

Summary

This thesis investigates the living conditions of farm households in rural Wolaita, Ethiopia, their adaptation and diversification activities and limits, as well as responses to risks and uncertainty. It shows how some farm household coping strategies can also exacerbate their susceptibility to risks and vulnerability. The thesis also highlights the need to ensure land tenure rights to promote rural livelihoods and economic growth in Ethiopia.

Paper I examines factors constraining livelihoods, the adaptation and diversification activities of households, and the relative contributions of different activities to household income in rural Wolaita. Findings indicate that rainfall variability, declining farm size, shortage of draught power and institutional deficiencies in input and credit delivery were the main constraints to livelihood endeavours. Rainfall was highly erratic and there was an apparent lack of public investment in infrastructure to reduce the risk of rainfed agriculture. The majority of households faced critical food shortages for about five months in the year and dependence on food aid was very high. The contribution of non-farm sources to household income in the Wolaita zone was quite low and adaptation and diversification activities were limited by asset poverty, poor access to credit and input supplies, and lack of opportunities. Frequent production losses and coping with seasonal food shortages through asset sales, renting out agricultural land, and borrowing were found to perpetuate food insecurity and poverty.

Paper II analyses the effects of the costs of funeral and wedding ceremonies on livelihoods and the significance of assistance from risk sharing networks in rural Wolaita. Both funeral and wedding costs were very high and participation in risk sharing and resource pooling were highly appreciated. Investment in social relations and conforming to local norms were the main reasons why households spent excessively on wedding and funeral ceremonies. Good social relations were sought in order to secure support and cooperation in livelihood endeavours, and also in cases of accidents and property losses. Nearly all the households who held funeral and wedding ceremonies ended up having critical food shortages. Evidence suggests that as much as investment in social relations helps to cope with risks and shocks, it may also increase household susceptibility to them.

Paper III assesses fertility and fertility behaviour in rural Wolaita in the light of the assumptions and objectives of the national population policy of Ethiopia. Fertility levels remained high and unchanged since 1993 in the study area, more than a decade after the launching of the national population policy. The reasons for this lay not in a lack of awareness about family planning and its usefulness but in factors that reinforced parental preference for 'many' children and in religious beliefs and the widespread perception that contraceptives would be harmful to women's health. The study concludes that fertility is closely linked to poverty and livelihood insecurity as well as other wider development issues, and cannot be adequately addressed using family planning alone. To achieve significant fertility decline it is essential to coordinate the provision of family planning services with comprehensive reforms directed at addressing rural poverty and livelihood

insecurity, improvement in the conditions for women, the provision of basic infrastructure, and the creation of alternative opportunities.

Paper IV investigates the possibility of accommodating growth and equity issues in a land tenure system in Ethiopia. It identifies factors in a tenure system that are essential for growth and equity goals. Both equity and growth issues are critical in Ethiopia because of the importance of agriculture to the livelihoods of about 85% of the population and to the national economy. The current state ownership of rural land provides better equity in land distribution but fails to provide tenure security, which is considered an important component for growth and better land management. Ambiguity of tenure rights; the conditions, restrictions and obligations attached to user rights; the practice of land redistribution or the threat of it; and undue official interference in land-related issues are factors identified as causing tenure insecurity. Providing clearly defined long-term and transferable use rights that are effectively protected and enforced by law could qualitatively improve tenure security. The fulfilment of these conditions would enable state ownership of land to serve both equity and growth goals. The paper also highlights the need to complement tenure rights with compatible institutional arrangements that enable farmers to access credit, inputs and marketing channels, as well as the need to make substantial investments in rural infrastructure and the development of nonfarm opportunities.