ET12

Identifying the 'community' in a contested woodlot

Key Points:

1 A new initiative has tried to set up community woodlots based on *'kires'* - or local CBOs

2 The Maryam-Wuha woodlot illustrates some pitfalls of *kire*-based schemes

3 Difficulties arise from the existence of competing local institutions

4 Where land areas are contested, community-based schemes may exacerbate conflicts

This *Briefing* focuses on an environmental rehabilitation and management programme supported by SOS-Sahel, a British NGO working in Meket *Wereda*, North Wello. A hillside woodlot enclosure, in a contested area known as Maryam-Wuha, is presented to illustrate some of the constraints and difficulties involved in the practical implementation of a community-based approach.

Community-based environmental rehabilitation

Since 1996/97 SOS-Sahel has been working to address the problem of tenure insecurity and environmental degradation in Meket. The NGO has initiated procedures which strengthen local user rights and so encourage users to make long-term investments in the environment. This has been mainly pursued through the development of a Participatory Land Use Planning and Implementation (PLUPI) methodology. The aim is to encourage local people to engage in reforestation and conservation activities.

The *Kebele* Administration (KA), the lowest level government recognised structure, was considered too large to be representative of 'community' interests.[1] Therefore user rights procedures and area hillside enclosures have been designed at the village (*got*) level to operate with the participation of 'community based organisations' (CBOs). SOS-Sahel identified '*kires*' as representative CBOs, as all households in a village are members. The *kires* are informally organised burial associations.

Across seven KAs in the Meket area, user-rights groups were established, based on the *kire* organisation. Community members were brought together to reach a 'collective decision', leading to the enclosure of areas of hillside.

In general, the policy has been seen as successful enough to influence government policy at zonal and regional levels. Yet, in certain contexts, problems have arisen. In particular, where *got* and *kire* boundaries do not coincide, where there are competing local-level institutions, or where land areas are contested, enclosure has the potential to contribute to, rather than resolve, local level struggles and competition.

The Maryam-Wuha woodlot

The disputed Maryam-Wuha community woodlot is located between the upstream *got* of Jirelie, and the downstream *got* of Megenagna. While households in Jirelie are exclusively Christian, those in Megenagna are largely Muslim. Despite being some distance apart, one *kire* covers both *gots.*

In 1997, SOS-Sahel worked with the *kire* to enclose Gala-Washa forest, situated near Giyorgis Church in Jirelie. Following this, the now disputed area at Maryam-Wuha (in Megenagna *got*) was also enclosed. It was at this point that conflict emerged between the two *gots.*

The following factors are identified, at least tentatively, as contributing to the conflict:

Lack of participation

A first point is that the enclosure process seems to have been carried out without the participation of all stakeholders in Jirelie and Megenagna *gots.* Instead, the key players were government extension workers (DAs), the SOS-Sahel PLUPI assistant, the Village Development Committee (VDC) Chairman, and two KA representatives.
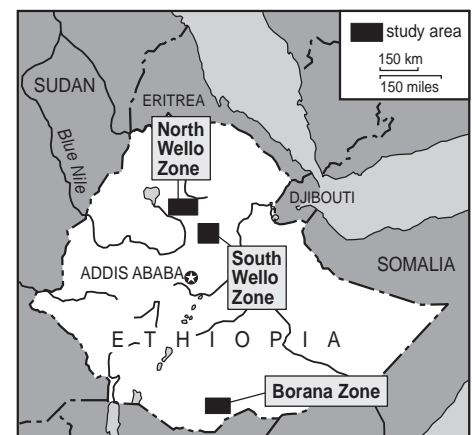
Different interests of the two villages

The first *kire*-based enclosure was carried out with the support of villagers in Jirelie. Although it was for the common use of both *gots*, villagers in Megenagna showed very little interest, as the enclosure was located to the north of Jirelie, beyond their reach. Subsequently, Megenagna villagers *were* interested in the enclosure of the Maryam-Wuha forest, which lies within their *got*. But villagers in Jirelie objected to the enclosure of Maryam-Wuha. They argued that the management plan for this area had been made without their knowledge or representation.

The Management Plan

On *kire*-based enclosures, a 'Community Woodlot Management Plan' has to be developed, and approved by the Wereda administration. Marked poles with bright red and white stripes, locally known as *jallo* or *ye-selam milikit*, are planted to see if there are any disagreeing groups.

Who signs for whom?

Specific problems emerged in Maryam-Wuha over who signed locally to approve the enclosure. Jirelie villagers accused the VDC Chairman of signing the Community Woodlot Management Plan by falsely claiming to be leader of the *kire*. They subjected him to an *imbidade*, a form of social exclusion in *kire* by-laws used against members committing serious offences. Yet, the VDC Chairman claimed he signed in

Land tenure conflicts

Land tenure conflicts over the enclosed area underlie a good part of the conflict that emerged. These were not, however, considered by extension agents. Villagers in Jirelie opposed the enclosure viewing it as an 'illegal' encroachment into an area to which they had been entitled. The immediate resistance came from individual farmers in Jirelie who live adjacent to the contested woodlot and who saw the enclosure as a direct threat to their traditional access rights to grazing land.

Social and institutional differences

Major problems were caused because the scope of the *kire* organisation was misunderstood. SOS-Sahel has specifically targeted the *kires* because of the assumption that the *kire* is a *got* or village-level institution. In fact, it is primarily a Christian institution, based on a parish church (*debir*). In some cases, a *debir* can cover more than one *got*.

In the case of Megenagna and Jirelie, it is the *Christians* in these two villages that belong to the same *kire*, as the church covers both villages. They mobilized the *kire* to help enclose the uncontested area in Jirelie. However, they viewed the enclosure of Maryam-Wuha as having been done without the authority of the *kire*.

In practice, the Muslims in Megenagna have their own self-help religious association, known as a *tertim*. They share this *tertim* with fellow Muslims in Waqeta, another KA. They were also able to gain the support of the powerful VDC Chairman

Concluding comments

Ultimately, the KA Council intervened to settle the conflict. It decided that both sets of villagers should use the contested woodlot in common. Yet, villagers in Megenagna see this decision as a political settlement in which they, as a minority, were marginally treated.

This case study shows how communities may be highly differentiated. Interventions that fail to understand this may shape and influence the interactions of local formal and informal institutions in unintended ways. As a result, deep-seated land tenure disputes and social inequalities may be exacerbated

[1]The KA covers around 1,000 households.

The Briefing team:
Contributors to the Briefings include:

- Richard Black and Elizabeth Harrison, School of African and Asian Studies, University of Sussex

- Yeraswork Admassie, Alula Pankhurst and Tarakegn Yibabie, Forum for Social Studies, Addis Ababa

- Elizabeth Watson, Department of Geography, University of Cambridge

- Jessica Schafer, University of Oxford

- Patrick Matakala and Antonio Serra, Centro de Experimentação Florestal, Maputo, Mozambique

- Antonio Ribeiro, Department of Politics and Communication Studies, University of Liverpool

We welcome comments and feedback, which should be sent to:
Richard Black (r.black@sussex.ac.uk) or
Elizabeth Harrison (e.a.harrison@sussex.ac.uk)