

## **The Land Question and Decentralisation Reforms in Ethiopia: New Spaces for Local Democracy? Case Studies from Siraro and Deguna Fanigo**

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Land and decentralisation are two of the most sensitive issues shaping development interventions in rural areas throughout Africa. Over the last years, decentralised approaches to land management and administration came into prominence for their ability to foster a more democratic access to policy implementation at the local level, reducing poverty and stimulating land productivity. Effectiveness of decentralisation depends on the nature of local bodies and the powers transferred, the role granted to customary authorities, the arrangements on land dispute resolution. Rural areas play a key role in Ethiopia. They represent the main development challenge of a country where more than 80% of the people base their subsistence on agriculture. Despite of that, poverty is widespread and food security remains extremely critical even at the top of rains and climatic conditions. Ethiopian rural areas face what is usually referred to as a productive crisis where population growth is both cause and effect of land shortage, landlessness, and environmental degradation, therefore contributing to widespread poverty. In this article I argue that efforts to decentralise land management notwithstanding, this process takes the form of a mere deconcentration of prerogatives from central to local level strengthening the verticality of decision making, and leaving few spaces for local democracy. Furthermore, 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. In so doing this article wants to critically contribute to the debate over the role of local governance reforms in Sub-Saharan Africa and question its mainstream interpretation, *i.e.*, that decentralisation promotes directly social empowerment, popular participation and democratic accountability. Case studies will be taken from Deguna Fanigo in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region, and Siraro Woreda in Oromia Region.