

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE 1983-85 FAMINE IN NORTHERN ETHIOPIA**

**A Thesis submitted to the University of London for the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Science**

**by**

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## Abstract

In this thesis it is argued that famine is a concatenation process caused by a severe shock to the economy which in turn leads to a series of socio-economic adjustments by the affected population. If the economic shock is sufficiently prolonged, then fallback strategies fail for vulnerable sections of the population. Unless the state intervenes to prevent mass migration and mass starvation, famine ensues.

It is shown that in northern Ethiopia, severe shocks to the economy, in the form of rain failures, pest attacks and warfare have frequently disrupted agricultural production, often leading to famine in an economy and society overwhelmingly dependent upon agriculture for subsistence. The failure of Ethiopian society to adapt sufficiently to changing agricultural production conditions is explained historically. Excess extraction of surplus from the peasantry was undertaken by a ruling class which largely failed to reinvest its wealth in agriculture and industry, and these conditions still generally hold true under the present regime.

The famine of 1983-85 is analysed in terms of a general socio-economic model of famine. It is shown that crop failures were severe and prolonged, leading to exceptional inflation of grain prices and erosion of fallback

strategies of highland peasants. These strategies included livestock sales, wage labour, trading, access to credit, consumption of famine foods, and migration out of the famine zone.

The failure of the Ethiopian state to respond sufficiently to the famine reflected its prioritisation of other aims, which included warfare and agricultural collectivisation. Western governments were in turn unwilling to provide relief aid to a hostile regime. The result was a lack of substantive action by international relief agencies, many of whose staff sought to avoid responsibility for providing sufficient famine relief. Television exposure of the famine eventually forced an expansion of the international relief effort.

## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mother, Ruth Theresa Cutler (1936-69). She would have appreciated my completing this work.



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Finally, I would like to thank the famine refugees in Sudan who answered my questions so patiently, despite their distress. I hope that all of them eventually survived.

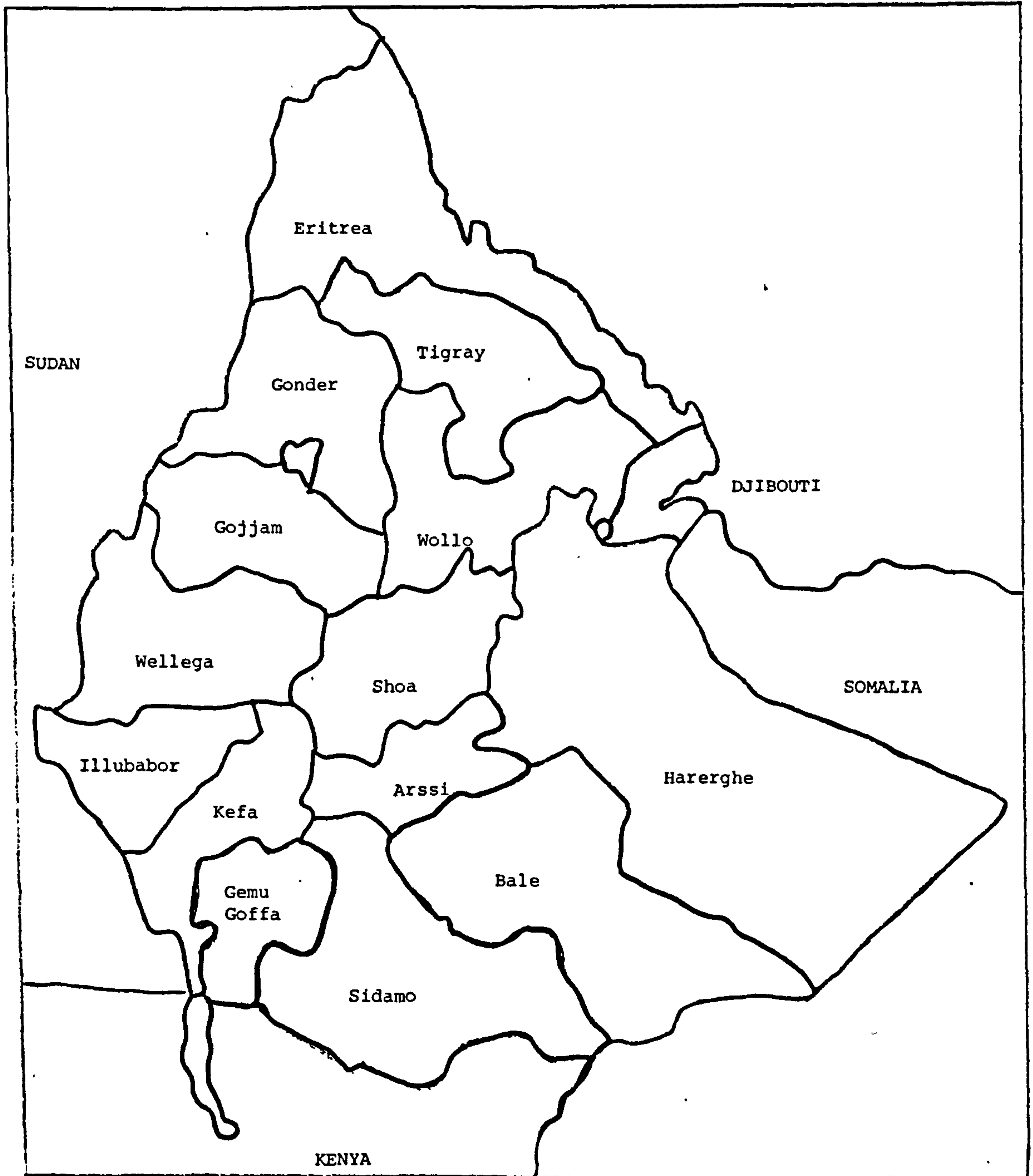
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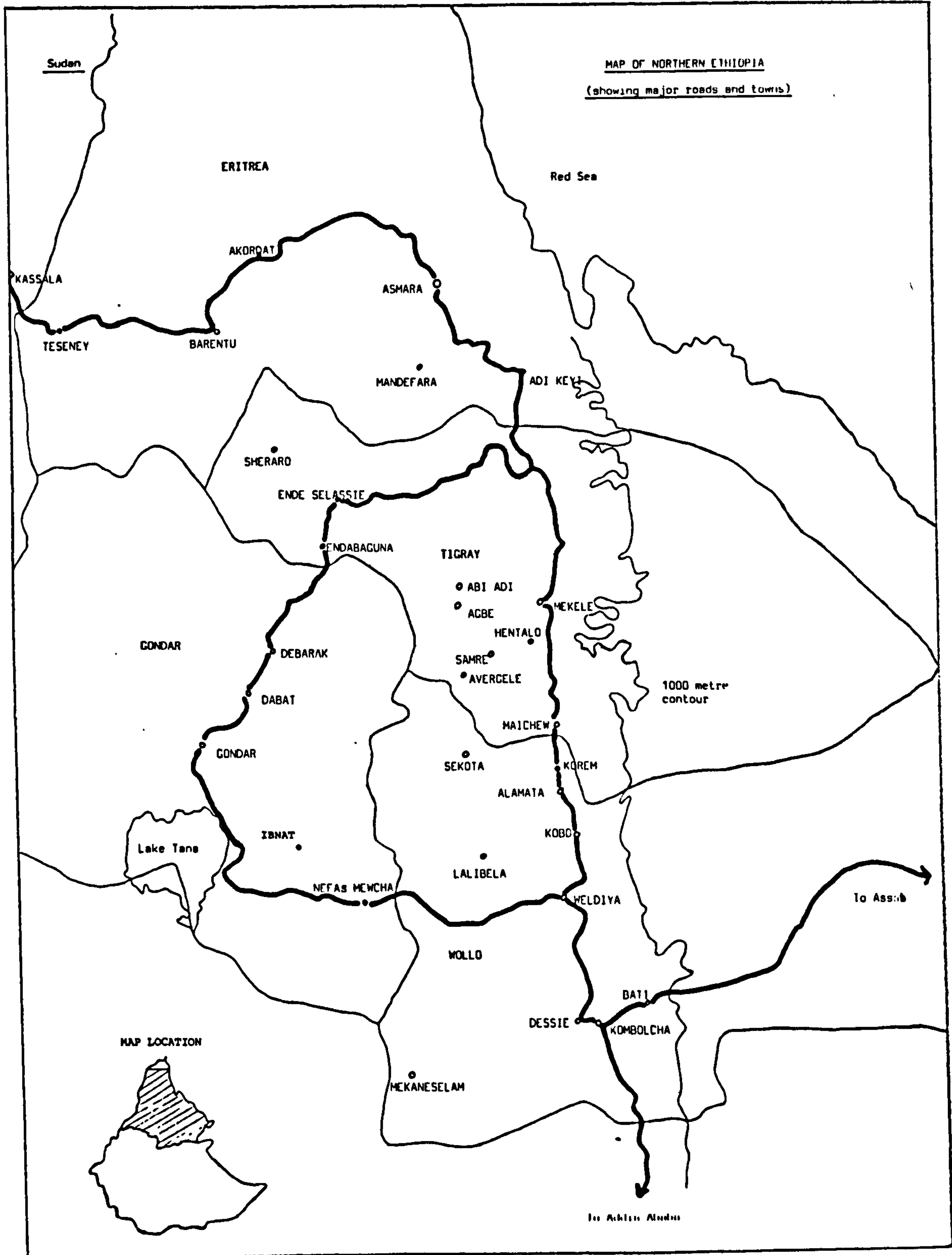
## Glossary of Common Abbreviations

AMC	Agricultural Marketing Corporation
CPSC	Central Planning Supreme Council
CRDA	Christian Relief and Development Association
CRS	Catholic Relief Services
CSO	Central Statistical Office
EEC	European Economic Community
ENI	Ethiopian Nutrition Institute
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EWPS	Early Warning and Planning Services
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
FFW	Food for Work
IGO	Inter-Governmental Organisation
MSF	Medecins sans Frontieres
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NOAA	National Office of Aerospace Administration
OSRO	Office of Special Relief Operations
REST	Relief Society of Tigray
RRC	Relief and Rehabilitation Commission
SIDA	Swedish International Development Agency
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNDRO	United Nations Disaster Relief Organisation
UNEOE	United Nations Emergency Office in Ethiopia
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WFP	World Food Programme

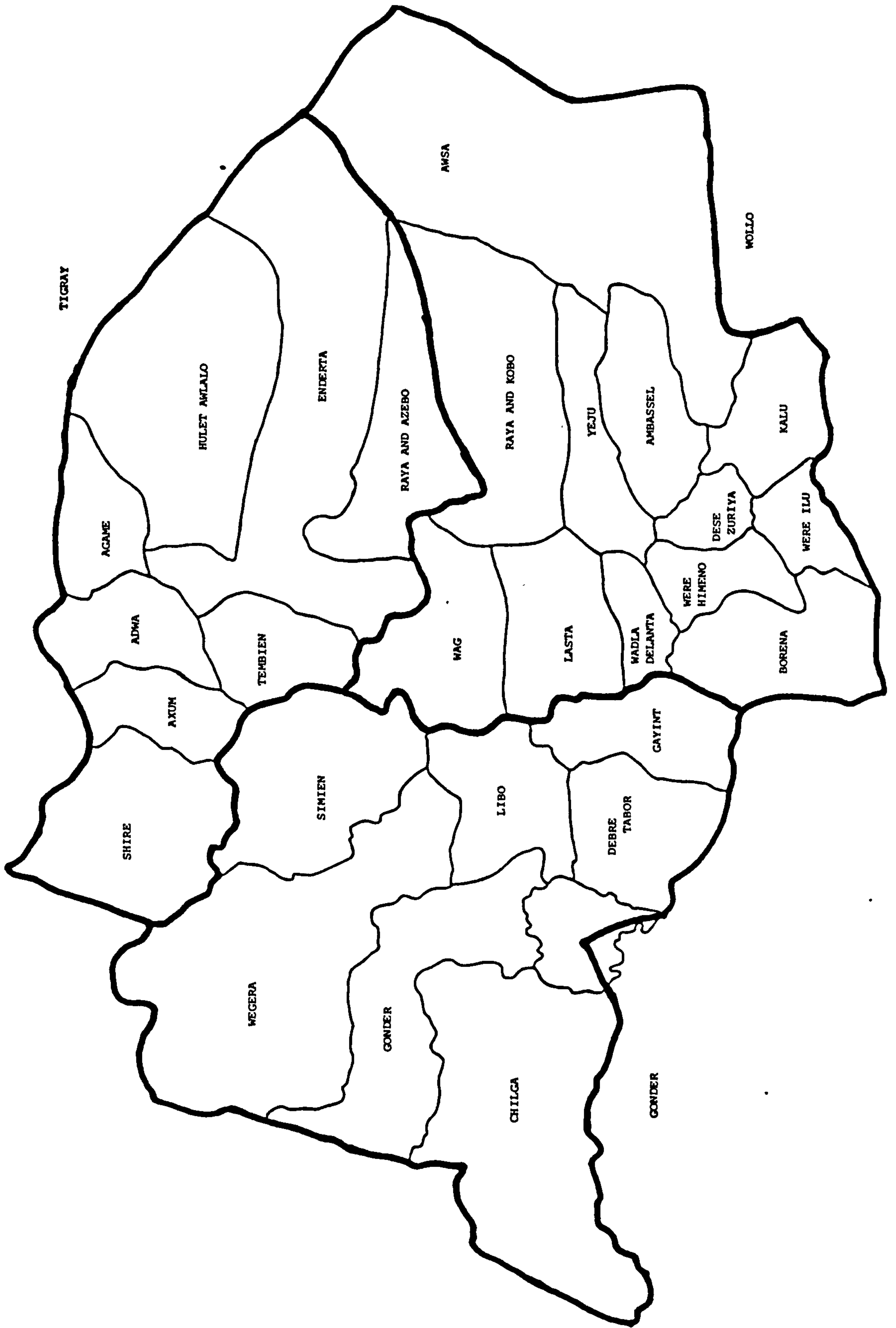
Map of Ethiopia showing Administrative Regions



0 100 200 300 kilometers  




AMRAJA (DISTRICT) LEVEL MAP OF TIGRAY, CONDER AND WOLLO ADMINISTRATIVE REGIONS, NORTHERN ETHIOPIA





## Preface: Background to the Thesis

### Data Collection and Methodology

This thesis was begun in September 1983 and completed in September 1988. It was carried out on a part-time basis, and had to be built around other research and consultancy commitments. Fortunately, these frequently provided opportunities for the development of the thesis.

I first became interested in the process of the development of famine in Ethiopia through my involvement in an ODA-funded research project (1983-84) on famine indicators in Ethiopia and Bangladesh. In many ways, the project approach was unsatisfactory, as it presumed that sufficient information would be available from official sources which would provide early warning for risk of famine to be assessed in a systematic fashion. In Ethiopia, basic data on the situation in the rural hinterland of the northern highlands - the traditionally most famine-prone region, were almost non-existent. At the same time, disturbing reports of famine were arising from the rebel administrations in this region, and from occasional Western visitors. I was keen therefore to get more information on actual peasant experience of the famine process as it developed.

Unfortunately, I was consistently denied access to rural areas of the north under government control where famine victims could be found. I had to content myself with documentary evidence such as

reports of crop-conditions and grain prices in parts of the provinces of Gonder and Wollo, supplemented by sparse documentation of conditions in the rebel-held areas of Tigray and Eritrea. Nevertheless, by the end of 1983 I had become convinced that famine conditions in the north were widespread, and that the trickle of displaced victims of this process was about to become a flood. Accordingly, I wrote up the available evidence (Cutler 1984), thinking that this might add documentary weight to the urgent calls for international assistance on both sides to contain the famine.

The research so far was, however, heavily based on macro information. I was reduced to speculating about such phenomena as the nature and extent of grain price inflation in the centre of the famine zone; and the range of survival strategies that the peasantry could adopt. In my first article I had suggested that it would be possible to construct maps of grain prices which would help locate more precisely the zones where crop failures were at their worst, and I wanted to show that this could be done. I had also suggested a range of strategies the peasantry might adopt in order to survive, but hard evidence was required.

According to my predictions, famine victims would descend onto market towns and into established camps during 1984. I rather callously hoped that this would give me an opportunity to interview some of them, in Sudan if not in Ethiopia. My chance came in December 1984, when I was able to append an unofficial trip to Kassala in eastern Sudan onto a consultancy visit. I



managed to interview 100 famine refugees, with the capable assistance of a colleague, Jeremy Shoham. The results of this work, with the "macro" evidence collected previously, provide the core case study of the 1984-85 famine developed in the thesis, presented in chapters six to eight.

Other consulting trips to Ethiopia brought me into contact with the institutions apparently responsible for alleviating the famine. At two critical periods in the calendar of failure of these institutions to respond effectively - in March/April 1984 and in August/September of the same year - I was able to witness firsthand the ways in which evidence was ignored or manipulated to suit the purposes of decision-makers in the international aid agencies. I interviewed over 100 officials and voluntary agency staff, both formally and informally, in order to broaden my understanding of issues of response. I was a participant observer - lobbying enthusiastically, although largely ineffectually, for famine relief efforts to be radically enlarged. I also became involved in a review of the national early warning system, and organised a workshop bringing together providers and recipients of the information (held in September 1984 and sponsored by UNICEF), which enabled me to focus on some of the key issues and areas of disagreement between the agencies and the RRC.

The latter experience convinced me of the necessity of understanding why the great institutions of humanitarian relief

were unable or unwilling to do what I supposed they were mandated to do - that is to take timely and efficient action to prevent, or at least substantially to mitigate, disasters such as famines. In order to document the avoidance of institutional responsibility, I have drawn upon both published and unpublished sources (some obtained through my work with international organisations and therefore not always able to be attributed) as well as interviews with officials. I was also fortunate to have been able to meet Bernard Schaffer before his death, and became influenced by his ideas, which I found to have great explanatory power in terms of the apparent failure of response by the humanitarian organisations. The synthesis of his work and my own ideas is discussed in chapter one, and the evidence presented in chapter nine.

I managed to view the belated, but massive relief operation of 1985 in June of that year, while again on a UNICEF-sponsored visit to Ethiopia as part of the continuing review of the early warning system. The way in which the relief operation was conducted brought out yet more questions which required at least partial answers, this time regarding resource allocation by the various actors. This is easily the subject for another thesis, but I have tried to address some of the major issues in chapter 10. These particularly concern the ways in which the controllers of famine relief resources (food, shelter and transport) direct them to suit their political objectives - such as to encourage resettlement (the government of Ethiopia); or to avoid economic development (the Western donors).

Finally, I realised that a bald account of the famine, without historical and geographical background was unsatisfactory. I spent the latter part of my time on the thesis in developing this background material, which draws from many sources. Again, I was able through a consultancy to gain access to the FAO databases in 1986. I was also able to tap into some of the unpublished accounts emerging from the experience of the 1970s and early 1980s. This information is presented in chapters two to five.

### Structure of the Thesis

The structure of the thesis may be summarised as follows. The first chapter reviews the important literature, and establishes the theoretical framework proposed to account for the development of famine. Chapter 2 introduces the political economy of Ethiopia, setting the scene for what follows. Chapter 3 considers the history of famine in the country, revealing common themes of frequent crop production failure through rain failures, pest attacks and warfare, together with documentary evidence for peasant response to these events. Chapters 4 and 5 develop an explanation of vulnerability to famine in Ethiopia, which is rooted historically in the excessive extraction of surplus from the peasantry and the lack of reinvestment in the forces of production. This process has led directly to a dangerous degree of environmental degradation, with a concomitant increase in production failures.

Chapters 6-8 present the case study of regional crop failures and



the responses to these as expressed through grain price inflation (chapter 7) and peasant survival strategies through asset sales, labour migration, trading etc. (chapter 8). Evidence for the failure of institutional response is presented and discussed in chapter 9, while the progress and strategies of the relief effort are considered in chapter 10. Finally, chapter 11 summarises the major arguments and evidence by way of a conclusion.

### FAD and Entitlements

It is perhaps necessary, given the recent debates in the literature, to make my position on food availability decline (FAD) and entitlements (as developed by Professor Sen) quite clear. I consider FAD versus entitlements as a false dichotomy. At a high level of aggregation (eg national or even international) one can usually argue that there is not FAD. Data presented in chapter 5 of this thesis, showing food availability at national level, appear to support the FAD thesis, although it is important to note that food production data have been until very recently highly suspect, subject to unscientific collection methods.

However, at a regional level, the situation is very different, with very severe absolute declines in food production per caput having occurred repeatedly in famine years. Again, data are presented in chapter 5 to make this clear for our case study. It is argued that a severe shock to the economy causing agricultural production failures always precipitates the famine process in

Ethiopia, both through reducing food production available for subsistence, and through its effects in reducing the marketed surplus, leading to rapid inflation of grain prices. This in turn triggers a collapse of effective demand, causing distress sales of assets and competition among impoverished farmers for scarce agricultural employment and other income-earning opportunities, such as trading. These strategies fail to arrest the slump in effective demand, especially as the markets for saleable assets such as livestock and labour become glutted and their prices fall.

In Ethiopia, regional FAD is further aggravated by controls on inter-regional trade, meaning that food supplies cannot easily be brought into the affected regions, where purchasing power still exists. However, these controls are an aggravating factor, rather than a fundamental cause of famine.

The FAD versus entitlements dichotomy is not only shown to be unhelpful in explaining the famine of 1983-85, but also the Wollo famine of 1972-73, which has been examined by Sen himself. There were undoubtedly severe sub-regional production failures, affecting the overall Wollo "food balance sheet". Sen agrees that this occurred, but notes that food exports from the region continued. He makes much of the fact that the grain market in the regional capital of Dessie in southern Wollo did not record inflation but neglects to mention that there was a doubling of grain prices in the rural hinterland - a fact which is recorded in the available literature. Sen pays no attention to

alternative income sources of the peasantry, preferring to believe that crop failure destroyed their direct entitlements to food and left them with no other options. In fact, he makes a strong case for FAD at the sub-regional level, although not in a wider context.

A sufficiency of food at a high level of aggregation is irrelevant to peasants who have no access to it, and Sen makes this case very well. Unfortunately, the question of how and why people lose their "entitlements" to food (especially in Ethiopia) is insufficiently addressed by entitlement analysis. When Sen suggests that famine happens when entitlements disappear, it begs the question as to why they disappear. It is a key contention in this thesis that an abnormal shock to the economy, causing FAD, is essential to the process of famine development, as it destroys "entitlements" in various ways. Whether or not FAD may be measured at national (or even regional) level is irrelevant to the argument. Researchers will be hard-pressed to discover a famine, in Ethiopia or elsewhere, which was not triggered by a shock to the system of food production and distribution, whatever its eventual effect on the ex post national food balance sheet.



## Chapter 1: Theories of Famine

### 1.1. Introduction

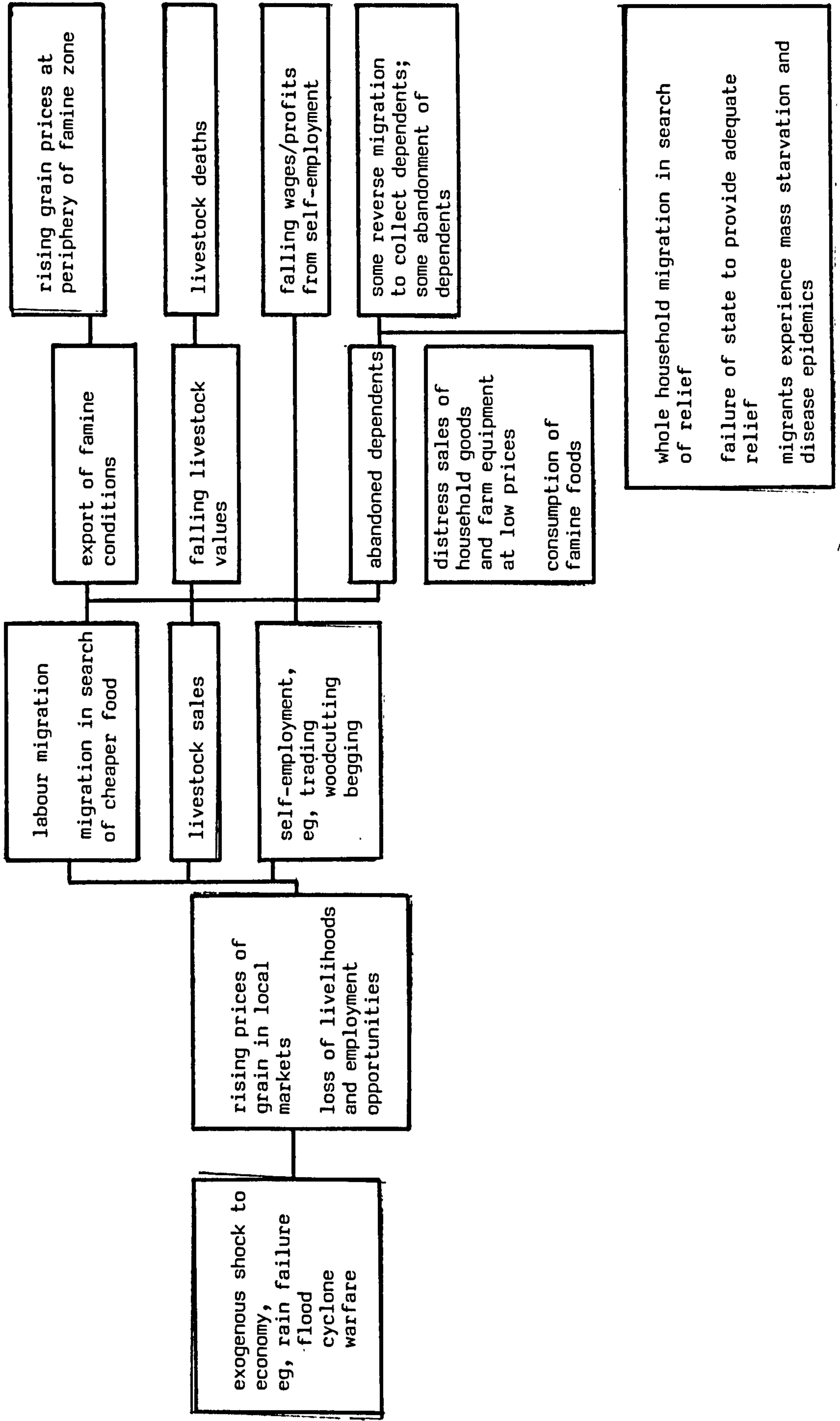
This thesis investigates the process of development of the 1983-85 famine in northern Ethiopia, taking into account its historical roots as well as proximate causes of famine. It is argued that the famine was a concatenation process triggered by a prolonged shock to the economy - a series of rain failures - which persisted to such an extent that the coping mechanisms of the affected peasantry eventually broke down on a large scale. In the absence of an adequate preventative measures by the State, mass destitution and elevated mortality resulted. The analysis is carried out according to a theoretical framework elaborated in this chapter.

Famine is, as Seaman and Holt have observed, "both easily recognised and quite distinct from even the extremes of poverty" (Seaman and Holt 1980 p 284). It is an abnormal breakdown in access to food which leads to mass starvation among vulnerable groups or classes of people. Starvation occurs when a person is unable to meet his or her minimum nutritional requirements - even if eating some food - and is forced to metabolise tissue to an extent where bodily functions become impaired. There are different perspectives on the causes of breakdown in access to food, and a general lack of understanding of the processes leading to famine has in part contributed to the failure

of the international relief and development establishment to prevent famines developing on a large scale in modern times.

A variety of situations are described in the literature as "famines", "food crises" or "food emergencies", and sometimes these terms are used interchangeably. In order to avoid confusion with terminology, it is worth making the following distinctions. A food crisis or food emergency is understood here to be an event necessitating extraordinary measures by the authorities to prevent mass starvation among vulnerable sections of the population. The term "food crisis" also implies a degree of change, or potential change, in society or government, so that government action is necessary to maintain the status quo. Famine conditions exist when elevated mortality would be likely to result in the absence of government intervention. Famine implies that starvation-related deaths are already occurring on a large scale. A fuller definition which includes causal factors, is as follows: Famine is an abnormal event, characterised by a breakdown in social relations giving rise to epidemic starvation and excess mortality. It is caused initially by a severe disruption in normal economic activity, principally but not exclusively brought about by the vagaries of climate, which leads to expectations of future scarcities of food among producers, traders and consumers. This in turn leads to modes of social behaviour such as asset sales,

FIGURE 1.1 A GENERAL MODEL OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF FAMINE





hoarding, speculation and the erosion of traditional social bonds, which themselves contribute to the development of famine conditions. When famine conditions have become fully established, so that large numbers of vulnerable people have become stripped of their assets and options and have begun to starve, there will be widespread mortality in excess of normal levels unless the authorities or other outside agencies intervene with effective relief and rehabilitation aid. Excess mortality is concentrated among certain classes, social groups and household members who are particularly vulnerable socio-economically or culturally. A corollary of this is the profit which can be made from famine by other dominant classes, social groups or households. This general explanation of the processes leading to famine is illustrated in figure 1.1.

The general model described above implies several necessary conditions, but only one sufficient condition. Firstly, it is necessary that the shock to the economy should take place, and in largely agro-pastoralist economies such as Ethiopia, the shock usually has to be very severe and prolonged to result in mass destitution, for otherwise social adjustment mechanisms tend to absorb its effects. Prolonged drought is normally the catalyst for famine in Ethiopia, acting synergistically with pest attacks and sometimes exacerbated by warfare. Secondly, it is a necessary condition that the modes of social

behaviour described above take place, impoverishing the majority and enriching the few, but again, a recovery of the economy can take place and poor households can survive intact, although stripped of many of their assets. Finally, it is a sufficient condition that the State fails to prevent the final stages of the famine process - mass migration, mass starvation, elevated morbidity and mortality, and social chaos. The reasons for the failure of the State, and by extension the international humanitarian organisations to relieve famine will shortly be discussed, following an exposition of current and historical theories of famine.

We shall begin by considering the classical theory that absolute shortages of food in a given geographical area cause famine, and show that apart from being quite rare events, absolute shortages of food are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for the onset of famine. Later we shall consider more recent approaches to famine analysis, in particular the notion that the behaviour of markets is a major factor in the development of famine. At its most sophisticated, this argument has been elaborated by Sen (1981) into a new theory, known as the entitlement approach. Sen, however, has his critics, and their views shall also be considered. A general model of famine behaviour will then be proposed, which describes some of the major features of famine discussed in the literature.

While the general model describes famine behaviour common to both rich and poor economies, in the former famine is only likely to be encountered under wartime seige conditions. It is widely recognised that famines today occur only in parts of sub-saharan Africa, although famine conditions can be encountered in some parts of South Asia and Latin America. Therefore, some of the key features of the political economy of famine are brought out prior to the analysis of famine vulnerability and famine behaviour in Ethiopia. It is argued that the roots of the vulnerability of the poor to a collapse in access to food in famine-prone areas are historical and reflect the excessive extraction of surplus product by the ruling classes and (to a lesser extent) foreign investors. The failure of these elites to reinvest sufficiently in economic development, particularly in agriculture, has compounded rural poverty, and has forced the peasantry to degrade its own resource base, leading to a crisis of agricultural production and social reproduction. While these factors all contribute to increasing the vulnerability of poor households to famine, the event itself is ultimately the result of a failure of the State, and by extension richer States allied to it, to make famine control a priority.

#### 1.2. Food Availability Decline as the Major Causal Factor

The "Food Availability Decline" (FAD) theory states that



famines occur when droughts, floods or other natural disasters cause crop failures, which in turn lead to a critical reduction in food availability below subsistence requirements for the affected population, causing mass starvation.

The first proponent of the FAD theory was Thomas Malthus (1766-1834). He stated that because food production grew arithmetically while population grew geometrically eventually human beings in any society would breed themselves into starvation. "Natural checks" of war, famine and disease would control their numbers, unless they did so voluntarily. Malthus advocated abstinence, in the absence of any contraceptive techniques. The present-day 'developed countries' did not experience FAD through population growth. Instead, they increasingly managed to control disease, although not being so successful with warfare. At the same time, the industrial revolution increased the volume of economic activity, and increased the overall demand for labour.

Nevertheless, the opening up of rich agricultural land in the New World, and the development of agricultural science and techniques of production did not lead to an eradication of famine. The problem was rife in India during the 19th century, while Ireland experienced a famine in 1845-49 which led to the death or emigration of about two-fifths of the population. The recent famines in

Ethiopia (1973-74), the Sahel (1972-74), Bangladesh (1974-75), and the famines in Africa of the early-mid 1980s, have given new life to the Malthusian thesis, which has been part of a general concern over the relationship between man and his environment which has become popular during the last two decades or so (e.g. Dumont 1974; Timberlake 1985).

### 1.3. Other Explanations of Famine

The FAD thesis cannot escape criticism on both empirical and theoretical grounds. Ireland exported food as well as people during its years of famine; and Sen has shown that the widespread Bengal famine of 1943 had apparently occurred when per caput agricultural production was greater than in previous years (Sen 1981). It was recognised then, as it is now, that famine can be caused through a failure in effective demand. The laissez-faire policies of the British government had meant that food was not sold in Ireland in sufficient quantities because there was not enough demand for it. Prices were too high, and the cash available to the poor too low. The law of supply and demand proved to be a pitiless one.

Governments did not always allow market forces their head. There was market intervention in Bengal in 1943, but this was applied on an insufficient scale, being directed mainly at urban workers in key industries at a late stage

in the famine process. The death rate grew to an estimated three million, while there were feeble attempts at famine relief <sup>1</sup>. These attempts were later to be strongly criticised by the Famine Inquiry Commission, set up to investigate the causes of the famine. This led to recommendations for greater efficiency in distributing famine relief.

Thus, as Seaman and Holt argue (op cit), there have been until recently three distinct causes of famine identified by writers on the subject: these being FAD; failures in demand; and failures in intervention. These three causes can be related to each other, for a failure of food supply raises food prices and bring about a failure of effective demand, which necessitates intervention, which again fails where there is insufficient attention paid to the affected population (notably the rural poor) and there is a famine. A famine is of course mass starvation, which according to Malthus is unavoidable given the primary environmental constraint which caused the FAD in the first place.

The above argument was roughly the state of the art of accounting for famines in the late 1970s, when there was a reappraisal. Beginning with Seaman and Holts' work let us consider whether this reappraisal is producing new and valuable insights into the causes of famine.

#### 1.4. Theories of Failures in Demand as a Cause of Famine

Seaman and Holt argue that an analytical framework for the study of famine should be able to account for "a number of (its) observed features". They assert that: firstly, the FAD approach is not always applicable, for there can be local famine in a good year, and no famine in a bad year. Secondly, the incidence of famine may fluctuate in one place over considerable lengths of time. For example, in India under the British, famine was not a very common problem before their arrival, became frequent, and then disappeared again from 1903-1943 (Bhatia 1967). Thirdly, famine can occur very quickly, there is not always a "slow onset" of starvation as food supply gradually peters out. They go on to argue that the major features of a famine can be understood through the consideration of five main subjects. These are: (i) the food market and its behaviour under changing supply and demand conditions; (ii) monetary incomes of consumers; (iii) the extent of the population's involvement in the market; (iv) the potential for State involvement in the market; and (v) the potential for governmental intervention in times of food crisis. Actually, Seaman and Holt note that these are not particularly new insights as "many of the principles involved in this discussion were clearly known to the Chinese by 400 B.C." (ibid p 284).

Giving the experience of Bangladesh and Ethiopian famines



as evidence, the authors conclude that famine is often caused by abnormal fluctuations in grain prices following "crop failure and other insults to the economy" (ibid p 295). Therefore, impoverished people heavily dependent upon the market for food are more likely to suffer. Furthermore, a slight FAD may cause a much larger decline in the marketed surplus of food. Fluctuations in the marketed surplus will cause speculation by traders involved in its buying and selling; while as prices climb producers may sell less surplus and speculate themselves, leading to further artificial shortages. The rise in price of such a basic wage good as food means that people who do not grow their own food lose purchasing power over it, while at the same time there will be an increase in the number of households demanding food on the market. Anyone who pays cash for food will find the real value of his or her money falling very quickly. Extra food does not flow into the region because the falling real value of money incomes reduces effective demand. A situation like that of the Irish famine develops, where market forces operated against the interests of poor consumers and brought about their deaths.

Spitz has shown that it is not merely consumers who can suffer from declining food consumption as a result of the market mechanism (Spitz 1980). Using a mathematical model, he demonstrates that in the event of a drought reducing the output of peasant farmers, the marketed



surplus is affected disproportionately. The smaller the proportion of marketed surplus in relation to production, the larger the proportional reduction in marketed surplus in a bad year. For example, a farmer who produces 100 quintals of rice and sells 20 in a normal year will sell only 10 quintals of rice in a bad year if he experiences a 10 per cent drop in production. In order to maintain his subsistence supply, the surplus sales are halved. If there is a substantial shortfall in production, (less than 20 quintals in this case), the marginal peasant will still fail to meet his consumption needs and may be forced to sell some of his assets to supplement his household's food requirements. Such "distress selling" of assets will lower their market value, as other marginal peasants will be selling at the same time. This is a very common feature of agrarian crises in general, for example, Jodha (1975) has noted that farm implements and animals were selling at half to a quarter of their normal price during the 1963-64 drought in Rajasthan. Therefore, droughts and other natural disasters can accentuate inequalities between classes of the peasantry; and should be considered in the light of an entire socio-economic system rather than as mere environmental constraints. Inequalities may even feed-back through the state and affect the world political economy - where countries require food aid, but only get it at a heavy political and economic price. This happened, for example, when Bangladesh was forced to end

its jute trade with Cuba as a precondition for receiving food aid from the USA during the 1974-75 famine (McHenry and Bird 1977).

Meanwhile, Seaman and Holt argue that famine is not simply caused by FAD, which obtains (at least on a regional level) as a necessary, but not sufficient condition. It is as much to do with the behaviour of the market, the availability of stocks (which are dependent upon storage facilities as well as extra supplies) and the efficiency of public distribution. They argue that as food shortages are exacerbated or even caused by the market then food aid should be sold on the market as a means of restoring it to an even keel. Presumably, if food is sold cheaply enough then the market will stabilize and people will be able to buy as much food as they need as its price drops and their real incomes rise. Again, if this were to happen, traders would have to compete and food would become even cheaper. Hence the authors argue that such an approach is "rational" and should be considered in the light of failures in free public distribution of food following interventions by governments and international agencies. Whether it is practical depends upon the willingness and ability of the State to intervene in a manner which requires a very much more active role than in simply facilitating the provision of free food by foreign agencies. The success of such intervention also critically depends upon its timing. Mesfin Wolde Mariam

(1984) notes that grain was sold cheaply by the authorities during the Ethiopian famine of 1968, but very little was actually bought as the famine-affected population had by that time exhausted its sources of income.

The above analyses represent a considerable break from the old theories, particularly FAD. They complement some previous work done on the Ethiopian famine by Seaman and Holt in conjunction with Rivers and Bowden (1976). The latter is noteworthy because it shows how famine can develop very quickly. When aid arrived it went to the Wollo district where the famine was already nearly over and did not find its way to the Harerghe province to the south where famine was developing. Harerghe was ignored until it was too late.

The interesting point about this case is that the authors mention that pastoralists in the famine area suffered very badly. This seems to have occurred not only because their animals died but also because more animals had to be sold to get the necessary cash with which to buy grain. The price of cattle was reduced while the price of grain was rising. The barter terms of trade moved so far against the pastoralists that the value of the remaining cattle fell to 15 percent of their pre-famine purchasing power. As a result the herdsmen began to starve. Seaman and Holt



did not develop this crucial point about relations of exchange between groups of producers in their 1980 paper, preferring instead to concentrate on the behaviour of the market in relation to cash sales of grain. To develop the argument further, we should now consider Sen's (1981) essay, Poverty and Famines, which is the culmination of more than a decade of work, and which attempts to expand the explanatory base of a new, possible general theory of famine.

#### 1.5. The Exchange Entitlement Thesis

Sen attempts to generalise about famines, taking as his starting point the "sudden collapse" of food consumption which characterises a famine, and focusing on this, as a definitive feature, rather than on "regular starvation" which characterises undernutrition. He notes that famine does not affect all groups of people equally, some starve while others do not. In fact, Sen states that there has probably never been a famine in which everybody suffered equally. This is not really a new idea, the work by Seaman and Holt has hinted at this possibility, although perhaps has not noted it explicitly. At the same time, Spitz does make it clear that farmers with only a small surplus to sell will suffer disproportionately in bad years. What is interesting is Sen's assertion that some people living in a famine area might not suffer at all; or even that they might profit from a famine. Again, this

has been hinted at, Spitz and Jodha having shown that distress sales of assets occur as small farmers become more desperate to feed themselves. Sen develops the argument that famines affect people unequally, and at the same time accentuate inequalities.

Sen is concerned to analyse changes in people's entitlements to food. He does not accept that we should consider peasant societies in famine areas as largely "self-provisioning" as Spitz does; as primarily dependent on cash income through involvement in the market, as Seaman and Holt argue; or as largely dependent upon the terms of trade between two commodities as was the case with the pastoralists in Ethiopia. In an economy based on private ownership of the means of production, people may be considered to have a set of "exchange entitlements" to its fruits. These entitlements are based on a mixture of several given "endowments", such as access to or ownership of land, labour power and capital. One can obtain resources through trading (with or without the use of money); by actually producing (Sen also calls this a direct entitlement); by working (selling one's labour power); by inheritance; or through transfer payments like interest on money deposited in a bank. Of course, any one group of entitlements may involve the interaction of several factors which would modify it slightly. Sen gives an example of rationing in a market economy. Each bundle of entitlements that one has can be related to the other



to build up a "map" of exchange entitlements. If a person's "E-mapped" set of entitlements falls below a critical level then he or she will starve. Sen calls this set of below-par entitlements the "starvation set".

In his analysis of four different famines (in Bengal, Ethiopia, the Sahel and Bangladesh) Sen is concerned to find out how the starvation set was reached; that is how relations of entitlement were affected, and under what conditions. His particular concern has been to demolish the proposition that famine is inevitably and necessarily caused by FAD. A brief examination of two of the above case studies will demonstrate the weakness of the FAD case, and it will also be seen that Sen's entitlement approach purports to be a general theory of famine causation.

#### 1.6. The Bengal Famine of 1943

Sen carefully documents a case for arguing that there was not a shortfall in production precipitating the Bengal famine; indeed, 1942 had been a relatively good year both in terms of absolute and per caput production. The famine victims were overwhelmingly rural people from a handful of occupational groups - agricultural labourers, fishermen and artisans. Therefore there was a "class basis of destitution". These groups suffered because their E-maps were heavily dependent in each case upon one base, selling

labour in the case of the landless agriculturalists; and selling commodities in exchange for cash to buy food (selling labour indirectly) for the last two groups. The price of rice rocketed, while the cash result of the labourers, fishermen and artisans' entitlement bundles did not: they were unable to buy enough food, and so starved. The groups of the poor who did not suffer so badly were those who produced foodcrops directly - Spitz's "self-provisioning" peasants and share-croppers.

If the Bengal famine was not caused by FAD, then what did cause it? Sen argues that the wartime inflationary boom had already begun the process of entitlement erosion. This was compounded by speculation and hoarding following an "indifferent" winter crop which intensified shortfalls in surplus reaching the market. This situation could have been defused through prompt government intervention, but half-hearted attempts at foodgrains procurement only made things worse, for speculation became even more intense with the eventual abandonment of price-control. By the time the government had regained control several million people had died.

Sen's analysis of the Bengal famine has come under strong attack from Bowbrick on both empirical and theoretical grounds (Bowbrick 1986, 1987). In direct contradiction to Sen, Bowbrick argues that there was a major food supply

shortage in Bengal during 1943. He further argues that there was little or no hoarding or withholding of food stocks through speculation, citing contemporary sources as stating that there was a widespread apprehension of shortage amongst traders, and that house-to-house searches for hoarded grain organised by the government failed to produce very much grain.

Bowbrick's alternative account of the famine suggests a rather different chain of causation. To begin with, he argues that the Japanese invasion of Burma had reduced exported supplies to rice-deficit India. Rice prices had risen throughout 1942 primarily as a result of the blockade, rather than through a wartime inflationary boom. The cyclone of October 1942 caused immense damage, killing an estimated 14,000 people, 190,000 cattle and destroying some 30 per cent of the winter rice crop. This reduced carryover into 1943. The reduction in grain supplies caused further inflation, and famine developed during the monsoon season before the major aman harvest, between July and November. The famine only ended after this date because the government increased its imports, which coincided with a reasonable harvest.

Bowbrick and Sen have since entered into an acrimonious debate. Much of their controversy has centred upon the reliability of the available statistics. Bowbrick continues to assert that as the agricultural statistics



are based on subjective estimates made by district officers they are subject to such large errors that they are useless for famine analysis. He nevertheless continues to argue on the basis of other evidence that there were major supply shortfalls, and that even the population of Calcutta was forced to reduce its consumption during the famine. Bowbrick is particularly scathing about the means by which, in the absence of FAD, the favoured one million industrial workers (who were guaranteed food rations) could have increased its consumption by enough to deny sufficient food to 40 million rural people. This, he says, is implied by Sen's entitlement theory of famine.

Sen has replied to these criticisms by noting that the data on production and consumption were subjected by him to analysis on the basis of several different assumptions, all of which proved fatal to the FAD thesis. Sen accepts that the data are far from perfect, but notes that the other sources cited by Bowbrick are equally flimsy. This is particularly the case with the observations of the grain trade, whom Sen says had a vested interest in promoting the notion that there was a grain shortage. He also disputes Bowbrick's assessment of the extent of effective demand in Calcutta, arguing that it was in excess of one million employees, and that dependents should be taken into account. Furthermore, if the cyclone



was a prime agent of the price rise of 1942-43, Sen wishes to know why the price of rice was lower two months after the cyclone than just before it.

Allen (1986) has attempted to mediate between the two points of view. He chides the participants in the debate for not conducting it in a less vituperative manner and suggests that while Sen's contribution to the literature is widely recognised, he might be well-advised to take more note of the role of FAD in famine causation. Allen considers that Bowbrick is right to take Sen to task for relying too much on poor data. Allen also makes an interesting point, derived from Bhatia (1967), by noting that the marketed supply of grain in British India was highly elastic, and that this factor would necessarily have a major effect on the availability of food to non-producers. This reinforces Spitz's view which has already been discussed in this chapter.

The dispute between Bowbrick and Sen seems set to continue. Yet even if Sen is proved entirely wrong in terms of his analysis of food availability, which is unlikely unless some startling new source of information is revealed, his entitlement theory will still be valid. FAD destroys direct ownership entitlements of producers. At the same time, Bowbrick does not explain why certain occupation groups should be more vulnerable to famine than others.

Nevertheless, Bowbrick's notion of FAD being a trigger of the famine process, leading to inflation and eventually to starvation through denying food to the poor seems to be more plausible than Sen's notion of massive price hikes caused by a wartime boom. As Bowbrick points out, there was wartime inflation in other parts of India, but not famine.

#### 1.7. The Ethiopian Famine (1972-1974)

Sen has also attempted to explain the Ethiopian famine of 1972-74 in terms of the entitlement approach. This had two phases in different areas, as we have already seen. In both areas (Wollo and Harerghe) the pastoralists suffered, although large numbers of agriculturalists died in the former case. At first sight it might seem that the Wollo famine was entirely a result of FAD, because there had been two successive rainfall failures. However, these had only drastically affected the north-eastern part of the country. The rest of Ethiopia was having average harvests, and aggregate per-caput food availability remained at roughly normal levels. In this case, according to Sen, low purchasing power for the province was at fault, or more specifically of those whose direct exchange entitlements had been demolished. Farmers and pastoralists could not buy food which was selling at normal prices, because they could not generate money incomes sufficient for their consumption needs. The grain

and labour market mechanisms therefore directly excluded them.

The pastoralists suffered badly from drought because much of their fallback grazing had been taken over by commercial farming. Therefore their tolerance of drought had fallen - which gives strength to Spitz's (op cit) assertion that a drought can be defined in terms of an entire political economy. As their cattle began to die in large numbers, the pastoralists' losses were compounded by the worsening terms of trade for grain caused by a glut of animals on the market, and they too began to die. As with the Bengal case, there are empirical grounds for disputing Sen's account of the Wollo famine. It will be shown in chapter 7 that grain prices did rise during the famine in areas suffering crop failures. Furthermore, evidence from refugees fleeing the most recent famine in northern Ethiopia suggests that peasant farmers do not depend entirely on own production for their entitlement to food. Indeed, they are likely to be thrown onto the labour market in growing numbers, and will increasingly take up trading on their own account. Poor peasants are not passive victims of famine, and show great ingenuity in devising ways of supplementing their incomes.

According to Sen, the examples of famine in Bengal and Ethiopia demonstrate the weakness of the FAD approach and the inability of the market approach to wholly explain the

processes leading to famine. Sen argues that although the Ethiopian case appears to have been caused by FAD, the decline in food availability was only a regional problem. The government would have had no difficulty in procuring food from other areas to make up the losses. The situation could not be left to the market because there was insufficient effective demand. At the same time, Sen feels that there are few grounds for arguing that the foodgrain market was behaving abnormally. Prices were not much higher than usual. The entitlement base of a section of the population had been wiped out, which was the real problem.

Similarly, the fisherman and artisans in Bengal, and the pastoralists in Hararge suffered sudden erosion of their entitlement bases because they were so dependent upon exchanging only one type of commodity for food. During famines, people with a more diversified bundle of entitlements were more likely to survive. Farmers who could generate sufficient income from trade, or who could live off credit and charity would survive in both cases. Over-specialization in a particular resource base (whether through direct production, employment or trading) would seem to lessen one's chances of survival in famine-prone regions.

Sen's exchange entitlement thesis seeks to show that the



insufficient intervention argument examines only part of the whole process leading to famine. He believes that FAD is only barely relevant to the Ethiopian case, and cannot explain the Bengal experience. The demand deficiency approach explains a lot more, but relies upon "market abnormality" as an explanation for famine, which according to Sen cannot be said to have occurred in the Ethiopian case.

While Sen's work has attracted a great deal of interest recently, and has begun to influence policy-makers internationally (such that the term 'entitlement' has even begun to appear in discussion papers on the food policy of aid agencies), there has been criticism from the political left. Ashok Mitra in his book review 'The Meaning of Meaning' published in Economic and Political Weekly (1982), tartly argues that Sen is saying nothing new, and is merely dressing up self-evident truths in economic language:

"Our great-grandmothers, who, Amartya Sen will kindly pardon the reviewer, were altogether innocent of the notion of 'non-negative orthant of n-dimensional real space', knew about these common factors underlying famines. The poor have little of assets or incomes; since the exchange value of these assets and incomes goes down further in the years of famine, poor people starve and occasionally die. Amartya Sen, I am afraid, has not said anything beyond what our great-grandmothers were already

aware of...." (ibid p 488).

Rangasami (1985) also considers that the substance of Sen's theory is implicit in the literature, especially in the Indian famine codes of the late nineteenth century. She further argues that famine is a long-drawn out process, and is not a "sudden collapse" in access to food, as Sen believes. Rangasami distinguishes three phases of famine - dearth, famishment and morbidity - to describe the phases undergone by the poor in reaching the point of destitution, and she criticises definitions of famine which ignore this long-onset aspect of the phenomenon.

Rangasami's comments are very relevant to this study of the most recent famine in Ethiopia. The victims themselves argue that their problems began at least 4-5 years before the last stages of famine - mass migration, rapid increase in morbidity and excess mortality - became apparent to the authorities and foreign observers. Nevertheless, Sen has carried out a valuable exercise in showing that it is possible for famines to occur in the absence of absolute shortages of food either at national or local level, and that it is important to identify precisely which groups or classes of people are most vulnerable to famine. However, in this study we shall have cause to take issue with him over his misunderstanding of the genesis of the 1972-73 Wollo

famine in Ethiopia, the proximate cause of which was in fact serious crop failure. Moreover, it will be argued that famine is always preceded by a shock to the production system, whether drought, pest attack, warfare, typhoon etc. or some combination of these factors. Indeed, it would be difficult to find cases of famine where some acute shortfall in crop production, albeit locally, did not happen. Furthermore, it will be argued that exceptional grain price inflation did take place during the Wollo famine of 1972-73. However, neither of these facts undermine Sen's general theory. Crop failures destroy direct ownership entitlements of the peasant producer, while grain price inflation erodes exchange entitlements.

Currey (1984) is not convinced that Sen's entitlement approach has improved explanatory power for another reason: "Sen's 'entitlement approach' does not ... 'explain' the causes of famine" (ibid p 186), instead it details the impact of famine. For Currey, famine is best explained as a complex concatenation of events - their coming together in space and time - which results in a breakdown of the bonds of reciprocity which normally ensure the survival of 'marginal members' of society. Currey gives two encapsulated examples, one of which is reproduced here as an illustration:

The 1974-75 famine in Bangladesh "in the wake of the independence war; the administration was inexperienced;



relations with aid donors were strained; government personnel in rural areas were left unpaid. Annual flooding was severely out of phase with the agricultural calendar in both 1973 and 1974. The dumping of sterile sand and the ponding of flood water on the fields lessened the need for agricultural labour. The government's initial response was minimal amidst widespread speculation, hoarding and smuggling by certain people." (ibid p 187).

Similarly, the Ethiopian famine of 1983-84 can be presented as a concatenation phenomenon as follows: following the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie a Marxist-Leninist inspired military government pursued a relentless war against Eritrean separatists and regional dissidents. This necessitated large arms imports from its strategic ally, the USSR, thereby alienating the largest potential food donors and minimising the amount of foreign exchange available for developing agriculture and for purchasing food imports. The agricultural base was already fragile through centuries of over-exploitation caused by a peasantry which had itself been overexploited by feudal landlords. A devastating drought which persisted for as long as ten years in some areas was therefore allowed to develop unchecked. Grain prices rocketed and livestock prices fell. The employment available to the poor and landless sections of the



peasantry as an alternative source of income was reduced by government policy and crop failures both in Ethiopia and Sudan. Warfare in the countryside made it impossible for agency officials to assess properly the scale of the disaster, and annual appeals for food aid were ignored by Western donors who were unwilling to sustain a hostile regime.

While concatenation process models are undoubtedly very useful for describing famine, the nature of the event itself is more than a mere "sloughing off" of marginal members of the family, as Currey goes on to describe (Currey op cit). Neither is famine merely an extension of chronic levels of poverty and undernutrition, a point of view put forward by certain scholars of South Asian conditions in particular (eg, Muqtada 1981; Rangasami op cit). Famine ought to be seen as qualitatively different from extreme poverty if the term is to have any real meaning, for full-blown famine results in a widespread collapse of the social and moral order that distinguishes it from chronic conditions of food deprivation. Greenough (1982) vividly recalls this process in his accounts of interviews with survivors of the 1943 famine in Bengal. During this dreadful time, families were torn apart and parents attempted to sell or even kill their children. Thus the moral values of idealised "Golden Bengal" when the rich dealt with the poor with patronising affection, and when children were treated with great indulgence, were

turned completely upside down. Similarly, Tigrayans recall famines as the years when "brother betrays brother". Yet there are degrees of famine, depending upon the intensity and duration of starvation, which in turn largely depends upon the availability of relief. Those families which reach relief camps often do stay together - although mothers may well compete with their children for food. It is only when relief is hopelessly inadequate that we see human beings least likely to maintain normal intra-familial relationships. This can also occur when a society lives permanently under the threat of mass starvation. The anthropologist Colin Turnbull discovered a whole culture - the Ik people of north-eastern Uganda - living lives apparently devoid of love, affection, kindness and charity (Turnbull 1972). These emotions seemed to have been sloughed off in the brutal quest for survival.

Some famines certainly are worse than others, while some are referred to only as "food crises". Yet in every food crisis - such as in Bangladesh in 1979, 1982 and 1984 - we would probably be able to find pockets of mass starvation on a local scale (see RDRS 1980). Politicians do not like to use the term famine, or even "food crisis" or "food emergency". Indeed, they might steadfastly refuse to acknowledge any problems at all even when outright famine openly exists, as in Sudan in 1984 (Cutler and Shoham,

1985). We shall consider the politics of the response to famine in the next section.

### 1.8. The Response to Famine

The response to the threat of famine can be very different between countries with similar levels of per capita income and associated vulnerability to famine. We can take as examples Ethiopia and Bangladesh, both of which suffered famine conditions in early 1984, but only one of which allowed these to degenerate into outright famine.

Although in both cases the governments reacted to the threat of famine by asking foreign donors for aid, only the Bangladesh government (GOB) actually purchased grain on world commercial markets, thereby adding substance to its claims for assistance. The government of Ethiopia (GOE), on the other hand, never bought grain on commercial markets to supply its relief effort. As we have shall see in the next chapter, the result has been a loss of international credibility and resources for GOE. By the time foreign donors became convinced of the magnitude of famine in Ethiopia, it was too late for bulk grain shipments to prevent many deaths.

However, this interpretation is only part of the reason for the failures of foreign donors to respond to famine in Ethiopia. The major reason is in fact Ethiopia's political and strategic wedlock with the USSR. Ethiopia



provides military facilities and a willing experiment in Soviet systems of political and economic management in return for the USSR's military and economic aid. Ethiopia is particularly tied to the USSR through massive imports of arms used for its civil wars. The World Bank estimates that up to 40 per cent of the Ethiopian national budget is given over to military expenditure. Consequently, the Western alliance is unwilling to give aid to Ethiopia for developmental purposes, and disburses substantial amounts of emergency assistance only for humanitarian reasons: in the face of widely publicised unambiguous need and the pressure of humanitarian politics in the West. Relief aid to Ethiopia commensurate with actual needs only began to arrive in January 1985, some three months after extensive television coverage of the famine which was by now affecting an estimated 7 million people in nine provinces (RRC 1985).

By contrast, Bangladesh is favoured for Western development aid. Its strategic position (sandwiched between non-aligned India and Burma, but close to major spheres of Communist influence), its pro-Western outlook and historical ties make the country a priority aid recipient for Western governments. Famines tend to cause political instability, so they must be prevented if the weakness of a regime is not to become exposed. Thus it is in Western political interests to prevent famine in Bangladesh and to allow it to occur in Ethiopia. These



political realities have wider consequences. A relatively stable status quo in Bangladesh has the effect of preventing the overthrow of the big landlord class which holds power in the countryside and whose removal is a necessary condition for accelerated agricultural growth (pace India; Januzzi and Peach 1980). Western interests may therefore be in conflict here, as modern agricultural technology is being promoted by western development agencies at the same time as the rural elite is being sustained. The status quo in Ethiopia guarantees continual warfare, which ensures that economic development in some of the most famine-prone regions of the country is virtually impossible. However, if the warfare could be prevented through political means, the 'grass roots' structure and political will to develop the agricultural base for the benefit of the peasantry do exist, although the precise form these approaches would take may not be to the liking of many Western donors. The peasantry has been organised by the government into "associations", which are required to implement directives from the politburo concerning initiatives in education, health, rural development, military service etc. Many of these initiatives are organised on a collective basis, so that even with peace, Ethiopia's socialistic outlook would not make it a prime target for Western development aid.

Ultimately, however, the responsibility for famine

prevention lies at the door of the government of the country experiencing famine. Even poor countries can obtain at least some commercially-purchased food from abroad, although much of this will necessarily be used to feed the politically volatile urban populations. Nevertheless, commercial purchases from abroad would take some pressure off the peasantry if they were to displace "surpluses" that would otherwise have to be extracted from a food-deficit rural sector. Like Bangladesh, in 1984 Kenya moved swiftly to purchase maize when harvest failures in the normally grain-surplus highlands threatened national food supplies. Kenya was able to contain the threat of possible famine with the aid of these purchases as a stop-gap measure before the arrival of western-donated food aid. The latter was, of course, quickly forthcoming as Kenya is considered an ally of the West.

There is one further possible reason for the Ethiopian government's unenthusiastic pursuit of famine control. Many of the traditionally worst-hit areas also harbour guerrilla fighters and the populations who support them. Famine is a convenient weapon of war which can be used to help destroy enemies and to favour friends. There is compelling evidence, presented in chapter 10 of this study, that food aid under the control of government was denied in those areas where the liberation fronts operated. Food aid was available only to government

forces, militia, and loyalist civilians in these areas, or else was given out only as an inducement for resettlement of households, or to facilitate the conscription of able-bodied men. However, in general the use of food aid for these purposes can be seen as opportunistic. As we shall see in chapter 3, the Ethiopian State has traditionally done little to aid rural famine victims, be they passive supporters of government or active opponents.

#### 1.9. Institutional Behaviour During Famine

Although the political context of famine is of paramount importance for an understanding of apparent failures of response (which may in fact reflect successful policy), there is, at a deeper level, a corresponding failure of international humanitarian institutions to respond which reflects not only the political context of famine but also the inherent behavioural patterns of the institutions themselves (Schaffer and Lamb 1981; Clay and Schaffer, 1984). We shall consider the essential features of these behavioural patterns after a brief review of the available literature.

To date, virtually no academic work has been done on the behaviour of humanitarian institutions during famines and other emergencies. Most of the available accounts are written by journalists. Probably the most widely read work of this nature has been written by Shawcross (1984),



who has described the politics of the governmental and institutional response to the Cambodian refugee emergency of 1979-80. In a recent edition of this study, Shawcross has added a postscript on the Ethiopian famine of 1984. He draws parallels between the famine and the Cambodian crisis, arguing that in both cases the victims of war and famine were also victims of the policy outcomes of international political alliances. Shawcross further considers that western famine relief aid to the Ethiopian regime is being used to "underwrite a war" and thereby can be said to be contributing to famine.

Another journalist, Peter Gill, has written a comprehensive account of political and institutional behaviour prior to the mass public awareness of the Ethiopian famine (Gill 1985). Unfortunately, although being quite clear on overall political analysis, both Shawcross and Gill fail to explain exactly why aid bureaucracies behave in a contradictory manner - ostensibly existing to prevent mass starvation, and yet standing passively by as it develops. On the other hand, Harrell-Bond (1986) has written extensively on the failures of aid policy towards refugees, using case studies from southern Sudan. These are good sources of material and provide a sympathetic account, particularly from the perspective of the refugees themselves, of the problems inherent in international humanitarian organisations "imposing aid".



However, a theoretical perspective is still lacking. Only Kent (1986) has made a serious attempt at constructing a theoretical framework to account for the behaviour of institutions during emergencies. It is therefore important to consider his work in some detail.

Kent is concerned to explain the conditions underlying the extent to which agencies will or will not cooperate with each other during disaster relief operations. He takes as his starting point a description of what he labels the "aid imbroglio" characterising the Ethiopian famine relief operation from October 1984 onwards - when the famine had reached the stage of mass distress migration and was the focus of international news media attention. Kent observes that the relief operation was marked by a profound lack of trust and cooperation between the many agencies involved. This was equally the case with intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) such as the United Nations Organisations; with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as western charities; and even among ministries of the Ethiopian government.

The analytical framework Kent uses to account for the aid imbroglio has several components. To begin with, there are organisational perspectives - agencies will seek to do what they feel themselves competent to do under conditions which will give them maximum publicity. This is important because agencies feel themselves inherently insecure -

depending upon governmental donors and the general public in their constituencies for money and other kinds of resources, notably food aid. In order to protect and enhance their support base, agencies jealously guard their territory, and at the same time seek to extend it wherever possible. Under these conditions, information becomes a strategic resource, and will not be shared with other agencies unless something of value can be exchanged for it.

Apart from having good reasons not to share information, agencies are protected from the need to coordinate with each other by the lack of any particular body among their ranks with the power to actually do the coordination. This power is rooted in "the power of the purse", which ultimately lies with the donors who provide the resources to the agencies. The host government could have the power to regulate agency activities, but is itself in the position of supplicant vis-a-vis the donors.

There are other constraints on information sharing and coordination. Notable among these are the political sensitivities of agencies operating in disputed territory, who may not want governments to be too well-informed about their projects. Equally there are the sheer pressures inherent in running relief operations - there is little time for liason meetings and in any case situations change

very rapidly, necessitating fast decision-making processes. The difficult logistics of moving relief materials and people essential to the continued flow of funds into the organisation - journalists, headquarters staff, politicians, TV crews, media personalities and representatives of donor agencies and governments - take up enormous amounts of time and administrative effort.

Perhaps the most important of the constraints on coordination is the highly-charged area of agency mandates, which relate very much to agency self-image, territoriality and access to resources. Mandates are usually confusing and can be manipulated to suit the needs of the agency concerned. This behaviour leads to overlap and duplication on the one hand,; and to vacuums of inaction on the other. Mandates are in fact very useful tools for agencies as a means of both claiming and disclaiming responsibility for interventions during a famine, depending upon the prevailing political climate. We shall discuss the latter tendency in greater detail shortly.

While Kent has provided useful insights into agency behaviour during relief operations, his framework does not allow for a thorough explanation as to when and under what conditions governments and aid agencies will actually begin to intervene to prevent the development of a famine, or to mitigate its effects. This is primarily a political



question, and should be discussed on a case-by-case basis. Nevertheless, there remain modes of agency behaviour which Kent has not discussed which have recently emerged from a critique of conventional views of bureaucratic behaviour. These help to explain the behaviour of IGOs under conditions of political uncertainty or donor hostility to the government of a country facing famine.

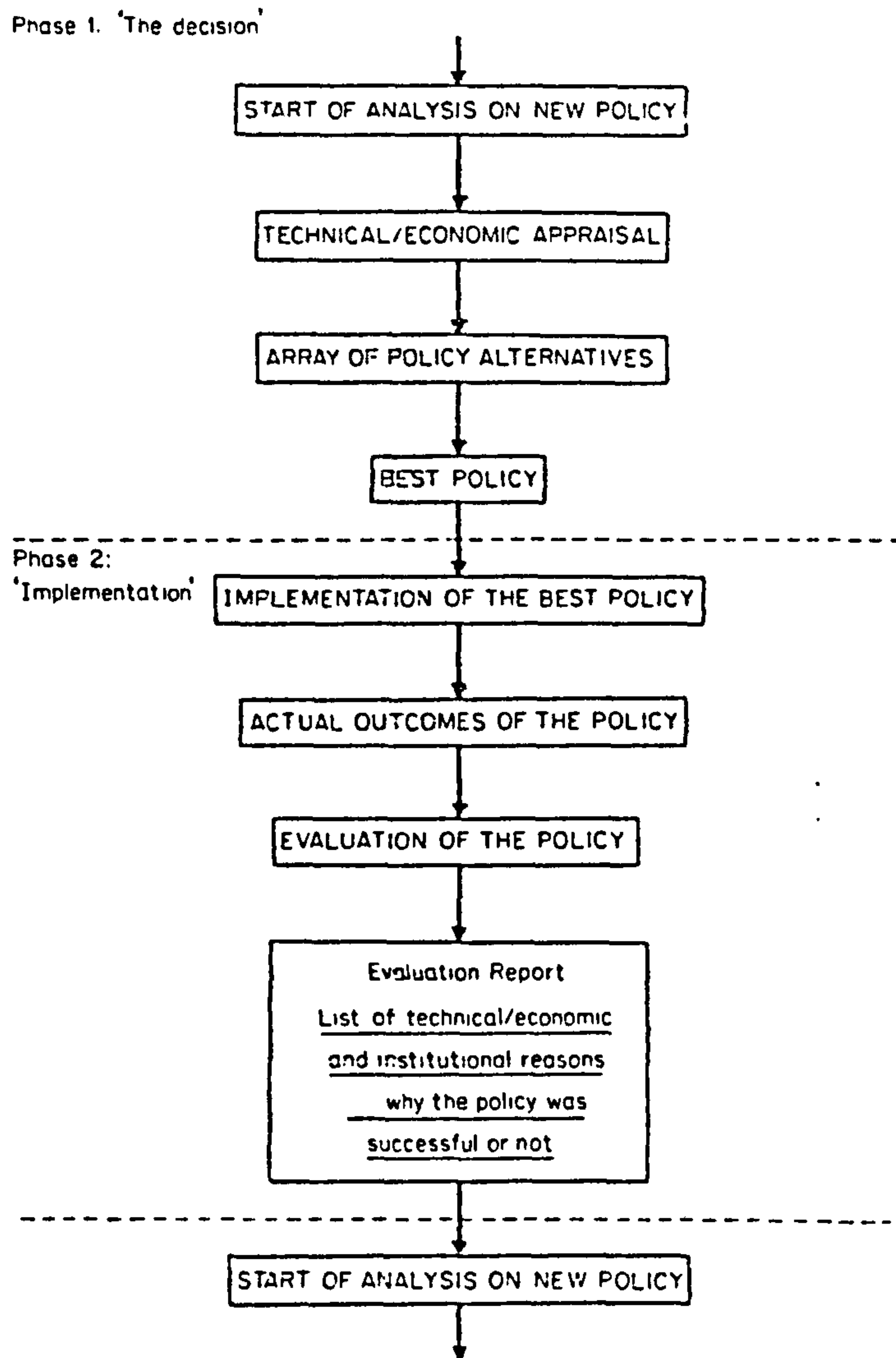
1.10. The Avoidance of Responsibility by  
Public Bureacracies

A great deal has been written on the formation and functioning of organisations and bureacracies. Weber was the first social scientist to formally elucidate the principles of bureaucratic organisation, noting that bureacracies were the epitome of "rational" authority, as opposed to "traditional" and "charismatic" forms, and were therefore most suited to societies emerging from the industrial revolution (Weber 1968). Since then, Weber's principles have been elaborated and applied to a whole branch of social science concerned with organisational behaviour.

One offshoot of this development has been the "science" of administration, and with the post-war wave of decolonisation, arose a branch known as "development administration". A principle concern of this school has been the advocacy of a particular model of rational



Figure 1.2: A Linear Model of the Policy Cycle



Source: Schaffer, 1984, figure 1.

decision-making which states that policy formulation takes place according to a linear and universally recognised process. First there is analysis and appraisal of the problem to be addressed; then there is a choice of the best policy from several alternatives; following this there is the implementation of the policy and its evaluation; and finally the process begins again with the analysis of further policy implications (see figure 1.2). This rational, linear "mainstream" model of project administration is commonly taught as the correct approach to development planning at university level, and is explicitly stated as the preferred methodology by international development organisations such as the United Nations agencies and the World Bank.

The mainstream model suggests a bureaucratically rational response to the risk of famine in a given country. Once a government has appraised a donor agency of a potential famine, or its field office has done likewise, an investigation is launched, and a policy is devised. This would seek to minimise the loss of life in the country concerned. To be rational, the policy would take account of the policy choices and actions of other aid agencies, so that it harmonises with them. The policy will then be implemented and adjusted in future as necessary.

Unfortunately, as Schaffer has argued, the mainstream

policy model is a myth (Schaffer 1984). This is so for two reasons. Firstly, the choice of policy is obviously constrained by the political and ideological bias of the decision-makers, such that certain policy choices will automatically be excluded from the agenda. Secondly, the effective planning and administration of policy is constantly avoided by the institutions themselves, which make it their prime aim to avoid risk. This in turn implies that they must avoid responsibility.

There are several ways in which risk and responsibility can be avoided, which Schaffer has labelled "escape routes" or "escape hatches". He argues that the most important of these is to be found in the nature of the policy-making process itself. In practice, policy choice and planning (phase I in figure 1.2) is deliberately divorced from policy implementation (phase 2 in the figure). This is often achieved by making 'implementation' the responsibility of some other branch of the institution, or another institution entirely. A classic escape route for both parties is then created. Policy failures can be blamed on poor implementation; and poor implementation can be blamed on poor policy.

There are other escape routes deriving from this process. Chief among them are the tendencies to blame poor implementation upon poor information, which in turn apparently requires more monitoring equipment and better



trained manpower. Yet trained manpower cannot circumvent the traps laid by the institutions themselves to avoid responsibility, for in doing so the latter make it more and more difficult for trained manpower to actually carry out policy. Thus even if a skilled and experienced person sees a problem or a potential opportunity developing, he or she may not be allowed to pursue the matter.

Demarcations between institutional responsibilities become strictly enforced. The low-level technician/administrator is forced to refer to superiors for instructions on procedure. In the meantime, the technician/administrator cannot act.

Schaffer's approach can be used partly to explain why famine relief operations are so late, and so poorly organised. However, in order to give the model a better fit, we need to distinguish between institutional policy-making under conditions of political (and personal/career) risk, as opposed to decision-making under conditions of political urgency. Under conditions of political risk, personnel working for humanitarian agencies deliberately restrict their policy choices to fit their perceptions of "what is possible". In Ethiopia, during 1983 and 1984, aid bureaucrats knew that even if the government's claims were true, given the country's international political alignment, it would be almost impossible to gain extra resources from the western donors commanding the bulk of



the supply of available food aid. Consequently, officials took refuge in various escape routes to deflect criticism. These commonly included resorting to mandates, (such as arguing that famine victims crossing international borders were not political refugees and so couldn't be fed); centralising decision-making to delay action; and arguing that insufficient information existed upon which to base a decision. At the same time, a very limited amount of help was provided, usually through another implementing agency, such as a western charitable organisation, which could be used to deflect criticism that nothing was being done. However, such aid was provided only in response to a visible problem - mass migration and mass starvation - which during the development of widespread famine conditions represented only a small part of the affected population. Response to famine perceived in this manner is always untimely, in that it takes at least six months to gear up an efficient relief operation. In any case, the sudden influx of tens and even hundreds of thousands of famine refugees into established feeding centres from mid-1984 onwards quickly overwhelmed relief camps which were planned to cater for at most a few thousand victims.

If the political rules change, the donors and agencies go into reverse gear. With the massive TV and press coverage of the Ethiopian famine in the autumn of 1984, it became politically risky for all western governments and humanitarian agencies not to be seen to giving aid.

Agencies promptly reacted to this threat by publishing long lists of things that they were already doing or planned to do, and attempted to grab as much as possible of the extra resources being made available by the government and general public. However, at the same time, they had to avoid responsibility for the inevitable failures of intervention, arising from the general political environment in Ethiopia and the inexperience of many of the implementing agencies. This objective could be met partly through channelling resources through other implementing organisations, notably NGOs, and partly by setting up committees and new organisations to control information flows. For example, in Ethiopia and Sudan the UN Secretary-General installed new "Emergency Operations Offices", whose task was ostensibly to monitor and coordinate international relief efforts. In reality, the offices had virtually no coordinating role because they had no real control over resources. They were, however, useful "screening devices" (Kent 1986) which could be used to marshall, or even manufacture information about the relief operation, thereby giving the appearance of being in control.

Eventually, relief operations became institutionalised and quite sophisticated. They only began to unravel once the flow of funds began to be cut-off, which in turn happened as the famine began to drift below the threshold of public

consciousness. This situation was opposed by implementing agencies desperate for control over their new empires, and who began to campaign for more rehabilitation and development aid. However, by now the political rules were returning to normal. The relief operations were eventually reduced to a skeleton staff, although more agencies retain a foothold in the country than was the case before the famine, having an administrative structure and a core of staff experienced in famine relief to draw upon. Hence they are a little better prepared for future emergencies.

#### 1.11. Underlying Causes of Societal Vulnerability to Famine

So far, we have discussed what happens during a famine, but not why some societies are more vulnerable to famine than others. Rangasami, for example, would argue that it is foolish to discuss the short-term processes leading to famine without considering the historical circumstances under which the affected population has become so vulnerable. Today, certain countries in sub-Saharan Africa are the most prone to famine, followed to a much lesser extent by South Asian countries, particularly Bangladesh, and parts of Peru, Bolivia and Brazil in Latin America. However, in South Asia and Latin America, governments usually manage to stave-off the worst effects of famine with public works schemes and similar



interventions. In sub-Saharan Africa, governments do not often manage to do this, although Botswana is a notable exception.<sup>2</sup>

The vulnerability of sub-Saharan African countries to famine can be attributed to a number of underlying conditions. An obvious factor is the relative youthfulness, not to mention arbitrary character, of the States which came into existence following decolonisation (Hyden 1983). In several cases, notably Chad, Sudan, Mozambique and Ethiopia, the territorial integrity of the State is strongly contested by insurgents, whereas in South Asia and Latin America this is far less the case. A further dimension is added when we consider that those countries or regions which are most famine-prone are also those closest to the Sahara, and hence are those which suffer the most marginal and varied conditions for agriculture. Consequently, they are countries which are most likely to suffer prolonged droughts - the major sources of shocks to the economy in famine-prone countries. Examples include Mali, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Mauretania and Niger, as well as Chad, Sudan and Ethiopia. Again, another dimension of vulnerability is added if we consider that many of the changes wrought by the colonising powers in Africa have marginalised peasants and pastoralists, making them increasingly vulnerable to economic shocks. Examples include the expropriation of



some of the most productive farmland by foreign settlers and companies; excessive taxation; the encouragement of cash crops such as groundnuts whose overcultivation can quickly destroy the soil; borehole and ranching development which encourage the destruction of pasture through overgrazing around the water source; and generally worsening barter terms of trade for the exported primary products vis a vis imported energy sources and industrial goods (see, for example, Meillasoux 1974; Wisner 1981; Watts 1983; Franke and Chasin 1981). In general, such analyses tend to stress the ways in which rural producers are marginalised - squeezed out from their productive base - while being forced to produce more and more agricultural goods for less and less return. The most vulnerable producers are those who have been entirely alienated from their land, and have been left with only their labour as the means of subsistence.

Yet many of these factors can be found outside Africa, especially in South Asia and Latin America, where proletarianisation (the process of transformation of an independent peasantry into a dependent wage labour force) is particularly far advanced. The proportion of landless labourers to the remainder of the rural population in South Asian countries is very high - at between 30 and 50 percent - depending upon the region. The proportion of landless peasant households in sub-Saharan Africa is far lower, typically at around 5-10 per cent of the rural

population. Yet today famine is a much more common event in Africa than in Asia. The decisive factor preventing famine in such circumstances therefore remains the political willingness and administrative capacity for effective state intervention.

It is difficult to generalise about the precise circumstances under which a given population becomes famine-prone. Ultimately, excessive extraction of surplus through rents and taxes, together with a failure by the ruling elites to reinvest part of the surplus in agricultural capital and new techniques is to blame. Yet it is simplistic to ascribe the bulk of the increasing vulnerability to famine in Ethiopia to the effects of "colonialism" or to "international capitalism". Ethiopia evolved her own system of surplus extraction in the form of the feudal organisation of society which ensured that her natural or potential abundance would not accrue to the masses. This underlying cause of famine vulnerability, which manifested itself in mass rural poverty, warfare, and ultimately land degradation is considered in chapters 4 and 5, following an introduction to Ethiopia (chapter 2) and a review of its history of famine (chapter 3). After this, a case study of the famine of 1983-85 is undertaken, using an analytical approach based upon the general model of famine explicated in figure 1.1. Finally, the failure of the Ethiopian state to prevent famine, and the related

failure of the international humanitarian organisations to intervene effectively is discussed in the context of the national and international political environment, and in the context of the patterns of organisational behaviour discussed earlier in this chapter.

#### Notes to Chapter 1

1) Sen believes that: "an estimate of around 3 million would be closer to the mark than the figure of 1.5 million arrived at by the official Famine Enquiry Commission". For his reasons, see appendix D in Sen ibid.

2) Botswana has invested heavily in an information and response system aimed at ameliorating the effects of drought. This relies on an administrative code similar to that developed for India. State intervention is financed partly by foreign exchange surpluses accrued from Botswana's advantageous position as a net earner of foreign exchange, the bulk of which is provided by diamond mining; and partly as a result of its strongly pro-western orientation, which makes the country a favourite with food donors (see Morgan 1986).

## Chapter 2: An Introduction to the Political Economy of Famine in Ethiopia

### 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter we shall broadly consider the evolution of Ethiopian political economy, paying particular attention to the structural legacies of the Abyssinian empire which continue to contribute to famine vulnerability, particularly through their enduring influence on State policies. This situation has persisted despite the apparently radical reforms carried out under the military government which deposed the late Emperor, Heile Selassie. The principal structural change, a land reform which dispossessed the old nobility and its intermediaries has in fact bound the peasantry into a new form of subservience, with the State acting as the landlord. The State increasingly monopolises the surpluses which used to find their way from the peasants' holdings into the pockets of the landlords. The wealth created by the peasantry is then used to finance the apparatus of the State, which comprises principally of a bureaucratic elite and a large army and civilian militia. The army and militia are used to fight imperial wars on several fronts against tribal or national groups who are seeking autonomy within or secession from the Ethiopian empire. The centralising tendencies of the imperial governments of the late 19th century and early-mid 20th century have therefore been accentuated by the new government, which uses Marxist-



Leninist doctrine to justify its policies. This proclivity has in part been fostered by a strategic alliance with the Soviet Union which was entered into in 1977, when Somalia invaded Ethiopian territory. Since then, the Soviet version of socialistic development, with its strong emphasis on centralisation and State control over the economy has come increasingly to influence economic and social development policy in Ethiopia.

Recent attempts at bringing the population under central control include forced resettlement and villagisation, which are reminiscent of Stalin's solution to the problem of wresting sufficient surplus from the Russian peasantry. New forms of agricultural taxation have been introduced, and the role of the established State marketing institution in siphoning agricultural surpluses to the centre (through direct control over agricultural pricing and through physical quotas) has been considerably strengthened under the new regime. At the same time, both urban and rural populations have been collectivised into mass peasant and urban dwellers' associations. These organisations serve as means of social control, and enhance the security of the regime. They also produce opportunities for economic development through the organisation and control of labour. However, State control of large-scale industrial and agricultural enterprises has reduced wage-labour and trading

opportunities for the peasantry and has often produced a poor, or even negative rate of return on capital investment.

As a result of the continued exploitation of the peasantry; the diversion of a large proportion of available funds into arms expenditure; the physical destruction and economic disruption wrought by the wars; and the abandonment of the capitalist growth path which had been gradually emerging under the old regime; the economic base of the country grows ever-more fragile and subject to climatic disruption. At the same time, improvements in disease control have helped to fuel rapid population growth which threatens the resource base of the peasantry, which has failed to adapt sufficiently to the declining man/land ratio. This situation has arisen mainly because of the historical legacy of a lack of reinvestment of surplus in the means of production, so that agricultural technology and techniques have often failed to keep production up to levels sufficient to ensure that foodgrain availability matches national demand.

Before elaborating these themes, it is necessary to put them into geographical and historical context.

Accordingly, in this chapter the physical features, climate, economy and political history of Ethiopia shall be briefly described. Following this exposition, the

history of famine in Ethiopia will be discussed in some detail, in chapter 3. In order to elaborate the structural causes of famine two further chapters will then be devoted to examining the roots of famine. The first (chapter 4), shall consider ways in which systems of land tenure, taxation and rural development have made the peasantry increasingly vulnerable to production failures. The second (chapter 5) shall consider how a history of exploitation of the peasantry has given rise to environmental degradation. The long-term effects of these factors shall also be examined, using available data on crop production. It will be seen that although the data series are poor, and in some cases may even be largely guesswork, there are signs that the longest-settled regions of the north have become chronically incapable of supporting their populations, whether through direct production on peasant holdings, or through producing livelihoods through other economic means.

## 2.2 Physical Features and Climate

Ethiopia is situated in the Horn of Africa, and has a north-easterly coastline along the Red Sea. Sudan is to the west, Kenya to the south, Somalia to the east, and Djibouti to the north-east. For the most part, the country is mountainous, with a large central massif rising abruptly to above 3,000 metres, bisected by the East African rift valley (see figure 2.1).



Figure 2.1: Physical Geography of Ethiopia

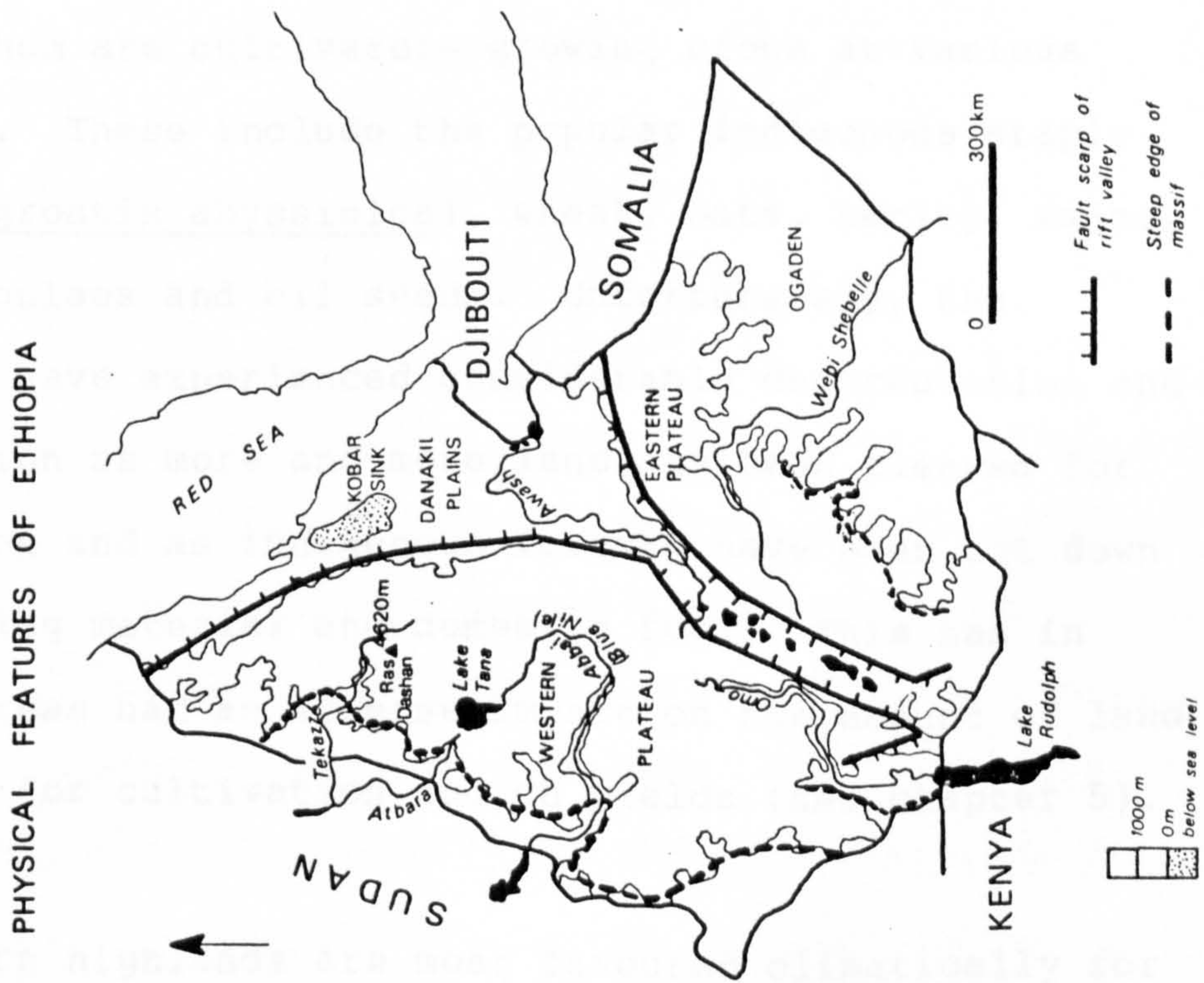
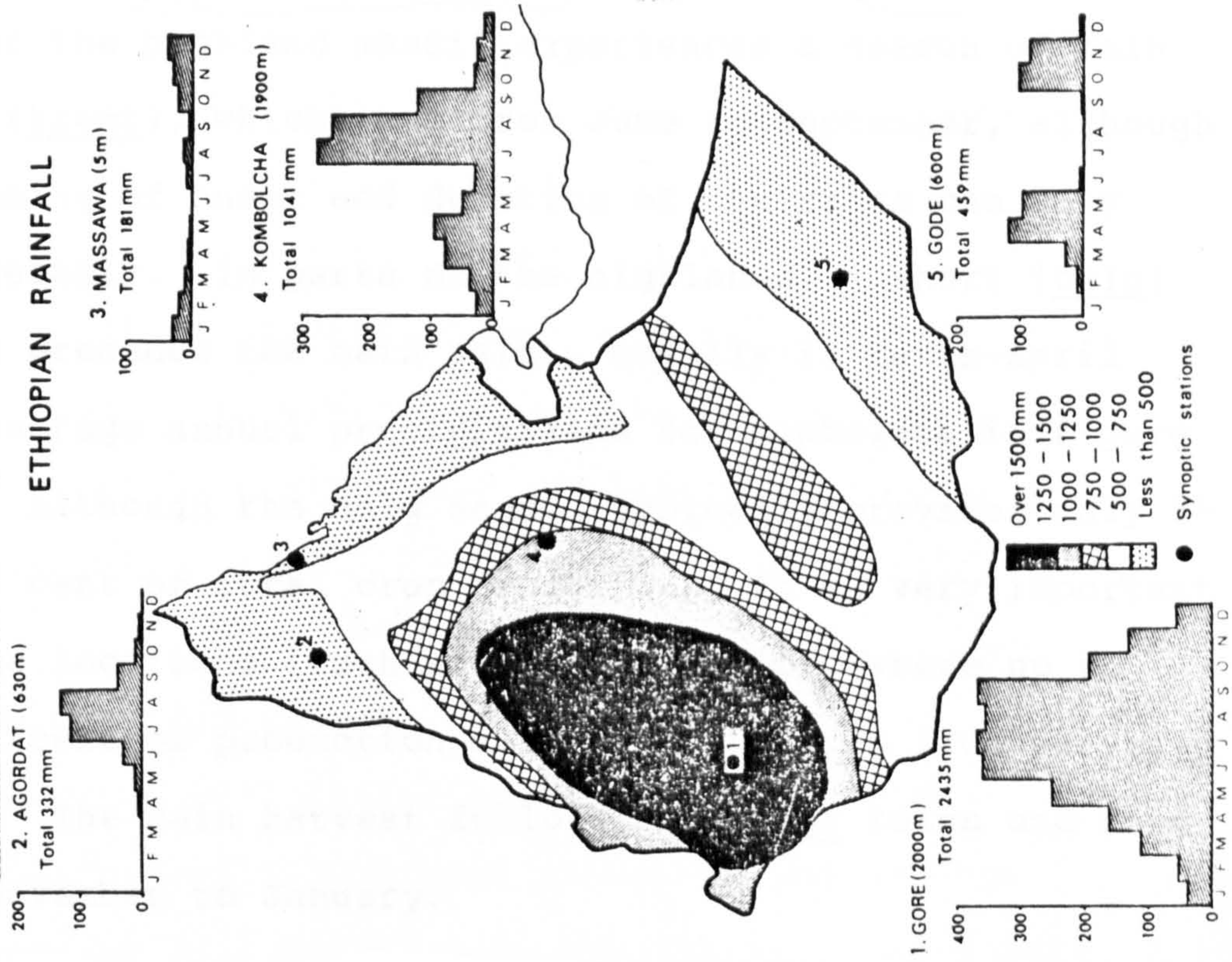


Figure 2.2: Climate of Ethiopia



Sources: Fitzgerald, 1980



Much of the highland massif experiences a season of main rains (kremt), which runs from June to September, although the timing of onset and duration of the rains can vary considerably. In parts of the highlands, a short (belg) season precedes the main rains, usually in March-April (see average annual precipitation for Kombolcha in figure 2.2). Although the belg season typically provides only 5-10 per cent of total crop production, it is very important in some locations (such as Western Wollo), where up to 50 per cent of production can be forthcoming from the belg rains. The main harvest follows the kremt rains and runs from November to January.

The highlands support the vast majority of the population, most of whom are cultivators growing crops at various altitudes. These include the popular indigenous staple teff (eragrostis abyssinica), wheat, oats, barley, maize, sorghum, pulses and oil seeds. Unfortunately, the highlands have experienced considerable deforestation and soil erosion as more and more land has been cleared for cultivation and as indigenous forests have been cut down for building material and domestic fuel. This has in certain areas had an adverse impact on the amount of land available for cultivation and on yields (see chapter 5).

The western highlands are most favoured climatically for crop production, receiving the highest amounts of rainfall, which is normally well-distributed (see Gore in

figure 2.2). The north is less well-favoured (see Agordat in figure 2.2). The variability of rainfall also appears to be greater in the north, perhaps reflecting the centuries of deforestation and more recent overcultivation of the land. The western provinces remain relatively underpopulated, and produce the bulk of the country's crop surpluses.

Highlanders keep animals, needing them for traction and transport, as well as for extra sources of food. Livestock normally have high market values and can therefore be considered as an investment or as insurance during times of scarcity, when they are exchanged for grain.

To the south and east the massif gives way to lowlands which were territories conquered by the Abyssinian highlanders during the 19th century. The lowlands generally support much sparser populations which rely on pastoralism for a livelihood, although in many cases this will be supplemented with a degree of cultivation. In the southern and north-eastern lowlands there are two rainy seasons of approximately equal length. The first occurs in April/May and the second in October/November (see Gode in figure 2.2). The rainfall in the lowlands is generally less than in the highlands, but is subject to the same degree of variability. A failure of one rainy season is

quite common, while the failure of two rainy seasons in succession is potentially disastrous for the pastoral production system.

### 2.3 Economic and Social Indicators

Although much of the available data is either out of date or of doubtful validity, it appears from official sources that with an annual income per caput of only \$120, Ethiopia currently ranks as the poorest country in the world (figures from World Bank 1985; see Table 2.1). The population, estimated in May 1984 at 42 million, is growing at approximately 2.7 per cent per annum. Life expectancy at birth is poor, at only 43 years; and infant mortality rates are high, at 166 per thousand. The average annual growth rate of Gross Domestic Product per caput is estimated to have been 0.5 per cent per annum over the period 1965-83, although great variations were experienced, depending upon the vagaries of climate and international trade. Overall food production per caput appears to have grown over the period 1974-76 to 1981-83, with the index rising from 100 to 106. However, this figure conceals great regional variations, and considerable year-to-year fluctuations in food production. Overall cereal imports had risen from 118,000 mt in 1974 to 325,000 by 1983. The demand for cereal imports has in part contributed to a deteriorating balance of payments situation, by 1983 the current account deficit was



**Table 2.1: Ethiopia - Economic and Social Indicators**

Area:	1,222,000 km <sup>2</sup>
Population:	42 million (1984 estimate)
Gross National Product:	\$120 per caput (1983, world's poorest)
GNP growth rate:	0.5 per cent (average, 1965-83)
Population growth rate:	2.7 per cent (1984)
Life expectancy:	43 years
Infant mortality rate:	166 per thousand
Index of food production:	106 (1983 figure, 1974-76 base year)
Index of terms of trade:	86 ( " " " " )
Distribution of GDP by sector:	
Agriculture:	48 per cent
Industry:	16 per cent
Services:	36 per cent
Distribution of employment by sector:	
Agriculture:	80 per cent
Industry:	7 per cent
Services:	13 per cent

Source: World Bank Development Report, 1985, Washington.

estimated at \$-171m, compared with -32m in 1970. The importation of military equipment is largely responsible for this shortfall, although the USSR, the major supplier, has extended long-term credit for the purchase of military supplies.

The backbone of the Ethiopian economy is agriculture, with 80 per cent of the working population employed in this sector, producing some 48 per cent of Gross Domestic Product in 1983. Agricultural products make up the main exports, more than half the value of which comes from only one crop, coffee. Upwards of 50 per cent of the total land area is used for grazing animals. As a result the domestic animal population of Ethiopia easily outnumbers the human population - there are more than twice as many sheep, goats, camels and cattle as people. Livestock are useful sources of milk, meat, traction, transport and cash for rural people, and of foreign exchange generated from live animals, hides and meat exports from the country.

Industrial development in Ethiopia is backward. Only 7 per cent of the working population is employed in industry, whilst 13 per cent work in the service sector. There is little in the way of heavy industry and most enterprises are devoted to food processing and other light industrial activities. The transport system remains very limited, and the vast majority of the population live more than a day's walk from the nearest motorable roads. There

are two railway lines, one in Eritrea running from Asmara to the port of Massawa and another from Addis Ababa to Djibouti, but the former is only intermittently in use owing to guerilla activity. By any economic standards, Ethiopia must be classified as an extremely underdeveloped country, and the United Nations list it as a 'Most Seriously Affected - Least Developed Country' (MSA-LDC).

#### 2.4 History and Ethnology

Northern Ethiopia was first settled by migrants from the Arabian peninsula in classical times. The Aksumite empire was first fleetingly referred to in written records in the first century AD (Markakis 1974). At that time, the Aksumites of what is now northern Tigray were a mixture of Cushite peoples indigenous to the area and Semites who originated from southern Arabia, having crossed the Red Sea. The superior culture of the Semites led to the establishment of a small but robust empire which had embraced Christianity by the 4th century AD. However, the rise of militant Islam later forced the Christian empire to become isolated within the highlands. As a result, almost nothing is known of the Aksumites in the following centuries, although impressive inscribed stelae and other artifacts remain as a reminder of their material civilisation.

The descendents of the Aksumites expanded southwards



towards the centre of the plateau, where they encountered pagan Agaw-speaking people who became subjugated and Christianised. The integration of Aksumites and Agaw eventually culminated in an Agaw dynasty, the Zagaw, which ruled the 'Abyssinians' from around the middle of the 11th century to 1270, when the dynasty was overthrown by another based on the Amhara tribe, which claimed descent from Solomon. The historical record becomes more detailed at this point.

There followed some three centuries of conflict with the expansionist Muslims, as both sides sought control of the south and eastern lowlands. The Abyssinians were finally invaded by Ahmad Ibn Al Ghazi (1506-43) who was known as Gran (the left-handed). Gran's campaign was successful and bloody, leading to large-scale conversions of Christians to Islam, but eventually Gran's forces were expelled. The Abyssinians had enlisted the help of the Portuguese to achieve this aim, and in return the latter were welcomed as architects and advisors, helping to found the city of Gonder, which became the fixed centre of the throne from the mid-17th century until late 19th century, when the capital shifted to Addis Ababa. Portuguese jesuits proved disruptive, attempting with some success to convert first the monarchy, and then the rest of the population to Catholicism, before being eventually expelled.

Following the protracted struggle with the forces of Islam, the Abyssinians were faced with a new threat. The Oromo peoples, also known as Galla, advanced from the south and west, facing the empire along a semi-circular front. Markakis has argued that this was not a readily-intercepted invasion, but a series of skirmishes with a people who were seeking a new home, and who effectively infiltrated the empire (Markakis 1974 p 16). As a result, the Abyssinians managed to retain much of their hegemony over the newly-settled Oromo tribes. Eventually, however, the Abyssinians themselves were to fall prey to a "highly virile provincialism" (ibid p 17) which has traditionally marked the conduct of Ethiopian affairs, and continues to do so today. By the late 18th century, the monarchy had become eclipsed, and a period known as the 'age of princes' followed, with endemic conflict being waged by provincial nobles seeking control over the State (see Abir 1968).

The 'age of princes' was ended in the middle of the 19th century by Emperor Tewoderos, who began the process of constructing a modern state in order to control the centrifugal tendencies of the provinces. He attempted to set up a national administration and a national army, but met with limited success, being forced to mount a succession of punitive raids against rebellious provinces. In 1867 Tewoderos committed suicide to avoid capture by

the forces of Lord Napier, who headed a British expedition which had itself been despatched to accomplish a punitive raid against Tewoderos, who was holding a British consul in an ill-fated attempt to gain an alliance with Queen Victoria.

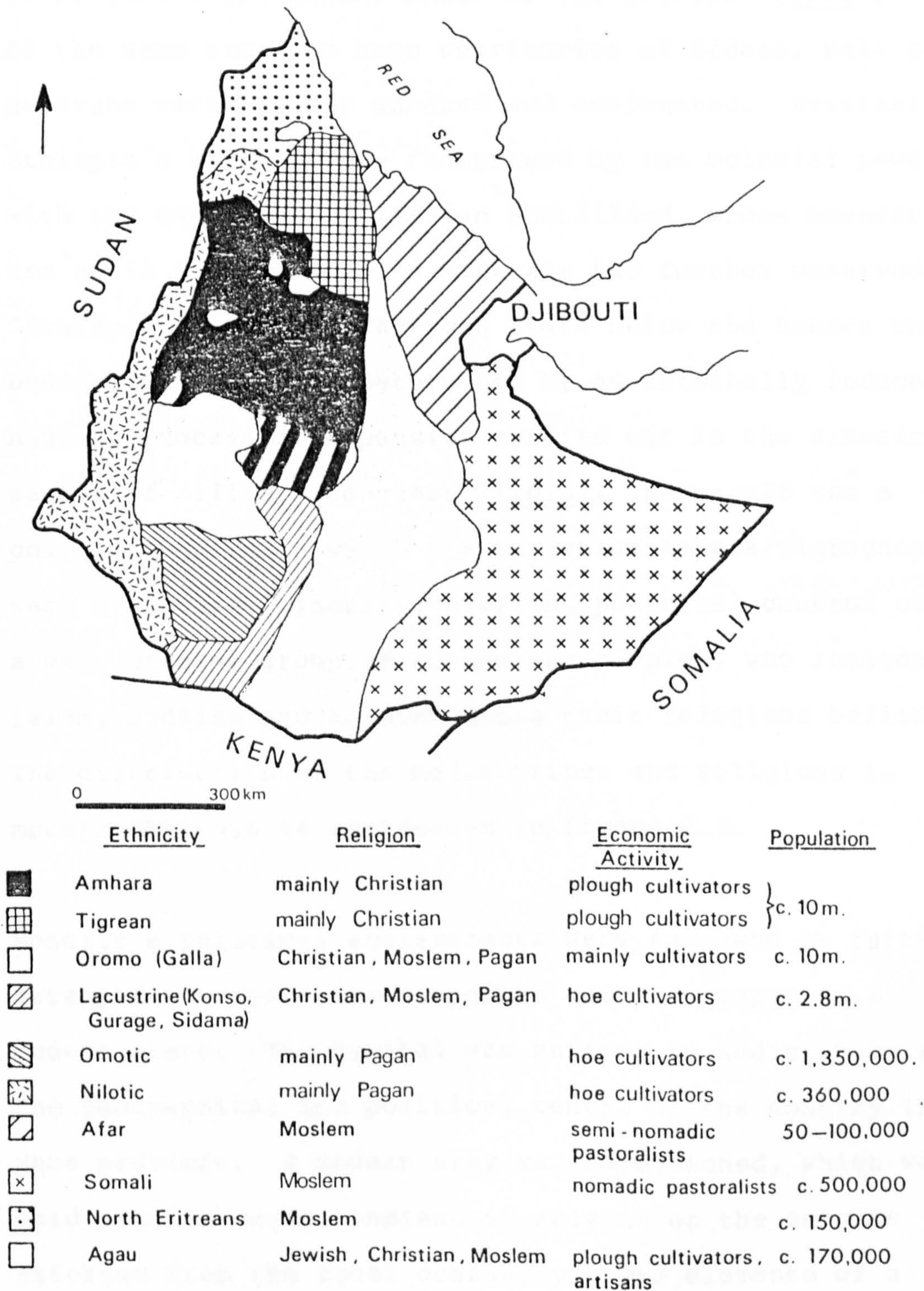
The short reign of Yohannes IV (1872-1889) followed, who was crowned 'king of kings' over the Kings of Shoa and Gojjam. Yohannes was faced with new threats to the empire, including the invasion of Eritrea by the Italians in 1879, and the sacking and burning of Gondar by Mahdist forces from Sudan in 1888. Emperor Yohannes eventually fell in battle during the retaking of Gonder in the following year. He was succeeded by the King of Shoa, who became Emperor Menelik II (1889-1913), the true founder of the modern empire of Ethiopia and moderniser of the Ethiopian state.

Despite the onset of terrible famine in the first year of Menelik's reign, and despite the incursions of Italian forces with their modern weaponry (later defeated at the battle of Adwa in 1896), Menelik undertook a massive expansion of the Ethiopian empire, more than doubling its territory. He did so partly in response to the threat of colonisation by other European powers. In order to maximise his claims in the face of European might, Menelik despatched soldiers to establish frontier posts at the farthest reaches of the south, south-east and south-west



Figure 2.3

CURRENT DISTRIBUTION OF ETHIOPIAN PEOPLES.



Source: Fitzgerald, 1980



of his empire. Markakis notes that "Ethiopian forces reached the northern shore of Lake Rudolph (Turkana) in 1898, just a few months ahead of the British" (ibid p 25). At the same time the huge territories of Sidamo, Bale and Hararghe were rapidly annexed and subjugated. Eventually, Ethiopia's borders were recognised by the colonial powers, with the exception of Italian Somaliland, whose boundaries are still in dispute. As Markakis has further observed: "Ethiopia is the only African state below the Sahara whose boundaries have been determined by an internally induced natural process of expansion carried out in the classic manner of military conquest" (ibid). The result was a polyglot empire in which the Christian Amhara/Tigrayans were a distinct minority, exerting political control over a very diverse group of tribes and peoples, who included Islam, Judaism and Animism among their religious beliefs. The distribution of the major tribes and religions in modern Ethiopia is reproduced in figure 2.3.

Menelik's political achievements were followed by further attempts to create the trappings and structures of a modern state. The capital was shifted to Addis Ababa at the geographical and political centre of the country in Shoa province. A modern army was established, which was paid regular wages, instead of relying on the surplus extorted from the local peasantry. The elements of a modern administrative structure also began to appear,

although executive power was still kept in the hands of nobles, rather than a modern bureaucracy.

Menelik II was succeeded for a brief period by his grandson, Lij Yasa, but the latter was ousted after three years by the Shoan nobility for sympathising with Islam. He was in turn succeeded by Ras Tafari Makonnen, later crowned Emperor Heile Selassie I in 1930. Heile Selassie continued a fitful process of modernisation which was interrupted by the Italian invasion of 1935, following which he fled the country, although later he was to return as part of an Anglo-Ethiopian force which drove the Italians out of Ethiopia in 1941. Heile Selassie's reinstatement lasted until 1974, when he was overthrown by a gradual coup and replaced by a military committee (Halliday and Molyneux 1981).

## 2.5 The 1974 revolution

The downfall of Heile Selassie and the rise of the military regime has been much discussed, although it is difficult to find accounts which are not biased towards one or another of the factions battling for power. However, almost all accounts waste no time in condemning the regime as a 'feudal' anachronism whose overthrow was long overdue. Yet Heile Selassie was ultimately overthrown by the forces which he himself helped to create. These included the army, the bureaucracy, the



urban working class, and the young student intelligensia. Although regional discontents grumbled on throughout Heile Selassie's reign, his overthrow was engineered by the joint, although rather ad hoc, efforts of urban interest groups. The grievances of these groups can be traced ultimately to the erosion of their economic position (see Love 1978). Thus soldiers mutinied over pay and conditions; urban workers and bureaucrats similarly complained about the rapidly rising cost of living in the face of fixed wages and salaries; and students were concerned about their future employment prospects. The underlying economic motives behind the grievances of these urban interest groups were evident in the first major challenges to Heile Selassie - mutinies over pay and conditions by soldiers and airmen, and a strike by taxi drivers over a 50 per cent increase in petrol prices in the capital during January and February 1974. As Halliday and Molyneux (op cit) have noted, political rather than purely sectoral demands began to emerge only later. These included the dismissal of the Aklilu cabinet, which occurred in late February. The new cabinet proved weak, and strikes and demonstrations continued, particularly over the extension of labour organisation rights to government employees.

Limited reforms were undertaken, but the situation destabilised once more with the formation by junior officers in Addis Ababa of the 'Co-ordinating Committee of

the Armed Forces, the Police and the Territorial Army', otherwise known as the 'Dergue', which is the Amharic word for 'committee'. The 146-man Dergue, although at first apparently unclear in its aims, gradually usurped the functions of government in a creeping coup which lasted from June-September 1974. Eventually, despite more cabinet reshuffles and other imperial concessions, Heile Selassie was arrested in September, driven off ignominiously in the back seat of a Volkswagen car, and reportedly died in prison a year later, although the precise circumstances of his demise are uncertain.

The revolution coincided with the international exposure of a famine which had been raging in parts of the northern provinces over 1973-4. While the famine helped to reveal the callousness of the regime and of its foreign backers and international agencies who colluded in its concealment (see Shepherd 1975); it cannot be said to have been a major factor in the downfall of Heile Selassie. Neither was the land question of much importance in bringing about the revolution although land reform was later to be a major plank in the programme of the Dergue, and was also being advocated by other radical critics of the regime, notably the various student factions. The peasantry was largely uninvolved in the 'creeping coup', which was confined mostly to Addis Ababa.

At the time of the revolution, no political party actually existed (Halliday and Molyneux op cit). Swiftly, a number of parties sprang up, mostly adhering to left-wing principles. Chief among these was the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) which was made up largely of radical students and middle-class professionals; CELU, the Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions; and MEISON, the All Ethiopia Socialist Movement. Other, lesser, socialist parties included the Oppressed People's Party of Ethiopia, ECHA'AT; the Marxist-Leninist Organisation of Ethiopia, MALERED; and Revolutionary Flame, ABYOTAWIT SEDED. The EPRP soon found itself in opposition to the Dergue, principally over the issue of autonomy for the various administrative regions of Ethiopia. The EPRP (took) "their stand on Leninist principles (defending) the untrammelled right of nationalities to self-determination, including the right of secession" (Markakis and Ayele, 1986 p 120). This was not acceptable to certain members of the Dergue, notably Mengistu Heile Mariam, who emerged victor and head of state from a power-struggle which saw more than two-thirds of Dergue members lose their lives. The Dergue decided to eliminate the EPRP, which was carried out during 1975-77, mainly in the back streets of Addis Ababa. The EPRP responded in kind, and indeed in some quarters is believed to have initiated the bloodshed (Schwab 1985) while others recount that the Dergue began the physical oppression of students, labour activists and others who opposed the regime (Markakis and Ayele, op



cit). In the event, the genuine working class opposition to military rule, under the banner of the Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions (CELU) was quickly destroyed, and by the end of 1975 had been transformed into a Dergue-controlled 'All-Ethiopia Trade Union'. Remaining radicalised labour activists mostly joined the violent opposition of the EPRP.

Other socialist groups, including Meison, Echa'at, Malered and Abyotawit Seded were initially supportive of the Dergue, and were grouped together under the name POMOA, the Provisional Office for Mass Organisational Affairs. This office set up a training school for revolutionary cadres, known as Yekatit 66, which is Amharic for February 1974. However, one by one, these groups were accused of subversive activity, and were effectively destroyed.

By late 1979, the Mengistu faction of the Dergue had emerged total victor, having driven the surviving opposition into exile; or into the countryside, where the detritus of the city revolution gathered to continue their battles. Mengistu swiftly embraced a Soviet model of Communism, which was justified according to Leninist principles and Stalinist practice. According to this somewhat adapted model, the military played the part of a socialist vanguard party, organising production and commerce in the collective interest. The manner in which

this would be carried out would necessarily involve a considerable degree of force. In order to secure a measure of popular support, from the earliest days of the revolution the Dergue had begun to arm the lumpenproletariat of the towns and cities (see chapter 4 for an account of how this class arose from the limited capitalist development fostered in Ethiopia) and organised the urban population into associations, known as kebeles. These poorly educated people were given considerable powers during the first few years of the military regime, and did not hesitate to use them, killing anybody suspected of being of the 'anti-people forces', as the divided opposition was termed. At the same time the peasantry, which had already benefited from a radical land reform implemented in March 1975 (again described in chapter 4), was organised into Peasants Associations, (also known as kebeles). However, the peasantry was less enthusiastic about pursuing the anti-people forces, and was in fact influenced by the (predominantly EPRP) students who were hastily despatched to the countryside in 1975 to implement a campaign (zemecha) for land reform. Gradually the opposition was driven out of the kebeles, or else was forced to operate very clandestinely and ineffectually, as the urban population was brought more under the control of the Dergue. As a means of hastening this process, prominent members of kebeles were occasionally executed for having exceeded their authority.

The kebele leadership, having benefited from the military coup, firmly owes its allegiance to the Dergue and is therefore a prime instrument of social control. All edicts of the regime, such as forcible conscription, allocation of housing, literacy campaigns, and control over opposition can be effectively implemented through the kebele structure. The same is supposedly true of the peasant's associations, but they appear to be more democratically constituted, and less subject to central control, particularly in regions traditionally hostile to the centre.

## 2.6 The Rural Opposition

We have seen that traditionally, opposition to the ruling regime has come from the provinces rather than the capital. This is still the case, for the remnants of the ancien regime and the unsuccessful left-wing factions fled to the provinces, where they organised resistance movements. Among the first was the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU), a hotch-potch of interests including ex-landlords, pro-western middle-class urbanites, and socialist or communist students. The EDU established offices in London and Khartoum, but after 1977 the movement split into various factions. These included the Popular Ethiopian Democratic Union (PEDU); the Ethiopian People's Democratic Revolutionary Party (EPDRP); and (in 1981) the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Ethiopia



(DFLE). The latter group appears to be related to the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM), which is beginning to become militarily active in the Amhara-dominated parts of Wollo and Gonder. As Schwab has observed, these bodies "had (have) virtually no membership and were (are) essentially paper organisations" (op cit p 66). The same cannot be said of the major opposition groups in Tigray and Eritrea. In Tigray, the opposition began as a broad-based democratic movement, the Tigray Liberation Front, which established a strong base in the western part of the province. This later split, with a new and eventually stronger faction emerging, which was named the Tigray People's Liberation Front, the TPLF. Like its 'sister' organisation, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), the TPLF professes a strong Marxist-Leninist orientation, which it is able to put into practice in the 85 per cent of Tigray which it claims to control (Bennett 1983b). In fact, there is little difference between TPLF socio-economic policies and those of the Dergue - land reform, commodity price controls, rural development, literacy and health programmes etc, are all encouraged through the establishment of mass organisations. The TPLF is, however, committed to "fighting for the national self-determination of the Tigrayan people (as well as) waging a people's democratic revolution" (Memo to the 36th session of the United Nations General Assembly of September 1981). According to

this memorandum, "as this formula does not preclude the voluntary unity of Tigrayans with other nations and nationalities in a larger state the TPLF is not fighting for secession". However, the memorandum goes on to observe that unless and until conditions change "the people (will) opt for the formation of an independent and democratic republic" (ibid).

The various Eritrean Liberation Fronts are absolutely clear as to their aims. They are all seeking outright secession from Ethiopia. There are three main groupings, the mainly Muslim Eritrean Liberation Front, formed in 1962, which lost most of its radical Christian following to a split in 1970, which in turn led to the creation of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). The EPLF is socialist and non-sectarian, whereas the ELF remains conservative and muslim. In 1977 the EPLF itself split into two factions, and the ELF-Popular Liberation Forces came into being (Halliday and Molyneaux op cit; Schwab 1981).

Periodic armed conflict occurs between these different factions, although short-lived coalitions do occur. There is also occasional fighting between Eritrean and Tigrayan fronts, the precise reasons often being obscure. This has even occurred between the EPLF and the TPLF, despite their similar political orientation and co-operation in the past. In one recent case the conflict appears to have

been a result of competing ownership claims over some armoured vehicles captured during a battle with the Dergue forces, in which both TPLF and EPLF forces took part.

Elsewhere in Ethiopia other liberation fronts and their various factions have come into being. Chief among these is the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) operating in the Ogaden and armed and supported by Somalia. It has been linked to the 'Somali and Abo Liberation Front' (SALF), which operates in Bale and Sidamo, provinces further west. An Oromo Liberation Front has also emerged; while the Afar Liberation Front has never really subsided, despite the loss of its original leader, Sultan Ali Mirrah, a big landowner whose assets were nationalised. These predominantly lowland, southern and eastern groups are "of little more than nuisance value at the moment" (EIU 1985 p 19) as they lack the numbers and firepower of the northern groups. However, during the war with Somalia in 1977-78 the WSLF and SALF received considerable support from the Somalis, with large quantities of arms and extra manpower being smuggled across the border in the build-up to the offensive.

## 2.7 External Relations

The conflicts within Ethiopia to a great extent explain the external political relations of the Mengistu regime. To begin with, the USA supported the Dergue, as the



Americans had invested considerable sums in the Ethiopian armed forces and the economy under Heile Selassie. Between 1953 and 1970, some \$305 million had been given as military aid, making up a half of total US military aid to Africa (Schwab 1985 p 10). In return the USA had received permission to establish a huge military communications base at Kagnev, near Asmara in Eritrea. This base contained some 3,200 American personnel out of a total of 6,000 stationed in Ethiopia, and represented a considerable investment in the strategically important Red Sea region.

The Carter administration became increasingly disenchanted with the Dergue, partly from a genuine concern over human rights' abuses, and partly as a reaction to the nationalisation without compensation of US and other foreign-owned assets. Further developments which made Ethiopia of lesser strategic importance were the rapprochement with the Arab States of Egypt and Sudan (Markakis and Ayelew op cit); and the establishment of a more advanced military communications base at Diega Garcia in the Indian Ocean. Political developments in the Arab world implied a need for the USA to discontinue backing the Ethiopians against the Eritreans, who enjoyed the support of several pro-western Arab States. Furthermore, the Eritrean Liberation Forces made significant headway in 1977, taking seven towns by April and cutting road links

to Asmara and the port of Massawa. With the Dergue embroiled in civil war with the radical left in Addis Ababa, it may well have appeared attractive to the US to gain the friendship of a soon-to-be independent Eritrea. After all, it is the Red Sea coast of Eritrea that is of strategic interest, not landlocked Ethiopia. By March 1977, the Carter administration had suspended aid to Ethiopia; a month later American nationals were expelled; and shortly afterwards all US aid to Ethiopia was terminated.

The attack by Somalia on the Ogaden in July brought a further threat to the regime. The Western Somali Liberation Front had been infiltrating thousands of armed men into the Ogaden as a preparation for this assault, and the Somali government considered that the Addis Ababa regime was too weak to resist a major territorial incursion. The Dergue was not even able to control the activities of the relatively weak EDU in western Gonder, and was being assailed from all sides.

The Somali attack apparently did not meet with the approval of the USSR (Halliday 1981; Schwab 1981). The USSR had already quickly established a foothold with the Dergue, despite its support for the Eritrean Fronts, and Mengistu had signed trade and aid agreements in Moscow during May. For a while, the USSR supplied arms to both sides until Somalia expelled its Russian trade, aid and

military delegates and broke off relations with Cuba. Following this action, the USSR wholeheartedly supported the Ethiopian counteroffensive, enlisting the support of Cuba and South Yemen, and airlifting in heavy military equipment and technicians to defeat the Somali forces, which was achieved in March 1978.

At this juncture, the USA saw a chance to recoup its losses in Somalia, although it was unwilling to openly support Siad Barre's regime, which was also casting covetous eyes on Kenya and Djibouti, both key western allies. The USSR meanwhile lost its naval base at Berbera in Somalia, but was soon given permission to build another on the Dhalak archipelago, on the Eritrean coast. The extent of Soviet military support for Mengistu's regime has been enormous, amounting to more than \$3,000 million between 1977 and 1983 alone (Schwab 1985 p 10). This far outstrips previous American efforts.

## 2.8 The Present Political Situation and Institutional Development

Following the defeat of the urban opposition and consolidation of its power, the depleted Dergue (which has been purged frequently and has increasingly come to mean Chairman Mengistu himself) has turned its attention to defeating the regional armed opposition and to strengthening its power base in those areas to the south



and west of Ethiopia which it still substantially controls. Thus, in addition to mounting regular and massive military operations in Tigray and Eritrea, the Dergue has sought to extend state control over the population and resources of the country, particularly those regions with substantial agricultural surpluses (such as Gojjam, Shoa, Wellega, Illubabor and Arsi), or those which are of particular strategic importance; such as Eritrea, Harerghe and Sidamo. To this end, a new phase of socialisation of agriculture is occurring - the peasantry is being forcibly collectivised into model villages. This programme, already implemented in Harerghe, supplements the resettlement of peasants from the rebellious northern provinces. Villagisation and resettlement schemes have several advantages. They depopulate areas which support some of the most dangerous liberation fronts and brings them under direct state control on collective farms. They guarantee that an increased proportion of the available agricultural surplus can be controlled by the State. They can also be justified on economic and humanitarian grounds as a means of rehabilitating a marginalised peasantry, and as a means of extending health and welfare benefits to the 'masses'. Nevertheless, there is evidence that resettlement and villagisation involve coercion, such as the withholding of rations, or of outright force, as we shall see in chapter 10.

**Table 2.2: Procurement by the Agricultural Marketing Corporation, 1976-85**

<u>Agricultural Year</u>	<u>Amount Procured (000 mt)</u>
1976-77	120
1977-78	110
1978-79	150
1979-80	270
1980-81	440
1981-82	460
1982-83	570
1983-84	420
1984-85	200

Source: Ahmed 1985.

Resettlement and collectivisation measures supplement those already instituted by the State. Of principal importance is the Agricultural Marketing Corporation (AMC), which buys crops at fixed prices from State Farms and from the peasantry. The activities of the AMC are discussed more fully below.

## 2.9 The Role of the Agricultural Marketing Corporation (AMC)

The Agricultural Marketing Corporation is a parastatal organisation whose task is to purchase grain and pulses for distribution at controlled prices. Most of the purchases are made from peasant farmers' associations. There are 1,700 collecting centres and 114 purchasing centres throughout the country, although there has been a concentration of AMC activities in the western provinces which produce most surpluses, in particular Keffa, Wellega, Illubabor and Gojjam. When the AMC began operations in 1976-77, the amounts of grain procured grew from 120,000 mt to a peak of 570,000 mt in 1982-83 (see table 2.2). The food crisis since then reduced procurement to below 200,000 mt for 1984-85. The reduction in procurement is not merely a result of the drought, but is also a product of the unwillingness of producers to sell grain at low official prices at a time when wholesale prices of grain have climbed rapidly in deficit regions, and are generally higher than official



prices in surplus areas.

Official prices are fixed by the Central Planning Supreme Committee (CPSC), which is the highest executive body in Ethiopia. The CPSC supposedly bases prices on production costs as assessed by agricultural research stations. The CPSC also sets procurement quotas for each province, in consultation with the AMC, Central Statistics Office, and the Ministry of Agriculture. The quotas are based on harvest prospects, which are first assessed during June and July and are periodically updated to the main harvest in November-December. The AMC subdivides these quotas down to awraja (district), woreda (sub-district), and kebele (farmers' association) levels.

The AMC distributes around 60 per cent of its purchases in Addis Ababa, with the remainder going to Asmara and other towns (Griffin and Hay 1986). Membership of an urban association (kebele) entitles card holders to claim a ration, which varies according to the occupation of the beneficiary and the availability of food. In good years, distribution might amount to around 50 kg per month for a family, but during 1984 distribution slumped to as little as 1 kg per head. Less popular grains such as rice and maize are most likely to be available. AMC prices are typically at 40-50 per cent of free market levels. The majority of urban consumers still have to rely on the free market for the bulk of their food supplies - increasingly

so since 1982-83.

Grain prices rose rapidly in many urban markets during last six months of 1984. By August, the price of teff in Addis Ababa was 170 birr (\$1 = 1.04 birr) per quintal, approximately three times the level of a year previously. Queues for privately sold grain began forming in the early hours of the morning, and by 1985 starvation among the poor in the kebeles was reported in Addis Ababa. Thereafter, relief grain was diverted to the cities, although earmarked for provincial famine victims.

In the absence of sufficient domestic procurement, or divertible relief grain, the AMC occasionally makes commercial purchases on world markets. It can also act as a buffer stock for the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), releasing grain from regional warehouses on condition that it is replaced from donor shipments. Such an arrangement was made in mid-1984, when 60,000 mt of wheat was 'released' to the RRC. Much of this was sold at controlled prices in urban kebeles in Wollo province.

#### 2.10 The Relief and Rehabilitation Commission

This organisation was set up in 1975, as the Dergue's answer to the persistent problem of famine relief and post-disaster rehabilitation. The commission has some 7,000 employees and has branch offices in 12 of the 14

Administrative Regions of Ethiopia (Holt and Cutler 1984). Although the RRC does not enjoy the same degree of political status as the AMC, it has a high public profile, being the organisation with actual control over about two-thirds of the relief materials flowing into Ethiopia. It is thought to be virtually free of corruption. However, western donors are suspicious of the political control exerted over the RRC by the Central Planning Supreme Council, which can divert relief goods to other priority areas as necessary.

The RRC is involved in three main areas of famine relief and rehabilitation. The first is disaster early warning, with the focus being on famine risk. Crop conditions in some 530 woredas (sub districts) are monitored each month during the cropping season, on the basis of subjective assessments which are nonetheless quite accurate at identifying risks of famine. These data are supplemented with synoptic meteorological reports from some 20 stations and by retail price series for major grains in some 30 markets. In theory, areas at special risk are supposed to be visited by a 'disaster area assessment' team which carries out an in-depth assessment. In fact, the resources of the RRC are so constrained that they are hardly expended at all on this activity. Instead, the major foreign donors are likely to be taken on a tour of famine affected areas to attract support, although such



excursions are often restricted to rural areas controlled by the government, which may not necessarily be the worst affected.

The second major area of activity is in disaster relief. Much of this activity involves bulk food distribution, and is an exercise in logistics. The RRC controls a relief transport fleet of some 140 vehicles to assist in this, but during major relief operations the fleet has to be supplemented with commercial vehicles operated under the state controlled trucking organisation, NATRACOR, and with small fleets run by various non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The RRC is also very dependent upon the donors for spare parts to keep its own fleet moving. Technical help for maintenance has also been provided by Germany and Sweden. A network of warehouses has also been constructed to store relief materials, partly funded by the World Bank. The largest of these is at Nazareth, south of Addis Ababa, and has a capacity of 100,000 mt.

The third major area of activity is rehabilitation and resettlement. The latter has become increasingly important as a result of government policy, but is not generally supported by the large bilateral donors or by the NGOs. Eastern bloc countries have instead provided aircraft and agricultural equipment to facilitate the transportation and resettlement of northern famine victims in the south and south-west. Some 200,000 peasants were

resettled over 1984-85. The rehabilitation of agriculture in the traditionally famine-prone areas is a preferred option of western NGOs, although the impact of NGO activity can only be slight.

The RRC also controls a small food reserve project, which was begun in 1982 with material support from the World Food Programme (WFP) and technical support from the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). The WFP made an initial donation of 12,000 mt wheat to the reserve, which was projected to grow to 180,000 mt within four years. In the event, no further donations were forthcoming. The reserve was exhausted by August 1984, representing the last efforts of the RRC to meet the demands being made upon it by the starving peasantry.

## 2.11 Conclusion

This overview of Ethiopian environment, history and political development has been necessarily brief. However, it does serve to bring out the main points of comparison between the ancien regime and the post 1974 military regime. Major changes have taken place in the relations of production as whole classes have been dispossessed of their land and property (we shall discuss this fully in chapter 4). The feudal remnants of the ancien regime are destroyed or scattered, and are no longer an effective force. The opposition to the Dergue

is splintered into regionalist factions based on common ethnicity although almost all of these groups profess a commitment to Marxist-Leninism which has much in common with the Dergue's policies. This is particularly true of the most successful groups, the EPLF and TPLF.

Yet in many ways, the political situation in Ethiopia has not changed very much over the centuries. The political landscape is reminiscent of 'the age of Princes', when provincial rulers struggled for supremacy. It is noteworthy that the most successful 'liberation fronts' are in Eritrea and Tigray, provinces traditionally at the heart of the old Axumite and Abyssinian empires. The peoples of these provinces have gained least from land reform, and are traditionally opposed to Amhara rule. The majority of Dergue members are Amharas, although Mengistu himself belongs to minority Shoan tribe known as the Shankella. Equally, there is hostility from northerners directed towards the Oromo, who make up the bulk of the Ethiopian population but are still looked down upon by northerners as conquered peoples. It is significant that the great majority of soldiers sent against the northerners are Oromos.

The political aims of the Dergue do not differ significantly from those of Heile Selassie and his 19th century predecessors. First and foremost, the integrity



of the empire must be maintained. It is particularly important that access to the ports of Massawa and Assab be guaranteed, for otherwise Ethiopia would be landlocked. To this end, the Dergue is further developing the centralist tendencies observed under Heile Selassie. The new mass organisations and the structure of the Workers and Peasant's party reflect the need of the Dergue to direct the activities of 'the masses' with only notional participation from below. In this way, Ethiopia is adopting the Soviet-type structures developed by Lenin and Stalin. The WPE is a copy of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. As in the USSR, the trade unions have been brought under central control, state farms have been set up, and steps have been taken to begin the process of agricultural collectivisation. However, there has been opposition to this process. The least tractable of the mass organisations are the peasant's associations (PAs), which are physically remote from the centre. In order to bring the PAs more closely under the control of the centre, cadres continue to be trained and despatched to the rural areas (Markakis 1981).

Ultimately, the regime plans to almost completely collectivise peasant agriculture, leaving only 0.1 ha to households as individual plots (Wood 1983). This transformation is likely to be as far as possible resisted by those peasants who have benefited most from land reform - they are unlikely to want to give up their individual

rights to land. We shall further discuss the development of land tenure systems in Ethiopia in chapter 4.

The virtual exclusion of workers and peasants from the Workers and Peasant's Party of Ethiopia is symptomatic of the Dergue's attitudes and strategies for the maintenance of power. The attraction of the Soviet version of Marxism (Leninism-Stalinism) is that it condones centralism and imperialism, laying particular emphasis on the incorporation of the peasantry, and therefore the agricultural surplus, into a centrally-planned economy (Keller 1985). The party and other mass organisations become instruments of centrist rule. Directives are passed down from above, with officials at lower levels unwilling to take the initiative unless directly sanctioned by 'safe' superiors. The result is a bureaucratic system which almost entirely lacks expression of initiative at the middle and lower levels and which is slow to change. However, the strength of such a system is that once instituted, it is very hard to overthrow. While urban opposition has been almost completely destroyed, those who would like to see more democratic forms of socialism are unable to air their views, for fear of being denounced by political cadres loyal to the Dergue. There seems to be little doubt that the establishment of Soviet-style system in the rural areas controlled by the Dergue will eventually be achieved. Any peasant opposition will

be ruthlessly crushed.

The situation in those areas where rebel movements are flourishing is quite different. The Dergue can establish only fleeting control of rural areas, before being pushed back through armed opposition to its urban strongholds. Under these circumstances, the country districts have become virtual free-fire zones, and the peasantry correspondingly hardens its resistance. Neither side can win outright, and without radical change at the centre, a compromise will not be reached. The wars are set to drag on for the foreseeable future.

Under these circumstances, famine control is not a priority for the Dergue. It will always be subordinated to centralist goals, notably the feeding of key urban populations and the prosecution of the wars. These continue at the same time as the Dergue ostensibly carries out famine relief operations. Famine will also be used as a weapon, both to starve out support from rebel areas and to be used as a threat to coerce peasants from rebel areas into resettling. At the same time, the regime is able both to benefit from the political lobbying of humanitarian groups in the West. Western donor governments provide the vast majority of relief and development aid, although they are still castigated by the Ethiopian government and by western humanitarians for not doing enough.



Through having set up the RRC, and by maintaining its public pleas for aid, the Mengistu regime has gained credibility by being seen to be tackling famine in a systematic manner. Thus it attracts resources which can be diverted to priority uses - the priorities being set by the Ethiopian government rather than by the demands of international humanitarians. The flow of famine relief goods takes a certain amount of economic pressure off the regime. Free food can be diverted to the army and to key urban groups while further having the effect of saving valuable foreign exchange which can be spent on arms, allowing the Dergue to pursue the civil wars with renewed vigour. Any analysis of famine in northern Ethiopia must always keep these wider political perspectives in mind, while also being cognisant of the deep historical roots of the famine process. The latter theme shall be developed in the next two chapters; while evidence for the diversion of food aid to suit the aims of the State will be considered in chapters nine and ten, following a detailed exposition of the process of development of the 1983-85 famine.

## Chapter 3: The History of Famine in Ethiopia

### 3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we shall consider in detail some of the better documented of the frequent famines which have occurred in Ethiopia in the past. The review will show that while most regions of the country have been famine-affected at one time or another, historically famine has occurred most frequently in the northern highlands, particularly in Wollo and Tigray. Furthermore, while the proximate causes of famine are varied - although often acting synergistically to attack the rural economy - drought and pest attacks are most frequently cited in the literature as triggers of crop failure. As a consequence, local food availability decline clearly has been a major factor in bringing about mass starvation, while in some cases an absolute shortage of food at the national level of aggregation also occurred.

In carrying out this review, we shall first consider the overall historical record, before proceeding to a detailed review of the Great famine of the late 19th century. After this we shall discuss four more recent famines which have occurred since 1958, all of which have been centred on Wollo and Tigray. In doing so, we shall be looking for major recurrent themes. These include the proximate causes of crop failure; the types of human responses to

these; and the response of the State. It will be seen that both the causes and consequences of crop failures show remarkable similarities during the various famines, and that in each case the State fails, often through deliberate neglect, to protect its citizens. Thus it emerges that food security for the rural masses is not a necessary condition for the maintenance of state power by the government of the day in Ethiopia.

### 3.2 Overview

The most recent Ethiopian famine of 1984-85 is the latest of many which have occurred over the centuries. In terms of size of area covered and population affected, it is probably second only to the great famine of 1888-92, during which time approximately one-third of the population is thought to have perished. However, the historical record of famine in Ethiopia is extremely fragmentary, with many calamities being only scantily reported, so that we do not have standardised or reliable means of comparison. This is true not only of the famines of the 11th-19th centuries for which there are some records, but also of 20th century famines. For example there are few documentary accounts of the famines of 1958, 1966 or 1977-78. These latter omissions are undoubtedly due to lack of publicity of famine conditions, itself a function of administrative neglect, if not of outright concealment by government.



Table 3.1: History of Drought and Famine in Ethiopia

circa 831-849	"great tribulation hath come upon our land and all our men are dying of the plague, and our beasts and cattle have perished, and God hath restrained the heavens so that they cannot rain upon our land" (Pankhurst 1985 p 11).
1066-72	Failure of the Nile flood, with ambassadors from Egypt being sent to Ethiopia to request the king to allow the river to flow. This implies drought in Ethiopia, which supplies 90 per cent of Nile waters (Wood 1977).
circa 1131-45	"famine and plague broke out in the land, and the rain would not fall on the fields, and great tribulation came upon the people" (Pankhurst <u>ibid</u> p 11).
1252, 1258-59, 1272-73, circa 1314-44	Recorded as famine years by Pankhurst ( <u>ibid</u> ) but no details given.
circa 1540	"Famine of cereals due to lack of rain" ( <u>ibid</u> p 28).
1543-44	"a great famine, a punishment sent on the country by the glorious God" ( <u>ibid</u> p 33).
1559-62	Rain failures for three years following the killing of the Emperor Geladius, especially in Harer. "Prices of grain, salt and cattle rose to unprecedented levels" and cases of cannibalism were reported ( <u>ibid</u> p 34).
1611	Recorded as a famine year with no details given ( <u>ibid</u> ).
1625-28	Unusually large locust swarms precipitating famine in northern provinces. Mass migration of victims in search of relief ( <u>ibid</u> ).
1634-35	More locust plagues precipitating famine, with accompanying widespread disease epidemics ( <u>ibid</u> ).
1650, 1653	Recorded as famine years, with no details given ( <u>ibid</u> ).

Table 3.1 cont.

- 1668 'a great famine' with exceptional grain price inflation and widespread livestock deaths (Pankhurst 1985 p 51).
- 1678,  
1700,  
1702 All listed as famine years by Pankhurst (1961), but no details given.
- 1706 Famine affecting the entire country, with starving peasants pleading for aid at the imperial court in Gonder (ibid).
- 1747-48 Two successive plagues of locusts that 'covered the land like a fog' destroy crops. Influenza epidemics follow (ibid).
- 1752 More famine deaths reported (ibid).
- 1772-73 Famine referred to in chronicles as quachne, literally 'my thinness' (ibid)
- 1788-89 A further famine outbreak 'over all the provinces', causing 'great distress' (Pankhurst, ibid, p 52).
- 1796 Locust plagues destroying crops in many districts (ibid).
- 1800 'Both men and horses died of famine' (Wood op cit).
- 1812 Locust plagues causing 'partial famine', with several thousand deaths in Hammassien (Pankhurst, op cit, p 53).
- 1828-29 Famine in Shoa following rain failures which destroyed both grain and cotton crops. Also widespread cattle deaths and a cholera outbreak. High food prices, and voluntary enslavement by the peasantry (ibid).
- 1865 Severe famine in Tigray and Gonder (ibid).
- 1888-92 The most devastating famine ever recorded in Ethiopia, which affected virtually the whole country. The entire period was unusually hot and dry, and a rinderpest epidemic carried off 90 per cent of cattle. Locusts, caterpillars and rats also infested the country at various times. Suicides and cannibalism occurred, and wild animals attacked dying people. About one third of the population is estimated to have perished.



Table 3.1 (cont)

1895-96	Failure of winter and spring rains (Wood <u>op cit</u> ).
1899-	An unrecorded drought manifested through a fall in the 1900 level of lake Rudolph. The Nile flood was also unusually low that year ( <u>ibid</u> ).
1913-14	Widespread drought in North Africa, with the effect on Ethiopia indicated by a very poor Nile flood (the lowest since 1895). The price of grain rose thirty-fold in the north of Ethiopia, and there was great starvation in Tigray ( <u>ibid</u> ).
1921-22	A similar drought to that of 1895-96. Complete failure of the rains between October 1920 and May 1921 ( <u>ibid</u> ).
1932-34	The level of Lake Rudolph dropped, implying a serious decrease in rainfall in southern Ethiopia. Victims fled to British Somaliland, where relief camps were set up to receive them ( <u>ibid</u> ).
1953	Undocumented drought in Wollo and Tigray ( <u>ibid</u> ).
1957-58	More than 100,000 people in Wollo and Tigray are reported to have died following drought and locust attacks ( <u>ibid</u> ; Wolde-Mariam 1984).
1964-66	Virtually undocumented drought and famine said to be more widespread than that of 1972-74.
1972-74	Complete failure of the spring rains following two or more years of low rainfall. Northern, eastern and southeastern parts of the country affected. The RRC estimates the number of dead at about 200,000 for Tigray, Wollo and northern Shoa. Deaths also reported in Hararghe.
1977-79	Poorly documented drought and famine in Wollo, Tigray, Gonder and northern Shoa, following failures of 1977 spring rains and main rains of 1978. More than 2 million people estimated to be affected, and relief operations undertaken.
1983-85	Rain failures beginning in north and spreading to most parts of the country by 1984. Relief operations mounted but insufficient to prevent mass migration and widespread deaths by mid-1984. Massive international response following media coverage towards end of 1984. UN estimates death toll of 1 million, with more than 8 million victims requiring assistance. Relief operations continue into 1986.



Table 3.1 lists the drought and famine years mentioned in the available literature on famine. Sources include: Pankhurst (1961, 1972 and 1985), who describes famines reported in the imperial chronicles up to 1888-92 (with some omissions, notably between 1835 and 1888); Wood (1977), who has constructed a chronology of drought and famine based on various sources, and whose work is particularly useful in describing the droughts and famines of the period 1892-1932; Zewde (1976), who has written a useful short review of the historical incidence of famine; and other contemporary sources documenting recent famines including Holt and Seaman (1976), Mesfin Wolde Mariam (1984), Mulugeta Bezzabeh (1980), Azbite (1981) and McKerrow (1979).

Table 3.1 shows that famine has indeed been a frequent occurrence in Ethiopia. Although the record prior to the 17th century is fragmented, 7 famines were reported between AD 831 and 1344. A further 3 famines struck between 1540 and 1562. During the 17th century it appears that 7 famines occurred, with a further 8 episodes of mass starvation attacking Ethiopia during the 18th century; while to date 8 famines and one drought which may have led to famine conditions have occurred during the 20th century.

Although the historical record is incomplete, it seems that the incidence of famine in each century is roughly

the same, averaging one famine every 12-14 years. However, the periodicity between famines varies. Some famines extend for as many as 3-4 years, such as those of 1625-28; 1888-92; and the most recent famine, which can be said to have lasted at least from 1983-85. Other famines appear to last only for a year or so, such as those of 1800, 1812 and 1953, although this may simply reflect incomplete reporting. Sometimes famines follow each other in quick succession, such as during the period 1650-1706, when there were 7 famines, giving an average of one famine every 8 years, while during other lengthy periods, such as 1706-1747, no famines are reported.

The periodicity and extent of famines in Ethiopia up to the late 19th century strongly resembles that of Mughal and early British India, as described by Bhatia (1967) and others. However, by the late 19th century, the British had instituted the famine codes which were effective in preventing mass starvation (although failing to prevent pauperisation) in imperial and post imperial India. A glaring exception was the Bengal famine of 1942-44. This took place in extreme war-related circumstances, although it was also built on a foundation of decades of environmental degradation and immiseration of the rural poor.

In the Ethiopian case, despite the onset of the

devastating famine of 1888-92, no such institutional arrangements were subsequently made. Famine victims traditionally threw themselves at the mercy of the emperor or his representatives, but as Pankhurst has noted: "the machinery of state was far too rudimentary to be able to provide assistance to the famine-stricken except perhaps in the vicinity of the capital, while the limited extent of the market economy, as well as difficulties of communication, rendered the purchase of supplies by the destitute virtually impossible" (Pankhurst 1961 pp 90-91). We might add that grain prices were typically very high during Ethiopian famines, and where livestock mortality was also high, so too were livestock prices. High grain prices are specifically recorded for the famines of 1559-62, 1567-68, 1668, 1828-29, 1888-92 and 1913-14. During the 1913-14 famine, the price of grain was reported to have risen 'thirty-fold' in parts of northern Ethiopia (Wood, 1977).

The causes of crop failure, triggering subsequent famine, are varied. Drought is a common factor - according to Wood, "seven droughts per century can be expected in Ethiopia" (Wood 1977 p 69). It can also be seen from Table 3.1 that locust plagues<sup>1</sup> were common during the 17th-19th centuries, and are still a serious threat today. Other pests devastating crops included 'caterpillars' (possibly army worm<sup>2</sup>) and rats. Livestock plagues such as rinderpest could also occur. Disease epidemics, particularly



cholera, typhus, smallpox and influenza were major killers of famine victims. Abnormal modes of social behaviour such as suicide (considered a dreadful sin by the Ethiopian church and normally uncommon), cannibalism and voluntary enslavement were often reported to have taken place during famines. Mass deaths resulted in rich pickings for wild carnivores, such as hyenas, leopards and lions. Pankhurst cites a contemporary eye-witness who related that during the great famine of 1888-92 the inhabitants of Addis Ababa would be awoken 5 or 6 times a night "by the cry of wasaden, wasaden (it's taking me away) uttered by people carried off by hyenas" (Pankhurst 1985 p 88). Thus the collapse of social norms which has been taken as part of the definition of famine put forward in Chapter 1, and which is so well-described for Bengal by Greenough (1982) is confirmed by Ethiopian experience. The Great famine of 1888-92 was certainly the most devastating ever recorded in Ethiopia, and deserves further examination as a background to the famines of the mid-late 20th century.

### 3.3 The Great Famine of 1888-92

This famine well illustrates the multiple factors which lead to crop failure and famine in an agrarian society which has little control over its environment. The principal trigger of crop failure was an epidemic of rinderpest which swept through the country between

November 1887 and January 1890, decimating the cattle population, and also causing widespread mortality among wild bovines such as buffalo. The rinderpest is commonly thought to have been introduced into Eritrea by the Italians, who brought large numbers of horses and mules with their expeditionary force. Many of these animals came from India, and Pankhurst states that "it appears very probable" that this was the source of the epidemic (Pankhurst 1985 p 59). A contributory factor may also have been the exceptionally hot weather, which may have helped reduce the resistance of cattle already ill-prepared to deal with an exotic strain of the virulent disease.

Cattle infected with the disease commonly died within ten days, with few animals surviving. Mortality was probably in excess of 90 per cent, with the few survivors found only at the highest elevations. One of Emperor Menelik's own herds, consisting of several thousand head, is said to have been completely destroyed, while his total losses were estimated at around a quarter of a million animals. The disease spread as far south as Somalia, and destroyed vast herds of wild buffalo and hartebeest. Thus the Ethiopian cultivators were deprived of their plough oxen, and pastoralist communities of their wealth in cattle, making both the production of crops and their acquisition through trade extremely difficult for highlanders and

Table 3.2

Inflation of Commodity Prices during the Great Ethiopian Famine

<u>Commodity</u>	<u>Year</u>	
	1889	1890
Barley	1 400 gunna	1 2-3 gunna
Wheat	1 200 gunna	1 1.5 gunna
Saltbar	1 8-12 pieces	1 2-2.5 pieces
Plough Ox	2-4 1 head	60-80 1 head
Cow	1-1.5 1 head	30-60 1 head
Sheep	1 1-6 head	2-8 1 head

Source: Pankhurst 1961



lowlanders alike.

Although the loss of plough oxen was the most serious blow to production prospects, there were concomitant agricultural calamities. Drought over 1888-92 withered crops in the fields, and swarms of locusts and caterpillars appeared in early 1889, and again in 1892. In July 1892, "thousands of rats were destroying the crops" in the northern highlands (Picard, quoted in Pankhurst, op cit p 89). Although locust swarms were frequent in other periods, these may have been larger than normal, while the appearance of caterpillars was apparently a rare and extremely unfortunate event.

The mass death of cattle and the associated loss of crops led to massive inflation in the prices of grain and livestock. Pankhurst (1961) presents data showing that the price of a measure of barley or wheat rose between 130 and 200 times during the years 1889-90 (see Table 3.2). Livestock prices also rose 20-40 times above pre-famine levels. These prices reflected the virtual unavailability of grain and cattle in the marketplace. Although there was speculation, and some people with stored grain could have prospered during the famine, in many cases even the rich are said to have starved for want of food at any price. Some food was imported, but a tremendous shortage of pack animals (also affected by rinderpest) ensured that

little could be transported from the ports.

The resulting famine was of enormous proportions.

Pankhurst notes that "terrible conditions ... existed in all parts of the country", and quotes a contemporary observer, describing conditions over the whole Tigre/Amhara plateau, as writing that:

"thousands are dying. The famine is indescribable, the well-to-do and the poor are alike carried away by hunger and pestilence. Such a famine has never befallen our land" (Aragani, quoted in Pankhurst 1985 p 75).

Conditions were reported to have been just as terrible in the southern and western parts of the country. Epidemics of smallpox, dysentery, typhus, bronchitis, influenza and cholera swiftly appeared as the corpses of men and animals remained unburied. Wild animals became fearless, carrying away both the dead and the living in broad daylight. Mortality was massive, and has been estimated by Wurtz at about one-third of the entire population (Wurtz 1898). Cannibalism was also reported, with one woman of Wollo eating her own child, and another accused of killing and eating seven children.

The demographic effects of the great famine were extreme, with the depopulation of vast areas taking place as victims migrated in search of succour, only to die by the wayside. Wurtz stated that he had been:

"ten days journey to the west of Addis Ababa, half way to the Abyssinian frontier, and passed whole days without seeing a habitation. I was shown the sites of considerable villages where nothing remained but thickets and grass" (quoted in Pankhurst ibid pp 89-90).

The lowlands did not escape either - the Awash region was thought to have lost 80 per cent of its population.

Perhaps one of the more remarkable aspects of the great famine was that two-thirds of the population survived. It is not at all clear from the records of the period how this was achieved by the majority of the population in the face of such massive destruction of crop-production capacity, although it is recorded that farmers were forced to harness themselves to the plough, and Menelik himself set an example to his subjects by tilling the soil by hand and urging farmers to do likewise. Recovery of livestock herds was very slow, as the survivors of rinderpest were so few in number. Even as late as 1898, the price of a cow was reported to be ten times above pre-famine levels.

The famine had long lasting socio-economic and political effects. The difficulties of the Abyssinian empire and the depopulation of vast areas of the highlands encouraged further Italian colonisation and settlement which was not halted until the battle of Adwa in 1896. The difficulties of provisioning armies also acted as a brake to Menelik's



imperial ambitions and necessitated the introduction of a special tax on the peasantry for the upkeep of soldiers. Although this may have slowed the recovery of the peasant sector, it reduced the depredations of the soldiery as they marched on campaigns, even through 'friendly' territory. The establishment of special granaries for the troops was a decisive factor enabling Menelik to raise the vast army which eventually defeated the Italians and kept Abyssinia independent during the European scramble for Africa in the late 19th century.

The famine also acted as a spur to the permanent migration of northern adventurers to the newly captured lands of the south, where they could become settlers on or administrators of crown lands. Resettlement was actively encouraged by Menelik, who acceded to the throne in 1889, and who was also able to consolidate his own power at the expense of the local lords, insofar as available resources for the rebuilding of the economy tended to be controlled by him. Certainly the agrarian crisis provided an opportunity for Menelik to demonstrate his mettle, and he was widely admired for his powers of leadership and for his compassion and example during the famine. Apart from cultivating the soil with his own hands, and personally distributing such relief as was available to the poor, Menelik introduced austerity measures at the palace. He is quoted as commenting to Captain M. S. Wellby, a British

traveller, as follows: "Why should I enjoy plenty while my people are in want?" Wellby remarked that he doubted whether "any European ruler would have denied himself to the same extent for a similar cause" (quoted in Pankhurst 1985 p 101). Certainly the behaviour of Heile Selassie did not match that of Menelik during the Wollo famine of 1973, while the present military government celebrated 10 years of revolution with extravagant ceremony at the height of famine during 1984.

#### 3.4 Crop Failures and Famines during the Past Quarter-Century

Although the experience of the great famine was exceptional in its severity, it is likely that it is also typical in that in most cases of famine the causes of crop failure are multiple, and inflated grain prices, mass migration and mass starvation follow in the face of the inability or downright unwillingness of the authorities to intervene. Bezzabeh, who has carried out a survey of drought and famine in Wollo over the period 1949-78, argues that:

"almost invariably people have talked of the Wollo famine (of 1973) as having been caused only by the absence of rain and all other causes have not been considered.

However ... the absence of rain has been only one of the factors of drought in Wollo. Frost, flooding, hailstorms, plant pests and animal diseases, human disease, epidemics,

in varying combinations with drought, seriously restricted agricultural production, creating famine conditions" (Bezzabeh 1980 p 68).

It is also likely that one could trace the onset of famine conditions through to outright famine over more than one or two years in most cases. Wolde Mariam (1984) has investigated the incidence of famine over the period 1958-77 for the whole of Ethiopia, based on records of administrative memoranda from officials in famine affected provinces and districts (awrajas) to the Ministry of Interior in Addis Ababa. He finds that according to this criterion there has been famine in one part or another of Ethiopia for the entire twenty year period, with an average of 20 per cent of the country under famine in each of the 20 years. Although the number of awrajas under famine varies year by year, the number of awrajas experiencing famine appears to be growing. Wolde Mariam argues that there is an "irregular but clearly discernable pattern" with famine "generally moving clockwise and forming a spiral" (ibid p 156). Tigray and Eritrea are identified as the heartlands of famine by 1958. Famine spread to the southern and eastern lowlands during the early 1960s, before moving northwards and westwards. A second 'inner spiral' of famine developed from Wollo southwards into Shoa and Arssi and westwards into Keffa, Illubabor and Wellega during the mid-late 1960s. Lastly, even the more prosperous western awrajas had succumbed to famine by the 1970s.



Although Wolde Mariam adopts a rather short time-frame within which to examine the spatial and temporal dimensions of famine, he brings out two important points. Firstly, some regions are historically more vulnerable to famine than others, and Wolde Mariam later goes on to show that those region which are least commercialised and most orientated to subsistence production are most vulnerable to famine (a reversal of the common Marxist view, eg, Bondestam 1974; Cliffe, 1974). Secondly, he argues that famine conditions have spread even to relatively prosperous regions in the recent past. If this is true, then it may be the case that the incidence and scope of famines (or famine conditions) in Ethiopia has been growing over the late 20th century. This would accord with the list of famines given in Table 3.1. Already the totals of recorded famines for the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries have been matched or exceeded in the 20th century. As we shall see shortly, there has been a virtually unbroken series of crop failures and reports of famine-related behaviour, if not actual starvation, over the period 1975-85. It may indeed be the case that famine conditions have developed every year in Ethiopia in one or more districts, whether remarked by officials or not. Famine may be a normal state of affairs from the point of view of the Ethiopian State, although individual districts will not, of course, suffer unbroken famine conditions, for otherwise they would become largely uninhabitable. Nevertheless, some districts and regions are historically

more famine-prone than others. We can consider the detailed record of famines over the past quarter century to develop this point.

### 3.5 Famines in Recent Times: 1958, 1966, 1972-75 and 1977-78

Between the mid 1950s and the late 1970s there were 4 distinct famines in northern Ethiopia. Three of these: the Tigray famine of 1958, the Wag-Lasta famine of 1966 and the Wollo-Tigray famine of 1977-78 are barely recorded in the literature. Only the famous Wollo famine of 1973 has attracted much attention from journalists and scholars. The reason for this is undoubtedly that the dramatic television footage filmed by Jonathon Dimbleby in September 1973 was released internationally. This in turn attracted a large-scale relief effort.

It is striking that all of these famines were centred on Tigray and Wollo, although famine could extend from these core areas, notably into the Eritrean highlands and into northern Shoa. A single exception during this period was the famine in the south-eastern province of Hararghe in 1974-75, which is often discussed as part of the northern famine of 1972-3, but should really be considered as separate. A brief consideration of each of these famines will now be undertaken in order to bring out both common and distinguishing features of each.

### 3.6 The Tigray Famine of 1958

Mesfin Wolde Mariam has produced an account of this famine, of which he had personal experience. He notes that this was "a very devastating famine that the population of Addis Ababa knew hardly anything about" (Wolde Mariam op cit p 35). Although 1958 is the year commonly attributed to the famine, Wolde Mariam states that "by the summer of 1958 the crisis was already two years old" (ibid). The government began to publicise the famine only in September 1959, asking for contributions to be made. Collections were got up in various parts of the country, but much of the money failed to find its way to Tigray for want of organisation on the part of the government. The USA despatched 32,000 tons of grain as famine relief for Eritrea and Tigray, of which only 7.5 tons was distributed in Tigray during August-September 1961. By this time the famine was estimated to have claimed 100,000 lives.

Wolde Mariam is unclear about the year in which the famine ended, although it is possible that unusual levels of starvation could have lingered until 1961, when the paltry amount of grain was distributed. It is also unclear as to the precise precipitating factors triggering the famine. Wolde Mariam notes that "at the beginning, drought was taken to be the cause of the crop failure" (op cit p 36). However, locusts and hailstorms are reported to have



caused substantial damage in the districts of Adwa and Tembien. Later, epidemics of smallpox, typhus, measles and malaria are said to have occurred.

The famine does not seem to have been confined to Tigray. Mulugeta Bezzabeh (1980) classifies 1958 as a drought year for Wollo and records that some 9,000 lives were lost as a result of famine over 1958-59. Wood (1977) lists 1957 as a year of famine for both Wollo and Tigray. He also says that food aid from the USA rotted at Massawa port as a result of bureaucratic delays. Wolde Mariam's data on food aid distribution further suggest that the famine occurred in Eritrea as well as Tigray.

### 3.7 The Wollo Famine of 1966

This famine was as little publicised as the 1958 famine discussed above. Often called the Wag-Lasta famine, in fact this famine affected several districts of Wollo, including Ambassel and Dessie as well as Wag and Lasta. The famine was apparently drought-induced, and Wood records "a virtually undocumented drought" for 1964-65 "said to be more widespread in Ethiopia than that of 1973-75" (Wood 1977 p 70). Bezzabeh (1980) also reports 1965 as a drought year for Wollo, noting that deaths recorded by local administrators as due to famine totalled 644 in 1965, 15,550 in 1966 and 394 in 1967. Thus the officially recorded death toll was greater than that of 1958-59.

According to Wolde Mariam, a police report was sent to the Ministry of the Interior in October 1965, warning of famine. The Deputy Governor of Wollo informed the Ministry in February 1966 that "large numbers of people were leaving their villages in search of work and food" (Wolde Mariam op cit p 37). By August-September 1966 starvation deaths were reported for Wag, Lasta and Ambassel awrajas. A report stating that 2,730 people had died of starvation in one sub-district of Ambassel was met with a request from the Ministry of the Interior for the names of the dead (ibid).

By September 1966, over a year following the first reports of famine, a sum of 220,000 birr was made available by the Emperor to the Ministry of Finance for the purchase of relief supplies. It took 12 months for transport of grain into Wollo province to be arranged, and there were further delays in transportation to various awraja centres within Wollo. Throughout the kremt season (June-September) of 1967 people continued to succumb to starvation. Relief operations were virtually non-existent, although there is a detailed account of medical relief operations at Korem over the period July-December 1966, published fourteen years after its compilation (Azbite 1981). The report notes that the western sub-districts of Sekota and Dehana of Wag awraja were worst affected by the famine. Some 60,000 people were estimated to have died in Wag awraja over the previous 3 years. This number represents one

third of the estimated district population of 180,000.<sup>3</sup> At the time of the relief operation, the famine refugee population in Korem was 20,000, four times greater than the normal population of the town, which was then estimated to be 5,000. Azbite notes that crowds of refugees "created a dreadful problem insofar as public health was concerned, since faeces, urine and all sorts of garbage accumulated to extremes" (ibid p 8). Epidemics of dysentery, relapsing fever and typhus occurred during the period of operation of the medical teams, with number of hospital admissions peaking in August and September 1966.

Some grain distribution was attempted by the local authorities, making use of bulgar wheat donated by the US government. This was not done strictly on the grounds of need, for Azbite writes that:

"There was no good organisation for efficient distribution to the needy ones. These were the poor refugees such as mothers with many children and without a father, or fathers with children without a mother, those who were already starved, helpless old people, and debilitated refugees. 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. The needy ones who were weak were unable to push through the mob' (ibid p 16).



Furthermore, the registration procedure was time-consuming as the Ministry of the Interior had provided a very detailed form to be completed by each supplicant. Azbite himself managed to cut through some of the bureaucratic red tape and improve the speed of relief food distribution, although the form filling was only dispensed with on one occasion, when the visit of a 'high dignitary' allowed the distribution of sizeable rations to almost 4,000 people in one day, a notable exception to the normal rate of off-take.

In fact, the bulk of the relief food allocated to Wollo was not given away. Instead, it was offered for sale to impoverished famine victims who had by now disposed of their assets. Despite the extremely low prices, of 15-18 birr per quintal (less than half 'normal' prices), only 12.5 per cent of the 10,000 quintals of grain allocated to Wag and Lasta were sold over a 14 month period. The remainder rotted in the storehouses, incurring high storage charges. Eventually the grain was rendered unfit for human consumption and was sold "at a ridiculously low price" to merchants and bakers, who presumably nevertheless themselves sold it for human consumption (Wolde Mariam op cit p 39).

### 3.8 The Wollo Famine of 1973

This famine has been much discussed, yet not very much

detail is actually known about its development because relief workers and researchers only arrived in the area towards the end of the crisis, by which time the drought had broken and many of the victims had already died or had managed to return to their homes to resume farming. It seems that the region worst-affected by rain failures and crop failures was "a strip of land some 10km wide and 100km in length running along the eastern escarpment north of Bati up to the eastern slopes of the Zobil chain" (Holt and Seaman 1976 p 5), although western Wollo and parts of Tigray and Shoa were also reported to have been affected (ENI 1974; Sen 1981). Both highland farmers and lowland pastoralists suffered from the effects of drought.

Although as many as 1,500 destitute Wollo peasants marched into Addis Ababa and camped in front of the Parliament building as early as February 1973, drawing the first public attention to the crisis (Brietske 1982 p 126); migration to roadside towns peaked in August 1973, when an estimated 60,000 people "were crowded round relief camps which could not deal with a third of their number, and many more flooded into the towns" (Holt and Seaman op cit p 4). By September 1973, when the first shipments of foreign relief began arriving in Wollo, the numbers of destitutes had fallen to around 15,000.

Although there had previously been several years of poor rainfall (Wood 1976), the Wollo famine was triggered principally by a failure of the main kremt rains in 1972,

followed by another failure of the spring belg rains, which are normally responsible for up to 50 per cent of crop production in parts of Wollo. A study carried out by the Ministry of Agriculture in November 1972 warned of famine, but this warning was hardly heeded by either provincial or local government (Shepherd 1975). A National Emergency Relief Committee was set up in April, but "most of its activities were directed towards attacking press reports of the famine. Protests from Wollo were met with gunfire" (Brietske op cit p 127). News of the famine was eventually leaked by a young UNICEF official in July, and he was subsequently fired from his post. A British television crew gained access to the famine area in August 1973 and were able to release film contrasting virtually uncontrolled famine with feasting in the Imperial Palace. The film provoked a wave of indignation and compassion from the general public both outside and within Ethiopia and helped expose the weaknesses of the Imperial regime, which was to fall during the following year.

Deaths from the 1973 Wollo famine are variously estimated from 40-80,000 (Miller and Holt 1975) up to 200,000 (Shepherd 1975). Rivers et al (1976) estimate that in excess of 100,000 people died over the period 1972-75 from starvation and related diseases. Their estimate includes deaths in south-eastern Ethiopia, principally in the province of Harerghe, which occurred following the failure



of the short rains in the Ogaden for two years in succession (September 1973 and 1974). The second rain failure in the Ogaden saw pastoralists in an extremely vulnerable position, with few livestock reserves and facing grain prices of 2-3 times normal levels (RRC 1974). Holt and Seaman report that in Harerghe "thousands of people' moved into some 17 relief centres, several of which existed in name only" (op cit p 7). Mortality and morbidity seem to have reached a peak during April-May 1975, and by September 1975 the camp population was static at around 70-80,000 people.

Unfortunately, such was the concentration of foreign donors and the new Ethiopian regime on Wollo that the developing famine in Harerghe was virtually ignored. Despite the rapid recovery of the northern famine areas during 1974, 70 per cent of the 137,000 tons of relief food received between November 1973 and December 1974 went north (Rivers et al 1976). This source goes on to note that "Harerghe, where famine was at its height, received only 8 per cent" (of the available relief food - op cit p 352). Hence there was a serious delay in relief distribution in both regions succumbing to famine over 1973-75.

### 3.9 The Drought and Famine of 1977-79

This famine is remarkable because its early stages appear

to have escaped the notice of the international relief organisations, despite the warnings of the newly-established Relief and Rehabilitation Commission. Following inadequate belg rains in the spring of 1977, the main kremt rains were delayed and continued late into October, creating conditions for the spread of the fungus-borne disease ergot and causing premature germination of crops before harvesting (McKerrow 1979). Locusts and other pests also contributed to the destruction of crops by late 1977. Areas affected included the highlands of western Wollo, Tigray, northern Shoa, and parts of Gonder, particularly in eastern districts. However, the mass starvation which began to occur towards the end of 1977 was not identified as a problem by the newly-created global Early Warning System of the Food and Agriculture Organisation until the spring of 1978. According to McKerrow "by June 1978 (famine conditions) were rapidly becoming comparable to the period preceding the famine of 1973" (ibid p 131).

The relief system was severely constrained by the government's need to procure military supplies to fight Somali invaders in the Ogaden, Eritrean secessionists, and urban insurgents. The only port open was Assab, which became severely congested. Only 3,000 tons of grain per month could be moved through the port, which represented half the normal figure, and which by way of contrast represented a mere one day's port offtake during the 1985-

86 famine relief operations. Nevertheless, by May-June 1978 some 20,000 tons of both locally produced and imported grain were distributed to 600,000 beneficiaries through 14 distribution centres in western Wollo alone. Rain failures again occurred during 1978, leading an FAO-headed multi-donor mission to conclude that the 1978 harvest would be no better than that of 1977. By September-October 1978, at the end of the rainy season, "the situation in the highlands was extremely critical" (ibid p 132). An estimated 2.1 million people were 'drought affected', more than half of them in Wollo province. Fortunately, sufficient grain shipments arrived from mid-October onwards to avert a catastrophe. There was some recovery of the rains in 1979, allowing a degree of rehabilitation to take place.

The events of 1977-78 can be seen as a good example of the unfortunate concatenation of events identified by Currey (1984) as characterising famines - in this case the co-existence of badly timed rainfall, pest attacks and war. The latter constrained both the supply of information about the famine and the supply of relief goods. However, the famine of 1977-78 may in part be attributed to the failure of institutional arrangements set up to prevent famine following the overthrow of Heile Selassie.



### 3.10 Conclusion

It seems from the historical record that famine has been a common occurrence in Ethiopia, although often ill-reported, even in the latter part of this century. The proximate causes of famine, those that trigger the process culminating in mass starvation (as discussed in chapter 1), appear to be crop failures and loss of livestock, themselves caused by rain failures, pest attacks and warfare, with these factors often acting repeatedly and in combination. Of these trigger events, pest attacks are perhaps most frequently mentioned in the historical record, often occurring in tandem with rain failures. The most common scourge appears to have been the locust, considered by Pankhurst to be "one of the peasant's greatest enemies, and a major factor depressing his standard of living in former times" (Pankhurst 1966 p 64). Locusts seem to have been particularly prevalent in Tigray and Eritrea, and plagues are frequently recorded during the 18th and 19th centuries. However, the incidence of locust attacks appears to have fallen since the early 20th century, and armyworm has become a more frequently reported devourer of crops. Nevertheless, Pankhurst notes that locusts can attack year after year in a certain locality, and then disappear for up to thirty years before returning. Indeed, locusts were reported to be breeding in strength in parts of Tigray and Eritrea in 1985-86, following the most recent famine (REST, 1985).

In view of the reported frequency of famine, from a national perspective it may not seem to be an abnormal event, and this may partly explain the traditional reluctance of the authorities to institute relief operations. Famine was seen by both the peasantry and the aristocracy as an act of God, a punishment of man for his sins, and prayer was advised as the most efficacious remedy. However, from a local perspective, famine might still be seen as an unusual event, for even in famine-prone regions such as Wollo and Tigray individual communities would not always be hit by generalised crop failures. The extraordinary diversity of production conditions in Ethiopian agriculture has already been remarked upon in Chapter 2, and will be further discussed in the case study of the most recent famine which is detailed from Chapter 6 onwards.

Before doing so however, it is important to go beyond mere description of famines of the past to an analysis of the root causes of vulnerability to famine of individual peasant households. This exercise shall be carried out in the next two chapters.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> There are four species of locust indigenous to Africa and the middle east: the brown, red, desert and migratory locust. Two of these, the migratory locust (Locusta Migratoria) and the desert locust (Schistocera Gregaria) are indigenous to Ethiopia. Of the two, the desert locust is the more widespread, and is therefore more difficult to control when exceptional breeding conditions occur.

Locusts have a seven stage development cycle, going from egg to adult through five phases of growth in the "hopper" stages. The insects can be relatively easily controlled using modern pesticides if they are poisoned at the "hopper" stage before they are capable of flight. Once swarms develop, locusts become highly mobile, very destructive of vegetation and difficult to control. Swarm densities are approximately 50 million per km<sup>2</sup>, and locusts can consume their own weight of food (2 grams) in a day. Thus, the total destruction of crops in areas on which swarms settle is easily assured (see Ford and Wright 1986).

<sup>2</sup> The African armyworm is the caterpillar larva of a moth (spodoptera exempta) which is widespread in Eastern and Southern Africa. The moths are carried long distances by winds, and so outbreaks can occur over a wide area and can



quickly spread.

<sup>3</sup> If we make the crude assumption of a constant rate of deaths over the period, this gives an estimated average death rate of 143 per thousand per annum. This is lower than the estimated mortality rate of 190 per thousand recorded by a team from the Ethiopian Nutrition Institute which surveyed five awrajas in Wollo during 1973 (ENI 1974). On the basis of comparison of the survey results with demographic data provided by CSO, the ENI team considered that 181 deaths per thousand were attributable to famine. Although the Lasta death rate in 1978 is relatively low according to the above crude calculation, it is an assumed constant rate over three years. The true rate was probably much higher for a shorter period over 1977-78.

## Chapter 4:

### The Historical Roots of Famine: Land tenure, taxation, and rural development in pre and post revolutionary Ethiopia

#### 4.1 Introduction

Early accounts of the agricultural economy of Ethiopia describe a situation of actual or potential plenty. In 1520, the Portuguese cleric, Father Francisco Alvares, wrote that "it seems to me that in the whole world there is not so populous a country or one so abundant in crops" (quoted in Pankhurst 1966 p 45). When Alvares visited Maichew, now in the heart of the Tigrayan famine zone, the inhabitants told him that were it not for pest attacks and hailstorms "there would have been abundance for ten years" from one crop (ibid). As it was, losses in one year could easily be recouped in the next. Similarly, James Bruce, an 18th century visitor, remarked upon the abundance of produce, but noted that after rents, taxes and tribute had been paid to the landlord and the State: "the quantity that comes down to the share of the husbandman is not more than sufficient to afford sustenance for his wretched family" (ibid).

This historical contradiction of penury for many in the midst of actual or potential plenty will now be analysed. It will be shown that the conditions of land tenure were extremely onerous for the majority of peasants. Rental payments and taxes were high, yet the landlords and the

State failed to reinvest sufficient surplus to encourage the development of agriculture, except in a few localities and at a very late stage, historically speaking. As a consequence, the bulk of rural producers lived in penury, and became ever more vulnerable to famine.

The later emergence of capitalism and the effects of the abrupt transition to socialism on the agricultural economy will also be considered. It will be shown that the impact of capitalism on agriculture was almost negligible for the majority of rural producers, although locally it could be very important, and could lead to the marginalisation of poorer peasants and pastoralists. The effects of capitalism were more pronounced in terms of their impact on national foreign exchange earnings, and through the development of wage labour opportunities for some of the peasantry. The transition to socialism initially incurred benefits to the majority of peasants through increased access to land as the large estates of the ancien regime were nationalised, and as the burdens of rental payments and taxation was reduced. However, there is now evidence that rural taxation is again back to high levels, while investment in agriculture remains a low priority. Income earning opportunities for the peasantry are also dwindling, with controls on trading being introduced and with reduced seasonal wage-labour opportunities on the nationalised plantations.



#### 4.2 The Influence of Tenurial Relations in Land

The most important constraint on the fulfilment of the production potential of Ethiopian agriculture prior to 1974 was the variety of tenurial arrangements, all of which to differing degrees involved the extraction of substantial surpluses from the peasantry in the forms of agricultural goods and corvee labour. These surpluses would rarely be reinvested in agricultural production or land conservation, but instead would be used to maintain the extravagant lifestyles of the nobility. Small numbers of artisans were supported, but they were traditionally scorned as non-cultivators, and devoted much of their time to the production of luxury goods for the nobility.

The various tenurial arrangements are often lumped together and described as 'feudal' by analysts of pre-1974 Ethiopian political economy (e.g. Cliffe 1974; Bondestam 1974). However, there are important features distinguishing Ethiopian 'feudalism' from classic European 'feudalism'. These differences will be considered once the variety of forms of tenure have been described.

At the heart of the Abyssinian empire, among the Amhara and Tigrayan peoples of Wollo, Tigray, Northern Shoa, Highland Eritrea, and Gojjam, the riste system of tenure predominated. Under this system, rights to land, rather than identifiable parcels of land, were inherited by the

great majority of peasants (Markakis 1974). Riste rights were passed on through both male and female lines, to an extent of some 10-12 generations, after which genealogical memories began to fade. As riste rights could be claimed over such a long period, and through ambilineal descent (through both male and female lines), endemic litigation became a feature of highland society. Clever and energetic individuals could pursue their claims through the courts and with the aid of sufficient 'witnesses' could amass considerable amounts of land. In his classic study of the riste system among the Amhara of north-eastern Gojjam, Alan Hoben notes that the amounts of land controlled by an individual in his or her lifetime would vary, and there was no guarantee that the land would continue to be controlled by the "owner's" offspring (Hoben 1973). According to Hoben, social mobility becomes "a real possibility" when individuals can obtain extra land through successful litigation. The riste system is perhaps more conducive to social mobility than may at first appear.

The peasants enjoying riste rights were known as gebbar, literally 'one who pays tribute'. The person to whom the tribute was paid was known as a gulteгна. A gulteгна acted as a tax-collector who was also empowered by the emperor to extract labour services from the peasantry on behalf of the state, and to act as local magistrate and administrator. He would be allowed to keep a proportion

of the taxes (usually about a third) as a reward for this service. A gulteгна would also invariably have riste rights of his own, in which case, taxes collected from riste lands would pass to the gulteгна and not to the state (Mulugeta Bessabeh, 1980). Peasants working on the riste land of others would become share-cropping tenants, yielding up to three-quarters of their produce in the form of rents and taxes, which became virtually indistinguishable in that both were immediately due to the landlord.

Other forms of land tenure included semon land, which was held by the church and from which all taxes and tithes accrued to the church rather than the state. Tenancies of semon land were supposedly less onerous than those of gult lands, and so were in greater demand among the peasantry (Markakis 1974). Another form of tenure, granted to servants of the state in lieu of salary or pension was known as maderia land. This was usually given for the lifetime of the incumbent, or for a fixed shorter period. Holders of maderia land paid all taxes to the government, but had the right to rent out the land to tenants.

Two other forms of government-held lands existed. These were known as mengist and gebretel (Gilkes 1975). The former were lands claimed by the state but not yet allocated. Much of the mengist land was in fact used by



pastoralists who could be dispossessed when the government saw fit. Gebretel was land reclaimed for non-payment of taxes. It could be re-registered by the former tenant if back taxes and an equivalent fine were paid; otherwise it would be allocated as gult or maderia land to new tenants.

A form of communal tenure also existed in parts of Eritrea and Tigray. This was known as shehena or diesa. Under this system, land would be allocated by the village headman to each household at regular intervals; usually from 3-7 years in duration. Each household would get equal shares of good, moderate and inferior land. Unlike the riste system, households leaving the village would lose their claim to land, and upon returning would have to wait for the next reallocation. The origins of this system are not properly known, although Gilkes (1975) considers that it is a legacy of Italian rule, being forcibly introduced during the occupation in areas of former riste tenure. Presumably this facilitated land registration and tax gathering. The shehana/diesa system strongly resembles that imposed under the land reforms of 1975.

The above types of tenure formed the basis of the 'northern' systems of landholding; which may broadly be distinguished from the 'southern' forms in territories newly-conquered during the great expansion of the Abyssinian empire under Menelik II. The newly-conquered

lands were originally under a variety of communal forms of landholding typical of pre-capitalist societies, whereby the allocation of cultivation and grazing rights was made by village chiefs or elders. The highland empire converted these communal forms of tenure into vast estates over which individual gult holders had rights of ownership and the collection of taxes. Thus the cultivators of these lands were transformed into tenants. Many of the gult estates were awarded to retainers of the emperor who had fought during the conquest. Even the meanest soldier was entitled to substantial amounts of land. Thus the emigration of peasants from the smallholdings of the impoverished and overpopulated northern highlands was encouraged by the state, so that recent attempts at resettlement are not without precedence.

Many of the gult estates were too large to be managed by gulteгна alone. The local chiefs would therefore be appointed as balabats, who would act as intermediaries and would be given small land grants or a portion of the surplus (including labour) extracted from the tenants as a reward for their services. In this way, a process akin to subinfeudation was encouraged. Gult estates could be given on either a hereditary or lifetime basis.

The major forms of tenure described here had many local variations, Gilkes notes that as many as 110 different

Table 4.1 Distribution of Tenants as a Percentage of the Total Population

	Rural population (000)	Wholly rented (%)	Partly owned/ partly rented (%)	Total rentals (%)
Arssi	690.6	45.7	7	52
Gonder	1087.2	9	6	15
Gemu Goffa	583.3	43	4	47
Gojjam	1344.5	13	7	20
Harerghe	1435.6	49	5	54
Illubabor	515.4	73	2	75
Keffa	969.1	59	3	62
Shoa	3585.0	51	16	67
Sidamo	1987.6	37	2	39
Tigray	1410.8	7	18	25
Wellega	1064.1	54	5	59
Wollo	2061.8	17	23	40

Source: Derived from Gilkes 1975 ,table 11, p 116.



types of tenure existed in Wollo alone; while Gebrewold (1981) states that up to 200 types were recorded in Ethiopia as a whole, making the land tenure system there among the most complex in the world. However, there were regional differences in the incidence of tenancy, which are apparent from Table 4.1, which gives estimates of the numbers of tenants in relation to the total rural population by province (excluding Eritrea and Bale) during the closing years of Haile Selassie's reign. In the provinces of Tigray, Gojjam, Gonder and Wollo the incidence of pure tenancy is low, ranging from 7-17 per cent of the farming population. Even when lands which are part-'owned' and part-rented are taken into account, the total number of tenants ranges only from 15-40 per cent of the rural population in these provinces. At the other extreme are the provinces of Arssi, Gemu Goffa, Harerghe, Illubabor, Keffa, Sidamo, Shoa and Wellega, where the incidence of pure tenancy is high, ranging from 37-73 per cent. It seems from the table that the great majority of those renting land in the southern provinces are pure tenants; whereas in the northern provinces a greater proportion of total rentals involve tenants who have rights to land on their own account.

The north/south division is not an absolute one - each of the major types of tenancy existed in both areas, indeed in his study of the conditions of agricultural production in modern-day Ethiopia, McCann believes that the extent of

pure tenancy in the northern highlands has been underestimated (McCann, undated). However, it provides enough of a generalisation to explain why the fissiparous tendencies of the northern regions were not commonly found in the south. In the southern case, the support of the state was needed to keep conquered peoples under the dominion of the gulteгна. In the north, the powerful holders of riste-gult rights could appeal to the regional sympathies of peasants jealously guarding their own riste rights. Peasant rebellions in the north were frequent, and often reflected attempts by the modernising state to replace the tax-collecting gulteгна with salaried administrators. Hoben describes revolts over taxation occurring in Gojjam as recently as 1968 (op cit). Such revolts were encouraged by the strong vertical ties of lineage and tribe in the north; whereas horizontal ties of class-interest were more apparent in the south. The latter situation arose because the southern landlords and intermediaries, regardless of their tribal origin, ultimately depended upon the armies of the centre for control over their tenants (Markakis op cit).

It was remarked earlier that the various forms of land tenure are often characterised as 'feudal' on the grounds that a nobility and a strong church were able to extract substantial surpluses in kind and labour services from the peasantry. Ellis (1976) has criticised this notion on the

grounds that the peasants were not serfs, being free to move, whether through invoking riste-rights or as pure tenants. There were further differences between the Abyssinian system and European feudalism. In Ethiopia, peasants were also warriors, and could gain rank and favour through their exploits on the battlefield; whereas under European feudalism warriors were a separate class. A further differentiating characteristic was that Gult rights were also controlled by the emperor, and could not be awarded by other members of the nobility. However, Ellis does note that just as in medieval Europe: "the predominating factor in the traditional land tenure of the northern provinces has been the perpetual struggle for power between the emperor and the nobles" (ibid p 278).

Further similarities with feudalism are apparent in the ways in which the surpluses were controlled and distributed. The main beneficiaries were the local nobles and landlords, including the church. The state faced varying degrees of difficulty in extracting its share of tribute, depending upon the amount of control it was able to exert over any given region at any given time. This obviously fluctuated with the fortunes of the emperor, a state of affairs which is reminiscent of the struggles between the crown and the baronies in medieval Europe.

In the northern provinces, the poorest producers cultivating under these conditions would be the pure



tenants, working on gult estates. However, their numbers would be far fewer than those who also enjoyed riste rights. Although pure tenancy was commoner in the south, the relative abundance of land, and the generally more favourable production conditions in the newly-settled areas ensured that the poorer tenants could subsist more easily, even under the domain of the landlord and the centralising state.

#### 4.3 The Demands of Warfare on Peasant Produce

There are three ways in which warfare can make claims upon the peasantry. Firstly, soldiers and revenue are needed to equip and provision armies. Secondly, food and food stores need to be controlled in areas in which campaigning is taking place. Thirdly, agricultural production activities will be disrupted during campaigns, and agricultural produce confiscated or destroyed. This is as true today as it was in medieval Ethiopia.

The constant strife among the petty kings and nobles of the northern provinces, particularly during the 'age of princes' of the 18th and early 19th centuries preceeding the reunification of Ethiopia by Emperor Tewoderos during the 1840's, led to frequent military campaigns. The large peasant armies raised by the various factions were not paid a regular wage, and were expected to fend for themselves during campaigns. As a result, armies preyed

upon the peasantry, even in 'friendly' territory. Pankhurst considers that storage of surplus grain acted "merely (as) an invitation to the soldiers to ravage the area or the tax gatherers to increase their exactions" (Pankhurst 1966 p 47). Furthermore, he argues that civil war was "the perpetual scourge of Abyssinia", being particularly bad during the 'age of princes', when as much as a quarter of the population was involved in military activity. Even under Menelik, when internecine strife was much reduced, warfare continued to make demands upon the impoverished northern peasantry. The first Italian invasion took advantage of the weakened state of the economy following the great famine. However, despite the difficulties of provisioning his vast peasant army, Menelik eventually defeated the Italian aggressors at the famous battle of Adwa in 1898. It has been argued that one of the decisive factors affecting the outcome was Menelik's recently-introduced policy of providing centralised grain stores and the introduction of regular wages paid to the soldiery, which reduced the sudden impact of army provisioning among the peasantry.

#### 4.4 The Demands of Religion on the Peasantry

The northern peasantry is highly Christianised and is deeply religious. As part of the practise of orthodox Ethiopian Christianity, some 180 saints' days must be observed. On these days, complete fasting takes place

from dawn to sunset, and often no work can be carried out, as "it was widely believed that to work on such days would cause terrible storms" (Pankhurst 1966). Although the agricultural cycle in the highlands is quite flexible, allowing planting over a long period, the availability of rain is not guaranteed. It is therefore likely that the proscription of work on holy days did (and still does) at times interfere with agricultural production. In addition, the high incidence of fasting has been put forward as a partial explanation for undernutrition and low labour productivity in the highlands (Redda 1984). While the effects of fasting are difficult to quantify, it does seem reasonable to suppose that they would have an overall negative effect on agricultural productivity through the debilitation of producers, even if the effects were partial.

#### 4.5 The Conditions of Agricultural Production

A striking feature of land tenure in Ethiopia has always been the small size of the plots of the vast majority of the farming population. Table 4.2 presents data compiled by Gilkes on the situation during the closing years of Haile Selassie's reign. It can be seen from the table that the small size of holdings is a feature of all provinces, although some stand out as extreme cases. In Wollo, for example, 80 per cent of farmers hold less than one hectare, and in Sidamo the proportion is even higher,



Table 4.2 Size of Holdings by Province

<u>Province</u>	<u>Percentage of total holdings</u>			
	<u>up to 10 hectares</u>	<u>10-20 ha</u>	<u>20-30 ha</u>	<u>30+ ha</u>
Arssi	31	29	20	20
Gonder	70	22	5	3
Gemu-Goffa	92	6	2	0
Gojjam	54	30	10	6
Harerge	76	16	5	3
Illubabor	69	21	3	7
Keffa	76	19	4	1
Shoa	45	27	13	15
Sidamo	91	7	1	1
Tigray	68	21	6	5
Wellega	65	24	7	4
Wollo	80	14	4	2
Average	68	20	7	5

Source: Gilkes (1975), table 15, p 121.

at 91 per cent. Only in Gojjam, Shoa and Arssi do significant numbers of peasants hold plots totalling in excess of 2 hectares, at 10-20 per cent of the farming population in these provinces. Furthermore, Gilkes notes that: "on top of these small farms there is an enormous amount of fragmentation, and although the amount does vary from province to province the majority of holdings are held in two, three or four parcels" (op cit p 121).

The trend towards land fragmentation and the dwindling average size of holdings has undoubtedly accelerated since the revolution. Population growth, environmental degradation and land redistribution have all played their part in this process. Population growth has obviously increased the demand for holdings, while environmental degradation has reduced the amount of land available to households. Land redistribution has reduced the average size of holdings by doing away with the massive gult estates, shifting the distribution curve leftwards. However, it should be noted that land fragmentation can be to the advantage of the peasant; allowing him (or her) to exploit different environmental niches and to spread risk of crop failure, especially where land is held at different elevations. On the other hand, time and energy are wasted in trudging between plots; and valuable capital assets like oxen are not used to their full advantage unless shared with neighbouring farmers.

It is traditionally supposed that the division of labour in Ethiopian agriculture is quite rigid. Certainly, jobs such as bush clearing, ploughing and sowing are traditionally considered to be men's tasks, while women are supposed to confine themselves to tasks such as manuring, grinding, wood and water collection, childcare and cooking. However, recent studies (Poluha, undated; Tadesse, undated; and Tamrat 1983) have shown that there is considerable sharing of agricultural tasks, with both men and women being involved in a whole range of work activities. In fact, women appear to spend more time than men on the majority of farming activities, including land preparation, weeding, harvesting and threshing, transporting, storing and marketing produce, and care of livestock. Although many tasks are shared, women actually have a greater workload than men. Yet men make the production decisions - as Tamrat notes, "the majority of women do not participate in decision-making with regard to what crops to grow, which crops to weed, when to weed etc." (op cit). Additionally, Poluha reports that although both sexes are involved in marketing, men usually sell the high-value products, particularly livestock, while women trade in lower-value commodities, such as poultry and grain.

Production methods among the highland peasantry are quite primitive. Although plough cultivation is undertaken, the traditional wooden plough (maresha) does little more than



scratch the soil. This means that the same piece of land has to be ploughed four or five times for crops such as teff, which need extensive land preparation, (Abate and Kiros 1980). A further constraint for poorer households has always been the limited availability of oxen (McCann 1985). Where rainfall is scattered, and ploughing time limited through religious observance or lack of oxen, then optimal planting conditions cannot always be achieved, even within the constraints of the available technology.

The dependence of the farmer upon rainfed agriculture also brings into question the poor level of development of irrigation technology. Although irrigation is sometimes practiced along the margins of rivers and streams, irrigation technology is for the most part simple. The reasons for this state of affairs have barely been discussed in the literature. Certainly the extravagance of the nobility, and the deeply conservative nature of the orthodox church, do not seem to have encouraged enquiry and experimentation within the traditional modes of production. Radical change in the forces of production awaited the limited introduction of capitalist agriculture using foreign techniques to boost productivity.

#### 4.6 The Impact of Capitalism on Traditional Agriculture

Although the process of modernisation had begun under Menelik II, the Imperial State was only subjected to

substantial capitalist penetration following the defeat of the Italians in 1941. From the 1940s onwards, foreign capital was encouraged to move into both the industrial and agricultural sectors of the Ethiopian economy, and was awarded substantial tax concessions and profit repatriation opportunities as incentives. A modest manufacturing base developed in the 1950s and 1960s, which gave rise to the small 'working class', principally located in Addis Ababa, which was later to be so influential in bringing down the Imperial regime. Growth of manufacturing industry was quite rapid, especially during the 1960s. Between 1961 and 1971, the gross value of production grew almost sixfold, from Eth.\$114.4 m to Eth.\$625.9m (Markakis and Ayelew 1986 p 47). However, the growth of the labour force was much slower, with the number of industrial workers rising from 28,314 to only 51,312 over the same period. Furthermore, Brietske notes that during the 1970's, "employment per industry actually declined by 3.5 per cent while production continued to increase rapidly - a logical outcome of a heavy dependence on imported capital-intensive technologies" (Brietske 1982 p 263).

Most industrial activity was devoted to food processing and a certain amount of import substitution, and quite a variety of multinational corporations became involved in these areas of the economy. These included the Dutch

company HVA in sugar refining; Shell, Agip, Total and Mobil in petroleum distribution; and British Leyland and Fiat in vehicle assembly. Meanwhile, the American company TWA formed Ethiopian airlines, while other famous names became involved in activities as diverse as life insurance, computing, drug manufacturing, meat packing, and textiles. Japanese and Indian interests were well represented, along with the Americans, British, Italians and Dutch.

The growth of the formal trading sector was paralleled by an expansion of informal sector activity. Much of this was devoted to petty trading. Brietske estimates that as much as three-quarters of the people now engaged in "commerce" in Ethiopia are hawkers or stall-keepers. Many of these traders are concentrated in Africa's largest marketplace - the Mercato in Addis Ababa.

The formal manufacturing sector also spawned its informal counterpart. Small workshops devoted to the repair and maintenance of machinery, especially vehicles, employed an unorganised labour force on low wages. However, workers in the formal sector were little better off. Heile Selassie had banned the formation of trade unions, so wages, although generally higher than in the informal sector, tended to lag behind prices.

The establishment of an industrial base in Addis Ababa was



augmented by the growth of capitalist commercial agriculture in favoured locations - notably in the Awash Valley, south east of Addis Ababa, and in the Setit-Humera region of Western Gonder. By 1973, about one-third of the 200,000 ha of irrigated land in the Awash Valley had been developed for the production of agro-industrial crops (Bondestam 1974; Cliffe 1974). Fully 70 per cent of these investments were foreign-owned, and rewards were high. Returns to recurrent expenditure on cotton cultivation could be as high as 67 per cent a year, and other investments in crops such as sugar could be recouped within 3-4 years (Bondestam op cit). Consequently, foreign investors were eager to develop commercial plantations.

Unfortunately, the Afar pastoralists native to the area were displaced by the new mode of production. This occurred in two ways: firstly, some of the best grazing lands were rented by the government to foreign companies for plantations (Bondestam ibid), and secondly, flood control and diversion of river water for irrigation ensured that less grazing was available in those areas not given over to plantations (Sen 1981). The marginalisation of the Afar tribes was not achieved without conflict, for they invaded the plantations with their cattle during the 1973-74 drought. The Afar were among the groups suffering most during the famine, having lost their fallback

grazing. Bondestam estimates that 25-30 per cent of the Afar died during the famine, out of a total population of around 100,000.

Although many of the Afar were impoverished by the impact of comprador capitalism, some prospered. Notable among them was Sultan Ali Mirah, who was a major investor in the commercial schemes. As a result, he amassed a vast fortune and kept his Sultanate intact in the face of foreign economic penetration. Other beneficiaries were the 4,500 permanent workers who enjoyed relatively high wages, although again being unable to unionise, and the 30,000 peasants who were able to supplement their incomes as seasonal workers. A further 50,000 found regular employment as coffee workers in Keffa. Bondestam observed that "during the peak season they wander in thousands down from the highlands to earn their daily bread by picking cotton for a few months, and then return either to subsistence agriculture or to the towns" (op cit p 437).

Although both Bondestam and Cliffe are scathing about the detrimental effects of commercial agriculture on the Afar, they seem to ignore the benefits of expanding seasonal wage labour opportunities for the highlanders, and also to ignore the substantial foreign exchange savings made from reducing the importation of basic wage goods like cotton and sugar. Moreover, foreign exchange was earned from the export of agro-industrial commodities. A certain amount

of infrastructural development was further accomplished as a direct result of commercial development.

Another form of capitalist development of agriculture was fostered by foreign development agencies. Among the first was the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), which set up a project in Chilalo region of Arssi province in southern Ethiopia. The Chilalo Agricultural Development Unit (CADU) injected a typical 'green revolution' package of improved seeds and complementary agricultural inputs, including credit and mechanisation, into traditional peasant agriculture. The benefits were supposed to be targetted towards the poorer peasants, but the effect was the opposite of that intended. The programme began in 1967 and by 1970 some 20 per cent of tenants in the district had been forced off the land to make way for more than 120 commercial farmers; half of whom were entrepreneurs from outside the district (Stahl 1974). Furthermore, tractors and combines were beginning to displace labour. As Markakis and Ayelew note: "It was also discovered that CADU facilities and credit had been monopolised by large farmers, and that the additional income generated in the district had benefited primarily the traders, landlords and local officials." (op cit p 58). Thus the relations of production remained largely unchanged - agriculture was being commercialised, but the benefits were accruing to the traditional elites, who



simply increased their demands upon their more industrious tenants. Consequently, the Swedes withdrew their support for CADU and became firm advocates for land reform, a policy with which they made little headway under Haile Selassie.

Other agricultural development schemes were attempted. In Wollamo awraja in Sidamo province, a project virtually identical to CADU was implemented in 1971. During the same year, a 'Minimum Package Programme' (MPP) was begun with funding from the Swedes, the Danes, the World Bank, FAO and USAID. Beginning with nine projects, the MPP had expanded into a further 27 areas by 1973. The programmes were designed to provide similar services as the CADU and WADU projects, but at lower cost. They were also supposed to appeal to the 'smaller' farmers - defined as those with 20 hectares or less. Unfortunately, the criteria for credit provision were strict, and many small farmers were in fact excluded for lack of literacy and assets. In some cases, large landowners would register their tenants as project beneficiaries; and then would acquire the improved seed and fertiliser for their own use (Gilkes 1975 pp 124-125). A certain amount of mechanisation outside the project areas was also encouraged by the spread of new farming techniques; and this inevitably led to evictions and the conversion of tenants into wage labourers. Gilkes remarks on this trend becoming evident around Shashamene in southern Shoa, during the early 1970s.

The development of agrarian capitalism was nevertheless at a very early stage in Ethiopia at the time of the revolution, being confined to a few localities in a few regions. Its impact on internal markets for land and labour remained slight, although agricultural exports probably did expand quite considerably. Some observers have attempted to ascribe far too much to its effects, for example Cliffe seems to argue that the 1973-74 famine was primarily a result of the transition to capitalism, stating that: "the famine, sparked off by the failure of rain, is thus a product of this complex set of factors operating not on an unchanged, feudal pattern of landlord exploitation of tenant-peasants but on a transitional situation produced by the impact of the harsh, impersonal relations of the money economy". Yet the majority of famine victims at the time were not southern tenants, or even dispossessed Afar, but were riste cultivators from Wollo and Tigray; and in 1974-75, Harerghe pastoralists barely affected by capitalism. Given the history of famine in these areas well before the impact of capitalism, one is inclined to agree with Fitzgerald (1980) who argues that the adverse impact of capitalism, or even of commercialisation of agriculture under existing relations of production have been overgeneralised. It will also be recalled that Mesfin Wolde-Mariam (1984) found that over the period 1958-77, famine was least likely to be encountered in those awrajas which were most economically advanced. Furthermore, the Marxist

overstatement ignores the beneficial effects of improvement in the forces of production, with agrarian capitalism increasing the earning capacity of those riste cultivators who were able to keep their land while having access to extra seasonal wage labour opportunities. Agrarian capitalism would also have expanded foreign exchange earning capacity, thereby improving the balance of payments position. This potential contrasts with the extremely poor performance of the state farms created on the former commercial estates after the revolution. We may now consider how the transition to socialism has further affected the resource base and income earning opportunities of the vulnerable Ethiopian peasantry.

#### 4.7 The Impact of Post-Revolutionary Reforms

The 1974 revolution created opportunities for the radical transformation of Ethiopia's economy and society. Foremost among them was a land reform whereby all land was nationalised and peasant households were given usufructory rights to parcels of land, with the maximum size of holding being set at ten hectares. At the same time, peasants were ordered to form associations on the basis of 800 hectare units (rather than on the basis of a specified population size). To assist in the campaign (zemecha), and to improve literacy among peasants, some 60,000 high school and university students were sent to the countryside for two years (1975-76). This move also



helped to dissipate opposition to the Dergue, as students were among those most ideologically and actively opposed to the military government. The Peasant Associations (PAs) were also designed to politicise the peasantry and to ensure that the land reforms were carried out successfully. They were to be instruments of rural administration and development.

Despite considerable opposition in some areas from supporters of the ancien regime (for a detailed example of opposition in Wollo province, see Mulugeta Bezzabeh, 1980), PAs were widely established. By 1980, there were 25,000 associations covering some 5 million households. These varied in activity from having virtual paper status to being capable of organising major projects such as service cooperatives and road building (Wood 1983). In general, the peasant associations were welcomed by the majority of tenants, who initially gained a great deal from land reform. However, riste cultivators had less to gain and may have resisted land reform (although not tax reform) in some areas - notably those such as Gojjam which were traditionally hostile to attempts by the centre to register agricultural land and tax the agricultural surplus. Also, richer peasants would inevitably attempt to be well-represented on the PA committees, and would then be in a position to allocate some of the best land to themselves (Brietzke op cit).

Thus, the hand of an emerging 'kulak' class was strengthened by the removal of the powerful gultegnas and their replacement with a new rival elite, represented by the Peasant Association committees, albeit under the nominal control of the centre. A further negative aspect of land reform is said to be the lack of incentive for peasants to improve their land in those areas where regular land redistribution takes place, as the trustee can never be sure that he or she will retain improved land (Aseffa 1986).<sup>1</sup>

An immediate result of the land reform was a fall in the marketed agricultural surplus, as peasants who no longer had to hand over large portions of their produce increased their own consumption (Ghose 1985; Gebrewold 1981). Consequently, the government was faced with a need to develop and control agricultural surpluses for foreign exchange and to ensure that urban populations would be fed. This was done in a number of ways. State farms were set up on fallow or virgin land and were devoted to the production of both foodcrops and agro-industrial crops, notably in the latter case cotton and coffee. Expansion of these was particularly rapid over 1979-81, augmenting the original commercial farms which were now nationalised. The state farms have taken the lion's share of modern farming inputs, for example, Ghose presents figures showing that with only 4 per cent of cultivated area,

state farms were allocated 76 per cent of available chemical fertilisers and 95 per cent of improved seed varieties over 1981-2 (op cit p 134). At the same time, the government attempted to encourage the formation of producer cooperatives, believing that these would be more efficient than individual smallholder production. In fact, yields on producer cooperatives have been substantially lower than on peasant farms. State farms have been most productive in terms of total contribution to national output relative to area planted; but in terms of returns to inputs it is likely that equivalent investment in peasant farming would have been more productive.

Another means of processing agricultural surpluses was introduced through the establishment of the Agricultural Marketing Corporation in 1976. This parastatal body purchases foodcrops for distribution at controlled prices (see Chapter 2). Most of the purchases are made from traders, state farms and peasant associations through a network of collecting and purchasing centres throughout the country. Recently, procurement has fallen to around a third of the peak levels achieved in 1982-83.

The reduction in procurement has not been merely a result of extensive crop failures, but has also been a product of the unwillingness of producers and merchants to sell grain at low official prices, especially at a time when open-



market wholesale and retail prices have been climbing rapidly, particularly in regions suffering an overall grain deficit. This situation contrasts with the rapid growth of marketed output from the peasant sector over 1977-82 (Ghose op cit). During this period the price differential between official and open market prices was much less than during the years of food crisis. Indeed, in some cases the prices offered by the state were quite attractive to sellers in surplus regions, so peasants and traders were much more willing to sell agricultural products to the AMC. Severe restrictions on inter-regional trade, implemented through state control over truck fleets through its transport agency, NATRACOR, have made it difficult for traders to respond to market signals in deficit regions. However, a certain amount of informal trade is still carried out; mostly using pack animals and mostly within areas of the country where state control is largely peripheral. Peasants themselves will turn to trade in an attempt to augment dwindling incomes caused by crop failures.

Taxation of rural producers has also steadily increased in recent years, despite a honeymoon period immediately following the land reforms when peasants enjoyed relatively high disposable incomes with the eradication of landlordism. While there is little or no information on current levels of taxation available from official

sources, Clay and Holcomb (1985) have gone into the subject in some detail in interviews in Sudan with refugees from southern Ethiopia who have fled resettlement and villagisation. They have made the following noteworthy statement:

"All those interviewed pointed out that the new government had promised to eliminate taxes and payments to landlords. This promise, along with endorsement of peasants' initiative in expelling southern Amhara landlords and their Oromo collaborators, accounted for the initial positive response by the local population to the Dergue and its policies. The breaking of these promises, however, accounted for the peasants' bitterness and sense of betrayal. Outrage was so strong that all respondents remembered with precision the exponential rise in baseline taxes. The first tax payment required was a E\$7 land tax in 1977. This land-use fee jumped to E\$20 the following year. After this, the land tax rose from E\$30 in 1980 to E\$50 in 1984" (ibid p 139).

In addition to land taxes, a whole range of other taxes and 'contributions' are now made. These include contributions to the peasant, youth and women's associations; payments for roads, construction of schools and other facilities; fees paid for various committee expenses, and contributions to 'revolutionary' campaigns such as wars, resettlement and villagisation. The average tax and fee burden for the agricultural year 1983-84 of 12

farmers interviewed by Clay and Holcomb was E\$188. As the researchers observe: "The totals ranged from E\$102 to E\$250 per household and were based on AMC prices - notoriously low - for grain and equivalent values for livestock and confiscated household goods." (op cit p 140). The real market value of contributions was therefore 2-3 times higher and can be compared to the estimated incomes per caput of the sample households of E\$720 pa. Indeed two-thirds of respondents had been forced to sell livestock in order to pay taxes, including oxen. Others lost livestock and other assets through confiscation by government for use by other farmers being resettled or collectivised.

Soil and water conservation activities have also been implemented through the Ministry of Agriculture and in collaboration with Peasant Associations in selected districts. The largest project involves large scale tree planting and terracing and is run on a 'food-for-work' basis with the support of the World Food Programme (see Holt 1985). Apart from contributing to a hoped-for improvement in soil fertility, the Wollo project has been an important source of income for peasants threatened with starvation in recent years (Yeraswerk and Solomon 1985). The ecological aspects of vulnerability to famine will be discussed in the next chapter, following which the interrelationship between economic, environmental, social



and political factors will be considered in a case study of the most recent famine.

#### 4.8 Summary

In this chapter, we have investigated some of the major factors contributing to the enduring vulnerability of the Ethiopian peasantry to famine. The most important influence on the impoverishment of an industrious people on a potentially rich natural resource base has been the systematic exploitation of the tenant by the landlord. Even where peasants have enjoyed partial access to their own holdings through inheritance, the landlord and the State have been able to exact considerable levels of taxation, with combined rents and taxes making up some three-quarters of the household's produce in some cases. Under such conditions, the peasant had little incentive to extend his area of cultivation or to undertake land improvements. The feudal lords and the central government similarly made few attempts to encourage investments in traditional agriculture, beyond allowing minor experiments in rural development by foreign governments. However, the development of certain favourable lowland locations for commercial capitalist agriculture was promoted by the State in the interests of generating increased foreign exchange revenues. This was done by inviting foreign companies onto land which had been alienated from its pastoral inhabitants. Consequently, the vulnerability to

famine of certain pastoral groups, such as the Afar, increased. However, the new plantations did provide substantial ancilliary income-earning opportunities for the highland peasantry.

The 1974 revolution initially brought some relief to the peasantry in the form of reduced rents and taxes. A network of Peasant Associations was also set up which held out considerable promise for agricultural extension work and for the organisation of labour for investment in public works. However, the priorities of the new government remain the same as those of the old - the consolidation of the empire and the maintenance of the priviliges of an (expanded) elite, this time made up of military personnel and bureaucrats rather than the nobility. Agriculture continues to be neglected, while the demands of warfare and the construction of a new socialist state have ensured that taxes would be raised to levels approaching those of the ancien regime. These priorities have aggravated the problem of increasing fragmentation of peasant holdings through rapid population growth, which seems set to result in increased land degradation in densely-settled areas and to reduce aggregate food availability. Whether or not this supposition is borne out by the available evidence is the subject of the next chapter.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> However, in other respects the PAs have been a progressive force. As instruments of data gathering and famine relief they appear to have discharged their duties competently and fairly in many cases (Holt and Cutler 1984).



## Chapter 5:

### The roots of famine: Environmental degradation, drought and crop production, 1961-84

#### 5.1. Introduction

In this chapter, we shall consider the causes and consequences of soil erosion and related land degradation in Ethiopia. It will be seen that although estimates of the extent of soil erosion are crude, recent work suggests that the problem is far advanced in the overcultivated highlands. The reasons for this state of affairs are complex, and little sociological work has so far been carried out to account for the propensity of highland farmers to degrade their own environment. Here we shall follow Blaikie's (1985) approach in order to unravel the social processes underlying the physical processes causing soil erosion. Blaikie directs our attention to questions about which groups or classes of people are contributing most to land degradation, and about the circumstances under which it occurs. He argues that the poor are often forced to degrade their environment because they are overburdened with rents and taxes, and are unable to reinvest surplus product in the land. Before examining the evidence for this thesis, we shall consider the geographical extent and physical impact of the problem.

## 5.2. The causes, extent and impact of soil erosion in Ethiopia

It is often asserted that the Ethiopian highlands are suffering from acute problems of soil erosion. For example, Hancock quotes UN estimates that around 1.6 billion tonnes of soil are lost every year from wind and water erosion (Hancock 1985 p 75). This estimate is higher than that of Mesfin Wolde Mariam (1972), who stated that the highlands lose about 960 million tonnes of soil annually. The difference between the two estimates may indicate that the annual rate of soil loss is increasing.<sup>1</sup>

Little detailed knowledge of the extent of erosion problems appears to exist. The most useful source is the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) Land Use Planning Project (FAO/ALP 1984), which divides the country into a number of agro-ecological zones and describes agricultural conditions and natural vegetation in each. Four categories of cultivated land are identified: state farms; intensively cultivated; moderately cultivated; and perennial crop cultivation.

Intensively cultivated land makes up some 10 per cent of land area, with 70 per cent of this area under a wide variety of annual crops. The remaining 30 per cent is left fallow or is unutilisable for agriculture. The report notes that overgrazing and overcultivation have led

to widespread soil erosion:

"Grazing land is excessively overstocked during the cropping season. Thus, the vegetative cover in these areas hardly ever grows more than a few centimetres, even at the peak of the wet season. Crop harvesting is not completed until well into the dry season, at which time the crop stubble, weeds and other vegetation are dry. At the beginning of the harvesting season, livestock move progressively into the previously cropped land for aftermath grazing as this is harvested, often at a faster rate than the crop harvesters. Consequently, by the end of the harvesting activities, the aftermath is nearly exhausted. This cycle leaves very extensive areas completely bare by the middle of the dry season - in both the areas which have just been cropped and those which have been fallow during the ending season. The result is tremendous erosion at the onset of the rainy season, and well into it." (ibid p 6).

The land-use study assesses the main areas of intensive cultivation as lying in Arssi, Shoa, eastern Gojjam and eastern Gonder; western Tigray and western Wollo. The report goes on to note that "some of the worst eroded areas in the country are within this mapping unit in northern Shoa, western Wollo and western Tigray" (ibid). These areas are among those traditionally most famine-affected in Ethiopia.



Moderately cultivated land, making up about 11 per cent of the country, is less intensively used but is also suffering from erosion. This will presumably worsen in future with increasing population growth and migration from overpopulated areas. Some of the migration is spontaneous, and part of an historical expansion of population southwards and westwards; while some is organised by the State, often on a very large scale. While large-scale migration is a relatively new phenomenon, it seems likely that it will contribute to the reproduction of ecological conditions existing in the homeland areas of the migrants. Soil degradation is likely to occur rapidly on lowland tropical soils which are not suitable for intensive cultivation of the kind practised by highland peasants.

A rather more detailed study of soil erosion has been carried out by Wright (1984) as part of the comprehensive Ethiopian Highlands Reclamation Study. Wright describes the main process of soil erosion in the highlands, which (to simplify somewhat) begins with abrupt deforestation. This is followed by physical damage to the soil from heavy downpours during the rainy season, and is compounded by the loss of plant nutrients, particularly from perennial plants. Overcultivation and overgrazing (as described earlier) reduce the ability of the soil to readjust to the new farming environment, which it is capable of doing if the change in land use from forest cover to intensive

agriculture were to be more gradually introduced. Wright also discusses soil erosion in terms of a somewhat wider time horizon whereby so-called soil degradation could be seen as part of a long-term process of renewal of the soil. Some degree of soil erosion is always necessary for soil renewal.

Nevertheless, the intensity and extent of erosion in the Ethiopian highlands does seem to be exceptional. Although conditions vary widely by soil type, topography and agro-ecological zone, Wright calculates that 52 per cent of highland soils "show significant signs of accelerated erosion" (ibid p vii), whereby the rate of soil erosion exceeds that of soil renewal. Of this proportion, a little over half suffers "seriously from the effects of accelerated erosion", and a little under half "show moderately or slightly accelerated erosion which is growing rapidly worse in many areas" (ibid). In physical terms, the higher rates of soil erosion could amount to 50-200 tons per hectare per annum.<sup>2</sup>

These findings are supported by Mesfin Wolde Mariam's (1984) wide-ranging study of the causes of famine in Ethiopia. Mesfin has assessed the quality of the physical environment by compiling five variables on a district-by-district basis. These include: the ratio of mean annual rainfall to the mean annual temperature; the number of

rainy days over a 120-day period; a coefficient of variation of annual rainfall; a soil rating; and the proportion of cultivable land to total land area. When these composite indices are related to the incidence of famine, a highly negative correlation is obtained, with the null hypothesis (that there is no relationship between the incidence of famine and the quality of the physical environment) being rejected with more than 99 percent confidence. In other words, there appears to be a strong relationship between the incidence of famine and the poverty of the environment.

The widespread incidence of severe soil degradation in highland Ethiopia can be explained in large measure by the historical legacy of the excessive extraction of surplus produce from the peasantry. We have seen from the previous chapter that as late as the 19th century the peasantry was potentially rich, but was constrained from cultivating in full measure mostly because the bulk of the wealth produced would be siphoned off by the balabats, gulteгна and other intermediaries through a process of subinfeudation running all the way up to the provincial rases and to the emperor. While during earlier periods of relative abundance of land this situation would not have led directly to problems of soil erosion - except perhaps in that manpower which might otherwise have been used for on-farm investment would have been diverted to other ends such as corvee farm labour or warfare - it became



increasingly problematic as the population grew to reach the physical limits of cultivation given existing technologies and modes of social organisation. The landlords failed to invest part of the available surplus in productive agricultural activities, instead frittering away the fruits of peasant labour on conspicuous consumption and incessant warfare. The relative stagnation of the Ethiopian type of feudalism ensured that technologies remained backward and a Boserupian-style agricultural revolution, whereby the intensification of agricultural techniques begins when the land frontier is reached (Boserup 1965), did not occur. Under such circumstances, in Blaikie's words:

"surpluses are extracted from cultivators who then in turn are forced to extract 'surpluses' from the environment (stored up fertility of the soil, forest resources, long evolved and productive pastures, and so on), and this in time ..... leads to degradation and/or erosion" (op cit p 124).

We should note here that the socio-economic circumstances causing soil erosion in Ethiopia are rather different from those which are usually shown to be the ultimate causes of soil erosion and land degradation in most LDCs. In the European colonies, much of the best land would be appropriated by the colonising power for use by settlers or by foreign companies to grow export crops.

Consequently, the indigenous population would be forced to farm on a dwindling land area. Classic examples of this process were (and are) to be found among the Kikuyu of Kenya and in southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe). We have seen from the previous chapter that the commercial exploitation of favoured lands was encouraged in Ethiopia from the 1940s onwards, with predictable adverse effects on the indigenous peoples, except where certain local rulers were able to become comprador capitalist farmers. However, the impact of such development was limited in terms of physical size of the areas covered by commercial farms, although the effects on markets for agricultural goods and labour were quite far reaching. Economic dualism resulted, with a rapidly growing capitalist agricultural sector having access to cheap peasant labour, especially on a seasonal basis, which was in turn subsidised by the produce of the peasant's own farms. At the same time, surpluses were being extracted from the peasantry by 'feudal' landlords (who might also be comprador capitalists). Yet agricultural capitalism was a double-edged sword. It acted as a safety-net for peasants who were able to find wage-work, especially if they had suffered crop failures on their farms.

The 1974 revolution did not change the objective conditions of the peasantry very much. Although the landlord/tax gatherers were swept away, renewed demands were made upon the peasantry by the military government.

Taxes were first dramatically slashed, and then gradually raised to the quite punitive (and often arbitrary) levels which now exist. New taxes in the form of compulsory purchases of grain at fixed prices were introduced. Trade restrictions were imposed, introducing a new squeeze on a peasantry which was traditionally heavily involved in small-scale commerce. Warfare actually increased, adding a further dimension to movement restrictions, and contributing to the destruction of produce. Worse still, the heavy demands of the military budget ensured that funds which could have been at least partially restored to the peasantry through rural development projects were unavailable. Only limited attempts at rural development were made, mostly through projects implemented with foreign aid. However, the establishment of a rural network of peasants associations (PAs) did give opportunities for collective decision-making and action to solve the problem of soil erosion at local level. Yet the PAs do not seem to be fulfilling this function particularly well, probably because the committees of rich peasants controlling them do not see it as necessarily in their interests to do so. The PAs exist primarily to facilitate the flow of surplus from the peasantry to the state bureaucracy.

To conclude then, soil erosion and land degradation in Ethiopia should be seen as the outcome of a long history



of excessive surplus extraction from the peasantry. Investment in agricultural capital and techniques was prevented by conspicuous consumption on behalf of the aristocracy and their intermediaries. This is not to suggest that the peasantry did not adapt to changing circumstances - experimentation with different crops, crop mixes and cultivation methods would certainly have occurred (cf Richards 1985). Yet the scope for agricultural intensification was slight without the aid of capital investment in the land and in improved techniques of production. Adaptation therefore took the form firstly of extending the land frontier up to the limits of cultivation and secondly of intensifying land use using existing farming techniques while not investing in the maintenance of soil fertility. A picture then emerges of periodic climatic disruption impinging upon a fragile resource base farmed to overcapacity at a given level of technology. In a localised sense, then, the famines of the northern highlands may be seen as Malthusian crises. Population has exceeded the carrying capacity of the land at a given level of technology and social organisation.<sup>3</sup>

### 5.3. The Impact of Drought

Meteorologists tend to distinguish three broad definitional categories of drought: meteorological, hydrological and agricultural (Farmer and Wigley 1985; Glantz 1987). Meteorological droughts refer to the

reduction of rainfall below the long-term mean over a specified period and to a specified extent. For example, a meteorological drought may be considered as seasonal or annual precipitation of more than 25 per cent below the 30 year average. Different cut-off points are adopted depending upon the opinion of the analyst or the purposes of the definition.

Hydrological drought refers to low levels of rivers, lakes, reservoirs, wells, waterholes and other sources of groundwater. These levels are determined not only by levels of precipitation; but also by levels of offtake for human and agricultural use, and by rates of evaporation. The levels of offtake are likely to change over time, especially with increasing population and changes in land use - for example through the introduction of irrigated agriculture.

Agricultural drought occurs when crops fail to get enough moisture (from whatever source) at the proper times during the growing season. Again, there may be different cut-off points adopted to determine agricultural drought - for example the World Meteorological Organisation lists 59 indices of agricultural drought (Hounam et al 1975). However, Farmer and Wigley note that "in human terms, agricultural drought is a moisture deficit on a sufficient scale to cause disruption of the rural economy. In an extreme agricultural drought, crops fail and animals, and

perhaps people, die" (op cit pp 24-25). This statement concurs with our notion that drought can act as an exogenous shock to the economy, precipitating a series of events leading to famine. Similarly, Glantz (1987) speaks of the 'second and third-order' effects, such as grain price increases, the need for extra food imports, and an acceleration of rural-urban migration in addition to the obvious first-order effects of drought, such as withered crops, reduced pasture and forage, and dry watering points.

Meteorological, hydrological and agricultural droughts are all obviously related phenomena and are respectively characterised by low average levels of precipitation, groundwater and moisture availability for crops. However, even under drought conditions precipitation may vary widely over time. For example, hailstorms frequently destroy standing crops in the Ethiopian highlands despite a previous dry-spell. During droughts, what little rain there is may fall heavily over a short space of time. Timberlake (1985) describes "the destructive impact of rain on overused soil during one week in May 1984" in Wollo. He writes that:

"the rains ... bounced off (the) compacted vegetationless watershed soil. The water ran off quickly in flashfloods, carrying away soil and precious seeds towards the lowland deserts to the east, or towards the Nile basin to the



west. After a night of rain, I looked out from a hilltop to see massive erosion, hills looking as if they had been dynamited, mud and rocks from the fields of hill farmers strewn over the fields of valley farmers" (op cit, pp 21-22).

Thus it may be more appropriate to speak strictly of 'rain failures' rather than drought when discussing conditions in the semi-arid tropics. In general, the variability of precipitation rises as its overall incidence falls. The term 'drought' tends to imply to the layman that virtually no rain falls, or else that available rainfall is weak and vacillating.

#### 5.4. The Incidence and Causes of Rain Failure in Sub-Saharan Africa

Sub-Saharan African is not well-served with regularly reporting meteorological stations. Gaps in coverage in central and eastern Africa are a particular constraint on data collection (UCAR 1985). Nevertheless, data series exist, particularly for West Africa, which in some cases go back to the 1890s. These time series have allowed meteorologists to construct generalised classifications of agro-climatic zones. The western part of Ethiopia impinges on four of these zones: the Sahelo-Saharan; the Sahel; the Sudan and the Soudano Guinean zone (Nicholson and Chervin 1983). These four zones coincide with the

region which is commonly referred to as the Sahel.

The characteristics of precipitation in each zone are described by Nicholson (1980) and are reproduced in Table 5.1. It can be seen from the table that the further north is the zone, the lower is the mean annual rainfall. The coefficient of variation of rainfall also rises with the increase in latitude; while the length of the rainy season shortens. Nicholson has plotted annual rainfall departures from the mean for each zone, using time-series data from stations in each region going back in some cases to the beginning of the century. These data series are reproduced in figure 5.1.

It can be seen from the figure that for each zone average rainfall declines sharply towards the end of the period. In the case of the two most northerly zones, this decline began in the late 1950s. The recovery of the rains during the mid 1960s was short-lived, while the apparent recovery during 1973-75 was below the long term mean. These findings are confirmed by Lamb (1985) whose sub-Saharan rainfall index is compiled from 20 stations (see Figure 5.2). Although Lamb locates the genesis of the drought in 1969, he argues that it has continued unabated since then. The famine of 1984 therefore followed 17 years of meteorological drought.

The length and severity of the recent drought has led to a

Table 5.1: Precipitation Characteristics of Sahelian Climatic Zones

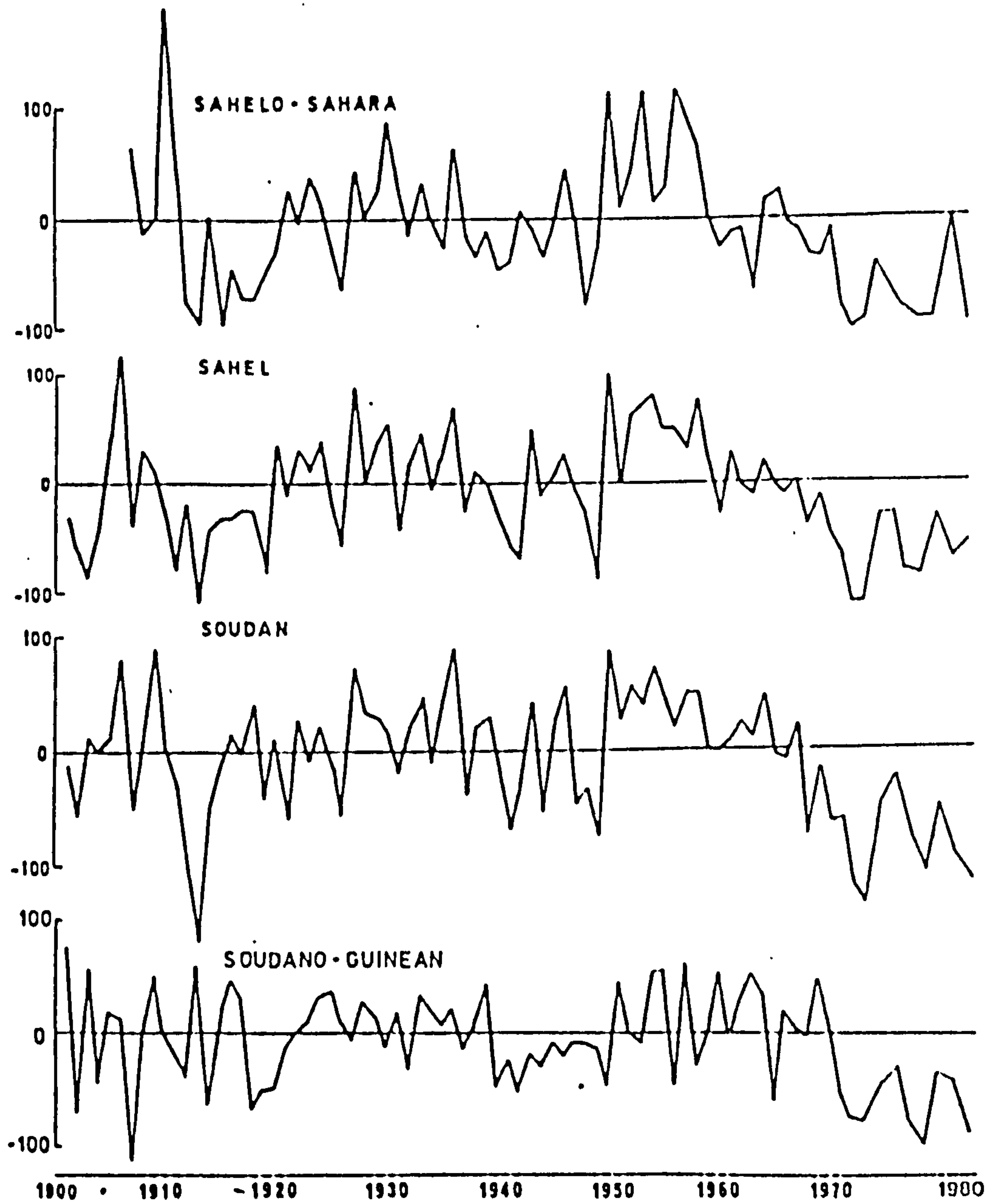
<u>Zone</u>	<u>Mean Annual Rainfall (mm)</u>	<u>Coefficient of variability(%)</u>	<u>Length of rainy season</u>
Sahelo-Sahara	50-100	50+	1-2 months
Sahel	100-400	30-50	2-3 months
Soudan	400-1200	20-30	3-5 months
Soudano-guinea	1200-1600	15-20	5-8 months

Note Standard deviation of annual totals expressed as a percentage of the annual mean.

Source: Nicholson, 1980.

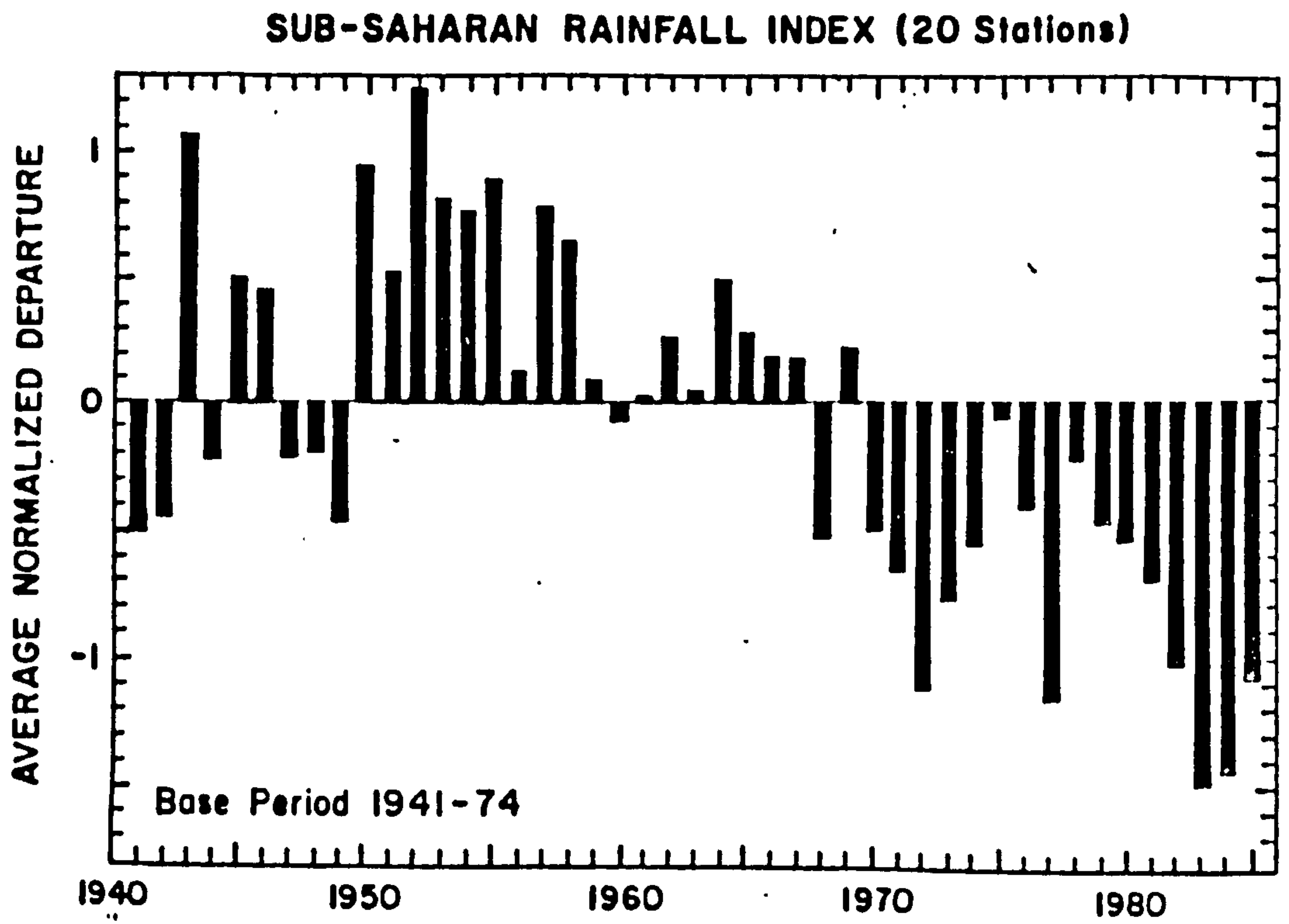


Figure 5.1: Annual Rainfall Departures for 4 North African Zones



Source: Nicholson, 1983.

Figure 5.2



Source: Lamb, 1985

debate among climatologists as to whether the changing weather pattern is the result of a permanent shift of climate. Although it is clear from written historical records and from analyses of past lake and river levels that protracted hydrological droughts occurred in the past (see Nicholson 1978 and Maley 1981) as Farmer and Wigley observe: "the recent rainfall decline is unprecedented in duration, intensity, spatial character and seasonal expression" (op cit p 2). Whether this is part of a very long term cycle or represents a fundamental shift towards drier and more variable precipitation conditions simply is not yet known with any certainty.

For those who argue in favour of the case for a long-term shift in climate, the actions of man are held to be a prime culprit. These anthropogenic factors include deforestation, overcultivation and overgrazing, all of which reduce the amount of vegetation on the earth's surface. This in turn increases the reflectivity (albedo) of the surface, which raises atmospheric temperature and reduces the opportunities for cloud formation. Evapotranspiration, a major component of available atmospheric moisture, is also reduced. The lack of plant cover allows accelerated soil erosion through the increased force of infrequent but heavy downpours. A further effect may be that of added atmospheric dust curtailing solar radiation, which would have much the same



impact as increasing surface reflectivity. To these anthropogenic factors could be added the global effects of the temperature increase attributed to the 'greenhouse effect'. This is the result of the burning of fuels (particularly fossil fuels in the industrialised countries) which raises the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. This in turn increases the absorption of solar radiation, raising the soil temperature, and hence atmospheric temperature. Concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere are increasing at the rate of 0.5 per cent every year (Timberlake 1985). Some climatologists believe, on the basis of computer modelling, that this will raise average temperatures in the tropics by some 2-3° centigrade by early next century, while at the same time increasing climatic variability.

While the relationship between these effects and the incidence of drought is open to debate, a further factor which has recently received attention has been the relationship between 'El Nino' and the incidence of drought in sub-Saharan Africa (Ropelwski and Halpert 1986). The term "El Nino" (Spanish for "Christ-child") refers to the warm water which appears off the coast of Peru in late December each year. The term "southern oscillation" (SO) refers to the pressure differential which exists between the Pacific and Indian oceans - when pressure is high over the Pacific ocean it tends to be low over the Indian ocean, and vice versa. A fairly high

degree of correlation between pressure at mean sea level in northern Australia and equatorial Africa has also been observed, indicating a further connection westwards.

During 1982-83, sea surface temperatures in the eastern Pacific were exceptionally high, registering 1-5° centigrade above normal. This caused a sharp and early fall in the SO index to record low levels. In turn this forced a shift eastwards in the convectional currents, known as Walker cells, which dominate weather patterns in the equatorial belt. As a result, moisture-laden winds circulated eastwards of their normal position, and both Africa and Australia suffered severe drought.

The precise causal mechanisms behind the ENSO phenomenon are not well-understood, and they are undoubtedly complex, involving interactions between ocean currents and temperatures and atmospheric pressure. Some of these complex inter-relationships are outlined by the World Meteorological Organisation:

"In the typical ENSO phase with a falling SO index, pressure rises over the Indonesian region. The pressure gradient along the equator decreases, and in the case of unusually strong events such as that of 1982-83, actually reverses. This is accompanied by a relaxation in the Pacific trade winds. The easterly winds in the western equatorial Pacific diminish, then change direction,

blowing from west to east. This dramatic change in the drag on the ocean surface, which normally persists for a period of several months, sets in motion a complex dynamical response in the ocean resulting in major changes in the equatorial current system and a change in sea level..... The combined effect is to create a much thicker mixed layer and warm ocean surface off Ecuador/N. Peru - the El Nino anomaly ..... ENSO brings heavy inter-tropical rains to the central and eastern Pacific and tends to leave the rest of the equatorial belt relatively dry" (WMO 1985).

Thus meteorological drought in the Sahel could be at least partly attributable to the ENSO phenomenon, which occurs approximately every 2-7 years, but which was exceptionally severe during 1982-83, and appears to have had a global effect on climate.

#### 5.5. Rain Failures, Crop Failures and Famine in Post-Revolutionary Ethiopia

The record of agricultural production for the years following the revolution has been unfortunate. Table 5.2 lists the main features of the situation reports compiled for the years 1975-85 by the FAO's Global Early Warning System. It can be seen that not a year has passed without climatic or war-related catastrophe in several provinces. Notable events include the Ogaden drought of 1975-76;



Table 5.2: Chronology of Food Crises as Reported by the FAO Global Early Warning System, 1976-85

(1) <u>Year/Month</u>	(2) <u>Crop/Food supply sitn.</u>	(3) <u>Popn. affected</u> (millions)	(4) <u>FAO est.</u> <u>req. (000 mt)</u>	(5) <u>Total imp.</u> <u>req.</u>	(6) <u>Actual</u> <u>import</u>	(7) <u>Food aid</u> <u>imports</u>
<u>1976</u> March	1975 cereal output 5% larger than 1974. Ogaden still affected by drought, 900,000 famine victims still in relief centres. 1976 crop condition average to good. Early cessation of rains, crop prospects poor. Special alert no. 25. Crop reduction of 300-400,000 tons from 1975 anticipated.					
June						
Oct.						
Dec.		0.8-0.9	131	110	92	60
<u>1977</u> April	1976 crop shortfall confirmed by FAO mission. Food shortages anticipated owing to slow arrival of imports. Severe food shortages. Dramatic price increases in urban areas. Crop cond. av. to good. Special alert no. 68 released.					
July				300		
Nov.				300	159	66

Table 5.2 (cont)

(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
<u>1978</u> Jan.	Crop damaged by heavy rains during harvest.					
April	1977 crop at least 200,000 tons lower than previous year. Belg crop fails in Wollo.			250-300		
Sept.	FAO calls for at least 200,000 tons emergency food aid. Severe shortages in Wollo.	3.0				
Nov.	Crop better than 1977.				274	113
<u>1979</u> Jan.	1978 crop slightly better than 1977.					
May	Govt. reports 1978 crop below normal. Serious shortages in Wollo and Tigray; war displaced in Bale and Sidamo.					
Nov.	1979 crop outlook favourable. Food shortages continue.			400	269	125
<u>1980</u> Feb.	1979 crop greater than 1978 but below normal crops in Wollo, Tigray, Shoa, Bale and Sidamo.					
May		4.5				
July	1979 crop estimated at 10% above 1978 level.					
Sept.	Crop prospects poor because of late rains.					
Nov.	Only 82,000 tons pledged.				386	186

Table 5.2 (cont)

(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
<u>1981</u> April	Main season crop poor in many regions.		350			
June	Belg crop prospects unfav.	3.9			210	160
Nov.	Drought continues.					
<u>1982</u> Jan.	1981 cereal prodn. sharply reduced in drought areas.	2.3				
Feb.	10 provinces reported drought-affected in 1981.	4.5	300			
Sept.	Belg crop reduced, meher prospects poor.					
Nov.	Poor harvest. Serious shortages anticipated in Wollo, Tigray, Eritrea.					
	Special alert no. 139.	5.2			255	155
<u>1983</u> Jan.	Govt. appeals for urgent assistance.	4.8	400-500			
Mar.	Shortages worsen.					
June	3 m. drought-affected in north alone.					
Oct.	Poor crops anticipated in north. Urgent supplies of food aid requested.	5.5	452		445	
Nov.	UNDR0 appeal for transport funds to move 15,000 tons food per month.				300	298



Table 5.2 (cont)

(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
<u>1984</u> Jan.	1983 crop prodn. worse than 1982.	4.7				
Mar.	Food aid urgently requested for the north.		685	400		
Apr.	FAO/WFP assessment mission confirms problems in north.	5.2		685		
May	Belg crop complete failure.					
July	Belg failure confirmed.		380			
Aug.	Meher prospects poor.	6+	441			
Sept.	Famine reported in north.					
Oct.	Crop failure confirmed.					
Dec.	FAO mission confirms crops fail.	7	900	1,700	511	459
<u>1985</u> Jan.	1984 main season crop 32% below 1980-82 average.	7.7	1,500			
Apr.	Donor pledges of 849,000 mt of which 378,000 delivered.					
Sept.	Belg crop prospects average. Main season crop prospects better than 1984. Total 1.2 million mt pledged, 0.9 mill. mt delivered.	7.9-8.5				
Nov.	1985 crop recovery confirmed but assistance still required for 1986.	7.9				
		7.9			1,515	1,265

warfare in the Ogaden and in Eritrea in 1977; and the onset of severe drought in the northern provinces in the same year. Although there was some respite over the years 1978-79, serious rain failures persisted in the north over the period 1980-83, and had become almost nationwide by 1984. There was a considerable improvement in rainfall conditions over 1985, but widespread loss of assets and demographic disruption reduced the ability of famine-affected populations to rehabilitate themselves.

Throughout the decade there are numerous reports of pest attacks, hailstorms, flooding etc. contributing to crop failures. Thus it is clearly inappropriate to attribute the 1984 famine solely to sudden drought, as its roots lie in the persistent crop failures of the previous decade, which were precipitated by a number of factors, and were presumably aggravated by environmental degradation. As table 5.2 indicates, the northern provinces of Eritrea, Tigray, Wollo, Gonder and Shoa have been continually hit by crop failures, and it is therefore not surprising that in these areas famine conditions were most widespread during the 1984 emergency.

In view of these reportedly severe crop failures, we shall now consider the effect on cereals production, both nationally and in regional terms. In this way we may begin to discern the extent to which a major cause of famine has been an absolute decline in food availability (FAD). This is important given Sen's rejection of FAD as

a cause of the 1973-74 famine in Wollo.

#### 5.6. Trends in cereals production and imports: 1961-1984

Data are available from the Central Statistical Office covering some 22 crops. FAO has compiled these data and has aggregated cereals production for each year. As cereals typically make some 85 per cent of the diet of the peasantry, it is reasonable to use cereals data as a measure of food availability for the population. However, we should at the outset add a note of caution. Before 1982, when the FAO introduced a reporting system based on crop-cutting and systematic sampling procedures, the estimates of agricultural production were carried out by MOA officials on the basis of "eyeball" estimation of crop production. These estimates were also likely to be adjusted to suit the purposes of the district and provincial administrators, before finding their way to Addis Ababa. Consequently, the data series are for the most part extremely suspect (Ghose 1985).

In table 5.3 the data are divided into two series: 1961-71 and 1972-84. It can be seen that cereals production per caput, using revised population data from the 1984 census, has fallen slightly over the period 1961-84, at -0.76 per cent per annum. However, over the period 1970-84, no change in the trend rate of growth has taken place.



Table 5.3: Cereals Production, Cereals Imports and Population: 1961-84

	<u>1961</u>	<u>1962</u>	<u>1963</u>	<u>1964</u>	<u>1965</u>	<u>1966</u>	<u>1967</u>	<u>1968</u>	<u>1969</u>	<u>1970</u>	<u>1971</u>		
Total Production (000 tons)	3963	4065	4221	4366	4010	4228	3955	4238	4272	4417	4396		
Population (000)	24756	25334	25925	26531	27150	27812	28489	29183	29895	30623	31327		
Prodn per caput (kg)	160.1	160.5	162.8	164.5	147.7	152.0	138.8	145.2	142.9	144.2	140.3		
Total Imports (000 tons)	4.8	7.6	7.3	9.0	27.2	57.4	31.2	23.9	31.3	75.5	53.5		
	<u>1972</u>	<u>1973</u>	<u>1974</u>	<u>1975</u>	<u>1976</u>	<u>1977</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>1979</u>	<u>1980</u>	<u>1981</u>	<u>1982</u>	<u>1983</u>	<u>1984</u>
Total Production (000 tons)	4489	4466	3866	4797	4431	3997	5204	6395	5612	5382	6718	5527	4770
Population (000)	32047	32784	33538	34309	35113	35936	36777	37629	38521	39479	40461	41468	42500
Prodn per caput (kg)	140.1	136.2	115.3	139.8	126.2	111.2	141.5	169.9	145.7	136.3	166.0	133.3	112.2
Total Imports (000 tons)	12.8	24.0	123.9	73.1	97.9	198.6	229.6	260.5	404.9	218.4	284.0	362.6	514.1

Table 5.3 (cont..)

	<u>Annual Growth Rates (per cent)</u>			<u>Coefficients of Variation</u>		
	1961-70	1970-84	1961-84	1961-71	production	imports
Production	0.67	2.36	1.59	0.041	0.786	
Population	2.4	2.4	2.4	0.170	0.742	
Production per caput	-1.7	0.00	-0.8	0.165	1.113	
Imports	31.5	22.2	20.3	<u>Correlation Coefficients: imports on production</u>		
				1961-71 = 0.51		
				1971-84 = 0.50		
				1961-84 = 0.66		

Nevertheless, the long-term trends conceal considerable year-to-year variation in cereals production per caput. This was at a relatively high level in the early 1960s, peaking at 164.5kg per caput in 1964, and at its lowest during the 1970s, with production falling to as little as 111.2kg per caput in 1977. This was a famine year, although food shortages were not widely reported (see chapter 3). The well-known famine years of 1974 and 1984 record the next lowest levels of cereals production per caput, at 115.3kg and 112.2kg respectively.

Production figures for the 1970s and early 1980s appear to be less stable than during the 1960s. Between 1961 and 1971 the range of cereals production per caput was from 138.8kg to 164.5kg, giving a low coefficient of variation (c.v.) of 0.041. During the period 1971-1984 the range was from 111.2kg to 169.9kg giving a c.v. of 0.17. The c.v. for the whole period 1961-84 was 0.165.

It might be expected that food imports would be negatively correlated with total crop production. In fact, the reverse appears to be the case. The correlation coefficients for aggregate production and imports are 0.51 for the period 1961-71; and 0.50 for the period 1971-84. The correlation coefficient for the whole period 1961-84 is 0.66. The linear regression coefficient of imports on production is also positive, at 0.44. Hence there is a strong association between growth in production and growth



Table 5.4: Trends in Area Cultivated and Cereals Yields, 1961-84

<u>Year</u>	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971		
<u>Area</u> (000 ha)	5561	5593	5625	5787	5234	5172	5092	5112	5175	5292	5225		
<u>Yield</u> (mt/ha)	0.71	0.73	0.75	0.75	0.77	0.82	0.78	0.83	0.83	0.83	0.84		
<u>Year</u>	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984
<u>Area</u> (000 ha)	5481	5550	4610	4571	4368	4458	4631	5331	4712	4646	5029	4716	4572
<u>Yield</u> (mt/ha)	0.82	0.80	0.84	1.05	1.01	0.90	1.12	1.20	1.19	1.16	1.34	1.17	1.04

Average Annual Growth Rates (per cent)

<u>Area</u>	1961-84 =	- 0.85	<u>Yield</u>	1961-84 =	2.46
	1961-70 =	- 1.12		1961-70 =	1.81
	1970-84 =	- 0.84		1970-84 =	3.22

<u>Average Annual Yield Growth Rates of Cereal Crops (%)</u>	1961-84	1961-70	1970-84
Wheat	2.38	2.55	2.85
Maize	3.17	2.07	4.05
Barley	2.06	-0.26	3.38
Millet	3.46	3.09	3.40
Sorghum	2.92	2.20	3.83
Teff	1.32	1.54	1.72

in imports. However, the coefficient of variation for imports is exceptionally high, at 1.113 for the whole period. This compares with a relatively low c.v. for production (0.165) over 1961-84.

#### 5.7. Trends in area cultivated and cereals yields: 1961-84

Under the conditions of agriculture so far described, we might expect area under cultivation to expand with rising population, and yields to fall as soil loses its fertility. However, according to the aggregate data, the reverse is true. Between 1961 and 1984, area under cultivation fell by an average annual rate of -0.85%, from about 5.5 million hectares (m.ha) and to below 4.5 m.ha by the middle 1970s, with only 1979 and 1982 being notable exceptions (see Table 5.4). By 1984, area planted was down to 4.57 m.ha. The rate of decline appears to have slowed somewhat in later years: the annual growth rate for the period 1961-70 was -1.12% p.a. compared with -0.84 for the period 1970-84.

Again contrary to the trends one might expect, cereals yields have been rising, albeit slowly, from 0.71 mt/ha in 1961 to 1.04 mt/ha in 1984, with 1982 being an exceptional year during which yields of 1.34 mt/ha were recorded. Trend growth rates of yield for some crops have exceeded the rate of growth of population (see Table 5.3). Millet, maize and sorghum have shown the highest rates of growth

Table 5.5: Cereals Production and Net Food Availability Per Caput, 1972-84

<u>Year</u>	<u>1972</u>	<u>1973</u>	<u>1974</u>	<u>1975</u>	<u>1976</u>	<u>1977</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>1979</u>	<u>1980</u>	<u>1981</u>	<u>1982</u>	<u>1983</u>	<u>1984</u>
<u>Cereals</u> <u>Prod'n</u> <u>(kg)</u>	140.1	136.2	115.3	139.8	126.2	111.2	141.5	169.9	145.7	136.3	166.0	133.0	112.2
<u>Index</u> <u>(1969-71</u> <u>= 100)</u>	98	96	81	98	89	78	99	119	102	96	117	93	79
<u>Net Food</u> <u>Availability</u> <u>(kcal)</u>	1584	1584	1566	1549	1611	1521	1654	1791	1861	1817	1704	1643	1695
<u>Index</u>	93	93	82	91	95	89	97	105	109	107	100	97	100
			famine				famine						famine

Source: FAO AT 2000 database



of yield. However, the trend rates of growth conceal considerable regional and temporal variations. There was a serious <sup>regional</sup> decline in cereals yields during the early-mid 1980s, as we shall see shortly.

#### 5.8 Cereals production and net food availability per caput: 1969-84

Table 5.5 shows indices of cereals production per caput and net food availability per caput (from all sources). Average production for the years 1969-71 is taken as a basis for comparison. During the period under review, two periods of famine (1973-74 and 1983-84) took place. Additionally, the year 1978 saw substantial famine relief operations following harvest failures in parts of the northern provinces during 1977. In view of Sen's (1981) criticism of the notion of Food Availability Decline (FAD) being a major causal factor in the development of the famines of 1973-74, it is worthwhile reconsidering this view using the FAO data.

We should note that food production data refer to the belg and meher harvests of the calendar year, and include a certain amount of carryover into the next calendar year. For example, the 1972 figure includes the belg harvest of July/August 1972 and the meher harvest of October 1972-January 1973. The production figures therefore inform us of domestic food availability for the major part of 1973; as well as of the outcome of crop conditions for 1972.

Sen used the same periodisation in order to calculate domestic food availability.

Net food availability (also called net food consumption in the FAO data series) is assumed availability/consumption once seed, feed, waste, stock transfers and exports have been subtracted from domestic production plus imports. The allowance for all factors other than exports is calculated at 20 per cent of gross production. The figure for net availability is given in calories per head, using the latest estimates of population size, which allows aggregation of food sources having different caloric values, such as cereals, pulses and meat.

Again, the majority of food stated as available in a given year will in fact only physically be available to the consumer towards the end of that year, or during the following year. An exception may be imports, which make up only a small fraction of total food availability.

The overall situation for the years 1972-84 is as follows. Per caput food availability is below the 3-year average 1969-71 from 1972 until 1978. After 1978, food availability is at the same levels or above those of 1969-71 with the exception of 1983. Cereals production follows broadly the same pattern, except for 1981, 1983 and 1984, which are below the base 3-year average. The data may be

considered in more detail by referring to specific periods of famine or near-famine.

#### 1973-74

Famine occurred in 1973 in Wollo, and in 1974 in Hararghe. National food availability per caput is poor in 1972 and 1973 (at 7 per cent below the base years in each case) and very poor in 1974, when it was 18 per cent below the base year. Cereals production was only marginally affected in 1972 and 1973, but was very poor in 1974. However, 1975 is not usually considered as a famine year, although local food shortages were reported. An exception was the aftermath of the Ogaden drought, which led to famine in 1974, with relief operations continuing into 1975.

#### 1977-78

1977 was the worst year on record for cereals production, with the index falling 22 per cent below the base level. Food availability is also poor, at 89 per cent of 1969-71 levels. Famine conditions were reported in parts of the northern provinces, but the government and donors mounted a relief operation during early-mid 1978 which appears to have averted mass starvation. Thus a fall in national food availability does appear in this case to be associated with famine conditions.

#### 1983-84

Although starvation has reported in some areas during 1981



and 1982, major problems surfaced only in 1983 and 1984. Food availability to the relief system collapsed during mid 1984, but this is not really reflected in the indices of food availability for either 1983 (97) or 1984 (100). In fact, the 1984 figure is inflated by massive food imports towards the end of the year. There was also an extreme shortfall in cereals production during 1984, with the index falling by 21 per cent from the base level. However, this did not lead to an escalation of famine in the following year, as food aid shipments were continued all through 1985 (see table 5.2).

It is important to note that the cereals production figure for 1982 was high, at 17 per cent above base levels, while food availability was apparently adequate. This gives no indication of the onset of famine conditions which developed during 1983.

A further important factor contributing to famine during 1973 and 1984 was the failure of the belg crop in parts of the highlands. Unfortunately, FAO data do not distinguish between the main and secondary harvests.

In conclusion, it appears that food availability decline in terms of national aggregate statistics cannot precisely distinguish famine years from non-famine years. It is likely that trends in regional production will prove more

**Table 5.6: Indices of Regional Cereals Production,  
1979/80 - 1984/85 (1979-80 = 100)**

Region	<u>80-81</u>	<u>81-82</u>	<u>82-83</u>	<u>83-84</u>	<u>84-85</u>	<u>c.v.</u>	<u>GR</u>
Arssi	102	120	133	110	104	0.13	0.3
Bale	n.a.	88	112	101	77	n.a.	n.a.
Gamu Goffa	108	77	116	97	56	0.24	-7.8
Gojjam	95	95	116	99	94	0.08	0.04
Gonder	77	83	127	87	75	0.22	-1.9
Harerghe	55	60	76	55	32	0.36	-14.4
Illubabor	55	69	114	126	61	0.34	1.5
Keffa	83	57	56	98	62	0.23	-3.8
Shoa	90	75	102	88	63	0.17	-5.7
Sidamo	91	74	113	103	88	0.14	0.4
Wellega	62	74	90	83	58	0.21	-4.7
Wollo	129	108	102	77	22	0.41	-23.0

Note

GR = average annual growth rate

c.v. = coefficient of variation

Source: Central Statistical Office, Addis Ababa.

revealing. Regional production data are available for the years 1979-84, and will be considered in the next section.

#### 5.9 Changes in regional cereals production: 1979-80 to 1984-85

Data concerning cereals production are available for 12 administrative regions (excluding Eritrea and Tigray, where sufficient data cannot be collected by the authorities) for the period 1979-80 to 1984-85. This series begins with the last reasonable year before severe rains failures developed in parts of the north, later spreading across the country (see table 5.2). The period ends with the catastrophic rain failures of 1984 which affected most parts of Ethiopia.

It can be seen from table 5.6 that there is considerable variation in regional experience of short-run changes in cereals production. Annual average growth rates of cereals production vary from 1.5 per cent (Illubabor) to -23.0 per cent (Wollo) over the 6-year period. However, in no province does the short-run rate of growth exceed that of the national population growth rate (2.9 per cent). Although there are no data showing regional population size or growth rates over the period with which to assess changes in production per caput, we can safely assume that the dramatic fall in availability of cereals by 1984 evidenced in the production figures would be even worse if



population growth rates were taken into account.

Again considering the data in Table 5.6 in general terms, we can see that while cereals production suffered over 1980-82 in comparison with 1979, there was some recovery in 1982-83. Levels of production begin to slip again after this point, with the decline accelerating into 1984-85. By then, production had fallen by 78 per cent in Wollo, 68 per cent in Hararghe; by close to 40 per cent in Illubabor, Keffa and Shoa; by more than 40 per cent in Gemu Goffa and Wellega; and by 20-25 per cent in Bale, Gonder and Sidamo. Only Gojjam and Arssi provinces were relatively unscathed with the latter region the only one to consistently raise production above the levels of 1979-80 throughout the period.

On the basis of 'food balance sheet' calculations, food shortages would have been expected for most of these regions over most of the period, although there are exceptions. Gonder shows a relatively good production index for 1982-83 which conceals severe deficits, for western Gonder was in surplus while the east was in deficit. The same is broadly true for Wollo over 1980-83, where northern districts were suffering severe shortages. Nevertheless, there clearly has been a severe decline in food availability over the early-mid 1980s for nearly all administrative regions of Ethiopia. This contrasts with Sen's (1981) analysis where he finds no serious shortfall

**Table 5.7: Average Annual Growth Rates (per cent) by Region in Area Cultivated and Yield of Cereals Crops in Ethiopia, 1979/80 - 1984/85**

<u>Region</u>	<u>Area Cultivated</u>	<u>Yield</u>
Arssi	2.32	-1.88
Bale	-4.26	12.39
Gemu Goffa	-2.17	-5.75
Gojjam	0.24	-0.22
Gonder	4.54	-6.09
Harerghe	-5.13	-9.76
Illubabor	-1.47	3.04
Keffa	-0.18	-3.78
Shoa	-0.24	-5.47
Sidamo	-0.65	0.96
Wellega	1.82	-6.30
Wollo	-4.24	-19.50

Source: Derived from statistics supplied by the Central Statistical Office, Addis Ababa

in food production and overall food availability in Wollo province preceding the famine of 1973. Circumstances have changed considerably over the past decade.

#### 5.10 Changes in area cultivated and yields of cereals by region: 1979-80 to 1984-85

Given that climatic conditions were generally unfavourable for crop production, and that soil erosion has become a serious problem in parts of the highlands, we might expect a decline in both area and yields of cereals to have taken place in the worst-affected areas, at least in the short run. Annual average growth rates of yield for the period 1979-80 to 1984-85 are presented in Table 5.7, and it can be seen that there has been a decline for all provinces except Bale, Illubabor and Sidamo, all of which are in the relatively underpopulated south of the country. Area planted has also increased, especially in the provinces of Arssi, Gojjam, Gonder and Wellega, which are provinces with extra land available for cultivation. The most dramatic declines in rates of growth of area planted and yield are in Hararghe and Wollo, which suffered particularly badly from rain failures, as we have already seen from the data presented on regional variations in production.

#### 5.11 Summary

From the preceding analysis, it seems that data on



national food production show very little decline over the past 25 years. While it is true that famine and near-famine years have sometimes coincided with years of relatively poor cereals production, and food availability, if the shortfalls had been equitably distributed, it is unlikely that there would have been famine. At the same time the long run growth rates of yield are encouraging; although area cultivated is falling slightly.

Nevertheless, there are considerable areas of Ethiopia, predominantly in the north and central highlands, where a continuation of soil erosion and poor weather conditions have reduced the ability of the local populations to support themselves through agriculture alone. These regional variations are to some extent reflected in the data series available for each administrative region, particularly over recent years. However, data are unfortunately no longer available for Eritrea and Tigray, reportedly among the worst-affected administrative regions.

Disaggregation down to the level of administrative regions is helpful, but still conceals enormous variations. A case in point is Gonder, in which famine-affected districts are adjacent to surplus-producing districts. There is clearly a need for the compilation of data on the basis of agro-climatic and socio-economic zones, rather

than in terms of strictly administrative boundaries.

Consequently, much of the information available on processes likely to contribute to famine in Ethiopia is qualitative. For example, no quantitative data are available concerning the effects of soil erosion on yields. Yet it is frequently stated that soil erosion is a major cause of crop failure. Similarly, we have little empirical knowledge about the relationships between deforestation, soil erosion and climatic change. Yet it does appear that rain failure is becoming the norm rather than the exception in parts of highland Ethiopia. On the other hand, wide variation in rainfall conditions may always have been a feature of the lowlands.

Rain failures lead to crop failures, but these in turn do not necessarily lead to famine. Rain failures must be prolonged and associated with a squeeze on alternative income-generating options for the affected peasantry before leading to famine. The way in which the various factors interact is the subject of the case study of the famine of 1984-85, which is presented in the next three chapters.

## Notes

- 1 The basis of these estimates is not clear from either source.
- 2 As a consequence, Wright recommends that some 6 million hectares should be completely withdrawn from cultivation and should be reafforested; while a further 8.5 million hectares should be turned over to permanent pasture. An additional 12.5 million hectares should benefit from conservation management techniques, including terracing. Wright recommends that farming households displaced in this process should be resettled in the underused highland valleys, which make up some 7 per cent of Ethiopia's land area. He states that if this is not done "perhaps within 20 years one third to one half of the total area of the Ethiopian highlands may become a landscape suited for little more than nomadic grazing" (op cit).
- 3 However, it does not appear to be the case that Ethiopia as a whole is short of cultivable land. The ALP report concludes that "despite the large area of the country with considerable rainfed agricultural potential, only a small proportion is actually under crops" (op cit p 14). Of land not under crops, 19 per cent is considered unutilisable, 12 per cent is forest or bushland, and 51 per cent is given over to grazing or browsing.



**Note 3 cont.**

Much of the land which would therefore theoretically be converted to rainfed cropland is lowland pasture. As the soils in these regions are generally more fragile than those of the highlands, as rainfall regimes may be even more variable in the lowlands, and as human and animal diseases constrain cultivation, then the real scope for extending cultivation may be somewhat less than expected.

## Chapter 6: The Incidence and Causes of Crop Failures in 1980-84

### 6.1. Introduction

It is the purpose of this and the following two chapters to test the hypotheses derived from the general model of famine put forward in chapter 1. Although we have characterised famine as arising from a concatenation process, involving both a failure of alternative income-generating activities among the peasantry and a failure of the state to provide relief, within this framework a sequence of events can be identified which appears from the literature to be common to most famines. Even where specific features of the sequence differ from reality in any given case, it provides a framework for analysis. Thus we shall be enquiring as to the causes and extent of crop failures; their effects on the markets for food, labour and household assets, especially livestock; and the direction, extent and outcomes of mass migration.

The most recent Ethiopian famine had its genesis predominantly in areas which are physically remote and administratively inaccessible as they are also war zones. One result of these factors has been that the famine is poorly documented, at least up to the point of mass migration when relief measures were instituted. This chapter will therefore begin with a description of data sources and methodologies of data collection before

proceeding with the analysis.

## 6.2. Data sources and methodologies of data collection

Several data sources will be consulted in our analysis of incidence and effects of severe and repeated crop failures. These include:

- (i) Data compiled by the Early Warning System of the RRC. These principally relate to crop conditions and food prices in administrative regions under the control of the government, which are monitored by staff of the Central Statistical Office.
- (ii) Data on general conditions reported by non-governmental organisations working in the regions.
- (iii) Formal and informal reports from visitors to the famine zones in Ethiopia.
- (iv) The information provided by 100 famine migrants from Tigray, Wollo, Gonder and Eritrea, who were interviewed by the author and a colleague (Jeremy Shoham) in December 1984.

Much of the data presented here and in the following two chapters was furnished through the latter survey of 100 Ethiopian refugees in two camps located in the Eastern Region of Sudan, close to the Ethiopian border. The two camps were Tukulabab and Wad Sherife, whose location is shown in Figure 6.1. The survey was carried out during



Figure 6.1: Location of Refugee Camps



Source: UNHCR, Khartoum

Table 6.1

Assisted New Arrivals From Ethiopia in Sudanese Refugee Camps (thousands)

Month	Dec. 1984	Jan. 1985	Feb.	March	April	May	June	July	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.
Nos.	3.5	12	18	45	5	6	6	3.5	12	18	5

Source: UNHCR office, Khartoum.

December, the month of peak famine migration from Tigray (see table 6.1). Between November 1984 and October 1985 340,000 Ethiopians were registered as having crossed the border and received some assistance from the authorities. A further 200,000 are estimated to have entered Sudan and remained unregistered (Angela Berry, United Nations High Commission for Refugees, personal communication, January 1986).

Conditions in the camps were extremely bad. In Tukulabab, the vast majority of refugees were without shelter, and were forced to camp under acacia trees or to huddle behind rocks. Water was in short supply, and food rations were erratic and inadequate. Geldof, who visited Tukulabab at the height of the influx, has made the following comments: "To call the place a camp would have been a misnomer. It was just a mass of people who had sat down in one place. Their only shelter came from ragged bits of cloth they had spread between bushes to provide some shade from the sun...there were two European doctors working there, in total despair. The place was a burning reflector of heat by day and freezing by night. As well as all the intestinal diseases which the relief workers had to cope with in Ethiopia, here they had a high incidence of pneumonia and malaria. They showed me into what they pitifully called the camp store. There were fifteen bags of flour for 27,000 people" (Geldof 1986 p 316).



In Wad Sherife, there was more shelter available, but there was a similar desperate lack of water, food and medical care. Fully 50,000 people had clustered into a camp designed for 5,000. Later, in March 1985, Wad Sherife's population was to peak at around 130,000 before refugees were transported to new camps being set up further inside Sudan. It is pertinent to note that according to the Centre for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia, the death rates in the eastern Sudanese refugee camps at the time of the survey were the highest ever recorded during a refugee emergency (RPG undated, appendix 6, p 20).

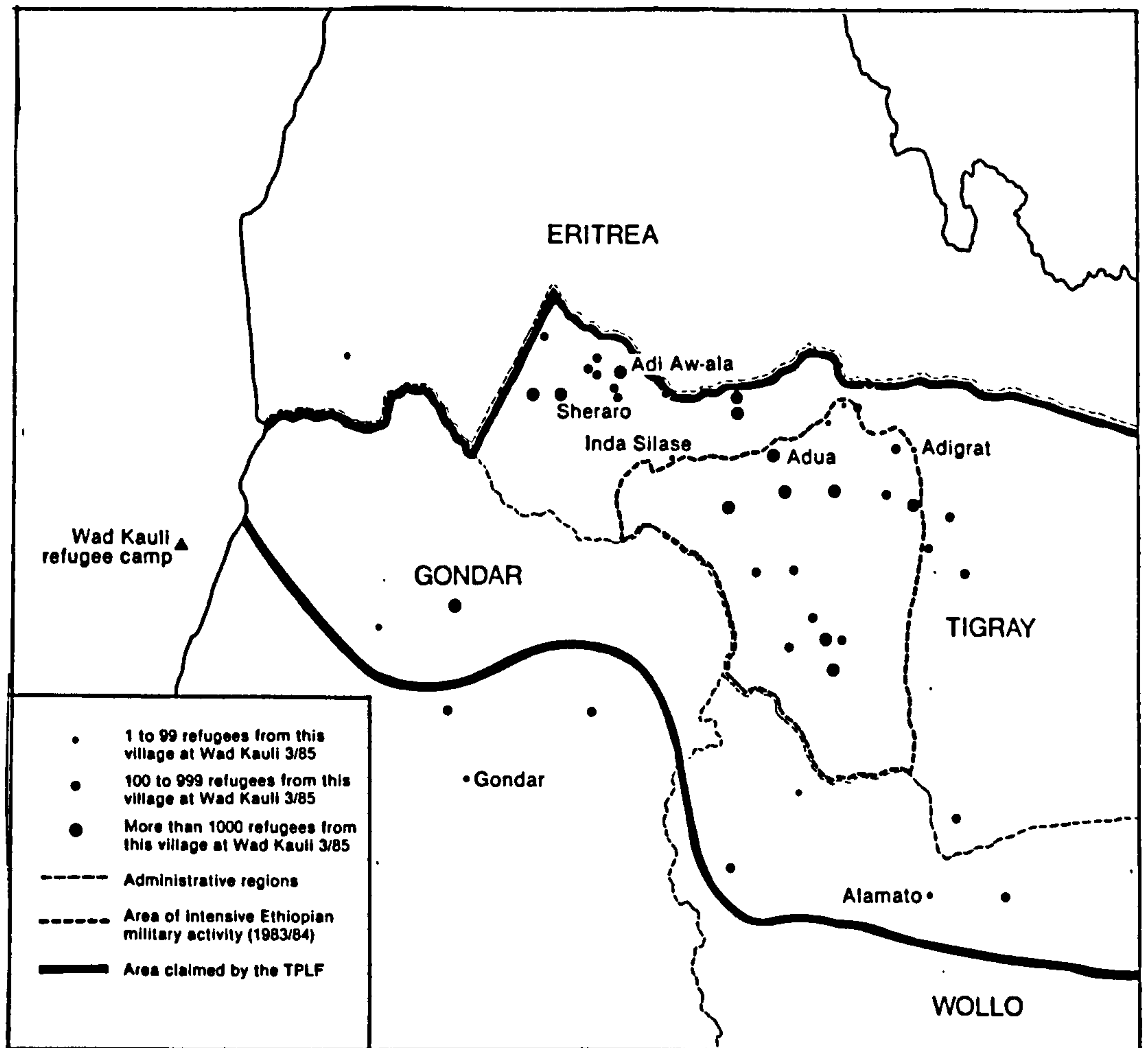
Under these circumstances, and with minimal financial and manpower resources, the author was unable to undertake a lengthy survey. Instead, a short but carefully structured survey was carried out, designed to extract sufficient information to test the basic hypotheses derived from the general model of famine developed in chapter 1. A delay in carrying out the survey (through applying for sufficient funds, official permission etc.) would have led to a missed opportunity to gather data on the famine. Nevertheless, there is clearly a case for a better-equipped, more detailed and wide-ranging survey to be carried out in future amongst settled refugees. This would help to verify the data and analysis presented here. However, a degree of verification is available from Clay

and Holcomb's survey of famine refugees at Wad Kowli, carried out under very similar conditions in March 1985. These researchers also carried out surveys among earlier settled refugees at Tawawa and Fau II camps.

The interviewees at the two camps were grouped by choice according to their place of origin. Accordingly, the author and a colleague, assisted by interpreters, carried out systematic sample surveys stratified by origin of the migrants. The questionnaire is reproduced in the appendix. Certain awrajas such as Enderta (in central Tigray) were responsible for providing the majority of refugees, while others, such as Shire (in Western Tigray) provided very few. This was obviously because some awrajas were far more afflicted with crop failures and famine conditions than others. Sample sizes, as determined by awraja, therefore varied.

At the same time, the camps did not have well-defined boundaries, and so it was impossible given the time and resources available to map accurately their extent and to divide them into sections according to the home awrajas of the refugees. Furthermore, the camps were growing daily with each new influx. Tukulabab was later closed, and new arrivals from Tigray were diverted to Wad Kowli camp further south. Wad Sherife remains a transit camp at the time of writing. Accordingly, the interviewers sought out the location of groups of migrants with the advice of

Figure 6.2



**HOME VILLAGES OF WAD KAULI REFUGEES  
(3/1985) AND THE MOST CONCENTRATED  
ETHIOPIAN MILITARY ACTIVITIES (1983/84)**

Source: Clay and Holcomb, 1985.



interpreters and health workers. Once a group from a specific area had been located, every third household would be interviewed along the line of a randomly chosen direction.

Although interviewees would be identified in this manner, the research attracted considerable attention from the refugees themselves. Consequently, many interviews would be conducted in the presence of a crowd of people from other households, who would often interject with their own observations and opinions. While this process was often beneficial for elucidating general information, such as with recall data on grain prices for example, it would sometimes slow down the interview schedule. Nevertheless, the sampling and recall methodology employed was considered to be the only method practicable under the circumstances.

Clay and Holcomb have identified the home villages of Tigrayans fleeing to Wad Kowli camp, and have weighted these according to the number of migrants coming from each place (see figure 6.2). The geographical spread of respondents is exactly the same as those interviewed in our sample. The majority (90 per cent) of the 80 households interviewed for the purposes of this study at Tukulabab were Tigrayans, with a minority coming from northern Gonder and northern Wollo. All 20 respondents

interviewed in Wad Sherife were Eritreans.

The survey provided new information on grain prices, based on recall. Interviewees were asked about the retail prices of different varieties of grain during the post harvest season and during the rainy season. Prior to the survey, the author estimated the degree of variation in response to questions on grain prices (a quantifiable variable) as plus or minus 25 per cent. Assuming a 95 per cent confidence interval, according to the standard formula <sup>1</sup> this implied a required number of respondents from each market of only *two*. In the event, the majority of markets identified were visited by more than one respondent. An important feature of these data is that respondents' recall of grain prices was remarkably uniform for the previous two-year period. For example, in one case eight respondents from the same area (Hentalo in Enderta awraja) all reported exactly the same grain prices for harvest 1984. The greatest variation in response for price data for a given place and period was in fact 25 per cent, which only occurred in one case and was within the variation anticipated prior to the actual interviews.

It has been possible to check the accuracy of recall of the interviewees in a few cases. For example, Kirsty Wright, a freelance journalist, reported that the price of teff in Tsedia, Tigray was 200 birr in July 1983. Three respondents interviewed by the author in December 1984

came from Tsedia. Each reported that the price of teff there was 200 birr during the kremt season of 1983. Unfortunately, Wright's price data are too scanty to cross-check for other markets. English et al (1984) also reported average market prices of a few grains for southern and western Tigray during the harvest period of 1983. They report an average price of 200 birr for teff in the south, whereas respondents from specific markets named by the team, such as Hareko, reported prices around 25 per cent higher than those listed by the Oxfam team. However, the team was generalising about prices over a wide area, and therefore proper comparisons cannot be made. As we shall see in chapter 7, grain prices can vary widely even in markets a few kilometers apart. Prices may also be expected to vary according to the relative bargaining power between buyers and sellers, even in the same marketplace.

There has also been a problem with the identification of certain markets. Some 30 per cent of the markets mentioned by interviewees were not subsequently located by the author on available maps. Nevertheless, this left some 50 data points with which to construct price maps. These data shall be discussed in chapter 7, following a consideration here of the actual extent of rain failures and crop failures in Ethiopia in the period preceding the famine.



### 6.3. Recent Rain Failures in Ethiopia

As we have seen from chapter 3, rain failures and associated crop failures have been a common feature of the ecology of post-revolutionary Ethiopia, just as in imperial times. These calamities have been particularly prevalent in the north, and only the years 1975-76 appear to have been relatively free from climatic disorder. This state of affairs tends to confirm Lamb's opinion that the "droughts" of the past two decades are part of a long-term phenomenon, within which they are not necessarily abnormal events.

Although precipitation continued to be erratic and somewhat deficient after the 1976 season, it was only from 1980 onwards that rain failures began to become persistent. A United Nations Coordinating Committee for Relief and Rehabilitation visited the country following the 1980-81 harvest. Their report of March 1981 noted that: "hailstorms, frost, floods and pests had an adverse effect on the crops of northern Shoa, Gonder, parts of Tigray, and western Wollo" (UNCCRR 1981 p 13). It is interesting to note that 'drought' is not yet mentioned as a causal factor in crop failure, although the widespread crop failures of the early-mid 1980s are popularly attributed to drought. Nevertheless, over 1982-84 in particular, delayed and insufficient rainfall, allied to pest attacks, was to be the major cause of crop failure. Insufficient rainfall was also a feature of agricultural

conditions in lowland Ethiopia over 1980-81.

In the event, rain failures continued to spread, and were chronic in parts of northern Ethiopia over 1982-84. The delay in the main kremt rains of June-September 1982 was particularly damaging to cultivation. The National Meteorological Services Agency (NMSA) put out a special bulletin on July 20th, stating that there had been a one month delay in the onset of kremt rains, and that "in the light of this we would like the concerned authority to pay attention to the northern parts of Ethiopia, especially to northern Shoa, Wollo, Tigray and parts of Gonder" (NMSA 1982). These were essentially the same areas as those highlighted by the UN report of March 1981.

During 1983, the situation appeared to improve somewhat. As Workineh Degefu notes: "the onset and withdrawal, as well as the amount and distribution of precipitation, during both belg and kremt seasons were generally good" (Workineh Degefu 1987 p 32). However, he goes on to note that cumulative rainfall totals in the north, particularly in parts of Wollo and northern Shoa, were below normal.

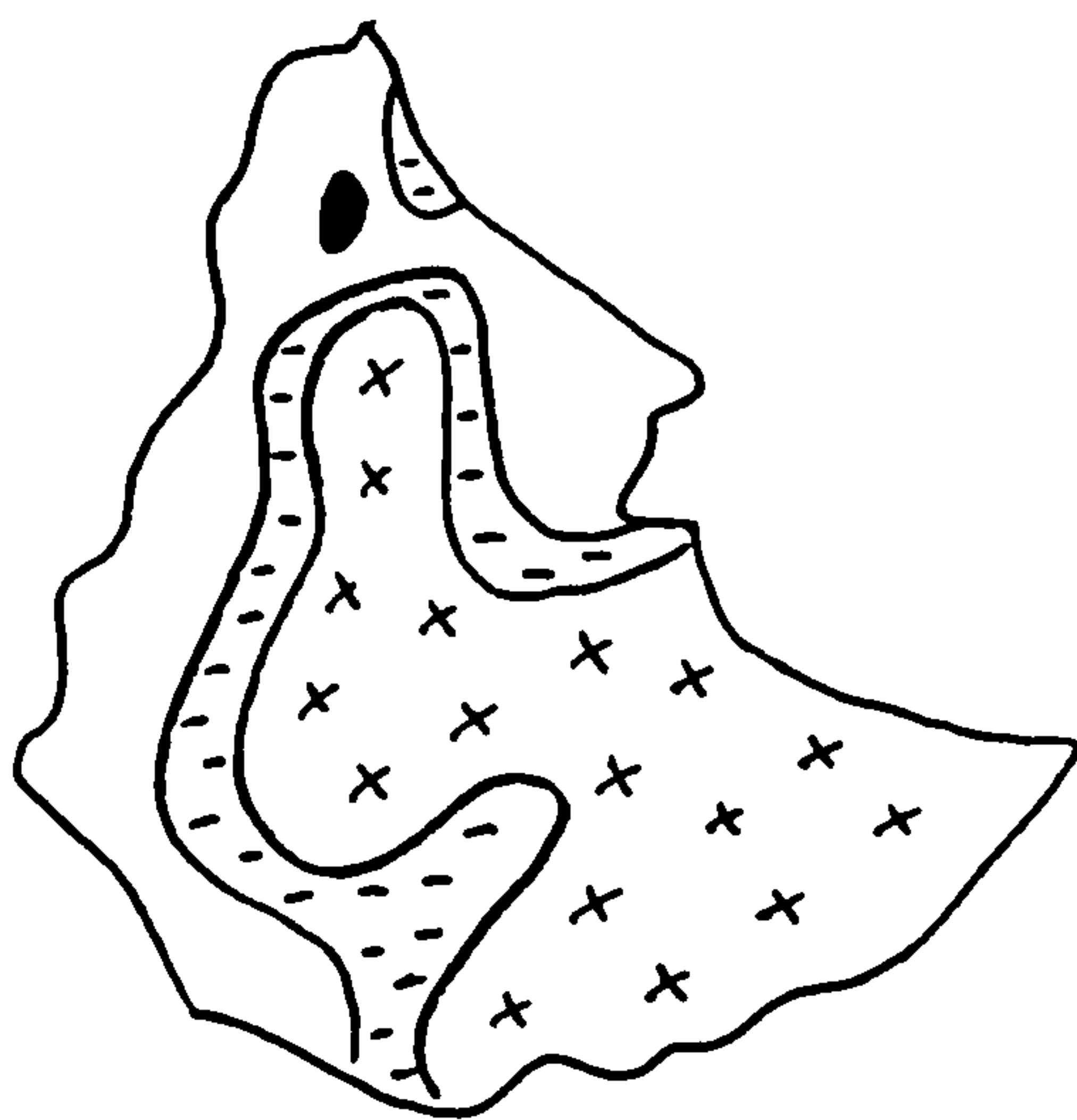
Other sources argued that rain failures in the north continued to be widespread during 1983. After remarking on the onset of drought in central and eastern Tigray from 1980 onwards, English et al stated that: "the shortfall in

rain continued through 1983 showing a marked shift towards later, more intensive rains in a short period of time, rather than the usual spread over a 2-3 month period" (op cit p 13). Wright (1983) reported no rain as of August 1983 in central and southern Tigray when she surveyed areas under famine conditions. Even during the middle of the rainy season, acute shortages of drinking water were reported in many parts of Tigray and Eritrea from NGOs working in the drought-affected districts (CRDA 1983). These shortages were to intensify and spread over the coming months.

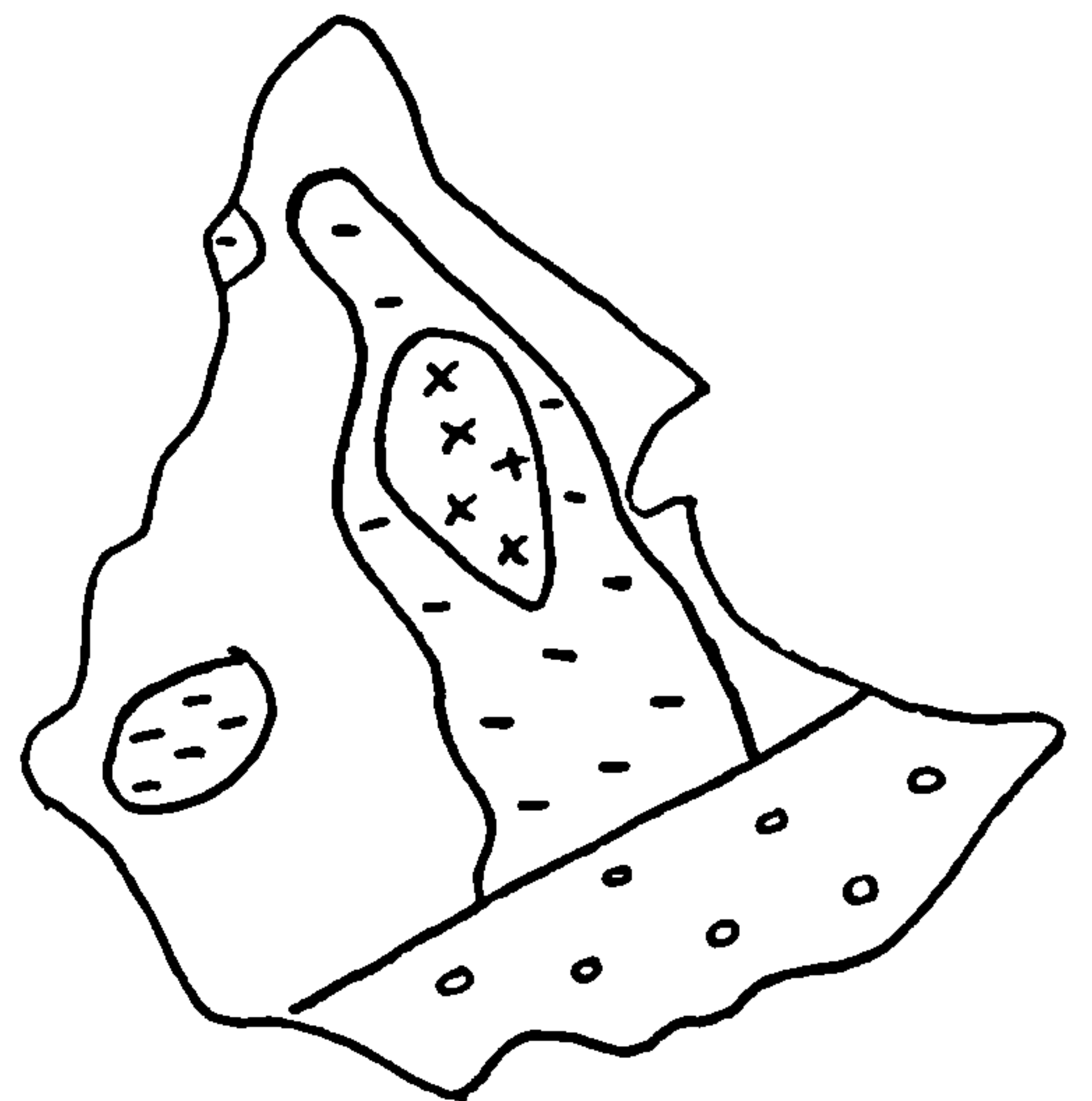
The delayed and insufficient rains in the north were followed by unseasonal rains at the beginning of the harvest season, in October. These gave way to a long dry spell throughout the country (Workineh Degefu op cit). The belg season of February-April 1984 was a complete failure, leading to widespread deaths of livestock already suffering water and pasture shortages following the dry season. Forest fires also began to break out owing to the exceptionally dry conditions. Rains reappeared in May 1984, but by now it was too late for farmers to plant belg crops and some long-maturing varieties of maize and sorghum. The agricultural calendar was thrown out of kilter. Rains continued into June instead of giving way to the normal dry spell preceding the main krent rains. As Workineh Degefu notes: "this unusual climatic pattern confused the farmers, and as a result they were unable to



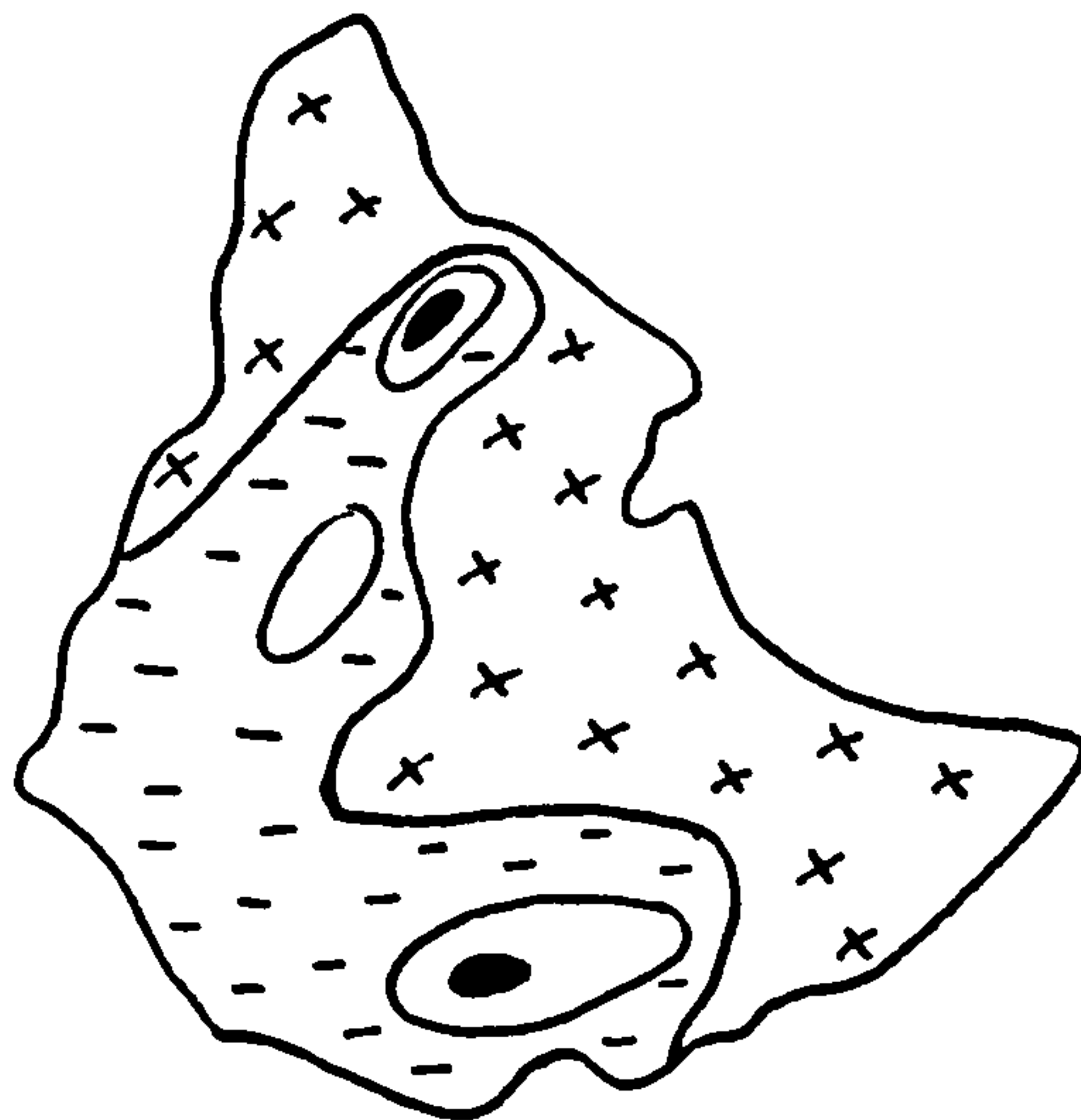
Figure 6.3: Ethiopian Rainfall Departures



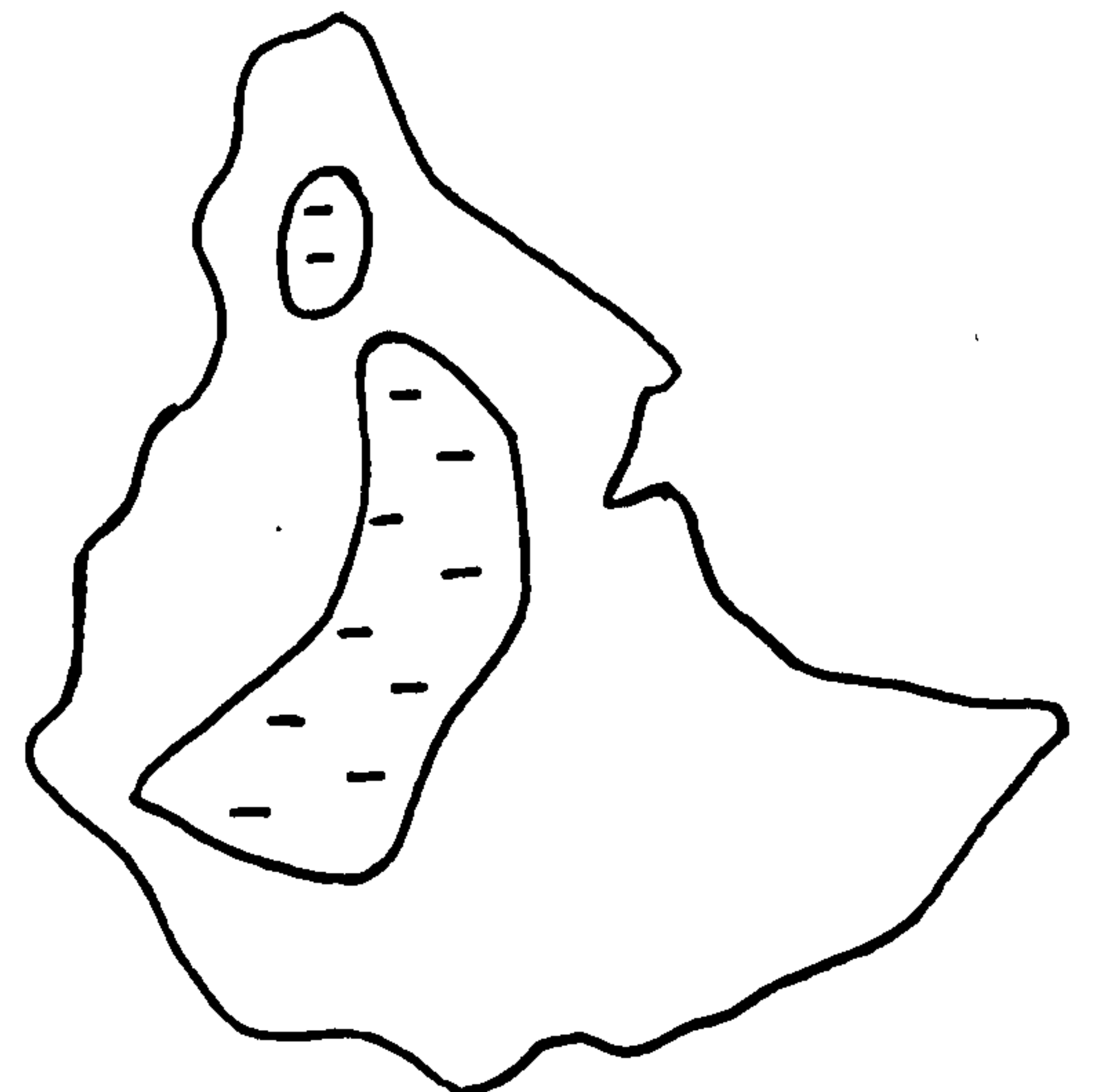
Belg season (Feb-May) 1984



Kiremt season (June-Sept) 1984



Bega season (Oct-Jan) 1984



Kiremt season 1972



Above normal (20% or more)

Normal (+20% to -20%)

Below normal (-20% to -59%)

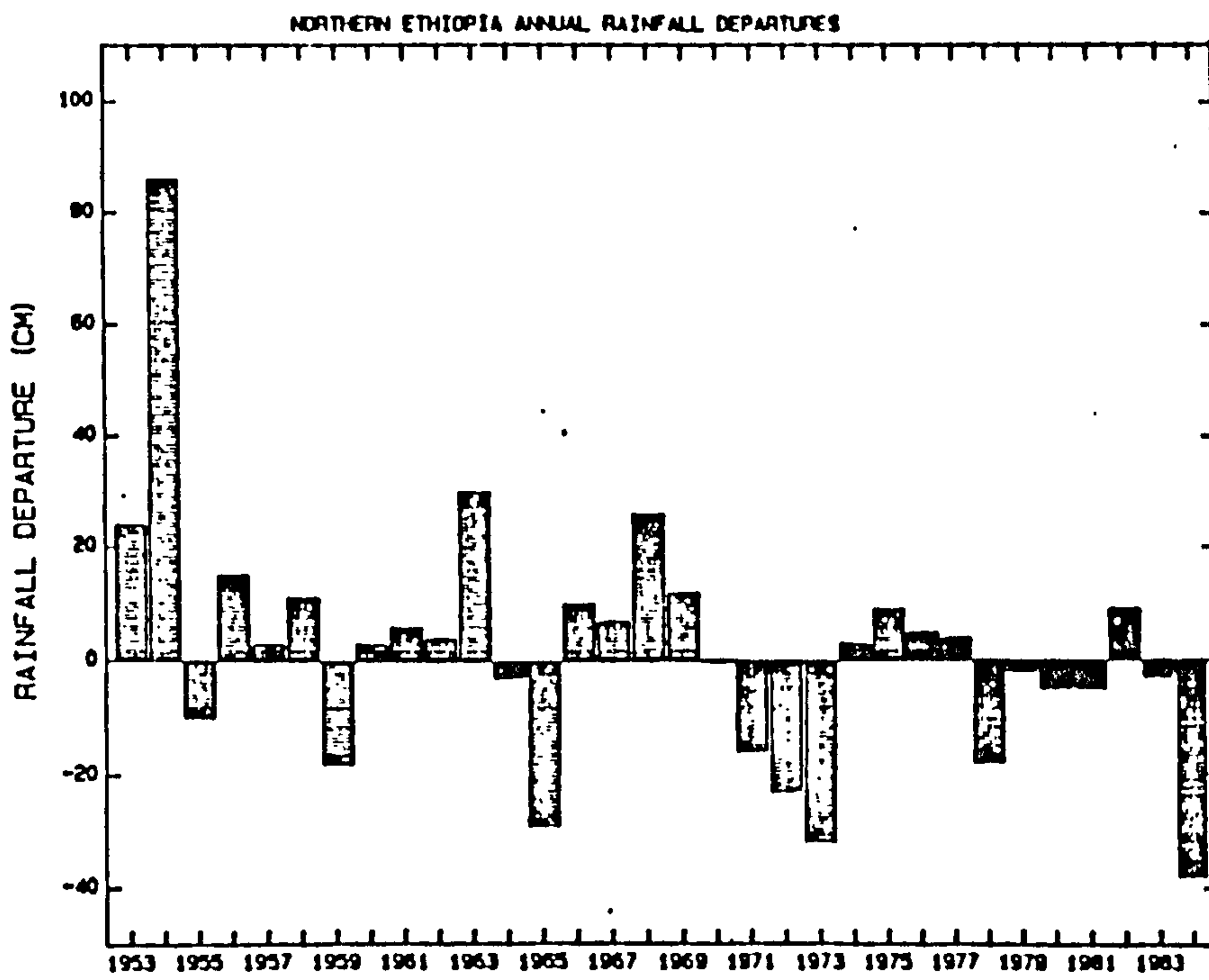
Much below normal (-60% or more)

No data

Source: UCAR, 1985

Figure 6.4

Rainfall Departures from the Mean, 1953-84



Source: Workineh Degefu, 1987.

perform their usual agricultural activities" (ibid p 32). The confusion continued with the kremt rains - instead of reaching their peak in late July, a dry spell ensued, damaging crops during their flowering stage.

The seasonal departures of rainfall from the norm have been compiled by Rasmusson from NMSA data and are shown in figure 6.3. It can be seen that in 1984 the north and east of the country consistently suffered from rainfall deficits amounting to as much as 60 per cent below the norm; whilst longitudinal data suggest that in 1984 northern Ethiopia suffered its largest rainfall deficit since 1953 - that is over a 31 year period (figure 6.4). The deficit appears to have exceeded that associated with the 1974 famine.

The rain failures of 1984 were exceptionally severe and were associated with a number of climatic anomalies, which have also been described by Workineh Degefu (ibid). These included anomalous surface conditions during the belg season, such as seasonal Arabian and Saharan anticyclones being out of position; and blocked or less intensive rain-producing airstreams at the middle and upper tropospheric levels<sup>2</sup>. During the kremt season the jet stream was weak and appeared less frequently over the Horn of Africa; the Indian monsoons were weak; and airflows from the south and east were fewer and weaker than normal. Thus the rain



failures in the Horn of Africa were part of a much more widespread climatic disruption. However, it is difficult to ascribe precise weights to each of these effects in producing the exceptional decline in rainfall. Far too little is known about weather and climate in north-eastern Africa at this stage.

#### 6.4 The Incidence and Extent of Crop Failures over 1982-84

We have seen from the data presented in chapter 5 that 1982 was a year which saw some recovery in agriculture with national cereals production apparently being at record levels. Nevertheless, there continued to be pockets of crop failure in several provinces. The RRC early warning system noted that "serious food shortages" were expected in eastern Gonder, northern Shoa, most parts of Tigray, northwestern and central Wollo, and unspecified areas of Eritrea. Crop failure was specifically blamed on drought in Gonder, Tigray and Wollo; while pest attacks were mentioned as contributing to crop failures in other regions, such as parts of northern Shoa, northern Sidamo, Wellega and Gojjam. Hailstorms were reported as having damaged crops in Illubabor. The RRC estimated that more than 3 million people would be affected by these calamities (EWPS 1984a).

In contrast to meteorological reports, the rain failures

**Table 6.2: RRC Estimates of Harvest Losses: Comparison of 1984 with 1983 (per cent)**

<u>Administrative Region and Awraja</u>		<u>Percentage Loss</u>
Gonder:	Gayint	-40
	Wegera	-20
	Semien	-25
	Libo	n.a.
	Gonder Zuri	n.a.
	Chilga	-10
	Debre Tabor	n.a.
Wollo:	Ambassel	-80
	Yeju	-85
	Raya and Kobo	-90
	Wag	-90
	Lasta	-70
	Wadla Delanta	-55
	Dessie Zuria	-65
	Kalu	-80
	Were Himeno	-80
	Wereilu	-70
Borena	-60	

Source: Early Warning and Planning Department, RRC.

of 1983 were reported by ground sources to be much worse than those of the previous year. For the first time, the RRC published estimates of the overall shortfalls experienced in each crop-producing awraja in those areas where they were able to monitor crop conditions through a network of enumerators, who were in turn informed by peasant association committees. The estimates were disturbing. In Gonder and Wollo, the drop in production in comparison with the 1982 harvest season ranged from -10 per cent to -90 per cent (see table 6.2). Wollo was the worst affected province of those monitored (Tigray and Eritrea were excluded), with no awraja recording less than a 55 per cent fall in production.

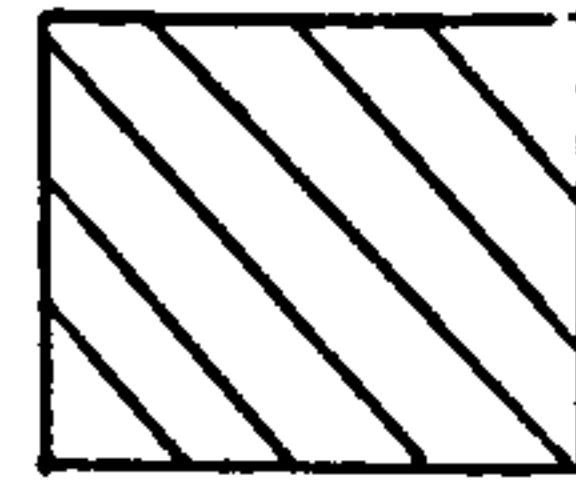
These estimates indicated an extreme situation, and were greeted with disbelief by many donor agency representatives, although other sources such as satellite imagery and NGO reports were available to contribute to the estimates of crop failures in the region. However, the estimates of areas and numbers of people affected by crop failures in Tigray and Eritrea were largely guesswork. The Ethiopian government does not regularly control more than a small part of these provinces, perhaps not more than 15 per cent or so (Bennett, 1983b), and it is necessary to consider other sources for verification of crop damage and food shortages in rebel areas. These are provided by reports of the Eritrean and Tigrayan rebel organisations: the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA) and



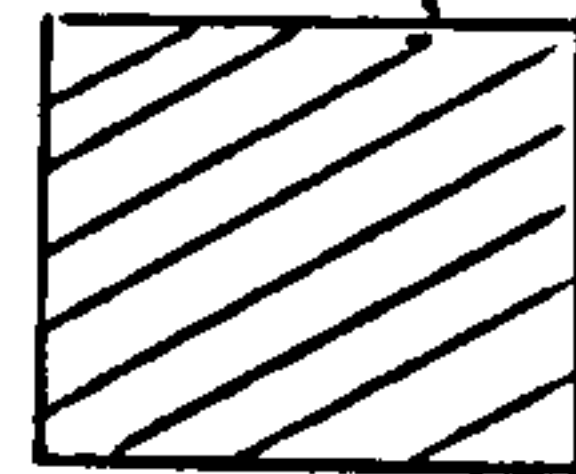
Figure 6.5

DROUGHT AFFECTED 1983-84: GROUND REPORTS AND  
LANDSAT COMPARED

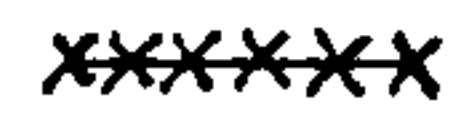
Sources: English et al, January 1984  
EWPS, January 1984



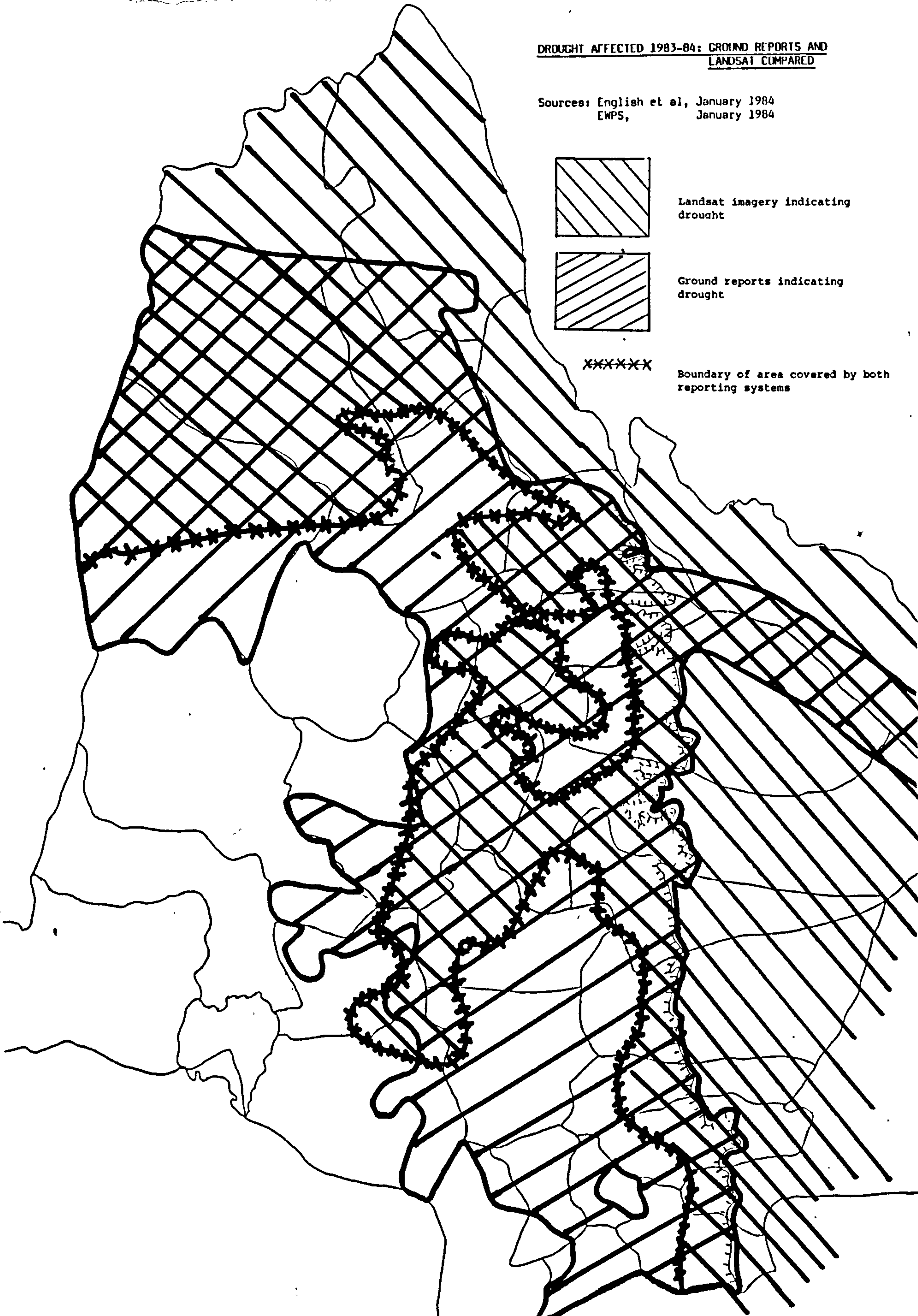
Landsat imagery indicating drought



Ground reports indicating drought



Boundary of area covered by both reporting systems



the Relief Society of Tigray (REST).

ERA reported that apart from small pockets in the south, west and northeast, the whole of Eritrea was drought-affected in 1982-83 (ERA 1983). Bennett (1983a) noted that while central Tigray and southern Eritrea were drought-affected, the western provinces of Shire and Axum were experiencing good harvests in 1982. An Oxfam team (English et al, op cit) stated that the drought in Tigray had intensified over 1983 and had spread westward into Axum, while the population of Shire was under increasing pressure from migrants arriving from the east. These field reports were given added weight by the satellite imagery available from Landsat. Staff of the International Livestock Institute for Africa (ILCA) in Addis Ababa were concerned at the appearance of large areas of poor vegetation cover in the cropping areas of central Tigray, north-western Wollo, the Wollo-Gonder border and along the eastern escarpment marking the boundary of the highlands. These various sources are summarised in figure 6.5, showing a substantial measure of agreement. However, the satellite data are incomplete, owing to interruption by cloud cover, and the lack of surveillance of vegetation conditions in southern Wollo. Furthermore, there is a critical lack of ground-level information about the extent of pasture failures in the lowlands of eastern Eritrea, Tigray and Wollo.

**Table 6.3: Indices of Crop Production in Wollo, Gonder and Ethiopia, 1981-84**

<u>Region</u>	<u>Crop Production Index</u>			
	<u>1981</u>	<u>1982</u>	<u>1983</u>	<u>1984</u>
Wollo	100	83	49	46
Gonder	100	106	149	96
Ethiopia	100	108	104	88

Source: Early Warning System, Special Report, "Food Situation in Ethiopia, 1981-85: Trend Analysis Report" (table 1), RRC, Addis Ababa, 1985.



Surveillance of these very large and sparsely populated areas is very difficult for both official and rebel authorities, while the correct interpretation of Landsat imagery requires a consistent and reasonably lengthy series of wet and dry years so that changing conditions in this marginal arid and semi-arid environment can be monitored properly.

Quantified estimates of crop production are carried out by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) on the basis of crop-cutting surveys in each region. While the CSO considers that these surveys generalise over too big an area to be used for accurate famine warning, they can be used to give an indication of the food situation by administrative regions and for the country as a whole. It can be seen from table 6.3 that according to these data Wollo suffered an enormous decline in crop production between 1981 and 1984, with the production index falling from 100 in 1981 to as little as 46 by 1984. In Gonder, on the other hand, there was a large increase in production between 1981 and 1983, with the index rising from 100 to 149. However, by 1984 production had fallen below 1981 levels. A similar pattern seems to have been established for Ethiopia as a whole, with production per caput rising slightly above 1980 base year levels in 1982 and 1983, before falling quite sharply in 1984.

The severe crop failures of the 1983 season were followed

by a disastrous failure of the short (belg) rains in February and March 1984. Although the belg season contributes only 5-10 per cent of national crop production, it is locally important in parts of Wollo and eastern Gonder, where it can amount to as much as half of total cereals production. The belg season is also vital for replenishing waterholes and pastures over the long dry season. The failure of the belg rains was followed by yet another delay in the main (kremt) rains. This was the last straw which broke the back of vulnerable peasants and pastoralists in Wollo, pushing them into famine. In May 1984, the RRC put out a special report on the belg rain failure and its effects on production. The report stated that all the major belg producing areas of Wollo, Shoa and Bale had been affected, and that the peasants facing food shortages would be unable to sell sufficient livestock to cover their losses, as their animals had weakened or died as a result of drought. Furthermore, the detrimental effects of lack of food and water for oxen would weaken them for ploughing during the coming main kremt season (EWPS 1984b).

In the event, the kremt rains also failed. In Wollo, sowing took place in June and July, but shortages of rain in August killed most of the early growth (EWPS 1984c). According to the RRC, in Tigray the kremt rains began in mid-July, but stopped after two weeks or so in central and

eastern regions. Western areas of the province experienced better rainfall conditions but were hit by widespread pest attacks. In Gonder, rainfall conditions were generally better than in previous years, but awrajas bordering Wollo continued to be badly affected. In Eritrea, kremt rains were reported to have failed in all awrajas except Seraye, which suffered from armyworm infestation. In Shoa, the northern awrajas of Menzna Giske and Yifatna Timuga suffered failures of both belg and meher crops.

#### 6.5 The Socio-Economic Impact of Crop Failures

While these rain failures, pest attacks and resultant crop failures were unprecedented in extent and duration, affecting many regions of Ethiopia (although undoubtedly at their worst in the north), at the individual household level, the impact was still patchy, even in the heartlands of famine. If production failures were so widespread, how was it that more people did not migrate out of the famine zones? As we shall see presently (in chapter 8) the victims, often previously quite wealthy by local standards, were forced to seek wage work, sell assets etc. However, other households must have been buying the assets and employing labourers. Unfortunately, very little information is yet available on the "gainers" during famine - even less than is available on the "losers". This study itself concentrates on the losers, because



access for research purposes to the famine areas within Ethiopia was denied to the author by the authorities. However, isolated observations do support the notion that substantial social differentiation existed even in the middle of areas which were supposedly hard-hit by famine. For example, McCann, who worked during the famine in the Tegulet and Bulga woredas of Northern Shoa has observed that:

"the effects of famine are distributed unevenly. Households with a pair of oxen, a short rain crop in the fields, and healthy children are found within 500 metres of households with no livestock, malnourished children, and heavy debts. The range of nutritional and economic well-being is astonishing, especially given the biblical imagery of universal starvation offered by media reports and television cameras. Major contrasts in the effects also appear between altitude zones one or two hours walk apart. In May, the green fields of maturing barley in the zones above 2,500 metres were in stark contrast to the dry, drought-stressed plantings below 2,000 metres."

This state of affairs stems from both environmental and social factors. To begin with, rainfall is highly variable, both over time and space. In the Ethiopian highlands, altitude is obviously a major variable influencing the distribution of rainfall. At the same time, access to good land and sturdy oxen varies widely between households, for there is still substantial

economic and social differentiation among the peasantry, the land reform notwithstanding. There is also an element of luck, as well as established resource endowment for some households. They may escape rain failure or pest attacks, while close neighbours suffer.

The differential impact of the apparently widespread 'shocks' to the economy, whether rain failures, pest attacks or warfare, is confirmed by the interviews carried out with escaped victims of enforced resettlement by Clay and Holcomb. The escapees appear to have formed a cross section of society from the famine areas. Interviewees were divided into two groups, those from Tigray and those from Wollo. Tigrayan respondents dated their best years of agricultural production at between 1981 and 1983. Clay and Holcomb note that:

"The 1984 production for the two groups differed. For those from Tigray who harvested their crops in 1984, 14 per cent had no harvest, 38 per cent had a small harvest, 35.5 per cent an average harvest and 14 per cent a good one... Individuals from Wollo had less produce and fewer reserve animals. About 20 per cent of all those interviewed reported a small harvest and 5 per cent an average harvest" (Clay and Holcomb ibid pp 82-83).

While the two groups may not be synonymous, given that Tigrayan resettlers are more likely to be captured while

going about their everyday business, whereas people from Wollo and other provinces chosen for resettlement are more likely to be from the poorer sections of society (see Chapter 10), it does seem clear that only a minority suffered severe crop failures. Moreover, this minority managed to survive successive years of crop failure before succumbing to starvation.

#### 6.6. Crop Failures: The Experience of the Refugee Sample

It is beginning to emerge that estimates of the incidence of crop failures can give only a very broad guide to regions which are likely to face famine, rather than the actual population groups likely to be affected. Neither can rainfall and crop monitoring, even where substantially accurate, tell us very much about when people are likely to be forced to move away from their homes, which is a distinctive feature of famines (Currey 1981). Wood (1976) noted that the peasants he interviewed had survived up to six years of successive crop failure during the 1972-73 famine in northern Ethiopia, and a team from the Ethiopian Nutrition Institute (ENI) recorded during the same period that "most of the farmers (had) not had a harvest for more than three years: 92 per cent in Ambassel and Raya & Kobo, and between 57 and 70 per cent in other awrajas" (ENI 1974 p 37).

It is also the case that famine migrants over 1983-84 had



Figure 6.6

Responses to the questions: When did the drought begin/when was your last good year?: Refugee sample



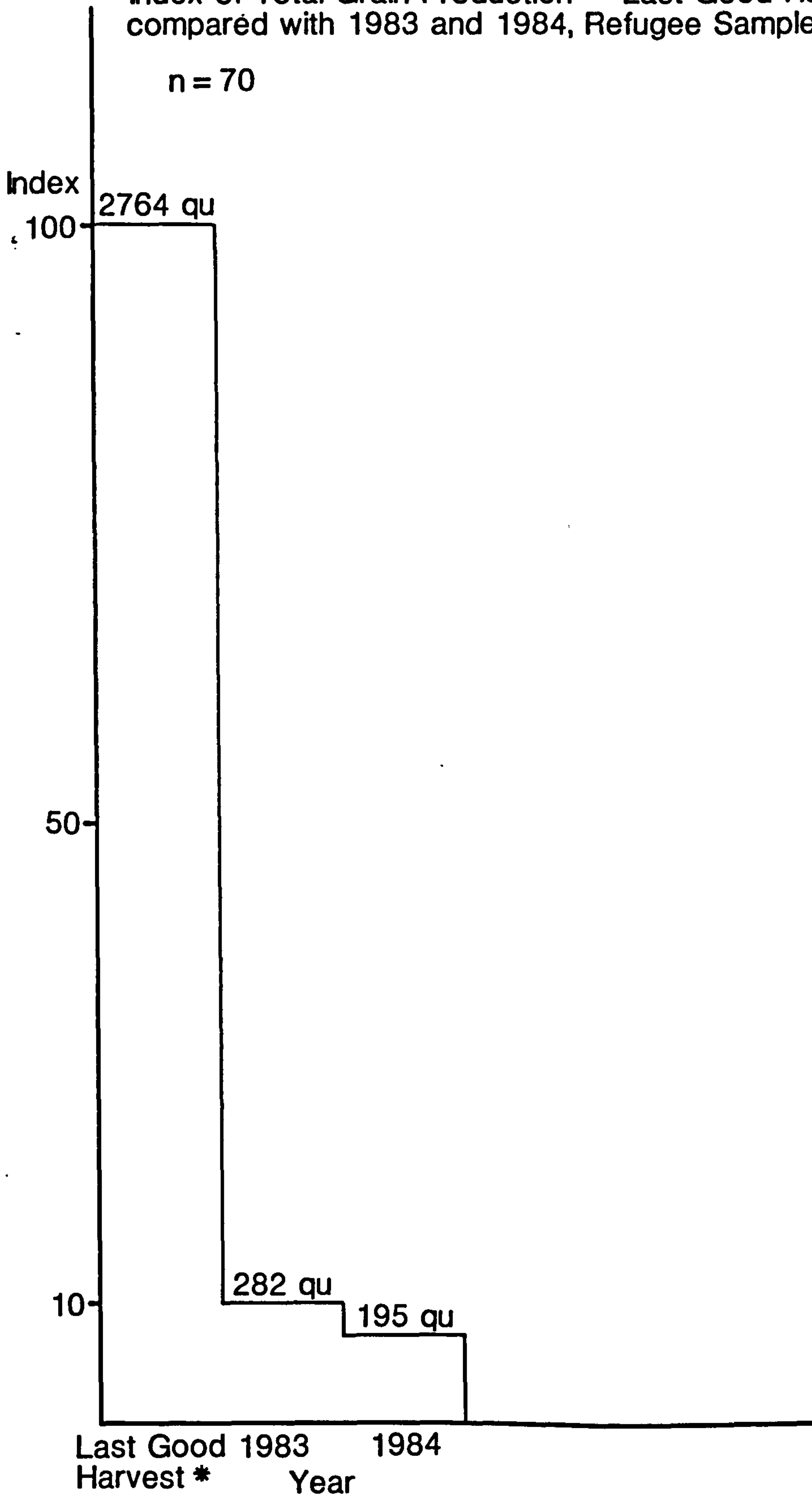
experienced long years of crop failure. Wright (1983) interviewed displaced farmers from Tigray and Northern Wollo, none of whom reported adequate harvests since 1974-75, in the wake of the famine a decade ago. The famine migrants interviewed for our present study also reported that the drought was of long standing. When pressed to be more specific about the timing of their last adequate harvest, 87 per cent of the respondents from Tigray, Gonder and Wollo stated that the drought began between 1978 and 1981 (see Figure 6.6), although several farmers were still adamant that they had not had an adequate year since the early 1970s. Respondents from Eritrea reported a somewhat later onset of drought, with all those replying to the question locating the years of crop failure between 1980 and 1982. Either Tigrayan agriculture is more resilient than that of Eritrea, or the latter has been generally more war-affected (see below).

While the drought had obviously been of long-standing, crop losses in the later years were very severe. Figure 6.7 gives the total crop yield reported by 70 migrant household heads from Tigray. As we have seen, 87 per cent of Tigray respondents located the drought as beginning or becoming particularly bad between 1978 and 1981. Most respondents gave actual yields for their last good year as compared with 1983 and 1984. These reported yields have been aggregated, and the yields for 1983 and 1984 have been expressed as a percentage of the earlier figure to

Figure 6.7

Index of Total Grain Production - ' Last Good Harvest '  
compared with 1983 and 1984, Refugee Sample

n = 70



\* 87% of respondents locate this between 1978 and 1981



give some means of comparison of the severity of the shortfalls. Accordingly, aggregate crop production in 1983 was reported as being only 10 per cent of that in the pre-drought period; and for 1984 it was down to 7 per cent of this figure. It is therefore clear that the highland peasantry has developed considerable resistance to severe crop failures through its various coping strategies, and we have hypothesised that these would include asset sales, labour migration, borrowing and consumption of famine foods (see chapter 8). Moreover, it is also clear from the very late migration of the majority of victims of the current famine, at or just prior to harvest 1984, that adequate rainfall during the previous Kremt season could have prevented widespread famine, although the drought would have left a substantial section of the peasantry with considerably depleted farm and household assets.

Resistance to crop failure varies by region and among different groups of the peasantry within regions according to the availability of alternative sources of income. We should note that in parts of Ethiopia when the man/land ratio is particularly poor, a single serious crop failure may precipitate famine. An example is given by Wollaita and Kembata Hadiya awrajas in northern Sidamo and southern Shoa. Here holdings are extremely small and households are crop dependent to a greater degree than in the north. Little wage labour, petty commodity production or petty

trading is available as alternative sources of income. Consequently, one serious failure of the Belg (short) rains in 1984 led to famine within a matter of months.

#### 6.7. Pest Attacks as Contributory Factors in Crop Failures

Early reports on crop failures and related famine conditions in northern Ethiopia tend to emphasise the role of rain failures in causing crop failures, whereas pest attacks are treated rather as secondary factors. Bennett (1983a) does not mention pest attacks at all in his early review of the famine situation in Tigray, although Wright (1983) mentions that as early as the period 1975-80 eastern escarpment and lowland areas had experienced "locust raids and crop pests" (ibid p 3). She further reports pest attacks in other areas of Tigray, notably the west and centre, from 1980 onwards, although the type of pest is not specified. Wright also states that anthrax and rinderpest became widespread, contributing substantially to livestock deaths, particularly among cattle. However, the lengthy report on famine conditions in Tigray over 1983-84 compiled by English et al (op cit) makes no mention of pest attacks.

Official sources gave passing mention to armyworm infestation as a cause of crop failure in several summary reports put forward over the same period by the RRC. For example, in 1982 armyworm were reported to be damaging

crops in Wollo, and in 1984 in Tigray. However, the emphasis in the official reports is again on rain failure rather than pest attacks as the prime agent of damage to crops.

It is therefore striking that the Tigrayan famine refugees and escapees from resettlement camps interviewed by Clay and Holcomb (ibid) cited pest attacks as the major cause of crop failure on their own farms. For example, the majority of the predominately Tigrayan refugees interviewed at Wad Kowli and FAU II camps cited armyworm as the main cause of crop failure, followed by armyworm and drought acting together. However, the majority of interviewed victims of resettlement from Wollo (68 per cent of the sample) stated that drought had been the major cause of declines in production. Thirty per cent of Tigrayans interviewed in the latter sample believed that production declines were caused by armyworm; another thirty per cent attributed them to drought; while a further thirty per cent attributed crop damage both to drought and armyworm. In both cases, a minority attributed crop damage to attacks by the army, or to government policies.

It is in fact likely that rain failures and armyworm attacks act synergistically to damage crops. Tucker (1984) has tested this hypothesis by comparing data on the timing and extent of rainfall with the reported incidence



of armyworm attacks in eight zones of Tanzania and Kenya. He discovered that in three out of the eight ecological zones identified there is a statistically significant (at the level of significance of  $p > 0.05$  or better) inverse relationship between rainfall quantity and the number of outbreaks reported; while there is also a significant relationship between overall rainfall conditions and total outbreaks for all eight zones. As Tucker uses rather crude categories of high and low rainfall, due partly to the paucity of data, then it may be the case that a comparison between poorly-timed, as well as deficient rainfall seasons with subsequent outbreaks of armyworm infestation would lead to a significant relationship being established for even more districts. Unfortunately, both the quality and quantity of data available do not allow this exercise to be undertaken for Ethiopia.

#### 6.8. The Effects of Warfare on Agricultural Production

Military offensives in Tigray, Eritrea and rebel-held areas of Wollo and Gonder are annual events, taking place principally during the harvest season to maximise freedom of movement for the attacking forces and consequent economic damage. Additionally, airborne attacks and other more limited ground attacks take place regularly. Attacks are particularly concentrated on the agriculturally-surplus areas, such as Shire and Tembien districts of western and southern Tigray, and can involve up to 70,000

troops, supported with armoured vehicles and tanks. An offensive on this scale was undertaken in Tigray in 1983; while in 1984 the focus of government attempts to dislodge the rebels shifted to Eritrea, where the Dergue initially suffered heavy losses. In 1985, a renewed government offensive in Eritrea eventually succeeded in recapturing much of the ground gained during the following year. As a consequence of such actions, towns on the edge of disputed territory are constantly falling in and out of government hands, with rebels occupying them for a short period before withdrawing under concentrated air and ground attacks. Towns such as Lalibela and Sekota in Wollo, and Sheraro in Tigray, regularly suffer this fate.

The year 1983 also saw the introduction of a wide-ranging conscription law allowing the recruitment of any male civilian between the ages of 18 and 30 years for two years' military service. At the same time a reserve force for those aged 30-50 years was created. Consequently, many men, particularly from rebel areas, were afraid to put themselves at risk of conscription, and stayed away from garrison towns as much as possible.

It should be noted that the capture of towns by rebel forces may be useful for the peasantry, despite the incidental destructive effects on farming. Towns are centres for the projection of state power, from which come

the tax collector, the administrator, the recruiting sergeant and the agent of the marketing parastatal. Towns may therefore be viewed as parasitical by the poor peasant, and their overthrow may be seen by the peasant as a benefit.

The losses from military offensives can be substantial. Wright considers that "hundreds of thousands of hectares of crops" have been destroyed in the wars in Tigray (op cit p 7). Bennett (1983a) quotes TPLF sources as stating that during the 1981 offensive grain losses in urban godowns amounted to 6,000 tonnes, mostly through incendiary bombing. On the other hand, we have already noted that the specific impact of warfare on agricultural production was said to be limited by the two sets of respondents interviewed by Clay and Holcomb. Among the famine refugees, only 11 percent stated that attacks by the Ethiopian army were the major cause of their personal experience of famine; while 14 per cent of resettlement victims from Wollo considered both drought and "the Dergue" to be the major cause; although a further 18 per cent considered government policies to be the major factor. While these categories are vague, it does seem clear that no one factor can be considered in isolation, as "drought" (rain failures), pest attacks, warfare and government policies (such as compulsory grain purchases, taxation and trade restrictions, all of which may be lumped together as being a result of "the Dergue") act



Table 6.4: Experience of Warfare among Refugee Sample

	<u>No. of Respondents</u>				<u>Percentage</u>
	<u>Tigray</u>	<u>Gonder</u>	<u>Eritrea</u>	<u>Total</u>	
No Problems	21	4	2	27	30
Fear/movement restrictions	15	0	3	18	20
Destruction of Property	10	2	8	20	22
Destruction of crops, loss of livestock, human deaths	21	1	2	24	27
Total	67	7	15	89	99

Note

1 Error due to rounding

Source: Interviews with refugee sample

synergistically to depress crop yields. Nevertheless, the famine refugees interviewed for the purposes of this study invariably pointed out that their major reason for fleeing Ethiopia was the drought, followed by warfare and government policies. Unfortunately, the question about the causes of crop failure was not put systematically, so comparison with the findings of Clay and Holcomb is not possible.

However, the famine refugees in Tukulabab and Wad Sherife were questioned about the effects of war on their households. The results are presented in table 6.4. Of the 67 respondents from Tigray, 21 (31 per cent) said that they were not affected by warfare, with a further 15 (22 per cent) saying that they were afraid of bombing and were prevented from entering certain towns. Some of those interviewed had been reduced to carrying out essential agricultural activities only at night. Destruction of houses was reported by 15 per cent of the Tigrayan sample, with destruction of crops and/or livestock, and the deaths of family or neighbours being reported by 31 per cent of the sample. The Eritreans had been generally more extensively affected by war, with ten respondents reporting varying degrees of losses, three reporting movement restrictions, and only two saying that they had had no problems.

The ravages of war and the problems associated with moving both people and relief goods at night have been well documented elsewhere (e.g. Bennett 1983a and 1983b; Wright 1983; English et al 1984). What is perhaps most surprising about the war in Tigray, the province which was worst hit of all the drought areas of Ethiopia, is that trade and aid continued much as usual during the drought. This will become clear from the economic activity described in the next two chapters. The war has been an added factor driving the highlanders to destitution, but does not seem to have been as important a factor as rain failure and crop failures. Only the Eritrean refugees appear to have been severely affected by actual destruction of livelihoods through the activities of the Ethiopian government.

#### 6.9. Summary

It seems from the available evidence that the rain failures, commonly called drought, which have afflicted Ethiopia's northern provinces have been longstanding. The origins of the recent dry spell can be traced from at least 1980 for many parts of the region, and in some cases the onset of rain failures and poor harvests is said to have begun much earlier. Indeed, it could be argued that there never really was a recovery from the last severe rain failures of the early 1970s.



Nevertheless, rain failures were not the sole source of crop failures. Pest attacks were apparently frequent and devastating, although not well documented. Warfare has also played its part, although direct destruction of crops and property is perhaps less widespread than one might suppose from some reports. At least, the majority of peasants interviewed for this study have not reported crop losses through warfare, although many experienced movement restrictions which would have helped to undermine the regional economy, and hence their chances of survival.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> There is a 95% chance that a single observation will lie in the interval:  $\delta \pm 2\sigma\sqrt{\frac{2}{n}}$

where:  $\delta$  = the true difference between the two population means

$\sigma$  = standard deviation

$n$  = sample size

Given that there is a 95% chance that the error in the estimate of  $\delta$  ( $\delta - d$ ) is less than  $\delta \pm 2\sigma\sqrt{\frac{2}{n}}$ , then the maximum likely error ( $e$ ) can be substituted for  $\delta$  in the equation.

$$\text{Hence, } e = 2\sigma\sqrt{\frac{2}{n}}$$

$$e^2 = 4\sigma^2 \times \frac{2}{n}$$

$$n = \frac{8\sigma^2}{e^2}$$

The standard deviation is unknown and must be estimated (Healy and Osborne 1983 pp 8-9).

<sup>2</sup> The troposphere is the lowest level of the atmosphere, extending from sea level to an altitude of 15 kilometers. It is the weather layer in which the bulk of atmospheric circulation occurs. The lower troposphere is also contiguous with the biosphere, a zone extending 9 km upwards, which is inhabitable by living things.

## Chapter 7: The Effects of Crop Failures on Grain Prices

### 7.1. Introduction

According to the general model of famine introduced in chapter 1, crop failures may be expected to have an inflationary effect on grain prices. It is well understood that in a South Asian context the retail prices of staple foodgrains generally rise to exceptional heights during famines, thereby reducing the real value of labour power (when paid in cash rather than in kind) and other assets or commodities exchanged for food, so that the poor become unable to purchase sufficient food to maintain themselves. Additionally, Sen (1981) has shown that certain classes or groups of the poor suffer more than others, when they depend almost exclusively on one or other "entitlement base" for subsistence. For example, during the Bengal famine of 1942-43, wage labourers, fisherman, and some artisans suffered disproportionately, while other groups of the poor, particularly small farmers who grew much of their own food, were less affected.

Sen makes a different case for Ethiopia. In his analysis of the Wollo famine of 1972-73, he argues that grain prices did not rise very far or for very long during the famine. Sen uses wholesale prices from the provincial capital of Dessie in southern Wollo to support his case, arguing that Ethiopian subsistence farmers derived their

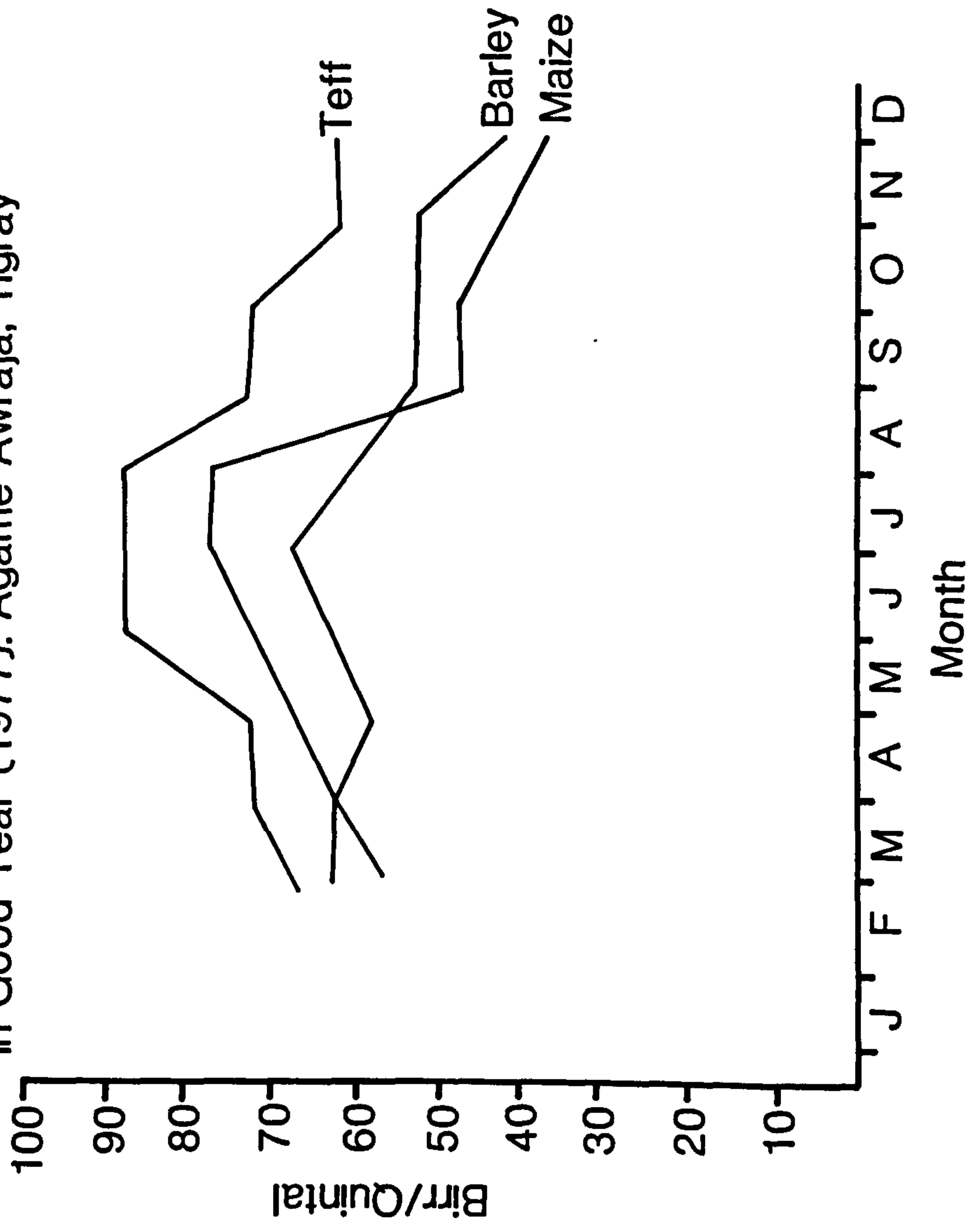


food entitlements substantially from their own production, and were unable to buy food when their crops failed. There was little excess of effective demand over supply, so prices remained relatively normal.

Seaman and Holt (1980) argue, on the other hand, that grain prices rise to exceptional heights during famines. Expecting this to be the case, they collected grain prices in Wollo during the last months of the famine, but found that these were within 15 per cent of pre-drought levels. It seemed, therefore, that Sen's analysis was correct.

During the course of this study, it also seemed at first that Sen's analysis was substantiated. Grain prices in drought-affected parts of Wollo and Gonder in the majority of the 20 markets monitored by the RRC early warning system did not demonstrate particularly high prices during 1982 and much of 1983. However, reports from Tigray province (Bennett 1983a; Wright 1983) stated that exceptionally high retail prices of foodgrains did prevail there during 1982-83. For example, Wright reported that as of July 1983 the price of sorghum in central Tigray varied from 140 birr per quintal to 200 birr per quintal, while in western parts of the province (which produced a surplus) sorghum was selling for only 70 birr. Teff was even more expensive in southern Tigray, at 200-240 birr in local markets. Unfortunately, the data collected by travellers into Tigray was very sparse. Despite this

Figure 7.1  
 Retail Price Behaviour of Foodgrains  
 in Good Year (1977): Agame Awraja, Tigray



Source: RRC

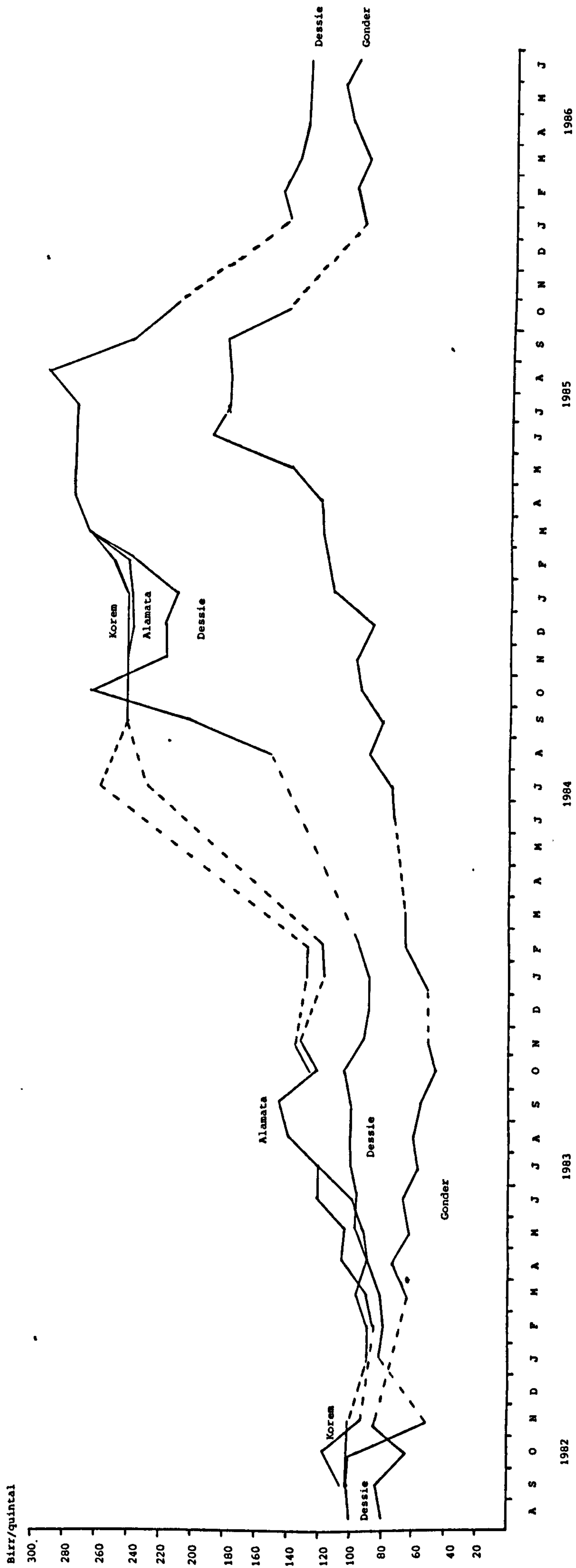
constraint, the author (Cutler 1984a) hypothesised that by late 1983 high grain prices (about three times normal) would be typical at the centre of the famine zone, and that on the basis of unseasonal upward movement of grain prices in western Tigray and the far north of Wollo, crop failures and associated famine conditions were spreading. The refugees fleeing famine conditions at the centre of the zone would themselves export famine as they retained sufficient effective demand through asset sales to raise the prices of dwindling grain supplies at the periphery.

## 7.2. Seasonal Variation in Grain Prices in Highland Ethiopia

In order to substantiate the above case, it was first necessary to establish what seasonal variation in grain prices typifies a normal year. Unfortunately, there has been a dearth of data for Wollo, Tigray and northern Gonder for pre-drought years. Only one reasonably intact price series exists for this area, which is reproduced in figure 7.1, showing the pattern of prices of teff, barley and maize for Agame awraja in Tigray in 1977. There is a clear bimodal seasonal variation in prices, with grain supplies being in relatively short supply during the kremt season, which influences a price hike from June until August, after which grain prices fall in anticipation of the harvest, which begins in late October. Inflation does not seem to be a factor, with prices



Figure 7.2: Teff Prices in Korem, Alamata, Dessie and Gonder - August 1982-June 1986



Year/month

Source: CSO/RRC

falling to below post-harvest levels of the previous year.

### 7.3. Price Behaviour following Crop Failures

Retail price behaviour of foodgrains during years of severe crop failure is rather different. Instead of falling 2-3 months in advance of the harvest, grain prices tend to rise steadily before levelling off or dipping slightly at harvest, and then continue to climb rapidly in the post harvest season. Figure 7.2 demonstrates this pattern for teff in two markets (Korem and Alamata) in northern Wollo during 1983. Note that at this time price behaviour in markets outside the famine zone (Dessie and Gonder in figure 7.2) was relatively normal. In Dessie, slight seasonal variation is apparent, and the rise in the price of teff is far lower than in Korem and Kombolcha. If we compare the rate of inflation of teff prices in the post-harvest months of February 1983 and February 1984, it can be calculated that the price of teff rose by 51 percent in Korem, and by 46 per cent in Alamata; whereas in Dessie it rose by only 8 percent. In Gonder, the price of teff actually remained static over the period, with no increase being recorded. It is notable that the most rapid inflation of teff prices in the two northern markets took place over a relatively short period, during the kremt season between May and September, traditionally a time of relative shortages of grain.

With the spread of crop failures and the migration of peasants looking for cheaper food sources, food prices began to rocket in the majority of markets in the region. A good example is given by Dessie and Gonder markets, which were said to be unaffected by the famine of 1973-74. As we have already observed, during 1983 the price of teff was unremarkable in both markets, not demonstrating a marked rise during the kremt season, and falling at harvest time as we would expect during a normal year. Presumably, this was the case because both Dessie and Gonder were drawing much of their grain supply from adjacent western regions which were in surplus. However, by 1984 crop failures had become unusually severe and widespread throughout the region. By October the price of grain in Dessie had jumped to around three times that of late 1983, with much of the rise accounted for during the failed belg and kremt seasons (see figure 7.2). A price hike of similar proportions occurred in Gonder some six months later, following the belg harvest failure of 1984, although the late response seems to imply that this market was even further removed from the famine zone.

By contrast, Korem and Alamata markets in northern Wollo demonstrated marked price hikes some 9 months in advance of Dessie. Therefore, it seems that there was a 'ripple' effect on grain prices as the famine zone spread. Price hikes in the worst-affected areas of Tigray and remote parts of northern Wollo occurred earliest, during 1982 in



some cases. Much later, in 1984, markets throughout Wollo and Gonder began to reflect the catastrophic crop-growing conditions following the failure of both belg and kremt seasons. We shall now examine this trend in more detail, considering both official and unofficial sources of data.

#### 7.4. Grain Price Behaviour in Wollo and Gonder during 1984

The extraordinary rise in the price of foodgrains during 1984 is evident from the official price data series, collected on behalf of the RRC by CSO enumerators in 20 markets in Wollo and Gonder. Unfortunately, price data collection stopped from March to July 1984 owing to the demands of the national census, which was the first of its kind in Ethiopia. This gap in data collection is a critical one for students of the Ethiopian famine, because it evidently coincided with the first large increases in grain prices in markets previously relatively unaffected by crop failures and related famine conditions.

Nevertheless, some idea of the pace of inflation over 1984 can be extracted from the fragmented data series. These are considered below.

In table 7.1, the data are divided into three periods. The first, February to August 1984, compares the post-harvest period (February), when prices would normally be at their lowest (see figure 7.1), with August, the month during the

**Table 7.1: Inflation of Teff Prices in 20 Wollo and Gonder markets: February 1984 - April 1985**

<u>Wollo</u>	<u>Feb 84-Aug 84</u>	<u>Aug 84-Feb 85</u>	<u>Feb 84-Feb 85</u>
Alamata	105% (to Sept.)	0%	105%
Bati	178%	19%	197%
Dessie	60%	79%	148%
Haik	109%	38%	188%
Kombolcha	108%	36%	148%
Korem	88% (to Sept.)	3%	94%
Lalibela	41%	54%	118%
Mekaneselam	102%	43%	243%
Tenta	79% (from Jan.)	37%	145%
Wegeltena	58%	60%	153%
Weldiya	35%	55%	109%
Woreilu	67%	44%	140%
<u>Gonder Markets</u>			
Addis Zemen	105%	8%	121%
Aykle	18%	18%	39%
Dabat	43%	50%	114%
Debarak	47%	48%	118%
Debre Tabor	35%	22%	86%
Gonder	36%	30%	77%
Koladiba	21%	44%	82%
Nefas Mewcha	58%	55%	144%
<u>Price/month</u>	<u>Feb 84</u>	<u>Aug 84</u>	<u>Feb 85</u>
median	72 birr	127 birr	199 birr
mean	73 "	133 "	176 "
c.v.	0.41	0.44	0.37

kremt rainy season when prices would normally be expected to be at their highest. August is also the month during which price data collection was resumed in most areas following the census. The second periodisation runs from August 1984 to February 1985, during which months one would normally expect grain prices to fall. The third periodisation refers to the change in grain prices over the whole year, February 1984 to February 1985.

If we consider markets in Wollo first, it is immediately apparent that the overall increase in grain prices during the first period was generally very high, ranging from 35 per cent in the central highland market of Weldiya to 178 per cent in the eastern lowland market of Bati. Inflation rates over the second period are somewhat lower, ranging from zero in Alamata to 79 per cent in Dessie. It is interesting to note that markets like Korem and Alamata which experienced early price hikes in 1983 were also the first to experience disinflation. However, the deflation one normally associates with pre-harvest price behaviour is absent in all markets. Inflation rates over the whole year, February 1984 to February 1985 are generally high, ranging from 105 per cent in Alamata to 243 per cent in Mekaneselam. In other words, teff prices rose between two and three times in Wollo during 1984.

Conditions in Gonder were generally less extreme, although



they too were varied. Prices rose at roughly the same rate during both the pre and post August periods, although markets closest to Tigray and Wollo in the north and east - such as Dabat, Debarak, Nefas Mewcha and Addis Zemen suffered the most extreme inflation. Markets adjacent to crop-surplus areas in the south and west such as Aykle, Koladiba, and Debre Tabor experienced smaller increases in teff prices. This suggests that the crop failures in Wollo, eastern and northern Gonder, and much of Tigray were indeed very severe during 1984.

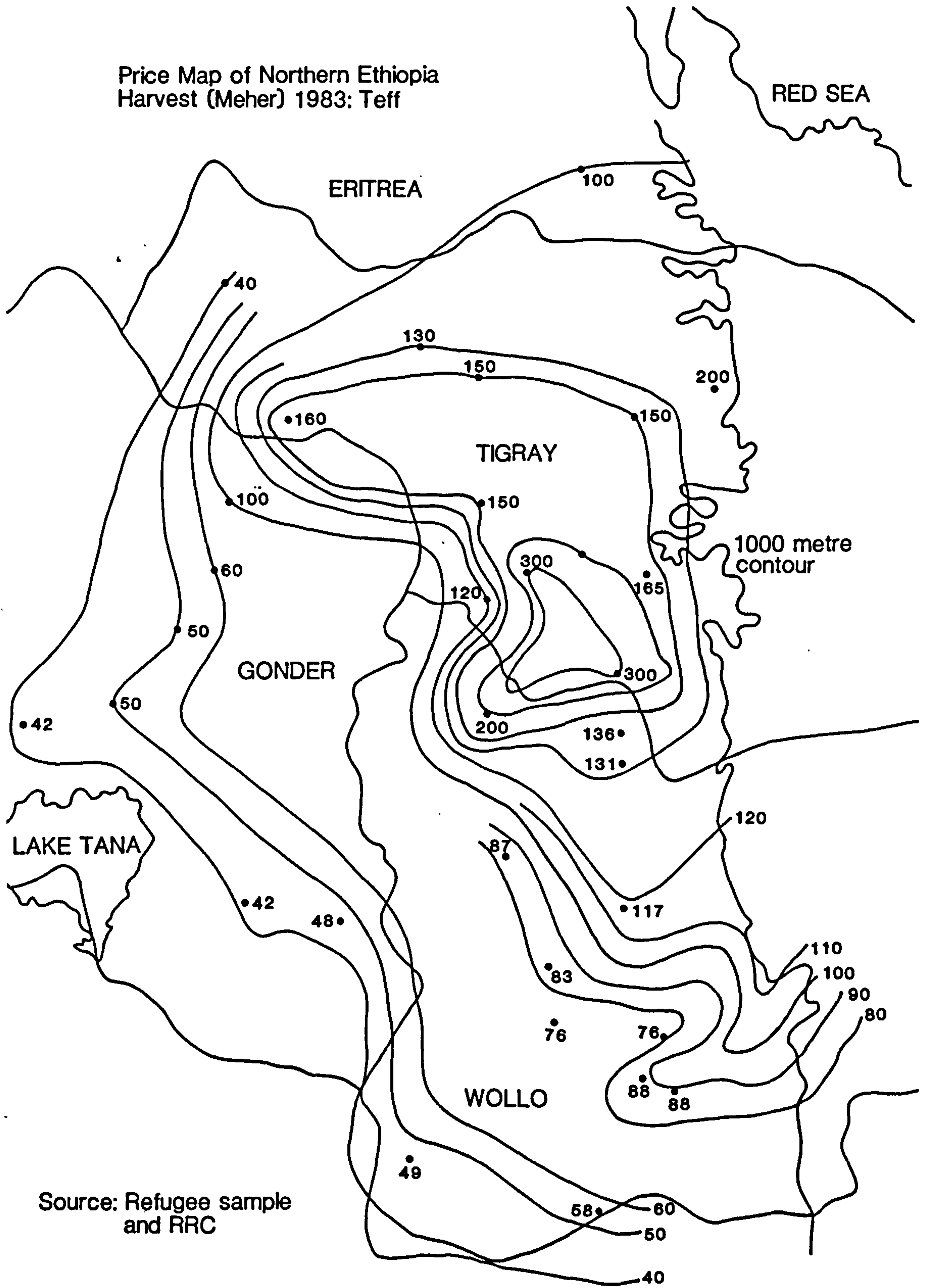
As usual under Ethiopian conditions, the variation in grain prices at any given time is wide. According to table 7.1 the coefficient of variation of teff prices in the 20 markets was 0.41 in February 1984, and rose slightly to 0.44 in August, before falling again to 0.37 in February of the following year. The eventual drop in the coefficient of variation is to be expected as grain price inflation became widespread with the outbreak of famine throughout the region, whereas earlier it had been confined to fewer markets.

#### 7.5. Regional Grain Price Behaviour over 1983-84:

##### Analysis using Official and Unofficial Sources Combined

Given the apparent lack of integration of markets in northern Ethiopia, it has been postulated (Cutler 1984a) that it should be possible to construct a map of grain

Figure 7.3







prices for each season which would delineate quite precisely the extent of famine conditions. In order to do this, it was necessary to establish what grain prices actually prevailed during 1983-84 in markets not covered by the RRC network. This was done through the interviews with famine migrants in Sudan. The refugees themselves distinguished a bimodal seasonal pattern of prices, as suggested by the data presented in figure 7.1. They recalled precisely the prices of several different cereals by season over the previous two years and sometimes prior to that (see chapter 6).

An example of price maps for teff is given in figures 7.3 and 7.4. It can be seen from these that the zones of highest grain prices - southern and central Tigray and northern Wollo - match the data already discussed on reported crop failures and the origins of the earliest famine migrants (see next chapter), whether reported subjectively in RRC reports and other documentation, or whether identified by satellite imagery.

If cross-sections are drawn through the price maps (figures 7.5 and 7.6), then the extreme differences in price for the same variety of grain (in this case teff) are apparent. It is important to note that markets only 20 kms apart, such as Maichew and Korem, or Samre and Adi Adi, can exhibit substantial price differentials, with the drought/famine zone prices being more than double those at

Figure 7.5

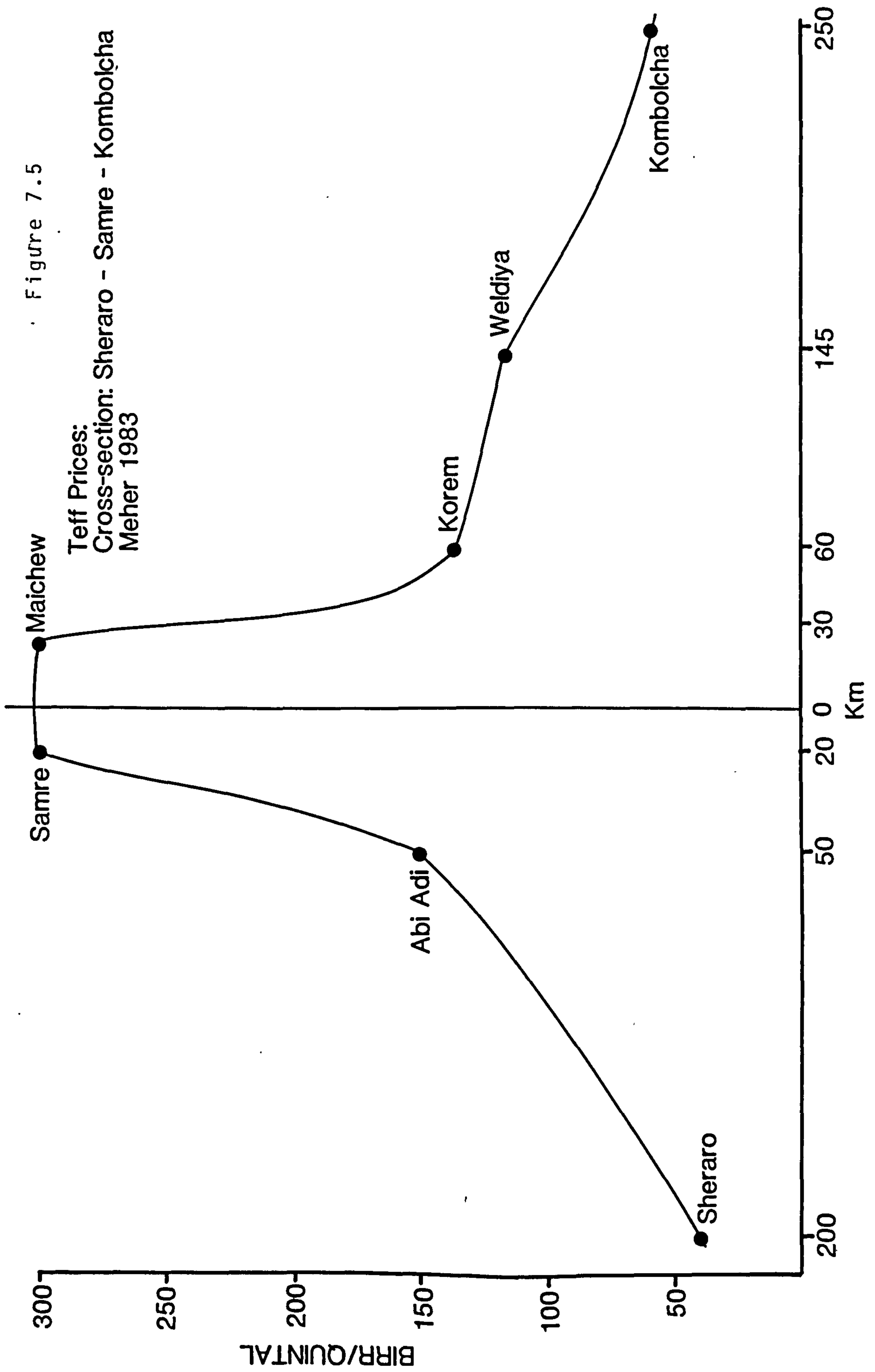
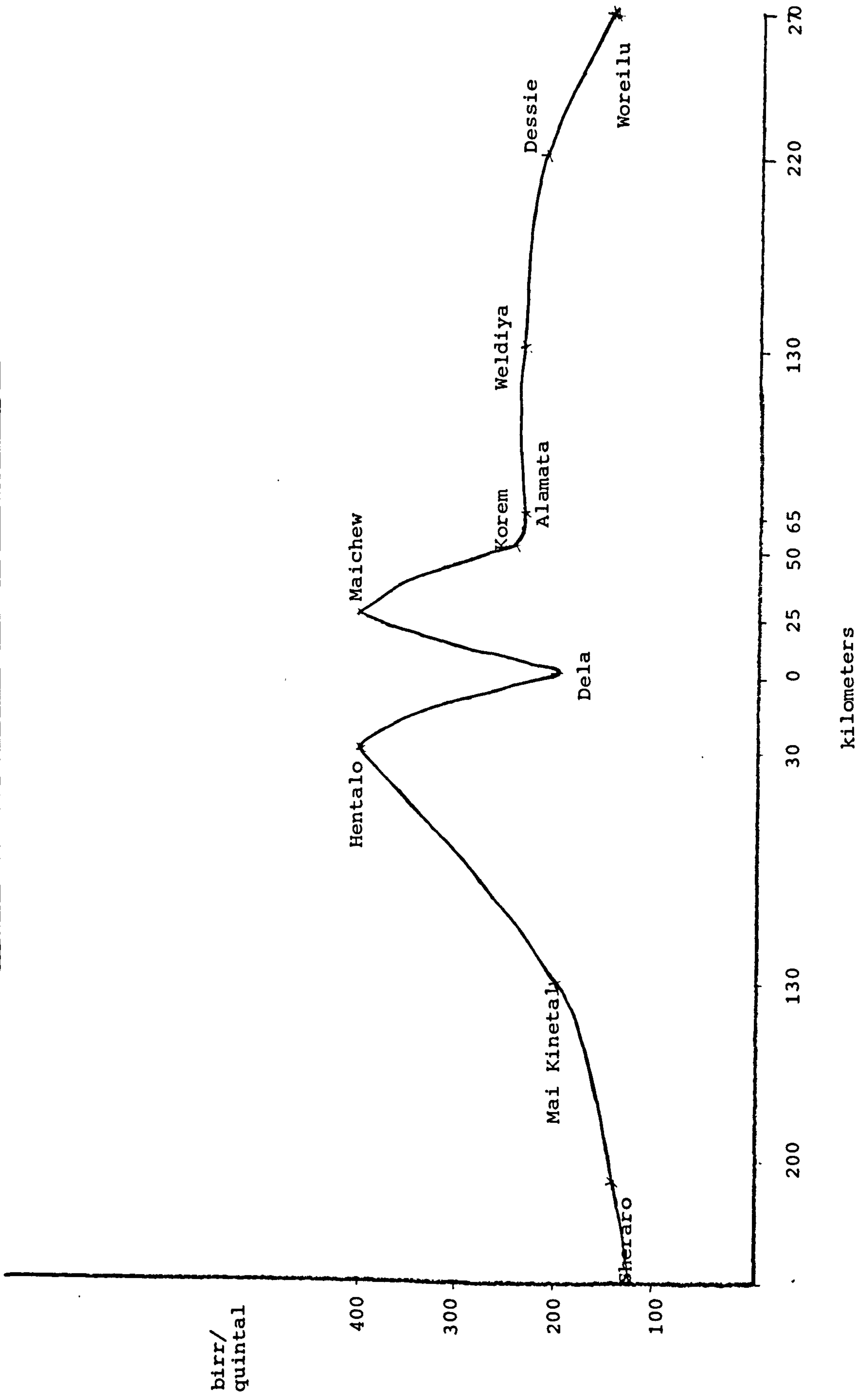


Figure 7.6: Cross Section of Teff Prices in 1984

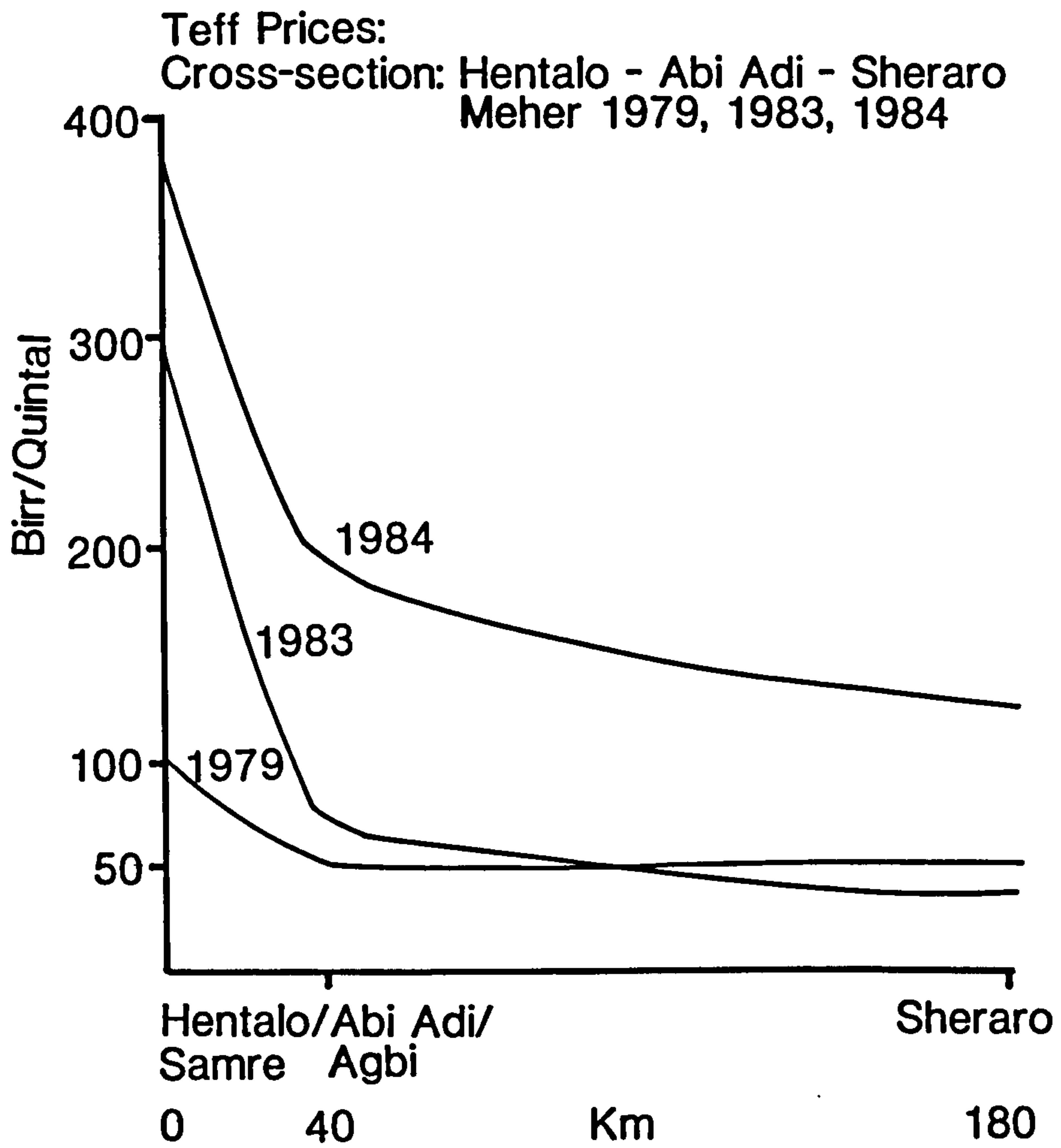




the edge of the zone. The further one moves away from the drought/famine zone, the lower are the prices of grain. For example, during 1983, at distances of 200-250 kms away from the worst-affected areas, where a quintal of teff cost as much as 300 birr, the same quantity of grain cost 80-85 per cent less (see figure 7.5). While we would expect some price differential due to transport costs, these are unlikely to be so large as to warrant a 100 per cent mark-up over a distance of 20 kilometers. Transport to remote areas would generally be carried out by pack animal accompanied by the trader, and transport costs would be made up of the trader's subsistence needs on the journey and expenses on fodder and depreciation of animals. Admittedly, all of these costs would be increased by drought conditions, with the possible exception of the cost of pack animals. Unfortunately, we do not have data on the costs of transport in the traditional sector.

An interesting case of intra-regional variation in grain prices is exhibited by Dela in figure 7.6. Here it appears that harvests were much better than in neighbouring areas such as Hentalo and Maichew. This situation adds further evidence to the case made earlier (in chapter 6) that there is considerable sub-regional and inter-household variation in experience of crop failure and famine.

Figure 7.7



Price mapping can also be a useful tool for tracing the path of famine over time. Figure 7.7 gives cross-sectional representations for markets north-west of the drought/famine zone over 1979, 1983 and 1984. The data supports the testimony of the famine migrants who argued that the drought was of long-standing in southern Tigray. Even in 1979, teff prices were twice as high in Hentalo than in Sheraro. This differential grew enormously over 1983, but in 1984 prices in the traditionally surplus west also moved up to famine levels, reacting to poorer crop conditions and the pressure of massive outmigration. Throughout, a price differential is maintained, although presumably if the drought and famine conditions persisted it would lessen. This has certainly been the case for northern and southern Wollo. As of May 1985, the price of a quintal of teff was uniformly high throughout the province. Teff was selling for 285 birr per quintal in Dessie market (the regional capital in the south); and for up to 400 birr per quintal in Korem (northern Wollo). In less accessible markets in western Wollo, teff was reported to be selling for as much as 1,000 birr per quintal when available. However, this was probably a notional price, reflecting virtually complete scarcities of this preferred grain.

The available price data, whether expressed serially over time or spatially at given times, lead one to hypothesise



**Table 7.2: Teff prices at meher harvest (Nov.-Dec.)  
1981-84; Ten markets in Tigray and Wollo**

	<u>1981</u>	<u>1982</u>	<u>1983</u>	<u>1984</u>
<u>Group 1 (north)</u>				
Hentalo	50	-	200	400
Maichew	40	-	300	400
Korem	-	95	136	240
Alamata	52	53	131	237
Weldiya	58	61	117	237
<u>Group 2 (south)</u>				
Wegeltena	65	83	83	237
Tenta	65	73	76	159
Dessie	76	100	88	216
Kombolcha	48	83	88	220
Wereilu	60	68	58	144
<u>All Markets</u>				
mean	57.1	77.0	127.7	243.6
s.d.	10.9	15.2	72.9	88.9
c.v.	0.19	0.20	0.57	0.37
<u>Group 1</u>				
mean	54.9	69.6	176.8	302.8
s.d.	10.9	20.1	75.9	88.7
c.v.	0.19	0.29	0.43	0.29
<u>Group 2</u>				
mean	62.8	81.4	78.6	184.4
s.d.	10.1	11.0	12.5	33.7
c.v.	0.16	0.14	0.16	0.18

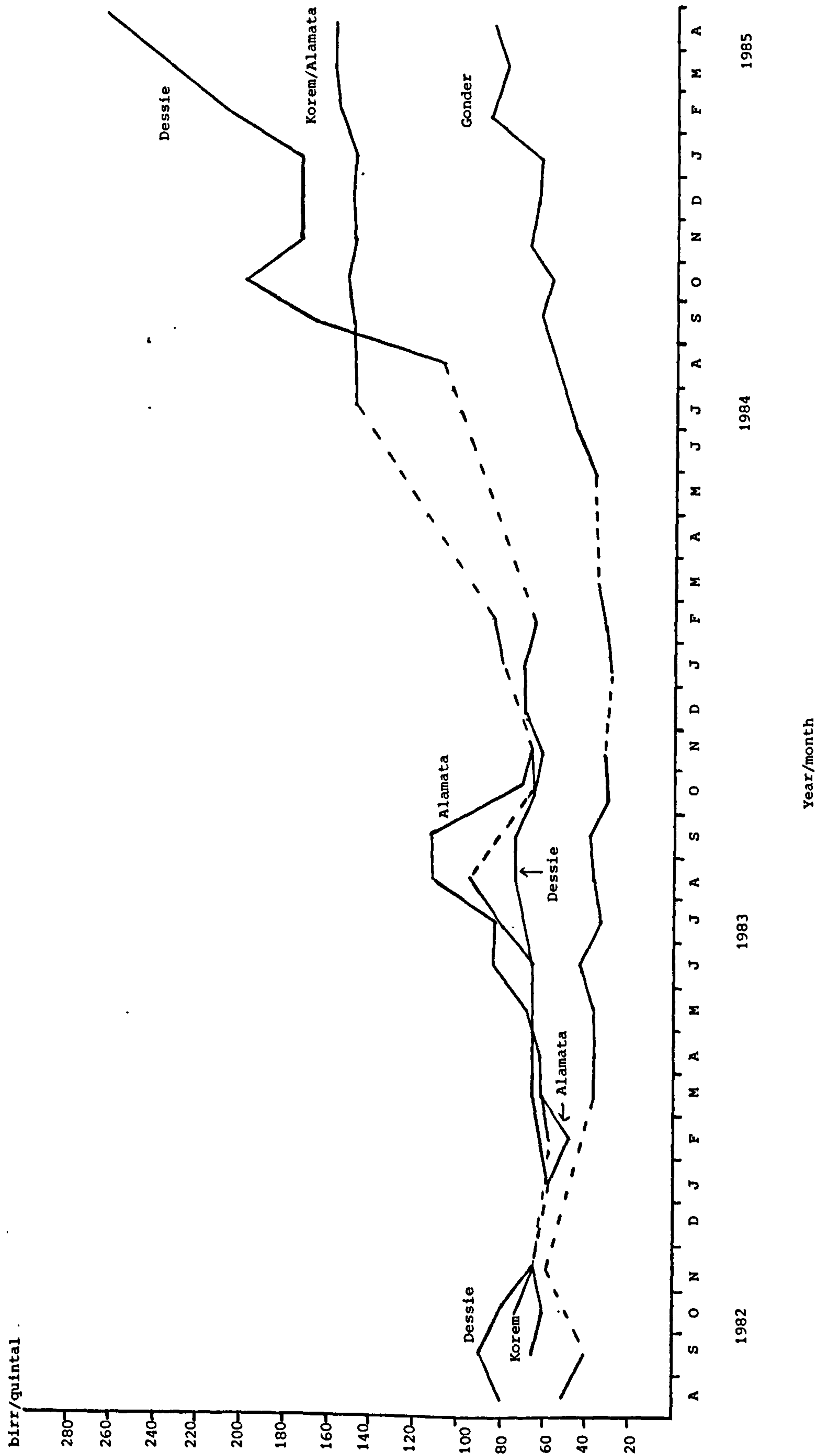
Source: RRC documentation; Hentalo and Maichew own data.

that the coefficient of variation (cv) between markets will increase during the early stages of famine before decreasing again as severe inflation becomes a general feature. If we take a cross section of markets from southern Tigray in the heart of the famine zone down to the southernmost market of Dessie at its edge, it can be seen that this in fact is the case. Table 7.2 compares 10 markets in Wollo and Tigray. It appears that for the set of markets as a whole, the cv does rise over 1981-1983, from 0.19 in 1981 to 0.57 in 1983, before falling again to 0.37 in 1984. If we further divide the markets into two groups, it can be seen that throughout the period the cv is much higher in the northern group, suggesting that markets within or close to the original famine zone demonstrate the greatest variety of trading conditions. It may be the case that as grain becomes more scarce, markets begin to take on a more oligopolistic character, at least in those roadside towns where transportation is not a serious constraint.

#### 7.6. Price Behaviour of Inferior Grains during the Development of Famine

The price data discussed above are for teff, the preferred grain. Similar patterns are produced if the prices of cheaper, more widely available but 'inferior' grains are mapped. In Ethiopia, several other cereals are commonly produced which are considered inferior to teff. The most

Figure 7.8: Sorghum Prices in Korem, Alamata, Dessie and Gonder - August 1982 - April 1985





widely available substitute for teff in both highland and lowland areas is sorghum. Maize, wheat and millet are also grown, but in smaller quantities. Barley is grown at the highest altitudes, but is used mostly for brewing beer, at least in normal times.

During times of hardship, poorer consumers should be expected to shift from the preferred grain to inferior substitutes. Therefore it is important to consider the extent to which the price of cereals like sorghum exhibit the same general trends as teff, and the extent to which they differ.

Figure 7.8 shows monthly time series data for sorghum in Korem, Alamata, Dessie and Gonder, the markets for which we previously logged teff prices. It can be seen from the graphs that overall, with the exception of Gonder, very high sorghum prices did prevail during 1984. In Gonder, prices begin to rise markedly only during the early months of 1985. The timing of the price hikes in the four markets follows exactly the same pattern as that exhibited by teff prices in figure 7.2, with price hikes in the two northern markets preceding those in the south by some nine months or so. Again, Gonder lags behind Dessie in its response to regional crop failures. The only significant difference in sorghum price behaviour vis-a-vis teff is that the initial price hike in Korem and Alamata markets in 1983 is followed by a fall to below 1982 levels at

harvest time. However, there is a rapid jump in the post-harvest months of January and February, suggesting that the temporary influx of sorghum onto the market was shortlived. Some varieties of the crop are harvested a little earlier than teff, which may explain why the price fall in October and November was so sharp.

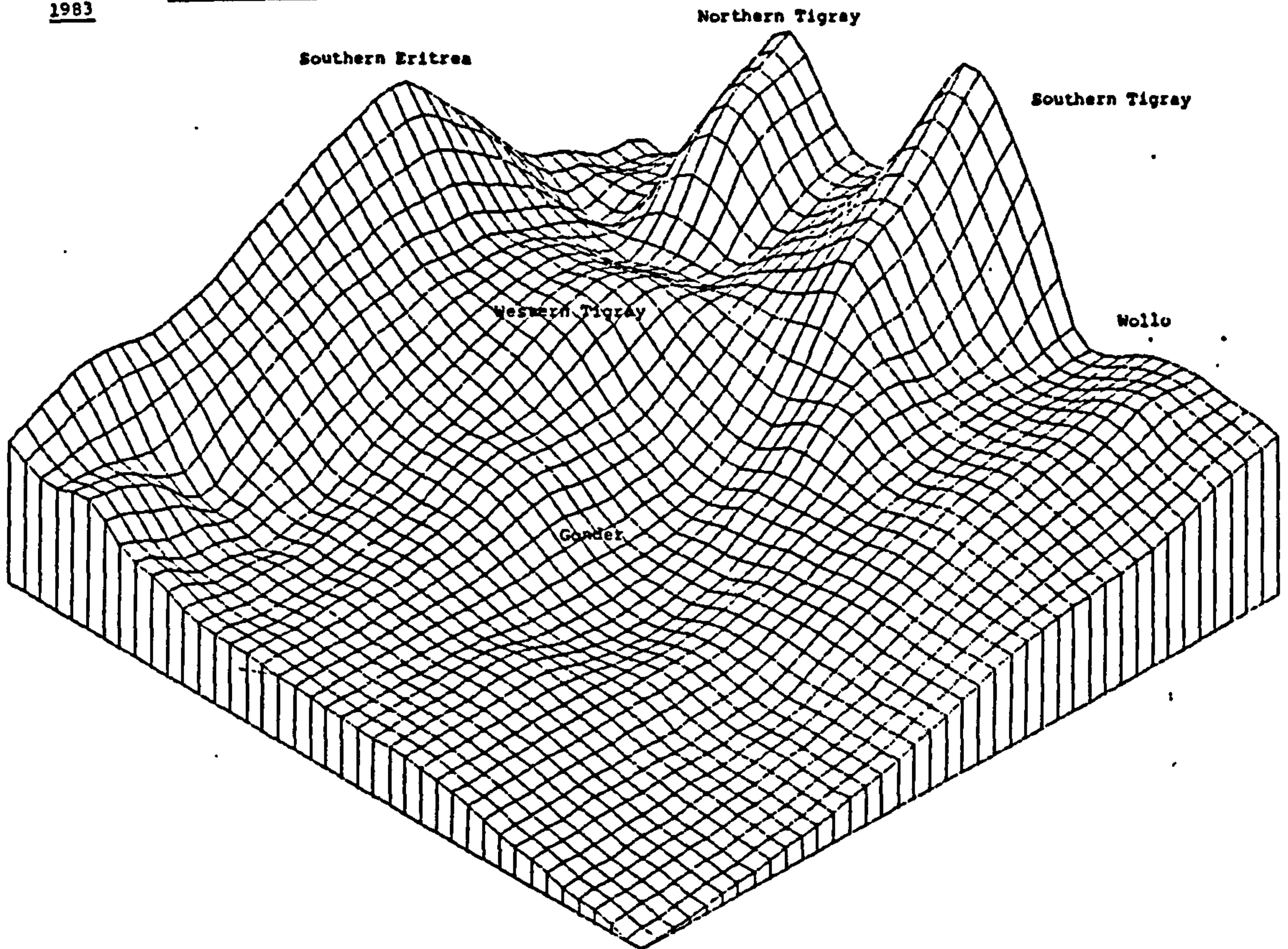
According to the recall of the refugees, by 1984 sorghum prices at the centre of the Tigray famine zone were little different from teff prices. However, according to official price data, there usually remains a significant price difference between the two crops, even under famine conditions, with teff being around 30-40 per cent higher than sorghum. Exceptions do occur, for example in April 1985 in Dessie the price of teff was only 3 per cent higher than sorghum. Evidently, constantly changing local supply and demand factors influence the relative prices of inferior and superior grains, so that it is difficult, without extensive local knowledge, to predict the likely price regime for any given market at any particular time.

However, if we consider in broad terms the spatial analysis of sorghum prices, it quickly becomes apparent that the regional price differentials during 1983 and 1984 follow much the same pattern as teff. In figure 7.9, the distribution of sorghum prices at harvest time during 1983 and 1984 has been mapped. In this case, a MAPICS computer

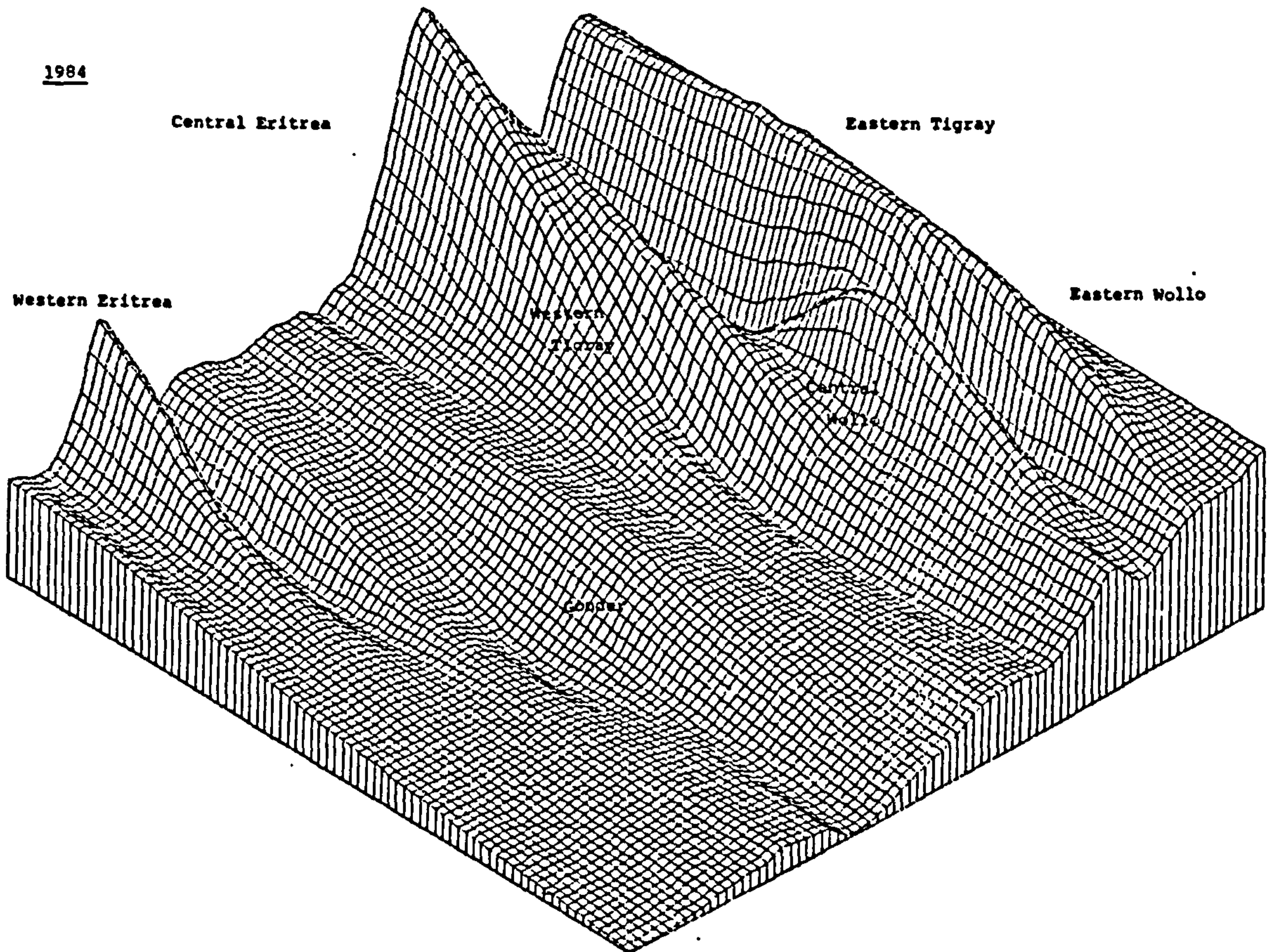


Figure 7.9: Sorghum Prices during harvest, 1983 and 1984

1983



1984





programme has been employed to highlight the price differentials by geographical region. It can be seen from the figure that the pattern of relative prices is very similar to that depicted for teff in figures 7.3 and 7.4. During 1983, the zone of highest sorghum prices was centred on a belt running from southern Tigray to southern Eritrea. By 1984, relatively high grain prices were also to be found in all parts of Tigray and Wollo.

The behaviour of retail prices of grain under famine conditions in Wollo has also been investigated by Baulch (1985). He found that during the later stages of the famine, the prices of inferior grains such as sorghum and barley rose at a faster rate than those of the preferred staple, teff. This is easily explained by the tendency of consumers to switch to inferior grains as the price of the preferred staple rapidly climbs out of reach of the majority. Baulch also comments on the 'price ripple' effect notable from data on famine conditions over 1983-84. He argues that while the price ripple hypothesis appears to be plausible, with price hikes in southern Wollo occurring several months after those in the north and in Tigray, it is strange that the pace of change (the gradient) is more rapid in the larger southern markets (see Dessie in figures 7.2 and 7.8, for example). This difference might be explained by market structure variables such as the greater concentration of the grain trade in the hands of larger private traders who are able

to influence the price of grain through speculative reaction to perceived future market conditions in towns like Dessie<sup>1</sup>.

The patterns of price behaviour discussed above probably have not been restricted to the most recent famine. In 1973, an ENI team noted that while the price of grain at the roadsides was generally low, prices in the rural hinterland were much higher:

"A quintal of sorghum costs less than \$20 in the roadside towns while it is retailed for \$35-40 in the interior.....

An important fact to be repeated here is that the rural population used to subsist on its own produce and supply the urban centres with its surplus. This phenomenon of subsisting by buying from the roadside towns is the consequence of the reported drought" (ENI 1974 p 53).

We should also note that while the activities of traders ensured that grain was relatively cheap at roadside markets during the Wollo famine of 1972-73, the costs and difficulties of transporting grain into the rural hinterland ensured a substantial price differential.

Soaring roadside prices in the latter stages of the 1984 famine reflected trade movement restrictions as well as regional scarcities of grain which were far more severe than those of 1972-73.

## 7.7 The Effect of Food Aid on Grain Prices

It is important to consider the effects of food aid on the grain market and related economic activity. This is because in modern times a large-scale internationally organised relief programme has become a normal part of the famine process. Typically, a response commensurate with the actual size of the problem has been extremely late in arriving, some months after the onset of peak levels of mass migration (see chapter 9 as to why this was the case in 1984). However, once underway, the relief operation distributes large quantities of grain over a relatively short period, for example, approximately 700,000 tonnes of foodstuffs were distributed in Eritrea, Tigray, Wollo and Gonder during 1985. Therefore, it seems reasonable to expect that the sharp falls in the price of grain noted in late 1985 for the markets depicted in figure 7.2 will be attributed to the impact of food aid distribution as well as to the prospect of better harvests.

The question of the impact of food aid distribution was addressed by an FAO team considering Food for Work (FFW) schemes in Wollo during 1982. The team concluded that the distribution of food aid, some of which was subsequently sold by the recipients, had not had any measurable effect on the price of locally produced cereals, although there was "a suggestion of a .... disincentive" (FAO 1982) in relation to the AMC procurement price, which in some cases



had fallen in real terms in FFW project areas. However, as Maxwell (1986) has noted, the availability of food aid does not appear to have caused the AMC to reduce its levels of procurement, as the "quota policy is energetically pursued", even in times or areas of famine (ibid p 27). Procurement prices are fixed by central government (see chapter 2), seemingly without regard for local variations in production costs and market conditions, and may therefore be seen as coercive.

The survey carried out on FFW projects in Wollo by Yeraswerk Admassie and Solomon Gebre (1985) also looked into the issue of local sales of food aid and their possible effects on local markets. The researchers found that FFW recipients sold a greater proportion of their own farm produce than non-FFW recipients. This would suggest at least a marginal effect on local grain prices. However, the study was carried out during the period of rapid development of famine conditions even in the FFW project areas - indeed, FFW was keeping many of the recipients from outright starvation. Consequently, massive grain price inflation was already taking place, and the relatively small quantities of food aid distributed would have had little countervailing effect on the shortfalls induced by production failures. On the other hand, the dramatic fall in grain prices in late 1985 may well have been associated strongly with emergency food distribution. One USAID representative noted that the "prices appear(ed)

to have fallen fastest in areas where food aid distribution was largest" (Maxwell op cit p 37). However, no econometric studies of this phenomenon have been carried out, so it is not yet possible to ascribe any particular weight to the impact of food aid distribution on grain prices during the relief operation.

### 7.8 Summary

In this chapter, we have considered the pattern of grain prices in northern Ethiopia over the period 1979-84. Although official data are scarce for some of the most important 'heartlands' of famine in Tigray, it does seem from the recall data provided by famine refugees, which are to some extent corroborated from other sources, that those areas which were reported to have been worst affected by crop failures were also those experiencing the earliest and most severe grain price inflation over 1979-83. However, during 1984, grain price inflation began to affect the larger urban markets at the edge of the famine zone to an even greater extent, possibly because a few large traders dominated the market and reacted sharply to a perceived serious regional grain shortage. Grain shortages in the famine areas were indeed so severe that in many cases grain was virtually unobtainable in remote rural markets and some of the highest prices quoted may well have been notional.

The influx of food aid into the region during 1985 seems likely to have had a deflationary effect on grain prices, although substantial falls in the price of grain were not forthcoming until harvest prospects improved late in the year. We may therefore conclude that high grain prices are a usual consequence of crop failures, although this may not be apparent in larger roadside markets until a very late stage in the development of famine. Grain price inflation in remote rural markets certainly occurred during the famines of 1972-74 and 1983-85, although in the former case it seems to have escaped the attention of most researchers at the time. It seems reasonable to suggest that severe grain price inflation is a normal feature of famine in Ethiopia, as elsewhere.

#### Note

- <sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note here that Ravailon (1985) has investigated traders' behaviour during times of food crisis in Bangladesh, and has found that they consistently overestimate the effects of harvest failures on food availability. Presumably it is in their short-term interest to do so, although traders must be careful to unload their marked-up stocks during the time of presumed shortage, so as not to be left with relatively expensive stocks at harvest time, when prices may once again fall sharply.



## Chapter 8: Additional Socio-Economic Effects of Repeated Crop Failures

### 8.1. Introduction

In this chapter, we shall examine further components of the concatenation process model put forward in chapter 1, making use mostly of data obtained from the survey of famine migrants. Specifically, we shall consider the extent to which sales of livestock and other farm and household assets took place, as well as the timing of these sales and the prices obtained for the assets. This is important in explaining how cash was raised to buy food at the prevailing high prices. Further aspects of the process which will be investigated include: consumption of famine foods; alternative sources of income; patterns of labour migration; and the extent to which dependents were abandoned with the onset of mass distress migration.

It should be noted at the outset that often respondents were very vague about the months of sale of their animals, with the exception of very important beasts like oxen. Consequently, the sample sizes are rather small in some cases.

### 8.2. Asset Sales under Famine Conditions

It is a generally observed feature of famines that the victims are forced gradually to dispose of their assets.

It has been postulated that for sales of livestock a hierarchy of responses might be distinguished, with valuable breeding stock being kept until last, and with older animals and male animals being sold off first (Swift 1984). The author has suggested in a previous paper (Cutler, 1984a) that a distinguishing feature of famine in the Ethiopian highlands would be the late sale of oxen, after other types of livestock had been disposed of, as these animals are essential for farming. Overall, a much increased volume of livestock sales, coupled with a fall in livestock prices, is to be expected in the development of famine. This occurs because the animals can be converted into cash, which can be used in turn to purchase food. At the same time, the sale of livestock relieves the vendor of the increasingly difficult burden of maintaining the animals under drought conditions.

Prior to whole-household migration, distress sales of essential household goods and farming equipment are also likely to take place. The interviews with the sample populations in Sudan made it possible to test these hypotheses. We will begin by considering the pattern of livestock sales in general.

### 8.3. Livestock Sales in General

An increased volume of sales of all types of livestock - whether associated with a dramatic fall in livestock

Figure 8.1 Total Livestock Sales, Korem and Kombolcha Markets, Wollo: September 1981 - January 1983

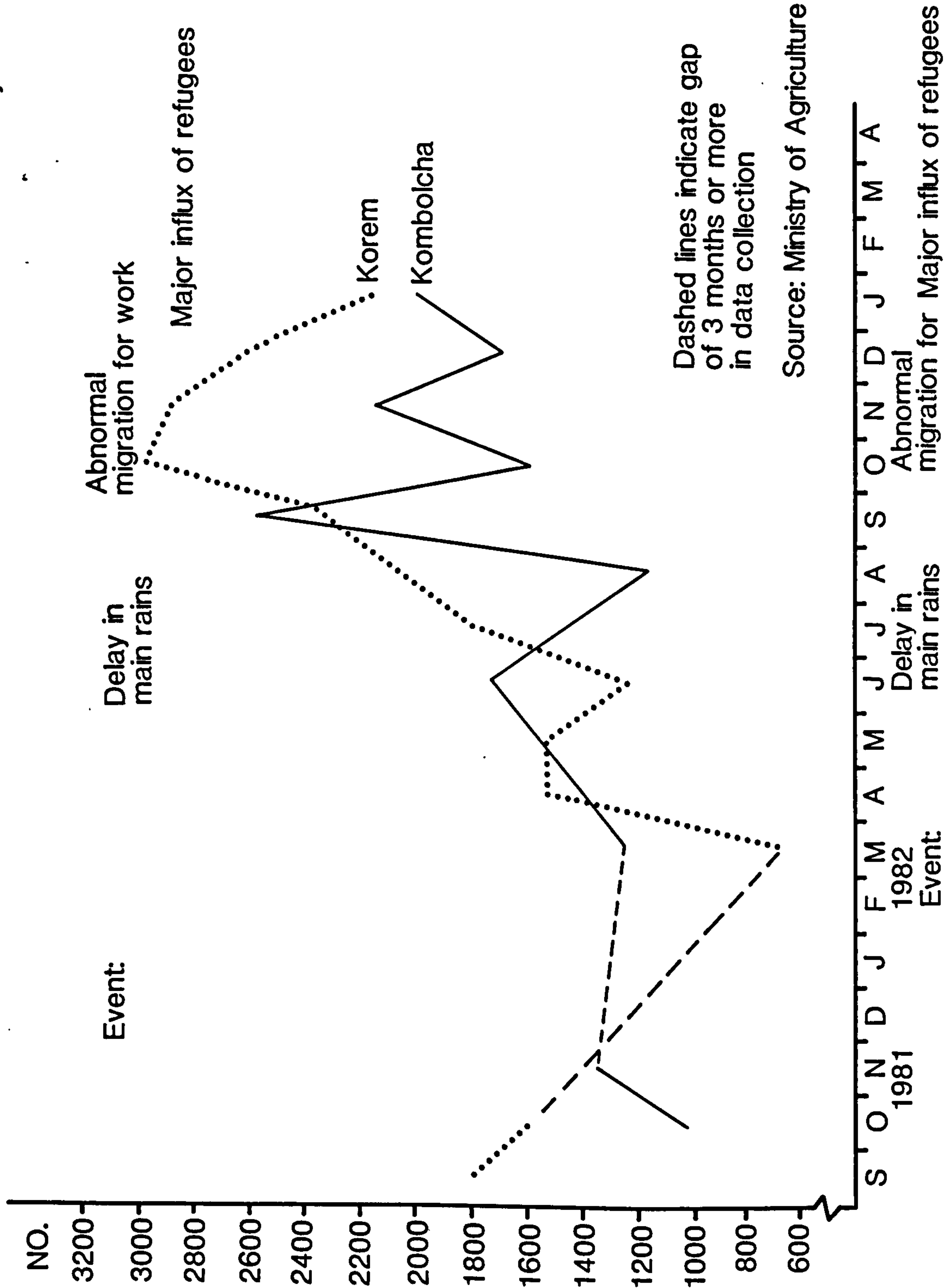
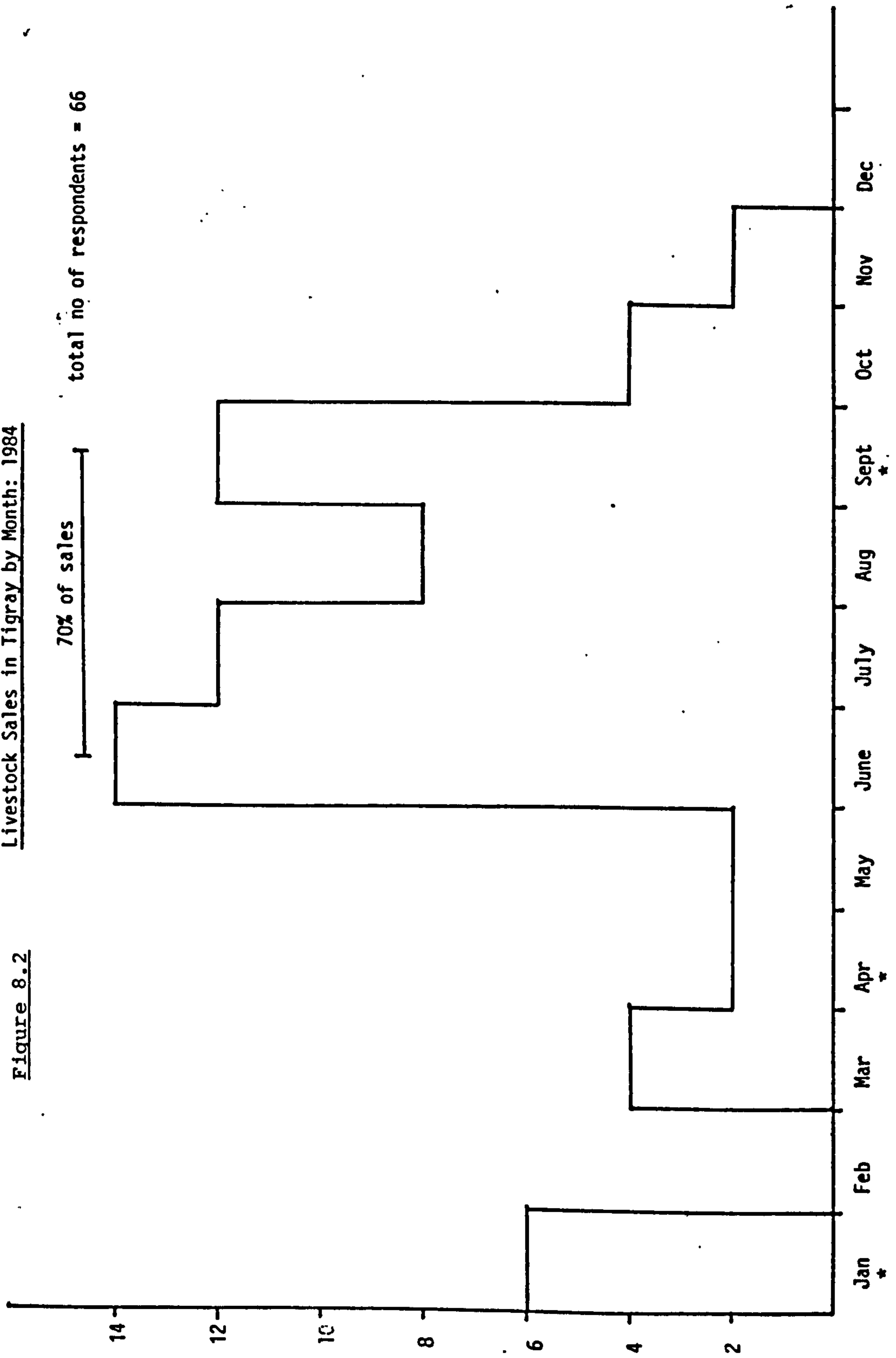




Figure 8.2 Livestock Sales in Tigray by Month: 1984

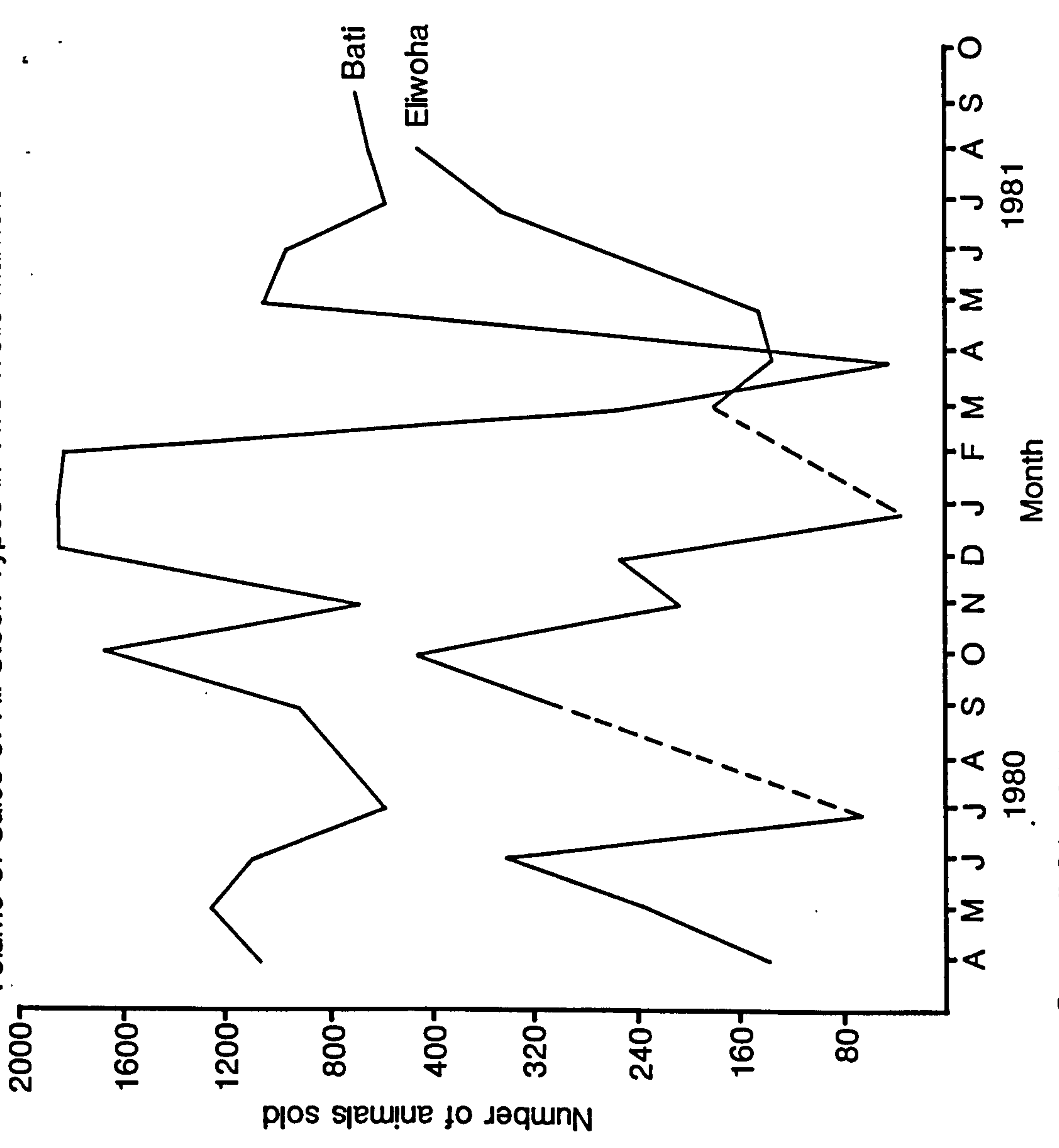


\* Normal seasonal peaks

prices or not - is a likely concomitant of famine conditions. Indeed, a graph of some data available from Korem in Northern Wollo shows a rather dramatic rise in both the amount of livestock offered for sale and the amount actually sold over the period March 1981 - January 1983 (Figure 8.1). The peak of sales coincided with reports of abnormal migration for labour and followed the critical localised rain failures of Kremt 1982. In this case the peak of livestock sales is >100 percent above that of the previous year and took place some six months ahead of distress migration. Another peak of sales might be expected just prior to migration. The first distress migration of whole households from northwestern Wollo and central Tigray took place in the early part of 1983 and began to gather pace thereafter.

Similar data from the sample population for Tigray (including Sekota in northern Wollo) shows that there is a "bunching" of livestock sales between June and September, with 70 per cent of sales taking place over this period (Figure 8.2). Traditionally, this period is the worst time to sell, as it coincides with the highest prices for cereals and the lowest demand for meat. The normal peaks of livestock sales, when consumer demand jumps, are the important festival periods of Easter, New Year and Epiphany during April/May, September and January respectively. This pattern, reproduced for two Wollo markets during 1980-81 in figure 8.3<sup>1</sup> is rather different

Volume of Sales of All Stock Types in Two Wollo Markets



Source: ILCA, 1983



from that generated by pre-famine distress sales, where a steadily growing volume of animals is offered for sale as household food stocks become depleted and as the condition of animals progressively worsens.

#### 8.4 Oxen Sales

Ownership of oxen among agriculturalists interviewed in the refugee sample (the majority of whom were Tigrayans) was very widespread, with 68 households out of 82 (83 per cent) having their own oxen before the onset of drought. The remainder would borrow oxen from neighbours in order to plough their land, and in return would give a share of the crop or labour time. Although actual ownership of oxen was widespread, there was notable inequality in the distribution of oxen holdings. Table 8.1 presents the data in terms of cumulative percentages which are also expressed in terms of a Lorenz curve (Figure 8.4). From the table it can be seen that a little over half of all oxen (51 per cent) are owned by only 21 per cent of households. It is far more common for households to own only one to two oxen - 50 out of 82 households (61 per cent) are in this position. These findings are supported by results from the agricultural survey recently completed by the Ministry of Agriculture, which found that on a national basis, 32 per cent of farm households owned only one working ox (whereas two are needed for ploughing), while 38 per cent of households owned no oxen at all

**Table 8.1: Distribution of Reported Oxen Holdings**

<u>Oxen</u>	<u>No H/holds</u>	<u>% H/holds</u>	<u>Cumulative % H/holds</u>
0	14	17	0
1	20	24	12
2	30	37	49
3	9	11	66
4	6	7	81
5	1	1	84
10	1	1	90
15	1	1	99 <sup>1</sup>
Total	82	99 <sup>1</sup>	

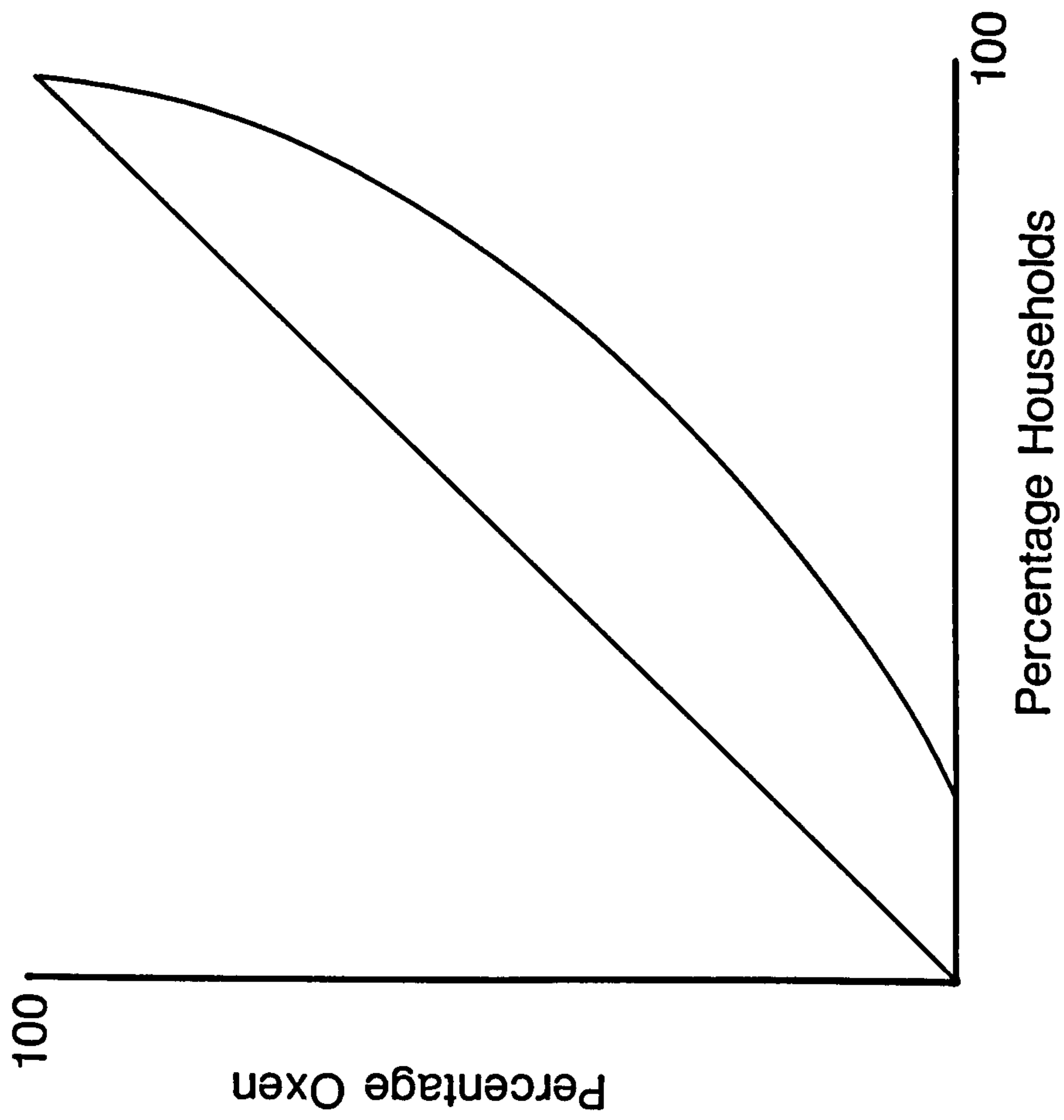
Note

<sup>1</sup> Error due to rounding

Source: Interviews with refugee sample

Figure 8.4

Lorenz Curve of Oxen Distribution, Refugee Sample





(Ministry of Agriculture 1984).

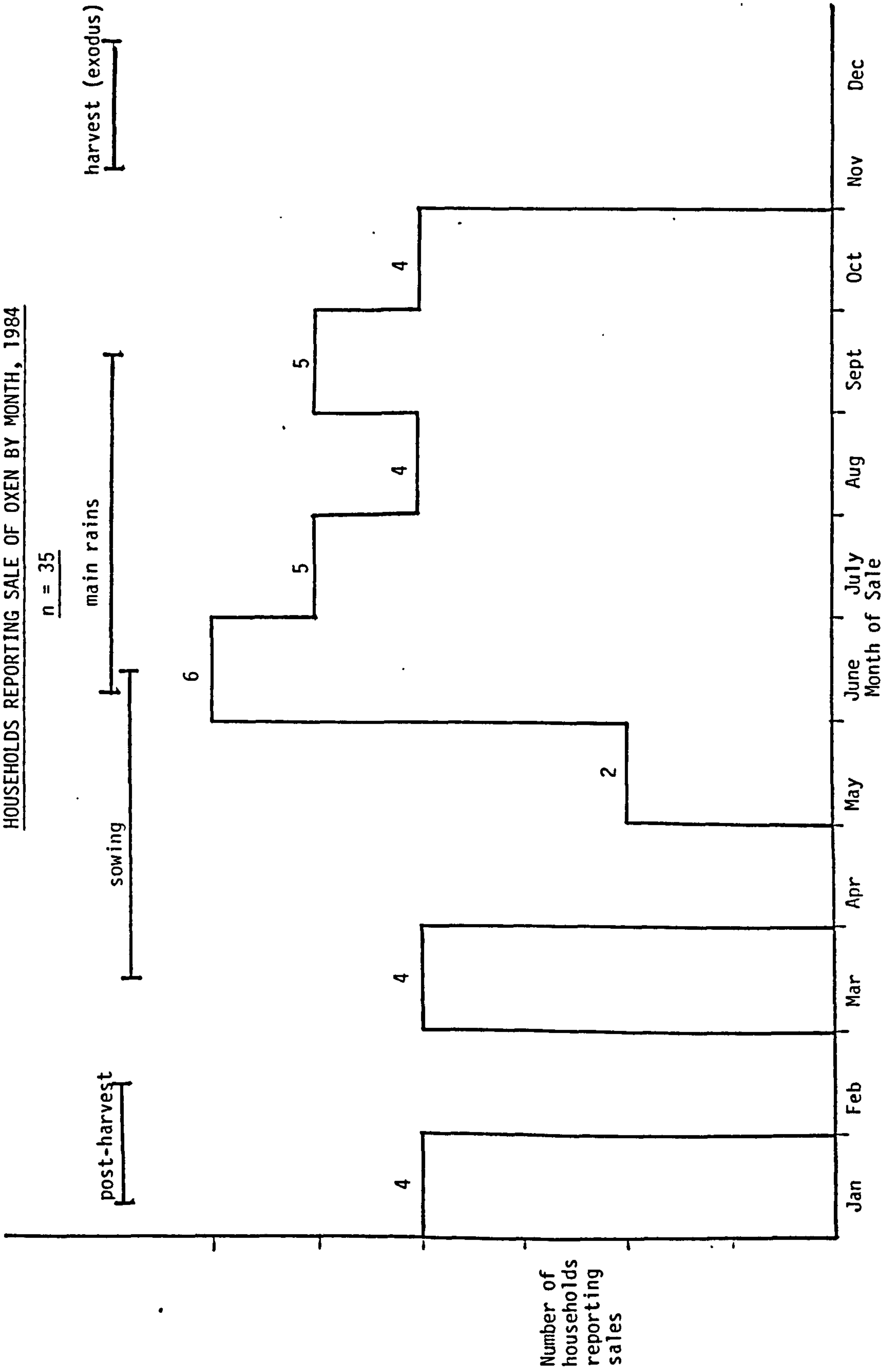
It does seem reasonable to suggest that households try to hold onto their oxen until after the April-June period when the first rains come. With the failure of the rains they may then be unable to continue farming and are forced to sell oxen only a few months before migrating out of the famine zone. Figure 8.5 shows that out of the 35 respondents who gave the actual date of oxen sales in 1984, 24 (69 per cent) delayed selling until the Kremt rain season through to the pre-harvest period in October. No households reported selling oxen just prior to departure in November, although as Table 8.2 (which considers the status of all livestock owned by the households sampled) shows, a small proportion of oxen were abandoned, amounting to 9 per cent of the total sample.

As we might expect, prices of oxen were generally low throughout the famine zone by 1984. However, there appears to have been great variation in sale values within districts where oxen prices (by month) were reported, and even within the same seasons in those districts. Figure 8.6 presents the data as a series of bar graphs by district showing the range of sale values of oxen compared with their pre-drought value as estimated by the respondent. In general, the actual prices received during 1984 (particularly during the Kremt season) were much

Figure 8.5

HOUSEHOLDS REPORTING SALE OF OXEN BY MONTH, 1984

$n = 35$



**Table 8.2: Households Reporting the Position of Livestock Holdings since the Drought**

<u>Type of livestock</u>	<u>Status</u>	<u>No of Households</u>
Cows	sold	39
	died	17
	eaten	10
	abandoned	14
Goats	sold	32
	died	3
	eaten	6
	abandoned	0
Sheep	sold	18
	died	1
	eaten	2
	abandoned	2
Equines	sold	16
	died	3
	eaten	0
	abandoned	2
Oxen	sold	58
	died	6
	eaten	1
	abandoned	6
	stolen	1
	dowry	1

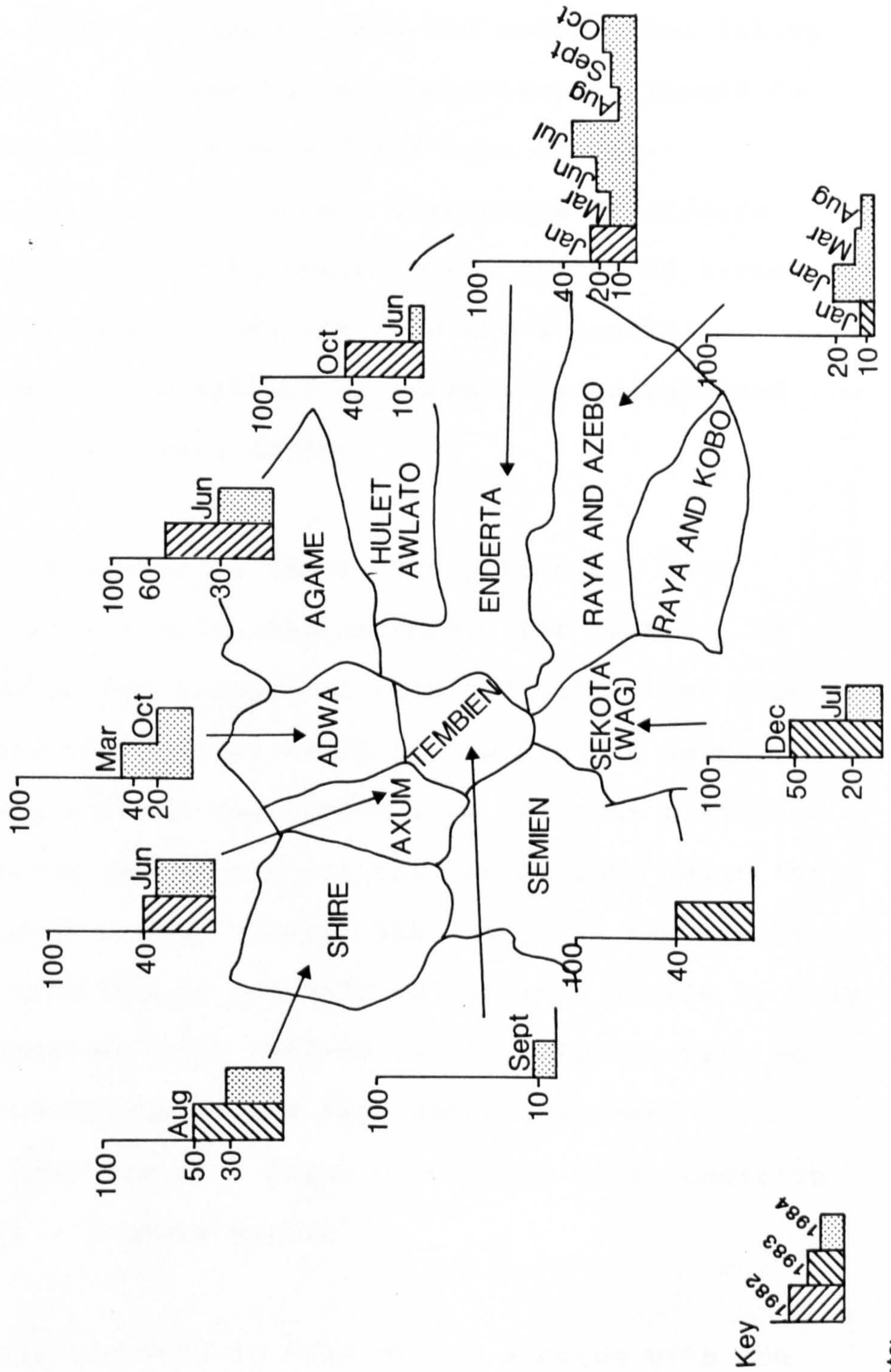
Note

Only 5 households out of the total sample of 100 had no livestock when the drought began.

Source: Interviews with refugee sample.



Indices of value of oxen by region and time of sale: Refugee sample



Note: Pre-drought value (as assessed by respondent)=100

lower than those obtaining in previous years. The average price received during 1982 and 1983 was 39 per cent of pre-drought value; whilst by 1984 the average had fallen to 24 per cent. In some cases, interviewees claimed to have received as little as 6-7 per cent of pre-drought prices for their oxen. This state of affairs reflected both a rapid increase in the volume of livestock of all types being offered for sale and a general deterioration in the quality of animals as pasture and browse became ever more scarce.

However, there are cases where oxen prices may have recovered over the short-medium term. For example, in Raya and Azebo, one respondent received only 9 per cent of the estimated pre-drought value of his oxen in January 1984, whereas another respondent from the same province recalls getting 23 per cent of the pre-drought value for his oxen almost a year later. Similarly, in Enderta it seems that oxen prices actually recovered a little by July 1984 in comparison with 1982-83 levels. Prices were to plunge to low famine levels from August onwards, reflecting mass distress sales of oxen in poor condition resulting in a 'buyers market'.

This apparent recovery in oxen prices accords with the limited amount of data available from Korem in Northern Wollo which shows a similar pattern obtaining over 1982-83 (Table 8.3). While between October 1982 and October 1983



Table 8.3: Grain and Livestock Price Relationships in Korem (October 1982 - October 1983) and Kombolcha (September 1982 - January 1983).

	<u>Korem</u>					<u>Kombolcha</u>		
	<u>Jan</u>	<u>Oct</u>	<u>Jan</u>	<u>JLY</u>	<u>Oct</u>	<u>Sept</u>	<u>Nov</u>	<u>Jan</u>
<u>Mean monthly price</u> (birr)								
Teff	87	107	110	119	102	109	92	
Sorghum	57	64	84	92	78	94	93	
Oxen	285	275	105	297	320	380	245	
Cows	158	175	173	263	245	235	170	
Sheep	38	47	34	43				
Goats	44	53	36	37				
<u>Livestock/Grain barter terms of trade</u>								
Oxen/teff	3.3	2.6	1.0	2.5	3.1	3.5	2.7	
Oxen/sorghum	5.0	4.3	1.3	3.2	4.1	4.0	2.6	
Cow/teff	1.8	1.6	1.6	2.2	2.4	2.2	1.8	
Cow/sorghum	2.8	2.7	2.1	2.9	3.1	2.5	1.8	
Sheep/teff	0.4	0.4	0.3	0.4				
Sheep/sorghum	0.7	0.7	0.4	0.5				
Goat/teff	0.5	0.5	0.3	0.3				
Goat/sorghum	0.8	0.8	0.4	0.4				

Note

Teff and sorghum prices are per quintal

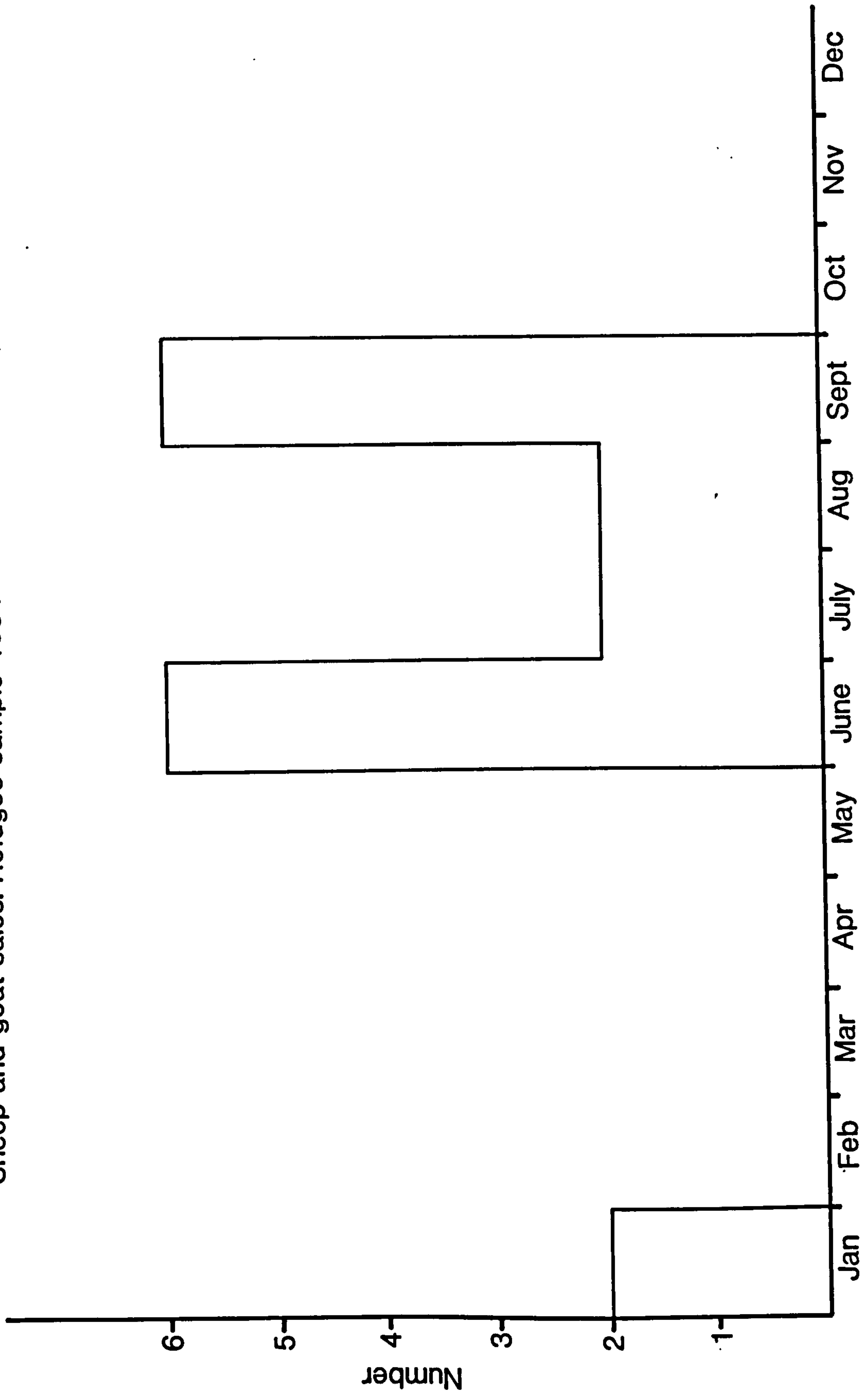
Source: Livestock marketing division, Ministry of Agriculture, Addis Ababa and RRC



there is a modest rise in the price of teff, and a somewhat sharper rise in the price of sorghum, the price of oxen falls from a high point in January 1983 to a low in July, before recovering again by October of the same year. The RRC Early Warning System also reported a recovery of oxen prices in south-eastern Gonder during 1982-83, despite the severe drought (EWPS 1983), while during 1974 in Harerghe province, Seaman, Holt and Rivers noted a general increase in livestock prices over a three year period of drought (RRC 1974). The reason for this price behaviour is that where livestock deaths are very widespread, surviving animals can regain some of their value, especially where, like oxen, they are essential for farming. Sheep and goat prices will also eventually recover, and were reported to the author (through ad hoc interviews with Wollo famine victims in June 1985) as having returned to the pre-famine levels of 1982 by early 1985.

In conclusion, it seems that initially, there is a general decline in oxen prices which can quickly halve the value of these livestock, and after two years or so of severe drought reduces them further to around a quarter of pre-drought levels. Given that peasant farmers still attempt to farm, even during drought and famines, there can be some recovery of oxen prices to around 40 per cent of pre-drought prices reflecting extreme local scarcities. With

Figure 8.7  
Sheep and goat sales: Refugee sample 1984



the complete collapse of options for the vulnerable section of the peasantry in the final year of drought prior to massive migration, so comes a final collapse of livestock prices. Furthermore, some animals are in such poor condition that they have to be abandoned as unsaleable.

It is interesting to note that a previous hypothesis (Cutler 1984a; Swift 1984) arguing that relatively less important animals such as sheep and goats will be sold-off first does not seem to be borne out by the data (albeit limited) displayed in figure 8.7. The majority of sheep and goat sales recorded for 1984 took place during the months of June-September, not long before migration. We have rather more information on the dates of sale of oxen. Fully 40 respondents reported the dates of sale and it transpires that among this group it is in fact more common for oxen to be sold off before other livestock, or at the same time as other livestock sales. Only 12 respondents reported selling off oxen last, although a further five households left oxen behind either because they were unsaleable or were in the care of relatives or neighbours. This compares with 18 households which are recorded as selling off oxen early on in the sequence of livestock sales, with cattle, sheep and goats being kept for a longer period. In ten cases, oxen were sold simultaneously with other livestock.



It may be the case that the individual decision-maker weighs the costs of delaying sales of oxen (if prices are tending to fall and if the availability of feed has to be taken into account) against the costs of renting oxen as the drought worsens. For some individuals, holding onto oxen until widespread whole-household migration is inevitable has considerable costs attached, given that the livestock market in the drought zone will have effectively collapsed. Many of the cattle left behind by the sample population were simply unsaleable. Thus we might make a crude distinction between pessimists, who guessed correctly that the drought would continue and who managed to get rid of their animals at reasonably good prices (of around 40-50 per cent of pre-drought levels) and optimists who guessed wrongly and kept their potentially most valuable animals for so long that they became virtually worthless. A third group might be the cautious pessimists who sold their most valuable beasts (ie, cattle) early and kept hardy goats which would be more likely to survive the drought and provide a nucleus for the rebuilding of household assets afterwards.

In order to ascertain whether social class has an effect upon the timing of sales of oxen, the dates of sales of oxen have been compiled by total output category. Table 8.4 shows the numbers and years of oxen sales categorised according to reported yields during the last good year,

**Table 8.4: Oxen Sales (1981-84) in Comparison with Household Wealth, Refugee Sample**

<u>Yield(gu)</u>	<u>No. households</u>	<u>Oxen Sales</u>			
		<u>1981</u>	<u>1982</u>	<u>1983</u>	<u>1984</u>
0-9	6	2	4	-	3
10-19	10	1	4	2	5
20-29	12	2	-	1	5
30-39	7	-	2	1	11
40-49	8	-	-	1	8
50-59	10	-	-	9	5
60-69	0	-	-	-	-
70-79	1	-	-	-	-
80-89	3	-	-	-	7
90+	9	-	-	6	8

Source: Interviews with refugee households

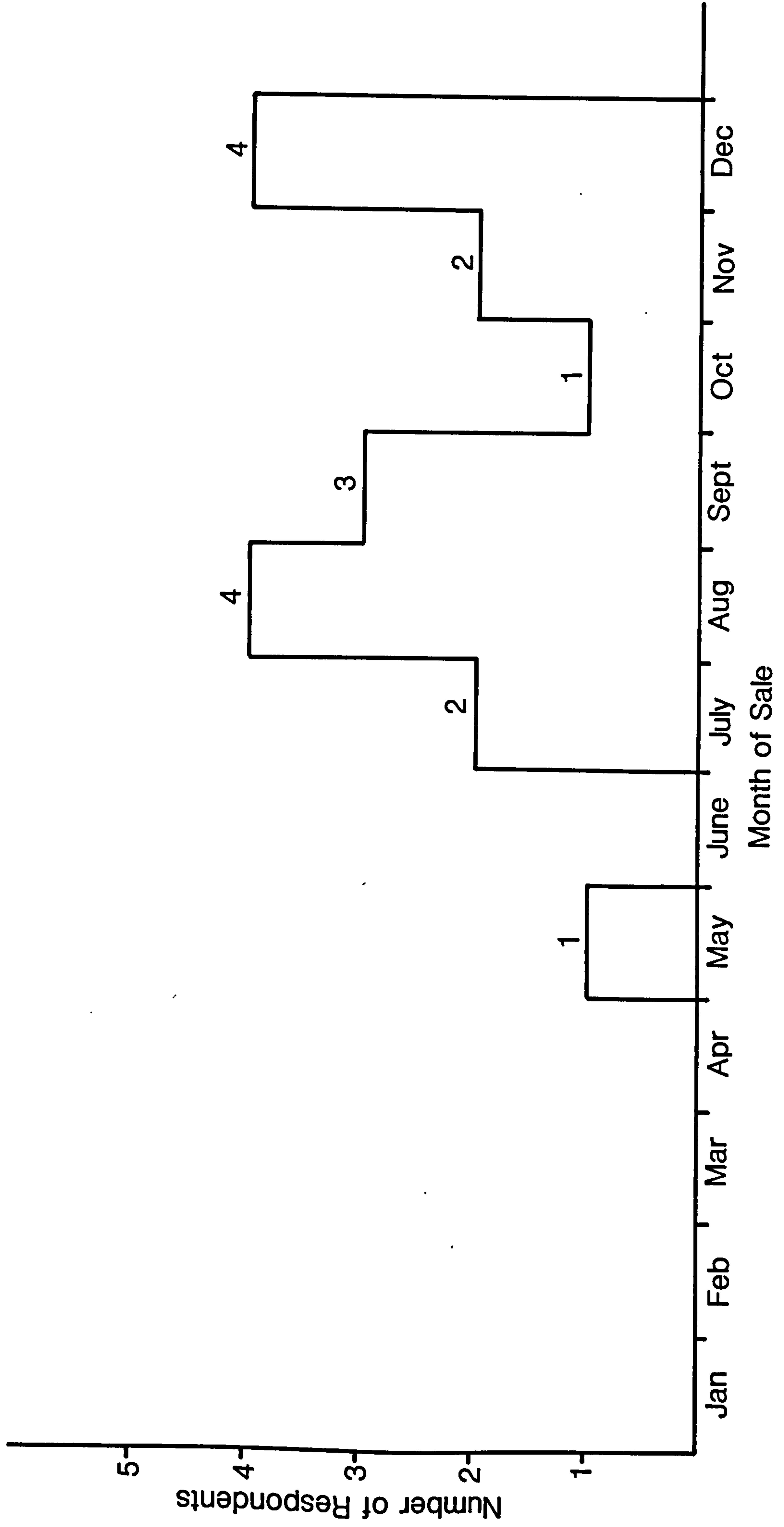
the latter being defined by the respondent. It can immediately be seen from the table that the poorest categories of farmers are those most likely to sell oxen earliest - sales are recorded as having occurred between 1981 and 1982 in the bottom four categories, while there are none recorded for the highest six categories. It seems therefore that the middle and rich peasants are most likely to hold onto their oxen for as long as possible, while the poor peasant is forced to sell early.

This study was not able to investigate the activities of traders buying up the livestock, as access to the famine areas was denied by the authorities. However, it seems likely that traders would purchase animals in drought and famine areas, take them to better-watered areas for fattening, and then return at a later date to sell them at high post-famine prices. Dessalegn Rahmato (1987) has estimated that about a quarter of the livestock sold in Ambassel awraja in Wollo during the most recent famine were later re-sold in the province. The remainder were either slaughtered or exported. Oxen in particular are sold at a premium as the agricultural sector begins to recover and finds these essential means of production in short supply. Traders have been assisted by large-scale restocking programmes supported by western agencies. For example, during 1985-86, World Vision purchased in excess of 1,000 oxen for free distribution to poor peasant households in several awrajas of western Wollo. In one



Farm and Household Assets: Months of Sale, Refugee Sample 1984

Figure 8.8



**Table 8.5: Asset Sales - Household Goods and Farm Equipment**

<u>Type of Asset</u>	<u>No of Households</u>
General household goods	4
Beds	8
Food Containers	3
Wood from house	1
Clothes	2
House	2
Agricultural Equipment	15
Total	35

Source: Interviews with refugee sample

case, an ox sold by a distressed farmer in 1984 was purchased by World Vision from the trader who had bought it, and was allocated to a neighbour of the original vendor in 1985 (personal communication, July 1986).

#### 8.5. Sales of Household Goods and Farm Equipment

The behavioural model put forward in Chapter 1 suggests that farmers will tend to wait until they are incapable of feeding themselves and their dependents and are about to migrate before selling off farm equipment and household assets. As can be seen from Figure 8.8, this is generally the case for the Tigrayan refugee sample. Of the reported sales, 94 per cent took place between July and November-December 1984, the latter being the months in which most of the migrants left their homes. Table 8.5 lists the kinds of assets sold by the sample population.

Agricultural equipment includes ploughs, yokes, and simple tools such as grinding equipment. Beds and food containers were sold in local markets, and these often fetched better prices than farm equipment. The latter was often sold at ludicrously low prices, for example one farmer reported selling his oxen yoke for 0.75 birr, as compared with a normal price of around 100 birr, while another sold his plough for 25 cents. By contrast, sales of beds, food containers and other relatively valuable items of household equipment commonly raised between 10 and 20 birr (US\$ 5-10). This is probably the case because



those households which can afford to buy goods already have farming equipment, but can always use extra food containers, better beds, etc, while traders can get good resale prices for household goods in the towns and more prosperous villages. Again, detailed information on the activities of traders during the famine is lacking.

#### 8.6 Access to Credit

Among the refugee sample, borrowing for consumption purposes was very common, with 59 households managing to take loans as a means of survival, while the remainder attempted to get credit but failed. Some 70 per cent of the loans obtained were interest free, while the remainder paid interest ranging from 10 per cent per month (where calculated monthly) or from 60-80 per cent per year (where calculated annually). In one extreme case a man was supposed to pay 300 per cent interest pa to the church on a loan of 60 birr. Yet the same individual received six cups of grain from a relative and 20 birr from a friend, both interest free. In fact, family and friends made up 81 per cent of creditors, with the church, and the rebel organisations, including 'peoples' associations', making up the remainder. The church generally did charge interest, while the rebel organisations are only recorded as having done so in one out of six cases. Most loans were in small amounts, and in cash, although 13 households also received loans of grain, ranging from a few tins of

Table 8.6 Household Wealth and Access to Credit Compared

<u>Yield (qu)</u>	<u>No. h/holds</u>		<u>Credit terms</u>		<u>Average amount</u>		
			<u>no.</u>	<u>(%)</u>	<u>cash/i.r.</u>	<u>kind/i.r.</u>	
0-9	20	1.	13	(54)	44		1.7qu (2)
		2.	2	(8)	29	32%	
		3.	8	(33)			
		4.	1	(4)			
10-19	21	1.	6	(29)	32		0.5 qu (1)
		2.	3	(14)	29	118%	
		3.	11	(52)			
		4.	1	(5)			
20-29	9	1.	8	(40)	24		
		2.	3	(15)	49	27%	
		3.	9	(45)			
30-39	9	1.	5	(62.5)	50		0.5 qu (2)
		2.	2	(25)	45	152.5%	
		3.	1	(12.5)			
40-49	9	1.	2	(22)	40		2.0 qu (1)
		2.	2	(22)	120	60%	
		3.	5	(56)		n.s. 25%	
50-59	11	1.	8	(67)	52		
		2.	1	(8)	300	60%	
		3.	3	(25)			
60-69	2	1.	2	(100)	165		
70-79	1	1.					2.0 qu
80-89	6	1.	3	(50)	20		0.4 qu (2)
		2.	1	(17)	100	10%	
		3.	2	(33)			
90+	14	1.	3	(25)	112		
		2.	6	(50)	122	33%	
		3.	2	(17)			
		4.	1	(8)			

Notes

1. = no. receiving free credit 3. = no. not receiving credit  
 2. = no. paying interest on loans 4. = terms of loans not specified. Nos. in brackets in last column refer to no. of loans in kind.

Source: interviews with refugee sample.

inferior grain to four quintals of teff. What is perhaps most interesting about the loans is that in no case were they ever repaid, either partially or in full, before migrating. Many respondents argued that they fully intended to repay, but had been in no condition to do so. However, if they survived (with the creditors) the debtors all intended to repay at some future date.

Table 8.6. analyses credit terms by social class, using ten categories based on size of yields of respondents holdings before the drought (as estimated by the respondent) as means of classification. It can be seen that interest-free loans were common to all categories, although the richest group records the lowest incidence of interest-free borrowing, at 25 per cent of recorded loans. Conversely, the richest decile took out the largest number of interest-bearing loans. The average size of loans rose with social class, with the richer half of respondents recording average loan sizes of 100 birr or more. The average size of loan among the poorer groups (the bottom 4 deciles) did not exceed 50 birr.

The incidence of famine victims not receiving credit varies from 12.5 per cent to 56 per cent of respondents in each decile. The highest incidence rates are in the bottom half of deciles, notably the second, third and fifth. Fewer people were refused credit in the top two



deciles, as might be expected. Those with the greatest amount of collateral will be the most creditworthy.

Given the high incidence of interest-free credit during the famine, and given the unlikelihood of either interest-free or interest-bearing loans being repaid in the short to medium term, it would seem that the Ethiopian peasantry is remarkably open-handed in times of famine. The availability of credit, in the majority of cases from family and friends of the famine victims, presumably increased the vulnerability of the creditors, some of whom would not be long in following the debtors out of the famine zone. Indeed, it seems likely that a web of petty credit/debt relationships sustains otherwise destitute households through those desperate last few months before the final harvest failure drives out large numbers of victims. Thus, households can be debtors and creditors at one and the same time. When one household has some small fortune - perhaps a labour migrant manages to remit income, or a distribution of food relief is made - then it will be under considerable social pressure to redistribute some of that income to relatives and neighbours. Certainly this was the case among Wollo peasants interviewed by Charles Stewart during the filming of 'Harvest of Hunger' in April 1984. Stewart observed that the ration was generally considered insufficient, not because of its calorie content per se, but because of the need for repayment and redistribution of the food aid

(personal communication).

#### 8.7 Employment and Self-Employment

According to the experience of Wollo peasants during the last famine (ENI 1974; Wood 1976), and as part of the behavioural model under discussion here, a major response to crop losses should be a rapid rise in the supply of labour flowing to traditionally prosperous parts of the region, particularly in the west, where seasonal employment is available. Well-established migration routes will evidence sudden increases in the numbers of peasant farmers seeking work. This phenomenon was observable in Northern Ethiopia during 1983-84 and was indeed noted by various agencies engaged in survey and relief work. The famine refugees interviewed for the purposes of this study were also questioned about their history of wage-labour and self-employment.

The earliest mention of exceptional labour migration during the development of the present famine is contained in a field report written by Jon Bennett, on behalf of the rebel relief organisation, the Relief Society of Tigray (REST). He noted that:

"...until December last year (1982), most of those displaced to the west of Tigray were family heads, usually male, travelling to the more fertile regions around Sheraro and Wolkait in search of temporary work. They

would then be in a position to buy grain and (bring) it back to their families in the drought-stricken areas. The hardest work available paid an average of only 2.5 birr per day when the market price for sorghum was 50 birr per 100 kg. Such work, even where available, could only be temporary and by January this year (1983) few possibilities were open to those seeking employment" (Bennett 1983a p 11).

Judith Appleton, a nutritionist working with Save the Children Fund, also reported from the other side of the famine zone that famine migrants from northwestern Wollo had arrived destitute in Korem having failed to find sufficient work:

"The farmers I got a chance to talk to in Korem had come from around Sekota, the district capital ... This stream of people looking for food had to go further afield than usual when the rains failed there and the autumn harvest was small. Some first traipsed west all the way over to Gonder, where there was still casual agricultural work to be found in some places as late as November, before hurrying back to Wollo when distribution started there." (SCF Field Report, April 1983)

By the end of 1983, large numbers of small peasant farmers and other able-bodied workers were moving out of the drought zone into Sudan in search of paid employment in



the large commercial farms harvesting sorghum in the Eastern Region of Sudan. Most of these labour migrants expected to return to their families, bringing cash or food if they were successful in obtaining work, and then moving out of the famine zone with their families (if necessary) at a later date. Wright (1983) reported that larger numbers of labour migrants than usual were moving further west in search of work because the labour market in food surplus areas of Western Tigray had become saturated. This saturation was caused partly by the rise in numbers of migrants seeking work and partly because of the reduction of *output* in food surplus regions as the drought deepened and as military action disrupted agricultural activities. An additional factor forcing the concentration of migration was the danger of conscription or of physical abuse where traditional migration routes brought the would-be labourers into zones controlled by the Ethiopian authorities. There also seems to have been a "bottling up" of labour migrants in Western Tigray caused by the difficulties of the passage to Sudan which was plagued by banditry and physical barriers such as the Tekeze ('terrible') river.

However, quite a number of labour migrants did manage to get to Sudan. John Seaman, of SCF, questioned some of them in November 1983 in an effort to estimate the degree of deprivation in Tigray and the likelihood of further famine migration. While some of the men said that they

**Table 8.7: Occupations Pursued by Famine Victims Prior to Migration**

<u>Occupation</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>% of total sample</u>
Agricultural Labourer <sup>1</sup>	19	22
Agricultural labourer migrant <sup>2</sup>	9	10
Woodcutter/trader	9	10
Trader <sup>3</sup>	14	16
Builder	6	7
Porter	1	1
Weaver	2	2
Launderer	1	1
Beggar	2	2
No work found	25	28
<b>Total</b>	<u>88</u>	<u>99</u> <sup>4</sup>

Notes

1. Includes such activities as ploughing, weeding, harvesting, watering, and milling.
2. Includes household members other than respondent.
3. Traded commodities included grain and other foodstuffs, livestock and salt.
4. Error due to rounding.
5. Nine respondents recorded two or more occupations.

Source: Interviews with sample refugee households.

were "going home to die", many clearly intended to seek help from the "authorities", whether rebel or government (Dr John Seaman, personal communication). A team of Oxfam researchers were later to meet returning migrants as the team left the drought zone (English et al op cit). <sup>2</sup>

The 100 household heads interviewed in Sudan were questioned about their employment history. The results are presented in Table 8.7, from which it can be seen that agricultural labour on farms which still yielded produce in the locality and migration for agricultural labour made up the largest category of employment, with 32 per cent of the total households reporting seeking work in these activities. Agricultural work wholly or partly employed 44 per cent of those who actually found work. This finding supports our notion of the extreme variability of rainfall even in an area considered 'drought affected', and the different production conditions experienced at different elevations, as was discussed in chapter 5. Another large category was made up of the self-employed, working as woodcutters and wood traders (14 per cent of those in work) or as traders of other goods such as grain, livestock and salt (22 per cent). The remaining tasks carried out included building and portering (which often meant working far from home), and weaving. A large category of households, making up 28 per cent of those reportedly seeking work, consisted of those who looked for work but could not find it. Begging was also reported by



two households, but was probably more widespread.

It may seem somewhat surprising that more long-distance labour migration was not reported. Part of the reason for the relatively low incidence of this phenomenon was undoubtedly due to the risks of travelling through war zones and areas where banditry is endemic. Added to this would be news of harvest failures in the main grain producing areas of Eastern Sudan, with consequent depressed wage-earning opportunities. Another factor discouraging labour migration is the possibility of self-employment through trading. When combined with sale of assets, households could subsist for several months after running out of home-grown food supplies before being forced into terminal migration.

Wages did not seem to have fallen a great deal in money terms, as one might expect during a famine. Wages were generally at very low levels of 2-3 birr per day which in normal times would buy about 1kg of the cheaper foodgrains. However, as there had been considerable grain price inflation over the last 2-3 years of drought, the amount of food this daily wage could buy had been reduced to around 330 grams at the centre of the famine zone. This would yield around 1,150 kcal, which is less than the energy expended in labouring. By way of comparison, a normal famine relief ration of 500 grammes per day should

yield about 1650 kcals.

Labour migrants to the Sudan may not have fared quite so well in their ability to keep money wages at pre-famine levels. A team filming the crisis in the Sudan reported that wages at least one commercial farm had been forced down to a quarter of normal levels (personal communication, Desmond Lapsley, BBC, January 1985). This was made possible by the pressure of both Sudanese and Ethiopian labourers competing for work. It may well be the case that Tigrayan wages were sticky downwards because of some degree of enforcement of wage levels by the rebel authorities. Certainly REST was able to organise employment for some 100,000 famine migrants as basket-weavers at a wage of 2-3 birr per day during most of 1983-84 (English et al, op cit).

#### 8.8 Famine Foods

A total of 60 households stated that they had resorted to the consumption of famine foods in order to supplement their diets. The most commonly-cited plant foods consumed were hamli (Brassica Carinata or Ethiopian cabbage) and kulkul (Opuntia Ficus-Indica or prickly pear). Another vegetable also called kulkul in Tigrinya is the trumpet gourd (Lagenaria Siceria). Other famine foods which have been tentatively identified include shembebata (Borassus Aethiopicum or fan palm); kanshera

(Ziziphus Spina-Christi or Christ's thorn); and k'unti (Solanum Americanum or black nightshade). Several interviewees recalled consuming the fruit from trees, called akat or gabaa, which is the fruit of the crab apple tree (Dovyalis Abyssinica). Unidentified varieties of grasses (musa) were widely consumed, while the local names of several other plant varieties were recorded, although not identified. These include: assema, gudibele, hansu, kurient, kurka, monquodt, mushumo, seraka and tatayi. Several respondents recalled eating birds and wild animals, including 'monkeys', which were probably the gelada baboons native to the Ethiopian highlands. One respondent complained of pest attacks decimating his source of wild plant foods.

Not all of the above foods would be considered inferior, some 'famine foods' would be eaten as delicacies in normal times. However, the majority of them, especially kulkul would be eaten only in adversity. It may also be the case that the consumption of certain foods is considered shameful, which may explain why 40 percent of the sample's respondents failed to report that they had resorted to foods not normally eaten.

#### 8.9 Migration of Household Heads in Search of Food Aid

It was argued earlier that with the establishment of the RRC and of parallel rebel organisations (REST and ERA), it



might be expected that whole household migration would be preceded by a wave of migration of household heads to RRC branch offices and to small roadside towns which act as distribution centres when food is available. The RRC and the rebel authorities were, in fact, somewhat successful in managing to deliver some food to household heads on a 'take home' basis. By the middle of 1984, the RRC claimed to have registered more than a million 'beneficiaries' of free food rations while REST were directly feeding an estimated 100,000 people out of a displaced population of 400,000. However, these rations were usually inadequate, in that they would have to be shared among beneficiaries not strictly included as part of the 'household' and in some cases loans would have to be repaid in kind to creditors by the aid recipients. Even if the RRC had distributed Ethiopia's entire food aid receipts for 1983 as free food aid among the five million people designated as famine-affected on a completely equitable basis, this would have resulted in a ration of only a little over 3kg of grain per person per month being distributed, instead of the 15kg minimum 'famine ration'. On the basis of a fairly conservative estimate of needs, Ethiopia would have required one million tonnes of food aid for 1983 instead of the 200,000 mt she received. In its March 1984 appeal to the donors, the RRC concluded that:

"Ethiopia is facing a potential disaster of considerable magnitude in which, this year, around one fifth of the country's population will need assistance in some form or

another. If those affected do not receive relief assistance, the consequences will be frightening." (RRC 1984 p 25).

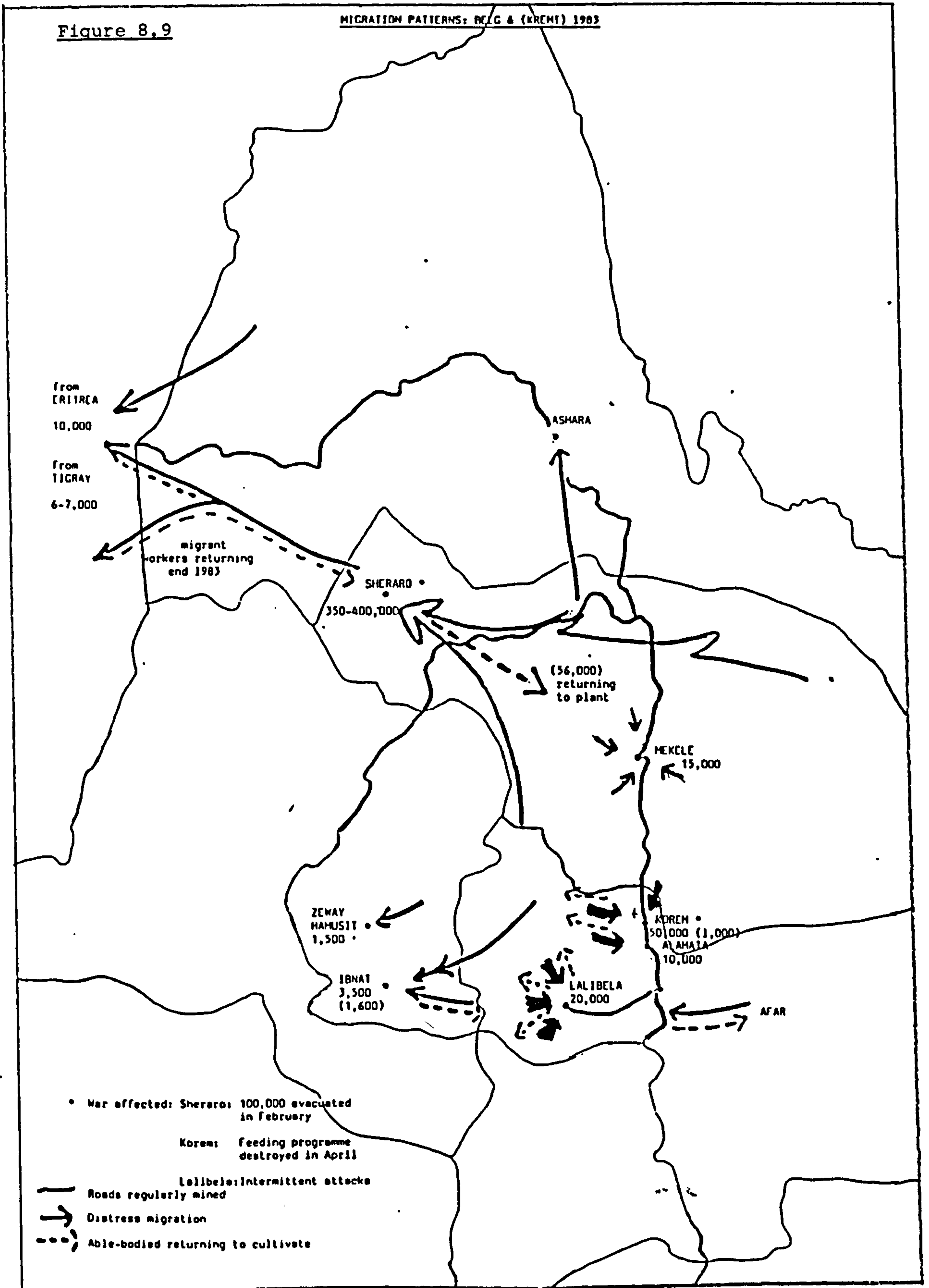
In fact, a critical gap in supplies to the RRC was allowed to develop, as we shall see in the next chapter. Relief food shipments, always erratic, fell desperately short in July and September-October. With the collapse of the 'entitlement' of registered household heads for a food ration, however insufficient, it was clear that outright famine on a large scale would result within a few weeks (Cutler and Stephenson 1984). By mid 1984 famine conditions, whereby mass starvation deaths were being prevented only by peasant resourcefulness and limited state action, had given way to outright famine, which was eventually filmed by a BBC TV crew in dramatic shots of tens of thousands of people converging as a last resort on virtually empty food distribution centres. This type of migration can be conceptually distinguished from labour migration or migration for 'take home' rations. The terminal wave of migration of distressed peasants marks a final stage of famine and is characterised by the break up of families.

#### 8.10 Terminal Distress Migration

While for any group of villages or districts we might find

Figure 8.9

MIGRATION PATTERNS: BE/G & (KREMI) 1983





it useful to use a simple macro-model of migration patterns, eg, labour migration followed by the return of household heads, then a move down to roadside food aid distribution centres, and finally 'whole household' migration down to towns and roadsides; these waves of migration do tend to overlap somewhat as different agro-climatic zones and socio-economic groups suffer famine conditions at different times. Thus, a certain amount of whole household migration was already taking place over 1983 from the centre of the drought zone in Tigray and northwestern Wollo. This movement was in three main directions: southeast from Sekota down to Korem; southwest from Sekota to Ibnat; and westwards from central and eastern Tigray into Shire and Wolkait (see figure 8.9). Notwithstanding the fact that the majority of victims were claimed as belonging to territory controlled by the TPLF, substantial numbers did move into government controlled areas for aid. At the height of its 1983 feeding operations (in April), Ibnat camp in southern Gonder had 4,500 inhabitants; while Korem claimed about 12,000 people, mostly mothers and children (the men were avoiding conscription), during the same month. Meanwhile, the TPLF estimated that 350-400,000 people had been forced to move westwards out of Sekota, Tembien, Enderta, Raya and Azebo, Hulet Awlalo, Axum and Adwa to the more fertile and rain-favoured western provinces in an orderly migration forced mainly by drought but exacerbated by war (see figure 8.9).

It is important to note that while whole families were forced out of their home areas in 1983 as well as 1984, many intended to return. The proof of this is in the reverse flow of household heads and other able-bodied household members to their farms to plant during the early Kremt season. REST estimate that 56,000 people, 70 per cent of them male household heads, did this during 1984, (English et al op cit) while Ibnat camp reported a dramatic fall in camp numbers from 4,500 to 1,500 by June 1983 as people went home to plant. Similarly, according to UNHCR an estimated 45,000 farmers left the Sudanese camps for their homes between March and May 1985. It is a rational strategy to leave the very old, the very young, and the sick in the care of humanitarian organisations while the able-bodied continue to seek work and even, as we have seen, seasonally migrate to their farms. Nevertheless, the continuing and spreading drought coupled with a collapse of employment opportunities and of the provision of food relief by the authorities in both government and rebel-controlled areas meant that by 1984 this precarious option was no longer viable. The final and greatest waves of terminal migration were to take both the earlier uprooted population and many of those who had so far survived the drought reasonably intact on long journeys to famine camps. There was an explosion of population out of the famine zone which began to gain pace in August-October 1984 and which reached epidemic proportions during the harvest and post-harvest season

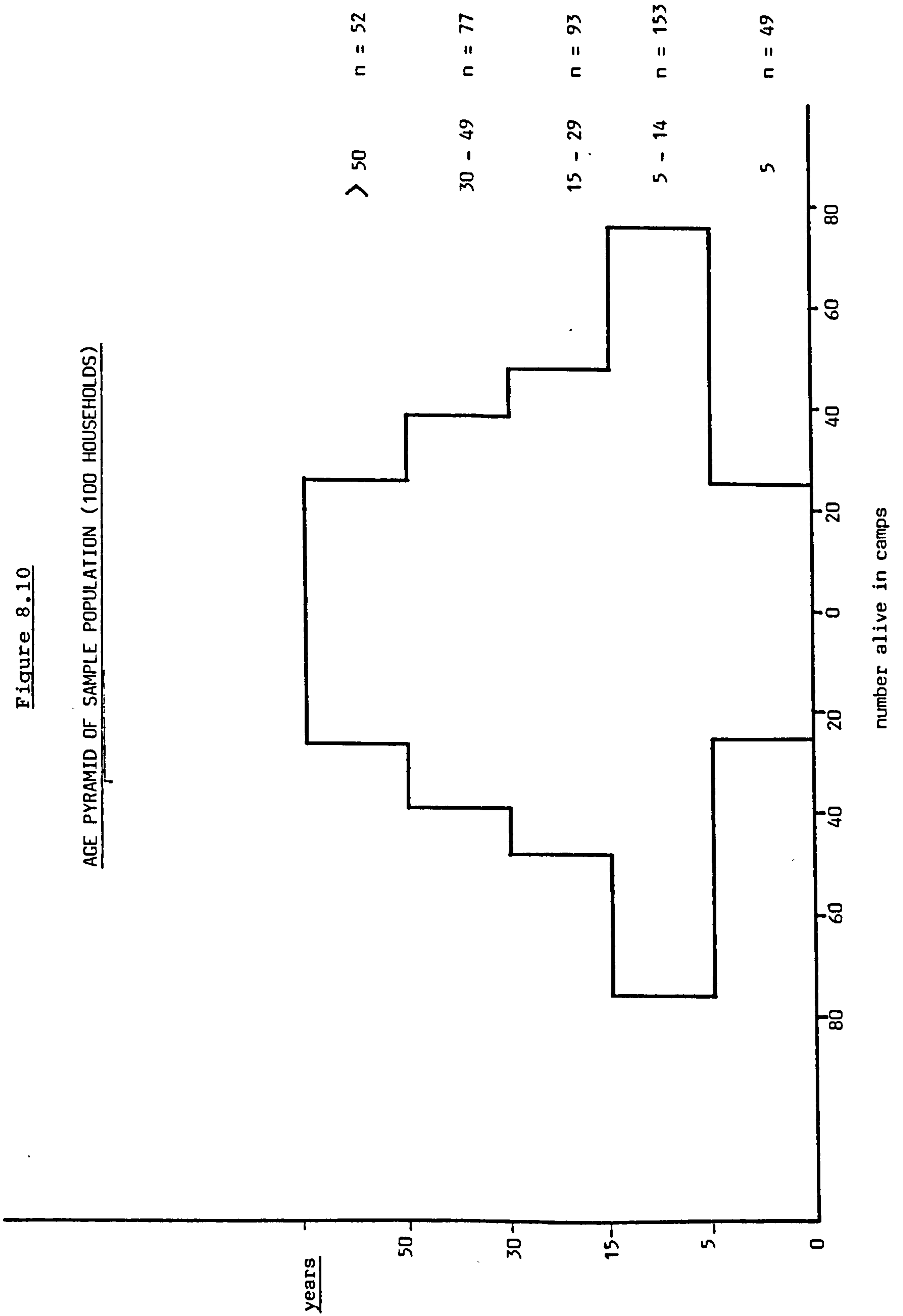
from around November 1984 through to March 1985. The exodus continued throughout 1985, with well over 300,000 people travelling to Sudan, and an unspecified but equally large number finding their way to other parts of Ethiopia (see chapters 6 and 9).

It is important to note that when famine conditions do break down into outright famine, the flow of victims to the roadsides, towns and camps can dramatically increase over a relatively short period. For example, the numbers crossing the Sudanese border rose from around 300 per day in September-October 1984 to 3,000 per day by the end of November. Flows of refugees over the border were stabilizing at around 3-4,000 per day by January 1985, but the exodus showed no signs of abating. However, there was again some reverse migration of able-bodied farmers back into the famine zone with the onset of Kremt rains in another attempt to get a crop from the denuded highlands. Unfortunately, the availability of plough oxen, seed and tools severely restricted the numbers which could return. Indeed, it was reported that in some parts of Tigray that many farmers had already abandoned the plough and had reverted to hoe cultivation by Kremt 1983 (Wright ibid). Thus there was a ratchet effect on production technology, with less efficient farming techniques being resorted to by impoverished farmers (Chambers, 1983).



Figure 8.10

AGE PYRAMID OF SAMPLE POPULATION (100 HOUSEHOLDS)



### 8.11 Terminal Migration and Mortality: Experience of Famine Victims in Sudan

The refugee sample was questioned about their household size and composition, deaths of household members and relatives over the past year, and about the abandonment of dependents in the famine zone. Figure 8.10 presents a simple age pyramid describing the sample populations. The majority of migrants were in nuclear family groups - 65 out of 100 households fell into this category. The men were concentrated in the 40-50 age groups, while the women were in the 30-40 year groups. This discrepancy reflected the traditional age gap between males and females on marriage. The preponderance of nuclear families in these age groups shows that it is the farming families at the middle stage of familial development who are most likely to migrate during famines in highland Ethiopia.

Young men in their twenties were not well-represented in the sample. They were more likely to be found in a sub-category of single male households, and there were nine of these, of all ages. Only one of this group stated that he was married - a 35 year-old who abandoned his wife and two children at Korem. A further 5 households consist of single men who had left their families in search of work and food. Three men were widowers in their 50s and 60s. Single men tended to attach themselves to other family groups for company.

Female-headed households made up the second-largest category (after nuclear households), with 13 women being in this position. Only two were entirely alone, the remainder were with their offspring. The majority of these women were in their 40s and 50s, with only two being in their 20s and 30s. A further two women were in their 60s. Five women reported being widows - usually of some years standing. The remainder had been abandoned by their husbands, although one woman was confident that her spouse would find his way to Sudan and meet with her shortly.

Male heads of household with children but no wives were also represented, with 12 men being in this position. Nearly all were in their 50s and 60s, with only one in his 90s and only two in their thirties. Two men admitted to having abandoned their wives, in both cases leaving daughters behind also. However, all of these men had some children to look after. The largest households were both headed by 50 year old men. One had 3 daughters and 4 sons to look after, while another had 5 sons depending upon him.

Table 8.8 gives details of dependents abandoned and deaths within the year preceding the interviews. A number of points arise from the data. Firstly, the ratio of surviving females to surviving males in the camps (immediately following migration) is 767:1000. The overall death rate both before and after migration is



**Table 8.8: Households Reporting Deaths and Dependents Abandoned at Migration**

**Abandonment**

<u>Relationship</u>	<u>No h/holds</u>	<u>with children</u>	<u>with spouse</u>	<u>with parent</u>
Father	10	1	4	
Mother	11	2	4	
Son	12			10
Daughter	10			7
Husband	3			
Wife	18	15		

Note

A total of 46 households reported abandoning dependents: 25 males and 39 females were abandoned in all.

**Deaths**

<u>Relationship</u>	<u>Starvation</u>	<u>Disease</u>	<u>War</u>
Father (in-Law)	1	1	
Mother (in-Law)	1	2	
Husband		1	
Wife	1	1	
Son	8	3	
Daughter	3		
Brother	2		
Sister	5		
Uncle	1		
Nephew	1		1

Note

A total of 37 deaths (in year of migration) were reported; 23 males and 14 females. The cause of death was not clear in some cases, and has not in every case been recorded here.

Source: interviews with refugee sample.

quite low, at 70 per 1000, and females appear to have a better chance of survival than males, with reported deaths being in the ratio 609 females to 1000 males. The discrepancy in the female/male ratio in the camps is to some extent explained by the abandonment of more female dependents than males, with the ratio being 1560 females for every 1000 males. The second largest category of abandoned dependents is that of wives with children, with old people most likely to be abandoned.

If we include abandoned dependents and deaths in the calculation of the overall female/male ratio, then the ratio is improved slightly but is still well below that which might be expected. Instead of a sex ratio of 1020 females to 1000 males (recorded during the drought in 1983 in Wollo province; Ministry of Agriculture 1984), the sex ratio overall is 822 females per 1000 males. Thus it is tempting to conclude that a degree of under-reporting of females has taken place. However, the findings that females are less likely to die of hunger, ceterus paribus, but are more likely to be abandoned with children burdening them (and therefore more likely to die of hunger in the long run) is supported by the literature (eg, see Rivers 1982; Ali 1984).

It is also notable that there are disproportionately few under-five year olds, amounting to only 12 per cent of

those reported to be alive in the camps. In normal times it might be expected that about 20 percent of the population would be under five (Ministry of Agriculture ibid table 2). It may be that that the drought has taken its toll on fertility, as well as increasing mortality. A drop in fertility occurs during the development of famine conditions partly because the incidence of miscarriages rises, and partly because starving people lose their libido. Wright reported that starving women in Tigray were failing to conceive during 1983 (ibid).

Children will also suffer disproportionately from hunger and disease in the camps and are more vulnerable to post-migration mortality. However, it should be noted that people do not wait until they are very weak before moving out of a famine zone - the relatively low death rate of 70 per 1000 overall at the time of the survey is an indicator of this fact. By way of comparison, it might be noted that the death rate at the height of the 1974 famine in Wollo was estimated at 190 per 1000 (ENI 1974, table D5, p 20). Unfortunately, famine survey teams often expect to find dramatic levels of poor nutritional status in famine zones and are confused to find that this may not be the case, although 'normal' levels of endemic undernutrition prevail (MSF 1984). It is at the edge of the famine zone that one is likely to find the most widespread malnutrition among migrant populations, particularly some weeks after migration when there is inadequate provision



of food, water, medicine and shelter, as has been the case both in Sudan and Ethiopia, owing to the failure of the governments of these states and the international humanitarian organisations to respond quickly enough to mass migration (see chapters 9 and 10). This is an important point given that the regular monitoring of nutrition status of children is widely advocated as a means of assessing risk of famine. It is likely that the children weighed and measured at the centre of a famine zone will be the children of the better-off families, unless there is some attempt at differentiation on the basis of social class and history of on-farm production failure is made.

#### 8.12 Summary and Conclusion

It can be seen from the above observations that the components of famine behaviour commonly described in the literature are also features of the household response to famine during the Ethiopian crisis of 1982-84. Asset sales were common, with most livestock being sold during the stressful kremt season, when grain prices are traditionally at their highest. The most valuable livestock sold were oxen. It seems that poorer households are more likely to sell-off oxen at an early stage, whereas richer households can hold onto their oxen for a longer period. Those who sell some years before migration receive a better price for their animals.

Indeed, the widespread deaths of oxen at a relatively early stage in the famine process may explain the temporary recovery of oxen prices in 1983, which was reported from several sources. Towards the end of the victims' sojourn in their home country, they resorted to last-minute sales of household goods and farm equipment. The resilience shown by the famine victims to repeated and severe crop failures was long-lasting, with victims surveyed commonly reporting 4-5 years of rain failures before the date of migration. Apart from asset sales, means of survival included widespread consumption of famine foods, wage labour and self-employment, and access to credit from relatives, neighbours and formal organisations such as farmers' associations and the church. It seems likely that in these ways great numbers of impoverished peasants were able to survive the famine without migrating. Those who moved to Sudan, although numerous, were a distinct minority who were forced to migrate through fear of death by starvation. They avoided feeding centres under the control of the Ethiopian government for fear of conscription or forced resettlement, or because the victims simply did not believe that they would be fed in the camps controlled by the Dergue. At least as many victims as migrated to Sudan were displaced inside Ethiopia, although a relatively small proportion of Tigrayans sought sanctuary in the government-held towns. Yet it should be remembered that

well over half of the population survived the famine intact, while a minority must have prospered, especially the traders buying up assets sold at distress prices, and the big farmers able to employ cheap labour. Unfortunately, lack of access to the actual famine zones at the time of the study has ensured that this analysis has necessarily concentrated on the losers rather than the gainers.

The losers who had been forced to seek sanctuary in the burgeoning famine camps during 1984 found themselves trapped in sink-holes of starvation and disease. Although human losses before migration had been kept low, at less than half the famine levels recorded in the previous decade, the almost complete lack of preparation and inability of the international agencies to respond quickly to a foreseeable event ensured that death rates rocketed in the months immediately following the migration. Eventually, the Sudanese camps were to experience the highest death rates ever recorded in a refugee emergency, whilst similar scenes were to be found across the border in Ethiopia. The reasons for this state of affairs are considered in the next two chapters.



## Notes

- 1 A seasonal pattern of livestock sales seems clear from the lowland market of Bati, which is one of the biggest in the region. However, the seasonal pattern may have been breaking down in Eliwoha during 1981, a highland market which shows a sharp increase in sales from May-September, during the kremt rain season.
  
- 2 These reports were taken as clear evidence by SCF, Oxfam and other observers that outright famine was imminent, and that forward relief planning was an urgent necessity.

## Chapter 9: The Response to the Famine prior to October 1984

### 9.1. Introduction

Before describing the institutional response to the famine, it is important to recall the methodological framework devised in chapter 1, so that the events described may also be explained. The key arguments are as follows:

- (i) Food is a strategic resource, especially during famines. Hence, governments and donors will allocate food in accordance with their overall political aims. These aims may be advanced during the famine as the social crisis provides political opportunities. The response to famine is therefore primarily politically-conditioned.
- (ii) The nature and extent of the institutional response to famine depends principally upon the relations of the inter-governmental organisations (IGOs) with donors and with the recipient government. The IGOs can respond only if the government requests help and if the donors provide sufficient resources. In cases of doubt, the IGOs will not take risks, and will avoid responsibility.
- (iii) The non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are dependent upon donor governments, the general

public and IGOs for resources. However, they are more likely to take risks than the IGOs in attempting to publicise famine because this can lead to a considerable increase of flows of resources into their organisations. Lacking a firm financial base, NGOs are highly insecure and must regularly compete with other NGOs for resources. This is not generally the case with IGOs whose budgets from funding governments tend to be fixed over the medium term, although budgets can suffer over a longer period if the IGOs activities are not to the liking of their major supporters.

Given these basic conditions, we must now consider what is likely to happen if the government of a famine-affected country fails to respond sufficiently. Such a government would value other political objectives - such as maintaining its power through feeding the urban population, fighting civil wars, building new social institutions etc. - above those of feeding starving sections of the peasantry.

The response of the donors to this situation would depend upon their own political objectives. There are two basic scenarios here:

- (a) the donors are allied to the government, and are concerned to prevent its downfall. Under these



circumstances, the donors will seek to persuade the government to act to control the famine where there is a perceived threat to the government's stability. Thus the USA unilaterally distributed food to the population of the potentially rebellious province of Darfur in Sudan in 1983-84, but not to the Ethiopian refugees or the passively-starving peasants in the less politically-volatile provinces.<sup>1</sup>

- (ii) the donors are not allied to the government, and have an interest in seeing it fall or change its political and economic orientation. Under these circumstances, famine control becomes an issue only when the problem becomes highly visible, in the form of mass migration of famine victims. This event will in turn only be responded to by donors on a reactive basis if it is sufficiently publicised by the media in the donor countries and becomes a humanitarian political issue. This state of affairs describes the situation during the recent famine in Ethiopia.

The role of the media in the latter case is extremely important. Only the exposure of the famine to the pressure of humanitarian political lobbying can change the degree of the international response. However, media

pressure may still fail to change the nature of the response, leading to a concentration upon long-term development programmes rather than short-term relief projects. In any case, the degree of response will dwindle as the news event passes into history.

The analysis of response given in the next two chapters is periodised precisely because the upsurge in humanitarian political lobbying, which forced the donors to respond to the problem in a manner commensurate with its size, did not occur until October 1984. Before that date, there had been quite a lot of reporting of the famine in the quality press, but not very much in the popular press. The famine had not yet attracted the concerted attention of the TV and radio media because it was not yet deemed by news editors to be spectacularly bad enough to warrant prime-time exposure. Only during the latter half of 1984 were the scenes of starvation considered sufficiently dreadful (and therefore newsworthy) to warrant such exposure. Even so, the timing of the broadcasting of these scenes depended to a great extent on the whims of news editors. The famine could have gone largely unobserved by the West had it not been for competition between rival television networks in the UK (Harrison and Palmer 1986).

The role of the IGOs over the period leading up to the mass media coverage of the Ethiopian famine deserves closer examination. Throughout, the IGO's response to

mass migration was reactive and therefore much less effective than it might have otherwise been in terms of its impact on excess mortality. This state of affairs arose because of both the nature of the overall political climate and of IGO institutional rationality and procedures. Knowing that Western donors were highly likely not to want to pre-empt mass migration, they awaited its effects before making detailed appeals. The IGOs then avoided responsibility for implementation as far as possible by passing it on to NGOs and branches of the Ethiopian government. If the media demanded to know what had already been done to combat the famine the IGOs could point to actions taken and provide lists of commodities and cash supplied to the implementors. It should be noted that the IGOs were in general poorly informed about conditions in the rural areas. Their staff were for the most part confined to the capital cities, chained to their mandates and organisational procedures, and were unable to take political risks, which were likely to prove fruitless and would probably act to the detriment of their careers. IGO staff also had little experience of famine, and found it difficult to recognise its symptoms or understand its probable development path.

Meanwhile, the response of the NGOs depended very much upon the scope of their operations in the country at the time and the degree of political security they



consequently enjoyed. NGOs operating in a famine area will usually attempt to publicise rural distress, and will mitigate it according to their own perspectives - for example childcare charities will concentrate on feeding children, and development charities will involve themselves in works projects. NGOs do not generally promote a broad perspective, and will be unwilling to share information and resources with rivals. Consequently, they suffer from tunnel vision, concentrating on their own professional fields and geographical areas of operation. Thus NGO's can be taken by surprise by the eventual scale and sudden onset of mass migration. This was largely the case in Ethiopia in late 1984.

It should be noted at the outset that many of the events occurring over the two periods remain obscure, both in terms of hard facts and in terms of underlying motives of the various actors involved. Motives often have to be inferred through a comparison between official statements of intent and actual behaviour. This study has to some extent benefited from interviews carried out with some of the important actors involved in the famine relief operation at key periods during its development, which has assisted in the process of untangling fact from fiction, for many of the agencies and actors involved have been editing history since the public disclosure of the extent of the famine (examples will be given in this chapter).

## 9.2. The Attitudes of Donors to Information about the Famine

As has been apparent from our analysis of the recent history of famine in Ethiopia, hardly a year has gone by since the revolution when actual or threatened starvation was not reported by the RRC's early warning system. Table 9.1 lists the RRC's estimates of the numbers of people facing "food shortages" over the period 1981-1984. The numbers given are very large, ranging from almost 3 million to more than 6 million over the period. However, the RRC does not attempt to define what is meant by its use of the term "food shortages".

Despite the fact that these estimates are compiled directly from field reports of peasant associations; the bureaucrats of the donor agencies rarely believe them. This is partly because the numbers are so large, and partly because the figures given are so precise. Nevertheless, historically, the donors have rarely taken the trouble to understand how the figures are arrived at; and equally the RRC has not (until recently) attempted to explain their origin. In August 1984, this situation was to some extent rectified through a workshop sponsored by UNICEF and attended both by producers and users of information (RRC 1984a). Unfortunately, this exercise coincided with the outbreak of uncontrolled famine in Ethiopia, so it was rather too late to affect planned food

**Table 9.1: No of People (000) Facing Food Shortages due to Meher Crop Failures, 1981-84**

<u>Administrative Region</u>	<u>1981</u>	<u>1982</u>	<u>1983</u>	<u>1984</u>
Arssi	220	220	60	2.5
Bale	109	59	35	52.9
Gamu Goffa	108	250	-	79.9
Gojjam	198	65	20	35.2
Gonder	202	50	424.6	376.5
Harerghe	777	327	285	419.1
Illubabor	6	-	-	33.1
Keffa	26	20	-	1.6
Shewa	533	471	195	407.1
Sidamo	333	-	145	695.4
Tigray	600	350	1,000	1,331.9
Wellega	96.6	46.6	-	-
Wollo	592.4	572.4	1,200.2	1,790.8
Eritrea	713	400	534.8	872
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,514</b>	<b>2,831</b>	<b>3,899.6</b>	<b>6,098</b>

Source: RRC documentation



aid shipments.

Part of the reason for the neglect of the RRC to define precisely its terms and to account for its figures is undoubtedly because it wishes to maximise potential claims. At the same time, the representatives of the potential donor governments are unwilling to admit these claims, given their own political and institutional interests, at least before famine itself becomes a political issue. Hence, the RRC reports have traditionally been the subject of extreme donor cynicism. Here are a selection of comments culled from representatives of bulk food donor agencies during March 1984, by which time large scale famine was virtually assured and the RRC was in the process of making a 'last ditch' appeal:

"They come up with a figure which nobody believes" (EEC official).

"Every year I have been here for the last four to five years they have said that several million people were facing food shortages. If this was true at least a million would have died by now" (WFP official).

"If we see the figures we tend to divide by ten - maybe that is a very cynical attitude. If there is a bad year, we might add ten per cent (to food aid imports)" (EEC official).

"There's a kind of 'wait and see' attitude, there are many other places which are being declared emergencies .... the RRC asks to be taken on faith. It says it will put on a show and it puts on a flop" (Canadian official speaking about a tour of the famine-affected regions).

We shall examine in detail the record of the official donor agencies shortly. At this point it will be sufficient to take note of the generally negative attitude of representatives of important donor agencies in Addis Ababa.

The RRC appeal of March 1984 was one of a string of regular appeals for aid. However, it was both quantitatively and qualitatively different from those preceding it. The report stated starkly that:

"Ethiopia is facing a potential disaster of considerable magnitude in which, this year, around one-fifth of the country's population will need assistance in some form or another. If those affected do not receive relief assistance, the consequences will be frightening" (RRC 1984b p 25).

The report was launched at a meeting with aid donors, held on March 30th. Gill (1985), who has written a detailed account of the response to the famine, is scathing about donor attitudes at this time:

"The RRC holds regular 'donor' meetings, several a year in

the recent past, and some donor representatives have tried to persuade me that there was nothing out of the ordinary about the 30 March meeting. There were in fact several unusual aspects to the presentation that day as the RRC struggled to bring international attention to bear on the developing tragedy. First they showed the donors a film, a video compilation stitched together in part from western television coverage of famine conditions, with an RRC commentary stuck on top. The question-and-answer session after the main presentation was particularly lengthy as donors queried the level of government food stocks in the country and the capacity of the ports to handle large quantities of aid" (ibid pp 28-29).

Moreover, the tone of the report was different from previous efforts. Gill considers that a note of desperation had crept in whereas previous reports had tended to understate the impact of developing famine conditions.

It must be remembered that this RRC appeal came in the wake of numerous other warnings from a variety of interested parties. These warnings are summarised in table 9.2, and it can be seen that they emanated from the UN system, research foundations, and from non-governmental organisations. In some cases, representatives of bilateral donor agencies also made reports to their head offices warning of famine, but this was admitted publicly



**Table 9.2: Main Features of Warnings of and Responses to the Forthcoming Famine**

March 1981	Ethiopia warns of serious crop failures in the north. UN Coordinating Committee for Relief and Rehabilitation prepares a report (with RRC) detailing assistance needs.
early 1982	The Organisation of African Unity warns that more than 100 million Africans would be affected by severe food shortages continuing into 1983.
April	The RRC details assistance requirements for more than 5.5 million people and states that "drought and the effects of war .... have together made the food supply most critical."
July	The NMSA warns of drought following a one-month delay in the onset of <u>kremt</u> rains in the north.
December	The RRC publishes a second 'assistance requirements' report asking for aid for 4.8 million people. SCF begins warning donor agencies of the likelihood of famine, including an influx to Sudan, and sets up a supplementary feeding centre at Korem in northern Wollo.
January 1983	First alert from the FAO Global Information and Early Warning System on the African Food Situation for 1983-84.
February	Oxfam begins feeding operations at Ibnat.
March	The RRC requests relief for 3.9 million people.
April	SCF team kidnapped by TPLF guerrillas at Korem.
October	FAO convenes a special meeting of representatives of donor countries and drought-affected countries to discuss the food crisis. CRS requests a further 16,000 mt. food from USAID.
November	The International Wheat Council warns of the deteriorating situation in the Sahelian countries, including Ethiopia, during its 99th session.

Table 9.2 (cont.)

December	The UN Economic Commission for Africa states that 150 million Africans will "face hunger and malnutrition in 1984".
January 1984	The USA announces \$90 m. additional aid for Africa. The International Disaster Institute/London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine begin warning agencies of worsening famine conditions and publishes supporting evidence.
February	FAO convenes joint session with UN ambassadors to inform them of crop conditions, food supplies and relief efforts in famine-affected African countries. FAO/WFP mission sent to Ethiopia to assess needs.
March	RRC launches extraordinary appeal for food for more than 6 million people, accompanied by a film to help convince donors of the seriousness of the situation. The World Bank issues a strong warning that Africa is facing a "food catastrophe" and that Ethiopia, Chad, Mozambique and Burkina Faso have only four month's food left in stock.
May	The US government approves only 8,000 mt of emergency food for CRS.
June	The London Economic Summit states that Western leaders are "greatly concerned" about African drought and are "pledged to maintain and wherever possible increase" aid to Africa. Church Drought Action in Africa issues a famine warning for Ethiopia. Oxfam warns of famine in Tigray. The FAO/WFP needs assessment report is published, recommending only 125,000 mt of emergency food aid for Ethiopia. FAO delays clearance of WFP emergency shipment of 30,000 mt.
July	'Harvest of Hunger' shown on British Independent Television. Joint NGO appeal launched. UNDR0 circulates 5 telexes on the deteriorating situation in Ethiopia between May and July.

**Table 9.2 (cont)**

August	The RRC publishes an update on relief needs and the general situation, stating that "we have no grain in our stocks as of the middle of July". WFP calculates the Ethiopian food deficit at only 50,000 mt.
September	CRDA demands "immediate and extraordinary action" of western donors. Oxfam announces a 10,000 mt grain shipment to shame Western governments into action. WFP figures state that Ethiopian food aid received or in the pipeline exceeds requirements. UNDRO states that crop growing conditions in the northern famine areas are "almost satisfactory".
October	Deaths in Korem camp reach 100 a day. The situation there is filmed by Samir Amin and presented by Michael Buerk as a "famine of biblical proportions". Film extracts get prime-time coverage worldwide over the coming weeks, stimulating an international political furore.



only later. Indeed, once the famine had begun, almost everybody claimed to have warned of its development, and many could point to internal memoranda or external appeals which supported these claims. This point is underlined by a survey of NGOs carried out in Addis Ababa in May 1986.

The report notes that:

"seven out of seventeen agencies interviewed claim to have known about a major famine before the end of 1983 .... Of the others, three said they knew a major famine was coming by February 1984, one said April 1984, one May, one September, one August and two October" (Confidential draft, undated).

The UN early warning system, based at the FAO headquarters in Rome has also been defensive about its record, pointing out that it had been warning of food crises in as many as 22 African countries as early as October 1983.

It is important to recognise that the Ethiopian famine was a creeping disaster. As such, it attracted a relief response as early as December 1982, which grew steadily over 1983 and early 1984, before undergoing a quantum leap in size of operations following the October television footage. Therefore, almost all agencies with a presence in Ethiopia could argue that they had responded to the crisis before it became known to the mass media and thence to the general public in the West. Furthermore, the crisis had already attracted considerable attention from the media. Regular press coverage since early 1983,

particularly in the 'quality' newspapers of western Europe and North America had been supplemented with a certain amount of television footage in early-mid 1984. Charles Stewarts' short film 'Harvest of Hunger' had already raised some £7 million for Ethiopian famine relief when it was broadcast on British Independent Television in June 1984. However, the misery depicted in the film was quantitatively and qualitatively different from that displayed in October. By then, the relief system had almost completely failed to cope with the onslaught of massive distress migration to relief camps. Consequently, the harrowing films and photographs of famine victims attracted a much more emotional and financially generous response from Western viewers.

In order to understand how this situation arose, it is useful to consider the actions of the responding institutions separately. These are grouped as follows: (i) the Ethiopian government; (ii) major governmental donors; (iii) the United Nations agencies and (iv) the non-governmental organisations.

### 9.3 The Response of the Ethiopian Government to the Famine

We have seen that the RRC was instrumental in issuing regular warnings and updates on the developing famine. It was also involved directly in the distribution of relief. It is unusual for a poor country such as Ethiopia to

invest in a permanently established body for relief distribution, and it is still more unusual for such a body to attract wide praise for its relative honesty and efficiency. The ex-director of Oxfam, Michael Harris, has stated that the RRC is:

"a bureaucratic organisation, often slow to operate and its systems are immensely hierarchical. Its reporting procedures are irregular and often non-existent. It is, however, infinitely better than corresponding organisations in many other countries (Harris 1985 p 17).

Even administrators of countries unsympathetic to Ethiopia are impressed with the RRC. Gill reports that "through clenched teeth, the (US) State Department acknowledged that aid donors considered the RRC to be a relatively well-organised and well-run organisation" (op cit p 37).

It may well be that the discipline based on fear instilled by the Dergue following the threat to its rule during 1977-78 (see chapter 2) has considerably modified the traditionally corrupt practises of the Ethiopian bureaucracy. Nevertheless, in 1983-84 the RRC was rendered virtually incapable of carrying out its mandate through lack of support from both donors and government. This is an example of sectoralisation leading to bureaucratic inertia, in line with Shaffer's arguments which were discussed in chapter 1. If we further accept B. Harriss' (1985) argument that famine ultimately represents a



failure of the State to provide for the subsistence needs of its citizens, then Ethiopia is a fine example of state indifference to mass starvation, despite the apparent priority given to famine control manifested in the establishment of the RRC. As we have seen from chapter 3, the State has traditionally been indifferent to mass starvation among the rural population, who represent little threat to the urban power base. However, when the urban poor are threatened, steps are taken to provide subsistence for this potentially riotous population.

Lack of state support for famine control was evident in a number of ways. To begin with, the government did not make commercial purchases of food, either for consumption by townspeople or for famine victims. This behaviour contrasts with that of the governments of neighbouring Kenya, and impoverished Bangladesh, both of which made substantial purchases to ward off famine in 1984, despite being priority recipients of food aid from the West. The lack of commercial purchases by government helped to convince donors that the threat of famine was exaggerated.

At the same time, the regime busied itself with preparing for the celebrations of the 10th anniversary of the revolution, held in September 1984. The cost of these has been variously estimated at (conservatively) at least \$50m (Korn 1986), although most estimates appear to vary between \$200-\$500m (M. Harris op cit). In addition to the

cost of materials for the celebrations, the government diverted large numbers of state employees to prepare for the celebrations. Even RRC staff were not exempted from "various parading and banner-waving exercises" (Cutler and Stephenson 1984 p 29). Meanwhile, donor agency staff were denied access to the famine areas, whether for needs assessment purposes or to support existing relief operations, because the government was particularly concerned that foreigners should not be captured by the various guerilla movements and used as propaganda material during the coming celebrations.<sup>2</sup>

When ships carrying relief goods did arrive, they were not always given priority over arms shipments and commercial imports, including shiploads of materials for the celebrations. Indeed, port handling charges were raised, and are currently among the highest in the world, being ten times higher than in neighbouring Sudan, and "which soon overtook coffee sales as Ethiopia's main source of foreign exchange" (The Times, 30-10-86). Meanwhile, the military campaigns continued, with major, if largely unsuccessful, operations in Tigray and Eritrea throughout 1983 and 1984.

The most compelling evidence for the government's lack of concern over famine victims was the way in which rehabilitation operations were eventually conducted.

Resettlement of northerners was the preferred strategy, and this was often forcibly undertaken. There is evidence to suggest that deliberate withholding of food aid took place to encourage resettlement, and that provincial allocations of relief food under the control of the government were not made on the grounds of need. As the resettlement programme took place after October 1984, these data shall be presented and discussed in the next chapter. For the moment, it is sufficient to note that the famine presented an opportunity for the government to pursue its major political objectives. As such the famine assisted the war effort and presented an opportunity for large scale experimentation with other overt methods of social control, such as resettlement and villagisation.

#### 9.4 The Response of the Major Governmental Donors

The most generous and influential of donors during disasters in African countries is usually the USA. Generally, the USA aims to provide up to half of the emergency needs of any country, and assumes that other donors will make up the remainder. Once the Ethiopian famine became public knowledge, the US authorities provided one-third of the 1.3 m tonnes of food shipped during 1985. However, before the media exposure of the famine, the USA had been extremely niggardly in its response. Its attitude had a direct bearing on the development of the famine, and in several instances went



against the advice of its own embassy and specialist headquarters staff.

As Ethiopia is considered hostile to US interests, it is not eligible for development aid, including Title 1 and 111 food aid allocations which are made for concessionary sale or for use on development projects under the provisions of Public Law 480. However, title 11 aid can be given for humanitarian purposes. Under the circumstances of dealing with a hostile country, the US prefers to channel aid through private US charities, such as the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) or the Committee for American Relief Everywhere (CARE). The former organisation had an established presence in Ethiopia, and during 1982 was working in Mekele, the government-held capital of Tigray in the heart of the famine zone.

Alarmed by the influx of famine migrants into the provincial capital during the latter half of 1982, CRS decided to appeal in December for a small amount of food - 838 tonnes - for its Mekele feeding programme. The agency stated that it would pay all transport and distribution costs. It took five months for this tiny donation to be approved. Later, in October 1983, CRS again appealed for a much larger amount, 16,000 tonnes of food needed to undertake a large expansion of feeding programmes in response to growing needs. This time, a seven month delay resulted in only half of the request (8,000 mt) being

approved, and there were further delays between approval and shipment. Given that CRS was an experienced agency staffed with US nationals it seems quite clear that the delays were a result of an extreme reluctance on behalf of the US government to assist even the displaced famine victims of a hostile regime.

Further evidence of US footdragging is provided by the reaction of the State Department to an urgent cable sent from the US embassy in Addis Ababa on 4th April 1984. The cable stated that "a very serious situation could develop in Ethiopia this year and we will be remiss if we are not adequately informed and prepared" (USGAO 1985 p 4). In response to the cable, a USAID mission was dispatched to conduct a survey. On May 11th the mission concluded that the situation should be monitored closely but that "no additional food (should) be offered to the Ethiopian government" on the grounds that it could not be distributed (ibid). There can be no clearer statement of the US government's intentions at that time.

It should be noted here that a very useful 'escape hatch' habitually employed by agency officials who were either unwilling or under instructions not to respond to the growing crisis was to claim that insufficient information existed upon which to base a decision. Certainly the Ethiopian government did not give sufficient "supporting

data to substantiate and verify food shortage claims and appeals for international food aid" (ibid p 6). On the other hand, few officials bothered to seek supporting evidence, or to canvas the opinions of relief workers with knowledge of the affected areas. No individual or agency had begun to routinely collect and summarise the available information, so each actor had only a partial view of the situation.

The difficulties of making a case for extra emergency aid for Ethiopia were not confined to the US embassy. The EEC is another very large donor with a permanent staff in Addis Ababa. A senior EEC official there has remarked on the difference between the atmosphere of post-October 1984 in comparison with the previous period: "You had this feeling of immense public support in Europe. And the spirit here was incredible. Everyone was positive about doing things. Before, you would never really talk about the problem itself; it was always a question of how to present the problem. There was simply nothing that could not be done at that time. Now, of course, we're back in the old routine" (quoted in Gill op cit p 79, emphasis added).

Before the media blitz, enemies of the Dergue in Europe were calling for a halt to shipments of emergency food, just as they were in the United States. These enemies included right-wing anti-communists in both national



parliaments and in the European parliament, who were concerned for both ideological and strategic reasons to undermine Ethiopia's alliance with the Soviet Union. They were joined by left-wing politicians and lobbyists who supported the liberation movements in Ethiopia, particularly in Eritrea and Tigray. These pressure groups considered that by denying food to the regime they would assist in putting pressure on its foreign exchange reserves, forcing the Ethiopian government to make commercial purchases in order to support its key interest groups, and thereby reducing the flow of funds available for arms purchases. The leftist supporters of the liberation fronts meanwhile hoped that food denied to the Dergue would instead be granted to the rebels. In order to marshall support for these strategies, politicians on the right joined those on the left in condemning the regime and in seeking evidence of misuse of food aid. Reports of food being diverted to the army were frequent, with journalists being shown physical and photographic evidence of food aid captured by the rebels from army camps in the north. Meanwhile, allegations concerning the exchange of EEC food aid for arms made in the Sunday Times in March 1983 caused a major row, particularly in the European parliament. These allegations were subsequently strongly denied by the EEC office in Addis Ababa, which launched an investigation at the behest of the European Commission.

Footdragging by the EEC was not confined to political machinations. The ordinary processes of identifying needs, making pledges, and releasing relief materials take an inordinately long time under EEC procedures, compared with donations from others such as WFP, the USA, and Canada. With twelve States represented, incorporating every shade of opinion from far left to far right, the pledging process can take months. The byzantine procurement procedures of the bureaucracy add further delays. The European Court of Auditors found that the record of food aid deliveries in 1983-84 was actually worse than that of 1982. Auditors calculated that "less than half the grain allocated in 1983 as food aid was delivered in the course of the year, with only a third of the milk powder and about a quarter of the butter oil. The Court of Auditors found that in the case of cereal the time lag between decision and delivery was up to fourteen months, and in the case of butter oil up to nineteen months" (Gill ibid p 70).

In the Ethiopian case, the 1983 allocations for all purposes (relief and development) were sanctioned only in July, ensuring that most of the deliveries were made in the following year. The 1984 deliveries were sanctioned a little earlier, in May. Of the 116,000 mt 'delivered or pledged' between January and September 1984 (before the media blitz), more than half (62,000 mt) was left over from the previous year. Moreover, only a fraction (16 per

cent) was for free relief distribution.

The EEC delegation appears to have been less aware of the potential famine than the US embassy. In early 1984, Brussels was informed that "no immediate shortage is expected" (ibid p 71). However, when the RRC appealed in May 1984 for 115,000 mt grain; 15,000 mt milk powder; and 2,500 mt butter oil as the EEC's contribution to famine relief, the Commission agreed to provide 18,000 mt grain; 1,400 mt milk powder; and 500 mt butter oil. In all, this amounted to 15 per cent of the foodstuffs requested. Clearly, the arguments advanced by the anti-Ethiopian lobbies were sufficient to attract widespread support, although a certain amount of food was nevertheless advanced to satisfy those arguing for aid on humanitarian grounds. One notable concession was made - the EEC agreed to earmark the grain for emergency relief rather than to stipulate that it should be used for food-for-work, which was the normal practice with EEC donations to Ethiopia.

Later, the EEC attempted to deny that it had substantially ignored the famine. In the house magazine, the 'EEC Courier' of March-April 1985, under the subheading: "the community reacts instantly and well", the Commission had this to say about their response to the famine:

"The Community, of course, did not wait for the media to cover the situation before it sat up and took notice ..... It was in fact in April 1984, six months before the first



television pictures, that the EEC brought in its first emergency plan" (of 210,000 tonnes of food aid and ECU 83 million). The report goes on to list in detail the amounts of food allocated to the 14 African countries covered by the plan. Ethiopia is not on the list.

The allocation of food aid according to political choice by the donors between countries suffering different degrees of distress is of course in accordance with the arguments advanced at the beginning of this thesis. This is underlined by the fact that Ethiopia was by far the worst-affected of the famine-affected countries - its nearest rival being Sudan, with less than half of the number facing starvation according to UN estimates. Allocations to favoured countries reflected economic links and strategic alliances, rather than relative need. The francophone West African countries particularly benefited from their existing links with France and other EEC countries.

The scarcity of food pledges from traditional sources meant that the smaller donors were increasingly called upon to make up the shortfalls. Among the most generous were the Canadians. Following the RRC's appeal of March 1984, the Canadians made a substantial donation of 20,000 mt grain through the World Food Programme, a United Nations agency. Little appears to have been recorded about the precise circumstances of the donations made or

of the attitudes of Canadian officials to the Ethiopian government. However, an assessment mission was despatched from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) in August 1984. In an urgent telex to the head office, the mission concluded that the situation was urgent and that further donations should be made.

Several other countries donated food for relief purposes in early 1984. These included Australia (1,000 metric tonnes of wheat); Belgium (4,000 mt wheat); China (1,000 mt maize); Denmark (4,500 mt wheat); Finland (500 mt wheat); West Germany (5,000 mt wheat and wheat flour); Norway (4,500 mt sorghum); Switzerland (2,200 mt wheatflour); and the USSR (10,000 mt rice). It is apparent that none of the contributions were very large. The RRC March appeal had been for 450,000 mt food, half of that which the RRC believed to be really necessary. Five months later, the appeal had generated pledges only of 87,000 mt grain and 8,000 mt other foodstuffs - a little over 20 per cent of that requested, and only 10 per cent of the calculated actual needs. It was clear that the nations with the most surplus food to dispose of were unwilling to come to Ethiopia's aid. The RRC would have to look to other sources of support. Logically, the relevant United Nations agencies might have been expected to fill the gap and to put diplomatic pressure on the donors to relieve the famine. Unfortunately, the UN

failed spectacularly to carry out this task. This failure will be analysed in the next section.

#### 9.5. The Response of the United Nations Agencies

There are sixteen agencies within the United Nations system, but we are concerned here to analyse the activities of only five of them, all of which are mandated in various ways to assist governments in relief operations. The most important is the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which is the lead UN agency in any country and which is mandated to coordinate the activities of the others in an emergency. Of lesser importance politically, but controlling greater material resources for famine control (especially food aid) are the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and its subordinate, the World Food Programme (WFP). FAO is responsible for collating and disseminating information concerning likely food deficits worldwide; while WFP is responsible for transporting and distributing foodstuffs donated by countries within the UN network. There is a great deal of tension between FAO and WFP over their respective roles, with FAO seeking to maintain control over WFP's activities, and WFP seeking autonomy.

The agency which is supposed to coordinate and disseminate all necessary information relating to the planning and execution of disaster relief is the United Nations



Disaster Relief Office (UNDRO), which is based in Geneva. UNDRO is a relatively new organisation, with a very small budget, few staff, and no financial control over the activities of other agencies during disasters. Consequently it confines itself mainly to advising potential donors of appeals made for disaster relief by the host government.

The final agency to be considered as having a role in famine relief within the UN system is UNICEF. Originally set up as the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund following the Second World War, UNICEF has since moved away from a pure concentration on emergency relief for children to more general support for family health and development programmes. UNICEF has a tradition of innovative thinking and decentralised management structures and is therefore capable of reacting quite quickly to disasters. UNICEF's institutional flexibility is partly a result of its diversified financial base - it enjoys charitable status and has a large network of private voluntary fundraisers. It is also partly a result of the outlook of its director, James Grant.

The sources of agency funding are extremely important to an analysis of famine response by the UN agencies. All (even UNICEF) depend for the bulk of their funds upon Western governments, in particular the United States. This country provides nearly half of the UNDP budget, and

around a quarter of those of FAO and WFP. The Eastern bloc countries provide little in the way of resources for the UN organisations, and are thus not able to influence them as effectively as the Western paymasters. In general, the agencies will put the interests of the donors above those of the recipient, while paying lip service to the opposite idea. In cases where this does not happen, as with UNESCO for example, financial sanctions are eventually employed by the donors in an effort to realign agency policy.

An analysis of the response of the UN agencies to famine should begin with the role of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), which is charged with the task of compiling information on potential food emergencies at its Rome headquarters. To do this FAO relies upon reports submitted from its offices in each country. The FAO representatives in turn rely mostly on governmental sources of information. These are often rather limited, and if FAO is requested to approve a shipment of food aid through its sister organisation, the World Food Programme (WFP), then a joint mission will be despatched to carry out a survey of crop conditions and overall prospects for domestic consumption. One such mission was sent in February 1984 to verify Ethiopian requests for food aid. The misleading analysis and conclusions of the report did much to undermine other attempts to highlight the

seriousness of the situation.

It will be recalled that the RRC had estimated emergency food needs at 900,000 mt, but in an honest appraisal of its transportation capacity had cut the appeal to 450,000 mt. The FAO/WFP mission calculated that the relief requirement was 685,000 mt, and that if this full amount were to be received, some \$49 m. would be required to pay for its distribution. However, the report focused specifically on the drought-affected north, and concluded that:

"considering the present and potential logistical capacity for the transport and distribution of relief goods (mainly food aid) as well as the accessibility of the affected areas, the mission concluded that 125,000 tonnes can be distributed from the ports to the drought-affected areas and distributed internally between April and December 1984 to supply the drought-affected people of the northern regions. No estimate was made of logistic capacity in the south" (FAO 1984 p 2).

In order to facilitate the shipment of these goods, the mission had prepared a plan which envisaged a modest expansion of capacity from a distribution rate in the north of 6,000 mt to 14,000 mt. The mission calculated that \$12 m. would be required to pay for this expansion.

While not stating outright that Ethiopia did not require 900,000 tonnes of emergency relief, or even the 450,000



tonnes she was claiming; the FAO/WFP joint mission was effectively stating that the requirement was only 125,000 tonnes, and that the only problem areas were in the north. The RRC's original needs assessment had been cut by 86 per cent. This impression was heightened by the leisurely manner in which the report was published - some three months after the mission had returned from Ethiopia - and by the failure of the FAO to convene the usual donors meeting to discuss the report.

The report did not go uncriticised within the UN system. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Resident Representative, Dr. Kenneth King, publicly lambasted the findings of the report as "an exercise in cynicism" on the 'Harvest of Hunger' documentary released by Central Television in the UK in July 1984. He obliquely referred to the strategic alliance between the USSR and Ethiopia as a possible cause of the underestimation of famine. Later, King was himself reprimanded by his superiors because "the donors did not like it" (Gill op cit p 45). While one might admire King for his public statement, his private actions do not invite praise. As head of UNDP, the Resident Representative is also in charge of the UN Disaster Relief Office (UNDRO) and is empowered to coordinate the activities of all UN agencies in an emergency.

Although UN agencies such as UNICEF and WFP were already engaged in

famine relief, their efforts were limited, uncoordinated, and underfunded. There was a clear case for an emergency committee to be set up, at the latest by April 1984, in order to pool information, streamline emergency relief operations, and to act as a pressure group on the major donors. King was requested to set up such a committee, but this initiative <sup>apparently</sup> failed to find its way onto his agenda. This may well have been the case because King was unwilling to appear critical of the Ethiopian government, which preferred to have resources channelled through its own organisations (see Kent 1986).

At this juncture, in Michael Harris' words, "one might be forgiven for asking where was UNDRO?" (op cit p 34).

UNDRO was set up ostensibly to "mobilise, direct and coordinate the relief activities of the UN system and to coordinate the assistance with that given by other inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations" (quoted in Gill op cit p 112). UNDRO is a relatively new organisation within the UN system and, as Gill has pointed out, it was therefore in a weak starting position when attempting to compete for resources. By the time of the Ethiopian famine, UNDRO had already been effectively marginalised by other UN agencies defending and expanding their territory. As a consequence, the agency was greatly understaffed, with a total international complement of only 50 professional staff, although there was a permanent UNDRO representative in Addis Ababa.

The UNDRO representative did attempt to coordinate appeals to donors, these being based mostly on official information. However, UNDRO's information was presented uncritically, and lacked analytical weight. Consequently, it could easily be dismissed by the donors who were in any case unwilling to provide aid to the Ethiopian government. Occasionally, UNDRO's information was wrong, as when it was reported that growing conditions in the north were "satisfactory" in late 1984 (New Scientist, 7th November, 1984). Nevertheless, the UNDRO representative could have played a valuable role as compiler and analyst of key information coming from a variety of sources relevant to the growing crisis which could have been used as a counterweight to the misguided reports emanating from FAO and the politically powerful food aid donors. Unfortunately, this exercise was not carried out, primarily because it was not part of the terms of reference of the UNDRO mission, which to a great extent is bound to accept information from the host government. In this respect, UNDRO resembles FAO, which also relies mostly upon official information from member governments of the United Nations Organisation.

Among the other UN agencies operating in Ethiopia, UNICEF was already reacting to the spread of famine, particularly in the areas in which it was already working on projects. In some cases, UNICEF demonstrated an innovative approach to famine relief. Early in 1984, the agency set up a



small "cash for work" programme in two peasant associations in Gonder. This was a useful intervention given that the PAs affected by crop failures there were close to areas of surplus production where food could be bought at reasonable prices. One of the main benefits of the programme was that it enabled some farming households to retain their capital, and even in some cases to purchase oxen and other means of production. However, the programme was not easy to administer, in that it was difficult to account for the large amounts of cash being distributed, and some of the poorer members of the PAs were not paid for work done on road-building projects. This situation arose because such was the scale of demand that three times as many workers were employed by the PA committees on the projects than had at first been planned. UNICEF staff meanwhile insisted that full wages be paid only to a third of the number employed, in keeping with the original plan, so the remainder were disenfranchised (personal communication, Charles Stewart, Central Television, August 1984).

This experience is worth mentioning because it could be argued that the distribution of cash during a famine is a more appropriate response than the distribution of free food. The experience of the UNICEF project suggests that such initiatives would not be quite as straightforward as they may at first appear. Furthermore, contrary to a

demand-centred view of famine, cash pumped into areas suffering absolute shortages of food (such as central Tigray and Northern Wollo) would simply have contributed to inflation, as more money chased a dwindling supply of grain. Sen's notion that food can be bought at normal prices during a famine (such as that described in his analytical version of the Wollo famine of 1973) applies only if there is an adjacent food source for sale at low prices.

Staff of UNICEF also kept themselves apprised of the spread of famine; dispatching personnel to report on newly-affected areas, particularly in the south. In doing so the agency was following the tradition established in 1974, when it exposed the famine under Heile Selassie. UNICEF also provided the funding vital for the operation of the RRC early warning system, following its abandonment by western donors in 1977. As a result, UNICEF would be expected to take a special interest in the reports.

The record of the World Food Programme during the build-up to the famine is less impressive. While operating the largest food-for-work programme in Africa, as well as providing small amounts of emergency food aid, WFP acted as the major information source on the status of food aid pledges and shipments. Although providing an comprehensive service in this regard, the WFP head office in Rome appeared to be incapable of distinguishing between

food aid for emergencies and that for regular developmental activities. This may have been a deliberate attempt to show that the agency was responding sufficiently to the appeals made by the Ethiopian government. As late as September 1984, WFP Rome was reporting that total food aid delivered and scheduled for Ethiopia between January and December 1984 was 338,945 tonnes: well in excess of its reported "FAO-estimated total food aid requirement" of 300,000 tonnes. Donors receiving such information might well have been forgiven for believing that there was not a food crisis in Ethiopia. Furthermore, WFP shipments of food used as wages for workers on the Wollo food-for-work projects failed to arrive just as the famine there neared its peak in the middle of 1984. Peasants who had previously congratulated themselves on being fortunate enough to have such a lifeline as food-for-work in the middle of a famine zone starved as they waited in vain for their back-pay (Yeraswork and Solomon 1985).

Delays in WFP shipments were not long compared with those of donors such as the EEC - an average delivery time of six months from request as compared with 17 months in the latter case. Shipments could, however, be held up as a result of the "state of guerilla warfare" (Gill op cit p 126) existing between FAO and WFP. This situation has developed because WFP wishes to break away from its parent



organisation, thereby gaining financial control over the monies allocated to it and complete physical control over food donated to the UN system. Certainly the decision-making process would be more straightforward if it were to do so. Currently, all shipment orders have to be countersigned by FAO officials at the highest level. Normally this is done within one or two days, and the established upper limit is ten days. However, an urgent request for 30,000 mt of emergency food aid submitted by the Ethiopian government to WFP on 26th May was not cleared by FAO until 27th June, a month after its receipt from WFP. The delay was part of a continuous process of agency wrangling, but it is unusual to find that requests for emergency food aid are treated in this fashion.

#### 9.6 The Role of the Non-Governmental Organisations

Before the October 1984 television coverage, there were about two dozen NGOs working in Ethiopia. Among the most influential, whether in terms of size or in terms of their involvement in relief operations in major famine areas were Catholic Relief Services (Tigray), Oxfam (Gonder and Southern Shoa), Save the Children Fund (Wollo), the Lutheran World Federation (Wollo), World Vision (Gonder and Gemu Goffa), Concern (Gonder), Redd Barna (Gemu Goffa) and the Ethiopian Church of Mekane Yesus (countrywide). With its confirmed evangelical approach, the latter is

viewed with suspicion by a regime preaching allegiance to Marxism-Leninism. Consequently, the Church of Mekane Yesus has suffered the imprisonment of its head cleric and the periodic harassment of its mission staff. Despite these difficulties, the Church manages to continue its relief operations. The Ethiopian Red Cross (ERC) was not overtly opposed to the policies of the government and was consequently in much better odour with the regime. Hence it was able, with little governmental interference, to pursue relief operations in Wollo.

The NGO operations were for the most part on a very small scale, involving supplementary feeding of mothers and children at established relief sites around Mekele, Korem, Ibnat and Zeway Hamusit. For many NGOs, relief operations were merely an adjunct to developmental activities (which would not involve free hand-outs of food), although some, such as Concern and Oxfam, attempted to link development projects to relief work, such as through roadbuilding projects in Gonder, which exchanged relief food for work on the part of the recipients. As the established NGOs had made substantial investments of time, effort and cash in their various long-term projects, they were well aware of the sensitivity of the Ethiopian government and were unwilling to prejudice their position through overt criticism of the way relief operations were being handled. As we would expect from our previous discussion of voluntary agency behaviour (see chapter 1), NGOs were also

quite competitive and were often privately critical of each others' activities, particularly in the relief field, where most were relative newcomers.

The NGOs were loosely grouped together under an organisation known as the Christian Relief and Development Association (CRDA). This body meets monthly to consider relief and development needs in the various regions and helps to coordinate the various activities. Although CRDA is potentially an excellent source of information on the rural situation, it is not ready to exploit its comparative advantage. Minutes of the meetings are edited to exclude any controversial references, and are then sent round to the various donors. The latter occasionally send junior personnel to attend. However, the minutes contain little or no analysis of the situations described, or projections of future needs. Prior to September 1984, at these meetings there was little or no discussion of strategy, beyond the level of general appeals to 'fill the gaps'. There was similarly no discussion of projected needs beyond the current month's activities. There was no move to bring pressure to bear on the donors, or to make some joint statement in support of the RRC (Cutler and Stephenson 1984). Only in September did the CRDA belatedly pen an open appeal to the donors, apparently doing so at the insistence of one individual with sufficient experience of famine and with the necessary



force of character (Gill ibid). The timing of the appeal is also significant - it came immediately after the celebrations of the 10th anniversary of the revolution had been completed - and it was hoped by the CRDA that the attention of the Ethiopian government would be refocused away from festivity and towards famine relief.

Such a low-key response to the famine by the NGOs was a product of the fact that they were as a group fearful of alienating both the Ethiopian government and their constituent donors. The NGOs were the weakest of foreign organisations working in Ethiopia, in terms of size, resources and political clout; yet paradoxically they were the best informed about the developing famine. They were unable to put this knowledge to effective use both because they failed to fully analyse and effectively present to the donors and the media the facts of the famine and, partly as a result of this failure, because they were unable to change the political conditions of aid allocation. In particular, no one agency took on the task UNDR0 had effectively failed to do - which was to collate, analyse and disseminate the available information. The NGOs were unwilling to do this partly because they were busy with their individual projects and partly because it was considered politically dangerous. The CRDA secretariat was probably the best able, yet the least likely candidate for such a task, being most concerned as the collective representative of the NGOs to

maintain good relations with both donors and the government. This entailed avoiding the responsibility for disseminating potentially controversial information.

#### 9.7 Other Institutional Factors Contributing to the Failure of Response

There are, of course, other institutional dimensions to the problem of anticipating famine. In the first place, all agencies are prone to a 'firefighting mentality', when short-term responses to the crisis take precedence over long-term planning. It is very difficult for agency staff to sit back and plan ahead under such circumstances - which is precisely why a higher, more politically secure body was necessary. In the second place, it is genuinely difficult to predict with confidence a famine, especially where travel is restricted and where much of the available evidence pertaining to the worst-affected areas tends to be anecdotal and subjective rather than measurable and objective. Nevertheless, by mid-1984, there was compelling evidence that the supply of food to the various relief systems was about to break down completely. An analysis of the kind presented in chapters 6 and 7 would have led inexorably to the conclusion that famine conditions were widespread.

A final piece of evidence - the supply side of the equation - was available in Addis Ababa in mid-1984, had

**Table 9.3: Projected Receipts of Relief Food in Ethiopia, July-October 1984**

<u>Month</u>	<u>Source</u>	<u>Recipient</u>	<u>Amount</u>	<u>Deficit</u>
July	WFP	RRC	12,320	
	USAID	CRS	5,667	
	Finland	LWF/RRC	700	
		Total	18,687	- 41,313
August	Canada	RRC/LWF/CRS	30,000	
	Australia	RRC	4,400	
	WFP	RRC	8,696	
		Total	43,096	- 16,904
September	USAID	CRS	5,000	
	WFP	RRC	22,692	
		Total	27,692	- 32,308
October	Belgium	UNICEF	4,000	
	USAID	CRS	2,181	
		Total	6,181	- 53,819

Note

Needs calculated in March 1984 by RRC at 60,000 tonnes per month.

Source: Food Commodity Shipping Bulletin No.4, World Food Programme, Addis Ababa.



the agencies cared to use it. Table 9.3 details the projected receipts of emergency food aid over June - December 1984. Even under the conservative assumptions of need put forward at the time (60,000 mt per month instead of the 100,000 mt per month eventually adopted; Cutler and Stephenson 1984), a massive shortfall was imminent.

In the event, no agency or group of agencies, whether bilateral, multilateral, UN or NGO took responsibility for compiling, analysing and disseminating available items of key information which could have given a more objective picture than that provided solely by government sources. We have seen that needs estimates, particularly those based on official sources, were the subject of deliberate donor cynicism. Nevertheless, it seems likely that a sustained campaign by the United Nations 'family' and the NGOs in Ethiopia would have resulted in a more media interest at an earlier stage of the crisis and therefore could have produced a more timely and coordinated approach to famine control. Given the political strategy of the donor governments, it is clear from the attitudes of the bulk food donors that (in the absence of a change in their politics), only massive publicity could force them to respond in a manner commensurate with the problem. This, as the world knows, eventually transpired.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the Nimieri regime continued to pretend that the country was economically self-sufficient. This attitude was perhaps partly a result of national pride, and partly of a desire to continue to attract foreign investment funds for agricultural and industrial development, particularly from the Arab world.
- <sup>2</sup> Two teams of foreign relief workers and Ethiopian nationals had already been captured in 1983 - one at Korem in April and another in Lalibela in June. In each case the rebels took their captives on a 'tour' of the famine-affected areas under their nominal control before releasing them with maximum publicity.

## Chapter 10: Relief Operations after October 1984

### 10.1. Introduction

In this chapter, we shall consider how the nature of the response to the Ethiopian famine changed after the BBC television coverage at Korem was shown worldwide. Public indignation at the scenes of mass starvation was so strong in the Western countries commanding the largest food surpluses and foreign aid budgets that the famine became a priority political issue and Western governments were forced to be seen to be taking it seriously. At the same time, they took action reluctantly. Some donors, such as the United Kingdom, made little fresh money available to deal with the crisis, and simply switched funds to uses in Ethiopia from existing aid budgets. Others, such as the USA and the EEC, had huge reserves of foodstuffs and were forced by public opinion to commit considerable material resources to famine relief. However, these were as far as possible channelled through non-governmental organisations. Such behaviour proved to be a tremendous economic and political opportunity for the NGOs, leading to a rapid expansion of their operations which in many cases severely strained their administrative resources.

The NGO activities in Ethiopia served two purposes of the donors: keeping resources out of the direct control of the



government, and serving to avoid responsibility on behalf of the donors themselves for implementation. The IGO sector, notably the UN agencies, attempted to exert control over the resource flows by setting up a special office, but only managed to give the appearance of doing so, acting as a clearing house for information and as a press office, yet failing to truly control the process of resource allocation. In other respects the IGOs behaved like NGOs, fiercely competing for resources and related prestige.

Meanwhile, the government was to use famine relief as an opportunity to pursue its own policy goals, although it received overt support for these only from its eastern bloc allies such as the USSR and East Germany. These policy goals included the collectivisation of agriculture through resettlement of displaced peasants, and the allocation of government-held food stocks to priority regions and population groups within those regions which were not necessarily those most affected by the famine. These contentions follow logically from the theoretical framework outlined in chapter 1 and summarised in the previous chapter, and the evidence for them shall now be examined.

The BBC film, first released on 23rd October 1984, was exceptionally well-filmed and well presented, receiving professional acclaim from the film industry itself

(Harrison and Palmer 1986). It was subsequently to be released by 425 broadcasting organisations worldwide, attracting an audience of almost 500 million people. The response was immediate. The Ethiopian famine was suddenly a priority subject on the political agendas of the democracies of North America, Western Europe, Asia and Australasia. Ordinary members of the public acted with unprecedented generosity - in some cases selling their homes or donating substantial personal savings to the famine appeals. The cash receipts of NGOs rocketed as people jammed their switchboards offering money and help. British relief agencies alone raised £50 million in the four months following the broadcast, adding to the £10 million already raised from the summer appeals. In the case of the two largest British NGOs, the famine appeal more than doubled their normal annual budgets. Unlike the response to previous famines, this was not shortlived. Initiatives such as the Band Aid and "USA for Africa" records, and the Live Aid international concert kept the famine a newsworthy event close to public consciousness for months afterwards<sup>1</sup>.

No doubt the timing of the BBC coverage was fortuitous. October is in the autumn, a season when television viewers in the northern hemisphere return to their television sets after the summer drop in viewing figures. News of the famine broke at a time when Europe and North America were

facing serious problems of surplus food disposal, and this topic had been high on the political agenda. The contrast was stark. Europe's grain mountain alone was some 16 million tonnes, while worldwide it was close to 300 million tonnes. Ethiopia required about one million tonnes to contain the famine - six per cent of the European stockpile whose procurement and storage costs threatened to break the budget of the Common Agricultural Policy <sup>2</sup>.

The famine became such a politically sensitive issue that politicians and aid agencies were immediately forced onto the defensive. They reacted in several predictable ways to the threat of being exposed as uncaring or incompetent. Firstly, they presented facts and figures designed to show that their response to the famine had already been substantial, although regrettably constrained by budgetary considerations. Secondly, they attempted to gain extra resources, as well as power and prestige for their organisations. Thirdly, they set up new organisational fora to deal with the extra resources and to give the impression of concentrated activity prioritising the famine. These ranged from the 'task forces' commonly encountered in virtually every aid bureaucracy to the special operational department set up in Addis Ababa by the United Nations. This classic bureaucratic escape route was a publicly visible institution although it had limited influence on the actual distribution of famine relief.



Its record shall be considered below.

## 10.2 The United Nations Emergency Office for Ethiopia (UNEOE)

The office was created in November 1984, immediately following the wave of international publicity. The speed of its inception was remarkable by UN standards, reflecting the exceptional degree of public pressure being exerted on the organisation. The office was headed by a Finn, Kurt Jansson, an able famine relief administrator with experience of the Kampuchea relief operation which began in 1980. The political background to this complicated operation was in many respects similar to that in Ethiopia, involving warring alternative socialist governments and inherent superpower conflict (Shawcross 1984). As a Finn, Jansson's nationality was acceptable to both East and West. He also had a diplomat's understanding of the political limits of his mandate, and would bring pressure to bear where there was "room for manoeuvre", while minimising conflicts over areas of contention, such as resettlement.

Jansson was given a suite of offices in the UN/OAU headquarters building in Addis Ababa, and a small staff affiliated to the various UN agencies (including WFP, WHO, UNICEF and UNDRO), sponsored by donor governments eager to gain credit for being at the centre of action over the

famine. The UNEOE office's task was ostensibly to coordinate the activities of the various actors involved in relieving the famine and to monitor the distribution of aid. This task was considered important for western donors who demanded accountability of the RRC and NGOs involved. They needed to know, or at least give a credible appearance of knowing, that the aid donated under the aegis of an unfriendly government would get to the famine victims requiring it. Accordingly, aid monitors were stationed in several famine-affected provinces to follow-up shipments forwarded from the ports.

Although Jansson was given the title of Assistant-Secretary General, and was therefore a very senior appointee directly under the authority of Perez de Cuellar, the UN Secretary General, other UN agencies were immediately sensitive to the potential threat to their territory. Chief among them was UNDP, whose director, a US citizen named Bradford Morse, engineered the establishment of yet another new office, the UN Office for Emergency Operations in Africa (UNOEOA), some six weeks after the establishment of UNEOE. The normal process of consultation with the heads of the various UN agencies about the establishment of UNEOE had not taken place, and Morse was apparently furious with Perez de Cuellar and with Jansson (Gill 1985; Jansson et al, 1987). The establishment of UNOEOA may well have been a move by de

Cuellar to placate Morse. Jansson's office was to report to UNOEOA, as was a sister organisation (UNEOS) later set up in Sudan. Thus UNDP managed to re-establish its role as lead agency in the UN organisation. This was also the role it had formerly abrogated in Addis Ababa.

There followed blazing arguments between UNEOE and UNOEOA over operational precedence (Gill op cit p 121; Jansson, ibid p 17). The latter eventually emerged principally as a focus for information on the current state of relief operations in 17 African countries in which relief operations were being mounted, while Jansson's office managed information about the day-to-day relief operation in Ethiopia. Both offices provided worthwhile information to donor governments, a function sorely lacking during the previous phase of relief operations. Nevertheless, battles for operational control among the various UN organisations remained a feature of the entire operation. Gill observes that: "the establishment of new UN offices in response to the famine did nothing to reduce the brawling between agencies. If anything, it increased it...." (ibid p 132). Agencies were competing for funds, seeking to expand their activities and influence wherever possible.

In the event, UNEOE actually did very little. Some of the nine food monitors responsible for the provinces in which relief operations were taking place were very active, and



accumulated much useful information, while others hardly bestirred themselves in keeping an adequate account of aid flows in their operational areas. This was not a problem for UNEOE, which knowing it could not greatly influence the allocation of aid by the donors and the Ethiopian government - both having political goals which were implemented through their respective national agencies, such as CARE, CRS, the RRC etc. Consequently, UNEOE was more concerned with the appearance of monitoring and evaluation than its substance. As the relief operation progressed, it became apparent that resource flows were being manipulated to suit the political objectives of the Ethiopian government, such as the preferential feeding the militia in Eritrea, or the diversion of supplies to resettlement. Information collected by some food monitors began clearly to demonstrate these priorities (see section 10.4). However, this information was not released to the donors.

In other circumstances, such as the burning of Ibbat relief camp and the expulsion of its inmates in April 1985, Jansson was forced to make representations to Chairman Mengistu, as reports had already found their way into the foreign press. By contrast, subsequent press reports concerning the misallocation of food aid were denied by UNEOE, despite being based on figures collected by its own monitors. Jansson had a good understanding of

what potential leverage existed, and would exert this only where results were likely or where pressure from the donors forced him to do so. UNEOE's main function was to act as a "screening device" (Kent 1986), giving the appearance of competent action in response to famine but not compromising its actual position in Addis Ababa by unduly antagonising the host government. However, the need to satisfy both donor and host government interests put UNEOE in a difficult position, although occasionally there may have been an inadvertent harmony of interests between the two opposing forces. For example, it would have been as embarrassing for the donors who had entrusted resources to the Ethiopian government as it was for the government itself to have aid misallocation exposed.

### 10.3. The Scope and General Conditions of the Relief Operation

The dramatic expansion of relief operations is evident from RRC figures published in October 1985, a year after the 'discovery' of the famine. Whereas before this date only 87,000 tonnes of food aid had been received or pledged for relief, between 11th December 1984 and 25th August 1985, fully 895,300 tonnes of grain and supplementary foods had been received, with a further 342,100 tonnes pledged (RRC 1985 p 5). These donations, amounting to more than 1.2 million tonnes, had exceeded by almost three times the RRC's original request of March

1984. They nevertheless represented what informed observers now reckoned to be the real level of need of the country's starving peasantry, at more than 100,000 tonnes per month. Of course, had the original assessments made by OSRO and USAID been correct, Ethiopia's infrastructure would have been hopelessly overburdened. In fact, deliveries from the ports often exceeded 3,000 mt per day, and this did not include commercial and arms imports. This level of offtake was substantially above the 1,000 mt per day commonly accepted as the upper limit for all imports during the early months of 1984. The increased level of offtake partly reflected the fact that donors had responded to transport needs as well as to food needs. The UK government had provided equipment to improve port handling capacity. The RRC fleet had been strengthened with vehicles, spare parts and technical equipment provided by the donors. Several NGOs had introduced their own trucking operations. Nevertheless, there were occasionally serious blockages at the ports, especially when essential imports (such as fuel and arms) or essential exports (such as cotton and coffee) were given priority. When these occurred, food had to be stockpiled at the dockside. On one occasion, some 10,000 mt was destroyed on the dockside at Assab when unexpected heavy rains fell on uncovered grain stocks.

The difficulties of transporting relief goods to the famine-affected provinces of the interior gave rise to a



much publicised international airlift. This was supported by the UK, West Germany, Poland and the USSR. Western Hercules aircraft were used to shuttle food from Assab and Addis Ababa to the interior, while Soviet Antonovs were used largely to shuttle peasants, not all of whom were famine victims, from the northern provinces to the resettlement sites of the southwest. Helicopters were also used for marking dropping zones in remote parts of the interior. Although aircraft payloads were small, and the operations some ten times more expensive than conventional road transport, their use for dropping food aid was justifiable at this late stage in the famine, when speed was essential to save lives. Road access to many parts of Tigray and northern Wollo was in any case severely restricted through the threat of guerilla warfare.

An early initiative was made to negotiate a safe passage agreement in the disputed war zones. This was spearheaded by the radical UK NGO, War on Want, and attracted the patronage of such international figures as Willy Brandt, the ex-Chancellor of West Germany; Pierre Trudeau, ex-Canadian Prime Minister; and the former premiers of Austria, Sweden, the Netherlands and Senegal. Kurt Jansson also presented proposals to Mengistu which had been drawn up in collaboration with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Mengistu refused to

countenance an arrangement with TPLF and EPLF forces, presumably on the grounds that this would endorse their claims to control substantial areas of Ethiopian territory. The President of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), Julius Nyerere, similarly refused to act as mediator, presumably being unwilling to establish a precedent in a continent characterised by boundaries which pay little heed to ethnic divisions. Meanwhile, the warfare continued, with the Dergue mounting major military campaigns in Tigray and Eritrea during 1985. Sekota in northern Wollo was captured by government forces in May, only to be relinquished 18 months later. Lalibela fell several times to the TPLF during the year; and the government lost several towns in Eritrea before managing to recapture them in bloody counterattacks.

#### 10.4. Food Distribution and Resettlement

Food, particularly during a famine, is a strategic resource. It has been argued throughout this analysis that food will be distributed as far as possible to the advantage of those controlling it. In this case, there is constant tension between the Dergue, which through its organ (the RRC) attempts to attract resources on an unconditional basis; and the predominantly western donors, who impose conditions or demand accountability. Hence information about food stocks and other aspects of famine relief, such as the status of vehicles, spare parts,

numbers of people affected by famine (especially those in camps) and camp death rates become strategic data. The government encourages secrecy in these matters - for example CSO estimates of national food production are classified information; while NGOs are fearful of expulsion if they were to divulge information on death rates and disease outbreaks in famine camps (Myles Harris 1986). As a result, it is extremely difficult for outsiders to gain access to data on overall food distribution. However, thanks to the activities of the UNEOE food monitors, a certain amount of data is available, although it is not formally published.

Table 10.1 lists the flows of RRC-controlled food aid going to the various famine-affected regions between April and August 1985. Although figures for food distribution by NGOs are not available (despite making up more than half of the total) it seems probable from the data that the RRC does not make allocations strictly on the grounds of need. According to the table, Wollo heads the list of famine-affected regions with 32 per cent of the total affected population; followed by the southern regions (served by the RRC store at Nazereth) with 30 per cent; Tigray (18 per cent); Eritrea (11 per cent) and remaining areas of the west and centre (9 per cent). However, in terms of food distribution, the southern regions (Nazereth) got the largest share, at 36.5 per cent; followed by Wollo (24 per cent); Eritrea (21.5 per cent);



**Table 10.1: Estimated Quantities and Regional Destinations of Wheat Consigned to the RRC,  
April-August 1985**

<u>Ports</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Wollo</u>	<u>Nazereth</u>	<u>Eritrea</u>	<u>Tigray</u>	<u>Elsewhere</u>
<b>April</b>						
Assab	16890	12684	3445	759	241	761
Massawa	1000					
<b>May</b>						
Assab	13013	1213	7044	3036	1154	4756
Massawa	4190					
<b>June</b>						
Assab	24615	5826	14475	15954	2046	4314
Massawa	18000					
<b>July</b>						
Assab	25681	9754	10206	10000	4122	5721
Massawa	14122					
<b>August</b>						
Assab	25818	6043	17998	1500	569	1777
Massawa	2069					
<b>Total</b>	145398	35520	53168	31249	8132	17329
% popn. famine-affected		32	30	11	18	9
% of total RRC grain		24.4	36.5	21.5	5.6	11.9

Source: Assab figures from WFP despatch records; Massawa figures from RRC, Eritrea.

and 'elsewhere' (11.9 per cent). Tigray got a mere 5.6 per cent of RRC wheat, despite having nearly a fifth of the famine-affected population. Furthermore, unpublished reports compiled by the UNEOE food monitor in Eritrea consistently noted that stores in Asmara were kept full, and that ration sizes were commonly 50 kg per person, and sometimes were as high as 70 kg. Many of the recipients were members of the militia. The size of the rations in Eritrea should be compared with those in Wollo, which rarely exceeded 10 kg.

It seems reasonable to suppose therefore that the distribution of RRC food is decided by "a higher authority" (Mitchell 1986). Food is not allocated on a regional basis on the grounds of need. The manner in which the food is distributed also shows that the relative severity of famine in each region is not uppermost in the minds of the food controllers. The latter are in fact the "higher authority", most probably the special committee set up by Mengistu in October 1984 to mobilize resources to fight the drought, which is made up principally of senior members of the highest executive body in the land, the Central Planning Supreme Council (CPSC). On the basis of the priorities set by the committee and the CPSC, the RRC would draw up a distribution plan. This usually applied to food deliveries scheduled some three months ahead. Obviously,

the situation in each province could change markedly over this period, so would have plans have to be adjusted accordingly. However, the RRC could use the status of the distribution plan as justification for despatching food to areas where it was not a priority requirement. 'Mistakes' would also occur, such as when 7,500 mt of grain specifically earmarked for Wollo was consistently delayed at Assab port, and was then sent to the central store at Nazareth, where it languished for several months. Mitchell argues that: "from these and other similar episodes one is forced to hypothesise that the distribution plan was used as an excuse to mask orders from a higher authority. If this was the case it would appear that the regional destination of RRC grain was not under the control of the RRC" (ibid p 30).

Perhaps the most convincing evidence of manipulation of RRC objectives by a higher authority is that relating to the distribution of food during the resettlement drives. Resettlement was a policy justified by the government as a logical response to the degradation of the environment in the northern provinces. Poor peasant volunteers would be moved from the camps to new state-organised farming areas in the well-watered western provinces, notably in Gojjam, Keffa, Wellega and Illubabor. Each household would receive basic accomodation and tools, and would have access to 1,000 m<sup>2</sup> of land for their own cultivation. The remainder of cultivation would be carried out on a communal



basis (Clarke 1986).

Broadly speaking, during 1984-85 resettlement took place over two main periods. The bulk of the state-organised mass migration took place between November 1984 and May 1985, with 169,000 people being settled from Wollo alone. During the rainy season there was a lull, possibly because of the enhanced transport difficulties experienced during the unusually heavy kremt rains. The resettlement drive resumed from October 1985 onwards, and by January 1986 some 600,000 peasant farmers and their families had been resettled (Jansson et al, op cit p 64).

Mitchell has compiled data which show substantial variations in the number of people being assisted by the RRC in Wollo over 1985-86 (see figure 10.1). Following a steady increase in foodgrains distributed over January - May 1985, there is a sudden fall (90 per cent below the previous month) in the assistance rate for June. From July to September there is a resumption of somewhat erratic, although much higher levels of food distribution, followed by a fall to extremely low levels from October onwards.

Mitchell observes that during the first phase of the resettlement drive, people volunteering for resettlement were given priority for food distribution.

Figure 10.1: RRC and NGO general ration distribution  
(number of assisted persons); Jan. - Dec. 1985

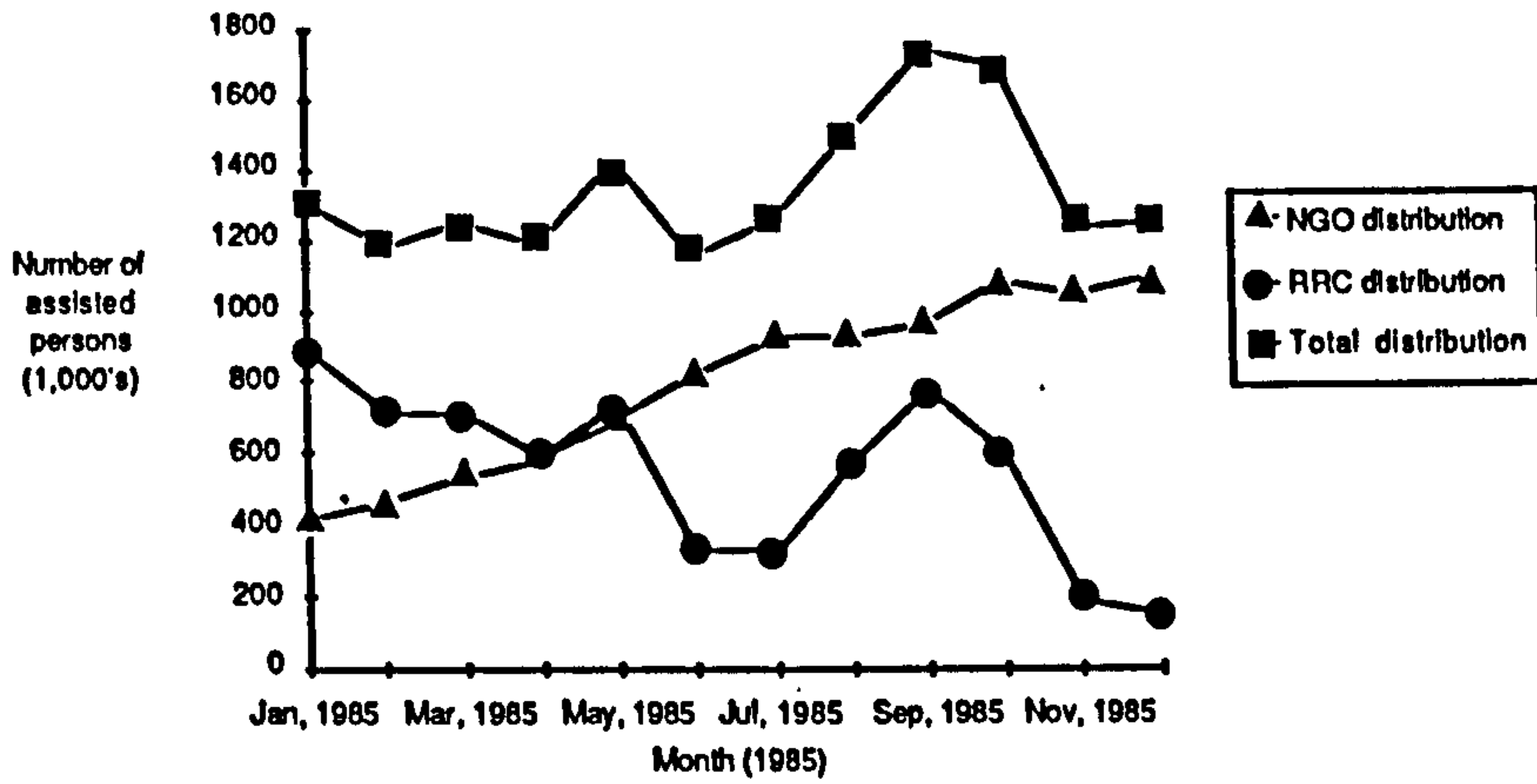
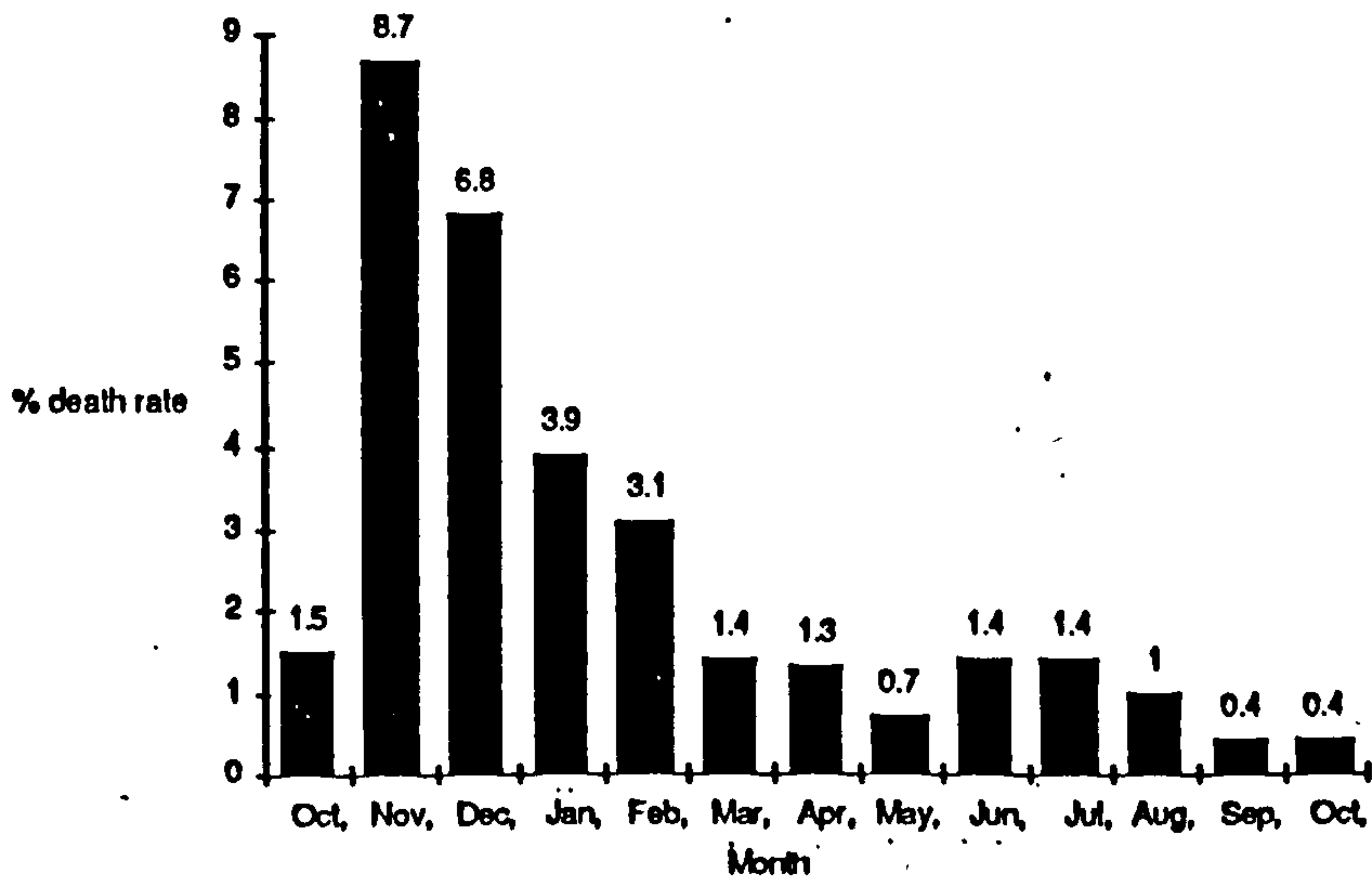


Figure 10.2: Average Monthly Death Rate at Bati Camp: Oct. 84 - Nov 85



Source: Mitchell, 1985.

Unsurprisingly, many starving people volunteered for resettlement. Some, particularly the old, sick, and adolescents were not deemed fit for recruitment and were left to beg at distribution points (Cutler and Mitchell, 1985). The second phase of the resettlement drive took place at a time when general ration distribution was well established by both the RRC and NGOs operating in the famine areas. As a result, local administrators were unable to fulfil their quotas of 'volunteers' and so the 'take home' food supplies had to be cut off to induce people to come down to distribution points. There, they were often forcibly rounded up. Mitchell notes that during this phase "coercive tactics were the rule rather than the exception" (op cit p 42). The NGOs were not exempt from participating in these tactics, as several were ordered by local RRC officials to discontinue food distribution during the campaign. There were even cases of NGO trucks being forcibly commandeered for the transportation of migrants. Such instances, together with the general tenor of the whole campaign, contributed to straining the working relationship between the RRC and the NGOs.

These reports are confirmed by the testimony of peasants who have since fled the resettlement sites, and indicate that people from Wollo were not the only forced deportees. The Swiss journalist Niggli (1985) interviewed more than 50 peasants from Wollo and Tigray who fled into Sudan to



escape resettlement. He found that in general, the Wollo peasants had been lured through the promise of food aid into the hands of the militia and then transported for resettlement. The Tigrayans, on the other hand, often came from villages outside the control of government and were captured either in those villages or in the towns under the control of government. Niggli points out that the average age of the settlers from the two regions was very different - 22 years for Wollo settlers and 42 years for Tigrayans - suggesting both that the Tigrayans ensured that only older people were put at risk of capture in the towns; and that the Wollo population was more trusting, having already received food aid from the government.

Clay and Holcomb (1985) also interviewed escapees, and carried out a thorough analysis of the data collected by Niggli. They note that while Wollo respondents could for the most part justifiably be classified as famine victims, Tigray respondents "strongly asserted that they had been captured for resettlement when involved in economic activities - working in their fields, threshing grain, selling produce, trading livestock or having their cattle vaccinated" (ibid p 85). This suggests that the majority of Tigrayan famine victims had already migrated out of the area, the bulk of them travelling to TFLF-controlled zones in the west or through to Sudan. It also shows that economic activity persists for a substantial section of

the population even during the height of famine, and in the worst-affected areas.

The forced resettlement of peasants was well-known among relief workers. In most cases, NGOs were unwilling to publicise their knowledge for fear of being evicted from Ethiopia. However, one agency, Medecins sans Frontieres (MSF), was so incensed by the enforced migration of famine victims in the areas of Wollo in which it was working that it published a paper entitled "Mass Deportations in Ethiopia" and demanded an independent enquiry into the conditions of resettlement. As a result, MSF was expelled from the country.

Some agencies support resettlement as a 'fait accompli' and offer humanitarian assistance. These include UNICEF, the Irish agency 'Concern', the German agency 'Menschen fur Menschen' and a French agency 'Secours Populaires Francais'. Others are unwilling to support resettlement, but are likely to do so in future as human misery in the resettlement sites increases. Some observers strongly argue in favour of resettlement as the only long-term solution to famine, for example, Hancock (1985) castigates the West's refusal to support resettlement as a "spiteful and misdirected error" (ibid p 110). However, his argument ignores the costs of resettlement, which are high at an estimated 1,400 - 5,000 birr per person. Taking the lowest cost estimate, this would mean that the cost of

resettling the 1.5 million people targetted by government would be 2.1 billion birr, which can be contrasted with the entire Ethiopian budget (for 1982) of 2.9 billion birr. It may well be the case that lesser amounts invested in rehabilitating agricultural land in the famine zones would be more cost-effective as well as a more humane alternative to a migration which appears to be largely forced.

#### 10.5. The Role of Non-Governmental Agencies in Famine Relief

We have seen that after appearing unconvinced of the imminence of the famine, the major bilateral and multilateral agencies were forced to make substantial donations to Ethiopian famine relief in the wake of massive publicity. Although the United Nations agencies received some of the benefits of this forced generosity, much of it went through the operational media of the NGOs. Donors such as the USA, Britain and France preferred to channel aid through NGOs organised by their own nationals rather than through the RRC. In this way, some degree of accountability could be ensured - the aid would be used strictly for famine relief and not to suit other purposes of the Ethiopian government.

The number of NGOs operating in Ethiopia expanded rapidly over 1984-85. During 1983, less than twenty foreign NGOs



were active in relief operations there. By late 1985, there were more than sixty. The NGOs handled 60 per cent of the food aid coming into Ethiopia, and in addition ran most of the intensive feeding centres, although often they would do so in partnership with staff of the RRC and Ministry of Health. As RRC ration distributions fell over 1985, the NGOs increased their efforts. Figure 10.1 shows this quite clearly, with the number of 'beneficiaries' supplied by NGOs in Wollo rising to over a million by October 1985. Unfortunately, figures on actual amounts of food distributed are not available.

Although the NGOs managed to communicate with each other through CRDA and informally in the field, their degrees of experience of relief operations varied widely. This was reflected in the varying degrees of success each enjoyed in setting up camps and in bringing down death rates. Although there was an unspoken understanding that the most undernourished children should get priority for relief feeding, NGOs had widely different cut-off points for deciding who was or was not malnourished. We should note here that the priority feeding of children during famines is a value judgement inflicted on the victims by the controllers of food. Logically, one should preserve the adults first, as they are the providers and are capable of reproducing the household unit. In the words of one relief worker, feeding children without feeding adults

results in a situation where one is "making orphans" (personal communication, August 1984). At the height of famine, mothers allowed into the feeding centres with their children would surreptitiously snatch food from their children. Sometimes, children would be deliberately kept undernourished in order to qualify for rations. Mitchell (1986) reports cases of undernourished children being rotated among several families in order to increase their chances of getting a ration; and of parents consuming raw rations of supplementary food which was supposed to be taken home and reconstituted with water before being fed to the children. In an extreme situation, none of this behaviour is surprising. What is surprising is that NGOs should expect famine victims to treat their children with indulgence when they themselves are starving.

Of course, many staff of NGOs realised that the supplementary feeding of children in the absence of general ration distribution was difficult to enforce. This may be one of the reasons why they were so eager to take on a logistical role in the famine, hoping to contribute to general ration distribution despite being ill-equipped to do so in terms of skilled personnel and experience. There was also prestige attached to being seen to be in an expanding relief role. The NGOs began to import trucks, which were used to transport relief materials in relatively secure areas such as Wollo.

However, the complexities of trucking operations require more than well-meaning amateurs, bolstered with the odd professional. As Mitchell has noted:

"High calibre staff were not readily available. It was noticeable, particularly in the early stages, that many relief workers lacked either technical competence, or experience, or both. Currently there still appears to be an image pinned to NGO staff as well-meaning but inexperienced volunteers doing their best under very difficult circumstances. On the basis of my observations in Wollo, this perspective is not without some foundation....." (op cit p 58).

With the dramatic expansion of their operations, and through venturing into new technical fields, many NGOs became overstretched and were unable to offer sufficient support to their field teams. This was particularly the case during the early stages of the operation. It is also an entirely normal feature of relief operations in sub-Saharan Africa given the present 'state of the art' of relief systems, which are characterised by a lack of skilled personnel, inappropriate policies, and poorly defined standard operating procedures (see, for example, IDS 1986).

A variety of factors ensured that the NGO personnel in the camps operated under extreme and uncertain conditions.



Communications were hindered by their physical isolation and by restrictions on travel enforced by the Ethiopian authorities. Staff based in Addis Ababa could be cut-off from their field teams for days at a time. The constant tussle over the RRC distribution plan as opposed to rapidly changing needs in the rural hinterland ensured that supplies to the camps were erratic. These problems were compounded by the usual hold-ups with vehicle breakdowns and accidents, while spare parts would often be held up at the ports. Living and working conditions for relief workers were often extremely poor. Many camps were set up at, or just after mass starvation reached its peak. Consequently, large numbers of people had crowded into roadside centres in the hope of finding food. One of the worst was Bati, in eastern Wollo. Myles Harris describes conditions there in early 1985:

"The entire floor of the valley had been covered in a mass of grey, ragged shapes which, indistinguishable at a distance from the mud-grey sand, became a sea of skeletons draped in grey sacking, hideous caricatures so bereft of flesh they seemed mere collections of triangles shrouded in cloth"... (Harris op cit p 192).

As usual during famines, these concentrations of people facilitated the spread of infectious diseases such as shigellosis, typhoid, typhus, bacillary dysentery, hepatitis, cerebro-spinal meningitis, malaria and cholera. The latter was officially referred to as 'infectious

diarrhoeal disease'. The authorities were unwilling to admit to having cholera in the country, as this affects agricultural exports. The disease appears to have broken out near Assaita in Wollo in November 1984, as a result of Afar tribespeople drinking infected river water. It quickly spread throughout the province, so that by April every camp had experienced outbreaks. Cholera also reached the Sudanese camp populations by June, probably after having been transported across the border by Tigrayan famine migrants. The degree of success enjoyed by the NGOs in dealing with cholera outbreaks depended to a great extent upon their experience and consequent adequacy of preparations. Mitchell notes that "in general, outbreaks were reasonably well-contained; in Bulbullo camp for example, although approximately 50 people were stricken, no deaths resulted. However, partly due to larger outbreaks, lack of experience and lack of preparation, camps at Lalibela and Kundi for example, experienced intense chaos and high death rates" (op cit p 12). Further disease outbreaks included pneumonia and associated hypothermia, respiratory tract infections and relapsing fever where typhus was prevalent. All of these diseases contributed substantially to mortality amongst a population severely weakened by starvation. Mitchell's conservative estimate of deaths in Wollo is that between August 1984 and August 1985 "at least 40,000 people died in the camps and shelters" (op cit p 14). Seaman

(personal communication) estimates roadside deaths in Wollo over 1984-85 at a minimum of 50,000. To these estimates may be added REST's calculation that deaths in Tigray reached a peak of 1,500 a day in early 1985 (REST 1985 p 4).

Gradually, conditions in the camps improved as general ration distribution was undertaken and as survivors began to return to their homes. Figure 10.2 illustrates the progress made in Bati, where mortality rates fell from a peak of 8.7 per cent in November 1984 to 0.4 per cent by October 1985. Conditions had improved sufficiently for many NGOs substantially to reduce their feeding operations by the end of 1985, with the numbers of displaced people in the camps falling from 800,000 in March 1985 to 15,000 in December (Jansson et al op cit p 64). In some camps, such as Korem, agencies were faced with the problem of rehabilitating families which had become institutionalised as a result of the feeding programmes and medical care. However, other groups such as the Afar were more than willing to return to their home areas. This was also true of Tigrayan farmers who returned in large numbers from Sudanese refugee camps in April 1985 to attempt farming once again. This latter group had been the victim of one of the most badly organised and reactive relief operations of the famine, which paradoxically had also been one of the most foreseeable. It is worth considering this case in detail as an example of agency inertia even under



political conditions apparently favourable to a relief operation.

#### 10.6. Agency Relief Operations on the Sudanese Border

Sudan has been host to numerous refugee influxes from the various countries surrounding it. By the end of 1984, some 500,000 Ethiopians, 250,000 Ugandans, 120,000 Chadeans and 5,000 Zaireans had sought asylum in the country. Although these refugees had arrived in large numbers over the past two decades or so, never before had actual inflows exceeded 30,000 or so over a short period of time. However, between October 1984 and March 1985 almost 300,000 Ethiopians were to cross the Sudanese border in an unprecedented mass migration. Available resources were pitifully few to cope with the demand, and as a result levels of starvation, disease epidemics and mortality on the border were among the highest of the entire famine.

As with the famine migration inside Ethiopia, this influx had long been predicted. Following the influx of approximately 100,000 labourers over the harvest season of 1983-84, there was a smaller migration of around 30,000 distressed men, women and children in the months up to March 1984. This migration had been expected (by agencies such as SCF and UNHCR) to be larger, and to gain momentum over the kremt season of June-September. Instead,

although people continued to cross the border in steadily increasing numbers, the exponential leap in refugee arrivals was to occur much later, between November and December 1984. In early November, the rate of inflow was approximately 300 people a day. This jumped to around 1,500 a day by the end of the month, and to 3,000 a day by late December. The flow was not steady, but occurred in fits and starts. For example, during one day in December, as many as 16,000 refugees crossed the border.

The exodus was partly organised by the Eritrean and Tigrayan Relief Organisations (ERA and REST). Eritreans had been fleeing the latest Ethiopian offensive; while Tigrayans were largely fleeing famine, being unwilling to throw themselves at the mercy of the Dergue, for fear of conscription or resettlement. Consequently, REST had already warned relief agencies of the imminent influx of up to 300,000 refugees. Although their estimate was remarkably accurate, REST gave very little lead time. Only two months or so elapsed before their prediction began to become alarmingly true.

The major responsibility for providing relief for refugees in Sudan lies with the government's Commission of Refugees (COR). This in turn to a great extent is funded by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). The latter organisation itself relies on bilateral and

multilateral donors for the bulk of its resources. Among these, the World Food Programme is notable in that it often undertakes to supply UNHCR with food.

The Resident Representative of UNHCR, aware of the March 1984 influx and of famine conditions on the Ethiopian plateau, prudently ordered 75,000 extra rations to arrive in February 1985. He also asked UNHCR headquarters in Geneva for the resources to set up two extra camps to assist with the growing flood of Ethiopian and Chadean migrants. The Geneva office responded by reducing his existing staff by two (Pearson 1986).

A further complicating factor was the imminence of an almost complete harvest failure on the established refugee settlements, which were supposed to be moving towards self-sufficiency. WFP had in fact already fielded a team in November to assess ration requirements for the settled refugees over the coming year. The WFP team recommended half rations for some 56,000 refugees, but completely ignored the developing crisis caused by the new arrivals. This seems to have occurred partly because had the team paid heed to this emergency it would have meant exceeding the terms of reference for the mission; and partly because the WFP office in Khartoum, headed by a rather inexperienced individual, refused at this stage to acknowledge the potential scope of the crisis. When UNHCR belatedly recognised the needs of the newcomers, WFP



insisted on sending yet another needs assessment mission. This team was despatched to Sudan in January 1985, by which time well over 100,000 new arrivals had established themselves in makeshift camps.

The major bilateral food donor in Sudan is USAID. This agency initially refused to become involved in feeding the eastern refugees, arguing that this was the job of the United Nations and the EEC (personal communication). USAID preferred to concentrate its efforts on propping up the shaky Nimeri regime by feeding the urban poor in the restive province of Darfur, which was adjacent to Chad and Libya. In doing so, the USA was initially shipping 82,000 tonnes of sorghum from Port Sudan to Khartoum, where much of the grain was to languish owing to internal transportation constraints. The route taken by the grain lorries passed the 30,000 starving Beja nomads who clustered along the highway outside Port Sudan (Cutler 1986) and also passed close to the Ethiopian camps. Although conditions in western Sudan were very poor indeed, with mass migration already taking place, they were nothing like as bad as those actually being experienced by the Beja, Tigrayans and Eritreans.

Later, the USA was to express a commitment to funding an initiative to push food aid into Tigray via Sudan. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which was

heavily involved in supplying food to the Tigrayans, was approached by USAID with the offer of 210 trucks to assist their operations. In February 1985, US Vice President George Bush visited the famine camps on the border, and further aid was promised. Like the trucks, this humanitarian assistance was not forthcoming. The EEC unofficially allowed some aid to be diverted, using an elaborate system to boost NGO operations elsewhere so that they could divert resources to the border. However, substantial delays arose from these transactions, so that as emergency aid the EEC contribution was slight (Gill op cit). Meanwhile, UNHCR mounted a last minute airlift, which cost \$1.3 million to transport a meagre 320 tonnes of foodstuffs. Belatedly, USAID diverted a small portion of their supplies, while the ICRC diverted food earmarked for the cross-border operation into the camps. As Pearson notes, "none of these sources were anywhere near enough and appalling scenes of starvation were witnessed on news programmes around the world as the media swooped to cover the story" (op cit p 29). The Refugee Policy Group emphasises this point by stating that: "overall, according to specialists from the Centre for Disease Control in the US, the east Sudan refugee situation during these months (from December 1984 to April 1985) recorded the highest sustained death rates of any situation they had ever recorded" (RPG, undated, appendix 6, p 20). The death toll over this period has been estimated from the same source at 10-15,000.

As usual, following the news coverage the NGOs scrambled to step up their response to the crisis, with predictable results. Teams were 'parachuted' into camps with virtually no back-up facilities. The strain on ill-prepared NGO country offices was extreme, and coincided with the expansion of relief operations elsewhere in Sudan. For example, the League of Red Cross Societies (LRCS) expanded their expatriate staff in Sudan from one in November 1984 to 300 within a year. Coordination within individual agencies under such conditions was extremely difficult, while coordination between agencies was virtually impossible. At the peak of the emergency, information on such basic variables as food stocks was lacking, and many agencies operated without reference to others. Pearson notes that "the jealousy with which UNHCR guarded the refugee camps from other UN agencies and even USAID led the US government to issue a series of complaints about UNHCR's conduct" (op cit p 30). The Sudanese Commission for Refugees (COR) was also highly secretive, and given to transferring large numbers of refugees from one camp to another without warning the NGOs assisting in those camps. Food supplies under the control of COR were highly erratic, and there were allegations of maldistribution by COR staff seeking to benefit from the inflow of foreign resources.

Despite the considerable disadvantages of disorganisation and distance, the foreign agencies operating on the border



eventually brought the situation under control. Although cholera was to break out in May, news of outbreaks in Ethiopia had alerted several agencies to the risk, and in many cases staff were already prepared to tackle the outbreaks. Supplies of drugs and intravenous kits were also airfreighted to the scenes of the outbreaks. As a result of preparation, death rates from cholera were kept low, at under 2 percent of reported cases. As in Ethiopia, the Sudanese government refused to acknowledge the existence of the disease.

#### 10.7. Conclusion

We can see from the above account that relief operations in Ethiopia and Sudan exhibited many similarities, despite the rather different political conditions obtaining in each country. In both cases the extent of the crisis was underestimated during the critical early stages. The political priorities of the USA, and to a lesser extent other western donors ensured that food aid was available in quantity only where it was considered politically expedient. Initially, this meant that western Sudan was protected. Later, when Ethiopia was being wooed (once the West had been forced systematically to respond to the famine) it became politically expedient to withdraw promises of support to the rebels. The Beja were of no strategic interest and were allowed to starve for nine months before NGO pressure and media publicity forced a

response from the food donors.

Although the USA was largely disinterested in preventing famine on the border, despite carefully monitoring refugee flows by satellite and other means, it remained for the United Nations system to fail spectacularly to prepare for a foreseeable event. In this case, despite the attempts of UNHCR staff in Sudan to plan ahead, and despite belated requests from WFP for emergency aid, head office suspicion of the assessments of their own field staff ensured that there would be delays while missions were dispatched to view conditions for themselves. It is notable that head offices do not seem to believe information emanating from their own organisations, not to mention outside sources. They are of course subject to rather different political pressures, being closer to the donor agencies providing the resources requested.

The NGOs are often first on the scene, but become quickly overwhelmed. Their ventures into territory of which they have little experience, notably the mass transportation of food, are costly and potentially damaging to their image, despite being undertaken partly in order to expand the agencies' influence and territory. A shortage of competent and well-paid staff, together with the inevitably long delays and shortages of fuel, spare parts etc. ensure that trucking operations are plagued with

difficulties. Several NGOs found that by the time they had ironed out these problems their truck fleets had become largely redundant, as the emergency was effectively over. However, NGOs may be reluctant to admit that their expensive investments are no longer needed, particularly given the need to justify them to the general public and government of the home country who have donated most of the funds. In the Sudanese case, the mass distribution of free food was continued on a scale damaging to the economy through its depressant effect on local markets for grain and for labour (Pearson op cit; Osborne et al 1986). NGOs are better organisers of their 'traditional' activities, such as relief camp management, although paradoxically their efforts are rendered rather fruitless in the absence of general ration distribution.

Where general ration distribution is in the hands of government, it will be used to suit the current aims of the State. It seems fairly clear, although some would testify otherwise, that the preferred strategy of the Ethiopian government is resettlement rather than rehabilitation of famine-affected populations from the north. In the south, villagisation seems to be the preferred goal, although as yet this process is in its early stages. However, it is planned to be extended over the whole country. To this end, the government continually insists that it is competent to distribute relief, and demands that all resources be channelled



through its official organs, notably the RRC. The latter is not as autonomous as may at first appear, and is generally subject to the orders of a 'higher authority'. As a result, bilateral food donors quietly divert as great a proportion of relief resources through 'their' organisations (NGOs staffed with donor country nationals) as possible. The longer the relief operation, the greater the proportion going to the non-governmental sector.

Despite all of these difficulties, constraints and political manoeuvrings, the famine was eventually contained. The very late response ensured that there was great loss of life, although until a systematic study is carried out we will not be able to make proper estimates of the death toll. One could say with certainty, however, that the total will easily exceed the 200,000 thought to have died in the Wollo famine of 1973-74. It is further conceivable that the death toll would exceed half a million, if excess mortality over the period 1982-86 were to be taken into account, and this is Jansson's personal estimate (op cit p 74). Meanwhile, the United Nations Emergency Operations Office for Africa has gone on record as stating that more than a million people died in the famine.

## Notes

1 It is interesting to speculate as to why pop stars such as Bob Geldof and his supporters are so keen to get involved in fund-raising for famine relief activities. Pop musicians do have a history of fund raising through musical events, but Band Aid, Live Aid and the USA for Africa initiatives were the biggest-ever manifestations of musicians' endeavours on behalf of charity. They were very successful because the celebrities involved were able to attract huge audiences who would then respond to direct appeals for money. The television and radio media enthusiastically participated to promote their own interests as well as to make a genuine contribution to famine relief.

Pop stars tend to be anti-establishment figures with unconventional views. They are the products of a liberal western generation of the sixties, seventies and eighties which is often scornful of contemporary political behaviour and which views governments as having failed in many socio-economic fields. Events such as the Live Aid concert are opportunities to make statements about such failures, but do not require the burdens of office. They tend not to recognise that the failure to respond to the Ethiopian famine may be

interpreted as successful foreign policy by a Conservative government.

- 2 The Common Agricultural policy (CAP) exists to support EEC farmers against world-wide competition which would put a great many smaller farmers out of business if market forces were allowed their head. As a result, large surpluses are produced which can find no market unless sold at prices well below their cost of procurement, if not production. These surpluses are kept in storage in the hope that they will eventually find buyers at prices which will recoup their costs.

This state of affairs has led to discussion about whether the surpluses might be mobilised to "feed the hungry". During famines, the use of food stocks for direct relief is obviously important and useful. However, the use of food aid for longer-term programmes is fraught with difficulties which have been widely discussed in the literature (e.g. Stevens 1979; Jackson and Eade 1982).



## Chapter 11 Summary and Conclusion

### 11.1 Introduction

In this thesis it has been argued that famine is a concatenation process caused by a severe shock to the economy which in turn leads to a series of socio-economic adjustments by the affected population. If the economic shock is sufficiently pronounced and prolonged, then the socio-economic adjustments fail for vulnerable sections of the population. Unless the State intervenes to prevent mass migration and mass starvation, famine ensues.

In northern Ethiopia, severe shocks to the economy, in the form of rain failures, pest attacks and warfare frequently disrupt agricultural production, and sometimes lead to famine in an economy and society which is overwhelmingly dependent upon agriculture for its subsistence. These production failures in turn represent a failure of Ethiopian society to adapt sufficiently to changing demographic and climatological conditions. The underlying causes of famine are therefore multiple, involving social, economic, demographic and technical factors.

The failure of Ethiopian society to adapt sufficiently to changing agricultural production conditions has been explained historically. Excess extraction of surplus from the peasantry was undertaken by a ruling class which

largely failed to reinvest its wealth in agriculture and industry. Therefore, the forces of production - both the infrastructure and capital requirements, and the technical means employed - tended to stagnate. This system remained largely unchanged until very recently. In 1974 the feudal order was overthrown and a transformation of the social structure took place. Yet the change did not reduce the risk of famine - it seems to have increased.

By way of a conclusion then, it is useful to reconsider the factors causing the development of famine in Northern Ethiopia as belonging to three interlinked categories. The first category is concerned with the historical roots of famine, which can be discussed in terms of the overall political and social context both before and after the 1974 revolution. The second category concerns the shocks to the economy, and the socio-economic responses to them, which precipitate famine. An example is provided by the 1983-85 famine, which is our major case study. The third category concerns the response of the State to famine, and is again illustrated by experience from 1983 onwards.

## 11.2 The Historical Roots of Famine

It was shown in chapter 3 that famine is no stranger to northern Ethiopia, its incidence having been recorded as long ago as the 9th century. If anything, the incidence of recorded famine has actually increased over the latter

half of the 20th century, with hardly a year going by without an outbreak of famine somewhere in the north. Traditionally less-affected parts of the country, particularly in the south and west, are also increasingly coming under pressure.

The roots of this high incidence of famine have been traced (in chapter 4) to the essentially feudal social system which reigned in Ethiopia for more than a millenium. Under the peculiar Ethiopian form of agrarian structure, many different types of land tenure could coexist. Essentially, however, the system was characterised by a ruling class of feudal lords and their intermediaries taxing the great majority of the produce of the poor peasantry. The latter became disinclined to labour to better their position, knowing that the bulk of the fruits of their effort would be removed by their superiors. Meanwhile, the peasantry itself remained highly conservative, jealously guarding its rights to cultivate land, even though these involved thorough exploitation.

The church occupied much the same position as the landlords, owning large tracts of land and further demanding a portion of every peasant's produce. At the same time, the church exhorted the masses to fast frequently and to observe days upon which labouring was proscribed.



As a consequence of several factors, including: primitive production techniques and little development of alternatives; the lack of reinvestment of surplus in agricultural infrastructure; the depressant effects of the dictates of the church on peasant productivity; and the demands of army provisioning on peasant produce, the agricultural system became ever less resistant to periodic production failures through rain failures, pest attacks and warfare. Unless work and food was available in adjacent districts, or unless the local elite had the resources and the compassion to distribute food to the starving, famine would often ensue.

The slow process of modernisation of the State, begun under Emperor Menelik II in the late 19th century, following the first steps towards unifying Ethiopia under his predecessor, Emperor Tewodoros, did little to alter the underlying structures of feudal society. Although roads and railways were constructed, and modern banking, postal and administrative services introduced, the feudal power structure remained intact. Under Heile Selassie, a parliament was set up, and a modest amount of capitalist development of industry and agriculture took place. Yet this form of modernisation was funded partly in the traditional manner, with surpluses extracted from the peasantry. Foreign investors also found a ready welcome in Ethiopia, but confined their efforts mostly to export crop production in a few areas. Capitalist development of

agriculture was not widespread geographically, but where it took place poor peasants and pastoralists became swiftly marginalised and more vulnerable to famine as they were denied access to land which they had traditionally cultivated or used for grazing. This was particularly the case in the Awash valley. At the same time, the large plantations which had been developed offered extra seasonal employment to poor highland peasants, thereby reducing their vulnerability to famine. Consequently, capitalist development of agriculture had both beneficial and adverse effects on the impact of famine on the peasantry.

Heile Selassie's government was eventually overthrown in a creeping coup which lasted some six months. The 160-man military committee which took power was reduced by two-thirds as a result of internecine warfare over the next few years. Bloody faction-fighting and an invasion by Somalia ensured that stability did not return to urban areas until the end of the decade. Meanwhile, large tracts of the rural north, particularly in Eritrea and Tigray, remain contested by rebel forces which have themselves undergone a similar process of internecine warfare. Now the situation has stabilised, with both government and the rebel opposition internally cohesive, but with neither side gaining any lasting advantage over the other.

Consequently, warfare is endemic to northern Ethiopia. Its direct effects on agricultural production are limited, but its effects on trade are serious. It has become extremely difficult for traders to move large quantities of grain from one part of the country to another. These difficulties are compounded by government restrictions on trade, which are rigorously enforced in the formal sector.

The government of Ethiopia (and its rebel advers<sup>er</sup>ies), is now embarked upon a development path modelled on Marxist-Leninism. The particular interpretation of Marxist-Leninism chosen by the Ethiopian government closely resembles that developed by Stalin. Neo-Stalinist techniques, including force exerted through a strongly-centralised and rigidly hierarchical political structure, are currently being used to coerce a recalcitrant peasantry into adopting collectivised forms of agriculture. Although land reforms aimed at removing the privileges of the feudal ruling class and establishing security of tenure on peasants' landholdings initially proved popular with the majority of the rural populace, before long rural taxation levels had crept back to, or even had exceeded those of the pre-revolutionary period. Consequently, there remains a substantial degree of political alienation of the rural masses from the urban elite.

Although both the official and rebel governments are



making attempts at agricultural rehabilitation and development through afforestation programmes, terracing etc., there is little prospect - given the enormity of the task and the poverty of material resources with which to tackle it - of a rapid transformation of the forces of production. As a result, the peasantry remains vulnerable to crop failures. The recent extent of these, and the coping mechanisms employed by the peasantry in attempting to adapt to them, are summarised in the next section.

### 11.3 Crop Production Failures and Peasant Responses

The official agricultural statistics analysed in chapter 5 have produced some puzzling anomalies. Although, given the persistence of famine in various parts of Ethiopia over the last quarter century one might expect per caput agricultural production figures to register a downward trend, they have in fact shown a slight upward increase over the period 1960-84. At the same time, yields appear to have increased and land area under cultivation appears to have decreased, instead of the opposite trends one would perhaps have expected. While these trends conceal considerable inter-regional differences; and while there is also a great deal of fluctuation in the record of production over time; a case could be made for food availability as a whole having had little bearing on the incidence of famine. Even allowing for population growth, agricultural growth rates appear to have been sufficient to ensure an adequate diet for all, were the food

distributed equally. However, local production losses are often very severe, although affecting national production figures less dramatically. This would appear to bear out Sen's general thesis that famines often take place in the presence of an adequate food availability "balance sheet". Nevertheless, in chapter 5 it is demonstrated that recent famines have taken place when food availability per caput was historically at very low levels, as during 1977 and 1984, for example.

The production failures of the early-mid 1980s do seem to have been exceptionally severe. It has been shown in chapter 6 that rain failures, including poorly distributed rainfall, hailstorms and floods, as well as meteorological drought caused sustained crop failures across large tracts of the north from 1980-81 until late 1984. As a consequence, as we have seen in chapter 7, the price of grain rose rapidly, demonstrating a geographical "price ripple" effect as crop failures spread and as more and more peasants were forced onto the market to purchase food. During the early stages of famine, high grain prices of both preferred and inferior grains were a feature only of central Tigray and northern Wollo. By late 1984, massive grain price inflation was evident right across the north, and had affected urban markets as well as remote rural locations. Only a combination of good harvests and the influx of large quantities of food aid

could bring grain prices back down to approach pre-famine levels, in late 1985 and early 1986.

Peasant responses to crop failures included a number of strategies aimed at generating extra cash with which to purchase dwindling local supplies of food. Among these strategies were labour migration to better-favoured areas, sale of livestock, and borrowing. Many victims were forced to consume unpalatable famine foods, having exhausted their meagre resources through asset sales. The latter led to a collapse of prices of livestock and household goods being offered for sale. Prices of goods 10-20 per cent *of* the norm were commonplace during the final stages of famine, and some assets were simply unsaleable in glutted markets.

Although most peasants suffered losses, there were differences in the ability of richer and poorer peasants to withstand the effects of crop failures. We have seen from chapter 8 that richer peasants tended to sell oxen later in the famine process, and had greater access to credit. Meanwhile, traders who were able to purchase assets at distress prices could then re-sell them in more prosperous regions, or even in their area of origin after the famine was over. This was particularly the case with livestock, with beasts such as oxen selling for as much as ten times their famine prices a year later, during the period of agricultural rehabilitation.



The above strategies were to become exhausted for hundreds of thousands of poor peasants, and even for some previously wealthy households. Mass distress migration of destitutes to famine camps began as early as December 1982, but snowballed only from mid-1984 onwards, as most of Wollo and Tigray suffered catastrophic crop failures. By the close of 1984, some one million people had been displaced, and an unknown number had starved to death. More deaths were to arise in the overcrowded and undersupplied camps during 1985. This was a direct result of the failure of both the Ethiopian government and the international famine relief agencies to prepare for a foreseeable event. The reasons for this failure are summarised in the next section.

#### 11.4 Response to the Famine

It has been argued in chapter 1, and reiterated in chapter 9, that ultimately famine control is the responsibility of the State, and that feeding rural people has never been a priority of the Ethiopian government, whether before or after the revolution. Nevertheless, the present government gave an outward appearance of concern, having set up a "Relief and Rehabilitation Commission" to plan and implement famine relief. This body was not, however, given sufficient resources to carry out its task. The regime preferred to spend scarce foreign exchange, which could have been used for the importation of relief food,

on warfare and on celebrating the tenth anniversary of the revolution, held by an unfortunate coincidence during the height of famine in September 1984. Only when the celebrations were over, and the foreign media alerted to the mass starvation in the north, did the regime take serious steps to contain the famine. It did so partly in response to international opinion, and partly in an effort to monopolise as much of the incoming resources as possible, which it could then redirect towards its own ends. These were to include forced or coerced resettlement, in line with its neo-Stalinist approach to peasant agriculture, and the support of key groups loyal to the regime, such as townspeople in Addis Ababa, and militia in Eritrea. The evidence for this behaviour has been reviewed in chapter 10, showing that food aid under the control of government was not directed to the various regions of Ethiopia on the grounds of need. Furthermore, food aid was withheld from famine-affected populations during 1985 in an attempt to induce starving peasants to "volunteer" for resettlement.

Meanwhile, the international humanitarian organisations had their own political agendas which dictated their response to the famine. Governments controlling the lion's share of the available surplus food aid were unwilling to support a Marxist government allied to the USSR, unless strategic concessions were to be made. Inter-governmental agencies were fearful of upsetting

their patrons, and hesitated to publicise legitimate fears of famine in an unpopular country. Charities suffered from tunnel vision, being unaware of the spread of famine except in the tiny project areas in which they worked, and lacking the courage and cohesion to challenge the power of governments.

It has been argued that media coverage of the famine in October 1984 was the critical factor creating a response commensurate with the size of the famine. The reasons why this occurred are considered below, in the context of a general model of response to famine, which may be used to clarify the arguments presented in chapters 9 and 10. The model is illustrated in table 11.1.

The response to famine on *the part* of the international controllers of food surpluses available for relief purposes is conditioned by their perceptions of risk. If individual decision-makers feel that it is risky to their organisations, and hence to their careers, to seek pre-emptive famine relief for a country unpopular with the Western donors, then they will avoid responsibility for doing so, and will not act. Various "escape hatches" can be used to avoid responsibility, including claiming that the organisation's mandate does not cover this particular situation; or that head office has already been informed and is already dealing with the problem; or that the



**Table 11.1 Donor Agency Decision-Making under Different Conditions of Risk**

**A. Risky**

Overall political situation unfavourable to government requesting aid.

High degree of career risks for individuals making decisions in favour of famine control, which are in any case likely to be blocked or severely curtailed at a higher level.

Unwillingness of agency officials to perceive a famine and avoidance of responsibility through recourse to "escape hatches" including:

- (i) mandate of organisation
- (ii) standard operating procedures
- (iii) centralisation of responsibility

Reactive famine management - perception of a problem only when mass migration occurs to camps and other centres.

**B. Non-risky**

Institutional response seen by top agency decision-makers as politically imperative.

Appearance of concerted responsible action through the establishment of committees ("task forces") to plan, monitor and coordinate relief programmes. These also serve to gain control over extra resources being made available by government and the general public.

Offloading of actual responsibility for implementation onto other organisations or branch offices of the parent organisation.

**Table 11.1 (cont.)**

Forward planning begins, but is undermined by forces causing reactive management, including:

- (i) host government's political goals
- (ii) problems of forecasting agricultural conditions
- (iii) rivalry among implementing agencies

Perceptual problems in ending famine relief operation, as this now involves political risk. Oversupply of aid, especially foodstuffs, distorts and damages local economies in some cases.

Establishment of a permanent relief operation leads to the institutionalisation of aid and a paradigm shift in methodologies for targetting aid. Currently this includes the adoption of socio-economic indicators as well as anthropometry.

Gradual dismantling of relief operations as the public furore dies down and the agencies run out of money.

Return to normal agency activities and operating conditions. Political risk grows again as the famine passes into history.

government of the famine-affected country has not declared an emergency. Other escape routes can be created to suit the situation. Only when there is unambiguous need, as when famine victims are forced to migrate and starve publicly, will these agency decision-makers respond. The response is necessarily reactive, and therefore late, leading unavoidably to deaths among the displaced victims.

When the famine becomes public, and when it is seen to be sufficiently widespread and horrific in its effects, it is likely to become a serious object of scrutiny by the Western news media. If this scrutiny is sufficiently well-presented, as was the Amin-Burke television coverage of Korem in October 1984, then it will engender a sympathetic international public response to the plight of the victims. The famine now becomes a political issue, and one which must be immediately addressed by the Western governments and the agencies sponsored by them. The risk profile is reversed, and it becomes risky for agencies not to react, or at least be seen to be reacting.

The underlying distaste for the unpopular regime remains with Western governments, being forced by public opinion to go against their perceived strategic interests. Hence the need for dramatic displays of action - task forces are set up, new offices arise, airlifts and food shipments take place. Development aid is not to be forthcoming, however, as this is long-term, expensive, and potentially



useful to the recipient nation. Ethiopia is, after all, a subject of an official embargo on development aid in the USA, traditionally the largest provider of famine relief and development aid.

The NGOs, meanwhile, have benefited enormously from the famine. Their prestige has risen and their coffers are filled with the results of public generosity. Vying for resources, they rush to involve themselves in famine relief, competing with their peers for the favours of donors. The latter are more than willing to subcontract their aid to the NGOs, solving onerous logistical problems and satisfying the need to avoid responsibility for implementation at a stroke.

The NGOs rapidly build up infrastructures and see opportunities for development projects, turning to their constituents and the donors for support. Unfortunately, the famine is now fading from public consciousness with the return of good harvests, and the political impetus behind the aid programme is dwindling. The risk profile is changing back to its original state, although for a while IGOs and donors are sensitive to a resurgence of famine, being unwilling to be publicly embarrassed once again by a foreseeable event. There is a degree of nervousness among relief agencies over the following few seasons, and they tend to overdramatise relatively minor

harvest failures. In countries popular with the donors, such as Sudan, too much aid may be delivered, causing disruption to indigenous markets for food and labour. However, eventually the relief operation runs down, and the famine is largely forgotten.

#### 11.5 Future Prospects for Famine Control in Ethiopia

It seems clear from the arguments and evidence advanced in this thesis that there is little prospect of an end to famine in Ethiopia in the foreseeable future - let us say over the next two to three decades. The underlying causes of famine have not changed, and neither will the international response to famine change unless there is a strategic re-alignment between Ethiopia and the West. There are not currently many signs of this occurring, although the volatility of politics in the Horn of Africa makes prediction difficult.

Any positive steps that are to be taken must come from the government of Ethiopia or its sponsors. A pre-condition for famine control and agricultural development in the north is peace, and again there seems to be little prospect of negotiations occurring without the intervention of the superpowers - the USA and the USSR. Currently, there are no signs of such an undertaking, although recent progress on arms control might produce a degree of optimism which was not called for during the

great famine of the 1980s.

If there is not to be peace, and given that the northern wars have reached a position of stalemate, there might be grounds for considering that the policies of the government would be able to deal with famine in those areas where it does hold sway. These policies include controls on trade; infrastructural development through organising labour; and resettlement and villagisation, which promote collectivised forms of agriculture. The actual and potential results of such policies are considered below.

The government has shown few signs of wishing to abandon controls on inter-regional trade. These were instrumental in assisting the spread of famine. Traders in the formal sector could not respond to market signals in the famine areas, neither was there much surplus grain available internally by 1984. The informal sector did respond, as we have seen in chapter 8, with peasants themselves turning to trading in an effort to secure a livelihood. However, the difficulties of transporting grain by pack animal in war zones ensured that large quantities could not be moved. The government prefers to transport grain under its own auspices, to feed people according to its own priorities.

Infrastructural development through mobilising labour in



the Peasant Associations does hold promise, in that it is a genuine attempt at dealing with pressing problems of soil erosion and declining soil fertility, principally through terracing, afforestation and water control. Such initiatives are also enthusiastically pursued in areas under the control of the rebels, and in both cases the results have been impressive. However, there has been no substantial breakthrough in the promotion of more intensive methods of agriculture - no "green revolution" such as has occurred in parts of Asia and Latin America. This is unlikely unless substantial sums are committed to agricultural research and extension. Furthermore, it is precisely those areas which are most vulnerable to famine which are least likely to benefit from agricultural research and investment. The government, like others elsewhere, prefers to target available resources at the zones which are likely to be most productive. This is also the recommended strategy of the World Bank and other large western IGOs. The NGOs can be persuaded to invest in marginal zones, and are already doing so, but lack the resources to make much of an impact.

Resettlement has been justified as a necessary, if regrettable measure, even when forced. Commentators subscribing to this view (e.g. Timberlake 1985; Hancock 1985) believe that the ecological degradation of the northern highlands is so advanced that only mass

depopulation can give the land time to recover. However, this view ignores several important factors. In the first place, with population growth at an estimated rate of close to 3 per cent per annum, the highland population remaining behind will rapidly expand to take the place of the migrants. Secondly, little is known of the ecology of the lowland areas to which the majority of the settlers are being taken, although it is usually the case that lowland soils are generally less hardy and less fertile than those in the highlands. With deforestation they are likely to quickly become leached. A situation could rapidly develop where the resettlement sites become overpopulated in relation to the available resource base. This problem would be compounded by the lack of producer incentives inherent in state-organised cooperative farming, which has a poor record of productivity. The latter situation has in turn arisen partly because production on resettlement schemes is organised communally, and is likely to be resisted by peasants who see it as reducing income incentives for individuals, while going against highland traditions; and partly because the produce is sold to the AMC at fixed prices, which are typically lower than those obtaining on the free market.

A third factor which does not seem to have been properly considered by the proponents of resettlement is the cost. Although cost-benefit studies have not been carried out,

it seems reasonable to suggest that investment in soil conservation and improved cultivation practices in the eroded highlands would be more cost-effective even than well-organised resettlement. Certainly the Institute of Development Research at Addis Ababa University has discovered that such schemes as the Wollo agricultural rehabilitation programme, which involves terracing and tree-planting, paid for on a food-for-work basis, are acceptable to the peasantry and do not appear to damage the local grain trade (Yeraswerk and Solomon 1985). This experience contrasts with the failure of even well-planned and well-supported agricultural settlements studied by the Institute to reach self sufficiency after a decade or so (IDR 1986).

It is doubtful, therefore, that resettlement is really seen by the Ethiopian government as an optimum economic solution, although there may be a lingering fascination with the potential achievements of 'scientific socialism'. Its motivation is primarily political and institutional. The State may recognise that communal farming will reduce the available agricultural surplus, but this is of lesser concern than the need for the State to control the available surplus and the farmers producing it. Thus a Stalinist agricultural strategy is being introduced, both through resettlement and its corollary, villagisation. Apart from the attraction of control over agricultural



surpluses and the development process, this strategy offers the added benefit of the movement of peoples to fragment ethnic discontents and to weaken the support base of the various liberation fronts. The enforced movement of people will facilitate social and economic control, especially if carried out in an incremental fashion. However, the enforced migration of northern highlanders to the southern lowlands recalls the great imperial expansion under Menelik II, and is likely to result in a stiffening of resistance among the slowly awakening Oromo. With almost half of the population of the modern Ethiopian empire, the Oromo are potentially potent enemies of the Amhara-dominated Dergue.

Famine will continue to plague Ethiopia, particularly in the north, where conditions are optimal for its resurgence. It is also likely to spread southwards and westwards into the newly settled areas as socialist agriculture fails to produce sufficient surpluses. The next famine will develop much according to the concatenation process outlined in this thesis, unless there is an extraordinary change in climatological conditions. Agricultural production will continue to be disrupted, and peasant responses to crop failures will be much the same as always. The only possible changes are likely to be a greater expectation among the peasantry for food aid from the relief system, perhaps leading to earlier migration to established feeding centres; and

greater sensitivity towards the threat of famine from IGOs and NGOs. Western governments will remain fundamentally unwilling to invest in a permanent food security system and agricultural development schemes in a State which remains a client of the USSR.

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FAMINE MIGRANT'S QUESTIONNAIRE

Household Number \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Location \_\_\_\_\_

Household Members

Name	Age	Sex	Relationship
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			
7.			
8.			

Deceased (relationship, age, sex, date died, cause of death, disease history)

1.				
2.				
3.				



Place of Origin (name, wereda, awraja) \_\_\_\_\_

Date began to migrate \_\_\_\_\_

Route taken \_\_\_\_\_  
(include lengthy periods of stay)

Date of arrival here \_\_\_\_\_

Who told you this was a good place to come? \_\_\_\_\_

Landholding, original farm (other in brackets):

Location

Dega

Weyna Dega

Quolla

a) Yield/good year

b) Yield/last harvest

c) Yield/previous yr.

a) barley (gebs)

b)

c)

a) maize (bokolo)

b)

c)

a) sorghum (zengada)

b)

c)

a) red sorghum

b)

c)

a) field peas (atter)

b)

c)

	Dega	Weyna Dega	Quolla
a) Yield/good year			
b) Yield/last harvest			
c) Yield/previous yr.			
a) barley (gebs)			
b)			
c)			
a) maize (bokolo)			
b)			
c)			
a) sorghum (zengada)			
b)			
c)			
a) red sorghum			
b)			
c)			
a) field peas (atter)			
b)			
c)			

teff

	Dega	Weyna Dega	Quolla
a) field beans (bakella)			
b)			
c)			
a) chick peas (shimbera)			
b)			
c)			
a) lentils (misseb)			
b)			
c)			
a) niger seed (nug)			
b)			
c)			
a) flax (talba)			
b)			
c)			
a) other (name)			
b)			
c)			

1. How much grain do you need to feed your family? (pre-drought)

\_\_\_\_\_

2. When was your last good year?

Grain Prices:	Good year				Place			
	pre meher		post meher		krent		belg	
	b	s	b	s	b	s	b	s
Teff								
Sorghum								
Wheat								
Maize								
Barley								

Last year farmed (date)

Place

	pre meher		post meher		belg		krent	
	b	s	b	s	b	s	b	s
Teff								
Sorghum								
Wheat								
Maize								
Barley								

Alternative Markets

Place

Teff								
Sorghum								
Wheat								
Maize								
Barley								

Previous year

Place

Teff								
Sorghum								
Wheat								
Barley								
Maize								

3a. When did grain prices rise?

3b. When was the peak of grain prices?

3. When did you/others last get work?

Householdmember    Employer    Location    Month    Task    Wage/day    No. days

1.							
2.							
3.							



Agricultural wages:  
(daily rate)

		Good year	This year	Last year
Task	Ploughing			
	Sowing			
	Weeding			
	Harvesting			
	Threshing			

Food for Work  
(megeb le Sera)  
(name task)

Good year	This year	Last year

Other work (name task)

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4. When did out-migrants leave/return? Out \_\_\_\_\_ Back \_\_\_\_\_

Livestock holdings (last good year):

Type Size (b,m,s) No. Value pre-drought Died Price when sold Date sold

Oxen						
Cows						
Horses						
Mules						
Camel						
Sheep						
Goats						
Chickens						

5. What else did you sell?

Asset	No.	Price realized	Date sold	Buyer

6. Did you borrow money?

Creditor	Amount	Interest rate	Date borrowed	Amount returned/when

7. Did you get any free help/interest free loans?

Amount	Source	Date	Comments

8. Did you mortgage rights to land?

Amount realized	Buyer	Date	Terms of transaction

9. Has anyone previously living with you stayed behind?

Name	Age	Relationship	Lodged with:

10. Who is looking after your remaining assets?

Grain prices on journey:

Type	Price	Place	Date

Livestock prices on journey (b/m/s):

Type	Price	Place	Date	Buyer

11. What wild foods did you eat/when?

12. How did the war affect you?

13. How has the government helped you?

Comments

