

In midst of drought, some prosper

POVERTY and plenty are uneasy partners in Ethiopia's drought-hit lands. The common logic is that drought leads to food shortages which leads to rising prices which, in turn, strikes the poor peasant communities a double blow.

But among this struggling social strata are farmers who, by good luck or, more likely, development aid, have managed to harvest a crop and save a surplus.

At market now, their spare sack of onions or bundle of grain is worth a small fortune.

Shimlis Buzune, a 44-year-old farmer and father-of-seven, had 12 such sacks at Huruta Market yesterday, each weighing one hundred kilos or a quintal as the local measurement is called, and his harvest is not finished yet. He expects to produce a total of 150 quintals before the earth in his one hectare plot is empty again.

"I will get an absolute minimum of ETB 180 birr (about €12) per quintal," he says through an interpreter, though he is clearly hoping for more.

Prices reached 270birr (€18) per quintal at last week's market and even at a conservative estimate, Shimlis hopes to clear about €2,240 after the cost of seed is deducted.

Three years ago, when he started growing onions, a quintal was fetching a minimum of 150birr, but it never went near the higher levels. Shimlis walked for two hours with his donkeys laden with sacks to get from his village to the market. All around him were hundreds of other farmers, scores of donkeys and thousands of onion sacks, which made similar trips from the outlying villages with equal confidence of making a killing.

Meanwhile, in the small stores where the landless, the urban dweller and the farmer, whose crop failed or produced no surplus, do their daily shop, the rising cost of a kilo of onions for the dinner dish is no cause for celebration. Householders have been hit with hefty price rises right

across their usual shopping basket, most notably for teff, the local grain which makes the injera bread — a three-times-a-day staple in many homes.

A standard 50 kilo sack, which will just about last a family of five for a month, costs five times more now than it did this time last year, while butter and sugar prices have also risen substantially.

Solomon Dabalke, a 35-year-old elementary school teacher-turned farmer, saw how the value of food was rising and didn't need a maths lesson to make the decision to quit his prestige profession.

Prestige earned him just 400birr per month — in two years he made some 60,000birr (€4,169) from onions. "I liked teaching but I have two children and I could not afford to feed them. I saw what could be done with the land and my father gave me some to try because he never made any money from it."

Solomon pulls his bank book out of his trouser pocket and presents it triumphantly as if it were the deeds to a palace. He insists on showing the deposits handwritten inside as proof of his success. For others living three hours drive in any direction from where he stands, the only piece of paper they carry is the one certifying their entitlement to food aid.

It is an unpalatable truth that hungry times for some mean happy days for others.

● Shimlis Buzune and Solomon Dabalke have been assisted by joint Irish-British development agency, Self Help Africa. See www.selfhelpafrica.com

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