



Rural Land Tenure in Ethiopia – A General Assessment

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Land Tenure in the Imperial Period

In Ethiopia, the question of tenure rights and the condition of peasant dependency on the one hand and, on the other, the need for land reform, were among the focal issues for student agitation in the 1960s. The “Land to the Tiller” demonstration in Addis Ababa, organized by university students in 1968 was the high point of this agitation. There was broad consensus among informed opinion, within the radical student movement and liberal professionals in government and the private sector that the existing land tenure system was unjust and exploitive, a roadblock to economic development, and one of the main pillars of the “feudal system”. The system was dependent in large measure on tenancy and the tenant who worked the land was subject to numerous abuses.

The main elements of the land holding structure at the time consisted of the following:

- Large tracts of land held by absentee landlords, notably the nobility, and worked by tenants
- Considerable land held by locally resident gentry (local *bal-abats*), which too was under tenancy

- State domain land, reportedly covering more than one-third of the land area in the country
- Land held by small owner cultivators in the north and central part of the country.

Land reform among radicals and progressives was envisioned to achieve several goals: right the wrongs of the existing system, bring justice to a downtrodden peasantry, and contribute to the modernization of the nation’s polity. In contrast, the Imperial government was not receptive to changes of the land system, and even a minor reform regulating tenancy and establishing rules governing relations between landlord and tenant was turned down by the Emperor (with strong lobbying by the nobility) on the eve of the military insurrection which was to unseat him and dispossess the land classes subsequently.

The Derg Reforms

The group of military officers and non-commissioned subalterns, called the *Derg*, which led the revolution, deposed the ageing Emperor and seized power in September 1974. Some six months later, in March 1975, a radical and comprehensive land reform proclamation was issued, following which a massive demonstration in

support was held by residents of Addis Ababa, with similar demonstrations in other towns later. Here was clear evidence of the public's positive regard of reform to the land system and the dispossession without compensation of the landed classes which was set out in the new proclamation. The key provisions of the reform were the following: private ownership of land was abolished, instead land was now held in public ownership; peasants were given use rights to the land they worked; the transfer of land by sale, lease, rent, mortgage or bequest was prohibited; tenancy was abolished; land was to be worked by the holder and no hired labor was allowed. Peasant Associations were to be established to implement the reform, and to serve as agents of local authority. Land reform was implemented over a period of several years, initially with the support of *Zemetcha* participants but later under the direction of highly politicized government cadres.

But the weaknesses of the reform soon became apparent: it gave rise to periodic land redistribution and as a result to the leveling down of holdings. It did not take into account factors having to do with demographic dynamics, and landlessness became an emerging threat. The prohibition of hired labor and of land rentals, and similar customary transfer practices, contributed to unemployment as well as to the inefficient utilization of land resources. Moreover, the Derg's hasty and ill-advised policies promoting agricultural socialization, and later in the 1980s, villagization, and grain price control came to embitter peasants who had earlier received the redistribution of land with great appreciation. The socialization program consisted of the promotion of peasant production cooperatives involving the pooling of land and working together on the one hand, and on the other, the establishment of state farms. Inefficient, wasteful and corrupt, state farms were responsible for widespread deforestation and considerable displacement of peasants from the land.

As a result of all these policies and their poor implementation, crop production, which had

increased following immediately after the reform, declined and continued to do so all through the 1980s. The devastating famine of 1984/85 came against the backdrop of peasant discontent and growing crisis of food production. Radical land reform failed in many of its aims, ending up, in particular, denying peasant farmers security of holding which they so strongly desired.

The Post-Derg Reforms

The Meles Zenawi regime, which replaced the Derg in 1991, adopted most of the provisions of the Derg land reform but with some significant modifications. The Constitution of 1995 and the subsequent land laws issued in 1997 and 2005 allow the transfer of land to heirs, land rentals, and the hiring of labor to work one's land. Under the federal political structure established by the new regime, the authority for land administration was left to the *Killils* (or Regions), with the Federal government putting forth broad policy measures. Killil laws were to be in conformity with Federal laws and the Constitution. One of the aims of the land legislations was to promote tenure security for land holders.

An important new measure set out in the 2005 Federal land law and aimed at promoting such security was land registration and certification (LR&C). The first level LR &C was carried out between 2002 and 2006. This was a task undertaken by peasants themselves, as a result it was accomplished with minimal cost and in a short time. But the program was riddled with flaws: plots were measured with traditional tools and were not accurate; plot boundaries often relied on movable objects and could be contested. The land register was simply a log book on which the details of each holder's land and other particulars were written by hand- it was in other words not updateable.

The 2nd level LR&C, launched a few years later and in progress at the moment, is expected to address these flaws. The difference between the two is significant: the second level uses modern technology, the accuracy of land measurement and demarcation is

much higher and more reliable as a result; plot maps are part of the certificates; and in all cases, a digitized and updateable system of land registry has been introduced. The result is more accurate information about each plot, and a more reliable and updateable registration system. But the program is immensely costly and time-consuming: it has been over a decade since the program was launched and to date only about 30 percent of farm plots have been covered. It is being supported by more than half a dozen donors, with U.K's LIFT and Finish REILA as the most important.

LR&C has been broadly welcomed by the peasantry, but it has not stopped Government and investors from expropriating farm and range lands and displacing the people on them. Compensation is paid not for the land but for any investment the users may have made on the land. On the other hand an important benefit not often mentioned is the empowerment of women. Rural women will stand to gain by joint land R&C. They now have to be consulted by their husbands and kinfolk in the event of renting out or sharecropping, of marriage endowments, inheritance matters, and other land transfer decisions. In the event of divorce, half of the land is theirs by right.



Challenges faced by land holders

The first challenge is *land scarcity*. This is due to growing population pressure coming up against limited land availability. The severe shortage of farm

land has been met by bringing pasture land, land on hillsides, woodlots and other fragile ecosystems under cultivation. As a result, there are high rates of environmental degradation (soil erosion, drying up of water sources, etc), esp. in the northern highlands. The second is *land fragmentation* which is driven by various customary practices: Partible inheritance (dividing family land among many heirs), which is common, has led to continuous subdivision of the land. Customary farming practices also encourage the fragmentation of holdings: peasants prefer to hold plots in different locations because of differences in the quality of the land. As a result, per capita holdings have been decreasing over time and today are less than one hectare in cereal farming systems of the North, and below half a hectare in the root-crop farming systems of the South.

A third challenge is *landlessness* which is growing at a rapid rate. In some places landlessness ranges between 20 to 28 percent. This has put immense pressure on families, community relations, land resources, and aggravated rural poverty and unemployment. *The main victims of landlessness are young people*. One of the outcomes of landlessness is out-migration: to other parts of the country, or to other countries, often illegally and through the agency of people-smugglers and criminal gangs. Illegal Ethiopian migrants in the Middle East & S. Africa have faced torture, murder, extortion, internment, xenophobic attacks, sexual abuse, and other abuses.

Other challenges faced by peasants have to do with pressures on their holdings brought on by investments, both public and private. Investment in infrastructure such as roads, railways, hydropower schemes, and large-scale housing projects--- all of which are "land hungry" have led to the dispossession of holders. The government has taken land for industrial parks, and for state-run mega industrial projects including sugar manufacturing, metal and engineering enterprises, and chemical industries. Land has also been offered to private investors for industrial projects and large-scale agricultural schemes. This comes on top of



the physical expansion of cities and towns into the rural areas, gobbling up farm and pasture lands. This expansion began in earnest in the last years of the 1990s and has accelerated thereafter until it was suspended temporarily in 2017. New towns are also emerging, along roadsides and around rural services centers. All these activities have led to peasant farmers losing their land and often forced to move and seek other livelihood options.

Conclusion

The land question is still important today. However the issues at the center of the question are different now from what they were in the 1960s. Land has been distributed to those who farm it, and the landed classes responsible for the injustice of the past have been removed for good. Today there are new issues and

land fragmentation, landlessness, land degradation, issues of security of rights, encroachment on peasant land by government, investors, cities and towns. And tied to all this: rural poverty, food insecurity, and growing risks associated with climate change.

Recent media reports indicate that the government is considering a bill to revise the existing land legislation. Among the improvements being suggested in the new bill are provisions to enable rural land holders to access credit from financial institutions using their land as collateral, something that they were unable to do under the existing circumstances.

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Source:- ደሳለኝ ራህመድ (2012) የገጠር መሬት ሥራት በኢትዮጵያ : አጠቃላይ ግምገማ

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