

## LAND ALLOCATION IN RETURNEE/REFUGEE SETTLEMENTS: A CASE STUDY OF TWO SETTLEMENT SCHEMES IN HUMERA

Kassahun Berhanu\*

*ABSTRACT:* This study examines the different aspects of land allocation in two returnee re-settlement sites in Humera in the light of efforts and strategies aimed at rehabilitating Ethiopian ex-refugees repatriated from Eastern Sudan camps since 1993. Data for the study were collected from a total of 300 returnee households in the Mai-Kadra and Rawyan resettlement schemes by using the survey method. Other sources of pertinent qualitative information on the subject of concern include local government officials and site administrators.

The major objective of the study is to determine whether planned land settlement is a viable strategy for rehabilitating returnees whose background is essentially rural and have practised farming as their major trade prior to flight. The study has established that there are different patterns of land allocation for different categories of actors in the study area. Uniform policy packages were applied for providing access to land resources concerning the resettled returnees regardless of limitations in making use of land resources, and land settlement in areas where adequate public land is available could lead to effective rehabilitation provided this is reinforced by proper planning and coordination. In the light of policy changes regarding resettlement and land allocation that took effect since 1995, the study questions the wisdom of lending primacy to large scale farms at the expense of small-scale production.

### BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

According to widely accepted socio-economic indicators, Ethiopia is designated as one of the least developed countries. Salokoski et al. (1994: 4) summarize the situation as follows: about 60 percent of the people live under a condition of absolute poverty reflected in a per capita income of US\$ 120 (1990 base year).

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\* Ph.D Candidate, Free University of Amsterdam. This is a revised version of a paper originally presented at a workshop on "Access to Land and Resource Management in Ethiopia", Addis Ababa, 28-29 November 1997.

The majority of Ethiopians (80 percent) are engaged in agriculture which is responsible for slightly over 40 percent of GNP.

Peasant production, the mainstay of economic activities in Ethiopia, is responsible for surplus extraction, foreign-exchange earning and government revenue. Notwithstanding this, however, it is characterized by prevalence of small and fragmented holdings, employment of outdated tools and techniques and production mainly aimed at fulfilling consumption requirements rather than the market (Mesfin 1984: 23). It is, therefore, justifiably argued that land remains the most important factor of production whose possession and control is widely believed to ensure livelihood security and a respectable social status.

In Ethiopia, as in many other places in the rest of the world, the state is considered the main repository of influence, wealth and prestige. Such a disposition constituted the major arena of inter-elite struggle and competition tempting those vying for power to put high premium on its control (Mesfin 1992; Daniel 1992; Markakis 1993). It could generally be said that the major protagonists in Ethiopian politics, both prior to and during the revolution, failed to forge consensus on major national concerns. Among these, the issue of access to land resources stands as paramount. This was, in the main, due to the lust for advancing one's own position at the expense of others with utter disregard for effecting a feasible arrangement for compromise. A well-considered and imaginative policy measure in this direction is believed to have paved the way leading to possibilities for averting consequences of a devastating nature experienced in subsequent periods.

The Land Reform of 1975 could be commended for providing equal access to land resources for producers who practice farming as their major trade. Apart from effecting a radical tenure reform, however, the reform proclamation and attendant practice have subjected land resources to repeated acts of redistribution whenever deemed necessary and appropriate. As Dessalegn (1984: 63) argues, this entrenched "... a distributive levelling reform based on a fixed but increasingly diminishing rural asset." Hence insecurity of tenure with adverse effects on productivity and improvement of individual holdings that could have been realized through investments by individual users.

The marked inability of society to withstand the challenges posed by natural adversities, as witnessed during the 1984/85 famine, was rooted in shortcomings of policy and practice with a direct bearing on land use and allocation. The crisis pertaining to the period under discussion took shape despite the Land Reform of 1975 and attendant socio-economic and political measures that dismantled imperial rule anchored on landlordism.

While the Dergue which supplanted imperial rule strove to cope with the threats posed by the armed opposition against its very survival and hegemonic perpetuation, localized food shortages that began to unfold since the late 1970s gathered momentum over time. This culminated in the 1984/85 famine which proved detrimental to societal stability. It is claimed that this episode was more devastating and deadly in terms of territorial magnitude and number of victims affected than those caused by the 1973/74 mass starvation (RRC 1985: 6). Historical accounts on famine occurrences in Ethiopia relate that the first recorded event goes back to the 9th Century (Pankhurst 1992: 25; Sen 1981: 86). Since then, there had been persistent recurrence of the hazard in subsequent periods at short intervals (Mesfin *op.cit.*, Hancock 1985). It is also claimed that most famine episodes witnessed in Ethiopia were often accompanied by extensive migrations in addition to other mishaps which victims were forced to encounter in their localities. Clarke (1986: 39-40) relates that movements of people in the past have occurred in response to famines and conflicts. Besides, the trends of migration have shown that the drought-prone areas coincided with places of origins.

As to the causes, it is argued that though recurrence of famine in Ethiopia is attributed to a variety of factors, the basic explanation lies in the dependence of the system of production of society on the rhythm of nature (Fassil 1990: 3). To this may be added mal-governance, policy failures and harmful social practices as having crucial roles in perpetuating the hazard. As a result, semi-starvation approximating potential famine has always been demonstrably present in rural Ethiopia (Mesfin 1978: 5). Besides, responses to famine occurrences in the past were totally confined to local action displaying passive and spontaneous features.

Hancock (*op.cit.*: 71) affirms that a well-considered government policy with regard to the mitigation of famine has not existed prior to 1974. This could be

one of the reasons that led to the exaction of heavy tolls by famine whenever it strikes.

The alarming proportion assumed by the 1984/85 famine was further reinforced by the increased disposition of the *Dergue* which relegated the art of politics to a zero-sum game. In order to ensure its indefinite perpetuation aimed at shaping a homogenous society congruent with its whims and wills, the intensive application of the machinery of the state for repressive purposes became increasingly attractive to the regime. Hence the resurgence of a crisis-ridden socio-political environment incarnated in raging conflict, devastating famine occurrence, and considerable societal dislocation. The mass exodus of hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians from Tigray, to the Sudan as refugees, should thus be viewed in the light of this. Tsegaye *et al.* (1994: 34) argue that many of those who fled the Tigray region became refugees because of their inability to access internationally-donated food supplies by staying in their home areas controlled by the TPLF. It can also be said that the problem was further exacerbated owing to diminished and marginal land holdings in the highlands which forced the producer to look for other alternatives.

In the face of such odds as recurrent famine, progressive decline in productivity and prevalence of a conflict-ridden situation, hundreds of thousands of people from Tigray and the adjacent regions found migrating to the Sudan a choice without alternative.

Now that the regime that was viewed as the perpetrator of flight is ousted and the famine that reinforced their decision to flee the country has subsided, several thousands of ex-refugees who originated from Tigray were repatriated to their country of origin and resettled in the *Humera* area.

This paper is concerned with the examination of the situation of land allocation in the two resettlement sites. These resettlement sites which have a returnee population of nearly 8000 and 2556 household were singled out for the study. The study focuses on the rehabilitation effort associated with the drives towards realizing self-sufficiency of the returnees and their engagement in agricultural production through planned land settlement. This was undertaken by assessing

the impacts of interventions made by the Ethiopian Government, multi-lateral agencies like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Food Program (WFP), and the Relief Society of Tigray (REST).

The paper has five parts. The first part deals with the background of the problem. Section two discusses the study location, sample population and other sources of data. Section three is a section on resettlement as a strategy for returnee rehabilitation. Section four deals with the policy change pertaining to resettlement and land allocation while section five is the concluding remark.

### **THE STUDY LOCATION, SAMPLE POPULATION AND OTHER SOURCES OF DATA**

The study is based on field work conducted in *Humera* of Western Tigray Zone<sup>2</sup> of Ethiopia. *Humera* is bordered by Eritrea in the north, the Sudan in the West and is located at 267 kms. away from the historic town of Gonder. The area has large tracts of unused public land suitable for agricultural activities. This, among others, made the area attractive for initiating returnee resettlement schemes. Since the last thirty-five years, the locality has earned fame for accommodating several large scale commercial agricultural schemes specializing in the production of cash crops like sesame, cotton and sorghum. Following the events of the 1974 revolutionary upsurge in Ethiopia, these undertakings were disrupted as a result of nationalization measures effected by the *Dergue*.

The nationalized farms were placed under the custody of the then newly created Ministry of State Farms which was made responsible for laying the foundation for planned socialist economic undertakings in agriculture. Thus, state farms replaced private capitalist agriculture previously owned and managed by individual entrepreneurs. It is now an established fact that the state farms in *Humera*, like several others throughout the country, have utterly failed to register success for a variety of reasons like mismanagement, corruption and intensification of insurgent activities. In the immediate aftermath of the unfolding of the revolutionary process, various forces were vying for influence and hegemony in Ethiopian politics with the anticipation of filling the vacuum created by the displacement of the old order. Notable among these and pertinent to

events that have transpired in the study location are the violent confrontations that took place between the Provisional Military Administrative Council (the *Dergue*)<sup>3</sup> and the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU)<sup>4</sup>; the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF)<sup>5</sup> and the EDU; the *Dergue* and the TPLF.

Military confrontations took place between these protagonists that espoused mutually antagonistic orientations and drives as regards the transformation of Ethiopian Society in the post-revolution period. The *Humera* area became one of the battle grounds for the struggles waged between these forces during the initial years persisting at intervals from the mid-1970s to the late 1980s. It is thus worth noting that the escalation of armed confrontation in this area was responsible for the exodus of thousands of people living and working in the locality during the period under discussion. This situation of conflict spilled over to other areas in the subsequent years entailing a significant emigration on a greater scale characterizing the refugee phenomenon as had taken place in the region in general.

The two returnee resettlement schemes in *Humera* that were singled out as the targets of this study are *Mai-Kadra* and *Rawyan*. They host a total of 746 and 1810 returnee households respectively. *Mai-kadra* is 30 kms. away from *Humera* town while *Rawyan* is only 6 kms. away. The *Mai-Kadra* scheme, which is relatively far from the town and located in a relatively remote spot, had 400 inhabitants in about 100 households during the arrival of the returnees while there were no inhabitants (host population) in the immediate vicinity of the *Rawyan* area. Those that could be considered as the host community for the returnee settlers in *Rawyan* are, therefore, the residents of *Humera* town. In *Mai-Kadra*, the majority of the local population was resettled in the area around 1975 by the *Dergue* regime in an attempt to move famine victims from some afflicted regions of Northern Ethiopia to relatively fertile places like *Humera*.

*Humera* was singled out as a suitable place for resettling the returnees in question due to different reasons. These included availability of large tracts of under-utilized public land characterized by fertile soil and sparse population. It was also assumed that the settlements could serve as a buffer from Sudanese encroachment.

A total of 300 returnee household heads, in both sites, were the major sources of data pertaining to this study. They were randomly selected to constitute the sample population in a manner that could amount to at least 10 percent of the total returnee households in each of the settlement sites. Accordingly, 90 household heads constituting 30 percent of the overall sample size and 12 percent of the returnee households in *Mai-Kadra*, and 210 household heads constituting 70 percent of the sample size and 11.6 percent of the returnee households in *Rawyan*, were selected.

Of the 300, 58 households (18 in *Mai-Kadra* and 40 in *Rawyan*) representing 19.3 percent of the overall sample were female-headed. The age range of the majority of respondents (38 percent), in both sites, was between 26 and 35 followed by those in the range of between 36 and 45 (27.7 percent), 46 and 55 (20.7 percent), 56 and 70 (9.7 percent), 20 and 25 (4 percent), in the order of numerical significance. If one assumes the actively productive age-range to be between 18 and 55 years, the age structure of the sample population shows that over 90 percent of the returnee households could be classified under this category.

**Table 1**  
**Number, Sex and Age Range of Respondents by Site**

Site	No. of Respondents			Age Range of Respondents					Total
	Male	Female	Total	20-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56-70	
Mai-Kadra	72	18	90	2	37	20	26	5	90
Rawyan	170	40	210	10	77	63	36	24	210
Total	242	58	300	12	114	83	62	29	300

Source: Household Survey

Most households in both sites (48.3 percent) are reported to have a family size of between 4 and 6. Those with family members of between 1 and 3 are 123 (41

percent). There are only 32 households (10.7 percent of the total sample population) with a family size greater than six. The overwhelming majority (94.3 percent) of the interviewed households are exclusively engaged in agricultural activities while the remaining 5.7 percent, mostly women, are engaged in petty-trade and wage labour as their major source of income.

**Table 2**  
**Marital Status, Family size and Occupation of Respondents by Site**

Site	Marital Status of Respondents					Family Size of Respondents			Occupation of Respondents			
	Single	Married	divorced	Widowed	Separated	1-3	4-6	7 and above	Farmer	Trader	Labourer	Other
Mak-Kadra	5	64	9	9	3	35	42	13	86	2	2	-
Rawyan	20	137	20	25	8	88	103	19	197	6	3	4
Total	25	201	29	34	11	123	145	32	283	8	5	4

Source: Household Survey

The ethnic composition of the sample population showed that 289 households (96.3 percent) are Tigrians and 9 (3 percent) belong to the Amhara ethnic group. It was also learned that 297 household heads (99 percent) are followers of the Ethiopian Coptic Church while the remaining 3 (1 percent) profess Islam.

**Table 3**  
**Educational Background, Ethnicity and Religious Affiliation of Respondents by Site**

Site	Educational Background of Respondents						Ethnicity of Respondents			Religious Affiliation of Respondents	
	Cannot read and write	Can read	Can read and write	Grades 1-3	Grades 4-6	Junior secondary and above	Tigre	Amhara	Other	Christian	Muslim
Mai-Kadra	58	-	20	11	1	-	89		1	88	2
Rawyan	111	3	30	35	25	6	200	9	1	209	1
Total	169	3	50	46	26	6	289	9	2	297	3

Source: Household Survey

Apart from the household heads whose profile is briefly portrayed above, other sources whose information are presumed to be vital to the different themes of the study have also been approached. These include officials and field-staff of participating organizations (governmental, non-governmental and the UNHCR), site administrators who are ex-refugees acting as returnee representatives, community elders of the host population and selected households treated on a case-study basis.

### RESETTLEMENT: A STRATEGY FOR RETURNEE REHABILITATION

Following the ouster of the *Dergue* in mid-1991 by the major insurgent forces, voluntary repatriation of the ex-refugees in question and their subsequent rehabilitation became one of the major preoccupations of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE). Repatriation of the returnees was initiated according to standard procedures based on a tripartite agreement which involved the host government (Sudan), the government of the country of origin (Ethiopia), and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In addition to this agreement among the responsible parties, the expressed willingness of the

returnees to be repatriated and resettled in their country of origin led to subsequent undertakings aimed at their rehabilitation.

Initiating organized settlement schemes presumed to lead gradually to self-sufficiency of beneficiaries was singled out as a viable strategy for realizing attainment of stated goals. This was the axis of convergence which prompted the forging of partnership on the part of the different actors involved in the venture. Accordingly, the concerned departments of the Ethiopian government at the central and local levels, the UNHCR, the World Food Program (WFP) and the Relief Society of Tigray (REST)<sup>6</sup> participated in the different phases and at various levels of the rehabilitation program designed for the returnees. These organizations, among others, were the ones that shouldered the responsibility for smooth implementation of the repatriation effort. They also agreed to assist subsequent endeavours that could result in lasting solutions in the form of achieving an acceptable level of self-sufficiency on the part of the target groups. Recognizing the fact that most of the returnee households were originally engaged in farming prior to their flight, it was decided to settle them in areas where public land could be made available for agricultural undertakings. Thus, the settlement sites in the *Humera* area were singled out as appropriate for the purpose.

The following arrangements were made to implement the decision in this regard:

- a) The Ethiopian Government allocated farm plots to returnee households by making use of available public land under its custodianship. It also assisted the rehabilitation endeavour by covering costs for clearing forests and providing tractor services for ploughing farmsteads. It mobilized relevant units of the various government departments like the former Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), the bureaux of Agriculture, Health and Education to extend required services in line with their specialization and competence.
- b) UNHCR agreed to cover infrastructural costs relating to the construction of schools, clinics and water points.

- c) UN/WFP, through the RRC, provided enabling *ad hoc* assistance in the form of food and other consumables that could be used by beneficiaries for 12 months - the assumed period for their becoming self-sufficient by meeting their food requirements from their farms.
- d) REST assisted returnees by extending transportation services, and by offering warehouses for storing food items. Moreover, it deployed experienced staff to coordinate the resettlement effort in general.

### **Land Allocation in the Settlement Area**

The Ethiopian Government, as custodian of all public land in the country, had no problem in disposing such a vital resource whenever deemed necessary and appropriate. As briefly stated in the preceding section, the *Humera* area is endowed with large tracts of unused and under-utilized public land which could be employed for this and other similar purposes. Given the fact that it was the government itself that took the lead in initiating land settlement as a viable strategy for rehabilitating the returnees, the issue of allocating land did not pose any problem as such. It can generally be said that the first batch of returnees, who were repatriated in 1993/1994 and volunteered to resettle in the localities in question, were provided with farm plots and land on which to build their houses.

All respondents in the two settlements were made to resettle on a voluntary basis without any form of coercion being applied. It has been learnt that the returnees were given the option of either resettling in *Humera* or reintegrating in their original places of domicile. To this end, they were briefed on the details and particulars of the envisaged resettlement program by the concerned officials of the Ethiopian Government prior to leaving the country of asylum. Reasons given by the returnees regarding their decision to resettle include: a) non-availability of land in their home villages due to population pressure; b) land marginality (even if there had been any possibility for access); c) existence of seasonal employment opportunities in the *Humera* area; and d) the pledge made by the government and other involved actors to provide *ad-hoc* assistance until they became self-sufficient by catering for themselves. It is worth noting, however, that an insignificant number of respondents (14 household heads) said that though they view

resettlement as the best alternative under the circumstances, they would prefer to resettle in other localities endowed with hospitable climate and closer to their original home villages. Reasons given for such preference include their desire to have easy access to their kith and kin living in the highlands, dislike for the excessively hot climate of *Humera* and fear of tropical diseases like malaria that are rampant in the area.

It is well known that most of the highlands of Tigray, from which the majority of the returnees originated prior to their flight, are not in a position to accommodate additional number of residents due to high population density. Such constraints are further aggravated by the fact that individuals who left their home villages several years back as singles returned to their country after forming families of their own. Moreover, allocation and reallocation of farmsteads have taken place repeatedly in the highlands during their absence leaving no room for the new comers. Nor is there any legal ground that could enable them claim their previous plots and homesteads which they forfeited when they took recourse to flight. Such state of affairs, coupled with the attraction of aid for rehabilitation, prompted the returnees to readily and enthusiastically embrace the government's proposal for resettlement.

The eligibility criteria for acquiring land by the returnees covered by the study include that they:

- 1) should be the ones repatriated in 1993 and 1994;
- 2) should be the ones that have originally volunteered to resettle and got registered accordingly;
- 3) did not have benefited from reintegration aid packages for opting not to resettle.

The allocation of land to returnee households in the settlements took place on the basis of family-size. Accordingly, an individual returnee is entitled to get 1 hectare, households with a family size of between 2 and 3 were given 2 hectares, and those with family size of over 3 were allotted 3 hectares regardless of the

number of family members in a household. It has thus been learnt that the maximum size of land formally allotted to households does not exceed 3 hectares. Nevertheless, there are few exceptions to this as can be gathered from the explanations provided hereunder.

Data elicited from the sample population denote that 286 households were allotted between 1 and 3 hectares. This means that the overwhelming majority were treated according to the laid down criteria. Returnees under this category had benefited from government assistance in terms of land clearing and land preparation. The exceptions mentioned above relate to 14 returnee households. Among these, 12 own between 4 and 10 hectares, 1 has over 10 hectares and 1 was given more than 20 hectares. This is explained by the fact that few returnees, like the ones presented as exceptions, were relatively better-off and came back with a significant amount of disposable property and cash. They claim to have earned their assets by engaging in profitable commercial activities while in the Sudan. After arrival, this group decided to invest in commercial agriculture and entered into contractual land-lease agreement with the local government. Though they were ex-refugees and repatriated in the same manner as the rest of the returnees, they can be viewed as investors like many others that are operating in the locality.

**Table 4**  
**Land Owned by Respondents by Site**

Site	Land Owned by Respondents (hectare)							Total
	1	2	3	4-6	7-10	11-20	>20	
Mai-Kadra	16	29	45	-	-	-	-	90
Rawyan	46	65	85	5	7	1	1	210
Total	62	94	130	5	7	1	1	300

Source: Household Survey

Another aspect of land allocation in *Humera* refers to access to land by investors who are not ex-refugees/returnees. Currently, there are hundreds of investors who work in *Humera* by obtaining land-lease contracts from the government. These entrepreneurs came from the different parts of the country and were entitled to land-lease rights provided they fulfilled the criteria qualifying them as such. The member of this group were given as many hectares of land as they wished to put under cultivation on condition that they met the terms of contract which included the obligation of investing in the form of inputs like farm machinery, fertilizer, labour, etc. Many individuals under this category have been allotted hundreds of hectares on which they deployed several tractors and thousands of wage labourers.

The most outstanding case relates to land controlled by an enterprise known as the *Hiwot Farm Mechanization*. It is alleged that the firm enjoys some kind of preferential treatment owing to its affiliation with the TPLF/EPRDF. It has been learnt that the *Humera State Farm* established by the *Dergue* Regime was transferred to the enterprise which took over machineries, buildings and related infrastructure that were once classified as public property. Tens of thousands of hectares of land that were put under cultivation by the defunct state farm were transferred to *Hiwot Mechanization* through administrative fiat. This came to pass without either being publicly auctioned or any payment made to the treasury of the government. It is worthy to note, however, that activities of the *Humera* state Farm have been disrupted owing to intensified insurgent activities in the area prior to 1991. Confrontations that raged between the different protagonists during this period led to total abandonment which resulted in the deterioration of infrastructure and malfunctioning of farm equipment and other assets. It is thus apparent that *Hiwot* had to invest a lot in order to make the enterprise functional after it acquired proprietary rights.

Regarding land-use tax, different rates are applied for returnees and the investors.

In the settlements, returnees are required to pay tax once they have started producing for themselves and become self-sufficient. Accordingly, returnees who own 1-2 hectares pay a sum of Birr 10 per year regardless of the size of land they possessed. Those who own 3 hectares pay Birr 15 per year.

Investors from the different parts of the country engaged in mechanized production of cash crops like sesame and cotton are required to pay Birr 44 per hectare annually. In addition, seven per cent is levied on sales tax on the basis of the volume of production and current market price during harvest seasons. One outstanding complaint on the part of the investors is that they are forced to pay in advance a one-year land-use tax prior to the commencement of agricultural activities for the specific year.

It is widely rumoured that the *Hiwot Farm Mechanization* does not pay both land-use tax and sales tax owing to the privileged status that it enjoys as a result of its affiliation with the incumbent political group. The author was not able to confirm the allegation and thus cannot elaborate further on the subject.

As repeatedly stated earlier, it is only the government that is legally empowered to allocate land to all users. Thus, the returnees, the host-population, individual investors and syndicates like the *Hiwot Farm Mechanization* are allotted land by the government. Nevertheless, situations where individual holders have managed to lease land are increasingly witnessed. These phenomena could be explained by the following:

- a) all returnees were allotted land regardless of whether they were capable of working on it or not. The aged, the disabled and women who could not plough the land themselves have resorted to leasing it on the basis of crop-sharing or for fixed annual cash payment;
- b) those who used to live in the locality prior to the arrival of the returnees (the host population) were allotted large tracts of land which they could entirely put under cultivation on their own. These people transferred the extra land which they could put to use themselves to those in need on the basis of contractual agreement;

- c) there are few cases where some individuals who were allotted land either resorted to other trades like commerce by quitting agricultural undertakings or decided to live in other places outside *Humera*. These individuals transferred use rights to those in need in return for some kind of compensation in cash or kind.

The existence of a situation of shortage of land for some households on the one hand, and abundance for others on the other, could not be balanced and offset by recourse to measures of equitable distribution. This is due to the fact that land redistribution in the Tigray National/Regional State Government is indefinitely suspended. As a result, some kind of "hidden" landlordism is taking shape in the process in *Humera*.

Over one-third of the respondents (101 households) claim that they rent extra land from individuals mentioned above. The reasons they give for doing so is either the land allotted to them is not enough to sustain their livelihood or they have the capacity (in terms of capital, labour and other farm inputs) to produce more by making use of the extra land they have obtained in the form of rent.

**Table 5**  
**No. of Respondents and Category of Owners who entered into Land-Lease Contracts**

Site	Respondents Renting Additional Land	Category of Owners				
		Big Holders	The Aged	The Disabled	Women	Others
Mai-Kadra	21	7	1	3	10	-
Rawyan	80	43	2	-	35	-
Total	101	50	3	3	45	-

Source: Household Survey

## **POLICY CHANGE OWING TO RESETTLEMENT AND LAND ALLOCATION**

Since 1995, the government has effected policy change regarding resettlement as a viable strategy for returnee rehabilitation. It is to be remembered that the government emphatically addressed the feasibility of resettlement programs when the first batch of ex-refugees were repatriated from camps in Eastern Sudan. Concerning other returnees who were repatriated in subsequent years (1995, 1996), the Government opted for reintegration in original places of domicile as an alternative to resettlement. Despite the desire of late returnees to be resettled in *Humera*, the government adhered to its decision of disregarding resettlement as an option.

According to local officials, policy change that terminated further resettlement in the area was buttressed by the following factors. Firstly, continuation of the practice is considered harmful in terms of aggravating further fragmentation of land when distribution of plots to individual households takes place which is presumed to be disadvantageous because small holdings could deprive the benefits of large-scale production accruing from economy of scale. Secondly, unhampered resumption of planned land settlement aimed at rehabilitating vulnerable groups like returnees is bound to be accompanied by a corresponding service-delivery requirement which calls for a considerable investment that is beyond the capacity of the government. Thirdly, further resettlement is viewed as unfriendly to the existing environmental resources owing to the fact that it entails removal of vegetation covers in the process of making preliminary preparations for rendering settlement spots suitable for domicile and productive undertakings. Fourthly, augmentation of government revenue and volume of production could be negatively affected by resettlement ventures that prohibit possibilities for leasing land to big investors. The shift in policy underlines the need for returnees to be repatriated as of 1995 to their home villages, or start a new life elsewhere by making use of a rehabilitation aid package provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). These returnees who are not accorded the "privilege" of being resettled as a result of the policy change are entitled to receive the reintegration package which includes Birr 1500 as income

generating grant per family regardless of size, 15 kgs. of cereals per person per month for 9 months, 450 grams of cooking oil per person per month for 9 months and 1100 grams of pulses per person per month for 9 months. Other aid items include blankets, plastic sheets and kitchen sets. This group of returnees were thus required to cater for themselves once they were dispatched to their respective villages from the "dispersal centres" located in the highlands. The case of this group is relevant to the issue of land allocation owing to what subsequently transpired in *Humera*. It has been found that the majority of the returnees, destined for reintegration in their original places of domicile, came to live around the settlements on their own. There were neither official arrangements made in their favour to live in the *Humera* settlements nor did they receive any official recognition for behaving as such. In both sites, the number of self-settled households exceeds that of the officially recognized ones who are assisted through planned interventions. The self-settled returnees claim that there are no possibilities to maintain normal life on the basis of arbitrary arrangements made on their behalf. They argue that their original places of domicile in the highlands are so congested that it is neither possible to accommodate additional number of people nor is it economically viable to start income generating activities by making use of the frugal sum of Birr 1500 granted by the UNHCR. Furthermore, there are no employment opportunities in the highlands due to the absence of enterprises like manufacturing firms and large-scale farms. They thus found migrating to *Humera* as the best option under the circumstances. In deciding to live in *Humera*, they anticipated that the government would make a change of mind and allow them to resettle by providing them with *ad hoc* enabling assistance. Moreover, availability of seasonal employment opportunities in the mechanized farms was another factor which prompted them to take such a course of action.

The government, however, is relectant to change its previous decision and thus refrained from extending official recognition to the demands of the self-settled returnees. Yet at the same time it did not force them to get out of the area for fear of violating the constitutional rights of citizens. The present Constitution categorically states that every citizen is entitled to live and work in any place of its preference within the country. Though they are unofficially allowed to live in *Humera*, the self-settled returnees are not provided with land both for farming

and constructing their residence. They rented houses from the officially recognized returnees and the host community who had the opportunity to construct thatched huts on the land allocated to them for homesteads. As a result of massive influx into the area, the demand for houses became so great that rent for a simple hut fetched an exorbitant monthly rate of Birr 200. Thus, the self-settled returnees were required to pay this amount and in the process the income generating grant which they received from the UNHCR was used for this purpose. The able-bodied among this group could either find seasonal employment on the commercial farms or enter into land-lease contractual agreements with big holders or those that are not able to plough the land under their control. Others continued to prey on forest resources by selling fuel wood and construction poles despite existing restrictions.

Government officials and site administrators in the locality were asked to elaborate on the wisdom of insisting on previous decisions in the face of mounting discontent associated with problems affecting the self-settled returnees. Responses obtained emphasize the rationales behind the change in policy on resettlement. It is claimed that the self-settled returnees were told in clear terms that they will not be resettled as was the case with the former repatriates. Instead, they were to be reintegrated by receiving rehabilitation aid packages presumed to be adequate for starting a new life. According to local officials, the returnees have initially agreed to this term which they violated at will after their repatriation and they have thus to bear the consequences of their acts.

## CONCLUSION

The issue of land allocation is central when embarking on resettlement undertakings. This is due to the fact that the very decision to initiate such a venture assumes the existence of adequate land for implementing plans. It is rightly claimed that a lasting solution in the form of launching resettlement projects has proved feasible<sup>7</sup> particularly in the case of refugees who originated from rural areas and practised farming as their major trade prior to flight. The overwhelming majority of the returnees who were repatriated from the Sudan since 1993 were basically peasant producers and thus they could well fit into resettlement programs designed to realize their betterment. Besides, a greater

chance for success could be envisaged when resettlement takes place on a voluntary basis as in the case of the returnees settled in *Humera*. Availability of adequate land, reinforced by proper planning and coordination, is also viewed as a crucial factor<sup>8</sup> that could lead to the success of settlement projects. As can be gathered from the foregoing discussion, land is allocated to some individuals who can not make use of it due to various reasons. On the other hand, others have acquired excess land which they failed to put under cultivation owing to constraints. This indicates the existence of shortcomings at the planning stage. Such deficiencies could not be rectified due to faulty policy decisions that overlooked specific problems in different localities. It is rightly said that a good policy is expected to look into peculiarities and specificities rather than prescribing measures that grossly level the modality of land allocation. Since the common objective of all resettlement programs, at least in principle, is the attainment of the "public good"<sup>9</sup>, policies relating to the issue should be concerned with distributive justice in terms of land allocation, particularly under a situation where land is proclaimed to be public property. Resettlement policies should also consider the attitude and reaction of the host population in the receiving areas and strive to obtain support for the schemes by introducing attractive measures to this end. One such measure could be working out some kind of benefit-sharing arrangements from which the local population could derive some tangible advantages.

It has been stated in the preceding section that some of the returnees who settled in *Humera* on their own depend on forest resources to sustain themselves. Furthermore, the preliminaries for establishing settlement sites in the form of meeting construction requirements, land clearing activities undertaken to prepare plots for farming, and household fuel-wood consumption-needs entail depletion of forest resources. In this regard, conditions can become increasingly dangerous unless careful planning that could offset adverse consequences is made right from the start. The fact that a vast expanse of land is covered by forests in and around *Humera* poses difficulty for controlling and mitigating irrational use of resources. In this respect, mechanisms designed to avert adversities emanating from acts of preying on forest resources do not seem to be in place. It is, therefore, recommended that the strategy of launching refugee settlements must be incorporated with the general problem of integrated rural development in the

receiving areas and plans should consider all pertinent socio-economic variables that are relevant to the undertaking.

Finally, extending primacy to large-scale farms at the expense of small producers or vice-versa is a contentious issue. Nevertheless, the proposed returnee rehabilitation strategies in the form of reintegration in localities that are already densely populated and characterized by high incidence of landlessness, land fragmentation and marginality have proved to be inappropriate and out of place.

#### NOTES

1. This figure is obtained from the office of the *Humera* District Council and the registry of the office of Site Administration of the settlements. It has also been learnt that this does not include families that have settled on their own without the consent of the government. It is alleged that the number of self-settled returnees is more than those that have obtained official recognition.
2. *Humera* was previously (during the reigns of Emperor Haile Selassie and the *Dergue*) under the jurisdiction of Gonder province, in the present-day Amhara Region. The 1992 rearrangement of local governments based on ethno-linguistic considerations had placed the area under the Western Zone of the Tigray National Regional Government.
3. *Dergue* is the Amharic equivalent for the English word Council or Committee. It was coined to signify the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC) which was initially composed of 120 coordinating committee members allegedly representing the various units of the armed forces, the Police and the Territorial Army. The commonly used term to identify this ruling body remained to be *Dergue*, till the end, despite Mengistu's claim of having established a "People's Democratic Republic".
4. The Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) is a political organization formed in 1974/75 in the immediate aftermath of the revolutionary process in Ethiopia. The founder-leaders were mostly members of the traditional nobility and high ranking military officers and civil servants of the imperial regime who were opposed to the radical orientation and drives of the revolution. The EDU was active in the Tigray and Amhara areas until its influence and power base were substantially destroyed as a result of separate military actions against it by the *Dergue* and the TPLF in the 1970s and 1980s.

5. The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was founded in 1975 with the initial professed objective of "liberating Tigray from Amhara domination". The leaders of this group were mostly university and college students who espoused an admixture of militant local nationalism and radical Marxism-Leninism. The TPLF formed and spearheaded a coalition of like-minded opposition forces, namely, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which won a decisive military victory against the *Dergue* in May 1991 and captured state power.
6. The Relief Society of Tigray (REST) was established in 1978 to assist the war and drought affected population in the TPLF-controlled areas of Tigray and Tigrian refugees in the Sudan (see, REST, Five Years Plan, 1996-2000: A summary).
7. See Gaim Kibreab, (1983), on the feasibility of agricultural settlements for refugees originating from the rural areas.
8. G. Kibreab (1987) argues that if properly planned and coordinated, land settlements could benefit the host-locality through positive multiplier effects.
9. See John Clark (1986), and H. Kloos (1989).

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