Such political conflicts could themselves devastate rural food systems and cause famine, as in Wollo in 1856, when in a retaliatory attack by the Emperor's soldiers "villages were burnt, the fields laid waste, and men, women and children unsparingly butchered or dragged into irredeemable captivity."[121]

In peaceful times, though, strong imperial structures could help protect farmers from a rapacious nobility, safeguarding a "precarious equilibrium" between highly unequal social classes in the highlands. According to some scholars, this equilibrium rested on a "communitarian ethos" that ensured subsistence and usufruct land rights to all free-born imperial subjects.[122] Under the traditional land tenure system, rights of land access (i.e. *rist*, the right to work a piece of land) derived from an individual's membership in a lineage-based community whose ancestors (through either the male or female line) were linked to the original settlers of that land; smallholder farmers who belonged to a community thus enjoyed secure access to land, potentially in more than one community if they could trace their ancestry to the founder. In addition, rural dwellers could access land through another set of arrangements structured by *gult* rights—land rights given by the state to the church, or to local chiefs or nobles in recognition of loyal military service. *Gult* holders granted land-use rights to cultivators (often referred to in the literature as "tenants") in exchange for payment of a "tithe" (a percentage of crop yield) along with loyalty and occasional labour service, in an arrangement that would resemble European feudalism except for the fact that the vast majority of "tenant" farmers using *gult*

***Gult* land rights:** granted by the Imperial government to the church, local political authorities or noblemen in recognition of loyal service. *Gult* holders in turn granted use rights to tenant farmers in exchange for payment of a tithe along with loyalty and labour service.

***Rist* land rights:** derived from an individual's membership in a lineage-based community whose ancestors were linked to the land's original settlers. *Rist* land could not, traditionally, be bought or sold.

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[120] See Donald Crummey, "State and Society: 19th Century Ethiopia," in Donald Crummey & C.C. Steward (eds), *Modes of Production in Africa: The Precolonial Era* (Beverley Hills: Sage Publications, 1981), 232. Crummey argues that the most injurious aspect of these losses was their irregularity, rather than their volume.

[121] Richard Pankhurst, *Economic History of Ethiopia 1800-1935* (Addis Ababa: Haile Sellassie University Press, 1968), 568.

[122] Quotations are from C. C. Wrigley, "Ethiopia Starves," *Journal of African History* 29, 1 (1988): 109. McCann makes the strongest argument about the "moral order" in pre-20th century Wollo, asserting that there was a "delicate balance" among local elites, peasants and the state that included limitations on elite rights and institutionalized mechanisms for redistributing wealth from landholding elites to farmers (e.g. ritualized feasts known as *gebir*). In his view, "accounts in the literature of an abject peasantry have probably been exaggerated." (McCann, *From Poverty to Famine*, 40-46, 99-104, 133). Domestic slaves, a ubiquitous sub-group in highland society until the 1930s, did not share the resource-access rights of the free-born.

land also had independent access to *rist* land—a critical and unique feature of the highlands tenure system.[123] Another important dimension of this system was that *gult* holders, in return for their land rights, accepted a number of obligations not only to their political overlords (including, ultimately, the Emperor) but also to *rist* holders within their domain. These obligations entailed responsibility for *rist*-holders' physical and spiritual well-being through maintenance of churches, provision of security, and support of the destitute (e.g. through loaned capital, food assistance, and emergency relief when needed).[124] When imperial structures weakened after the 16th century, many local elites seem to have shrugged off these responsibilities, leaving smallholder farmers more vulnerable and progressively undermining rural households' capacity to withstand shock. Although there is not sufficient evidence to prove a causal link between diminished or absent imperial government and increased famine frequency in the highlands between 1600 and 1900, the correlation does suggest a precedent for a central state helping to safeguard rural food security, especially in ecologically vulnerable areas.[125] It also points to a long tradition of some portion of highlands households depending for their food and livelihood protection on institutionalized state support, at least in times of crisis.[126]

b. Food systems & rural vulnerability under Ethiopia's "empire-state," ca.1900-1940

> The Wollo peasantry is diligent, frugal and highly skilled, and yet this same peasantry has been the victim of all the major famines that have occurred in the country in the last one hundred years.
>
> Dessalegn Rahmato, *Famine and Survival Strategies* (1991)

Available information on Wollo's history makes one long-term trend clear: whereas most food emergencies before 1900 seem to have resulted only when multiple shocks (i.e. some combination of drought, pests, disease, war, etc.) occurred around the same time, from 1900 on it was increasingly the case that a single shock on its own—particularly drought—could propel the highlands into food crisis.

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[123] Lionel Cliffe, "Feudalism, Capitalism and Famine in Ethiopia," *Review of African Political Economy* 1, 1 (1974): 36-37; McCann, *From Poverty to Famine*, 40-46. See also Allen Hoben, *Land Tenure Among the Amhara of Ethiopia: the dynamics of cognative descent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973).

[124] McCann, *From Poverty to Famine*, 45.

[125] Menelik II's decision to open imperial granaries to his subjects and set soldiers to work farming during the Cruel Days famine reflects this tradition of centralized government taking institutional responsibility for disaster victims (Davies, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, 131).

[126] There is a wide range of views on this issue, ranging from praise for the substantial efforts of the Ethiopian state and church to aid famine victims to strong condemnation of emperors' "feigned liberality" in "institutionalising the dole," given that imperial food stores were filled with crops taken as tribute from rural subjects. See Bahru Zewde, "A Historical Outline of Famine in Ethiopia," in Abdul Mejid Hussein (ed.), *Rehab: Drought and Famine in Ethiopia (African Environment Special Report 2)* (London: International African Institute, Environmental Training Programme, UNEP-IDEP-SIDA, 1976), 55.

The 1888-92 Cruel Days famine, for instance, might not have occurred if northern cattle-owners had been able to observe traditional practices for preventing the spread of infectious livestock disease; but the introduction of rinderpest in 1888 coincided with a drought, massive pest infestations, and imperial military campaigns to battle armed incursions from Mahdist Sudan in the west, Italian forces in Eritrea, and local rebellions in Shoa and Gojjam. With multiple armies "marching across the land, 'eating' the countryside as they went,"[127] highland communities—already struggling with a poor agricultural year—were in too much disarray to follow normal animal hygiene procedures. The resulting annihilation of the cattle population deprived households of their milk and meat supplies, and brought plowing to a standstill just as swarms of locusts, army worms and rats began devouring crops and food stores, causing food prices (then calculated in salt bars) to skyrocket.[128] The ensuing famine owed its origins to the combined impact of these catastrophes.[129] After 1900, though, it took less and less to bring about a lethal disruption of Wollo's food systems. In 1913-14, 1926-28, 1953, and 1957-58, Wollo suffered from famines that seemed to be caused primarily by deficient rainfall. These crises, each more severe than the last, received little attention from either the Imperial government or the outside world.[130] Analyses of subsequent famines have also largely overlooked these events, explaining Wollo's heightened susceptibility to food crisis as a late 20th-century, principally drought-induced phenomenon—a consequence of rainfall lessening and becoming increasingly unpredictable after 1960.[131] Yet the apparent power of drought to single-handedly provoke large-scale starvation in Wollo had begun to intensify fully half a century earlier. Moreover, total annual rainfall did *not* significantly decline in Wollo between 1960 and 2000; and irregularity in rainfall timing, which did increase during this period, only posed a dire threat to harvests when farmers also lacked other factors of production necessary to adapt

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[127] Relief & Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), *The Challenges of Drought: Ethiopia's Decade of Struggle in Relief and Rehabilitation* (Addis Ababa: RRC, 1985), 71.

[128] Richard Pankhurst, "The Great Ethiopian Famine of 1888-1892: A New Assessment," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 21 (1966): 109-10.

[129] Pankhurst, *The History of Famine and Epidemics in Ethiopia*, 58ff; Davies, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, 127-33; Workineh Degefu, "Some aspects of meteorological drought in Ethiopia," in Michael H. Glantz (ed.), *Drought and Hunger in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 30; Relief & Rehabilitation Commission, *The Challenges of Drought*, 69-71.

[130] Dessalegn Rahmato also observes that "the frequency of famine in Wollo and the northeast has increased markedly since the beginning of this [i.e. the 20th] century," but does not offer an explanation (99-100).

[131] E.g. Staffan Rosell & Bjorn Holmer, "Rainfall Change and Its Implications for Belg Harvest in South Wollo, Ethiopia," *Geografiska Annaler: Series A, Physical Geography* 89, 4 (2007): 287-299; Kelkilachew Ali & Million Tafesse, *Ethiopian Village Studies: Shumsheha* (Oxford: Centre for the Study of African Economies, Oxford University, 1996), 2; Save the Children UK, "Ethiopia Food Economy Map," 5. Ahistorical approaches to famine analysis in Wollo also miss the fact that "meteorological drought" did not always lead to "agricultural drought"—i.e. did not necessarily mean famine or even economic decline—in earlier times (see Michael H. Glantz, "Drought and Economic Deprivation in Sub-Saharan Africa," in Glantz (ed.), *Drought and Hunger in Africa*, 46-47.

their cropping strategies to rainfall shifts (e.g. sufficient land, suitable soil, timely access to labour and oxen), as they had been able to do in earlier times.[132]

Something other than weather, then, was responsible for the worsening vulnerability of Wollo farming communities to food crisis from ca. 1900 on. Unfortunately, it is difficult to reconstruct early 20th-century highland food systems from secondary sources, given the heavy ideological emphasis in the few studies on this period, which generally blame Wollo's rising famine susceptibility on the "feudal" order that preceded Derg rule. An extreme example of this perspective is the scathing portrayal of pre-1970 agrarian society offered in *The Challenges of Drought*, by the Derg's Relief & Rehabilitation Commission (RRC). Arguing that extractive pre-revolutionary economic relations and elites' "abject ignorance" of farming stifled smallholder productivity, discouraged crop storage and soil management, and deterred technological innovation, this work describes Ethiopian "peasants" as "endlessly victim to…[feudal] forms of robbery," "since time immemorial…weak, under-nourished and teetering on the brink of starvation."[133] Given how little is known of the history of nutrition in the highlands, it is difficult to counter such sweeping (and unsupported) statements empirically. However, this claim jars with evidence from Wollo that before the 20th century, "in normal years, the expected yields from land available to peasant households proved able to absorb the cost of reproduction of the labor force and to provide surplus to support the spiritual and secular administration."[134] The RRC's version of Ethiopian history turns such evidence on its head, interpreting the critical role of smallholders' harvests in feeding soldiers, churches and the imperial court—and, regularly, farming communities themselves, as in the redistributive institution of *gebir* (ritualized communal feasts stocked from "state and feudal granaries")—not as proof of "peasant" agricultural success but as confirmation that famine in Ethiopia was ultimately the Emperor's fault.[135] Their argument here also contradicts fifteen centuries of Wollo history during which sporadic years of food shortage or famine, while catastrophic, were nonetheless far

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[132] Rosell & Holmer 2007; Declan Conway, "The climate and hydrology of the upper blue Nile river," *The Geographical Journal* 166, 1 (2000): 49–62. Other work has also challenged the correlation of famine with drought in Wollo (e.g. Mesfin Wolde-Mariam, *Rural Vulnerability to Famine*, 127; Webb & Von Braun, *Famine and Food Security in Ethiopia*, 26). It is worth noting for this period that when severe pest infestations or epidemic disease hit Wollo in the absence of drought, as in 1915 and 1917-18, they did not lead to famine (McCann, *From Poverty to Famine*, 31).

[133] RRC, *The Challenges of Drought*, 66-72. See also Wolde-Mariam, *Rural Vulnerability to Famine*, 17ff; and Shepherd, *The Politics of Starvation*, Ch. 2. Shepherd (10) also refers to a 1974 USAID document reiterating this view, illustrating how international development actors in Ethiopia were also ideologically driven in these years.

[134] McCann, *From Poverty to Famine*, 50. Crop price evidence from the 1800s supports this claim. According to Richard Pankhurst, cereal prices in the highlands were "remarkably low throughout the nineteenth century except in periods of famine," and in Wollo in 1901 barley was reported to be a mere 100-150 kg per dollar (Pankhurst, *Economic History of Ethiopia*, 192).

[135] RRC, *The Challenges of Drought*, 68.

outnumbered by years when smallholders seem to have enjoyed reasonable food security, at least in terms of quantities of calories available to rural households.

Moreover, James McCann's fieldwork-based historical research on northern Wollo suggests the need to distinguish carefully between Wollo's experience of food security before Menelik II took power in 1889, and under the modernizing imperial (or "empire-state") system during Menelik's reign (1889-1913) and that of his successor, Haile Selassie.[136] Menelik's expansionist, Shoa-based regime reunified Ethiopia and laid the foundations of the modern Ethiopian state, introducing the country's first railway, paved roads, and hospitals; Menelik also protected Ethiopia (except Eritrea) from colonial conquest by defeating an Italian invasion at Adwa in 1896.[137] According to McCann, however, Menelik's political achievements came at great cost to the former Amhara-centred empire's homeland in the north. From 1900 to 1935, a burgeoning Imperial administration in Addis Ababa introduced "fiscalist" policies that established stronger state control of regional administration at the expense of local elites, and imposed harsh new forms of taxation—harsh because more numerous, payable in cash rather than kind, and based on fixed rather than proportional assessment—just as population growth was pushing Wollo's agroecological system to its demographic limits. In the same period, Ethiopia's new southern-oriented and export-promoting political economy marginalized the north, such that Wollo missed out on infrastructural development underway elsewhere in the country. These parallel developments in the highlands—increasing population density, heightened state extraction of surpluses, and limited opportunities to earn income outside of agriculture—were further influenced by the Amharic system of bilateral descent and partible inheritance, which encouraged geographic dispersion of households when children married and after the death of male household heads.[138] By the 1910s and '20s, as a result of these combined pressures, farmers increasingly extended cultivation into higher-risk environments that were less suitable for preferred food crops: *dega* zones above 3,500 m, near the frostline; and *qolla* areas (usually pasture lands) below 2,000 m, which were prone to erratic rainfall, flooding and drought, along with higher risk of malaria and livestock disease. Population growth also caused intensified land use in the long-settled 2,000 to 3,500 m altitude range, accelerating the erosion of already worn highland soils. The cycle of rural impoverishment set in motion by these simultaneous processes resulted in a steady rise in the proportion of "unviable" households that lacked access to sufficient

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[136] Haile Selassie effectively ruled Ethiopia as Regent from 1916 until 1930, when he was crowned Emperor.
[137] Graham Hancock, *Ethiopia: The Challenge of Hunger* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1985), 29.
[138] On Amhara descent and inheritance practices, see McCann, *From Poverty to* Famine, 186; and especially Hoben, *Land Tenure Among the Amhara of Ethiopia*. The dispersive character of Amharic households is reflected in the proverb "A fire and relatives warm best from a distance" (Iliffe, *The African Poor*, 16).

productive resources— land, oxen, pasture—to sustain themselves independently. Other consequences throughout the area included declining agricultural productivity, rapid deforestation, and the beginnings of large-scale outmigration of Wollo's young men, notably to work in the flourishing coffee economy of the south. Between 1920 and 1935, McCann argues, there was "a dramatic increase in the drought-vulnerable population" in northeastern Ethiopia, and more and more highland households were "pushed to the edge of bankruptcy." By the mid 1930s, the agrarian crisis that would render Wollo so famine-prone later in the century had already begun.[139]

c. Livelihoods in crisis: post-World War II agrarian change and the 1964-67 famine

> Haile Selassie…made a number of efforts to continue the trend of modernization that had been started at the turn of the century by Menelik. He was quickly to find, however, that modernization was a tiger; riding on its back he was safe; but, when he tried to get off, it turned around and ate him.
>
> Graham Hancock, *Ethiopia: The Challenge of Hunger* (1985)

The vulnerability of Wollo's agricultural livelihoods worsened steadily after World War II. In the 1950s and '60s, the Ethiopian empire-state under Haile Selassie stepped up the pace of investment in education, health, industry, transport infrastructure, and large-scale commercial farming, principally in the south. For Wollo, this process of national "modernization" entailed more intense penetration of rural production and distribution systems, a process that transformed the context of household agricultural decision-making while largely ignoring the region's own development needs. In addition to a multitude of new tax and labor assessments, new customs regulations disrupted ancient networks of exchange, tribute and raiding that had linked the highlands with the lowlands to the east, serving as a major source of oxen for highland farmers as well as supplementary income from the long-distance hides, skins and salt trades. By deliberately capturing many of the traditional revenue sources of local secular and religious elites, the Imperial government eroded not only their income and power base but also the ethic of reciprocity that had bound elites to rural producers, protecting farmers from excessive elite demands and ensuring some redistribution of food surpluses, even in good agricultural years. Local

[139] McCann, *From Poverty to Famine*, 143, 207. This paragraph summarizes the main argument of McCann's *From Poverty to Famine* along with key points in McCann, "The Myth and Reality of Agricultural Crises in Ethiopia" and McCann, *People of the Plow: An Agricultural History of Ethiopia, 1800-1990* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995).

elites in turn sought to recoup their lost revenues by imposing new taxes and fees of their own, also in cash and at fixed rates rather than proportional to harvests.[140]

Squeezed from all sides, smallholders intensified agricultural production, sought supplemental income through non-farm activities (e.g. petty trade), and adapted their cropping schedules to the empire-state's unpredictable labour needs (e.g. road-building to connect Addis Ababa to cash crop zones and trade hubs). Yet for the majority, working harder only made things worse. Trying to expand agricultural production by opening additional plots, clearing forests and pasture for farming, cultivating in unsuitable areas (e.g. poor quality soils, steep slopes), and eliminating fallow periods increased households' labour burden while decreasing returns to their efforts—and dangerously depleting livestock forage. Exhausted and underproductive farmers, soils and oxen compromised the performance of "one of Africa's most efficient agricultural systems, whose technology [had] sustained sophisticated state systems for millenia."[141] Both human and animal food security suffered, especially for households that settled above or below the preferred 2,500 to 3,500 m altitude zone and had to shift from growing teff and wheat to growing barley (at higher elevations) or sorghum (in the lowlands), grains that were less marketable and less palatable as fodder.[142] Despite these disadvantages, aerial photography from the 1950s and 1970s confirms that settlement continued to spread into previously avoided upper highland and low-lying areas during these decades—altitude zones that farmers had historically relied on as temporary settlement sites in times of drought, which were now increasingly occupied by permanent residents.[143]

The most critical damage to the long-term viability of Wollo's agricultural system in this period, though, occurred through changes in rural household assets and interhousehold social relations, changes that were linked to the spread of the cash economy and commercial agriculture into the highlands. As disappearing pasture, high livestock maintenance costs and farmers' need for cash spurred animal sales and discouraged restocking, the average number of plow oxen per household

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[140] In some cases, local elites rebelled against this expansion of central state authority, most dramatically in the 1928-30 uprising in Tigray and Wollo, the 1943 revolt in Tigray, and the 1948 uprising in Yejju, Wollo (see Alex de Waal, *Evil Days: 30 Years of War and Famine in Ethiopia* [New York: Africa Watch, 1991], 53ff; and Sarah Vaughan, *Ethnicity and Power in Ethiopia* [Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2003], 126). Brutal imperial suppression of these uprisings decimated rural production systems and livelihoods, sometimes irreparably (see McCann, "The Myth and Reality of Agricultural Crises in Ethiopia," 189-90).

[141] McCann, *From Poverty to Famine*, 204; Webb & Von Braun, *Famine and Food Security in Ethiopia*, 23-26.

[142] McCann, *From Poverty to Famine*, 174.

[143] McCann, "The Myth and Reality of Agricultural Crises in Ethiopia," 181-82. The processes described in this paragraph are outlined in McCann, *From Poverty to Famine*, Ch. 8 & Epilogue. On the traditional practice of migrating to *qolla* and higher *dega* altitudes during drought, see RRC, *The Challenges of Drought*, 185-86.

declined.[144] Many farmers who lost their oxen replaced part or all of their cereal crop with pulses, which required fewer plow passes but yielded less. Over time, fixed tax demands in cash rather than kind contributed to the decapitalization of many smaller farms, as households already living on the edge were forced to sell livestock, tools and/or seed in order to meet their tax burden.[145] In consequence, the growing number of asset-poor households looked to the shrinking minority of wealthier farmers for access to the means to sustain food production, offering all they had left—*rist* land and/or labour—in exchange for borrowed oxen and seed. For their part, wealthier *rist* holders and *gult* landowners, hoping to take advantage of the Selassie government's heavy promotion of export-oriented agriculture after World War II, were eager to acquire both additional land and the labour needed to cultivate it for market sales.[146] In these circumstances, the traditional highlands institution of *magazo*, originally a safety net for the infirm or aged, was repurposed as a system by which oxen-owning farmers used their livestock to rent fields from poorer households that, without plow oxen, could not cultivate enough of their land to get by. This arrangement clearly served the interests of livestock lenders, enabling many to enter commercial farming; but because borrowed oxen arrived late in the season and already worn out, *magazo* worked to borrowers' short- and long-term disadvantage. Relying on borrowed oxen interfered with time-sensitive planting schedules and undercut productivity, often making it necessary for borrowers to exchange or sell their labour to supplement household food and seed stores through purchase. Taking on additional labour obligations reduced time available for own-farm production, which forced further compromises to poorer households' cropping strategies and food yields, and led to deepening indebtedness.

By the 1950s, as a result of these trends, better-off farmers and *gult*-holding officials began purchasing *rist* land—previously not alienable "through sale, contract or even gift"—from households so asset-poor they could not farm any longer. Meanwhile, *gult* holders pressed their tenants to pay both taxes and tithes in fixed, sometimes inflated cash amounts, a sharp departure from the flexibility and negotiability of previous crop-share arrangements. This erosion of the traditional land system led to land and livestock consolidation in the hands of a wealthy minority and widening class disparities, including the emergence, for the first time, of a sizeable landless population in Wollo, along with an increase in the outflow of rural men seeking wage labour on cotton and coffee plantations in the south. The decline of *rist*-based subsistence rights on the one hand, and *gult*-based reciprocity protections for

[144] McCann, *From Poverty to Famine*, 80.
[145] McCann, "The Myth and Reality of Agricultural Crises in Ethiopia," 191-92.
[146] Cliffe, "Feudalism, Capitalism and Famine in Ethiopia," 37-38.

the poor on the other, marked a profound rupture in rural social relations and a dramatic worsening of risk exposure for the vast majority of Wollo residents.[147]

The extent of Wollo's livelihood deterioration became painfully evident by the mid 1960s. Drought struck the area in 1964, affecting eight *awrajas* (sub-provinces), most severely Wag and Lasta in northwest Wollo, where "acute food deficits" were observed at that time.[148] In October 1965, local police conveyed their concern about an impending famine to Imperial authorities. By February 1966, Wollo officials were reporting large numbers of people leaving their villages in search of work and food; in June, the Ministry of Interior in Addis Ababa was informed that people in Wollo were starving, having consumed their last food stocks and "exhausted whatever was available in capital, credit and local charity."[149] By July, a small Ethiopian mobile health clinic was dispatched to Qorem (in Wag *awraja*) in response to reports of famine-related epidemic disease outbreaks there. A 1966 account from the Health Officer in charge of the clinic, Mogues Azbite, provides a rare ground-level glimpse of this scantily documented crisis, which was long underway by the time of his arrival:

> …the two western [*woredas* of Wag]…have had very poor rainfall for 3 consecutive years. This has caused unimaginable destruction of all living things in the area. First the green vegetation did not appear, then cattle and other animals were destroyed, and finally, since last year, human beings started fading and dying. Five months ago, when the [Ethiopian] Red Cross unit was in the area, there was an estimated report that 56,000 people had already died within the last 2-3 years….[150]

Qorem town, with a population of about 5,000, was by July 1966 already hosting roughly 20,000 "highly starving refugees…looking for food and other forms of help."[151]

Mogues' profile of the 977 men, women and children treated in Qorem's corrugated iron "Emergency Hospital" between July and December 1966 reveals important details of northwest Wollo's livelihood collapse. "Virtually all patients admitted were severely starved refugees" whose other

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[147] McCann, *From Poverty to Famine*, 179ff. McCann also argues that poorer farmers' awareness of their heightened vulnerability fostered a conservative, risk-averse attitude to technology, helping to explain the strikingingly low level of innovation in highland agricultural technology—i.e. the persistence of the single-tine scratch plow—since the 19th century . See also Cliffe, "Feudalism, Capitalism and Famine in Ethiopia"; and Wolde-Mariam, *Rural Vulnerability to Famine in Ethiopia 1958-1977*, 96-97. On the other hand, Dessalegn Rahmato stresses the cooperative, mutually beneficial—"if not always and necessarily equally shared"—nature of such oxen-land exchanges, only minimally addressing the long-term consequences of inequalities underpinning these arrangements (Rahmato, *Famine and Survival Strategies*, 30, 74-76).

[148] Hunger was reported in 1964-65 in the following *awrajas:* Ambasel, Lasta, Raya and Kobo, Werehimenu, Wag, Kalu, Yejju and Dessie Zuria (RRC, *The Challenge of Drought*, 77).

[149] Mogues Azbite, "A Famine Relief Operation at Qorem, Ethiopia, in 1966," *Disasters* 5, 1 (1981): 7; Wolde-Mariam, *Rural Vulnerability to Famine in Ethiopia 1958-1977*, 37.

[150] Mogues Azbite, 7.

[151] Ibid., 8.

illnesses (dysentery, typhus, relapsing fever, pneumonia) stemmed from weakened immune systems caused by micronutrient deficiencies and severe acute malnutrition. The latter was evident in signs of kwashiorkor (oedema, depigmentation, ascites), the former in conditions associated especially with lack of Vitamins A and B (xerophthalmia, pellagra, keratitis, neuritis, cheilosis, etc.) and less commonly iron (anemia) and Vitamins C (scurvy) and D (ricketts).[152] Roughly two-thirds of admitted patients were female, with the greatest gender imbalance occurring among those between 15 and 44 years of age, where 73% of admissions were female. "Many orphans under 5 years of age" were treated at the hospital. The larger proportions of children and women among admissions were explained by a "rumour" that most older adolescent and adult males had "sent their wives and children to grain distribution centres and to where medical services were available" while remaining behind to await the 1966 *meher* season rains, to cultivate their own land or to work for wealthier farmers.[153] These observations point, on the one hand, both to the advanced stage of the crisis by mid-1966 and to a common household coping strategy, whereby families shifted to what Dessalegn Rahmato calls a "crisis division of labor" driving "men and women in different directions"—men to look for cash-paying work, sell livestock and/or monitor markets, and women to take small children and seek help through "begging" for aid.[154] On the other hand, the fact that many men were staying home, rather than evacuating the countryside with their wives, also indicates that a significant number of households did not yet feel they had exhausted all their resources, as a wholesale flight of families would have suggested. For reasons difficult to know with certainty now, some expectation or hope that they had sufficient resources to survive kept farming households at least partly rooted in famine-affected rural areas, even after three years of severe drought.

The report of the 1966 relief operation at Qorem also sheds light on the institutional dynamics—and local perceptions—of famine relief in late Imperial Ethiopia, before foreign or national government aid played a major role in rural disaster response. Mogues' group was preceded at Qorem by small medical relief teams from the Ethiopian Red Cross (ERC) and Wollo's Provincial Medical Officer of Health (PMOH), which both departed soon after the new team's arrival. Food provided to patients by the ERC and PMOH, and food expenditure lists for the July-December operation, included 200 tonnes of bulgur wheat "donated by the U.S. to the Ethiopian government." All other food supplies for the hospital (dried skimmed milk, macaroni, wheat flour, tea) were recorded as either donated by provincial government authorities and "dignitaries" in Wollo, purchased locally by Mogues with cash funds he

[152] Ibid., 11-12.
[153] Ibid., 9.
[154] Dessalegn Rahmato, *Famine and Survival Strategies*, 152-53.

requested from the Wollo Welfare Committee and the Wollo PMOH, or obtained through the exchange of American wheat for local foods (sheep and goat meat, eggs, oil, salt, spices, tea, sugar) to enhance the nutritional content of patients' diet. Mogues was similarly proactive in securing assistance from provincial officials to solve problems related to general food distribution to refugees. Before his arrival, relief grain was distributed by *awraja* and *woreda* (district) officials in paltry rations (25 lb per family per month) by a process that was bureaucratically cumbersome and ineffective in reaching those most in need: "The grain was given to everybody, especially to town people who had property and were strong, because they could push out the poor ones and get in front; or else they were known by the registrar, as they were from the same town."[155] Mogues personally persuaded the Wollo Governor to increase the ration size dramatically, to enlist the police force and army to manage distributions, and to target only "the refugees and poor people from the gathered crowd" on distribution days, a measure so successful in reducing mortality that refugees "insistently refused to go back to their home regions for grain distribution" and thus "caused a great problem in Qorem."[156] From the viewpoint of a frontline Ethiopian relief worker, in other words, institutional famine response in 1960s Wollo was largely a local (or, at most, provincial) affair. There is no evidence in the 1966 report that either crisis responders or aid recipients expected that the Imperial government (much less foreign organizations or states) would participate in relief operations in a meaningful way.

This perspective, with its emphasis on localized responsibility for famine relief, challenges later analyses of the 1960s crisis, which tend to overlook the local dynamics of emergency response in favour of blaming the central government (typically, the Emperor himself) for failing to take adequate action. Commentators affiliated with the socialist regime that overthrew Emperor Selassie in 1974 condemn the Imperial state's "very disorganized and extremely inefficient" response as directly contributing to the 1964-67 famine's high death toll.[157] According to these sources, as of September 1966, when the famine had spread to other parts of the province (e.g. 60% of Desse *awraja*'s population was reportedly suffering from severe starvation), the central government had sent only a small amount of cash relief to Wollo. These writings remain silent on the U.S. grain shipments that reached Qorem, via Addis Ababa, in early 1966, and say nothing about cash disbursements from the capital, which helped to fund food purchases for Qorem that year, stressing instead that despite their early knowledge of the crisis, Imperial authorities did too little too late to help famine victims. There is no question that the overall

[155] Ibid., 16.
[156] Ibid., 17.
[157] RRC, *The Challenge of Drought*, 77. While the total death toll is unknown, scattered *awraja* reports suggest that mortality was quite high throughout northwestern Wollo, especially from late 1966 through late 1967.

response to this crisis was insufficient. By July 1967, police in Lasta *awraja* were reporting that "since June the number of corpses…lying unburied all over the place along the roads is great"; by the end of the year, the famine had killed an estimated 40,000 people in Lasta alone.[158] When in October 1967 the Imperial government sent "nominal" quantities of food aid to Wollo, grain distribution was hampered by the lack of roads and vehicles capable of accessing the worst-hit areas. The bulk of this grain ended up being offered for sale at reduced prices, but very little was purchased and most rotted in storage.[159] When we contrast this information with the earnest, independent efforts by provincial, *awraja* and *woreda* officials to implement community-level relief measures throughout the crisis (e.g. creating local food reserves through annual grain collection from farming households),[160] what emerges is a picture of a national famine response system in transition, when all levels of government—including the empire-state—may still have assumed that traditional local institutions were responsible for sustaining crisis-affected rural families.[161] The coping strategies pursued by many victims of the 1964-67 famine—e.g. converging on local churchyards, monasteries and noblemen's compounds in search of aid—confirms this view, recalling documentary evidence of local relief measures during the 1888-92 famine.[162] The fact that through the height of the 1960s crisis, even in the worst hit areas, some *awraja* officials continued to collect taxes and recruit labour for the central government, and that repeated written pleas for aid from Wollo Governor Mamo Seyoum (in letters sent between 1967 and 1970, i.e. well after the crisis' onset) failed to elicit an Imperial response,[163] could also be interpreted as evidence not of official callousness but of a system in flux, when the conflicting needs of a modernizing state and disaster-stricken rural communities had not yet been resolved.

In retrospect, many commentators view the 1964-67 famine as a foreshadowing—if not the origin—of the much better documented 1972-74 disaster.[164] The livelihood crisis of the mid-1960s was

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[158] Wolde-Mariam, *Rural Vulnerability to Famine in Ethiopia 1958-1977*, 38.
[159] RRC, *The Challenge of Drought*, 77-79; Wolde-Mariam, *Rural Vulnerability*, 38-39.
[160] RRC, *The Challenge of Drought*, 79-80.
[161] In fact, the RRC's portrayal of local-level relief measures as an ad hoc, fallback system desperately cobbled together in the absence of Imperial aid (e.g. "Things were instead left to functionaries at the local level with no policies or guidelines and little support from the central administration") runs directly counter to Ethiopia's historical record, in which local institutions clearly held primary responsibility for "humanitarian" aid in food crises.
[162] For example, "People came from the four corners of the country and the poor and the miserable filled the town…. A huge hall was constructed on the right side of the Church of St. Mary. The poor were brought into it…. Then the servants gave out crumbled *injera* mixed with stew" (quoted in RRC, *The Challenges of Drought*, 64). See also McCann, *From Poverty to Famine*, 202; Iliffe, *The African Poor*, 13; and Pankhurst, "The Great Ethiopian Famine of 1888-1892."
[163] Shepherd, *The Politics of Starvation*, ix; RRC, *The Challenges of Drought*, 79.
[164] Wolde-Mariam, *Rural Vulnerability to Famine in Ethiopia 1958-1977*, 41; RRC, *The Challenges of Drought*, 77; John Seaman & Julius Holt, "The Ethiopian Famine of 1973-4: I. Wollo Province," *Proceedings of the Nutrition*

unprecedented in the completeness of the devastation it wreaked on agrarian production systems: for the first time in Wollo's history, a significant proportion of rural households were simply not able to recover. Vulnerability to food shock had become endemic and system-wide, leaving the poor majority of Wollo residents with few reserves to combat another drought.

V. "The Hidden Hunger": Wollo and Save-UK in the 1972-74 famine

> This is a queue for food. These people are Ethiopian peasants. Once they had cattle, land and houses. They sold them all to buy food. Now, they have only their ration cards….
>
> Jonathan Dimbleby's film *The Unknown Famine* (1973, BBC; edited, retitled & broadcast in Ethiopia as *The Hidden Hunger*)

> Historians of the future may well see the drought of 1972-74 as the sorrowful setting from which a new society began to emerge.
>
> RRC, *The Challenges of Drought* (1985)

In the thousands of pages of published writing on Ethiopia's 1972-74 famine, which took anywhere from 40,000 to 300,000 lives,[165] it can be difficult to disentangle the story of one province's livelihood collapse from the drama of national regime change against which accounts of this catastrophe are always set. In part, detailed reconstruction of the causes and progression of this famine in Wollo eludes us because, despite intensive media coverage from 1973 on, "there [was] little factual information about what actually happened" in the areas worst affected.[166] Moreover, as McCann notes:

> …our understanding of the local effect on drought-affected farming systems derives almost exclusively from scattered data drawn from

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Society 34, 3 (1975): 114A; A.P. Wood, "Farmers' Responses to Drought in Ethiopia," in *Rehab: Drought and Famine in Ethiopia* (African Environment Special Report No. 2), ed. A. M. Hussein (London: International African Institute, Environmental Training Programme, UNEP-IDEP-SIDA, 1976), 70. Sorenson refers to the "Long Famine of 1965-1974" (John Sorenson, *Imagining Ethiopia: Struggles for History and Identity in the Horn of Africa* [New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993], 111). Webb & Von Braun note the difficulty of pinpointing the start date of food emergencies, in Ethiopia as elsewhere, since famines tend to develop out of food shortages or broader livelihood vulnerabilities over an extended period of time. Rather than isolating the 1972-74 famine, some analysts claim that between 1958 and 1977, roughly 20% of Ethiopia was under famine conditions each year (Webb & Von Braun, *Famine and Food Security in Ethiopia*, 21).

[165] Former Save-UK Ethiopia Country Director John Graham describes the 1973-74 famine as "one of the most studied events in humanitarian experience" (Graham, "Disaster Response and Risk Management in Ethiopia," unpublished manuscript, 2009, 4). The estimated death total of 40,000 comes from Seaman & Holt, "The Ethiopian Famine of 1973-4: I. Wollo Province," 115A. The upper-range estimate of 300,000, which may include victims in Tigre as well as Wollo province, is from T.P. Ofcansky & L. Berry, *Ethiopia: A Country Study* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, 1991), quoted in Graham 2009, 4. The estimate of 200,000 is more widely accepted (see Shepherd, *The Politics of Starvation*, xiii; and RRC, *The Challenge of Drought*, 77).

[166] Julius Holt, John Seaman & J.P.W. Rivers, "The Ethiopian Famine of 1973-4: 2. Harerge Province," *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society* 34, 3 (1975): 115A.

> those who have come to relief camps, a demonstrably poor cross-section, and a distinct minority of the rural population affected by drought…[since most] remain on their land.[167]

Without knowing more about the contextual dynamics that drove some Wollo residents from their homes while enabling others to stay, retaining enough of a foothold in the rural economy to survive and attempt to reconstruct their lives afterwards, our understanding of the crisis—its deeper roots and most indelible consequences for the people of Wollo—remains severely limited. In a way, this informational "black hole" at the heart of the 1972-74 famine also crippled international relief and rehabilitation efforts from the outset, and contributed to setting humanitarian intervention in Wollo on a course that may, over time, have done more harm than good to food security and agrarian livelihoods.

By contrast, the significance of the 1972-74 crisis for Ethiopian political history is clear. The Imperial government's strenuous efforts to conceal the famine—and its feeble relief response—played a pivotal role in toppling Haile Selassie, as did a group of dissident Ethiopian military officers' propagandized reworking of British journalist Jonathan Dimbleby's now-iconic film.[168] These events ushered in the 1974 revolution that brought the Provisional Military Administrative Council (Derg) regime to power, and provided the impetus for the Derg's sweeping reforms of the country's agricultural, land tenure and disaster management systems. They also transformed Ethiopia's relationship to the outside world, including the humanitarian community:

> The 1973/74 famine remains unique as an event… This was the first food crisis in the country to attract world attention and to draw international emergency support on a large scale…. High powered, organized relief operation by foreign governments and international voluntary agencies (or NGOs) is a new experience in Ethiopia, dating back to 1973, and since then the country has continued to be the focus of international relief efforts, and has had to live with the murky politics of international food aid.[169]

These outward aspects of the 1970s disaster have been analyzed at length elsewhere and will only be summarized here.[170] This section focuses instead on the famine's origins and impact in the

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[167] James C. McCann, "The social impact of drought in Ethiopia: oxen, households, and some implications for rehabilitation," in Michael Glantz (ed.), *Drought and Hunger in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 245.

[168] For details, see Jonathan Dimbleby, "Feeding on Ethiopia's famine," *The Independent*, 8 December 1998 (http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/feeding-on-ethiopias-famine-1189980.html, accessed 19 December 2012).

[169] Dessalegn Rahmato, *Famine and Survival Strategies*, 101.

[170] See Shepherd, *The Politics of Starvation*; Wolde-Mariam, *Rural Vulnerability to Famine in Ethiopia 1958-1977*, especially Ch. 2 and 3; Liam Nolan, *The Forgotten Famine: History of Famine in Ethiopia* (Dublin: Mercier Press,

context of Wollo's livelihood history, the implications for Wollo of changing national systems of famine response, and the area's new exposure to external humanitarian actors, including Save-UK, whose interventions would become a permanent element of Wollo's food security and livelihoods landscape from that point forward.

a. Explaining the 1972-74 famine: dominant narratives and neglected voices

> Peasants are the most peripheral group in the power structure of Ethiopia…. As Mesfin Wolde-Mariam succinctly put it, peasants..."never had any significance in terms of power and influence. This fact must be included as one of the most important aspects of the problem of famine in Ethiopia and its increasing frequency and magnitude."
>
> Alemneh Dejene, *Environment, Famine, and Politics in Ethiopia* (1990)

> Famine victims do not respond to stress from a position of ignorance, but from a position of knowledge.
>
> Peter Walker, "Indigenous Knowledge and Famine Relief in the Horn of Africa" (1999)

Continuing erratic rainfall through the late 1960s further compromised Wollo harvests and pasturage, leading to localized food shortages and intermittent government relief measures in the worst-hit areas.[171] While historically, Wollo farmers were used to irregular rainfall and periodic drought, they had not yet adapted to the crumbling of the social and political pillars of the old highland food system, and its replacement by a new order in which the inflexible demands of a distant central government and the impersonal relations of a spreading cash economy trumped rural households' ability to manage risk in a strained physical environment. During the years leading to the 1970s crisis, the extractive demands of Ethiopia's empire-state continued to consume the dwindling crop surpluses and seed stocks of even better-off Wollo households, while driving more farmers into extreme poverty. By this point, official surveys showed the presence of 375,000 landless farmers in Wollo.[172] At the same time, land shortage and worsening population pressure magnified the livelihood impact of climate

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1974); Alex de Waal, *Evil Days: 30 Years of War and Famine in Ethiopia* (New York: Africa Watch, 1991); Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia: 1855-1974* (London: James Currey, 1996); Alex de Waal, *Famine Crimes: Politics & the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997) ,Ch. 6; Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An essay on entitlement and deprivation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), Ch. 7; B.G. Kumar, "Ethiopian Famines 1973-1985: A Case-Study," in *The Political Economy of Hunger*, ed. J. Dreze and A. Sen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), Vol. 2, 173-216; Hancock, *Ethiopia: The Challenge of Hunger*, Ch. 2.

[171] J.B. Mason et al, "Nutritional lessons from the Ethiopian drought," *Nature* 248 (1974): 647; Shepherd, *The Politics of Starvation*, 13; Kurt Jansson, Michael Harris & Angela Penrose, *The Ethiopian Famine: The Story of the Emergency Relief Operation* (London: Zed Books, 1987), 93; Webb & Von Braun, *Famine and Food Security in Ethiopia*, 27; RRC, *Challenges of Drought*, 80; Dessalegn Rahmato, *Famine and Survival Strategies*, 101.

[172] Shepherd, *The Politics of Starvation*, 3; Cliffe, "Feudalism, Capitalism and Famine," 37.

stress, above all by undermining conditions for livestock reproduction. Many recent studies of the Wollo economy highlight the crucial role of livestock, particularly oxen—as both factor of production and form of wealth—in the region's plow-based farming systems, and oxen-less households' increased exposure to food insecurity and destitution.[173] Yet in the ecologically stressed circumstances of Wollo farming systems by the early '70s, livestock ownership was a double-edged sword, competing with food crops for access to workable land and fuelling processes of deforestation, soil erosion, fertility loss and yield declines, in what Alemneh Dejene calls a "vicious cycle of environmental degradation, drought and famine."[174] With the opportunity costs of rearing draft animals thus greatest at the same time as highland farmers' need for them was most acute, McCann's observation that the areas of the northeast most seriously affected by drought since the 1950s have also historically been "net oxen-importers"[175] hints at a crucial social dimension of the famine's origins. As noted above, household oxen ownership in Wollo had been both declining on average and becoming increasingly skewed—concentrated in the hands of a small minority of better-off farmers—in the two decades prior the 1972-74 crisis. This widening asset imbalance intensified the need for poorer farmers to seek borrowing or rental arrangements with wealthier households in their community or, if necessary, further afield. These "institutions of capital borrowing and exchange" might help in the short term by providing access to draft oxen and other key inputs, but they also exposed borrowers over time to ever-greater risk, including the risk of reduced productivity, food shortage and permanent indebtedness.[176] As the stakes of such interhousehold arrangements increased, so did competition for them, for the progressive decapitalization of rural households led to widening impoverishment throughout Wollo—and fewer households in a position to lend or rent out their draft animals. In this context, the 1964-67 famine appears to have been a breaking point, after which a critical mass of Wollo residents simply lacked the economic, ecological and social resources necessary to restock.

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[173] E.g. Julius Holt & Mark Lawrence, *Making Ends Meet: A survey of the food economy of the Ethiopian northeast highlands* (London: Save the Children, 1993); R. Ramakrishna & A. Demeke, "An Empirical Analysis of Food Insecurity in Ethiopia: The Case of Northern Wollo," *Africa Development* 27, 1 & 2 (2002): 127-143; Save the Children UK, *Wealth, Health and Knowledge: Determinants of malnutrition in North Wollo, Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa: Save the Children UK/USAID, 2002); Kay Sharp & Steven Devereux, "Destitution in Wollo (Ethiopia): chronic poverty as a crisis of household and community livelihoods," *Journal of Human Development* 5, 2 (2004): 227-247; Stephen Devereux & Kay Sharp, "Trends in poverty and destitution in Wollo, Ethiopia," *Journal of Development Studies* 42, 4 (2006): 592-610; Peter D. Little et al, "'Moving in place': Drought and poverty dynamics in South Wollo, Ethiopia," *Journal of Development Studies* 42, 2 (2006): 200-225; Anne M. Cafer, *A Survey of Agricultural Productivity and Nutritional Status in Rural South Wollo, Ethiopia* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Nebraska, 2011).
[174] Alemneh Dejene, *Environment, Famine, and Politics in Ethiopia*, 5, 23-24 and passim.
[175] McCann describes northern Wollo as a "net oxen importer" since at least the mid 19th century ("The social impact of drought in Ethiopia," 252). See also McCann, *From Poverty to Famine*, 68-71.
[176] Ibid, 253.

This deeper background to the 1972-74 famine, and its influence on how famine-affected communities not only coped with the crisis but also responded to relief when it arrived, rarely figures in analyses of this disaster. Yet signs of the damaging health consequences of longer-term livelihood trends in Wollo and other parts of northern Ethiopia began to appear in the late 1950s and '60s, when nutrition surveys conducted by Ethiopian, American and British research teams found evidence that a large portion of the highlands population—even in so-called "normal times"—was badly underfed. Survey data revealed widespread protein malnutrition, inadequate intake of key micronutrients, low body weight reserves, low birth weights, "multitudinous infections" (including gastroenteritis, intestinal parasites and venereal diseases), and "appallingly high infant mortality rates." In particular, the 1960s surveys found "a high prevalence of iodine deficiency goiter and of vitamin D deficiency rickets… everywhere in highland Ethiopia," along with "xerophthalmia, mainly in combination with severe protein-energy malnutrition." General malnutrition worsened significantly in the lean season between harvests, with energy intake 55% of the FAO standard and intake of Vitamins A and C only 10% of the FAO standard.[177] Although the published results of these surveys do not discuss the differential distribution of particular forms of malnutrition—who suffered from which forms of dietary inadequacy, and why—they do make starkly clear that Wollo's population was experiencing generally heightened livelihood risk, food insecurity and nutritional vulnerability well before drought conditions worsened in the 1970s.

It is drought, however, that dominates narratives explaining the 1972-74 famine, and rainfall events that are used to define "distress indicators" and turning points before and during the crisis.[178] These events, at least, are relatively easy to reconstruct. Retrospective climate studies published in the late 1980s note the worsening "intensity of drought" in the highlands over the previous two decades.[179] The meager rains of 1970 and 1971 led to a poor enough harvest in some parts of Wollo that local officials petitioned the Provincial Governor for food aid, and the Imperial government sent small shipments of grain.[180] Then the 1972 *meher* rains partially failed, and a crop assessment report by Ethiopia's Ministry of Agriculture that year described a "serious problem" in many areas of Wollo (as

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[177] M. Gebre-Medhin & B. Vahlquist, "Famine in Ethiopia: The Period 1973-75," *Nutrition Reviews* 35, 8 (1977): 195-6; D.S. Miller & J. Holt, "The Ethiopian Famine," *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society* 34, 3 (1975): 168.
[178] See for instance Webb & von Braun, *Famine and Food Security in Ethiopia*, 27.
[179] Dejene, *Environment, Famine, and Politics in Ethiopia*, 3.
[180] H. Goyder & C. Goyder, "Case studies of famine: Ethiopia," *Preventing Famine: Policies and Prospects for Africa*, eds. Donald Curtis et al (New York, Routledge, 1988), 75; Shepherd, *The Politics of Starvation*, 13; RRC, *The Challenges of Drought*, 81.

well as Tigray and northern Shoa) and predicted worsening hardship to come.[181] By late 1972, Wollo residents were "leaving their homesteads in increasing numbers in search of food, water and shelter."[182] The complete failure of the *belg* rains in early 1973 was especially devastating for highland farmers, and most observers depict this event as the triggering cause of "widespread starvation" in Wollo.[183] In February 1973, 1,500 drought victims trekked 200 miles south from Wollo to Addis Ababa, where they received aid from the Ethiopian Red Cross and, according to journalist Jack Shepherd, reported not only the loss of food and seed stores but the death of "almost 90% of their cattle" and distress sales of land, livestock, tools, "the wood from their huts, and even their clothes."[184] In March, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church cabled the World Council of Churches in Geneva about a "mass exodus" out of Wollo, pleading for emergency aid; other sources from this time describe "sick and hungry people [lining] parts of the north-south highway through Wollo, stopping vehicles to beg for food."[185] The crisis peaked between May and August 1973, when refugees crowded into towns along the highway, and relief camps hastily improvised by local voluntary agencies and foreign missionaries were "exceedingly ill-equipped with food, sanitation or medical services…overwhelmed by some three times the numbers they could shelter."[186] By July, "sharply rising grain prices" in Wollo's main markets were making it hard for these responders to purchase food for their roadside feeding stations.[187] In August, a visiting UNICEF team reported that 283,000 Wollo residents had registered at these stations and were receiving some food and grain supplies; the same team estimated famine-related deaths at between 50,000 and 100,000.[188] By September, over 60,000 people were crowded into (or around) Wollo's twelve emergency shelters, where irregular and nutritionally inadequate food supplies, along with abysmal hygiene conditions, contributed to a high incidence of infectious and vector-borne diseases (diarrhea, acute respiratory

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[181] This report was not made public until mid 1973. See Kumar, "Ethiopian Famines," 179; Webb & von Braun, 27; Gebre-Medhin & Vahlquist, 196.
[182] Gebre-Medhin & Vahlquist, 196.
[183] E.g. Seaman & Holt, "The Ethiopian Famine of 1973-4," 114A. Nine of Wollo's *awrajas* were especially severely affected (RRC, *The Challenges of Drought*, 80).
[184] Shepherd, 1, 19. See also Lionel Cliffe, "Feudalism, Capitalism and Famine in Ethiopia," *Review of African Political Economy* 1, 1 (1974): 36.
[185] Gebre-Medhin & Vahlquist, 196. See also Kumar, 179.
[186] J.P.W. Rivers et al, "Lessons for epidemiology from the Ethiopian famines," *Annales de la Société belge de médecine tropicale* 56, 4-5 (1976): 351; Gebre-Medhin & Vahlquist, "Famine in Ethiopia," 197; Shepherd, 32.
[187] Shepherd, *The Politics of Starvation*, 22.
[188] Rivers et al, "Lessons for epidemiology from the Ethiopian famines," 351; Mason et al, "Nutritional lessons from the Ethiopian drought," 647. According to Shepherd, there were 283,000 "starving peasants…out of 670,000 people who were hungry and needing food in [Wollo] province" (32). The estimated population of Wollo province at the time was 2.5 million, out of a total national population of about 27 million (Holt & Seaman, 115A).

infections, measles, malaria, typhus, relapsing fever) among the gravely weakened refugee population, causing high mortality especially among young children.[189]

It was not until the October 1973 release in Britain of Dimbleby's *The Unknown Famine* that the Imperial government was forced to publicly acknowledge the severity of the crisis, and previously "timid" international relief agencies broke their own silence. Aid, including cereals and other basic commodities, "began to arrive in quantity" that month, and private donations to Western organizations such as Oxfam and Save-UK began to pour in.[190] It was also in October, however, that the resumption of near-normal *meher* rains broke the drought in Wollo, returning cereal prices to close to pre-famine levels and reducing the shelter population to 15,000.[191] Reports differ as to whether people left shelters voluntarily or under pressure from aid workers and/or officials. According to Dr. Mehari Gebre-Medhin, then director of the Ethiopian Nutrition Institute, "In Wollo serious efforts were made to encourage the people to return to the previously drought-stricken areas. Small cash incentives were used, seeds were distributed, and oxen and other cattle gradually could be procured."[192] According to Shepherd, the Imperial government and some international agencies were so anxious for refugees to return home to help with the December harvest that they "sent peasants out of the camps," resulting in many deaths en route.[193] By late 1973, the worst of the famine appeared to be over in Wollo, just as the foreign relief effort there was entering "full gear," spearheaded by the World Food Programme, USAID, and the International Red Cross.[194] Even when it was clear that the drought had moved south, with a new epicenter in Harerghe province, international relief workers from Britain, the U.S., Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and elsewhere were "flooding in" to Wollo; by April 1974, no less than 40 foreign agencies were working in the province.[195] By that point, the Imperial government had also taken steps

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[189] Mason et al, "Nutritional lessons from the Ethiopian drought," 646; Shoandagne Belete, "Study of Shelter Population in the Wollo Region," *Journal of Tropical Pediatrics and Environmental Child Health* 23 (1977); Gebre-Medhin & Vahlquist, "Famine in Ethiopia," 197-98; Helmut Kloos & Burt Lindtjørn, "Malnutrition During Recent Famines in Ethiopia," *Northeast African Studies* 1, 1 (1994): 126.

[190] Mason et al, "Nutritional lessons from the Ethiopian drought," 647; Shepherd, *The Politics of Starvation*, 34. See Shepherd for the fullest but also the most politicized (anti-Imperial) account of these events. A more nuanced (and sympathetic) analysis of the actions of the Selassie regime during this crisis can be found in Sue Lautze, Angela Raven-Roberts & Teshome Workineh, *Humanitarian Governance in the New Millenium: an Ethiopian Case Study* (London: Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute, 2009).

[191] Mason et al, "Nutritional Lessons from the Ethiopian Drought," 647; Seaman & Holt, "The Ethiopian Famine of 1973-4: I. Wollo Province," 115A.

[192] Gebre-Medhin & Vahlquist, "Famine in Ethiopia," 198.

[193] Shepherd, *The Politics of Starvation*, 36.

[194] Lautze et al, *Humanitarian Governance*, 12.

[195] Shepherd, *The Politics of Starvation*, 51; Kumar, "Ethiopian Famines," 180. Kumar notes that despite the earlier abatement of the famine in Wollo, the bulk of food aid in 1974-75 went to the north of the country, with Harerghe receiving only 8% of the total. On the 1974-75 famine in Harerghe, see Julius Holt et al, "The Ethiopian Famine of

to ramp up its own system of emergency response, in March 1974 replacing its Drought Relief Operations Coordination Office (DROC, the country's first disaster management institution) with the new Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC).[196]

The RRC's belated declaration of a state of emergency in Wollo in September 1974, the same month as the so-called "creeping coup" finally overthrew the Selassie regime,[197] revealed that the end of the drought and the arrival of foreign aid had not erased famine conditions from Wollo as readily as hoped. The region's mountainous terrain and lack of roads had impeded movement of relief grain from storage points along the north-south highway into the interior, requiring creative but slow or (logistically complex) transport alternatives—mules, donkeys, camels, helicopters. More significantly, "enormous distribution problems" related to bureaucratic red tape, politically motivated delays by Ethiopian and foreign officials, and complications related to the secessionist armed struggle in Eritrea were also responsible for preventing emergency supplies from reaching the estimated 900,000 people in Wollo in need of assistance.[198] Corruption, too, played a role, with reports of relief grain being bought and resold on commercial markets at much higher prices.[199] Although there are no accurate data on the proportion of relief food that actually reached—in time to help—Wollo famine victims, available evidence suggests that "relief was restricted almost entirely to the camps"[200] and that emergency conditions persisted in many parts of rural Wollo long after the end of the drought. In June 1974, doctors reported that "within a day's journey by mule in the interior of Wollo, people were still starving to death," while cholera and other diseases killed many others.[201] Without food, seed or oxen, farmers could not resume production, and even with near-normal rainfall harvests were inadequate, both in December 1973 and after the *belg* rains of early 1974.[202] Cases of accidental poisoning resulting from consumption of unsafe wild foods (including tree bark) were reported.[203] Indeed, by June, "the trek back to the shelters started all over

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1973-4: 2. Harerge Province," *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society* 34, 3 (1975): 115A-116A. See also Shepherd, *The Politics of Starvation*, Ch. 8.

[196] Lautze et al, *Humanitarian Governance*, 11.

[197] For details, see Shepherd, *The Politics of Famine*, 49-50; Peter Gill, *A Year in the Death of Africa* (London: Paladin Grafton Books, 1986), 4-5; De Waal, *The Evil Days Famine*, 107-8.

[198] Mason et al, "Nutritional lessons from the Ethiopian drought,"647. See also Shepherd, *The Politics of Starvation*, Ch. 9. The figure of 900,000 comes from RRC, *The Challenges of Drought*, 96.

[199] Shepherd, *The Politics of Starvation*, 59.

[200] Mason et al, "Nutritional lessons from the Ethiopian drought," 647.

[201] Shepherd, *The Politics of Starvation*, 56.

[202] According to one report from late 1973, "stock losses of at least 80% had occurred in many areas," only 50-70% of the land was planted, and yields from the December harvest were only expected to last until "March to May 1974" (Mason et al, "Nutritional lessons from the Ethiopian drought,"647).

[203] Mesfin Wolde-Mariam, *Rural Vulnerability to Famine in Ethiopia*, 64.

again," and the Dessie camp alone held over 5,000 by the end of the month.[204] An RRC survey in November 1974 revealed that 20% of the population in seven of Wollo's districts had perished, and that 85% of the population in several districts was "subsisting on less than 1500 calories per day," with 10% "critically malnourished."[205] Yet less than six months later, in the spring of 1975, the situation in Wollo had "seemingly improved" enough that the last of the province's shelters were closed.[206] While subsequent events would show this optimism to be premature, both Ethiopian government officials and some foreign donors believed that "famine relief had created a feeding operation that the Ethiopian peasant came to depend upon," and that some refugees "were adopting a life of 'comfort' at the relief shelters" because of the availability of "too much grain."[207]

That farmers from one of the country's most agriculturally productive provinces would be described in such patronizing terms, despite the centuries of food self-sufficiency behind them, illustrates the fundamental problem with explanations of the 1972-74 famine that rely on the perceptions of foreign journalists, relief workers and government officials. With their knowledge of the crisis limited to what they observed among the fragment of Wollo's drought-affected population that ended up at roadside camps and emergency feeding stations, these commentators are not only poor sources for reconstructing the complex local causes and consequences of the famine; they also obscure the famine's differential impact within and across rural communities, promoting an image of the crisis as socially monolithic (i.e. experienced by all people equally), monocausal (i.e. produced primarily by drought), and rectifiable only through the intervention of non-"peasant" outsiders.[208] Perhaps the most damaging effect of such representations is their erasure of the myriad ways in which rural men, women and children—whether individually, as households, or through other social-relational networks—strive actively to minimize threats to their livelihoods, drawing on their accumulated expertise to protect the resources they know to be most vulnerable and most essential for long-term well-being. Dessalegn Rahmato's rich ethnographic research in Ambassel *awraja* after the 1984-85 famine showcases such "survival strategies" in one area of southeastern Wollo, including elaborate "indigenous systems of disaster forecasting and disaster preparedness"—in effect, an early warning system—that was practiced

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[204] Shepherd, *The Politics of Starvation*, 56, 73.
[205] RRC, *Drought and Rehabilitation in Wollo and Tigre*: *Report of a survey and project preparation mission, October-November 1974* (Addis Ababa: RRC, 1974), quoted in Webb & Von Braun, *Famine and Food Security in Ethiopia*, 27.
[206] Gebre-Medhin & Vahlquist, "Famine in Ethiopia," 197.
[207] Shepherd, *The Politics of Starvation*, 73-74.
[208] See Sorenson, *Imagining Ethiopia*, Ch. 4 for an analysis of the role of international media in creating a "famine-centred discourse on Ethiopia" around the 1984-85 famine.

by specialists (e.g. diviners) and ordinary farmers alike, and grounded in local knowledge of meteorology, agronomy, ecology and environmental change.[209] As this work suggests, long before outsiders are aware of a potential food crisis, rural dwellers initiate a series of social, economic and nutritional coping strategies designed to minimize their risk exposure and maximize their capacity to withstand disaster. Not all of these strategies overtly relate to food production, acquisition or consumption. The Ambassel study, for instance, mentions modified marriage practices (e.g. delayed or simplified ceremonies) and household composition (e.g. children being sent to visit more prosperous kinfolk) among a range of less "open" crisis management methods that supplement reduced food intake, consumption of wild foods, asset "pawning," labour migration, etc.[210] This research also stresses the highly fluid character of famine-mitigation strategies, showing "the Ethiopian peasant" as a quick study for whom the value of new food sources, and the relational networks that supplied them, would be immediately apparent. In this context, outsiders' concerns about relief "dependence" indicate a failure to understand how humanitarian aid—the commodities themselves, but also the social implications of accessing and utilizing this assistance—might have functioned as one of farmers' many tactics of livelihood protection, along with alternative income sources and intensified market involvement.[211]

b. Social geography of hunger: who suffered and why

Not all contemporary reports homogenize the impact of the 1972-74 famine on Wollo's rural population. Writings from the field by a handful of relief workers and nutritionists, Ethiopian and British, indicate that experience of the crisis varied by ecological zone, age, gender, marital status, household composition, land allotment, livestock holding, pasture access, non-farm income, political and social status, religious affiliation and more.[212] Differential impacts of the famine also varied over

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[209] Dessalegn Rahmato, *Famine and Survival Strategies*, Ch. 7. See also Peter J.C. Walker, "Indigenous Knowledge and Famine Relief in the Horn of Africa," in D.M. Warren, L.J. Slikkerveer & D. Brokensha (eds.), *The Cultural Dimension of Development: Indigenous Knowledge Systems* (London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1999), 147-154.

[210] Dessalegn Rahmato, *Famine and Survival Strategies*, Ch. 8. The Coping Strategies Index utilizes many of these specifically food-related behaviour changes because they are so common in conditions of food shortage. Adjustments to social institutions are more difficult to capture, but may be more sensitive indicators of impending crisis.

[211] See Wood, "Farmers' Responses to Drought in Ethiopia"; Peter Cutler, "Famine Forecasting: Prices and Peasant Behavior in Northern Ethiopia," *Disasters* 8, 1 (1980): 48-56; John Seaman & Julius Holt, "Markets and Famines in the Third World," *Disasters* 4, 3 (1980): 283-297; Dessalegn Rahmato, *Famine and Survival Strategies*, Ch. 8.

[212] See, for example, Belete, "Study of Shelter Population in the Wollo Region"; Mason et al, "Nutritional lessons from the Ethiopian drought"; Miller & Holt, "The Ethiopian Famine"; Seaman & Holt, "The Ethiopian Famine of 1973-74"; Wood, "Farmers' Responses to Drought in Ethiopia"; Cliffe, "Feudalism, Capitalism and Famine in

time, in some cases changing dramatically over the course of weeks or days.[213] Some dimensions of variability, such as geography and occupation, were more readily visible to observers than others. Wollo's eastern lowlands, occupied predominantly by Afar camel herders, showed the highest incidence of excess mortality, both over all age groups and among infants—but only in 1974-75, after the worst of the crisis was presumed to be over (see Table 6). Julius Holt and John Seaman, British relief workers who "began their careers in Ethiopia at this time,"[214] reported that the famine's effects were "in general

Excess Mortality in Wollo, February 1974 - February 1975 (%)		
	All ages	**Infants**
Wollo Province	61	119
East	61	124
West	61	103
Lowlands	63	128
Eastern	65	137
Western	62	106
Highlands	56	100
Eastern	54	98
Western	58	103

Table 6: Source: Mario Maffi, *Wollo: Two Years after the Crisis* (Addis Ababa: Consolidated Food and Nutrition System, 1975), from Kumar 1990, 188.

least in the western highland areas and most severe in the lower, eastern agricultural areas and the [Afar-dominated] Danakil desert." In lowland agricultural communities, they noted, "starvation affected the poorest people, mostly tenant farmers and small landowners, because of their own limited food production"—a consequence, perhaps, of being relative newcomers to this area, which had historically been pastoralist territory.[215] To these zones of extreme vulnerability Alex de Waal added "a narrow strip of middle-altitude areas of northern and central Wollo," where Oromo tenant-farmers suffered especially severely. In his analysis of both Afar pastoral nomads and Oromo farmers, de Waal

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Ethiopia"; Gebre-Medhin & Vahlquist, "Famine in Ethiopia"; Rivers et al, "Lessons for epidemiology from the Ethiopian famines." For strong analyses based on these sources, see Seaman & Holt, "Markets and Famines in the Third World"; McCann, "The Social Impact of Drought," 257-59; Kloos & Lindtjørn, "Malnutrition During Recent Famines in Ethiopia"; De Waal, *Famine Crimes*, Ch. 6.

[213] John Iliffe, *The African Poor*, 257.

[214] Lautze et al, *Humanitarian Governance*, 12.

[215] Seaman & Holt, "The Ethiopian Famine of 1973-74," 114A; and Seaman & Holt, "Markets and Famines in the Third World," 285. See also Kloos & Lindtjørn, "Malnutrition During Recent Famines in Ethiopia," who write that "nutritional studies in Wello, Hararge, and Sidamo reported higher mortality rates in human and livestock populations in lowland agricultural and grazing areas than at higher elevations" (124-25).

highlighted prior "massive" land confiscation by the Imperial government—in the Afar case, for commercial sorghum farms and cotton plantations in the 1960s; for the Oromo, as punishment for rebelling against the Emperor in the 1940s.[216] Other scholars, such as James McCann, Dessalegn Rahmato, and Helmut Kloos and Bert Lindtjørn similarly hold the view that "famine risk varied…primarily as a function of productive capacity," but place more emphasis on oxen ownership than land access—for pastoralists and farmers alike—in determining household production levels.[217] This attention to the value of draft animals for agriculturalists echoes the important insight of a British relief team that, throughout Wollo, "the two food sources, crop and animals, [were] interdependent," with lowland pastoralists just as reliant on highland grain markets for food as highland farmers needed herders for access to livestock to plow their fields, supplement food supply, and provide "a little wealth" in times shortage.[218]

Yet as crucial as a household's productive assets may be to its food supply, and as directly as its asset holdings might be shaped by geography and occupation, the fact that contemporary sources hint at so many other axes of variation in the experience of the 1972-74 Wollo famine raises a number of important issues both for understanding the history of food insecurity in Wollo and for humanitarian decision-making in protracted food crises. First, this primary emphasis on productive capacity reflects an assumption that the famine was caused principally by drought, leading to production shortfalls corresponding to the extent and timing of rainfall failure. This short-term understanding of the crisis overlooks the historical processes described above, which had been generating conditions of food crisis throughout Wollo for decades, as well as clear evidence that within Wollo communities and households experiencing the same drought conditions, not only food shortage but particular forms of malnutrition varied along age, gender and other social lines.[219] Mesfin Wolde-Mariam's work provides especially vivid examples of differential vulnerability to nutritional diseases and disorders in Wollo in the late

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[216] In times of drought, Afar herders had traditionally migrated far outside their normal grazing zones to seek pasture. These "drought reserves" were appropriated by the state for agricultural purposes; by 1972, 20,000 Afar had been displaced from an area of 50,000 hectares in the Awash Valley. See Alex de Waal, *Evil Days*, 58-60.
[217] Kloos & Lindtjørn, "Malnutrition During Recent Famines in Ethiopia," 123.
[218] Mason et al, "Nutritional lessons from the Ethiopian drought," 647.
[219] For instance, landless farmers, divorced and widowed women without secure land rights or livestock, and less favoured male offspring cultivating marginal land were at considerably higher risk of inadequate food access in times of shortage (see McCann, "The Social Impact of Drought," 262-65; Wood, "Farmers' Responses to Drought in Ethiopia"). Studies of Wollo's shelters showed a "marked preponderance" of females over males, over-representation of children aged 5-14, and under-representation of children under 5 and adults over 45, because the very young and the elderly were often already dead. In addition, average weight-for-height was significantly lower among 0-4 year-olds than among children 5-14 (see Belete, "Study of Shelter Population in the Wollo Region," 18; Gebre-Medhin & Vahlquist, "Famine in Ethiopia," 198).

1960s and early '70s, such as heightened exposure to ergotism (caused by eating grain contaminated with the poisonous ergot fungus) among the most desperately poor, and the resulting enhanced mortality risk to infants whose ergot-infected mothers ceased to produce breast milk.[220]

Second, the "productive capacity" approach encouraged a narrow focus in emergency response on famine impact in terms of food supply—that is, relief aimed at addressing the "gap" between available food stocks and food needs, as well as specific nutritional deficiencies (real or perceived) in existing food stores—rather than "the predisposing factors of famine, or vulnerability,"[221] in terms of broader factors shaping unequal access to food. As several reports from during and after the 1972-74 crisis imply, this approach led to relief providers' preoccupation with treating "protein-energy malnutrition" by measuring famine victims' needs in terms of quantities of kilocalories of grain required "per head per day," and overemphasizing provision of protein even when the available vehicles for doing so (protein biscuits, protein "tonic," dried skimmed milk) "were neither locally acceptable nor suitable for treatment or prevention of malnutrition."[222] Epidemiological surveys conducted among longer-term residents of Wollo's relief shelters pointed to the often dangerous consequences of nutritionally inappropriate food aid: in addition to achieving "variable success in reducing wasting in children," shelter diets dominated by carbohydrates and protein and lacking in key micronutrients appeared to cause diseases such as scurvy ("normally rare in Ethiopia"), and to increase susceptibility to Vitamin A deficiency-induced xerophthalmia, "known to aggravate measles, diarrhea, and acute upper respiratory infections, all major causes of mortality in children during famines."[223] The tragic irony here is that the individuals most exposed to the health and mortality risks associated with prolonged presence at relief shelters—women and young children—ended up there not simply because they lacked an adequate calorie supply at home, but because local cultural norms and social hierarchies dictated both that they would be first to travel in search of charitable assistance, and that they were less equipped to produce or purchase food on their own.

This point directs attention to the third, perhaps most important issue raised by explanations of differential experience of the 1972-74 famine that prioritize household asset access over other causal

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[220] Mesfin Wolde-Mariam, "The socioeconomic consequences of famine," in Fassil Gebre Kiros (ed.), *Challenging Rural Poverty* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1985), 17.
[221] Kloos & Lindtjørn, "Malnutrition During Recent Famines in Ethiopia," 122.
[222] Mason et al, "Nutritional lessons from the Ethiopian drought," 649. See also Gebre-Medhin & Vahlquist, "Famine in Ethiopia," 199; Shepherd, *The Politics of Starvation*, 72.
[223] Kloos & Lindtjørn write that "famine victims in relief shelters…experienced some of the most severe forms of malnutrition and among the highest mortality rates" in Wollo ("Malnutrition During Recent Famines in Ethiopia," 130).

factors. Reports that households lacking sufficient access to productive resources (livestock, cultivable land, forage, etc.) or alternative income sources suffered most severely from the drought nicely fit Amartya Sen's "entitlement" theory of famine causation, as did evidence that more than adequate supplies of grain, legumes and other food commodities—including relief food—existed both within Wollo and elsewhere in Ethiopia throughout the crisis. Ethiopian government statistics showed not only that "food production for the whole country was about normal" in 1972-73, but that Wollo was surrounded on three sides by areas where food production was either normal or above normal during the peak famine period (see Figure 10, Tables 7 & 8).[224] According to Holt and Seaman, "At no time was grain unavailable in local markets and large amounts of cereals produced in the province were exported

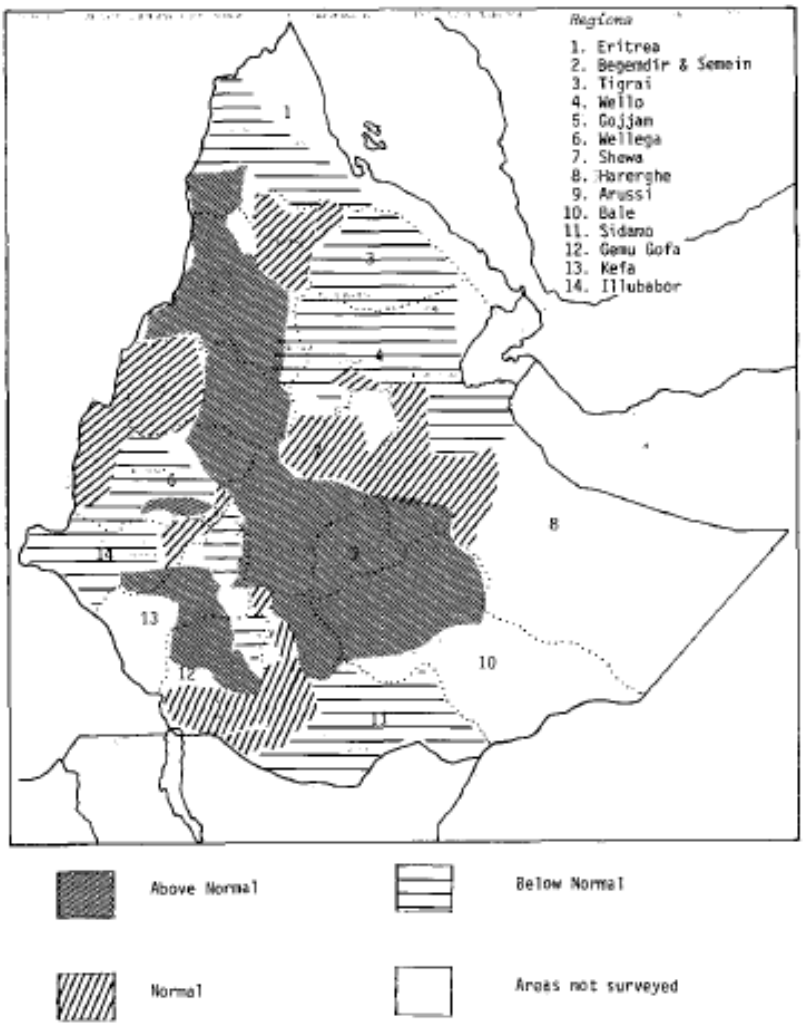

Figure 10: Food Production, 1972-73 (Hussein 1976, 34).

[224] Miller & Holt, "The Ethiopian Famine," 170; Abdul Mejid Hussein, "The Political Economy of Famine in Ethiopia," in Hussein (ed.), *Rehab: Drought and Famine in Ethiopia (African Environment Special Report 2)* (London: International African Institute, Environmental Training Programme, UNEP-IDEP-SIDA, 1976), 9-44.

for sale in urban areas."[225] Journalist Jack Shepherd wrote that relief workers "seethed" at the "considerable stores of grain" held by landlords in Wollo in 1974, and described government officials and private traders holding relief grain off the market to keep prices high, then selling it slowly.[226] It was not difficult to move from observations of this kind to the assertions (pre-dating Sen) that "people died in Ethiopia not because of an extreme shortage of food, i.e. famine, but because of an extreme shortage of money, i.e. poverty."[227]

Province	Provincial subdistricts (%) reporting production, 1972			
	Above average	Average	Below average	Poor
Arussi	5	70	15	10
Bale	82	9	9	0
Begemdir	6	84	2	8
Eritrea	4	78	9	9
Gemu Gofa	6	82	12	0
Gojjam	14	82	4	0
Harerghe	22	39	30	9
Illubabor	22	64	14	0
Kefa	33	45	22	0
Shoa	17	54	21	8
Sidamo	22	78	0	0
Tigray	6	84	2	8
Wollega	0	86	14	0
Wollo	0	10	38	52
TOTAL	14	65	14	7

Table 7: Crop production for 1972, relative to previous average production (Source: Miller & Holt 1975, from Ethiopia Ministry of Agriculture, 1973).

Such information also fostered lively debate among scholars through the 1980s about the relative importance of "food entitlement decline" versus "food availability decline" as causal forces in the 1970s Wollo crisis. This debate was initiated by Sen's argument in *Poverty and Famines* (1981) that the famine resulted neither from a shortage of food in Ethiopia—since "a 7 percent decline in the output

[225] Seaman & Holt, "The Ethiopian Famine of 1973-74," 114A. See also Rahmato, *Famine and Survival Strategies*, 102.
[226] Shepherd, *The Politics of Starvation*, 60-61. Shepherd also reports that pulse exports from Ethiopia increased 92% in 1973 compared to 1972, and that 9,000 metric tons of grain were exported that year.
[227] Miller & Holt, "The Ethiopian Famine," 168. Similarly, Kloos & Lindtjørn summarized that "the peasants hit hardest were also the ones who could least afford to purchase food" ("Malnutrition During Recent Famines in Ethiopia," 123).

of food crops [see Table 7] is hardly a devastating food availability decline"—nor from "a substantial rise in food prices," which he claimed did not occur. Rather, according to Sen, people in Wollo starved because of a combination of "direct entitlement failure" among farmers who lost their food crops to drought, and "market entitlement failure" among those highland residents—male tenant farmers, landless farmers, and unemployed labourers; female household servants, water carriers, beer brewers and prostitutes—who were too cash-poor to purchase food (because they lacked "market power to pull food into Wollo" from elsewhere), and lowland pastoralists who had not only progressively lost land and livestock but also suffered from worsening terms of animal/grain trade as livestock prices fell with mounting asset distress sales in 1973-74.[228] Critiques of Sen's assertions about Wollo food production and price trends in the early '70s, and about the relative weight of supply- and demand-side variables in determining who starved and why, did not fundamentally challenge his basic claim that people in Wollo

Province	No. of Districts Studied	Surplus		Self-sufficient		Deficit			
						1975		1974	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Arussi	21	6	29	9	42	6	29	n.d.	n.d.
Bale	13	1	8	5	38	7	54	7	58
Begemdir & Simien	21	3	14	8	38	10	48	n.d.	n.d.
Eritrea	23	1	4	5	22	17	74	10	84
Gemu Gofa	16	2	13	6	38	8	49	6	67
Gojjam	26	2	8	19	73	5	19	n.d.	n.d.
Harerghe	36	1	3	17	47	18	50	25	76
Illubabor	24	0	0	10	42	14	58	4	40
Kefa	27	5	19	10	37	12	44	3	23
Shoa	73	14	19	44	60	15	21	11	20
Sidamo	30	0	0	7	23	23	77	1	6
Tigray	51	2	4	10	20	30	76*	15	37
Wollega	45	3	7	13	29	29	64	3	16
Wollo	30	1	3	13	43	16	54	16	69
TOTAL	**436**	**41**	**10**	**176**	**40**	**210**	**50**	**101**	**35**

Table 8: Main Crop Harvests 1975 (Hussein 1976, 38; from Ethiopia Ministry of Agriculture).
Notes: "n.d." = no data. "*" = value not correct, but copied from original

starved if their command over available food supplies fell below their subsistence needs.[229] Neither did they question the conceptual limits of Sen's paradigm, which stand out sharply when deeper patterns of livelihood and food security history in Wollo are kept in mind. The "entitlement" approach, with its

[228] Amartya Sen, *Poverty and famines : an essay on entitlement and deprivation* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), Ch. 7.

[229] See Seaman & Holt, "Markets and Famines in the Third World"; Devereux, S. (1988). "Entitlements, availability and famine: A revisionist view of Wollo, 1972–1974." Food Policy **13**(3): 270-282. No one, however, contested Sen's argument about the consequences for pastoralists of plummeting livestock prices. According to one source from 1974, "the price obtained for cattle, sold in order to buy grain, fell from Eth$ 120-150 to about Eth$ 10. The abbatoirs were unable to cope with the influx, so that many cattle, already in very poor condition, died before they could be slaughtered" (Mason et al, "Nutritional lessons from the Ethiopian drought," 646).

overriding interest in the economic aspects of famine—in individuals' (or, more typically, households') possession of material resources or assets that enable them to produce, purchase or otherwise (legally) acquire food—overlooks the social world of interpersonal relationships, associations and institutions through which the capacity to access those resources and assets is shaped in the first place. Indeed, attention to this more abstract and fluid (but no less powerful) dimension of food security forces us to move beyond individuals and households—as holders and utilizers of assets—to a broader, community- or social network-focused analysis where the distribution of food entitlements, and what constitutes a "food entitlement" at all, are actually negotiated and defined. Considering this dimension of famine causation would require attention to power, a variable distinctly absent from Sen's discussion but one obviously central to the production of vulnerability both within and between households.

c. Measuring, mothering and making nutritional ends meet: Save-UK in Wollo, 1972-74

> It is recorded that when Save the Children Fund first set foot in Ethiopia at the time of Mussolini's war in 1936, the locals could not for the life of them understand what all the fuss was about. The fund's initiative there had been entrusted to a formidable woman by the name of Mrs. Lothian Small, who set about the establishment of what was described as a combined child welfare centre and emergency feeding canteen. The need was evidently great. Statistics were very inadequately prepared, she declared to the March 1936 issue of *The World's Children*, but she estimated that the infant mortality rate was as high as 600 per 1,000…. The July issue of *The World's Children* carried this account: "She found the people courteous and ready to cooperate. Nevertheless, they could not at first understand her mission, which was to help them set up some social welfare work on behalf of children… It simply had not occurred to the Abyssinians that their children were underfed…".
>
> Peter Gill, *A Year in the Death of Africa* (1986)

> Little information was available as to the conditions in the countryside away from the roads, although it was assumed that many must have died. It was therefore clear at this stage that immediate action was required to prevent widespread malnutrition.
>
> J.B. Mason et al, "Nutritional lessons from the Ethiopian drought" (1974)

> Hence, relief centers, unknown in Ethiopia prior to the 1970s, became a major means of treating famine victims.
>
> Alemneh Dejene, *Environment, Famine, and Politics in Ethiopia* 1990)

Among the many lasting consequences of the 1972-74 famine was the arrival and establishment of international humanitarian organizations, including Save the Children-UK,[230] as permanent fixtures on Wollo's landscape. Save-UK was not new to Ethiopia, for in December 1935, a few months after the Italian invasion, the agency provided some emergency supplies for refugees fleeing Mussolini's army and sent "their most experienced" field worker to Addis Ababa to open a child welfare and feeding center—the *Ghébi de l'enfant* ("Palace of the Child"), possibly "the first modern relief operation in Africa."[231] The assumption that "child welfare" in an African setting necessarily included nutritional support—in this case, a "canteen" where meals featuring local foods such as *berbere* and *injera* were served to over 200 children daily—was neither unique to Save-UK nor limited to the nascent humanitarian community in interwar Europe. The "Palace of the Child" embodied principles articulated in a three-volume report prepared by British medical researchers John Boyd Orr and John Gilks and presented to the Assembly of the League of Nations in 1933, which argued for the need to make nutrition an integral part of public health policy in Europe and her colonial empire. The *Report on Nutrition and Public Health* not only "signalled the impending emergence of nutrition as a discipline in its own right", but claimed to identify—on the basis of surveys from a handful of African colonies—"the 'new problem' of colonial dietary," including the finding that "colonial populations, in general, are undernourished."[232] Motivated mainly by a desire to enhance the value of "the native as an economic factor," the field of colonial nutrition in its early years focused on improving African diets in order to strengthen the health and physiques of African men, and thus increase the efficiency of the colonial labour force.[233] African women and children, however, were lynchpins in this strategy, for in European social welfare discourses of the late 1920s and '30s, maternal and child nutrition and hygiene education were essential prerequisites for a strong workforce; and despite disclaimers to the contrary, responsibility for the "backwardness and ignorance" presumed to be at the root of Africa's

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[230] Established as the Save the Children Fund (SCF) in 1919 (see http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/about-us/history, accessed December 14, 2012). On the origins of SCF and its importance to the history of the humanitarian system, see Peter Walker and Daniel Maxwell, *Shaping the Humanitarian World* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 25.

[231] Dominique Marshall, "The Rights of African Children, the Save the Children Fund and Public Opinion in Europe and Ethiopia: The Centre of Child Welfare of Addis Ababa, Spring 1936," in Siegbert Uhlig (ed.), *Proceedings of the 15th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* (Hamburg, July 20-25, 2003), 296-306 (http://books.google.com/books?id=jRMWPSfPBysC&dq=save+the+children+ethiopia+1936&source=gbs_navlinks_s, accessed December 14, 2012). See also "An Overview of SC UK Work in Ethiopia," unpublished manuscript (January 2001), 1.

[232] Michael Worboys, "The discovery of colonial malnutrition between the wars," in David Anderson (ed.), *Imperial Medicine and Indigenous Societies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 213-14.

[233] Worboys, "The discovery of colonial malnutrition," 211.

undernourishment was implicitly laid at women's (i.e. mothers') feet.[234] It is not surprising, then, that Save-UK's Frederique Freund Small arrived in Italian-occupied Ethiopia confident, even in the absence of "statistics," that "Abyssinian" children were uniformly ill-fed. Although Save-UK's operation of the *Ghebi de l'enfant* was short-lived (lasting only until April 1936), its founding colonial ethnocentrism—and underlying premises about African dietery deficiency and nutritional gaps—endured until the organization resumed work in Ethiopia nearly 40 years later.

It was not until the Biafra crisis of the late 1960s that Save-UK stepped up its work in Africa and, along with other international relief agencies, expanded its African operations with the onset of the Sahel drought in the early 1970s.[235] In early 1974, after the extent of the Wollo famine had become shockingly clear to the outside world, Save-UK turned its attention to Ethiopia. In March of that year, "before large-scale food distribution had begun in the rural areas," John Seaman and Julius Holt, then with the London Technical Group (LTG), were contracted by Save-UK to design and conduct a nutrition survey in the Raya and Kobbo *awraja* of Wollo. Assessing nutritional status through "weight and height measurements" of "a population of 618 children under 14 years of age," Seaman and Holt concluded that "nutritional status…was unexceptional for an Ethiopian agricultural population," especially because they found just "a single child with severe protein-energy malnutrition."[236] Their estimates of mortality rates for the previous year, however, demonstrated how catastrophically the area had suffered during the peak of the famine (see Table 9). In a subsequent survey conducted in Harerghe province as the

Age group (years)	>1	1-4	5-9	10-14	15-44	45+	**Overall**
Crude death rate/1000 per year	212	214	97	13	40	130	**82**

Table 9: Crude death rates in Raya and Kobbo *awraja*, Wollo Province, 1973 (Seaman & Holt 1975).

drought shifted south, Seaman and Holt—medically trained relief workers who had helped to organize feeding centers in Wollo in late 1973—and LTG colleagues John Rivers and Mark Bowden, along with J. B. Mason and R. W. Hay of the University of Cambridge's Medical Research Council Dunn Nutrition Unit, similarly applied anthropometric techniques (i.e. weight-for-height measurement) to assess protein-energy malnutrition (PEM), and looked for additional clinical signs of "severe PEM" (oedema) along with

[234] Ibid, 214. For a fascinating case study of Save the Children's maternal welfare work in Ghana, Jean Allman, "Making Mothers: Missionaries, Medical Officers and Women's Work in Colonial Asante, 1924-25," *History Workshop Journal* 38, 1 (1993): 23-47.
[235] Ilife, *The African Poor*, 258.
[236] Seaman & Holt, "The Ethiopian Famine of 1973-4: I. Wollo Province," *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society* 34, 3 (1975): 115A.

"vitamin and mineral deficiencies."[237] Their immediate goals, to determine quantities of grain and protein foods required to "improve the nutritional status of the malnourished" (via "rehabilitation feeding") and to "support the nonmalnourished population" (via "maintenance feeding"), reflected a conceptual framework that distinguished between the need first to "influence dietary intake and disease patterns directly, by feeding programmes and public health measures," and only then to address "long term development work" in order to tackle "the basic causes of malnutrition," including agriculture, environmental and social factors, etc. (see Figure 12).[238] "Where possible," they believed, relief interventions "should also advance the longer term development aims"; but how "rehabilitation" and "maintenance" feeding programs might do that was not explained.

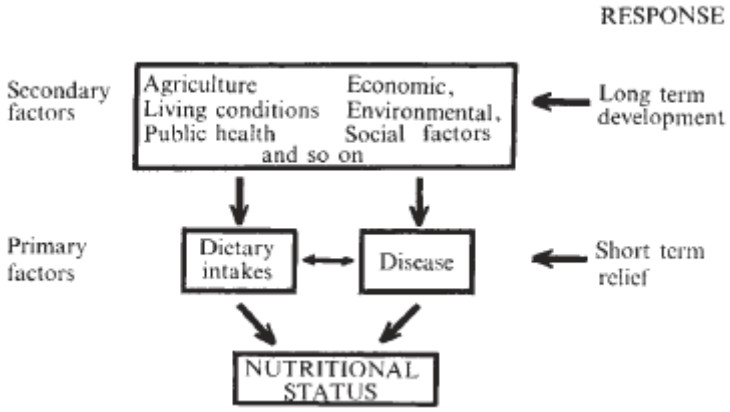

Figure 12: "Exogenous influences on nutritional status and levels at which efforts are directed to improve it" (Mason et al, "Nutritional lessons from the Ethiopian drought," 649).

Although the request for nutrition surveys in famine-afflicted areas in early 1974 seems to have formally originated with the Imperial government's newly constituted RRC, as part of its effort to assess the true extent of emergency needs, another objective of the Wollo survey involved laying the informational groundwork for a mother and child health program to be established in Wollo by Save-UK.[239] In numerous publications about the Wollo and Harerghe surveys, this group of British relief worker-researchers made clear their own views of the larger importance of such data collection, arguing vehemently about "the need for nutritional surveillance in assessing relief situations, for adequate

[237] Mason et al, "Nutritional lessons from the Ethiopian drought," 648.
[238] Ibid.
[239] Save-UK also established an office in Wollo at this time. Sue Lautze, Yacob Aklilu, Angela Raven-Roberts, Helen Young, Girma Kebede & Jennifer Leaning, *Risk and Vulnerability in Ethiopia: Learning from the past, responding to the present, preparing for the future* (Medford: Feinstein International Center, 2003), 130.

planning and for appropriate responses in terms of food aid."[240] Insisting that the "idiosyncratic methods" and "nonquantitative subjective data" typical of assessments done by the Ethiopian Nutrition Institute had to be replaced by "objective information" and "standardized survey techniques" long established in nutritional science,[241] these men played a critical role both in creating "a consolidated food and nutrition information system"[242] for Ethiopia and in prodding relief agencies to think more carefully about the timing and effectiveness of aid. In particular, by envisioning the use of repeatable sample surveys not only to capture nutrition status but to gather information on "dietary intakes, food stocks [i.e. crops, livestock] and potential supplies [i.e. expected harvest yields],"[243] their approach offered a way to monitor and predict nutritional trends in areas prone to food shortage, thus enabling food availability crises to be foreseen and (in theory) averted. What made their method of producing "rapidly gained but systematic" nutrition information especially compelling, earning them "increasing recognition among relief agencies" and material support for the Harerghe survey from UNICEF, USAID, Oxfam and Christian Aid, was its rather lofty though earnest promise of humanitarian cost-effectiveness:

> The use of expensive air transport tends to be the price paid for belated reactions to an emergency. In any of the recent African droughts an effective field-surveillance programme could have been mounted for less than 1% of the cost of the total relief programme, and could have helped ensure that for the first time aid arrived before people died of starvation.[244]

It would be interesting to know the extent to which these British relief workers' impassioned advocacy for a more "rational and measured approach to relief"[245] arose from their emotional reaction to the horrors they witnessed at the worst of the famine, e.g. a need to assert psychological or cognitive control over a situation both incomprehensibly tragic and beyond their power to truly relieve. In any case, their work laid the foundation for an ambitious nutrition support program that took shape in Wollo through the mid to late '70s and set the direction for Save-UK's emergency food interventions for

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[240] Mason et al, "Nutritional lessons from the Ethiopian drought," 646. See also Seaman & Holt, "The Ethiopian Famine of 1973-4: I. Wollo Province"; Holt et al, "The Ethiopian Famine of 1973-4: 2. Harerge Province"; Julius Holt, John Seaman & John Rivers, "Famine Revisited," *Nature* 255 (1975): 180-181; John Seaman, Julius Holt & John Rivers, "The effects of drought on human nutrition in an Ethiopian Province," *International Journal of Epidemiology 7* (1978): 31-40.
[241] Mason et al, "Nutritional lessons from the Ethiopian drought," 647.
[242] Gebre-Medhin & Vahlquist, "Famine in Ethiopia," 197.
[243] Mason et al, "Nutritional lessons from the Ethiopian drought," 648.
[244] Holt et al, "Famine Revisited," 180-81. It is somewhat ironic that the authors do not mention USAID's provision of helicopters so that surveyers could reach remote rural areas for the Harerghe survey (Holt et al, "Famine Revisited," 180).
[245] Mason et al, "Nutritional lessons from the Ethiopian drought," 650.

decades to come. In the immediate wake of the 1972-74 crisis, hoping to prevent a repeat of the famine, the European Union established strategic grain reserves in Wollo, linking them to a "somewhat makeshift" nutritional screening system supported by Oxfam. According to John Seaman, "students were employed to live in the grain reserve sheds and to measure children brought in from the villages. Those with low weight for age (underweight) received food."[246] In 1978, Save-UK, collaborating with the RRC and the Ethiopian Ministries of Health and Agriculture & Rural Development, took over these arrangements and established a Nutrition Field Worker (NFW) Program, through which 25 Ethiopian high school graduates from Dessie were trained by the Ethiopian Nutrition Institute to serve as nutrition workers covering nine of the most drought-prone *awrajas* in Wollo. The program's objective, "to monitor and improve the nutritional status of young children and their mothers," meant that NFWs operated through health clinics and food distribution points, where under-five children of relief recipients were measured and where necessary referred to supplementary feeding programs, while their mothers were signed up for nutrition and health education.[247] Since NFWs were assigned to particular areas, they came to know vulnerable communities well, enabling them to gather not only anthropometric data—for targeting interventions to the individuals who seemed most vulnerable—but also indicators of food availability, such as grain prices in local markets, which were seen as key signals of impending stress. Although this information did not "on its own…give a clear warning of food shortages or their precise impact," the NFW program helped to draw early attention to the 1983-85 Wollo famine (after which it evolved into Save-UK's Nutrition Surveillance Program, operated with the RRC).[248] In its embryonic stage in Harerghe province in 1974-75, this "rational and measured approach" to nutrition monitoring was considered "of great help in the timely mobilization of relief programs."[249]

Yet while the methods developed by Seaman and his colleagues were rooted in the medical understanding that "populations do not suddenly starve,"[250] the inherent limitations and biases of Western nutrition science combined with the circumstances of emergency relief work blinkered their perspective on the causes of the 1972-74 famine from the start. With the advantage of hindsight, it may

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[246] Fiona Watson, Carmel Dolan, Jeremy Shoham & Margie Buchanan-Smith, *A Review of Save the Children UK's Nutritional Surveillance Programme in Ethiopia* (London: Nutrition Works, International Public Nutrition Resource Group, 2006), 10.

[247] Watson et al, *A Review of Save the Children-UK's Nutritional Surveillance Programme in Ethiopia*, 10; Lautze et al, *Risk and Vulnerability in Ethiopia*, 130; Gill, *A Year in the Death of Africa*, 17. In 1980, the NFW methodology was expanded to include providing "nutritional surveillance of the 'at risk' population" and monitoring the impact of program interventions (Watson et al, 10).

[248] Watson et al, *A Review of Save the Children-UK's Nutritional Surveillance Programme in Ethiopia*, 10-11.

[249] Gebre-Medhin & Vahlquist, "Famine in Ethiopia," 200.

[250] Holt et al, "Famine revisited," 180.

seem unfair to criticize Save-UK's original interpretation and treatment of rural starvation in Wollo; a scrambling team of humanitarian workers who arrive long after disaster has struck and who must try to save lives while assessing future relief needs makes far too easy a target. These famine responders, like the RRC, knew that behind the famine lay "a background of endemic malnutrition and poverty."[251] Their lack of willingness or ability to analyze this "background," however, reflected the shared assumptions of a discipline (nutrition) and profession (humanitarianism) that saw those features of Wollo as innate rather than historical—the consequence of "backward" agricultural and food systems, accompanied by forms of social inequality Westerners had long found bizzare and troubling, and transformed into an humanitarian crisis by natural disaster, i.e. drought. Those assumptions dictated fairly straightforward, short-term solutions: food availability gaps to be filled—to prevent wasting—with calories and protein; vitamin deficiencies to be addressed with food supplements; regular screening of young children and mothers to protect communities from nutritional harm. There are several (now widely recognized) problems with this approach, including the questionable reliability of measures taken over a short period of time, especially when there was (as in Wollo) "a profound lack of baseline data"; and the inability of anthropometry (then based on reference values derived from industrialized countries) to detect the ways child malnutrition varied "from one agroecology to another."[252] The top-down, Western expert-managed, centralized "surveillance" and distribution systems of Save-UK's original nutrition programming also raised concerns among contemporary Ethiopian medical relief workers that without "full community involvement" in the planning and implementation of nutrition monitoring, "surveillance systems remain theoretical exercises, regardless of how comprehensive and costly they might be," and will not "pave the way for a more just and efficient distribution of available food resources in times of hardship."[253] Such concerns were well-founded, because where interventions were linked solely and directly to nutrition screening of "vulnerable individuals," only those people capable of reaching screening sites were eligible for assistance. And where evaluation of population-level vulnerability rested on assessments of "the extent to which a normal [dietary] equilibrium has been disturbed,"[254] Save-UK's "genuine lack of information about…the forces that fuel environmental degradation and vulnerability to famine"—a deficiency they shared with other international relief

[251] Ibid.
[252] For this critique, see Rahmato, *Famine and Survival Strategies*, 121.
[253] Gebre-Medhin & Vahlquist, "Famine in Ethiopia," 200. See also Kloos & Lindtjørn, "Malnutrition During Recent Famines in Ethiopia," 130.
[254] Mason et al, "Nutritional lessons of the Ethiopian drought," 647.

agencies operating in the highlands in the '70s[255]—meant they were unaware that Wollo's downward spiral into impoverishment had been decades in the making, and that the famine was "merely the closing scenes of a drama whose most important and most decisive acts [had] already been played out behind closed curtains."[256]

Most problematic of all, by comprehending neither the deeper roots nor the crucial social dimensions of Wollo's food security crisis, Save-UK may have inadvertently contributed to a reorientation in farming communities' historic repertoire of strategies for predicting, adapting to and coping with livelihood stress. In part, this outcome of the agency's early work stemmed from its acceptance of the then-dominant view that hunger, whether chronic or acute, resulted from a lack of sufficient food, rather than from poverty and unequal access to food sources. More importantly, though, as research by James McCann and Dessalegn Rahmato in particular shows, the presumption that nutrition and food security were individual and household affairs flew in the face of agricultural and environmental realities in the highlands, which made interhousehold and community-level relations—social institutions, formal and informal, that organized access to productive resources (e.g. oxen, land, seed) as well as food in times of need—of supreme importance for sustaining nutritional well-being over the long term. These relationships were never entirely equitable, and they had changed during the 20th century in ways that put increasing numbers of poor families at greater risk. However, they had been developed over generations by skilled farmers adapting to an array of environmental, economic and political constraints; and as the following description reveals, their operation in practice shows little resemblance to the relief methods implemented by outsiders:

> During the course of a food crisis…all forms of relationships at all levels of community come into play in a heightened manner and at an accelerated tempo. The rural world is turned into a scene of feverish activity as men and women attempt to take protective measures and make short- or long-term arrangements to insure the survival of their families: Neighbours and friends decide to pool their resources the better to withstand the hardship; agreements are reached between relatives or friends to dispose of assets in turns, and to support each other in the meantime; measures are taken to remove livestock to areas in the community or to other areas which are less exposed to the crisis and to leave them in the care of acquaintances or fellow peasants with or without compensation involved; arrangements are made to sell livestock to peasants in one's own community or a neighbouring one which with the understanding that at the end, the sellers will rent the animals for farming purposes; markets both in the neighbouring

[255] Dejene, *Environment, Famine, and Politics in Ethiopia*, 15.
[256] Rahmato, *Famine and Survival Strategies*, 29.

> communities and in distant ones, especially those reported to be relatively free from social or ecological stress are frequently monitored, and the information disseminated widely; distress signals are sent out to relatives living in urban areas or in other *awrajas* or provinces….[257]

Relief agencies' failure to recognize or work through these institutions, to support them in ways that might have restored their capacity to provide a safety net for the poor, or to perceive their importance for rebuilding household-level food production and nutrition, may be understandable given the difficult context of humanitarian action in mid-1970s Wollo. It still, however, needs critical examination, perhaps above all for organizations such as Save-UK, whose staff, offices and programs—operating continuously in Wollo since 1974—have certainly by now been woven into the social web through which food security is sought by some of the region's poorest residents.

VI. Conclusion: Livelihood history and humanitarian impact assessment

> It is true that relief and emergency aid was responsible for saving the lives of countless peasants, but it is equally true that indigenous survival techniques and the collective efforts of the peasants themselves were instrumental in saving a greater number of people from death.
>
> Dessalegn Rahmato, *Famine and Survival Strategies* (1991)

> The people of Wollo face an extraordinary range of obstacles to making a living.
>
> Kay Sharp et al, *Destitution in Ethiopia's Northeastern Highlands* (2003)

Recent studies of food security in Wollo, including those by Save the Children-UK, have found that chronic malnutrition and vulnerability to food shortage among rural households have not only persisted but worsened over the past four decades.[258] The array of factors influencing Wollo residents' access to food has become increasingly complicated during these years, in part because, after the 1983-85 famine, Wollo became a "testing ground for the Ethiopian government's policy of 'food self-sufficiency.'"[259] By that time, the Ministry of Agriculture was reporting that "a third of the rural population in Wollo suffered from food shortage even in normal years."[260] By 2005, a nutrition survey in

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[257] Rahmato, *Famine and Survival Strategies*,29. See also McCann, "The Social Impact of Drought," 247; Cliffe, "Feudalism, Capitalism and Famine in Ethiopia," 38; Walker, "Indigenous Knowledge and Famine Relief in the Horn of Africa," 148-49.

[258] E.g. Philip White, "War and Food Security in Eritrea and Ethiopia, 1998–2000," *Disasters* 29, Special Issue on Food Security in Complex Emergencies (2005): S94;

[259] Dejene, *Environment, Famine, and Policy in Ethiopia*, 15. The implications of government food programs for Wollo farmers, particularly the Productive Safety Net Program, will be considered at a later date!

[260] Ibid, 70.

North Wollo found prevalence rates of stunting, underweight and wasting of 44.5%, 25.0% and 9.0% respectively among children under five, with even higher preponderance among toddlers (0-24 months).[261] It is unfortunate and telling that we know so little about the extent to which Save-UK's programming, or that of any other humanitarian agency, has played a role—for good, ill or naught—in shaping nutrition and food security in Wollo over the long term, since the inception of "organized famine relief"[262] there in 1974. According to Dessalegn Rahmato, writing in 1990, "Only 15% of all peasants interviewed [in Ambassel *awraja*] said they will seek emergency relief if famine strikes again, whereas 30% said they will work hard, save and make better use of their resources in such an eventuality."[263] Do such findings mean that humanitarian food assistance was ineffective, or that aid recipients themselves were concerned that food aid might do more harm than good? For Wollo perhaps more than anywhere else on earth, a debate continues over whether decades of food aid imports have fostered "dependence" in rural communities, pitting those who argue that "relief assistance is…often a relatively small contributor to people's survival in emergencies"[264] against those who worry that the prolonged presence of aid has discouraged farmer innovation, reduced diversity in rural diets, and caused the disappearance of previous household coping strategies.[265] Yet these debates have too rarely raised the question have whether and how emergency food interventions have replaced, sidestepped, discredited, reinforced or otherwise altered the thick tapestry of social relations through which Wollo communities understood food "entitlements" and allocated productive resources for centuries before foreign humanitarians arrived on the scene.

What lessons might we draw from Wollo's long livelihood history for humanitarian impact assessment today? Perhaps we should start by asking current recipients of the various forms of humanitarian food and nutritional support available in Wollo to describe and evaluate their food security at individual, household and community levels, and to compare that evaluation critically with what they know of food security in previous generations. Building on the insights that led to the development of participatory impact assessment methods, a study of livelihood change over time that sets out expressly to understand not just measurable infusions of food assistance from relief agencies to

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[261] J. Haidar, G. Abate, W. Kogi-Makau & P. Sorensen, "Risk Factors for Child under-Nutrition with a Human Rights Edge in Rural Villages of North Wollo, Ethiopia," *East African Medical Journal* 82, 12 (2005): 625.
[262] The term is Dessalegn Rahmato's, and he also uses scare quotes (*Famine and Survival Strategies*, 160).
[263] Ibid, 159.
[264] Alex de Waal, quoted in Hofmann et al, *Measuring the Impact of Humanitarian Aid*, 22.
[265] See, for example, Fassil G. Kiros, *Enough With Famine in Ethiopia: A Clarion Call* (Addis Ababa: Tsehai Publishers, 2005); and Poverty Action Network Ethiopia (PANE), *The Impact of Food Aid in Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa: PANE, 2006).

households, but the social influence and cultural meaning of those food sources—both the commodities and their distributors—on recipients' other prior and ongoing ways of accessing food, might point the way toward humanitarian impact assessment that conceptualizes farmer vulnerability, and livelihood resilience, at multiple social levels: individual, household, interhousehold, and community-wide.

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