

The Transformation of Commons in the Afar Region in Ethiopia



Traditional communal landholding has long been prevalent in the Afar region of Ethiopia, accommodating the interests of different user groups for many generations. This form of land ownership, which entails use of pastoral resources scattered over a wide area to produce livestock, is attributable to ecological conditions characterized by frequent drought. The harsh environment in which herders raise their livestock requires constant mobility to regulate resource use via a common property regime. In contrast to the mobile way of life characterizing pastoralism, agriculture as a sedentary activity is only marginally present in the lowlands of the Afar region. However, the traditional land use system is changing because of pressures from both governmental policy and natural events such as drought. Communal land ownership in Afar is under pressure as a result of state intervention (political risks) and natural challenges (natural risks).

SOURCE:

Bekele Hundie and Martina Padmanabhan, 2008, *The Transformation of the Commons: Coercive and Non-Coercive Ways*, In Mwangi, E., H. Markelova and R. Meinzen-Dick, *Collective and Property Rights for Poverty Reduction: Lessons from a Global Research Project*, IFPRI: Washington D.C.

Coercive and Non-Coercive Property Rights Changes in the Afar Region

State intervention in the Afar region, mainly since the early 1960s, has produced detrimental effects on pastoralist livelihoods.

1. The state expropriated large areas of dry season rangeland, exacerbating feed scarcity in the area.
2. The state enforced the transformation of pastoralism into sedentary farming, without taking into account pastoral households' capacities to produce crops. Development schemes initiated and financed by the state couldn't enhance the capabilities of pastoral households to derive the full benefits of their land.

3. State intervention created a window of opportunity for some pastoralists, while others, such as women and the poor, were deprived of the benefits of the new arrangements.

Afar pastoralists are threatened not only by the coercive actions of the state, but also by natural challenges such as recurrent drought. Two major droughts have hit the area since the mid-1990s, and short dry spells are common. This has had two major consequences. First, the prevalence of drought has reduced total livestock assets and productive capacities of the area. Second, it has recalibrated the terms of trade against the pastoralists.

Risks to Pastoralism in Afar

The question of whether the option of small-scale farming is taken up by pastoralists depends on factors such as suitability of the area for agriculture, per capita livestock holding of a household, access to wage employment, and external support. Overall, the study indicates that communal land ownership, which forms the basis for pastoralism, is under pressure as a result of state intervention and natural challenges, confirming results of other studies of pastoral areas.



Faced with such natural challenges, pastoral households employ coping strategies which may involve different ways of using the available resources, even looking beyond pastoralism. On the one hand, this natural challenge triggered the intervention of external actors to facilitate cooperation among pastoralists, providing a catalyst for them to take up farming. On the other hand, it increased pastoralists' expectations that they would benefit more by taking advantage of external assistance and participating in collective efforts. These expectations, realized or not, produced cooperative decisions toward engaging in organized activities such as farming.

Implications for Action in Pastoral Areas

Averting state coercion: Current experiences in non-pastoral areas show that undervaluation of land, large variances between what investors pay and what evictees receive, and failure of evictees to start new livelihoods are critical problems associated with the expansion of investments in rural areas of Ethiopia. These problems are attributable to a lack of effective institutions and appropriate governance structures, including lack of clear guidelines on land valuation, marginalization of landholders in the process of land transfers, and a weak organizational setup to administer the transformation process.

Harmonizing policy emphasis with the potentials of pastoral areas: The transformation of property rights due to natural challenges has had important implications for the livelihoods of pastoralists. Poor households (in terms of livestock assets) are more interested in farming compared to better-off ones. Decisions of pastoralists toward farming could reflect their reactions toward recurring natural hazards. Farming is thought to be a post-shock livelihood undertaken by households that cannot call upon their pastoral assets post-drought. Despite this fact, two points can be made about the potential of farming in the study areas in general.

1. Since they are mobile, livestock appear to be somewhat more tolerant of drought conditions than crops. The existence of mobile pastoralism in dry regions of the world also implies the relative viability of livestock production as compared to rain-fed agriculture in these regions. Efforts to produce food crops under rain-fed conditions may not provide any substantial remedy to the decline of food security when drought occurs; during a prolonged spell it presumably will not.
2. Although crops can be produced using irrigation in some ecological niches, an irrigation-based production system is less appealing in many parts of Afar given the scarcity of water. Consequently, livestock production appears to be the best, and in some areas the only option under the existing technologies.

Current Situation in Afar

The coercive expropriation of pastoral land has slowed since 1991, and Afar pastoralists have regained some of their lost rights over their traditional land. However, current national policies are not immune from the anti-pastoral sentiment. The 2005 National Land Use Proclamation declares that communal rural land holdings may be converted to private holdings if the government finds it necessary. There is also a plan to expand irrigated land in the Awash basin. Implementation of such a plan would require evicting pastoralists.

Conclusion

The relatively low participation level of better-off pastoralists in collective action to start farming implies that crop production is not a substitute for, but is rather subsidiary to, livestock production in such dry areas. Therefore, instead of overrating the sustainability and impact of farming on poverty reduction, it would be worthwhile to focus on livestock production. In this regard, improving key services, such as the livestock market information system, veterinary and financial services, investing in infrastructure, and enhancing feed management are key to turning the silent transformation of commons into a viable development path for the Afar. Moreover, other alternative income sources should be promoted in addition to farming as means of improving the capacity of (poor) pastoralists to overcome potential livelihood challenges.

Suggested Readings

- Beyene, Fekadu. 2008. Challenges and Options in Governing Common Property: Customary Institutions Among (Agro-)pastoralists in Ethiopia. *Institutional Change in Agriculture and Natural Resources* Vol. 32. Aachen: Shaker.
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