



# Oxfam Impact

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## Sowing seeds of self-reliance in Ethiopia

With an initial investment from Oxfam, community-owned grain banks allow Ethiopians to feed the World Food Programme

by Coco McCabe

In a region recently plagued by drought and high rates of malnutrition, sacks of maize stuffed to bursting and piled to the ceiling of a warehouse in Shashemene, Ethiopia, are a welcome sight: food ready for distribution.

But what the blue UN World Food Programme (WFP) logo on the sacks doesn't tell you—and which makes this stock of white corn even more remarkable—is where it comes from: right here. It's grown by small farmers in the West Arsi Zone, some of whom may once have been as hard hit by hunger as the fellow Ethiopians for whom the food is now destined.

All of this stems from a simple idea—grain banks—supported by Oxfam America; developed by its Ethiopian partner,

Center for Development Initiatives, or CDI; and linked to new markets now made available through a pilot initiative launched by the WFP.

With strategic support, local farmers can take solid steps toward making a better living for their families, ensuring not only that they have enough to eat but that a steady expansion of household resources can begin to pave their way out of poverty.

Grain banks are essentially storehouses run by members of the community who have pooled their resources to build a capital base from which they can leverage a better price for their harvests. The banks serve two purposes: to keep a stock of grain on hand for times when food is in short supply

in the community and to improve market opportunities for members, by holding onto the grain until the price goes up.

CDI has helped launch 20 of these grain banks in the West Arsi Zone, and now 3,077 farmers are members. Recently, nine of the grain banks joined together to form a union—the Mira Service Development Union—that, in turn, struck a deal with the WFP to sell it about 600 tons of white corn.

Those sacks stacked high in the Shashemene warehouse? They are packed with maize from the nine grain banks, maize nurtured in countless small fields by hardworking West Arsi farmers dependent on the rain and the cooperation of nature for every kernel they harvested.

In a warehouse in Shashemene, Ethiopia, workers shake dried kernels of white corn before adding them to a large pile for bagging. In a second warehouse across the yard at the Center for Development Initiatives, sacks of the corn await distribution. *Eva-Lotta Jansson / Oxfam America*

The name of their union says it all: *mira* is a word in the local language—Afan Oromo—that means “blessing.”

“When something is blessed, a small thing can serve a lot,” says Mekonnen Koji, program coordinator for CDI, noting that Oxfam supported construction of two of the nine grain banks in the Mira union and provided training to members of all nine. Here, in the town of Shashemene, where CDI has a field office, what started as a small initiative with a handful of grain banks has now grown into a network that is helping farmers sow the seeds of their own sustainability.

### Purchase for Progress

What is making some of this possible is a five-year initiative started by the WFP to help small farmers in 21 countries supply the program’s global operations—and earn competitive prices for their harvests. Called Purchase for Progress, the pilot was launched in Ethiopia in June. Through it, the WFP plans to buy up to 85,000 tons of food from about 50,000 farmers during the next five years. That food will help feed other Ethiopians.

Farmers’ associations, like Mira, are a key part of the initiative: the World Food Programme buys directly from them. And its objective is also to help link farmers and their unions to other markets.

Next year, says Koji, Mira hopes to sell about 3,000 tons of grain to the WFP. And in the meantime, he adds, the WFP has promised to support the construction of a storage facility for Mira in Shashemene.

“The idea is to create fair market opportunities for smallholder producers,” says Koji.

### How the grain banks work

Grain banks, owned and managed by their members, play an important role in all of this by bringing together farmers and providing them with resources they can use to improve their production.

Members pay a fee to join—matched by a contribution from CDI—which the banks then use to buy their initial stock of grain. Following the harvest, banks buy grain from their members at a fair price, holding some for emergencies, such as during drought when members need food, and selling the rest at the best rates they can get. Once the grain is sold, members divide the profit among themselves or reinvest it in the bank.

During a severe drought two years ago, the 167 members of one bank in West Arsi found themselves in the enviable position of having earned 70,000 birr—or about \$7,425—from the sale of their grain, and they had recently stocked a large supply of corn as buffer against the hunger that was then stalking many people in the community.

“We have a stock in our bank and our members are not starving like other people,” said the bank’s storekeeper at the time. “Our experience in the last three years has shown us we can make big progress in our lives.”

For Demitu Gurmesssa, a mother of nine children, her membership in a grain bank in Jello Dida has already helped her family through hard times. In June, with food in short supply, the bank agreed to loan approximately 60 households about 49 pounds of corn each to tide them through the “hungry season” until their crops were ready to harvest.



Demitu Gurmesssa joined a grain bank in Jello Dida, Ethiopia. The wheat she planted in July was growing well one month later, and she was looking forward to a robust harvest. *Eva-Lotta Jansson / Oxfam America*

Besides the corn, Gurmesssa also borrowed a supply of wheat seeds from the bank, which she planted in July. On a morning in August, with a sickle in hand, she walked to her fields. The rain had been abundant, and shades of green—corn, wheat, and grassy pastures—bathed the landscape.

Gurmesssa’s wheat was growing well, and her hopes were high.

“I have planted improved seed and I have applied fertilizer,” she says. “So I expect a good harvest.”

There’s one unknown, though: the weather.

For poor farmers in Ethiopia who must rely on rain to feed their crops, uncertainty is a wearing fact of daily life. But Gurmesssa has strategies for coping—including, now, the security of her membership in the grain bank.

## Do one more thing today: Support women farmers around the world



March marks the 100th anniversary of International Women’s Day (IWD)—a day when women around the world have for a century celebrated their rights and accomplishments. This year, Oxfam will mark IWD by raising awareness about hunger. Women produce most of the world’s food, yet millions of rural women go hungry. Through our collective action, we can change that. Become one of Oxfam America’s Sisters (or brothers) on the Planet—a group that is raising global awareness about hunger, climate change, and other crises facing women in poor countries. Go to [oxfamamerica.org/sisters](http://oxfamamerica.org/sisters).



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