

ET17

Conflicts over communal grazing areas

Key Points:

- 1** Peasant grazing requirements conflict with external views of pasture as unused or wasted.
- 2** Both hillside 'community' afforestation and 'individual' enclosures endanger local pasture requirements.
- 3** Communal grazing lands have come under increasing threat from urban expansion and private investment.
- 4** Enclosures of communal grazing areas have therefore been resisted by peasants.

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.

Conflicts over communal grazing areas

Peasants view pasture as a crucial resource, since livestock are vital for a mixed farming economy. However, planners tend to ignore grazing lands and see 'free grazing' as unproductive. Government livestock policy concentrates on improved breeds and veterinary care. Agriculturalists are more concerned with forage crops, and view communal grazing areas that are not seasonally protected as 'wasted'. This *Briefing* identifies actual and potential threats to grazing land in South Wello.

Types of grazing areas

Three types of grazing land may be distinguished:

- small areas close to hamlets used by residents for social events and recreation as well as grazing;
- small plots of private grazing land which may also be used for growing fodder, which are included in the taxed land and which the 'owner' has the right to plough; and
- larger 'communal' grazing areas, with relatively unrestricted access.

The focus here is on the last category and dynamics of change mainly in relation to external forces.

Communal grazing lands

Communal grazing areas are often in highland valleys with streams or small rivers running through them. Waterlogging during the rains tends to restrict ploughing at least in valley bottoms, although there has been growing pressure from agriculture and settlement moving down from the slopes. There have also been increasing external threats to these grazing areas, particularly to those closer to urban areas. Such threats have included forestry projects, notably on hillsides considered 'denuded', imposition of cooperatives resulting in enclosures, expansion of towns with construction of

houses and religious buildings, competition from urban residents and private investors raising livestock, and recently the enclosure of hillsides for 'individualised' forest use.

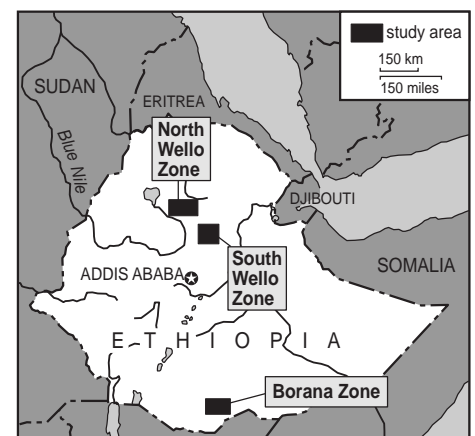
External threats – examples from South Wello

The impact of external threats on the dynamics of grazing areas can be illustrated by the cases of three large highland valleys with communal grazing areas in three *weredas* of South Wello: Alansha in Kuta, Gerado in Dessie Zuria, and Gimba in Legambo.

Imperial times

Already in imperial times areas closer to towns were considered useful for obtaining forage and developing dairy production. External interest in exploiting Gerado, within close proximity of the capital Dessie, goes back to the early twentieth century when the ruler, King Michael, obtained hay from there. In the 1920s Empress Zewditu kept cattle there. In the late imperial period peasants resisted the construction of an airport, a mission, clinic and private agriculture by appealing to the Crown Prince who was then governor of Wello or even to his mother Empress Menen, in cases when her son was involved.

Though the surrounding land was owned by landlords, the valleys were considered to be open to all, including travelling traders with their caravans. The plains were referred



to in the local discourse as 'refuges for the poor' who could collect dung for sale as a survival strategy or could share-rear livestock, obtaining part benefits of milk and offspring.

The Derg period

State impacts increased from the mid-1970s as a result of the Derg's interventionist policies. Afforestation programmes limited grazing on the surrounding hillsides increasing pressure on valleys. The ideology of 'clothing the hillsides with green' led to the establishment of 'community forests' through massive food-for-work programmes. Tree nurseries were set up near rivers and springs leading to evictions of farmers and reducing water for grazing areas. The villagisation policy promoted moves from the mountain towards the lower slopes increasing pressure on the plains. Cooperatives were established and given preferential access to farming land and parts of the commons. These were enclosed seasonally to let grass grow for cattle of both cooperatives and, in reaction, private farmers.

Projects included dairy development in Alansha and Gerado, sheep breeding in Gimba, and forage development in Gerado, taking further land from the commons.

The transition period

Just before the Derg was overthrown cooperatives collapsed and open access was at first restored. However, during the transition and early EPRDF period in Alansha peasants reintroduced wet season enclosures to harvest grass. Several interest groups lobbied for a return to open access. These included displaced returnees and the young landless, urban residents from Kuta

town who keep livestock, and an outlying community, which had been excluded from the commons during the Derg period on the grounds that they belonged to neighbouring Teluledere.

By appealing to the authorities, the latter not only obtained the right of access and inclusion of their area as part of Kuta *wereda* along with the rest of the valley's catchment area, but also a revocation of seasonal enclosures by other communities. The slogan successfully used to resist the enclosures was "*beni* (the commons) belongs to the state and to the people".

Recent developments: commons under threat

In the past decade threats to communal grazing lands have come mainly from the expansion of urban centres. The town of Dessie has spilled over into the Gerado plain, Kuta town has made inroads into the Alansha plain and in Gimba, a new town called Tulu Awliya has grown rapidly in the valley with suggestions that it should become a 'zonal' town for the western *weredas* of Wello.

Peasants have resisted these moves by pulling down houses at night, which were rebuilt during the day. Resistance leaders were imprisoned and burial association leaders were threatened with loss of food aid. Religious rivalries between Muslims and Christians have also led to ongoing attempts to build religious edifices on the commons, which peasants have also resisted.

Private investment has also been promoted at the expense of the commons in Gimba, where an investor has recently been allowed

to enclose a large area. This has limited use by peasants, who have sought to appeal, so far in vain. The allocation of 'communal' hillsides for private forestry has further restricted peasant grazing areas. The combination of these factors, along with serious rain shortage over the past few years during the *Belg* short rainy season - on which many of these areas rely - has resulted in high rates of livestock loss and increased dependence on food aid in a number of parts of south Wello.

Concluding comments

The commons seem endangered in the 21st century. From the peasant perspective, these threats are not new, and a variety of mechanisms exist to resist loss of the commons for grazing. However, the range of threats has increased over the period of transition and more recently encompass state, private, urban and religious initiatives. What these threats have in common is a neglect of the continuing value of grazing land to peasants.

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