



Land and Food Security Concerns in Oromia National Regional State

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Introduction

In Ethiopia’s political discourses and economic policies, land continues to play a pivotal role in shaping state-society and inter-group relations. Beyond its materialistic value, land, as a vital economic resource necessary for livelihood sustenance, also embodies political and social values accrued to it in the form of power over society and social prestige, respectively. It is obvious that, in agrarian developing economies like Ethiopia, land, land policy and land use-planning influence the societies’ food security and the national economic development. Ethiopia’s land tenure system and land policies, which often marginalize poor farmers in favor of the state (and in favor of the feudal lords during the imperial period), have been criticized as the cause behind the country’s backwardness, economic underdevelopment and poverty . In this brief note, land and food security concerns in Oromia are analysed and looked in to, putting these issues within the broader debates on land policy in the country.

Agrarian Economy and Land Policy in Ethiopia

Agrarian economy entails the rational utilization of land and land-based resources. However, Ethiopia, as an agrarian country, has kept land under the control of the state/government and has designed policies mainly from political interests of land rather than from improving the life of the peasantry. Land ownership, land use right and land tenure security are known to be the integral components that shape an agrarian economy, because access to and control of productive resources such as land influence

not only agricultural productivity but also peasants’ trust in investing on their land. However, land policy in the country continued to be a contentious arena among scholars, politicians, development institutions and practitioners for over half a century in the country’s policy and political landscapes.

Two strands of polarized policy debates on land policy that continue shaping political discourses in the country are, those advocating for private land ownership (neo-liberal thoughts), and those supporting state control of land. While proponents of policies that provide for private land ownership raise issues of efficiency, those who argue against this position supporting state control of land, bring out issues of fairness to and protection of the poor whom they believe may fall prey to greedy wealthy urban dwellers . Although the 1960s “Land to the Tillers” slogan influenced the military regime’s 1975 land proclamation, the regime did not liberalize land as a private property. Rather, drawing from the experiences, and strengthening the arguments of the feudal regime whereby absentee landlords controlled about 46% of cultivable land in the Southern parts of the country, the derg opted for state control of land. Following the demise of the military rule in 1991, the debate on land reform resurrected, whereby strong proponents of private ownership of land emerged in the country’s policy milieu. During this period, not only did scholars and political actors advocated for privatization, but also, financial institutions and donor organizations also called for withdrawal of state control over land. While efficiency and tenure security were the major arguments of these actors, this position has constantly and evidently been rebutted by scholars who posit that privatization would put the economically poor, financially weak and politically powerless peasants

under the influence of urban bourgeoisie who they fear would buy and accumulate land into their hands.

Accordingly, the 1995 Ethiopian Constitution (article 40.3) clearly stipulated, “The right to ownership of rural and urban land, as well as of all natural resources, is exclusively vested in the State and in the peoples of Ethiopia. Land is a common property of the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia and shall not be subject to sale or to other means of exchange”. However, although the constitutional provision was based on the notion of fairness and protection to the mass, and recognizing the state as a guardian of powerless citizens, the EPRDF government has only continued the tradition of dispossessing peasants through its policies of transferring land to investors. In his work on land acquisition in Ethiopia, John Abbink (2011) argues that the EPRDF regime manipulated the constitutional provision that reserves the mandate of land ownership to the state to its political and economic advantages. According to

Land-Food Security Nexus in Oromia

As it has been discussed in the preceding section, the capacity to access the means of production (land) and inputs for productivity (technology, capital, and knowledge), market, and the power to decide on means of production and product are among the integral components that define the concept of food security. In other words, food security is not only about availability of food but also about the capacity of accessing it. Although the capacity of accessing food does not necessarily require access to means of production (land), in agrarian societies such as Ethiopia, both the availability and the capacity of accessing food mostly depend on land. Landlessness in Oromia ranges from 25-45% in different zones, which is caused by population growth, urban expansion, land degradation, land expropriation, and lack of alternative livelihood that in turn have led to increased prevailing pressure on land.



this scholar, dispossession of smallholder farmers from their holdings under the guise of large-scale investment has added to the already dwindling economy and contributed to poverty in most of rural Ethiopia. Likewise, landlessness in Oromia has been partly attributed to the government’s policies of land expropriation, which, due to lack of good governance and accountability, left peasants either uncompensated or paid disproportionately low amount of money. Peasants’ access to and control of land resources enables their agency and capabilities of increasing productivity of their land by providing them the autonomy to decide what to produce, when to produce and where to distribute their produce. In other words, landlessness and peasant’s lack of control over their plots of land exacerbate food insecurity and poverty among peasants that also scales up to the wider society.

However, landlessness and its consequential impacts on food security in Oromia should also be put in historical contexts. Beginning from the late 19th century, state predation over the peasantry focused on levying heavy taxation, collection of tributes in kinds, exploitation of labour and other resources mainly in geographically accessible resource-rich areas of central, southern and southwestern highlands. Although the feudal mode of economy was not exclusively limited to Oromia, Oromia’s geographical proximity to the center and resource abundance made it victim of state exploitation under successive regimes. Land measurement, transfer of land to absentee landlords, military officers and members of the nobility under the imperial regime, agricultural collectivization under the military rule and transfer of land to “developmental investors” under the EPRDF regime have all made the peasantry victims of state interventions.

Peasant dispossession has been legitimized by legal frameworks and through the narratives of development across different regimes. For example, over the last two decades, millions of peasants in Oromia lost their land due to floriculture, industrial zones, urban expansion (particularly unregulated expansion of Addis Ababa) and agri-business projects. The 2005 Land Expropriation Proclamation (Proclamation No. 455/2005) gives absolute power to the government to expropriate land when it is deemed necessary for “public interest” – a vague phrase in the proclamation that does not clarify what public interest includes and whether the people or an individual on the land should be consulted before the decision for expropriation is made. Similarly, another proclamation (Proclamation No. 456/2005) that was promulgated to determine rural land administration and landholding, also grants the government unlimited power to transfer communal land to private ownership (cf. Article 5.3, and 5.4a). From a broader political spectrum, the year 2005 was a period when the ruling party officially adopted the so-called developmental state political economic model that enhanced strong state intervention in development programs. The land administration and expropriation proclamations were used as legitimizing legal frameworks for dispossessions of land that ensued for the next decade that culminated with the widespread protests and upheavals in Oromia over the fateful 2014 Master Plan.

Some Policy Implications

The following policy implications can be drawn from the discussions in this paper:

Although the competing discourses on land reform have continued to be central in the political debates, the argument towards private ownership of land ignores the possible vulnerability of peasants to powerful and wealthy urban dwellers. Unless legally and institutionally checked, wealthy rural and urban elites would potentially buy land from poor peasants and turn the peasants into tenants or wage laborers. Therefore, the study suggests that while state control of land remains salient, it requires robust and multidimensional land policy that gives peasants the freedom, agency and autonomy to decide on their land. According to the Oromo worldviews, land is not considered to be an individual/private property. The saying, “Lafti keenya lafee keenya” literally means, “our land is our ancestral space”, doesn’t signify private ownership. Therefore, land policies and proclamations in Oromia need to take into consideration such broader perspectives of the society.

In recent years, discourses of development and fundamental human and democratic rights – the right to live in healthy and clean environment, the right of people not to be displaced, the right to be consulted, the right to participate in decision-making and the right to get access to productive resources – have

been in collision. On the one hand, the EPRDF government under the so-called developmental state political economy has been advocating for “bread-first” principle compromising other strands of rights. That was why the government used to give a deaf ear to massive displacement and environmental pollutions but it rather followed coercive top-down approaches to development, in stead. On the contrary, studies show that top-down, hegemonic and non-participatory development models often fail because; 1) such approaches generate resistance from groups who perceive or experience marginalization and dispossession; and 2) they ignore local contexts: indigenous knowledge, values, diversities, aspirations and environmental realities. Thus, the government ought to put the people at the center of development policies, strategies and programs. It must also put the interests and benefits of the people at the center of land reforms.

Food Security is a function of access to land, technologies of production, market and the capability (agency) to decide on products. In an agrarian economy, land remains fundamental to food security but, given the ever increasing population growth, unemployment and diminishing productivity, designing alternative livelihood strategies and focusing on irrigation projects (on food crops) that accommodate large number of youth can be helpful both in reducing pressure on land and increasing food security of the people. Oromia’s irrigable rivers have not been properly utilized, and those used have been given to non-food agri-business projects. As it has been witnessed over the last ten years, the government’s focus on agri-business projects have failed to contribute to national economic development as well as local community development.

As one of the regions in the country consisting large area size with pastoralist groups, Oromia needs comprehensive pastoralist development programs and strategies. If properly managed, developed and utilized, livestock in Borana and parts of Guji alone could significantly contribute to regional and national economic development. Nevertheless, successive regimes in Ethiopia, including the current government, consider pastoralist areas as conflict zones, as backward, unproductive, and dangerous frontiers not worthy of investing national resources on. State intervention that is built on such hegemonic and paternalistic perception often marginalizes local communities. For example, state development projects like the South Omo projects, and securitization of borders (such as Ethio-Kenya borders) have been implemented without the participation of local communities. Therefore, putting pastoral communities at the center of development programs, and designing land-use planning according to local contexts (culture, knowledge

and values) ensures both local developments as well as contribute to national economic development.

Ethiopia is a country of diverse ecologies and agro-climatic zones. The same applies to Oromia. Nevertheless, neither at national level nor at regional level does specific land use planning exist. Specific land use planning helps to efficiently use land resources for activities that fit the characteristics of the land in that specific area. For example, it has been a glaring blunder to give agriculturally fertile and productive areas in central Oromia for horticulture (flower industries). These areas could have been used for food crops. Therefore, in order to effectively and efficiently utilize land for purposes that fit the characteristics of the land, comprehensive, multi-level and multidimensional land-use planning is required.

Depoliticizing the issue of land and land distribution is very important to ensure equal opportunities for citizens. Over the last two decades or so, the ruling party has used land as an instrument of recruiting party membership and, unfortunately, that trend continues to this day. In this regard, land has become at the center of corruption practices and patronage on the one hand, and it has also been used as an instrument of suppression of political dissents on the other. Thus, a fundamental structural reform that needs to include prohibiting the appointment party members to land administration offices at different levels is required in order to depoliticize the issue of land.

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