

Environmental, social and economic problems in the Borkena plain, Ethiopia

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A note on Ethiopian names:

Following Ethiopian practice and the logic of names, please quote and list this author as **Berhanu**, not under his second name. The author's name is Berhanu, - Gutema is his father and Balcha his grandfather.

INTRODUCTION

People in the study area, the surrounding of Borkena plain, suffer from a complex interplay of environmental degradation, population growth, ethnic and religious conflicts, and related social tensions. But the most depressing problem in their life situation is that they can not find a way out of the downward spiral of resource scarcity and conflict. They are not given any chance to get involved themselves in actively searching of solutions specific to their problems. The advise they can get from their authorities, is not taking into account the complexity of their social situation, and consequently can not solve their problems.

Neither the land reform of 1975, nor the ecological campaigns of the 1980s, the police interference in the 1960s, the troops in the 1990s, nor the land distribution of 1997 could solve the root problems of environmental and social degradation in the area. All of these measures were imposed from above, and interfered in the social fabric to cure just one of the different symptoms. They tried to solve the land issue or the problems of violence or erosion or deforestation – but none of them approached the full spectre of local problems in their complex interrelations. In particular, none of these measures considered the local people as actors and active agents in finding a lasting solution with which they could agree.

The study shows, in a living example, that a solution to complex natural and social problems can only be found if the people actively seize the opportunity to integrate all aspects of **their** own life adaptation. Such a solution can not be only technically administered but has to be also negotiated by the local people in a process of dialogue. Only the active participation in negotiation can give people a consciousness of local ownership, of responsibility for being themselves the initiators, builders and guarantors of peace and a distribution, use and protection of scarce resources to the benefit of themselves.

Technical advise can be necessary as an input in such a process. But it has to be integrated in a wholistic solution with the interests of the local people. A local negotiation asks for compromise, demands a dialogue which takes care of all individuals' and groups' interests, rights and dignity as members of a community. A solution imposed from above will not succeed, because it does not allow the people to develop that feeling of ownership and responsibility which is needed for them to adopt and carry out and protect it as **their** solution.

1. CONCEPTION AND FIELDWORK

This study is based on material collected as part of my studies for the M.A. degree at [Aalborg University](#) in Denmark. The research interest in the area goes back to 1997 when I worked in [evaluation and redesigning of World Vision's Antsokia I Area Development Programme in Magete area](#). When this experience later was confronted with earlier reports about recurrent ethnic conflict and ecological and land problems Around Majete area (Pausewang 1983: 67, 96, 129-135), a set of questions became prolific: Why have all these attempts at solving the conflict failed? Why has the situation in Borkena plain only gone from bad to worse, in spite of repeated concern and interventions from different sides, both from authorities and from NGOs and local initiatives?

I decided to try to get an understanding of how the actors themselves conceive of the problems, and how they explain the apparent failure of development efforts and mediation initiatives. In summer 1999, I decided to re-visit Borkena area to study these questions. With two small grants, one from Heinrich Böll Foundation and one from a programme on "Democracy from Below" at the Christian Michelsen Institute in Bergen, Norway. I spent two months intensive field work, interviewing people and conducting group discussions with elders, farmers, craftsmen and other local groups in the area.

Most of the information in this study was thus collected during two months of fieldwork in September to November 1999. As the research interest was in finding causal relations and identifying the conflicting interests and positions of different actors, the field work did not aim at statistical representativeness, but rather at problem identification and at the variety of opinions and arguments. Group discussions appeared to be a better tool for such an endeavour than systematic interviews. Groups of farmers, elders, women, traders, craftsmen were identified and involved in individual and group discussions. Concerned officials from the *woreda* agricultural offices, the *woreda* council, the *kebele* and peasant associations were also consulted. In addition, different project documents and other written sources, mostly prepared by the Ministry of Agriculture, were consulted.

References to the fieldwork will in the following be identified according to my field notes from the group and individual discussions, as N (field note) followed by a number. The first digit refers to the source of information. The figure 1 refers to my notes from discussions with local people, such as farmers, elders, and others in Borkena area. 2 refers to interviews and information from officials on *woreda* and peasant association level. The following numbers represent the page number in my fieldnotes. To protect the anonymity of my informants, yet assure the rigid controllability of documentation, I decided not to mention any names nor to refer directly to interviews and group discussions in the text, but identify them only by numbers.

The material used in this study was also used in my thesis in fulfilment of the requirements for the M.A. degree in Development Planning at [Aalborg University](#), Denmark, in August 2000.

2. PHYSICAL, SOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL ENVIRONMENT

2.1 Area description

This study focuses on the people living around the Borkena plain and the highland areas surrounding the plain, namely the people of Antsokia (Mekoy), Gemeza (Magete) and Artuma (Cheffa Robit) areas. The area has been characterised by persistent environmental degradation and ethnic hostility. Amhara and Oromo are the dominant ethnic groups in the area, the Amhara dominating mainly the highlands and the Oromo the lowlands. The Afar also used the area in the past to graze their herds, but after much of the lowland grazing area was converted into agricultural land, they stopped coming there.

Previously the lowland in the river bed was mainly grazing land, but population pressure forced people from the highland to push down into the river plain and to change parts of it into agricultural land. This gradual process of expansion of agriculture into the plains is one of the reasons for conflict between highlanders and lowlanders.

The major environmental problems are deforestation and serious erosion in the highland; flooding and swamping in the lowland. Because of high erosion in the highlands, the soil has become much less fertile. As a side effect of erosion in the highlands, the lowland is exposed to storm-flooding, especially in the rainy season.

In 1984/85 a severe drought occurred in the area. The people survived thanks to massive food aid from governmental and non-governmental agencies. According to the people, the situation has become even worse during a period of three years after the drought. Food distribution had all but ceased, but productivity was reduced due to lack of working force and draught oxen, seeds and, not least, social coherence and cooperation. Many peasants mentioned that people were forced to migrate to towns due to land shortage and lack of employment in the farms.

More recently, erratic rain also repeatedly has destroyed crops in the field. Recently food shortages have occurred more regularly in a growing number of rural families. Food aid has been distributed to selected households, both by government authorities and by NGOs.

Moreover, there had been frequent fighting between the Christian highlanders and the Muslim lowlanders. The elders explain that the starting cause of the conflict might have been of religious origin, having started at the time of Ahmed Gragn expansion (the Muslim king seeking to expand Islam into Ethiopia in the 16th century). The enmity has been inherited from generation to generation (N1029). There are strong indications that land right issues also contributed and exacerbated the conflict.

2.2 Deforestation

The deforestation rate has been very high, and local elders insist that the vegetation cover of the hills is severely reduced. Population pressure and failing agricultural income are main factors for this. The more family members, the more difficult it is to feed the family from

agricultural income on a small plot. So people see no alternative but collecting or cutting wood from the state owned forstes, to sell it for a supplementary income (N1039).

Some historians have recently challenged the unspecified claims that forest cover has been reduced. They frown at the often repeated figure of 40 % of the highland areas having been covered by forests at the beginning of the century, being reduced to (locally varying) small fractions of that figure. They question what degree of shrub cover is called a forest, and how much of forest thinning would constitute deforestation. And they show historical documents indicating forests naturally re-claiming agricultural land, as well as conscious human efforts at re-forestation (McCann 1997)

While agreeing that one can not take at face value the elders' claim that "all this area was covered by forest some 30 years ago", we still believe there is no evidence to prove the elders wrong who report a considerable degree of deforestation in the highlands above the Borkena plains, and even on the hills east of it. Figures or illustrations given may not be exact statistical data. But there can hardly be any doubt that a reduction of forest cover in the highlands has contributed significantly to erosion problems in the plains.

Long time residents of the area explained that four decades ago, also much of the area east of the river plain was covered by forest. Plantations were started by a white man who cleared the forests. He leased the land from the Crown Prince (N1007). According to the resident: "The forest was full of devils, no one went into the forest. But the white man who had the ability to kill the devil had cleared the area and started plantation" (N1007). At that time there were fewer farmers in the highland area and the lowland areas were left for grazing.

The plantation cleared by two Italian investors is also mentioned in Pausewang (1983: 96). According to this source, the then Crown Prince, Asfa Wossen Haile Selassie, went around 1960 into a "joint venture" with the Italians, bringing in as his share 80 gasha land (ca. 32 square km) belonging to his "gult" (that is, he had an inherited right to collect part of the produce of this land, but not the primary user rights). The Italians brought in the necessary machinery, cleared the land and started commercial grain production. The Oromo people (lowlanders) using the land for grazing, for fuelwood collecting, and partly as agricultural land, were evicted and had to find their livelihood somewhere else. Once the farm started making profits, Asfa Wossen demanded his share. When the Italians disagreed because of demanding needs for further investments, he used his authority as governor of Wollo - which he otherwise only executed through a depute - and had the barns closed, sealed by police, in the hope to bankrupt his own company and take over the machinery at no cost. The case lingered on until the revolution of 1974 forced Asfa Wossen into exile and the farm was nationalised and became a state farm.

The case shows in a nutshell how not only population growth can reduce the land resources available for peasants, but also the development of the productive potential and the establishment of commercial farms. No doubt the land was put into far more productive use by growing grains, instead of grazing and wood collecting. However, all the people who had previously depended on this land for their livelihood, had to find a new place, mostly with relatives living on the already overcrowded land outside the farm development area. The new

farm did employ agricultural workers, but they were mostly brought in from other parts of the country and depended totally on the farm project.

The case shows further that deforestation is not only a result of peasants' interference with nature. Also the productive development of land demands forest areas. When such a project does not employ those people who depend on the area for their livelihood, it increases pressure on the remaining forest land, even disproportional to the land cleared for farm development: people may feel compelled to exploit the communal or state owned forests even more to compensate for the loss of agricultural opportunities.

Especially around the downfall of the Derg in 1991, there was heavy deforestation. The protected forests were considered government property, so everybody took part in cutting trees for sale, household firewood and for construction. Farmers took wood to the nearby towns like Kemissie and Magete, and also to the Addis-Dessie main road for sale.

Before 1998 the hills were considered government land without proper protection. Since then the hills have been divided up between individual farmers for tree planting purposes. Tree plantation in the hand of the government has failed miserably earlier, and even plantations in collective ownership of the rural communities were not spared from immediate devastation as soon as the Derg government fell. Peasants just simply wanted their land, confiscated from them, back. In line with present liberal philosophy, private reforestation appeared the solution. Farmers got 25 by 50 metres each (1/8 of a ha) of land on the nearest hill (N1002). The farmers were granted certificates - which they consider as ownership - by specifying the use of the plots for tree planting and not grazing or agriculture. To do so would mean loss of ownership of the land. Without approval from the local office of the Ministry of Agriculture trees could not be cut, but the land would not be taxed for seven years. The hills are slowly covering up with trees in some areas, but on a small scale. The paradox is that these farmers - as they see it - have ownership certificates for the land in the hills but not for their farmland nor even their residential areas.

Actually, the Constitution clearly states in Article 40 that rural and urban land is the property of the State. Consequently, farmers can not **own** the land - but they can be given secure and inheritable user rights. If they conceive of a written contract to that end as ownership, they are legally wrong but socially justified. In the context of the constitutional provisions, they have ownership rights over the trees they plant on that land, and have a long term user right to the land itself, as long as they stick to the terms of the contract.

Higher income farmers have shown some effort to develop the hills, whereas the poorer farmers show less effort, because they have more pressing needs to support their families in times of food shortage. Frustration is evident, because tree planting has not solved the immediate problem of feeding the families. The only benefit farmers get from the protected hills is grass that they are allowed to cut for their livestock.

What type of trees to plant is another point of disagreement. People prefer the eucalyptus tree which matures in three years and has a great market demand. But the Ministry advises them to

plant indigenous trees instead. These take twenty years to mature. The people want quick economic benefits that will solve immediate problems. Therefore the distribution of the hills for private reforestation has created new conflicts and frustrations. Given the peasants' experience with reforestation and state interference, it is understandable that peasants fear they might once again be deprived of the fruit of their work.

2.3 Erosion and Flooding

The plain has been flooded frequently. Flooding has intensified in the past three years, especially in the rainy months of June, July and August. According to the community the main reason for the flooding is the deforestation and altering of watercourses due to improper land use practices in the highland areas. The forest cover of the hills was cleared in the demand for more agricultural land and need for income supplementation by selling wood.

The communities propose drainage constructions to solve the flooding problem. Manpower is readily at hand, but people request technical support like heavy machinery and know how. To go with this they request experts to consult. They want the experts to listen to them – since they know the problem from experience and are able to give valuable information from life long knowledge of the area.

One example mentioned is an effort made in the mid-1990s by the local agricultural office to construct small-scale drainage works in the Borkena River. A committee of elders was established to advise the construction. But the elders were never given a chance to get involved in decision making. The experts presented their plan and the work was done according to it, without any deviation. The committee was established for the sake of formality. It was not given any authority to challenge or change any decision of the experts. The elders complained that they did not want nominal roles for formalities, but real decision making power and negotiating roles (N1041). The construction was carried out but brought no solution.

The people tried on their own to stopp the floods by constructing check-dams and small drainage constructions. But the magnitude of the problem is beyond their control. They have requested government support and repeatedly reported on the situation. But they got no response. They said tree planting had to be supplemented by drainage construction in the lowland areas. They know that, at best, it would take long time to control the situation.

In the Borkena Plain, a large area of farm land was littered with boulders and stones coming down from the hills after erosion damages and storm flooding. Many farmers lost their farm land, and the problem also expanded to nearby areas. As the river changes its course, partly because of these boulders, new areas are exposed to deposits. Besides, farmers have to over-exploit their remaining fields if parts are lost due to the stones (N1043).

Land slides are another major problem. Especially in one *kebele* in the highland area, hazardous land slides occur frequently, affecting a large number of households. This problem has halted agricultural production for three years.

2.4 Social consequences

At present farmers are aware that they are in a serious situation and need help to replace their damaged crops. Without assistance from the government, many peasants will be forced to sell off plough oxen so vital for future agricultural activities.

Many farmers are getting desperate and saying that if it is not possible to solve the flooding problem, they would prefer resettling in other places, rather than to suffer on there.

Many people have already been forced to migrate to nearby towns like Magete and Mekoy, temporarily or even permanently to make a living as daily labourers. Some farmers just disappear and leave their families.

Distribution of food aid has started in the area. The woreda administration has confirmed the problem, but declared to be unable to do anything about it but to report to their superiors (N2070).

The local community has demanded to get a chance to resettle wherever place is available, even in more remote areas. The higher authorities have stressed the point that resettlement in a different regional state is not possible in the present system of federal government (N 2160). The community feels left without any solution.

3. LAND TENURE

3.1 The land distribution of 1997

According to estimates of the community and the agricultural office, the majority of the farmers in the area have only in average 0,5 to 1 ha. of land, and many families have no land at all. Landlessness is estimated at 30 to 50 percent in different parts of the area (N2075).

In 1997, a land redistribution was carried out. Efforts were made to give land to families without land. Land being the most scarce resource from before, it had to be taken from someone. The redistribution hinged on the assumption that some people had benefitted illegally and unduly from their cooperation with the Derg regime. It thus decided to take the land to be redistributed from farmers who were considered to have benefitted illegally or due to their social position and to have received more land than their due share during the past governments. These people were identified as bureaucrats and feudal remnants.

The term *bureaucrat* was used to describe those serving under the Derg regime as members of local administrations and party members (See the chapter by Svein Ege in this book). Those who had served as chairmen or secretaries of the **earstwhile** peasant associations (*gebere mahber*) had indeed sometimes been able to get more land or more fertile plots than other farmers. But nobody bothered to find out how much land each individual family had actually

acquired through misuse of their positions. As a rule these people were restricted to get only 1 ha. of land. The remaining parts of their land was confiscated and redistributed to peasants without land.

The term *feudal remnant* described peasants with access to more than 3ha. land, as well as relatives of the former feudal class that had lost most of their land in the 1975 rural land reform. This group was allowed to keep up to 3 ha. land. According to the rules every farmer could get up to 3 ha., but land shortage did not make it possible to grant this much except to very few farmers (N2074).

The 1997 land redistribution process was carried out through peasant cadres, nominated from the peasant associations (the lowest administrative unit in the rural areas). These cadres took part in meetings set up by the authorities to discuss the procedures and formalities about the land redistribution. After the meetings the cadre returned to their areas and presented the resolution to the farmers. A land redistribution committee was elected. It conducted its deliberations in total isolation from the community, to avoid any interfering influence. Then the committee presented their final decision on how much land each family was allowed to retain (See the chapter by Svein Ege). The confiscated land was distributed by a kind of lottery. Due to the land shortage, distribution created considerable potential for conflict, but by leaving the decision on distribution to the lottery, the cadres could diffuse some of the feelings of resentment and revenge from themselves (N2057).

The lottery system was preferred to avoid controversies when distributing more fertile land. It was arranged on priority bases. First priority was given to farmers who had many children. Second priority was given to married couples. Lastly those over the age of 25 were given land. Widows and divorcees with children were also given priority. Only people who had lived in the area for five years or more were considered in the land redistribution (N2058).

Some widows and divorcees got land. But due to traditional views that women do not till the land, they rather lease off the land or hire landless peasants to cultivate their land for a fifty/fifty share of the harvest.

Many rich farmers complained that the land they lost in the redistribution had been acquired with hard work and it was unjust to take it from them. Some farmers said they had in good will bought the land from farmers leaving the area. Consequently they feel the redistribution is an irrational measure and is destructive to initiative and punishes hard work(1059).

The group of people classed as "bureaucrats" also complained, saying that not all of them had benefited from their past positions. In the actual redistribution, the bureaucrats were allowed to retain only 1 ha. However, the authorities claim that there are no policy decisions restricting the land holdings for "bureaucrats" to 1 ha. They claim that local level administrations made such decisions by taking into consideration the fertility of the land these people possessed (N2161).

Using the land as collateral for loan credits, where the lender holds the land till the borrower pays back the sum, has a long tradition (1061). Usually it takes up to two or three years to pay

back. In some cases debtors are unable to pay back and so the land remains the property of the lender. Technically there is no legal recognition of this form of ownership, since selling of land is illegal by the law.

3.2 Conflict on land in the lowlands

In the lowlands there has been conflict between lowland pastoralists and highland farmers about the use of the land. The pastoralists used the land seasonally. The farmers in the hills needed new fertile land due to land shortage in the highlands. The highland peasants started already around 1960 expanding their farming activities to lowland areas near the escarpment.

Population pressure made fertile land in the highlands scarce. Also much land was taken by new residential compounds for newly married couples establishing families. According to tradition, when a young man marries he is allowed to construct a house on the land of the parents.

The productivity in the highland has also decreased due to erosion. This problem pushed an expansion by the highlanders into the lowland areas, traditionally used for grazing. The pastoralists used the land seasonally, moving to adjacent areas when the present area was unable to support their herds, and returning again after the grassland had regenerated. This is a system used through generations. However, every time they returned, more land had been converted to farmland (Pausewang, 1983: 129). This led to frequent fighting that had more than once to be stopped by troops of successive governments.

The central government always favoured settled agriculture. The pastoralists had little decisive leverage to protect themselves from losing more land. Commonly pastoralism was seen as backward and unproductive and the pastoralists were advised to go into settled agriculture. The pastoralists were not convinced, having survived this way for generations, and continued their way of life by moving eastwards on the Afar plain. This move brought them into conflict with the Afar people, also pastoralists struggling to survive in a limited grassland area.

4. SOCIAL RELATIONS

4.1 Ethnic and religious differences

In the area most Oromo are Muslim of faith, while the Amhara predominantly practice Christianity, though some Amhara follow Islam. It is a common misconception to not recognise Muslim Amhara as Amhara. The Muslim Amhara claim that their ancestors were converted to Islam at the time of the Ahmed Grawn expansion. They are happy to preserve their Muslim identity and their relationship to the Muslim Oromo. The Oromo emphasise that they give priority to the religious similarities rather than to ethnic differences (N1029).

There are cultural similarities between the Muslim Amhara and the Muslim Oromo. The Muslim Amhara interact more easily with the Oromo than the **with the** Christian Amhara. Intermarriage between these two ethnic groups has occurred since a long time (N1030). But land rights have caused numerous conflicts after the recent fall of the *Durg*. The Muslim Amhara farmland in the lowlands had previously been used as grazing land for the Oromo. The community described the renewed conflict after 1991 as having been instigated by political parties propagating radical nationalism. In the **1990s** EPRDF forces **frequently** interfered and halted the violent conflict. Following this a reconciliation process was attempted. Elders from both communities were elected to mediate. The cadres also set up sensitisation and agitation programmes (N1030).

In some cases marriage between the religious groups has taken place, where one part of the couple agreed to change his/her religion. Both communities recognise that Christian Amhara more easily change their religion to marry the Muslim partner. The community described the reason as being that the land (in the low land) occupied by the Muslim Oromo was more fertile and productive than the highland areas occupied by the Christian Amhara. After changing religion the Christian part easily moves into the Muslim area (N1029).

The relations between the Oromo and the Christian Amhara have for a long time been filled with conflicts. In the past there were widespread killings between the two groups (See Pausewang, 1983: 130). Religion might have been part of the cause. However land right issues and traditional practices fuelled and exacerbated the enmity. There had been a practice of decorating and respecting the killers. Both groups called them heroes and killers of the enemy. The killers also were preferred by the girls for marriage because of the heightened social status attached to them. The wife of a killer was respected by the community, she would have priority in fetching water. Also the herds of a killer would have priority to water. The killings only targeted men, not women. The killing of a member of the opposite religious group was seen as an easier way of getting into heaven (N1032).

At present the tension has been reduced after interference by the federal army. The administrative bodies showed a strong commitment to bring the killers to justice. When there is a killing in an area, the community is required to expose the killer. The people are forced to comply. Otherwise they may be denied access to social services like health, education, market and transport services. The practice of *Guma* (local word for paying compensation to the victim's family) has been extended to the inter-tribal conflict (N2097).

Periods with power vacuums seem to trigger the conflict. An absence of firm law and order brings out the feeling that the conflict might intensify again. The authorities have tried reconciliation between the antagonists through the elders and cadres. The process is like the stick and carrot approach. A sensitisation programme was carried out by ridiculing the killings as backward practice. At the same time, the guilty killers have been executed in public (N1033).

4.2 The status of women

A significant numbers of widows and divorcees live in the area. They are mostly engaged in local bars, or they are selling wood and doing petty trading activities.

Generally women have less land than men, and have more difficulties in getting land or holding on to it. Particularly in case of divorce, women have problems getting or dividing land. Especially in the Muslim community, such discrimination is justified by referring to their religious laws. In the Muslim community, when a marriage breaks up the woman leaves it without a share in anything. In most cases she goes back to her parents, or she may go to the nearest town looking for work. In the 1997 land redistribution process, it was set as a rule that the women should get their share of the land at the time of the divorce. But the Muslim communities in the area very reluctantly follow this rule. They say they respect the rule as far as it does not contradict their religious laws (N1035). The women too are reluctant to ask for land division, mainly due to social and religious pressures. They fear being accused of revolting against religion if they insist in applying a rule that others consider being against their religious law. In contrast, in the Christian communities it is observed that women are starting to get their share of the land (N2099).

In the Muslim community the divorce process itself favours the man, giving him the right to divorce at any time he wants. For the woman divorce on similar terms is impossible unless the man agrees to it.

Early marriage, between the ages 12 and 13, is widely practised in the area. The communities claim it is better for the girls to get married at a young age rather than to wait longer. Waiting longer increases the risk that the girl gets pregnant due to sex before marriage (N1038).

The communities around Magete were unhappy with present low marriage rates. They consider that poverty is the main reason which prevents the young men from marrying as practised before. Previously forced marriage was pervasive in the area, but is now illegal and strict law enforcement has reduced the problem.

4.3 Craftsmen

A few craftsmen in the area produce farm tools like ploughs and sickles. The farmers affirm that they have traditionally relied upon these craftsmen for their tools. Tools from the market are manufactured in factories and are not as strong as the locally produced ones, though light and easy to use (N1065). If people buy the tools from the market, they bring them to the craftsmen for improvements.

The local craftsmen do not have enough capacity to satisfy the demand for new tools and equipment. The handicraftsmen are continuing to use their traditional productive tools. They have no access to credit, loans or training that would allow them to buy modern blacksmithing equipment to increase their production capacities.

Their role is diminishing mainly because of competition from cheap industrial products (Pausewang, 1983: 71). At one time FAO distributed free farm tools in the area. The craftsmen stopped producing tools for a considerable time (N1065).

Though craftsmen are valuable to their communities, their social status is traditionally very low. For an Amhara or Oromo boy, marriage relations with the daughter of a blacksmith is not acceptable in the community. The community views craftsmen as culturally inferior, mainly because of their crafting knowledge. There is a misconception about portraying the ancestors of the craftsmen as inferior human beings or as *bariea* (the Amharic word for slave) (N1064). There are also other misconceptions about blacksmiths having the "evil eye" or having close relations to evil spirits or to the devil.

5. AGRICULTURAL SUPPORTS AND PROJECTS

5.1 Advise to farmers

The local office of the Ministry of Agriculture gives advice and training on agriculture, forestry, soil conservation and other related subjects. It uses lectures, discussions and extension services. The agricultural extension agents or development agents give their assistance to groups of farmers and individual peasants.

The office felt that peasants are very reluctant to adopt new methods and techniques (N2074). But peasants respond that some of the advice is not helpful for them. The main controversial issue is the use of fertilisers. Peasants claim they found no difference in yield with or without fertiliser. In some cases farmers not using fertilisers got better yields, they claim (N1047).

Agricultural experts also indicated that it is not advisable to use fertiliser in areas where frequent moisture stress is typical. No detailed studies were carried out to identify the appropriate types of fertilisers for the area. Instead, the same fertilisers have been used in all areas (N2070).

5.2 Indebtedness

The farmers who use fertilisers claim it indebted them periodically. They got fertilisers on credit. In most cases they have been forced to accept fertilisers on loan and to apply them on their land. So when crops fail or are damaged (as happens frequently) the loss is double. They are required to pay back the loans regardless of their yield, and sometimes the farmers who lack the money are imprisoned until they repay their loans. They confirmed that some farmers have had to sell their farm oxen to pay off debts for fertilisers (N1047).

The agricultural authorities make a strong point that farmers should pay their debts. They insist that the motive is not to punish them, but to change the farmers' perception to the credit system (N2161). There has been a widespread conception that government credits would not have to be paid back. The authorities believe that annulling the credit loans would weaken the efficiency of the credit system the next time.

During the last few years, food shortage has become critical, and food aid had been distributed to selected families. Priority has been given to farmers without cattle. This approach was resented by other farmers, because they feel they are tacitly encouraged to sell off their farm oxen in order to buy food. Farm oxen are the most valuable assets for the peasants for starting farming activities when the rain comes. The authorities on the other hand defend their position by referring to limited food stocks. When there is not enough to feed all, they give priority to those who are the most vulnerable (N2161).

5.3 Training

The agricultural office also faced problems related to training activities. They believe it was a mistake to introduce money payments to attending farmers. The extension officers expressed that most farmers were more attracted to the programmes by the payment rather than the courses. They feared that without cash payment, future programmes will be hard to organise.

In most cases trainees were selected by the chairman of the peasant association. Corrupt practices have been observed in selecting trainees. Some farmers have complained that only those with close relations to the administrative group have access to training because of the economic benefit attached to the training (N2074). Such practice, and indeed a conception of agricultural training as a financial benefit, is going to harm the reputation of the Ministry as well as the practical application of training results.

6. IS THERE A LOCAL SOLUTION?

6.1 The problem

According to the study findings, the major problems in the area can be categorised in environmental and social aspects. Environmental degradation has been manifested in deforestation, high erosion, water logging and flood-storms. This environmental degradation has caused persistent food insecurity and absolute poverty. In turn, the prevailed poverty has

also exacerbated the environmental problem. Impositions of different environmental protection and development packages have not brought any apparent results. In social aspect, there has been continuous ethnic hostility that has led to frequent fighting. Religious and land right issues are explained as the major factors. The interference of the central authority has only helped in stopping the fight but it has not helped in bringing lasting solution for the on-going hostility.

The environmental problem in the area has been conditioned and affected by the existing ethnic tension, in related effect the existing poverty situation has also exacerbated the environmental and ethnic problem. Any measure that would be designed to bring improvement in the area, therefore, should take an integrated approach to tackle the environment, ethnic and land right issues.

6.2 Conflict and environmental development

As it is explained in part I of this study that there had been frequent conflict in the area. People say that the root causes for the conflict are religious and ethnic. But indirectly, their witness indicates that behind it there is a fierce competition for land. If measures are available to solve the problem associated with the land right, it can be possible to reconcile religious conflicts. It is observed that people are willing to shift religion and to enter cross-ethnic marriages, especially to have better access to land. The major question lies, therefore, how to resolve the land issues.

In relation to conflict about land that the lowland pastoralists felt that they had lost their grazing land without justice, so they expressed their resentment by using violent means. Religious difference also gave them an impetus to justify their action. Whereas, the highlanders faced with land degradation and land shortage felt that it was rational in survival ground to utilize the lowland area, which was used by pastoralists seasonally. Nevertheless, the lowland area has not assured survival, as it was expected. High erosion and frequent flooding from the surrounding highland areas have hindered the proper utilisation of the land. Hence, thus both communities have been bogged down in lose-lose situation.

The problems of land degradation and land right issue are linked, and it seems difficult to solve the latter without addressing the former. It might be difficult to solve some issues such as conflict about land in the present situation. In situation where the majority of the people have less than 1ha of farmland, it is unlikely to solve the problem through land distribution process. Frequent land distribution measures have created ownership insecurity and this brought hindrance for individuals' land enhancement activities. Besides, it also aggravated land fragmentation and social tension in the area. Redistributing the land by taking it from other peasants have created another contradiction in the community. The Land Redistribution process was not carried out in the interest of the communities. The people are not consulted or debated on whether land redistribution is needed or not. It was decided by the authorities and the resolution was presented to the people only to accept it. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

There may be possibilities to solve the land issues in the area by reclaiming much of the wasteland and by adopting improved agricultural practices. The area has potential of water and

vast irrigable land. Few peasants have started irrigation agriculture and achieved better results. This is an indication that there is a possibility to utilise the wasteland, given the right development approaches and commitment.

If the productivity of the land enhanced, the land may be adequate for both communities. Land enhancement programme should be directed in solving the flooding and soil erosion problems in the lowland and highland areas respectively.

At present, afforestation activities are started by planting trees in the hills. The experts have believed that this measure will improve the erosion as well as the flooding problems. Nevertheless, the measures did not have wider acceptance by the people mainly for three reasons. First, the people are continuing planting Eucalyptus tree, which is not accepted by the experts. It is also precisely believed that Eucalyptus will harm the land. However, the people believed that they will get quick results from Eucalyptus. Second, the people are not mostly interested in the long term results while their immediate survival is in question; they are not convinced that whether they will be benefited, or not. Third, the people felt that their crucial problem at the present, that is food shortage, has been neglected. They are hungry, but told to plant trees.

An open debate in which poor peasants participate on equal level with experts, might bring the possible alternatives. For example, the peasants might understand the long term value of preserving a forest of indigenous trees, but also devote some part of the hills to eucalyptus, for the sake of income for short term survival. After that, it might become possible to divide the forests in a way that every family receives some tangible benefits. Once solution is found by the local participation, there is a better chance the people will implement it and also defend it. Forests will survive even without political powers to protect it.

The above points clearly indicate that the concerned people are not part of the decision process. The experts want to implement solutions based on their assumptions and knowledge. They did not accommodate the interests and priorities of the people. In such situation it is very unlikely to expect improvement and success.

But no technically perfect solution will work unless people are allowed to actively develop a sense of security: protection against arbitrary decisions that violate their rights. A sense of responsibility: a duty to find solutions for their problems. A feeling of ownership: to have an agreed solution, and to carry it out. A sense of belonging: to be a member of the community that made this solution. And a sense of rights: Nobody can take this responsibility, this membership, and this security from them.

6.2 Dialogue, empowerment and development

It is most important to start improvement an improvement measure in the area through the initiation of the concerned people. If the people are convinced that the process is going in accordance with their best interest, they can easily mobilise their action to bring change and improvement. The preferred measure should be arrived through consultation and dialogue with the people. The people should indicate their solution how can they best utilize the hills, how can they solve the flooding and soil erosion, how can they solve their immediate problems with ensuring their long term advantages.

The experts can help in explaining the advantages and disadvantages of different measures in the form of debate. The experts might bring good solutions, but the most important factor is how the people perceive such solutions. The people might not mobilise their action, unless they are convinced and believed that the measures will solve their problems. If no willingness by the people then, the whole effort will be wasted

6.3 A new approach

At present most of agricultural and environmental support projects are carried out by the local office of Ministry of Agriculture through development agents. The approach is in most cases characterised in top-down style. The development agents tried to persuade the peasants to change their traditional farming practices and to adopt new measures and practices. However, no noticeable success has been achieved so far. Because, the agents are mainly imposing ideas and measures that have been designed by the experts. In such case, no room is existed to accommodate the priority and interests of the people. To improve this situation it is necessary to change the role of the development agent by making them an agent of facilitation and consultation. It is essential to make them an agent for promoting local interests and decisions. The development agents should become accountable to the people. To help this process, it is vital to give the people a chance to select their own development agents from their area. In such case, it is easy to build trust and confidence. In addition to this, it is also essential to consider the method which the development agents have been trained. If they trained in top-down style, such as teacher-to-student type of relationship, it is also likely that they follow the same style when they are doing their job. This damages their relationship with the community.

There is also another possibility in promoting local participation through the civic education programme. The programme can establish a discussion forum for debating on local problems and solutions. The approach should not be to introduce new concepts and ideas, but to start with the people's existential knowledge, values and history. If so, it can become very easy to have wider participation of the people. The people can discuss about the environmental, agricultural, ethnic and religious issues, and other related subjects to their area. This will help to find local solution for local problems and encourage the people to take proper action to improve their situation. This is the only available way to bring change and improvement in the area.

With such a starting position, it may be easier for the peasants to establish a new way of organising their own efforts and initiatives. But at the end, success will only be possible if peasants are empowered to decide for themselves on the path they want to go to solve their lasting problems. Outsiders can help to keep their dialogue informed. They need a lot of knowledge, on techniques available and on their side effects, on conditions at other places, on successes and failures, on how their action influences and in turn is dependent upon actions taken at other places, on laws and on resources available, and much more. But at the end, local democracy is the only way to make a success of their efforts possible. It may not guarantee success. But at least, from our material we can easily see that without such empowerment it is not possible to reach there at all.

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Summary

People in Borkena in Ethiopia suffer from a complex interplay of environmental degradation, increasing shortage of land due to population growth, conflicts between different ethnic and religious identities, and social confrontations as a result of such tensions. The most depressing problem is that they can not find a way out of the downward spiral of resource scarcity and conflict. And the authorities do not give them any chance to get involved themselves in actively searching for solutions specific to their complex problems. All they get is orders, and plans which are designed from above and do not take into account their experience about the complexity of their social situation, and consequently can not solve their problems.

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