

ET11

Conflict, transition and deforestation

Key Points:

- 1** Great damage to forests occurred during conflict and immediate post conflict periods
- 2** Deforestation may be seen as a form of local resistance to threatening policies
- 3** Ambiguous and conflicting policy and institutional changes may precipitate deforestation
- 4** Merely handing back forests to communities does not ensure their protection

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.

Falling in the midst of 'conflict' and 'post-conflict' transition, the years between 1990-1993 witnessed a widespread destruction of forests in many parts of the country. Much of this 'deforestation' was committed by the local population themselves. Although persistent tension between the state and 'peasants' over tenure and NRM represents an underlying factor, war, institutional vacuum and displacement and return have played a role in speeding up this process. This *Briefing* examines these processes in Tehuledere district in south Wello.

Rehabilitation from above

Since early 1980s, the Derg carried out environmental rehabilitation and resettlement programmes, and the collectivisation of agricultural production to combat the root causes of famine and natural resource degradation in northern Ethiopia.

Some initiatives did appear to have been effective in addressing deforestation, according to local informants. For example, reforestation activities such as the closure of forest areas and hillside plantation, soil and water conservation and the construction terraces were carried out, and, initially had some success.

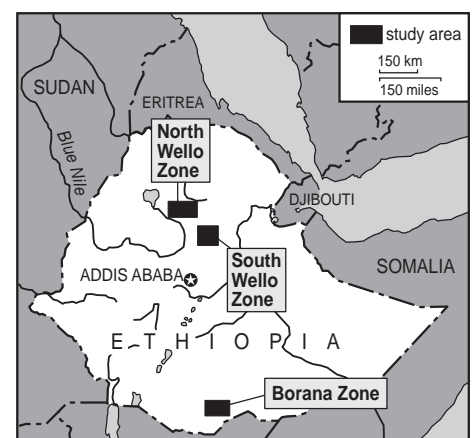
However, these enclosure and hillside plantations were implemented against the wishes of the local population. The state controlled forest reserves and grazing areas. It also enclosed agricultural land including trees planted by individual farmers. The reforestation programme seemed to have led to the dislocation of many households from their previous residences and holdings.

In 1986 a Producer's Co-operative (PC), consisting of 120 households was 'voluntarily' mobilized near Hayk town. Other families were sent to resettlement sites in the south and southwestern regions of the country. Such initiatives, however, failed to have far-reaching positive impacts either in improving agricultural production or in curbing natural resource degradation.

The formation of PCs also negatively affected public attitudes towards forests, as large tracts of the best quality farmland was allocated to PC members. The majority of households who did not join the PC were therefore left with small and marginal agricultural lands in the distant and remote lowland areas. Both the state-led reforestation and the PC formation, in effect, led to the generation of land inequalities among the local population.

Such actions of the government provoked resentment and divisions amongst the population towards state controlled forests and hillside plantations. There were therefore attempts to resist government environmental rehabilitation programmes whenever opportunities arose. Even before 1990 there were reports of 'stealing' inside state and hillside closures.

The situation was exacerbated by the then on-going war in the northern part of the country. For example, around an army command based in Sulula Town, near the Zonal Capital, Dessie, great damage was done to the forests by members of the army who cut down trees for quick profits. The local population collaborated and 'formed a front' with the army by offering axes. In other words, the crisis of order and authority caused by the soldiers' action served as a strategic entry point for local people to encroach on state and 'community' forests.



The declaration of the Mixed Economy Policy

During the war period, the Derg designed some key policies towards rural land tenure and NRM. One of these was the declaration of the new Mixed Economy Policy in March 1990. This signalled a move toward *private tenure* of land and trees for smallholders. It was stated that trees *within* individual farmer's plots would be *private property* and thus farmers were given the right to use the products from the trees. The transfer of previously state protected forest areas to the 'community' was promoted, except for those that were believed to need the government's protection. The aim was to create a sense of secure ownership and let farmers see forests reserves as their own property.

However, the practicalities of implementing these measures remained unclear. This, in effect, contributed to increasing deforestation. For the majority of the local population, the declaration had meant a return to, and a reclamation of the land that they had lost as a result of the Derg's closure and hillside plantations. Although the government attempted to 'clarify' the confusions surrounding the declaration and stop local farmers from destroying forests, these measures came too late. As the Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF) forces advanced, the Derg also found it difficult to maintain its power, let alone ensure the protection of forests.

'Post-conflict' transition and vacuum

The Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took control of Tehuledere and surrounding areas in mid-

April 1991. It continued with similar policy changes, but with a seemingly 'new' political rhetoric. According to the EPRDF, the main reason for the deforestation of forests and hillside plantation was the absence of a sense of ownership amongst the rural population. The EPRDF argued for rural people's right to reclaim resources which had been taken away from them by force. In the years between 1991-1992, therefore, EPRDF agents handed over further forest areas to the 'community'.

Such policy changes both by the Derg and the EPRDF did not address the pressing needs and demands of the local population, and failed to curb the process of deforestation. After the declaration of the Mixed Economy, the local population requested the return of farmland and grazing areas, which had been forcefully enclosed within hillside plantations and state forests. With an institutional vacuum, and lack of any 'formal' authority to oversee official rules on NRM, people sought to achieve this by their own actions.

Problems of land tenure and land allocation

With the overthrow of the Derg, the majority of households in Tehuledere expected a new land redistribution by the EPRDF. To their dismay, however, no general land redistribution has taken place. The EPRDF left the land question as 'a constitutional issue', which would be resolved after the election of the new Federal Government.

In 1993 a partial allocation of farmland was made to address the problem of returnee

households. Much of the land allotted to returnees was inside state enclosures and hillside plantations, which the EPRDF had 'transferred to the 'community'. This seems to have led to the conversion of much forested land into farmland, and ultimately to more severe deforestation.

Concluding comments

The destruction of forest areas in Tehuledere during the war and immediate post-war years may be seen as a result of the spill-over effects from changes and continuities over land and NRM policies.

Though other multiplex causes are involved, the absence of measures to address the land inequalities inherited from the conflict period seems to be an important factor contributing to the process of deforestation prevalent in Tehuledere even today. Military conflict, power, institutional vacuums, and population return were contextual events to deforestation.

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