

Ethiopia.

The South Wollo area of Ethiopia has long been part of Ethiopia's plow-based intensive agricultural system, which has sustained substantial populations over many centuries. Ironically, it was also the epicenter of cyclical famines including the tragic famines of 1973/1974 and 1984/1985. Famines of such magnitude have lately become rare, thanks to improved early warning systems and government-provided safety-net and asset-protection programs. However, seasonal agricultural shocks—including prolonged droughts, poorly timed rains, frosts and crop pests—remain important challenges to millions of farmers.

The two South Wollo villages chosen for this study are located at different altitudinal gradients. The first village, hereafter called the “highland” for shorthand, is located in a moderately cold zone locally called *dega* ‘Afro-alpine highland.’ The second, hereafter called the “lowland,” is nested in a low-lying isolated valley locally classified as *kola* ‘hot lowland.’ The elevation ranges from about 2500 meters above sea level in the first to below 2000 in the second.

This vertical difference is undoubtedly associated with further variation in other agro-ecological features including timing and duration of main growing season, plus crop diversity. In normal years, farmers in the highland village cultivate twice, using both *belg* ‘spring,’ from February to May, *kirmet* ‘summer,’ from June to September, rains. By contrast, the lowland village relies solely on summer rains. Compared to the highland, the topography in the lowland village is relatively flat and extensively cultivated. Although moisture-stressed, the soils are extremely fertile, conducive for cultivating a wide variety of crops including teff, maize, sorghum, wheat, barley, horse beans, cow peas, chickpeas, lentils, and fenugreek. Separated from the neighboring village by a dry stream, the village consists of 60 household units, clustered into four neighborhood groups inhabited by closely related families.

The highland village consists of 56 homesteads, horizontally distributed along the middle slope of a low rising mountain range. Each household owns patches of plots vertically scattered between swampy fields along the valley below the homesteads and the dry grounds on the summit above. Like in other highland area of South Wollo, a majority of these households suffer from chronic food insecurity, i.e., they don't produce enough food to feed themselves year round. Studies attribute this difficulty to many factors, most notably ill-advised rural development programs. Yet, farmers and local government officials alike often single out erratic rains as the most important factor to blame. To an extent, this claim is valid. The rains in this village, like in some other parts of northeastern Ethiopia, tend to be unreliable for crop cultivation as they are too scattered and few in the spring, and extremely heavy and intense in the summer.

Despite these variations in growing seasons and degree of food self-sufficiency, the two villages share many historical and socio-cultural features in common. While currently Amharic-speaking and predominantly Muslim, residents of both villages are descendants of Oromo lineages that settled in the area as part of a larger northward expansion of

different Oromo communities beginning in the 16th century. More relevant for this study, each village comprises the smallest unit of an all-inclusive residence-based community called *qire*, widely known outside South Wollo as *iddir*, and commonly translated in English as ‘burial society.’ While primarily concerned with helping members in times of death, the *qire* in both villages also functions as a collective action group that coordinates village-wide responses against common threats. In times of prolonged droughts or other rainfall related threats, for example, the *qire*—led by an elected man addressed as *qire dagna* ‘judge of the *qire*’—organizes communal prayers and sacrificial rites. Specific responsibilities of the *qire dagna* include collecting contributions from individual members and visiting *awaki* ‘men of knowledge’ on behalf of the *qire*. In doing so, the *qire dagna* relies on the support of knowledgeable neighbors and other helpers.