



ENCOURAGING A HEALTHY DIET IN DROUGHT-RIDDEN DIRE DAWA

Severe droughts take a heavy toll on crops, livestock, and the wellbeing of farming communities. In Dire Dawa, primarily an agro-pastoralist area, the climate continues to heat up, growing increasingly severe, threatening local livelihood and food supplies. A shift in rainfall patterns, growing population, and rising temperatures have pushed communities into extreme poverty, showing need for robust drought adaptation strategies.

Kebula Shekumer, mother of ten, was born and raised in Dire Dawa's Gendergie kebele, where it has not rained for several months. *"Life a few years ago was different from the life we're living now, all because of the weather change,"* she says. *"A few years ago, our neighborhood was filled with goats and cows, and we consumed meat, butter, honey and milk without reservation. Now, because of the drought, I have lost seventeen goats and five cows."*

Drought has increased food prices, as traders predicted shortages and a major decline in purchasing power due to limited job opportunities. With little means to generate income, Kebula and her husband, once a farmer, now find themselves working in non-agricultural sectors. *"My husband works as a guard in a factory, even though this means consistent income, it's not enough to feed a family of ten children, everything has become more expensive now,"* she says. *"I support my husband by collecting twigs and selling them in the city, but it takes me almost four hours just to reach the woods, and I don't get much income from sales."*

Mohammed Muktar, Kebula's neighbor, lives with his wife and three children. *"It has rained three times this year and every time the rainfall was not strong enough to keep our crops alive. We are living in an almost desert-like state. If it doesn't rain at the right time and in the right amount, we face the risk of starvation."*

The community who once relied on agriculture for their livelihood, have taken on different jobs for income, *“I used to own a big farm with my brothers, but because of prolonged periods of no rainfall, it has dried up. I now wake up every morning not knowing what my job is going to be, sometimes I am a bricklayer, other times I unload trucks - I take any job I can get,”* Mohammed says.

In response to the widespread food insecurity stemming from irregular rainfall and declining agricultural productivity, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), under the Joint Emergency Operation (JEOP), provides critical food assistance to food-insecure families in six out of ten regions across Ethiopia. Since 2012, JEOP has been working with the Harergie Catholic Secretariat in Dire Dawa to distribute wheat, yellow split peas and oil to communities affected by drought. In 2019, JEOP added a cash component to this initiative, distributing cash-in-lieu of wheat to targeted communities living in close proximity to local markets. This allowed families to make their own cereal choices among those available locally.

Market assessments were conducted to determine needs. *“It’s important we give families the option to buy the food they want, we must not restrict them into consuming just wheat,”* Mesfin Kebede, the secretariat’s cash coordinator says. *“During one of our assessments, we found the same wheat we had distributed to the community being sold back to the community, it turned out a recipient of this commodity had sold some of the wheat to buy something else. This is why cash distribution is important.”*

To strengthen informed decision making over household foods, JEOP also facilitates trainings on financial education before and during cash distributions, trainings are participative, covering areas in expense management, income generation and savings. *“We don’t want project participants to use the cash for anything else but food. We want them to move away from consuming diets of low micronutrient content to a more balanced diet.”* says Mesfin.

Kebula was one of the recipients of cash. *“After the drought, my family and I ate enjera, bread and stew, that was all I could make with the ingredients I had. Now, with the cash I receive, I can buy rice and vegetables and I can add it to the food we consume.”*

Agreeing with Kebula, Mohammed says, *“In our town, we are used to eating pasta, macaroni and rice but with the drought I wasn’t able to buy this for my family, we were eating the same food every day. With the cash I have received from JEOP, I am now able to buy pasta, vegetables, and fruits for my family. My children are happy, and I am very thankful for your support.”*

Cash transfers enable communities to avoid pre-determined consumption patterns, and purchase what they need, when they need it. This flexibility results in improved nutritional balance as it enables the purchase of more varied foods. Cash distribution also has an empowering effect on communities when they are given the power to control money and the autonomy to decide how to spend it. JEOP’s cash-in-lieu of commodities program started with four kebeles (wards) in Dire Dawa, now reaching twenty-three kebeles, and aiming for ten more in the coming year.

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