

Elderly Care and Social Support Systems among the Gedeo of Southern Ethiopia: Socio-cultural Contexts, Forms, Dynamics and Challenges

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Abstract: This qualitative study aims at disclosing the dynamics of care and social support systems for the older adults among rural Gedeo communities. The study revealed that the long-standing social values, norms, and belief systems of the ethnic group have always prescribed families, extended families, and neighbors to respect and take care of their older members. Nonetheless, poverty in rural households, the diffusion of urban values, and the incipient erosion of longstanding rural values, as well as the tendency of rural youth to abandon agriculture are challenging the capacity of community members to ensure sustained availability of adequate informal care for older adults. Though its coverage is limited to certain rural parts considered to be the most food insecure, the recently introduced Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) was reported to have bolstered and supplemented the challenged informal care. The article suggests that a holistic approach should be pursued to scale up the capabilities of rural households thereby to ensure the sustained availability of informal care for older adults. The situation of vulnerable older adults inhabiting seemingly food secure *Kebeles/Woredas* [administrative divisions] requires PSNP to re-evaluate its “geographic targeting mechanism.” Furthermore, the exploitative relationship between the beneficiaries of PSNP and the local moneylenders needs close follow-up at a grassroots level.

Key words: Elderly care, informal care, Gedeo, older adults, social support

Introduction

Recent reports verify that, as fertility rates steadily drop and life expectancy increases, the share of older persons is growing at unprecedented rate worldwide.¹ For instance, according to the UN, the number of people aged sixty and over was 200 million in 1950, 590 million in 2000 and is projected to reach 2.1 billion in 2050.² Surprisingly, the overwhelming majority of the world’s aging population currently resides in the less developed regions. Moreover, the same source indicated that in the less developed regions, the population aged sixty and over is currently increasing at the fastest pace ever (i.e. 3.7 percent annually in the period 2010-2015). Concern about the rapid increase in the number of people older than sixty years in sub-Saharan Africa has also grown in recent years. According to UNDP, this number in sub-Saharan Africa is

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projected to rise sharply from 37.1 million in 2005 to 155.4 million in 2050, i.e., a more rapid increase than any other region of the world or for any other age group.³ Congruently, OEC indicated that although the population of East African countries will be dominated by a youth bulge for the next twenty to thirty years, the proportion of older persons will start to rise rapidly thereafter.⁴

In Ethiopia, the proportion of elderly seems to have changed only minimally between 1950 and 2005, from 4.8 percent to 4.9 percent. However, evidence indicates that the absolute number of the older adults in Ethiopia increased four-fold between 1950 and 2005, from 885,000 to 3,653,000. Although Ethiopia is a country with 46 percent of the population under the age of fourteen, over five percent (3.6 million) of its current population is aged sixty and over. This proportion of older persons is even anticipated to nearly double to nine percent by 2050.⁵ Alarming, most have no reliable income sources; currently, only 500,000 older adults have any regular public sector pension.⁶

This unprecedented increasing proportion of the older adults necessitates that all stakeholders look into the dynamics of social protection of older persons among various social groups in the face of the rapidly changing cultural and socio-economic conditions. It is clear that the ratio of older persons to those of working age (age fifteen to sixty) will rise significantly. This, in turn, means that there will not only be more people in need of care but also fewer people of working age that are able to contribute towards the protection of needy older persons.⁷ Due to this fact, the growing proportion of older persons has alarming “implications for nearly all sectors of society, including labour and financial markets, the demand for goods and services, such as housing, transportation, and social protection, as well as family structures and intergenerational ties.”⁸

A cursory look at the gerontological literature shows that the social protection of older adults is embedded in the cultures of social groups. Accordingly, the subjective experience of aging in diverse contexts globally is governed by unique historical, institutional, and social systems.⁹ For instance, in Western cultures, the elderly are now commonly removed from their community and relegated to hospitals and nursing homes.¹⁰ Whereas, in much of Africa, and Asia, a family is still the most important unit where aging parents are cared for and maintain a high status.¹¹ The Ethiopian government has also recognized that less than 15 percent of elderly in the country have a regular public sector pension and the rest have no form of secure income apart from that provided through their own families or money earned from their own labor.¹² In the same vein, Erb asserts that regardless of changes occurring to traditional systems of family support, children and extended family still remain a strong source of economic support for elderly in Ethiopia.¹³

Recent studies in and reports, however, witness that massive socio-economic changes such as labor migration and epidemics such as HIV/AIDS have impacted cultural capacities with regard to elderly care and support.¹⁴ The function of the extended family as an informal care and social support unit has been eroded, leaving the elderly vulnerable and in need. For example, Cattell demonstrates that, in Western Kenya, older adults have taken on new roles as caretakers of their adult children with HIV/AIDS and their orphaned grandchildren, at a very time in their lives when they themselves require care.¹⁵

Some of the previous studies in Ethiopia emphasize the role of elderly as the custodians of information about history, and other elements of culture.¹⁶ Others examine the role of elderly in dispute resolution.¹⁷ Still others analyzed the livelihoods and general living and working conditions of the elderly in various parts of Ethiopia.¹⁸ This existing body of literature, as well as official government documents portray not only a large increase in the number of Ethiopia's elderly population but also the steady expansion of destitute elderly throughout the country.¹⁹

The majority of these studies, however, examine the conditions of older persons in cities who are already "captured" by one or more formal support schemes. Yet, the overwhelming majority of older persons in Ethiopia inhabit rural areas as does some 80 percent of the population.²⁰ It seems that the social protection needs of the rural elderly has either been taken for granted or completely entrusted to informal social support systems.²¹ Furthermore, there is a notable misconception that these informal social support mechanisms remain intact. However, rural Ethiopia is experiencing noticeable demographic, cultural and socio-economic changes which detrimentally affect the longstanding societal values and social arrangements that have supported healthy aging of senior members. Relatively little is known about changes in elderly care among the various ethnic and religious groups in rural Ethiopia. Therefore, the present study aims at disclosing the status of elderly care and social support among the Gedeo of rural southern Ethiopia. Accordingly, this paper seeks to examine both formal and informal social protection mechanisms by situating them amidst changing cultural and socio-economic contexts.

Research Site

The study was conducted in Gedeo zone which is one of the fourteen administrative zones found in Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples' Regional State (SNNPR) of Ethiopia. There are six *Woreda* administrations and two town administrations within Gedeo zone.²² The administrative capital, Dilla Town, is located 369 kilometers south on the main Addis Ababa-Nairobi international road. It is situated along the eastern escarpment of the Great Ethiopian Rift Valley bordering Sidama Zone in the North and Oromia Regional State in the south, east, and west.²³

According to the recent census, the total population of Gedeo zone was estimated to be 1,079,771 in 2014-15 of which 865,906 were rural inhabitants.²⁴ With the total land area of 1353 km², the population density is 853 persons per km² and with population growth rate of 2.9 percent in 2015-16.²⁵ The most densely populated *Woreda* in the regional state and the country—Wenago—with 1039 persons per square kilometers, is located in this administrative zone.²⁶ According to the traditional climatic classification, 62 percent of the land is categorized under subtropical climate (*Woina dega*); 37 percent under high altitude climate (*Dega*) and the remaining 1 percent is classified under hot tropical climate (*Kolla*). Rainfall ranges between 800-1800mm while mean annual temperature varies from 12.5°C to 28°C.²⁷

The rural inhabitants of the zone are mostly farmers belonging to the Gedeo ethnic group. Their livelihoods have long depended on an indigenous agroforestry system which involves growing enset (*ensete ventricosum*) in conjunction with cereals, coffee (*coffea arabica*), a variety of fruits and vegetables, and dairy farming.²⁸ The zone is one of the largest coffee and enset producing zones of the region and the country. Enset is the main staple food while high-quality

arabica coffee is their major cash crop. Onion and cabbage are the main vegetables grown for sale in the cool highlands. The Gedeo people are well-known for maintaining efficient indigenous agroforestry system which enabled self-sufficiency in food-security by maintaining a balanced ecosystem. The efficiency of this farming system is evident in its carrying capacity, which is the highest among all agricultural systems in Ethiopia.²⁹

Research Methods

The study has employed a descriptive qualitative research approach as it was aimed at investigating meanings and interpretations of old age, in the particular cultural and socioeconomic context. Employing a range of methods, a qualitative approach is ideal for understanding the subjective meanings through which people interpret the world i.e. social events and phenomena are understood from the perspective of the actors themselves, avoiding the imposition of the researcher's own preconceptions and definitions.³⁰ This approach allows the researchers to investigate the subjective meaning attached to aging in the social context where it is taking place.

The participants of this study were recruited purposively from the *woredas* of Bule, Wenago and Yirga-cheffe . In this regard, officials and experts from concerned government offices, community leaders and older adults, the youth and young adults were selected purposively on the basis of their proximity to and knowledge about the issues under consideration. Data collection included key informant interviews, focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and non-participant observations. Furthermore, the authors conducted a comprehensive desk review of previous scholarly works on Gedeo culture, and also on the policies and legal frameworks underpinning the government's social protection endeavor. Among the qualitative methods of data analysis, thematic analysis method has been employed to analyze the collected data.

Results and Discussion

This section begins with analyzing the recently introduced formal (state-led) social protection system. Then, it looks into the social norms, values, belief systems, and the social engagement of the elderly. The discussion then shows how the informal care and social support mechanisms are situated in the historical context and influenced by changing cultural and socio-economic circumstances. Finally, the article examines the major challenges to identified social protection mechanisms.

Formal Social Protection Mechanisms

Article 41(5) of Ethiopia's constitution proclaims that "The State shall, within available means, allocate resources to provide rehabilitation and assistance to the physically and mentally disabled, the aged, and children who are left without parents or guardian." The Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) is a well-known and large-scale social protection scheme under implementation in rural Ethiopia. The government of Ethiopia, the World Food Program and other development partners rolled out PSNP as a response to chronic food insecurity. Since 2005, the programme has been operating in rural Ethiopia with the objective of "providing transfers to the food insecure population in chronically food insecure *Woredas* in a way that

prevents asset depletion at the household level and creates assets at the community level.”³¹ Perhaps PSNP is a notable formal social protection mechanism as poor older persons in the target food insecure *Kebeles* are entitled to the Direct Support (DS) component of the program.

Secondary data obtained from Food Security Department of Gedeo zone indicates that PSNP is under implementation in the selected *Kebele* administrations of four *Woredas*, namely: Dilla Zuriya, Wenago, Yirga-Cheffe, and Kochere. Interviews with *Woreda* administrators and officers in Social and Labour Affairs as well as Food Security Officers revealed that a significant number of destitute older persons are entitled to the direct support component of the PSNP. Accordingly, they are entitled to money transfers on monthly basis. PSNP contributes towards the protection of existing assets of the beneficiary older adults and ensures a minimum level of food consumption for them and their dependents.

However, this scheme has been implemented only in selected *Kebeles* of *Woreda* administrations considered more food insecure than others. As the scheme primarily targets highly food insecure *Woredas*, it is unresponsive to the social protection needs of the poor households inhabiting *Woredas* that are considered relatively food secure. Consequently, poor older persons inhabiting *Woredas* not covered by PSNP are left without any formal social protection scheme. The geographic targeting mechanism that PSNP employs to identify eligible households in chronically food-insecure *Woreda* administrations takes for granted the welfare of food insecure households (including the destitute elderly) in those *Woredas* deemed food secure. This was an issue of concern for FGD participants in Bule *Woreda* wherein the participants questioned the mechanism of PSNP which “blindly excluded” their *Woreda* by considering it food secure. There was a consensus among the FGD participants at Bule that the geographic targeting approach of PNSP underestimated the existence of highly vulnerable households (including elderly) in a generally food secure *Woreda*.

Where the PSNP is under implementation, however, evidence indicates that it serves an important latent function for older persons who have no children or whose younger adults live away from them. Interviews revealed that being the beneficiary of PSNP is more than food security for some older adults. The cash and in-kind support poor older persons receive through the direct support component of the PSNP enable them to raise grandchildren or a child of a relative, thereby providing them with additional emotional and physical support.

In addition to the PSNP, retirement pensions in the study area cover a small number of residents. This scheme embraces only those older persons who once were public servants. Evidence from the Social and Labour Affairs offices of the study areas evidenced that only a few elderly (mostly from small rural towns) are fortunate to have access to the old age pension. Even the older informants from small towns who have access to the monthly retirement pension indicated that the amount they are entitled to is so meager that it can’t cover their basic necessities.

Medical support (health fee waivers) to the poorest is another form of formal support for the destitute elderly. However, interviews with *Woreda* administrators and Social and Labour Affairs officers revealed that very few seriously ill older persons manage to access these due to the meager budget allocated, the bureaucratic challenges that make accessing it tiresome for the elderly, and the reluctant health seeking behavior of the elderly. Yet older persons from small towns (such as Wenago and Bule) indicated little awareness about the health fee waiver scheme

and their entitlement to it. Not only is the unavailability of comprehensive formal social protection schemes a problem for older adults, the lack of access to information about even the limited available schemes also prevents access.

Social Norms, Belief Systems and the Place of the Elderly

It is well established in gerontological literature that the way the elderly are perceived among a given social group correlates with the care and support provided to them.³² In other words, the quality of care provided to the elderly is, at least partly, dependent on the societal attitude towards old age and the older adults. According to Kiphe, "The Gedeo believe in *Mageno* - the one and only one Supreme Being..."³³ Senishaw also indicated that in the indigenous belief system of the Gedeo, *Mageno* is the supreme being.³⁴ Senishaw argues that the followers of this belief system formed the majority of the Gedeo until 1950s.³⁵ Kiphe goes on to say that "The Gedeo recognize the role of the intermediaries between *Mageno* and man. These are the elderly men and women."³⁶ Elders conducted and led the rituals central to this belief system.³⁷ Historically, spiritual authority was vested in the older adults.

Due to this indigenous belief system, informants indicated that even today there is a strong belief in the spiritual power of older adults. FGDs and key informant interviews revealed this indigenous belief system fostered values, norms and beliefs among the community that promote respect and positive treatment of older persons. Since 1950's, however, the belief system of the Gedeo underwent significant transformations mainly due to the introduction of Protestant Christianity.³⁸ Introduced by the Sudanese Interior Mission in 1948, Protestant Christianity expanded rapidly.³⁹ Since then, many Gedeo people have abandoned their indigenous belief system and ritual practices.⁴⁰ Kiphe recounts that "Christian missionaries came to the Gedeo in the early 1950s. They established two churches, i.e., the Ethiopian Kale-Hiywot Church and Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane-Eyesus. Of these, the Ethiopian Kale-Hiywot Church (EKC) attracted the bulk of the Gedeo population and exerted a far-reaching influence."⁴¹

Senishaw argues that missionary use of *Gede'uffa* (the Gedeo language) for preaching, the opening of schools, and the backing the Gedeo in their 1960's against the central government further accelerated conversion to Protestant Christianity. Though its expansion slowed during the Derg period (1975-1991), it managed to survive and resumed its rapid expansion after the regime change in 1991.⁴² According to the 1994 census, only 24.6 percent identified as a follower of the indigenous Gedeo religion. A decade later, this declined to only about 8 percent while 73 percent followed Protestant Christianity.⁴³ Consequently, followers of indigenous religion, "who formed the majority in 1950s, had become a minority by 2007 census."⁴⁴ The decline of indigenous rituals negatively impacted the religious authority and leadership of the elderly which has been taken over by youth with formal education.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, as informants of this study argued, the conversion to Protestant Christianity didn't result in a fundamental change to the Gedeo's belief in *Mageno*. Kiphe observed that "The missionaries found their evangelical work among the Gedeo quite easy, as they had only to substitute the Christian God for the *Mageno* of the Gedeo."⁴⁶ Therefore, the massive conversion to Protestant Christianity has not resulted in the absolute erosion of the spiritual power of the elderly. There is still a strongly

held belief among the Gedeo that older adults influence every aspect of the lives of the community.

Social Engagements of the Elderly

An equally important issue is the association between the social engagements of older persons and the respect or care provided to them. There is a strong belief that the elderly meaningfully contribute to the wellbeing of the community and beyond. The elderly are highly valued and treated with respect due to the central role they play in the *Baalle* system. *Baalle* is an indigenous socio-cultural and political system of governance through which the Gedeo governed itself until its forceful incorporation into the Ethiopian Empire in the late 19th Century.⁴⁷ Debate is ongoing among researchers whether this institution is indigenous to the Gedeo or adopted from the *Gadaa* system of the neighboring Guji Oromo.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, there is an agreement among the researchers that it is an overarching institution. Regassa et al. state: "Like the *Gadaa* system of the Oromo, *Kataa* system of Konso, and the *Luwaa* system of the Sidama, the *Baalle* institution of the Gedeo is overarching and governs all parts of life, including the ecological, sociocultural, political, administrative, and spiritual."⁴⁹ In the same vein, Legesse posits that *Baalle* is an institution that passes rules and regulations concerning all aspects of life such as: land and its products; various social and cultural matters; and organization/mobilization of the people whenever needed.⁵⁰

Incorporation of the Gedeo into the Ethiopian Empire, however, detrimentally affected and incapacitated the *Baalle* system. Kiphe argues that it had devastating consequences on social organization as it stripped off the political hegemony of the *Baalle* system, evident from the fact that "the Gedeo were barred from using their *Baalle* tradition in their day-to-day lives, except in religious rituals."⁵¹ This was mainly due to the fact that there had been an "imposition of the feudal administration's cultural, linguistic, religious, political and economic systems" upon the Gedeo.⁵² Subsequently, the Derg period also discouraged practicing this system of administration.⁵³

There is some divergence among researchers regarding the current status of this institution. While Tadesse holds that the *Baalle* system is still intact in the lives of the community, Regassa et al. argue that the institution persists only in a weakened form.⁵⁴ Senishaw sees it declining due to the influence of Protestant Christianity which "associates such rituals with 'evil' spirit."⁵⁵ Some informants indicated that the institution has become resurgent since the downfall of the Derg. One elderly informant asserted that "The norms, values, and beliefs central to these indigenous institutions are being passed down to the younger generation through various ways."⁵⁶ While some rituals associated with *Baalle* have continued, "albeit on lower scale and with some modifications," Getachew concludes that "the Gedeo *Baalle* system functions today only as a symbol of Gedeo identity."⁵⁷

The *Songo* is the lowest administrative unit of the *Baalle* system and represents an assembly of older persons (locally known as *Songo Hayyichcha*). It is also a ritual and public place at the village level where elders gather to discuss various societal matters and present prayers on pressing societal issues.⁵⁸ Discussing the central role of the elderly in these indigenous institutions, Legesse indicated that:

Elderly people conduct the majority of the activities under *Baalle* institution and other indigenous institutions. In this regard, elders have a big place among the people. That is, the respect given to elders is enormous. They have extensive power through which they can pass law, code of conducts and regulations. Elders are the only ones who assume power to lead *Songo* and conduct ritual ceremonies such as *ciinnessa* and *qexxela*.⁵⁹

Regarding the role of *Songo Hayyichcha* in biodiversity protection, "The value given to *Songo* elders is massive, most of the local people stand for the rules and regulations passed by *Songo* elders. They do not tend to breach the words of the *Songo* elders in most cases."⁶⁰ Yet the power of *Songo* as a political institution has diminished following introduction of the modern legal/judicial system to the area. Regarding this, Legesse maintains that "Currently, the local people present their case to the *Kebele* administration. The traditional court systems are no more functioning except in rare cases. In other words, any illegal acts, robbery, or dispute between or among people is taken to *Kebele* administration."⁶¹ It is clear that this author maintains that the role of the *Songo* institution has significantly declined. Evidence obtained from field observations and key informants reaffirms that *Songo* functions in some rural villages though its sphere of influence is limited. According to the Culture and Tourism Department, there are more than 525 *Songos* in the Gedeo zone. According to informants, *Songo* is still serving as an alternative institution adjudicating certain criminal cases and resolving disputes over various issues apart from its well-known (but contested) role in biodiversity protection.

Thus, it is evident that these indigenous institutions have faced a variety of challenges across time and consequently, their power has significantly declined. The multitude of roles historically assumed by the elderly and community members' belief in their centrality to the community's well-being has, however, bestowed reverence and respect on the elderly. Though the institutions exist in a weakened form currently, their historical influence seems intact. That is, the values, norms, and beliefs associated with these institutions continue to influence the lives of Gedeo people even today.

Equally noteworthy to older adults' presence in sociocultural life are their economic activities. Even older adults engage in various economic activities and earn their living by their own labor as long as they are capable, with various degrees of support from their family, kin and neighbors. Kiphe argues that "The Gedeo have a rich culture that fosters hard-work and egalitarian principles. Begging for money or food, even for the blind and physically disabled, is forbidden."⁶² As an informant from Bule stressed, "let alone begging, it is a taboo among rural elderly to tell some external body [i.e. a person who is not a family member or close relative] that they are in need of financial or material support."⁶³ Perhaps older adults' continuity in economic activities is among the factors that contributed to their healthy aging by reducing loneliness and social isolation. In sum, the engagement of the elderly in the socio-cultural, economic, political and environmental matters through various social institutions, has fostered favorable attitudes and actions among community members towards the elderly.

Informal Care and Support Mechanisms

Informal care and support mechanisms practiced for generations are strongly embedded in the belief system of the Gedeo. The belief in the spiritual power of the elderly is intact until today.

As one informant indicated, “There is a strong belief in both the cursing and blessings pronounced from the mouth of older persons. This makes the younger generations to highly value their elders: to treat them with respect and bear the responsibility of taking care of them to receive their blessing and/or to avoid cursing.”⁶⁴ There is still strong belief that the cursing and blessing pronounced from the mouths of older persons can influence all aspects of the life of the younger generations. Consequently, as informants stressed, the adult children, kin and neighbors of older adults are usually attentive to the care needs of their elderly.

The responsibility of taking care of an older adult is divided mainly among the adult children and their families, close relatives, and sometimes the neighbors of older adults (depending on their respective capacity). A council composed of the adult children and close relatives allocates the care tasks and periodically evaluates each household or individual. The council may change an assigned responsibility if not properly discharged. The council does so not just to ensure the elderly receive adequate care, but also to save younger generations from the cursing of older adults.

Informal care provided to older adults often includes preparing meals, buying clothes, attending to their personal hygiene, farming, house maintenance, medications, collecting water and fuel wood, and providing other emotional support. Informants reported that it is common to send one’s child to reside with older adults if they are alone. Consequently, “many older persons are entitled to be accompanied by one or more grandchildren.”⁶⁵ Furthermore, where there are older adults at a nearby home, family members do not dare to drink coffee at their home while leaving the older adults alone. Rather, they often gather at the older adults’ home and spend lengthy time on coffee ceremonies. By enhancing the social integration of older adults, the coffee ceremony plays an important role in protecting them from emotional and social loneliness. As the adult children, close relatives and neighbors want to receive the blessings of older adults, they provide care and support even when the older adults are self-sufficient. Nonetheless, emerging socio-economic realities faced by rural households pose challenges to these time-honored values and norms of ensuring healthy aging of older adults.

Challenges of Elderly Care and Social Support Systems

Though destitute older adults considered the PSNP formal social protection scheme as their dependable source of support, some informants revealed that PSNP beneficiaries are highly exploited by local moneylenders. One informant revealed that “The beneficiaries of PSNP get loans from local moneylenders now and then at extremely high-interest rate to pay back when they receive the monthly cash transfers. Consequently, during cash transfers, it is the local money lenders who receive the lion’s share of the cash transfer rather than the PSNP’s beneficiaries.”⁶⁶ The participants of FGDs also reaffirmed that significant share of the PSNP beneficiaries are the victims of this hidden exploitative relationship. The impact of Ethiopia’s largest social protection program intended to serve the poor is jeopardized by hidden exploitative relationships at a grassroots level.

As PSNP coverage is limited to the *Kebele* administrations considered the most food insecure, social protection of older adults inhabiting excluded *Kebeles* is completely placed upon the shoulders of the informal care providers, the informal care and support mechanism is also not free from challenges. Interviews and FGDs revealed the deteriorating socio-economic

conditions of rural households detrimentally affects the provision of informal care for older adults. Conditions of rural households in the study area are largely related to population pressure and the resultant land fragmentation, reduced agricultural production, and productivity, large family size, and limited livelihood diversification. A significant share of rural households suffer from seasonal and cyclical food insecurities. A strong consensus emerged among FGD participants that members of their community largely adhere to long-existing social norms of valuing, respecting and caring for their own elderly unless they are prevented from doing so by poverty. Older adults also expressed concern that the care and social support they receive is adversely affected by poverty.

The abandonment of agriculture by rural youth was also identified as an emergent reality that detrimentally affects informal care of the elderly. Rural out-migration means that younger family members are not easily available to support older persons through their labor in difficult farm work. Though the size of rural household farmland is very small in most parts of Gedeo, the elderly continuously seek the agricultural labor of their adult children and grandchildren. An older informant from Bule Woreda, where farmland size is relatively larger, stressed that “an elder does not just need money from his children, he needs companionship at home, companionship on farm, and he compares the care and support services he receives from the adult children with the care and support services he provided to his elderly when he was young.”⁶⁷

Conclusion and Recommendations

As in other rural parts of the country, a large-scale formal social protection scheme is a recent intervention in Gedeo zone. While the recently introduced PSNP have supplemented the existing informal care where it is operational, the social protection of the older adults inhabiting areas not covered by PSNP is completely placed upon the shoulders of informal care providers. Though cultural values are still influential in prescribing community members to take care of the elderly, the established informal care practices are challenged by deteriorating socio-economic conditions of rural households, the diffusion of urban values, and the tendency of abandoning agriculture among the rural youth, among others. Apart from its limited geographic coverage, PSNP’s success is challenged by an exploitative relationship between local moneylenders and PSNP beneficiaries. Hence, a holistic approach should be pursued to scale up the capabilities of rural families/households to ensure the sustained availability of adequate informal care and support for the elderly from their own families and community. The situation of vulnerable older adults inhabiting seemingly food secure parts requires PSNP to re-evaluate its “geographic targeting” mechanism. Furthermore, the exploitative relationship between local moneylenders and the beneficiaries of PSNP at grassroots level needs further examination to assess possible policy recommendations.

Notes

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- 1 UN 2012; UN 2015.
- 2 UN 2012.
- 3 UNDP 2008.
- 4 OEC 2017.
- 5 UN 2012; DAG 2013.
- 6 MoLSA 2012.
- 7 HelpAge International 2015.
- 8 UN 2015, p. 1.
- 9 Samanta 2017.
- 10 Giddens et al. 2014.
- 11 For example, HelpAge International 2015; Al-Makhamreh et al. 2011.
- 12 MoLSA 2012.
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- 14 For example, HelpAge International 2015; Cattell 2008; Nyambedha et al. 2003.
- 15 Cattell 2008.
- 16 For example, Maki 2009; Soga 2009.
- 17 For example, Unruh 2005; Mamo 2006.
- 18 For example, HelpAge International. 2011; HelpAge International 2013; Mariko 2013.
- 19 For example, Tesfamichael et al. 2014.
- 20 World Bank 2015.
- 21 MoLSA 2012.
- 22 *Woreda* is an administrative division which is equivalent to a district whereas, *Kebele* represents a lower level administrative division /peasant association/ in rural Ethiopia.
- 23 Amzaye 2007; Negash et al 2011; Legesse 2013.
- 24 SNNPR BoFED 2016.
- 25 GZFEEDD 2017.
- 26 SNNPR BoFED 2016.
- 27 Legesse 2013; Negash et al. 2011.
- 28 Koohafkan and Altieri 2017.
- 29 Kiphe 2002; Amzaye 2007.
- 30 Jupp 2006.
- 31 Berhane et al 2014.
- 32 For example Zhang et al 2012; Giddens et al. 2014; Cao 2019.
- 33 Kiphe 2002, p. 27.
- 34 Senishaw 2018.
- 35 Senishaw 2018.
- 36 Kiphe 2002, p. 27.
- 37 Senishaw 2018.
- 38 Kiphe 2002; Legesse 2013; Senishaw 2018.
- 39 Senishaw 2018.
- 40 Legesse 2013, p. 41.
- 41 Kiphe 2002, p. 27.

- 42 Senishaw 2018.
43 CSA 1996; CSA 2007.
44 Senishaw 2018.
45 Senishaw 2018.
46 Kiphe 2002, p. 28.
47 McClellan 1988 as cited in Regassa et al 2017.
48 Senishaw 2018.
49 Regassa et al. 2017, p. 2.
50 Legesse 2013, p. 87.
51 Kiphe 2002, p. 25.
52 Regassa et al 2017, p. 2.
53 Senishaw 2018.
54 Kiphe 2002; Regassa et al 2017.
55 Senishaw 2018, p. 22.
56 Interview with Chewaji Alemayehu, Wenago Woreda.
57 Senishaw 2018, p. 25.
58 Kiphe 2002; Awoke 2007; Regassa et al. 2017.
59 Legesse 2013, p. 87. Qeexala is a ritual and dance conducted for a number of ecological problems, like a shortage of rain or outbreak of locusts.
60 Legesse 2013, p. 82.
61 Legesse 2013, p. 89.
62 Kiphe 2002, p. 30.
63 Interview with Ato Tadesse, aged 66, Bule Woreda.
64 Interview with Ato Berhane Lokega, aged 90, Yirga-Chefe Woreda.
65 Ibid.
66 Interview with Ato Gezahegn Qenqe, aged 70, Gedeo Zone.
67 Interview with Ato Tadesse, aged 66, Bule Woreda.

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