

ET18

Forest management in Desse'a

Key Points:

- 1** The Desse'a forest was reserved for exclusive use by those who could trace descent to 'pioneer fathers'
- 2** Traditional institutions governed how forest resources were used.
- 3** Neither the revolutionary government nor those opposing it had significant impacts on these institutions
- 4** In contrast, the wartime economy, and post-war administrative changes have posed a major threat.

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.

Forest management in Desse'a

With about 120,000 hectares, Desse'a is probably the largest natural forest in Tigray National Regional State. The forest stretches in a narrow corridor along the eastern escarpment from close to Senqata town near Adigrat to the east of Quiha town. Desse'a provides a good example of sustainable traditional management of common natural resources that has partially survived to the present.

The forestland

Desse'a is situated on the slope between the plateau proper and the beginning of the Afar lowlands. The land is rugged, criss-crossed by cliffs, with hills separated by deep ravines. Since it is unsuitable for cultivation and faces water shortage, the land was spared the plough and divisions into peasant allotments. Moreover, the value of the forest to communities as a source of abundant fodder, timber, fuelwood, honey, cactus fruit, hops, and other useful plants has positively contributed towards its protection and maintenance.

Exclusion and control by locals

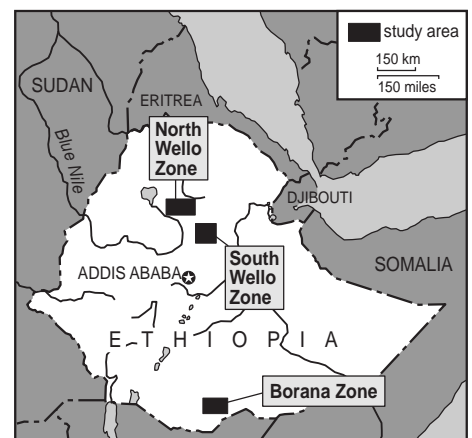
Discrete localised groups occupying land along the forest held well-established rights to clearly-delineated forest areas. The prevalent *rist* tenure conferred usufruct hereditary rights equally on all those who could trace descent to specific pioneer fathers, who were credited with establishing recognized claims to well-defined areas. The identity of these ancestors and the churches they established are aspects of the communities' living memory, serving as symbols of their common descent and collective rights. Only persons able to prove their descent claims were recognized as full members of the *ristegna* group, and could obtain a share of land and use the group's common resources. Outsiders were excluded from access to land and other resources, except in cases of traditional reciprocal arrangements with neighbouring groups, or with express permission issued on a case-by-case basis.

The 1975 agrarian reform substituted these traditional rights with state-sanctioned user-rights granted by peasant associations. However, since the *ristegna* groups were often taken as units for the new peasant associations, traditional group rights were passed on to the peasant associations and continued to operate, albeit with certain modifications.

How 'traditional management' worked

Thanks to the *rist* system, forest resources came to be managed as 'controlled-access resources' with specific groups acting as collective owners and exercising exclusive control over their utilization. Outsiders attempting to fell timber or clear land for cultivation were repulsed even when they were office holders or powerful personalities.

Each *ristegna* group divided its forestland into two distinct areas for grazing purposes. A small and choice forestland (*sar be'era*) was set aside close to the fields on higher grounds for grazing plough-oxen. The remainder of the forest area was open to all other livestock belonging to members of the group. In some cases, people from neighbouring communities without forestland were tolerated when they grazed livestock in the second type of forestland. In one exceptional case in Esot area, communities maintained two separate sections of grazing land for livestock other than plough-oxen on which they practised grazing by deferment



- closing one of them during the big-rains and the other during the small-rains.

The grazing area set aside for plough-oxen was generally subject to the following regulatory rules:

- Grazing livestock other than plough-oxen was strictly forbidden;
- The area was closed during the big-rains season;
- An officer was elected annually to serve as 'keeper of the grazing area' (*halawi-heza'eti*).

Apart from plough-oxen and one or two milk cows, households generally kept other livestock away from homesteads deep in the forest in makeshift herding-stations (*gare*) manned by youths. Households also maintained circular fenced-off enclosures 2-3m high as beehive stations (*grada*) deep inside the forest. For security, several households establish their *grada* at the same site giving it the appearance of a colony.

Rights to forest tree-use was also based on membership within the *ristegna* group. Traditionally, all members who could establish their hereditary legitimacy had free access to trees, and could cut live trees or collect dead wood for construction, manufacture of farm implements or fuel, without requiring permission. Yet, this did not lead to abuses as the *ristegna* neither cut trees for sale or charcoal production, nor cleared the forest for cultivation. Outsiders had no rights to trees, and had to implore communities by bringing gifts exclusively for churches established by the *ristegna* group's founding ancestors.

Transition and change

During the imperial period attempts by private interests to gain access to timber or to control sections of forestland were successfully repulsed by local communities. Likewise crude attempts by the government at introducing taxation on extraction of timber were apparently unsuccessful.

The Derg was in secure control of the Desse'a area too briefly to alter the forest management. The TPLF, which controlled different parts of the forest at various periods between 1976 and 1989, left traditional arrangements undisturbed other than introducing the practice of posting forest-guards chosen by communities. However, the southern section, close to Quiha and Mekele towns, was negatively affected by the misery and disorder created by the civil war. Sale of wood, that began with the towns' foundation, intensified, and within a few years the area became practically deforested and is now left with nothing save some remnant shrub and bush.

Post-war changes

A major development was the delineation of the forest in 1991/2. Since then, the regional Bureau of Agriculture has assumed official responsibility for managing the forest, which was given the status of National Forest Priority Area. The 1996 restructuring of administrative units resulted in the merging of several units, which negatively affected traditional forest management.

In particular, wherever a forest *qushet* was merged with a non-forest one, this led to

intense competition detrimental to forest resources and ultimately to full-fledged conflict.

Concluding comments

There have been impacts on traditional forest management both during and after the conflict in Tigray. Unlike some other areas, the most significant changes occurred less as a result of government and rebel initiatives during the war, and more from the war economy and post-war changes. Despite these changes in land tenure and rural institutions, a feeling of ownership over forestland and resources still persists among the communities. They speak in terms of 'their land,' 'their section of the forest' and 'their trees,' even when referring to the present. Confident of their collectively held birthright to forest resources, they betray no fear that this could change in ways injurious to their collective interest.

MARENA Briefings (Ethiopia)

- ET01 Conflict, 'post-conflict', and natural resource management
- ET02 An overview of natural resource management under the Derg
- ET03 Migration, resettlement and return
- ET04 Returnees and natural resource management
- ET05 Struggles over 'the land of the deceased'
- ET06 Government, community and donor relationships in NRM
- ET07 Participation: a dilemma for extension agents
- ET08 Interpretation of user rights
- ET09 Conservation and participation in 'community forests'
- ET10 Characteristics of 'traditional' forest management
- ET11 Conflict, transition and deforestation
- ET12 Identifying the 'community' in a contested woodlot
- ET13 Gender and natural resource management
- ET14 Inter-group conflict over land tenure
- ET15 Participatory paradigms
- ET16 Trends in irrigation management
- ET17 Conflicts over communal grazing areas
- ET18 Forest management in Desse'a

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)

The views expressed in this Briefing are those of the Briefing team, and do not necessarily represent DFID policy.