

The 'Graduation' Dilemma: Lived Experiences of PSNP Beneficiaries Navigating Self-Reliance in Adama, Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

In Ethiopia, millions of families living in chronic food insecurity rely on the main jurisdictional social protection initiative, the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP). Many of the studies have been done on the functionality of this program in rural settings, but I am not that familiar with how beneficiaries feel in secondary urban centers. The article presents the results of the 4-month ethnographic research in Adama, Oromia, a major urban area of the region where the Climate-Smart PSNP pilot was done. I consider the so-called graduation dilemma. It leaves an impression of conflict between the objectives of the program in ensuring that the beneficiaries have become self-sufficient and the structural barriers that constantly make this process look almost as impossible as achievable. I will incorporate a detailed analysis of 22 beneficiaries, life stories of 6 people, household economic data, observations at the place of work, and payout structures. Studies have indicated that the PSNP has succeeded in enhancing food security, and it has averted the sale of desperate assets. Nevertheless, it still has a problem propagating actual asset building or developing enduring livelihood transformations (Berhane et al., 2020). Results appear to also show that most of the families are still graduating from the program too early, which is usually due to the administrative quotas rather than as a result of actual poverty reduction. This they refer to as the rotation of similarly impoverished households (Sabates-Wheeler et al., 2020). I believe that even though the PSNP provides a decent approach toward alleviating extreme food insecurity in Adama, its graduation model overlooks the unstable nature of employment in the town, increasing housing prices, and deteriorating society. Dependents tend to face the anticipation of being independent, but they do not have the resources and opportunities to attain it. This scenario transcends mere oversight of a policy. It is an all too real account of a life in limbo of waiting to graduate, which is a rarity in life, or an unknown future post-graduation. The results demonstrate that there is an urgent necessity to implement programs that address the structural barriers rather than only individual readiness. They also pose concerns with the existing assessments of urban PSNP.

Keywords: PSNP, social protection, graduation, lived experience, livelihoods, Adama, Ethiopia

1. INTRODUCTION

They advise us to work hard, save money, and graduate, but what? Where am I waiting in the same corner of the street every day until the jobs are obtained? To the same housekeeper who increases my rent annually? For what? These are the thoughts of Tsehay, who is a 42-year-old mother of five and who participated in the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) in Adama for seven years, as they represent the broadest question that this post will aim to answer. The PSNP started in 2005 in Ethiopia and is considered one of the best social security programs in Africa (Berhane et al., 2020). The program was established to alleviate the chronic food insecurity experienced by rural households; in return for their services in conducting government projects, it offers food or cash transfers to millions of households. It aims to make families achieve the stage of reaching graduation when they need no external assistance to satisfy their food demands throughout the year (MOA, 2014).

The studies have always revealed that PSNP has done a lot to reach its primary goals, which are saving lives, eliminating the necessity to sell assets during difficult periods, and providing additional community service (Berhane et al., 2020). Nonetheless, it has been lagging in its secondary aims to develop household assets, status incomes, and sustainable livelihoods (Sabates-Wheeler & Devereux, 2010). According to Sabates-Wheeler and her colleagues, PSNP households are not only still existing but are also not prosperous (2020). Over the past years, the concepts of the PSNP have been urbanized in reference to the fast urbanization and the increasing issues concerning poverty in urban centers. Addis Ababa in 2016 initiated the Urban Productive Safety Net Project, which has been followed by new towns in the surroundings, creating initiatives from the experimental program. The challenges faced by the government have been exhibited through an overstretched system, insufficient funding, and inferior connection with the market, which are stated in the recent review of the graduation programs (Hirvonen et al., 2020).

There is even greater likelihood of ineffective graduation because of some larger factors, which include the absence of vocational farms, recurring economic booms in cities, the excessive nature of the accommodation expense, and competition in the job markets. This paper points out the strategic location of Adama for various reasons. Being the largest town in Oromia and a major transport center linking Addis Ababa and the eastern provinces, Adama depicts the problems of rapid urbanization in Ethiopia. Its economy encompasses both formal employment and casual

trade, as well as a huge number of individuals who depend on daily employment that is not stable. It is worth pointing out that Adama was selected as a pilot location in the Climate Smart Mainstreaming in the Productive Safety Net Programme (CSM-PSNP), which is geared towards linking environmental objectives with social protection within a city context. Adama not only acts as a case study, but it can also give us a picture of what lies ahead for the social protection of urban areas in Ethiopia. The predominant postulates of PSNP research are unlike mine, being mostly quantitative, as opposed to my anthropological approach. Instead of just inquiring whether the program is effective, according to the conventional indicators, I would also like to understand what it entails to be a community-based PSNP beneficiary in Adama. What is the way in which people and families deal with the promises and expectations of the program? What occurs when the official discourse of graduation collides with the constraints on structure? In answering these questions, I intend to point out the so-called dilemma of graduation, the contradiction between the individual orientation of the program and the broader social and structural dynamics that hold it back.

Although there are shortcomings in the program, this is a reason to note its true achievements. It is especially important in averting starvation, asset protection, stability, and social relationships, as well as enhancing the infrastructure of the community. Recent investigations on the graduation out of social protection have found that there are three potential meanings of dropping out of programs such as PSNP. Homes could be removed (no longer enrolled in the program, whether they are willing or not), they could be ready (really willing to be self-sufficient), or they could be rotated (to free up space for the needy) (Sabates-Wheeler et al., 2020). This essay is more than highlighting the critical protective functions that these programs serve, and more so, how these dynamics are expressed in the individual experiences of recipients of such programs in Adama, which is illuminating on the human costs of carrying out such policies. This paper will start by introducing my study into the literature regarding PSNP, graduation models, and anthropological perspectives of social protection. Once I have given a description of my ethnographic techniques, I give a description of the research site, Adama. The results are also presented in five chapters: the community infrastructure created with the help of the public works projects, the real experiences of the people involved, the issues involved during the graduation, the informal economy, the social networks developed to fill the gaps which are created as a result of the program, and the protective functions of the PSNP, which demonstrate the positive effects. I conclude with an analysis of how

the insights can be used in policy planning in secondary urban environments and how anthropological perspectives of social protection can be developed.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Historical Emergence of Ethiopia's Safety Net

The Productive Safety Net Program has not just sprung up overnight. In order to have a real picture of what it would appear like today and of what ideas it suggests, I would have to look back at the long history of Ethiopian food insecurity and development aid in the country as it has evolved.

Until 2005, Ethiopia had a largely reactive plan in addressing food insecurity. The Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission oversaw a crisis emergency appeal system, which reacted to the crisis in its time of occurrence (Devereux and Guenther, 2009). There was at least a major drought every three to four years in the country between 1980 and 2005; hence, creating a scenario of repeated humanitarian interventions costing the country billions of dollars in humanitarian aid (Sharp et al., 2003). This emergency-oriented strategy was criticized by many. To begin with, it was counterproductive because responding to the problems once they had arisen proved to be much costlier than implementing preventive actions.

Secondly, it had affected the livelihoods of people: as families were regularly being shocked, they had to sell their assets to survive, and these were not only land or livestock but also equipment. This reduced the production capacity in addition to increasing their vulnerability in the long term (Devereux, 2006). Moreover, it caused it to become extremely difficult for the families as they were never sure when they would receive help. Finally, emergency food assistance did not address the causes of chronic food insecurity; it concentrated more on the symptoms as opposed to the underlying problems (Devereux & Guenther, 2009).

In the early 2000s, there was a beginning of a change in world attitudes towards poverty and aid. International donors and governments started considering more systematic methods of social protection, and it was quite materially affected by such authors as Amartya Sen (1999), whose work revolved around capabilities and development, and by the growing body of research that was pointing out the shortcomings of emergency aid. This change was not only seen at the global scale but also in Ethiopia, as it experienced other major changes in the internal political arena. Ever since the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front took over in 1991, it has used

economic growth as a way of justifying its government. Nevertheless, the fact that the cost of food was still being affected by chronic food insecurity, even with the improvement in economics, was a challenge politically. In line with this, the 2002 Food Security Strategy by the government noted the need to have more holistic strategies that could meet the short-term requirements as well as the long-term productivity (MOFED, 2002).

With the help of a group of donors, such as the World Bank, DFID (then FCDO), USAID, and the European Union, the first other funding to launch the Productive Safety Net Programme back in 2005 occurred. This program was a significant departure in the approaches used in various crucial ways: it brought in predictability by making transfers over years, which is useful in planning by households; it targeted chronic issues by targeting those with chronic food insecurity rather than facing an acute crisis; it prioritized productivity by requiring beneficiaries to do community work and receive assistance through the work yet had a graduation goal, specifically, a household that plans to be in sustainable food security gradually comes off the program (MOA, 2014).

Devereux and Guenther (2009) point out that it was because the PSNP was groundbreaking on the Ethiopian scene due to the fact that it substituted an annual humanitarian appeal with a multi-year, predictable transfer program, which would counter structural vulnerability. This move was a major transformation of the form of provision of aid, whereby the main aim was a long-term solution and not only immediate relief.

2.2 The PSNP Evidence Base: Two Decades of Research

Since its inception, the PSNP has been one of the best-researched social protection programs in Africa. The effectiveness of it can be well supported by numerous impact assessment studies performed by the International Food Policy Research Institute, in cooperation with Ethiopian scholars. An in-depth analysis of the 15 years (2006-2019) identified some beneficial results. They consist of an increase in the use of health services, especially among women and children; a drop in depleting assets, where households in PSNP are significantly less likely to start selling productive assets during economic crises; better food security, with fewer months of food shortages and a lower likelihood of going to bed hungry; and spillovers, whereby even households who did not receive the benefits directly in PSNP communities had spillovers to local economic growth (Berhane et al., 2020).

The results have been replicable in other areas and during the different stages of the program. A randomized controlled trial conducted in Tigray demonstrated that enrolment in the PSNP decreased the risk of being faced with a food shortage by thirty percentage points (Gilligan et al., 2009). The subsequent study in Oromia and SNNPR grossed a positive position on dietary variation, and especially in households receiving cash transfer rather than food transfer (Berhane et al., 2014).

Although the studies reveal a couple of good results, the studies also mention a number of key limitations. A 15-year analysis (Berhane et al., 2020) reported mixed strengths of the program on assets, despite the positive change in food security. There were periods and locations where some households managed to accumulate a significant number of assets, and, in other cases, no apparent advantages to the same. Also, Sabates-Wheeler et al. (2020) observed that the program has achieved marginal gains in wage or livelihood diversification (Sabates-Wheeler et al., 2020). According to the theory of change of the PSNP, such kind of transfers are expected to assist in a manner that makes households not sell their assets when they are distressed, but purchase productive assets gradually, which would be instrumental in the attainment of graduation. In case households cannot accumulate their assets, this route to graduation is very difficult.

There are various causes of this discovery, as proposed by researchers. According to Sabates-Wheeler and Devereux (2010), the transfer levels were adequate in ensuring that consumption was smooth, but too low to facilitate major accumulation of assets. Others cited the randomness of such transfer; although the program had good plans, it was observed that there was a delay in payments that negated the predictability that was expected to help in planning (Berhane et al., 2011). Also, others highlighted that informal requirements tended to water down the benefits of transfers: when the household is given the money, family and neighbors would tend to take their part, and the positive effect would become diffused (Devereux et al., 2008).

It is very disturbing to note indications that most of the homes are actually graduated out of the PSNP, not because they have become self-reliant, but because of administrative problems. Sabates-Wheeler and colleagues (2020) discovered that numerous households, nevertheless, were graduated out of PSNP, allegedly due to the field staff having quotas to satisfy, regardless of whether the households had ceased poverty. According to recent research, one should interpret the three ways of households leaving the program: they may be rotated (rolled out of the program to

allow others in similar poverty to join, which seemingly is more about the burden-sharing and not necessarily poverty elimination); they may be removed (out of the program despite their apparent readiness, often because of administrative decisions, or budget constraints); and they may be ready (prepared to be self-sufficient when reaching sufficient level of assets and income diversity).

The rotation theory is actually important. It would imply that the local authorities are under pressure to allocate scarce resources as widely as possible, particularly in regions with high poverty levels and constrained budgets for programs. This usually translates to the fact that they will graduate from poor families that are highly vulnerable. Although this group of existing households may possess slightly higher assets than continued ones, they remain poor, with low levels of income, high poverty rates, and minimal gains in their consumption (Sabates-Wheeler et al., 2020).

The PSNP has seen the introduction of several measures through a so-called graduation model to overcome its drawbacks in relation to sustainable livelihoods. Such measures can be in different forms: government-led tools that have failed to maintain any noticeable improvements in the aggregate well-being, including overstretched systems, poor access to credit, and weak market links (Hirvonen et al., 2020); NGO-led, light-touch solutions that have enhanced resiliency but produced only minimal gains in the general well-being (Hirvonen et al., 2020); and more aggressive, expensive ones that combine consumption support, transfer of assets, skills training, and hands-on coaching.

Even the most intensive graduation models have gone to the extent of limited success because the challenges of graduation have structural foundations, and not programmatic ones. Widening structural limits, including a decrease in land holdings, a lack of nonfarm opportunities, and frequent drought and other shocks, worsen the graduation programming promise, further in this setting, Hirvonen and others (2020) say. This points out that the inadequacy of these models in achieving sustainable results is subject to more systemic obstacles.

2.3 Anthropological Approaches to Social Protection

My study can be said to help improve the developing anthropological contribution in the area of studying the management of poverty, especially in the form of cash transfers and social protection systems. The anthropologists have been keen on the assumptions of behavior behind these social protection frameworks. In his bestselling work, 'Give a Man a Fish', Ferguson (2015) held that modern social protection has been described as a transformation of "developmental" politics to the

distributive form, but is nevertheless intrinsically linked to the standards and expectations of behavior it imposes upon its beneficiaries. According to him, programs such as PSNP do not merely assist, but do so with some strings attached, and that their beneficiaries act or labor in a specified manner, or they turn into a certain kind of a person. This isn't a neutral approach. It makes some assumptions concerning poverty by arguing that the poor are not purely short of financial assets but also the correct mindset, desires, and aspirations. Consequently, the inevitable consequence is that the emphasis is put upon the change of behavior, such as imparting financial literacy, business planning, and the related building up of so-called aspirations, rather than simply material maintenance.

A better approach that can increase the capacity of the state is community-based strategies, and some recent ethnographic studies on PSNP in the Ethiopian region of Somalia indicate that this can indeed be very efficient. As Alene, Duncan, and van Dijk (2023) explain, the idea of the government through clanship is used to demonstrate how the utilization of clan values and regulations when organizing the PSNP can make the environment that Somali pastoralists live in more comprehensible and manageable. They observe that the clan-based strategy of the PSNP implementation has become a powerful method to exert state power over the nomadic pastoralists, and this, consequently, has changed the balance of power and the relationships between the pastoralists and their clan leaders, as well as between pastoralists and the state.

This study is essential to my study since it shows that the effects of PSNP are not only material gains. Although the program does not ensure the full accomplishment of its objectives, it still affects the perception of people, power changes, and the transformation of social relations. Similar questions I ought to pose in Adama: How does PSNP influence the relations between citizens and the state among the beneficiaries themselves, and between those that benefit and those that do not benefit?

Through anthropologists, it is remarkable to note their efforts in studying the effects of social protection in personal relationships. As an example, Ellis (2012) researched the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) in Ethiopia and discovered that the program established new differences between the beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of the aid. Although community-based targeting was meant to make sure that only those who needed it were, in fact, picked, it resulted in creating a moral environment whereby individuals started to divide the deserving and undeserving poor.

Such differences can be applied to reality. The recipients may find themselves discriminated against, at the periphery of the social networks, or even an attitude of resentment on the part of their neighbors who feel that they are getting what they do not deserve. Indeed, receiving help as is may make others believe that one is strange, incompetent, or excessively reliant.

Anthropology is an important subject on temporality. Han (2018) wrote an article about precarity in Chile to examine how time is perceived by families living in poverty due to the continued uncertainty. To them, the future does not give them a sense of possibility but rather an element of anxiety; the time when things will most likely only get worse, and calamities can occur again. This renders planning impossible, and life becomes nothing beyond surviving in the here and now. This experience of time affects programs such as the PSNP that make participants develop graduation plans. Such a concept as self-reliance planning may sound not only challenging, but ridiculous as well when the future seems so unstable, since you can never be sure whether you will remain healthy, whether rent rates will be affordable, or whether you will have a job. This practice puts time pressure on them that does not correspond to their lived reality.

2.4 The Gap: Secondary Urban Centers in PSNP Research

Past PSNP research has been predominantly carried out in rural regions, with little research being done on urban PSNP experiments. In this respect, it is most evident in the capital city, Addis Ababa. But it is possible to liken some differences between the capital and other metropolitan areas, such as Adama. Secondary towns are more trade dependent on transport and local markets, whereas Addis Ababa has a more diverse economy with a substantial number of formal sectors, international agencies, non-governmental organizations, as well as an expanding service market. Despite the fact that the labor market and job opportunities are fewer in the secondary towns, Addis Ababa has a higher supply of employment, although most of these jobs are precarious and not good enough to sustain the poor. Moreover, because of the high population turnover and poor social ties, secondary towns tend to be transitory destinations for the rural-urban migrants.

Secondary towns are usually ignored in studies and directives, whereas Addis Ababa, which is the capital, is likely to draw a treasure trove of policy-setting attention and financial resources. This bias implies that the knowledge acquired in Addis Ababa cannot be easily applied to such locations as Adama. Even the metropolitan regions may have some distinct challenges as far as the graduation issues are concerned. This article seeks to fill that gap by offering the first

comprehensive ethnographic literature on the implementation processes of PSNP in a secondary Ethiopian town.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper makes an intensive study of social phenomena with the perception of the people who are affected by them, using an ethnographic research design. Instead of relying on existing theories, I intended to construct my knowledge by beginning with a blank slate, and running in parallel with existing academic debates, whilst letting themes and patterns emerge out of the data. The basis of my research was 4 months of fieldwork in the town of Adama in the period between October, 2024 and January, 2025. The focus of this prolonged interaction was important in order to generate trust, monitor the seasonal variation, and the dynamics of program participation.

In order to gain the depth of personal experiences and the extensive nature of participation in the program, I used a combination of data collection methods. I conducted the in-depth semi-structured interviews with 22 participants: 15 current beneficiaries of the PSNP, who I picked to present a representative sample of the populations, i.e., the variety of ages, genders, household structures, and program attendance duration; 4 people who graduated within the last two years as a way to learn about what their post-graduates lives were like, and 3 key informants, including two program officers of the PSNP and one kebele¹. The administrator should have their official opinions in the implementation process and the picture of the graduation process. These interviews took around 30 to 50 minutes and were conducted in Afan Oromo and Amharic and were translated and transcribed with the assistance of a local research assistant. I was able to discuss various issues, among which are life experiences before the PSNP, the process of enrolling in the institution, daily lives, and uses of transfers. I also explored lives in the world of public work, the meaning of graduation, ambitions, social network, stigma, finances, and health and Ill-being.

I chose six members of the sample of the interview to participate purposively in three or four sessions of comprehensive life history interviewing. The topics covered in these interviews included childhood and family experiences, immigration experiences for those who were not born in Adama, work and career changes, and how their lives have worked out, their experiences with poverty and crises throughout their lives, their interactions with different programs, as well as how

¹ Smallest administrative unit in Ethiopia

their households and families used to work. This procedure enabled me to situate the modern experiences with the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) in the bigger frameworks of poverty, work, and existence. These life histories are used as the narrative backdrop of the article.

I gathered extensive economic information about each individual whom I interviewed, which involved the information about their households, the age, sex, health, education, and work of all the family members. I also investigated what they possessed as their household items, furniture, appliances, livestock, tools, and any business equipment. Also, I was able to collect details about their sources of income, which included PSNP transfers and formal employment, all the way to day labor, small trades, remittances, and gifts. On the expenditure side, I observed their expenditure on food, rent, utilities, transportation, school fees, medical expenses, and debt repayments. I even checked on their individual balances of debts, such as how much they had borrowed, the interest rates, the lenders, and the reasons why they had borrowed. This in-depth information enabled me to perceive the economic forces that define the daily experience and helped me to include individual narratives in the context of their materialistic circumstances.

Participant observation was one of the major points of the study. This involved receiving visits to the public works places where the beneficiaries are preoccupied with activities such as cleaning the streets, drainage, and urban greening. I made observations about social relationships and the interactions between the citizens and their bosses, as well as the physical work requirements. I also noted payout points on distribution days, where I observed how transfers are received, relations with the officials, and the general mood of the people in the queue awaiting help. I was also present at community meetings where beneficiary selection and graduation were discussed. I could witness the debates on who was to benefit from the community members. Finally, I was able to visit homes, markets, and neighborhoods of beneficiaries and immerse myself in the beats of everyday life and informal economies, which contribute to supporting their families.

These observations resulted in field notes that had the lived experience, social relations, and material conditions of PSNP involvement, information that could not be given by interviews.

I supplemented such simple databases with extensive analysis of documents. I gathered and read local government reports on poverty and social protection, graduation records and statistics at the kebele level, PSNP policy documents, program manuals, and any existing monitoring and

evaluation data of Adama. These records are useful in creating a formal pattern in which lived experiences would be compared.

I conducted data analysis in an iterative manner during the fieldwork and after. I took notes during the interviews and translated them where necessary. To assign the transcripts and field notes a code, I used the deductive codes, which are the result of my research questions, and the inductive ones, which emerged naturally out of the data. I explained themes, cleaned them, and checked them against negative examples. Also, I created life histories in the form of narrative reports that retained the personal voice and time sequence.

I was very conscious that I, as a researcher, was in place. My research assistant, a graduate of Addis Ababa University, proved highly beneficial to me, helping me navigate the social landscape and ensuring my findings were in line with prevailing views. She would correct me when my assumptions were going out of context, and I had a lot of serious talks about what I had discovered. All the participants gave their informed consent after a proper explanation of the goals of the study, methods, risks, and benefits of this study. In an attempt to uphold confidentiality, I sought consent orally rather than using written documents. Participants are also guaranteed the right to leave whenever they want since they would not be subjected to any kind of punishment.

I have created fictitious tales of compositions in several instances to give anonymity and, at the same time, achieve the richness of anthropological understanding. Also, the names and other details that will be used to identify them have been altered to protect confidentiality.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 The Protective Functions of PSNP: Documenting Positive Achievements

It's important to highlight the PSNP's successes in Adama before diving into the challenges and issues recipients face. These achievements not only showcase what the program has accomplished but also lay the groundwork for any potential critiques.

The contribution to the prevention of severe food shortages and starvation must be listed among the largest victories of PSNP in Adama. All beneficiaries with whom I engaged acknowledged that their families would be subjected to severe food insecurity in the absence of the monthly transfers. This program provides a sure backup to the worst kind of hunger.

Tsehay, who had earlier experienced difficulties in making both ends meet, would also tell of days when PSNP would take the kids to school on half-full stomachs. Now I can count on the amount paid even when there is a shortage of money, I can borrow against it. I say to the kids, we will have good dinner tomorrow. Everything in the world is different with that knowledge.

This is how Lemma, the wounded worker, thinks: I was afraid I was going to starve when I would not be able to work anymore. What am I going to do to my wife and children? Then came the program. That might not be much, but it will get us through. I have food. It is not always adequate, and it is not always what I desire, but I get to eat.

This trend has been supported by the household economic information, as was obtained using the 15 current beneficiaries. All the households said they had experienced some food distress, such as skipping and cutting down on the number of portions of food, but none said that they were experiencing a severe, permanent food deprivation. The PSNP transfer is a safety net when held together with other incomes, and the houses are not going to become poorer than a specific level.

This protective action is not limited to nutrition only, but also to calorie consumption. Most of the mothers mentioned that the better transfer not only enabled them to buy a wider variety of foods, such as vegetables and even animal protein, as opposed to how they used to do when their mothers just had to survive on the inexpensive and filling starches. One of the mothers aptly described it as follows: I am simply eating shiro² and injera³. Now, I can purchase meat, onions, and tomatoes. The kids are healthier."

4.1.2 Protecting Against Asset Depletion During Crises

The PSNP is one of the major factors considered protective against making families sell their valuable assets in difficult times. Such protection is extremely crucial in a world where even cooking pots, beds, and tools are the smallest things needed in everyday life and any possibility of further development.

This is indeed pointed out in the story of Lemma: when my knee failed me, I was left with nothing. Thanks to PSNP, though, I did not need to sell my cooking pots and bed. I managed to grasp onto

² A staple dish made from ground chickpeas or beans

³ Traditional Ethiopian flat bread, staple food

something. And had I sold them, where was I this moment? I'd have nothing. I'd be out on the streets."

Ayelech, the widow of 62 years, has had her experience of another form of struggle: a year ago, I was very ill. I was having malaria, and I was unable to work for an entire month. I believed I would be forced to sell all before the PSNP, including my fine clothes and radio. However, luckily, I did not have to since the payments continued. I recovered in the end only to find everything intact.

This asset protection is of high importance to families with children. Tigist, a 29-year-old who takes care of her ailing mother, told us: When my mum fell ill, I required money to have her medication. I would have sold her a beautiful shawl and blanket at the PSNP, but I did not need to. The payments covered it. She could retain her blanket and continue to preserve her dignity.

I engaged in a discussion with the administrator of the kebele, and they indicated a very obvious trend: It is clear to us. The PSNP families visit us when they need assistance at a time of need, such as when an individual is ill, in case of a death, or during the flooding period, they are able to keep their properties intact. Families outside the program, on the other hand, receive nothing. They've sold everything. The program protects the little that they have left.

4.1.3 Providing Predictable Support

It is also notable that the PSNP changed the emergency funding into a more stable support system that was multi-year based. My field work can bring to light just the importance of this predictability to the beneficiaries. It was all summed up by Ayelech: I know the money will come. Of course, it may not come as fast as that; at times, it is a little slow, but it will come. Those words are invaluable. "I will be able to say to my landlord, just wait, the money is about to be paid. Or I could tell the food salesman, "Believe me, the money will be forthcoming. In the absence of that knowledge, there would be no plans that I can make.

Such predictability has made it possible to indulge in a form of minimal planning which otherwise would not have existed. Some individuals gave accounts about how they manage their finances, build credit with shops and stores, and promise little to their children using their routine activities. One father told of his daughter who would need some books on exercise in school. I explained to the shopkeeper that the PSNP payment will arrive the following week. The shopkeeper knew about

the program and accepted it, and said, I will receive payment at that time. He is aware that the money will come.

The comparison of the situation before the PSNP was actually highlighted through Wondimu, whose position was that of a program officer. People, he said, I left in the dark back then. They did not know whether there was going to be food, whether it would be late, or whether it would come at all. They were not able to make plans or exchange anything with their children. Even with the delays still in place, they are aware that the system is in existence. To a poor person, such knowledge is his weapon.

4.1.4 Creating Social Connection for Some Beneficiaries

Although PSNP has not had a complete free ride in terms of criticism over its public works program, a good number of those who are beneficiaries, especially the elderly women, have felt that the program has provided them with some form of important social networks and even renewed meaning and purpose in life that is not as much materialized. The fact that Ayelech kills the snake to clean the drainage is brought to the fore in this story: we go and clean the drainage with other women. we joke around, laugh, and occasionally complain about the supervisors or the heat. However, in the end, we drain the drain. There is no concern of flooding as people can walk. That's what we did. Me. It's something.

The main way through which Yelech associates with other people is when she has to do community work, now that her children have gone to Addis Ababa. I would go mad spending the whole day inside the house. I have friends here. I tell them news and discuss our shared problems. I even have lunch together. It feels like family. The same was echoed by other elderly women. Gete, a 68-year-old participant, told us that her husband died a decade ago, and her children are in Dire Dawa. I used to sit alone in my room. I am employed now, and people are all around. I feel important again.

Quantitative measurements that emphasize only assets and revenue tend to turn a blind eye to the social aspect of the program. However, to beneficiaries such as Ayelech and Gete, this social aspect can be as significant as the very transfer itself

4.1.5 Producing Community Infrastructure

PSNP, you know its public works program does a lot of good for the entire community. As I was working in the field, I saw beneficiaries engaging in different projects that enhanced infrastructure and made public spaces in Adama better. Clearing the drains and greenery was one of the usual activities. As seasonal flooding is a fact in the Adama region, it may destroy property, halt transportation, and pose health risks. However, when beneficiaries find time to de-clog such drainage channels, this actually aids in mitigating such risks. Ayelech was proud to point out that people could walk without flooding. And that's exactly what I did!

City greening as an exercise of the Climate Smart PSNP experiment was the sowing and maintenance of trees in the streets and roads. Its trees will last decades, remarked one of the program supervisors. They will give people beauty, shade, and air. Their endurance in terms of hard work persists even when the beneficiaries who planted them have passed away.

Other types of projects carried out in completing the work of the public include cleaning of marketplaces, keeping of public restrooms, and some minor repairs on community buildings. Although these activities might not appear significant, they serve actual needs within a city in which the local government has its hands full.

Regarding the advantages of this kind of program, the kebele administrator responded by saying that, from time to time, people will express some concerns about this kind of program. They complain that it is too expensive and makes citizens dependent. But have you a glance at our drainage system, and trees. All this is by the efforts of the benefactors. Their work is rewarded by the whole society.

One of the local merchants who is not a member of PSNP remarked, I used to complain about the program because I thought that it was free money. However, I detected them cleaning the drainage just in front of my shop. It does not flood with rainwater as it used to in the past. I have so, and they have gotten their wages.

4.2 The Lived Experience of Enrollment

To the majority of my informants, it was not a well-thought-out move to join PSNP but rather a reaction to a crisis. The entry points to the program say a lot about the urban poverty in Adama. A case in point is Take Lemma, a 55-year-old man who abandoned rural Arsi fifteen years ago. I came to Adama with no clothes on me, I travel, he said. Arsi had land, but my brothers stole it out of my hand. You see, you are the youngest, and, therefore, you go, but off we went. It seemed to me that there would be something to do in the city, and at first, there was. I was employed at the station where I loaded trucks and delivered goods to merchants.

I even thought that I was able to earn my meals, rent a place, and even come to the aid of my mom to some extent. But then there's my knee. The physician tells me that I cannot lift heavy stuff anymore. What am I supposed to do now? Who will have them hire a person who is not able to lift? I have been job seeking and just in two years, I was seeking any job with any sort of security. But nothing came up. I am broke, and my debts are ever-increasing. Then I got to know about the PSNP through the kebele. Frankly speaking, I was not interested, but that is all I have to offer. Migration, low-level jobs, accidents, sliding back to poverty, and the search for assistance, which Lemma goes through, are too frequent. In a world where most of the low-income men are on physical jobs, falling ill or becoming injured can be a disaster, and PSNP seems the final breadwinner.

The experiences of women on these routes are different. Tsehay is 42 and has five children, and her recollection of her entry point can be seen through an interview with Tsehay: Her husband would drive a minivan between Adama and Addis. In some cases, he earned good money. However, in the minibus, there was an accident. Luckily enough, he was not very badly damaged, but the owner made him pay the money to repair him. He simply failed to cope with it, and because of this, he lost his workplace. Then he changed-he got furious and resorted to drinking. One day, he simply did not go home. I waited and waited. I went as far as asking people outside the transport terminal, to whom nobody could claim to have seen him. He had disappeared. Back then, I had four children under my care, and currently, I have five children since my sister died and the child is living with us. I was deprived of everything, neither money nor family to take care of us.

A neighbor informed me about the program. I went to the kebele with her. They posed queries. They came to look at my room. I was accepted later after that. The story of Tsehay is an example

of the common way of a woman: being left by a husband, a woman is deprived of the income source as ill as of children. This abandonment is catastrophic in a world where women have fewer paid jobs than men, and their incomes are lower.

Worku, a 50 years old collector of junk, observed a gradual deterioration of his health: I worked 20 years in the construction profession. I was robust and was capable of bearing cement throughout the day. Then my chest began to hurt, and I started coughing. The physician attributed it to the years in contact with dust. I must quit building, I told him. But what else can I do? I also attempted less laborious work such as cleaning and guarding, but the cough cannot be chased. No one is going to employ a coughing man. They think it's contagious. The physician assured me that it is not so, but the people do not know that.

I pick up plastic, and I find myself glaring at the place that I pass as I walk about all day. It is something, but it does not feel like enough. My wife was attracted to PSNP based on becoming a member of a church group and attending a kebele. Upon arrival, they found me coughing, which is why they offered their assistance. The story by Worku truly brings the fact to light that chronic illness can disable a person from earning their living, though it may not be so drastic as to be an acute disability. It also explains the value of social networks, such as a religious community, in linking people to support programs.

PSNP, officially speaking, addresses the productive aspect of its public works under the name of productive one, which is a means for recipients to obtain their transfers by contributing to community development. But in reality, things are very different. As previously pointed out about the social relations, the labour gave certain people some purpose, especially the older ones, a new purpose. The good experience that Ayelech shared matches up with past reports. On the other hand, some people were made to feel undermined by the work. The former construction worker, the 38-year-old Tadesse, and an injured person in an accident caused by the workplace replied, they call it 'public works.' But look, I am a man who builds things. I had cement and stone to work with.

I have begun picking plastic bags with the help of a stick on the edge of the street. I would do this, and schoolchildren pass and laugh at me, addressing me as the garbage man. However, I am not a mere trash collector. I was once a builder, and I cannot even build anymore. They just don't get it. The example of Ayelech and Tadesse indicates the significance of social factors in the perspective of the same activity. In the case of women who are aged, the work projects may be viewed by way

of social interaction and belongingness to the community. However, to men who no longer have employment, it may be an emblem to the world of the vanished dignity.

Following the Adama PSNP, a family of five receives 1,300 birr ⁴monthly payment. To see exactly what this entails, let us have a closer look at the household budget of Tsehay. Her monthly spending is composed in the following way: 1,200 birr on renting a room in a shared compound; 3,500 and 4,000 birr on food, which consists of such staple foods and dishes as injera, shiro, vegetables, and at times meat; 300 birr on school supplies, things like exercise books, pencils, and uniform, 200 birr on transport, which is used in her husband daily job hunt; variable medical charges that are seen when the children fall ill; and

Tsehay lives on a monthly salary of between 5,700 and 6,700 birrs. The sources of her income are not too many: a 1300-birr transfer through the PSNP, unreliable daily income of her husband, which varies depending on the day and brings between 1500 and 2500 birr, and her small business of selling vegetables that can bring her about 800 to 1200 birr a month. In total, she makes 3,600-5,000 birr every month. The statistics are a brutal tale: despite all of these sources of income, her household is still short by 700 to 1,700 birr to cover at least the very basic requirements. They usually compensate this crunch by taking on debt, whether it is borrowing from their neighbors, local merchants, or even informal money lenders who charge a high-interest rate of 20-30 per cent per month.

This discussion leads to a very important question: though PSNP transfer does its best to avoid famine and ensure the necessary support, it is unable to intervene in the cycle of debts that makes people live in poverty. This bleak reality is apparently ignored by the graduation model. When the simple needs of a person are not being satisfied, how then can he/she save up to acquire assets? And when all the additional money is used to pay last month's loan, how are they able to consider beginning a small business?

⁴ Ethiopian currency

4.3 The 'Graduation' Dilemma

Firstly, in order to fully appreciate the dilemma of graduation, I must be able to define the term graduation. It is a simple word by Wondimu, a PSNP program officer in Adama: "A household will be ready to graduate when it is capable of sustaining itself with food throughout a year without any external assistance. This is determined by visiting their homes to check such resources as savings, small business, or a few livestock, provided that they have space. I also give close consideration to the availability of other services like microfinance. When I am persuaded of our results, I go to the community committee, and, on receiving a green light, graduate. Wondimu indicated a few problems: it is certainly harder in the city. I also strive to match people to training opportunities, but the economy is not always cooperating. So where will they keep the livestock? Without anything to pledge as security, how are they supposed to borrow any funds to start a business?"

At Wondimu, 147 households were recorded to have graduated out of the PSNP of Adama in 2024. But 28 of those households had reapplied and were readmitted, giving the re-entry rate 18 percent. This amount is likely to be under the actual number of those families that reverted to poverty without the official re-enrolment. This re-entry or rotation trend is consistent with the national results. This is demonstrated by the recent study that pointed out that exited households are extremely poor and vulnerable with low-income levels, high levels of poverty, and low consumption gains (Sabates-Wheeler et al., 2020). The mounting pressure on local officials to bring in and take out the program includes the process of cycling households, and in effect, a needy household is being rotated every day with a view to equalizing the funds expended in the program to the amount of urban poverty.

Then there is the official graduation narrative, which appears to be very simple; one enters into school, performs community service, gets transferred, acquires training, accumulates properties, becomes self-contained, and graduates. However, the truth with beneficiaries is even more intricate with regard to their view of time. Take Almaz, for instance. She is 47 years old and has been a PSNP in different capacities for close to 10 years, and provides a perspective on the nonlinear experiences that are not applicable in the official statistics. Leaving her family and three children behind in Adama in 2015 made her a PSNP beneficiary, and her husband abandoned her, leaving her without any source of income, making her recognized by the kebele. This Int through some

small business training, transfers, and involvement in public works projects. The general graduation narrative appears to be quite simple: you enroll, undergo training, perhaps change to various programs, complete work in the community, accumulate your assets, become self-sufficient, and then you graduate. However, the life of time can be very different as people live. The 47-year-old woman Almaz, having served in the PSNP in different positions for almost ten years, illuminates such a non-linear reality. In 2015, when her husband abandoned her and their three children, the kebele acknowledged her as a PSNP beneficiary, and that was a turning point to her. She was suddenly left alone in Adama without a family or a fixed income. She took small business training, was given money in transfers, as well as engaging in public work.

The eyes of the committee members were on me as I came in. Some of them knew me previously. So, they said, you graduated, and raised their eyebrows at me. I would have liked to clarify that it was the case with the loan and the bus stop, and they were just concentrated on filling out the paperwork. Rapidly, in 2024, Almaz was able to graduate. She was also more cautious this time. She had no decision to take a loan. Rather, she began with a small enterprise of selling vegetables out of a basket right outside her home. It enabled her to get a little money saved. Almaz had technically graduated today, although she continues to hang on the threshold. It only takes a single poor sale or even the illness of a family member to put her back in square one. I heard that I graduated, she said to me. But to tell the truth, I am the one who feels he is in limbo. Waiting till that one thing could get me up again.

The flaw of the graduation model is that it presupposes a stable environment where an individual effort can result in a permanent change. This is a point mentioned in the experience of Almaz. Adama, on the other hand, cannot boast of a stable economy. The delicate balancing game of struggling households is shaken by any urban redevelopment, landlord decisions, health, and market forces all the time. Thus, graduation in this case seems like a temporary and reversible escape rather than an accomplishment.

The case of Almaz shows how far the difference between the primary goals of food security and consumption and the secondary goals of constructing assets is (Berhane et al., 2020). The program had made her survive and eat on hard days, but it never completely altered her life to the extent that she would no longer need the assistance. The motivation behind the pattern identified in national research on rotation came out very clearly to me when I attended community meetings

and when speaking to people in power. During one of their private conversations, one of the kebele administrators commented that there are plenty of poor people in our midst, and it is something the curriculum does not teach. I just need to come to hard decisions. At times, I graduate a family after three years in the program, although they may still be struggling. Others should get an opportunity, and it is not because they are prepared, but because everybody is struggling and getting some kind of help. It seems fair, doesn't it? This notion of fairness echoes the lack of resources that local authorities have to manage with, even-handed suffering being regarded as an alternative to proper support for all people. To homes such as the Almaz, this perpetual spinning results in an infinite cycle of the unknown, which does not cross over into poverty yet remains perpetually on the verge of poverty, rarely fully confident in the assistance they are getting.

I can find the graduation problem in such a way based on what my informants have told me: there are two conflicting demands among the urban PSNP beneficiaries. On the one hand, they must adopt the concept of personal responsibility in the program and move forward; they are supposed to participate in the training programs, create a business plan, save money, and be ready to be independent. Conversely, they also face stark structural issues such as a congested job market, high cost of housing, and exploitative credit practices, which make them among the few who are self-sufficient. One cannot hear the story of the program without feeling the need to attribute any failures to his/her own self. However, the alternative of denying it is to deny them the sole source of support they can avail.

This quandary is not merely an issue to the mind; it is very emotional and physical. It was also revealed by many people that they were anxious and depressed because of the pressure to be able to accomplish something that they did not feel was possible. They discussed problems with sleeping; they were no longer hungry and had a sense of hopelessness.

The same emotional attitude was expressed by Berhan, a 35-year-old mother of three with a husband who struggles with a long-term illness: There is a time when they say that I need to have a vision during our training sessions. You must think about the future, but in my case, the future is now. Will I be having kids to eat today? Is the landlord going around today? I cannot even know whether I will live five years down the road, so it seems impossible to make arrangements five years in advance. This lifestyle is tiresome, not the fact that I am sick, but it will deplete you day in and day out. Thus, the graduation problem is not only a policy problem but also a manner of

feeling that it is as much about the manner in which I happen to know time, and who I have become and what I can do in the world, in which I am uncertain, as it has ever been.

4.4 Beyond the Transfer: Informal Economies and Social Relations

So, what actually happens to the beneficiaries as the PSNP transfer is not quite enough to graduate, and the natural ways to self-support are closed? You see how the poor families are creative and the new challenges that face them in informal economies and social networks that sustain them.

It appears that almost all of the beneficiaries that I had used to converse with were struggling with a debt of some sort. The origin of this debt took various forms; some had to borrow money from their neighbors, some borrowed funds from store owners or informal lenders, to whom they could lend their money, but the root cause remained constant: debt became the main means to match their wants to their earnings. Regrettably, there are quite harsh conditions attached to informal credit. In Adama, as an example, moneylenders usually impose up to 20 to 30 per cent. interest every month. Thus, when you take a loan of 1,000 birr, you will be asked to pay the loan in 30 days, between 1,200 and 1,300 birr. It usually results in another loan borrowed by the family with unpredictable incomes to pay the earlier loan, and this starts the delay of debts that can last years.

Beneficiary Desta, 40, said that this is her case: I borrowed money from a woman in my neighborhood. She does have some money at hand, courtesy of the job of her husband. At the time of school fees, I withdrew 1500 Birr. However, a month later, I will be required to pay back 1600. I wonder, what about that 600, how am I to make it? I end up borrowing 600 from someone to pay off the debt. That's just how it goes. Every one of the PSNP money I get in a couple of months will simply go directly to paying off these debts. I do not have a sight of that money. This cycle effectively goes against the point of the program. Rather than investing in my future, the money is, in most cases, in the hands of moneylenders, and this forms a backhand delivery by the government to the unofficial lenders, another barrier to poverty.

The beneficiaries would be increasingly facing the intricate social interaction with one another as well as with individuals who are not covered by the program. Family and neighbors are, on the one hand, the key sources of support, such as small loans, joint meals, and childcare. On the other hand, these relations could also be a scapegoat and a point to criticize. This is the experience of one recipient, Tigist, who is 29: My neighbor is not a member of PSNP. Her husband works at a

hotel. I can at times find her looking at me as I collect my payout. I can see it in her eyes. She believes that I am getting some easy money. But she never knows that I give myself to the drains, nor does she observe my attendance on my invalid mother.

The money is all she can concentrate on. This social gap between the recipients of help and the recipients of non-help can cause stigma and isolation. Some of the individuals receiving assistance stated that they usually tend to shun social events, or they feel the necessity of keeping their PSNP status confidential among their neighbors.

Social networks may be valuable in assisting individuals to get through difficult times. Family and neighbors often have to contribute their small part when sickness strikes, bills need payment, or a child needs a new pair of shoes, etc. Ironically, these support networks are being stressed due to the same poverty that PSNP aims to solve. The beneficiaries are exposed to vulnerable communities that are experiencing pressure around them. Ayelech, a 62-year-old widow, pondered over this challenge by indicating that my neighbor is also finding this a challenge. Her husband is unwell. I assist her as much as I can, and the same for me. However, I have never been in such a situation to assist one another simultaneously. Thus, the absence always tends to go and come with us."

Beneficiaries also practice various forms of informal economies that most of the time go unrecorded in the records, particularly in the area of debt and socialization. Indicatively, Tsehay and other women sell fresh vegetables right at their doorsteps. Men have to work in every odd job that is available, and kids have to carry out their errands to local shopkeepers. Local alcohol is brewed in households and sold, scrap metal is collected and then sold, and household laundry is provided. In the absence of these informal activities, this distance between PSNP transfers and simple survival would be further increased. However, the attempts are usually volatile, uncontrollable, and often neglected by the program awarding assessors who have the habit of concentrating on formal employment or rather business development.

Scrap collector Worku described his daily routine in the following way: "I walk all day. The market is in residential conditions near the bus stop. I scourge the highways, even behind stores and in the ditches. I get out to sell for fifty birr one good day. Nothing, just a lousy day. It's not a job. Simply put, it's survival. The PSNP officer, however, asks, Do you have a business? When he comes and tries me. Say what I like, say, "Have your savings? I refuse, and therefore I will not be 'graduating,'

but what could I do more? Cogent but rhetorical is the question Worku puts. The graduation model, with its focus on measurable assets and structured livelihoods, cannot appreciate the type of work that can actually serve the urban poor. It thus cannot be used to their support.

5. DISCUSSION

The consequences of these results go way beyond Adama. They hint at the basic questions of urban poverty, the structure of social protection, as well as the assumptions that shape the development program.

The PSNP is also critical in eliminating starvation and securing resources in times of crisis, and offers them reliable support that needs minimal preparation in Adama. It also assists in social networking of specific beneficiaries and develops the much-needed community infrastructure. These are nothing like small feats. This program may be the difference between living families such as that of Lemma, retaining their little property, and a financial collapse. It also presents women such as Ayelech with some good social networks that offer material and emotional support. The community projects result in massive enhancements done in sanitation, green areas, and drainage for the total community. These are some of the achievements that should be identified when criticizing the program.

Although these armor measures are potentially useful, they certainly have some significant drawbacks. The concept of the graduation models utilized in PSNP and other programs, which work with poverty, all over the world, is rather clear: poverty is viewed as a deficiency in its resources, skills, and guidance, which can be addressed with the help of if-specific interventions, and individuals can become independent (Hashemi and de Montesquiou, 2011). Nevertheless, this methodology has been greatly criticized because it puts excessive emphasis on individuals (Ferguson, 2015; Lavers, 2019). My results add to this criticism by demonstrating how the structural issues in the secondary urban regions render the assumptions of the model untenable.

It is not a problem with Adama that the money, the skills, motivation, and desire to work are missing. The problem is that the economy has no means of integrating them. The job market is being flooded every day. Housing prices are picking up at a rate that no one can afford in terms of savings. The informal lending institutions tend to exploit the weak. Here, the promise of graduation

turns into what anthropologist Berlant (2011) refers to as a cruel optimism, meaning the promise that, in turn, is constantly sabotaged by the starkness of the reality in which the promise is given.

This concept of rotation that was proposed by the team of Sabates-Wheeler and colleagues in 2020 actually assists in illuminating the processes I witnessed in Adama. The nature of local officials are often confronted with difficult decisions due to the lack of resources and pressure to provide their assistance. This might be a reasonable reaction to the lack of resources for families that graduate on aid and continue struggling with poverty, and not an operational failure. But in the case of such families as Almaz, this rotation is the source of an annoying loop of being trapped, never to completely get out of poverty and never to feel safe in the help they seek. The emotional stress of this persistent uncertainty is one of the costs that Berhan wants to point out, and many are used to ignoring when conducting numerical assessments.

My findings further complicate the growing field of study on urban PSNP. In an analysis of Addis Ababa, Tafere and Woldehanna (2022) also demonstrated the fact that assets are less affected, a point that these authors explained through the high cost of living experienced in the city. Nevertheless, this is slightly different in the case of Adama; in this regard, the unstable working opportunities have more to do with the economic framework rather than merely with the high costs. Being a secondary town, Adama lacks the range of options that Addis Ababa has, and which presents international organizations, NGOs, and a developing sphere of services that offers at least some chances to aspiring entrepreneurs with a difficult position.

Also, it lacks the safety net that the rural people need on land. The beneficiaries in Adama are caught in an awkward situation of being far enough to be accessible to the opportunities the city can offer, but still be close enough to the urban hustle to make them live like it is in the countryside. This state of affairs points to the necessity of a more individual approach to urban social protection. The programs that large cities have to follow cannot be duplicated in secondary towns. The interventions must be based on the peculiar aspects of the local environment since the economic situation is rather diverse.

Anthropology is said to shed light on the issue of timing, which is what I found interesting. The graduation model is more likely to place a linear schedule on the lives full of unpredictability and continual crises. It is anticipated that people will make plans about a future that is unimaginable to them due to their current circumstances. This is actually the issue with the graduation model, as

this time mismatch is the key to the results of the program. The future might turn out to be an object of anxiety, which was raised by Berhan. The potential ultimate self-sufficiency provided in the program may, instead of bringing about actual progress, outline the actual impediments to realizing what is considered the most ideal condition of existence. This is a crucial psychological aspect of social protection that research and program design should consider.

There are some interesting theoretical implications of social interactions and informal economies that I have discovered during my research. In particular, the example of the debt economy can explain that PSNP transfers may be exploited by other stronger actors, such as predatory moneylenders, who can contribute to the further increase in poverty, rather than its decrease. This is a case of the wider political economy that the program is in, as opposed to a weakness in the program itself. Until the low-income families can get easy access to inexpensive loans, any cash that flows will most likely go to informal financiers. In order to address this problem, it is as important to reform the financial system as it is to strengthen the social safety nets.

The fact that following involvement in the PSNP program is stigmatized is also directly pointed out in the story of Tigist, which illuminates another manner of its impact on society. Being a recipient is frequently regarded as a sign of poverty, reliance, and incapability by many people. The support that it offers is essential to survival; however, this can have a disastrous effect on social status and self-worth. The existence of the program as a means of public work to encourage so-called productivity and make recipients stand out among the ones who are viewed as free-riders may further contribute to this stigma. By sweeping drainage tracks or scavenging litter trails along the roads, when the beneficiaries are on the street, they are actually displaying their helplessness, which can attract condemnation from the people passing by.

It's important to acknowledge that this public presence also provides certain beneficiaries like Ayelech with a sense of purpose and a feeling of social connection. Each person's unique life experiences shape the meaning of the program, which is anything but fixed. This complexity calls for a deeper, ethnographic approach and resists simple evaluation.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper explores the actual life stories of PSNP beneficiaries in Adama, Ethiopia, which I suppose I would call the graduation dilemma. I have been able to record the actual achievements of the program together with its major failures, courtesy of my strong ethnographic engagement.

The PSNP is executing its primary protective role in Adama, very well. It guarantees that even the most vulnerable families are able to meet their basic needs, which virtually eliminates famine and severe food insecurity cases. Allowing families to retain their assets in tough times will see them stay afloat without the need to dispose of their limited assets. The program offers strong support that enables the recipients to live their unstable lives at least a little bit more steadily. It is something that also cultivates important social relationships and provides a sense of direction to most especially to older women. Besides that, it develops physical community infrastructure that is valuable to all parties.

These achievements are not small at all. The program is an important standard level for households, which ensures they are not below a particular standard in the world where there is a prevalence of poverty and the state funds are minimal. It develops community, maintains dignity, and eventually saves lives. These achievements are the key step that should be acknowledged to assess the PSNP.

Although these protection measures are definitely worthwhile, they are limited to a great extent. The post-idea of graduation, which is that transfers can be used to digitize self-sufficiency in families, fails in the Adama case. A basic need of a household that is higher than its income cannot accumulate any value. When the informal credit systems are overwhelmed by their scarce resources, they end up in a conflict of debts. With the job market being devoid of any credible employment opportunities, it is almost impossible to have a stable livelihood. The situation that occurs is not actually graduation, but a "rotation" where struggling households are shuffled through a small set of resources, keeping them in their unstable condition, as it gives an illusion of improvement.

It is the same I refer to as the graduation dilemma; the true security of the program and the illusory promises existing between two extremely different realities. Almaz is locked in an endless cycle that the linear plot of the program would not be able to represent: he finishes his college education,

and repeats, finishes his college education, and repeats, finishes his college education, etc. Tsehay, on the other hand, spends her time as her transfer slip is floating away in a mountain of debt, yet the basic needs of her children remain unfulfilled. Worku is out scraping around, collecting scrap metal in a town where he has no home. However, there is also Ayelech, who finds her sense of purpose and her new friends in her engagement in the work of the public services. In the event of a crisis, it was Lemma who wouldn't lose his cooking pans and bed. The society is enjoying the fruits of drainage systems that are cleaner and greener in surrounding areas.

The graduation dilemma provides a distinctive insight into the larger problems of urban poverty in present-day Ethiopia. The effect of the fast urbanization, which has not been accompanied by economic development, is evident in Adama. I can observe the underdevelopment when social protection is carried out within an independent environment without considering the labor market policies and financial systems reform. What is more debilitating is the human aspect of these development models, whereby people are forcibly subjected to economic systems that are unable to support them.

Our existing ways are no longer doing the trick, as demonstrated by the manner in which the needy households continue using a limited number of resources in a cycle. My study supports this claim and is in line with that of national studies. In Adama, completion of these programs is more of a ticking time bomb than a real escape from poverty, particularly when the poverty is rampant, and the lines are long.

To make the PSNP be everything it is alluring in the secondary urban locations, it must face these issues head-on. As I have learned, there are a couple of recommendations that I can make.

Graduation is a high time to consider as a shared accomplishment rather than merely an individual one. However much an individual may work, I cannot expect all of us to become self-reliant in an economy where opportunities are not abundant due to structural problems. This is why I do not simply need the programs that address the demand side of labor markets, but only concentrate on making people employable. This may be a collaboration on economic development projects that generate employment in small towns, investing in infrastructure that is labor-intensive, or making connections with government employment efforts.

On the specific issue of addressing the debt, I must attack it with a headshot. Unless the informal credit stops ravaging the low-income families, any development in the shape of transfers will merely fall into the hands of moneylenders. The only way to become a good friend of sustainable livelihoods is to have interventions that offer cheap loans or even debt relief. Microfinance organizations have a role to play only when they are properly regulated and do not concentrate on profit maximization, but rather on enhancing poverty reduction. They should also be able to provide terms that can be afforded by the low-income citizens.

It should also be noted that housing is a very significant point of urban poverty. It is almost impossible to think of graduating or advancing in life when individuals are paying 30 to 50 percent of their wage receivables on rent. Urban social protection must be elementarily coupled with housing policy, whether it involves rent control, social housing, or subsidy. Unless I pay attention to the issue of housing, any gains that PSNP payments will make will simply get into the pockets of landlords rather than assist people in making their living better.

The programs must focus more on the psychological and social aspects of support. It is important to take into consideration that anxiety, shame, and stigma are not casual side effects of beneficiaries that they should experience. To address such problems, attempting to take some measures, which would respect dignity and support social cohesion, is worth as much as giving material help. It may include local discussions of poverty and assistance, community-oriented approaches that conceal individuals, or projects that view the process of joining the PSNP as a right rather than a failure.

The dynamic of rotation mentioned in this paper is important and has to be noted. In case not all the resources exist to support those in need, it is preferable to let everyone know about it as opposed to masking the fact as graduation. Other options may involve making smaller portions of aid available to more households or having a much clearer distinction between long-term livelihood investments and short-term crisis relief. Regardless of the resolution that is adopted, the homes cannot be seen to be independent when they actually are not.

Sixth, it is still important to supply and improve the effective protective services of the program even though the attempts to cope with the weak aspects of the program continue. The ambition to reach an unrealistic graduation goal should not take precedence over their essential successes, such

as the eradication of hunger, the safeguarding of resources, the provision of stability, the creation of social connections, and the enhancement of the infrastructure of communities.

Lastly, there is a strong necessity for further studies regarding Ethiopian and other suburban cities. As an increasing number of people become urbanized, this means that there will be a lot of low-income people in locations such as Adama that are between rural and urban life. Research and policy must understand their particular weaknesses as well as what kind of social protection may be able to ease them.

It is their fight, and it is our fight. What can I do to develop solutions that will address urgent needs without guaranteeing something I cannot fulfill? How can I help people here, and at the same time, how can I anticipate a day when people no longer need any help? But how is it possible to advocate even more and at the same time glorify the actual success of such programs as PSNP? No simple answers to such questions exist. Nevertheless, it is necessary to raise them and speak about them with the people who encounter such problems on a day-to-day basis. The Tsehays, Almazes, Workus, and Ayeleches of Adama are not simply the passive beneficiaries of change. They are very adequately navigating through economies, which generally have no clear direction and act as guides in a world that appears to be impossible. Their interaction with their experience not only supports anthropology; it is an essential measure to social protection, whose purpose is actually to change and protect their lives.

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Ethical Approval

All participants provided informed oral consent before their involvement in the study, and measures were taken to ensure anonymity and confidentiality throughout the research process.

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