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**When hunger persists: Humanitarian policy and aid in a marginalised region of Ethiopia.**

**Abstract:**

Historically, the Wag Himra area of northern Ethiopia has been affected by famine and conflict with central government. Several recent droughts have made the lives of the isolated Agaw farmers very insecure and dependent on government food security systems and/or international humanitarian organisations. This paper describes the different aid systems that support these people but fail to offer sustainable solutions to lift them out of poverty, thus driving them to migrate. This leads to questions about whether the government has deliberately chosen not to help the region, beyond maintaining a perpetual state of emergency, and about why international aid organisations have chosen not to leave an area where they cannot work independently.

**Keywords:**

Ethiopia, Wag Himra, Hunger, Food security, Humanitarian aid

## **I. Introduction**

Ethiopia combines the highest yielding food production system in Africa with an international image of extreme rural poverty. Although the 1973-1974 famine, which resulted from recurring and complex crises, had already had international repercussions, that of 1984-1985 affected a bigger area, despite warnings from the international media and the intervention of several international non-governmental organisations (INGOs). Reception sites were set up for displaced persons in Wag Himra, including the Medecin Sans Frontières (MSF) site at Sekota, where accounts of people being subject to forced displacement led MSF to leave the country (MSF, 2013). Indeed, the communist-inspired authoritarian *Derg* regime (1974-1991) took advantage of the fact that hunger brought people together, deporting them to areas judged to be more fertile and less densely populated: these resettlements were suspended in 1986 (Pankhurst, Piguet, 2009).

In 1995, after the fall of the *Derg* (1991) and their replacement by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (the Party State, EPRDF), the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia was created although the 1975 agrarian reform was left unchanged. This reform had allocated land in equal shares between households, thus ensuring that farmers had stable land-holdings, but vastly reducing the mean size of farms. Land tenure was made more secure by the authorisation to transfer land to heirs, even though the State remained – and remains to this day – the ultimate owner (Regassa, Korf, 2018; Rahmato, 1992).

Since 80% of jobs in Ethiopia are agriculture-based, aid to farmers is a condition for lifting a large proportion of the population out of poverty. In order to reconcile agricultural policies with economic objectives, the Party State developed quota systems and launched big infrastructure projects in order to revive the economy and ensure the country's independence, for example building hydroelectric dams which also provide irrigation. From 2005, it modified its agricultural policy as part of a process of opening up to global markets known as the "Ethiopian

renaissance”: a complex, technocratically-implemented system involving sometimes contradictory decisions, often approving liberal methods (Bach, 2011, Planel, 2014; Lefort, 2015). This “Democratic Developmental State” “is based on significant imposition of sometimes contradictory laws (...). Concern for a certain social egalitarianism and the attention paid to the peasant masses inherited from the socialist period had to be combined with the adoption of liberal principles which led to ever more selective public policies. Planned mathematically and applied using quotas, the Developmental State’s policies are strongly marked by bureaucratic methods” (Planel, 2016, p. 59). Its objectives are, first, to guarantee social stability, at the same time increasing the Party State’s control over rural areas, where it “manages” the population (Clapham, 2002) and, second, “the selective inclusion of farmers in the political as much as the productive apparatus” thanks to increasing numbers of EPRDF cells (Planel, 2016, p.60).

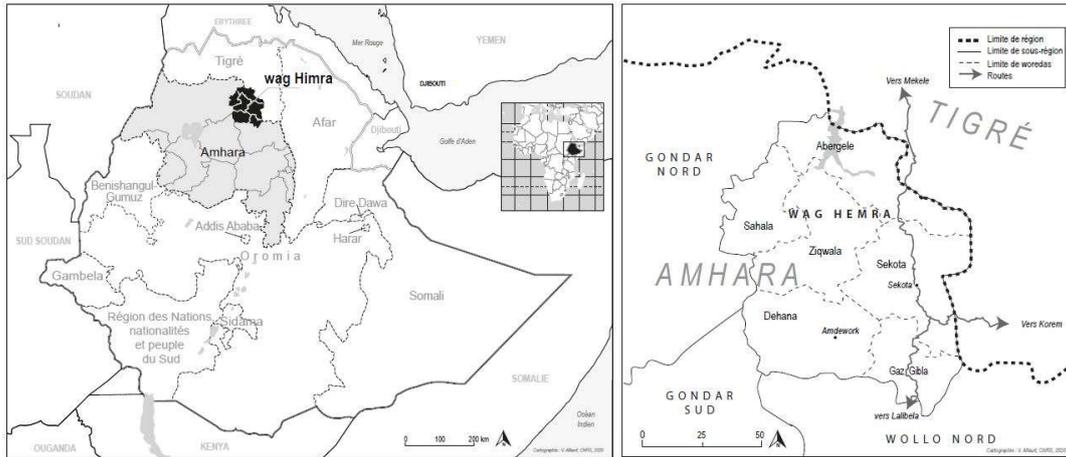
Recently, Ethiopia has suffered several periods of drought: in 2002, 2011 and in 2015-2018, when the field work was carried out for this study, which describes contemporary mechanisms for managing hunger in a region marked, historically and on a daily basis, in people’s memories and in their bodies, by food scarcity (Part II). The state as manager relies on a nationwide political network and the implementation of technical solutions to ensure durable food security using methods including targeting specific stakeholders such as development coordinators, while controlling the population and INGOs (Part III). The article goes on to describe adjustments in the practices of the various stakeholders, ranging from government injunctions and survival strategies and including migration by farmers. The whole article is underpinned by two hypotheses, for which ideas will be put forward, without providing definitive responses. The first, based on local political and climate history, is that the area is being maintained in a state of insecurity and dependence, without any real desire to find a way out of the crisis, leading to the inhabitants being isolated by the Ethiopian government. The second is that the decades-

long presence of INGOs as conscious instruments of the government illustrates a humanitarian stalemate.

This article has been written following three visits to Sekota in 2017 and 2018, using a limited qualitative method because of logistical constraints, particularly the absence of transport or translators. The first visit involved meetings with officials, in English: the local representative of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MOARD), several development coordinators, the *chairmen* and executive committee members for the Sekota and Dehana *weredas* and the *chairmen* of three *kebeles* forming part of the Sekota and Dehana *weredas*. All these individuals were Party members and demanded several official letters of introduction before granting an interview, only to limit themselves to providing restricted information mainly based on national or, at best regional, statistics. During the second visit, I conducted many interviews with staff from the main INGOs working in Sekota: *Action Contre la Faim* (Action Against Hunger), Save the Children and Dan Church Aid. I accompanied them on several occasions when they visited villages to observe therapeutic monitoring of malnourished individuals and distribution of food and hygiene kits. During these visits I was able to speak to around 20 people, who believed I was involved in the INGOs' activities, the staff of the latter providing translation into English (which implies an obvious bias in the access to information). During my third visit, the overall climate had worsened due a wave of protests throughout the country, but I returned discretely with the INGOs into remote rural areas, meeting local humanitarian staff and several farmers. The field work was completed by a dozen or so interviews with international consultants and INGO directors in Addis Ababa.

## **II. Hunger as an everyday occurrence**

### ***Wag Himra, a marginalised region***



**Figure 1: Wag Himra. Cartography: Valerie Alfaut, LAM-CNRS.**

Wag Himra (904,000 hectares: Figure 1) is one of 12 administrative areas in the Amhara region’s high plateaux. Divided into six constituencies (*weredas*), the majority of its population, estimated by the local authorities to be 543,020 in 2017, live in hamlets and villages sometimes a long way from area capital Sekota (population 30,000)<sup>1</sup>. In the southern *weredas* (Gaz Gibla, Dehana and Sekota), where fieldwork was carried out, the main subsistence activity is cereal growing. The area is at a lower altitude than the northern *weredas*, where goat rearing and sorghum production predominate. The fields, often remote from the farmers’ homes, are small: between 0.25 and 0.75 hectares per household for the Sekota and Dehana *weredas* (MOARD figures). There is only one rainy season in Wag Himra and rainfall is very variable: in 2016, the inhabitants had to cope with a practically waterless year. In fact, only 13% of Wag Himra can be used for cereal growing, the remainder being too dry or too inaccessible (EU, 2016).

The *weredas* are divided into *kebele*, which are geographical and administrative units and local bases for political supervision. They have health centres and aid distribution points, and markets offering a limited variety of produce, the vendors having the same resources as the buyers. They

<sup>1</sup> The town has given its name to one of the many programmes introduced to improve food security: the “Sekota Declaration” (2015) which promises to end infant malnutrition in Ethiopia by 2030 and applies to the catchment of the Tekeze river. A hydroelectric dam was completed in the Abergelle *wereda* in 2009.

are inhabited by a variety of ethnic groups depending on the locality, including the indigenous Agaw, the subject of this article. Mostly farmers, the majority of the Agaw live in the countryside, particularly in remote areas. Their households are fairly big (four to eight children) and their Cushitic language, Xamtanga, is spoken by approximately 200,000 people. Although the literature covering rural Ethiopia is fairly dense, that relating to the Wag Himra area is practically non-existent, and no ethnographic study had been made of the Agaw.

The town of Sekota stretches along a river and one main track. A minority but significant Muslim presence is made visible by the mosque lying in the heart of the town, which is also dotted with orthodox churches and has a lively weekly market (Figure 2). However, apart from small businesses, administrative jobs and the INGOs, it is difficult to find work there.



**Figure 2: Sale of grain at a local market. Photo: Katell Morand.**

The history of Wag Himra relates as much to famine episodes as to the recurring tensions between the Tigray region, with which it shares a frontier, and central government. Indeed, at the beginning of the 1980s, Sekota was home to the founders of the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM), which was allied with opponents of the *Derg*. There was heavy fighting against the *Derg*, involving intense resistance activity to which the government responded from 1985 with waves of bombing. Wag Himra was thus (1) the seat of fighting between the EPDM-Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) coalition and the *Derg*, (2) neglected by the latter (which took no interest in how people obtained access to food) and (3) the epicentre of its project for achieving demographic balance.

After the fall of the *Derg* in 1991, when the EPRDF took power, roads were built to Mekelle and Korem, Sekota received an electricity supply and the Agaw language and culture were promoted. This promotion of identity formed part of a disputed historiography which “highlighted the Wag region’s tradition of resistance, from the imperial period to the overthrow of the Derg” (Osmond, 2009, p. 156): that of the Zagwe dynasty, which was considered to embody the “authentic” indigenous peoples of northern Ethiopia, descendants of Moses and the Kingdom of Aksum. But, in 1996, the EPRDF turned against its former allies, fearing their desire for power and capacity for resistance. The region fell back into lethargy, while the EPRDF continued to wipe out the opposition there, to the extent of reorganising elections when they lost them, as in 2005, and violently crushing the subsequent demonstrations. This reversal “led to a sudden cessation of development in Sekota and barely concealed bitterness towards the Ethiopian federal government” (Osmond, 2009, p. 165).

### ***Permanent food and agricultural insecurity***

The Ethiopian countryside is subject to diverse, complex dynamics, torn between factors that are local (e.g. the absence of rain in a given year) and national (the effects of national planning policies). Demographic pressure is often used to explain the exhaustion of land, but it is not the only reason: Ethiopian farmers have been adapting to changes in their environment for a long time (Crummey, 2018). The climate argument, which links deforestation and desertification, fails to take into account the various reforestation campaigns and migrations, be they voluntary or organised villagisations, nor the constant efforts of the farmers, who have always striven to fertilise their fields with compost, build ingenious terrace systems and canalise water, etc. In his study of Lasta (Lalibela), McCann (1987) concluded that periods of food shortage were as much a result of demographic pressure as of the lack of productive resources (land, winter fodder, oxen to pull ploughs), which are in turn due to lack of rain. In his book published

in 1990, Alemneh predicts that the effect of human activity on the environment is the main reason (overgrazing, overcultivation, deforestation) why millions of people cannot produce enough food for themselves on the high plateaux: he thus legitimises resettlement. Lewis and Rahmato (1992) provide a very precise analysis of the adaptation strategies used by farmers in Wollo, a region that borders Wag Himra. They show that the farmers grow food only for consumption and not with the objective of accumulation, which makes them dependent on random events. Local markets are meant to compensate during difficult periods while only offering a very limited range of products: this inevitably leads to food crises when periods of drought follow one another. Vulnerability is increased by the region's isolation, meaning that the provision of goods from other regions, thanks to private market forces or aid from government or charitable organisations, is essential at certain times.

The final stage of decapitalisation, i.e. the sale of goods or production equipment, is marginally observed in Wag Himra, because food aid takes up the slack when times are difficult. But deprivation is frequent: it appears when impoverishment becomes so bad that it is difficult to escape from it, particularly because of debts (Vaughan, Tronvoll, 2003). Destitution, the ultimate stage of dependency, is a constant threat (Sharp, Devereux, Amare 2003). Nevertheless, since 2005, living conditions in the Ethiopian countryside have improved (Ege, 2019), and micro-practices of adaptation (Crummey, 2018) are found daily.



**Figure 3: Ploughing stony ground, Wag Himra. Photo: Katell Morand.**

Mutual aid systems between relatives and neighbours help to cope with bad periods by providing help to people in difficulty, e.g. the old or ill. Ideally repaid afterwards, the need for this community help has become more pressing as drought follows drought, and people can no longer offer help when those who are helped find it difficult to return the favour, causing a social malaise that can lead to tensions or to their self-exclusion (including migrating elsewhere). Those who cannot farm their land establish a *kontract*, a long-term lease allowing someone else to use the land in exchange for a sum fixed at the start. This practice, where the landowner has no guarantee of recovering the land in the future, is a kind of disguised sale because the yield from the parcels is so low that a family that leases out its land loses its means of survival (Planel, 2016).

For the people of Wag Himra, access to food is conditioned by the seasons and the randomness of climatic events. The farming year is divided up into various periods: January to March, when the ground is dry, is the festive season. It requires money or a good harvest to feed guests (“rain breeds children, drought breeds frustration”: in 2017, the *Chairman* of Dehana was worried about the fall in the number of marriages because of the drought). In years of low rainfall, food starts to become scarce in April and May, when farmers are beginning to prepare the soil. This period also includes the end of the 55-day Easter fast (*fasika*), leading to increased expenditure. The period from June to September is the hunger gap: there are no reserves. It is time for ploughing, which requires access to a pair of oxen: there are few in the area and they must be “booked” in advance, for a date which may prove to be far from ideal from the point of view of weather; this may also involve going into debt. Planting and harvesting follow (the latter takes place in September - October), at which time expenditure increases in order to buy equipment and food for the workers. In December, food is available and prices fall.

Meals generally consist of *injera* (pancakes made with barley, sorghum or teff) garnished, depending on availability, with peas, chili pepper puree, lentils or tomatoes. Quantities are

small, and the lack of variety means that the diet is not balanced, to which must be added the fact that meals are omitted during lean periods or on fast days imposed by the orthodox religion (Wednesdays, Fridays and religious festivals)<sup>2</sup>. Water abstraction points are poorly protected from animals and dirt, which has an impact on hygiene (of the place, of tools, clothes and people's bodies) but also on health. The water points are few and far between and the families are used to not drinking very much. This widespread restriction in eating habits has direct repercussions on health: 31% of households in Wag Himra reduce the number of meals they eat at least three times a week, more often during hunger gaps (Link NCA p54).

In the Sekota and Dehana *weredas*, malnutrition, defined as a quantitative and/or qualitative nutritional imbalance, is chronic. It manifests itself through severe growth retardation in the first five years of life, affecting 53.3% of children in the two *weredas* in 2016 compared to a national average of 38%, while acute malnutrition was estimated to affect over 15% (10 % in the country as a whole; CSA, 2017).

Unsurprisingly, hunger is also fixed in people's memories. It was difficult for me to identify who referred explicitly to the 1984 famine. But memories of times when someone had died of hunger seemed to be numerous. These memories were systematically associated with those of displacement and of the loss of goods and homes: "My parents and I had to leave. It was very hard. We left our house. We walked and walked towards the big town where we used to go to market [Sekota]. It was hot in the daytime, our hands, feet and eyes were burned. Our parents had hidden some grain in their *gabi* (blankets) by making knots in the corners of them. They ate it at night. They didn't give any to us children because children are often tougher and what's more, the parents have to survive because they are the ones who know how [to farm]). We walked and found a place where we were given food. When we returned to our land, we had to

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<sup>2</sup> It is forbidden to eat before a certain time of day or to eat any animal products, which does not in fact change the diet much since meat is only eaten on feast days while milk and eggs are rare on the high plateaux where livestock rearing is limited.

build a new house [on another parcel] and start from scratch. But since then I've never had to travel elsewhere to eat".

The Agaw woman who told this story had come to get food aid when I met her. She lived more than an hour's walk from the isolated village where the distribution centre was installed, which was not a long distance in local terms. Her comments seem to be linked to the fact that the aid has come to her, and it is not she who, pursued by hunger, had to go to a very distant food distribution centre. The fact that the children did not receive grain as a priority must be seen in the extreme context of famine: when food is short, parents do indeed make sure that their children are fed, depriving themselves if necessary.

Access to healthcare, generally free of charge, takes place in the *wereda* health centres. Sekota alone has a hospital. Those who promote healthcare are concerned that parents only start worrying when their children are already suffering from malnutrition. According to Agaw farmers, a child whose ribs are showing is "normal": "An Agaw child is never fat"; "My child is ill because of the air"; "If my child were hungry, he would cry", (Gaz Gibla, 2018). This perception causes problems in the treatment of hunger because the parents turn first to remedies that they can buy in the markets (unidentified medication or mixtures, traditional medicine) before they think of food supplements. They also normalise thinness, raising the alert too late in the case of critical diet-related deterioration. Although upstream government and INGO intervention tries to avoid these extreme problems, some inhabitants adapt by leaving the region.

### ***A survival strategy: increasing numbers of people migrating***

In order to lift people out of poverty, the Developmental State encourages rural households to diversify their sources of revenue, for example by encouraging groups of young people to start their own businesses. But in Wag Himra opportunities are limited, failure rates high and

potential revenues are often insufficient to provide a durable means of survival, whether this is because starting capital is low or because the local market is small and quickly saturated (EU, 2016). No major Developmental State project has been implemented in Wag Himra: no school campuses nor universities, despite a significant population, nor industrial estates nor factories. The roads that would open up Sekota have not been tarmacked, dirt roads are destroyed in the rainy season, the distribution of water and electricity is random, etc.

When shortages continue, farmers temporarily change their activity or benefit from intra-family and community remittances. But such strategies can only be temporary. Over the last 20 years, the rainy season in Wag Himra has become unpredictable: sometimes it arrives too early, when the ground is not ready, sometimes too late, when the seeds have already died. There seem to be more destructive insects than previously (perhaps this impression results from the pesticides offered for purchase by development coordinators in case of invasion). Investment projects aimed at reducing vulnerability with respect to food and farming, for example planting trees whose wood could be sold in the long term, remains fairly marginal, because such efforts are at the mercy of drought, animals and thieves, but also of the government which can take back the land at any time: “It’s our land, but we don’t own it. If Addis [Ababa] wants it back, we have to leave” (Agaw farmer, 2018).

As the pressure on land is increasing while the sustainable agricultural production in Wag Himra is limited to 75% of the area’s rural population (EU, 2016), more and more young people are leaving rural areas to undertake increasingly long migrations. Seeking temporary employment elsewhere is a classic phenomenon: the men leave to find day work while the women and children look after the fields that ensure their survival. Migration is thus a necessary adaptation, decided upon as a function of households’ capacity to provide for themselves and the extent to which it will reduce the charges upon them. They leave after the harvest or before *fasika*, more to save their families food than to earn money, returning in summer to help with

preparing the fields. These short-term migrations are intra-regional, particularly towards Lalibela or the Raya plain, encouraged by the regional authorities which are trying to develop certain localities. Migrants often work in building or road-making, employed by the Chinese companies which are constructing the majority of Ethiopian infrastructure.

But since the 2011 drought, people have been migrating further and further (INGOs consultants, 2018), and returns are becoming rarer. The women sometimes accompany their husbands, and the land may be redistributed to others (generally an older relative) during the couple's absence: it then becomes difficult for them to claim a right of use. The authorities confirm this phenomenon: "once they leave, it is normal that someone takes their land. When they come back, why give it back to them if they were incapable of farming it the first time?" (*Kebele chairman*, Dehana, 2017). Most family conflicts are, moreover, related to the shortage of land. These long migrations are as feared as they are necessary: working conditions, isolation, loss of bearings in the urban environment, but also new illnesses (particularly malaria) make departure appear to be as much about taking personal risks as about providing an opportunity to earn a living. Agaw farmers sometimes leave to join people they know or call on *delalas*, intermediaries who come to the Sekota area during the departure season (February to April) to put them in touch with employers in exchange for a high percentage of their wages. Migrants go to the frontier of Sudan (Metemma) or Eritrea (Humera) as well as to major towns such as Gondar, Dessie and Addis Ababa. Although some Agaws speak Trigrinya and local history links them to Tigray, few seem to migrate to Mekele: "we are poorly accepted there. The police chase us away" (young unemployed person, Sekota, 2018).

Some undertake international migrations, which may go beyond neighbouring countries (mainly Djibouti and Sudan, sometimes the Arabian Peninsula, although we did not meet any cases during this study), the men working in farming, construction or small businesses on markets, and the women as nannies, cleaners and in restaurants or hotels, or selling clothes and

everyday utensils (group interview with farmers, Gaz Gibla, 2018). When possible, migrants remain in contact with their families by telephone, the Ethiopian network having been extended in recent years, although communication is difficult in the Wag Himra countryside (moreover batteries need to be charged in areas not reached by the electricity network).

The departure of children, sometimes as young as ten, is endured, regretted, but presented as necessary to the survival of the household. The presence of people trafficking involving young Agaws was mentioned by interviewees in Addis Ababa, but this research failed to substantiate it. Although minors' migratory pathways seem to be determined before they leave, with a desire to see them remain within the family, a woman farmer told me: "two of my children have left: someone came to tell me that a family needed them in Djibouti. Life is hard here and I couldn't take good care of them (...). I haven't had any news of them. I hope they'll come back and work in the *kebele*" (2018). Child migration is still little seen but, according to humanitarian stakeholders in the area, the droughts mean that it is affecting ever greater numbers and taking them on increasingly long journeys.

Despite the difficulties, people always look forward to migrants' returning: they hope that young migrants will come back and marry in their home region, that they will have their children there, that they will participate in the area's social life e.g. the *Shadey* (a festival for young people held in mid-August). In short: "young people who go away should come back. They are Agaw. They leave to discover new things and live, but they should come back to their culture. Who'll look after our area if they don't come back?" (Agaw women, 2015).

### **III. Many aid schemes, constant control**

#### ***Government systems to control food security and poverty***

Since 2005, Ethiopia has developed a food security system: the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) (Rahmato, Pankhurst, Uffelen, 2013; Cochrane, Tamiru, 2016). Managed

by the Agriculture Ministry through the *kebeles*, it involves aid distribution, intended to be exceptional but which has proved to be permanent. In nearly half of the country's *weredas*, more than eight million families receive help from PSNP programmes (MoA, 2014). Its guiding principle is to help each household to become self-sufficient thanks to a food security programme associated with those of the INGOs: it then "graduates" and is taken off the list. Money is distributed, as are small items of equipment, seed and food (mainly oil, onions and potatoes) in exchange for community work: "beneficiaries of public works", must be healthy and must carry out activities for the public good such as building roads (their children then have to look after their fields, which increases deschoolisation). They are called upon for two days per week, i.e. eight days per month, from January to September, not including the many non-working days imposed by the Church (including Sundays), making it a very time-consuming activity. They can switch to "temporary direct support", for example in the case of pregnancy. "Direct beneficiaries", the old and the ill, are exempt from this work (MoA, 2014). If the members of a household are unable to participate on one occasion, they can make up for it over the following days, but if they are repeatedly unable to work, the aid due for those days is deducted from the sum initially announced.

A local food security working group draws up lists of PSNP beneficiaries: it includes the *chairman* of the *kebele*, coordinators for development, agriculture and health awareness as well as groups of elders, young people and women. They are all Party members, and they have poor mastery of targeting techniques, leading to numerous readjustments among them or under pressure from the inhabitants. The targeting of beneficiaries that was carried out when the PSNP was launched has evolved to include new-born babies and to exclude the dead and migrants. Since 2016, the size of benefitting households has been based on an average of five people: the type of households concerned has diversified while numbers of beneficiaries have been reduced in order to control expenditure and to demonstrate the programme's efficiency (Bishop,

Hilhorst, 2010). This limitation has also led to more children leaving, sometimes migrating: “It’s difficult to feed the children: we find it hard. [Government] aid doesn’t help everyone. But the older children leave to work elsewhere so that we can look after the younger ones” (Agaw woman farmer, 2018). The criteria for selecting PSNP beneficiaries are poorly defined and perception of who is the most “vulnerable” is subjective: “We know the people, we know who is needy and the others” (official, Sekota *wereda*, 2017); “Given that most of the working group members are government employees or representatives, they can be influenced by the exercise of targeting and re-targeting” (local INGO director, 2017). In 2014, 30% of Wag Himra’s population was on the PSNP list (MOARD, Sekota).

However, the PSNP does not solve the problem of chronic poverty, which would require overhauling production methods and making other profound changes. The farmers describe the few benefits that it provides compared to the obligations demanded: aid arrives randomly or late; non-essential donations are made and then illegally resold, leading to competition and market collapse. Very demanding compensatory work is required that coincides with the agricultural season, for example: “they ask us to repair a road when it is raining, whereas our fields require a lot of attention at the same time” (Agaw farmer, 2017). But poor farmers cannot escape sometimes badly-adapted aid policies for fear that they will not be considered “good Ethiopians” (*chairman* of Dehana *kebele*, 2018), that the authorities will take away the land of which the farmers have the usufruct, or that they will be imprisoned: the family will then have to pay the debt “and the interest” in order to free the person. In 2016, in certain towns where protests took place, demonstrators were removed from the list of PSNP beneficiaries (Desportes, Mandefro, Hilhorst, 2019).

The *Democratic Developmental State* is also present in the Ethiopian countryside in the form of Ministry of Agriculture development coordinators (DC) (MOARD, 2014). Supposedly recruited from the regions where they work, none of those whom I met spoke Xamtanga.

Presented as “models”, their role is to spread “good practice” among the farmers. DCs offer – or even impose – resources to farmers considered to be vulnerable. These resources mainly consist of animal vaccinations, fertilisers, pesticides in the case of insect invasion (in 2015), “improved” seed: this is known as the “technical package” (Planel, 2012). These products are not free, but each household is strongly encouraged to use them, to the extent that everyone explained them to me as being “obligatory”. They are acquired through micro-credit systems and can lead to indebtedness.

However, the farmers complain that they or their animals become ill after the spreading of fertiliser, whose effectiveness they do not feel has been demonstrated (it exhausts or “burns” the soil). On the receiving end of a whole “top-down” organisation over which they have little control, they tacitly criticise the random or inappropriate nature of the decisions taken at higher levels, and regret the ineffective, discretionary programmes that embody a “clientelist interface between the State and farmers” (Planel, 2016, p. 69) whose actions “form their day-to-day experience of the *Developmental State* and maintain them in an increasing state of dependency with respect to the public authorities” (*ibid.*, p. 70). DCs, who represent the authorities and the fear that is associated with them if their recommendations are not followed, are rejected, feared and at the same time listened to: the farmers do not offer them a drink when they come but they submit to their advice<sup>3</sup>.

For their part, the DCs and those in charge of the *kebeles* and *weredas* often have a paternalistic attitude towards Agaw farmers, who they describe as boorish and requiring education: “We have to teach them”; “They don’t know”; “They are not capable of adapting”; “They’re not like us, they haven’t been to school: they need someone to help them”; “We teach them but they’re

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<sup>3</sup> The INGOs have set up complaints offices as in government departments, but no-one mentioned them during this study.

no good”; or, speaking of the distribution of fertiliser: “It’s for their own good (...): we know what’s good for them” (interviews, 2017 and 2018).

Moreover, the approach used by the DCs is often opposite to that used by the INGOs: while the former impose the use of chemical fertiliser, the latter recommend more environmentally-friendly cultivation methods and try to help households to get out of debt. This is why the authorities in the region encourage INGOs to employ DCs in order to “harmonise” the policies applied there. For their part, the INGOs try to “soften up” the DCs in order to successfully implement certain projects. Although the INGOs refuse to make the DCs fully part of their teams, they cannot avoid their coverage of the region, nor the information that they provide to the government.

The interweaving of stakeholders, along with the programmes’ lack of clarity, makes it more difficult to understand the governance of food security and strengthens the feeling among the population of being subject to a centralised power (Hillhorst, 2016). Thus, aid provided by DCs is often confused with that of the PSNP, the authority of the Party State and interventions by the INGOs. The omnipresence of identical stakeholders in the different bodies also contributes to this confusion: INGOs’ food aid distribution centres and health centres located in government buildings, Party members within humanitarian teams, lists of beneficiaries similar to those of the PSNP (which are partially drawn up by DCs), etc.

This incomprehension of roles and stakeholders came to light during a group interview (2018): “NGOs are the *mengist*” (the government), “NGOs are the government who help us”, “We have to closely follow the recommendations of the DC and the *wereda* to get aid from the INGOs”, “The people who work for the INGOs are civil servants”, etc. When one of the INGOs gave out chickens, in order to develop poultry farming, to farmers benefitting from the PSNP, the latter called them “government chickens” (*yāmāngəst doro*, Figure 4).



**Figure 4: “Government chickens”. Photo: Katell Morand.**

### *Long-standing, necessary help from INGOs*

Wag Himra is peppered with noticeboards presenting humanitarian projects and the logos of operational stakeholders, international aid organisations and the Ethiopian government. They attest to the presence of INGOs and their projects for years in the area: Save the Children has been there since 1965, Dan Church Aid since 1974, *Action Contre la Faim* since 1985. Nevertheless, they have to adapt to numerous constraints imposed by the Ethiopian regime: complicated expatriate visa processes, programmes based and evaluated on uniquely quantitative criteria, the 70/30 rule in the *Charities and Societies Proclamation* (ChSA), which has governed their work since 2009 and limits their administrative costs to 30% of their budget (Corbet, Bayle, Labzae, 2017). INGOs are constantly having to produce reports for the government and the ChSA and must permanently justify their actions using the country’s bureaucratic method: numbers. This endless production of statistics responds to a manner of thinking about society in terms of numbers, a numerical approach intended both to describe the population as clearly as possible and to prove the effectiveness of the actions being carried out (Desrosières 2008). Statistics also help to justify targeting different population segments, thus reinforcing the State’s multi-faceted stranglehold.

All these difficulties lead to practical restrictions whose result is a certain conformity between the State and the INGOs, although the latter try to manoeuvre by adopting different methods of

self-restraint in order to successfully complete their projects (Desportes, Mandefro, Hilhorst, 2019). Although it is difficult for them to target other beneficiaries than those identified by the authorities, whose lists are supposed to correspond to needs, their work (particularly their “assessments” which aim to evaluate local needs in order to adapt their responses) provide them with data that is more realistic than the government’s. Indeed, official figures are often drawn up without a reliable method and are made to conform to the authorities’ expectations rather than reflecting actual observation (Enten, 2008). The INGOs thus juggle between two sets of documents: one which remains in-house, with figures derived from field observation and words considered to be accurate (“cholera”, “famine”), the other official (with “acute watery diarrhoea”, “lean period”). This careful use of figures and words enables them to avoid confrontation with the authorities.

Every June, MOARD carries out a national evaluation in order to identify critical hunger thresholds: complex indicators which allow the *weredas* to be placed at different “levels of insecurity” in order to identify areas within which fundraising appeals or aid interventions – possibly international – will need to be organised. Every three months, “hotspots”, also identified at national level, call for rapid responses but do not lead to the resolution of the structural problems resulting from slow development. This strategy of consecutive temporary programmes, with which the INGOs are associated, prevents the implementation of long-term projects such as crop diversification and the acquisition of new practices: it is “a singular conception of food insecurity, orientated more towards the resources that are produced than to the ability to acquire them, more determinist than jointly developed” (Janin, 2010, p. 8).

The humanitarian INGOs are nevertheless encouraged to deploy part of their aid (previously validated by the Ethiopian government) towards regional development projects. In these cases they move away from their core role, encouraged by institutional sponsors (generally intergovernmental organisations) which have an international developmental cooperation

viewpoint, in the hope of dealing with the continuing crises in a more structural manner. Thus INGOs which habitually deal with emergencies participate in the construction of canals and terraced fields in order to resolve irrigation problems, sometimes doing “the work that the government should be doing” (2018, local employee of an INGO).

Emergency activities nevertheless remain significant and represent approximately two thirds of the programmes carried out by the three abovementioned INGOs. They are carried out in the *kebeles*’ health centres where they undertake measurement (weight and brachial circumference: Figure 5), monitoring (health and epidemiological surveillance) distribution of aid (ready-to-use therapeutic food items). Several INGO directors, however, pointed out that these programmes are recurrent (“we have carried out the same temporary project every year for 30 years”, INGO director, Sekota, 2017), which reveals long-term food insecurity. Established over short periods – because they are launched in response to appeals from the Ethiopian government and financed by donors who often impose timescales limited to two or three years – they do not contribute to the population’s food security.



**Figure 5: INGO employee measuring brachial circumference. Photo: Alice Corbet.**

#### **IV. Caught between deliberate exclusion of Wag Himra and government control: a humanitarian stalemate for the INGOs?**

In the Ethiopian regime, aid exists in a context where food policy is intimately linked to strategies for the legitimisation of power. This permanent control of access to food, at all levels, enables the State to “remain master of the food policy game” (Bourmaud, Darbon, 1990, p. 42) by administrating and disciplining – to use Foucauldian terms – the population.

The Wag Himra case is not such a perfect example as it was during the major famines, when humanitarian intervention was intentionally misappropriated and used to force people to move to other areas. But today, international aid stakeholders’ respect for national sovereignty is still in confrontation with respect for humanitarian principles, particularly those of independence (remaining separate from economic or political objectives) and of impartiality (being based uniquely on need and having access to people without distinction). While the INGOs have been complementing central government programmes and trying to make up for their shortfalls for decades while carrying out incessantly-renewed emergency programmes, their activities are always overseen by the centralised state structure which perpetuates and strengthens its power through a chain of authority that maintains a tight grip on society (Aalen 2016). At every level of project implementation, they have to negotiate for their place and their values and put up with constant Party State intrusion as it maintains a stranglehold on aid. The relationship with local authorities both structures and restricts their work: as far as the population is concerned, INGOs are thus *de facto* Party State intermediaries. Moreover, the majority of their employees, Ethiopian or otherwise, complain about this state stranglehold over their work:

“We do not choose who we help or how we help them. We spend our time in meetings [with the authorities]. We are constantly trying to negotiate room for manoeuvre, but we have to try to reverse decisions at the local level, as well as at the national level, where orders are given. And that is impossible. We end up being

an executive arm of the Ethiopian government. Thankfully, what we do is good and necessary, and sometimes we achieve our objectives! But it all takes time.” (Country INGO director, Addis Ababa, 2018).

Apart from this feeling that their services are being instrumentalised by the authorities, being unable to help a population constantly and increasingly confronted with the impossibility of ensuring its own subsistence without aid is leading the INGOs to question the legitimacy of their remaining.

“Doesn’t staying in Wag Himra, mean condoning the government’s flaws? Aren’t we providing it with technical support, both in emergencies and over the long term, in a region whose history recalls its vulnerability, and for which the future of small farmers would appear to be difficult?” (*ibid*).

The interlocking of the different aid systems (PSNP, DC, INGO) and control methods (evaluation of needs, lists, good practice among recipients, INGOs’ recruitment and programmes) is stopping Wag Himra from developing and is embodied in multi-faceted, very precise control by the *Developmental State* which fails to prevent, or even maintains, the area’s isolation. Hunger is constant there, amplified in times of drought, pushing people to migrate for longer and longer periods. “The authorities don’t care about those who are hungry, they’re not the future of Ethiopia!”, declared the Sekota *wereda chairman* in 2017: the region seems to be isolated from the economic impetus of the “Ethiopian renaissance” thanks to a sustained, although hidden, political will. Does this absence of long-term solutions for resolving food insecurity and lifting the Wag Himra farmers out of poverty reveal a lack of interest in a marginalised area and its inhabitants?

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## References

### Figures:

Figure 1: Wag Himra. Cartography: Valerie Alfaut, LAM-CNRS.

Figure 2: Sale of grain at a local market. Photo: Katell Morand.

Figure 3: Ploughing stony ground, Wag Himra. Photo: Katell Morand.

Figure 4: “Government chickens”. Photo: Katell Morand.

Figure 5: Measurement of brachial circumference by an INGO. Photo: Alice Corbet.

