

ET14

## Inter-group conflict over land tenure

### Key Points:

- 1** Conflict and 'post-conflict' land tenure changes led to changing patterns of inequality
- 2** Land tenure conflicts are outcomes of competition over power, ideology and local history
- 3** Social and economic differentiation contributes to the marginalisation of weaker groups
- 4** There is a need for awareness by government and NGOs of socio-economic differentiation between and within groups

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.

### Conflict and 'post-conflict' contexts

Land tenure and access to resources are sources of numerous disputes amongst the farming population of northern Ethiopia, a region prone to recurrent droughts. The purpose of this *Briefing* is to shed light on the extent to which changes in land policy and institutions during periods of conflict (and 'post-conflict') have contributed to local level land tenure disputes. In particular it considers how attempts to redistribute land have exacerbated social and economic differentiation between two social groups in Meket District, North Wello.

Much discussion on periods of conflict and 'post-conflict' tends to view the two as distinct and separate. However, it is important to see them as inter-related. Many areas in northern Ethiopia have seen fundamental institutional changes both during conflict and 'post-conflict' periods. In particular, policies to promote land redistribution have spanned both periods.

### Land redistribution

A useful example of land tenure competition is provided by the village of Jirelie, a densely populated gorge area, in 020 *Kebele* Administration (KA), in Meket *Wereda*. The majority of the population in this area are Christians. However, there is a minority Muslim population in the village of Megenagna, downstream from Jirelie.

The most recent land redistribution started in January 1991, before the formal end of the war against the Derg. The responsibility to implement the redistribution was the task of a temporary Land Distribution Committee of seven members.

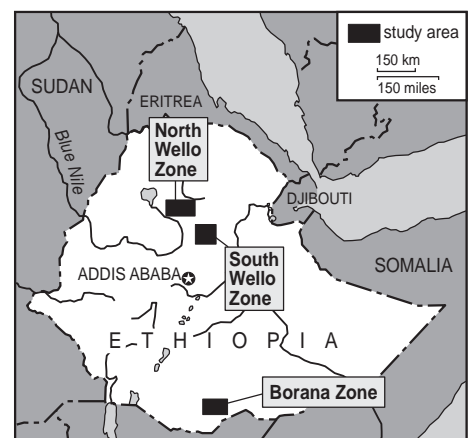
A significant difference between the 1991 land distribution and earlier redistributions was that it was undertaken at parish level. During the Derg, land redistribution had been carried out at the Peasant Association level in each *kebele*. Hence, individual farmers had farm plots in different agro-ecological zones *within* and *between* parishes.

### A contested area of land

This distribution *within* parishes put pressure on resources as households competed to control land. One factor that led to conflict between Christians and Muslims was each group's claim over a highly valued agricultural area known as Adbawuha. The contested area, located between Jirelie and Meganagna villages, is seen by most farmers as the best quality land. It is wetter and is considered more stable and productive in times of severe drought.

Providing an additional impetus to the two social groups' conflicting claims to Adbawuha were features of the rules of land allocation. First, the regulation stipulated that land close to houses (*wejed meret*) should be allocated to the nearby households. Secondly, land types classified as 'first quality lands' (*lemcha meret*), whatever their distance from the household, were to be allocated on a lottery basis amongst all households in the parish. However, during the actual redistribution, these rules sometimes contradicted each other, since land could fall under both land categories. This led the two groups in Adbawuha to interpret the rules in different ways.

The Megenagna Muslims stressed their right to claim Adbabwuha as *wejed* land on the grounds of their proximity to it. The Christians, on the other hand, made strong claims to the area arguing that it was a *lemcha/sib meret* (first quality/fatty land) and had therefore to be divided amongst all households in the Parish on a lottery basis.



The Land Redistribution Committee's decision favoured the demands of the dominant Christian farmers. Accordingly, a lottery was drawn of all households living in both sides, in which the Christians farmers were seen to emerge 'victorious' with control of much of Adbawuha.

The Muslim minority then made an appeal to the Complaints Committee, demanding corrective measures. Their complaint was ignored. The Muslims in Megenagna interpreted their failure to get control of Adbawuha as a result of deliberate act by the Land Redistribution Committee leaders, all of whom were Christians, who manoeuvred the rules to their own benefit. The conflict over Adbawuha seemed to have influenced the use and management of other natural resources. For instance, a further conflict arose over the control of a community woodlot, supported by SOS-Sahel, a British NGO, as part of its 'community'-based environmental rehabilitation and management programme (see *Briefing ET12*).

## Unravelling historically rooted claims

Local land tenure is rooted in historical contestation in which religion plays an important role. This is not, however, to say that land tenure conflicts between the two social groups were caused by religious differences. Rather, the causes lie at least in part in pressure on natural resources, particularly land, and a history of political exclusion.

The Christians often refer to *rist*, a pre-Derg tenure system based on descent from a hereditary ancestor, as evidence that natural resources belonged to them. The Muslims,

who were prevented from owning land and who specialised in weaving, were considered as a special group. They had maintained 'temporary' access rights over land either through land contract arrangement (*megezo*) or through grants from local landlords (*balabats*) for their services. They generally had to pay one third of their agricultural produce to the 'landlords'.

The Derg's 1975 Land Reform and its later redistribution enabled the minority Muslims to gain equal rights in land. Some of them were even able to get access to the most sought after fertile land in Adbawuha. Consequently, Christian households who had seen their plots in the area taken away and given to the Muslims were and are still resentful of the Derg.

The Muslims, on the other hand, viewed the 1991 land redistribution by the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) as unfair because they were disfranchised.

### ***"They owned no land before"***

"Before the Derg, the Muslims had owned no land. They used to get land by arranging *megazo* (sharecropping/ land rent) with the Amhara, (In this particular context the term Amhara refers to a Christian). But then land was not a problem as it is these days. They were also very few. Now they have multiplied and expanded. The Derg made them equal. It gave them the land, which had been ours. They are now the landlords".

## Concluding comments

The means by which people access and control resources are not always material but may be related to ideological and power differences. For this reason, understanding the historical context of unequal access to resources is critical.

In the case of Jirelie, confusions surfaced in EPRDF's land redistribution, which contributed to inter-group land/resource conflicts, influencing who 'won' and who 'lost' at the local level.

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