

RURAL LAND HOLDING READJUSTMENT IN WEST GOJJAM, AMHARA REGION

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ABSTRACT: Regardless of economic policy changes made by the new Ethiopian government towards market economy and pressure put on it from different sources, especially from donor agencies and international organizations like the World Bank, rural land remained under state ownership. With such policy in place, there is preoccupation with the possibilities of the recurrence of those problems associated with the land tenure system of the Derg: diminution of size of holdings and farm plots, tenure insecurity, land degradation, discouragement of peasant movement outside agriculture, and others. There are indications, such as land redistribution that the new government has started doing the same as what the Derg was doing in the past and what had been the major features of the Derg's problematic land policies.

This paper examines the policy, implementation process and the results of the 1996 rural land holding readjustment carried out by the Amhara Regional Government in some areas of the Amhara Region, particularly in West Gojjam. Findings of the study show that the policy could cause those problems of the land tenure system of the Derg. It was also found that the policy was not in accordance with the provisions of the Federal Constitution. The reallocation of land was primarily based on political considerations, and its implementation was highly centralized, politicized and secretive. Contrary to official pronouncements, the evaluation of the outcomes of the policy also shows that it did not achieve any of the classical political, social, and economic objectives of land reform. The paper then concludes that the policy had primarily a political motive.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Before the 1975 land reform, in Gojjam, like in most other areas of the Amhara region, *rist* was the predominant land tenure system. *Gult* and *rist* rights were the major land rights that allowed access to land ownership in the area. As Hoben (1973:5-6) explained it:

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Gult (fief) rights over land were given to members of the ruling elite as a reward for loyal service to their lord and to religious institutions as endowments. The individual or institution that held land as *gult* had the right to collect taxes from those who tilled it; they also had judicial and administrative authority over those who lived on it. *Gult* rights were thus far more than just a type of land tenure. Moreover, they were an integral part of the Amhara feudal polity; they represented the granting away by a regional ruler of an important part of his taxing, judicial, and administrative authority.

Rist rights, ..., were ... land-use rights. In principle, they were hereditary and could be held by lord and peasant alike. ... *rist* and *gult* are not different types of land but distinct and complementary types of land rights. Normally, they extended over the same land. A single estate of *gult* land, comprising a few square miles, included within its boundaries tracts of fields held as *rist* by scores or even hundreds of farmers. The *gult*-holder might also hold some fields as *rist* within his estate of *gult* land.

A person who held a farmland as *rist* could cultivate it as he wished, subject only to the limitations imposed by following the pattern of his neighbours. Although he was not a tenant, his hereditary right to use the farmland was conditional on his meeting tax and service obligations associated with it.

However, according to Hoben (*ibid.*), the *rist* system, with its inherited land rights, did not guarantee equal access to land to all dwellers of the area. Although it was assumed that all *rist* land-use rights were hereditary, that was not the case in practice. Individuals' access to land was highly determined by their social status rather than by their birth. *Gult* rights were, for example, held by the elite rather than by ordinary peasants whereas *rist* rights were held by both. Moreover, there were some people who had neither of these land rights. These included smiths, weavers, and tanners who had access to land only through tenancy. This land tenure system was, however, abolished by the 1975 land reform following the overthrow of the then monarchic rule.

The 1975 land reform of the *Derg*, among other things, transferred ownership rights on all land to the state, prohibited tenancy, and in the case of areas of *rist*

system, guaranteed possessor rights to peasants who were tilling the land at the time of the reform. Since 1975, the principal means of land transfer has been the frequent redistribution of land to new claimants and others. This redistribution policy, with other policies of the *Derg* such as villagization, establishment of state farms and producers co-operatives and resettlement became veritable constraints on the development of agriculture. Among those effects of such policies of the *Derg* were eviction of peasants, diminution of size of holdings, fragmentation of farm plots, tenure insecurity, land degradation, inefficient allocation of land, and discouragement of peasant movement outside agriculture.

When the *Derg* collapsed in 1991, the land tenure issue became one of the policy matters in which change was expected. Hence, one of the most critical policy issues to be determined by the new Ethiopian government was that of rural land ownership. Since the change of government in 1991 until the promulgation of the federal constitution in 1995, there was a debate on land tenure issues. This debate was between two polarised positions; one was pro-private whilst the other was pro-state ownership, the latter advocated mainly by the government and the party in power. At the end, however, government ownership of land was decided on the bases of the provisions enshrined in the 1995 constitution. The constitution provided:

The right to ownership of rural land and urban land, as well as of all natural resources, is exclusively vested in the state and in the peoples of Ethiopia. Land is a common property of the Nations, Nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia and shall not be subject to sale or the other means of exchange.

Art. 40 sub art. 3.

Sub-Article 4 of Article 40 also states that the "Ethiopian peasants have [the] right to obtain land without payment and the protection against eviction from their possessions".

These constitutional provisions show that no change has been made in this respect from the policies of the *Derg* regime. As can be discerned from these articles, the law provides ownership right by the peasantry but at the same time imposes restrictions on some rights of transfer of land to others such as by sale and exchange. State ownership provides immense and legitimate power to the government to allocate and reallocate land to people with its discretion. This power also extends to the determination of use and other rights over donated land.

It was based on such land ownership policies that the Ethiopian governments have been distributing and redistributing rural land to the peasantry and deciding upon land use and other rights. In November 1996, the Council of the Amhara Region promulgated a rural land reallocation law which was implemented in 1996/97 in some areas of the Region. This study examines the policy, implementation process, and results of that rural land holding readjustment carried out in the Amhara Region, particularly in West Gojjam.

The Setting

The Amhara Region occupies mainly the central highland area of Ethiopia. According to the Central Statistical Authority (1994), issued in 1995, it was estimated that the Region had a total population of 13,834,297 out of which nearly 91 per cent were living in rural areas. The same source indicated that nearly 93 per cent of the total economically active population of the Region were engaged in agriculture. Administratively, the Region is divided into eleven administrative zones one of which is West Gojjam. This part of the Region is located in the Southwest and Western part of the former Gojjam province. Historically, this part of the region has remained one of the surplus grain producing areas of the nation.

West Gojjam zone has six important grain producing weredas. Among these, the study included *Jabi Tehnan* and *Quarit*. Jabi Tehnan Wereda is located some 385 kms away from Addis Ababa alongside the main road that leads to Bahir Dar through Debre Markos. Finoteselam is the major town (capital) of the wereda. It has an area of 119,630 ha and a population of 194,942 (1994).¹ Currently it has

33 rural *kebeles*. *Quarit* wereda is located some 60 kms north of Finoteselam town. *Gebeze Mariam* is the only town and capital of the wereda. It has 28 rural *kebeles* with a population of 137,437 (1994) and an area of 69,900 hectare. Of the 28 *kebeles*, only two have been selected for this case study: *Arbaitu Ensisa* from *Jabi Tehman* and *Dinja Tsion* from *Quarit*. *Arbaitu Ensisa*, which is located near Finoteselam town, has an area of 2,733 ha and a population of 5,403 of which 2,812 are male and 2,591 are female. The *kebele* has 1,015 households. *Dinja Tsion kebele* is located near *Gebeze Mariam* which is the centre of the wereda. This *kebele* has an area of 2,725 ha with a population of 2,922 out of which 1,471 are male and 1,451 female. It has a total of 600 households.

Methodology

West Gojjam was selected as a study area mainly because (i) it is one of the six zones of the Amhara Region where the 1996 land reallocation was carried out extensively; (ii) the area has been one of the main surplus-food producing areas and it was therefore deemed important to examine the possible impacts of the policy on food production sooner or later; (iii) the researcher also felt that, regardless of its contribution particularly to food production, this area is one of the least studied sites in relation to land policy and agricultural production. It was selected because of its proximity to the main road, accessibility, existence of some facilities, among other things, and because studies related to rural development, particularly land tenure, had concentrated on North Shewa, and to a lesser extent, Arsi regions.

Due to time, manpower and other resource constraints, the sample for the study is obviously small. Although it was originally planned to conduct the study in three weredas and six rural *kebeles* (two in each wereda), it was found rather impractical to do so mainly due to shortage of time. For example, it took this researcher some twenty days, that is, one-fourth of the whole time allotted for the work, to get letters of permission from the Regional as well as Wereda Councils. Moreover, the rainy and busy months of Hamle and Nehassie made access to research sites and peasants very difficult. Although it was possible to gather some pieces of general information from other areas, it was decided to focus only on two Weredas and one rural *kebele* in each wereda. These specific *kebeles* were

again selected mainly for their accessibility and proximity to main roads. Finally, it was managed to complete the research undertaking satisfactorily only in *Arbaitu Insisa kebele*, *Jabi Tehman* wereda. In the case of *Quarit* wereda, *Dinja Tsion kebele*, however, the researcher could not have adequate access to the wereda and *kebele* officials because of which it was practically impossible to have access to the necessary data. Thus, the information pertaining to the reallocation process in that *kebele* is incomplete.

As mentioned elsewhere in this study, the land issue was highly politicized. Due, perhaps, to this state of affairs, it was found very difficult to get access to the necessary data and information on the policy and its implementation process at the time of the research. The main sources of data were formal and informal discussions held with focus-groups, principal informants, individual peasants, members of the different committees established to carry out the policy, and *kebele* officials. For the purpose of implementing the policy, *Kebeles* were divided into villages (*got*) and there was one representative from each *got* in the reallocation committees of the *kebeles*. Thus, these *got* representatives, who were members of the *kebele* land reallocation committees, and *kebele* officials were the major sources of data. The researcher employed, as field assistants and data collectors, wereda agricultural and co-operative office employees, school dropouts who participated in the reallocation process, some *kebele* officials and members of reallocation committees. They were provided with the necessary guidelines and questions. Wereda Council members and officials in the different wereda offices, political cadres involved in implementing the policy were also consulted, with a limited success of course, to get the necessary data. Groups of peasants of all social categories ("bureaucrats", feudal remnants, the rich, the middle class, and the poor), including a sample of randomly selected women were interviewed.

The researcher's observations in the field have also been important mechanisms of getting first-hand information. Policy documents, written guidelines, reports, party organs and other media have also been used. Statistical tools were also used in computing and presenting numerical values. Different tables were constructed to show the different features of the process and outcomes of the policy.

POLICY FRAMEWORK

In November 1996, the Council of the Amhara National Regional State promulgated a law which provided for the readjustment of rural land holdings. It was "A proclamation [aimed at providing] for the reallocation of the possession of rural land in the Amhara National Region - Proclamation No. 16, 1996" and its amendment given in February 1997, proclamation No. 17, 1997. The proclamation in its preamble stated the following rationale and objectives of the reallocation:

That land is both the basis of the peasant's economic life and his constitutional right. During the past regime land was grabbed by few bureaucrats and elected officials of agricultural co-operatives who were supporters of the regime. This has resulted in unbalanced possession of rural land and subjected the peasants to abject poverty. The peasants have also organized themselves under the Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Revolutionary Front (EPRDF) and waged a life-and-death struggle in order to do away with such inhuman oppression and overthrow the oppressive regime. In the areas of the region freed from the *Derg* before 1991, fair land distribution was carried out and the landless had been granted the right to possess land. On the other hand, however, in other areas that remained under the *Derg* rule and even after the demise of the same, no redistribution was introduced. Therefore, in these areas where there was no redistribution after the ascendancy of the EPRDF to political power, the land issue has since then been a burning question raised repeatedly by the peasantry. To make the peasants beneficiaries of the region's rapid economic change, it was necessary to do away with that unbalanced land possession and carry out a fair reallocation.

Thus, the implementation of the land allocation policy was limited to those areas of the Amhara Region freed from the *Derg* after 1991 and to sites where there was no land redistribution operation under EPRDF. The proclamation also prohibited land possession by peasants outside their residential *Kebele*. Four committees were established in order to enforce the law: land possession verifying committee; family size verifying committee; land allotting committee; and grievance-hearing committee. The structure and number of each committee differed from the other, but all are said to have been established through direct

election of members by the inhabitants of the respective *kebeles*. According to the law, all administrative organs of the region at every level of the hierarchy were assigned responsibility for directing the allotment of land and for rendering material and financial support to the various committees established to implement the law. However, it was the rural *kebele* administration that was made responsible for the overall execution of the proclamation.

As per the proclamation, the regional council was vested with the power of issuing policies and directives necessary for the implementation of the proclamation. Accordingly, plans, policies and guidelines have been prepared and disseminated by the Council throughout the administrative hierarchy. While the whole responsibility of implementing the policy was given to the administrative bodies (executive committees) throughout the hierarchy, the above mentioned four implementation committees were established for specific tasks.

Part two of the proclamation provided general guidelines for its implementation. The land-possession verifying committee was to verify and register all the land under the possession of the *kebele* inhabitants. The results were to be presented to the *kebele* people for discussion. After the *kebele* people discussed and ratified the documents, they were to be submitted to the family-size verifying committee. The family-size verifying committee, on its part, further verifies and registers the households and the members of each household as well as the landless in the *kebele*. Later on, the results were to be presented to and discussed by the *kebele* dwellers. After ratification and the necessary recommendations made by the people, the documents were submitted to the land allotment committee. It was the allotment committee's responsibility to forward a proposal to the people from whose possession it was to take land and to whom and how it would reallocate it. The distribution was performed by casting lots. Art. 8, Part Two, of the proclamation also provides for payment of compensation and payment for produce by the new possessors to the previous possessors of the land. Sub Art. 2, of Art. 8 (Payment of Compensation and Fructus) stated that "... the peasants who formerly possessed the land in a legal way and had been cultivating [it] by employing their labour and money owing to the reallocation of land carried under this proclamation; if their land is taken away they shall get appropriate compensation and payment of the fruit of land from

new possessors who received it due to the reallocation.” Later on, a guideline was provided from the Regional Council on how to effect the compensation and payments.

OFFICIAL RESULTS

Government officials, government and party documents and mass media have all confirmed the successful achievements of all the goals of the land reallocation. All of them stated that the burning question of the landless broad peasantry had been once and for all answered. They added that the process has also been democratic, and participatory which made the distribution fair and just. It was, however, reported at the 4th regular session of the regional council that out of the 756,809 peasant households, who had applied for land, 547,087 have been given some land while 209,722 did not get any. Among those who received land, 391,912 were those who had very small land or none at all, whereas 129,682 were poor women. Those 547,087 households who were made new possessors of land had about two million family members. The concerned bodies claimed that the land reallocation would minimize the burden on judges in relation to litigation associated with land issue. The new land policy has also done away with those practices that undermined women's rights, thereby helping them to stand on their dignity. It was claimed that the policy eradicated all sources of social problems and reassured women's equality to men. Their possession of land has also enabled them to 'get married'.² It has also assured tenure security and land use rights which were expected to enhance women's productivity and size of production in the study area.

THE LAND POLICY FROM PEASANTS' PERSPECTIVE

All the above objectives, rationales, processes and results of the rural land holding readjustment officially stated, discussions with the peasants and with a closer observation and study of the law, its implementation process and results in the field, suggest the following

1. Many people raised questions whether or not the regional land policy was constitutional. They made reference to the Federal Constitution where, the

powers and functions of the Federal Government are provided. Art. 51 (1) (5) states “ It [the Federal Government] shall enact laws for the utilization and conservation of land and other natural resources, historical sites and objects.” And Art. 52 provides for the powers and functions of regional states where the objectives stated in Sub Art. (2) (d) is “To administer land and other natural resources in accordance with Federal laws.” It was, however, evident that there was no such law enacted by the Federal Government until July 1997 which is identified as “Rural Land Administration Proclamation of the Federal Government, Proclamation No. 89/1997”. This federal law mentioned the Federal Constitution’s stipulation contained in Article 52 (2) (d), mentioned above, and acknowledged the need to have such laws by the Federal Government. It states that “WHEREAS, the implementation of [the] said provision, i. e., [Art. 52 (2) (d)], calls for the promulgation of rural land administration law that is of general scope and consequent identical application to all Regions;...”. Hence, it shows that the 1996 rural land possession reallocation proclamation of the Council of the Amhara Region has preceded the Federal rural land administration law of July 1997.

Both the level of authority and the scope of application of the land policy have also created uneasiness of mind in the peasants. They thought that land policy was a national issue and expected a national policy. Moreover, many peasants were not convinced by the application of the policy within the scope of a sub-region because it was applied fully only in six out of the Region's eleven zones (East and West Gojjam, North and South Gonder, South Wollo and Agew Awi, and partially in two zones - North Shewa and Oromiya). Although the authorities stated that there was a previous step taken to redistribute land by the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in the other parts of the Region that it controlled before the fall of the *Derg*, the peasants in the research area were unfamiliar with it.

What was more revealing about the land redistribution policy was that although the regional government officials and documents reported that the whole issue of land, just from the inception of the policy to its implementation, was demanded and decided upon by the people through their active participation, the peasants, however, expressed their feelings of confusion about it.

2. The most unconvincing part of the policy to the peasants, lies in the principle that applies to reducing holdings and, to some extent, to reallocating them. According to the peasants' view, fair and just distribution of land is that which is based on family size. For instance, they have used this principle in *Arbaitu Ensisa kebele* as they were relatively free at the time when they dissolved their producers co-operatives. They believe that everyone should have his/her right to work, eat and live because land to rural people is the primary means of realizing these rights. However, a new and a very unpopular principle of political consideration rather than family-size was the norm in the current reallocation. According to the different guidelines provided by the Regional Council for the purpose of implementing the reallocation, peasants were stratified into five social categories: feudal remnant, bureaucrat, rich, middle and poor peasants.

Although there were no clear definitions of how these concepts were developed, communicated and uniformly applied during the reallocation process, some meanings have been given to each of the terms, i.e., "bureaucrats" and **feudal remnants** (see Mahtot, 4th year, No. 115, p. 3).³ According to such definitions, a '*bureaucrat*' is

"... one who had power in the *Derg* bureaucracy and who had misappropriated land from the poor, or one who had used his power during the previous land redistribution to exclude someone from getting land, or one who was responsible for such land redistribution."

Feudal remnants, on the other hand, were those who had *rist* land and made others pay taxes. In reality, *rist* land was land acquired through inherited land use rights and did not necessarily depend on social status (Hoben, 1973).

Rich peasants were those who had two or more pair of oxen, had agricultural produce which exceeded one year's consumption, domestic animals and other means of income.

Middle peasants included those who: (i) had two or three oxen; (ii) used hired labour; (iii) were food self-sufficient; and (iv) got income from domestic animals and other sources.

Poor peasants referred to those whose livelihood was dependent on agriculture, who had one or no ox, and no other significant source of income to support their lives.

It seems rather unsound to stratify the Ethiopian peasantry into social groups in such a discrete manner. In connection with this issue Dessalegn (1994) argues that the task of breaking the backbone of the landed gentry for social justice and equity to prevail has been decisively dealt with by the 1975 land reform. Therefore, at present land reform and land policy should aim at guaranteeing land tenure and economic security, promoting peasant autonomy through popular control and management of local resources including land. However, it is very unfortunate that the Ethiopian peasantry are still considered as the sources of oppressive social classes and political danger. This may be a tactical approach adopted by the power that be to control the peasantry or a situation created by the politicians because of their own paranoia.

Many poor peasants who were elected as members of the different committees during the military regime are at present labelled as "bureaucrats". There was also propaganda warfare waged against the previous land redistribution operation which was discredited of having created 'modern feudalism'.⁴ The oppressed and oppressors were also living together in the countryside, a situation that led to extended 'class struggle'. This state of affairs was reminiscent of the days of the revolution of the 1970s. People in the first two categories - 'bureaucrats' and 'feudal remnants' - were not referred to as peasants (*arso ader*). In some cases, this stratification included the third category, i.e., the rich peasants. According to the different laws and official reports, these categories of peasants were said to be 'illegal' possessors of land. The legal documents frequently referred to as 'legal' possessors those peasants who possessed land and had other rights. It is, however, very unfair to discriminate peasants on such grounds as 'legal' and 'illegal' possessors of rural land in a country where there was no land registration and titling. It is true that there were a lot of accomplices of the *Derg* regime in the countryside such as party members, some *kebele* and co-operative officials and other time-serving individuals. It is also true that some of those committee members had been corrupt, and abused their power in many ways. However, there was no attempt made to isolate and clear up the guilty

from the innocent. As some cases from the two *kebeles* show, possessors of the largest pieces of farmland were not 'bureaucrats' in the strictest sense of the term. The argument maintained by the officials was, therefore, not persuasive. The situation also shows that although it was true that holding official positions in those committees was one means of having better access to land, there were other important factors which enabled 'non-bureaucrats' to become possessors of very large ho'dings.

In addition to that, such meanings of the different social strata of the peasants were not clearly and uniformly communicated to the principal actors of the reallocation. In the research area, particularly in those two *kebeles*, someone identified as a 'bureaucrat' was anyone who had served in any committee during the reign of *the Derg* regime. For instance, there was a peasant labelled 'bureaucrat' just because he served in a literacy campaign committee at the time of *Derg* rule. In some *kebeles* only heads of the former youth and women associations were stigmatized as 'bureaucrats' while in others this kind of categorization included all members of committees referred to above.

So, this unsound stratification of some of the peasantry as bureaucrats was used as a criterion in lieu of family-size to confiscate or retain land holdings. Accordingly, regardless of their family-size, all so-called 'bureaucrats' and 'feudal remnants' were permitted to possess only 4 *timad* of land whilst other peasants who were neither in the bureaucrat nor feudal remnant categories were entitled up to 12 *timad* of land, again regardless of family-size.

A guideline had also set the order of priority in providing plots of land to the applicants mainly according to sheer political considerations. The first group consisted of poor peasant households with six or more family members. The second were those poor peasant households with three to five family members. In third place were those poor peasant households (a couple in wedlock) with no additional family members. In the fourth order were middle peasant households with six or more family members. In the fifth, group were middle peasant households with three to five household members. In the sixth category were middle peasant households with no additional family members (man and wife only). The seventh stratum included sons and daughters of poor and middle

peasants who reached 20 years of age and above. The eighth and the last group embraced in the priority list comprised those sons and daughters of the 'bureaucrats' and feudal remnants who were 20 years of age and above with no land at their disposal.

3. The land policy and its implementation has been characterised by lack of transparency. Peasants from the two Weredas - *Jabi Tehman* and *Quarit* speak that there was public discussion on some issues. In the discussion the need for holding readjustment was felt and recognized. The current type of readjustment was thought to be partial. Therefore, the issue of taking land from those who unfairly possessed and transferring it to the most needy (landless and land-starved) was also discussed with the people. The peasants expressed their hope that once decisions regarding such issues were made, there would be no doubt that the usual principle of land redistribution based on family-size was to be operational. However, they said they were surprised when they witnessed that the class stratification and its application in the allotment process was implemented. They have realized that their views had no weight to influence official decisions and what was presented and approved at the meeting was only the agenda. All the strange aspects of the policy implementation process were held in secrecy. Hence, not only the people but also those committee members did not know what followed after each step in the process. Because officials practised such unfair withholdings of information as 'smart tactics' (as stated by a chairman of a wereda council). The peasants themselves considered the tactics as treacherous.

4. Another characteristic of this land policy and its implementation process was that it was highly centralized and politicised. The whole process was exclusively confined to the jurisdiction of the political structure, i.e., the executive committees of councils. Not even concerned Ministries, including experienced implementing agencies of land reform such as the Ministry of Agriculture, were involved. Wereda executive committees and political cadres (mainly young high school dropouts) were the ones who took charge of the reallocation process. Moreover, written guidelines were not provided at the *kebele* level and the task was mainly carried out through oral communication which resulted in a lot of confusion and arbitrariness both in interpreting and implementing the policy.

The process of interpretation and implementation of the policy was a secret held between the political bodies and, to some extent, reallocation committees. Reallocation committee members were kept in separate places such as *kebele* offices so as not to allow them to have any contact with the public until the readjustment process was over. The isolation of the reallocation committee members was necessary, according to some officials, to avoid any possible temptations of corruption. Both the members and their families were taken care of by the *kebele* administration and the *kebele* people in that the latter contributed food and water to maintain their lives while in confinement. The *Kebele* officials were simple facilitators rather than principal actors. As a result, a lot of people, including committee members, could not explain how and why things happened the way they did. The answer they often gave was that "it was an order". Even months after the accomplishment of the reallocation, discussion about the land reallocation was rather unsafe.

THE REALLOCATION IN ARBAITU ENSISA KEBELE, JABI TEHNAN WEREDA

As already mentioned in the introduction, an attempt was made to study the case of the land reallocation policy that was operational in the two *kebeles*. However, as explained in section 2 above, given the shortage of time and other limiting factors, the study in *Dinja Tsion kebele* was not completed. Therefore, here are the results of the land policy in *Arbaitu Ensisa kebele*.

Table 1
The Policy Featuring Reallotment in Arbaitu Ensisa Kebele

Applicants	Male		Female		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Total No. of applicants for land	469	61	306	39	775	100
No. of applicants who got land	325	62	199	38	524	100
No. of applicants who didn't get land	144	57	107	43	251	100

Source: Kebele Administration and land reallotment committees (1996/97)

Table 2
Sources of Reallotted Land (*timad)**

Source	Amount of land (<i>timad</i>)	% of total
From "bureaucrats" (67 peasants)	566.5	52.6
From those non-bureaucrats (rich peasants) who had > 12 <i>timad</i> (39 peasants)	145	13.5
From Deceased and Migrated	110.5	10
Reduced from grazing land	242	30
Other sources	12	1
Total	1,076	100

*1 *timad* is equivalent to 0.25 ha

Source: Kebele Administration and land reallotment committees (1996/97)

Table 3
Average Size of Land holding of 'Bureaucrats' and Non-bureaucrats (rich peasants) who had more than 12 *timad*

Peasant category	Before Readjustment	After Readjustment
"Bureaucrats"	12.5	4
Those non-bureaucrats (rich peasants) who had > 12 <i>timad</i>	15.6	12

Source: Kebele Administration and land reallocation committees (1996/97)

Table 4
Distribution of Plots to the New Possessors

Size of reallocated land in <i>timad</i>	No. of applicants who got the corresponding <i>timad</i> of reallocated land					
	Male		Female		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
4	5	100	0	0	5	100
3	71	58	51	42	122	100
2	149	59	102	41	251	100
1	100	68	46	32	146	100
Total	325	62	199	38	524	100
Plot allotted for the construction of houses (with a size of 25 m x 40 m)					108	100

Source: Kebele Administration and Land Reallocation Committees (1996/97)

Table 1 shows that out of 775 applicants 524 (67.6%) have got some land while 251 (32.4%) did not get any. This *kebele* had, however, relatively abundant land. For example, at the wereda level, 45% of the applicants in *Jabi Tehnan* could not get any despite the availability of land. As shown on table No. 4, among those who got some land, 28 per cent got one *timad* and 48 per cent two *timad*, which means that 75.6 per cent of all who got land had received one to two *timad*. Table 2 also shows that the largest source of land made available for redistribution (52.6%) were those "bureaucrats" (67 peasants) who had an average holding of 12.5 *timad* or 3.1 ha before the readjustment and whose holding had been reduced to 4 *timad* or one hectare after the readjustment. The second source (13.5%) were those non-bureaucrats (rich peasants) who had more than 12 *timad* or 3 ha (39 peasants) and an average holding of 15.6 *timad* or a little over three and a half hectare (3.6) before the readjustment. They were allowed to have 12 *timad* or three hectare after the readjustment. It is again important to note that this *kebele* had not only abundant land but also many 'bureaucrats' and peasants with more than 12 *timad*. For instance, the situation in other study areas, i.e., in *Dinja Tsion Kebele*, *Quarit* Wereda, was that there were only 32 'bureaucrats' and 9 non-bureaucrats (rich peasants) with more than 12 *timad* having an average holding of 8.5 *timad* (2.13 ha) and 13.4 *timad* (3.35 ha) respectively before the readjustment. The reason for *Arbaitu Ensisid's* big share of bureaucrats and rich peasants was perhaps because there was a model producer's co-operative (source of 'bureaucrats') and a process of clearing and occupying uninhabited savannah and forest land (one which may be the most important source of those with more than 12 *timad*) as some part of the area was vacant but later occupied by people who came from other areas.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

The Policy and its Stated Objectives

Has the policy achieved its stated objectives by doing away with the unbalanced land possession created as a result of grabbing land by those bureaucrats and elected officials of agricultural co-operatives? It is possible to argue, on the basis of the above figures, that there was an unbalanced possession of land which

ranges from an average of 15.6 *timad* held by the rich peasants and 12.5 *timad* by the so-called 'bureaucrats', to none by the landless.

Reallotment and Social Equity

Did the reallotment process minimize the disparity in land holding? Obviously, the objective of the policy led to the reduction of land from those who had unfairly possessed large holdings and the redistribution of them to the most needy. The tables also show that holdings have been reduced whereby a lot of landless and land-starved people were then given land. However, both the assumptions and the practice of the policy were full of flaws. First of all, the statement that the disparities in holdings were created mainly by the 'bureaucrats' and co-operative officials was mistaken. The case of the *Arbaitu Ensisa kebele* clearly showed that before the reallotment the non-bureaucrats had an average of 15.6 *timad* which was the largest share compared to that of the 'bureaucrats' who had only an average holding size of 12.5 *timad*. The case of *Dinja Tsion kebele* also showed the same pattern. The first group had, on the average, 13.5 *timad* while the 'bureaucrat' group had only 8.5 *timad*. Another flaw of the policy was that the non-bureaucrats who owned the largest size before the reallotment had been granted to retain 12 *timad* still remaining as possessors of the largest holdings. Yet again, the holdings of 'bureaucrats' were reduced to 4 *timad*. What made the policy rather tilted towards the already-privileged and the better-offs is that there were a lot of people without any land at all.

Furthermore, it is also important to note that the *average family size of the 67 "bureaucrats" in Arbaitu Ensisa was 7.4* which exacerbated the inequalities of the per capita holding. Hence the objective of 'balancing' holdings has remained on paper and the unjust practice of land redistribution coupled with the absence of consideration for family size made false the promised fair-and-just readjustment of holding.

The land policy and social relations

Ethiopian rural societies have very important and close social relations which have enabled them to survive under such distressing state of poverty. But the land

holding readjustment policy had, to some extent, negatively affected these relationships. A lot of peasants complained that those members of the different committees who were involved in the implementation of the policy misused their power to benefit some and deprive others. Corruption was not uncommon. There were complaints related to deliberate and unfair judgement of the size and fertility of holdings, rejection of requests made by some family members for registration, biased reclassification of plots for different uses, ignoring plot choice rights of those whose holdings have been reduced, biased classification of people in the lots arranged for fertile and non-fertile plots and the like. Despite the centralized and secretive nature of the policy as well as the lack of clear guidelines which led to arbitrary decisions, and the very unfair appeal procedures and deadlines (according to Proclamation No. 16/1996, Articles 21 and 22), appeal was supposed to be made within three days after the completion of the reallocation to a grievance-hearing committee in which the allotment committee members themselves were a part of. While the situation was characterized by a highly politicized atmosphere, it is not difficult to imagine the absolute power that those young and inexperienced committee members were vested upon. Because some of these miscarriages of justice had some bearings on and aggravated the already-existing and long-running feud among peasants, there were new mishaps that created other hostilities among villagers. Uses of violence have also been reported. The political tone of the policy itself, which created a number of social groups among the peasantry, has also created a difference of attitude mainly between generations because of the fact that many of the landless who gained from the policy were the young and apparently supporters of the new redistribution.

It is also very important to note that the policy has very severely disturbed the family support system of the rural society. Parents used to allot plots of land without government permission to their offspring and create a means of livelihood. Young people also used to support their old parents with the hope that the latter will do the same in response to such services. This tradition of reciprocity has been negatively affected by the land policy. For example, this bi-directional support system will not be a viable option any more for the so-called 'bureaucrats' who are left only with 4 timad of land. As shown in *Arbaitu Ensisa* "bureaucrats" had, on the average, 7.4 family members which was a big family size compared with the average family size in the Region and West Gojjam which

were 4.5 and 4.8 respectively (1994 Census). People also complain that the daughters and sons of this group of peasants have been partially discriminated against and ignored in the reallocation process. So one may ask what the fate of these young peasants would be. Usually, the youth were the most disadvantaged group in the land redistribution operation as they did not fulfil the family size, and at times, the age criteria during redistribution. Now also, the largest number of peasants left without any plot were the youth. Among them who were said to have received land were those who got the 25m x 40m piece of land given for constructing domicile. For instance, the number of those young peasants was 4,608 in *Jabi Tehnan* Wereda and 1,468 in *Quarit* wereda. As a result, some young peasants have already started migrating to cities and other areas where they hoped they would get land.

Security of use rights

Different official reports state that security of tenure has been enhanced by the readjustment policy. However, what is existing in actual fact seems to be on the contrary. Ethiopian peasants have a good deal of experience in what "state ownership" of land means. They had been evicted from their possessions in the name of establishing producers co-operatives, villagization, resettlement, land redistribution and other policies. Therefore, peasants feel that such frequent and high-handedly exercised land redistribution were a real source of holding insecurity leading to reduced size of holdings, loss of investment on land and apprehension of what the 'owner' will do in the future. As mentioned above, many peasants feel that there was no sound justification, whether in terms of the law or social equity for the reduction of holdings from the so-called "bureaucrats" and 'feudal remnants' only to bring their possession down to 4 *timad* regardless of their family size. Moreover, those people have been denied of their rights to compensation and payments for their produce on their previous holdings. Hence, it seems that tenure insecurity has been heightened as a consequence of such unsound justifications for confiscation of land and produce.

Production and Productivity: Unfulfilled Promises of the Reallotment

Although no explanation was given as to how the reallotment would enhance production and productivity, it was stated by officials that it would. However, the only salient feature of the new readjustment policy they often make a reference to is its enhancement of security of use rights. Even if it were true that security of use rights would be enhanced, a number of studies have shown that there is no direct and conclusive relationship between the two (see Migot-Adholla et al. 1993). Security of tenure will encourage people to invest on land. But if one argues that security of tenure will enhance productivity by enabling peasants to have access to inputs like capital, it ought to be in an environment where land is a commodity which can be sold and/or mortgaged. In this case, titled land will give more chance and better access to resources such as formal credits. However, this is not the case in Ethiopia because land cannot be sold or mortgaged, at least legally. Access to resources such as formal credit does not depend on security of tenure. In fact, there is no such thing as security of tenure or rights. The case of holding security enhancing productivity may only materialize indirectly assuming that insecurity will discourage some investment in land such as the application of manure.

In the case under consideration, it is very unlikely that the new possessors, many of them being less endowed with other indispensable inputs, will produce more than the previous possessors did. The more reduced farm plot size may also affect production. For example, the Regional Agriculture Bureau states that 2 *timad* of 0.5 ha is the minimum size for the application of new technology. In view of this, it means that those numerous single *timad* plots which resulted from the new readjustment process would be excluded. In light of the above consideration, one of the important determinants of the diffusion of new agricultural technologies is size of holdings. Small holdings means small assets and this in turn means limited capacity on the part of the peasants to acquire new technologies and to take risk in experimentation. Limiting the application of new technology to 2 *timad* is tantamount to saying that holdings smaller than this to be handled with inefficient and backward technology, which is equal to defeating the readjustment's objective of adopting improved methods and means of production.

In the short run, that is, for the year 1996/97 when the policy was promulgated and implemented, the process itself had some negative effects on production. For instance, it slowed down farming activities, particularly land preparation. Since its enactment was completed (sometime from November to May), the policy disrupted farming activities. Because of so much complication, centralization and secrecy, the policy took long to implement.

In addition, the policy has disturbed the different systems of land transfer and other kinds of relationships that are useful in the utilization of land and the production process. For instance, during the reallocation process, the new possessors were warned not to rent land to 'bureaucrats' and 'feudal remnants'. A number of farmers complained, for instance, that such conditions had delayed agricultural activities resulting in planting more Niger seed (*mig*), a crash crop, which does not require much land preparation in place of *teff*, the most preferable staple grain in the nation, which demands more arduous work.

Soil Preservation and Environmental Degradation

After the political change, peasants who sought land for farming resorted to clearing the few patches of trees which were planted in the 1970 and 1980s' afforestation programs. Under the pretext that such forests and other areas of preservation were the results of the *Derg's* high-handed policies and the need to recognize the 'rights' of peasants to reclaim their farmland, preservation of such resources has been the most neglected part of the degradation of the rural environment since 1991. Accordingly, large areas of conservation (afforestation, reclamation, and even grazing land) have now been redistributed as farmland. For instance, in *Dinja Tsion Kebele*, one of the steep areas most affected by soil erosion, 227 *timad* (56.75 ha) of land earmarked for afforestation and reclamation was redistributed as farmland. In *Arbaitu Ensisa kebele* too 242 *timad* (60.5 ha) of grazing land was redistributed for farming. As there is no important animal-feed that can be used in the area other than grazing and as there are a lot of livestock in the area, this will lead to overgrazing of the remaining small grazing areas which is one of the causes of soil erosion and degradation. It is also clear that diminishing the average holding size of families will lead to abandonment of conservation measures such as crop rotation, fallowing and planting legumes. It

will also lead to more intensive cultivation and over-grazing ultimately making fertile land vulnerable to drought.

THE LAND POLICY AND THE CASE OF RURAL WOMEN

Since the 1974 Revolution, equality of women has often been voiced with concern. However, the reality differs from what has been stated in the policies. Women have been, for example, one of the disadvantaged groups in the hitherto land redistribution policies. They lack power, are not articulate and organized, and lack any weight in their claim for land and other resources. The patriarchal system is one of the excuses for their problems: men are household heads, wives go to husbands' residential areas thereby forfeiting their land, and because they are expected to go to their husbands' residences, they are not mostly considered when plots are given by families.

In the case of the Amhara Region's land reallocation policy, officials claim that women were the most beneficiaries. Official reports also show that in the Region's land holding readjustment 129,682 women (22.6% of all who got land) have been granted land and out of the 36,382 were from West Gojjam.. And in *Arbaitu Ensisa Kebele* out of the 306 women who applied for land 199 (65%) got some while 107 (35%) of them did not get any. The percentages for men are 69 and 31 respectively. Moreover, none of the women got as much as 4 *timad*; rather they got 3 and 2 *timad* and these constitute only 42 and 41 percent respectively. Nevertheless, simply looking at the figures of the applicants and the supply of land, one can realize that women in *Arbaitu Ensisa* have been treated fairly. The male-female ratio of applicants in percentage was 62 to 38 but the percentage of those who got land was 60 to 40. One will not also be mistaken if one assumes that women who got land will be better-off than in their previous conditions if they properly utilized it. There was also the belief that the land holding readjustment would provide solution to all those economic and social problems of women. It was also stated that the land reallocation policy has relieved women from some degrading activities, reassured their equality, and has done away with the sources of all their social problems. Very interestingly, officials stated that those women who got land have also got husbands.⁶

But it is very important to note that women will not necessarily be better-off simply because they have got land. First of all, many of them have got very small plots. For instance, six women applicants were randomly selected from the two *kebeles* in the two weredas. It was found that one did not get land at all while four got 1 *timad* and a piece more for constructing a house and only one got 2 *timad*. However, the two women, that is, the one without land and the other with 1 *timad*, were members of the *kebele* executive committees. None of these interviewed women gave opinion that they have a bright future as a result of their new plots. In fact, some of them have never visited or did not even now where their new plots were located. Secondly, in some cases, peasants informed the researcher that those who informed the PAs that they had given earlier some of their land to their daughters, although the land was owned by the family rather than by the daughters, were able to retain such land. This was because such land was registered in the names of the daughters during the land registration. However, in such cases, one may question whether or not those women were real beneficiaries of the land just because it is now registered in their names. Thirdly, many of the poor women lack other necessary resources to put the land into use (money, oxen, seeds, labor, farm implements, and others). So, they need support such as credit facilities, extension services, support to set up their own organizations, and so on.

The magnitude of the problem of women was also overwhelming. It was, for instance, stated by the Amhara Region Women's Affairs Office that there were about 6.3 million females living in the Amhara region. Out of these, 18 to 20 per cent were heads of households. About 90 percent of those women who had reached working age were engaged in informal employment (*medebegna ye 'alhone sira*). For example, there were about 13,453 women prostitutes in the Region's rural areas.

THE ROLE OF *KEBELE* ADMINISTRATION IN IMPLEMENTING THE LAND POLICY

Since the 1974 revolution, one of the most important state-initiated and state-sponsored rural organizations with a vital role both in land administration and resource management has been the Peasant Association (PA). PAs were first established to implement the 1975 land reform which they have done effectively.

Since they have been implementing other land policies which would otherwise have been very difficult tasks for the government. However, these grassroot organizations were abolished in 1991 immediately after EPRDF assumed state power because it was alleged by the new government that they were the creations of the *Derg* and its party.

In line with the new federal structure, the *kebeles* were designated as the lowest tiers of the administrative structure established since 1995 as *kebele* administrations (KAs) by Constitutional provisions. However, during the research work, it was observed that *kebele* administration did not have official status of an administrative organ. For instance, rural *kebele* officials were not paid for their services unlike their urban counterparts in urban areas. In fact, some *kebeles* had no offices and records at all. Moreover, local administrative posts were filled by young and inexperienced personnel on the basis of their political loyalty. There was a continuous reshuffling of these personnel and because of this practice the chance of developing competence through experience looked very slim. The system was also politically sensitized and a great deal of time was spent in continuous meetings called *gemgema* in stead of providing administrative and other services. At the beginning, *gemgema* was claimed to be a system of evaluation which empowered the peasants to control their chosen representatives. However, in reality it seems more likely that *guimgema* is perhaps used in order to make sure that officials are committed to party line.

In the land reallocation proclamation (No. 16/1996) ultimate responsibility for the implementation of the land holding readjustment was given to KAs. However, in practice they did not have important power in the process. They were facilitators rather than principal actors. Of course, nowadays there is a complete fusion of administration and politics in that all administrative posts (membership in executive committees) are filled by people in the ruling party. Thus, partizanship characterizes the system. So, political cadres and members of the land reallocation committees seem to have real power than *kebele* officials. Among the tasks of the KAs were calling people for meetings, safeguarding and providing care for committee members, who, in general, were serving the regime as watchdogs. In the field, the researcher witnessed political cadres giving orders to the chairmen of the *kebele* executive committees, and deciding a number of administrative issues

which should otherwise be done by the KA. As a result, KAs were not settling disputes arising from the land holding readjustment because they did not have enough knowledge of what happened and had no power regarding land administration. A lot of such officials were also complaining that such free service had posed serious problems in maintaining their livelihood. Within such conditions it may be difficult to expect rural KAs to administer effectively their villages and manage to bring about the necessary changes.

CONCLUSION

The land reallocation has achieved two things: (i) thousands of landless peasants have been given pieces of land (regardless of how it had been done) and (ii) a few unscrupulous committee members who abused their power during the *Derg* regime have been punished which may also be a good lesson to all time-serving peasants. Had it been possible to alleviate the problem of landlessness and rural poverty by way of "robbing Peter to pay Paul", the reallocation would have resulted in a great success. However, this is not the case.

Dessalegn (1994:13-14), notes that there are some major objectives of reform commonly cited by specialists or reform practitioners and mentioned three of those objectives which he thought are major ones and pertinent to us:

- a) *Political Objectives*: reform will break the back of the landed classes which are the chief obstacles to political change and development; give land to the tiller and you break the power of the lord.
- b) *Social objectives*: social justice and equity justifies reform; exploitation and propertilessness should be done away with, and those who work the land should own it, and the populists add that those who own the land should work it.
- c) *Economic objectives*: the guarantee of secure tenure will stimulate greater initiative and greater investment by land users; this will invigorate the rural economy.

Considering all what has happened in reality, it can be concluded that the rural land holding readjustment policy had neither aimed at the achievement of these objectives nor had it achieved them even incidentally.

Many fallacies in creating a lot of differentiated social groups among the peasantry have been already discussed. In the reallocation process, all those committee members in the previous regime and those who had even the lowest position in the administration of the Emperor have been classified as oppressors and all those who had no position have been labelled as oppressed. The former have been made 'class enemies' of the latter. Both concepts of the terms 'bureaucrat' and 'feudal' have been given new and derogatory meanings in order to make them fit to the propaganda campaign. It is well known that in such an oppressive regime as the *Derg* people had been serving in different committees regardless of whether they wanted or not. Moreover, there were a lot of innocent committee members who served the society and there are a number of 'bureaucrats' with or less than 4 *timad* of land (e.g. there were three in *Arbaitu Ensisa kebele*). It may be surprising that there are feudal lords in the Amhara Region where a predominantly *rist* system prevailed even before the 1974 revolution. Even with the new definition of the term 'feudal' - anyone who can be grouped in whatever petty officialdom during the Emperor - their number should be too small to justify such a policy (for instance, the researcher found none alive in those two *kebeles*). Therefore, the readjustment policy cannot be justified by a political objective of breaking the backbone of the landed gentry.

Secondly, although there had been holding inequalities which would have entailed genuine corrective measures, the policy simply attached the imbalance to a certain group of peasants whereas there were other major sources of it. Hence, while there were people with larger plots than those of the 'bureaucrats', neither their large plots were reduced nor were they made targets of the propaganda campaign. So, entitling those non-bureaucrats and feudal non-remnants with 12 *timad* of land without even family considerations and amidst such severe shortage of land invalidates any justification of the reform by reference to its social objectives of justice and equity.

Thirdly, it has been discussed that there was even a question of legitimacy of the land policy in that it has preceded the Federal law on the subject. In addition to that, policy implementation has been more administrative and arbitrary. For instance, the proclamation does not say anything about the different categories of peasants and what should be done with them which resulted in great inconsistency in implementation. Many peasants who lost their possession were not convinced by all those measures and some of them had gone to the capital to appeal to the Federal Government against such confiscation of land and property. There was also confiscation of property such as perennial plants and other produces. Then, the policy created lack of confidence in what the peasants possessed and rather made them more wary of what will happen in the future. Therefore, it did not address such economic objectives as secure tenure and all its benefits.

One may then ask what the real motive of the policy was and whether it has achieved what it set out for. To the party in power, land redistribution is not a new task. There has been land redistribution since the 1970s in areas previously controlled by the EPRDF during their fight against the *Derg*. The current EPRDF's political program and its economic policies, since it assumed state power, contain ideas of rural land redistribution. Hence, the current policy seems to fit Dessalegn's (1994 : ix) earlier apprehension that "... land policy may be sacrificed for political and doctrinal purposes." Once such a policy has been made part of the political program, it will not be easy to change it. A good example can be *Derg*'s drive to collectivisation regardless of all practical failures, pieces of advice and lessons received from the Soviets and the Chinese experiences (see Yigremew, 1996). Lipton (1977:91) also notes that "An ideology usually claims to explain the past, to be confirmed by all of it, and to predict the future. It lies too deep to be reasoned out." The beliefs in an ideology, he added "... are morally right, their eventual triumph is inevitable, and the believer is committed to accelerate that inevitable by all praxis" (ibid.).

Such a political nature of the land policy has been explained by Ege (1997: 142) who concluded by saying the following about it:

"The current redistribution must be seen in a political context. It is not easy to see any economic motive for the reform, and not even concern with inequality

can explain the design of the reform. The apparent motive, the only that can explain the facts presented in this report, seems to be a political project of establishing a class basis for the current regime and to enter a new period in Ethiopian history.”

However, to answer the last question, that is, whether the policy has achieved its stated objectives seems too early.

Notes

1. For the Population figures the 1994 Population and Housing Census is used. For areas and other information from the two *wereda* agriculture offices are used.
2. See Bekur, 3rd year, No.21 Miazia 24, 1989 E.C.
3. For definitions of 'bureaucrat' and remnant feudal see *Mahtot*. 4th year, No.115. Megabit 25 - Miazia 1, 1989 E.C. p.3. and for the rich, middle and poor peasants see Agriculture Bureau of the Amhara National Regional State 1997. "A Guideline to Enhance the Participation of Poor Peasants in the Agricultural Extension Programme." (in Amharic). *Megabit*, Bahir Dar.
4. See, *Mahtot* 4th year. No.99, Hidar 26 - Tahsas 3, 1989 E.C.
5. See *Mahtot* 4th year, No.115, Megabit 25 - Miazia 1, 1989 E.C. p.3.
6. See Bekur 3rd year No.21 Miazia 24, 1989 E.C.

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