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To cite this article: Melisew Dejene & Logan Cochrane (2021): Safety nets as a means of tackling chronic food insecurity in rural southern Ethiopia: what is constraining programme contributions?, Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue canadienne d'études du développement, DOI: [10.1080/02255189.2021.1914559](https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2021.1914559)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2021.1914559>



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Published online: 07 May 2021.



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Safety nets as a means of tackling chronic food insecurity in rural southern Ethiopia: what is constraining programme contributions?

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ABSTRACT

Agriculture is the predominant livelihood in rural Ethiopia, where chronic food insecurity is prevalent. In 2005, Ethiopia launched the Productive Safety Net Program, aiming to improve rural livelihoods and food security. This study focuses on the primary modality of the programme: food and/or cash in exchange for labour. We analyse how the supports have contributed to the stated objectives, assessing food security status using two measurement tools (Household Food Insecurity Access Scale, Coping Strategies Index). We find that the programme has not reached its potential due to unpredictable and delayed payments, exposing households to unconventional debt arrangements, often exacerbating vulnerability.

RÉSUMÉ

L'agriculture est l'activité de subsistance prédominante en Éthiopie rurale, où l'insécurité alimentaire chronique est courante. En 2005, l'Éthiopie a lancé le Programme de filet de sécurité productif dans le but d'améliorer la subsistance et la sécurité alimentaire dans les milieux ruraux. Cet article concentre son analyse sur les modalités principales de ce programme : la rémunération du labeur en nourriture ou en espèces. Nous analysons la manière dont le soutien apporté par ce programme aux foyers ruraux a contribué aux objectifs établis par le gouvernement en utilisant deux outils de mesure (le Barème d'évaluation de la sécurité alimentaire des ménages et l'Indice des stratégies d'adaptation) pour évaluer le niveau de sécurité alimentaire. Nous estimons que ce programme n'a pas atteint son potentiel du fait de ses paiements imprévisibles et tardifs qui obligent les foyers ruraux à recourir à des arrangements non-conventionnels pour gérer leurs dettes, ce qui exacerbe souvent leur vulnérabilité.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 3 February 2020
Accepted 11 March 2021

KEYWORDS

Ethiopia; safety net; food insecurity; public works; coping strategies

Introduction

Agrarian change, land tenure and food security have been the subject of research in Ethiopia for decades. The land question has been the centre of activism since the

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1960s (Zewde 2014) and remains a key issue in contemporary contestation. However, over the decades, there has been significant change in the tenure system, most notably the agrarian reform undertaken by the military government. According to Rahmato (1993, 40), the agrarian reform of the military government (1974–1991) “redefined the land system in a radical way but in doing so made insecurity of holding an enduring element”. The agrarian transformation of 1975 created opportunity, but also vulnerability, because it abolished landlordism while also making land a state property, with citizens entitled only to usufruct rights. The land reform coincided with resettlement, vil-lagisation, collectivisation and a host of socialist-inspired, state-driven, transformations. The current government has largely kept the 1975 tenure system, adding a land certification system, arguably to offer a degree of tenure security, while the state-maintained ownership of all land and peasants had usufruct rights. Food security is a key driver of decision making about agrarian transformation. The demands of student movements in the 1960s and the reform by the military government in the 1970s were in response to extreme food insecurity events. The government of Ethiopia is cognizant that food security is among the variables of the agrarian question, as well as political stability, and has created a host of policies and programmes to transform the agrarian systems.

In the 1990s, early after coming to power, the EPRDF-led (Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front) government introduced ADLI (Agricultural Led Development Industrialization) that aimed to guide the economy as a whole including the rural agriculture sector. ADLI broadly aimed to transform the economy by fostering high economic growth, eliminating the dependency on food aid, and supporting a broad spectrum of the population (MoFED 2003, 9). On the first objective, high levels of macro-economic growth have been experienced (Cochrane and Bekele 2018). Presumably various public revenues were invested in public infrastructure which facilitated private investment. On the second and third objectives, however, the results have been mixed. Ethiopia has been able to prevent the occurrence of famine, but food insecurity remains chronic and widespread (Cochrane 2017; Dejene 2019; Dejene and Cochrane 2019). Rural vulnerability to shocks increased from 14.9 per cent in 2000 to 19.5 per cent in 2010¹ (Rahmato 2013, 116). One of the largest investments, the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP), launched in 2005 supports an estimated 8 million land-scarce and landless peasant households that experience food insecurity. Although the PSNP has been in operation for a decade, the drought of 2015/16 required emergency food aid for an additional 10 million people² (DRMFSS 2016). More than one-in-four people, 28 per cent, live under the food poverty line (CSA and WFP 2014). The sustained macro-economic growth has not relieved the country from the food insecurity burden.

Safety nets and programmes to support chronically food insecure households are required. This study does not explore “what” ought to be done per se, but critically analyses the PSNP to better understand “how” the other two objectives of ADLI can best be met. Safety nets, as a form of distributive justice, are supported as a means to stabilise households during shocks, enhance livelihoods during stability, and enable people to overcome the vulnerabilities of food insecurity (e.g. Crush and Frayne 2011; Devereux 2012); in other words the “what” is not being contested per se. The reasons why food insecurity continues have often been blamed on other “what” issues as most problems were attributed to the vagaries of nature more work is needed on how better the food insecurity challenges be tackled. The food insecurity measures adopted help us reveal

how client households are coping with the situation fore sighting how better the challenges be addressed. This study contributes to an emerging critical literature (e.g. Diriba 2018; Chanyalew 2017; Tolossa 2005) that views the challenges as rooted in “how” existing programmes are designed, and thus the ways in which the Government of Ethiopia is forcing a particular type of agrarian transformation. These policies are important because they are connected to the first ADLI objective, of economic growth rooted in rural agriculture. While the peasants are envisioned as the ones contributing to that growth through the export of their surplus, they are also the ones who bear the greatest burdens of chronic food insecurity and have benefited the least from the economic transformation. Focusing upon southern Ethiopia, we utilise the HFIAS and the CSI to understand the contributions of the PSNP, and specifically to elaborate on the “how” components of why chronic food insecurity has worsened despite significant investment into safety net and emergency relief programmes.

The context

Agriculture is a major source of livelihood in Ethiopia where an estimated 80 per cent of the population is agrarian. Agriculture contributes around 40 per cent of the nation’s GDP, depending on the year (Cochrane and Bekele 2018). Despite their significance to the economy, smallholder farmers are challenged by the vulnerabilities of rainfed agricultural practices (Geda 2011) and by land insufficient to meet basic needs, even in the best of years³ (Abebe and Shanko 2018; CSA and WFP 2014; Haddis 2014; Negatu 2010, 2016; Rahmato 2018). For decades, government policies have sought to support the agricultural sector, and smallholder farmers specifically. In the 1990s the EPRDF government introduced the ADLI, and successive policies, strategies and plans came into effect under its umbrella, including GTP II (2015/16–2019/2020), among others aimed to achieve food security. Each of those policies, in varying ways, put agriculture at the epicentre of economic transformation. While the agricultural sector has grown over the last two decades, so too has the number of people experiencing chronic or temporary food insecurity.

The oft-cited definition of food security by FAO conceives it as existing, “... when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (World Food Summit, 1996 cited in FAO 2006, 1). The FAO definition captures four dimensions: *food availability*, *food access*, *stability of the food supply*, and *food utilisation*. The issue of *availability* refers to the supply dimension where food is available in quality and adequacy for a healthy diet. Access is about “adequate resources (entitlements) for acquiring appropriate foods for a nutritious diet” (FAO 2006, 1). *Stability of food supply* conveys the idea that food can be accessed by an individual, household, a population at all times. *Utilisation* conveys the issue of safety towards meeting the nutrition and dietary needs of people (FAO 2006).

In what could be classified as a stabilising function of food security, the Government of Ethiopia, in collaboration with donors, introduced the PSNP in 2005 as its key mechanism for strengthening food security. The PSNP covered over 8 million people (Berhane et al. 2020; Pankhurst and Rahmato 2013) in 319 food insecure rural *woredas* (districts) (Pankhurst and Rahmato 2013, xxvi). The Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) was designed having three-pronged purposes. These are: “smoothing food consumption”

for the chronically food insecure rural poor, through cash or food transfer during “hunger season” (“protection from hunger”); “protecting household assets” by cushioning asset depletion due to food insecurity (“preventive”); “building community assets” (“promotive”) using the public works component that has been mostly focused on building village and feeder roads (Devereux and Guenthe 2009, 4). The fourth phase of the PSNP was aimed to “to be a systemic response to complex challenges of reducing food insecurity, improving livelihoods, and improving health and nutrition outcomes while at the same time contributing to broader national goals, such as the Climate Resilient Green Economy ...” (Berhane et al. 2020, 1). PSNP has also included a Behavioural Change Communication (BCC) session that aimed at sensitising client households in hygiene, child nutrition and prenatal care for mothers which has important goals but limited by shortage of resources and personnel to implement it as Health Extension Workers have several responsibilities at the community level (Berhane et al. 2020, 120–121). At the national level, its implementation involved the Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources (MoNR), the Ministry of Health (MoH), and Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA). While donor funded, there has been a vision from the outset to transition the funding of the programme to the government (MoA 2014, 2–8).

Politics, capacity limitations and governance issues have affected the implementation of social protection programmes (Hickey et al. 2020; Niño-Zarazúa et al. 2012). Likewise, there have been issues regarding state capacity in governance, accountability and participation at different levels of the PSNP implementation (Berhane et al. 2020; Hoddinot et al. 2013; Berhane et al. 2011). This has to do with the highly centralised nature of policy making and governance in the Ethiopian Developmental State (Vaughan and Rafanell 2012) and the involvement of politics in PSNP participation and implementation especially at the lowest administration level (Cochrane and Tamiru 2016; Hoddinot et al. 2013). A recently publicised evaluation on PSNP IV identified social accountability and governance issues at the lowest administration level (Berhane et al. 2020). A case in point is that “29 percent of [women] reported they were discouraged from stopping work by the Community Food Security Taskforce” during their pregnancy, against the provisions of the implementation manual for women to be on Temporary Direct Support (TDS) during most of their pregnancy period and for 12 months after birth. Additionally, a substantial proportion of mothers, 36 per cent, were made to resume working five months after their lactation period (Berhane et al. 2020, xii–xiii). Part of the causes for these are limitations of capacity and training at the lowest levels of PSNP implementation, however these implementation issues also relate to power and control as local officials flaunt the guidelines of the programme (e.g. Cochrane and Tamiru 2016).

The PSNP targeted land-scarce and landless poor households through its Public Works and Direct Support (for labour-constrained households) components. Being landless or land-scarce or having landless youth is one of the criteria for households to be entitled for participation in the PSNP (MoA 2014). Other eligibility criteria for PSNP include; facing shocks that caused asset depletion; lacking external support (from other safety nets or family); and facing food gaps (MoA 2014). However, given the lack of progress (or “graduation” in the language of the PSNP), a critical question is how the supports provided are envisioned as contributing to boosting the coping strategies of landless and land scarce households towards tackling the food insecurity

challenge. The programme, with its specific form, requirements and processes, outline a particular type of agrarian transformation.

Study design, study sites and methods

This study utilises mixed-method research design. We collected data primarily from households that are clients of PSNP Public Works component to see its contributions on household food insecurity. We also held focus group discussions (FGDs) with food security task force committee members at *woreda* and *kebele* levels. The food security task force committees are local bodies responsible for administrative issues and also for overseeing the implementation of the PSNP. Data was collected in two areas of Southern Ethiopia, Sidama and Hadiya (see Figure 1) in two rounds in May–June 2017 and in July 2018. Most of the data was collected in May–June 2017. We also collected follow up qualitative data in July 2018. Building upon our extensive research experience in Sidama and Hadiya, we selected the study sites. We then purposively selected two PSNP vulnerable and food insecure *woredas* (districts) as the areas are drought prone food insecure *woredas* Boricha from Sidama and Shashego from Hadiya. Following that, two PSNP *kebeles* from each *woreda* were randomly selected. Those rural households that were benefiting from the Public Works (PWs) component of the PSNP were randomly chosen for the household survey. A total of 389 households were drawn to be involved in the survey using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination formula, of which 67 per cent were male-headed and 33 per cent female-headed where the national average for female-headed households is 25 per cent (CSA and ICF 2016).

Understanding the contribution of the PSNP Public Works programme to tackling food insecurity among landless and land scarce households requires assessing the food security situation of client households. Our aim here is not to gauge the variance by land ownership. We rather are interested in studying the PSNP's role in relieving the food insecurity distress among client households who are recruited, for they were

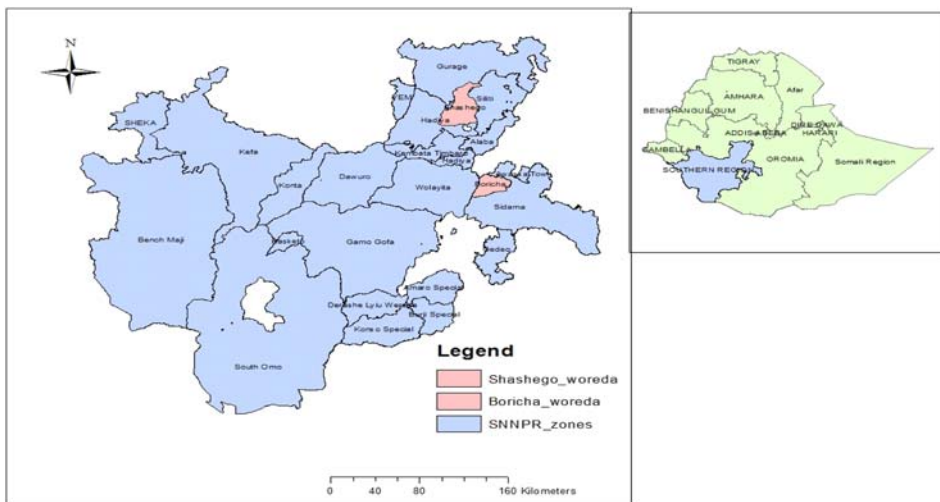


Figure 1. Map of the study areas.

landless or land scarce. In light of the stabilising function, this study assumes as the study participants who are clients of the fourth phase of the PSNP have been in the programme for a minimum of two years. PSNP IV came into effect in January 2015 and we collected most of the household level data in May–June 2017. We assumed the transfers from the programme could have helped them smooth their consumption and tackle the food insecurity challenge at household level. The study, however, is methodologically limited in the sense that we did not have baseline data that could serve as a benchmark to gauge the extent to which the intervention helped clients in terms of tackling the food insecurity challenge.

There are various measures of food (in) security including the FAO measure which was presented earlier. Others measures utilised by public health and nutrition researchers include anthropometry and dietary intake scales. The study adopted the HFIAS, one of the experience based measures, which has proved feasible to measure food insecurity in both developed as well as developing countries including Ethiopia (Maxwell, Vaitla, and Coates 2014; Maxwell, Jennifer, and Bapu 2013; Coates, Swindale, and Bilinsky 2007; Coates, Patrick, and Robert 2003). HFIAS has nine variables that aim to investigate different levels of food insecurity. Specifically, (1) households' uncertainty or worry about food, (2) ability/inability to eat food of their preference, (3) if they eat a few kinds of foods or a variety, (4) if they eat foods they do not want to, (5) if they eat a smaller meal because of shortage, (6) if they eat fewer meals a day due to lack, (7) if they faced a situation that there was no food of any kind at home, (8) if they went to bed hungry and (9) if there was a situation where they went a whole day and night without eating. In order to gauge households' ability to fend off food insecurity, the study adopted the CSI, which has a wider application for assessing the "extent of food insecurity" at the household level (see Maxwell, Caldwell, and Langworthy 2008). This was used in order to see if the transfers by the PSNP improved the households' coping strategies. The study asked household clients of the PSNP Public Works component their coping strategies, as the extent of food insecurity is subject to the coping strategies they adopt (World Bank 1998; Yared 2010). The questions we asked are broadly: strategies households employ to lessen the influence of food insecurity on their household, including dietary change; mechanisms they deploy to boost short-term availability of food; and rationing strategies they employ (see Maxwell, Caldwell, and Langworthy 2008).

There are a number of limitations that readers should keep in mind when reading the findings of this research. First, we draw upon data from specific sites and as a result the findings should not be generalised. Second, for the specific questions we pose, we do not have comparable longitudinal or baseline data. This presents a limitation in comparing the context of the time of data collection to other points in time. That said, we do not offer an impact assessment of these activities over time and we believe the findings highlight the description of the food security status of PSNP Public Works' component client households. Critical implementation issues experienced by clients at the time of data collection, which warrant greater attention.

Results

The findings of the study reveal that land scarcity and landlessness are issues among the client households. The selection processes are targeting households that align with the

Table 1. Client households by size of landholding ($n = 389$).

	<i>N</i>	%
Own no land	24	6
<0.25 ha	284	73
0.26–0.5 ha	65	17
0.51–1 ha	14	4
Above 1 ha	2	1
Total	389	100

Source: Household survey (May–June, 2017).

inclusion criteria. Nine-in-ten of the PSNP Public Works client households under study hold 0.5 hectares of land or less, with 73 per cent, holding less than 0.25 hectares. A small percentage (6%) were landless (see Table 1). Land fragmentation and landholding size are among the determinants of farm income and subsequent food security (Rahmato 2018; Gebremedhin, Pender, and Ehui 2003). Land fragmentation has also been identified as a serious concern in rural Ethiopia (Rahmato 2018).

Smoothing consumption among landless and land scarce households is one of the purposes of the PSNP (MoA 2014). Given limited resources and enrolment potential, achieving this objective requires targeting the right clients. The PSNP IV implementation manual (PIM) prescribes that target households need to be chronically food insecure, have no means of other support, households with landless youth or those who lost their assets due to chronic illnesses like HIV/AIDS (MoA 2014). The study participants were asked questions related to these inclusion criteria. As shown in Table 2, the participants of this study reported that PSNP Public Works client households were either those who report having chronic food insecurity problem 98 per cent ($n = 383$), or that most of those recruited by the programme reported that they lacked adequate familial/ social support 96 per cent ($n = 373$), or that those recruited by the programme reported facing a sudden loss of assets due to chronic illness like AIDS, 77 per cent ($n = 301$) or that client households were those with landless youth 47 per cent ($n = 184$).

Qualitative data supported this finding; the targeted households were those who have no other livelihood options and those who are vulnerable to poverty. According to FGD participants from both of the *woredas* under study, the programme has targeted those deserving poor as per the requirements of the programme implementation manual. This has been ensured by involving the community in selection process.

The stabilising function of the PSNP Public Works programme, in terms of relieving seasonal stress or temporary food insecurity, is subject to timely and predictable transfers of assistance. In many cases this is done as a cash transfer, but in some areas it is food items or a combination. This was especially the case in the previous phases of the PSNP, especially PSNP I, II and III. In the communities under study, the Public

Table 2. Households' view of the PSNP-PWs targeting food insecure households ($n = 389$).

		<i>N</i>	%
Clients are those chronically food insecure	Yes	383	98
Clients of PWs are those with no adequate family support/ other means of social protection	Yes	373	96
Clients are those with sudden loss of assets due to chronic illnesses like AIDS	Yes	301	77
Client households are those with landless youth	Yes	184	47

Source: Household survey (May–June, 2017).

Table 3. Households' view of the timeliness and predictability of payment ($n = 389$).

Response		<i>N</i>	%
Payments are transferred on time within 15–20 days of the month	Yes	40	10
Payment for PWs is timely, predictable	Yes	167	43

Source: Household survey (May–June, 2017).

Works schedule runs from January to June. The PSNP IV implementation manual suggests that payments are to be paid within 15–20 days from the end of the month and that it should be predictable for client households to know when to receive it. As shown in Table 3, most of the respondents, 90 per cent ($n = 349$), however, reported that payments were not made within the 15–20 day timeframe. Regarding the predictability of payment, majority of the respondents, 57 per cent ($n = 222$), reported that the PSNP Public Works payment was not predictable at all. In fact, in all of the communities under study, both client households and the food security task force committee members who participated in the FGDs at woreda and kebele levels complained that payments were delayed. Additionally, the delay was a significant amount of time, an average of three months. The delays have significant negative implications for clients. As per the inclusion criteria, clients are chronically food insecure. However, due to a lack of timely transfer, households are forced to find other means to provide for the basic needs of their households. One example of this is borrowing small sums of cash, to be repaid with interest, during the interim period. One study in southern Ethiopia has found that borrowing is extremely common, and that the primary reason for borrowing it was to meet basic needs (Cochrane and Thornton 2017). Two outcomes of the transfer delay are lost value (due to interest incurred on loans) and vulnerability (as borrowers often obtain loans informally).

According to the food security task force committee members (both at *woreda* (district) and *kebele* levels) and the PSNP Public Works clients, the reason for the delay is the payment modality, which is made through the Omo Microfinance Institution (government microfinance institution in southern Ethiopia), which according to them, is beyond the capacity of the kebele, the woreda and even the zonal administrations. They are here referring to the Omo MFI as a paying institution as well as the government institutional arrangements in charge of the PSNP. One FGD participant explained:

The delay in payment [at regional or federal levels] is affecting the benefits the program could bring. The payment delay which happens usually has been pushing clients to resort to credit arrangements with loan-sharks. The interest rate and the arrangements are unusual. The lender forces the clients to pay up to 150% interest, even after the third day they might have taken the loan. They come with the clients on the day they receive payments. If payment is not delayed, I feel the transfer could help clients tackle their food insecurity problem. (FGD W1, K1)

Astonishingly, 88 per cent ($n = 342$) of the households reported that they spend the PSNP transfers to pay their debts. The findings of both the FGD and the household survey substantiate the payment delay and its unpredictability, and that it is exposing clients to debts with unreasonable high interest rates. This consigns the transfer payment to debt-servicing rather than its primary purpose of tackling household food insecurity.

As shown in Tables 4 and 5, the contribution of the Public Works programme in tackling the food insecurity challenge of its household clients has not been encouraging, viewed in both access and utilisation dimensions of food security. As shown in Table 4, for example, most of the PSNP Public Works clients, 92 per cent ($n = 358$), have a feeling of “anxiety or uncertainty” and worried about what they or their household members could consume, which is a well-founded concern as 46 per cent ($n = 177$) reported that this has happened to them. Less than a third, 29 per cent ($n = 111$) reported that they worried “rarely” and only 8 per cent ($n = 31$) of the respondents said that they

Table 4. PWs client households’ food security status ($n = 389$).

In the past four weeks ...		<i>N</i>	%
... did you worry that your household would not have enough food?	Yes	358	92
If you did worry ... , how often did this happen?	I did not worry	31	8
	Rarely (Once or twice in the past four weeks)	111	29
	Sometimes (three to ten times in the past four weeks)	177	46
	Often (More than ten times in the past four weeks)	70	18
... were you or your family member not able to eat the kinds of food you preferred because of lack of resources?	Yes	346	89
If you or your family member were not able to eat the kinds of food you preferred ... , How often did this happen?	This problem did not happen to me or any of my family members	43	11
	Rarely (Once or twice in the past four weeks)	106	27
	Sometimes (three to ten times in the past four weeks)	169	43
	Often (More than ten times in the past four weeks)	71	18
... did you or your family member have to eat a limited variety of foods due to lack of resources?	Yes	359	92
If you or your family member had to eat a limited variety of foods ... how often did this happen?	This problem did not happen to me or any of my family members	30	8
	Rarely (Once or twice in the past four weeks)	111	29
	Sometimes (three to ten times in the past four weeks)	168	43
	Often (More than ten times in the past four weeks)	80	21
... have to eat some foods you really didn’t want to eat because of a lack of resources to obtain other types?	Yes	300	77
If you or your family member had to eat some foods that you really didn’t want to eat ... , how often did this happen?	This problem did not happen to me or any of my family members	89	23
	Rarely (Once or twice in the past four weeks)	93	24
	Sometimes (three to ten times in the past four weeks)	161	41
	Often (More than ten times in the past four weeks)	46	12
... did you or any household member have to eat a smaller meal than you felt you needed because there was not enough food?	Yes	374	96
If you or your family member had to eat smaller meal than you felt you needed ... , how often did this happen?	This problem did not happen to me or any of my family members	15	4
	Rarely (Once or twice in the past four weeks)	0	0
	Sometimes (three to ten times in the past four weeks)	374	96
	Often	0	0

Source: Household survey (May–June, 2017).

did not worry about what they or their household would eat, within in the past four weeks. The findings suggest that there was a higher feeling of “anxiety” or “uncertainty” over what to eat among the PWs client households, albeit transfer primarily aimed at consumption smoothening.

As the data was collected in May, and June 2017 (during the PSNP period which runs from January to June in the study areas), and follow up interviews in July 2018 the implication is that the transfers from the PSNP Public Works has not minimised households’ feelings of anxiety due to food shortage. The vast majority of the respondents, 89 per cent ($n = 346$), were not able to eat the kind of food they or their household preferred to consume. This problem happened “sometimes” to majority of the respondents, 43 per cent ($n = 149$), “often” to 18 per cent ($n = 71$) and “rarely” to 27 per cent ($n = 106$). Only 11 per cent ($n = 43$) of the respondents reported that they or their household were able to eat the food they preferred. Most of the respondents, 92 per cent ($n = 359$) also reported that they had to eat a “limited variety” of foods because they lacked the resources where a majority, 43 per cent ($n = 168$), said that happened to them/ their household “sometimes”, 29 per cent ($n = 111$) said it happened to them “rarely” and 21 per cent ($n = 80$) reported that happened to them “often”. As shown in [Table 4](#), the vast majority of households, 96 per cent ($n = 374$), reported that they or their household had to eat a smaller meal than they felt they needed, as food was not sufficient. A study in Tigray region in northern Ethiopia also indicated that households

Table 5. PWs client households’ food security status ($n = 389$).

In the past four weeks ...		<i>N</i>	%
... was there ever no food to eat of any kind in your household because of lack of resources to get food?	Yes	260	67
If there was ever no food to eat of any kind in your household ... , how often did this happen?	This problem did not happen to me or any of my family members	127	33
	Rarely (Once or twice in the past four weeks)	125	32
	Sometimes (three to ten times in the past four weeks)	106	27
	Often (More than ten times in the past four weeks)	31	8
... did you or any household member go to sleep at night hungry because there was not enough food?	Yes	240	62
If you or any household member went to sleep at night hungry because there was not enough food, how often did this happen?	This problem did not happen to me or any of my family members	150	39
	Rarely (Once or twice in the past four weeks)	121	31
	Sometimes (three to ten times in the past four weeks)	99	25
	Often (More than ten times in the past four weeks)	19	5
... did you or any household member go a whole day and night without eating anything because there was not enough food?	Yes	174	45
If you or any of your household member did go a whole day and night without eating anything ... , how often did this happen?	This problem did not happen to me or any of my family members	211	54
	Rarely (Once or twice in the past four weeks)	91	23
	Sometimes (three to ten times in the past four weeks)	77	20
	Often (More than ten times in the past four weeks)	10	3

Source: Household survey (May–June, 2017).

who faced food shortages predominantly employed consumption-based strategies including eating smaller meals and minimising the number of meals they eat per day (Gebrehiwot and van der Veen 2014).

As shown in Table 5, 67 per cent ($n = 260$) of the households reported that there was a situation where they had no food at all, for they lacked the resources, while 8 per cent ($n = 31$) of the respondents reported to have experienced that “often” (more than ten times in the past four weeks), 27 per cent ($n = 106$) “sometimes” and 32 per cent ($n = 125$) experienced “rarely”. As a consequence of a lack of food of any kind in their household, 62 per cent ($n = 240$) of the respondents reported that he/she or a household member went to sleep hungry. Nearly half, 45 per cent ($n = 174$), reported that there was a situation where they or their household members went a whole day and night without eating any food due to such lack. In terms of frequency of occurrence, 3 per cent ($n = 10$) said that happened “often”, 20 per cent ($n = 77$) reported that occurred “sometimes” and 23 per cent ($n = 91$) said they or their household member experienced that “rarely”.

The findings suggest that PSNP Public Works client households have faced all the dimensions of the food insecurity challenges, be it “uncertainty” or “anxiety”, insufficient quantity (reductions of intake), insufficient quality (in terms of dietary diversity) and even a feeling of “shame” as households reported that they or their household member had to eat food they do not want to. This could be viewed from two perspectives. On the one hand, these findings could be used to justify accurate targeting of the programme. In other words, those who most greatly need support from a safety programme are enrolled in one. On the other hand, this clearly shows that food insecurity is prevalent amongst PSNP client households, and that the programme has not yet enabled households to obtain even a basic level of food security. The data, however, is limited in suggesting improvements as we did not have data on clients prior to their enrolment in the programme.

Another perspective of the household food security status could be grasped using another indicator in the HFIAS scale, the Household Food Insecurity Access Prevalence (HFIAP). The HFIAP categorises households into four levels as “food secure”, “mildly food insecure”, “moderately food insecure” and “severely food insecure” in terms of their level of food insecurity (access). According to this classification a “food secure” household “experiences none of the food insecurity (access) conditions or just experiences worry, but rarely” (Coates, Swindale, and Bilinsky 2007, 19). The second category, “a mildly food insecure (access)” household

worries about not having enough food “sometimes” or “often”, and/or is unable to eat preferred foods, and/or eats a more monotonous diet than desired and/or some foods considered undesirable, but only rarely. It, however, does not cut back on quantity nor experience on any of the three most severe conditions (running out of food, going to bed hungry, or going a whole day and night without eating). (Coates, Swindale, and Bilinsky 2007, 19)

The third category, “a moderately food insecure household” is one that

sacrifices quality more frequently, by eating a monotonous diet or undesirable foods sometimes or often, and/or has started to cut back on quantity by reducing the size of meals or number of meals, rarely or sometimes. But it does not experience any of the three most severe conditions. (Coates, Swindale, and Bilinsky 2007, 19–20)

The fourth category, “a severely food insecure household” is one that has

graduated to cutting back on meal size or number of meals often, and/or experiences any of the three most severe conditions (running out of food, going to bed hungry, or going a whole day and night without eating), even as infrequently as rarely. (Coates, Swindale, and Bilinsky 2007, 20)

Based on the findings of the household survey, the study computed the four HFIAP categories using the formulae (as per Coates, Swindale, and Bilinsky 2007; see Table 6).

As the analysis in Table 6 depicts, none of the households were able to meet the criteria to be categorised as, “food secure”. The findings suggest that targeting was accurate, but the PSNP support, however, has not enabled even a single household to become “food secure”. One could draw at least two implications from this. First, the support is not enough (it is ETB 195 (approx. USD 7) and ETB 230 (approx. USD 8)) with place adjusted rates in the two study areas, per an able-bodied adult for a maximum of five persons per household. Second, the transfer delay has aggravated the situation, pushing households into indebtedness with unconventional arrangements with loan-sharks. Hence, the debt-servicing is affecting their investment of the transfer for

Table 6. PWs Client households' by HFIA category ($n = 389$).

HFIA Category 1*	Households who fall in “food secure” category		
		<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
	No	389	100
	Yes	0	0
HFIA Category 2**	Households who fall in “mildly food insecure” category		
		<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
	No	389	100
	Yes	0	0
HFIA Category 3***	Households who fall in “moderately food insecure” category		
		<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
	No	291	74.8
	Yes	98	25.2
	Total	389	100
HFIA Category 4****	Households who fall in “severely food insecure” category		
		<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
	No	98	25.2
	Yes	291	74.8
	Total	389	100

Source: Household survey (May–June, 2017).

*If ((Q1A = 0 or Q1A = 1) & Q2 = 0 & Q3 = 0 & Q4 = 0 & Q5 = 0 & Q6 = 0 & Q7 = 0 & Q8 = 0 & Q9 = 0).

**If ((Q1A = 2 or Q1A = 3 or Q2A = 1 or Q2A = 2 or Q2A = 3 or Q3A = 1 or Q4A = 1) & Q5 = 0 & Q6 = 0 & Q7 = 0 & Q8 = 0 & Q9 = 0).

***If ((Q3A = 2 or Q3A = 3 or Q4A = 2 or Q4A = 3 or Q5A = 1 or Q5A = 2 or Q6A = 1 or Q6A = 2) & Q7 = 0 & Q8 = 0 & Q9 = 0).

****If [Q5a = 3 or Q6a = 3 or Q7a = 1 or Q7a = 2 or Q7a = 3 or Q8a = 1 or Q8a = 2 or Q8a = 3 or Q9a = 1 or Q9a = 2 or Q9a = 3] yields.

Q1 is “whether household members worry that they or their household would not have enough food”.

Q2 is concerned with “any household member not able to eat the kinds of foods you preferred because of a lack”.

Q3 refers to if “any household member had to eat a limited variety of foods due to a lack”.

Q4 is whether “any household member have to eat some foods that you really did not want to eat because of a lack”.

Q5 is if any household member had to eat a smaller meal than you felt you needed because there was not enough food.

Q6 is about if any household member had to eat fewer meals in a day because there was not enough food.

Q7 is concerned with if there was ever no food to eat of any kind in the household.

Q8 is whether any household member go to sleep at night hungry because there was not enough food.

Q9 is if any household member go a whole day and night without eating anything because there was not enough food.

consumption. The findings also indicated that none of the households under study were able to fulfil the criteria to be categorised as “mildly food insecure”. The findings suggest that the support has not enabled client households achieve the “food secure” or “the mildly food insecure” statuses. It is only 25.2 per cent ($n = 98$) of the households under study that met the criteria to be categorised as “moderately food insecure”. The majority of the PSNP Public Works client households, 74.8 per cent ($n = 291$), were in HFIA category four, “severely food insecure”. A recent evaluation of the PSNP, on the other hand, suggested that only 73 per cent of the budget allotted for a household has been transferred to client households (Berhane et al. 2020).

PSNP-PWs support and the coping strategies of the local people to food insecurity

As the findings have shown, nearly 85 per cent ($n = 330$) of the respondents said that they faced food shortage in the past 30 days (within the PSNP Public Works support period). As shown in Figure 2, respondents use various kinds of coping strategies to deal with the food insecurity problem. The findings suggest that though the degree varies, households employ various sorts of strategies that include dietary change, mechanisms that could boost short-term availability of food, decreasing the number of people that were fed and various rationing strategies (see Maxwell, Caldwell, and Langworthy 2008). The majority of the respondents in this study utilised strategies that could boost the short-term availability of food for their household. For example, 88 per cent ($n = 344$) “purchase food on credit” and 70 per cent ($n = 273$) or “borrow food”. Similarly, the majority of the respondents, 87 per cent ($n = 339$), reported that they employed dietary change by

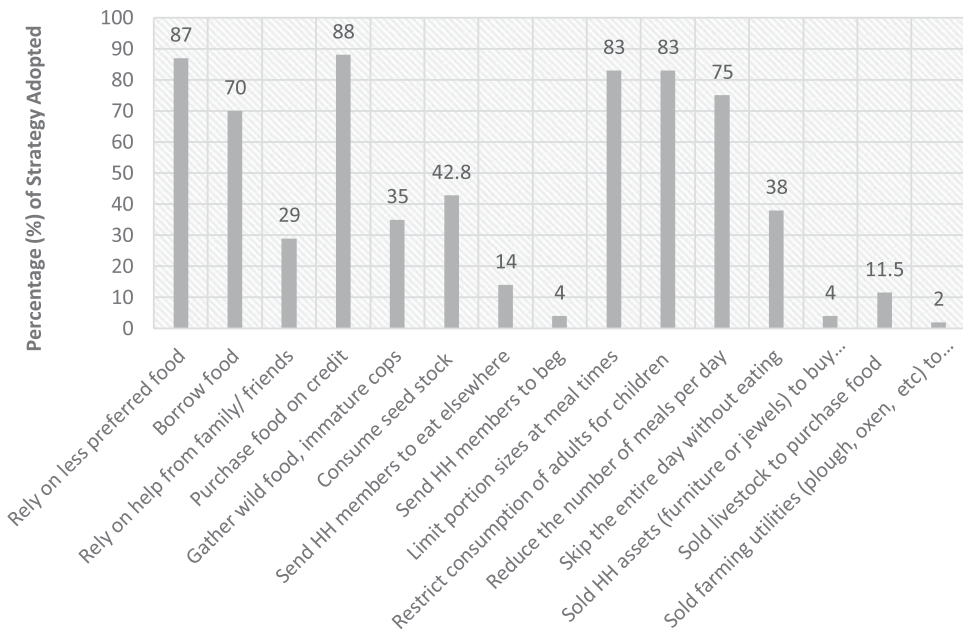


Figure 2. Coping strategies by PSNP-PWs households in the past 30 days, by % ($n = 389$).

“relying on less preferred and less expensive food” as their coping strategy. The dominant rationing strategies reported to be employed include: “limit portion sizes at meal times”, 83 per cent ($n = 323$), “restrict consumption of adults so children can eat” (83 per cent, $n = 323$) and “reduce the number of meals eaten per day”, 75 per cent ($n = 290$). This highlights the level of vulnerability among PSNP Public Works’ client households.

A strategy that may indicate the severity of the food insecurity challenge some households encounter is that 42.8 per cent ($n = 167$) reported “consuming seed stock held for next season”, which has significant implications for the future, either as having to purchase seed or plant less in the next season. Additionally, though it is not the main coping strategy employed by PSNP households, 11.5 per cent ($n = 45$) reported that they sold their livestock, 4 per cent ($n = 16$) sold household assets and 2 per cent ($n = 7$) reported that they sold their farming utilities like oxen and plough to avail food to their household in the past 30 days. This suggests albeit a small proportion, less than 20 per cent, the presence of client households that used asset depletion as survival strategy means that without the PSNP the food insecurity situation could have been direr.

The frequency of the coping strategies households employ suggests that the level of food insecurity they experience was severe. As shown in [Figure 2](#), slightly above one in three of the respondents, 34 per cent ($n = 132$), relied on less preferred and inexpensive food “everyday”. Nearly one in five of the respondents, 19 per cent ($n = 72$) relied on “less preferred food” 3–4 times a week. The majority of the respondents borrow food to increase short-term availability; 20 per cent ($n = 79$) reported doing so “3–4 times” a week and 49 per cent ($n = 192$) said they did it “1–2 times a week”. The majority of the respondents, 45 per cent ($n = 174$), purchased food on credit “3–4 times a week” seconded by those who did that “1–2 times a week”, by 37 per cent of the respondents ($n = 142$). [Figure 2](#) demonstrates the severity of food insecurity in these communities.

Discussion

The PSNP is primarily aimed at reducing food insecurity for the short-term. Its purpose coincides with one of the ADLI aims that is “eliminating dependence on food aid” introducing predictable transfer instead of emergency food aid that come in response to shocks. The clients who have been recruited into the programme, for labour-conditioned transfer, were those that were chronically food insecure. Should programmes like the PSNP Public Works positively contribute to addressing the food insecurity problem and lift client households out of chronic food insecurity, the transfer should be of sufficient amount and be granted on a timely and predictable manner. The findings of this study suggest that the Public Works transfers in the study areas were not sufficient, not timely and not predictable. The transfer delay, which is three months on average, exposed the clients to informal loan arrangements with loan-sharks with interest rates piling up to 150 per cent.⁴ The mobile network based M-birr technology introduced by the Omo Microfinance Institution in southern Ethiopia did not resolve the problem, as it too was a source of payment delay, for mobile networks were sometimes unavailable when agents arrived for payment. Some regions, such as Amhara have introduced an offline payment system to solve such problems (Berhane et al. 2016). Innovations to address these issues need to be shared and scaled up.

A similar study on cash transfer programmes in Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho and Zambia identified that a “robust program design” with “a relatively generous and regular and predictable transfer increases the quantity and quality of food and reduces the prevalence of food insecurity” (Tiwari et al. 2016, 72). A study by Miller, Tsoka, and Reichert (2011, 230), on the Malawian social cash transfer programme, suggested the potential of such programmes on “food security and food diversity”. Another study that explored the impact of social protection expenditure on food insecurity in over 22 countries in Europe following the 2004–2012 recession suggested that a reasonably greater social protection spending helped mitigating the risk of household food shortage (Loopstra et al. 2016, 44). The findings of this study do not contest these results, and explain why the positive outcomes sought after were not met, namely that payment modalities are insufficient, not timely, and not predictable. In many cases, the PSNP transfers were used for debt-servicing contrary to its consumption stabilising purpose, because of the delays. It was confirmed through the findings that this issue has been significantly affecting the food security situation of client households. The data from the FGDs also concurred in testifying this fact. In terms of sufficiency of the transfers in tackling the food insecurity threat of client households, the ETB 195 (approx. USD 6.7) in one of the study areas and ETB 230 (approx. USD 7.9) on the other for an able-bodied adult up to a maximum of five adult members per household (as prescribed by the PSNP IV Manual) was not sufficient as a stabilising mechanism.

Our findings, however, do not counter the potential of the programme in boosting the resilience of the poor and their capacity to be productive (World Bank 2013). Rather, it is to suggest that such potential is being compromised by an ineffective payment transfer system and the insufficiency of the amount of transfer. As a kebele level food security task force committee chair witnessed during one of the FGD sessions, however, irrespective of the inefficiency of the transfer system and the insufficiency of the payment, many lives could have vanished had it not been to the presence of the programme. However, the benefits could have been more meaningful if transfers were timely, predictable and sufficient. Hence, improving the payment modality by introducing an offline payment system and working towards its predictability and timeliness among others could improve the contribution of the programme in both relieving food insecurity and in improving the livelihoods of client households. For this to happen, the Government of Ethiopia needs to improve its financing of social protection programmes which presently is heavily dependent on donors (see World Bank 2013; Rahmato 2013).

The findings concur with Diriba (2018) that the food insecurity problem in Ethiopia is complex in the sense that both short-term and long-term policy interventions and innovations are needed. This study does not presume transfers like the PSNP Public Works payment, which is very small and for only 6 months in a year, will relieve chronic food insecurity. It rather assumes that such transfers could positively contribute to relieving food insecurity by enabling new livelihood options of client households’ and by preventing asset loss. It also highlights the idea that the food insecurity situation would have been worse without the programme. However, the agrarian “transformation” that is envisioned through this large-scale programme is one that continues a situation of precariousness. Even if the payment modality was timely and predictable, the policy takes a neoliberal approach of individualising food insecurity. The pathway to change is not one of system change, of market adjustment, of localising food systems, or of rights.

Conclusions

The study was intended to assess how the PSNP contributed to tackle household food insecurity and to identify the coping strategies client households employ to relieve short-term food insecurity. The capacity of the PSNP Public Works to contribute in relieving the food insecurity challenge among others depends on the timeliness and predictability of the transfer so that households could spend the transfer on issues that minimise the household food insecurity challenge. The findings indicated that due to transfer delays, some of the PSNP Public Works clients were exposed to loan arrangements with loan-sharks and were burdened with debt servicing. A study by Cochrane and Thornton (2017) also confirms high levels of rural indebtedness. This is also found by research in other parts of rural Africa (Cull, Demirguc-Kunt, and Morduch 2013). The findings suggest that while safety nets are an important constituent of the package of policies and programmes that strengthen food security, their contributions, as reflected in the current implementation practices of the PSNP Public Works transfers are limited in terms of tackling the food insecurity challenge at household level. The programme contributions have been marred by unpredictable and delayed payments that exposed households to unconventional debt arrangements that exacerbated their destitution. The current implementation approach is a neoliberal one, oriented to the responsibility of the individual to overcome food insecurity, an impossibility in a livelihood that is influenced by regional, national and international processes. In some regards, therefore, the results are not surprising. Minute levels of support, even if they were timely and predictable, could not foster a system change that prioritised local food security over international exports, it does not address the fluctuations of international commodity prices and the vulnerabilities that have been individualised, nor does it reframe responsibility to that of inclusion within a rapidly growing economy.

The findings indicated that the aim of ADLI, especially that of eliminating dependences on food aid have yet to be achieved, and are unlikely to be unless the specific “how” problems are addressed and the broader “how” questions of policy and programme objectives are transformed. The food insecurity level of the majority of the client households was severe, as measured by both the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS) and the Coping Strategies Index (CSI). The findings by both of the measures were found to be consistent, revealing the severity and prevalence of food insecurity within client households. Previous research also indicated these measures correlate with each other (Maxwell, Vaitla, and Coates 2014; Maxwell, Caldwell, and Langworthy 2008; Coates, Swindale, and Bilinsky 2007). It is evident that the food insecurity situation could have been direr had it not been to the contributions of the PSNP even amidst of limitations in implementation, transfer delay for example.

Notes

1. Rahmato defined vulnerability In terms of those who lived on food aid or PSNP support,
2. Meaning nearly a tenth of the population required assistance.
3. According to the 2014 land survey by the Central Statistics Agency (CSA), 36 %, 60% and 25% of households in Ethiopia respectively hold 0.5, 1 and between 1 and 2 hectares of land.
4. In some of the *kebeles* under study the *kebele* administration and the Food Security Task Force members confirmed that loan-sharks take 150 Birr as an interest for every 100 Birr they lend to the PSNP clients. This is the result of the transfer delay by the PSNP transfer system.

Acknowledgement

Open Access funding provided by the Qatar National Library. The authors are grateful to the anonymous reviewers whose comments helped us to improve the manuscript.

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