Conflict management over contested natural resources: a case study of pasture, forest and irrigation in South Wello, Ethiopia

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SUMMARY

Pankhurst explores natural resource conflict management processes during the past century in South Wello, Ethiopia. The study examines how local groups and external agents, including officials and landowners, managed conflicts over communal pasture, forests and water for irrigation. Local, informal dispute settlement fora still operate. However, state institutions increasingly control conflict management processes and make attempts to take over the dispute resolution role of religious leaders. During times of political instability or changes in regimes, local populations reassert their priorities and challenge unpopular interventions. Overall, the outcomes of conflict management processes depend on the type of conflict and the power relations among stakeholders.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

KEY ISSUES
- What are the major causes of conflict over natural resource management?
- How do conflict resolution mechanisms and outcomes differ according to the types of conflict and resources involved?

CONTEXT
- How are natural resource management conflicts affected by priorities of different political regimes?
- What are the differences between the interests of local and external stakeholders?
- How does the involvement of formal and informal institutions vary by type of dispute and resource?

CONFLICT BACKGROUND OR HISTORY
- What have been the major conflicts under different regimes?
- What elements of continuity exist in conflicts over different regimes?
- How are natural resource management and conflict resolution affected by times of transition?

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND RESOLUTION PROCESSES
- What factors explain differences in how stakeholders handle conflicts?
- What are the characteristics of each kind of conflict resolution process?
- How (and why) are conflict management processes selected?

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND RESOLUTION OUTCOMES
- What explains the success or failure of different conflict resolution processes?
- How do power relations affect the outcome of conflict resolution?

LESSONS LEARNED

- What is the significance of considering conflicts relating to different resources?
- What benefits can be gained from viewing conflicts spatially and temporally?
- What are the prerequisites for participatory conflict management?

KEY ISSUES

This case study illustrates the complexities of natural resource management conflicts and resolution processes concerning several resources in northern Ethiopia during the past century under three regimes with contrasting political orientations: the imperial monarchy until 1973; the socialist Derg Government from 1974 to 1991; and, since 1991, the federal government led by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).

By comparing how three common resources – pasture, forest and irrigation – are perceived by various stakeholders, and how conflicts between them over such resources are managed, the case study shows contrasting and often conflicting interests within communities and between local groups and external agents, including government officials, landowners and outside investors. The communities studied are divided internally along lines of generation, gender, wealth, religion, whether or not members have been displaced, and according to their involvement in different state regimes. These divisions are manifested in conflicts over overlapping resource entitlements, which were made worse by government policies affecting agriculture and natural resources during the Derg. Intra-community differentiation has created some room for alliances between internal and external interests under successive regimes, although the specific interest groups have varied in different periods.

Looking at conflicts from a historical perspective reveals changes and continuities in dispute settlement processes, and changes in relations between informal and formal institutions. Institutions created by the state and accountable to it have become increasingly intrusive in local affairs over successive regimes and have tended to marginalize or co-opt local informal institutions such as groups of elders, religious leaders and burial associations. The history of resource management reveals, overall, an increasing trend towards state control, and participatory resource management largely remains something that is talked about rather than implemented.
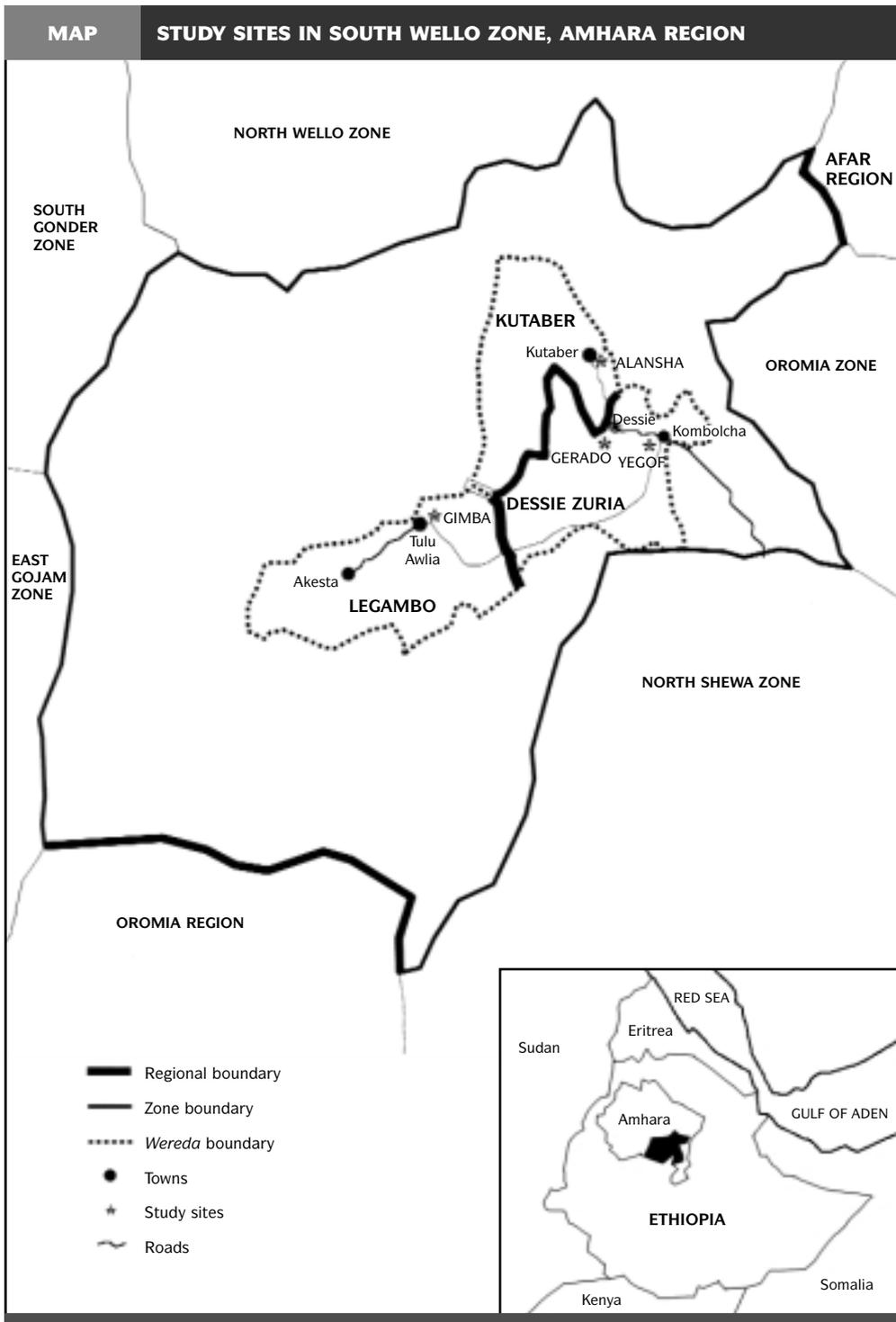
The case study considers different conflict resolution processes, which vary according to the kind of dispute and the actors involved. In cases of internal conflict the main forms of pressure used by local institutions rely on threats of social exclusion and the fear of curses believed to harm offenders who refuse to confess. In cases of conflict between communities and external agents the main strategies include appeals to higher authorities, avoidance and boycotts, and direct action in opposing changes in ownership of common resources. Where there are divided interests within communities, external agents are less likely to be frustrated in pursuit of their objectives. Boycotts and direct opposition are often costly for community members, but united resistance is sometimes successful.

The study offers insights into what explains which conflict management strategies are most effective under different circumstances. Overall, power relations between local communities and external interests tend to favour the latter, despite various resistance strategies by local populations. At times of transition between national regimes, when state power has declined, peasants have reasserted their priorities and challenged unpopular interventions. Conversely, at times of famine, peasant resistance is weakened and state intervention in natural resource management increases.

A more constructive approach to resolving contradictions between local and external interests would require the recognition of local communities' primary rights to management of common resources and the involvement of informal institutions in joint management and benefit sharing with formal institutions. The concept of participatory management needs to be mainstreamed and institutionalized within government structures and should not remain largely a concern of donors and international organizations. However, this requires a change of attitude regarding power relations between state and peasantry, which runs counter to long-lasting traditions of governance in Ethiopia.

CONTEXT

This case study is concerned with conflicts over three types of natural resources – communal pasture, forests and irrigation – in three *weredas* or districts of South Wello Zone within the Amhara National Regional State (ANRS) in northern Ethiopia. The study focuses on the Yegof State Forest (Pankhurst, 2001) and surrounding irrigation, and two communal pasture areas: Alansha in Kutaber *Wereda* and Gimba in Legambo *Wereda* (see Map). A multisite approach within South Wello illustrates specific conflicts over three different resources and shows how conflicts over these resources are interrelated. The approach also reveals how conflict management processes concerning different resources are similar and are addressed largely by the same institutions.

MAP	STUDY SITES IN SOUTH WELLO ZONE, AMHARA REGION

The centre of Tulu Awlia town in Gimba pasture area

South Wello is located in the drought-prone Ethiopian Highlands at more than 2 000 m above sea level (masl). The area is characterized by a rugged topography of mountains, plateaus and narrow valleys. Environmental degradation and famine have been crucial concerns over the past quarter of a century, leading to the implementation of massive rehabilitation programmes on the basis of food for work provided by donors, notably the World Food Programme (WFP).

The primary stakeholders in local natural resource management are peasant households which mainly rely on rainfed plots, although some river valleys have gravity-fed irrigation. Households depend on oxen for cultivation and graze live-stock on steep slopes and wetlands located in valleys. Differences in landholdings have been minimized by successive redistributions of farmland by the Derg and the current government aimed at promoting more equitable rural development. However, the rural society is far from homogenous. Communities are divided along the lines of generation and gender, wealth and poverty, and religion. They are also divided according to whether or not members have been displaced or are returnees and, especially, according to their involvement in different political regimes. There are overlapping and conflicting rights over communal natural resources. Community members generally pursue courses of action in disputes based on their individual circumstances and perceived interests.

The vast majority of South Wello inhabitants are rural dwellers, but urban and peri-urban areas have expanded in recent years owing to road development and increased market opportunities. Different religious groups seeking to build churches

and mosques, often with foreign funding, have contributed to urbanization. The rise of urban markets has had a significant yet complex impact on the rural areas. Urban demand for wood has led to deforestation in state forests, but it has also stimulated tree planting by individual households. The growth of towns and peri-urban centres has occurred at the expense of pasture and farms, generating conflicts over land use in places such as Gimba. Local households with livestock bitterly opposed enclosure of pastures for the peri-urban centre. In contrast, households headed by women, landless youth and returnees were more favourable towards the urban area, since it offered opportunities for wage labour and petty trade.

External agents have also been important stakeholders, generally in opposition to the interests of peasant communities. In the past, outsiders included landowners and, since the 1974 Revolution, Ministry of Agriculture professionals and cadres. Recently, private investors have joined the list. State representation now strongly extends to the local level.

Informal local institutions include Muslim religious leaders in an area where most inhabitants are followers of Islam, groups of elders who are respected in communities for their dispute settlement skills, and burial associations established for mutual assistance when a family member dies. State institutions have become increasingly powerful during the past 25 years, and since the 1975 land reform all matters relating to natural resources have been treated by the government as being within its domain.

Regional institutions such as local governors in imperial times, regional administrations under the Derg, and zonal administrations under EPRDF have been the main bodies dealing with appeals by peasant communities complaining against external interventions. National and regional policies regarding issues such as land redistribution, environmental management and private investment also have a bearing on local resource use. National policies were particularly intrusive on peasant communities under the Derg, especially with respect to forestry, but have had less impact under the federal EPRDF system.

Government policies themselves need to be seen in the context of shifting global ideologies. The Derg's interventionism in natural resource management stemmed from an allegiance to socialist policies advocated by the Eastern Block. At the same time, Western aid after the 1985 famine and global views among donors about linkages between drought and deforestation prompted massive environmental rehabilitation initiatives through terracing and eucalyptus planting. These conservation campaigns in effect reinforced state power and undermined community management by taking control of large tracts of local pasture and farmland (Yeraswork, 2000). The current Western donor promotion of privatization and market-focused development is reflected in Amhara Region's policy of dividing hillsides for private forestry enclosures, often ignoring conflicting tenure claims and peasants' grazing needs.

CONFLICT BACKGROUND OR HISTORY

Tensions between local and external natural resource management priorities have escalated over the past few decades. However, the way conflicts have been played out and the parties concerned have changed with different priorities of successive regimes. The time line (see Box) summarizes key conflicts and their outcomes.

BOX	EVENTS AND CONFLICTS IN NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT BY PERIOD IN SOUTH WELLO SITES		
Time	**Event/conflict**	**Consequence**	**Outcome**
Imperial			
Nineteenth century	Communal grazing areas defined A regional ruler takes an interest in Yegof Forest as a political stronghold Irrigation established at Gimba Famine strikes, 1888–1892	Pasture areas deforested Peasants forbidden to graze animals in state forest Those with irrigation survive famine better	Common pasture with open access introduced Conflict starts between state and peasants over forest versus pasture Famine provides stimulus for development of irrigation
Early twentieth century	Local rulers exploit communal grazing areas	Pressure on, and reduction of, communal grazing area	Clashes between state and peasant interests begin
Italian occupation 1936–1941	Sawmills and irrigation schemes set up and farming in grazing areas	Deforestation pasture converted into farmland	Conflict between occupiers and local resource users
1941–1973	Development projects planned on communal pasture by governors and investors Foreign missionaries enter the area Government interest in establishing state forests	Peasant opposition through appeals to governors and/or imperial family or direct action State interventionism in forestry sector begins	Resistance successful through appeals or direct action in some cases but fails in others Conflicts over demarcation of state forests
Transition 1973–1974	Famine, loss of central authority, fighting, banditry Dispute over delimitation of Yegof Forest	Farming encroaches on pasture Peasants uproot seedlings, destroy roads and chase away labourers	Pasture redistributed as farmland Detention of state forest opposition leaders

Box continued

Time	Event/conflict	Consequence	Outcome
Derg			
1974–1991	Land redistributed from landowners to tenants Expansion of state forests, hillside afforestation, cooperatives enclose commons for agriculture and livestock development Famine, 1984–1985, "villagization" and resettlement	Conflicts over trees planted by landowners Peasant resistance to state forest demarcation and tree planting on grazing land Conflict between peasants joining and resisting cooperatives Famine used by the state to impose natural resource management interventions Tenure insecurity, evictions and victimization	Tenure conflicts develop Relations between state and peasantry worsen Leaders of opposition imprisoned Increasing conflicts between government supporters and opponents Conflicts worsen within communities Competing claims over resources intensify
Transition 1990–1991	Cooperatives' land redistributed, livestock looted Tree cutting in state and community forests Large numbers of returnees from resettlement schemes	Grazing land returned to commons Government concern over deforestation increases Conflicts over tenure claims become more intense	Communal grazing re-established New attempts at hillside enclosures Pressure for redistribution increases
Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)			
1991–2001	Further land redistributions Attempts to enclose or cultivate commons Growth of urban and religious interests in commons State institutions established at a lower level Investors granted land on commons	Farm sizes reduced Burial associations oppose enclosures Peasant resistance to enclosures Conflict with burial associations United community opposition	Increase of agricultural pressure on communal grazing In some cases opposition leaders imprisoned, in others appeals succeed Burial associations quietly overlook encroachments Some investors succeed, others withdraw

In imperial times conflicts between local landowners and the peasantry emerged mainly over pasture areas. Peasant communities resisted by appealing to authorities and, if this failed, resorted to direct actions such as removing boundary markers or challenging enclosures by driving cattle into them. Under the Italian occupation land expropriation continued as the occupiers established irrigation and agricultural schemes. The Italians also cleared extensive areas for sawmills (Bahru, 1998). As one elderly man commented: "The Italians used the forest to cook pasta." In the late imperial period external agents attempted to carry out enclosures on communal grazing grounds for various projects, including an airport, a hospital and a school, and a few state forests were established.

In the Derg period conflicts occurred over tree tenure between former landowners and tenants who obtained their land through redistribution. Serious conflict also arose when state agents and international organizations proposed addressing famine by converting hillside pasture into eucalyptus plantations through food-for-work (FFW) projects. As one peasant in Alansha recalled: "We only saw the grain, not the consequences of the trees, which ended up evicting us from our residences." Peasants were compelled to move from areas designated for forestry into valleys that had been agricultural land or pastureland (Alemayehu, 1990). Urban expansion also reduced rural landholdings. One peasant near Kombolcha town complained: "The forest from above and the town from below are pressing hard on us" (Bahru, 1998).

From the mid-1980s the Derg's agricultural policies resulted in intense conflicts over natural resources. State-run farm cooperatives (essentially collectives) monopolized access to irrigation (Dessalegn, 1999) and enclosed pasture areas, and peasants were moved off hillsides into villages in the plains. Agricultural and grazing lands in valleys were taken over by village settlements established by the government, and hillside pastures were converted to forests. As one peasant put it: "We live on what we used to cultivate and left our residence to wild animals."

During the early EPRDF period the main internal conflict occurred between the former and new leaderships. The demands of the landless younger generation and returnees from resettlement schemes were partly accommodated by additional land redistributions. Externally generated conflicts emerged between communities and market forces in the form of investors and urban interests, and heightened religious competition over resources. For example, a large-scale commercial sheep enterprise recently enclosed a large part of Gimba pasture area, generating widespread local opposition. Men who have taken jobs as guards or agents for the firm have been excluded from the community burial association. Enclosure of hillsides for individual forests also generated conflict given overlapping and competing tenure claims.

Periods of transition between regimes were characterized by peasant resistance and a reduction in state interventionism. During the transition between the imperial and Derg governments in 1973–1974, peasants encroached on grazing areas, cut trees from landowners' holdings, uprooted seedlings from state forests and raided irrigation plantations. In the transition between the Derg and EPRDF governments in 1990–1991, poor peasants and returnees encroached on forests and grazing areas, cutting wood for sale to urban areas.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND RESOLUTION PROCESSES

Ways in which the primary stakeholders, peasant households and communities try to handle different conflicts depend on several factors: 1) whether the conflict is "internal" or "external"; 2) whether the conflict is dealt with by informal indigenous institutions or formal state-sponsored institutions; 3) relations between formal and informal institutions over different regimes and in transition periods; and 4) types of resources and their importance for peasant subsistence and survival strategies.

Internal conflicts

Generally, if conflicts are internal, communities attempt to solve them using indigenous informal institutions and avoiding letting the matter reach formal state institutions. For instance, disputes over irrigation tend to be solved by elders, with the threat of sanctions by burial associations in recent years. Only if the matter cannot be resolved informally, or if the dispute becomes serious, will the case be taken to government institutions. For example, attempts at limiting cultivation of communal grazing areas may be dealt with by burial associations threatening peasants who encroach with exclusion, but if individuals become violent, cases will be taken to state authorities. However, as matters to do with land have been seen as a state prerogative since the Derg land reform, encroachments into forests and pasture areas are most likely to be dealt with by formal structures.

External conflicts

Three types of peasant response to external threats have been common: 1) appeals to higher authority; 2) avoidance and boycotts; and 3) direct action.

Appeals to higher authority were common in imperial times. Representatives of local communities went to local governors and sometimes to members of the royal family or the emperor himself. Under the Derg, since most threats originated from measures carried out by the state through the peasant associations, appealing was generally no longer an option. Under EPRDF, people have appealed to district and zonal authorities about enclosures of grazing areas by private investors or communities.

Avoidance and boycotts have been common strategies during all three regimes, especially where state interests have been synonymous with external threats and appeals are impossible or fail. However, the ability to resist through non-compliance was often limited by prevailing power relations. With greater state control at the local level, avoidance seems less of an option than previously, although boycotts may sometimes succeed, as when religious institutions proposed building on grazing lands in Alansha.

Direct action against land appropriation by external agents has been a common, although risky strategy. Under the imperial government, attempts to enclose pasture areas for development ventures were resisted by voicing opposition at meetings and removing boundary marks. Likewise, under the Derg, afforestation projects on grazing areas were resisted by uprooting seedlings, which was perceived by outsiders as sabotage. During the transition, with the breakdown of state control, direct action was the main form of protest. Large areas of forest were destroyed, cooperatives' holdings were divided and enclosures returned to the commons. Under EPRDF, opposition to the development of a town on Gimba pasture area involved destroying houses and a church by night, despite the danger of imprisonment of opposition leaders and threats to withhold food aid from the communities involved.

Types of institution involved in conflict resolution

When formal and informal conflict resolution institutions are compared, it can be seen that the former have the backing of state power to enforce their decisions, are mainly concerned with externally generated agendas and may lack local legitimacy. Informal institutions, on the other hand, have limited ability to impose their views, rely on threats of social exclusion and cursing to achieve reconciliation, are often grounded in local knowledge and are considered more legitimate by local people. This is summarized in the Table.

TABLE	STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS			
Name	**Description**	**Dispute settlement role**	**Strengths**	**Limitations**
Type of institution : FORMAL				
Chiqashum	Tax collector under imperial regime	Serious conflicts	Enables appeal Ability to enforce decisions	Represents landowners Little regard for interests of tenants
Peasant association	Local administrative unit under Derg	Serious cases not resolved by informal institutions	Ability to enforce decisions through its court and militia	Limited local accountability Danger of power abuse Imposition of leaders' views and repressive state policies
Kebele administration	Local administrative unit under EPRDF	Serious cases unresolved at lower level	Ability to carry out decisions through its structures	Large unit Limited local accountability Danger of power abuse
Mengistawi Budin	Hamlet-level unit under EPRDF	Lowest local-level disputes	Responsive to local needs	Power to make decisions affecting livelihoods
Type of institution : INFORMAL				
Abagar and sheikhs	Muslim religious leaders	Mainly homicide	Considered legitimate Curse feared	May not represent all interest groups
Qire	Burial association	Interpersonal within association	Wide representation Sanction ostracism	Limited ability to enforce decisions Lack of transparency
Sheni	Group of elders	Interpersonal local	Local knowledge of social relations	Dominated by elders and men
Yewuha abbat	Irrigation leader	Concerning irrigation	Local legitimacy	Deals only with irrigation issues

Camels carrying hay and sorghum stalks to Kombolcha market

Formal conflict resolution institutions have been linked to state interests. During the imperial period, local tax collectors were the main government representatives, and serious disputes were brought to them. Under the Derg, peasant associations soon became a powerful instrument of state interventionism. They had their own judicial committee to oversee conflicts and had the power to impose decisions through fines and imprisonment. Under EPRDF, *Kebele* administrations were set up, bringing together two or three of the former peasant associations, with similar judicial powers to the latter. In addition, governmental teams were established to represent a maximum of 50 households, thus bringing state institutions to an even more local level. Conflicts relating to natural resource management are nowadays often reported to the governmental teams and, through them, to the *Kebele* administrations.

Informal conflict resolution institutions are of two types: religious and secular, although there is much overlap. Muslim leaders who are dominant in the area, notably the *Abagar* and sheikhs, are involved in conflict resolution relating to interpersonal disputes. The former, who are also referred to as "blood dryers", play an important role in reconciliation, especially in homicide cases, and their curse is much feared. Their role in natural resource management is indirect, since they conduct ceremonies at shrines under trees and in pasture areas, especially in times of hardship, notably famine. *Abagar* are also involved in propitiatory ritu-

Elders from a burial association involved in conflict resolution

als for the first ploughing of each season and are said to have occasionally censured people ploughing communal grazing areas.

Secular institutions consist mainly of local elders and burial associations. Local elders, known as *sheni,* specialized in identifying offenders when no one had been caught in the act of committing an offence. Their main strategies consisted of cursing and threatening social exclusion. These were combined in the *bele* institution, where community members were called to a public forum and were expected to walk over a stick or rope. Each person would have to swear that they were not guilty and did not know who was. If a person lied the curse was believed to fall not just on the individual, who would become sick and die, but on successive generations of descendants. One individual commented ironically: "*Bele* is our AIDS." Elders often try to resolve disputes without recourse to cursing by interrogating individuals separately to seek information. They then call those involved and try to obtain confessions. Compensation is often in the form of food and drink served at a reconciliation session. Generally, elders seek to minimize punishments because the main aim is not to attribute blame but to ensure that people who live together can be reconciled.

The second group of social institutions involved in dispute settlement is burial associations, known as *qire.* These associations became formalized relatively

recently as a result of urban influences. They mainly offer mutual aid when family members or relatives die. Nowadays they have a list of members, a leadership with differentiated functions, and sets of rules and sanctions. They collect monthly payments and own property such as tents and equipment used at funerals. *Qire* is the only widespread informal organization with membership based on locality and cross-cutting differences of interest by wealth, social position and, in Wello, even religion. Almost all community members take part in such associations, which provide a vital forum for expression of belonging. Although the associations are formed largely for burial purposes, they are involved in dispute settlement and have recently become more concerned with development issues. The main form of pressure that burial associations can use relies on social ostracism (Pankhurst, 1992b). Households offending the community could be socially excluded. This is symbolized by threats not to bury their family members. Other common expressions of this exclusion are refusing to offer fire when the offending household's fire goes out and withholding help should its ox fall off a cliff. As this sanction is extreme it is rarely used and warnings are more common.

Changing relations between formal and informal institutions in dispute settlement

The role of informal institutions in dispute settlement has changed over different regimes. In imperial times, because there was less pressure on resources and land was controlled by landowners the involvement of informal institutions in managing common resources was mainly limited to settling interpersonal disputes. Serious cases of murder and theft would be taken to the state representative, the *Chiqashum*. Under the Derg, with the land reform and the establishment of local state structures, informal institutions were excluded from involvement in land-related issues, but continued to deal with minor disputes. During the early EPRDF years informal institutions played a role in trying to control encroachments into common pastures and in solving disputes over irrigation. State institutions also sought to involve religious leaders in preventive cursing of tree cutting, as well as burial associations in identifying offenders. However, this collaboration could reduce the legitimacy of local institutions. In Alansha the "cultural committee" established for this purpose was viewed by many as lacking moral authority, and the elders themselves were reluctant to hold confession sessions. After a few years, EPRDF extended its formal structure down to the hamlet level and the role of burial associations was much reduced. In Gimba, the associations then became a vehicle for protest against external threats such as urbanization and private investment, and condoned encroachment of common grazing lands by local peasants. With the banning of the burial associations' cultural sanctioning mechanism, a new informal dispute settlement institution run by a migrant religious leader emerged a few years ago.

The importance of different resources

The kind of resource and its significance for peasant subsistence and survival have also been crucial in conflict management. Given the mixed economy based on plough agriculture, the most important resource for peasants has been pasture. In imperial times, irrigation was limited and largely externally generated and controlled, and the value of forests was not greatly appreciated. Under the Derg, conflicts between forestry and pasture became particularly pronounced with hillside reforestation campaigns. Irrigation expanded and its value became more evident in famine years and as a result of expanding markets. Private tree planting became an important source of income and a survival strategy in drought years. Cutting trees from state or community forests was limited by guarding and checkpoints. In the final year of the Derg and during the transition period, with the lack of restrictions, sale of wood from state/community forests became a major survival strategy. Under EPRDF, wood sales have continued and irrigation has further expanded. Communal pastures, however, remain vital and conflicts over them have become more pronounced, especially with urban expansion, concessions to private investors and individual hillside plantation enclosures.

Resolution processes

Internal conflict settlement is usually initiated by the person who considers him/herself to be the victim. He/she approaches leaders of local institutions, who seek to persuade the offender to apologize or pay compensation, since the objective is to achieve reconciliation among people living within the same community. For a minor case the offender may be pardoned, but if the offence is repeated the guilty party may be requested to provide food and drink, generally bread and beer, and in more serious cases a sheep, to be consumed at a ceremony aimed at peace-making.

External conflict resolution generally involves appeals to higher authorities by community representatives. The major actors in such appeals used to be elders and more wealthy individuals with community backing, although more recently younger literate representatives have also been selected. However, leading opposition, especially where external interventions have state backing, has been dangerous and has often resulted in imprisonment and/or fines.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND RESOLUTION OUTCOMES

Outcomes of conflict management depend on types of conflict, who the stakeholders are and the power relations between them.

Types of conflict

Internal conflicts are initially handled by informal dispute settlement institutions. The threat of social exclusion retains its power. However, the repeated use of the *bele* institution in seeking out individuals involved in tree cutting seems to reduce the effectiveness of the curse. Poor peasants may have little option but to cut trees from forests to survive; as one such person put it: "If *bele* kills you tomorrow, hunger may kill you today!" However, the ability of informal institutions to manage conflict over common resources depends on their relations with formal institutions. If informal institutions are excluded from playing a role they may work behind the scenes on minor interpersonal conflicts, they may become a means of expression for peasant opposition to land appropriation, or other informal institutions may emerge, as in the Gimba case.

External conflicts with local communities have often been resolved through appeals to higher authorities, especially in imperial times. What explains whether such appeals are successful? A major factor seems to be the position and power of external agents against whom peasant groups appeal. In imperial times direct appeals to the emperor or royal family were often successful. However, in one case the Crown Prince was said to have been involved in allowing external agents to make use of Alansha grazing land, and peasants only succeeded in avoiding this by appealing to his mother, the Empress. The success or failure of appeals to governors may have depended on the importance and "connections" of landowners against whom local communities appealed. During the Derg period there was little room for appeals, but this option has again become somewhat more common.

The recent cases of Alansha and Gimba can be contrasted. In the former, local opposition to enclosures was successful, but in the latter it failed. In Alansha, seasonal enclosures were carried out by local communities. Opponents included an outlying community that had been excluded from the commons under the Derg, richer peasants with more livestock to herd, older peasants who believed in the sanctity of open access, and residents of Kuta town whose livestock was herded on the commons. Opponents appealed against the enclosures, which they likened to the Derg cooperative enclosures, and argued that the pasture was a refuge for the poor and was government land on which tax had not been paid. In Gimba, the main enclosure was by an external investor with the backing of the district authorities, with whom he had personal connections, and the government stood to benefit from taxes. Community opposition was more united than it was in Alansha.

Private wood-cutting at Alansha

Strategies

Avoidance and refusal to be involved are strategies incurring costs and became increasingly difficult with growing state interventionism. Under the imperial regime, tenants were not in a position to boycott initiatives by landowners. During the Derg, peasants opting not to join cooperatives retained independence but lost access to the best land. Under EPRDF, involvement in conservation work has been compulsory; participation in individual hillside enclosures is voluntary, but the limited success of this initiative may be related to lack of enthusiasm as a result of conflicting rights and community needs for hillside grazing.

Direct resistance can succeed, as in the case of numerous projects seeking to enclose the Alansha pastureland. As one elder put it: "This area has constantly been sought after, but solutions have always been found." But resistance can be dangerous for leaders, especially in cases of state-supported interventions, and can lead to imprisonment or fines. Nonetheless, sustained resistance can have some effect. In Gimba, after houses were repeatedly pulled down, the district authorities set up a committee and further building was temporarily halted. However, the committee, which included individuals who had built houses on the commons, in effect legitimized existing buildings and the town later continued to expand. As for conflict with investors, opposition leaders were imprisoned and burial association leaders threatened with loss of food aid. It therefore seemed that opposition failed. However, a second investor, who had permission from the state officials, desisted and did not go ahead. Presumably peasant opposition to the first investor's plans affected his decision to withdraw.

LESSONS LEARNED

This study has shown the importance of understanding conflict resolution through comparisons in terms of space and time within a local context. By considering conflicts and institutions involved in their resolution over several sites and different regimes, the study has revealed continuities and changes in dispute processes, and changing relations between formal and informal institutions. The study identifies limited involvement of local informal institutions as a key constraint on participatory natural resource management. However, attempts by formal institutions to involve informal ones may result in the latter being co-opted, with the consequent danger that they will lose their legitimacy.

Resolving internal conflicts over resource management requires an understanding that communities are divided along lines of wealth, generation and gender, and according to whether or not members have been displaced and their involvement in different political regimes. These differences can affect actors' positions over natural resource management and outcomes of resulting conflicts. Exclusion of informal institutions may deprive certain sections of the community of their rights. A more constructive approach needs to consider means of addressing priorities of various societal categories and to promote a more genuine collaboration between formal and informal institutions.

Conflicts between local and external interests over natural resources are based on different values. Peasants in South Wello are most concerned about sustaining their livelihoods through strategies in which livestock, and therefore pasture, play a key role, whereas external actors have perceived communal pasturelands as wasted, empty or undeveloped. External actors have been concerned primarily with bare hillsides, which peasants view as vital grazing resources. These conflicts can only be addressed if the state recognizes local communities' rights to traditional management of common resources. Although this is acknowledged in the Ethiopian Forestry Action Program (1994) and in the Conservation Strategy of Ethiopia (1997), there is limited evidence of such an approach in practice.

Relations between informal institutions and formal state organizations have been characterized by mutual suspicion. Apart from a brief period of transition at the end of the Derg period and in the early EPRDF years, when local institutions were given some authority to manage resources, state institutions have tended to control access to resources. Attempts by donors to promote participatory natural resource management by involving local institutions have been viewed with mistrust by government bodies. State collaboration with burial associations and religious leaders in forest management limits their involvement to cursing tree cutting and identifying offenders, a role that can threaten their legitimacy with local populations. What has tended to occur is either the exclusion or the co-optation of local informal leadership.

Children collecting dung from Gimba grazing area

A more conciliatory approach towards informal institutions requires formulating joint management practices, involving local communities in benefit and revenue sharing. However, this assumes a change of government attitudes and a commitment to participatory resource management that needs to go beyond public statements. Ironically, the government is promoting decentralization, but this is occurring in ways that bypass local informal institutions. What might be required is a new recognition of the existence and significance of such institutions. Given the prevailing scepticism among many government professionals, a participatory approach would need emphasis in training programmes.

The vital importance of pasture resources to peasant communities needs to be recognized by external agents, and hillside reforestation should not be seen as an overriding end in itself. Outsiders have often misread the landscape, assuming that treeless hills were wastelands in ecological distress. Instead, they are heavily used local pastures. Potential threats of private investment and urban expansion to peasant livelihoods and survival strategies need to be acknowledged, and local communities should stand to benefit directly from external investment, which should include specific advantages for them.

In conclusion, current realities in the study area provide little evidence that participatory natural resource management is being implemented. A shift in state views on community involvement through informal institutions would be required to give natural resource management conflict resolution better chances of success.

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