

# Gender, Climate Change and Nutrition Integration Initiative (GCAN)

## Brief Overview of the Ethiopian Policy Landscape

### 1 Introduction

With a population of over 120 million, it is one of Africa's most populous countries and exhibits a remarkable cultural as well as agro-ecological diversity. Ethiopia's economy is primarily agrarian, with the majority of its population reliant on subsistence farming for their livelihoods. Despite recent strides in economic growth, the country faces significant development challenges, including widespread poverty, food insecurity, and environmental degradation.

These challenges are exacerbated by the impacts of climate change, which have increasingly threatened the resilience of Ethiopia's communities and ecosystems. Over the past decades, the country has experienced rising temperatures and increasingly erratic precipitation patterns. Since 1960, average temperatures have increased by 1.7°C, and the frequency of hot days and nights has grown significantly, leading to higher evapotranspiration and reduced soil moisture. Rainfall trends are marked by high inter-annual variability, with some regions, such as the south-central areas, experiencing up to a 20% reduction in rainfall since 1960. These changes contribute to more frequent droughts, flooding, and land degradation, which directly impact food and water security (World Bank, 2021).

The agricultural sector, which employs 70% of the Ethiopian population, is particularly sensitive to these climate stressors. Projections indicate further warming and erratic rainfall, potentially shortening growing seasons and increasing the risk of crop failure. For instance, staple crops such as teff and maize may see reduced yields due to higher temperatures and unreliable rains (USAID, 2024). Additionally, pastoralist communities face shrinking pasturelands and more intense competition over water resources, which could lead to heightened conflicts and displacement. These compounded climate impacts threaten to reverse developmental gains and deepen food insecurity across Ethiopia.

Ethiopia has made significant strides in gender equality, reflected in its ratification of international frameworks and progressive national policies like the National Policy on Women and revisions to the family code. Despite these advancements, deep-rooted gender norms and systemic inequalities persist, impacting women's participation in education, the economy, and leadership (Ministry of Women and Social Affairs, African Development Bank, & UN Women, 2024). Gender dynamics play a pivotal role in shaping the experiences and responses of Ethiopian communities to climate change and food security challenges. Women, who are traditionally responsible for household food production and management, are disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change. Prolonged droughts, erratic rainfall, and land degradation not only hinder agricultural productivity

but also exacerbate the burdens on women, particularly in rural areas, where access to resources and decision-making power is limited. Addressing these disparities requires a gender-sensitive approach to climate adaptation and food security policies.

The intersection of gender, climate change, and nutrition is critical to understanding the vulnerabilities and capacities of its population. Malnutrition remains a pressing issue, with women and children bearing the brunt of its effects. Ethiopia faces significant challenges in nutrition, with 37% of children under five stunted and 7% acutely malnourished (wasted). Micronutrient deficiencies are widespread, with 57% of children and 24% of women of reproductive age suffering from anemia (USAID 2021). Climate-induced shocks, such as droughts and floods, disrupt food production and access, leading to reduced dietary diversity and nutritional quality. Women's roles in food preparation and caregiving mean that their health and well-being directly influence household nutrition outcomes. Consequently, empowering women and addressing gender inequalities are essential strategies for enhancing climate resilience and improving nutritional outcomes.

## 2 Brief Note on Policy Frameworks

### 2.1 *Agricultural Policy Frameworks*

Ethiopia's agricultural policy landscape has changed considerably during the last six decades, as a result of changes in government and political systems. Broadly speaking there have been four major policy initiatives defining agricultural objectives and expected outcomes in the period. In what follows we present a brief sketch of each to serve as a starting point for discussion.

The Imperial period (1960s to early '70s). The country's development journey was defined in a series of 5-year development plans which defined the goals, expected outcomes and resource allocations for each plan period. Here agriculture was assigned by and large a subordinate role with industry and the modern sector expected to be the driving force for change and development. Policy planners expected smallholder agriculture to satisfy the food security needs of the country and also to provide raw materials and labor to industry and urban based modern enterprises. The prevailing assumption at the time among planners was the country and abundant fertile land, the farmers, though employing using ancient technologies and farming methods, the country could still become the breadbasket of the Middle East if all its land resources were fully utilized. Smallholder agriculture however continued to be neglected except for the few modern and large-scale farm enterprises that were engaged in the Awash Valley and producing industrial crops.

The Derg regime which came to power by radical means adopted a hard-line policy with collectivization at the heart of rural production and enterprises. Socialization of smallholder

agriculture through producers' cooperatives, but later including villagization and agricultural price controls, on the one hand, and on the other, state ownership and management of large-scale farms, was the center piece of its collectivization program. It is important to note that in both these two regimes, the rural areas were engulfed on several occasions by severe food crises and devastating famines, with the loss of thousands of lives, yet very little policy attention was given to the need to promote food security. Indeed, there was a time when food security was not regarded a subject for serious consideration in policy planning and needs assessment. However, as the frequency and magnitude of food crises grew to be of serious concern both within the country as well as among the international community, food security programs increasingly became important components of the country's agricultural effort, especially following the fall of the Derg. The collectivization program became in the end a colossal failure, responsible for poor production, shortage of food commodities in the urban areas, and increasingly higher prices for consumers.

The EPRDF government, established after it had overthrown the Derg, centered its agricultural policy on what came to be called 'agricultural development led industrialization' (ADLI). This placed strong emphasis on rapid development of agriculture (including smallholder farms) as a basis for modernization and progress in the industrial sector and an effective measure to promote poverty reduction. Large-scale farms managed by private investors (both local and foreign) were to operate side by side with small farms though the latter were to benefit by increased state support such as provision of modern inputs and extension services to enable them to improve their production. In the end, however the regimes policy prescriptions failed to deliver the expected outcomes and the country continued to be dependent on a regular flow of humanitarian food aid by foreign countries to meet its basic food security needs. Large-scale farm investments that were eagerly sought failed to materialize and the growing high prices of imported agro-chemicals became burdensome on many small farmers.

The current government has produced several documents having to do with agriculture, food and nutrition strategy in the last four or five years. In 2020, the Government of Ethiopia (GoE) launched the Home-Grown Economic Reform agenda and a ten-year economic development plan (2021–2030), with agriculture designated as the top priority sector. The priorities and objectives set in the documents are different in many ways from those of previous governments. Here the emphasis is on smallholder farm enterprises and the goal is to improve the incomes of farmers by making agriculture more productive on the one hand, and on the other to contribute to poverty reduction. Other objectives also include improving the role and participation of the private sector, supplying raw materials to industry as well as improving the volume and quality of exports of agricultural goods. Moreover, the documents emphasize that to achieve the high degree of success expected of it, agriculture will have to reduce its dependency on rain-fed production and instead expand irrigation capacity on the one hand and improve farm mechanization services on the other. Contrary to past practice, a clear case is made here for the importance of integrating nutrition in the agricultural sector, in the framework of addressing poverty eradication and achieving global

nutritional commitments (2021, 2024). It is a paradox that the population which is responsible for producing food is also the most malnourished. One of the most important goals of agriculture-nutrition integration is ensuring the availability, access and consumption of diverse, safe, healthy and nutritious food in farming and pastoral communities. This, it is believed, will enhance the resilience of rural populations but especially the more vulnerable families and individuals. Here also, there is a reference to the need for the “empowerment and engagement” of rural women, but there is no discussion of the socio-economic context in which rural women live and operate and the many challenges they face in their day to day lives. But the 2024 document issued by MoA lists a number of opportunities which should be provided to them to promote women-empowerment. These include improving women’s access to agricultural inputs, as well as to extension services and credit opportunities. It is also suggested that awareness creating forums are necessary to promote more women in leadership roles and community participation.

## *2.2 Food Systems Policy Framework*

Ethiopia's journey to address nutrition challenges has evolved significantly over the past two decades, marked by a series of strategic policies and programs aimed at reducing malnutrition and improving food security. While the government has long recognized that Ethiopia grappled with severe malnutrition, particularly among women and children, characterized by high rates of stunting, wasting, and undernutrition, efforts to address these challenges were largely fragmented, lacking a unified national strategy. The need for a coordinated and multi-sectoral approach became increasingly clear as malnutrition was recognized as a major impediment to the country’s development. In 2008, Ethiopia took a significant step by introducing the National Nutrition Strategy (NNS). This strategy aimed to provide a comprehensive framework to combat malnutrition. It laid the groundwork for multi-sectoral collaboration and targeted vulnerable populations, particularly infants, young children, and mothers, as the most affected groups. The strategy marked a turning point, signaling the government's commitment to tackling nutrition challenges in a more structured and coordinated manner.

Following the NNS, the government rolled out the National Nutrition Program I (NNP I), which was implemented from 2008 to 2015. The program’s main objective was to reduce child mortality and malnutrition by focusing on key interventions: improving maternal and child nutrition, expanding community-based programs such as Growth Monitoring and Promotion, and promoting nutrition-sensitive interventions in health, agriculture, and education sectors. While NNP I achieved notable successes, including reductions in stunting and underweight rates, it also faced challenges, such as limited implementation coverage and weak coordination between sectors, which hindered its full impact.

In 2013, Ethiopia made a high-level political commitment through the Seqota Declaration, a bold initiative aimed at ending child undernutrition by 2030. This declaration targeted the elimination of stunting among children under the age of two. The Seqota Declaration emphasized multi-sectoral action, recognizing the importance of collaboration across agriculture, health, education, and WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) sectors to address the root causes of malnutrition.

Building on the lessons and achievements of NNP I, Ethiopia launched the National Nutrition Program II (NNP II) for the period 2016–2020. NNP II addressed the gaps identified in the earlier program and introduced a stronger focus on nutrition-sensitive and nutrition-specific interventions:

- Improving maternal and child nutrition, with specific goals to reduce stunting, wasting, and micronutrient deficiencies.
- Promoting nutrition across sectors such as agriculture, education, and WASH.
- Strengthening nutrition governance and enhancing accountability mechanisms.

NNP II reflected Ethiopia’s growing recognition of nutrition as a cross-cutting issue that required coordinated action.

A milestone was reached in 2018 with the endorsement of Ethiopia’s first Food and Nutrition Policy. This policy provided a comprehensive and overarching framework to address food security, food safety, and nutrition quality. It aimed to:

- Ensure availability, accessibility, and utilization of diverse, safe, and nutritious foods.
- Improve nutrition outcomes throughout the life cycle, particularly for women and children.
- Strengthen governance, coordination, and institutional capacities to implement sustainable nutrition interventions.
- Build a climate-resilient food system to address emerging environmental challenges.

The Food and Nutrition Policy of Ethiopia demonstrates a clear acknowledgment of gender issues, particularly in the context of malnutrition and food insecurity. The policy identifies women and adolescent girls as especially vulnerable, attributing this to systemic gender inequality, which both drives and perpetuates malnutrition. For example, the document highlights unequal food distribution within households as a critical challenge, often disadvantaging women and girls. To address this, the policy adopts a gender-responsive approach, emphasizing the need for equitable participation of women, men, and community leaders in nutrition initiatives. However, while the policy recognizes the importance of breaking the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition, it does not delve deeply into the structural causes of gender inequality, such as cultural norms and power dynamics. A more detailed analysis of gendered roles in agriculture, decision-making, and access to resources could enhance its impact on women’s empowerment in the nutrition context.

In terms of climate resilience, the policy integrates some elements to address environmental challenges affecting food and nutrition security. It promotes the adoption of climate-smart agricultural practices. These measures are crucial for building resilience to climate change, which exacerbates food insecurity in vulnerable communities. Furthermore, the policy aligns with Ethiopia's broader goals of achieving a climate-resilient green economy, highlighting the importance of environmentally friendly interventions. However, while these strategies are commendable, the document lacks clear mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of these climate-smart interventions at scale. For instance, there is limited discussion on how local communities, particularly marginalized groups, will access the necessary knowledge, technology, and financial resources to adopt climate-resilient practices effectively.

In 2020, the Government of Ethiopia launched the Ethiopian Food Systems Process to define a national vision and pathway for food systems transformation, focusing on six priority areas: nutrient-dense food production and climate-smart technologies; value chain development and nutrition awareness; integrated policymaking and rural transformation financing; agricultural innovation and input supply; market access and infrastructure; and risk management to protect vulnerable populations.

### *2.3 Climate Change and Adaptation Policy Framework*

Ethiopia's Climate Resilient Green Economy Strategy (CRGE) (2011) represents an ambitious blueprint for sustainable development, aiming to achieve middle-income status by 2025 while minimizing greenhouse gas emissions. The strategy's emphasis on agricultural productivity, forest protection, renewable energy expansion, and energy-efficient technologies is laudable, particularly in a country so heavily reliant on climate-sensitive sectors. However, the document's integration of gender considerations is superficial at best, failing to address the differentiated impacts of climate change on men and women. This oversight undermines the strategy's potential to foster truly inclusive resilience. Similarly, while nutrition is indirectly addressed through agricultural goals, the lack of explicit connections between food security, malnutrition, and climate adaptation strategies limits the scope for holistic interventions.

The National Adaptation Plan (NAP) (2019) takes a more comprehensive approach, building on the CRGE to incorporate gender sensitivity and equitable implementation across its 18 adaptation options. This recognition of gender dynamics is a significant step forward, reflecting a more nuanced understanding of the vulnerabilities faced by women, particularly in rural areas. The plan also establishes clear links between climate-smart agricultural practices and nutritional outcomes, highlighting the importance of food security in adaptation strategies. However, its reliance on existing governance structures and financial mechanisms raises questions about feasibility, given Ethiopia's constrained institutional and financial capacities. Furthermore, while the plan aspires to integrate climate adaptation into broader development pathways, its practical implementation

framework lacks clarity, particularly regarding how it will bridge national goals with local realities

The Sectoral Climate Resilience Strategy for Agriculture and Forestry (2011) focuses on Ethiopia's most vulnerable and economically critical sectors, presenting a detailed analysis of risks and proposing interventions such as sustainable land management, irrigation improvements, and reforestation. The strategy's acknowledgment of women's central role in agriculture is a positive feature, but it still lacks details regarding substantive measures to address systemic inequalities or empower women in decision-making processes. The strategy's link to nutrition is more implicit, focusing on food security through resilient agricultural systems, but it does not adequately address how these measures will tackle the root causes of malnutrition or align with broader nutritional goals. Moreover, the strategy's reliance on external funding and technical expertise underscores the ongoing dependency on international support, raising concerns about sustainability and ownership

## 3 Issues for Debate

### 3.1 *Agricultural Extension Services*

The task of translating agricultural policy objectives into concrete programs and goals on the one hand and ensuring their implementation in the rural areas on the other is the responsibility of the extension department in the Ministry of Agriculture whose agents are found in all farming communities in the country. It is through these rural based agents, a great majority of whom are male, that the government provides services, technical advice, and other relevant support to the farming community. However, there are two main problems regarding these agents: one is that they do not have much knowledge about farming and all that entails (farmers have extensive knowledge of crops, soils, agro-ecology, etc); the second is there is a high degree of turnover among agents; (many agents prefer to live in bigger towns where there are better opportunities). Moreover, the relationship between the state and the farmer is based on a hierarchical top-down approach. All services, information and initiatives flow from the top (often the Ministry in Addis Ababa) and filtered down to the farmers at the bottom. There is in effect no dialogue between the farmer and the state, and new policy initiatives are often not the outcome of careful analysis and consultation with farmers and other relevant actors but mainly donor-driven. Furthermore, because of the gender balance noted above and social differentiation in rural communities, questions have been raised regarding the efficacy and inclusivity of the delivery of government services. Households headed by women (which are quite significant in number), the elderly, poor and the marginalized households, and young people do not often benefit by the full range of services on offer. Some of the goods and services on offer are either inadequate, inappropriate, or not delivered when they are most needed.



### 3.2 Food Systems and Nutrition

As suggested above, government policy has become more and more aware that nutrition deficiency in general and among the rural population in particular has been one of the root causes of ill health, high mortality, low labor productivity and poverty, and that it is therefore important to address the problem from multiple dimensions. This is in part one reason why nutrition has been integrated as an important element of the agricultural sector as noted above. But there are two major concerns that arise in this connection: 1. How do you ensure access to and consumption of diversified and nutritious food on a regular basis as the policy recommends? 2. Will customary food consumption practices within each household ensure that the meal is equally shared by all members?

The goal of agricultural development is for farming families to produce more from their plots and to sell more to earn more income: more production leading to greater commercialization of farm produce. But this may have a deleterious effect on household consumption, especially if the commercialization involves quality food produced by the household. There are instances, for example, that the commercialization of milk by farm or pastoralist families has led to malnutrition of children in the family.

The other issue is concerned with “micro-level” analysis of how food consumption is managed at the household/family level. The intra-household, and particularly gender-based, distribution and consumption of food and related consumables has not often been given the attention it deserves. So questions need to be asked whether there is a gender or age-related bias in food consumption practices in the household set by custom or patriarchal authority? Differential access to and consumption of food in the household will not contribute to household resilience despite better production and more commercialization of farm products. Food and nutrition security must therefore be based on micro-level analysis at the household level.

### 3.3 Climate Change and Adaptation

Smallholder farmers are well aware of climate change which for them involve changes taking place in the natural world whose impact they experience on their lives and livelihoods on a daily basis. The most consequential and the ones often cited by farmers we have interviewed for several earlier research projects are changes in *rainfall regime* and *temperature patterns*. The rains, they say, have now become more erratic and unpredictable in regard to their timing, duration and volume, and there is now a longer period of high temperatures and dryness. Indeed many of the farmers reported that a gradual shift from a bi-annual to an annual agricultural season is taking place at present. They say that the availability of rain in the *belg* season was no longer dependable and that many had given up *belg* season farming altogether.



There are several mitigation and adaptation programs adopted by the government since the early 2000s. They include several policy options to enhance the country's resilience to climate shocks, such as the Climate Resilient Green Economy policy (CRGE 2011), as well as mitigation instruments such as NAPA/EPACC (2011), and NAMA (2010), NDC (2016) and updated NDC (2021). Broadly, the government has placed strong emphasis on the following to promote climate resilience: a) investment in road and transport infrastructure. The country's road network has expanded considerably since the last decade and half, and many rural areas which previously were considered remote are now accessible. b) Investment in hydropower and renewable energy, including wind, solar and thermal energy. c) Expanded extension services, both agricultural and health extension. On the other hand, despite persistent threats posed by drought occurrences, the government has not given sufficient attention to nor provided adequate investment for water management schemes benefitting smallholder farmers. The irrigation schemes put up by the government in some rural communities are too few and too late given the magnitude of drought and other climate change hazards. Similarly, reforestation/afforestation initiatives do not appear to have been a high priority in the past (except where there have been strong Regional initiatives), though the recent campaigns (launched in May 2019) mobilizing the public across the country to plant billions of tree seedlings suggests a renewed interest and a change of direction.

We should also observe that the government provides a wide range of welfare and other support services to rural people. In the rural areas these include the Safety Net Program as well as emergency food aid schemes for victims of environmental and climate shocks. Other measures that target mainly rural people include: agricultural extension services managed by MoA; health extension services managed by MoH; community-based health insurance schemes; technical education for selected farmers; rural electrification; and anti-malaria programs for families (both rural and urban) living in malaria-prone areas.

It is important to note here that farmers have devised their own ways of meeting the challenge of climate change by means of what may be described as *indigenous adaptation strategy*, consisting of the following activities: planting improved crop varieties when available (fast growing and drought resistant ones), shifting from cereals to vegetables (chilli peppers, onions, potatoes), and from vegetables to fruit trees (mangoes, oranges, avocados) depending on market conditions, and availability of improved varieties, changing cropping plans and shifting from food crops to non-food crops with high market value, using irrigation where available, if not, extracting water on their own initiative, intensification of labor, reducing the number of livestock owned, or shifting from herding large animals (cattle and camels) to small ruminants (sheep and goats), and finally migration to urban or other rural areas in search of employment.

It is worth noting here that the idea of *climate smart agriculture* has been under consideration by MoA for some time, but up to now no specific programs have been introduced in the rural areas.

There are numerous questions that arise and need discussion on climate change in the rural context:

1. Does climate change promote or erode tenure, food and crop security? There is no simple answer to this, or rather the answer is yes and no in many cases. With regard to crop security, there are complex factors at play, one of which is the shift in the seasons and characteristics of agro-ecologies. What was suitable for a *weyna-degga* agro-ecology in the past, for example, is now no longer certain.
2. Does climate change intensify land disputes? The frequency of land disputes that has been noted in several recent research projects indicates that tenure security here is not robust and enduring. There were numerous land dispute cases at the woreda land office at the time of our study for a recent project.
3. Does climate change give rise to land fragmentation? What are the implications of fragmentation esp. in communities with severe shortage of land? Fragmentation is considered harmful to agricultural modernization by development agents at the local level. There have been attempts in some areas to persuade or pressure farmers to undertake land consolidation. But farmers may have a different point of view. Consolidation may be likened to “putting all your eggs in one basket”. Indigenous adaptation schemes work well when farmers have different plots because it gives them different options.
4. And finally, does climate change broaden or restrict land transactions? Does it broaden or restrict crop choices and varieties.

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