

# Rural meetings as communication strategies: connecting people to development programs?

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Hagos Nigussie Kahssay<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

In Ethiopia, rural meetings are the most commonly used communication strategies to address the socio-cultural, political and development programs to the rural public. The recurring use of rural meetings is due to the lack of infrastructure and inaccessibility to modern media outlets. As the result, government representatives and other concerned parties organize public meetings to communicate their objectives and interests. In rural areas, there are two types of meetings: customary meetings which are initiated by community elders and also government meetings often organized by government representatives. Customary meetings are organized to address diverse community issues that require collective decision making being facilitated by community elders. On the other hand, government meetings are dominated by the government representatives who set the agenda of the meeting. Therefore, the main focus of this paper is to examine the significance of government meetings to address food security programs in eastern Tigray, rural Ethiopia. The overall question of the paper is thus: Can rural meetings help to connect people in eastern Tigray with the development initiatives and the food security programs? Are these communication strategies enabling the public to participate in the design and implementation of food security programs and help them to make choices to their own development? Though food security is a complex concept and results from diverse factors, this paper is confined to examining the use of rural government meetings as development communication strategies in promoting food security. Qualitative research and specifically ethnography was employed to analyze various factors associated with food security programs; examine how rural people themselves understand food security programs and also to find out

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the extent rural meetings connect people and mobilize them to participate in food security programs.

**Key terms:** rural meeting, development communication, food security, Ethiopia

## **Introduction**

While the world has experienced significant changes in all fronts over the last 25 years, food security<sup>2</sup> remains an 'unfulfilled dream' (Syngenta Foundation for Sustainable Agriculture, 2004). Food insecurity thus has become one of the defining features of rural poverty for most of the developing nations. Food security as a thought came to being in the 1970's and continued to take hold of considerable attention in the global context. Broadly, food insecurity is characterized by the lack of available, accessible, adequate and acceptable food. Gillespie and Haddad (2001) note that food insecurity refers to inability of households to have reliable access to food in sufficient quantity and quality to enjoy active and healthy life. Similarly, Oriola (2009) also states that food security entails producing food that will go round every citizen both in quality and quantity.

In the mid-1970s, food security definitions focused on total food supplies at national and global levels, and analysts advocated production self-sufficiency as a strategy for nations (Van der Veen & Tagel, 2011). However, these definitions became more intricate due to a shift in the level of analysis from global and national to household and individual levels (ibid). Food security definitions in the 1980s for instance, shifted from global and national levels to household and individual levels. Moreover, the definitions have undergone a further analysis after the 1996 World Food Summit. Thus, based on the refined definition, food security is seen as a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (FAO, 2002). This definition is broader than the previous definitions, for example, that of the World Bank (1986), which was summed up by Maxwell and Frankenberg (1992:8) as "secure access at all times to sufficient food for a healthy life." Therefore, a blend of them, with the main emphasis on availability, access, and utilization of food can deal with the operational definition in addressing food security matters.

There are two types of food insecurity: the transitory food insecurity and the chronic food insecurity. The transitory food insecurity refers to the situation when there is a temporary lack of access to food, whereas chronic food insecurity situations exist when people face inability to produce or acquire food (Maxwell & Smith, 1992). Nevertheless, the exact difference between

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<sup>2</sup>Food security is a knotty concept and there might not be a single agreed definition to it. Hoddinott (1999), for instance, argues that there are approximately 200 definitions and 450 indicators of food security.

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the two food insecurity types remains vague (Devereux, 2000). Regardless of the extent of transitory food insecurity, food deficiency is generally related to structural factors such as the persistent lack of access to land or productive assets or the highly skewed distribution of employment opportunities and income. In the Ethiopian context however, the rural poor are facing both forms of food insecurity. They cannot even achieve their food needs during the rainy seasons. FAO (2012) contends that population growth; urbanization and rising incomes have put more pressure on food demand. However, Barrett (2002) argues that a large share of hunger worldwide arises due to chronic deprivation and vulnerability, not short-term shocks. However, the causes for food insecurity in Ethiopia remain complex as the country is prone to drought and environmental degradation making households extremely exposed to food shortages. In light of this, Ethiopia is one of the most food insecure countries in the Sub-Saharan region. In the last three decades, the country has never been able to attain sufficient production to feed its growing population (Ejiga, 2006). With this, other social factors like high population growth, environmental degradation, and drought have been exacerbating the vulnerability of people to persistent food shortages. WFP (2009:4) states that more than 58% of the total population in the region lives in absolute poverty (earning less than a dollar a day), which makes the region's situation more serious compared to the national average 44.4%.

In Ethiopia, agriculture accounts for 50% of the country's GDP, 65% of the total exports and 85% of employment (MoFA, 2007) however, with the change of regimes, the Ethiopian agriculture has undergone through several policy changes in terms of focus and major goals (Kassahun, 2012). During the Imperial regime for instance, the first two Five-Year plans (1957-1962 and 1962-1967) heavily favoured large-scale commercial farms to supplement agricultural production. Accordingly, though the country had shown a significant progress in its economic development mainly in the 1950s and 60s, the Haile-Selassie regime was unable to maintain a peaceful co-existence in the country which became a cause to different uprisings. This was chiefly due to the primitive state economy and the inequitable relations between the peasantry and the feudal lords.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, it had brought a widespread discontent among the majority, especially among the children of the peasantry who didn't have access to modern education.<sup>4</sup> Cognizant of the consequences, the Haile-Selassie regime had shifted from a feudal to a capitalist system and developed a free market economy. But the regime remained powerless to achieve it in a sustainable and peaceful manner.<sup>5</sup> Thus the agricultural policy focus

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<sup>3</sup>See *Ethiopia, A country Study*, *supra* note 14, (*Growth and structure of the economy*), <http://countrystudies.us/ethiopia/77htm>.

<sup>4</sup>On the history of land tenure in Ethiopia, see Bereket Kebede, *Land Tenure and Communal Pool Resources in Ethiopia, a Study Based on Fifteen Sites*, *African Development Review*, June 2002, vol. 14, no. 1, and pp. 113-149 (37) pp. 119. For a Critical Analysis of the student movement in Ethiopia, see also Marina Ottaway, *Social Classes and Corporate Interests in the Ethiopian Revolution*, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (1976).

<sup>5</sup>Marina Ottaway, *supra* note 17, p. 473, Edmond J. Keller, *Ethiopia: Revolution, Class, and the National Question African Affairs* Vol. 80, No. 321 (Oct., 1981).

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in Imperial regime was to improve exports in line with the modernization of agriculture meant to earn foreign currency at the time (Kassahun, 2012:5).

The agricultural policy in the Derg (Military Regime) was based on the socialist path of development. This policy was renowned for introducing radical agrarian changes signified by the Land Reform Act, which was expressed in nationalization and equitable distribution of land. Besides, peasant associations were established as the bases of grassroots administration that served as a means for controlling local communities (Kassahun, 2012:6). The current regime, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) also introduced a new agricultural policy called an Agricultural Development-Led Industrialization (ADLI).

### **Government policies and food security programs in Ethiopia**

To tackle rural food insecurity, the currently ruling EPRDF government has introduced ADLI as a prime development policy direction and a fundamental basis for industrialization in the country. ADLI as a policy direction includes: input provision to peasants, promotion of small-scale irrigation, improved livestock herds, environmental protection and natural resource management, grain marketing efficiency, promotion of farmers' organizations and women's participation in agriculture, expanding rural roads (Holt & Dessalegn 1999:2). These components were supposed to support each other and realize the sustainable livelihood in the country. However, it is argued that the ADLI remains strong in rhetoric and unable to materialize due to lack of consistent policy and effective implementation strategies. Critics also doubted its efficacy arguing that ADLI tends to disregard labour productivity by focusing on land productivity despite the fact that the main problem of Ethiopian agriculture is low labour productivity (Berhanu, 2003).

ADLI allegedly tends to emphasize the supply side with little focus on demand in the face of low purchasing power of the rural people on the one hand and the small size of the urban population on the other. Hence, it is unconvincing that increased production alone could entail higher farmer income in the absence of adequate demand (ibid). It is also claimed that given its fragmented nature and the small size of per capita land holding, peasant agriculture cannot shoulder the burden of transforming agriculture to the required levels. The recurrence of food insecurity in Ethiopia results from inappropriate development strategies and policy failures (Nicola, 2003; Fasil, 2005). Tekola (1997) notes that most development policies in developing countries do not always go in line with the expectations of the people at the grassroots. However, the policies often appear to be high in rhetoric rather than achievable objectives. In the same view, Nicola also remarks that:

*Policies have been formulated as a means of guarantying political support, particularly in the run-up to elections. This favours large symbolic gestures, the distribution of largesse and promises of favours, but not, in general, promises to resolve structural problems with better policies. Policies are pursued that allocate*

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*economic resources inefficiency, with high opportunity costs from the point of meeting the real needs of food insecure. State intervention in supply of agricultural inputs, pricing and food distribution persists for political reasons...*

Based on the above views, it can be noted that rural development policies are either non-inclusive or else their implementation strategies are inconsistent or ineffective that severely affect rural livelihood programs. Accordingly, the policy frame works of the past governments in Ethiopia and decades of long civil war in the region have played a role in exacerbating food insecurity. With respect to the causes of the 1977-1988 Ethiopian famine for instance, Downing (1995) notes the correlation between famine areas and specific government policies. Based on the discussion with the government food security officers and development agents<sup>6</sup>, government food security programs in eastern Tigray are associated with packages like: Fertilizers, Animal husbandry, Poultry; Small scale water projects, Bee keeping. These packages are provided either in the form of loans or bought in cash except the case of Small scale water projects which are partly supported by the government. Hence, how are these packages communicated to the rural public so that each of them can make choices and preferences? How engaging are the food security communication strategies to promote dialogue and horizontal communication and enable people effectively communicate and share ideas? The next section deals with the use of communication in development programs and also analyses the currently functioning food security communication strategies in eastern Tigray, rural Ethiopia.

### **Communication for development**

Development communication has many definitions; sometimes it is named as “a field known by many names” (Quarry & Ramirez, 2009:6). Similarly, Dagon (2009:453) argues that development communication is a “subject as tricky as development itself.” Thus, the confusion and ambiguity is reflected in many terms used to designate various definitions it represents (Mefalopulos, 2003). Davis (2011) for instance compiled and presented more than 20 definitions of Communication for Development on her website, Communication for Development (C4D): Communication for Development Network.<sup>7</sup> The term communication for development was used as a title in the first World Congress on Communication for Development (WCCD) organized by the FAO Communication Initiative and World Bank in 2006, in Rome. The purpose of the Congress was to demonstrate the vital role of communication for development in addressing the most pressing development concerns of our time. Moreover, it was meant to formulate ways to integrate it to development policy directions (FAO, 2007). The broader significance of communication in development (Quarry & Ramirez, 2009; Servaes, 2008; Tacchi, 2012a) state that communication is “understood as a two-way relationship that not only acknowledges the right of people to be heard, but includes prioritizing effective listening, and recognizing and respecting alternative forms of knowledge, is needed to achieve

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<sup>6</sup> *Technical experts who work closely with the farmers.*

<sup>7</sup> *See Davis, (2011) available at: <http://c4dnetwork.ning>.*

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this.” The terms ‘listening’ and ‘alternative knowledge’ in this part highlight the fundamental role of individuals at a grass-roots level who could add up to the fulfillment of development efforts. This therefore helps to promote dialogue, as a “key ingredient in building trust, sharing knowledge and ensuring mutual understanding” (Mefalopulos, 2008:8). The definition of communication for development as stated by Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada (1998) is:

*Communication for development is the use of communication processes, techniques and media to help people toward a full awareness of their situation and their options for change, to resolve conflicts, to work towards consensus, to help people plan actions for change and sustainable development, to help people acquire the knowledge and skills they need to improve their condition and that of society, and to improve the effectiveness of institutions.*

The above definition emphasizes the abilities and skills of people to deal with issues affecting their lives based on the knowledge and experience they have towards a certain issue of interest. In doing so, people may employ a variety of approaches ranging from modern media outlets to village communication channels and the folk media forms. Hence, whichever fits them would be appropriate enough to address their problems and thereby identify solutions. This implies that at community levels, the structure and process of participatory communication requires dialogical processes to enable local people to exert a level of commitment, ownership and control of development process (Tuftte & Mefalopulos, 2009; Willis, 2005). Highlighting the role of people in development, Quarry and Ramirez (2009:32) argue that “...good development is that which shows people making choices, investing and finding rewards without logical frameworks and bureaucrats.”

In the same way, grass-roots development (Bessette, 2004; Taylor, Wilkinson & Cheers, 2008; Willis, 2005) is meant to ensure effective people’s engagement and collective decision-making towards sustainable community development initiatives. This remarks that communication and participation are interrelated and mainly “intimately knotted as the strings in a fisherperson’s net” (Dagron, 2009:460). In Ethiopia, it is a widely acknowledged that stakeholders are consulted prior to any development endeavors. Yet it is difficult to witness whether the currently existing rural projects like food security are engaging the community and considering peoples’ knowledge as an input for rural development. Hence, though participation is often acknowledged, its implementation is still at lower levels. Based on this, it can be noted that either development practitioners may not have the required expertise to apply participatory communication approaches or they may be unwilling to devote time in the process. With this, implementation of participatory approaches may require transparency, trust and close interaction between the stakeholders which is often minimal in most rural projects in Ethiopia and the eastern Tigray.

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### **Participatory communication**

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, development thinking has shifted to a more inclusive approach of development. This led to the recognition that people needed to be encouraged to participate rather than adopt new practices based on information. In light of this, Freire (1970) challenged dominant conceptions of development communication, particularly as applied to literacy training. Freire offered the concept of liberating education that conceived communication as dialogue and participation. The goal of communication should be conscientization, which Freire defined as free dialogue that prioritized cultural identity, trust and commitment. His approach has been called “dialogical pedagogy” which defined equity in distribution and active grassroots participation as central principles. Communication should provide a sense of ownership to participants through sharing and reconstructing experiences. Based on Freire, education is not the transmission of information from those “who have it” to those “who lack it,” from the powerful to the powerless, but the creative discovery of the world. Freire’s model and participatory models in general proposed a human-centered approach that valued the importance of interpersonal channels of communication in decision-making processes at the community level. In support of Freire’s participatory model, Okunna (1995) state that studies in a variety of Third World rural settings found that marginal and illiterate groups preferred to communicate face-to-face rather than through mass media or other one-way sources of communication. The overall assumption from Freire’s model was that development workers should rely more on interpersonal methods of communication rather than national media and technologies, and that they should act as facilitators of dialogue. These views have helped to integrate participatory development as part of the policy within international development practice (Brett, 2003; Cleaver, 1999; Cornwall, 2006; Green, 2010).

For Servaes (1999:116), participation involves a more ‘equitable sharing of both political and economic power,’ which often reduce advantages of certain groups. Participation at its best therefore explains a holistic, collective and dialogical process that brings together relevant stakeholders, ‘engaging them in critical dialogues about development problems’ (Bessette, 2004; Hickey & Mohan, 2004; Willis, 2005). The World Bank has recognized participatory development as “a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development vision, make choices, and manage activities” (Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009:6). Participation entails the involvement of in-community stakeholders in the initiation, implementation, and evaluation of development interventions and policies that are designed to change their lives. At the community level, participatory communication becomes a “continuous cycle of action and reflection, in drawing conclusions, applying them in practice and then questioning them again” (Bessette, 2004:26). In an effort to enhance the theoretical foundation of the concept of participation, Carpentier (2011:24-28) puts forward six characteristics of maximalist participation:

1. The key defining element of participation is power.
2. Participation is situated in particular processes, localities and actors.
3. Participation is contingent and dependent on the ideological framework within which it is being used, or on how we ‘think participation’

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4. Participation is not based on populist fantasies of the replacement or overthrow of hierarchy, but on diversity and power sharing, and equal power relations in decision-making.
5. Participation is invitational and not imposed
6. Participation is structurally different to access and interaction

In general, for a genuine participation, communication should occur among all parties affected, ensuring all have similar opportunities to influence the outcome of the initiative. Optimally participatory communication would be a part of the whole project process, from beginning to end. Since this approach promotes the active involvement of stakeholders in investigating options and shaping decisions regarding development objectives, participatory communication also facilitates empowerment. In this way, the effects go beyond the project boundaries, 'spilling into the wider social and political dimensions' (Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009:17). The consensus about participation is thus it should entail an active involvement of communities in decision making processes in projects that affect their lives and livelihoods (Anyidoho, 2010; Chitnis, 2005; Guijit & Shah, 1998; Jennings, 2000; Thwala, 2001). Participatory approaches are often closely linked to empowerment. Melkote and Steeves (2001:37) define empowerment as a process in which individuals and organizations gain control and mastery over socio-economic conditions, over democratic participation in their communities and over their own stories. In the same way, Chitnis (2005:35) notes that "empowerment is linked to creating an environment where people who have control over situations that affect their lives are given the opportunity, knowledge, and power to bring about the change that would improve their lives." Servaes (1999:194) also links empowerment to participation and collective decision making at all levels of society so that people can control the outcomes of these decisions. Thus, empowerment is making sure that people are able to help themselves.

Melkote and Steeves (2001:36-37) consider the power inequities as the main challenges to be addressed in development. Accordingly, an essential step towards empowerment is that every unit of development must seek self-reliance, whether this is a nation or local community (Servaes, 1999:79-83). Every unit has to see what its basic and essential needs are and to supply these needs, as much as possible, with its own sustainable resources. The argument is that peoples' participation at the grassroots level promotes participatory decision making and self-sustainability, the result of which is empowerment. Empowerment is both a process and an end that builds capacity. Through empowerment, the poor come to understand, appreciate, analyze, and gain capacity to respond proactively to the situations that affect their lives. This capacity and empowerment enables the articulation of their baseline disempowered state. It creates the opportunity to use resources that are now available to them in order to live better and more productive lives. Participatory approach to peoples' empowerment is no doubt a complex issue because it is a new paradigm that will take time, meaningful research, and dialogue at every stage (Ettling, Buck & Caffer, 2010). The process involves the establishment of relationships as an "entry to the field and initiating the processes has been considered a very sensitive aspect of participatory development" (Dearden & Rizvi, 2008:23). The strengths of

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participatory development communication approach rely mainly on the fact that it requires cultural sensitivity and specific context that were ignored by other theories.

Despite the widespread support and recognition of participatory development communication, there are also a range of criticisms and implementation problems. Servaes (1996:13) for instance, notes that though participatory development communication is not new and has been practiced for decades, its application to development projects cannot be generalized. This implies that communication at the grassroots is “...often overlooked by development experts” (Mezzana, 1996; Mefalopulos, 2008). Waisbord (2008:511-515) discusses the major challenges that prohibit the successful adoption of participatory approach in development projects. According to him, these are: First, bureaucratic requirements favor the use of informational models over participatory approaches. In view of that, standard institutional procedures inside development agencies, donors and governments perpetuate understandings and uses of communication as a set of technical skills to disseminate messages. Second, the weak status of communication as an autonomous field of study and practice in development organizations undermines the prospects for expanding the understanding of communication that does not fit prevalent institutional expectations. As long as technical experts or other fields expect communication to be ‘the art of messaging,’ communication staffs lack autonomy to make decisions and incorporate participatory approaches. Third, the institutional predominance of a technical mindset also limits the uses of participation thinking. The prioritization of technical perspectives decouples ‘development’ programs from local processes of participation and change.

## **Research Methodology**

This paper deals with the potentials of rural meetings to convey food security messages in eastern Tigray, rural Ethiopia. Accordingly, it examines the extent rural meetings mobilize people to participate in development programs and also enable them to make choices to their own development programs. In light of this, it requires a comprehensive understanding of the context; the way people view development programs and the food security packages in rural areas. Based on this, qualitative research methodology and specifically an ethnographic research design was employed. To this study, ethnography was considered relevant as it is used to ‘critically analyze interconnected socio-cultural issues’ in a given context (Sarantakos, 2013:182). Fetterman (2010:1) also notes that ethnography ‘gives voice to people in their own local context, typically relying on verbatim quotations and a “thick” description of events,’ facilitating an understanding of the social and cultural views from the ‘insider’s perspectives’ (Fetterman, 2010; Sharkey & Larsen, 2005). This therefore makes ethnography an appropriate method to observe the lives and experiences of the research participants (Murchison, 2010; Gobo, 2008; Marvasti, 2004; Angrosino, 2007).

Ethnography is often about an immersion into the natural setting of the research participants and partake in their activities. Immersion in the natural settings helps to closely understand

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how people react to the realities surrounding them, implying that “reality is socially constructed” (Mertens, 2005:12). Qualitative research is inherently ‘multi-method in focus’ (Flick, 2002, 2007; Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Liamputtong, 2013). Particularly, ethnographic research employs a blend of techniques called triangulation, as a way to understand a given situation in a more complete manner (Angrosino, 2005; Daly, 2007; Murchison, 2010; O’Reilly, 2012). Accordingly, this paper has employed a combination of different data collection methods, such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and document reviews as its main techniques of data collection. The reason to employ a combination of different methods is that it helps to enrich individual research method as each of them will have their own strengths and weaknesses.

### **Research Setting**

The research site to this study was in eastern Tigray and specifically in Irob and Gulomekeda districts. Tigray region has a population of 4.3 million; out of which 80.5% lives in rural areas (CSA, 2007). Most rural inhabitants in eastern Tigray are illiterate, 33.8% (ibid), who live in dispersed villages. The research setting for this study was in eastern Tigray specifically in Alitena and Kokebetsibah sub-districts of Irob and Gulomekeda sites respectively. These sites were purposefully selected due to the fact that they are repeatedly affected by chronic food insecurity. There are different reasons why these areas remain persistently affected by chronic food insecurity. Firstly, these areas were battle grounds in different wars including the 1998 cross-border conflict with Eritrea. During these wars, people were displaced from their homes and lost most of their belongings. Conflicts may not cause food insecurity but may result in demolishing infrastructure and loss of personal belongings. For instance, though bee keeping is the source of income for most Irob inhabitants compared to their Gulomekeda counterparts, most of their bee hives were either taken away or burnt by Eritrean soldiers. Farms in both districts were also covered with landmines that caused many civilian casualties. As a result, farming was difficult as people were afraid for their lives which had a great impact on agricultural practices. Thus, even after returning to their villages, most people in these areas were dependent on food aid for their survival. Secondly, in these areas, erratic rain is also a major challenge for farmers who rely predominantly on agricultural production and grazing land for their animals. Hence, though the above factors may not have solely caused food insecurity, they may perhaps have exacerbated the unending challenge to food security. To tackle food insecurity, government and NGOs have put lots of resources in these districts. Nevertheless, food insecurity continues to be a major challenge for the rural poor. Therefore, it remains relevant to examine the potential of folk media channels in promoting food security in these post-conflict areas.

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### **Discussion of results**

#### **Communication strategies in food security programs in eastern Tigray**

##### **Strategy design**

Rural life in eastern Tigray or elsewhere in the country is dominated by kinship, religion, and social networks. Social networks can be described in such terms as the density of ties, boundedness, and homogeneity of a particular society (Ackerson & Viswanath, 2009). In light of this, rural communities have a lot in common and value their social networks. Based on this, information communicated through these networks obtains social acceptability. Hence, rural communication is attached more to the source of the message rather than the content of the message (Obijiofor, 1998, Orewere, 1991). Trust to any information also depends on whether it comes from their social networks and circulates among them.

Communal issues in rural areas are discussed through public gatherings to promote collective decision-making among the community members. In this regard, customary meetings play an important part in the lives of the people. Rural people respect their elders and no one avoids a call from them who take the initiative and consultative roles. In customary meetings, responsibility is given to the community elders who hold much respect within their respective communities. Rural people realize that customary meetings are democratic and participatory in that community elders holding key roles to promote community discussion as the result meetings held under big trees become solutions for various social issues. As the result, rural people regard customary meetings as autonomous approaches to handle communal issues democratically. Even at present, customary meetings are the most preferred strategies to resolve various social problems among the rural public. The features of customary meetings in eastern Tigray are consistent with the studies by Myers (1986:440) who observes the role of individuals chosen to speak on behalf of their fellow members as:

*One important result of the restriction on who can speak is in symbolic action: it produces in every event, a tangible representation of the social order as consisting of those who speak and those who listen. This image identifies initiated older men with knowledge and sociality.*

On the other hand, unlike the customary meetings, the currently functioning food security government meetings are quite unrelated to the people's long-lasting experiences of customary meetings. Rural food security meetings are often dominated by the views from government representatives in that neither the community elders nor fellow members have control over the agenda. Hence, rural people remain as passive listeners of their own development rather than being encouraged to participate and make their own choices. Quarry (2008) argued that 'decisions makers' clearly understand the importance of participation; but they don't apply it to avoid complicating or confusing their ready-made plans. Rural people as the result are uncertain whether the socio-economic problems could be resolved through recurrent government meetings. Rural people clearly indicated that government officials coming from

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offices don't understand the realities on the ground and cannot figure out solutions. This implies that solutions should be context-based rather than one-size-fits-all approach.

Evidences from the fieldwork<sup>8</sup> also indicate that the ongoing food security packages in eastern Tigray are impositions rather than on people's choices and preferences. Regardless of the viability and productivity of each package to specific locations, package distribution in eastern Tigray takes place viewing how packages are working in other zones or regions of the country. In support of such a view, a development agent in Irob district disclosed that *"the only way to ensure food security in our area is to follow the government's rural policy and participate in the packages."* However, a Dagron (2003:6) noted this is called *"...donor's agendas are imposed over people's needs."* People have limited choices about the food security packages but should rely on the available options to participate in packages to promote their food security. Social change as Moemeka (2000:4) affirmed depends on the *"knowledge of the socio-cultural and structural environments of the target social system."* Therefore, the lack of it would neither *'take the people into confidence; nor attempt to learn from them'* (Ibid). Accordingly, as most of the research participants have revealed, this approach has eroded the trust and mutual understanding between the government representatives and the rural people in that rural people have continued to question the transparency of their leaders. As the result, there exists a mismatch between people's expectations and the development practice often resulting in undermining their morale and competition to maintain their food security endeavors.

In general, the currently functioning rural food security meetings have a number of limitations: Firstly, claiming to the urgency of each government plan, most meetings entertain 3-5 different programs in a single session. However, rural people remain confused as to which program they would like to focus on. Secondly, rural people don't have access to public transportation and should travel longer distances to attend meetings. This affects their interest and also distracts their attention from messages addressed in the meetings. Thirdly, meetings are always chaired by experts trained outside of the rural communities and are dominated by technical jargons which the dominantly illiterate community members don't comprehend. Fourthly, as food security messages are addressed orally, people can forget what they have been told. However, neither there are any specific methods outlined to examine to what extent people have understood the messages nor there are follow-ups to inspect the implementation of food security projects.

### **Strategy implementation**

In eastern Tigray, food security as a program is administered under the Rural Agriculture and Development Office in each district. This office is responsible to assign development agents who closely work with farmers and assist them with technical expertise. They have also the responsibility to provide guidance and instructions and also monitor implementation of food security packages. The communication strategies being in use are completely of top-down in nature and telling people to participate in the packages. This indicates that the communication

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<sup>8</sup> *Discussion with interviewees and focus group discussants.*

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focus is on effective information dissemination (Mefalopulos, 2008); which doesn't mean that people are well communicated rather it is simply about 'information dumping' (Kennedy, 1984). Development agents are merely working to achieve package allocation objectives rather than encouraging people to make choices. In light of the people's criticism about package distribution, a development agent in Irob district indicated that *"We understand that sometimes people are unwilling to participate in some packages, but it is part of the rural development policy and we advise them to participate in it."*

In package distribution implementation, communication strategies are both persuasive and aggressive. Persuasive communication is that it is meant to convince people to participate in packages so that they improve their food security. Communication strategies are also aggressive in that people are forced to purchase some packages like fertilizers. The main reason to focus on fertilizers in this section is due to the fact that rural development in eastern Tigray is agriculture-centered. With fertilizers, it looks that the emphasis is about reporting the number of sales that matters rather than their viability to the specific locations and the purchasing power of the poor. Reflecting on the package distribution communication from development agents, an interviewee in Gradender village in Gulomekeda district revealed that *"the case with some packages is becoming a real concern to us. We are pressurized to take them or considered as opposing the development policy."* People were forced to purchase fertilizers in the view that it improves their farm production which is not working the way it was expected. Though there are also other food security packages, each package is related to agriculture as far as food security is concerned. There can be various factors affecting fertilizers as a food security package, but rural people believe that this package in itself cannot work in most of the rural areas except in specific locations with adequate rain fall. Based on the views from respondents, the clearly advocated strategies of *'take this or you are against poverty reduction'* approaches from government has affected the transparency and mutual understanding between people and the rural food security experts.

Generally, to determine the viability and effectiveness of rural meetings as food security communication strategies in eastern Tigray, it is important to look into the following points like: how informed are the rural public about the achievability of each food security package, how context-based are the communication strategies in terms of the mostly illiterate communities, to what levels do the rural people participate in the design and implementation of the projects and how often are they encouraged to make choices on what would be best for their food security programs? In such a view, the food security communication strategies and implementation approaches in eastern Tigray as revealed by the research participants are clearly short of such significant factors among others. This denotes that most development experts are not fully aware of the principles and practices of participatory development communication regardless of their wide recognition (Dagron, 2009; Mefalopulos, 2008). Based on this, the effectiveness of the existing food security communication strategies in mobilizing communities and encouraging them to make their own choices is minimal. As the result, the currently functioning food security packages are becoming a burden rather than a solution for the rural poor. In overall terms, people are not encouraged to make choices and are unable to

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make concrete decisions to the viability of the food security packages. This primarily comes from power inequalities in that disempowered people have extremely limited options to participate and make their own decisions (Dagron, 2009; Chitnis, 2005; Melkote & Steeves, 2001; Servaes, 1999; Huesca, 2008; Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009).

### **Potential and limitations of rural meetings in food security programs**

As stated in previous sections, rural food security programs are communicated through government meetings. The reason to heavily rely on meetings is due to the fact that the government believes that meetings would enable people to discuss their issues in common and in an openly manner. However, there is still a concern whether people can openly discuss their feelings about development programs. Government meetings are associated with 'Wudabe' system.<sup>9</sup> 'Wudabe' is a local term in political system that literally means organizing people into different groups based on their age and gender. 'Wudabe' formation is based on government's direction to promote political solidarity under the ruling party rather than peoples' choices. Thus, people are assigned to their respective 'Wudabe' group in accordance with their political motive as every rural community member is supposed to be part of the 'Wudabe' system. There are three 'Wudabes' namely: the farmers' Wudabe, Women's Wudabe and Youths' Wudabes. Each 'Wudabe' group is led by 'Wudabe' leaders who are given the authority for their active political participation. The responsibility of the 'Wudabe' leaders is thus to inform their members about the forthcoming meetings in different locations in the district. Hence, the 'Wudabe' system helps to make sure that every 'Wudabe' member attend meetings. This enables to get many participants which would have been difficult to get the community otherwise. Based on this, a development agent in Gulomekeda district relates 'Wudabe' as unity and strength and stated that *"If people make 'Wudabe,' it is a power which gives them opportunities to enlighten their concerns collectively."*

Under each 'Wudabe', there are sub-groups called 'Gujule Lim'aat.' The 'Gujule Lim'aat' refers to development groups who are assumed to communicate development issues to their fellow members. Both the 'Gujule Lim'aat' and 'Wudabe' leaders are not trained professionals. But they may have an experience sharing across different zones and villages in the region. They obtained the positions because of their status of being registered members of the ruling party. Their primary duty is thus has become to promote the government's propaganda and glorify its rural development policy rather than closely address rural problems which themselves experience. Accordingly, there are mixed feelings from the community about their roles as leaders. Regarding the 'Wudabe' and the 'Gujule Lim'aat' leaders, an interviewee in Aiga village in Irob district has revealed the following saying: *"You deceitful member of the ruling party, what do you want to tell us again?"* This implies that the community members do not trust 'Wudabe' and the 'Gujule Lim'aat' leaders. This blame emanates from the fact that these leaders are not serving as a channel to connect communities to development programs rather focus on the political agenda. Due to the way meetings are held in rural areas, people remain unconvinced about the use of recurrent meetings to improve rural food security endeavors. To

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<sup>9</sup> *Interview with development agents and food security officers.*

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this part, an interviewee from Gradender village in Gulomekeda district notes that “*there is nothing we are benefiting from it (the meeting) but a waste of time.*” The criticism and mistrust is not only about individuals but also about the overall system of administration in the districts. In this regards, rural people in eastern Tigray have similar sentiments in that they are not heard whenever they have concerns about the food security packages or other issues. In areas like the eastern Tigray where there is no access to modern media and people residing in dispersed geographical locations, the ‘Wudabe’ system has the potential to promote discussion and dialogue among the rural public. However, as communication and mutual understanding is all about trust and transparency between the concerned parties, the ‘Wudabe’ leaders are not working for the people and lack trust from their community. Therefore, rural meetings are functioning the way rural people want them to be.

Different scholars have indicated the limitations of meetings. Above all, meetings are dominated by the interest of a few. Kratz (1983) for instance reviewed rural meetings in African countries (also called the ‘palavers’) and concluded that the extent of discussion and participation in rural meetings varies. For instance about the Kenyan palaver, she noted that while meetings sometimes are “said to be open to all, sometimes women are explicitly excluded or intended to perform support tasks.” Kratz further indicated that the ‘Palaver in Ethiopia’ as a more successful “treatment of a similar problem.” Molutsi and Holm (1990) also examined the ‘*Kgotla*’ in Botswana (a venue for meeting to political participation) and observed that the meeting agenda is often set by the chief of the meeting accompanied by his advisors and relatives. Hence, they revealed that neither opposing to the proposed agenda nor comments is rarely appreciated in the meeting. Molutsi and Holm further indicated that the general public lacks opportunities to express its voice and particularly women are largely excluded. In related reflection, about rural meetings held between members of the Aboriginal Council of Papunya and Pintupi Aborigines in Australia, Myers (1986) concluded that Pintupi meetings rarely resulted in decisions or plans for concerted action. These findings from different scholars are related to the results obtained from the fieldwork in eastern Tigray. In general, government meetings as viewed by rural communities are not operating the way rural people like them to be. The reason for this as Myers (1986:440) observes is that “people are more concerned with the recognition of their autonomy as the right to be consulted and the expectation of being heard.” Hence, it can be argued that rural meetings in eastern Tigray are not connecting people to rural development and food security programs. People are not encouraged to participate in the design and implementation of food security programs which limited their options to make choices to their own development.

## **Conclusion**

Food security communication strategies in Irob and Gulomekeda districts in eastern Tigray are dominated by government meetings. Agenda setting for such meetings is often determined by the government representatives in that rural people mostly remain passive participants. The communication approach is mostly persuasive in nature meant to convince rural people to participate in each of the food security packages. The ‘Wudabes’ and ‘Gujule Lim’aat’ leaders

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who were supposed to facilitate the communication between the community and the government food security officers lack the trust from the community they belong to. Rural communities blame them for their political motives rather than the public needs and expectations. As the result, community participation in the strategy design and implementation phases of food security programs is minimal.

In general, rural government meetings are not connecting people to development initiatives and food security programs. Different reasons can be mentioned as to the ineffectiveness of rural meetings as food security communication strategies: firstly, the communication strategies are neither in the language (especially to the Irob people whom a number of them don't comprehend the Tigrigna language- the regional office working language) nor there is feedback after the meetings to communities. Secondly, the same repetitive communication strategies held by experts trained out of the culture and communication skills of the community rarely understand their audience rather than merely disseminating the messages. Thirdly, food security package distributions are not demand-driven. Hence, packages are rarely available based on individual request or preference. Fourthly, there are no follow-ups to the implementations of packages limiting the viability of each package and the extent it contributes to the rural food security. Lastly, there are no performance evaluation techniques on the ground rather performances are evaluated based on compiled reports to the donors and local government. Thus, the communication strategies for rural food security programs in eastern Tigray are not contextualized and failed to mobilize the people to development programs. Therefore, policy makers and the government are required to figure out a more inclusive and participatory directions to promote people's participation in rural development initiatives.

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