

## Geblen in 2010

Geblen tabia comprises four kushets<sup>1</sup>: two of them lie on the Eastern Tigray highland plateau while the other two, spread out on the steep slopes from the plateau to the Afar Region, are not easily accessible. A very small town called Mishig is emerging around the tabia administrative centre (on the plateau), which has had electricity since 2008. This urbanisation trend is encouraged by the tabia administration which provides residential land for young landless households. The tabia centre is connected through a small all-weather road (which has to be annually maintained, usually through FFW) to a tar road going to the zonal capital Adigrat (35 kms) and in the other direction to Freweini, the centre of Saesia Tsaeda Emba wereda (39 kms). There is transport three times a week from Geblen to Edaga Hamus (at the junction with the tar road), the second town of the wereda with an important market (18 kms), and transport every day from Adikelembes, the neighbouring tabia where there is also a small market (45 min walk from Mishig). There is a wireless phone in the tabia office. The mobile phone network does not yet reach the tabia except for a few spots and the reception is not good.

In 2007 the population of the tabia was estimated to be 3,500 by the DAs. One third of the 750 households were registered as landless and 46% were female-headed, two trends that are said to be upward. In Geblen there are Erob and Tigrayans, though several people said that they could not clearly identify to which group they belong. There are two main religious groups, Orthodox Christians and Muslims, as well as a few Catholics. The links between ethnic and religious identities are complex. Relations between groups are tolerant and there is no evidence of intentional bias against any of the groups. The 'far away' kushets, historically inhabited more by Erob people, are at a disadvantage with regard to access to infrastructure and services. But this is being addressed, within the limits of the means available to the community, by measures such as the construction of two satellite schools in these kushets and of better paths between the kushets and the tabia centre.

Geblen is known to be drought-prone and this is said to have lately become worse. There was only one good year between 2002 and 2009; in three of the years crops totally failed (in one year even cactus were destroyed), and in one of the years drought and diseases killed 810 animals. Water is very scarce, a big issue for all farm-based activities in Geblen and a strong disincentive for government staff posted in the tabia. The stony soil and the topography prevent the use of technologies found elsewhere in the wereda. The few existing water structures which serve an estimated 10% of the population do not hold water the whole year. Since 2009 all non-farm land has been put under a strict zero-grazing programme which officials say will revive the area, to most people's anger as this causes serious lack of access to fodder and even food items for people (cactus fruits). The very few household ponds built do not hold water as they are not cemented (an unfulfilled wereda promise).

The tabia is included in the PSNP. The assistance is shared through a system of partial family targeting (condoned by the tabia administration) so that 90% of the households benefit for some of their members (instead of 70% officially registered), a situation that is more acceptable for the community than the full family targeting foreseen in the policy. There have been allegations that some tabia officials were biased, some of which were taken up to and addressed by the wereda. By 2010 no household had graduated from the safety net, although a few households having done less badly than others had been 'excluded' from the PSNP second phase and others had been included. In very bad years the community gets additional emergency assistance. 40% of the under-five children get supplementary feeding (which is often shared too, among household members).

Less than 10% of the tabia is farmland and in most areas the soil is poor so that even in good years, households cover at most a few months of their food needs with their own production. Very small-scale irrigation is being practised but for minimal incomes. Households therefore have to have a

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<sup>1</sup> A tabia in Tigrigna is like a kebele; a kushet is a part of a tabia, like a got for a kebele.

range of other activities in their livelihood portfolio. One option for most households is work under the PSNP which, although not well paid compared to other daily labour opportunities (including smaller-scale NGO FFW projects), is supposed to be a reliable source of food/income. Delays in PSNP transfers cause hardship but once they arrive transfers make a real difference for poorer households.

People in Geblen keep livestock, mainly goats and sheep and richer households have oxen to plough. Modern beehive and small livestock packages, available on credit provided by DECSI, the regional MFI, are being heavily promoted under the government Other Food Security Programme. In an effort of the tabia administration and DAs to try to reach the wereda targets for the OFSP, reportedly many farmers were forced to take modern beehives packages 'against their interest' (with threats of otherwise being denied other opportunities including access to the PSNP). Most of these failed, mainly because of drought (500 bee colonies died or absconded in 2008). Also, although in 1995 beekeeping was mentioned as important a number of people explained that they had no experience with it and they did not believe that it would work for them, and so they were reluctant to take the hive packages. Livestock packages are generally better accepted and whilst many fail due to lack of water, fodder and regular vet services (there is a veterinary post in Geblen but no assigned staff) some people could get some income from these.

For the poorest households, taking a package under constraint may just aggravate a cycle of debt (for which some use their PSNP rations as a collateral and even repayment means). Due to failure with packages some households have had to become PSNP beneficiaries, which they were not before. People of all ages and even loyal party members deeply resent the coercion and blame the tabia officials for their cowardly attitude when they refuse to take their complaints to a higher level. Tabia officials, pointing at the high level of bad debt in the wereda as a whole and the usually good performance of the tabia in terms of repayment, stress that this (enforcement) '*cannot continue*', as everyone in the tabia will become bankrupt.

People engage in various non-farm activities, self-initiated (e.g. daily labour) or, for a few and more recently, non-farm package options in the OFSP. A number of women are doing quite well with running small shops, teashops and bars in Mishig. Apart from the PSNP, other local non-farm opportunities are few and occasional (e.g. NGO development projects needing labour). People thus migrate for variably long periods of time to different places, finding jobs on construction projects or quarry work in the Region, going to Humera for the sesame harvest, finding work in towns as housemaids, waitresses, or commercial sex workers (for women) and manual labourers (for men), or migrating (illegally) to the Gulf States for both men and women (some women migrate legally), with stories of hardship and failures but also successes – with a few people sending remittances to their families in Geblen.

Migration is increasing particularly among the youth, who lack access to land and '*lose hope*' (one going so far as saying: '*our parents are our enemies*'). The tabia tries to organise groups and facilitate the provision of credit for them to start economic activities but by 2010 only one such group had been formed. They got communal land, though after strong resistance by others in the community, and started beekeeping but failed like others to get any production due to drought. The OFSP non-farm packages mentioned earlier worked for a few youth who '*at least did not get bankrupt*'. But tabia officials point that youth need skills to be able to engage in more lucrative work. Market linkages are also an issue as the local demand for services and products is unlikely to expand dramatically in the future. Examples of success among the young people who stay in Geblen are rare, and linked to some exceptional factors like the story of a young man who invested the savings he had made by working several years in a grinding mill in various local activities.

Education and getting a job is hoped by many to be a way out and there is a strong commitment to education. Even poor households find ways of sending children to study at university and poor students of self-financing their education. But there is also much concern about the poor quality of

the education in the local schools and the implications for children's ability to get further, the lack of affordable opportunities, and the risk of unemployment. Some women point out that children from poorer families have much fewer chances to succeed in the 'education-job' route and criticise the government/party for failing to address this. Indeed it is not easy for children to pursue education after primary school. There is one full-cycle and two satellite primary schools in the tabia. Enrolment is said to be almost 100% and gender parity is achieved. There is a newly opened secondary school in Adikelembes, the neighbouring tabia. Children from the far away kushets of Geblen have to stay there for the week because of the distance, which increases the costs. Children from families who can afford it also go to Edaga Hamus, Freweini and Adigrat – also for TVET though there are not enough places so pass marks are high to restrict entrance. The number of young people who drop out at some stage after grade 8 is becoming large, and there is little for them to do as said above.

There is a health post in Mishig although only one HEW, who faces a real challenge considering the difficult topography of the tabia, and given that she has a child under five. She offers the usual teaching on sanitation and prevention and Geblen is a model tabia in this respect, though she says that she does not know the extent to which people actually use latrines for instance, which even do not exist in all houses in Mishig. The HP offers first aid, pregnancy check-up, delivery and post-natal vaccination services – though the HEW is concerned that she needs better ANC skills. Distance to the HP is also a disincentive for women from the far away kushets. There is a health centre in Adikelembes and most people interviewed are satisfied by the services though some point out that costs are high. Waterborne diseases are a serious issue. HIV AIDS is not seen as a big issue by most. VCT is available through campaigns but there is little use of it before marriage as is advocated, and many youth are said to have unsafe sex practices. Family planning has been available for a long time in Geblen and although it is now even more easily accessible with the HP and health centre offering a range of means, its use is only slowly increasing.

The relationship with the government is good 'on the surface'. Geblen is the 2<sup>nd</sup> model tabia with regard to governance and wereda officials say that the community is easily mobilised (for instance for the 20 to 40 days of annual free community labour). The tabia and sub-tabia administrative and party structures overlap and have the same leaders. There is a heavy responsibility on party members and especially local leaders to 'show the way' and convince others to adopt government policies. Party membership is high but not universal. For some people it sounds like a matter of genuine personal commitment, for others, and in particular many women who have been strongly encouraged to become members (in a drive to increase women's representation on local Councils in the Region as a whole), it brings 'no benefit but no harm'. However, as noted earlier people deeply resent the coercion which is apparent in several areas (particularly packages but also latrines and fertiliser), and extension workers resent being prevented from studying outside of wereda-sponsored scheme.