

Girar in 2010

Girar na Yeferema Zigba (abbreviated to Girar) comprises sixteen villages surrounding Imdibir town, the capital of Cheha wereda in the Gurage zone of SNNP. The kebele emerged from Imdibir Haya Gasha rural kebele¹, part of which was incorporated in Imdibir town and the rest merged with other areas. The villages of Girar adjacent to Imdibir are as urbanised as the town itself (which enjoys an economic boom and rapid development notably thanks to the chat trade). Girar and Imdibir are bisected by a (gravel) all weather road with regular public transport, going to the zonal capital Wolkite (30 kms) and from there Addis Ababa in one direction, and Hoseana in the other direction. The 'inside villages' are not very well connected to the main road (seasonal roads and community built bridges) which is a constraint for marketing their products, particularly eucalyptus. There is electricity and piped water in town and in the urbanised villages. Elsewhere people have to use water from the rivers crossing the kebele. The lack of access to safe water is a bone of contention between the community and the wereda, especially as there seemed to be solutions that the wereda, allegedly inexplicably, prevented from happening. The mobile phone network covers all parts of the kebele and most people have access to a mobile phone, which made a big difference for trade, keeping in touch with relatives and migrants etc.

People are almost 100% Gurage, a group with strong customary institutions and structures that are still very important in people's everyday lives and with which the government is increasingly trying to work (e.g. clan elders have been a critical support for the 'modern' gender equality agenda in Girar). There are followers from four major religions, Islam, Orthodox Church, Catholicism (since the 1980s) and Protestantism (most recently established). The different groups and their leaders entertain mostly good relations, with faith-based organisations collaborating to address social issues affecting the community and assisting each other in development activities, although there was a dispute between Catholics and Protestants over land to build a church, and people are said to dislike conversions, which these days happen mainly toward Protestantism.

Population density is high and landholdings are very small. People do not talk about landlessness but there is a growing number of youth and young households who do not have their own farmland. Some are organised in groups to engage in productive (agricultural and non-farm) activities with support from the wereda and kebele administrations. However, this is fairly recent and groups have faced difficulties (poor repayment of credit, lack of genuinely common interest etc.). Youth unemployment is seen as a major challenge by the community. Young people (especially men), spending time in town for work and entertainment, are said to be at risk of becoming chat addicts. They may also get involved in the sometimes violent conflicts occurring around the chat trade.

There is an emerging big change in women's lives, which the new regional family and land laws underpin and with actual cases of women claiming and obtaining new land rights and rights to divorce, evidence of successes in banning female circumcision, progress in girls' education and associated reduction in the trend of young girls being sent to work as easily abused housemaids for relatives in towns, and progress in women's economic empowerment. Some 200 women (from among Girar's 900 families) are involved in economic activities (through co-ops) beyond their domestic chores and tasks on the family's farm. These changes (less pronounced with regards to politics and administration) make a deep indent in the traditionally male dominated Gurage society and provoked stiff resistance from some men. Most were supported by the powerful Gurage customary institutions although the growing number of cases of divorces is thought to be a much undesirable consequence of lack of consideration of family and social implications under the 'modern' justice system.

Rural livelihoods are organised around enset cultivation and cattle rearing, closely interlinked. Farmers also grow an increasing number of complementary crops for cash and household

¹¹ Abbreviated in Imdibir in previous research.

consumption especially for richer households, some of these promoted by the wereda and DAs (grains and vegetables and fruits), others in response to market demand (e.g. coffee). Chat and eucalyptus wood have emerged as high demand/value products and some farmers growing these are quite wealthy. Chat especially is well suited to provide a good return from farmers' increasingly small plots of land (moreover, enset and coffee production has been beset by diseases), and many in Girar are involved in chat trade. As another response to farmland scarcity, communal land is being parcelled and given for use under contracts to groups of youth and women formed in co-ops and to farmers with small private landholdings to experiment with government-promoted crops. This is part of a recent big push for '*no land to remain idle*', which also includes government services advising farmers to use techniques such as intercropping (which they were reportedly already using in 1994).

The rivers crossing the kebele are said to be hard to use for irrigation; water harvesting had little success (among others because household reservoirs takes precious land away) and brought very little change if any (contradicting accounts). The use of modern inputs is limited, due to a mix of inter-linked factors including alleged lack of sufficient credit opportunities and bad repayment issues. Formal credit is widely available (government-linked MFI, private bank and MFI in town, women co-op credit service, NGO schemes for poorer households) but there are various issues including modalities that people criticise, and poor repayment of 'government credit' as people allegedly do not take their obligation seriously when something 'comes from government'. This has also limited the reach of wereda-led initiatives to promote new livestock activities (e.g. bull fattening, a scheme said to be 'in its infancy' for four years because of constraints on the number of farmers allowed to take loans).

A number of people engage in agricultural daily labour for others (households where men have migrated, the women's co-op, female-headed households and wealthy households with businesses in town). People in Girar have access to non-farm daily labour opportunities in Imdibir town and a growing number of them spend time there (sometimes blamed by their wives or the DAs for doing this rather than working hard on their garden), a trend parallel to the rapid development of the town. Some complain that youth from the rural villages do not have access to better opportunities such as metal or woodwork, because of lack of both TVET education and skills, and electricity in the villages. The market is also an income source for many women and girls engaged in pottery. A number of wealthy farmers from Girar invest in shops and other activities in town.

Following the long-standing Gurage tradition of migration many people from Girar, including many youth, migrate to towns elsewhere in Ethiopia to engage in all sorts of activities, from shoe-shining to very big businesses for the successful ones, or joining older migrants to further develop their activity. Most keep strong links with families at home and return regularly – some men for enset harvesting, and most people for the big annual religious holy days, especially Meskel for the Orthodox Christians and Arefa for Muslims. Some send remittances or more occasional financial support when needed. New patterns have emerged. Among those migrating in Ethiopia there is more permanent or long-term migration of people who get employed in government or the private sector or launch their own business. Migration to Arab countries, including of young women, is also on the increase. Remittances may be a substantial boost to the economy of the households concerned, and provide seed capital for some.

There is a health post in the kebele though it lacks basic amenities (water, electricity) and does not provide any curative services, which some in the community complain about. People have access to the health centre of Imdibir and can and do go to a Catholic mission hospital 12 kms away (including for deliveries with complications). The HP offers vaccination and family planning but no delivery and pregnancy check-up services (the HEWs attend deliveries at home if asked). The use of contraception is reportedly becoming widespread but also still stiffly resisted by some people. Many people in Girar seem genuinely convinced by the benefits of prevention, better sanitation and nutrition (e.g. Girar is a model kebele in the use of latrines) although some point out that lack of safe water defeats some of the measures promoted. It is not clear whether malaria has become an issue

or not. Similarly, there is no consistent account on the number of HIV cases though it is a big issue in Imdibir town. Campaigns of awareness-raising and for regular testing seem to have an effect.

There is one full-cycle primary school in the kebele, recently expanded with support from the community and the Gurage 'diaspora', and a (general and preparatory) secondary school at the periphery of Imdibir town. After this, children have to go far away to continue to study. This will change soon as the Catholic mission is building a TVET in Imdibir. A university is also being built in the wereda – this was a promise made after the 2005 elections, reportedly following a request by the people of the wereda. Commitment to education is said to have increased and there is evidence of this among the people we interviewed, as many people have hopes that education will lead them/their children to better life opportunities. However, the costs (especially of post-secondary education), failure to get good enough grades to be able to continue (which parents link to the poor quality of education in the available primary and secondary schools), the prospect of unemployment for those who have to drop out (which is already a reality for many) and the risk of unemployment even for graduates, are big concerns.

The relationship between the community and the government is complex. In 2005 initially in the wereda the EPRDF lost to the CUD. After months of upheavals the alleged effects of the good governance discussions ('government tried to understand why people were unhappy') occurred: people returned to the 'development path' whilst the government was removing 'those kebele leaders who had lost people's confidence'. In Girar this led to some reshuffle but the kebele leader, a long serving and well-liked person, remained in post. Community people differ in their appreciation of the government performance (both broadly and with regard to the wereda administration) and have different opinions on the effectiveness of the good governance ideas. In the 2010 elections for the first time there was no opposition in the wereda.