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Attitudes to income-earning opportunities: report of a ranking exercise in Ethiopia

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• Introduction

As part of a World Food Programme mission on uses of food aid, we carried out two group ranking exercises with male household heads in Dawe Sake PA, Damot Woyde Awraja, North Omo, Ethiopia, in order to investigate:

- the range of alternative income-enhancing opportunities perceived by farmers;
- the criteria they use to select which options to follow; and,
- the ranking of alternative options.

The first exercise was carried out with a group of ten to twelve farmers (assisted by a large crowd of onlookers), sitting on the ground in a covered part of the Peasant Association (PA) building. The second exercise was carried out with a group of five farmers, sitting round the table in the PA office. The method was slightly different in the two cases, which are therefore reported separately.

• The first ranking exercise

In this exercise, a dozen PA members (all male) were selected from a large crowd of villagers observing the interview with the PA leadership. They were seated on the ground on planks in two rows, facing each other. The procedure took about 45 minutes and was as follows:

i. Participants were asked to identify the various ways in which a family might secure a higher income. Each suggestion was written on a separate piece of paper. There were seven suggestions altogether.

ii. The seven suggestions generated in step (i) were then compared in pairs. Participants were asked to choose which they preferred and to say why. This generated eight different criteria.

iii. An attempt was then made to produce a matrix, combining the seven options and the eight criteria. This proved to be difficult, given a time constraint and the absence of a blackboard or flip chart.

iv. The seven suggestions were then ranked, by placing the seven pieces of paper on the ground in a column, with the best at the top and the least attractive at the bottom.

This brief report was prepared after leaving the project area. It includes a ranking table which is derived from the exercise. The results of the exercise are summarised in Table 1. The participants identified the seven income-enhancing options listed across the top of the table. Three of these are agricultural and on-farm, while four are non-agricultural or agricultural off-farm. The only activity to take place outside the village is temporary migration to work on state farms. The list is in order of priority from left to right: food for work (FFW) was ranked highest and work on state farms lowest. The criteria for choosing options are listed down the side of the table. They overlap somewhat, but include measures

of relative profitability, security and stability of income and compatibility with existing activities. 'Regular income' refers to income all the year round and 'stable income' to income that is not subject to wide inter-annual variation. The criteria are not listed in order of importance.

The results show that food for work is ranked highest among the seven options considered: it provides an assured source of employment at a rate of pay that is high compared to other options; it is over in half a day, which means that farm work can be fitted in during the

afternoon; and it provides a possible source both of food and (by selling grain) cash. Among the agricultural options, vegetables are preferred to coffee or teff, despite being more rainfall-dependent, largely because they offer a higher return to scarce land resources. Among non-agricultural options, weaving is preferred to agricultural labour, mainly because it offers regularity and security of income. Labour on state farms is ranked very low on almost all criteria: it is far from the village and therefore precludes farming on one's land, living conditions are poor and wages are thought to be low.

Table 1. Income earning opportunities: results on first ranking exercise

Criteria	Options						
	FFW	Vegetables	Weaving	Teff	Coffee	Farm labour	State farms
Well paid	H	H	M	M	M	L	L
Regular income	H	M	M	L	L	L	L
Stable income	H	M	M	M	L	L	L
Provides cash	M	H	H	H	H	M	L
Does not need land	H	M	H	L	L	H	H
Good in drought years	H	L	H	M	L	L	M
Meals provided	M	L	L	L	L	H	M
Least time required	H	L	M	L	L	M	L
Final rank (by participants)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

H = High

M = Medium

L = Low

• The second ranking exercise

The second ranking exercise was carried out with a small group of farmers around the table in the PA office. On this occasion, it was decided to include a wider range of agricultural innovations, derived from discussions with agricultural extension staff. The procedure, lasting about an hour, was as follows:

- Participants were presented with a total of seventeen options, rather than seven. As on the previous occasion, a pairing exercise was carried out in order to generate ideas about criteria for selection. However, given the number of possible combinations, 68, it was impossible to cover all the possibilities. Instead, the exercise was used to focus attention on the criteria that might be used.
- The participants were then asked to assign each option to one of three piles on the table, good, middling or bad. Twelve of the seventeen options were assigned to the 'good' pile, so the bottom two piles were removed and the exercise was repeated. This round gave seven options as 'excellent' and the remaining five as either 'very good' or 'pretty good'.
- Finally, participants were asked to choose not more than one option from the 'excellent' pile as the very best bet. This gave a total of five best bets.

In terms of criteria for choosing between options, the exercise added one or two items to the list obtained from the first ranking exercise. Flexibility was mentioned a number of times as a desirable characteristic: options were preferred which could generate both cash and food. Food for work and teff were mentioned in this connection. Avoiding dependency was also regarded as desirable, which prejudiced participants against working for others or travelling to state farms. A regular cash flow was regarded as desirable, which made weaving particularly attractive.

In terms of ranking, the exercise yielded the following results:

Absolute best bets: food for work, weaving, row planting, compost, planting more coffee.

Excellent: spinning, coffee pruning.

Very good: selling teff, improving forage, using improved seeds, planting fruit trees.

Pretty good: trade.

Middling: intercropping.

Bad: selling more vegetables, brewing, working for others, working on state farms.

• Discussion

The exercises suggest that PA members use a complex set of criteria in choosing income-enhancing options. Total profitability is only one of the criteria; regularity of income (within and between years), food security and avoidance of dependence on others (especially other farmers and state farms) are also important criteria.

Applying these criteria to the available options produces a clear ranking, although the ranking is not identical in the two cases. Food for work rates highly because of its present relatively high return, its contribution to food security and its reliability. Working on state farms rates poorly because it fails on all these counts. Among the agricultural innovations, coffee and teff are highly regarded. Vegetables ranked highly in one exercise, but low in the other. Among non-agricultural options, weaving is regarded as a good source of regular and independent cash income.

It is worth noting that livestock intensification was not included in the list of options. It was also impossible, given time constraints, to investigate what would happen to the rankings without food for work. However, participants in the second exercise were adamant that they would not participate in food for work for

anything less than the current wage of 3 kg of wheat per five-hour day. This was almost certainly an astute bargaining exercise and reflected their expressed view that 'foreigners are always kind!'

• Conclusion

This exercise was inserted without preparation into a wider food security assessment. We decided to do it when it became apparent from interviews with key informants that we needed to know more about the impact of food for work on agricultural innovations. The ranking exercises were male-biased and rather rushed. It is also rather hard to do a group ranking without a blackboard or flip chart. Nevertheless, a 'quick and dirty' group ranking is a very good way to explore options, assess criteria and generate discussion on priorities. The trick is to keep the discussion lively by varying the format and adapting to the circumstances.

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NOTES

A more detailed paper is also available:

Simon Maxwell et al: The disincentive effect of food for work on labour supply and agricultural innovation in North Omo, Ethiopia.

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