

**LOCAL INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND RELIEF IN ETHIOPIA:
A KIRE-BASED SEED DISTRIBUTION PROGRAMME IN NORTH WOLLO**

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Abstract

This paper highlights the important role played by community-based organisations in relief supply operations. In the context of an emergency seed supply project in Northern Ethiopia in 1995, it examines the participation of burial societies, known as *kires*, in targeting, distribution and management. The paper illustrates that factors of local institutional legitimacy, transparency and accountability are central, both to the effective representation of community views and to long-term partnerships between local institutions and non-governmental organisations.

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INTRODUCTION

The benefit of this seed distribution was not only the seed... it also gave us heart. On the one hand, the poor did not have to migrate or rent out land because they had no seed to plant. On the other hand, our *kires* are becoming more active than ever before.

Memere Seme Asfawe

This paper offers a reflection on the initial stages of a relief programme supported by SOS Sahel, a non-governmental organisation working in Meket Woreda in the northern highlands of Wollo, Ethiopia.¹ By highlighting the possibilities of working with local institutions in relief situations the programme is of particular note since it offers an alternative model of emergency relief supply and because it highlights key contemporary issues of local institutional capacity-building in Ethiopia. The programme, initiated in May 1995, responded to acute seasonal seed shortages affecting 75 per cent of households in highland areas. At that time additional indicators such as the sale of livestock, increased rates of out-migration, high cereal prices and consumption of non-

staple, 'famine', crops warned of a potentially serious scenario. The programme worked with local communities in identifying burial societies known as *kires* as the most appropriate channels for the distribution of relief seed supplies. The *kires* assumed responsibility for targeting the distribution to the most vulnerable households in the community and in establishing community managed revolving seed funds. In relating the modalities of the operation, this paper identifies a range of difficulties and opportunities involved in contemporary efforts by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to support local institutional capacities and to narrow the gap between the rhetoric and reality of community participation in development initiatives (see Bergdall 1995).

Food security in Ethiopia

Even in a relatively normal year it is estimated that over 45 per cent of households in Ethiopia are chronically food insecure. In response, efforts to tackle food insecurity have depended extensively on annual emergency relief operations. Macro-economic reforms since the establishment of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) in 1991 and support for a liberalised market-based economy have been associated with additional food aid provisions from international governments and donors. Since 1991, approaches to food aid distribution, however, have been subject to considerable re-thinking. The National Policy on Disaster Prevention,

Preparedness and Management, for example, is designed to reduce 'free' distributions by linking relief to ongoing development activities such as public works programmes using food-for-work or cash-for-work, and ensuring greater community participation in planning, implementation and evaluation.

SOS Sahel is a British NGO specialising in agricultural and natural resource development. The agency began implementation of its integrated rural development programme in Meket, North Wollo in November 1994. While SOS Sahel's strategy is based on long-term development interventions, focusing on measures designed to enhance food production and improve environmental management, it has, in the light of chronic seasonal food insecurity in Ethiopia, sought to explore the potential for integrated relief and development programmes. A more extensive examination of the integration of relief and development, based on SOS Sahel's Food Security Project, which was initiated in 1992 at the Koisha Rural Development Project in Wolaita and which implemented an employment-based safety net approach, is found in Jenden (1995).

Local institutional development

A key element in viable food security programmes which aim to promote greater community involvement is the participatory role of local structures which manage appropriate targeting and distribution systems at the grassroots level. Indigenous

or introduced, institutions which aggregate demands and capacities at the community level operate at a significant interface in the development process. Community-based organisations (CBOs) are mediators between the state and society, and between development agencies and the household. While it is increasingly recognised that there is an institutional imperative to the implementation of sustainable and locally managed development, the challenge for governmental and non-governmental development agencies is how to promote an effective enabling environment for local institutional development.

Characterised by membership control, voluntary contributions, mutual benefit, and accountable leadership, CBOs display a great diversity of organisational capacities in sub-Saharan Africa. In terms of promoting participatory development, local institutions are significant for their capacity to mobilise resources and regulate their use. Commentators observe that CBOs undertake productive activities by putting available resources to their most efficient and sustainable use according to locally specific experience, and offer appropriate resolutions in conflicts of resource management (Uphoff, 1986). An additional factor in the recent prioritisation of local institutional development is linked to the promotion of social pluralism and the strengthening of civil society in sub-Saharan Africa. Support for the

institutions of civil society is advocated on the premise that community organisations promote democratic behaviour and effectively represent a local counterbalance to state authority.² These factors have contributed to various NGO approaches to working with local institutions as both conduits of service delivery and agents of self-determined change.

Within the context of local institutional development a broad distinction exists between spontaneous forms of social organisation and those committees and community groups introduced by implementing agencies as project partners. The differences are important as they raise complex and contrasting challenges to the criteria employed by the NGO community for development assistance and the techniques employed for organisational capacity-building. The issue of engaging with spontaneous or 'traditional' organisations has often received academic recommendation on the grounds that the emergence of viable community-based institutional partners depends on utilising existing social capital and capacities. Yet the practice of such local institutional development is problematic. The concern for NGOs, indeed, is that many community-based organisations are informal and 'invisible' making them difficult to identify and to negotiate with. These local institutions also represent existing hierarchies, are often not democratic according to Western liberal definitions,

and their membership representation may be neither gender neutral nor gender balanced.

Community-groups introduced as partners for development NGOs present a very different set of challenges. Since community participation can often mean little more than an exclusive partnership between project staff and local elites, many programmes seek to introduce representative structures of collaboration to guarantee broad-based participation and the equitable distribution of benefits. Experience among development NGOs suggests that facilitating the emergence of strong, self-sustaining community-based organisations, however, is a complex process. Committees may provide more or less efficient foci of collaboration between project and community, but unless they are endowed with a commitment to resource ownership and the capacity to solve problems other than those directly related to the specific transfer of information and resources, their ability to assume control of operations in the longer term is questionable. Among those projects which implement a sectoral approach to community development, with separate committees for primary health care, credit and water supply activities for example, the fragmentation of roles may further exacerbate this difficulty.

The process of local institutional development at project level can therefore be seen to represent a series of trade-

offs, between working with existing or introduced groups, between programme criteria and customary practice and between building on established capacity and transferring new skills. In most cases successful local institutional development is dependent on securing an effective balance between these factors. Support for viable local institutions also rests on identifying the relevance of processes of inter-household reciprocity, community co-operation and the ways in which the events of daily life are organised rather than structural and procedural features (Nuijten, 1992).

Local institutions in Ethiopia

Associative life in Ethiopia before the revolution in 1974 is poorly documented. With land reforms in 1975 and 1976, which effectively eliminated feudal obligations and distributed usufructary rights to tenants and the landless, the state created implementing structures, the rural Peasant Association and urban *Kebele*, which continue to dominate the local institutional landscape. Consequently, until 1991, ethnically or regionally based associative processes were focused in the various liberation fronts, and community-level groups were confined to a variety of small-scale social welfare institutions.

The Peasant Association (PA), the basic rural institution in post-revolutionary Ethiopia, is a territorial organisation

encompassing 800 hectares or more. All households living in the area should be members and constitute an assembly which gathers several times a year during which it elects a chairman and an executive committee to run the daily affairs of the association. In addition, the assembly elects a judicial tribunal which functions as a local court (*shengo*) adjudicating minor legal matters. The PA is also responsible for the dissemination of national directives, for mobilising labour for tree planting and soil conservation programmes on designated 'development' days, for distributing food aid, for land allocations and tax collection.

Despite the authority and national coverage of the PA system, however, the role of non-governmental community-based organisations in Ethiopia in securing participation, equitable benefits' distribution and long-term community management has been recognised for some time. Observers, such as Hailu (1987), Salole (1988) and Tirfe (1995) have identified a broad range of local institutions which demonstrate that '... the latent co-operative forces of local and ethnic communities can be channelled to mobilise labour, capital and organisational leadership to successfully address local and regional problems' (Hailu, 1987: 92). In this way the role of *ekub* (a rotating savings and credit group), for example, has been highlighted in the financial development of the country.³ Similarly, the *dabo* (a system of communal labour exchange) has

been identified as a potential focus for broad-based community participation in project design and implementation.

Local institutions and systems of inter-household co-operation are also central to an understanding of community-level coping strategies in response to food insecurity. The main types of co-operation which underpin peasant responses to hunger in Wollo, for example, include sharing draught animals and labour co-operation through share-cropping and work groups known as *jiggae*. Membership of local institutions does not generally carry with it particular economic benefits in the face of food shortages but rather these institutions play a significant role in focusing collective solidarity. Among Muslim communities in Wollo, for example, the *wodajja* (ritual sacrifice) is held in April in the *belg* season and during the harvest in October to pray for good yields and for protection against crop disease. Similarly for Orthodox Christian communities burial societies, the *kire* or *idir*, provide an important system of mutual support. Even at the height of the 1984-85 famine in Wollo, when the PA structures had collapsed, the *idir* continued to be observed in many communities:

It was the *idir* which helped bury the dead, supported families in their bereavement, and by mobilising the co-operative efforts of the community took care of most of the ritualistic practices associated with death and mourning. Without the association many peasant communities would have been helpless in the face of mounting death rates, and the risks of an epidemic would have been great as more and more of the dead would have been left unburied (Dessaiegn, 1991: 155).

Since 1991, the changing political climate in Ethiopia has enabled non-governmental organisations to explore alternative institutional partnerships and attempt to support local capacities through existing legitimate structures.⁴

SOS SAHEL'S EMERGENCY SEED DISTRIBUTION IN MEKET WOREDA

SOS Sahel's experience in North Wollo provides an example of this current trend in NGO approaches to local institutional development and offers an alternative approach to the provision of emergency relief supplies. The participation of community-based organisations, from needs' identification through to running a long-term development programme, indicates the way in which local institutional capacities are crucial in providing a bridge between relief and development.

Meket Woreda, North Wollo

Meket Woreda is located in the former Lasta *awraja* of North Wollo.⁵ Wollo is a predominantly Amharic-speaking area⁶ in which the Orthodox Christian and Islamic faiths co-exist. Since the beginning of this century Wollo has been subject to six famines, numerous localised food shortages and continues to be a food insecure area. Meket is therefore included in the national Relief and Rehabilitation Commission's list of 'disaster-prone' *woredas*. This status makes the *woreda* a priority for developmental support and while it has benefited from intermittent relief assistance since the 1984-85 famine, households remain vulnerable to food shortages, and have access to few, if any, medical, educational, credit, or agricultural support facilities.

The population of Meket *woreda* is estimated at 275,000 people. Over 98 per cent of the population of the *woreda* are rural-based while the small proportion of urban residents live in Filakit (the *woreda's* administrative centre) and small market towns such as Estayesh and Diboko. Rainfall is bi-modal, and usually occurs from February to April (*belg*), and from June to September (*meher* or *keremt*). Agricultural systems vary with altitude and climatic conditions. The terrain of Meket *woreda* drops sharply from 3,400 metres above sea level in the highland to below 1,700 masl. in the deep river gorges which traverse the region. As a result there are three distinct agro-climatic zones: highland plateau (known as *dega* or *wurch*)

areas where barley is the only crop grown in both the *belg* and *meher* seasons, gorge (*weina-dega*) where barley and wheat are cultivated, and lowland gorge (*kolla*) where teff, sorghum, wheat and lentils as well as barley can be grown.

The relative wealth of asset holdings among highland plateau communities, compared to gorge and lowland areas, has meant that highland farmers are locally perceived to be better off. Incomes on the plateau are largely derived from animal sales with correspondingly less reliance on crop sales. Nevertheless, while the *dega* areas escaped the worst affects of the 1984-85 famine, evidence from 1972-73, when the highland was badly affected by frost, pest infestation and the almost complete failure of the spring *belg* rains, indicates that this agro-ecological zone is prone to chronic stress on food supplies.

Three key features contribute to the continued fragility of highland livelihoods: single-crop dependence, relatively greater reliance on the *belg* rains and limited seed varieties. Communities in the highland zone enjoy little access to small-scale irrigation and associated crop-diversification. Barley represents up to 95 per cent of high plateau production (SOS Sahel, 1993). Relative to other altitude zones, the plateau is also more dependent on the earlier *belg* rains. Typically farmers in the highland PAs prepare 25 per cent of their land

for *belg* sowing. For Wollo as a whole it is reported that 63 per cent of households do not farm their lands at all in the *belg* season (MOA-FAO 1984 quoted in Dessalegn, 1991: 54), and *belg* production is estimated to constitute only about 12.5 per cent of the main harvest.

In addition, variable rainfall patterns have shortened the growing season in this area, which, combined with pest infestation and declining soil fertility, has meant that only early maturing, and hence lower-yielding barley varieties are suitable. *Enat gebis* used to be the most productive land race on the high plateau but farmers have now shifted from the late maturing race to *Ehil zer*. Furthermore, customary practices of seed credit provision, based on the exchange of seed for labour with farmers who owned larger land-holdings, has significantly declined as a result of successive land redistribution programmes.

Project Identification

These factors therefore make the highland area of Meket *woreda* particularly vulnerable to the failure of the *belg* rains and shortages in appropriate seed varieties. A crop assessment in March 1995 in the frost-prone highland area indicated that communities had been very badly affected by the poor distribution of rainfall in 1994 and infestation of crop pests. Most farmers lost nearly 100 per cent of their *belg*

crop and only obtained an average of 16.4 per cent of the expected yield from their *meher* crop. Some land was planted with the start of the *belg* rain in March 1995, but many farmers were unable to plant because of lack of seed. Indeed, 25 per cent of households in the *dega* zone did not have any seed for the *meher* planting season, and 50 per cent of households had only half their seed requirement for the *meher* season.

A number of additional factors contributed to growing concern that the region was facing a potential crisis. As well as lacking seed, farmers in the highland PAs also faced serious food shortages. Food production in the *woreda* in 1994 met only 44 per cent of local needs - 210,655 quintals (21,65.5 tonnes) out of a total estimated requirement of 478,655 quintals (47865.5 tonnes).⁷ As a result farmers sought additional incomes from selling livestock in local markets (a 300 per cent increase in numbers was observed between September 1994 and February 1995 in GeraGera market), from out-migration to Kobo and Woldiya for daily labouring work, and from the intensification of petty trading. Communities also sought to preserve food stocks by suspending food contributions to funerals and religious events. Nevertheless, cereal prices continued to rise beyond the reach of many local farmers, increasing from 125 Br per quintal (per 100kg) in February 1995 to 220 Br in May 1995, and the Ministry of Health

recorded an increased incidence of malnutrition cases being treated in the *woreda*.

As a result of these indicators a survey was conducted in April 1995 which found that eight highland PAs in Meket were experiencing acute food and seed shortages. Of the 11,054 households living in the eight PAs, 75 per cent required seed assistance for the *meher* season, a total of 8,291 households.

Distribution systems

Conventionally, relief distributions in Ethiopia are managed through the Peasant Association under the auspices of the Woreda Administration and Ministry of Agriculture. The PA committee is responsible for registering beneficiary lists of the most vulnerable households, and for transporting the food or seed to local distribution points. Increasingly such distributions are conducted on a credit basis to reduce food-aid dependency and therefore the PA is often also responsible for ensuring repayment.

Discussions with farmers, however, revealed limitations in this distribution system particularly with regard to targeting, monitoring and follow-up on the credit repayments. In general, PA committees were found to lack membership accountability and local legitimacy. Since it is generally understood that PA officials receive their salary out of food

aid distributions suspicions of petty corruption abound. The process of beneficiary selection is also questioned since the single basic requirement is that a member of each household be registered for every day on which community development works are undertaken (*lemat* days). For households lacking surplus labour, often the most vulnerable, participation in *lemat* days is particularly difficult. Furthermore, under the PA system it is recognised that credit repayment rates are extremely poor. Prior to the seed distribution, for example, an Oxen Credit Programme in Meket sponsored by FAO in 1994 achieved a repayment rate of just 1 per cent.

In the case of SOS Sahel's seed distribution the process through which alternative local institutions assumed responsibility for targeting, distribution and management was made on the basis of farmers' recommendations and a review of CBO capacities. Potentially viable institutions included the *ekub*, *mahaber*, *sembete* and *kire*. The *ekub* is not practised in rural Meket since it is commonly cash-based. Membership of the feasting and prayer associations, *mahaber* and *sembete*, is particularly valued because of the links they reinforce with the church and individual worship, but they are small groups whose membership is not inclusive and who, in times of crisis, are prone to collapse (Dessaiegn, 1991: 154-155).⁸ Rather, interviews and discussions conducted over the previous year indicated that the preferred institution, which also

demonstrated key features suitable to targeting and management, was the *kire*:

If there was a donation to the village I would distribute the food through the *kire* because it can identify the poor. The *kire* knows everyone, it knows because there is a minimum *injera* contribution and because people can only bring what they can afford. Plus, the farmers will immediately sack the people in power if they are doing wrong.

Ato Fekadu Getu

Kire is the term used in Wollo for a mutual insurance association through which members contribute regularly to offset the responsibilities of burial costs, particularly the expense incurred feeding mourners at the ceremony. The society is more commonly known as *idir* elsewhere in Ethiopia and in urban centres. Indeed, while the *idir* or *kire* is a widespread institution throughout Ethiopia, there are significant regional, rural and urban variations in the association's operations.⁹ The *kire* is an orthodox Christian institution; the *ezen* manages a similar contribution system among Muslim communities. In Meket *woreda* *kires* represent geographically distinct units which are often based on the *mender* (a settlement composed of a cluster of households) or *got* (a community made up of one or more *menders* and grouping about 100 households).¹⁰

The *kire* in Meket is a highly respected and legitimate institution which demonstrates effective processes of membership accountability. The society also displays a range of specific capacities appropriate for the functions required in distribution programmes.¹¹ It was for these reasons that an alternative distribution system based on *kire* management was supported.

In rural areas of North Wollo *kires* maintain an inclusive membership base. As a religiously homogenous community in the highland area, every household is able to join the *kire*. Each household head, whether male or female, represents their household as a member and failure to join the *kire* is extremely rare. In addition, the *kire* system in Meket has not developed sub-groupings for women or young men as is found among the Gurage and in Wolaita (Pankhurst, 1994) and which serves to fragment membership.

The *kire* leadership is transparent and accountable. The leadership is normally formed of a judge (*danya*) and a secretary who are publicly elected and chosen because they are popular and respected community representatives. The actions and responsibilities of the *kire* leadership are open to public scrutiny and because of this transparency the membership is entitled to replace the judge should he behave improperly.

Leadership accountability and the open forum they offer is highly valued as Ato Tesfa Ayalew indicated: 'The *kire* is controlled by the poor because the poor can talk openly'.

Systems of membership contribution to the *kire* are equitable, decided upon collectively and are set according to members' available resources and local conditions. Food-based contributions are standard in rural Meket.¹² In the event of a death, each household is responsible for providing a pre-determined quantity of *injera* (flat bread) to the funeral ceremony which is shared among the mourners.¹³ A high degree of local knowledge concerning the relative wealth of members is formalised in the *kire* in procedures through which in-kind contributions are recorded at the burial ceremony. Every *kire* has an *injera* counter (*injera kotarie*) whose role is to check and record each households' contribution. In this way the *kire* leadership knows who has and who has not been able to participate in the event. Indeed, the ability of the *kire* regularly to monitor the number of households who are suffering from food or cash shortages represents a significant local capacity for targeting assistance to the most vulnerable members of the community.

Furthermore, while contributions are made according to customary regulations, these systems also demonstrate a high degree of flexibility. In times of food insecurity, for

example, the group can decide to reduce or suspend contributions. In common with many *kires* in the highland area, Mekrecha *kire's* regular system of contribution, for example, was based on the provision, by each household, of five *injera*, a cup of grain and a bundle of firewood. Female-headed households were required to provide half this amount. As a result of poor rainfall and the burden which these payments made on available food stocks, Mekrecha *kire* suspended this system in May 1994. From that date households were required to contribute only the firewood and a cash donation of 1 Br instead of *injera*. It is important to note that this decision was taken almost twelve months before local food and seed shortages had become acute and long before local difficulties were recognised by outside agencies.

Breach of the *kire's* rules on the part of members, particularly failure to attend the burial ceremony or to make the necessary contribution normally invokes a small cash fine which may be waived in the case of the most vulnerable households in favour of some form of labour input. The most significant sanction imposed by the *kire* for transgression of its rules, however, is that of expulsion, known as *ambadadie*. While the term refers to the termination of membership privileges it also has a wider set of connotations which can be interpreted as being outcast or isolated from the community. In the event of the death of a member of an

ambadadie household the *kire* will not assist in any of the funeral preparations. Similarly, *kire* members are not allowed to co-operate with *ambadadie* households and are fined for entering *ambadadie* homes or for sharing essential domestic items. While the sanction appears harsh, *ambadadie* is rarely invoked. Households are able to appeal against the decision to neighbouring *kires* and receive advice from *shemaglie* (elders) on how to reconcile their dispute. The severity of the sanction, however, plays a key role in defining the boundary of the organisation and enhances social cohesion among its members.

Membership inclusiveness, leadership accountability, locally appropriate rules and acceptable sanctions combine to enable *kires* to retain a high local status and authority.¹⁴ Drawing on the capacities demonstrated in the *kire*'s customary functions and procedures the emergency seed supply programme supported this alternative structure because of the potential for equitable targeting and the greater prospects of repayment of the seed credit through *kire* management. Many questions were raised, however, as to the suitability of engaging with the *kire* system. Chief among these was the issue of working outside the conventional system. Understandably there was some resistance from PA officials, who felt undermined by the suggestion that the distribution would not pass directly through their hands. Furthermore, it was felt that there was a

risk of over-burdening an institution whose financial and technical capacity was largely confined to recording contributions in kind, and that as a result the *kire's* traditional functions might be neglected. Additional doubts were raised over the decision to work with a male-dominated 'traditional' institution which was based on entrenched systems of patriarchy and hierarchy. The question of gender representation in terms of the *kire* leadership was not addressed and remains an important concern. In the context of decision-making and targeting, however, the *kire* system, which enables all community views to be expressed in public and which provides particular membership arrangements for female-headed households, is seen to represent all sectors of the community effectively.

While farmers supported the concept of playing a central decision-making role and 'owning' the seed package, they nevertheless stressed that the PA Committees should retain a supervisory and regulatory role. In this way the strengths of both the *kires* and the PA could be drawn upon. A tripartite arrangement was therefore established consisting of Seed Credit Committees at the level of the *kire*, the PA and the *woreda*. At the *kire* level, *kire* elders recruited literate members to assist in record keeping. At the PA level, sub-committees were formed from the association's leadership and representatives of selected *kires*, the Ministry of Agriculture

and Ministry of Natural Resources. The PA-level committee was to be involved in overseeing the distribution and repayment process and to provide a separate forum for debate and conflict resolution given its additional legal sanctions. Customarily, the *shengo* of the *kebele* can serve as a court of appeal for members in dispute with their *kire*. Finally, a Woreda Seed Credit Committee was formed composed of representatives from the Woreda Administration, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Natural Resources and SOS Sahel to participate in the planning, monitoring and evaluation of the programme.

Targeting and Distribution

SOS Sahel's emergency seed credit programme operated in five of the eight highland PAs which were experiencing seed shortages. Seed distribution in the three neighbouring highland PAs was managed by the Ministry of Agriculture and Save the Children Fund UK. Both programmes, distributed 25kg of seed per household which represented an approximate value of 55 Br and which was designed to enable farmers to plant 1 *timad* ($\frac{1}{4}$ hectare of land). While SOS Sahel did not work through conventional distribution systems it was agreed between the agencies that the same per household allowance would minimise confusion and competition between neighbouring PAs. In the five PAs in which SOS Sahel worked there were 114 *kires* with a total membership of approximately 7,100

households and an average membership per *kire* of 62 households. Under the SOS Sahel programme a total of 1,000 quintals (100 tonnes) of barley seed were distributed through the *kires* to 4,000 households, reaching 56 per cent of *kire* member households.

Each of the *kires* was given standard criteria to help them select households who most needed seed and who could best make productive use of the input. On the basis of collective beneficiary ranking they were asked to identify all those farmers who had their land ploughed and ready for sowing, but who had no seed, or no money available to buy seed. In line with the *kire's* own membership system only one member of each household (the head of household) was eligible.

The system of beneficiary ranking saw an important shift in the role of the *kire* leaders. Ranking was discussed at open *kire* meetings on the basis of collective agreement. At initial gatherings, when individual members raised their cases the leaders sought to back their own judgements and defend their position. In later meetings, however, *kire* elders adopted a neutral stance and facilitated more constructive discussion. Nevertheless, debate was lively both in terms of individual cases and more general arguments concerning, for instance, the eligibility of households who rented out their land, whether young men who had recently formed their own families should be

considered as separately eligible from their parents and whether members whose contributions had lapsed should be included. *Kire* groups devised their own solutions to these issues.

The transparent style of these meetings revealed isolated instances of abuse. In one case, for example, four members of the same PA official's family were listed which was openly challenged and revised by the community. This process also exposed local political cadres who posed as legitimate *kire* leaders, and eliminated the common practice among PA officials of exaggerating the PA size. Inflated population figures are often submitted under the conventional system since distribution quotas are allocated to each PA on the basis of the PA's relative size. SOS Sahel chose instead to try to respond to the needs of each *kire* on the basis of its size and the relative reported incidence of seed shortage among members. Overall the beneficiary selection process, through which *kires* identified less than 40 per cent of their members as being in need, was deemed fair, appropriate and was conducted without protest:¹⁵

No *kire* member complained as a result of the beneficiaries' selection. We were all responsible for the selection, therefore it was fair.

Memere Kassaw Kibret, Tegudadash *Kire*, PA 38

SOS Sahel had originally considered distributing cash to households to enable them to purchase the seed locally from markets within Meket's highlands. At this early stage however, the *kires'* capacity to manage a cash-based distribution was in question, it was feared that too radical a shift in distribution procedures might overload the traditional structures, and initial reports indicated that locally appropriate varieties were not available in sufficient quantities. Later feedback would show that a cash-based distribution was preferred by farmers and that in fact a significant volume of appropriate seed was traded in very small village-based weekly markets. In the event, however, the collection of seed from multiple isolated markets would have incurred time-consuming logistical difficulties, and in the interests of speed, seed was purchased from Tigray.

The suitability of an initial consignment was checked by a group of farmers who were selected by the community. The seeds were found to be of 2 different kinds: a poor quality highland variety not generally grown in Meket, and a high quality lowland variety. Farmers accepted the latter, even though it

was not suitable for their planting needs, since its high quality made it easily exchangeable for highland-adapted seed in local markets. Later reports would suggest that since community participation in the selection of seed types was a new practice, farmers were reluctant to reject the seed for fear that it would not be replaced on time if at all.

On each day of the distribution, which was conducted in the central market town of Estayesh, *Kire* Seed Credit Committees and nominated beneficiaries from a single PA collected and distributed the seed. Confusion over the type and amount of repayment led to some minor delays in the distribution process. Initial suggestions of cash repayment were rejected by the *kires* who favoured repayment in kind. The *kires* also raised the proposed interest rate from 5 per cent (calculated on the basis of a cash repayment) to 20 per cent for the in-kind credit repayment which they felt was a more realistic figure to compensate for accidental transportation and storage losses. The *Kire* Committees signed statements with SOS Sahel to indicate that they had received the seed but were bound by no other agreements with the agency. The beneficiaries themselves, however, signed for the credit they received with their respective *kires*. Since the seed and the interest were to be repaid to the *kires* and not to SOS Sahel the direct link between beneficiary household and *kire* established by this procedure not only encouraged a sense of community-ownership

of the resource but also provided the *kires* with the necessary records and authority to demand repayment.

Monitoring

From the outset, working with *kires* enabled a positive dialogue to be established between the community and the supporting agency. The programmes' direction and progress was therefore subject to extensive community monitoring and feedback. A positive initial indication of *kire* participation was their own demand to monitor the crop of the beneficiaries during the growing period to avoid later disputes over the ability of recipients to repay to the *kire* after the harvest in January. *Kire* leaders therefore proposed two monitoring periods, after planting (August) and after the frost period (November), to enable them to assess crop performance and farmers' capacity to repay.

From the first monitoring exercise, for example, a sample of 25 *kire* reports (representing 1,091 beneficiaries) indicated that 89 per cent of households had exchanged some or all of their seed for locally appropriate varieties. It was also found that because of associated food shortages 14 per cent of beneficiaries had eaten more than half of the seed provided while 6 per cent had eaten less than half. In terms of crop performance, 53 per cent of households reported a fair condition while 5 per cent indicated that crops had been

damaged as a result of pest infestation from worm-like insects known as *Meske* and heavy rains. Indeed, by October 1995 nutritional surveillance surveys reported that the *meher* rains in North Wollo were worse than those the previous year (Save the Children Fund UK, October 1995).

SOS Sahel organised participatory evaluation and orientation workshops for *Kire* Seed Credit Committees at regular intervals to offer communities further opportunities to comment on the distribution process and to feed into future planning. The main conclusions and observations which were presented by the *kires* during the workshops were as follows:

1. The seed was delivered and distributed in adequate time for the *meher* planting season.
2. Although the type of seed was inappropriate exchange rates for local seed were favourable and sufficient quantities of local seed were available in small village markets. The vast majority of beneficiaries exchanged their seed while those who experimented with the *kolla* variety planted only small quantities. Generally it was found that the barley seed purchased by the project from Tigray did not perform well, it withered quickly and proved particularly susceptible to heavy rains. *Kire* representatives suggested that any future seed credit programme be based on cash payments to enable

farmers to purchase seed varieties suitable to the prevailing agro-ecological zone.

3. The main criticism of the distribution was the quantity of seed involved. All *kire* leaders agreed that the number of beneficiaries reached and the amount of seed they each received were inadequate. In some cases only a proportion of the households who met the criteria actually received seed credit which caused resentment and brought pressure upon the *kire* leaders. Most farmers also stated that a figure of about 60kg per household (rather than the 25kg provided) would have been needed to sow available land which remained fallow after the distribution.
4. *Kire* leaders found the reporting procedures and training effective and easy to understand.¹⁶ At no point did it appear that the *kires* were over-burdened during the process and they felt that the literate *kire* assistants were effective in helping them keep records.
5. Theft, pests and water infiltration were identified as the main problems that the *kires* faced in storing the seed. They therefore appointed trusted individuals who owned large underground pits or first storey rooms, in a central location within the community, to deal with these problems. Several *kires* also proposed that the role of store-keeper would be rotated among members to prevent theft.

Credit Repayment

One of the key features of the programme was that the *kires* were encouraged to secure repayment of the seed with interest to enable them to establish community-managed seed banks. In February 1996 an average of 38.4 per cent of beneficiaries had repaid the seed with interest. Within a month the overall repayment rate had increased to 57.36 per cent across the five PAs. Table 1 indicates the repayment rate for each PA as of March 1996.¹⁷

Table 1 Percentage of beneficiary households who repaid seed credit by Peasant Association.

	No. of Kires	Beneficiaries	Repaid	Percentage
PA 37	14	548	362	66.06
PA 38	46	961	879	91.47
PA 39	20	841	271	32.22
PA 40	11	849	237	27.92
PA 41	23	760	522	68.68
Total	114	3959	2271	57.36

Kire leaders have considered punitive action against defaulters whose harvests were good while those who are known to have suffered crop failure were exempted. There were, however, marked variations in repayment rates both between *kires* and within the different PAs. In addition to crop failure, a key factor to which these variations were attributed was the strength of the working relationship

between the *kires* and the PA Committees. Despite initial reservations, the resentment and obstruction from PA officials which might have been expected was not evident during the programme and their positive engagement with *kire* leaders was significant during the credit repayment stage. SOS Sahel's support for this partnership was not founded on a lack of confidence in the *kires'* influence but rather on the need for community authorities to present a united voice. Since requests for credit repayment in Meket had been previously ineffective it was clear that the additional weight of authority which the PAs offered in backing the *kires'* demands was beneficial.

In PAs 37 and 38 strong leadership and a good relationship between *kires* and the PA structures contributed to high repayment rates even though the interim evaluation in these PAs noted crop damage due to pests and flooding. In PA 41 the PA Committee is reported to have been convinced of the need to assist *kire* leaders in enforcing repayment following a series of monitoring visits in February 1996 and repayment rates consequently rose from 19 to 69 per cent over a 3 week period. Equally, reports from PA 39 suggested that PA and *kire* leaders devoted less time to monitoring the distribution because of trading concerns in Estayesh, and the lowest rate of repayment, 28 per cent in PA 40, appears to coincide with poor leadership as the PA chairman was replaced in April 1996.

Table 2 Distribution of repayment rates by *Kire*

Percentage Seed Repaid	Number
0	14
1-19	4
20-39	8
40-59	12
60-79	17
80-99	36
100	23

The increase in repayment rates, to an average of 56.7 per cent in March, with 23 *kires* recording 100 per cent repayment from their beneficiaries (as indicated in Table 2), was encouraging, especially given the poor history of credit repayments in the area in the past. In contrast, by April 1996 no repayments had been reported under the PA-based Ministry of Agriculture seed distribution in the *woreda*. Participants' views clearly suggest that the sense of community-ownership

was a strong contributory factor in the relative success of the *kire*-based programme:

You told us that the seed belongs to our *kire*, then we agreed and we set the interest and now we have repaid. This process will in the future help our *kire* to be financially strong as well. Our *kire* received 5 quintals last year, today we have 7. This is good progress.

Memere Kassaw Kibret, Tegudadash Kire, PA 38

CONCLUSION

From a short-term perspective the seed distribution programme alleviated the need of many farmers to migrate for employment and to engage in share-cropping arrangements. The long-term overall effects of the programme, however, have yet to be determined. The seed distribution, which sought to reduce farmers' seasonal risk and to reconstitute seed stocks, complements activities such as on-farm trials at SOS Sahel's project which aim to diversify the crop varieties available to highland farmers. Nevertheless, the *kire*-based seed distribution programme represents a significant step in enabling communities in Meket to undertake locally appropriate interventions which are managed according to familiar and respected procedures.

The unsuccessful attempt to involve community organisations in selecting seed varieties, however, illustrates an important point relevant for this type of NGO intervention, since as Cromwell et al identifies, '... there is a dearth of projects that are compatible with strengthening community control of seed systems. Few NGOs are using existing community structures and working with local varieties or adapted modern varieties appropriate to small farmers' needs' (1993: 98). It is apparent from this project that the balance between a process approach which emphasises community participation and the need for technical expertise (in areas such as seed selection) has significant implications for the capacities demanded of local staff and on project performance. It might be argued in this case that the investment made in facilitating community control, and the role of the *kires* in particular, might have undermined the technical success of the project had farmers not been able to exchange the lowland seed variety without serious economic loss. More convincing, however, is the contention that with a stronger relationship established between SOS Sahel and the *kires* the issue might not have arisen at all. The status accorded the *kires* as legitimate institutions by the project has given them and their members a confidence which was lacking at the time of the seed variety selection. At this point the group of farmers nominated by the community were not prepared to identify the agency's error and only in later meetings did the *kire* leaders suggest that a

cash-based distribution would have enabled the purchase of local varieties in the small village markets. The selection of appropriate seed varieties for relief distribution programmes is therefore a significant technical problem but it is evident from this experience that investment in supporting local institutions is also investment in validating indigenous knowledge.

As a result of the programme, beneficiaries and *kire* representatives were keen to redistribute seed to those in need for the next agricultural season, with the seed again being given on credit with repayment at the same rate of interest. At the time of writing this second cycle is underway with SOS Sahel 'topping-up' the most effective seed banks and testing a cash-based approach. The significant role played by the *kires* in the seed bank programme also subsequently led to their participation in other project activities such as *kire*-managed woodlots.¹⁸ Local responses confirm that the programme has strengthened the role of the *kire* in other activities:

One thing the programme contributed was greater respect for the *kire*. *Kires* which were on the verge of collapse before the seed distribution are now becoming very strong.

Berhanu Guangule, Tedomash Kire, PA 40

Indeed, reports suggest that the *kires* have become particularly active in settling disputes concerning divorce and land boundaries following the distribution. In many respects this provides a clear endorsement of a strategy which was designed to enable local institutions to assume the role of 'critical partner' in the programme and which aimed to enhance the capacity of community-based organisation in playing a wider role in problem identification and resolution.

In the context of local institutional development in Ethiopia, the programme illustrates the potential for operationalising knowledge of how local societies are organised. It highlights the practical opportunities available for governmental and non-governmental agencies to link awareness of these local capacities to productive activities. This is particularly relevant to food security interventions, since as Dessalegn argues, '... the rural population, especially the peasantry in areas with a long history of food shortages, has over the decades evolved relatively effective techniques of coping with hunger and privation, and if these techniques are improved, strengthened and extended, they can form the basis of a viable and indigenous system of famine survival' (1991: 33).

NOTES

¹ The project was designed and implemented in collaboration between staff at SOS Sahel's Wollo Agricultural Support Project (WASP) and a research team looking at the development roles of local institutions in North Wollo. The WASP project is funded by the Royal Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the emergency seed distribution was funded by the Overseas Development Administration of the British government. Members of the WASP staff closely involved with the project included Yadessa Girme, Martha Negussie, Paul Laird, Betemariam Kitaw, Tom Hockley, and Tessfaye Cherenet. The research team was led by Solomon Shone and Yeshiwas Assefa. Special thanks also to Feyera Abdi, Hazel Godfrey, Duncan Fulton and Brigdet Crumpton for their contributions to the project. This paper draws on research material compiled in Meket along with project reports produced by Solomon Shone, the WASP staff and Hazel Godfrey.

² Bratton (1988) provides a critical analysis of the role of local institutions and civil society in state-society relations.

³ The capacity of rotating savings and credit associations, elsewhere known as *esusu* (Nigeria), *tontine* (Mali) and *sandoug* (Sudan), has long been recognised as a potential 'middle-rung' in development (Geertz, 1962) and a

significant community-based adaptation to poverty (Kurtz, 1973).

⁴ Recent experiences in which NGOs have worked with *kires* and *ekubs* in different sectors of intervention include The Netherlands' Development Organisation's (SNV) Integrated Rural Development Programme in Bugna Woreda, North Wollo; the Community Empowerment Programme conducted by the zonal government administration and funded by SIDA in South Wollo; ACORD's Dire Dawa Urban Development Programme, and FarmAfrica's Community Forestry and Wildlife Project.

⁵ Prior to reorganisation in 1987 and again in 1991 Ethiopia's administrative system was made up of 14 provinces, 102 districts (*awraja*) and around 600 sub-districts (*woreda*). Since 1991, the *woreda* has remained as the smallest administrative unit, but the zonal level has replaced the *awraja*, and the province has been replaced by the region.

⁶ According to the Population and Housing Census, Analytical Report on Wollo Region produced in 1991, 78.6 per cent of the population of North Wollo were Amhara.

⁷ 1 quintal is equal to 100kgs.

⁸ The Saint's Day *mahaber* is a rotating feasting and prayer group. The groups meet on a specific saint's day every month in the Ethiopian Orthodox calendar in an individual's home. Membership of the *mahaber* frequently represents the *mizea*,

an informal network of 12 friends who contribute gifts to each other's wedding. *Sembete* refers to the Sabbath and is a group which meets in the church compound every Sunday. Membership of *sembete* is inherited. While representing an affirmation of individual faith, the *sembete* is also an occasion at which members extend hospitality and invite poor neighbours to share food which is provided by members on a rotational basis.

⁹ In his thesis, Fecadu Gedamu (1972), suggests that *idirs* were originally formed in urban centres. Other theories have suggested that *idirs* were formed as a result of the Italian invasion in 1935 because of the loss of life and disintegration of social institutions (Levine, 1965).

¹⁰ As Dessalegn observes of Wollo, until the formation of Peasant Associations, the *got* was, '... the most important social frame of reference of every peasant here. Even now many peasants in the region - highlanders more than lowlanders - identify with the *got* rather than with the larger *kebbelae* or peasant association' (1991: 26).

¹¹ The Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV) working in neighbouring Bugna *woreda*, North Wollo, had initially engaged the *kire* in a distribution programme in 1992 under the Complementary Emergency Recovery and Reconstruction Programme.

- ¹² In urban centres and other regions of Ethiopia cash-based systems predominate which give the *kire* additional scope to provide credit.
- ¹³ In addition to arrangements for the death of close relatives of *kire* households living in the community, the *kire* also organises contributions for ceremonies held on the death of a members' relative living outside the community (*murdo*) and the *kire* membership will attend the funeral of a members' relative in a neighbouring community (*terri*).
- ¹⁴ While *kires* are not formally registered with the authorities their functions are recognised informally by each PA chairman (*kebele mastadadir*).
- ¹⁵ It was not possible to effectively compare beneficiary selection between the *kire*-based system and previous PA-based distributions because of the different community boundaries and selection criteria involved.
- ¹⁶ Each monitoring exercise was based on a tour of beneficiaries' land-holdings in which observations of crop performance based on general guidelines provided by SOS Sahel were recorded by the literate *kire* assistants. Formal training for the reporting of crop performance and later seed repayment was limited to equipping *kire* leaders with essential guidelines and to familiarising *kire* assistants with the reproduction and completion of pre-prepared forms.

¹⁷ All repayment figures are based on the final project report to ODA compiled on 23 March 1996.

¹⁸ The approach which supports local institutional development in Meket, and which the seed distribution validated, has also led SOS Sahel to strengthen the management capacity of *kires*, *tertims* (a daily coffee drinking group among Muslim communities) and *ekubs*, in financing income generating activities.

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