

Market prices in Tigray (March 2020 – March 2022)

by

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Acknowledgments

This short note is based on information provided by colleagues and friends in Tigray, through a rare internet connection; thanks also to several colleagues with close ties to Tigray for additional input.

Summary

In northern Ethiopia, Tigray continues to be blockaded. The 2021 crop yield was just 25-50 percent of what it would be in a regular year. At the beginning of March 2022, colleagues and friends in Tigray provided us with average statistics on the cost of living in Tigray (especially food). Farmlands had been poorly ploughed and planted lately or not at all due to military targeting of farming activities. Hence, every crop has gotten more costly. As a result of distress or desperation sales, the price of live animals has dropped dramatically. Coffee, firewood, gasoline, and transportation have also seen significant price rises.

Introduction

The war in Tigray has disastrous impacts for the population. Tigray continues to be blockaded. Crops have been harvested now, but according to field observations done by Mekelle University geographers, and in line with FEWSNET estimates, the harvest by the end of 2021 was only 25-50% of a normal harvest. This food has already largely been consumed soon. The food shortages are the base for an extreme human health crisis. In these conditions, ICRC gets through with daily flights with medical aid, and now also WHO, but food aid continues to be almost completely blockaded. Colleagues and friends in Tigray provided us with average data regarding the strongly increased cost of life in Tigray (particularly the Mekelle-Hagere Selam area) on 9 March 2022 (Table 1), while few people have cash at hand. In the next sections, we provide some context related to several of the goods and services.

Food items

Warfare and military targeting of farming activities up to end of June 2021 have led to a largely failed harvest. Farmlands were insufficiently ploughed¹, and sown lately or not at all. Hence, every crop has become expensive. The only edible oil factory of the region, in Shire, was destroyed by the Eritrean army. Edible oil is part of standard food aid packages, which is now blockaded. Consequently prices of oil and other imported products such as sugar have skyrocketed.

Table 1. Prices recorded in the Mekelle – Hagere Selam area, in ETB

Cereals		Early March 2020	Early March 2022
T'ef	1 Qt*	<3500	>6500
Sorghum	1 Qt	<1500	>3500
Wheat	1 Qt	<2000	>3500
Pulses, spices, oil, etc.			
Lentil	1 kg	<40	>120
Beans, Chickpea, Grasspea	1 kg	<40	90
Fenugreek	1 kg	<100	>150
Linseed	1 kg	<40	>80
Oil	5 L	<400	>1500
Onions	1 kg	<10	>50
Rice	1 kg	<40	>80
Salt	1 kg	<25	>150
Berberè (powdered chili)	1 kg	<200	>800
Sugar	1 kg	<30	>150
Coffee	1 kg	<100	>750
Animal products			
Meat in butchery**	1 kg	300	200-220
Egg**	1 piece	4	6
Milk**	1 L	40	30
Honey	1 kg	400-500	<350
Livestock (live animals, average)			
Ox***		25,000	15,000
Donkey		>5000	<4000
Goat		5000	2000-3000
Sheep		5000	2000-3000
Chicken		500	300-400
Fuel and transportation			
Firewood	1 Qt	<300	650
Charcoal	1 Qt	<500	>1200
Benzine	1 L	<30	>600
Gasoline/Diesel	1 L	<20	>320
Minibus Hagere Selam to Mekelle	1 seat	25	200
Exchange rates****			
Formal exchange rate	1 EUR	36	55
	1 USD	32	51
Black market rate	1 EUR	40	68-70
	1 USD	35	70

*The quintal (Qt) is a unit of mass, commonly used in Tigray; 1 Qt = 100 kg; **There are seasonal price fluctuations for animal products during fasting periods; high fluctuation for milk, medium for eggs, low for meat; ***"Normal ox", the one destined at ploughing, not the old one for butchery; ****For sake of referencing, but quite meaningless in Tigray because banks are not operational and no foreign currency is circulating; black market rates as in Addis Ababa.

Live animals and animal products

The price of live animals has strongly decreased. This is the result of distress selling by numerous farmers who need cash to buy staple food.

Animal products are much cheaper also, but here a strong short-term variability needs to be taken into account. Many followers of Orthodox Christianity will be very strict for fasting, particularly in this war year. It is common for traditional societies to assume such a crisis as 'a curse from God'. Fasting and non-fasting periods vary, as this year's calendar is very different from previous years in terms of religious landmarks.

Milk production, particularly, is something that can't be stopped, and it becomes cheaper during fasting times in the production area (because of almost no market demand)². The chicken also lay eggs every day, but it can be conserved a bit better than milk³. There are almost no changes in the price of meat though. In normal times, farmers avoid selling their animals in fasting periods and meat production is lowered to match the market demand. This interplay may have slightly changed depending on farmers' tolerance to survive without cash for the duration of the fasting time (almost 2 months).

The price of honey has decreased from 400-500 to 350 birr per kilogram. Honey is produced locally and, like meat, at this time considered a luxury product on which most people would not spend the rare cash they have. Hence the price lowering.



Fig. 1. Coffee gardens at Addi Nefas (near Kidane Mihret rock church in Tanqwa Millash district, Tigray). Each farmer has a small plot under cover trees, where they grow coffee, gesho (the local hops), and a few orange or lemon trees.

Coffee

Coffee in Tigray is mainly imported from Oromia and Southern regions. There are a few ecological niches in the region where coffee can be grown (particularly in woredas of Raya Azebo, Raya Alamata, Tanqwa Millash, Abiy Addi, Rama ...) (Fig. 1), but most places are too dry or too cold. Hence, what is available as coffee reaches high prices. Smuggling of coffee, fuel and

firewood to Tigray using pack animals has been anecdotally reported, and is obviously related to the high prices that can be obtained for these goods in the region.

Fuel and fuelwood

With electric power cut most of the time, and in absence of kerosene or butagas, people reverted to firewood and charcoal for cooking. Some photos of the wood market in Mekelle (Fig. 2) show absence of construction wood and a preferential sale of eucalypt firewood with standardised dimensions. A paper will soon be published on the impact of the fuel crisis on Tigray's woody vegetation; a strong pressure has arisen from the need for firewood. Besides fuelwood, the blockade of Tigray has also led to dramatic increases of prices of benzine, gasoline and hence transportation costs.



Fig. 2. Wood market in Mekelle on 13 February 2022

Conclusion and outlook

This short note mainly aimed at presenting the dire situation that Tigrayan households are experiencing. Hopefully it can also be an input into further studies regarding price setting in

conditions of total blockade, the supply chains of food items up to the households, the role of merchants, etc. In the meantime, farmers in Tigray are nearing the margin. According to eyewitnesses, many residents in Tigray have ran out of food, sold their valuables, and are now fleeing their houses in search of sustenance. There's no way of knowing where they're going. Urban destinations are no longer possible due to the deterioration of the food situation in urban regions. Smuggling people out of the region, and even to Addis Ababa, is becoming a lucrative business. The desperation has reached the point where people have begun crossing into the Amhara region in quest of food. This appears to be the most difficult decision to make, as this region is regarded as a stronghold with conflicting interests.

References

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