

Twenty Years to Nowhere: Property Rights, Land Management and Conservation in Ethiopia

By Yeraswork Admassie, Yeraswork

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Preface

This study focuses on Ethiopia's attempt at introducing soil conservation and afforestation innovations aimed at reversing the process of degradation of its agricultural resource-base. It considers the tenure ambiguity, uncertainty, and insecurity stemming from the state ownership of land under which these innovations were attempted. It tells the story of how rural people responded to the project-induced adoption of measures to protect the land even though their holdings remained under a constant threat of reallocation. This story concerns issues arising from over-population, revolution, agrarian reform, population relocation, land reallocations, internationally financed projects, and not least, civil war.

Questions of soil conservation and afforestation, and land tenure are issues of fundamental importance to the millions of rural families in Ethiopia. In fact, in the long-run, they may be more may be as important to the people of several Sahelian and Sub-Saharan African nations that have opted for state ownership of land. The study deals with the variety of ways in which institutional arrangements such as property rights regimes directly and indirectly influence the outcome of attempts at externally inducing innovations, and contribute in defeating the intentions of planners as well as their new strategies. In this study, I take exception to a good part of what the soil conservation and afforestation program in Ethiopia has done; but, in no way do I wish to question the personal motives of the overwhelming majority of the people that worked for it.

The present work is a cumulative product of my involvement with the study of the social aspects of environmental degradation and conservation issues spanning over the past 12 years. In the course of this period, I have been involved in a number of studies looking at different socio-economic aspects of soil conservation and afforestation in Ethiopia and, to a small extent, also in Kenya (see references).

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Editorial Review

From the Back Cover

The point of departure of this work is the problem of introducing soil conservation and innovations in afforestation on a sustainable basis in rural Ethiopia. This book attempts to answer why a major conservation program introduced and implemented in Ethiopia during the twenty years of the Derg regime failed to induce the changes in land use and management practices that it sought to bring about, and why it was not sustained by indigenous farmers.

The search for an explanation of the failure of the program-induced adoption of soil conservation and innovations in afforestation focuses on four areas: the existence or absence of indigenous conservation-oriented land use and management, the manner in which the program was implemented, the balance sheet of its benefits and short-comings, and the property rights conditions under which the program was promoted. The contribution of this last factor is systematically examined and weighed, separately as well as in conjunction with other factors.

The study concludes that property rights conditions have contributed most to the failure of the program, first by directly undermining farmers' motivation and local institutions; and, secondly, by helping create conditions conducive to the annulment or invalidation of indigenous systems. In addition, property rights conditions led to the emergence and maintenance of a Derg's style of work. The blockage of access to assets generated through a program, and resulted in the loss of a sense of ownership among farmers. A unique contribution of this book is its original perspective for distinguishing between different property rights regimes.

About the Author

Yeraswork Admassie is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology and Social Administration of Addis Ababa University. He received his Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Uppsala. He is currently serving as president of the Ethiopian Society of Sociologists, Social Workers and Social Anthropologists.

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