

Forest access: policy and reality in Kafa, Ethiopia

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Kafa is a predominantly highland region in southwest Ethiopia. About one third of Kafa and the surrounding area is covered by tropical rain forest comprising a rich mixture of species arranged in three or more stories. The forest ecosystem makes an important contribution to the livelihoods of people in the area in a variety of ways. Tree species with several high horizontal branches, for example, are ideal for hanging cylindrical log beehives - a widespread local bee-keeping practise. The forest provides shade for coffee and a variety of commercially valuable spices that thrive when protected from frost and direct sunlight. The forests also supply rural communities with fuelwood and timber, which they use both for household consumption and for sale. There is urban demand for both wood and non-wood forest products such as honey, coffee, and spices.

This article draws on research and case studies from six forest villages in Gimbo *Woreda* (district) of Kafa Zone (Figure 1). In the case study areas, the level of income from non-wood forest products varies from household to household but averages at least a third of the annual cash income of the rural households. This income may not be sustainable due to heavy deforestation as timber production is sometimes excessive. However, it is worth noting that the considerable effort local people make to secure access to forest resources is a direct consequence of the importance of these resources to their household economy.

Land reform and access to forests

During the late nineteenth century, Ethiopia's central government expanded to control the Kafa region, replacing the Kafa kings as the dominant authority. Land and forests were allocated to local notables and wealthy and powerful outsiders. The latter were interested in extracting some of the more commercially valuable forest goods, such as coffee. The majority of the local population became tenants, who could only access forest resources through a variety of tenancy arrangements.

In March 1975, the new military government of Ethiopia (known as the *Derg*) that ruled the country between 1974 and 1991, issued a land reform proclamation that brought all land resources in Ethiopia – including farmland, grazing areas, and forest land – under the direct administration of the State. As part of the reform, grassroots level Peasant Associations (PAs) were established.

One of the tasks of the PAs was to implement the land reform and to solve land conflicts. As the land reform proclamation was decreed without adequate preparations, it came to be implemented in a hasty and haphazard way, leaving considerable space for local interpretation. In most areas, the land reform proclamation was, therefore, implemented in ways compatible with local notions of fairness and entitlement.

The involvement of the PAs in controlling access to forest resources varied. In some of the case study areas, the PA authorities saw the land reform as a means of redistributing agricultural land only. The absence of specific directives on the utilisation of forests reinforced this view - the law dealing with forest resources came into being only five years after the land

reform proclamation. The villagers in these communities continued to claim forest access through locally recognised customary channels. The principles informing customary forest access included geographical proximity to the resource, proven track record of use, and ancestral claim of ownership.

In other communities, where conflicts over local forest user rights threatened the smooth implementation of the land reform, the PA authorities intervened and distributed patches of forest to needy households as their respective bee-keeping and/or coffee collection domains, although this intervention was never included in the land reform.

Neither the PA-sanctioned forest access nor the forest utilisation through customary principles were formally recognised. In “official” government thinking, forest resources were basically expected to be preserved and passed on to future generations.

In March 1990, about a year before the *Derg* fell and the government changed, the *Derg* proclaimed a halt in land re-allocation. This was also taken as an order to the PA's to disengage from allocation of forest rights.



Figure 1: Map of the study areas in southwest Ethiopia

The current forest legislation

The post-*Derg* Ethiopian government (1991 – present) continued to support the state control of land resources. The current land law encourages the participation of private investment in agriculture and recognises the “holding right” of farmers to farmland. It is, however, silent regarding the natural forest from which most of the marketable forest goods are produced. The country's present forest proclamation has a strong element of forest protection, but does not spell out the villagers' rights to use the forest clearly. The proclamation makes timber processing by villagers an illegal undertaking, and introduces an element of uncertain legality to forest gathering operations such as bee-keeping and collection of wild coffee and spices. This is in direct conflict with traditional forest use practises.

The forest proclamation entrusts the Ministry of Agriculture with the tasks of controlling, protecting, and managing forest resources. The proclamation puts great faith in the role of ‘forest guards’, who are employees of the Ministry of Agriculture, to protect forests from fire hazards and forest use violations. In spite of these efforts, encroachment into natural forest areas is widely reported. Forest guards have neither the

incentives nor the organisational backing to hinder this trend. Not surprisingly, forest resources in highland Kafa continue to be seen and utilised as village commons. This complex situation is a consequence of a mismatch between government policy, implementation capacity and grassroots realities and the informal forest access mechanisms described below should be seen as instruments developed to secure forest livelihoods within the restrictions of the local socio-cultural environment.

Wejoo and Gogoo

In the present post-*Derg* period an increasing proportion of younger households have no *direct* forest access rights. Although traditional rights can be inherited, the prevailing population dynamics make it difficult for younger families to benefit from this arrangement. All the same, local people employ a number of informal mechanisms that enable the younger generation and other sections of the population to participate directly in the local forest economy.

One of these mechanisms is *Wejoo*. Under this system, parents grant their sons trees when they come of age so that they can gather forest products for themselves and their families, and also in anticipation of their continued support in forest and food farming activities. The other informal forest access mechanism is *Gogoo* (which literally means “equal share”), a sharecropping arrangement for forest goods. Both *Wejoo* and *Gogoo* are originally traditional practises; however, they rose to prominence in recent years as mechanisms of coping with a lack of institutionally recognised forest access mechanisms.

Gogoo is a much more widespread means of forest access than *Wejoo*. Its importance as a means of forest access can be explained in terms of three main factors:

Distribution of skills

The uneven distribution of skills in bee-keeping and lumber production means that some holders of tree rights need a share partner to realise the economic value of their forest resources. In honey production, for example, those who have direct access to tree resources seek the services of skilled partners in preparing and mounting beehives on the high branches of forest trees. Harvesting is a joint undertaking and the produce is divided equally. In wood processing, the processor takes two-thirds of the income from the planks produced, while the tree ‘owner’ receives the remaining one-third. Wood processing is an illegal activity, although the individuals involved are well known locally. Weak enforcement of forest laws combined with uncertainties concerning villagers’ continued use of natural forests has encouraged wood processing for short-term benefits, although it is an unsustainable practise.

Timing

The need for timely coffee collection among larger scale coffee growers also necessitates involvement in sharecropping. During the main harvest period (October – November) share tenants (the collectors) receive a third of the total quantity they pick. At the second coffee harvest, which mainly involves the collection of fallen coffee beans, share tenants receive half of the amount collected. Collection of fallen coffee beans is a time-consuming and a socially despised activity, which may be why the amount given to the share tenant is higher.

Stigma

There is a cultural stigma associated with the marketing of buckthorn and spices, but the increased commercialisation of these products has prompted right holders to opt for share cropping arrangements. For buckthorn, which is used as a condiment in the preparation of local alcoholic drinks, share

tenants are made responsible for selling the produce that the tree right holder has gathered, and the sale proceeds are divided equally. For spices (notably, Ethiopian cardamom – *Aframomum korarima*) the share tenant is responsible for both collection and marketing, as the tree right holder usually desires to dissociate completely from the sale of spices, a low status activity. The share tenant retains half of the sales proceeds and gives the other half to the right holder.

Gogoo has been identified in particular as an important means of securing access to forest resources for younger households who have no PA-allocated or customarily recognised bee-keeping domains. Moreover, the *Gogoo* arrangement has helped resource poor farmers, including women, to generate cash income that would otherwise have been difficult to come by.

The way forward

The forest access situation in highland Kafa shows a complex combination of state tenure and *de facto* private rights of use similar to the overlapping systems of tenure that exist in much of Sub-Saharan Africa. Local people have developed forest access arrangements that have reflected the changing realities. However, lack of official recognition of locally tailored forest access rights has contributed to tenure instability and encouraged a short-term mentality in the use of forest resources, for example through illicit timber production and wood processing. Reconciling the state’s position as an overall resource owner and the villagers’ concern for security of forest use rights is therefore an important issue.

Policy makers need to formally recognise the forest use rights of rural households, in a manner similar to the recognition of farmland. This might facilitate the development of village-level institutional norms that would challenge destructive forest uses. Sustainable forest management demands that ‘rights’ to use forest resources are accompanied by corresponding farmer ‘obligations’ in forest conservation. The forest law should, therefore, be re-oriented to support local organisational development and forest management, rather than a blanket policy of forest protection through the use of forest guards, as has hitherto been the case. These steps should be taken as preliminary measures aimed at stabilising local forest use at a sustainable level. At the same time, it is also important to address the inequalities in direct forest access between generations, through local-level consultative processes.

The interest that even non-tree right holders such as *Wejoo* beneficiaries and share tenants in NWFP activities - have in the local forest economy is an asset that has to be seized upon for enlisting the co-operation of villagers in bringing about sustainable forest management. Extension agents and other grassroots level field workers entrusted with the responsibility of advising farmers with improved agricultural practises and natural resource conservation should recognise the multiple tenure under which forest resources are utilised. In practise this includes recognising and consulting with beneficiaries and rights holders under informal access systems like *Wejoo* and *Gogoo*. ■

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