

Decentralisation of Land Management and Administration in Ethiopia: the Case of Siraro Woreda in Oromia Region

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1. Introduction

Twenty years after the fall of the Derg regime, rural areas in Ethiopia are still at the heart of the debates on development, democratisation and poverty. Poor productivity, growing pressure on land, recurrent external shocks and a rural economy poorly integrated with market, are all interconnected dimensions shaping these debates. Over the last decades the rural world became increasingly reliant on state and donor community. Population growth was neither accompanied by a meaningful process of rural out migration nor by productivity increases. Rural Ethiopia today is still heavily dependent on food aids distribution and rural dwellers find themselves trapped in an overcrowded countryside. According to the 2007 National Census (FDRE 2008) 84% of the total population lives in the countryside, and over the last twenty years the rural-urban ratio has not changed dramatically. A small scale family-led agriculture is by far the predominant economic activity. Rural population growth together with an inflexible land tenure system – which provides strong disincentives for rural-out migration – are primary reasons behind growing competition for land and natural resources. Youth's and sometimes newcomers access to land are accommodated only through periodical subdivisions of existing land holdings.

Given that the land question in Ethiopia has always been a very politicised issue closely tied to the national question (Dessalegn 2004, 2009; Crewett, Korf 2008; Hussein 2004), from its early declarations the Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) considered a fast growth in agriculture as a cornerstone of the country's modernisation project. Rationale behind the Agriculture Development-Led Industrialisation Strategy (ADLI) is attaining a fast growth in agriculture to diversify the national economy in the medium to long run (Senait 2005). For the purpose of this article, this strategy focus on at least two main pillars: 1) setting-up a decentralised framework of land management and administration; 2) stepping-up land productivity by a progressive formalisation of land tenure and integration to markets. While on paper a decentralised framework of land management and administration is in line with mainstream interpretations of rural development under the Post-Washington Consensus agenda, this article wants to discuss its very implementation and the broader political and ideological context where it fits into.

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Contrary to other experiences in sub-Saharan Africa, the rural development strategy embarked on by the Ethiopian government since the 1990s has a contradictory attitude towards neo-liberal policies. Despite that EPRDF committed its action towards decentralising and democratising access to land and natural resources in line with good governance reforms (FDRE 2002; FDRE 2005c; FDRE 2010), the state retains a strategic control of major economic sectors and resources. A land policy heavily drawing on state ownership is a meaningful example at this regard, and today it remains a controversial and highly politicised issue.

My research question is to what extent decentralisation of land management and administration in Ethiopia holds the potential to expand the peasants' land opportunities. This article wants to critically assess some impacts of decentralisation of land management and administration, by taking the case of Siraro – a rural *woreda* (district) of West Arsi Zone, Oromia Region – where I conducted extensive fieldwork between 2009 and 2010. I will show how a closer analysis of these policies and their very implementation at the local level reveals a blurred picture. I argue that rather than opening new spaces for local democracy and improving the rural dweller's ability to control how relevant decisions concerning their resources are taken, decentralisation of land management and administration in Ethiopia has contradictory impacts at the local level. Particularly, a double process is underway. First, by taking the form of deconcentration, decentralisation strengthens the hegemonic pattern of state/peasant relations. Second, by providing local officials with growing powers over resource management and distribution and given the current system of state ownership of land, decentralisation of land management and administration allows local officials to exert greater leverage over land allocation. In short, rather than opening new democratic spaces, it is lessening the rural dwellers' opportunity to both express their needs and bringing forward demands to the political and administrative system. This should warn about the stated objective of neo-liberal reforms such as decentralisation to directly spread democracy and a more equitable access to resources.

2. Democratic Decentralisation of Land Management and Administration: a framework for analysis

Land tenure policies are affected by decentralisation in many regards. Nonetheless the literature on land rarely addresses the implications of decentralisation, and *vice versa*. Over the last two decades the debate on decentralisation of land management and administration in Africa is closely tied-up with mainstream neo-liberal discourses on rural development, and it fits into the broader debate on democratic decentralisation (Ribot 2004; Wily 2003; Cotula *et al.* 2004). Before turning to the case study presentation I will briefly review this general debate.

Over the last two decades democratic decentralisation became a central pillar of development discourses and practices in Africa as well as in many other developing countries. The good governance agenda has promoted a recent inversion on theory and practice from centralised to

decentralised state building to sustain the process of modernisation in the long run and to attain poverty reduction (Craig, Porter 2006). Rationale behind democratic decentralisation is that past development initiatives were top-down, statist and the poor did not benefit from the policies implemented much. Neo-liberal discourses for long justified a «rolling back the boundaries of the state» approach to development on the ground that state resources were usually captured by a consolidated system of rent-seeking elite in power (Zamponi 2007). Nonetheless, soon it became clear that a market-led approach to development – based on macroeconomic reforms, liberalisation and Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) – was not sustaining the expected benefits of economic growth, poverty reduction and political stability. Since the 2000s the good governance agenda under the Post-Washington Consensus acknowledges that side by side with macroeconomic reforms and liberalisation, strengthening democracy is an overriding objective of development. Decentralisation is an essential aspect of this new project (Cotula *et al.* 2006). Strengthening the ability of local communities and development beneficiaries to design their own initiatives and controlling how relevant decisions concerning their livelihood are taken, is today an overriding objective of development under the good governance agenda. Participation, empowerment, ownership of development interventions are some of the benefits expected from democratic decentralisation.

When discussing different model of decentralisation, a broad distinction is between devolution and deconcentration. *Deconcentration* relates to transfer of functions from national to local institutions. It represents the least fundamental change. Authority remains within the state structure and accountability is ultimately still upward to central government. *Devolution* has to do with the transfer of authority and decision making to local government. When local bodies are elected, such reforms are referred to as democratic decentralisation. The extent to which devolution is effective, depends on the degree of local democratic representation and of accountability of decentralised authorities to local people (Wily 2003). While devolution of powers without a certain degree of control from above is a dangerous procedure, deconcentration of administrative prerogatives strengthens centralisation (Ribot 2004).

Concerning land management and administration, the debate on democratic decentralisation raises a number of relevant political issues and experiences throughout Africa vary greatly. This debate focus on the extent to which powers are transferred to local bodies, the choice between different local institutions and their degree of accountability towards people and upper levels of government (Meinzen-Dick *et al.* 2008).

First, the extent to which powers are transferred depends on the nature of local bodies. A primary distinction is between elected or administrative bodies, and between existing or new institutions (Ribot 2002a). This choice will greatly affect the outcome of decentralisation and whether accountability is directed upward to higher levels of government, or downward to people.

Legitimacy of local bodies in charge of land management and administration is a second issue of concern. Access to land in Africa takes place through a number of statutory and customary institutions, whose competences usually overlap and coexist within the same territory. This is usually referred as “legal pluralism” (Wollenberg *et al.* 2001). Effectiveness of decentralisation therefore depends on whether new institutions in charge of land administration overlap with existing bodies, and to what extent they are legitimate towards people. Third, the choice between different bodies and the issue of legitimacy call into question the role of customary authorities (Wily 2003). Customary institutions involvement can vary from no role to their active participation in land management, to the recognition of direct land tenure responsibilities. The powers granted to local bodies on land dispute resolution and conflict management is a fourth critical aspect of land management decentralisation (Cotula *et al.* 2004). Their role can range from no responsibilities, to their involvement as first instance courts, to compulsory conciliation procedures.

Overall, depending on the body empowered and prerogatives devolved, the literature (Cotula *et al.* 2004; Meinzen-Dick *et al.* 2008; Ribot 2004; Wily 2003) envisages at least three broad models of land management and administration.

A first option is appointing land management and administration bodies from above. Composition of land-specific bodies varies greatly throughout Africa, but usually they are appointed by central government and accountability is often directed upward. A second option is electing local government institutions. Empowering customary authorities of land management and administration prerogatives is a third option. Even if formal legislation abrogated customary institutions, at least informally they usually continue to exert some power on land management, due to lack of financial, technical and institutional capacity of governmental bodies.

Depending on political, socio-economical and historical factors, effectiveness of each model must be evaluated at country-level. From an analytical perspective each institutional option holds strengths and weaknesses. Appointed bodies usually lack of legitimacy to the people at large, and they are often only accountable upwards to upper level of government (Ribot 2002b). Setting-up new institutions is thus costly and requires time. They often overlap with existing customary authorities which often hold greater legitimacy (Cotula *et al.* 2006). Elected institutions are likely to be more accountable towards their constituency (Ribot 2002a). Nevertheless, elected officials may use their power to reward political allies through land allocation, therefore increasing corruption and patronage. Empowering customary authorities enables a reduction of the costs of setting-up new institutions. They often hold greater legitimacy than new bodies and they are already involved in land management and administration. Furthermore customary authorities may ease the integration of traditional and formal law in the long run (Wily 2003). Despite these advantages, empowering customary authorities may reproduce and “freeze” within the formal law economic and power inequalities – for instance over minority groups and women land rights (Cotula *et al.* 2004).

Central government control may be exercised through a variety of tools (Ribot 2002b). First, central government may retain important land management responsibilities. Second, strong political control is exerted when central government retains the power to appoint and dismiss members of local bodies. Third, central bodies may retain the prerogative to formulate directives that local authorities must apply to local contexts. Finally, a certain degree of budget autonomy is an essential asset for local bodies to properly and independently run their affairs. When they largely depend on central resources and flows, their ability to autonomously work is highly compromised and undermined.

In the following paragraphs I will proceed by reviewing the decentralisation of land management and administration experiment Ethiopia is currently undertaking by focusing on the power transferred to local bodies, their degree of accountability towards people and the role granted to customary authorities. I will then focus my analysis on some aspects I found relevant for my argument in the case of Siraro.

3. Decentralisation of Land Management and Administration in Ethiopia: an introduction

Agriculture has always been an important activity of the Ethiopian economic, social and political life. Over the last fifty years, land policy was a primary issue determining the ability of both the Imperial and the Derg regime to stay in power, their legitimacy to the people at large, and their ability to effectively control rural areas (Dessalegn 2009). Since 1990s the EPRDF-led government land policy is based on two main pillars. On the one hand by retaining state ownership of land, the new government decided to not question the overall framework provided by the 1975 land reform (Crewett, Korf 2008). On the other hand it provided for a decentralised framework of land management and administration.

The government's land policy tries to keep together two contradictory elements. On the one hand public ownership of land aims to preserve equity in the distribution of landholdings, avoiding massive rural-out migration and land concentration. On the other hand by setting-up a decentralised system of land management and administration and promoting initiatives towards greater formalisation, government efforts are directed towards stimulating productivity, improving tenure security, and incentivising the commercialisation of agriculture.

By confirming state ownership of land, the 1995 Ethiopian Constitution prohibits land sales and restricts exchanges. Nonetheless by allowing renting in and out of both land and labour, use of the land is now liberalised, and inheritance rights are strengthened.

The Constitution also provides for a decentralised framework of land management and administration. Strengthening local democratic spaces by improving the rural dweller's ability to take relevant decisions on land management is an overriding objective of decentralisation (FDRE

2002a, FDRE 2005c). An important aspect of the Ethiopian decentralisation experiment is the so called “block grant” reform which was enacted for the first time in the 2000-2001 fiscal year (Keller, Smith 2005). Under this new system major efforts were centred upon shifting responsibilities and budget provisions to *woreda* level, so as to ensure grassroots participation in development planning and implementation. Concerning land management and administration both the *woreda* and *kebele* level are now vested of important prerogatives such as promoting land distributions and expropriation, issuing land-use certificates to implement the land registration programme and dealing with land related disputes (Turton 2006).

Legislative power over land is assigned to the federal government and implementation is reserved to the regional states. The Federal Rural Land and Administration Proclamation 89/1997 (FDRE 1997) confirms that ownership of all lands is vested in the Federal State and that regions are required to issue their own land proclamation to effectively implement the federal legislation. Meanwhile, the Regional States of Amhara and Oromia already issued their own legislations even few months before the federal proclamation was enacted (1996). By formally delegating its authority to the Regional States in 1997 – for instance land redistributions – federal government legitimised most of the Amhara and Oromia state proclamation provisions. Nonetheless these Regional States then reviewed their Land Proclamation respectively in 2000 (ANRS 2000), and 2002 (ONRS 2002). Tigray issued its land law in 1997 (TNRS 1997), then amended in 2002 (TNRS 2002). Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP) Region enacted its land law in 2003 (SNNPR2003). Nonetheless few years later the legislative framework of land administration and management was destined to change once again.

The question of land was a major theme in socio-economic and political discussion during the national elections of 2005 (Abbink 2006; Lefort 2007; Dessalegn 2009). At that time the government land policy was deeply criticised by several opposition candidates, and soon became one of the burning issues of the political debate. While the government continued to support public ownership of land on the ground that it would have preserved poor farmers land rights, several opposition candidates strongly criticised this position by claiming for more secure forms of ownership (Lefort 2007). As noted by Dessalegn (2009: 175) the government decided to pass a number of legislations in the dying days of the parliament. Among these it adopted a new Rural Land Administration and Use Proclamation (FDRE 456/2005b) and a proclamation ruling the Expropriation of Landholdings for Public Purposes and Payment of Compensation (FDRE 455/2005a). By introducing some minor changes in the government’s land policy, regional states were thus required to revise their regional laws in accordance with the new federal proclamation. Tigray and Amhara were the first issuing the new Land Administration and Use Proclamation in 2006 (TNRS 2006; ANRS 2006), followed by Oromia and SNNP Region in 2007 (ONRS 2007; SNNPR 2007).

By reaffirming public ownership of all lands, the 2005 Land Administration and Use Proclamation (FDRE 2005b) emphasises the need to achieve better tenure security, land consolidation and investments. Duration of land use rights is subjected to time limits which are determined by each regional proclamation. For the purpose of this article, the proclamation focus on three broad political priorities. By implementing a coherent land use planning, it stresses on the need to improve land investments and land productivity (paragraph 5). Second, by pointing out the urgency to establish an information database identifying rural landholdings, the proclamation endorses land registration and provides for a general framework of its implementation (paragraph 6). Third, in order to create an environment suitable for investments and improving access to land, it stresses on the need to establish a conducive system of rural land administration (paragraph 11).

A controversial and innovative point is that it rules how to acquire rural land for commercial agriculture or industrial purposes (paragraph 5), opening-up a huge debate on the issue of land grants to international private investors – otherwise known as land grabbing.

Most importantly for our discussion the proclamation eases the procedures for public authorities to promote land expropriation for generic “development purposes” (paragraph 9) or when it is not “properly protected and conserved” (paragraph 10). This interpretation is also confirmed by the Expropriation of Landholdings for Public Purposes and Payment of Compensation Proclamation (455/2005) affirming that the “competent authorities” have the power to expropriate rural and urban landholdings for public purposes or when the land is required for «a better development project to be carried out by public entities, private investors, cooperative societies or other organs, or where such expropriation has been decided by the appropriate higher regional or federal government organ for the same purpose» (FDRE 2005a).

For the purpose of this article I just note that despite minor differences, the four regional land laws implementing the Federal Proclamation contain the same provisions and they simply reassert a majority of the principles contained in the federal law.

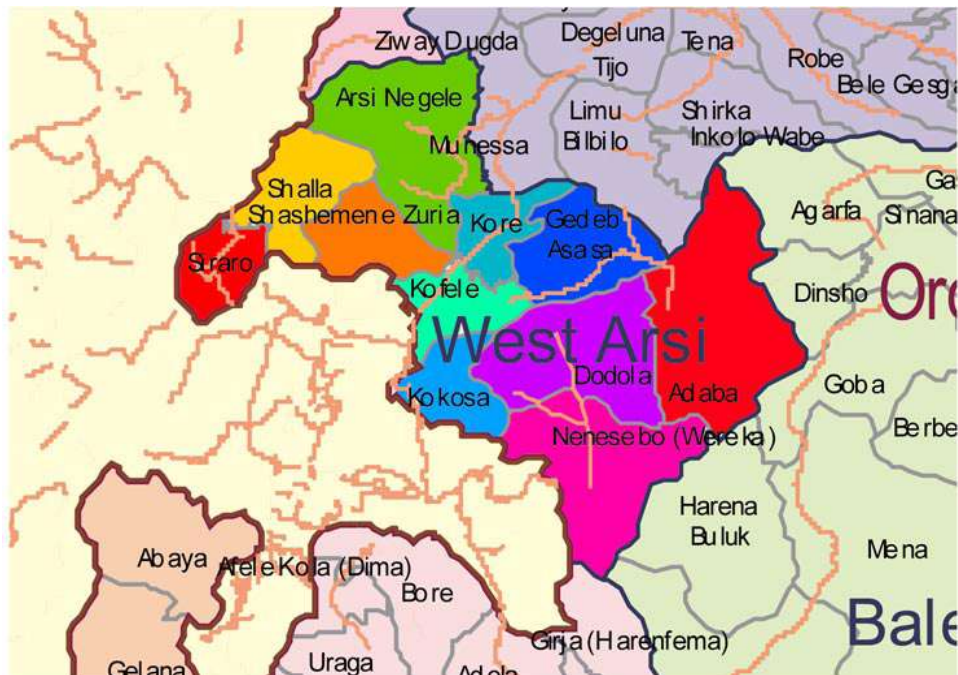
4. Decentralisation of Land Management and Administration in Siraro

The following discussion is based on a field work I carried out from November 2009 to April 2010 in Siraro, West Arsi Zone, Oromia Region. Field research encompassed data collection in a number of offices at *zone*, *woreda* and *kebele* level. A sample of over 300 semi-structured and group interviews was collected from local officials, development staff from local and international organisations, elders, and farmers. Local offices include the Agriculture and Rural Development Office (ARDO), the Environmental Protection and Land Use Authority (EPLAUA), the Capacity Building Office, the Food Security Office. I made use of qualitative methods of data collection and analysis.

4.1. Introduction

Siraro covers an area of over 674 km² with altitude ranging from 1500 to 2750 meters, and it is divided into 29 *kebelles*². It borders with Southern Peoples Regional State in the north (Alaba Kulito), in the south (Deguna Fanigo) and in the west (Hadiya), while in the east Siraro borders with Shala district of Oromia region. Loke Heda is the administrative county seat of the district and Bilate is the only significant river, tracing the border with the Southern People's Regional State. Siraro *woreda* is divided into two agro-climatic zones, 90% is under Weine Dega (up to 2000 m) and 10% is under Kolla (below 2000m). The “long” rainy season (Meher) starts in June and continues until

October with the highest concentration of rains in July and August. The number of rainy days varies from Weina Dega to Kolla, where the latter is characterised by less rainfalls. As in many provinces of Ethiopia, Siraro is characterised by a season of small rains between April and



May (Belg season). Nonetheless, over the last years rainfalls during this period have decreased, and farmers are no longer able to collect an additional harvest. Following the data gathered at Zone level³, Siraro gets annual mean rainfall of maximum 900-1500mm, while its agricultural potential is limited.

According to the 2007 National Population and Housing Census (FDRE 2008), Siraro accounts for a population of over 145.000 people. It is predominantly a rural district, with only less than 10% of people living in urban areas. This is in line with the data available for the whole West Arsi Zone⁴, where almost 85% of people live in rural areas. Thus, a density of 214 people per km² is high for a rural district. Estimations show that the population is growing at a rate of over 3% per year⁵. As agriculture is by far a predominant economic activity of Siraro, population growth is a primary

² Data gathered at the Agriculture and Rural Development Office (ARDO) in Loke Heda, Siraro.

³ Data gathered at the Environmental Protection and Land Use Authority (EPLAUA), Shashemene .

⁴ Data gathered at the Agriculture and Rural Development Office (ARDO), Shashemene.

⁵ Data gathered at the Capacity Building Office, Shashemene.

reason behind land shortage and landlessness. Following official sources⁶, over 40% of farmers are landless while on average each household holds between 0.5 and 0.75 hectares of land. Each household on average is composed of 5.5 people, with larger units in rural areas (6 individuals) than urban areas (5 individuals)⁷.

Peasant agriculture is by far a primary economic activity of the district and it is given overriding priority by local policy initiatives⁸. Meeting the demand of the population as well as of the market is a primary task of development activities in the district. Nonetheless, a number of constraints affect the performance of agriculture and, from time to time, additional food supply (often in form of food aids) is required to meet internal food demand. Lack of access to modern technology, lack of information, low productivity, dependency on rainfalls, lack of irrigation schemes, lack of new varieties and agriculture inputs (fertilizers, pesticide), are mentioned by official policy documents as reasons limiting agriculture performance⁹. Agro-climatic conditions of the districts make its territory suitable for cereals, which cover the vast majority of annual production. Overall agriculture production in Siraro includes a limited variety of crops. Maize is by far the largest crop, followed by wheat, *teff*, millet and sorghum¹⁰.

In line with the majority of rural districts throughout the country, agriculture in Siraro is highly dependent on rainfalls, with very limited areas covered by irrigation schemes. Beside land shortage and rapid population growth, rain-fed agriculture and recurrent drought constitute a third critical element characterising Siraro. This is sometimes source of the harvest's loss, increasing the dependence of rural population on assistance from the government and international donors. This picture highlights a condition of extreme vulnerability of rural Ethiopia. At this we must add a number of per-harvest and post-harvest agricultural losses due to diseases and pests. Available data for Siraro¹¹ show that nearly 40% of farmers have no oxen, while 30% have one and another 30% have at least two oxen. Thus, farmers with more than three oxen account for only 5% of the farming population.

Following the Siraro *Woreda* Agricultural Office¹², around 10% of the *woreda* have high agricultural potential – *i.e.* it is suitable for intensive agricultural practice – while another 50% have medium agricultural potential. Over the last thirty or forty years massive deforestation took place throughout the district. Both official accounts and community narrative¹³, highlight how human

⁶ Data gathered at the Agriculture and Rural Development Office (ARDO) in Loke Heda, Siraro.

⁷ Data gathered at the Capacity Building Office, Shashemene.

⁸ For further details see the report “Physical and Socio-Economical Profile of Siraro Woreda” available at the Agriculture and Rural Development Office (ARDO), Loke Heda, Siraro.

⁹ Data gathered at the Capacity Building Office in Loke Heda, Siraro.

¹⁰ Data gathered at the Agriculture and Rural Development Office (ARDO) in Loke Heda, Siraro.

¹¹ Data gathered at the Agriculture and Rural Development Office (ARDO) in Loke Heda, Siraro.

¹² Data gathered at the Agriculture and Rural Development Office (ARDO) in Loke Heda, Siraro.

¹³ Group interviews with elders, Siraro, 21 November 2009; 13 December 2009; 18 January 2010.

intervention seriously altered the ecological balance of the district, also by affecting agriculture activities. Deforestation was a primary means for local communities to get fire woods, building materials and to put new lands into cultivation, as a result of population growth. Nonetheless, deforestation often went step by step with growing desertification and loss of soils fertility. The district's Agricultural Office estimates that today natural vegetation covers an area of only 500 hectares including light forests, band bush and shrubs¹⁴. Community narrative usually refers to a glorious past when most of the district was covered of natural vegetation.

4.2. Development Priorities and Local Administrations in Siraro

Siraro is a rural districts where peasant agriculture is by far the predominant economic activity. Over the last years, population pressure over land generated growing land shortage, and increased the local communities' dependence on external aids. A growing number of households face chronic food crises. Unpredictability of rains worsens this picture, highlighting the limits of a rural economy overwhelmingly based on smallholder rain-fed agriculture.

Under the present conjuncture, evidence of my fieldwork highlights a picture where rural dwellers find themselves "trapped" into their overcrowded rural communities for at least three reasons.

First, the current system of state ownership of land provides few incentives for out-migration from rural areas. Peasants are well aware that undertaking migration to urban areas would imply the loss of their usufruct right over land. Second, under the current conditions the urban economy is not strong enough to absorb massive rural out-migration. At this we must add the poor productivity of agriculture sector. Siraro has a predominantly rural structure and there are few opportunities for rural dwellers to find alternative employment opportunities in urban areas. The rural-urban divide is rather a complex issue to address. Third, it appears that the current government development strategy for rural areas is aimed at limiting rural out-migration as much as possible. Either for ideological reasons or for control purposes, the current government considers massive urbanisation as an unintended outcome of modernisation of the rural world in the long run.

Given this precarious context, I argue that a closer analysis of recent programmes and legislations implementing decentralisation of land management and administration in Siraro show that a double process is underway. On the one hand decentralisation strengthens top-down policy-making and – by taking the form of deconcentration – it allows the federal government to rapidly and effectively implement its policies at the local level. Virtually all the (state-led) development initiatives I came across during my fieldwork were part of national programmes. Local bodies are therefore only vested the task of implementing federal initiatives. On the other hand, decentralisation reforms provide local authorities with relatively more power in terms of budget management and programme implementation. By providing local officials with growing powers over resources

¹⁴ Data gathered at the Environmental Protection and Land Use Authority (EPLAUA) in Loke Heda, Siraro.

management and distribution and given the current system of state ownership of land, decentralisation of land management and administration allows local officials to exert greater leverage over land allocation. In short, rather than opening new democratic spaces, it is lessening the rural people's opportunities to both express their needs and bringing forward demands to the political and administrative system.

Discussing decentralisation of land management and administration in Siraro brings us also to explore the extent to which powers are transferred to local bodies, whether they are elected or nominated from above, and their degree of legitimacy to the people. Among the institutions which are now empowered of land management and administration tasks at *kebele* and *woreda* level, there are a number of local offices expression of the local administration, for instance the Agriculture and Rural Development Office (ARDO), the Land Administration and Use Authority (EPLAUA), the Food Security Office, the Capacity Building Office. *Woreda* and *kebele* administrations are in principle elected institutions and therefore accountability in theory is directed downward towards people and representativeness of various interests is guaranteed through periodical democratic elections.

In the following discussion I will take into consideration two broad aspects of decentralisation of land management and administration that I find particularly relevant for my argument: policy making and development initiatives at the local level; the role of local officials in land management and administration.

4.3. Decentralisation in Siraro: Devolution or Deconcentration?

A first aspect designing decentralisation as deconcentration is that the federal state retains extensive powers over local policy making. Evidence of my fieldwork shows that *woreda* and *kebele* offices in Siraro simply implement policy designed at upper levels of government. Development programmes in Siraro include a limited number of activities, for instance the Productive Safety-net Programmes, food aid distribution, voluntary resettlement schemes, food for work, sustain to off-farm activities, fertiliser distribution, credit and agriculture input supply. It is worthy to note that a vast majority of these initiatives are part of national programmes. By now decentralisation left few spaces for local administrations to design original policies and development programmes. While providing local authorities with relatively more power of action in terms of programme implementation and budget management, decentralisation has probably strengthened top-down decision-making because accountability is still directed upward.

Evidence I collected in Siraro clearly highlights that local administrations are only vested with the task of implementing government designed policies. Virtually all the *woreda* and *kebele* officials I interviewed in Siraro (95% of sample) argued that they felt more responsible of their actions

towards upward bodies rather than to local people¹⁵. They argued that *woreda* and *kebele* administrations have few budget autonomy to effectively and independently run their activities. Other interviews with local and international NGOs staff working in Siraro confirmed this interpretation. According to some informants local administrations lack of trained staff and essential infrastructures to effectively carry out their tasks. For instance several *kebele* as well as the *woreda* offices of Siraro in the village of Loke Heda, were lacking electric power despite having several desktop computers. Many *kebelles* lack enough administrative capacity to effectively mobilize resources, and to carry out a wide range of prerogatives provided by decentralisation reforms.

Indeed we must keep in mind that a rural district like Siraro is able to collect only a small share of budget by itself¹⁶. Given the dominance of the Federal Government in revenue generation and tax collection, local bodies have to extensively rely on transfers from the centre in order to carry out their tasks and meet their obligations. According to available data at *woreda* level almost 90% of the total budget of Siraro comes from federal cash transfers¹⁷. Several other studies confirm this picture at national level (Chanie 2007; Chanie 2009; Keller, Smith 2005; Young 1998). It is estimated that between 80 percent and 90 percent of all revenue is controlled by the Federal government, which then – through the “block grant” formula – is in charge to redistribute these resources to regions and *woreda* administrations. Ethiopia is characterised by fiscal vertical imbalances generating a gap between expenditure responsibilities and revenue capacities of local authorities (Keller 2002). Expenditure of local administrations are centrally monitored and, thereby, controlled (Keller, Smith 2005).

This picture highlights at least three issues. First of all, the case of Siraro shows that given the weak institutional capacity of *woreda* and *kebele*, establishing a clear and effective system of revenue generation at the local level is a hard task for poorly endowed local administrations. Second, this system is likely to generate upward accountability to the bodies and institutions providing revenues (*i.e.* the federal government), rather than downward accountability to the people. Given that expenditure patterns of local administrations are centrally controlled, *woreda*’s officials – in order to defend their position – are often compelled to follow the directives coming from upper bodies rather than collecting demands and needs from local communities. As a result, and this is the third issue, local democracy opportunities are severely constrained by a decentralisation taking the form of deconcentration.

A majority of development initiatives in Siraro therefore follow central directives, meaning that local administrations have few opportunities to originally design their own initiatives. This is a critical aspects constraining the local administrations’ ability to independently exercise the powers

¹⁵ Interviews with *kebele* leaders in Siraro; and *woreda* staff members, Loke Heda, Siraro.

¹⁶ Interview with *kebele* leaders in Ropi, Siraro; and *woreda* staff members in Ropi and Loke Heda, Siraro.

¹⁷ Data gathered at the Woreda Administration Financial Office, Loke Heda, Siraro.

and prerogatives provided by decentralisation reforms. On the other hand we must keep in mind that decentralisation became effective only recently. It is likely to presume that local administrations will require some time to articulate their own policy initiatives and to design an effective system of budget generation.

4.4. Decentralisation of Land Administration: the Role of Local Officials

When it comes to land management and administration, upward accountability of local bodies is thus strengthened by the fact that the federal state is vested of the ultimate ownership over all lands. The case of Siraro shows that – side by side with upward accountability of local officials towards upper bodies – when decentralisation of land management and administration is associated with state ownership of land, it generates incentives for local level official to reward political loyalty with land-related benefits.

According to some informants¹⁸, farmers are often threatened to lose their land-use right, for instance when they are suspected of supporting the political opposition. Threat of dispossession is in general an instrument often employed by local officials to pressure farmers to line up with government programmes, and to not question any decision. Other interviews¹⁹ concerning the land registration programme showed that sometimes farmers are compelled to get the membership of the local party branch – and this involves also paying a fee – to receive their land certificate. It has also been reported to me that farmers suspected of voting for the opposition were either not given the certificate or penalised in terms of land allotment²⁰. Given that the issue of land is by far a politicised issue in Ethiopia, it is often hard for an external observer to clearly distinguish between rumours, personal opinion of farmers, informants and facts. As one may easily imagine, I was not able to confirm this issue through other sources, and particularly by asking local officials.

Nonetheless, I stress that farmers in Siraro are well aware that *kebele* and *woreda* officials are granted of extensive power over land management, as well as they know that their relationship with them will determine their access to basic resources and services. While social sanctions from the community sometimes mitigates such indiscriminate use of power (Dessalegn 2009), many local officials often enjoy effective impunity for their actions. *Woreda* and *kebele* officials are often both the ruler and the bodies in charge to implement the law. Given that peasants are given only of use-rights and land allocation prerogatives are in the hands of government local officials, land distribution, management and administration become primary means to exert extensive power in rural areas. Local officials may use land allocation – or the threat to withdraw it – as a tool to

¹⁸ Interview with a Development Agent in Loke Heda, Siraro, 7 December 2009, 8 February 2010; Interview with a Priest in Ropi, 15 December 2009.

¹⁹ Group interviews with farmers on the distribution of land certificates, Siraro, 7 December 2009; 14 December 2009; 5-8 February 2010; 12 February 2010; 21 February 2010.

²⁰ Interview with a Development Agent in Loke Heda, Siraro, 7 December 2009.

reward political loyalty. This picture thus clearly shows that the land question in Siraro as well as in many other rural districts of the country is an extremely politicised issue, and that the current government land policy is – to some extent – intended to strengthen the control over the peasantry.

In a context like Siraro where land shortage is by far an overriding problem, population grows fast and landlessness is high, threat of dispossession is in my opinion an extraordinary tool for local official to pressure peasants. Further insights on this point are drawn from the law on expropriation and the relative right to compensation.

From a legislative perspective we noted earlier that the 2005 Federal Land Administration and Use Proclamation eases the procedures for public authorities to expropriate land for generic “development purposes”, or when it is not “properly conserved”. Concerning Siraro *woreda*, this is confirmed by the Oromia Land Administration and Use Proclamation (ONRS 2007). Article 10 of paragraph 6 of the proclamation state that land use right may be terminated by the competent authority at local level when the land is required for generic “more important public uses”. Despite that, it is not clear what both the federal and regional land laws mean for “development purposes” or “more important public uses”, article 11 rules the right to compensation. Compensation may be paid in cash or by providing alternative land which, following the law has to be of equivalent value. When asked whether they prefer compensation in cash or kind – *i.e.* in terms of food –, almost all of farmers I interviewed opted for the latter (95% of respondents)²¹. Payment in cash is said to be less than the equivalent value of alternative land. Furthermore, given that shortage of fertile land in the district is an overriding problem, they are afraid to be unable to access to additional plots, for instance by rental contracts. Nonetheless, a number of informants²² reported that alternative land provided in case of expropriation – when available – is often far away from the area of residence, and it is often less fertile and suitable for farming practices. While in the areas under investigation I came across land expropriation only in few circumstances, growing population pressure over land is likely to increase the number of expropriation cases in a coming future either for public purposes, or for accommodating new land claims. Overall, in a context like Siraro where land shortage is an overriding problem, it is clear that the right to compensation involves at best marginal losses for the farmers involved. Therefore the threat of dispossession is a strong tool in the hands of local officials to reward political loyalty with land- related benefits.

Another issue has to do with the frequency of change to the land laws. I noted earlier how the federal and regional laws pertaining to land administration over the last ten to fifteen years were subjected to frequent changes. This is often source of institutional as well as political instability, and it also generates a good deal of insecurity among citizens. Thus, the administrative apparatus at every level (Regional, Zone, *Woreda*, *Kebelle*, etc.) often lacks enough organisational capacity and

²¹ Interviews with farmers in Siraro and Deguna Fanigo, November 2009- February 2010.

²² Interviews with Development Agents, Siraro and Deguna Fanigo, December 2009 – February 2010.

skills, to rapidly and effectively manage frequent changes to the law. Given that legislation on land is by far a sensitive political issue, it contributes to generate social tensions as well.

Thus, as I noticed during my fieldwork, peasants often feel frustrated about continuous changes in laws dealing with land, for several reasons. First of all, it is hard for peasants to get full information over changes of the laws in force and all the technical as well as material consequences they have on their everyday lives. Second, frequent changes contribute to reinforce the idea of peasants as mere “subjects” of policies initiated by the government and simply implemented at the local level. In one of my interviews a farmer in Siraro noted

“from time to time the government send here his officials to communicate us that something changed, that a new law has been introduced or that a new program is available for our community (...) I wonder what participation really means”²³.

A further issue designing decentralisation as deconcentration has to do with the dominant role of the ruling party in rural affairs and everyday local policy implementation (Medhane, Young 2003; Aalen 2006; Chanie 2009). The literature widely acknowledges how the local administrations system overlaps with the structure of the ruling party throughout the country. Virtually any *woreda* and *kebele* administration in rural areas is controlled by EPRDF or one of its affiliates.

In short the federal state has many instrument to influence local policy implementation. Decentralisation is likely to generate a new set of inequalities when it comes to service distribution and programmes implementation. By providing local officials with greater leverage over land allocation, decentralisation of land management and administration strengthens their ability to influence farmers’ decisions and actions. Farmers are not sure about future government plans including land redistribution. Many peasants are well aware that the government has many instruments to promote land distribution, and that future decisions may involve land alienation. Local communities are often the last to be informed when relevant decisions are taken or new programmes are planned. Consultations are an instrument which is seldom used by the current establishment to design rural development programmes and activities (Dessalegn 2009: 288). For instance, rather than targeting the poor, a great majority of development programmes are used by local officials to extend their field of influence. The case of Siraro shows that land is becoming a primary means employed by local authorities to reward peasants for political loyalty. Given that local administrations in Ethiopia are centrally controlled by EPRDF or one of its affiliates (Aalen 2006), land management and administration is an extraordinary tool for the government to exert immense power in the rural world.

²³ Interview with a farmer in Ropi, Siraro, 21 November 2009.

5. Conclusions

Over the last ten years decentralisation has been largely implemented throughout Ethiopia and today it is almost completed. Despite considerable efforts to support decentralisation in rural areas, local administrations lack enough resources, trained staff, essential infrastructures, to effectively carry out their tasks. Local administrations performance is severely constrained and few efforts are made to design original programmes and planning activities. Rather than giving an answer to local demands, local officials have no option but implementing programmes designed by upper bodies. Thus, opportunities for rural dwellers to express their needs and demands are constrained by a rigid and vertical institutional framework limiting local democratic spaces.

In this article I have argued that the decentralisation experiment Ethiopia is currently undertaking is mostly a case of deconcentration, where accountability of local bodies is usually directed upward to upper level of government rather than downwards to people. Until now decentralisation left few spaces for local administrations to design original policies, rather they simply implement government initiated programmes. On the other hand, decentralisation provides local officials with relatively more power of action on programmes implementation, thus strengthening the verticality of policy-making.

Concerning decentralisation of land management and administration, the case of Siraro gives us some more insights. Given a growing condition of livelihood insecurity, shortage of land, rapid population growth and given the current government's land policy, decentralisation seems to be little conducive to local democracy.

Rather than improving opportunities for rural dwellers to control how relevant decisions on important resources such as land are taken, decentralisation of land management and administration in the case of Siraro reveals that two processes are underway. First, given the peculiarities of the Ethiopian decentralisation experiment, local officials are likely to be more accountable to upper level of government. Second, when decentralisation of land management and administration is associated with state ownership of land – as in the Ethiopian case – it tends to create incentives for local level official to reward political loyalty with land- related benefits.

Overall the issue of land in Ethiopia is by far a politicised question and it is a primary source of power differentiation, affecting the livelihoods of the poor and, in the end, defining their citizenship's rights at the local level.

What makes the Ethiopian case controversial is probably that decentralisation of land management and administration is associated with state ownership of land. As the land question in Ethiopia is a critical aspect of the country's modernisation project, the reason behind the choice of the current government to retain state ownership is probably to keep the monopoly on power and to avoid a

new agrarian class to emerge. The government orientation seems motivated by the need to keep together two contradictory elements. The first is the notion that rural development initiatives are intended to modernise and formalise social, economic and political relations in the countryside, by strengthening private sector enterprise, stimulating market formation and supporting local democracy through decentralisation. The second is the more problematic view that the state has to retain extensive control over major resources – particularly land – and economic activities, so to allow the poor to benefit from such process of modernisation. This tension is embedded in the paternalistic idea that state ownership of land is a primary means to protect the poor from adverse market effects, as well as the institutional framework provided by decentralisation is a panacea for local democracy.

Finally, decentralisation revealed to be an instrument to externally attract donors by committing the government action towards good governance policies, while internally it allowed exerting extensive power in rural areas. This should warn about the potential of neoliberal reforms such as decentralisation to directly spread democracy, poverty reduction and, in general, “development”. Actual emphasis on participation, decentralisation, and equity can easily become a rhetorical instrument for governments to externally (towards donors) and internally (towards people) justify authoritarian power.

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