

Korodegaga in 2010

Korodegaga is a collection of nine villages scattered over a large area (2 hours walk between some of them) and forming one kebele in Dodota wereda in Oromia. Sefera village, the administrative centre (and a legacy of the Derg villagisation) with some new administrative and service buildings, is located along the Awash river. It does not have electricity (nor do any of the other villages) although since the fieldwork a line may have been extended across the river to Sodere (as was done at times in the past), which was needed to restart an irrigation scheme using electric pumps. There is only one spring giving potable water so that most people use water from rivers for all their needs.

The nine villages are almost encircled by the Awash and the Qelete, another perennial river. Access to Dera, the wereda centre, is either through a dirt road (25 kms) which is not passable the whole year but was recently maintained with the help of a recently arrived Australian investor using his tractor, or, crossing the Awash river on a manually-hauled raft as there is no bridge, and walking to Sodere where there is an all weather road and transport to Dera. So on the one hand Korodegaga is remote. On the other hand, once on the all weather road people can easily reach Nazreth (30 kms), the second or third largest city in Ethiopia, and several small towns on the way. Moreover, most people have access to a mobile phone (in addition to a public V-Sat phone in the kebele though only receiving calls).

The people, who are descended from pastoralists who settled gradually, are almost 100% Oromo Muslims belonging to thirteen different clans of which one (Sebro) is dominant in terms of population and economic power and social and kin networks. In 2004 it was estimated that well over half (56%) of the population was under 20; 23% of the households were headed by a woman; polygyny concerned 12% of households.

New laws and repeated training led to people saying to be changing their mind and progress being made on a number of women's rights issues. Female circumcision is at the very least much reduced though may still be hidden; at least half of the young women who marry are said to choose their partner (less likely if the family is rich); women can and do refuse to be 'inherited wives' when their husbands die; polygyny is solidly entrenched but first wives now have to be consulted and can obtain that property is shared in case they do not agree to their husband taking a second wife. Individual land rights by inheritance or upon divorce are enforced, which is a dramatic change with repercussions for relationships between siblings and between married partners.

The kebele has ample land, but many young men are landless. To address this, for a few years the wereda and kebele administrations have worked together to allocate communal land (of which there is a good amount) to groups of youth organised in co-ops to engage in rainfed and irrigated agriculture. Some youth co-ops also started non-farm activities (sand, loading/unloading, and stone splitting and crushing). The loading/unloading co-op was successful; the other two failed due to quality and market access issues.

Rainfed agriculture (mainly maize and teff) which used to be the most common form of livelihood in the community is unreliable. There have been few good harvests since the early 1990s and four severe droughts since 1984 including two since 2002. The kebele is considered to be food insecure and received food aid regularly since the mid-1980s. Since 2005 it has been included in the Productive Safety Net Programme. Food aid is generally appreciated by community members but provokes a lot of conflict during the selection for targeting. Kebele officials highlight that food aid increases a sense of dependency, whilst wereda officials highlight that the good irrigation potential of Korodegaga provides the way toward food security.

This potential is being increasingly exploited. A number of farmers owning small pumps individually or in small groups irrigate their private land. There are two communal schemes with almost all landholding households belonging to the larger government scheme, operating under one joint irrigation association which gives good services to its members including credit for inputs: the first

was established with the support of an NGO which phased out since but the scheme is still operating; the other, recently developed with government support, faced problems resulting from theft of parts after one year of operation but was due to restart soon after the fieldwork. Some of the youth groups/co-ops got irrigable land and one of them a pump from an NGO. Most recently a group of eight women formed a co-op and got irrigable land though they had to call on the wereda Women Affairs' office to overcome initial refusals by the kebele and wereda administrations, and later on faced further opposition from other community members. There are a few inward investors, including an Australian investor who was given land by the wereda. This was against a decision by the kebele administration and the community to give this land to a group of youth. However since then, the investor has gained acceptance as he proves to be willing to help the community and individuals in different ways and his farm generates employment opportunities.

These developments benefitted a large number of households, directly for the farmers and youth producing on irrigated land, and for others through providing opportunities for daily labour (largely substituting for firewood cutting and selling), loading/ unloading work to one of the youth co-ops, and an emerging land leasing market for households with irrigable land and not enough labour (which is against the rules). But there have been setbacks too, due to pests, increasing price of inputs, what looks like sabotage with critical parts of the equipment of the government-sponsored scheme stolen for several months, and a number of conflicts over land or other issues (like the pump for a youth group that was borrowed by the irrigation association which later on refused to give it back). Some farmers grow maize and not vegetables and fruits as this is less labour-intensive, but it also is potentially less good return on their investment. The main constraint, though, is the lack of a bridge over the river to facilitate marketing of the products, something which the community raises repeatedly at wereda level. Recently wereda officials have promised a 'step-by-step solution'. It also seemed that wereda officials had a plan to graduate almost the whole community from the PSNP – although this was not known by community members who also did not seem to know about a second phase of PSNP.

Apart from the developments around irrigation various government-led initiatives to try to enhance agricultural and livestock production have had varying success. In principle farmers have access to credit to get some inputs and new technologies (but fertiliser must be bought in cash). But there are quotas (e.g. on improved seeds and livestock) so that the quantity may be insufficient; there are allegations of bias in the distribution (e.g. for improved seeds); there are issues of repayment (e.g. revolving fund for livestock not revolving); failure to use the technology due to insufficient information (e.g. improved maize) or loss of livestock due to lack of vaccination and drugs (there is a newly built vet post but no assigned veterinarian). There also are some stories of successes.

Richer farmers may spend most of their time on their farm on rainfed and irrigated agriculture and some livestock-rearing. Sons, poorer farmers and female-headed households usually have a portfolio of activities changing over the year and including in addition work on sharecropped/rented land, daily labour, FFW and selling wood. There are virtually no local non-farm activities. With the various co-ops started recently, wereda officials estimate that about 15% of the community is engaged in the co-op movement, to which the irrigation association must be added. There is some (likely illegal) migration of young women and men to Sudan, a trend which started quite recently and is slowly increasing.

There is a new health post and health extension workers living with the community since 2009, though the HP equipment and services provided are minimal, focusing on teaching the health extension programme 16 packages and sanitation and prevention advice. For curative services people have to cross the river, the nearest facility is a private clinic (8 kms) then the health centre in the wereda centre. Malaria is a big problem, bednets are distributed but not regularly and people do not always use them, partly because their shape is hard to fit in the round huts of most people, and treatment is not available at the HP. An epidemic of chronic diarrhoea killed three people in 2009. A wereda programme to provide HIV testing, ARV and counselling could not be implemented properly

because of shortage of kits, but there is increasing awareness of how the disease is transmitted in the community and a number of voluntary tests were conducted. Family planning services are available at the HP though the supply of contraceptives has been irregular, and large families are still the norm. Pregnancy and childbirth services are available at the clinic and health centre but not the HP, and the distance is a disincentive to use the services.

There is one primary school in Sefara, which was recently expanded to grade 5 with community labour and wereda support and the plan is to gradually bring it to full cycle, and a new satellite school in another village. There are more girls than boys at school, reportedly as a result of the activities of a dedicated committee. Students beyond grade 5 have to go to the full cycle school in Sodere, across the river. Students are often absent on market days or miss school during peak agricultural time and sometime to do FFW under the PSNP. Teachers are expected to try to prevent this by going door-to-door which they hate doing. This is not out of lack of commitment: for example the teachers successfully approached an investor, who agreed to support six orphans (providing them with educational materials). Very few students go beyond primary education and most of those who do drop out. There is no TVET provision nearby.

The wereda and kebele administration played a significant role in the developments around irrigation. However, the community is upset by the lack of progress with the serious issues of lack of access/link to markets, and safe water supply, in spite of the pressure put by the woman wereda Councillor from the kebele. Wereda and kebele officials do not always see eye-to-eye. The case of the land allocation to the Australian investor prompted the then kebele leader to step down even though he was well-liked by the community for being a 'democratic leader' who did not force people to do what they did not want to do and simply reported to the wereda, but basically, he said, the wereda did not want him to be the leader. Other leaders were removed because of community allegations of corruption or lack of effectiveness, which suggests that the opinion of the community somehow matters (also, the recently appointed kebele manager was known previously and recommended by the kebele officials) but may also be linked to inter-clan competition for access to government resources.

There are a large number of kebele and sub-kebele structures involved in development and political activities (including EPRDF party cells with 20 members, a leader, deputy, accountant, and co-op person). The OPDO-EPRDF party activity was stepped up since 2008 and almost everyone is a member in Korodegaga. However, for most men this seems to be a matter of avoiding problems (even if there are no fines in principle, people say that 'fines happen indirectly') and they were speaking bitterly about the number of meetings they had to attend given the lack of economic development in the community. In contrast, many women apparently supported the EPRDF, saying that 'with this government women get their rights'. On the other hand, participation in the Women's Association meetings and community work seems to be fairly compulsory (threat of exclusion from other government interventions). Militia members reluctant to work (as they are not paid) are also told that they will be excluded from different kebele services and advantages if they do not serve as they should and can be fined.