

# Older people's lives at risk: Addressing the crisis in Ethiopia



## Key messages

- **The food, fuel and finance crisis has had a significant negative impact on the well-being of older people in Ethiopia.**
- **The economic insecurity is exacerbated by drought and the armed conflict in northern Ethiopia.**
- **Most older people in our study had poor food consumption and a lack of diversity in their diet, with women registering especially low scores.**
- **87 per cent of older people reported that both the diversity and quantity of food available to them and their households had declined due to the crisis.**
- **The poor diet and reduced food consumption can be explained by the challenges of producing enough food, rising food prices, and falling incomes.**
- **To mitigate the effects of the crisis, older people and their households have been compelled to eat cheaper food, reduce the number of meals eaten per day, and reduce meal portions.**
- **The impact of the crisis on older people's livelihoods is aggravated by the fact that most of them lack adequate savings, access to credit and social protection.**

Food insecurity in Ethiopia is among the worst in the world, driven by a combination of major events in recent years. These include the prolonged drought and economic insecurity but also more recently the impacts of COVID-19, the armed conflict in northern Ethiopia as well as the Russia-Ukraine war. The food, fuel and finance crisis that took hold in 2022 has exacerbated this situation, leading to a rapid rise in food, fuel and fertiliser prices compounded by falling incomes. A comprehensive study conducted by the World Food Program (WFP)<sup>1</sup> estimated that by May 2022 the rise in fuel and food prices had pushed up the inflation rate in Ethiopia to about 37 per cent meaning that the purchasing power, especially of poor households, has fallen significantly. Most recent data show that high inflation remains a problem: in September 2022, year to year inflation was 30.7 per cent, with food inflation reaching 31 per cent over the same time period.<sup>2</sup>

The crisis has worsened poverty and further eroded people's livelihoods. According to the World Bank, 23.5 per cent of Ethiopia's population lived below the poverty line in 2021.<sup>3</sup> As of September 2022, around 20 million people in Ethiopia required humanitarian assistance.<sup>4</sup> In a rapid needs assessment conducted by HelpAge International<sup>5</sup> among older people in Borena region, 71 per cent of respondents indicated that their businesses and livelihoods have been negatively affected by the pandemic and 60 per cent of all respondents said that accessing food was their main priority. Another study conducted in East Gojjam districts, northwest Ethiopia revealed that over 60 per cent of 2,120 interviewed households were food insecure and that COVID-19, climate, agroecological conditions and price inflation were the key drivers.<sup>6</sup>

As a result of these pressures, older people in Ethiopia can no longer afford enough food and other basic necessities, and in many cases are on the brink of survival. According to the most recent (2021) World Bank data<sup>7</sup>, the age dependency ratio of older people (above 65 years) is around six per cent. There are slightly more older women than men. Ethiopia has the highest proportion of older people in East Africa and the United Nations projects that this proportion will grow over the next 30 years.<sup>8</sup>

Older people in Ethiopia are particularly at risk of poverty as they tend to have little income from their economic activities, have limited opportunities to accumulate savings throughout their lives, and lack social protection. As a result, they struggle to sustain their basic needs generally - but especially in the event of shocks and stresses - and become financially dependent on family and relatives.

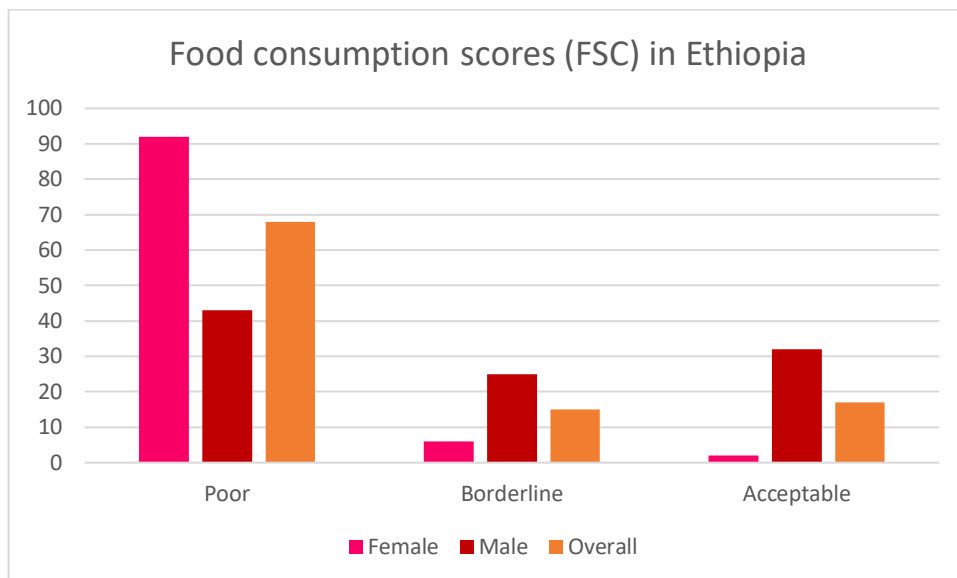
## **Impacts of the food, fuel and finance crisis on older people in Ethiopia**

To examine the impacts of the crisis on the wellbeing of older people in Ethiopia, HelpAge International, Help Age Ethiopia and the Ethiopian Elderly and Pensioners National Association (EEPNA) undertook a mixed-methods study. This included a survey of 387 sample households with at least one older person (60 years of age and above) in four regions: Addis Ababa, Amhara, Oromia and Hawassa. The quantitative research was complemented by 15 focus group discussions (FGD), five key informant interviews and one individual level case study.

During the survey period, most older people in Ethiopia registered poor Food Consumption Scores (FCS) (Figure 1). FCS was calculated by multiplying the number of days a food commodity was consumed and its relative weight, which is based on a seven-day recall period. Scores are classified into poor (FCS=1 to 21), borderline (FCS=21.5 to 35) and

acceptable (FCS>35). About 68 per cent of older people in the study areas had poor food consumption scores. Looking at the gender breakdown, FCS indicate that 92 per cent of older women (compared to 43 per cent of men) had poor consumption scores and hence a larger proportion of women are in need of urgent interventions to improve their food security and nutritional status.

**Figure 1 Food Consumption Scores (FCS) for older people (per cent) in Ethiopia**



Note: poor (FCS=1 to 21), borderline (FCS=21.5 to 35), acceptable (FCS>35)

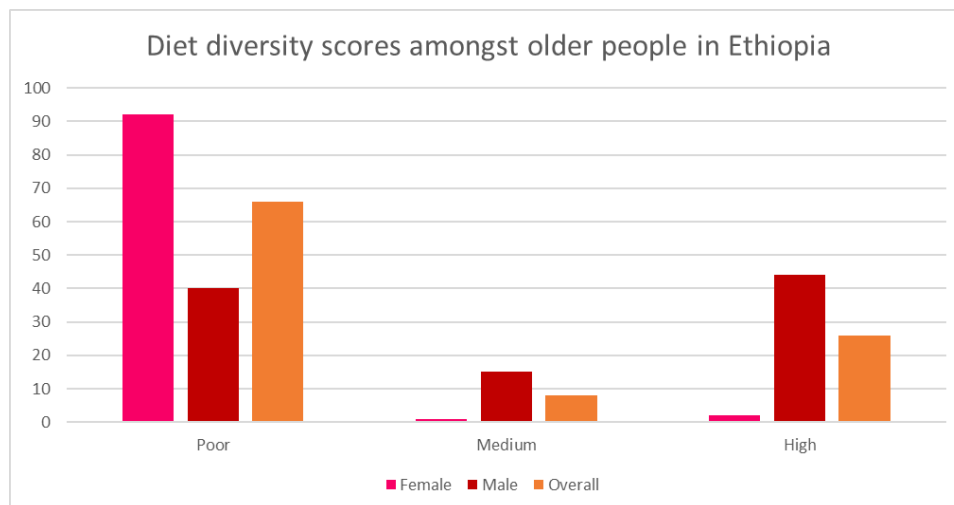
Source: HelpAge International. 2022. [Dataset] Food, fuel and finance crisis: impact on older people (unpublished).<sup>9</sup>

Our study suggests that older people’s food security clearly deteriorated as a result of the current crisis. Between the time of the survey and the benchmark period of six months earlier, an average household income was found to decrease, while food and fuel prices have been sky-rocketing. For 87 per cent of older people in the survey areas both diversity and quantity of food available to them and their households had therefore declined.

According to the survey, most households cope with the impacts of the crisis by eating cheaper food (100 per cent), reducing number of meals eaten per day (97 per cent), and reducing the amount they eat per meal (97 per cent) (Table 1). Such coping strategies have detrimental effects on people’s nutritional and health status and can often lead to ill-health. The adoption of these coping strategies also means that older people are far less resilient to future crises.

A FGD participant from Hawassa region recounts: “The price of food items has been increasing more that 100 per cent nowadays whilst the income of older people is declining; let me share my experience – I used to work as a guard in one private organisation with monthly salary of 1,500Birr (around USD 28) but due to the loss of profit the owner decided to lay off some staff of course I was the one easy to get rid of. Now I am left with no income thus I am struggling to put food on the table for my family” (FGD1, Participant 1, Hawassa, 14 July 2022).

**Figure 2 Diet Diversity Scores (FCS) for older people (per cent) in Ethiopia**



Note: poor (DDS≤4), medium (4<DDS≤6), high (DDS>6)

Source: HelpAge International. 2022. [Dataset] Food, fuel and finance crisis: impact on older people (unpublished).<sup>9</sup>

Analysing the main sources of food for older people in our study showed that 99 per cent purchased their food, which put them at greater risk of food and nutrition insecurity. Older people - in general and in Ethiopia specifically - are less likely than younger people to be able to produce enough food for their consumption. They often struggle to meet the high costs of agricultural inputs and tools; and both ill-health and reduced physical strength can affect their productivity. Price rises brought on by the current crisis and a fall in incomes and, coupled with drought and political instability, have further eroded their productive capacity.

Climate related shocks and the armed conflict in northern Ethiopia have been major triggers of economic and livelihood losses in the country.<sup>9</sup> In particular, unreliable rainfall, the associated droughts and changing temperature patterns in some parts of the country have had a devastating impact on agriculture. Existing evidence shows that potential adaptation strategies could not be fully implemented due to poor access to finance, information and technologies.<sup>10</sup> The absence of early warning systems puts people’s livelihoods at risk in the country’s climate-vulnerable areas.

In addition, the continuing armed conflict meant that most farmers were not able to till their land to prepare it for planting. Nearly all FGD participants stressed the importance of peace-building. As one participant said: “Peace building has to be priority of all concerned bodies and stop displacement, disruption of farming activities and destruction of public and private properties” (FGD Participant A, Debre Markos, 5 July 2022).

Dida G, an older person from Borena Zone of Oromia Regional State is one of the many thousands of older people struggling with the consequences of drought and accelerating food prices (Box 1). His testimonial reflects the alarming situation faced by many pastoralists, who due to drought, conflict and inflation are no longer able to buy sufficient food.

**Table 1: Coping mechanisms adopted by households (per cent) in Ethiopia**

Coping mechanisms	Percentage
Using less expensive food	<b>100</b>
Reducing food quantities eaten per meal	<b>97</b>
Reducing number of meals eaten per day	<b>97</b>
Restricting food consumption for the sake of children	75
Skipping food entire day	51
Obtaining relief food from government	37
Sending family members to eat elsewhere/beg for food	32
Buying food in credit	27
Borrowing food from friends	25
Gathering wild fruits	2

Source: HelpAge International. 2022. [Dataset] Food, fuel and finance crisis: impact on older people (unpublished).<sup>9</sup>

In terms of the fuel crisis, 99 per cent of survey respondents stated that prices of cooking fuels had increased in the previous six months. To cope with rising fuel costs, over half the survey households reported switching energy sources for cooking to cheaper ones and a third switched their energy sources for lighting to cheaper ones. Other respondents were compelled to limit the number of times they cooked their meals and their usage of lighting. A FGD participant from Addis Ababa indicated: "I paid my whole pension this month for electric bill (used to pay 600Birr ≈11USD, now 1200Birr ≈22USD)" (FGD5, Participant 5, Addis Ababa, 18 July 2022).

The impact of the crisis on older people's livelihoods was severe as most had little savings to draw on and limited access to social protection. As recent HelpAge research suggests, there are currently two types of pension systems in Ethiopia: the Public Servants' Pension Scheme and the Private Sector Organizations Employees' Pension Scheme. The first pension is for civil servants and military personnel. The second was established to cover private sector workers (including informal sector workers) on a voluntary basis.<sup>12</sup> Only 7.3 per cent of older people in Ethiopia receive a pension, of whom only 10 per cent are female, which reflects the low participation of women in the formal economy.<sup>11</sup>

Restricted access to credit makes it difficult for older people to generate income that could help them sustain and enhance their livelihoods in normal times and strengthen their capacity to prepare for and respond to shocks. Formal banks tend to be reluctant to provide loans to older people, because of prejudice, and because they tend to lack assets for collateral. Our survey data shows that only 4.6 per cent of all respondents reported having an active loan. A FGD participant in Addis Ababa noted: "Neither banks nor micro-finance institutions take older people as credit-worthy" (FGD1, Participant 5, Addis Ababa, 15 July 2022). Access to low-cost credit could substantially enhance older people's coping and adaptive capacity.

### ***Box 1: Pastoralist Dida G struggles to make ends meet (testimonial)***

"My name is Dida G. I am 89 years old. I live in Borena Zone of Oromia Regional State, Guchie district, in a village called Erder. I am a father of 11 children.. Six of my children live on their own. They have got married. Sometimes they come to visit us. I am a pastoralist. My cattle are my assets. I look after them, take them to pastureland. I depend on them to provide for my family. It is what I do for living. My cows are my cash. I sell them to buy food for my family. Most importantly, we get milk from our livestock. Milk is an important food to us.

In the last few months, we have not got enough rains in Borena. It is a recurring situation, but this time it is being harsher as we have missed rains for multiple seasons. Few months into the drought, cows started dying. The grazing land all dried up. I had nothing to feed the cows. Everyone in my village lost their cattle. Some of them took their cattle away to other places in search of water and pasture.

In addition to the dire situation, we are in, the food prices are going up an unimaginable rate. I do not know why it always happens, but when the fuel price rises, food price also rises. The situation changes every month and week. As a pastoralist, I do not grow crops. I buy food to feed my family. Every time I go to town to buy food for my family, there is a change in price. The merchants say that fuel prices are to blame for the persistent rise in food prices. Here in Borena, we struggle a lot to save lives of our cattle, buying them hay from our savings. Now all my savings are gone. I do not have enough cash to buy food. The situation is quite difficult even for other people. As an old man, I am struggling to buy food with significantly scarce resources. This situation is severe for people at my age because we are unable to work much as compared to younger people."

## **Recommendations**

The food, fuel and finance crisis has had dire consequences for the food security and nutrition of older people in Ethiopia. Its effects have been aggravated by climate related events, such as drought as well as the ongoing internal conflict. A widespread food emergency is expected in southern and south-eastern pastoral areas, where drought conditions are projected to persist at least until June 2023.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, policy and programmatic responses need to recognise and address the interlinkages between different drivers of the crisis. Below we provide recommendations for urgent action by the government and other stakeholders to improve the wellbeing of older people in Ethiopia.

- The government should continue with efforts to reduce food price inflation by supplying subsidised consumer goods (edible oil, wheat flour, sugar and other commodities).
- To improve food security and support farmers, in 2022 the government announced 15 billion birrs (around USD 280 thousand) for fertiliser subsidies.<sup>13</sup> The government should continue to implement subsidy programmes for fertilisers and other agricultural inputs to improve the productive capacity of low-income households in rural areas – especially older farmers.

- Access to social protection can help older people better cope with the impact of the crisis. The government should strengthen the existing social protection system to provide a safety net to older people to meet their most immediate needs. In particular, income support through cash transfers and food subsidies for older people can help reduce the devastating effects of the economic crisis.
- Our qualitative findings concur with existing evidence about the devastating impacts a prolonged armed conflict can have on food insecurity and hunger.<sup>14</sup> As a priority, the government and other parties in the civil conflict should work towards a peaceful settlement in the affected areas. The international community should urgently call for the restoration of peace, and provide a platform for peace talks.
- Older people are particularly hard hit by the internal conflict in Ethiopia. To deal with its immediate impacts, the government should work closely with the international community to provide adequate humanitarian and food assistance for the affected population, to meet the growing demand.
- The government and other development partners should support livelihood diversification of older people to ensure that when one source of income is lost, they can do alternative income-generating activities. This can be achieved through capacity building for older people.
- Evidence suggests that home garden systems can be an effective way to boost the food security of urban households, improve dietary diversity and increase incomes when they grow sufficient quantities of produce.<sup>15</sup> To enhance the food security and nutrition of older people in urban areas, the government should continue promoting sustainable urban agriculture strategies, such as home gardens. To make such home gardens sustainable, access to adequate irrigation is key and older residents in towns and cities need to be trained in home garden crop diversification, vegetable growing, livestock fattening and dairy and poultry production.
- To address the severe impacts of climate change, in particular the effects of drought on farming and pastoral production systems, the government should further promote climate smart agriculture (CSA) and long-term adaptation strategies, such as diversification of herd composition and livestock mobility. Dedicated budget allocation and expenditure on climate smart agriculture could be an effective strategy to ensure adoption of CSA. This could attract more climate finance by showing Ethiopia's own contribution and the mainstreaming of climate change within agriculture. To mitigate climate change impacts, given Ethiopia's potential for renewable energy generation, the government should diversify renewable energy sources and develop more renewable energy projects at the community/village level.
- To facilitate the analysis of the wellbeing of older people and the different risks they face, the Central Statistical Agency of Ethiopia together with relevant ministries should continue to improve how they collect disaggregated age and gender data on older people. This could include the preparation and dissemination of guidelines for all ministries and agencies which are responsible for data collection.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> World Food Program (WFP), 2022. *Implications of the Conflict in Ukraine on Food Access and Availability in the East Africa Region*. Update # 3. WFP
- <sup>2</sup> Trading Economics. (2022). Online: <https://tradingeconomics.com/ethiopia/food-inflation#:~:text=Food%20Inflation%20in%20Ethiopia%20averaged,percent%20in%20March%20of%202014.,last%20accessed:7.11.2022>
- <sup>3</sup> World Bank. (2022). World Development Indicators accessed at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.65UP.TO.ZS?locations=ET> on August 12<sup>th</sup>, 2022
- <sup>4</sup> OCHA (2022). Ethiopia. Situation report. September 2022. Available at: <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ethiopia/>, last accessed: 4 October 2022
- <sup>5</sup> HelpAge International. (2021). *Bearing the brunt The impact of COVID-19 on older people in low- and middle-income countries – insights from 2020*, available at: <https://www.helpage.org/what-we-do/bearing-the-brunt/>
- <sup>6</sup> Negesse, A., Woyraw, W., Temesgen, H. *et al.* Spatial exploration of non-resilience to food insecurity, its association with COVID-19 and household coping strategies in East Gojjam districts, Northwest Ethiopia, 2020. *Sci Rep* 12, 15511 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-022-19963-2>
- <sup>7</sup> World Bank, World Development Indicators accessed at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.65UP.TO.ZS?locations=ET> on August 12<sup>th</sup>, 2022
- <sup>8</sup> UNFPA. (2022). *Rapid Review of Healthy Aging and Long-Term Care Systems in East and Southern Africa*, available at: [https://esaro.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/2022\\_healthy\\_ageing\\_country\\_summary\\_reports\\_ethiopia.pdf](https://esaro.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/2022_healthy_ageing_country_summary_reports_ethiopia.pdf).
- <sup>9</sup> HelpAge International. (2022). HelpAge International. 2022. [Dataset] Food, fuel and finance crisis: impact on older people. (unpublished).
- <sup>10</sup> Tofu, D.A., Woldeamanuel, T. & Haile, F. (2022). Smallholder farmers' vulnerability and adaptation to climate change induced shocks: The case of Northern Ethiopia highlands, *Journal of Agriculture and Food Research*, Volume 8, June 2022, 100312.
- <sup>11</sup> Juergens, F. & Galvani, F. (2019). *Coverage of older people in Ethiopia's social protection system. Realizing the commitment of the National Social Protection Policy to expand social protection to all older people*. HelpAge International, available at: [https://socialprotection.org/sites/default/files/publications\\_files/Coverage%20of%20older%20people%20in%20Ethiopia%20E2%80%99s%20social%20protection%20system.pdf](https://socialprotection.org/sites/default/files/publications_files/Coverage%20of%20older%20people%20in%20Ethiopia%20E2%80%99s%20social%20protection%20system.pdf), last accessed: 7.11.2022
- <sup>12</sup> FEWS NET. (2022). *Ethiopia Food Security Outlook: Food aid remains insufficient amid very high levels of hunger and malnutrition*, June 2022. Famine Early Warning Network (FEWS NET) and World Food Program (WFP), available at: <https://fews.net/sites/default/files/documents/reports/Ethiopia-Food%20Security%20Outlook-June%202022-Final.pdf>, last accessed: 7.11.2022
- <sup>13</sup> World Food Program. (2022). Market Watch Ethiopia, June 2022, available at: <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000141077/download/>
- <sup>14</sup> World Food Program. (2022). *Conflict, climate and soaring food prices push Ethiopia further into hunger while WFP funding runs out*, available at: <https://www.wfp.org/news/conflict-climate-and-soaring-food-prices-push-ethiopia-further-hunger-while-wfp-funding-runs>
- <sup>15</sup> Beyene Teklu Mellisse, Katrien Descheemaeker, Ken E. Giller, Tesfaye Abebe, Gerrie W.J. van de Ven, Are traditional home gardens in southern Ethiopia heading for extinction? Implications for productivity, plant species richness and food security, *Agriculture, Ecosystems & Environment*, 252, 2018, 1-13

---

**HelpAge International is a global network of organisations promoting the right of all older people to lead dignified, healthy and secure lives.**

Written by Sylvia Szabo, Sofia Mohammed, Hailemichael Kebede and Tapiwa Huye, based on research conducted in collaboration with the Bayesian Consulting Group. Inputs by Javeria Afzal, Climate Change Adviser, HelpAge International, are gratefully acknowledged.

Published by HelpAge International  
PO Box 78840, London SE1 7RL, UK  
Tel +44 20 7278 7778

[info@hepage.org](mailto:info@hepage.org)  
[www.helpage.org](http://www.helpage.org)



Registered charity no. 288180

Front page photo by Maheder Haileselassie Tadese/ Fairpicture / HelpAge International



Copyright © HelpAge International 2023

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License,  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>

Any parts of this publication may be reproduced without permission for non-profit and educational purposes. Please clearly credit HelpAge International and send us a copy or link.