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rural livelihoods

research findings for development policymakers and practitioners

Disability lowers living standards and happiness in rural Ethiopia

Letegebrial Gebre Meskel, a former combatant with the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front, rests at home in Mekele, Tigray Region, Ethiopia. Letegebrial has been jobless since she was injured in a succession of incidents, wounded first by bullets and then hurt in a car accident. She can hardly sit or stand up and spends almost all of her time on her bed.

People in poor countries are often more vulnerable to becoming disabled than those in rich countries. They can also find it more difficult to adapt to living with a disability. In rural Ethiopia, how does disability affect people's wealth and happiness?

Research from Oxford University and the University of East Anglia, both in the UK, examines the effects of disability on people in poor countries. It draws on a 2004 survey of households in rural Ethiopia, which gathered information on different forms of disability (problems with hearing, speaking, sight, loss of limbs and paralysis) and people's levels of reported life satisfaction or happiness.

Many studies in rich countries have found that people can adapt to any life event, including disability. People who become disabled often experience a marked recovery in mental wellbeing, even if there is not a complete return to previous happiness levels. Other studies, however, have shown that adaptation depends on the type of disability and the individual.

In poor countries, the effect of disability on people's lives is likely to be worse than in rich countries:

- Having a physical impairment makes it difficult to undertake physical work such as farming.
- Poor countries have less money to invest in technologies designed to help disabled people to continue working.
- Social insurance is also usually lacking, meaning people have to rely on friends and family for support.

However, some factors result in poor countries sometimes having a lower proportion of disabled people. Disability tends to increase with age and many people in developing countries do not live long enough to become disabled. Also, once people become disabled they have a much lower life expectancy than they would in a rich country.

The research shows that rates of sensory disability (difficulties with hearing, speaking and sight) in Ethiopia are very high (nearly 11 percent of the population) compared with the USA. However, the research also shows that rates of physical disability are higher in the USA, because of longer life expectancy.

In poor countries, the effect of disability on people's lives is likely to be worse than in rich countries

The researchers explored the links between happiness, wealth and disability. They found:

- People's happiness is strongly linked to how well-off they feel compared with others in the village.
- People living in households with at least one disabled person – whether themselves or another member of the household – are less happy than those living in households without disabled people.
- Evidence to support the idea of adaptation is lacking: people in households that had experienced disability for long periods were not happier than those in households that had experienced it only recently.
- Disability is linked with lower household wealth.
- It is this negative impact on household wealth that links disability with lower levels of happiness.

People in rural Ethiopia struggle to adapt to disability, mainly because of the negative effect it has on earnings and wealth. This is likely to be the case in other developing countries where most people rely on physical labour, such as farming, to earn a living.

Marcel Fafchamps and **Bereket Kebede**
Marcel Fafchamps, Centre for the Study of African Economies, University of Oxford, Department of Economics, Manor Road, Oxford OX1 3UQ, UK
T +44 1865 281446 **F** +44 1865 281447
marcel.fafchamps@economics.ox.ac.uk

Bereket Kebede, School of Development Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ, UK
T + 44 1603 593376 **F** + 44 1603 451999
b.kebede@uea.ac.uk

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Livelihoods, incomes and soil management

Most rural populations in Africa face high poverty levels and environmental degradation. How they make a living and how much they earn has a direct impact on their interaction with the environment.

Research from Kenya's Rift Valley examines whether rural household assets influence livelihood diversification strategies and how these are linked to soil management practices. Livelihood diversification strategies are the combination of activities that contribute to income.

Diversification is a rational response to the lack of opportunities for specialisation. Natural, physical and social assets are key in determining what options households have. But differences in strategies among households sharing similar conditions, and their implications for sustainable natural resource management, have rarely been empirically investigated.

The authors conducted research in 177 households of one clan representing the Rokocho area in the Rift Valley. As in other parts of western Kenya, both on- and off-farm activities are important. On-farm activities include grain production, horticulture and livestock production (indigenous and exotic). Off-farm activities include regular activities (formal employment and business) and casual activities (such as charcoal making).

- Five main livelihood diversification strategies include: those reliant on steady incomes from off-farm employment or businesses; fruit and dairy; single crops; pastoral livestock; and casual, off-farm labour (34 percent).
- Income levels decline in the order these strategies are listed above, from roughly US$190 per month for steady off-farm work to US$43 per month for casual off-farm labourers.
- Although 57 percent of households rely heavily on off-farm labour, high-paying, reliable jobs are limited to those with the necessary knowledge and skills.
- More diversified, better-off households have greater incentives to continue to expand their range of activities and invest in soil management measures.
- Poorer households trapped in limited, low-profit activities are more dependent on communal resources (such as trees) and use less sustainable farming methods.

The knowledge and skill levels of households are major factors in determining their livelihood strategies and how successfully they pursue them, from both an income and soil management perspective. Recommendations include the need for:

- better understanding of what livelihood strategies mixed crop-livestock and pastoral households pursue at national and local levels
- national development policies and strategies that focus on education, farm activities and off-farm activities
- improved diversity and profitability of the activities that poor people engage in, so they have more incentive to invest in sustainable soil management practices
- strengthening efforts aimed at natural resource management, rather than restricting access to communal resources.

Miyuki Iiyama, **Patrick Kariuki**, **Patti Kristjanson**, **Simeon Kaitibie** and **Joseph Maitima**
Miyuki Iiyama, World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF), United Nations Avenue, Gigiri, PO Box 30677-00100, Nairobi, Kenya
T +254 20 7224215 **F** +254 20 722 4401
M.Iiyama@cgiar.org **miyuk00@attglobal.net**

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Creating rural jobs in South Africa

Unemployment is a persistent problem in South Africa, particularly in rural areas. A proposal to extend the existing public works programme to provide welfare support for poor unemployed people in rural areas is being considered.

Research from IT Transport Limited, in the UK, looks at the likely participation rates (labour supply response) for extending the current Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) and the related cost implications. The research draws on information from the 2004 General Household Survey.

The EPWP, which began in 2004, is a nationwide government-led initiative that provides jobs to poor unemployed South Africans. However, because it relies on the availability of suitable public sector projects to create jobs, it cannot respond to high unemployment in particular areas.

The proposed extension aims to increase the job creation impact of the programme by providing unskilled paid work close to the homes of those who need it. The focus would be rural job creation; unemployment and poverty in rural areas is high and job opportunities are scarce.

Extending the EPWP would require a major redesign of the programme and increased costs. The researchers estimate what the labour supply response would be for a range of wage rates (from 15 to 70 South African Rand (ZAR) a day) and the likely size of the wage bill for each rate. Estimating the wage rate below which people do not accept employment (the reservation wage rate) is central to the researchers' approach.

- At a daily wage rate of 30 ZAR, around 2.4 million people would participate in the programme and the wage bill would be about 6 billion ZAR (if 80 days of work are offered).
- Around 53 percent of jobs created at a wage rate of 30 ZAR would be taken by unemployed people with the rest being taken by those in other low-paid employment.
- At higher wage rates (over 40 ZAR a day), people switching from other jobs could risk damaging other economic activities.

The EPWP has been allowed to pay wage rates below the minimum level because it combines work opportunities with training and skills development. The extended EPWP may be too large to make training provision feasible. However, because the programme will provide welfare support to unemployed people, there is still a strong case for exemption from the minimum wage.

- The programme should be exempt from minimum wage regulations to ensure that it does not disrupt the labour market and is affordable.
- Further studies during the programme's early stages will be needed to test the assumptions in this research.
- Creation of enough worthwhile employment to absorb the numbers of people wanting to participate in the programme will be a challenge.
- The programme will need to be properly managed to ensure fair access.

Kirit Vaidya and **Farhad Ahmed**
Kirit Vaidya, Economics and Strategy Group, Aston Business School, Aston Triangle, Birmingham B4 7ET, UK
k.g.vaidya@aston.ac.uk
T +44 121 2043263 **F** +44 121 2043696

Farhad Ahmed, IT Transport Limited, The Old Power Station, Ardington, Wantage, Oxfordshire OX12 8QJ, UK
T +44 1235 833753 **F** +44 1235 832186
itt@ittransport.co.uk

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id21
Institute of Development Studies
University of Sussex
Brighton, BN1 9RE UK

T +44 1273 678787
F +44 1273 877335
E id21@ids.ac.uk

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ISSN 1746-8655
Printed on paper produced from sustainable forests

Keywords: disability, livelihood diversification, living standards, public works, soil management, unemployment