

ET02

An overview of Natural Resource Management under the Derg

Key Points:

- 1** The 1972-3 famine enabled the Revolutionary State to gain control over land and NRM
- 2** State land ownership resulted in state involvement in NRM through food for work and campaign labour
- 3** Rural institutions became tools of state control and NRM became “top-down”
- 4** Frequent land redistribution affected security of tenure and NRM measures

This Briefing is one of a series produced jointly by the Forum for Social Studies (Ethiopia), Centro de Experimentação Florestal (Mozambique) and the University of Sussex (UK). Each is designed to summarise research findings and encourage feedback. The Briefing is part of the ‘Marena’ research project, funded by the UK’s Department for International Development.

The rise of the Derg and environmental awareness and activism in Ethiopia are both partly attributable to the 1972-73 Famine. Both the 1974 Revolution that catapulted the Derg to power, and the sudden public and government awakening to the need for more appropriate NRM practices came after the famine, which dealt a blow to the mystification of the country as a potential breadbasket.

The Ethiopian people were forced to face the hard reality of advancing deforestation, erosion, and drought. These needed to be checked if the country was to be spared yet another calamity. The urgency was generally felt, so much so that experts, technicians, and even political cadres, were ready to put the ‘greening of the country’ at the top of their priorities. While justified, this urgency was to lead to an NRM strategy that mistook quantity for quality of action.

State land ownership

The March 1975 Proclamation nationalizing rural lands effected a change in the very basis of NRM. Henceforth, this became primarily a Government concern. Once it vested itself with legal ownership rights over land and natural resources, the State ceased to be their mere custodian. Instead, it became their lawful manager. Whenever any local authority assumed NRM roles, this was either because it was itself part of the state apparatus or was delegated by the state to manage natural resources located within a specific area (as in the case of Peasant Associations, or PAs).

State land ownership facilitated the appearance of progress of government NRM activities in two ways. First, government agents in charge of NRM, conservation and development, particularly Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) functionaries, obtained enormous power over farmers – the new ‘tenants of the state’. As overseers of all rural matters including access to land and land-based resources, MoA staff had powers to bring dissenters back into line. Secondly, state land ownership coupled with collective labour provided through food-for-work (FFW) or campaign work, resulted

in an NRM approach that took entire or partial river catchments and not individual farms as planning and implementation units.

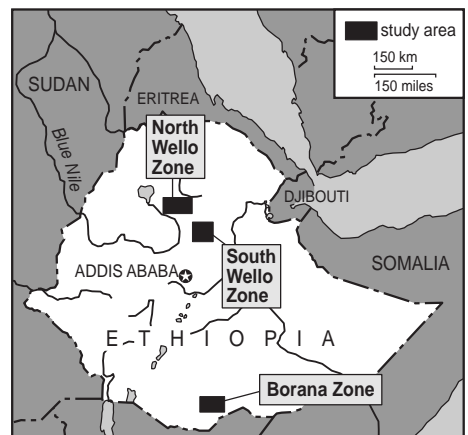
On-farm conservation structures were introduced, completely disregarding priorities of individual farming households.

From relief food to food-for-work

The shift from relief aid to food-for-work (FFW) in the wake of the famine, contributed to the shaping of NRM policy during the Derg years by placing a potent tool in the hands of Government staff. The promise of FFW contributed to dampening potential opposition and made farmers contribute labour for NRM activities. Furthermore, FFW served the MoA in two ways. It gave the appearance of compensating communities for their losses, and it split each community, winning over to the Government a section of community leaders who had no qualms about gaining unearned income.

Subversion of rural institutions

The Derg years were also characterized by a surge in the formation of uniform and hierarchical peasant organizations. These emerged out of the land nationalization proclamation enabling the implementation of the reform and the management of nationalized lands. In spite of their genuinely popular beginnings, nearly all rural institutions that mattered were gradually co-opted by the state. This was true of PAs, and a plethora of other associations and committees that were common fixtures of the rural social landscape. All formal



organizations were made part of the hierarchically-organized monolithic political structure. Even purely voluntary indigenous associations such as *idir* and *mahaber* were occasionally subjected to subtle political manipulations.

Coercion and Dirigism

One of the characteristics of the Derg regime was its capacity for violent suppression of real or perceived threats. In rural areas this power was used to discourage resistance to State rural transformation schemes.

In NRM, too, coercion became an important tool. The MoA forced leaders and ordinary farmers to make NRM contributions by giving up farm and grazing land for hillside plantations and area-closures, accepting responsibility for protecting on-farm and off-farm conservation structures, and contributing labour to ongoing campaign work. The threat of force was further employed to block communities' access to plantations and closed hillsides.

The MoA encouraged a similarly *dirigiste* approach within its own ranks. A quota-system, according to which higher levels handed down strictly applied and highly exaggerated achievement targets to lower levels, created impossible tasks for the technicians and development agents working with farmers.

This social-institutional context enabled the emergence and preservation of a 'top-down' work-style that permeated public life, including NRM. This also hindered the few experiments at introducing participatory NRM approaches. Such was the case with the Upper-Mille and Cheleka Catchment Disaster Prevention Program (UMCC-DPP)

in Wello, which was, for all practical purposes, stillborn.

Land redistribution

One logical outcome of state land ownership was recurrent land redistribution. The proclamation obliged the state to provide all farmers with equitable access to land. In a relentless attempt to reach this elusive objective, the government had to periodically redistribute land. No sooner was one redistribution over, than its achievements were undone by demographic pressure, thereby necessitating yet another redistribution.

Land redistribution and a reduced sense of ownership resulting from limited usufruct rights, led to the emergence of a severe sense of tenure insecurity. The future became unpredictable, so that farmers acted in ways that were contrary to longer-term land improvement. Uncertainty about whether work and investment in NRM would lead to long-term benefits forced farmers to prefer short-term endeavors on their allotments, and predatory activities with regard to public/common resources.

When opportunities presented themselves, as with developments leading to the Derg's downfall, farmers pulled down terraces and dispersed the soil intending to reap quick gains for a year or two. They did not care about their plot's future, as they were more-or-less certain that, during the next redistribution, they would be allocated another plot from which terraces would also have been pulled down.

Similarly, farmers embarked on wholesale deforestation of hillside plantations or natural forests, as they foresaw no possibility of

gaining lawful access to the assets. The only means for farmers to utilize the plantation or forest resources was by abusing them.

Concluding comments

State land ownership has contributed to shaping the *dirigiste* NRM of the Derg years. Reinforced by repressive state measures and FFW, state land ownership allowed government staff to hold absolute sway over rural communities, and to introduce a catchment unit of planning and implementation to the detriment of interests and priorities of individual farmers. Thus NRM mainly consisted of issuing orders down the chain of command. Although, this initially led to impressive quantitative results in terms of kilometers of terraces constructed or numbers of seedlings planted, the achievements were short-lived. In fact, the *dirigiste* work-style came to be the major hindrance to NRM during the Derg period.

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