



About this Research

Recent environmental and infrastructural changes have disrupted the food systems in Ethiopia's Lower Omo region, having a major impact on food security. Agro-pastoralists in this area have experienced negative effects on farming and herding due to reduced access to water for farming caused by the Gibe III dam, constrained access to farmland due to the Kuraz Sugar Project, and drought, crop pests, and cattle disease (Slinkman et al., 2021; Stevenson and Buffavand 2018; Tebbs et al., 2019; Hodbod et al., 2019). This briefing note uses data from the Biodiversity and Community Resilience in the Omo Valley (BIOM) project (University of Leeds, 2022), to provide an updated report on food security as experienced by three politico-territorial groups residing in the newly formed Tama Community Conservation Area - Mursi, Bodi, and Bacha (exonyms for people who call themselves Mun, Me'en and Kwegu (Clack and Brittain, 2018)). Through community-based conservation, ecotourism, and community capacity development, BIOM seeks to promote biodiversity, livelihood security, and human rights in the Lower Omo.

Food security can be defined as a state in which all individuals, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (FAO, 2002). The inverse of this condition, food insecurity, is characterised by varying degrees of difficulty in accessing food. To measure the extent of food insecurity within Ethiopia's Lower Omo region, we used an adapted version of the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES), the preferred measurement of USAID (USAID, 2020) – FIESa. Prior to survey work, focus groups were conducted to put local food security challenges in context and to document coping strategies used in the face of food insecurity. This report details the methodology used to measure this construct in the Lower Omo, summarises our key findings, discusses their implications, and recommends pragmatic responses.

Context

Alongside many well-recognised questionnaire-based tools, such as the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (Coates et al., 2007), FIES consists of eight questions concerning access to food of sufficient quantity and quality for the last 12 months (USAID, 2020). Questions focus on a lack of money and resources with which to obtain food. Resources may include own production, sale of small livestock, bartering, trading, fishing, hunting, gathering, or receiving food donations from family, community, government or NGOs (USAID, 2020). A "mildly food insecure" household experiences a reduced quality and/or quantity of food and may reduce dietary diversity. By comparison, people in "severely food insecure" households have gone a day or more without eating.

Following our focus groups, we adapted the FIES (FIESa) as follows to best fit the agro-pastoralist food culture in SW Ethiopia:

- (1) We structured the questions in reverse order, with the most severe type of food insecurity experience first, to ensure clarity in responses and reduce the time demand on the participants.
- (2) We omitted the following three questions regarding more mild forms of food insecurity because our qualitative data collection and piloting suggested these questions were difficult for participants to differentiate:
 - FIES q5. During the past 12 months, was there a time when you or others in your household ate less than you thought you should because of a lack of money or other resources?
 - FIES q6. During the past 12 months, was there a time when your household did not have food because of a lack of money or other resources?
 - FIES q7. During the past 12 months, was there a time when you or others in your household were hungry but did not eat because there was not enough money or other resources for food?

Below, we list the five FIESa questions used in the surveys, in the order they were asked:

- FIESa Q1. During the past 12 months, was there a time when you or others in your household went without eating for a whole day because of a lack of money or other resources? (FIES q8)
- FIESa Q2. During the past 12 month, was there a time when you or others in your household had to skip a meal because there was not enough money or other resources to get food? (FIES q4)
- FIESa Q3. During the past 12 months, was there a time when you or others in your household ate only a few kinds of foods because of lack of money or other resources? (FIES q3)
- FIESa Q4. During the past 12 months, was there a time when you or others in your household were unable to eat healthy and nutritious food because of a lack of money or other resources? (FIES q2)
- FIESa Q5. During the past 12 months, was there a time when you or others in your household were worried you would not have enough food to eat because of a lack of money or other resources? (FIES q1)

Participants could respond in four ways: yes, no, don't know, refuse to answer. FIES categorises households as 'food secure' or as having experienced 'mild, moderate or severe food insecurity' within the last 12 months, with thresholds based on response to certain questions. The Global Standard Thresholds for FIES combine "food secure" and "mild food insecurity" into one category (FAO, 2016). Affirmative responses to FIES question 5 (ate less) cross the threshold to "moderate food insecurity", and affirmative responses to FIES question 8 (whole day without eating) cross the threshold to "severe food insecurity" (FAO, 2016).

Given our adaptation of the FIES questions, we adjusted these thresholds. First, we classified affirmative responses to FIESa Q4 (unable to eat healthy or nutritious food) as a threshold for "mild food insecurity". Second, we adjusted the threshold for "moderate food insecurity" to affirmative responses to FIESa Q2 (skip meal). Affirmative responses to FIESa Q1 remained the threshold for "severe food insecurity". "No" responses to every question indicated households were food secure. Additionally, we created a 'Food Security Score' (range 0-5) by summing the Yes responses.

Methods

Research was carried out within Salamago Woreda, South Omo Zone, Southern Ethiopia Regional State, located in the southwest of Ethiopia. Table 1 shows the sample overview.

Focus groups: Focus groups were held in 18 villages of three politico-territorial groups – 8 Mursi, 7 Bodi, and 3 Bacha — across 3 weeks of fieldwork in both March and August 2023. We list the kebele rather than village names for confidentiality. Groups varied in size, but averaged ~10 per time, usually with separate groups for men and women. The semi-structured protocol covered use of natural resources, food security, agricultural calendars, disturbances to agricultural production, and coping strategies in the face of food insecurity. Data were transcribed and coded in NVivo, with thematic analysis used to identify core themes related to food insecurity.

Household survey: In addition, a total of 300 households were surveyed across 39 villages in Bodi, Mursi and Bacha in September 2023, ensuring a wide range of responses across the three ethno-linguistic groups, reflective of overall population (Bacha n=32, Bodi n=138, Mursi n=130). The survey sampled a total of 209 male and 91 female participants – all heads of household (HoH). Out of the 300 participants in the survey, 2 male participants from the Hailwuha kebele refused to provide data and are therefore redacted from the findings. Participants were predominantly male due to social norms within the region. However, gender of HoH had little apparent impact on the findings. Data were transcribed from paper surveys and then analysed in Excel and STATA. For the presentation of data, we analysed the frequency of responses across the sample and sub-samples.

Table 1: Study samples and sub-samples

Kebele	Politico-territorial group	Focus group?	Number of Survey Participants
Gura	Bacha	No	8
	Bodi	Yes	32
Kuduma	Bacha	Yes	8
Margo	Bacha	Yes	8
Omo-Hana	Bacha	Yes	8
	Bodi	Yes	40
Chirim	Bodi	No	8
Giyomarsio	Bodi	Yes	20
Narmashek	Bodi	No	8
Omorombe	Bodi	No	30
Hailwuha*	Mursi	Yes	83
Makki	Mursi	Yes	32
Moyzo	Mursi	Yes	13
TOTAL:		18	298

Key Findings

Food Insecurity

98.7% of the sample were severely food insecure – i.e., in the 12 months preceding September 2023, they and/or their households went a whole day without eating at least once. The only participants not classified as severely food insecure were 4 residents in a single Mursi kebele (Makki) who did not report any food insecurity experiences.

Mean Food Insecurity Scores were around 4 (Bodi 3.99, Mursi 3.97, Bacha 4.03). The mean reflects most households reporting ‘No’ for ‘eating a few types of food’, likely due to a less diverse subsistence food culture rather than limits due to monetary assets. There was no significant difference in mean across politico-territorial groups (Figure 1).

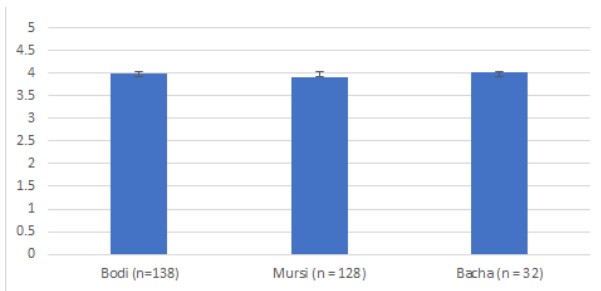


Figure 1: Mean FIESa score among politico-territorial groups in the Lower Omo, 2023.

Seasonal Hunger

Focus group data showed that the Bodi, Mursi, and Bacha all experienced similar problems regarding food security at roughly the same point throughout the calendar year. Throughout an average historical wet season, communities would often experience moderate food insecurity as crops tended not to be available until the end of the wet season, but wild foods were abundant. These wild leaves and fruits provide some food security while households wait to harvest their crop. As one participant from Makki explained when asked what they would do in an average wet season:

“Well, we will depend on the wild leaves” (03/2023\\Mursi - Makki)

However, with the droughts in 2020-2023 the lack of long rains limited crop cultivation and the availability of wild foods. With no stores of grain for the dry season, food consumption was significantly reduced, plunging households into severe food insecurity. The data collection in March 2023 occurred as the long rains were

beginning for the first time in 3 years. By August 2023 households had secured some harvest and the short rains were beginning as expected. However, as FIESa looks at the previous 12 months, we still recorded the extent of the hunger in the previous year. Probe questions revealed that households had suffered numerous days of hunger due to shortages of food and thus severe food insecurity:

“During the dry season it's hard because we go four days without food” (08/2023\\Bodi - Gura)

“Sometimes we'd go hungry for seven days” (08/2023\\Bacha - Margo)

The availability of milk, another essential source of nutrition in the Lower Omo region, also decreased in the prolonged dry season due to lack of grazing and disease:

“During the dry season there's no milk, but during the wet season we're definitely expecting milk.” (03/2023\\Mursi - Makki)

Severe Hunger and Starvation

Coupled with the drought were other challenges affecting key assets that also influence capacity to respond to food insecurity:

“Diseases are finishing our cows, ... Sometimes when the cows want to give birth, they will struggle. Some of the calves will die inside their mothers ... There's also a disease that attacks a cow's lungs and the cow just dies. ... Our lives revolve around cattle. So, this is our most important resource” (08/2023\\Mursi - Makki)

Reliance on wild foods during these prolonged hunger times sometimes led to illnesses:

“These wild fruits sometimes cause diarrhoea and vomiting.” (03/2023\\Bodi - Giyomarsio)

“If you give this to small children who don't have enough milk to drink, then when they eat these wild leaves, they're not safe, they get sick and have diarrhoea.” (03/2023\\Bodi - Gura)

Some communities even experienced starvation-related deaths:

“Now it's... four or five, six days, one person died from starvation, from a shortage of food... When you're coming and going to see the people in home, you know

*a lot of people are in a battle of life and death”
(03/2023\\Bodi - Giyomarsio)*

*“Some people passed away this year, and last year, due
to the hunger” (08/2023\\Bacha - Margo)*

*“The starvation, the starvation is high... two people have
died of this starvation... one old man and one baby”
(03/2023\\Bacha - Margo)*

These findings corroborate reports from other sources (e.g. The Oakland Institute 2023; Stevenson & Buffavand 2018) that suggested that the food situation was deteriorating in the wake of the end of the Omo flood, and in light of displacement caused by the Kuraz sugar estates.

Policy Recommendations

Our findings show that increased food aid was urgently needed in the Lower Omo region during times of drought, given that 98.7% of participants reported that they and/or their households went a whole day without eating on at least one occasion in the preceding 12

months. Although food aid distribution occurred in Spring 2023, according to our observation and local reports some of the communities most in need in Mursi, Bodi and Bacha were not included in the distribution due to diversion of supplies by the local administration.

It is hoped that the results presented here will assist the Mursi, Bodi, and Bacha communities in receiving appropriate support for future drought situations, as well as other kinds of extreme weather such as heavy rainfall and flooding, which can also affect crop production and lead to food insecurity. To aid this, the BIOM project aims to increase the resilience of communities by supporting community-based conservation, ecotourism, and livestock agriculture in the region through the Tama Community Conservation Area and privately funded, community run ecotourism.

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