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Access to Rural Land in Eastern Ethiopia: Mismatch between Policy and Reality

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Abstract

This paper explores the different means of access to land in three districts of Eastern Ethiopia. Data collected from a random sample of 313 heads of households were used in the study. The results show that as land is state-owned and farmers have only usufruct rights on land allocated to them by local authorities, access to additional cultivable land is achieved through land rental transactions (mainly in the form of sharecropping) and land borrowing. Another important finding of this study is that the average land holding has been declining over the years as a result of increased demographic pressure, resulting in individual farm units that are generally too small to be economically viable. The study also makes it clear that the issue of access to cultivated land is inextricably linked to other important factors such as availability of credit, market integration, effective advisory service, etc.

Keywords: Access to land; land borrowing, land fragmentation; land redistribution; land renting; land tenure; state ownership; usufruct rights

1 Introduction

Ethiopia, with a population of 70.7 million in 2003 is the third most populous country in Africa just behind Nigeria and Egypt (Walta Information Center, 2003). Its economy is based on agriculture, which accounts for about 50% of GDP, 90% of exports, and 85% of total employment (MEDAC, 1999). The Ethiopian agriculture is virtually small-scale, subsistence-oriented and crucially dependent on rainfall. About 90 percent of the country's agricultural output is generated by subsistence farmers who use traditional tools and farming practices (Omiti *et al.*, 2000). Low productivity characterises Ethiopian agriculture. The average grain yield for various crops is less than 1 metric ton per hectare (Belay, 2002). Available evidence shows that yields of major crops under farmers' management are still by far lower than what can be obtained under research managed plots (Habtemariam, 2003). This is a clear indication of the gap, which exists between researchers and farmers. The livestock sub-sector plays an important role in the Ethiopian economy. The majority of smallholder farms depend on animals for draught power, cultivation and transport of goods. The sub-sector makes also significant contribution to the food supply in terms of meat and dairy products as well as to export

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in terms of hides and skins which make up the second major export category. However, the productivity of the sub-sector is decreasing as a result of poor management systems, shortage of feed and inadequate health care services (BELAY, 2004).

Over the last two decades, Ethiopian agriculture has been unable to produce sufficient quantities to feed the country's rapidly growing population. As a result, the country has been an important recipient of food aid and importer of commercial food grain. In recent years food aid has been accounting for a significant proportion of the total food supply in the country. For instance, Ethiopia received 726,640 metric tons of food aid yearly over the period 1985-2000 (FDRE, 2002). This represents about 10% of the national food grain production. Recent studies on Ethiopian agriculture found that low technical inputs, outmoded farming practices, inappropriate polices, tenure insecurity, as well as the degradation of the environment and its productive potential are the underlying reasons for poverty, food insecurity and increased vulnerability to drought in rural Ethiopia (DESSALEGN, 1999; OMITI *et al.*, 2000; KEBEDE, 2002; HABTEMARIAM, 2003; BELAY, 2004). The average land holding is only about one hectare per household and the population growth rate is creating increasing pressure on land and other natural resources (MEDAC, 1999; CENTRAL STATISTICAL AUTHORITY, 2002). In fact, more than 80 percent of Ethiopia's population live in the highlands where the population pressure on arable land has always been immense. This has resulted in smaller and fragmented individual land holdings which, in turn, led to the cultivation of marginal lands, such as steep slopes, hills, forest lands and permanent pasture lands and exacerbated the effects of recurrent droughts and famines (BELAY, 2004). It should be noted that, at the household level, the problem of food insecurity will be compounded in the event that farmers own landholdings less than the area required for minimum food production and have to rent-in cultivable land, which requires them to pay rent (in kind or cash) to the land rights-holders.

In a country like Ethiopia where agriculture employs the vast majority of the population, land is an important economic resource for the development of rural livelihoods. Available empirical evidence on land rights and land administration in Ethiopia shows that the land tenure systems have been an important determinant of investment in land improvement measures and sustainable use of land (ALEMU, 1999; DESSALEGN, 1999; KEBEDE, 2002). In Ethiopia, land has been owned by the state since 1975. Following the 1975 land reform proclamation, the Marxist military regime (1975-1991) prohibited tenancy relations, such as sharecropping and renting. The current government lifted these restrictions and at present the different means used to acquire access to land include gifts or borrowing, fixed rent tenancy and share tenancy (PENDER and FAFCHAMPS, 2001)[1]. The existing empirical literature on land tenure arrangements in Ethiopia is dominated by studies conducted in the central and northern parts of the country. This paper examines the current land tenure arrangements in Eastern Ethiopia.

[1] In the context of this paper access to land simply means that a person is able to make use of the land. Access rights do not necessarily include ownership or possession (BRUCE, 1998), but usually do include some decision-making power over the production process, products, and use of that land.

The rest of this paper is organized in four sections. Section 2 focuses on the study area and the method employed in the study. Section 3 discusses the concept and implication of land tenure systems as well as the evolution of the land tenure systems in Ethiopia. Section 4 presents the results of the study. The final section summarizes the main findings and draws appropriate conclusions.

2 Research Design and Data Collection Method

2.1 Description of the study area

The study was conducted in three districts of the Harar Highlands, Eastern Ethiopia. The Harar highlands are part of the south-eastern Ethiopian Highlands. They fall approximately within a demarcation of 40° 45' E to 42° 20' E longitude and 8° 50' N to 9° 30' N latitude and cover an estimated area of 15,000 km^2 (AMARE, 1980). The topography is characterized by undulating relief and dissected plateaux. The altitudes range between 1,500 and 3,400 meters above sea level (m.a.s.l.). The most important agricultural zone is the 1,800 to 2,500 meters above sea level zone. Areas above 2,500 m.a.s.l. represent about 5% of the highlands, and are not as intensively cultivated as the 1,800 to 2,500 m.a.s.l. zone (POSCHEN-EICHE, 1987). The Harar Highlands have in general favourable climatic conditions for agriculture, though this suitability declines from north to south and from west to east, governed partly by the topography and rainfall respectively. The average annual rainfall in the different districts of the Harar Highlands ranges from 700 to 1,200mm (HABTEMARIAM, 2003).The area exhibits a bimodal pattern of precipitation, with the 'big' rains that constitute about two-thirds of the annual total rainfall amount falling between July and September, and the 'small' rains between March and May.

The Harar Highlands are located in the Eastern Hararghe Zone of the Oromia National Regional State (ONRS)[2]. The ONRS is the largest of the nine regional states of Ethiopia. The population of Eastern Hararghe zone is estimated to be 2 million (ZOPED, 2001). The majority of the population (over 90%) were reported to live in rural areas and depended directly or indirectly on agriculture for their livelihood. Due to the high population pressure in rural areas, farmers cultivate smallholdings. The farming system is a typical mixed crop-livestock. The principal agricultural activity is crop cultivation with livestock rearing as a secondary activity. Crop production sub-system is characterized by multiple cropping, especially mixed and relay cropping of different species. The major cash crops are chat (*Catha edulis*) and coffee and in some locations vegetables[3]. Major

[2] With the change in government in 1991, on the basis of ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity, the country was divided into 9 semi-autonomous regional states, one federal capital (Addis Ababa) and one special administrative division (Dire Dawa). According to the Ethiopian Federal Democratic Republic administrative hierarchy, the regional states are divided into zones, districts and Peasant Associations or *kebeles* (local administration units), in that order.

[3] *Chat* is a natural stimulant plant, which reaches heights from 3 to 7 meters. Fresh chat leaves, which are typically chewed like tobacco, produce a mild cocaine- or amphetamine-like euphoria that is less potent than either substance. Chat is widely used in eastern and southern parts of the country.

food crops include sorghum, maize, bean, potato, sweet potato and to a lesser extent wheat and barley (HABTEMARIAM, 2003). The principal livestock species are cattle, goats, sheep, and donkeys.

2.2 Sampling design

A three-stage sampling technique was used to select the sample farmers. In the first stage, among the fourteen districts found in the Harar Highlands, three districts with similar agricultural production systems and fairly similar access to major road and urban centres were selected based on information from ZOPED (2001). In the second stage, one Peasant Association (PA) from each district, with comparable characteristics with other PAs in the other districts was selected[4]. In the final stage, household heads in the selected PAs were listed down and given the limited resource and time at the disposal of the researcher, a total of 313 farm households (about 16% of farm households in each PA) were selected randomly using probability proportional to sample size sampling technique (Table 1).

Table 1: Number of Households and Sample Size by Peasant Association

District	*Peasant Association*	*Total number of households*	*Sampled households*
Deder	Medejalela	679	110
Gursum	Awebere	631	102
Kombolcha	Tula	625	101
Grand total		1935	313

2.3 Method of data collection

Field research was conducted from March to May 2003. A structured questionnaire was used for the field interviews. The questionnaire was pre-tested by administering it to selected respondents. On the basis of the results obtained from the pre-test, necessary modifications were made on the questionnaire. Five technical assistants with rich experience in survey research work administered the structured questionnaire. In addition to the questionnaire survey, discussions were made with randomly selected farmers and key informants including community leaders, development workers and representatives of non-governmental organizations. These informal techniques helped to acquire useful and detailed information, which would have been difficult to collect through the questionnaire survey.

[4] A Peasant Association (PA) is a territorial organisation with broad administrative and legal powers encompassing 800 hectares or more.

3 Conceptual and Historical Background

3.1 Concept and implication of tenure systems

Land tenure issues have become increasingly important in the developing world. Problems such as high population pressure, increases in resource degradation, recurrence of food shortages, and the low capacity of the non-farm sector to siphon-off the excess population from rural areas have made land tenure a politically sensitive issue. A land tenure system cannot be understood except in relationship to the economic, political, and social systems which produce it and which it influences (Bruce, 1998). Downs and Reyna (1988) note that "land tenure systems may be thought as sets of rules- at sometimes customs, at others laws- concerning people's rights to land, together with the institutions that administer these rights and the resultant ways in which people hold the land". Rules of tenure define how property rights to land are to be allocated within societies. They define how access is granted to rights to use, control, and transfer land, as well as associated responsibilities and restraints (FAO, 2002). Hence, land tenure is more about property rights in land and the way such rights are administered.

The nature and strength of property rights profoundly condition economic decision making. There is strong consensus that well-defined and well-enforced property rights internalize externalities and thereby, guide decision-makers to consider the social consequences of their actions (Furubotn and Pejovich, 1972; Bruce, 1998; Alemu, 1999). There is also widespread evidence that well-defined and well-enforced property rights on land are the main instruments for increasing tenure security, empowering a flourishing land market, facilitating the use of land as collateral in credit markets, enhancing the sustainability of resource use, and preventing environmental degradation (Atwood, 1990; Deininger and Binswanger, 1999; Platteau, 2000; FAO, 2002). This illustrates that with exclusive and secure property rights, resource depletion is internal to the owners/users, while under open access it is external to the users.

Rights to use and/or of control over land are central to the lives of rural populations especially in countries where the majority of the population lives in rural areas and the main sources of income and livelihood are derived from land. In areas where other income-earning opportunities are limited, access to land determines not only households' level of living and livelihood, but also food security. The extent to which individuals and families are able to be food-secure depends in large part on the opportunities they have to increase their access to assets such as land, as well as access to markets and other economic opportunities (FAO, 2002).Though there is an old and large literature on land tenure systems, studies aimed at exploring the direct links between land tenure and food security are few and far between. According to Maxwell and Wiebe (1999), land tenure and food security have not traditionally been the subject of integrated research, in part because land tenure is defined primarily in legal institutional terms, while food security is generally defined in terms of food consumption and bio-medical criteria. In recent years, however, there is an increasing interest to investigate the implications of different land tenure systems for food security (Dessalegn, 1999; Maxwell and Wiebe, 1999; FAO, 2002).

3.2 Review of the land tenure systems in ethiopia

A historical survey of the land tenure systems in Ethiopia reveals that since the l975 land reform, all rural lands have been owned by the state. Prior to the 1975 land reform, diverse forms of land tenure systems that emanated from different social, political, economic, cultural and historical conditions co-existed in the country. A closer look at the types of tenure systems across the country shows that there were regional variations. In the north, a 'communal' or kinship tenure system, with periodic redistribution of communal land to accommodate new claimants, was in place, resulting in few landless farmers and perpetual fragmentation of holdings. Whereas in the south, a private ownership system was predominant and land was concentrated in the hands of members of the royal family, persons of influence as well as military, civil and ecclesiastical officials. The land tenure system in the southern regions was therefore characterised by a predominant private ownership pattern, a wide-spread and exploitative landlord -tenant relationship, tenure insecurity, widespread landlessness, as well as large proportion of tenants with miserable living conditions (Alemu, 1999; Mengisteab, 1990)[5].

Following the downfall of the Imperial regime in September 1974 the military government which took power embarked on the establishment of a state-controlled socialist economy. As part of its economic policy it enacted a land reform law on March 4, 1975. Through this proclamation all rural land became the "collective property of the Ethiopian people" (the Ethiopian State). The proclamation banned private ownership of rural land and its transfer by sale, exchange, succession, mortgage, lease or other means. However, the proclamation made it clear that any person willing to cultivate land shall be allotted a family holding which may not exceed 10 hectares over which he/she would have only usufruct rights. Accordingly, land in excess of 10 hectares and large scale mechanised farms were expropriated and the latter were organised into state farms or co-operatives and in some cases distributed to landless farmers.

Available evidence shows that the great opportunity that the land reform created to develop the agricultural sector was nipped in the bud by a series of misguided policies. These included, among others, coercing farmers to join producer co-operatives, tenure insecurity and diminution of holdings through redistribution of land, state control of grain marketing as well as farmers' obligation to sell a fixed proportion of their produce (in form of quotas) at fixed prices, which were by far lower than the free market prices, to the state-owned Agricultural Marketing Corporation (Mengisteab, 1990; Kebede, 2002; Belay, 2004). These authors argue that the policy measures resulted in farmers' dissatisfaction and stifled agricultural development.

The military government was overthrown on the 28^{th} of May 1991. The Transitional government which replaced it adopted an economic policy in November 1991, which espoused the main principles of a free market economic system. The policy document emphasised a limited economic role for the state and established a basis for liberalisation

[5] Negash (1997) cited government sources that reported that in southern Ethiopia up to 50 percent of the peasants were tenant and in the north as much as 90 percent of the peasants owned the land they tilled.

of the economy. Regarding the issue of land ownership rights, the policy document stated that "until the issue is settled by a referendum after the transition period, there will be no changes in the policy of public ownership of rural land" (TGE, 1991). It was only in 1994, with the drafting of the new constitution, that it became apparent that the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the ruling party, was in favour of maintaining state ownership[6]. Sub-article 3 of article 40 of the new constitution (FDRE, 1995) states: "The right to ownership of rural and urban land, as well as of all natural resources, is exclusively vested in the State and the peoples of Ethiopia. Land is a common property of the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia and shall not be subject to sale or to other means of exchange".

A closer look at the EPRDF's land tenure system reveals that it is not fundamentally different from that of the military regime. Like the military regime's land ownership policy, the current land policy states that land is state-owned and cannot be sold or exchanged or mortgaged. One noticeable difference between the two policies is that, in the current system, farmers have not only user rights on the land, but they can also rent it out to other people.

According to the official statements of the government, state ownership of land helps prevent: large numbers of farmers from selling, mortgaging or transferring their land and becoming landless; land concentration in the hands of a rich peasantry; and urban and non-indigenous businessmen and elite from buying up rural land, leading to an increase of tenancy, eviction, rural-urban migration and political unrest (MOIPAD, 2001).

Recent studies suggest that in the Ethiopian context, state ownership of land has resulted in fragmentation of agricultural holdings (Negash, 1997; Dessalegn, 1999; EEA/EEPRI, 2002; Kebede, 2002). This has in turn seriously imperilled the economic and social viability of holdings. From the foregoing discussion it can be concluded that the issue of land ownership rights remains to be one of the contentious problems that Ethiopian agriculture has to live with. In reality, because of the fact that land constitutionally belongs to the state, farmers are rather sceptical to invest in long-term land improvement practices (such as tree planting, construction of anti-erosion barriers, building of ditches and furrows). In this regard, recent studies in different parts of the country found that tenure insecurity generated by fear of further redistribution was the principal factor explaining farmers' unwillingness to invest effort in measures to improve soil conservation and enhance fertility (Omiti *et al.*, 2000; EEA/EEPRI, 2002; Kebede, 2002; Mulugeta *et al.*, 2001).

The current government's land policy contradicts with its officially stated objective of building a free market economic system, since this could hardly be possible without secured property rights including land rights vested in citizens. The reality is that in many rural areas there are emerging informal land markets that signal farmers' preference (Kebede, 2002; Pender and Fafchamps, 2001).

[6] Following national elections held on May 7, 1995 the EPRDF won overwhelming victory and formed a national government on August 21, 1995 thereby replacing the Transitional Government, which was in power for almost four years.

4 Results and Discussion

Table 2 presents summary statistics of some household characteristics of the sample respondents. The average family size of the sample farmers was 6.92, a figure which was above the national average of 5 persons (Central Statistical Authority, 2002). About 94% of the sample households were male-headed and the remaining (6%) were female-headed. The survey shows that the average dependency ratio was 1.52, i.e., each economically active person in a family supported more than one economically inactive person[7]. The average age of the sample household head was about 40 years. However, this average conceals differences in age among sample household heads, which ranged from 16 years to 80 years. About 69% of the respondents were illiterate while about 10 percent could only read and write and the rest (about 21% of the sampled farmers) had formal schooling of different levels. With regard to the marital status of the sample respondents, 93.5% were married, 5.5% were widowed and the remaining (1%) were single. The majority of the respondents (98.4%) were Moslems and the rest were Christians.

Table 2: Some Household Characteristics (Mean and Standard Deviation)

Variable	*Peasant Association*			*Total*
	Awebere n=102	*Medejalela n=110*	*Tula n=101*	*n=313*
Farm size (ha)	1.44±0.86	0.85±0.38	1.04±0.89	1.10±0.78
Household size	7.01±2.44	6.40±2.34	7.40±3.11	6.92±2.67
Livestock holding (TLU)	1.77±1.49	1.90±1.56	2.54±1.67	2.07±1.60
Age of household head	39.27±12.28	40.27±12.83	41.34±12.64	40.29±12.58
Draft oxen (head)*	1.51±0.93	1.28±0.51	1.14±0.65	1.32±0.75
Dependency ratio	1.68±1.14	1.39±0.92	1.49±1.12	1.52±1.06

* Mean values are computed for those respondents who reported to have owned oxen at the time of the survey. About 58 percent of sample respondents in Awebere reported that they did not own oxen at the time of the survey. The respective percentages for sample respondents in Medejalela and Tula are about 67% and 65%.

Source: Survey results

The average landholding of the sample respondents is 1.1 hectares. The size of the land owned by the respondents, of course, varies from a minimum of about 0.1 hectare to a maximum of 7.25 hectares. It is also important to note that 10% of the respon-

[7] Dependency ratio is the ratio of the number of children below 15 years of age, disabled members and elders above 65 years of age to the number of economically active family members (15-65 years of age).

dents owned less than 0.42 hectares of land. This clearly shows the existence of "latent landlessness" in the study area in that land which is the major source of income and subsistence is in short supply relative to the large family size of households. Similarly, 50% of the respondents had less than 0.87 hectares of land and only 10% of the respondents had a farm size of larger than 2 hectares.

In response to a question regarding the size of their land holding since the change in government in 1991, 13% of the sample respondents reported that it had declined where as the remaining (87%) stated that it had remained the same. The principal reason for the reduction in the average land holding as reported by the sample respondents was the increase in population in the area and the ensuing demand for land by newly formed households. The survey results show that as there is no spare arable land in the study area, access to cultivable land by those who reached the age of adulthood and/or newly-married members would be through sharing land from their parents. In this respect, about 99% of the respondents reported that the only way to get access to cultivable land is to share it from parents. Whereas the remaining (1%) respondents indicated that newly formed households cultivate marginal areas, steep and fragile lands. In the current state of affairs, an increase in rural population gives rise to a reduction in the size of family holdings and ultimately in individual farm units that are generally too small to be economically viable. It is important to note here that the shortage of arable land is a central issue which needs to be addressed if peasant agriculture is to play a leading role expected of it in the country's food security strategy. Under the current situation, state ownership of land and the associated policy measures exacerbate the problem of land fragmentation.

The average livestock holding per household was 2.07 TLU for the whole sample and the respective figures for sample respondents from Awebere, Medajalela and Tula are 1.77 TLU, 1.9 TLU and 2.54 TLU[8]. The importance of livestock for subsistence, as a source of cash and as a store of wealth, is contingent upon the number and types of animals owned, the availability of feed and water, and the owners' management skill. In this respect, about 95% of the respondents reported that lack of animal feed as the most important constraint for livestock production. The corresponding percentages for Awebere, Medajalela and Tula are 93%, 99% and 93%.

Seventy-seven respondents (about 25% of the total) reported that they rented-in land (Table 3). The average size of the rented-in land was 0.53 hectares. Seventy-six of the 77 renter households were male-headed. Of the 77 respondents who reported to have rented-in land, 93.5% indicated that their principal reason for renting-in land was the small size of their holdings. In this respect, the survey results reveal that the renter households had an average land holding of 0.89 hectares. The respective figure for the non-renter sample households was 1.17 hectares. Other reasons cited by the respondents for renting in land include, to assist the land rights-holders who because of disability, old age, lack of working capital and other factors could not cultivate their

[8] One Tropical Livestock Unit (TLU) is equal to 250kg. The TLU values for different species of animals are: 1 for camel; 0.7 for cattle; 0.8 for horse/mule; 0.5 for donkey; 0.1 for goat/sheep (ILCA, 1992).

land (18.2%), availability of extra cash (15.6%), availability of extra draught power (9.1%), and availability of extra labor (5.2%). The remaining (6.5%) failed to specify the reasons for renting-in land. The survey results show that the sample respondents who rented in land participated in rental transaction on average for a period of five years since the down fall of the military regime. However, the great majority of them (72%) reported that over the years it has become difficult to find land to rent mainly as the result of increasing demand for the same.

Table 3: Percentage distribution of respondents who rented-in land by reasons for renting in land *

Duration of the contract	*Peasant Association*			*Total*
	Awebere n=27	*Medejalela n=20*	*Tula n=30*	*n=77*
Shortage of own land	96.3	90.0	93.3	93.5
Availability of extra cash	29.6	10.0	6.7	15.6
Availability of extra draught power	14.8	10.0	3.3	9.1
Availability of extra labor	3.7	0.0	10.0	5.2
To assist the land rights-holder	37.0	20.0	0.0	18.2
Other reasons (not specified)	0.0	5.0	13.3	6.5

* percentages do not add up to 100 because of multiple responses.

Source: Survey results

One interesting outcome of this survey is that land rental transactions are made among people who know each other very well. More precisely, about 90% of the sample respondents reported that they rented land from their close relatives, friends and neighbours. This is possibly because of the ease at which arrangements are made (not written, often without witness) and their flexible nature. With respect to the location of the rented-in land the great majority of the respondents (88%) reported that the land they rented-in was located within their village (peasant association). The fact that 12% of the sample respondents rented land from other villages shows that rental transactions are not confined to the boundaries of the village land.

The rental agreements were reported to be of short duration. About 90% of the respondents who reported to have rented in land stated that their rental agreements were for three years or less; only 10% of the respondents indicated that their rental agreements were for longer than three years. All of the sample respondents reported that land rental transactions took the form of share-cropping with the commitment by both parties to share the benefits of the outputs and the share-renter to pay for all inputs. While the amount that the share-renters paid to the land rights-holders was on the average one-

third of the produce, the land rights-holders were responsible for the payment of land tax to the government.

The survey results reveal also that land was rented-out by some farmers who were disabled, had no sufficient labour and no oxen and lack working capital (Table 4). About 6% of the sample farmers reported that they rented-out an average of 0.46 hectares of their land. Among those households that rented-out their land, 73.7% and 26.3% were male-headed and female-headed, respectively. The great majority of the respondents (92%) stated that their rental agreements were for two years or less. The sample respondents who rented out land reported also that participated in rental transaction on average for a period of three and half years since the down fall of the military regime.

Table 4: Percentage distribution of respondents who rented-out land by reasons for renting out land *

Reasons for leasing out land	*Peasant Association*			
	Awebere n=3	*Medejalela n=9*	*Tula n=7*	*Total n=19*
Lack of seed	33.3	11.1	28.6	21.1
Lack of cash	33.3	33.3	0.0	21.1
Lack of draught power	66.7	44.4	14.3	36.8
Labor shortage	100.0	77.8	85.7	84.2
Disability of the land rights-holder	0.0	33.3	0.0	15.8
Other reasons (not specified)	0.0	33.3	0.0	15.8

* percentages do not add up to 100 because of multiple responses.

Source: Survey results

Another form of access to land in the study area is cultivating borrowed fields[9]. These fields are given by the land rights-holders to the users free of charge. The survey results show that only 6 respondents (about 2% of the total respondents) cultivated borrowed fields and the average size of the borrowed land was 0.35 ha. It is important to note that those who cultivated borrowed fields owned an average of 0.81 hectares of land whereas the remaining farmers owned an average of 1.1 hectares of land, implying that those who cultivated borrowed lands do so principally because of the small size of their holdings. While four of the six respondents who cultivated borrowed fields indicated that they got the land from their close relatives, the remaining two reported that they got it

[9] Borrowing is a temporary arrangement (often for one production season) of receiving the right to cultivate land. This arrangement is often made between people who are related through kinship. Borrowing involves very little material obligation of the borrower towards the lender. No money or presents are given and no labour contributions are expected in exchange. However, the borrower may give to the lender grain and other presents.

from people with whom they had long term and close relationships. All the respondents who cultivated borrowed land reported that the land rights-holders authorized them to use the land for one year and they did not have to pay anything in exchange. This result is in complete agreement with GAVIAN and EHUI (1999) who reported similar results for Arsi zone of the Oromia Regional State in Ethiopia.

Table 5 summarizes the responses to a pre-coded question on the most important factors, which affect agricultural production in the study area. The Table shows that the most important limiting factors, as perceived by the respondents, are related to availability of land and other inputs. For instance, the shortage of grazing land was cited as the most important problem affecting animal production in the study area. Similarly, the shortage of arable land was cited by about 82% of the sample respondents as a serious factor affecting agricultural production in the study area. In this connection, it is interesting to note that 62.5% and 37.5% of the sample respondents indicated that the size of their land holding was very small and just adequate, respectively.

Table 5 shows also that about 80% of the respondents cited weather variability (drought) as an important barrier to agricultural production. In fact, in the course of informal discussion with key informants it became clear that drought had become a structural problem that people had to live with in the study area. With respect to the frequency of drought occurrence, the key informants indicated that in the 1970s and 1980s drought occurred once in a decade but in recent years drought has struck the study area every 3 to 4 years. The situation can become even more problematic if farmers continue relying solely on rain fed agriculture as is the case now. It is also important to note that about 52% of the respondents cited the shortage or lack of working capital as an important barrier to agricultural production. The fact that individuals are unable to use land as collateral and are, therefore, unable to access credit makes this problem very crucial. The shortage of working capital wouldn't be a serious problem if households had the possibility to participate in non-farm activities that would enable them earn income and thereby ease their liquidity constraint. However, only 18% of the sample respondents reported earning income from non-farm activities.

Table 5 provides compelling evidence that peasant agriculture in the study area is beset with a host of economic, institutional and social challenges which need to be properly addressed to come to grips with the problem of food insecurity. This is precisely because the great majority of the sample respondents (71%) reported that they had not been producing enough amounts of food crops that could make them food self-sufficient year round. It is especially during the dry season that food shortage problem reaches a crisis point in the study area. The respondents indicated that, in alleviating their food deficit, their coping strategies (their way to persevere) included measures like: selling any cash crop (e.g. *Chat*) or animals to generate money to buy food with (40.2%); seeking credits in cash or kind from persons who are able and willing to extend them (20.5%); sending of able bodied male members of the family to nearby towns to engage in petty trade or to work as daily labourers to generate income (18.3%); and receiving food aid from humanitarian agencies (2.6%).

Table 5: Major Constraints to Agricultural Production as Perceived by the Respondents *

Factors	*Peasant Association*			*Total*
	Awebere	*Medejalela*	*Tula*	
	% of respondents	*% of respondents*	*% of respondents*	*% of respondents*
Scarcity of grazing land	95.1	99.1	97.0	97.1
Land scarcity (arable land)	77.5	86.4	81.2	81.8
Weather variability (drought)	82.4	85.5	71.3	79.9
Lack of improved seeds	57.8	60.0	79.2	65.5
Lack of draught power	54.9	69.1	59.4	61.3
Lack of chemical inputs	57.8	51.8	73.3	60.7
Lack of working capital	57.8	60.9	35.6	51.8
Low product prices	56.9	42.7	48.5	49.2
Lack of advisory services (extension)	43.1	26.4	53.5	40.6
Lack of improved farm tools	38.2	50.0	24.8	38.0
Soil erosion (land degradation)	25.5	56.4	22.8	35.5
Shortage of labor during peak periods	41.2	11.8	49.5	33.5
Late availability of inputs (delay)	34.3	8.2	32.7	24.6
Lack of veterinary services	17.6	12.0	36.6	21.9
Crop pests and diseases	32.4	11.8	17.8	20.4
Storage problem	7.8	3.6	21.8	10.9
Lack of market outlet	7.8	11.8	9.9	9.9
Others (non- specified)	3.9	5.5	3.0	4.2

* percentages do not add up to 100 because of multiple responses.

Source: Survey results

When requested to indicate the dominant observable trends of the farming systems of their area over the past ten years, almost all respondents (99.7%) pointed out that perennial crops such as *chat* and coffee have become more important (replacing annual crops) principally because they are relatively drought resistant and fetch higher income per unit area. Other important trends reported by the sample respondents include putting marginal areas under cultivation (74.6%), reduction in livestock population (55.3%) and shrinkage of communal grazing lands (21.2%). With regard to security of land ownership right, almost all of the respondents (99.4%) indicated that they felt

secure to use their farmland at least in their lifetime. This high percentage could be attributed to the fact that there was no land redistribution in the study area.

5 Conclusion

This paper examined farmers' access to cultivated land in three districts of Eastern Ethiopia. It is believed that this study, although limited both in its coverage and scope, provides information to all concerned in agricultural development so that they can make informed decisions. The historical review reveals that the issue of rural land ownership rights has been a politically sensitive topic throughout the country's modern history. The empirical results indicate also that shortage of arable land, scarcity of grazing land, recurrent droughts, lack of working capital, lack of advisory services, inadequacy of relevant technologies (improved seeds, chemicals, improved farm tools) were the most important barriers to agricultural production the study area.

The results of this study show also that state ownership has resulted in smaller and fragmented individual land holdings which, in turn, have led to the cultivation of marginal lands. Under the current situations of limited off-farm employment opportunities and population pressure, state ownership of land makes peasant agriculture simply a "refuge" for the growing rural population. In fact, the current state ownership of land does not provide the right incentives to enterprising farmers. Nor does it reflect a cohesive policy direction on the part of the government in that the government claims to be committed to build a free market economic system while maintaining state ownership of land.

In the light of these results it is imperative that policymakers pay utmost attention to the constraints that beset peasant agriculture. More precisely, the empirical results point to the fact that improved access to land is not a sufficient condition to improve households' productive capacity and their welfare. In fact, farmers also need access to complementary productive and institutional resources, including financing, advisory services, efficient marketing system, technology, and rural infrastructure if the potential benefits of improved access to land are to be achieved. The debate about land ownership rights (whether to maintain state ownership or embrace a system of privatization of rural lands) would be simply an exercise in futility if it is dissociated from the multitude of problems that farmers have to live with.

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