Feed the Future Country Fact Sheet

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Women Move from Vulnerability to Resilience in Ethiopia

USAID/Food for Peace

Birtukan Dagnachew has moved from poverty to resilience with support from a food assistance program.
In Ethiopia, almost one third of the population lives in poverty and 40 percent of children under the age of five suffer from stunting. For decades, parts of the country have faced high levels of food insecurity and have depended on food aid to cover their household food shortages. In the country's northern Amhara region, however, women farmers are beginning to break the cycle of hunger and poverty by increasing agricultural production and raising incomes with support from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

In partnership with the international community, USAID helped the Government of Ethiopia establish the Productive Safety Net Program, a social safety net to help millions of farmers build resilience and reduce their vulnerability to climatic and environmental shocks. This safety net employs vulnerable people in public works projects and pays them in regular food or cash transfers.

Birtukan Dagnachew, who participated in the program, did not have sufficient means to provide for her family. She grew up poor and married at a young age. Her husband died, and even though she inherited a small plot of land from his family, she was not familiar with agricultural techniques to farm on steep slopes. She struggled in poverty and could not provide enough food for her four children – a common story among widowed mothers in Ethiopia.

Dagnachew and her children received food assistance through the safety net program for more than four years and gained critical knowledge and tools to escape poverty and improve their food security. In addition to regular food aid, Dagnachew received a $350 loan from the government and training on financial management. She also received nutrition training from USAID partners, where she and other women were encouraged to adopt healthier diets and consume the commodities her family received to improve their nutritional well-being.

Since joining the program, Dagnachew has been extraordinarily successful. She has more than doubled the size of her land and diversified her sources of income. She planted more than 5,000 pine trees on the additional tract of land, enabling her to sell the timber for firewood. She leased additional land to other community members to work, using the additional income to provide a better education for her daughter, who recently completed her first degree.

Dagnachew's story is an example of how food assistance can help move vulnerable families from a state of urgent need to self-sufficiency and long-term resilience. Safety net programs not only provide relief in the immediate term, but they can also help families stabilize long enough to build skills and savings that will help them survive future shocks, such as drought.

Dagnachew no longer relies on USAID support to meet her family's food needs. In 2013, she was honored with the Oxfam America-sponsored Female Food Hero award for Ethiopia's Amhara region. She sees USAID's safety net program as the foundation for Ethiopian women farmers to improve their livelihoods and to break the chronic cycle of hunger and poverty.

"It was a big challenge for a woman like me," Dagnachew says, "but I've moved passed it and will never go back."

The Productive Safety Net Program is supported by USAID's Office of Food for Peace, which works to reduce hunger and malnutrition and ensure that all people at all times have access to sufficient food for a healthy and productive life.