

Ethiopia to shift a million people from drought-hit areas

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Ethiopia has begun a resettlement programme which aims to move up to a million people away from the country's drought-stricken and over-worked central highlands to more fertile regions.

Tens of thousands of families are to be moved before the rains come in May as the result of a pilot project last year, which the government says resulted in improved harvests.

Critics say the lands available for resettlement - mainly along Ethiopia's border with Sudan - are in areas notorious for diseases including malaria and kala azar or visceral leishmaniasis, a potentially fatal disease transmitted by sandflies.

Attempts to resettle farmers are not new in Ethiopia but this is the biggest relocation scheme in the country's history.

Aid agencies say that even though the government has provided food and health services to support the resettled families they may struggle to cope in an unfamiliar environment.

An aid worker in Addis Ababa, the capital, said: "There are people who say they are better off [at resettlement sites] than they were where they came from. There are services provided and they are getting more food than they would at home.

"That's not the issue - we are talking about a very vulnerable population. They are the most destitute people otherwise why would they leave the highlands for the lowlands where it is much hotter and they know there are diseases.

"The reason why they are going is because they are fairly desperate and want to make a new life for themselves."

The settlements may also be cut off from the rest of the country during the rainy season, which is also the height of the malarial season and the time when the settlers will need help most.

"The issue is that they haven't developed coping mechanisms," the aid worker said. "They don't have livestock, so they don't have anything to fall back on [if harvests fail].

"Some of the resettlement sites are in the middle of nowhere so there's not even a host community to fall back on.

"Small problems can become big ones. If a hand pump breaks down in their own environment they know where to walk to find water. Where they are being moved to, they won't."

The government's strategy is aimed at reducing Ethiopia's dependency on food aid, which supports about 15 million of the country's 70 million population.

But the plan has been criticised by academics who say the government should allow farmers to move to the cities instead.

Desalegn Rahmato, head of the Ethiopian Forum for Social Studies, told a conference last week that resettlements in the countryside were "a complex, costly and, in the end, wasteful undertaking".

Mr Rahmato said: "If the goal of food security is to be achieved, we would need to create employment opportunities on a large scale outside agriculture, in the modern sector of the economy, and enable rural people to move to urban areas."

Ethiopia's population has nearly doubled since the famine which caught the world's attention in 1984. The country has suffered several subsequent famines.

About 85% of the population depend on agriculture, mainly subsistence farming.

Over the next three years the government aims to relocate more than 2 million people, including the million who are being moved in the coming months.

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