

ET04

Returnees and Natural Resource Management

Key Points:

- 1** Different categories of returnees had combined negative effects on NRM
- 2** During the conflict and afterwards soldiers and returnee settlers cut trees to survive
- 3** Returnee settlers were generally unable to regain their redistributed land and became poorer
- 4** Returnees' leadership experience seems to be more useful for livelihoods than the agricultural skills they may have learnt

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.

Two million displacees

Just as refugee influxes may have environmental implications, large scale return can also have an impact on the management of natural resources. In Ethiopia the issue of returnees has been one crucial 'fall-out' of the post-Derg period. Suddenly more than two million people were able to return to areas they formerly inhabited. Some went back to their former homes, whereas others remained in urban centres, joined new settlements or even went to 'homelands' known only to their parents or grandparents. Such dramatic population increases can affect forests, land holdings, and common resource management.

Categorising returnees

There are at least four types of returnees:

- Refugees returning from outside Ethiopia (from Somalia, Sudan and Kenya, and Eritrea)
- Demobilised soldiers including former Derg soldiers, Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) soldiers
- Settlers leaving resettlement areas in the west of Ethiopia
- Groups displaced due to ethnic conflicts

These different displaced groups have specific characteristics, geographical spread, periods of return, and particular needs. Nonetheless, their effect on NRM and land tenure have combined and overlapped.

These categories need to be further broken down by sex, urban-rural, region etc. For instance the demobilised soldiers are primarily male; refugees from Eritrea and displacees resulting from 'ethnic' conflicts are largely urban; refugees from Somalia are mainly living within the Somali region etc.

TYPE OF RETURNEE	NUMBERS	%
Refugee Returnees	1,081,500	53
of which:		
Somalia	710,900	
Sudan	160,600	
Kenya	10,000	
Eritrea (+Asseb)*	200,000	
Demobilised Soldiers	377,500	18
of which:		
Ex-Derg soldiers	326,300	
EPRDF soldiers	30,000	
OLF soldiers	21,200	
From Ethnic Conflict	328,000	16
From Resettlement	253,000	12
TOTAL	2,048,710	100

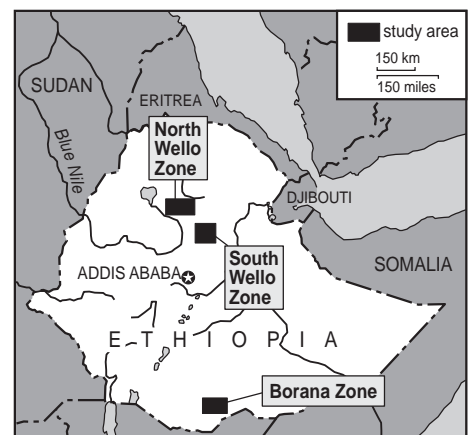
Source: various. Some figures are estimates, and others may be incomplete.

* Does not include refugees from the latest war.

have increased fuelwood requirements and often engage in collecting wood as a survival strategy. Moreover, surviving in town may be a temporary option, while aid or wage-labour is available or until access to land can be negotiated.

Returnees in Wello

In Wello region the largest proportion of returnees were those returning from resettlement sites (over 150,000). There were also many refugees from Eritrea whose numbers have also increased due to the recent conflict (200,000). Former Derg soldiers (30,000) and displacees as a result of ethnic conflict were less numerous.



Trees, ex-soldiers and returning settlers

Despite their relatively small numbers, the negative environmental consequences of Derg army encampments were sorely felt even during the last years of the regime. This was particularly true in South Wello around the town of Dessie. Demoralised soldiers sold wood to survive, and allegedly paid prostitutes with wood instead of cash.

The sale of wood became even more prominent in the first years of the transitional period until law and order was re-established.

In contrast, former settlers came back in large numbers just after the overthrow of the Derg. Their effect on NRM was most noticeable in 1991 and 1992. For instance, on Mount Yegof much illegal tree cutting, settling and ploughing in state forests was and still is attributed to former settlers.

For returnees to rural areas, the issue of obtaining land was crucial to independent survival. Settlers' land was redistributed when they left; in some cases people were forcibly removed in order to take their land.

Sometimes, close relatives who stayed behind were able to retain part of the settlers' land. Nonetheless, returning settlers generally lost out in subsequent land

Labelling of settler's land

Settlers' land was classified under the category *yemote kedda meret* (literally "land of a person who forewent his claims by dying"), i.e. land that had no rightful claimant

There are regional variations to this picture. In North Wello the EPRDF carried out redistributions in areas they controlled before the complete overthrow of the Derg. Since the bulk of settlers returned after the change they were excluded from formal redistributions. In contrast, in much of South Wello redistribution was not carried out at all. In the few cases where redistribution was implemented, returnees, categorised as landless, were entitled to obtain only tiny holdings of half a hectare.

There was also some variation in peasant associations' attitude towards former settlers. Often they were given small pieces of unwanted land, in addition to a household plot, often on their former holdings. As a result, returnee settlers have been among the poorest households. They have been forced to borrow land from relatives, to become sharecroppers, or manual labourers.

Returnees, Knowledge and Power

It is possible that some returnees had a positive impact on NRM by bringing back particular skills, or knowledge of agricultural techniques and crops. One returnee planted mangoes which were not known in his area. An NGO worker claimed that returnees were more receptive to accepting new ideas such as adopting fertilisers. However, agricultural innovation by returnees seems to have been limited, perhaps because options for intensification are restricted.

Returning settlers may have had better access to literacy, education and leadership

opportunities, on returning, to become involved in decision-making positions. Also former settlers are often seen as victims of the Derg. Given shortages of 'educated' people who are not 'tainted' as collaborators, returnees may have had privileged access to leadership. Evidence suggests that, given the context of overall diminishing and more 'equal' holdings, involvement in leadership positions may prove to be a more effective livelihood strategy.

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