

Property Rights among Afar Pastoralists of Northeastern Ethiopia: Forms, Changes and Conflicts

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Introduction

In the Afar districts of Northeastern Ethiopia, traditional pastoral land rights evolved to fit the ecological conditions of the drylands, where nomadic pastoralism is the dominant livelihood and where mobility and resource sharing are fundamental. Accordingly, property rights often exist as a complex bundle of rights which often confer conditional access to land according to communally dictated norms. While traditional communal ownership still prevails, the increasing privatization of traditionally owned land by the state has triggered an evolution of land rights privileges that is at considerable odds with traditional property rights norms.

As the key catalyst to the changing nature of land rights, the state based its strategy on the principle that land belongs to the state and that pastoralists have no right to block the former from using land in a specified way. As such, land rights policies did not take into account traditional pastoral land rights and state development programs in the region were developed without consulting the local people or seeking their consent. This is especially true in areas with relatively superior resource endowments where the incentives for privatization were higher. These context-independent state-driven changes in land tenure systems have led to increasing conflicts between pastoralists and the state. Furthermore, as changing land systems disproportionately favored certain groups over others, it fostered tensions that have resulted in violent conflict. The consequences of changing land tenure have been further exacerbated by the problems of recurrent drought and increasing sedentarization that has heightened the vulnerability of the pastoralist livelihood.

This research concerns itself with explaining the unique set of challenges that evolving land rights pose for the pastoralist livelihood. While the author focuses specifically on the process and consequences of land rights changes among the Afar pastoralists of Northeastern Ethiopia, much of it is generalizable to the contemporary experience of pastoralists across the arid and semi-arid lands of Eastern Africa.

Study Area

The Afar Region, located in the northeastern part of Ethiopia, shares an international border with Eritrea and Djibouti. The six Afar communities examined in this study were selected purposively to reflect differences in resource endowments and use patterns, inter-ethnic relationships and state-pastoralist relationships. Four of the sites, Ambash, Kurkura, Doho, and Dudub are found in the middle Awash valley which is also home to several state-owned irrigation schemes and private farms. These four sites share boundaries with the Karrayou (an Oromo clan) in the east and southeast, the Issa (a Somali clan) in the north and northeast and the Argoba in the southwest. The other two

study sites, Harihammo and Daleti, are located across the southwestern escarpments bordering the Amhara region. No extensive commercial farming exists in these sites but pastoral households practice opportunistic farming where rainfall patterns allow them to do so. The Amharas (west and southwest) and the Oromos (northwest) are the neighbors of the Afar pastoralists in these areas.

Traditional Property Rights of the Afar Pastoralists

Property rights in Afar are traditionally based on the philosophy that land is a communal resource. Accordingly, the clan is the lowest social unit to which communal property rights over land and other natural resources are defined. Afarland is divided among all clans of Afar as a function of resource potential and the dominance of a clan (either in number or political power). Clan land often comprises strategic resources such as grazing areas including dry season retreats, browsing resources, and water points. In addition, each clan also has its communal graveyards, settlement areas (*metaro*) and ritual sites. Each clan has a well-established gerontocracy granting authority on decisions regarding land and other natural resource use to a village council consisting of the clan leader, elders, and local wise-men. The decisions taken by the village council include exclusion of non-members, allocation of sites to non-members, negotiating use privileges of other clans' land, and determining resource use patterns. Based on these customary institutions, every member of the clan, by default, has the right to use the fruits of his clan's land in accordance with the established rules.

Catalysts of Property Rights Changes

The state was the key catalyst that triggered the evolution of land rights in the area. Part and parcel of the economic development strategy of the Imperial government of Ethiopia during the 1960s, the expansion of large-scale commercial farming was promoted as a means to supply raw materials to domestic industries as well as to produce surplus food for would be factory laborers. Because of its suitability for irrigated agriculture, Ambash was among those areas whose land was 'captured' for the exclusive use of the state. While the other communities were not directly affected by state intervention, natural challenges and socioeconomic transition resulted in increasing demands for privatization by a small subset of the population that stood to gain. The expansion of truck-stop towns, increased commercialization, increased demand for grain and other cultivars, recurrent droughts and the need to source food aid, all led to an increased demand for private land amongst those who recognized the potential benefits.

Increasing Land-Rights Conflicts:

Violent conflicts related to perceived violations of property rights are endemic in the region. While inter-ethnic conflicts among pastoralists feature occasionally in the history of the region, they are now occurring with greater frequency and intensity. As has been the case, most of the conflicts stem from competition over grazing land and water sources. Extensive livestock raids, driven by the honor bestowed to raiders for their courage, are also a major source of conflict. The infiltration of small arms in the area has

further intensified the conflicts and increased the associated level of violence and bloodshed.

The conflicts in the study area largely occur between different ethnic groups. Afar pastoralists find themselves in regular confrontation with the neighboring Oromos, Amharas and Somalis. Much of the conflict has to do with the increasing shortage of pasture and water. Resource scarcity is exacerbated by recurrent droughts, vigorous expansion of the *Prosopis juliflora* bush that is replacing palatable and more nutritious grasses. In addition to resource scarcity, weak and inappropriate formal institutions in pastoral areas coupled with the inability of traditional institutions to manage conflicts and secure property rights have contributed to the intensification of violent conflicts and animosity among pastoral groups.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

The issue of property rights is critical to pastoral livelihoods. Access to grazing and watering rights across a vast area of land, which is fundamental to pastoralism in the face of seasonal availability of forage and water, is at odds with the notion of private access to land. As development trends support the privatization of land, pastoralists find themselves with a diminishing stock of resources upon which they can support their herds. This study examined the issue from the perspective of several sites in the Afar region of Northeastern Ethiopia that have been affected by an evolving land tenure regime. The author shows how changes in property rights combine with resource pressures and changing socioeconomic conditions to breed violence in the areas.

These conflicts pose a major stumbling block to realizing the potential gains from resource sharing through peaceful negotiation. As both the engine of property rights changes and the enforcer of law, the state has a responsibility to facilitate negotiations between conflicting groups and to ensure that property rights laws are inclusive of the rights of pastoralists. A coherent property rights policy, supported by a participatory process, needs to be articulated. Without this, the conflicts are likely to escalate in the face of diminishing access to grazing land.

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